

Bosnia: A Question of Objectivity

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Could some journalists in south-east Europe be rediscovering the importance of virtues that certain of their British counterparts are abandoning?

A few days ago, IWPR - the organisation I now work for - posted a story from Sarajevo concerning controversial plans to change the name of the main avenue from Tito to Izetbegovic street.

The story ended with a quote from the youth wing of a political party that had published some diaries by way of contribution to the debate containing a message from the late president Tito "from beyond the grave". Tito's comment on the quarrel was upbeat: lucky the city if I am the biggest problem!

An IWPR seminar in Sarajevo this week looking at whether media objectivity poses a trap or a challenge gives rise to similar feelings. The Balkans must be lucky now if we are even discussing such an issue.

More than a decade ago, when I was reporting from the region, such a seminar would not have made any sense. Leaving aside some well-known and often courageous exceptions, the very concept of an objective media seemed hopelessly distant.

Indeed, I might be tempted to call this talk "Where have all the Shiptars gone?" as one of the most dramatic changes in the media in the region since that period has been the decline in routine ethnic stereotyping.

Working here a decade ago, newspapers barely featured Albanians. They didn't exist - there was only the derogatory term Shiptar. There were very few Croats either, for the media had long since turned them all into Ustashe.

This ritual communal abuse was not limited to one side in the conflict. In Croatia, there were few Serbs in the media, for they had turned into that strange hybrid word Serbo-Chetniks.

I could afford to laugh at such terms. To me, the word Serb-Chetnik was comic, and for some reason conjured up images of a cheap eastern-European car. You drive a Skoda? I drive a Serb-Chetnik!

But among many people these words exerted great power. Dehumanising and depersonalising their objects - as they were intended to - their introduction into the general public discourse through the media paved the way for the public in the former Yugoslav republics to accept the principle of collective punishments for the "other side".

Reporting from Northern Ireland a few years ago for the newspaper *The Independent* - and in an area as ethnically and religiously divided as any of the Balkan crisis zones - I felt grateful that British journalism - for all its weaknesses and flaws - had generally resisted the temptation to demonise whole communities in this way.

In the bitterly divided town of Portadown, I was reporting from an area whose local population was almost totally opposed to a British presence in their community, whether that took the form of police, soldiers or the judiciary.

But as a British media representative, I met only courtesy from the community who - after years of conflict with the British state - treated reporters as people who were likely to report their own views with attention to detail and concern for accuracy. They assumed I was likely to be reasonably objective in my reporting.

The reasons for the difference in the Balkan and British traditions lie deep in history. British journalism has a tradition - not so much of objectivity, but of critical independence - which dates back to the beginning of organised party political conflict in the early 18th century.

The relatively equal strength of two large but opposing political parties created the necessary space in which a free media could grow. By the 1740s, the British media was remarkably free of external control in comparison to its continental counterparts.

The philosopher David Hume remarked this in his essay *Of the Liberty of the Press* in 1741. "Nothing," he said, "is more apt to surprise a foreigner than the extreme liberty which we enjoy in this country of communicating whatever we please to the public and of openly censuring every measure entered into by the King or his ministers."

Accountable to wealthy press oligarchs but not to governments, British journalism became famous for its aggression, inquisitiveness and its freedom from restraint.

What enabled this state of affairs was the wide distribution of power and money. Because the English crown was weak and unable to finance itself, the crown had to govern in harness with parliaments that voted the crown supplies of money. When money and power are widely dispersed in this way, there can never be much centralised control of information. It was, therefore, natural that with the rise of mass circulation newspapers, proprietors in Britain should take an independent line from the executive.

Balkan states emerged on different lines. Impoverished by centuries of foreign rule, after the new states emerged in the 1800s, power centralised in royal courts and in the royal bureaucracies. It was hard to succeed in these societies without coming into close contact with state officials from whose influence it was hard to escape and whom it was often dangerous to oppose.

People often think the Serbian media's culture of craven support for the Milosevic regime was a legacy of communist ideology, which inculcated a disregard for inconvenient facts, refused to separate news from comment, had an inbuilt preference for seeing issues in black-and-white and was obsessed with the discovery and extermination of internal enemies and traitors.

But while the communist legacy was important in perpetuating the weaknesses in Balkan journalism, the roots of these flaws predated the revolutions of 1945.

The journalistic culture of the Balkans has had difficulty escaping a public culture that was shaped during the independence struggles of the early 19th century. Milovan Djilas wrote an interesting pen portrait of the public culture of pre-war Serbia - I forget in which book - recalling the sight of a large crowd in Belgrade that had gathered to applaud the public appearance of the King Aleksandar at some function. The crowd, he wrote, was composed almost entirely of officials and their hangers-on who were permanently on hand to create the impression of spontaneous, massive public enthusiasm for any royal event.

How little Serbia had changed in fifty years from King Aleksandar's time to Slobodan Milosevic's, for I can still remember the vast, not-so-spontaneous meetings in support of Milosevic's policy in Kosovo comprising huge numbers of workers who had been bussed in from their factories by the government.

This may seem like a divergence from the subject of journalistic objectivity. But objectivity can only flourish in the framework of independence - and newspaper independence, as I have tried to outline, is closely related to the distribution of resources and to the public culture which grows up in the shade of those resources.

In Britain, the public culture is changing all the time. The balance of power between the media and the government has continued to change - dramatically at the expense of the latter. David Hume might be shocked at the change since 1741.

Within my own lifetime, journalists interviewing leading politicians have moved from a general culture of deference to one of aggression. A highly inquisitorial interviewing style - carrying the implicit suggestion that almost every politician is lying - has become something of a new journalistic norm.

The recent battle between the BBC and the Blair government over the BBC Today programme's reporting of the Iraq war has exposed this confrontation and triggered the most wide-ranging debate that I can remember on the British media's standards of objectivity.

The debate has been highly polemical and has not been characterised by the journalistic corpus rushing to defend the standards of criticised colleagues.

Some - it is true - have robustly defended the British media as the best of its kind, guilty at the very worst of cutting a few ethical corners in order to pursue the superior goal of uncovering wrong-doing in high places.

Writing in the *British Journalism Review*, sociology professor Stein Ringen takes precisely this line.

"Standards are relevant, but they are not what the press is about," he said. "They are the means by which the press does its job, but are not the job. That job is to enlighten the public and to educate and entertain it. It is to hold to answer those who exercise power.

He describes what he calls "the essential democratic job" of the media quite simply as "scrutinising power".

"In order to be able to display power at work, the press may need to sacrifice some accuracy of information, at least during the process of investigation," he went on. "There is something paralytically puritanical and bloodless in the opinion that standards are holy and paramount. That is to ask for a pretty press with no bite."

Ringen contrasted this British approach with that of the French press, which he calls "pretty" in the sense that it cultivates standards at the expense of investigation. Lambasting leading titles such as *Le Monde* for their refusal to inform the French public about the private life and political background of the late president Francois Mitterrand until he was almost dead, Ringen describes this flagship of French journalism as an example of "élitism on display".

"No censorship is needed because a culture is in place in which order is maintained," he said.

But this is only one side of the argument in the debate. Many other voices, including a surprising number from the centre-left stable, who might once have been expected to rally round the flag of journalistic freedom, have said the BBC-Blair bust-up has exposed a decline in the standards of objectivity in British press reporting and a worrying tendency to conflate news and comment.

The highly respected magazine the Economist in an editorial damningly described the BBC's controversial reporting on Iraq as "typical of much of modern British journalism, twisting or falsifying the supposed news to fit a journalist's opinion about where the truth really lies. Some in the British media have described such journalism as 'brave'. Sloppy or biased would be better words".

Similarly the Financial Times editor Andrew Gowers has described the row over the BBC as a "wake-up call" for British journalism rather than for the government. Gowers has said it "should prompt us to resist the easy, superficial certainties of parti-pris opinion and rediscover the virtues of accuracy, context and verification".

Finally, John Lloyd, former editor of the left-leaning New Statesman, has attacked what he calls a "culture of attachment" in the press, which he says grew directly out of the experience of journalists frustrated over British and western inactivity in the Bosnian war.

It was not the fact that journalists had openly called for Western intervention in Bosnia that disturbed him, he wrote. It was their growing inability to distinguish between "advocacy" journalism and news reporting, which he insists must be kept rigorously separate from one another.

It might be painting too flattering a picture of Balkan journalism to say that journalists in south-east Europe are rediscovering the importance of virtues that their British counterparts are abandoning.

Even without the crude ethnic stereotyping I described earlier, the drive to raise standards of objective journalism in this region remains hampered by the un-signposted fusion of news and comment. There is still an over-reliance on the famous "anonymous sources" and unnamed "experts" to prove points.

This kind of journalism only pretends to standards of objectivity, crudely adopting a few superficial mannerisms and techniques of western journalism to disguise what in fact is the same old deeply partial reporting.

There is also another much newer problem in the Balkans - a kind of wildcat reporting which, rejoicing in the sudden lifting of state censorship, identifies "liberty" with the liberty to print almost any rumours about anyone, with no regard to the laborious fact-checking that has long been the rule in American, if not so much in British, newspapers.

But as the current debate over the media in Britain shows, the British have no monopoly on the question of objectivity. We are not paragons of virtue, either.

Marcus Tanner is an IWPR editor/trainer in Belgrade. This article formed the basis of a lecture he delivered at an IWPR seminar, Media Freedom - a Challenge and a Trap, in Sarajevo on March 4.

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