

# **FREEDOM OF THE MEDIA IN CROATIA IN THE YEAR OF 1989/1990 ILLUSTRATED WITH AN EXAMPLE OF THE CITY OF ZADAR**

*Marijana Raznjevic Zdrilic, PhD*  
University of Zadar, Croatia

---

## **Abstract**

This paper explores the issue of freedom of the media illustrated with an example of the local press. The paper is based on an analysis of the content of newspaper articles on legislative changes published in local newspapers – a weekly *Narodni list* and a monthly *Fokus*, published in the city of Zadar in Croatia in 1989 and 1990, and relating to the topics of media freedom and pluralism. The analysis of the content of newspaper articles included articles published from February 9, 1989 to September 22, 1990, which is the period when the monthly *Fokus* was published. The period researched was an extremely important and turbulent period for Croatia as it had to constitute its sovereignty as well as independence in the initial transition period. In 1989, Croatia was still a part of the multinational Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and political disagreements among the republics resulted in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Croatia gained its independence fighting in the Homeland War from 1991 to 1995, basic preconditions for the development of democratic society thus being put in background. Changes in the field of media occurred along with social and political changes. Media played a key role in the process of democratization in Croatia. The Croatian press was a significant participant of democratic events in Croatia for the period researched, and later. The research was based on an analysis of 104 newspaper issues, comprising a corpus of 1175 newspaper articles, 149 of which belonged to the category of *The Freedom of the Media*. Descriptive and explanatory methods were employed in the paper, as well as the method of qualitative and quantitative content analysis. The research results have shown the local newspapers actively informed their readers about matters of media freedom and pluralism.

---

**Keywords:** Freedom of the media, local newspapers, democratization, Croatia, content analysis

## Introduction

The role of media in development of any society is of key importance, therefore media are very often called fourth authority or seventh force. One of the basic roles of media is their influence on the development of democratic order and pluralism of a country as they contribute to realization of the fundamental human rights of each individual – freedom of speech and freedom of expression. Another important role of media is their corrective role; they point to and warn about anomalies in a society, or the changes which are in contradiction to freedom and democracy (Malovic, 1995: 30). In a democratic transition of each country, media are defined as main participants (Peruško Čulek, 1999: 1). When talking about freedom of expression and freedom of media, it is interesting to stress the mentioned formulation is present in constitutions and other legal regulations and ordinances of a country, yet in certain countries some legal subacts skillfully hide limitations in freedom of speech and freedom of expression (Malović, 2004:34). Along with media freedom, one of the most important objectives of each democratic media politic is pluralism of media, which is related to media diversity principle as the fundamental principle of each democratic media politics (Peruško Čulek, 1999: 76). In the transition years of 1989 and 1990 Croatia was in the beginning of transition period, characterized, among others, with a transition from a communist to a democratic society. Along with changes of political order, in Croatia there occurred changes in other segments of society – economy and media. In the period researched, Yugoslav media information system was still valid, limiting freedom of the media and informing based on *Public Information Act* introduced in February 1982. Within this Act, special attention was given to article 133, known as *Verbal Delict Act*, which limited freedom of the media, of expression and of the press (Novak, 2005: 880, 923). When it comes to pluralism of Yugoslav media, it is important to stress it was quite large.

According to 1988 data, all Yugoslav republics and provinces included a total of nine TV stations, 202 radio stations, 27 daily newspapers, 17 political magazines and hundreds of local newspapers and magazines (Thompson, 1995: 5). Yet, majority of the media mentioned did not act according to democratic principles, but they served the function of propaganda, ideology and politics. Democratization of the media in Croatia began in 1989 as a reaction to political events in Yugoslavia, which were a reflection of social and political changes occurring in the Middle and the East Europe. Legal fundaments for development of democratic pluralistic information system were realized through changes in *Public information act*, introduced in 1990, and through four basic acts of the Council of Europe on freedom of the media and expression. The Croatian Constitution, introduced in December 22, 1990, also guaranteed the freedom of opinion and

expression of thoughts (Constitution of the Republic of Croatia, National Gazette, [http://narodnenovine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1990\\_12\\_56\\_1092.html](http://narodnenovine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1990_12_56_1092.html)).

June 1990 saw the introduction of Act on Croatian Radio and Television, while July saw the introduction of Act on Croatian News Agency “HINA”. Local newspapers *Fokus* and *Narodni list* were chosen as a corpus of this research. Zadar is a very particular Croatian town with its cultural and historical value, but also with a long media tradition. It is called the cradle of the Croatian press as the first newspapers in Croatian, *Kraljski Dalmatin*, were published right here in Zadar. In 19th century, along with Zagreb, Zadar was a center of the Croatian press. This is supported by the fact that over 120 different newspapers were published in Zadar from the beginning of 19th to mid-20th century. During the former SFR Yugoslavia, only two media were active in Zadar: a weekly *Narodni list* and a state radio station – Radio Zadar.

## Metodology

The aim of this paper is to research on the issue of media freedom illustrated with an example of the local press. The paper is based on an analysis of content of newspaper articles published in local newspapers – a weekly *Narodni list* and a monthly *Fokus*, published in Zadar, Croatia, in 1989 and 1990, and relating to the issues of media freedom and pluralism.

The content analysis included those articles published from February 9, 1989 to September 22, 1990. The defined research period covers the time when a monthly *Fokus* was published. Due to their specific characteristics, the newspaper *Narodni list* and the youth monthly *Fokus* were chosen as the research corpus. Although the newspapers in question have different profiles in terms of their publication frequency as well as editors’ policy, both of the print media had a significant role in informing the public on social and political current events for the period researched, on the local, national and international level. One of the addressed issues included media democratization within a more general issue of the democratization of Croatian society. The youth monthly *Fokus* was the first independent media in Zadar, started as early as 1988 by Zadar's bold youth. The first issue was published on February 9, 1989, while its only 20 issues played a significant role in the democratization of the press in Zadar and the entire Croatia. Its specificities included criticism and a more liberal approach to the then current themes. In this period, Croatia was still a part of SFR Yugoslavia, where *Public Information Act* was still valid. The Act, introduced in 1982, limited the media freedom. Despite that, *Fokus* slowly cut the chains of the existing Act presenting current social and political events according to the principles of media democracy. Zadar's weekly *Narodni list* was one of the oldest print media in South East Europe. The first issue was published as

early as in 1862, from when it has been constantly published with a short interruption during the period of Treaty of Rapallo in 1920. In the beginning it was published as a supplement to Italian newspaper *Il Nazionale*, while it has been published only in Croatian as of 1876. From its first issue to the present issues, this information and political weekly has been actively participating in political, cultural, economic, and other segments of society providing information to the public on the current events. The research was based on 104 newspaper issues, comprising a corpus of 1175 newspaper articles, 149 of which belonged to the category of *The Freedom of the Media*. Descriptive and explanatory methods were employed in the paper, as well as the method of qualitative and quantitative content analysis. We chose 8 newspaper articles published in the weekly *Narodni list* and 8 articles published in the monthly *Fokus* for qualitative analysis. The main topic of the articles chosen was media or media freedom and media pluralism.

Criteria for qualitative content analysis included the importance of the topic and its implications to the current events with regard to social and political context of the period researched. The basic premise of the paper is that Zadar's local newspapers *Fokus* and *Narodni list*, in 1989 and 1990, in the beginning of the transition period in Croatia, actively informed the public on the events related to the media issue, thus promoting and developing media freedom and pluralism in Croatia in the beginning of the transition period in 1989/1990.

## Result of Research

Newspaper issues of *Narodni list* and *Fokus* in 1989 and 1990  
(adjusted according: Ražnjević Zdrilić, 2013:85)

	NL	%	FOK	%	TOT	%
<b>1989</b>	48	55,81	11	55	59	55,66
<b>1990</b>	38	44,18	9	45	47	44,34
<b>UKUP</b>	86	100,00	20	100,00	106	100,00

Note: NL-Narodni list, FOK-Fokus, TOT-TOTAL

In the period researched – when the monthly *Fokus* was published, from February 9 to September 22, 1990, the weekly *Narodni list* published 86 issues, or 55.81% in 1989, and 44.18% in 1990. The monthly *Fokus* published 11 issues in 1989, or 55%, and 9 issues in 1990, or 45%. In total, 55.66% newspaper issues were published in 1989 and 44.34% in 1990, which is almost the same number of issues for the both researched years.

Table 2. Comparison of ratio of newspaper articles in *Narodni list* and *Fokus* in 1989 and 1990 with regard to the category of *The Freedom of the Media*

	NL	%	FOK	%	TOT	%
<b>1989</b>	26	35,16	41	54,67	67	44,97
<b>1990</b>	48	64,86	34	45,33	82	55,03
<b>UKUP</b>	74	100,00	75	100,00	149	100,00

Note: NL-Narodni list, FOK-Fokus, TOT-TOTAL

Analyzing the percentage of the articles published in both newspapers in the category *The Freedom of the Media*, we concluded the weekly *Narodni list* published a total of 74 articles in both researched years, with 35.16% articles in 1989, and 64.86% in 1990. Youth monthly *Fokus* published a total of 75 articles within the researched category, or 54.67% articles in 1989, and 45.33% articles in 1990. In total, 149 articles were published in both years, with the majority of the articles published in 1990, or 55.03%, while 44.97% articles of *Narodni list* and *Fokus* were published in 1989. It is also interesting to notice how both newspapers published almost the same number of the articles in both researched years, with 75 of them published in *Fokus* and 74 in *Narodni list* within the category of *The Freedom of the Media*.

The first part of the qualitative analysis will include the articles on media freedom published in the Zadar's weekly *Narodni list*. With regard to the new social and political situation, media in Croatia acted in accordance with the changes mentioned, analyzing and commenting on the issue of media activity and the press in the transition period of creating a new democratic and pluralism society in Croatia. In *Narodni list*, within the section of *Youth*, an article entitled *Every Man is the Architect of Their Own Opinion* was published. The main topic of the article was the credibility of newspaper texts and journalists in general. The author analyzed and commented on the influence of media on disagreements among certain Yugoslav republics, giving partially correct or partially complete information. Due to their unethical activity, a number of print and electronic media were called on in the article. The author expressed her belief that liberalism brought about a larger number of public newspapers, on the one hand, but media misused the democratic orientation variously interpreting the current events, on the other hand (Kučina, 1989: 11). The article included a questionnaire which analyzed the opinion of young people from Zadar regarding their belief in newspapers' claims. The majority of them believed it was best to develop their own attitudes and opinions which would help them have their own judgment on the credibility of media claims (Kučina, 1989: 11). An article entitled *Journalism Growingly Independent and Critical* addresses the strains of the members of the Association of Local Information Media Assembly of SR Croatia for creating a unique information system in Croatia. The members believed that local newspapers

should be financed by the budget used also by republic newspapers; moreover, they pointed out the importance of public newspapers in the economic and political reforms to come: *Yet, it seems that society has created the conditions for giving the independence to journalism, which is along with objectivity and truthfulness a presumption of good journalism* (M. K., 1989: 2). They also highlighted the problem of growingly common form of supportive writing under the command of the republic and province authorities, which should be eliminated. The then situation in the Yugoslav press was commented on in an article entitled *Aliens*. This was incited by a Conference of Yugoslav Journalists in Belgrade, where the journalists appealed to the Yugoslav public against the misuse of public newspapers in the propaganda war. The journalist critically addressed the members of the Conference saying it was them who pressured and manipulated the masses and threaten the rights and freedoms of the citizens (M. Kučina, 1989a: 3). Another article entitled *The Destiny of Buridan's Ass* addressed the relationship between the press and political changes in Croatia for the period researched. According to the author of the article, the press was on the crossroad between journalist code and national (mono)journalism: *Instead of serving the function of communicators, journalists renounced their profession and turned into political couriers and judges of our unreality* (S. Župan, 1990: 3). The article *Independence Ideal* also analyzed and commented on the impact of democratization of social and political life in Croatia on the press. The topic of the article was publication activities of public newspapers within the then Socialist Union, which up to then was their only publisher. The article suggested the other people, communities, companies and organizations could also be publishers, under the condition of having financial means to support the publication, of course (M. Kučina, 1990: 4). The changes in the press activities by the beginning of introduction of democratic changes in Croatia also reflected on the activities of *Narodni list*. An article entitled *In a Professional Way* brought the conclusions from the conference of the Newspaper Council, where program orientation of the newspaper was discussed. The president of the Council Rober Didov stressed that *Narodni list achieved an independent position in presenting and commenting on the current Yugoslav and more specific topics related to Zadar* (E. Š., 1990: 2). Along with social and political changes influencing the press activities, *Narodni list* also regularly informed the public on new media being established in Zadar, with a special attention being given to the introduction of the youth monthly *Fokus* as the first independent medium in Zadar. An article entitled *A Conditional Support to Fokus* presented the new Zadar's medium, which enriched the Zadar information area. It also pointed out the lacks of the medium, such as sensational approach to the current topics and unsupported calling on of certain people (M. K., 1989a: 2).

Another article, *The Beginning of Zadar's TV Maturity*, addressed the establishing of a TV station in Zadar as yet another medium. The article was based on an interview with Goran Radman, a director of TV Zagreb. Radman argued the main obstacle for establishing a Zadar TV studio was a technological and communication structure which had not been developed enough for establishing a TV medium in Zadar (T. Stupin, 1989: 9).

Zadar's youth monthly *Fokus* also actively informed the citizens on the changes in media activities in the transition period in Croatia. Its approach to the issue in question was different from the approach of *Narodni list*, therefore it was often called on. As stated earlier, since *Fokus* was an independent newspaper, it also had a greater possibility to approach the current issues in a more liberal and open way. In his article *Black and white world*, the president of the Council of *Fokus* Damir Maričić wrote about the birth-giving troubles during establishing and developing of *Fokus*. He gave special attention to the articles published in this monthly which bothered certain persons (Maričić, 1989: 19). Program orientation of *Fokus* was a common topic of many conferences of municipal committee. The editor Branko Mrčela himself commented on the complaints regarding the editorial policy of *Fokus*: *What is then the real reason standing behind this? Probably the texts, their openness and the possibility to represent any topic, even the "unexpected" ones. Also, this community (of Zadar, that is) has not been used, nor will it be soon, to such openness and "different perspective" of the reality, far away of the proclaimed one* (Mrčela, 1989: 2). The occurrence of this independent newspaper was reacted on by a reader who expressed his opinion on the newspaper and its editorial policy in a letter. He compared *Fokus* with Slovenian newspapers *Mladina* and *Omladinska iskra*. He believed this youth newspaper would deal with youth-related topics in a lesser way: *Be original, but please try to help the young to really find themselves. Leave the rambling on this and that system aside, because we are hungry, please write also on how to get out of the general crisis* (Josip T., 1989: 2).

As an example of democracy-oriented journalism, *Fokus* mentioned a work by a journalist and a column writer Tanja Torbarina in an article entitled "20 years of Tanja Torbarina". She was called a Rambo of Yugoslav journalism due to her rough and ironic texts on the then social and political events (*Fokus*, 1989: 16). Its support to media freedom and pluralism was proven by *Fokus* in its section *Mail box* which published reactions, polemics, debates and opinions of readers on the then current topics. Addressing the first Croatian multiparty elections, *Fokus* thus published a reader's letter sending his personal data and proposing his political program for a representative in the Croatian Parliament. He also suggested the editors to form a new section *Expecting Elections* where citizens would get the

possibility to present their programs for the first multiparty elections in Croatia (Pavelić, 1990: 22). *Fokus* was also unique for its addressing the issues of human rights of Albanian population in Kosovo. In the *Mail box* section, intended for readers' letters, it published a confession of a reader relating to the consequences of a Greater Serbia politics of Slobodan Milošević. In the article *What They Did to Us* the reader stated his confession on the torture and deaths of his family members from 1919 to 1940. He believed Yugoslav public was misinformed about the Kosovo situation (Quni, 1990: 11). *Fokus* also informed about activities of new Zadar's media.

Congratulation on establishing a new radio station Ga-ga was published in the article *God save radio Gaga*. It pointed out a great role of the editor Aleksandar Kovačić, who according to *Fokus managed to break down the media monopol and promote the western-type station* (Klarica, 1990: 9). In the issue 18, *Fokus* published an open letter to Franjo Tuđman, the then first president of the Republic of Croatia, asking him to use his legally acquired authority to judge the attack on *Fokus* redaction, which occurred in the form of a number of threatening letters. The editors of *Fokus* described this as *a primitive political addressing which should be stopped in the democratically constituted Croatia* (Fokus, 1990: 6).

## Conclusion

In 1989 and 1990 the process of democratization started in Croatia, involving all segments of society, including media. Croatian media were the ones that pointed to social and political changes occurring in Croatia in the period researched. Changes on the political scene also influenced the media system change, from the then Yugoslav to a new, democratic and information media system. Local newspapers, a weekly *Narodni list* and a monthly *Fokus*, were given as an example of analyzing the concept of freedom, as they were published in Zadar, the city with the oldest media tradition, dating back to 1806. Media freedom, which was a current issue in the researched years, was also represented in the Zadar's local newspapers.

Newspaper articles published in the category of *The Freedom of the Media* in the weekly *Narodni list* covered a wide range of topics on freedom and pluralism of media, such as credibility of media texts and journalists, the trend of liberalism and the problems of financing and publication of public newspapers, their misuse in the propaganda war and the occurrence of the new media in Zadar. Furthermore, *Fokus* actively informed the readers on the attitude of the President board of Zadar's municipality committee regarding the activities of the monthly *Fokus* and their negative attitude towards program orientation of *Fokus*. The youth monthly *Fokus* approached the research issues on media freedom and pluralism in a more liberal, open and critical way than the weekly *Narodni list*. As the first independent

medium in Zadar, *Fokus* analyzed a wide range of topics from the field of media freedom, such as activities of other journalists, with a special attention being given to its own editorial policy and complaints on its own work expressed by the then Zadar's authorities. *Fokus* enabled its readers to react, comment on and appeal to in the *Mail box* section in a form of a letter. The results of the research on the issue of media freedom and pluralism illustrated with an example of the local press in Zadar in the years of 1989 and 1990 have shown the researched newspapers *Narodni list* and *Fokus* actively, continuously and critically informed the public on the events in the field of media, thus contributing to the development of the new democratic and informative media system in Croatia.

### References:

- Malović, Stjepan. Novine. Zagreb: Dr. Stjepan Malović, 1995.
- Malović, Stjepan. Ima li granice slobodi medija. Politička misao, Vol XLI, br. 1. Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti, 2004.
- Novak, Božidar. Hrvatsko novinarstvo u 20. stoljeću. Zagreb: Goldenmarketing- Tehnička knjiga, 1996.
- Peruško Čulek, Zrinka. Demokracija i mediji. Zagreb: Barbat, 1999.
- Ražnjević Zdrilić, Marijana. Demokratizacija zadarskog novinskog prostora 1989. i 1990. godine na primjeru *Fokusa* i *Narodnog lista* (doktorska disertacija). Zagreb: Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, 2013.
- Thompson, Mark. Kovanje rata. Zagreb: Hrvatski helsinški odbor za ljudska prava, Građanska inicijativa za slobodu javne riječi, 1995.
- M. Kučina. Svatko je kovač svog mišljenja. *Narodni list*, br. 1935 (7635), 11. veljače 1989.
- M. K. Novinarstvo sve samostalnije i kritičnije. *Narodni list*, br. 1952 (7652), 10. lipnja 1989.
- M. Kučina. Vanzemaljci. *Narodni list*, br. 1973 (7673), 4. studenoga 1989.
- S. Župan. naslovom Sudbina Buridanovog magarca. *Narodni list*, br. 1982 (7582), 6. siječnja 1990.
- M. Kučina. Nezavisnost ideal. *Narodni list*, br. 1985 (7585), 27. siječnja 1990.
- E. Š. Na visini zadatka. *Narodni list*, br 1982 (7582), 6. siječnja 1990.
- M. K. Uvjetna podrška „Fokusu“. *Narodni list*, br. 1943 (7643), 8. travnja 1989.
- T. Stupin. Začetak zadarske TV zrelosti. *Narodni list*, br. 1967 (7667), 16. rujna 1989.
- Damir Maričić. Crno-bijeli svijet. *Fokus*, br. 2., 23. veljače 1989.
- Branko Mrčela. - . *Fokus*, br. 5., 13. travnja 1989
- Josip T. *Redakciji Fokusa*. *Fokus*, br. 2., 23. veljače 1989.

N. N. „20 years of Tanya Torbarina“. Fokus, br. 2., 23. veljače 1989. Rikard Pavelić. - . Fokus, br. 12., 9. veljače 1990.  
Martin Quni. Što su nam radili. Fokus, br. 16., lipanj 1990.  
Siniša Klarica. *God Save Radio Gaga*. Fokus, br. 17., 30. lipnja 1990.  
Redakcija. *Otvoreno pismo gospodinu dru Franji Tuđmanu*. Fokus, br. 18., 25. srpnja 1990.  
Narodnenovine, [http://narodnenovine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1990\\_12\\_56\\_1092.html](http://narodnenovine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/1990_12_56_1092.html) (1. veljače 2015.)