

Final report
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Topic: *MEDIATING THE NATION: MEDIA PROPAGANDA IN CROATIA DURING THE
HOMELAND WAR (1991 – 1995)*

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I started of the research at the OSA with a presumption that the mainstream media played a crucial part in the ex-Yugoslav conflict of the 1990's. State controlled media came under a strong nationalist parties influence and virtually without any opposition (since there were no commercial televisions, or widely influential critical anti-government newspapers) swept, in a very short time period, the entire region with their separate envisioning of history and reality that submerged Croatian and Bosnian territory into war.

As stated in my initial proposal, my intentions while going through the (predominantly) video materials were to focus on specific events and reports on them, to grasp the editorial policies by investigating, for instance, what public figures were given most media space and what were the prime-time interviews, as well as how did the journalist-commentators position themselves as opinion-makers. This I tried to analyse through the net of ideological coding by identifying the dominant topics and their intensification with time, searching for certain information and language types that can be considered exclusive, repetitive and function as absolute statements in the dominant nationalist-narrative presentations and outputted opinions. For instance, a clear linguistic example of this is the division of the term *refugee*, to differ between the ones from Croatia and Bosnia: Bosnian *izbjeglice* / Croatian *prognanici*. The first embodies the meaning for somebody who fled (own choice) and the other describes someone who is driven out (no choice). In the following paragraph I will point out the aspects and examples that I find most significant in this early stage of going through and analysing the viewed and recorded materials.

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After a being advised by Robert Parnica to look into it, I started my research with the Croatian subject files (1991 – 1997) in the *Open Media Research Institute* collection **OSA 205 - 4 - 100**. Browsing through various subjects, I focused on the specific Media category (boxes 2 - 3), and was making photo files for the Parallel archive as well. This collection is containing news agency releases, newspaper clippings and copies of articles from scientific and other publications, but the press clipping is fore mostly from the printed media that was considered to be more independent and critical of the state authorities, like *Slobodna Dalmacija* and *Novi list*. I consider it to be an insightful starting point for researching the

specifics of transitional period of the Croatian printed media. As I could grasp from the files, the journalist profession was redefining itself drastically which was visible by the number of articles that were of self-reflective nature, posing questions on professional ethics and integrity and how the journalists should position themselves on the war-time events. Transitional process through the specific political positioning of the media was in focus, as changes in the ownership structures occurred rapidly and significantly, and so did the working conditions. A renowned case is the weekly paper *Danas* that was considered a peek of investigative journalism of the pre-war period and was abolished in a very early (nationalist) stage to reappear controlled by ruling HDZ party renamed into *Novi danas* (The New Today), which even semantically concurs with the project of establishing a new nationalist state.

My main research was conducted within the two following collections: **OSA 304 - 0 - 16** (Records of the International Human Rights Law Institute Relating to the Conflict in the Former Yugoslavia - Video Recordings Relating to the Conflict in the former Yugoslavia) and **OSA 350 - 1 - 1** (Records of the International Monitor Institute - Europe - Balkan archive).

Although the primal interest is the Croatian television (HTV), I was also watching the excerpts from the Serbian television as well as foreign news agencies reports, to gain a wider understanding of the different representation of the same events as well as to acquire information that were withheld from certain media sources. During the research process two investigative aspects presented themselves as being crucial for a more in depth analysis: following the reports in a continuous manner and comparative approach of the media, when possible. From applying these methods it can be stated that the implementation of propagandistic content in the central Croatian information show *Dnevnik* was done more gradually with adding specific content (like more minutes for covering the events dominated by president Tuđman and HDZ), whilst the Serbian media fabricated news from an early stage (case of false reporting on victims in Pakrac that resulted in massive oppositional demonstrations in Belgrade and Novi Sad).

As the viewing and analysis of the videos is very much time consuming process, I had only the time to investigate the period between fall of 1990 and summer of 1991 during which an intensification of reports based on presenting binary relations and simple equations (as ethnicity = religion = nation) is obvious. Such repetitive formulas are used in the news content, creating a media rhetoric of simple truth and clear messaging based upon strict ethnic-national bordering: such political reasoning has the constant upper hand, as, for instance, citizenship comes in as a secondary category to ethnicity.

What I also find important to mention is that right from the start questions arose on the intersection of personal and collective memory, due to the fact I was growing up during the period.

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Initial important finds were several hard-line documentaries (*Croatia for Croatian, This is Croatia*), specially produced by the Croatian television (same group of authors) for the foreign public, specifically for the Croatian diaspora, with a clear intention to outline the political stand of the ruling HDZ: independence based on the historical right and cultural specificity of the Croatian state within Yugoslavia. This was made within the theoretical framework that I've proposed; the national identity was outlined in opposition to Serbia on several accounts: religion (catholic/orthodox), culture (Central-European/Balkan), political ideology (democracy/communism) and even mentality. Bosnia is regarded as the second homeland of Croats.

I was also searching for more subtle propaganda implementation and cases that would contradict my framework. An excellent example of the later is a short documentary report *Knin bez komentara (Knin without comment)* which mostly consists of interviews with individuals on both "sides", where moments of clear disorientation about the situation can be read out from their statements, pointing towards the influence of the mainstream media sources, as the interviewees try to establish what news stations are trustworthy. The statements that they give are those of transitional insecurity, just before the propaganda from both dominant and opposing media sources (Croatian / Serbian TV and radio stations) is soon going to "make up their minds" towards political radicalization.

Several topics I found exceptionally interesting to be analysed as symptomatic cases: the reporting on the pre-war tensions in the towns of Pakrac and Virovitica; the change in perspective when the Muslim-Croatian conflict started in Bosnia and Herzegovina, forwarding a paradigm of creating an image of the new Muslim enemy; and reports made by the Austrian television (ORF) which I consider to be examples of remarkable war journalism in respects of objectivity: by presenting stories of more than one side and reporting on events that are not generically processed by all the other media, but rather point out something new on the issues, as was the case of the villages near Mrkopalj where the inhabitants of different dominant ethnicities singlehandedly agreed on not waging war against each other.

I find that the significance of the research lies in its actuality, as the nationalist public discourse implemented in the 1990s is present to the day and very much reviving. The '90s are basically being historicised, especially in the light of the current mutual genocide lawsuits that are being in the media focus. However there isn't much, if any, investigative journalism (especially of archival sort) foregrounding and influencing the public sphere on this issues. Thus I find it important for the implement the research, in the form of articles published in the daily media and academic journals, into the public discourse and emphasize the role of the media in war campaigns. Therefore I find my two-month research period to be a start of a wider investigation at OSA, as first I plan to make further individual visits to the archive and, depending on the possibilities, creating a project that could be a longer term investigation including collaboration with a number of interested researchers, because the Balkan archive definitely holds the potential for it.

Due to my research in the OSA archive I find that future investigation should be based upon the premises that public and personal ideology merged and existed as closely as they could – people were recognizing their identity and memories in a wider context and appropriating them as their own if the narrative seemed coherent. (It is important to stress out that the construction of a mediated reality, appropriated by the audience which mostly consumed the propaganda without the awareness of the nature of the media, was only not specificity of the rural Croatian areas, where the sources of information were minimized, but also in the cities, as there was no effective intellectual resistance.) This is to be done by giving a genealogical perspective of what I consider to be a re-nationalistic project of 'convincing'. It can be done by perceiving and examining nationalist stereotypes and ideas in three phases. First, how they came about, were nurtured and finally 'bloomed' in the late 1980s. Secondly, how they were mediated, hyperbolized and further invented during the war. Finally, how they still consequently linger in the popular imagery and memory.

Also, journalist professionalism is brought into question as several reaction-types of journalists could be recognized. For instance, the 'Ketman', 'forced' or 'believer' type, who among others were commissioned to 'educate and bring up' the nation by perpetuating the myths served by the nationalist politicians (especially on the mutual World war II competitive and comparative victimization) into the popular domain, as old stereotypes were emphasized for the sake of unifying the people in the national struggle. A closer look inside the pockets of resistance, like the oppositionist newspapers (*Feral*, *Arkzin* as the most radical ones), as well

as the right-wing extremist media like *Hrvatsko slovo*, is also necessary. A transnational comparative perspective is required as reviewing the work of the Serbian, Bosnian and the foreign media on the same issues is especially interesting because of the narratives used in the opposing nationalist discourses, in particular by the Croatian and Serbian TV, radio and mainstream newspapers, which offer an insight into a mutual reflecting representation of one another.

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Additional bibliography used during the research, from the OSA and CEU library:

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