

Court Reporting Lessons for Croat Media

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Croatian journalists learn how to cover war crimes trials objectively.

A workshop held in Zagreb has boosted interest in war crimes reporting among Croatian journalists and highlighted the need for better coverage of war crimes proceedings in the local media.

“I wish there were more workshops like this,” said Ivana Peric, a student of journalism who took part in the workshop on war crimes reporting held in the Croatian capital between December 8 and 18.

“The local media is full of irrelevant information, while important subjects such as war crimes proceedings rarely get enough space in the media outlets. And even when these reports do appear in the newspapers or broadcast media, they tend to be biased and lack objectivity.”

The workshop was organised by Croatian NGO Documenta and Zagreb University with the support of the National Foundation for Civil Society.

“The aim of this workshop was to help young journalists and students understand the importance of war crimes trials,” said Vesna Terselic, the director of Documenta.

One of the trainers was IWPR’s reporter in Zagreb, Goran Jungvirth, who used the knowledge he gained working with IWPR to teach the students the basics of objective and balanced reporting on war crimes trials and related issues.

Jungvirth was himself trained by IWPR in 2005 and has been reporting for the organisation ever since on war crimes proceedings in The Hague and in the Croatian courts.

“The students who participated in this workshop had some prior knowledge of this issue, but after just a few days most of them admitted they were amazed at how little they actually knew about war crimes trials taking place either in The Hague or in Croatia,” Jungvirth said. “They also expressed their concern that due to the lack of information on this subject the general public in this country and in the whole region can easily be manipulated by the nationalist politicians who are trying to use these trials for their own political goals.”

Jungvirth added that the majority of students who took part in the workshop realised that war crimes trials are extremely important “because facts established in the judgements can help set the record straight about recent wars in the former Yugoslavia and events that led to these wars”.

During the practical part of the workshop, Jungvirth presented reports from several media outlets in Croatia and Serbia on the trial of three Croatian generals – Ante Gotovina, Mladen Markac and Ivan Cermak – which is taking place at the Hague tribunal, and compared those reports with IWPR articles on the same case.

The three generals are on trial for crimes committed against Serb civilians in the Krajina region during Croatian military operation Storm in the summer of 1995, during which 350 Serb civilians were killed and 200,000 were forced to flee.

The reports on this case presented at the workshop showed that Croatian media gave more space to the defence arguments, and little or no space to the prosecution’s examination in chief, while the Serbian media focused on the prosecution’s arguments and did not even mention what the witness said when cross-examined by the defence.

Only IWPR’s reports presented the arguments of both sides, and Jungvirth used them as a positive example

of what balanced reports on war crimes trial should look like.

As part of the workshop, the students visited the tribunal's office in Zagreb where they discussed the reasons behind negative perception of the tribunal among people in Croatia. According to the tribunal's staff, the lack of information on the trials taking place in this court is the main reason why Croatian people are under the impression that the tribunal is biased and an anti-Croat institution.

The students were then asked to cover the Hague proceedings against two former Bosnian Serb police officials, Mico Stanisic and Stojan Zupljanin, indicted for crimes against non-Serbs during the Bosnian 1992-95 war and to write a report on this trial. The reports they wrote were balanced and had enough background information on the case.

"This workshop made me realise how little people actually know about what really happened during the wars in the Nineties. War crimes trials can definitely fill that gap," said Martina Pizeta, a student of journalism who participated in the training session.

"I learned a lot about the responsibility of the media when it comes to reporting about war crimes trials. I now know why it is so important to provide balanced and objective reports on this sensitive issue," said Sanja Hrvojevic, an experienced Croatian journalist who took part in the workshop because she wanted to learn more about this subject.

Documenta plans to continue with these workshops in the future. The focus of the next one will be on trials taking place at war crimes courts in Croatia.

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IWPR undertakes capacity-building programmes in more than two dozen areas of crisis and conflict around the world. Established in 1993, its work focuses on training, reporting and institution-building. This includes establishing independent local media; training local reporters, editors and producers in basic and specialist skills; supporting extensive in-depth reporting on human rights, good governance and related issues; disseminating fact-based reporting in developing countries and internationally; and strengthening communications capacity of local human rights, women's and grassroots organisations.

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