Tito's Maverick Media

The Politics of Mass Communications in Yugoslavia

GERTRUDE JOCH ROBINSON

Dr. Tito prescribes for his patient (the "Party"): "With the shape you're in, you have to become more active -- start moving around!"

Jer (Belgrade), May 26, 1967
To summarize a study as complex and diversified as this one is virtually impossible. How to recapitulate Yugoslavia’s movement from a central to a regional media organization in the past thirty years? How to explain the changeover from an overtly political to a professional management in newspapers, radio stations, and the national news agency? How to sketch the changes in media content resulting from the substitution of audience for government financing? How, in addition, to highlight the essential characteristics of the country’s journalism corps and the changing role of the audience? Instead of recapitulating what has already been said, this epilogue will discuss a few of the study’s most important findings.

To begin with, the book has argued that the party is not monolithic and that the interrelationship between various party groups, the press, and the people is not simple. Political scientists like Chris Arthur and Goran Salanovic have documented the existence of at least four groups with power to articulate their opinions and to check the apparat in policy making. In descending order of influence, these are official bureaucracies such as the military, security, and economic managers. Their proximity to the leadership helps them articulate their opinions. Then there are the legislative, judicial, mass media, and cultural organizations. These include the intellectuals who are also strong contributors to public opinion formation. Last in order of influence come the workers and peasants who have bargaining power only as producers.

Since the media function as platforms and articulators of those who are able to speak out, Yugoslavia’s liberalized media organization and content in the 1960s reflected a new balance between institutional order and freedom. Earlier on, as has been seen, national government and party bureaucracies ran the media through a variety of censorship procedures and content was primarily defined in terms of official political goals. A decade later, professionalized mass communicators increasingly became the spokesmen for a variety of groups, often introducing conflicting points of view into Yugoslavia’s political communication stream. A similar plurality emerged in economics and culture where administrators and technocrats as well as writers and university professors expressed their frequently dissident views. Yugoslavia consequently became the single most interesting example of socialist democracy in action.

The introduction at this writing of yet another media reorganization highlights another important finding. Under the surface of kaleidoscopic change and adaptation the political power over the media has remained virtually static throughout the past thirty years. It has shifted merely from the national to local party hierarchies and back again. Instead of solving the incongruities between the democratic self-management principles and party needs, new organizational forms were in fact devised not to affect the power base. While it is beyond the scope of this epilogue to fully evaluate the proposed 1975 setup, its aims will be scrutinized in relation to the new groups who will have access to decision making.

What is touted as the right to public access through the "delegate system" turns out to be a subtle means for neutralizing the crystallization and expression
of public opinion. According to the new statutes, public representation will take three forms. There is to be increased representation through parity on publishers' councils, which are to be converted into two-chamber bodies. In addition there are to be two new supervisory bodies in the media, the "joint editorial councils" and the "local information councils." The former are to have about ten to fifteen "public" members and to provide critical appraisal of media output; the latter are to function as intermediaries between broadcasters and their audiences. Mijalko Todorović claims "the essential change introduced by the delegate system lies in the fact that decision-making in the broader socio-political communities is no longer exercised by some kind of general political representatives but through a type of political institution which ensures that interests formed in the base of the society are directly represented in the centers of political power."13

Closer scrutiny reveals that the "delegates" on the new councils represent other organized groups, such as trade unions; the local administration; and factory, educational, and cultural groups. Still excluded from participation are private individuals of all sorts, as well as rank-and-file workers who are the backbone of Yugoslavia's self-management system. Federal statistics indicate that since the 1960s the already small representation of workers in public life has further declined. In 1963 there were 5.5 percent workers in the Federal Assembly as compared to .6 percent (five representatives) six years later. The same trend is visible in republican and regional assemblies, where participation dropped from 7.5 percent to 1.3 percent. Only in communal assemblies has representation of workers remained virtually stable at the 14 percent level between 1963 and 1969.4

This state of affairs corroborates that most reorganizations of public and media bodies have not involved the redistribution of political power. A Yugoslav commentator notes with regret: "It is not the associated workers who decide the existential issues of their own state, but it is the other way round — the state decides about these issues. . . . Only when associated workers will have been offered a chance to spell out what they really want from their 'state,' how much of their 'state' they need, and what 'state' they desire, will it be possible to remove the discrepancy between words and deeds and to carry out reforms."13

All over the world the media serve as a channel between the governors and the governed, transmitting information and values through which social and political courses of action become defined. They also help integrate conflicting needs and formulate critical outlooks which serve as a check on government. Performance of these roles requires a balancing of economic necessities against normative demands.

The major difference between Yugoslavia and the United States our study shows is that the balancing of media roles is primarily determined by political ideology in the former and by market values in the latter. In Yugoslavia's political communication system, social integration is assumed to be the prerogative of government and party councils whose norms dominate the articula-
tion of public opinion. In the United States, it is generally accepted that the balancing is left to chance or to the interplay of various governmental groupings and market pressures. The upshot is that the Yugoslav press and broadcasting must tone down sensationalism and the reporting of "soft" news in the name of social responsibility. American chains and networks on the other hand are not guided by a conception of what is "good" for "John Q. Public" but what sells.

Still another finding of this study is that the clash between the dictates of self-management and the demands of the one-party state lead to severe contradictions in the role of the audience and of journalists in Yugoslavia's communication system. Though the media through their publishers and other councils are to be responsive to audience inputs, it appears that opinion pluralism is more evident in the cultural and economic than the political realms. Throughout the 1960s the Yugoslav audience which finances newspapers and broadcast stations has pushed for and received more entertaining content by buying papers and periodicals with a lighter content mix. Yet in the 1970s such audience preferences have once again been deemed frivolous, and "soft" news production has come under increased scrutiny and criticism. What balance will ultimately be struck between information and entertainment and how this will affect the financial survival of Yugoslavia's media is still an open question in need of a solution.

For journalists the contradictions arising from combining the articulation of party values with responsible reporting to the audience have meant a precarious balance between their advocate and public roles. It was frequently noted how difficult it is to be a critic in a situation where criticism must be "constructive." Since the leadership has reverted to a democratic-centralist style of rule without the right of minority dissent, the communicator must oscillate between justifying the top and expressing the base. Our data show that in peaceful times the public is better served than in times of national crisis. During the latter both publishers' councils and party colleagues urge the communicator to become a spokesman for the local party outlook in order to protect his precarious social status.

What about the future? Here as in so many past instances President Tito seems to be an accurate barometer of his country's mood. At eighty-four this last of the surviving wartime leaders is retiring from the world stage. Yugoslavia under his leadership has turned from a country with revolutionary zeal and a unique vision for the humanization of socialism into a country satisfied with its existing governmental system and preoccupied with its substantial standard of living. Precisely this economic success is what troubles both the leadership and some intellectuals, but for exactly opposite reasons. Yugoslavia's headlong rush toward affluence, which tripled real incomes during the past fifteen years, is exacerbating economic imbalances within the country and dampening people's zeal for such socialist goals as greater income, regional equalization, and enterprise equalization. In 1972, therefore, President Tito severely criticized his party's flabbiness and reverted to measures which have saddened his Western admirers. Among these are purges of the ranks, some
recentralization of power in the party's national hierarchy, a muting of the press, stricter economic controls, and stern warnings against Western "intellectual poisons."

Some Yugoslav students, intellectuals, economic administrators, and artists, on the other hand, are troubled because the potentialities of their country's unique participatory principles have never been truly tested. Self-management, they claim, was not allowed to evolve out of its factory setting and penetrate the society as a whole. By equating self-management with market values alone, they argue, and failing to apply them to the political realm, these principles seem to have become obsolete before maturing into a viable and humanistic social system. According to one observer, "the reason . . . is not that normative systems do not agree with actual processes in our worker organizations, nor is it that they do not determine social activity as a whole, but rather that they motivate this activity less and less." As a result Yugoslavia in the mid-1970s has moved out of the political and ideological limelight where its maverick actions used to garner respect and admiration.

The country's immediate future is further darkened by a number of other debilitating pressures which, added to its inability to take the leap into political democratization, are causing grave concern. Among these are Yugoslavia's precarious political existence vis-à-vis the Soviet Union and the potential internal strife engendered by the succession and nationalities problems. As long ago as December, 1971, C. L. Sulzberger noted that "there is every probability that when the aging Marshal Tito dies, Moscow will use every trick short of outright intervention to try and either disintegrate Yugoslavia or bring it under Kremlin influence, something that has not been the case for twenty-three years." The reason for this pressure lies in the Soviet's desire to eradicate once and for all the independent-of-Moscow regimes in Rumania and Albania which together with Yugoslavia have provided leaks in the Warsaw Pact military and COMECON economic alliance systems.

Frequent Yugoslav and United States press reports testify to the continued seriousness of this threat and indicate that Sulzberger's predictions were not pure fabrication. As recently as November, 1975, Politika, a Belgrade paper, announced that nine more persons had been arrested for pro-Soviet activities which subverted the local order. The article continued that since 1974 as many as 200 "Cominformists" may have been arrested, and the New York Times notes that those who came to public trial received long sentences.

Another area of concern is the potential succession crisis smoldering just below the surface of Yugoslav politics in spite of President Tito's 1970 creation of a twenty-two-man collective presidency. This group, which is to take over after his death, will be divided into an executive of eight, made up of the republics' chief executives and the heads of the two autonomous provinces, plus a larger group of fourteen, and will be elected for five years. The succession crisis has two potential foci, one having to do with the group's ability to rule and the other concerning the seeming lack of qualified younger party chiefs growing up in the shadow of President Tito.
Yugoslav sources claim that effective collective rule will be determined by the leaders’ personality and their relationship to the Federal Assembly. If they fail, the army, Yugoslavia’s only centralized agency, will probably take over, and it is difficult to be optimistic about the implications of such a step for the continuation of self-managed socialism. The inability of younger leaders to flex their political muscles under the watchful eyes of the aging president may in turn prove detrimental to the stability of the country in the post-Tito era. It is well known that the resignations of such important functionaries as Marko Nikolic and Mirko Tezlava have inhibited the appearance of bright new personalities on Yugoslavia’s political stage.

The final area of concern has historic roots and cuts across all matters Yugoslav. It has to do with the waxing and waning of the nationalities question. Though great strides have been made and successive constitutions have given the republics increasing autonomy over their own affairs, nationalism continues to cause strife. It permeates every facet of Yugoslav existence from the sublime to the ridiculous. It is a crucial element in national security planning, Soviet infiltration, the succession question, economic policies, tourism, education, media organization, and programming, not to mention the inability to choose a “representative” Yugoslav novel to submit for an international competition. How to cope with this virulent infection is of major concern to statesmen not only in the developing but also in the developed worlds. Britain, Belgium, and Canada join Yugoslavia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and others in trying to formulate adequate legislation which will make it possible for different races to live and work together peacefully. Up to now the progress has been slow and painful and in many instances less than spectacular. The reason may lie in the fact that contrary to Schopenhauer who said “the cheapest sort of pride is national pride,” many people still view their national identification as of fundamental importance.

To chart a course for future communication research in Yugoslavia during the twilight 1970s is difficult if not impossible. Irrespective of what happens on the world stage, much remains to be done to clarify the working of Yugoslavia’s maverick media. The early history, contemporary organization, and functioning of the country’s self-managed media units are well covered by Yugoslav research. Less is known about the role of film and publishing, both of which merit greater attention since they were in the forefront of the 1950s campaign abrogating “socialist realism” in culture.

Regulation and control of the media, both formal and informal, are also relatively well understood, but there is a lack of studies of the relationship between media personnel and economic elites. How exactly have filtering practices changed in the past twenty years? How do large industries like Inex or General Export affect the information collection and distribution of Tanjug as well as the journalistic access to and coverage of economic issues in the firms’ municipalities? It is known that the country’s information flow contains at least three different streams, political, economic, and cultural. But it is not known exactly what these flows contain or how they differ from republic to republic.
Quite a bit has been written about the role of the national news agency in selecting and channeling international news to the Yugoslav media and about Tanjug's attempt to create a news product for third world distribution which will avoid some of the geographical and political biases of Anglo-Saxon reporting. But much still remains to be done in the analysis of world news flows connecting countries with different cultures and political systems.

Though Yugoslav research institutes often survey questions of political and cultural concern, they lack funds to undertake investigations concerning journalists or audience members. The socio-political and demographic aspects of these two groups have been analyzed by the Yugoslav Journalists’ Association, the Institute of Journalism, and the RTV audience bureaus. But it is not known whether Yugoslav journalists perform their jobs in ways different from their colleagues elsewhere or what they think about their professional responsibilities to themselves and to their audiences. Studies of women in the profession, their assignments, and their promotions are also lacking.

A number of investigations have documented regional variations in Yugoslav media availability, but less is known about differences in media utilization across the country. Additional topics of interest are comparisons of audience roles in socialist and capitalist countries, typologies explaining media utilization, and the relationships between content preferences and political ideology. The questions of whether entertaining content is universally preferred and how much space or time should be devoted to it are still hotly debated. We are also in need of comparative data on socialization patterns to explain differences in Yugoslav and North American audience perceptions of the world.

Still another area of inquiry in need of research concerns public access to media organizations. Cable legislation in the United States favors an “access” model where groups are responsible for program ideas, production, and promotion. Canada, on the other hand, has opted for what Vernone Sparkes calls a “facilitator” approach, which places the cable carrier in charge of developing community programming on the public channel. Yugoslavia’s new “delegate system” has not come to grips with this question and favors neither approach.

A final area of future research must deal with technological communication innovations and their impact on society. Who will control and have access to cable when it comes to Yugoslavia? How will regional networks be affected by satellite communication? What about the balance between local, regional, and federal cable networks in the country’s multi-ethnic republics? These and similar questions need answers to permit future planning.

Summing up Yugoslavia’s experiment in media self-management, the outsider observer cannot but feel both elated and sad. This ambivalence results from the realization that though self-management has great potential for the press and broadcasting, this potential has been only partially explored. There is no doubt that the contemporary Yugoslav media are much more responsible to their varied audiences than is usual in other socialist systems. Yet, in spite of this, Yugoslav regulatory changes have up to now failed to integrate community
groups into media governance. Entertainment and relaxing content are more available in Yugoslavia than in Poland or Hungary, but media professionals still view themselves as the rightful custodians of public knowledge, rather than as facilitators of public debate.

Furthermore, the dual trends of more stringent political information filtering and increased attacks on students, intellectuals, and artists are causing widespread concern at home and abroad. Both of these reinforce the disconcerting use of self-management principles to subvert cultural freedom of expression through self-censorship. Why ban Dušan Makavejev's film WR: Or the Mystery of the Organism which spoofs Soviet, United States, and Yugoslav ideologies?\(^4\) Why close the Belgrade, Zagreb, and Ljubljana student papers in 1974 and a year later insist on the administrative removal of Marxist faculty from Belgrade University?\(^5\)

Taken together these events raise questions about the degree of social criticism which will be permissible in Yugoslavia in the future. Whether a pluralistic balance will be maintained or not is impossible to predict at this time. All that can be said is that all those who favor the Yugoslav experiment in democratic socialism hope for its survival.

---

6 Sterling, "'Balancing Act,'" p. 43.
13 Verene Sparkes, "'Community Cable Casting in the United States and Canada: Different Approaches to a Common Objective,'" *Journal of Broadcasting* (Fall, 1976), forthcoming.