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Producing 'protocol news' in Kosovo's public broadcaster: Journalism in a transitional risk society

Kurzfassung: Eine ethnographische Nachrichtenproduktionsstudie in der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalt 'Radio Television Kosovo' (RTK) zeigt, wie Journalisten unter vielfältigem Druck, rapiden Veränderungen und Risiken sog. 'Protokollnachrichten' produzieren. Die Risiko-Theorie erweist sich als hilfreiches Analyseinstrument um zu untersuchen, wie Journalisten und Nachrichtenorgane ihre Zuflucht in pragmatischen Lösungen der Nachrichtenproduktion finden. Nachrichtenjournalismus in einer sich schnell verändernden, hoch politisierten Gesellschaft, bringt eine Vielzahl an Herausforderungen mit sich. Journalisten und Redakteure sehen sich ständig der Forderung nach Professionalität und nationaler Loyalität und politischem Druck ausgesetzt. Zwischen den Journalisten und ihren Quellen herrscht ein Klima der wechselseitiger Skepsis und Abhängigkeit. Aufgrund der gemeinsamen Kriegserfahrung bestehen in einer fest zusammengewachsenen Nachkriegsgesellschaft aber zugleich auch persönliche Bindungen zwischen den Angehörigen des Establishments und den Nachrichtenmedien.

Abstract: An ethnographic news production study conducted in Kosovo's public service broadcaster 'Radio Television Kosovo' (RTK) shows how journalists produce 'protocol news' under multiple pressures, rapid change, and risks and where risk theory can be helpful in analysing how journalists and news organizations find pragmatic solutions in news production. News journalism in a fast-changing, highly politicized society, offers multiple challenges. Journalists and editors face constant demands of 'professionalism', national loyalty, and political pressure. There is a mutual scepticism and dependency between the journalists and their sources. At the same time, the close-knit, post-war society, there exist personal ties between workers in the 'social establishment' and the news media due to common war experience in the past. This all adds to the growing field of 'journalism cultures' globally that challenges the traditional Western monopoly of 'professionalism'.

1 Introduction: Kosovar newsrooms under fire

Journalists and newsrooms in Eastern Europe, especially the Balkans, are frequently criticized for the way they report (or not report) the news. The lack of 'professionalism' among journalists is addressed by researcher Stacy Sullivan (2000) who says: "...there is simply a lack of talented and professional journalists in the region" (p.39) and Julie Mertus and Mark Thompson, who have been researching media in post-conflict societies, describe the lack of courage among journalists in their assessment of Kosovo's media after years of international media intervention (2002). After the March 2004 riots¹ in Kosovo, the international community had few flattering characteristics about the newsrooms in Kosovo. Most reports heavily criticized the Kosovo Albanian media, claiming they totally failed during the dramatic days. The OSCE² Representative on Freedom of the Media said in its report:

"Without the reckless and sensationalist reporting on 16 and 17 march, events could have taken a different turn. They might not have reached the intensity and level of brutality that was witnessed or might not have taken place at all[...]the media, specifically the broadcasting sector, displayed unacceptable levels of emotion, bias, carelessness, and falsely applied 'patriotic' zeal" (OSCE 2004, p. 3).

In addition to critics of 'reckless reporting', Kosovar and other Balkan media are also accused of practicing 'protocol journalism', meaning stories that is reported mainly from press conferences, political meetings, conferences, seminars and so on, mostly involving politics and politicians.

There has been conducted very important research on the international media's coverage of the Kosovo War (Nordstedt, Höjjer, Ottosen 2002), but little research on local journalism inside Kosovo. *This article analyses news production in the largest newsroom in Kosovo; Radio Televizioni i Kosovës (Radio Television Kosovo), or RTK, in order to see what news they report, how they report it, and what factors that influence the news.* By using an ethnographic method involving newsroom observation, in-depth interviews and content analysis, it focuses on the working conditions of the journalists in a society undergoing extreme transitions, involving elements as communist past, ethnic conflicts, local traditions, international intervention, unemployment and multiple risks and pressures.

1. During March 16 and 17, 2004, there were major riots in several towns in Kosovo after three Albanian children drowned in the Ibar River, west of the divided town of Mitrovica. Rumors said that the children were chased by Serbs. Shortly after, thousands of Albanian took to the streets and started burning Serbian homes and churches. Shooting and beating also took place. The rampage left 19 dead, 900 injured, 700 Serb and Roma homes burned, 30 Serb churches destroyed, two monasteries damaged and about 4,500 people displaced. This was the largest level of violence in the province since the during the NATO war in 1999. During these days, the major Kosovar Albanian media, especially the radio- and TV stations "Radio Television Kosovo" (RTK,), Kosova TV (KTV) and TV 21 reported extensively from the riots. They later were criticized for ethnic bias in their reporting. More detailed account of these events can be found in several reports written after the events (International Crisis Group 2004, OSCE, 2004, TMC 2004, Human Rights Watch 2004, Amnesty International 2004).
2. Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

2 Theoretical framework: Journalism cultures, protocol journalism and risk societies

2.1 From 'professionalism' to 'journalism culture'

The criticism against Kosovar media is, as we have seen, linked to the term *professionalism*, a key term in journalism, and is used frequently when assessing journalistic quality. It is used by organizations measuring press freedom globally, by organizations like IREX, Committee to Protect Journalists, Freedom House, UNDP¹, Reporters sans frontiers, OSCE, and others (Becker 2007), measuring how independent media in certain countries are. But as Becker points out, these organizations don't use the same methods and come at times up with different conclusions. IREX, for example, measures 'professionalism' as one of the indicators of media sustainability in many countries, also in Kosovo (IREX 2008).

Lately, however, journalism researchers have discussed more frequently the need for more research and debate around the term 'professionalism' in global journalism, and that there is a need for more empirical studies globally in newsrooms to dig deeper into this issue. Barbie Zelizer asks what are some of the imperatives and impediments of professionalism in journalism and argues that 'freedom of expression' and 'journalistic independence' are two such imperatives, and impediments are that no journalistic models can be implemented around the world (Joseph 2007). She furthermore criticizes Siebert et al.'s (1956) *Four Theories of the Press* that she says have laid the groundwork for a binary of libertarianism and authoritarianism, thus dividing the world into a scale from Western 'free press' to Soviet 'authoritarian press' and that all media systems even today tend to be measured along this scale.

There is also a realization that journalism in the West has changed over the last few years. In their edited book *Journalism after September 11*, Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allan (2003) point out how journalism has become less independent and less critical to sources. The fear after the attacks on the World Trade Center not only introduced the aspects of trauma as a major driving force in coverage of the dramatic events, but it also showed how fragile journalism in Europe and North America is when it comes to uphold the old principles of critical investigative reporting.

In addition to the influence of fear and risk, we must admit that media economics has also reduced investigative reporting in the West. Time constraints, staff cut-backs and market competition have made the newsrooms prioritize one-source news, press statements and short versions of news. Deep analysis has been sacrificed for quick entertainment news.

2.2 Influences and journalism cultures

The "Worlds of Journalisms" (note the plural) project, initiated by German researcher Thomas Hanitzsch, has linked journalism researchers from 13 countries who work together on conceptualizing "journalism culture" globally by linking together research from their respective countries (Hanitzsch 2007)². The theoretical groundwork for this research is found in previous research:

Researchers refer to a considerable array of concepts, including "journalism culture" (Campbell 2004: 80; Gurevitch & Blumler 2004: 337), "journalistic culture" (Donsbach & Patterson 2004: 252; Hollifield, Kosicki & Becker 2001: 112), "news culture" (Deuze 2002), "newspaper cultures" (Knott, Carroll & Meyer 2002: 26) or the "culture of news production" (Schudson 2003: 186), just to name a few.

News production studies have dealt with aspects of *influence* since the dawn of these studies (Gans 1980/2004, Gitlin 1980/2003). Historically, studies emphasize various aspects of influence and forces shaping the news; individuals, routines, media organizations, economic factors, competition in the market, and society at large (Hansen et.al. 1998). Stephen Reese and Pamela Shoemaker's "*Hierarchy-of-influences*" model (Reese and Shoemaker 1995, Reese 2001) can be helpful in analyzing journalism in a global setting. It brings forth a useful framework in understanding news production, with its hierarchy-of influences-approach, including the levels of the: individual journalist, news routines, organizational, extra-media, and ideological influences, each "carrying a different view of the professionalism issue"(Reese 2001, 173-187).

In the "hierarchy of influences" – model, the levels range from micro to macro, "these levels address what factors shape media and news content (Reese 2001, p. 173). They include:

- *Individual level* – the attitudes, training and background of the journalist.
- *Routines level* – the constraining influences of work practices[...]patterned practices that work to organize how we perceive and work within the social world[...]rules, norms, procedures that are imbedded in media work.
- *Organizational level* – the goals and policies of a larger social structure and how power is exercised within it[...]the imperatives that give rise to routines and how individuals are obliged to relate to others within that larger formal structure

1. United Nations Development Programme

2. <http://www.worldsofjournalisms.org/background.htm> (available September 21, 2009)

- *Extra-media-level* – influences originating primarily from outside the media organization[...]including the government, advertisers, public relations, individual news sources, interest groups, and even other media organizations
- Ideological level – how each of the previous levels function in order to add up to a coherent ideological result[...]At this level we ask how a system of meanings and common-sense understandings is made to appear natural through the structured relationship of the media to society.¹(Reese 2001, pp. 178-183)

Stephen Reese says, "Many media scholars would share the conviction that there should be an international standard of journalistic professionalism with basic shared values" (2001, p.143). This is important, according to Reese, also because the increasing global higher education in journalism. Reese also questions the notion of 'professionalism, indirectly criticizing the massive attempts to import the Western "objective" journalism model in other parts of the world. "US government and media initiatives have worked to encourage the adoption of the "objective" press model in the emerging democracies of South America and Eastern Europe. They implicitly assume that US-style journalism is a natural and inevitable world model" (p. 175-176).

2.3 Protocol journalism

As we have seen in the introduction, newsrooms in the Balkans are frequently criticized for lack of professionalism, a term that is frequently used in Western journalism literature. We will see later in this article that the news people in this small country are self-critical to their own practice of "protocol journalism"². Every day, the journalists attend press conferences, seminars, meetings and speeches and produce news stories from these. Many of these stories have a reference style, where the main points from the events are reported, often with few additional comments, analysis or critical question. This is what Taylor (2009) and Taylor and Kent (2007) describes as "protocol journalism". Blood et.al. (2005) also describes this practice as common from previous research on Kosovar media.

"Protocol journalism" is a negative term, indicating that the journalist and news organization reports simply what is said at a news event. It deals, in other words, with methods of reporting. It is important to also look at the *content*, which is mostly dominated by *politics*, as we will see.

2.4 Risk societies

In the search for reasons why protocol journalism is widespread in post-war Kosovo, I find it helpful to look at one key aspect of the Kosovar post-war society; the element of *risk*. German sociologist Ulrich Beck first coined the terms 'Risk society' and 'reflexive modernization' (Beck 1992), emphasizing how modern societies reacts and organize as responses to different risks. These might be external risks, such as natural disasters and wars, but even more human made risks that have come as a result of modernization, such as pollution, poverty etc. This affects people's individual lives as well. Modernity focuses on individualization, argues Beck, and this trend has made people consider themselves as "centre of the conduct of life, taking on multiple and mutable subjectivities, and crises are seen as individual problems rather than socially based (Tulloch 2003). He calls this 'reflexive biography' (Beck 1992, p. 135). John Tulloch and Deborah Lupton, in their book *Risk and Everyday Life* (2003) examines how people respond to, experience and think about risk as part of their everyday lives. Like Beck, they argue that people produce their own 'risk biographies' and to invent new ways to adjust life in a risk society. Tulloch and Lipton focuses however more on risks that meet people on an individual level, such as sickness, family and marital breakdowns, unemployment etc. People seek ways in order to meet and overcome these risks. They also argue that one must take into consideration social and cultural dimensions of risk-taking, such as gender, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, occupation, geographical location and nationality (2003). Beck might be criticized for putting too much emphasis on individuals. In addition, they lift up the issue that other sociologists argue that people react to risks in cultural subgroups rather than merely as individuals (Lash 1993, 2000). In such subgroups, unarticulated assumptions and moral values are shared and developed during time and are often "non-reflexive in that they are taken-for-granted" (Tulloch 2003, p. 6). Lash argues for 'risk cultures' rather than 'risk societies'.

Regarding Kosovo, we will see that risk theory provides a helpful tool of analysis in attempting to explain why 'protocol news' and politics are major characteristics in a post-war society marked with rapid transitions. However, let us first move to the area of the ethnographic research; the newsroom of Kosovo's public broadcaster – *RTK*.

1. Reese points out: "In a broader sense this level resembles the "culturological" approach outlined by Schudson (1989) which is concerned with the relations of ideas to symbols. The "cultural air" thus provides the larger environment that journalists and their institutions occupy" (p. 183).
2. The term "Protocol Journalism" was first used by Nigerian media professor Ralph Akinfeleye (1987, 1988) in his analysis of Nigerian development journalism, where he described how the journalist "attends "protocol" events such as speeches and news conferences and merely restates what the politician said with no additional thought or scrutiny" (Taylor 2007). Later, the term has been widely used in the description of similar journalism in Africa and in the Balkans (ibid.)

3 Radio Television Kosovo (RTK)

This paper presents news production in one of the four newsrooms researched during my fieldwork in Kosovo between September 2005 and May 2006 for my PhD project "Local news production and international media intervention in Kosovo". *Radio Televizioni i Kosovës (RTK)* is Kosovo's public service broadcaster. It was established in 1999 by a Memorandum of Understanding between EBU (European Broadcasting Union) and OSCE. *RTK* transmits television nationwide in Kosovo, and has also two radio channels, *Radio Kosova* and *Radio Blue Sky* (RTK 2005). *RTK* broadcasts in five languages: Albanian (majority language and the vast majority of the programs), Serbian, Turkish, Bosnian and Roma. In 2005, around 80% of the news was in Albanian, and the rest in the minority languages. During the same year, *RTK* had 425 employees; 307 male and 118 female. Their budget for this year was € 6, 5 million, making it the smallest public broadcaster in the Balkans. It has for a long time been financed by foreign donors and contribution from the Kosovo Consolidated budget. However, *RTK* now has to rely more on more on licence fees (around 60% of the budget in 2005) and commercial revenues (RTK 2005).

Kosovo's public broadcaster has one central television newsroom, where around 20 journalists work during the day. They produce news for three daily Albanian language broadcasts: two short bulletins at 15:00 and 17:00, and the main "Central News" at 19:30. The minority news bulletins are aired continually between 18:30 and 19:30.

4 Methodological remarks: newsroom ethnography in Kosovo

4.1 Broadening the scope of news production studies: transitional societies

News production studies in a transitional society like Kosovo require considerations beyond most classical studies mentioned earlier in this paper. In the literature, there have emerged a few studies of journalism practice in non-Western settings over the last few years; changing paradigms among Chinese journalists (Pan 2003); news reporting in transitional Nepal (Ramaprasad 2003); knowledge production by Palestinian journalists (Bishara 2006); Iraeli journalists being part of contradicting communities, professional and national (Zandberg 2005), difficulties for Korean female journalists (Kim 2006), transition in Russian journalism (Pasti 2005; de Smaele 1999; Koltsova 2001; Davis 1998). They all call for broadening the scope of news production studies to include challenges that journalists in transitional communities face.

These studies have brought knowledge about news production beyond the concept of 'professionalism'. We have previously looked at the fact that 'professionalism' needs to be challenged when entering transitional societies. Mark Deuze (2005) argues that journalists' professional operational ideology and status need to be reconsidered, especially when we see how their values are changed or challenged by cultural and technological developments. Beate Josephi (2005) calls for a reconsideration of the 'professional model of journalism' in light of globalization. She says, "Research outside the Anglo-American orbit, which has so far shaped the dominant journalistic concepts, is now challenging these paradigms" (p. 576). She supports James Curran and Myong-Jin Park's efforts in *De-Westernizing Media Studies* (2000) to acknowledge the severe conditions journalists in transitional societies live and work under. However, she also criticizes the contributors in the book for not being able to present other models spanning across many countries. Josephi calls for more qualitative studies in non-Western areas, reminding us that quantitative studies outnumber qualitative studies by 2 to 1 (Josephi 2005). Daniel C. Hallin and Paulo Mancini (2004) are pleading for more studies based on field observation and interviews, especially on media organizations' interaction with social actors and institutions.

4.2 Empirical data

From September 2005 to May 2006, I spent a total of 12 weeks in four Kosovar newsrooms; about 3 weeks in each place. (The daily newspapers *Express* and *Koha Ditore*, *RTK* (all in Prishtina and mainly Albanian), and finally, the Serbian radio station *Radio Kontakt Plus* in Northern Mitrovica. During the ethnographic study I conducted daily observations, in-depth interviews and content analysis of the main print stories / news broadcasts. I observed in the newsrooms from morning to evening; following the news production process from morning meetings to final editing/layout/broadcast. Notes were taken from participating in meetings, being with journalists in the field, sitting by their desks, following them in the editing process and watching/listening to the final broadcasts. The study is also based on in-depth interviews (40-90 minutes) with about 50 journalists and editors in the four news organizations. The text analysis part is the top stories from *Express* and *Koha Ditore* during my time there and full daily main news broadcasts from *RTK* and *Radio Kontakt Plus*.

The empirical data from *RTK* for this article is based on newsroom observations over three weeks, 15 in-depth interviews with journalists and editors, and full transcribed content of the main evening TV news broadcast "Lajmet Cendrore" (Central News) at 19:30.

5 News production process: from ideas to broadcast

5.1 Structure: from "what" to "how" and "why" of news production

In the ethnographic description I have chosen to structure it inspired by Herbert Gans' classic newsroom study, "*Deciding What's News*" from 1979 (Gans 2004)¹. Kosovar newsrooms are small enterprises in a flux, transitional, post war society in the Balkans in 2005. How can Gans be useful here? Besides mentioning that there is a need for developing models of news production studies in conflict areas I will argue that Gans' method of looking at the *news production process* in his study is universal and therefore very useful in studying this in Kosovo: Gans starts with a content analysis of the news produced in the analysis period, "indicating *what* [my emphasis] news journalists have selected over time, *not how* [my emphasis] they have selected it" (p. 5). Gans then, after doing a content analysis, moves into the newsrooms, "...to analyze how journalists work and to explain the findings of Part 1 [content analysis²]"³. Looking first at the news content creates questions about the deep how's and even deeper why's of news production.

News research in Kosovo since 1999 has been, with few exemptions, based solely on media texts, through media monitoring by organizations like OSCE and UNMIK³ (Andresen 2005). Conclusions about the state of the media in Kosovo is too easily been drawn on this. Therefore, I get inspired by Gans' method to first look at content and then go inside the newsrooms and attempt to understand how news selection works in the Kosovar setting.

5.2 Content: RTK's top news stories

During the research period at RTK (February 2006), the content of the main evening news broadcast "19:30 Lajmet Qendrore" (19:30 Central News) was analyzed, with a special emphasis on categories of top news stories selected for the broadcast. Not unexpectedly, stories about *politics* dominated the news broadcast, as it had done before and after the research period. Here is a brief summary of the findings:

5.2.1 Headlines

Each broadcast started with three headlines. They represent two aspects; saying something about what a news organization considers as the most important news, and secondly, to "sell" the news broadcast to the viewer. Here are the categories of the RTK headlines February 1-16, 2006 (15 broadcasts analyzed):

Category	No. of headlines	%
Politics	28	62,3
War/war crimes	3	6,7
Business	3	6,7
Roads/transportation	2	4,4
Iran	1	2,2
Disaster	1	2,2
Religion	1	2,2
Culture	1	2,2
Economics	1	2,2
Health	1	2,2
Energy	1	2,2
Crime	1	2,2
Iraq	1	2,2
Total	45	100

Table 1: Headlines, RTK "Central News" Feb. 1-16, 2006 (n=42)

1. New edition in 2004.
2. Gans explains his content analysis like this: "The analysis proceeds on the assumption that the news contains a picture of the nation and society, but journalists are not paid to present such a picture. Their task is to create "stories" about what they have observed or whom they have interviewed" (2004, p.5).
3. United Nations Mission in Kosovo

As we can see in Table 1, news about politics dominated the lead stories with over 62 percent. In this category there were a number of stories about Kosovo's future status, news from the Kosovo Assembly, government conflicts, statements from politicians, and a number of political meetings.

5.2.2 Lead stories

The lead stories, or top stories, are the first story of each broadcast. This story is considered to be the most important story of a news broadcast.

Category	#	%	Topics
Politics	14 of 15	93,3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kosovo status (7) • Election of new president in Kosovo (4) • Serbs in Kosovar government (1) • Other governmental issues (2)
Disaster	1 of 15	6,7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ferry disaster in the Read Sea (Feb 3)
Total	15	100	

Table 2: Lead stories, RTK "Central News" Feb. 1-16, 2006 (n=15)

Politics as category counted for 14 of the 15 lead stories. Stories about the future status of Kosovo also dominated the lead stories, with 7 of 15.

As mentioned earlier, the question around Kosovo's status¹ dominated the news during the research period (September 2005 – May 2006), and the majority of the news stories in the four newsrooms contained different variations of this topic. The Kosovar Albanian newsrooms, including *RTK*, covered it from a "Pristina point of view" with focus on internal conflicts in the Kosovar Negotiation Team², political meetings regarding status negotiations, numerous comments (domestic and international) about the issue, and parliamentary discussions regarding the negotiations. There were no discussions regarding the proposed final outcome of the negotiation (which was full independence for Kosovo) in the Kosovar Albanian news stories. However, there were at times space for reactions and comments from Serbian counterparts.

We see from the short analysis of news categories that there is a large representation of *politics* in Kosovar news production.

This is a first step in searching for answers. Doing media monitoring and content analysis is the most common tool in the attempt to describe news production. Going 'behind the scenes' and into the newsrooms is one of the ways to provide more grounded findings in this field (Cottle 2007, p.1).

After noting the content of the "Central News" news in RTK at 19:30 from February 1st to 16th, 2006, we will now enter the newsroom and look at the production process that led to the news stories reported every evening. As mentioned earlier, we will look at the four phases of daily news production; selecting, gathering, formatting, and presenting the news.

We will now go behind the scenes and enter the RTK newsroom to see how a "typical" news story is produced.

6 Producing a story for RTK

Snapshot 1: News selection

09:00 am, February 2006, in the main newsroom at Radio Television Kosovo (RTK)

The news editor starts writing the 'events' of the day on a whiteboard at one end of the newsroom. 'Events' are a number of meetings and press conferences happening in Prishtina this day:

08:45: Daci and members of the Negotiation Team meets with Rosemarie DiCarlo (From US State Dep.) and Philip Goldberg (US representative in Kosovo).

09:00: Minister of Energy, Ethem Ceku, meets with USAID and EAR to discuss the energy situation with the Jashari family.

09:30: PM Bajram Kosumi meets with Frank Wisner (USA representative in negotiation group) Also meets the same people as Parliament

1. The Kosovo status stories had several sub-categories; EU and Kosovo, the direct talks between Belgrade and Pristina, conflicts the Kosovar negotiation team, and statements from politicians (Albanian, Serbian and international).
2. This team negotiated with Belgrade in Vienna on behalf of the Kosovar Albanian majority in Kosovo. The team had members from the major political parties in Kosovo, both the government coalitions and the opposition.

Speaker Daci.

11:45 Hashim Thaci (PDK and opposition) meets with Frank Wisner.

13:00 PM Bajram Kosumi meets Giorgio Mambeto (Chief of Liaison Office of EC/EU) and Torbjorn Solstrom, a representative of Javier Solana

13:00 Oliver Ivanovic (Serb MP) meets head of Russian Office in Kosovo.

14:00 Oliver Ivanovic meets head of Hungarian Office

14:15 PM Kosumi signs Memory Book of Late President of Germany, Johannes Rau

15:00 Hasim Thaci (PDK) meets the Chief of Kosovar office of International Monetary Fund (IMF), Mark Aubion.

5-6 journalists are circled around the editor, a few more scattered around the room, most of them paying attention to the editor, but there is also some small talk around. The editor assigns stories to journalists, cameramen and drivers. He asks if there are ideas for other stories. One journalist says he is working on a specific topic, the others are quiet. The meeting breaks up and the journalists leave the room, most go to the RTK coffee shop for a short cup of coffee and a cigarette before leaving the building.



Figure 1: RTK Television newsroom. Photo: Kenneth Andresen.

Snapshot 2: News gathering

11:30 am: I go with the RTK journalist and cameraman to a press event at the Kosovo Assembly Building in Prishtina. US special representative to the Kosovo negotiations in Vienna, Frank Wisner, is about to meet representatives from Kosovo's Negotiating Team¹ and other politicians as a stop in his Balkan tour of involved parts in the status talks. More and more journalists, photographers and cameramen are gathering behind some barriers outside the meeting room, at the end of a stairway. These barriers have been set up, in order to keep the

1. Representing Kosovo in the Vienna negotiations about Kosovo's future status (2005-2007)

press in a restricted area. The journalists, now about 20, greet each other with hugs and kisses; they are competitors, but also many are close friend from various Albanian media in Kosovo. There are lots of talks and laughter. Then, Prime Minister Bajram Kosumi comes up the stairway. Cameras are clicking, but no one is allowed to ask questions. After the Prime Minister, the other members of the Kosovo Negotiation Team comes; same procedure. No one talks, just the sound of cameras. Finally, Frank Wisner and his delegation pass by the gathering of the press. Wisner greets them, but rushes into the meeting room behind the large doors. After a couple of minutes, the doors open for a short photo opportunity of the two delegations sitting at separate sides of the table. The doors close after this, and the press goes downstairs for a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. No complaints. There will be a short news conference after the meeting, they are being told. The mood among the journalists is good, lots of smiles, handshakes and lively talking. Then, after about 30 minutes, the whole pack goes up and waits for the doors to open again. One after the other, the politicians come out and answers interviews from the journalists. First, Assembly Speaker Nexhat Daci (LDK)¹, then Hashim Thaci (PDK)², and finally, Frank Wisner. The whole press crew gathers around, and they help each other holding microphones. After the short press brief, Wisner will meet with political leaders from minority groups in Kosovo (except Serbs, who have separate meetings). A short photo event at the beginning of the meeting also here, but none of the journalists wants to hang around for the comments after this meeting. The press, including the RTK team, disperses and leaves the building. Outside the Assembly building, RTK makes a stand-up piece.



Figure 2: Kosovar journalists interview PDK leader (now Prime Minister) Hashim Thaci. Photo: Kenneth Andresen.

1. Lidhja Demokratike e Kosovës (Democratic League of Kosovo) is the political movement co-founded in the late 1980's by late President Ibrahim Rugova. It was for a long time Kosovo's largest political party; now it is the second largest, with about 23% of the votes in the last election (November 2007)
2. Partia Demokratike e Kosovës (Democratic Party of Kosovo) is Kosovo's largest political party (35% of the votes in the 2007 Election). Hashim Thaci is today Prime Minister of Kosovo. PDK and LDK (former enemies in Kosovar politics) form now a Coalition Government in Kosovo.

Snapshot 3: Formatting and editing

The RTK journalist rushes back to the newsroom to edit the story. It will be aired already during the 17:00 short news bulletin, in addition to the main 19:30 "Central News". Right before she starts editing, there is a power cut, and all the computers in the newsroom go dead for a few minutes. There is no UPS¹ connected to the computers. She waits for the power to return, then goes down to one of the edit suites and edits the piece quickly together with a female picture editor. They use off-line editing equipment financed by the Japanese Government through a donation in 2000. The editing of the story takes about 30 minutes.

Snapshot 4: Presentation

The story from today's meetings is the top story in the 17:00 news bulletin. It starts with the stand-up, where the reporter explains the background of Wisner's visit and meetings in the area, continues with interviews with Speaker Daci, LDK leader Thaci, Ambassador Wisner, and finally some reactions from other Kosovar Albanian politicians. All the interviews are with people from the political life.



Figure 3: RTK TV Control Room. Photo: Kenneth Andresen.

7 Double standards: Inaccessibility and eagerness from political sources

The above example from a news conference at the Kosovar Government building represents the problem of the combination of political news and difficult access to sources. Kosovar journalists are invited to numerous press events and are treated like one flock. They get very limited access to politicians, which they consider as key people regarding information. During my observations in the newsrooms and by following the journalists in the field, I witnessed the journalists' frustrations in this area on a daily basis. The criticism from the RTK is not only directed to Kosovar institutions, but also very much

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towards the international organizations present in Kosovo, the very organizations that are there to promote openness and democracy. In the case of UNMIK, many are frustrated, also in *RTK*:

„In most of the cases you have the same response that ‚we do not have information, this is responsibility of Security Council‘, etc. Usually they only respond on any issue that is already in press releases. They never add anything which is not their press releases.“ - *RTK* journalist (24)

The inaccessibility to sources continues today, even after almost a decade of training of journalists and public servants by international organizations. Today, there are two sets of official sources in Kosovo: First, the local political institutions (government offices, political parties, municipalities and the security sector (police, TMK¹ etc.) All of the *RTK* journalists confirmed this, and there has been a deep mutual distrust between media and officials.

This mistrust seems to continue today, although the editors say that there is no lack of emails and phone calls from official sources:

„For the locals you can do it [get information] by phone, but with the internationals, especially UNMIK, you have to arrange interviews and send the questions through their public relations services. The answers usually take weeks.“ - *RTK* journalist (30)

8 Protocol news in RTK

RTK's Editor-in-Chief says he has been working hard to change *RTK*'s news coverage. He acknowledges that *RTK* must cover the political events, but also that:

„There is a hanging political issue over Kosovo, which is the status issue. Historically, *RTK* has not explained the *contexts* of the stories; we have just told what statements were made[...]it wasn't anything about *why* they did meet, what did they say in meeting, did they have any argument, did they argue, did they have any disagreements, what does this mean for the average Kosovar, what should the average Kosovar know about this. [...]My concept of the whole thing is that it should be completely different. I try to encourage journalists to keep this in mind and to make stories which can be understood by all citizens.“ - *RTK* Editor (30)

The academic discussion on "protocol journalism" in Kosovo needs to be put into the dilemma that Kosovar newsrooms are facing in during heavy transition times in a post-war society; which is the widespread notion or feeling that *all* the political events are in the center of the development of the Kosovar society. Therefore, the *RTK* journalists and editors feel obliged to cover these events.

They say they feel they are in a squeeze between different expectations – on one side the expectation to follow the BIG story – the question of Kosovo's final status – and on the other side stories that affect ordinary people. One journalist says that citizens expect *RTK* to follow the developments of politics and status negotiations, and that most people are interested in this. The editor-in-chief states bluntly that "we are all held hostage to the [status] situation". A journalist (35) says: "...till this problem [Kosovo's status] is fixed, we will have too much politics. I am sure that when this status is finished, we will have less and less politics in our news bulletins". A young female news journalist (21) says: "I follow protocol events against my will".

8.1 Pressure from politics and politicians in news selection

The importance of politics in the Kosovar society cannot be underestimated. Kosovo has been and still is an area where politics have determined people's lives to a high degree, and there have been rapid changes and transitions. Today, a year and a half after Kosovo's Declaration on February 17, 2008, the Kosovar public life and debate is centred on the status of Kosovo, and there is a legion of meetings on this issue, which the journalists follow every day

The *RTK* newsroom is in the middle of this on a daily basis. They tell about numerous calls and emails from local politicians about "their" events that *RTK* should cover. The journalists and editors have a sense that local politicians and government officials have a sense of ownership at *RTK*, since *RTK* is a public service institution. A News Editor (50) says:

„We have been badly trained by following the politicians and government people. They think we should follow all their meetings; they know the phone numbers of editors and journalists; they call during the day and during the night. This is one of the many pressures that Kosovar journalism lives under.“

Many of the journalists express a fatigue about politics and protocol journalism. They say they feel trapped under the yoke of covering politics.

However, *RTK* journalists are not shying away from doing stories on political conflicts in the Kosovar society. Many of the

1. TMK - Trupat e Mbrojtjes së Kosovës (Kosovo Protection Force) is a civilian emergency services operation in Kosovo that was formed after the demilitarization of UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army), see www.tmk-ks.org.

stories deal with rivalry between the government parties and the opposition, personal conflicts between journalists and also fights within the political parties. They express that the pressure on the newsroom comes from all political parties.

9 Self-censorship: The unwritten expectations of news selection

There is little direct pressure from editors on journalists regarding selection of news, but rather an unwritten expectation based on invisible pressure. The journalists and editors agree on this. They say they are overwhelmed by the current situation of politics penetrating all aspects of public discourse.

This discourse is subject of debate in the different Kosovar newsrooms. While the editors and journalists in the most progressive newspaper Express, say they want to break with the tradition of protocol journalism and the domination of politics in the news, a journalist in *RTK* tries to put it into perspective:

„People have double standards regarding politics and news. They say they are fed up and tired of politics, but they watch and read about politics all the time. In Europe and USA people don't have to know who the Prime Minister is or what he/she is doing. But here in Kosovo – and in all the Balkans – everybody knows who the politicians are. They have always known this. And in a mysterious way, people here have hopes that somehow the politicians will help solving their problems [...] now Albanians have “their own” politicians and the hope is in them...It's a kind of love-hate relationship. And we as media are feeding the public with this.” *RTK* journalist (30)

Many of the journalists have a double feeling about the kind of news that they are covering. They see the need for following the political events. However, they are frustrated, since they want to set the agenda in the news with investigative stories about ordinary people. Instead, they feel that the agenda is set for them.

„There has been a long tradition of making stories about real people [in Kosovo], but all the status talk and politics make us follow SRSG¹ and others everywhere. It is a “state of emergency” for the media. Journalists know and want to do other stories and stories done in another way. They also know how to do it. My hope is that when the status question ends, the media can get “back to normal” and make other stories. We have followed ordinary people and made stories about them, but the political situation changes this and we are doing so much protocol news.” *RTK* journalist/editor (25)

Official and informal sources:

One of the hardest elements of news production for Kosovar journalists is access to sources. During my observations in the newsrooms and by following the journalists in the field, I witnessed the journalists' frustrations in this area. Kosovo does not have a tradition of open access to information. This has roots in communism past and beyond. The media in Kosovo were traditionally party press during communism; it was deeply ethnically divided during the 1980's and 1990's (after most Albanian press were closed by the Serbs), and after 1999 there has been a myriad of media outlets popping up. Through these stages, it has been hard for journalists to obtain reliable information from official sources, and there has been a deep mutual distrust between media and officials.

10 Pragmatic solutions: Personal source networks

As a response to the difficult source access the journalists form their own network sources within the public administration in order to get information through the back door. This is, of course, common journalistic practice many places, but in Kosovo this is the way also to get official information. Lots of effort is put into this network building:

„It is not easy to have access especially with UNMIK. They are closed for the media, so we have to work hard on building relationships with sources. We invite them out for coffee or something. Happily, Kosovo is a small place where everybody knows everybody so most of the time you stick with them until you find the information.” *RTK* journalist (30)

The *informal networking* has long traditions in Kosovo, which is a tight society where family, friendship and personal informal contacts have been more important than official connections. The journalists in *RTK* (and other newsrooms) carry on this kind of relations in their work as journalists. When official channels don't work, there are better and pragmatic solutions; meeting officials in coffee shops and maintaining personal network is an important building block in daily news production. In the interviews the journalists and editors tell several stories about Kosovo as a tight knit society where people have held together in tough times. In today's Kosovo, people who suffered together during oppression now have different positions in society, for example in politics, government administration and journalism. Many are good friends but are on “different sides of the table” when it comes to news production. This is beneficial in many ways when official channels don't work. However, the journalists express an awareness of the dangers of too close connections.

1. Special Representative of the Secretary General, or Head of UNMIK – UN's top envoy in Kosovo.

11 Analyzing the findings: Protocol news and the Kosovar risk society

Looking at how risk theory is helpful in analysing local news production in Kosovo, I have chosen to look at three aspects in Kosovo and risk: *society, individuals, and newsrooms*:

11.1 Kosovo as risk society

The post-war Kosovar society bears many marks of a society that fits risk theory. As a country in Europe it can be considered as a modernised society, although it is among the poorest nations in Europe when it comes to material wealth. Kosovo's per capita income was € 1,118¹ in 2006, the lowest in Europe. According to World Bank, around 45 percent of the population live in poverty (below € 1,42 per day) and 15 percent in extreme poverty (below € 0,93 per day). The initial boost in financial growth after the 1999 war has stagnated. 90% of the population is Albanian, and the well-known ethnic conflicts (especially between the Albanian and the Serbian population) are still very much present. The political distance between Pristina and Belgrade escalated even more after Kosovo declared itself as an independent state on February 17, 2008. Before this, two years of negotiation talks about Kosovo's final status did not give any results.

These are well-known characteristics of Kosovo from numerous international and local reports over the last years. However, behind these numbers there are aspects that, I will argue, are relevant in the discussion of risk society and the *RTK* newsroom. I base this mainly on my own fieldwork at the station.

In addition to the interviews, the historical verification of the society the *RTK* journalists grew up in and work in, can be found in numerous books and articles written about Kosovo history and society over the last years (Malcolm 2002; Bieber 2003; Doucette 2004; Elsie 2001; Goff 1999; Judah 2000; Kola 2003; Maliqi 1998; McAllester 2002; Pellegrin 2002; Pettifer 2005; Quarta 2006; Spahiu 1999; Vickers 1999; Howard 2000; Di Lellio 2006; Malcolm 2002; Mazower 2001; Schwandner-Sievers 2002)

11.2 Influences on news production in the Kosovar risk society

As mentioned earlier Stephen Reese and Pamela Shoemaker's "*Hierarchy-of-influences*" model (Reese and Shoemaker 1996, Reese 2001) is helpful in analyzing news production in a risk society. I will not use all the aspects of influence in the model here, but draw up three of them in analyzing the findings presented previously in this article. I focus on influences on the *individual level, routines level and extra-media level*.

11.3 Internal level: Living and working with memories of oppression and war

All the *RTK* journalists and editors have lived through times of oppression and war. During the interviews, numerous stories of suffering, loss and trauma came up. As mentioned before, they have lived for years in a highly ethnically divided society, where most people were denied basic rights like education and work. Several of the journalists have experienced that family members, friends and colleagues have been killed, also right in front of them. Many also worked as journalists while they were refugees during the NATO war. The newspaper *Koha Ditore* set up its publishing in Tetovo in Macedonia after the war. Others worked as 'fixers' and stringers for international news teams, both inside Kosovo and in the region (Andresen 2008). The Kosovar Albanian journalists express great appreciation for the press freedom they now experience, while the minority journalists (especially Serbian) are more fearful of the future, due to the hardship that minorities now experience in Kosovo. However, they recognise that the past experiences may influence how they perform journalism today. This comes especially down to avoiding stories involving great risks, such as investigative stories dealing with crimes, such as smuggling, mafia and other risky areas. One journalist in *Koha Ditore* told about how she now worked with less "dangerous" stories after she was shot at a few years ago while working on an investigative story.

11.4 Routines level: Protocol news' – inexpensive journalism

RTK runs on a low budget, with low salaries (€200 – 700/month) and low running costs. This affects also the news stories they choose, admits editors. To follow political meetings and to get stories from that is a rather inexpensive way of doing news production. You know that the journalist will come back with a story. Investigative stories are expensive, and there is no budget for letting a journalist go for days in search for a breaking story, says the editors. The journalists see that this is the case, and they are tired of this situation:

„I like more topic stories and reportages. However, we do not have a lot of space for this[...]often you just see your name written down

1. World Bank Kosovo (www.worldbank.org/kosovo).

in the table and you have to go to a protocol meeting."

RTK journalist (21)

11.5 *Extra – media level: Duplication of civil society - Parallelism.*

Societies in the Balkans have through history had a strong ability of self-organising. In times of occupation and oppression, societies have organised themselves numerous times. During the 1990's after Milosevic closed civil institutions for the Albanians in Kosovo and firing them, they organised their own parallel school system from kindergarten to universities. In times of lack of a civil society, the Albanians created something that would resemble just that. There was a collective strive of reorganising and finding workable solutions in times of an outer threat, which was represented by Milosevic's regime. Risk theory deals with societal responses in times of risks, and this represents an example. Most of the RTK journalists (who are Albanians) gained their education in this parallel education system. The journalists are, in other words, used to a society of self-organising.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Albanian politicians were very active. Several political parties were formed in times of oppression; most well-known was Ibrahim Rugova's LDK. Elections were held in 1992, where Rugova was elected president in the Kosovo 'Republic', in a shadow government. There was an enormous interest for political developments in the society (and there still is). This emphasis on politics seems to have carried on after the 1999 war as well.

12 Conclusion:

This article has attempted to give a glimpse into a 'journalism culture' in Kosovo, where news production happens in a highly transitional post-war society. During the international negotiations about Kosovo's formal status from 2005 to 2007, the news media in Kosovo were dominated by stories about this issue, as well as other stories involving politics and politicians. An ethnographic newsroom study in Kosovo's public television station, RTK, revealed that 14 of 15 lead stories dealt with politics and politicians. 62 percent of the headlines were about politics; 10 of 14 studio guests were interviewed about politics and a total of 52 percent of all the domestic news stories were under the category of 'politics'. The journalists and editors of RTK are aware of the dominance of politics in the news. This is not only a problem for their station, but a regional problem as well. They feel hostage to the current situation where so much is about politics in the society, while issues like crime and ordinary people's problems are pretty much ignored.

Risk theory is helpful in seeking understanding of news production in Kosovo. It deals with how societies, organizations and individuals respond to threats of risk in modern societies. However, risk theory has not been applied very much in studies of news production in conflict areas. This paper argues that due to past experiences of war, threats, economic hardship and suffering, Kosovar news organizations and journalists produce news in a high risk society. A tradition of self-organization, parallel structures and adjustments to risks seem to be important factors in local news production in Kosovo. Newsrooms seek to find pragmatic solutions to challenges, and 'protocol journalism' including news on politics, is one reaction to this. The editors and journalists believe the viewers want news about the status questions. At the same time, they see that they ignore other news like crimes and other social issues in Kosovo. The traditions and values of a small and tight knit community, where people know each other and form numerous networks, play an important role in connecting to sources in a society where formal channels of information do not work, neither from the international community in Kosovo (UN, OSCE, EU etc.) nor local political sources.

Author's note:

Since the end of the field work for this article (2006), RTK has been increasingly criticized for being too close to the Kosovar government. The editor-in-chief featured in this article resigned a while ago over frustration that he became more and more restricted. The General Director resigned in September 2009, allegedly after a feud with a news editor. Many journalists and commentators feel that RTK has been going "in the wrong direction" in terms of independent journalism. I recommend Balkan Insight's website (www.balkaninsight.com) for further information about this dispute.

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