

The reception of the Jolie film *In the Land of Blood and Honey* in Serbian press and internet portals, a case study

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Abstract: The study presents several newspapers coverage of the local and worldwide reception of Angelina Jolie's first film "In the land of Blood and Honey" and tries to show which implications this has for the freedom of expression in Serbian media. The discussed factors are political influences, media ownership structure, audience demands and source availability, in accordance to McQuail's model of sources of media demand and restraint. The study reveals several important connections between different social forces that limit freedom of speech significantly in Serbian media and generally, firstly the question of national importance, secondly the inability or lack of will of foreign owners to influence Serbian media and, thirdly, the heavy economic situation of the journalist and how it relates to news creation.

Introduction: Theoretical framework, object and aims of the case study

The aim of the study is to analyze presentation of Angelina Jolie's "In the land of blood and honey" film (especially topics on the film's reception) in Serbian press, and show the forces influencing Serbian media through McQuail's model of social forces' influence on media organization¹. In the end, I will draw out what implications these forces have on the freedom of expression in Serbia, especially freedom of press.

Study object: This study will focus on analysis of content in Serbian media, concerning the reception of the Angelina Jolie film. The object analyzed is a sample of articles concerning the reception of the film, in main newspapers and on popular news portals, published in December 2011 and January 2012. Other traditional media, radio and TV, will not be analyzed in this paper, since newspapers and portals provided the most coverage and detail on the topic (the subject was not so present in TV yet, it will most likely appear during the following months) and also some of the articles are practically direct transcripts of the TV news.

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Chosen method and corpus: Amongst the great number of articles on the topic of the film “In the land of Blood and Honey”; I chose the film’s reception as a topic for analysis. This decision is based upon the fact that it best shows how much pressure there is on Serbian media to present things in a certain light, especially when, even 2 months before the film came out, it was concluded that the antagonists in the film is the Serbian army, and the main question amongst the general Serbian public was: will the world like it?

1. General situation in Serbian media^{II}

1.1. State regulations

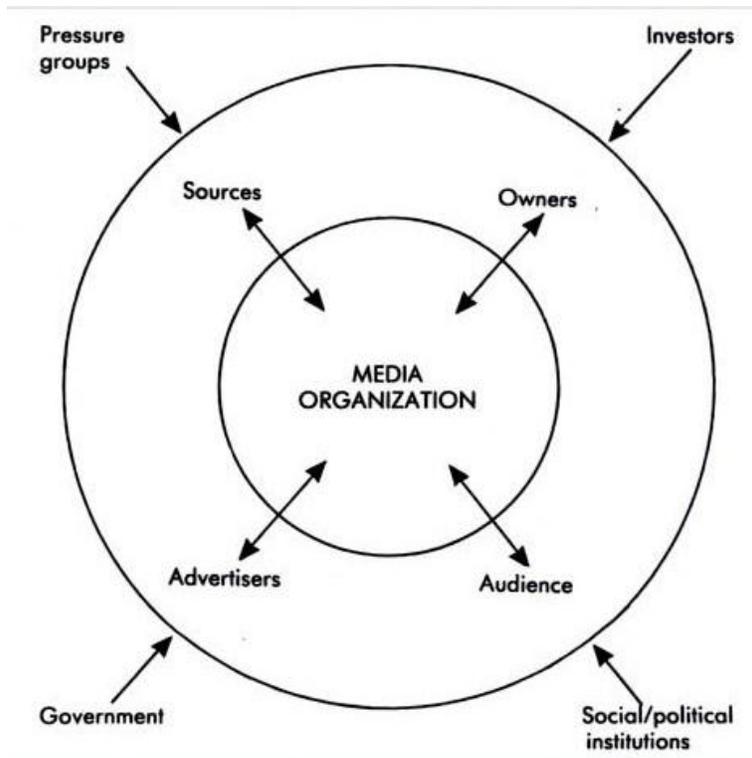
The constitution of the Republic of Serbia guarantees *freedom of thinking and expression*. The media laws have been radically changed after year 2000 (after the fall of Milošević regime), to bring order into a chaotic media situation. In 2009, a controversial law on media public information was passed, which included some articles obligating courts to, in certain conditions, press charges against media, and obligating them to make certain decisions during trials concerning media crimes. Experts warned this law was against the constitution and that it would endanger the freedom of speech and bring economic burdens to the media². But, also according to ANEM, some parts of the law on information of public interest are a good sign in development of freedom of expression on a legislation level. However, in a review in 2010, ANEM and other journalists documented a great number of cases where this law was breached and no actions were taken. Why this law, and law in general is often breached in Serbia without punishment is a different topic, but everything points to that, for the time being pressure from the side of the law is not so strong on Serbian media. It is a chaotic period, but there is often strong state intervention, like in the Mediterranean Polarized Model of media and politics.³

1.2. Serbian media: context and structure

Most press, radio and TV in Serbia are used by political parties for promotion of their ideas and views (sometimes so obvious it looks like the strongest pressure). Like in most post-communist states the main division is pro-government and anti-government, even now, 21 year after communism collapsed and 12 years after the end of the Milošević regime that used the pre-existing structures to reinforce propaganda. Also, ownership structure is quite problematic: the most powerful media (TV, radio and newspapers) owners and investors have either a history of crime, or helping out the Milošević propaganda during the 1990ties (for example, Bogoljub Karić and the EU-black-listed Željko Mitrović⁴, see also Groner, C. (2006) for more detailed information), and are, thus, protecting both personal and (consequently) political interest. It is not rare to see the exact same news framed in two very different ways. Lots of media owners have, however, after the fall of Milošević, entered strategic partnerships with foreign publishing

^{II} Some information is based on the author’s daily personal observation of Serbian media.

companies to rehabilitate and regain reputation.⁵ In this article will examine a case where we see some messages are not even reaching the general public, due to pressure on media.



McQuail (1992): Media environment – sources of demand and restraint

Concerning freedom of speech, the existing institutions promoting freedom of speech are NGOs (mostly with little influence), and somewhat more important journalist unions, which have some problematic aspects. Separate unions are in very unfriendly relations amongst themselves, the heads and workers in some of them are ex-war reporters and mongers of what would today be classified as pure hate speech (such as the suspicious case of Milorad Popov, head of *Nezavisno društvo novinara Vojvodine (NDNV)* [Independent journalist society of Vojvodina]). Also, according to ANEM reports⁶, the year 2011 has been marked by several physical and verbal attacks on media houses and individual reporters. In a small country like Serbia, publishing information that could endanger someone's interest could also result in a direct life or career-threat.

1.3. Press

There are 3 big newspapers in Berliner format: *Politika*, *Večernje Novosti* and *Danas*. There is a much great number of tabloid newspapers (*Blic*, *Kurir*, *Alo!* and the free *24 sata* to name a

few), with certain experts claiming there is an over-gratification of the consumers need for tabloids.

The changing ownership structure of Serbian newspapers is quite hard to follow, even though the (often changing) political orientation of the editorial policy is not.

The oldest Serbian daily newspaper, called *Politika* (lit. *Politics*), is at the moment partially state-owned, partially owned by the WAZ Mediengruppe. Most of the texts correspond to Serbian government's desires to promote political (against independence of Kosovo, for Serbia's entry into EU), economic (free trade, capitalism) and other ideas. Politically speaking, it is a political centre newspaper, however recently becoming more populist, mostly due to of growing populism in politics on a general level.

Tabloid newspapers are great in number, *Kurir* (lit. *Courier*) being the leading tabloid in Serbia. It has the highest demand and circulation in Serbia. It gained enormous popularity by using extremely obscene language and pictures since it was started in 2003. This is perhaps one of the most mysterious commercial newspapers, publishing just about anything that will either attract attention or bring money (appeasing audiences or accepting money for commissioned articles). Due to that, this newspaper had a changing political attitude as well. As an example, *Kurir*, otherwise famous for being extremely right-wing oriented, presented a story in which two of their workers took a walk along the main pedestrian street in Belgrade⁷ (Serbia is generally a country in which such an action might even have physical attack as a consequence).

Blic and *24 hours* (partially owned by *Ringier*) are similar, often publishing lightly edited information from news agencies, but are not considered yellow press.

2. Case study

The film is this Hollywood superstar's first attempt at film directing, and Jolie stated she would make a film on a difficult, controversial topic, namely war in Bosnia, involving local artists and actors that actually survived the civil war.

Plot: Love between a Muslim (Bosnian) girl and a Serbian soldier (a Serb from Bosnia), which takes place in Sarajevo during the attack by Serbian forces. What is controversial is that Serbian troops are shown doing rape, killings, bombings in the city (in traditional Hollywood words, presented as the "bad guys"). The film has been censored in Republika Srpska (though, through Facebook, news came out that some individuals decided to arrange private film showing in their apartments), and shot mostly in Budapest. The initial reactions to the trailer and plot outline were quite negative amongst Serbian audiences. Especially potent was the notion that one of the most famous actresses in the world decided to create something "anti-Serbian".

Event sequence:

- August 2010: Angelina Jolie visited Bosnia and announced she will make a first attempt at movie-making in on the topic of war in Bosnia. Gossip newspapers around the world announced the plot will be a love story between a Serbian soldier and a Bosnian woman. Initial reactions in Serbia were dismissal of the film's potential importance.
- May 2011: Announcement that the premiere will happen in December, 2011.
- 21st of October 2011: The first trailer was released, the first articles written on the subject and first strong negative reactions from Serbian audiences came.
- 5th of December: New York premiere
- 14th of January 2011: Premiere in Sarajevo, during which Jolie received an award for humanitarian efforts from the Bosnian state.
- 23rd of January: Announced Serbian premiere, Jolie said she was informed she is unwelcome and will (for now) not appear.

2.1. Circulating text and reactions

The news about the public's and critics' reception of the film are mixed and quite contradictory in Serbian media. One thing is for sure: one part of the story is missing, namely, the one praising the film or any of its aspects.

On the 6th of December, after the world (pre-) premiere in New York, *Večernje Novosti* reported that the premiere took place in an article consisting of 3 paragraphs and 86 words altogether, placing totally unrelated information, such as the name of Angelina's dress designer, under section "Spectacle". *Kurir*, on the other hand, came with a title *A magnificent premiere of "Agie's" first film*, but with equally deficit information, painted with epithets such as *proud* and *glamorous*. There was no mention of the film itself.

After the premiere, at the 62. *Berlinale*, and the press conference with the actors on 10th of January 2012, a much greater number of articles appeared. Including the RTS (Serbian national radio and TV) web portal with the title *Critics are merciless towards Angelina*. The article rates the film as a stereotypical, artless Hollywood trifle. It states how only a few critics rated it as good, then continues with quoting some, actually quite neutral, comments of critics Jan Lumhold and Gunara Rehlina that the film is "too hard" or "lacks some balance". The rest of the article is the editor's personal view on the film, commenting on the film's serious lack of artistic value, authenticity and especially the fact the only the Serbian army and Bosnian civilians are present in the film.

After the Sarajevo premiere on 14th of January, most tabloid newspapers (here including *Blic* and *Kurir*) published the approximately the same text, delivered by news agencies *Beta* and *Tanjug*. Most of them described the positive reactions of the Sarajevo audience, how Angelina and her husband were present, but other than that the reception of the film was good, nothing was said about the film. *Večernje novosti* published a text on 22nd of January under the title

Angelina's debacle in American cinemas. This showed information from internet portals *rottentomatoes* and *IMDB*, saying that the overall rating of the film is low, an extract from a critique by Justin Chang, quoting the banality of the dramatic effect in the film, and the editor also mentioned that *few critics missed the prevailing lack of objectiveness in the film.* The very end of the article included translations from two quotes from, both critics stating that the film, in a single-sided manner, presents Serbs as “the bad guys”. Later, January the 27th, the same newspaper announced Angelina would come to Sarajevo to the premiere on the 14th of February. The news was again short, but the comment section was much more interesting: it is 4 comments, full of hate speech against Angelina, including a comment by user “Rioda” who said, on the 27th of January: *Why the hell are you reporting about her!!!!!!* No one reported that the film won a prize on the same festival. Tabloids ignored the film content fully, attacking Angelina Jolie’s personality and wrong choices as a filmmaker.

Politika, on the 16th of February wrote *Andelinin film u Srbiju stiže na mala vrata* [Angelina’s film is coming to Serbia through the back door], in which the editor compared the enthusiastic reactions of the Bosnian audience at the premiere to the, apparently, weak reaction of the world audiences to the film. To better depict the reaction of the Bosnian audience, the head of the Islamic community in Bosnia, Mustava Ćerić, was quoted, saying that the film: *...is the best thing that happened to this country [Bosnia] after the Dayton.*

On the 19th of February *Politika* writing about the *Berlinale* film festival, published an article, caliming that Angelina Jolie’s film already “has been forgotten”, and presented outtakes from 4 critiques, presenting the negative sides of the film, both artistically and politically. Namely, the story and directing are poor, characters unrealistic, and there are also dangerous political implications of the film, such as conveying messages that are not meant for a film to convey. This occupied almost a half of the article, which had the title „Златни медвед“ браћу Тавијани, награде публике за „Параду“ и филм о Марини Абромовић [Golden lion goes to the Traviani brothers, audiences award to *Parade* and *The Marina Abramović film*], the rest consisting of descriptions of this film festivals main films and awards. The interesting thing, is that all the comments, but one, that came in until this moment (20th of February), were about the Angelina Jolie film, talking negatively about it (10 in total).

2.2. Conclusions

The very great corpus supplies the readers with pretty deficit, repetitive information. Most articles after the premieres at least mention the not-too-good reception the film had in the rest of the world, at least by one aspect of it. Every critique was also followed by the editors personal presentation of the film’s content: both chosen/written negatively, either presenting the film as neglectable or extremely bad and dangerous. This was present both from the editorial point of view and from the choice of critics cited. More importantly, information about positive receptions of the film was not absent always, but was carefully omitted and presented in small sentences.

The state-owned media was the one who published most of these kinds of articles, than the right-winged press, and then tabloids, which even reported positive sides of the story (mostly not connected to the content, though). Most were published under the section “Entertainment”, fewer under “Culture”.

Comment sections on web portals consisted almost exclusively of negative comments, ranging from insults, invitations to boycott, even certain people demanding less media attention to be attributed to the topic.

3. McQuail’s model of media organization in the light of the case

The main source of demand comes from the audience, as it wants as much information on a topic that seems so important. Taking into account the topic of the film, the problematic aspects of Serbian politics and the questions of national pride, we can say what the audience would like is that the news about the film would be negative, or, it is “important for the film to be unimportant”. However, the positive reception, as well as the aspects of the film, is restrained by the policy in the press. However, the ownership structure of the media companies does not allow for this news to be completely ignored (here meaning foreign publishing houses, such as WAZ), so there is an obligation to report on the film, even before the Serbian premiere.

Relationship to sources: here we see a reverse situation than the usual one. McQuail points out that media is pressed both to accept pre-prepared content from powerful sources such as agencies, government and firms, but that less powerful source should also not be ignored, as well as that there is a problem of financial nature that arises when choosing those sources that are more difficult to reach¹. In this case, we see a different situation: Serbian journalists had a difficult task to find sources that would answer both to the demands of the public, and to deal with inability to get more financing. The journalists are forced to find negative critics in foreign (American and German newspapers) and choose parts that would fit into the desired outcome. Definitely, this is the product of pressure on journalists to make their texts fit a certain criteria comes from the relationship with audience.

We already said that the relationship to sources is a problematic one, but those problems come from the difficult audience demand, we mostly see it in tabloid newspapers (*Blic*, *Kurir*) that attack the film and Angelina Jolie personally. However, government plays an important role in this relation – an especially touchy subject is the national pride, in all post-war countries that are building up their economy and relations, press needs to give people a certain amount of self-confidence about being a citizen of Serbia. This would explain the harsh anti-film critics found in *Politika*, the state owned newspaper, and on the *RTS* portal.

4. Implications for freedom of expression in Serbian media

- 1) In Serbia, even a film can cause very limited possibilities to express and write a different opinion, when it comes to a question of national importance. Here we see an example of how freedom of those who didn't see the film was expressed, and those that did, could not be which we can see from the one-sidedness of media.
- 2) Owners, audience and government can create a sort of necessity for a certain kind of desired reporting. Partial foreign (central European) ownership of certain media is not strong enough to bring a different side of a story to the media.
- 3) Bad economic situation makes source-finding and researching difficult, so, when unable to resort to big news agencies, international media etc., journalists still have to make find sources from other newspapers in world languages, and usually can't do much fieldwork.

For further study

- 1) Is freedom of speech again limited if media owners and government can have separate goals, does it lead to media chaos or the same kind of uniformity?
- 2) Causality problem: has the audience created the initial negative reaction to the film announcement, or is the media, under government or owner-pressure constructed this feeling through initial texts about the film? Would the audiences' feelings be any different if media were to report more objectively?
- 3) Could any of the possible mechanisms be used and how, in this kind of situations, to increase demands and reduce restrains, and thus restore a situation in which there would be no significant reduction of the possibility to freely express opinions?

Links to the main articles analyzed:

- Jolie cried in front of 5000 people Sarajevo people: <http://www.kurir-info.rs/stil/andjelina-zoli-zaplakala-pred-5.000-sarajlija-182608.php>
- A brilliant pre-premiere of “Angie’s” first film: <http://www.kurir-info.rs/stil/sjajna-pretpremijera-andjinog-prvenca-157432.php>
- Angelina Jolie cried during Sarajevo premiere: <http://www.blic.rs/Zabava/Vesti/307145/Andzelina-Zoli-zaplakala-na-premijeri-u-Sarajevu>
- Angelina’s debacle in American cinemas: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/kultura.71.html:363101-Andjelinin-debaki-u-americkim-bioskopima>
- New York – Premiere of Angelina’s film: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/spektakl.147.html:356486-Njujork-Premijera-Andjelininog-filma>
- The critics were merciless towards Angelina: <http://www.rts.rs/page/magazine/sr/story/411/Film/1043154/Kriti%C4%8Ddari+nemilosrdni+prema+An%C4%91elini.html>
- Kusta strikes back: Angie, I will make a film about the victims in Iraq: http://pressonline.rs/sr/vesti/Dnevni_magazin/story/203188/Kusta+uzvra%C4%87a+udarac%3A+An%C4%91o,+snimi%C4%87u+film++o+%C5%BErtvama+u+Iraku.html
- Balkan is not blood and honey: <http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Kultura/Balkan-nije-krvi-i-med.lt.html>
- Angelina’s film is coming to Serbia through the back door: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/kultura.71.html:366662-Andjelinin-film-u-Srbiju-stize-na-mala-vrata>
- After the Sarajevo premiere, Angelina Jolie got threats because of her film <http://www.24sata.info/zabava/film-tv/87805-Nakon-sarajevske-premijere-filma-Angelina-Jolie-primila-prijetnje-zbog-svog-filma.html>

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7. Kurirovi "Gejevi" šetali centrom Beograda! [Kurir's "Gays" took a walk in the centre of Belgrade!], 15th of August, 2010. Link to article: <http://www.kurir-info.rs/vesti/drustvo/kurirovi-gejevi-setali-centrom-beograda-45940.php>