

**PhD Dragan Klaric**,<sup>1</sup> docent  
Faculty of Management in Herceg Novi, Montenegro

## The Role of Local Broadcasters in Montenegro and Problem of Digitalization<sup>2</sup>

Montenegro is lucky to have preserved its local media so today, when we are flooded with cheap and very often unacceptable programme content, one can see the benefits of such, I feel free to say, a visionary decision.

Since the introduction of a multi-party parliamentary system, the changes in the political system of Montenegro and the appearance of the first private media at the beginning of the 90s of the previous century, the situation has changed many times. Many printed and electronic media appeared and disappeared all over Montenegro. The media market in 1990 consisted of one daily newspaper, one state-owned radio and the influential state-owned television, as well as a few radio stations owned by local authorities. Since then, in the past 24 years, many things have changed.

Today in Montenegro there are six daily, one biweekly, six monthly and periodical editions and nine local newspapers.

At the same time, in Montenegrin media landscape in 2013 even 43 commercial radio stations broadcast their programme. The majority of these commercial radio stations were established in Podgorica, the administrative capital, and on the coast i.e. in the areas that are economically stronger than the other parts of Montenegro. Local radio broadcasters were established in 14 Montenegrin municipalities, whereas in the municipalities of Budva, Pljevlja and Nikšić local televisions exist within public services. Considering the size of the country and the number of inhabitants, it is a respectable number of the media.

In Montenegro, 8 distributors with the total number of 800 channels distribute programme through cable systems by any of the three platforms. Therefore, the citizens have the opportunity to watch over 250 different programmes.

It is worth mentioning that Montenegro, as a geographically small area, with an oversaturated market and more than a sufficient number of radio and TV stations, has difficulties with the influence of the media from the neighbouring countries that can be watched and listened in cable networks. Through cable operators

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<sup>1</sup> Director of RTV Budva and member of Board of Union of Local Public Broadcasters of Montenegro (ULES CG)

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the citizens of Montenegro may watch almost all the television channels in Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina which have a licence for national broadcasting. Besides, individual TV programmes are regularly broadcast on temporarily purchased frequencies or are a part of the programme of Montenegrin TV stations. It is also worth mentioning that printed media from Serbia, most daily newspapers, are regularly distributed in Montenegro. On the other hand, it is not the case with Montenegrin radio or TV stations and not even are Montenegrin printed media regularly distributed in Serbian market.

In the market where money rules, small systems, such as local public broadcasters, have no chance. Their income, compared to the income of the commercial broadcasters can be considered a statistical error. However, a large number of the media community representatives, particularly those who are in the direct contact with commercial broadcasters, think that local public broadcasters should not exist, pointing out that they have not proved themselves by their work, that the time of the privileged has passed and they do not deserve to be entrusted with public interest and that they are redundant in the media landscape. On the other hand, in the Electronic Media Law, which was enacted in accordance with the strictest European regulations, the importance of local radio broadcasters is recognised and their position strengthened.

The Electronic Media Law, enacted by Montenegrin parliament in July 2010, clearly defines the manner of establishment and funding of local public broadcasters. The conditions under which such media can be established are clearly defined. The decision on establishment of local public broadcasters is issued by the local parliament for its territory. The parliament of the local self-government may establish only one radio or TV local public broadcaster.

In accordance with the aforementioned law the crucial role of the local public broadcasters is production and broadcasting of programme which, apart from other things, affirms exercising of minorities' rights, exercising of the human and political rights, preservation of Montenegrin national and cultural identity, stimulating cultural creativity, informing people who have problems with seeing and hearing. If the editors and journalists in local public media have this legal obligation in mind, we can clearly conclude that such programmes are not of a commercial character. Functioning of the public service at a local level, apart from the fact that it is responsible work by definition, is additionally made more difficult in the time of crisis.

Economic problems are visible on at least two levels. The first one is an unfair competition in the market with commercial media whose programmes are aimed at making profit and the other, not less significant problem, is a bad economic situation of the founder, i.e. local self-governments.

However, funding local public broadcasters is very problematic in a lot of local self-governments. Although legal solutions are in favour of the local broadcasters, the situation is different in reality. The circumstances in which local self-governments are, tend to be extremely bad and do not provide fulfilment of the obligations to the local media.

A particular problem is the founder's non-compliance with legal regulations. Some local broadcasters have more damage than good from that status particularly in case of irresponsible local self-governments that do not fulfil their obligations.

Instead of fulfilling their obligations which arise from the aforementioned Electronic Media Law, some founders behave irresponsibly regarding the fulfilment of their obligations so they allocate lump sum funds from municipal budgets, which are most often insufficient to sustain the system. In some municipalities certain programmes of commercial broadcasters are financed from the funds allocated for funding local public broadcasters.

A particular problem, apart from the three party agreement signed by the founder, public local broadcasters and Broadcasting Centre (RDC / Radio-difuzni centar), is unsettled liabilities to the RDC, so local broadcasters often face situations that their transmitters are disconnected.

The question is how to solve this problem but at the same time preserve the character of local public broadcasters?

One of the solutions is creation of regional public broadcasters in Montenegro. In that way the survival of the local media would be provided as a very important factor of democratisation of society. The Electronic Media Law recognises such possibility for several municipalities to make a regional public broadcaster and to agree on the manner of functioning and funding by special acts afterwards. This could be one of the solutions which should be considered seriously.

The other option of co-financing and establishment of local public broadcasters is regional or cross-border cooperation. Considering the fact that contemporary Europe is based on the development of regions and decentralisation, local public broadcasters in Montenegro must recognise the potential and a chance that arises from this cooperation. Cross-border cooperation between the media in this part of Europe is far from a satisfactory level. Local broadcasters, but also the commercial ones which are privately owned, in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural region, which, apart from Montenegro, consists of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Albania and Italy in a way, ought to promote the values of tolerance between different cultures. TV stations from the region, particularly where there is no language barrier, in fact ought to be bridges between the regions where economic, tourism, traffic, cultural and many other interests entwine.

The media in Montenegro would have multiple benefits from regional cooperation. First of all, professional standards of all the employees, from journalists over technical staff to music producers would be improved; production and technical standards in implementation of joint projects and coproduction would be raised to a considerably higher level.

The process of digitalisation of terrestrial broadcasting of a TV signal is almost complete and we enter a short period of parallel work of analog and digital television. From the technical point of view, almost everything is said here. From the point of view of a consumer of such service – a viewer, there will be no revolutionary changes as over 70% of citizens of Montenegro have watched digital pro-

gramme through one of the cable operators for several years and the producers of the programme, particularly local public broadcasters, enter the final phase of this process with uncertainty.

We get an impression that the local public broadcasters are neglected and they are slowly becoming a kind of a problem of the whole process of digitalisation. The situation is even more serious given the fact that the deadlines are approaching and the time is unstoppably passing.

It turns out that after many years of struggling with technical issues of this process, practical implementation has been completely neglected and that today, before the very beginning of this process, we are in the situation to talk about elementary issues that refer to the conditions of accessing multiplex, prices etc.

It might sound paradoxical, but the questions whether the digitalisation will put an end to the local public services and how the digitalisation process will affect their future are asked more and more often.

Of course, it is obvious that this process is not directly related to it, neither has the establishment of the digital surrounding been used for that purpose, but the uncertainty and vagueness that appear in that sense cause anxiety.

The questions asked in relation to this are of crucial importance for the future of the local public informing.

What are these questions?

1. How much the use of multiplex infrastructure will cost and who will pay for it? According to Montenegrin law the access to multiplex for the public services ought to be provided by the state. Will this legal solution last?

It is particularly important if we consider bad material situation of the local public broadcasters and the inability of the founder to settle the obligations towards the local media. In the end, these expenses must be known now so that they could be calculated in the budget plans of the founder for the following year (the decision on the budget is rendered by the end of this year)

2. How much are the local public broadcasters interested in their programme being visible outside the service zone which is within the borders of the administrative territory of the founders (municipalities) i.e. are there justifiable reasons that one channel of multiplex is left for the use of the local media so that they could be seen in the territory of the whole country? Of course not, we are aware of that and so, in that sense, the question of the local multiplex is being raised as well and, in relation to it, regional services, too. We wonder if the law stipulated such circumstances.
3. What is the possibility of choice for the local public broadcasters in relation to the access to multiplex and is there an option to digitalise signal by purchase of our own equipment? From the point of view of the local public broadcast-

ers it would be the most acceptable option as expensive lease of multiplex facilities would be avoided and the autonomy of the system would be preserved.

4. The company that provides multiplex services at the moment is state-owned. What is the perspective of such status? What will the status of the local public broadcasters be in case of privatisation of the system and how will it reflect their basic function and their role in relation to the citizens? In this case, to what extent will the local public services keep the most important condition of all conditions of their existence – independence?

The announcement of the Agency for Electronic Media of Montenegro (AEM - Agencija za elektronske medije) that they will immediately give licences for digital programme broadcasting brings some certainty and it ought to be mentioned as a positive example. We hope that in the future all the interested parties will become more active so that permanent and sustainable decision for the work of local public broadcasters is found both in technological and material sense. We hope that the aforementioned paradox will not happen and that the local public broadcasters will benefit much more from digitalisation, which will not only mean removal of the old analog technology but also the justification of their existence by improved quality, first of all because of the citizens of local communities and so I hope that this meeting will affirm regional cooperation as well.

