

An Analysis of UNTV

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The main aim of United Nations Television (UNTV) was to challenge the nationalists' interpretation of some critical episodes in the post-Yugoslav conflicts and to undermine the monopoly on information that each of the nationalist political elites exercised within their specific territories. By attempting to do so, UNTV offered insights into daily life on the 'other' side of the frontlines and reporting which aspired to be without prejudice. This was precisely the opposite of the approach of local broadcasters. The notion - thought through in the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) headquarters - looked very good in theory. The practice was more challenging however and begged key questions: How could an organisation with neutrality in its mandate avoid getting involved in the information war? Could it, moreover, win the information war by offering unbiased reporting, if it did not also have a reliable, fully controlled means of transmitting its programmes?

By setting up UNTV, UNPROFOR undoubtedly enriched its previous output. A new form of communication had been tested and deployed in the war theatre. The crucial element of reaching the local audience proved difficult and undermined much of the effort. UN missions had traditionally included film and information units, but this was a much more ambitious attempt to communicate to the audiences in the conflict area. Instead of the footage that traditionally glorified efforts by the peacekeepers that hardly anyone outside the UN offices showed any interest in, the idea was to benefit the local population. Therefore, this new approach had potential. The question remains whether the obstacles were too significant for success.

UNTV bears some similarities with the operation commonly known as 'Radio Boat' (Radio Brod), a broadcasting station on a ship named *Droit de Parole* and funded by the organisation of the same name. It operated from the Adriatic Sea between April 1993 and February 1994, aiming to offer professionally gathered information to audiences that were generally deprived of independently produced news. By hiring local journalists with proven records and with a critical position towards nationalist ideology, Radio Boat differed from UNTV, whose journalists were hired from outside the region and with varying knowledge of Yugoslav and

post-Yugoslav affairs, and as a result thirty years later appears a decidedly overbearing approach. However, the final results of both operations and methods were similar: not many local audiences followed their broadcasts. UNTV relied on the goodwill of local broadcasters to transmit their work to audiences, resulting in many refusals by several major broadcasters. In some cases UNTV attempted to reach audiences via less powerful, more localised television stations whose signal was weaker and therefore did not reach the target audience.

In retrospect, a fresh analysis of the project might identify several factors that weakened the operation.

UNPROFOR possibly did not realise that the causes of the series of post-Yugoslav conflicts were the people in power in each of these new states and not the ordinary people. In its efforts to transmit its broadcasting and reach people who were not necessarily nationalists, UNTV needed to rely on agreements with those same people who had initiated the war and were the very creators and supporters of the nationalist ideologies the UN was seeking to counter. UNTV thus clashed with the new states' agendas.

The methodology of UNTV – deriving from the nature of the staff appointed – was questionable. With the exception of when UN staff or foreign visitors were being interviewed, the raw material was filmed in local languages, then translated into English, edited and produced in English before being translated back into local languages for audiences to consume. Not all material went through all these phases, but much of it did. The UN top military and civilian officials could not be expected to like the idea of local citizens posing questions which, on occasions, awkwardly raised matters of persuasion and bias that they would rather not have addressed. Another issue was how viewers in Bosnia-Herzegovina could post questions for these representatives? The postal service was not in operation.

The international producers relied heavily on local staff for the linguistic skills they often lacked. Knowledge of local contacts, networking and often even of local contemporary history depended, in the beginning at least, on what could be obtained from local staff or secondary sources. Reliable reporting depends on matching expertise in conflict reporting with expertise about the local area. However, the locals hired to work for UNTV were not employed as experts in reporting or politics, but rather as technicians, translators and fixers – in other

words support staff. While some of the international journalists had been reporting on the conflict already, others had gained their initial background knowledge from peacetime holidays in an 'exotic Yugoslavia' which was now distant in time.

A good example of traps that outsiders sometimes fell into involves the hiring of local fixers. Joe Sacco, the Maltese-American cartoonist and journalist, produced an excellent comic book, *The Fixer*, based on his experience during the siege of Sarajevo. Sacco's original plan was to create a book about the besieged city. Upon his arrival, he hired a local guy with excellent knowledge of English, a vast list of contacts, an impressive background, and who apparently knew 'everyone'. Unlike many of his colleagues, Sacco realised that his local fixer had one failure – while telling exciting stories, the fixer also invented some of them. Hence the book is about the fixer, and the siege of Sarajevo stays in the background.

This is precisely the problem that many foreign media with significant expertise in conflict reporting, but without a reliable network of local contacts, fall into. Attacks by local media on some of the UNTV outputs prove that UNTV was not wholly naïve, but these attacks also made some valid points in their criticisms of UNTV.

The nationalist regimes perceived local independent and anti-war media as a 'fifth column' in their war effort. UNTV's position was different to these local independent media organisations, but hostile local media perception of UNTV was that it was a propagandist tool of the international community and was there as a help to the enemy, not friendly to 'our side'.

The reliance on internationally recruited journalistic staff, including the camera-operators, was based on the assumption that locals could not travel across the frontlines. At the same time leading global media, like BBC, CNN, Reuters, AP and others, hired locals as fixers and drivers within their production teams, and many of these people were frequently crossing over to the 'other side' regardless of ethnicity. Trucks in humanitarian convoys were also driven by local drivers who crossed the frontlines. UNTV's strategists somehow missed these facts. On most occasions, representatives of international media organisations did not have the privilege of using UNPROFOR's transport services, and therefore the potential danger for them was greater than it would have been for representatives of UNTV. The locals employed

by UNTV might have technical and linguistic expertise but were largely kept within studio facilities. The opportunity for a possibly substantial journalistic contribution to war reporting was lost from the start.

The political decision to set up UNTV, meanwhile, ignored the main problem: how could it reach its target audience? All interventionist media faced a similar situation in the service of supporting the peace efforts. Droit de Parole's Radio Boat used its chosen frequency illegally. It was eventually shut down after the European Commission, French government and other donors stopped financing the project, partly fearing breaking the law. A TV signal is even more difficult to transmit unless the sides involved in the conflict agree to it. This brings the whole discussion towards its fundamental point: why would the nationalist regimes with their aggressive agendas accept an intervention that would undermine their own propaganda, which they relied upon to develop popular support for their war efforts?

Besides the documentary materials for present and future historians and social scientists, the main value of the UNTV and the consequent museum's story and collection lies in initiating a debate on how best to develop effective media intervention in support of a peace mission.