

From the Region

**A Long-term ‘Infection’:
On Postwar Hate Speech in Media**

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Hate speech that was transmitted, spread and mediated through the media is considered by many to be one of the key factors in the preparation and breakout of the conflicts and wars in the region of the former Yugoslavia. From the very beginning of the conflicts, a phrase that the “first rounds were fired from TV screens” took hold among the critical circles, meaning that the war was started by the media and that they were the most responsible for it. At one point hate speech and the media seemed to have become synonyms.

Although there is no doubt that the media really did play one of the key and dirtiest roles in the conflicts in the region of the former Yugoslavia, they were only an instrument of politics, under its greater or lesser control. In any case an instrument, not an autonomous creator of conflict. There is no doubt that this primacy belongs to politics. However, the role of the media in the war and preparation for war, and also in the postwar period, has not even remotely been explained and illuminated. On the contrary, there is a tendency to give serious, although somewhat superficial and simplified, evaluations, which either underline the media as the cause of the war or reduce their function solely to spreading negative propaganda and lies. This tendency neglects many other aspects of the very complex media activity with long-term negative consequences, even after the end of the conflict.

To mark the appearance of the book “The Media and War” – published by the Belgrade agency “Argumenti” and the Zagreb-based Transition and Civil Society Research Center, comprising a number of important empirical and theoretical researches into the role and conduct of the media in the wars in the region of the former Yugoslavia – the Croatian Helsinki Board, Sarajevo-based Law Center, and Transition and Civil Society Research Center (with support of the “Friedrich Ebert” Foundation and Open Society Croatia) organized a roundtable entitled “Hate Speech,” in Rovinj, Croatia, on April 7-8. The aim of the gathering, which brought together a number of journalists, sociologists, political scientists and philosophers – was primarily to illuminate further and deeper the different aspects and ways of functioning of “hate speech,” first of all its “production plants” (the media) and the

conditions of their operation, as well as the marks that “hate speech” leaves in political communities and their value systems. The gathering also discussed more adequate and efficient approaches to researching hate speech.

A very demanding range of key topics and issues presented before the gathering did not enable complete and powerful answers to be given to many of the questions opened, but in any case it considerably contributed to the ways of raising the issue and illuminating the many concealed aspects of this phenomenon.

Of course, one cannot speak about the phenomenon of hate speech only in the context of the media, as they are not the only channel and means of spreading hate speech. One should not forget that these channels also include, for example, the education system and military indoctrination. Furthermore, from a formal viewpoint, one may or may not consume the media, but education is compulsory, and military service almost inevitable. The common source and generator of hate speech that uses these sources are beyond doubt the political power centers. However, it is the media that are able to have a more autonomous position towards them, more autonomous than the institutional power mechanisms (education, army, etc.), which makes their sin greater.

By analyzing hate production plants, the media, the journalists Miso Vasic and Danko Plevnik saw “hate speech” primarily as an instrument of legitimizing war policies, but even more than that as an instrument of concealing the key goals of war. Hate thus becomes an emotional excuse for stealing property, a “manipulative fog” for justifying direct war plunder and – what is even more important – for organizing systematic social plunder in war that impoverishes all segments of the population and destroys economic resources. Media (industrial) instigation of thunderous ethnic hate makes it possible to be silent with regard to the mechanisms and degree of this social plunder.

Hate is not instigated through the media as a reflection of (emotional) conditions; it is produced as an ideology in which the system of civilized and human values of (civil) society is destabilized and eliminated. In this context, there is a key difference between a political war crime and a media war crime. For a media war crime, namely a war crime committed via the media, the Hague Tribunal for Rwanda has already pronounced several sentences. However, these sentences are based on the fact that war operations directly resulting in slaughter were directed or instigated via the media. It remains unclear what criteria can be used to raise the issue of media war

crimes committed in the territory of the former Yugoslavia. This issue is readily avoided “slippery” ground, although there exists numerous testimony (and even proof) on the most perfidious and direct abuse of the media for the war effort. Perhaps we should start to work on systematizing the types of responsibility and the cause-and-effect relationships in the case of the war and media in the former Yugoslavia.

However, although journalistic introspection of the media hate industry has offered very alluring explanations for this phenomenon, it still has not been absolved in many dimensions. One of the key and fundamental objections is that hatred can be produced “rationally,” but that it still functions as an emotional (but not always irrational) condition, which therefore is insensitive to arguments. Hatred works as a moral amalgam whose position is not subject to discussion. It takes the side of truth and lie; lie as a media category becomes irrelevant for this kind of problem.

Hate speech becomes even more complex if one knows that it does not even have to be based on lies. On the contrary, it may be based on facts. However, the media present, elaborate and put in context these facts in such a way that they produce ideological patterns by which they spread hate as a system of values, as a moral surrogate for a process that eliminates moral dilemmas and questions. Namely, as the philosopher Nadezda Cacinovic warns, one of the fundamentals on which hate speech rests and functions is aestheticism of hate. Namely, creating a situation, setting an environment in which violence, hate, and even crime can function as “something normal.” Aestheticism of hate destroys moral questions, criteria and dilemmas that would otherwise block violence. The process of aestheticism “trains” an appropriate (reduced) moral sensibility, and suspends the moral dimension. The role of the broadcast media is inevitable in this regard, in particular of television, which uses specific stylization, actually a seemingly irreconcilable, but efficient combination of mythical tradition and, for example, Americanization (in the form of “Ramboism”) to impose widely acceptable patterns.

This aestheticism, as a mimicking terminator of “excessive” moral dilemmas and questions, points to the specific characteristic of the actual state of hate speech, or more precisely of its postwar physiognomy. Hence, for example, the well-known Croatian publicist Igor Mandic says that hate speech has not disappeared; it is still present as a – chameleon. It is hard to recognize, it changes color (form, rhetoric, contents, emphasis, aims), but it is still active. Extremists do not pose the biggest danger, because the most extreme media as a rule do not have much influence on the

general public; they are limited to narrow circles of people who share their views (it is sad that quality and critical media have an equally small public). The new hate speech, the new atmosphere of intolerance, in which moral criteria are substituted and reduced, is spread by constantly regenerating hate through humorous speech, for example programs whose recipients have a reduced critical threshold. This means not through political programs, but through entertainment, sports and similar contents.

Perhaps the most fatal aspect of this issue is that today, consciously or unconsciously, it sometimes involves media that for a long time have had the reputation of being critical, professional and civilized fighters against the political and media “swamp” (for example, a lot of criticism in this context was heard at this gathering against the cult Zagreb-based Radio 101). Regeneration of hate speech in the media is helped by continued connection of the media to the political structures (incumbent or former authorities) and their participation in political conflicts, and the profiteering motives for which all tools are used to scandalize the public.

The participants in the Rovinj gathering also warned of another problem. This problem is that certain media, without clear professional criteria, standards and rules – which to a great extent is caused precisely by the nature of their de-professionalism when they were helping the war effort – even today legitimize the new hate and violence speech. Various associations with clear messages of hate and violence do not legitimize themselves in the open political arena; they do this primarily by maintaining a constant uncritical presence and recycling their messages in the highest circulation/highest rated media.

How can hate speech in the media be opposed? The gravity of this issue and the difficulty in answering this question were best expressed by the well-known Croatian philosopher and president of the Croatian Helsinki Board, Dr. Zarko Puhovski, who assessed that arguments are practically the only tool in this fight. But he also warned of the difficulty of using arguments to oppose the fabrication of an emotional condition of irrationality, which hate speech actually is. On the other hand, sanctioning hate speech always means walking along a dangerous line – the sanctioning of hate speech brings with it the danger of sanctioning freedom of speech itself. Perhaps the solution should be sought somewhere in-between – in media ombudsmen whose public reputation can become a factor that curbs hate speech and builds and develops professional standards and rules in raising the media culture.

This means that it is even more important to carry out permanent research into the content of messages spread by the media and their influence on the public and on users. This issue was discussed as a separate part of the gathering. Research of this kind has so far solely focused on the wartime period and the wartime functions of the media. We are now entering a new phase that calls for new explication of this phenomenon and new research methods in order to examine what we are facing now and how to oppose it. If not, our communities, political and social, may become “contaminated” again.

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