

Footprint of Financial Crisis in the Media

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA country report

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The media sector

The media in Bosnian-Herzegovina are not in good health and their condition looks like getting worse. That briefly sums up the responses of people interviewed for the Bosnia and Herzegovina (henceforth BiH) media market survey. Although the respondents differ in their social and professional backgrounds, the intellectual circles in which they move and their ethnic origins, their views about the state of the media in BiH are remarkably uniform. These differ only in degree, with assessments ranging from bad to catastrophic. The sole point on which respondents disagree is the reason for this state of affairs. For some it arises from the political divisions within BiH, which they foresee as becoming yet sharper. Others put much of the blame on the global economic crisis.

Media content

As indicated, all the respondents believe the media market in BiH is not thriving. While most do not consider things are any worse than two years ago, they do not see any grounds for hope; if the situation has not gone further downhill it is because it was already disastrous and could not deteriorate any further. "It is difficult to talk about a market in BiH at all - simply because we cannot call this state of chaos by any name that would imply the existence of a system," says one of the respondents, arguing that the media reflect the reality of BiH itself, still in a pre-market and pre-political phase.

Those respondents who believe the reasons for the situation are political say that, like BiH society in general, the media are divided along ethnic fault lines, they support the policies of self-proclaimed representatives of various ethnic groups and they are dependent on the promoters of these policies. This view is well represented by one respondent's comment that "in the past two years, those in power have learnt how to influence the media in a more sophisticated, less provocative way." A smaller group of respondents take the view that "the media were either finished off by the economic crisis or provided with an excuse to throw in the towel."

Most respondents believe that since investigative journalism was never a strong feature of the media in BiH there is no quantitative difference from the previous period. The only difference is in the subject matter. Such purported investigative journalism as exists is mostly commissioned and serves to promote the agendas of political and financial patrons: "... you sometimes get the feeling that the reporters seemingly conducting investigations are actually pawns in the political games and spats of everyday clashes in BiH politics," says one of our respondents. This comment goes for others. But while most respondents do not think the economic crisis has affected the quantity of supposedly investigative reports, they do believe it has encouraged a subservient mentality among the media

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which is reflected in the choice of topics.

In the view of most respondents the lack of enthusiasm among professionals for genuine investigative journalism can be largely attributed to the indifference shown by institutions and the general public when it does produce worthwhile findings. “Our problem is that these reports are not accompanied by an adequate response from public opinion, the police, prosecutors or courts.” It is recognised, of course, that investigative journalism is expensive, since it involves a large commitment of reporting staff who are then not available to cover everyday matters; it also carries costs in terms of travel and gathering information. However, if there is no reaction to the outcome of such investigations the question arises whether they are worth bothering with at all, especially at a time of financial constraint.

The situation of public broadcasting is much the same as that of the rest of the media. Most respondents feel public broadcasters are failing to fulfil their obligations to society because, as one put it, “they are mainly prisoners of the state of BiH politics and the economy,” and are not capable of developing an independent mission. Moreover, where they try to evade the influence of political power centres they fall into another trap: they imitate the behaviour of the commercial broadcasters. “Instead of reporting on all segments of society, they primarily broadcast content to boost their ratings.” And by abandoning their public responsibility they cease to be of importance to the public.

So, almost all the respondents conclude, the average consumer paradoxically ends up “overinformed”. In the search for reliable information he or she has to look to a range of media, which is not only costly but frustrating. As one put it: “the media speculate more than they present real information on important issues.” The consequence is the consumer becomes apathetic and loses interest in obtaining information at all.” One respondent observed sardonically: “We arrive at a situation where the consumer feels ‘sufficiently misinformed’.”

Legislation

The recently adopted law on the public broadcaster, RTVFBiH, completely changed its management structure¹, sending a clear message from the Parliament of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina about who is in charge of this media institution. Coincidentally, the government of Republika Srpska awarded 5 million Convertible Marks to media houses in that entity as part of alleged “aid to the media”. The amount of “aid” the media received was determined by government criteria – in other words, whatever the authorities in this part of the country deemed important.

1 This Law enables representatives of Parliament to appoint members of the governing body of the Federal Television, so opening the door to interference in the work of this public broadcaster.

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All that remains for BiH to become legally a closed society is for the media in BiH to be regulated in line with the principles prevailing in the region: “In RS there is increasingly frequent talk about the need to pass a law similar to the one in Serbia.”²

Editorial independence

Almost unanimously, the respondents judge that editorial practice in the media is clearly determined by, or indeed directly linked to, political parties. Given that in BiH economics and politics are inseparable, the opportunity exists for politicians to have direct influence over the editorial policies of certain media. In a stark example offered by one respondent: “We have a situation where an owner of a media company has become directly involved in politics, which has only further politicised the media scene.”³

There is wide agreement among respondents that little distinction is made between news and commissioned pieces⁴. They also feel the line that should separate advertising from editorial content has become so blurred as to be almost imperceptible, if not totally absent. “Sometimes you just don’t know if something is news, an ad, a commercial, or... what?!”

Media ownership

Respondents were unanimous in what they considered the ideal relationship between the owner of a media institution and its editorial policy. “The owner should take care of the accounts and the editor the quality of the newspaper.” This prescription might sound banal, but, as its author added, it is “hardly feasible”. All the respondents believe that in BiH owners play a significant role in shaping editorial policy. Lip service is paid to editorial autonomy, which is “respected in situations of lesser importance.” But otherwise “the media are used as a means of defence or attack.”

Labour

2 The Law on Changes and Amendments to the Law on Public Information adopted by the Serbian Parliament on 31 August 2009 came into force on 8 September 2009. The Amended Law stipulates greater penalties for certain offences and defines ownership relations and registration rules for media houses in a way that has been seen as unacceptable by some reporters’ associations. In the light of allegations that the amendments are not in line with European laws and provisions for media freedom, an analysis by independent legal experts is underway. The Law envisages drastic penalties for reporters and owners of media outlets, and introduces censorship provisions that some in the industry consider to be worse than during the regime of Slobodan Milošević. The definition of libel has been completely changed, and penalties have been increased to tens of thousands of Euros. For example, showing statements recorded by another media outlet without the permission of the interviewee is now considered libel, even if there is a video recording and no doubt about the authenticity of the statement.

3 This is a reference to Fahrudin Radončić, the owner of the Avaz company that includes the *Avaz* daily, the most influential and widely circulated daily newspaper in BiH. A few months ago, Radončić founded a political party, the Union for a Better Future, and officially entered politics.

4 These are not the same as advertising. They are commissioned articles that are not intended to be impartial or critical. So, only the positive aspects of a business or person will be presented in a piece that is paid for or requested as a favour

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The general condition of the media is inseparable from the people working in them. So respondents' views on reporters are no different from those on the organisations they work for. These, they assert, deliberately employ young, inexperienced and poorly-educated reporters so as to perpetuate the kind of journalism described above. "Inexperienced, even uneducated reporters are the standard, and this has a very bad effect on the quality of the content, because they aim to keep people in the dark and keep them misinformed."

New media

All respondents note the growth of new media, with the increasing availability of information over the internet and a rising level of internet penetration. Given the importance of the internet as a means of communication for young people, they foresee internet reporting serving this generation in particular.

There is less agreement about the extent new media can be trusted as sources of information. The majority believe that the pluralism afforded by the internet creates opportunities for truly independent journalism, though others are concerned about the opportunities for misinformation in a media space that lacks regulation or organisation. How far the traditional media are adjusting to the new media remains to be seen, but all the respondents believe they will eventually have to come to terms with them and modernise what they currently have on offer. As to a model for such modernisation, most respondents think the traditional media should concentrate on investigative journalism and analysis, leaving news and multimedia projects more and more to the internet: "Daily reporting should be transferred to the internet, while newspapers should provide more analysis and disclose the background of events."

Conclusions

Clearly, there is little optimism to be found among the respondents. All are convinced that the media in BiH lack influence, that they are merely abused and exploited, and that they leave the public frustrated and ill served. As one respondent remarked: "Some dogs bark, but the caravans pass by and no one gives them a second glance." Not only has the financial situation exposed the deep underlying crisis of the media in BiH, it has made even more remote than ever any prospect of positive change.

Respondents

Gordan Isabegović, Revolt Youth Movement Tuzla

Nihad Kreševljaković, blogger and producer for MESS

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Husein Oručević, Editor of Media Centre at the Abrašević Youth Centre in Mostar

Milorad Labus, President of the Association of Young Reporters of Republika Srpska

Muhamed Jusić, Muslim theologian, columnist and teacher Bugojno

Srđan Puhalo, psychologist and member of the Court of Honour of the Association of Psychologists of Republika Srpska

Marko Tomaš, editor of the Kolaps Book Production series and editor of the Kolaps literary magazine

Svetlana Cenić, Professor at the Economics Faculty in Banja Luka and former Finance Minister in the RS Government

Boro Kontić, reporter, Director of Mediacentar Sarajevo

ANNEX: TABLES

Table 1. Main economic indicators

| | | | | |
|---|----------------------|------|------|-------|
| Population, total | 3.905.251 (estimate) | | | |
| Working population | 1.131.557 | | | |
| | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009* |
| GDP per head (\$) | 5900 | 6200 | 6500 | n.a. |
| GDP growth (%) | 6.9 | 6 | 5.5 | n.a. |
| Unemployment (%) | 45.5 | 41.3 | 39.8 | n.a. |
| Average wage (\$) | 406 | 481 | 548 | 586 |
| Internet users (per 100 people) | 25 | 28 | 35 | n.a. |
| Mobile telephones (per 100 people) | 50 | 65 | 84 | n.a. |
| Households with at least one TV set (%) | n.a. | 89 | 91 | 92,60 |

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Table 2. Main economic indicators of the media sector

| | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 (11 months) |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|---------------------|
| No. dailies | n.a. | n.a. | 12 | 11 |
| No. regional newspapers | n.a. | n.a. | 13 | 13 |
| No. weeklies | n.a. | n.a. | 16 | 16 |
| No. public TV channels | n.a. | n.a. | 15 | 15 |
| No. public radio channels | n.a. | n.a. | 65 | 65 |
| No. commercial TV stations | n.a. | n.a. | 30 | 30 |
| No. commercial radio stations | n.a. | n.a. | 79 | 79 |
| No. news websites (unattached to the traditional media) | n.a. | n.a. | 3 | 4 |
| Advertising revenue in print media (BAM) | 25.560.236,00 | 26.347.785,00 | 36.351.555,00 | 35.901.766,00 |
| Advertising revenue in TV (BAM) | 259.465.121 | 313.702.716 | 454.627.434 | 423.735.389 |
| Advertising revenue in radio (BAM) | n.a. | 3.700.000 | 5.200.000 | 4.500.000 |
| Advertising revenue in new media (BAM) | n.a. | n.a. | 500.000.00 | 700.000 |

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Authors

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Editor of the online magazine Žurnal. Previous experience: Editor-in-Chief of Start BiH magazine, awarded the Magazine of the Year award in 2004 in BiH, and received the Amnesty International award for investigative reporting the same year. Previously Editor-in-Chief of the magazine Ekonomist and Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Business magazine. Before that, he was the editor of the Crimes and Accidents Section of Večernje novine. Professional journalist since 1 March 1996. He has worked with other media and organisations engaged in educating reporters. For three years, he was a guest lecturer at the Media Plan School of Journalism. He occasionally teaches education projects for reporters organised by Mediacentar. Executive Director of the Citizens Association, Centre for Media Development and Analysis.

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Executive Editor of the online magazine Žurnal. Deputy Editor-in-Chief of Start BiH magazine. Before that, he worked as the head of the Večernje novine Information Centre in Zenica. Editor of the fanzine Hijatus. Author of Tenants and Other Stories, he also works with other print media in BiH and the region. Assembly Chairperson of the Citizens Association Centre for Media Development and Analysis.

Dražen Simić

Freelance journalist working with magazines in BiH and the region. Correspondent of the following Croatian magazines: EUkonomist, Banka and the business daily Business.hr. As well as a magazine from Serbia, Biznis&Finansije, he also writes for the BiH business online magazine Investitor.ba. He is a specialist in investigative and business reporting. He was the editor of the Business magazine of San daily, and a reporter for Večernje novosti, Večernji list, Večernje novine, the Centre for Investigative Reporting. He has coordinated dozens of projects for the World Bank in BiH.

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Graduated in journalism at the Faculty of Political Science in Sarajevo. Currently enrolled in the second year at the Law Faculty in Sarajevo. He was a correspondent from Zenica for the daily newspaper Oslobodjenje, and a journalist on Start BiH magazine. Founder and president of the non-governmental youth organisation Bunt perom. Journalist and designer of the youth magazine Eho. Holds the Mediacentar and European Journalism Centre certificate for investigative journalism.