



On the Road to a Free Press in Albania: Evaluating Outside Aid Efforts

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[Editors' Note: This study by Professor Van Kornegay of the University of South Carolina was funded by the James M. Cox, Jr. Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research of the Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. So far as the editors know, this is the first attempt to evaluate in detail efforts by a variety of non-Albanian organizations, agencies and institutions furnishing aid to help establish a free press in Albania.]

A Media Struggling to Mature

The office walls of the Democratic Press printing plant in Tirana, Albania are decorated with an American flag, a poster of the Statue of Liberty rising up out of the mist and portraits of Presidents Bush and Clinton. But it's the other symbols of new-found freedoms that cover the room like wallpaper: Playboy's Miss September, Miss October and Miss every-other-month-of-

the-year. Coming off the press is the most recent issue of Eros, a soft-porn tabloid printed at the plant.

The more wholesome icons were in vogue during the heady days when communist rule had come to an end and journalists were getting their first taste of press freedoms. But today, the mood in the Albanian media has become more somber. The dialog of democracy is still an ideal, but pornography helps pay the bills. Like the rest of this small Balkan nation of 3.5 million, the media are struggling to mature as they wrestle with issues of financial survival, an uncertain political climate and whether the new face of press freedom looks more like Lady Liberty or Miss October.

To help Albanian journalists find a new role in their emerging democracy, Western organizations have sponsored a variety of media aid programs. Many of these aid efforts have provided essential resources to help nurture a fragile, free press while others have struggled to bear fruit in the harsh climate of a society with no democratic legacy.

Reviewing Media Aid Efforts

This monograph is a review of such efforts to aid the Albanian media. It is not a comprehensive enumeration of all the projects that were undertaken or are still underway, but an accounting of some of the first efforts that began in early 1991. Through the voices of the aid recipients and organizers, and from my own experiences, I hope a discussion of these efforts will help inform the decisions of those still involved in the important work of building a free press in Albania.

As they have struggled to establish a free press, Albanian journalists and their benefactors have confronted endemic problems of a nation with a long history of isolation and totalitarian governments.

The Balkans have been called "Europe's forgotten rear door" and Albania is perhaps the most anonymous and enigmatic nation of this region. Its people are descended from the ancient Illyrian tribes that by some accounts came to the area even before the Greeks and Slavs. The Albanian language, Shqip, comes from these tribes and bears no resemblance to any other known tongue.

As far back as the 18th Century a British journalist described Albania as "a land within sight of Italy which is less known than the interior of America." [1] Not much has changed in the intervening years. When Albania began opening its doors to foreigners in the late 1980s, the first visitors found a nation behind the times and falling apart. Anthony Daniels wrote in 1991:

"At Tirana Airport one leaves a continent and several decades behind. . . People move slowly, almost with reluctance. The aircraft in which one lands stands in solitary glory on the tarmac (apart from the few ancient and probably flightless MiG fighters half-hidden behind the bushes. . .). One walks to the terminal through a pleasantly seedy garden with spiky grass and stunted palm trees, and notices there is no smell of aviation fuel in the air, as at other airports. . . Before the entry formalities are completed, the aircraft has taken off for its return to the other world, and

suddenly the reality of Albania's terrible isolation is revealed to the tourist. If he contracts appendicitis now, he will have to submit to an Albanian appendectomy." [2]

I visited Albania four times between the fall of 1992 and late 1994 as part of an aid program to provide computer training to journalists, which was sponsored by the James M. Cox, Jr. Center for International Mass Communication Training and Research at the University of Georgia.

I didn't have to go far beyond the dilapidated airport to discover why the U.N. would classify Albania as a "least-developed nation," the only one ever in Europe. From a distance, the skyline of the capital city of Tirana had a familiar urban profile with row upon row of high-rise apartments. But up close the crude brick and mortar construction of the buildings gave the city a primitive, unfinished look. Windows were broken, public fountains were dry, everything seemed old, worn and used up.

Much of the blame for Albania's misery lies at the feet of xenophobic dictator Enver Hoxha. Albania underwent a massive spiritual and material erosion during his reign that started at the end of World War II and lasted until his death in 1985. Hoxha left Albania with a crumbling infrastructure and a huge vacuum in public life. Even after his death, his legacy remained a strong force in the country under a hand-picked successor, Ramiz Alia, who wasn't voted out of office until March, 1992.

The Media As Hoxha's Mouthpiece



Relindja Demokratike is the newspaper of the ruling Democratic Party and was the first opposition paper to appear as the dictatorship fell in Albania. Today it is widely criticized as being little more than a mouthpiece for President Berisha. The front page photo was an attempt to discredit a socialist politician by placing his likeness in the mouth of the late Albanian dictator, Enver Hoxha.

Hoxha used the media as an important instrument of policy. Broadcast media, especially radio, were the dominant tools of propaganda since they afforded the easiest access to the majority of the Albanian population living in the remote and mountainous countryside. It also allowed

Hoxha to transmit his propaganda abroad--probably the only export to come out of Albania during his reign. For years Radio Tirana broadcast worldwide in more than 20 languages from atop nearby Mt. Diti, and it was famed for having one of the most powerful signals in Europe.

But even though radio was an important tool of the government, it developed little depth or sophistication in its programming. By 1991 there was only one national program simulcast on AM and FM from 5 a.m. to midnight, and four stations in smaller cities which only broadcast several hours a day. [3]

Television eventually became the most important segment of the electronic media, but it developed at a much slower pace. The only TV station in Albania didn't start broadcasting in color until the early 1980's, and color TV sets weren't common in Albanian homes until the mid 80's because they were too expensive. [4]

Albania's close proximity to Europe made foreign TV and radio programming accessible, but it had little impact on public life during Hoxha's reign. The regime tried to maintain a captive radio and television audience with threats of harsh prison sentences to those caught tuning in to foreign stations. Many, however, listened to foreign broadcasts.



The "Voice of the People," the newspaper of the socialist party and of the hard-line communists before the revolution, is printed on old hot metal presses. But it still has the highest circulation of any paper in Tirana--about 30,000.

During Hoxha's rule the print media were less pervasive and influential than broadcast. Newspapers were published by the only real political party in Albania, the communist Labor Party, which cultivated a handful of party organs. Zeri i Popullit, or Voice of the People, was the party's flagship daily paper and had a circulation of 180,000 at its peak. It still survives today but with a circulation of approximately 30,000.

Aside from Zeri i Popullit, the government sponsored several non-daily newspapers targeted at different audiences. There was a newspaper for youth (Zeri i Rinise), sports (Sporti), arts and culture, (Drita), labor (Pune), and the military (Luftetari).

Albania Opens the Door

It wasn't until communist regimes in other East Bloc nations began to crumble and demonstrations erupted in Tirana in December, 1990, that the government began giving up its monopoly of the print media. In response to the waning influence of communism and the internal unrest, laws were passed that sanctioned the publication of newspapers and magazines by groups outside the government.

As the government started easing restrictions on the media, a number of Western organizations began looking for ways to help the country's fledgling free press. Among the first groups to begin work in Albania were the International Media Fund (IMF), the United States Information Agency (USIA), the Cox International Center at the University of Georgia and the Soros Foundation.

The Need for Aid

The first media aid initiatives started when IMF President Marvin Stone visited Albania in May, 1991. Only six months earlier the government had issued its first permit to a newspaper offering an alternative to Labor Party propaganda. Relindja Demokratike, a newspaper of the opposition Democratic Party, published its first issue on January 5, 1991 and quickly sold 50,000 copies. [5]

Stone found that the print and broadcast media, like the rest of the nation, were in dire need of assistance. The available printing technology was 50 years old, distribution systems were inefficient and subject to tampering from Communist cronies still in control, and newsrooms lacked basic tools, such as electric typewriters and ribbons.

"Visits to the two state-owned publishing houses is a trip back to pre-World War II technology," wrote Stone in his report. "In the major house, the British linotype machines are as much as 60 years old. Spare parts are no longer available. The lead for plating has been recycled so many decades it has lost its durability. The sole rotary press itself is 50-60 years old. All of this is housed in a dark, Dickensian warehouse," he wrote. [6]

A Tirana seminar for journalists, held jointly by several aid organizations in the fall of 1991, was probably the first effort by the West to help develop an independent Albanian media. Taking the lead in this pioneering effort was the International Media Fund, set up by the U.S. Congress to help develop a democratic press in Eastern and Central Europe; the U.S. Information Service in Tirana; and the Cox International Center of the University of Georgia. Among journalists and academics meeting with a large group of Albanian journalists and political leaders were David Binder, foreign correspondent of the New York Times, known for his thoughtful coverage of the Balkans and other areas; Bill Kovach, veteran editor and curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University; Professor Ray Hiebert of the University of Maryland; and Professor Al Hester, Director of the Cox International Center.

This first seminar, held in what had been the Enver Hoxha Museum, was well-received by the Albanians who spoke out strongly for freedom of the press. The seminar laid the ground work for future IMF, U.S. Information Agency, Cox Center and other aid efforts.

"Those were euphoric days in Albania, particularly in the media," said Hester. "Albanian journalists came to these seminars and said things they had never said before, at least not in public or with their colleagues. They had never thought much about reporting critically on the affairs of the government because it wasn't a possibility. They talked of being freed, not only from their long isolation from the world, but from an enslavement of the mind." [7]

In addition to conducting seminars, these aid organizations also began providing material aid. The IMF purchased a satellite dish and VCR tapes for the government television station so it could capture, record and play back international programming. IMF also donated two vans to aid in the distribution of newspapers. The Soros Foundation began supplying newsprint to opposition newspapers, since the only newsprint plant in the country could not meet demand.

In the winter of 1992, the Cox Center set up a computer lab in a government-owned building with a half-dozen personal computers and laser printers purchased by the IMF. Al Hester used the lab as a site to conduct desktop publishing and reporting workshops. For most of the journalists who participated, it was the first time they had ever used a computer.

Aid to the Broadcast Media

More long-term projects were initiated to lay the groundwork for increasing the diversity of the broadcast media through the construction of two new radio stations. The IMF funded the construction of a Tirana station that was the first in-country alternative to the government-owned station, and IMF funds purchased a transmitter and studio equipment for another community radio station in the city of Elbasan.

The first station went on air in 1992 and continues to broadcast over the Tirana area. Most of its programming comes from Voice of America Europe; however, it supports a small Albanian staff that reports Albanian language news once in the morning and once in the evening. The IMF claimed the station became the most popular in Tirana soon after it went on the air. [8]

The station played on the radios of virtually every newsroom I visited in the fall of 1992, and it was strange to hear American rock music piped into this ghost town corner of the world.

"Ain't that America, you and me," the lyrics of a John "Cougar" Mellencamp song echoed one night through the dingy, three-room apartment that was the newsroom of Relinda Demokratique.

Ain't that America, something to see, baby.
Ain't the America, land of the free
Little pink houses for you and me."

I couldn't tell whether the music was a source of hope and inspiration or just a diversion from the heartaches of a people whose tiny apartments rarely had heat or running water. Whatever the

effect, the IMF-sponsored station gave Albanians some of their first cultural connections with the West, and they were connections they were eager to make.

Aid to the Print Media

While there has been progress in upgrading facilities of government-owned stations, the aid effort to the broadcast media has been hindered by the prohibitive costs of equipment and the fact that private ownership of radio and television stations is still against the law. The print media, however, have faced fewer technical and legal obstacles, and as a result, the aid effort here has produced more dramatic changes.

One of the most ambitious media aid projects was the construction of the Democratic Press printing plant. At a cost of more than \$1 million, the IMF purchased land and constructed the plant to house computers, platemaking equipment and a printing press. Albanians were hired to run the facility and sent to Germany for training.



The printing center constructed by the International Media Fund in Tirana.

At the time of its construction in 1992 and early 1993, the printing plant was one of the most ambitious building projects in Tirana. The steel frame building would not rate as much as a second glance in most Western cities, but it was a novel structure for Albania at the time. In fact, all of the materials to build the plant had to be shipped into the country, and the project manager, Bruce Anderson, said none of the Albanian construction workers had any experience with modern building methods or materials.

Sharing Responsibility and Profits

The IMF invited seven independent newspapers in Tirana to participate in a consortium which was supposed to jointly operate the plant and share in its profits. Three of the seven newspapers had existed under the old communist regime and were struggling to remake themselves, while the other four were new publications supported by parties in opposition to the Labor Party.

Zeri i Popullit, the Labor Party's newspaper, was not invited to participate in the consortium. "They controlled the only printing plant in town when we came there," said IMF Senior

Counselor Bill Sheehan. "They were being sponsored by the communist government who'd been in power for years, and we weren't going to bring them into the group." [9]

The Cox Center also participated in the project by coordinating the placement of computers and laser printers in each of the seven newsrooms and by sending consultants to Albania on five occasions to provide training.

The Free Press Is Launched

The new equipment freed the seven newspapers from having to use the services of the communist party press house for typesetting and lay-out; however, it also created problems the Albanians had never faced using primitive production methods. The same day I delivered computers to one newspaper staff they put aside their manual typewriters and started entering stories and laying out pages on the terminals. Throughout the day there were power outages and resulting computer crashes, and by late evening not one page was finished.

"Mr. Van. When will we get our newspaper out of the computer?" asked the editor.

"When you get the electricity to stay on," I said.

"But the electricity never stays on for long," he moaned.

The sun was rising the next morning when the last page crept off the laser printer, and the pasteups were rushed off to the printing plant. But the Albanians were undaunted by the experience. After a few hours sleep, I trudged back to the office and found a machine that looked like a huge green hot dog stand blocking the front door. It turned out to be a diesel generator left behind by the Chinese some 20 years before. The Red Army's bright star adorned one side, and several copy editors were huddled around a panel of knobs and dials trying to decipher the operating instructions, written in Chinese.

No one knew Chinese, but no one wanted to spend another night waiting for the electricity to come back on, either. The generator was started and a thick cable terminated by two exposed wires was threaded through a window. After several misconnections that caused a shower of blue sparks, the lights flickered on and the Albanian free press lurched forward, courtesy of communist China.

By the time the construction of the the Democratic Press printing plant was finished, most of the newspapers had completed the conversion to computerized lay out and typesetting. The plant was dedicated on February 2, 1993, in a ceremony attended by President Berisha, representatives of the Cox International Center, the International Media Fund, USIA and most of the Tirana media. Addressing the crowd, President Berisha said he had encouraged the building of the plant because he believed a free and independent press was essential to building a democratic Albania. However, less than two years later, several journalists were jailed for violating press laws that had been passed during his administration and his political opponents were charging him with resorting to repressive tactics.

Along with their desperate need for material and technological assistance, Albanian journalists have had few opportunities for any type of formal journalism education. Nor has Albanian

society at large ever been exposed in a systematic way to a thoughtful explanation of the role of a free press in a democratic nation.

Aid initiatives in this area consisted of providing study abroad programs for Albanian journalists as well as sending U.S. professors to Albania to teach and help develop journalism curricula.

In one of the first exchange programs, the Cox Center brought a handful of Albanian journalists to the University of Georgia for a series of journalism seminars. The USIA's Voice of America and the Cox Center also provided a year-long fellowship in 1992 to Albanian journalist Anton Joro to study journalism at the University of Georgia where he translated a basic journalism text.

Other groups, such as Gannett's Freedom Forum, the Knight Foundation and the Soros Foundation, have also sponsored programs to bring Albanian journalists to the U.S. to study in university journalism programs or gain practical experience working in the field.

Developing a Journalism Curriculum



"The newspapers only talk to themselves and not to their readers," said a member of this English class at the University of Tirana. "We don't trust them."

In Albania, university courses in journalism were either limited or nonexistent under communism, and, as with any other endeavor, there were significant obstacles to developing new programs. Shortages of knowledgeable faculty, facilities and textbooks have been a major problem for creating programs in even the most basic disciplines. [10]

In response to this need, IMF helped coordinate the placement of three Fulbright Scholars in the journalism department at the University of Tirana. Ned Colt, a broadcast journalist, was the first Fulbright scholar to teach in the program in the fall, 1992, semester. Cathy Packer, a journalism professor from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, followed and taught from January, 1993, until June, 1993, and Frank Jossi, former director of the World Press Institute at Macalester College, taught from fall, 1993, until spring, 1994.

The three professors taught courses in basic reporting and mass communications and worked with the small Albanian faculty to develop a journalism curriculum.

In addition to the Fulbright Scholars, three American exchange students from the graduate school of Columbia University also taught briefly in the department during the fall, 1993, semester. They came to the university and started a student newspaper, Reporteri, with support from the IMF and the Soros Foundation. The trio taught a practicum-type course that gave Albanian students hands-on experience with basic reporting, layout and production.



This is a student newspaper at the University of Tirana, started with the help of U.S. journalism students. University administrators shut the paper down and evicted the U.S. students from their offices when the first issue printed articles criticizing a new press law. The newspaper continued publishing from the offices of the Soros Foundation's Media Training Center.

Reporteri's first issue became one of the most controversial events in the media aid effort to Albania. In an editorial, the newspaper wrote: "For years, journalists were mouthpieces for the state, hiding, manipulating or exaggerating facts to serve the propaganda machine. . . . Our responsibility is to provide objective and balanced information free of political or ideological taint." [11]

The issue also contained an article that aired criticisms of the government's new press law--a document crafted with the help of the journalism department's then Chairman, Rudolph Marko. Just days after it appeared, the three Americans were barred from the university, and desktop publishing equipment donated by IMF was locked up. University officials denounced the Soros Foundation on national television, accusing it of a conspiracy to discredit the Berisha regime.

After being banished from the university, the three American students moved to the Soros Foundation's Media Training Center where Marianne Sullivan was made co-director, and Reporteri continued publishing on a sporadic basis.

The Media Training Center is one of the most visible symbols of the Soros Foundation's presence in Albania, and it's this type of presence that has helped make George Soros' name a household word in much of Eastern Europe. Since 1991 the Soros Foundation has spent or

committed many millions of dollars to Eastern Europe through more than 30 philanthropic projects. In doing so, founder George Soros has become one of the most influential and controversial figures in the region. A recent public opinion poll in Bulgaria put his name recognition at 85 percent. [12]

Western-Style Opportunities

Activities at the center typify the Soros Foundation's interest in financing programs for education and information. Located down a narrow alley near the city's main square, the center is a modern, two-story stucco building painted a subdued tan, yet it stands in stark relief beside the dilapidated, World War II vintage buildings on either side.

Walking into the center is like clicking your heels and being magically sent back to Kansas. Here, floors are level, windows and doors all shut tight and the carpet and furnishings are new. There are computers, Touchtone telephones and fax machines. It's like any office you'd find back home and like no other office anywhere in Tirana.

The center is a site for small workshops where journalists and students learn desktop publishing and graphics skills on several computers. They can also read the wire services of Reuters and Associated Press, and there is even a small video editing room for those interested in learning basic broadcast editing skills.

Programs have been created to bring high school and elementary students to the center where they learn how to publish their own newspapers and newsletters. And media center staff have been active in picking Albanian students to participate in study-abroad programs sponsored by a variety of other aid groups.

The Media Center has also organized seminars for practicing professionals on topics such as the role of women in the media, newspaper distribution, government secrets and the public's right to know, press law and writing.

One of the more impressive aspects of the aid effort to the Albanian media has been the degree to which a variety of public and private organizations have cooperated with each other.

The Thomson Foundation from England has worked with the Soros Foundation to provide BBC internships for Albanian students, and two German organizations the Frederick Ebert Foundation and Hans Siedel Foundation have provided legal and legislative counseling on the development of Albanian press laws.

The Knight Foundation sent American journalists Rick Foote and Warren Talbot to Tirana for three months in the summer of 1994 as Knight Fellows. During their stay, they offered training in newsroom organization, copy editing and layout. They also taught a crash course in journalism at the Media Training Center for Albanian students who were preparing to go to the U.S. as part of a study abroad program.

Laying the Foundation for a Free Press

After more than three years of aid efforts the current picture of the Albanian media scene is one of contrasts. The encouraging signs of greater press freedoms are often overshadowed by the tumult of a contentious party press that practices journalism like a blood sport. But this much of the picture is clear: Albania has opened its doors to foreign aid and, with it, ideas that have produced significant changes in the media.

Evidence of this change is most obvious in Tirana where satellite dishes are blooming everywhere on top of the ramshackle apartment buildings. Today, Albanians can tune in to every form of international programming, including CNN.

The actions of aid agencies in early 1992, which brought more foreign television programming to Albanian TV and offered an alternative to the government radio station, were important first steps. They gave Albanians some of their first links to Western-style media that in turn have created a greater demand for reforms in the Albanian media.

These reforms have been slow in coming, but there are signs of progress. Private ownership of television and radio stations is still against the law, and most reporting is controlled by government station directors or self-censorship by fearful reporters. But while the content may be tame, broadcast reporting is no longer completely one-sided.

In the Fall of 1994, I watched state-run TV air a program in which opposition politicians debated the referendum for a new constitution. The proposed constitution, which President Berisha pushed hard for, was eventually defeated at the polls. Much of the criticism reported by the media claimed the proposed constitution placed too much power in the hands of the president. In this case it was clear that even the government controlled TV station would air the issues of the day and challenge the authority of the sitting president.

In the area of radio, the Albanian people's desire for more Western-style journalism even threatens to render some aid efforts passé. Since its promising start, the popularity of the IMF sponsored Voice of America radio station has waned because Albanians now want more internal news than the station can provide. Increasingly, they are tuning in to the BBC station broadcasting out of Italy to get it.

"The BBC station in Italy has a staff in Albania and it gives us more current information about Albanian events," says Alma Kondili, an Albanian student studying at the University of South Carolina. "The Voice of America station has less staff and less variety. We listen to it for music, but for news, the BBC station is better." [13]

As the media aid effort and other outside influences have given the Albanians more choices, the government radio station has been forced to become more innovative in its programming. A radio call-in program called "No Silence Tonight" was started in the spring of 1994, and it features young Albanian hosts talking to callers about the "secrets" in their lives. Arben Kallamata of Radio Tirana says the show represents a small breakthrough since Albanians have never been able to call a radio station and express their opinions on any subject. [14]

Encouraging Developments

There have also been encouraging developments in the print media as a result of aid initiatives. Residents of Tirana buy their newspapers in the city's main square, a large open area which is intersected by the traffic-choked Boulevard of the Martyrs. The square is bordered by drab government buildings with names like the Palace of Culture, and the facade of one is emblazoned with a huge communist-era mural depicting a parade of triumphant workers. They march on, out of step and oblivious to the political ground that has shifted beneath them. Amid the noisy traffic and a growing number of privately owned cafes, kiosks sell more than 20 different newspapers with opinions that run the political spectrum.

The Democratic Press printing plant has had a direct impact on the growing variety and improved quality of Tirana's newspapers. As of this writing, the plant is still the best equipped printing facility in Albania, and the majority of established newspapers in the capital print there. In the same week it was dedicated, newspapers began printing at the plant and realized immediate improvements in quality. Photographs, when available, were no longer blurry and smudged due to poor printing. The graphics were crisp and the typography, for the first time in years, was legible.

The turn-around time for getting newspapers out on the street also improved dramatically. Breaking news became a real possibility for a daily newspaper like Relindja Demokratike. Previously, it had taken almost two days to get a newspaper typeset and printed using the Labor Party's hot metal typesetting system and printing press. Thus, Wednesday's paper had to be put together on Monday.

I saw this change illustrated on the night Relindja Demokratike converted their production system from manual typewriters to the computer and pagination software. The last page was coming off the laser printer when an editor raced in with the important news that a notorious bank robber had just been arrested. "It's sensational!" exclaimed the editor. Bank robberies were a new and fascinating event in Albania at that time.

Page one was brought up on the screen and a story removed to make way for the news. Albanians awoke the next morning to find the robber's arrest detailed on the front page in a large black box with reversed type.

Evaluating Education Efforts

It's much easier to substantiate how material aid has changed the quality of the media than it is to judge how journalistic seminars and education programs have changed their character. Albanian journalists, many of whom eagerly attended the first seminars and forums in 1991 and 1992, now offer a range of opinions on the value of such programs. Some acknowledge they played an important role in helping set a new agenda for the media, while others play down their influence or are dismissive of them entirely.

"I've been to several of these forums and I don't think they have much impact," said Gjergi Pilika, a freelance journalist who writes for Republika and Koje Jone. "In Albania poverty is

what determines loyalty. People may talk about noble ideas, but they are usually willing to trade their professional standards for money." [15]

Albanian journalists also complain that most of these seminars focused on free press ideas that were too far ahead of their time for Albanian society. "We have a saying that you can't raise a baby in the street and expect it to grow up and become a good person," said Pilika. "Right now the Albanian media are like babies in the street. We need some rules to keep us from becoming dishonorable citizens."

But in spite of the skepticism, a number of ideas put forth at these seminars and forums are taking root and showing tentative signs of growth. From her vantage point at the Media Training Center, Marianne Sullivan said she's seen a slow but positive evolution in the content of a number of newspapers.

"They've started running more pictures, more package stories and more news from outlying districts," she said. "That's very important since more than 50 percent of the Albanian population lives in rural areas. They've also started printing TV and train schedules and more ads. Those were things you didn't see in newspapers just a short time ago." [16]



Koha Jone uses many photos and breaking news stories. It is considered by most Albanians to be a reliable and independent source of information.

The tabloid *Koje Jone* (Our Time) is considered by many Albanians to be one of the most independent newspapers, perhaps because it frequently levels harsh attacks against the government. *Koje Jone* is a daily and contracts with the Democratic Press to print anywhere from 10,000 to 13,000 copies each issue. [17] It has led the way in publishing consumer-oriented items, such as a column on women's issues, and has published investigative pieces on the influence of gangs and the problem of police brutality.

Surprisingly, the government news service, Albanian Telegraph Agency, has also gained a reputation as a reliable news source. The ATA publishes daily bulletins which supply

newspapers, government agencies and businesses with Albanian news. The ATA has also begun publishing an eight-page tabloid, *Lajmi i Dites* (News of the Day), three times a week at the Democratic Press with a \$25,000 grant from the IMF. [18]

With a staff of about 70 reporters and editors, ATA is one of the few news organizations that goes beyond the urban centers to cover national news. *Lajmi i Dites* also carries international news by publishing stories from Reuters and Agence France Press.

"Journalists with the ATA were some of the most professional I met," said Fulbright scholar Frank Jossi, who conducted several reporting workshops at the agency. "Most Albanian journalists only write commentary and analysis and don't recognize what we would think are obvious story ideas. But the ATA people were more enterprising about developing story ideas." [19]

Whether these positive changes in the print and broadcast media would have happened without the presence of the aid effort is an open question. Undoubtedly, most Albanians were already eager to embrace the culture and many of the institutions of Western democracies. But without the aid effort, it is doubtful they would have ever found the wherewithal to begin building these institutions. The technical and material aid gave the media a jump start, seminars and forums helped framed the debate about where it would go.

Journalism Educators Encounter Many Obstacles

In the area of journalism education, the achievements of the aid effort have been tempered by material and cultural obstacles. In many cases, journalism educators had to try and create something out of nothing. All of the Fulbrighters at the University of Tirana had to use interpreters to translate lectures and grade papers as well as create their own instructional materials. There was only one Albanian textbook, a small handbook produced by the IMF that covered the basics of journalistic writing.

"Language was a bigger issue than I thought it would be," said Fulbright scholar Cathy Packer. "As I was lecturing, students would start arguing with the interpreter over the meaning of words. But that's understandable; they didn't even have words for things like advertising. It just wasn't a part of their vocabulary." [20]

Packer taught a course she called "Theory and practice of the free press," using articles from journals and magazines. "I brought over a lot of stuff that was at the high school level, because I thought I should keep things as basic as possible," she said. "But the Albanian students were very bright, especially when you considered the hardships they had endured. They were every bit as capable as undergraduates in the U.S."

Frank Jossi taught a two-hour beginning reporting course twice a week with 35 to 40 students. "When I got there they had assigned me a course, but they didn't have a classroom for me to teach in," said Jossi. "We finally found a room in a local library and that worked out well because it had no windows, and I could keep them focused on the class. [21]

"They weren't accustomed to coming in and taking notes and tests and writing papers and getting involved in dialog. They were used to just showing up, listening to a lecture and then taking a pass or fail test at the end of the semester."

Jossi had students read and analyze samples of Western journalism and write basic news stories. However, he encountered difficulties assigning out-of-class reporting assignments. "They didn't like to go out and interview people, especially people in the government, because officials won't talk to reporters, and so it was difficult to give them the type of reporting assignments you would give students in other countries."

Introducing New Teaching Styles

While Albanian students weren't familiar with the more interactive teaching style of U.S. professors, Packer said they welcomed new approaches in the classroom. "I held a mock trial early in the semester in which a student playing a newspaper editor was charged with publishing something critical of a government minister. Another student was the prosecutor and the class was the jury. They all got into it, and the editor gave an eloquent defense of the role of the media in a democratic society. But the students convicted him anyway and sentenced him to prison. Even young students had it in their heads that you don't criticize authority in the newspaper."

By the end of the semester Packer said the jury heard the editor's appeal and overturned their conviction. "They may have been trying to appease me, but I'd like to think it was because I'd worked on them with these ideas about a free press."

Outside of the university setting, the Media Training Center continues to serve as a site for technical training and as a forum for journalists to exchange ideas. A special board, made up of a cross-section of Tirana journalists, meets at the center on a regular basis to brainstorm and debate tactics for improving the Albanian media. The board has enabled Albanians to come up with their own ideas for confronting issues such as censorship, newspaper distribution and sensationalized reporting.

The center has also helped refine and maintain study-abroad programs by matching students with situations that relate better to their experience in Albania. "It's counter-productive to send an Albanian journalist to work on a large newspaper in a big metropolitan city in the U.S.," said Sullivan. "It doesn't relate to their situation here, and they just end up getting lost in the shuffle and overwhelmed by the pace."

Instead, Sullivan tried to match Albanian journalists up with smaller papers in more rural areas of the U.S. "It gives them a chance to work in an environment that is more like Albania. They come back with clips, and they get more feedback while they're on the job."

Road Blocks and Potholes

The aid effort has brought improvements to the Albanian media that are real and significant, yet it has also frequently been stymied by the problems of a nation struggling to reconcile democratic ideals with the reality of its totalitarian past.

Despite its auspicious dedication by the president and the enhanced technological capabilities it brought to the print media, the Democratic Press has experienced personnel problems, and critics have charged that it is being used as a political tool by Albania's Democratic Party.

The personnel problems began between the plant's manager, Petro Dhimitri, and the editors of the seven consortium newspapers. Dhimitri insisted on a hard line in his operating policies. He would allow no one, other than plant staff, into the production area of the building and was a taskmaster who enforced deadlines unmercifully. Newspapers that violated one of Dhimitri's policies or had problems paying were frequently refused service.

The problems escalated to the point that the press workers eventually went on strike and soon afterwards Dhimitri was arrested on charges he had illegally authorized the spending of consortium funds. Dhimitri claimed he was the victim of a setup. He was eventually convicted of the charges against him but never sentenced. However, he resigned from the plant when the editors refused to continue printing there while it was under his direction.

Controversy continued to dog the plant even after Dhimitri's departure. There were charges that the new director, Fejzi Bozgo, was being pressured by members of the consortium to deny opposition newspapers access to the plant.

"I did tell Zeri i Popullit they couldn't print here because they are a communist newspaper," said Bozgo. "And I won't let them print here, but that's my right because communist organizations are outlawed in Albania. Other than that, anyone can print here." [22] Bozgo claims that he is under no pressure from the consortium directors to censure or deny other newspapers access to the plant.

The personnel problems brought to light a criticism Albanians frequently level at outside groups who want to help. They say foreign aid programs frequently fail to take into account how years of totalitarian rule have shaped Albanian society.

"These groups come here for a short time and they make decisions about how to help based on the patterns they observe," said Arben Kallamata. "Yet these patterns often don't reveal the depth or complexity of our problems. Hiring Petro to run the printing plant is a good example. Here is a man who had worked for years for communist newspapers and then opposition newspapers. His career had covered the political spectrum and everyone here knew this and felt this about him." [23]

But Kallamata says the biggest problem with the printing plant project involved control and authority rather than individual personnel. "The IMF should not have agreed to give so much control of the plant to Albanians so soon. Had they better understood the Albanian mentality, they would have seen that Albanians would use the printing plant for political purposes. They should have created a more restrictive agreement and should have stayed in control longer. People in democratic countries think it is undemocratic to tell people of another country what to do, but we have no tradition of this type of freedom here and we don't yet know how to handle it."

IMF's Bill Sheehan sees it a different way. He says there was too much foreign involvement, rather than too little, in the operation of the printing plant. "Our mandate was to go into these countries and cut through the red tape and get things started. We shouldn't have been refereeing these internal squabbles from overseas. We should have built the plant, trained them how to use it, then let them sort out their personnel problems. We stayed too long." [24]

Sheehan points out that it's difficult to find anyone in a country like Albania who isn't tainted by some type of political past. "Petro was one of two people in the country we felt were capable of running the plant. It was either hire an Albanian or put a foreigner in there, and after awhile people start to resent you when you exert too much outside control." Culture Clashes Journalism education programs, both at the University of Tirana and in study-abroad programs, have also had culture clashes that have frustrated groups on both sides of the aid equation.

Albanian journalists in at least two study-abroad programs in the U.S. have chosen not to return to Albania when their programs were over, opting instead to enroll in graduate programs or simply stay in the country illegally and find jobs.

In addition, those who have gone abroad have often lost their jobs back home or faced resentment when they returned from co-workers who had to "tow the line" while they were gone. There are no furloughs or sabbaticals at Albanian newspapers, and there are plenty of people eager to fill an empty post in the newsroom.

"I've seen a lot of people who go abroad to study become discouraged when they see the disparities between Albania and the rest of the world," said free-lance journalist Pilika. "They also become frustrated because the style of journalism is so radically different. They know they can't come back here and practice the type of journalism they are studying in another country. I think it's better to bring foreigners here and have them stay for longer periods of time."

Cultural differences came to a boiling point with the Reporteri incident at the University of Tirana. The American students teaching in the program were portrayed as free press trailblazers in national newspapers in the U.S. after they were banned from the school. "Americans teach Albania a lesson in free press" said a headline in the Los Angeles Times. But there were some who felt like the timing and tone of Reporteri may have been too much too soon. "The article they published about the press law was balanced and objective," said Jossi. "And everything they published about it had already been said in the popular press, but publishing it in the school newspaper was like throwing cold water in the chairman's face. I think it could have been handled better. "

A Climate of Backlash



Many new publications are of an erotic or even pornographic nature in Eastern and Central Europe. This Albanian publication is rather sedate compared to some others on the newstands in that nation and elsewhere in the former socialist contries.



One of the "soft-porn" newspapers which have sprung up recently in Albania. The income from these newspapers supplements the less lucrative party newspapers in Albania. Existing laws against pornography are widely ignored.

Jossi also thinks placing too many foreigners in the journalism department at the University of Tirana coupled with the Reporteri incident created a climate of backlash against the Fulbright program.

"There was one American Fulbright and three American students teaching in the department and only three Albanians. It didn't take long before people started asking 'What's wrong with this picture?' They already have too many foreigners marching through there giving them advice. They are starting to say 'Hey, we've got a culture, too.'" [25]

Two other problems that continue to color the character of the media, and frustrate those involved in the aid effort, are the strident nature of the country's party press and a burgeoning pornography industry.

After being refused service at the Democratic Press, Zeri i Popullit has continued publishing, using an ancient hot metal Linotype for typesetting and a 1940's vintage printing press. The layout is Iron Curtain grey: the type is faded, the newsprint is yellow, and there are rarely any photographs. Yet, it is the most widely read newspaper in Tirana.

"People buy it for the same reason they go to see a boxing match," one journalist told me. "They want to see some blood, and Zeri i Popullit is always swinging at Berisha."

None of these criticisms seem to bother Senior Editor Thoma Gellci. He is relishing his current success and describes Zeri i Popullit's rising fortunes like a victory in a Cold War campaign.

"We've made \$30,000 in the last three months, and soon we are going to install the best four-color printing press in Albania," he said. "And then we will underbid that so-called Democratic Press, and all the newspapers will come to print here. And we will build the tallest skyscraper in Tirana and rent out office space to them all." [26]

When I smiled at his posturing he jumped up and walked to his desk. "You think I'm kidding?" He picked up a stack of newspapers and dropped them on the table in front of me. "Look at all the newspapers we print now. We print more than anyone, and they are the most respected and well-read of all the newspapers."

In the stack were issues of an Albanian imitation of Playboy and a tabloid named Erotika. Blonde-haired and pictured in opulent settings, the playmates looked suspiciously like imports whose pictures had been reprinted from Western magazines.

"You call this respectable journalism?" I said, pointing to Playboy.

"It IS serious journalism," he said indignantly. "People buy it for the articles." His newspaper may have been shunned by Western aid organizations, but that hasn't soured him on capitalist propaganda.

Zeri i Popullit is by no means the only newspaper to peddle pornography and the party line. Most Albanian newspapers are owned by political parties, and their pages are dominated by political articles and opinion pieces with very little breaking news.

"We used to not trust the media because we had one party propaganda," said Kallamata. "Now we don't trust them because we have multiparty propaganda. We don't have a problem with free expression of opinions in this country. We have too many opinions and not enough informative news." [27]

The frustration with the party press is most apparent among the young and reflects a potentially serious problem of alienation among future readers. It was the students from the University of

Tirana who led the demonstrations in 1990 that forced the government to begin easing away from its repressive past, and they, more than any group, have little tolerance for party press propaganda. In an English class at the University of Tirana, students expressed a deep cynicism about Albanian newspapers.

"We don't trust many of the papers," said Ermira Ithamallah, a 21-year-old studying English. "They only talk to each other and not to their readers. You read five newspapers and get five different versions of the same event. We never know the real story. We watch foreign TV to find out what's going on." [28]

"I'm tired of reading only about politics and political debates," said another student. "I want to read about the things that affect me personally--stories about careers and how to find a job."

Challenges for the Future

Much has been done to help an independent media get started in Albania, but there is still much that needs to be done if the media are to survive and flourish. The most effective aid programs will be those that adjust and adapt to fit the needs of a society in transition.

The current mentality among most Albanian journalists is "Don't tell me something, give me something--a skill, a piece of equipment, a scholarship to study abroad." Continued attempts to influence the character of the Albanian media will have to work harder to gain an audience by providing tangible skills, material aid and technical support as incentives.

Journalism education continues to show promise in helping introduce a new generation of Albanian journalists to the ideas and practices of Western-style media. But journalism education efforts should also be directed at other elements of Albanian society, especially the government. Media relations training for government spokesmen could teach them how to work with the media rather than against it and thus encourage a more open exchange of public information.

Pros and Cons

Study-abroad programs can give Albanians important opportunities to develop journalistic skills and be exposed to Western ideas and culture. Scholarly projects while they are abroad, such as translating textbooks into Albanian, can also help provide badly needed educational resource material back in Albania. But the material temptations to stay in the U.S., combined with the fact that journalists often have to give up their jobs to go abroad, usually make these programs a net loss for Albania.

Shortening the length of time Albanian journalists stay in the U.S. as well as assigning them to more rural areas while they are here might help ensure Albanians return home when their programs are finished. But media aid goals would be better served by sending journalists and educators to Albania for longer periods of time to train people in the environment in which they work.

Marianne Sullivan's time at the Soros Media Training Center and experience with Reporteri taught her that change will be slow and that aid organizations must be willing to adjust their expectations.

"I think too much training and emphasis has been on an American First Amendment model versus a more European model," she said. "We Americans don't accept things like press laws, but they are common in most European nations. I think a press law in Albania is a natural evolution in the development of their press. They don't have the traditions that we do and so some controls, especially at first, are probably inevitable.

"We should concentrate on skills-based things first and then progress to more theory-based concepts. A lot of our training didn't allow for a natural progression to take place. I think it's going to take another round of national elections before the press finds its comfort zone." [29]

One tactic to build greater trust and acceptance of foreign consultants to Albania would be to give them introductory training in Albanian language and focus on more long-term assignments. Lack of knowledge of the Albanian tongue is a significant hindrance to assessing the quality of Albanian journalism and the ability to offer informed critiques.

Continuity of the aid effort is a problem as well. With each new wave of aid, workers and organizations that come to Albania, new plans and programs are devised based on what may or may not be an accurate snapshot of the need of the moment. Perhaps a board made up of representatives from aid organizations could meet on a regular basis to coordinate efforts and create initiatives with more long-term goals.

Conclusion

There are no neat prescriptions for nurturing a free press in a society that has little or no democratic legacy. Every step is a first step and there are no well-worn paths or time-honored institutions.

There have been obvious successes in Albania. The technical and material aid to the newspapers has propelled production practices from the 1940's into the 1990's in only a few short years. Broadcasting, while still laboring under the yoke of government ownership, is changing due to cultural and political influences from abroad, and aid programs have put the building blocks in place to offer alternatives to government programming when and if laws allow.

But technical successes are only part of the recipe for building a free and independent media. Albania's most potent legacy is one of totalitarian rule, and without a great deal of political maturation, the aid given to the media could easily be turned into a tool for exploiting the seamy and the sensational. Or worse; the underdog free press could become the lapdog of yet another repressive regime.

Albania may yet teach the rest of the world some lessons about determination as it struggles through this difficult transition. Starting newspapers, magazines, radio and television stations in

a place like this would seem to most outsiders to be a heroic act of faith in the future. But the Albanians have endured a long bleak night, and they are not ready now to give in to despair.

Endnotes

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- [16] Marianne Sullivan, personal interview by the author, Tirana, Albania, October 17, 1994.
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- [21] Frank Jossi, phone interview with the author, St. Paul, MN, March 3, 1995.
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- [23] Arben Kallamata, personal interview with the author, Tirana, Albania, October 17, 1994.
- [24] Sheehan, interview.
- [25] Frank Jossi, interview.
- [26] Thoma Gellci, personal interview with the author, Tirana, Albania, October 21, 1994.
- [27] Kallamata, interview.
- [28] Ermira Ithamallah, interview with her and an English class of approximately 20 students, University of Tirana, Albania, October 18, 1994.
- [29] Marianne Sullivan, interview.

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