

PROPAGANDA FOR WAR AND HATRED AND FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA

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Session 2 - Public and Professional Challenges to Propaganda

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Moisture in the computer

Propaganda and crisis situations are twins. They always come as a pair.

Propaganda seems to be the first drop of moisture in a sophisticated machine.

But it would be wrong to blame just media or only journalists for the devastating effect of propaganda on a country's public. Besides journalists, we should never forget politicians and their political parties, military headquarters and their authoritarian circles. There are also the increasingly numerous intellectuals, historians, experts and even entire parts of the public. When you read some reactions by "ordinary people", you cannot escape the impression that they could hardly wait for a new serving of media lies so they could use the "alchemy of digestion" to turn them into pure truth.

Of course, media and journalists carry their portion of the blame. It mainly has to do with failure to adhere to the rules of the profession. From not verifying the facts to contempt for other sources or uncritical acceptance of all information from "reliable sources". One of the best Bosnian journalists, Zlatko Dizdarević, in an article for local media, explaining the total chaos in the coverage of Syria and the public's inability to understand most events after 2011 when the war started, refers to an observation by Britain's *Independent* journalist Robert Fisk – the lack of one of the key questions in any news piece. News items do not provide the answer to the question why. As any piece of news relies on the famous 5 Ws (who, what, when, where and why), in today's journalism there is never the important one – why.

The reason is simple, argues Dizdarević. The background of what is happening must be explained and that is no longer desirable. In order to answer the question why – one must know everything that is important, but contemporary journalism has no interest in that.

The mission is mainly to convince the public. As a chronicler has observed a long time ago: "We are not informed; we are frightened".

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (1991 – 1995) was marked by grandiose media propaganda. Propaganda was a prelude to the war because it could be used to explain anything. The hate, the tens of thousands of killed, the concentration camps, the cities under siege, the hunger and misery, the indescribable crimes, the inevitability of war. Watching television programs during the war in the former Yugoslavia, it was not hard to agree with Lieberman's description of Nazi Germany's press: "One could not eat as much as one could throw up".

I observed two common propaganda models in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia. One was related to the announcement that the enemy wants to use the most dangerous kinds of weapons, which was expressed most precisely in the widely broadcast news that "Croatia is preparing an atomic bomb". The second model is linking the opposite side with fascism, especially fascism from the Second World War, on which there is evidence the size of an encyclopedia. What is fascinating is that this propaganda pattern has generally been used over the last decade in all crises and wars across the world.

Propaganda grows because it completely changes the media environment in a crisis situation. Key sources are located in military and political headquarters, which create the desirable impression through regular briefings and filtered information. On the other hand, today's public (people formerly known as the audience) is very sensitive to all information that confirms "our" side is right. The essence of journalism is news. That means facts. The environment changes in that it favors other formats, in which views and opinions dominate. Generally dominant are broader information, stands, comments, interviews and contemplations, where there is much more room for all forms of propaganda. The share of verified facts decreases, while the role of personal and collective views, observations and reflections increases.

It is also important if certain rules are established. Censorship? An order on desirable terminology? During the war in Sarajevo official censorship did not exist. What did exist was constant political and military pressure on the media, to which everyone reacted individually. It resulted in management shifts and "acceptable

conduct” by both media and journalists. It was only towards the end of the war, in June 1995, that the army sent its controllers to the most important B&H TV outlet to inspect information before its release. Croatian journalist Drago Hedl often refers to an event from the first years of the war in Slavonia. Croatian Radio-Television had made some sort of list of terminology which journalists had to use when reporting on the war, from the name of the enemy to the naming of the enemy’s institutions. Thus, the Krajina, the military name for the territory controlled by Croatian Serbs during the war, on Croatian television always had to have an addition – the adjective ‘so-called’. It happened once during the war that a fiddle player, the well-known Đuro Krajina, visited Osijek and the reporter who was covering the clearly music event started his report with the words: So-called Đuro Krajina held a concert tonight...

Beyond the usual humor, propaganda in crisis situations really does change the content of certain words. It becomes some sort of golden bridge between today and a future history. History, by definition, is the past. It talks about events that already happened. With propaganda, history becomes some sort of future. We have to wait tens of years to finally find out what happened to us in the past.

That is why journalism with its value system is important. In a deluge of millions of voices which enjoy freedom of speech, it modestly admits that limitations of that freedom do exist for journalists. That is because every piece of information must be verified, every number compared and source contacted, and one must always ask – why. That is how journalism fights so that we do not have to wait for the faraway future to create our history and only then to discover in what kind of world we had lived.

Boro Kontić