

Can a radio station really help a people free themselves from tyranny just by broadcasting independent news? The story of B92, the Slav broadcaster that was set up and that expanded in the time of the Serb dictator and has

# B92: the radio that caused Milosevic's downfall

SOCIETY 1

by Sania Lucic

now become a multimedia mass-media company, shows that such a thing is possible. Subjected to threats and shut down innumerable times, B92 has always risen from its own ashes, like the phoenix ...



There seemed to be no way out. In the 1990s a country with a population of 20 million was tearing itself apart from the inside. Many people felt hemmed in, others felt out of place, some would have preferred a different uniform. The borders separating the different republics were being frayed and rather than focusing on the solidity of the country as a whole, others were intent on shoring up the stability of newly-born nations which had only just stopped being part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRJ). Weakened, impoverished, and devastated, not one of the five new States was left untouched by dramatic upheavals. Serbia together with Montenegro, under the name of Savezna Republika Jugoslavija, licked the wounds inflicted by war, economic sanctions, the endless queues in front of supermarkets, the black market, the gradually impoverishment of the spirit of the nation from which more and more young people were fleeing. It was against this background of fear and

mistrust that a radio station founded a few years earlier, in 1989 in Belgrade, drew strength. It was a radio station broadcasting for the young, the one that offered an alternative. And while the walls went up round Serbia, cutting the country off, a number of journalists became increasingly convinced of the need to halt the dangerous and relentless official move to segregate the country from the rest of the world. This idea spurred on and reinforced Radio B92's struggle, until the station became famous the world over as the only independent broadcaster that successfully fought to change the history of its country. For many people B92 had become synonymous as a way out of their dark and difficult humdrum lives, the partially open door to that "better world" that so many young people were aiming for. Other people saw B92 as the voice of the West, the voice of treachery and lies, of the spies in the pay of foreign powers working to discredit the nation and hand it over to the West. Pursuing its own path with the slogan "Never believe anyone – not even us!", Radio B92 sought to keep up (as far as possible) dialogue with the government, and the opposition, demanding answers from the authorities. Viewed as saviours on the one hand, and as heralds of impending doom on the other, the people who worked for B92 sought to maintain balance, held up by their unbreakable faith in changing events.

In the first phase of its existence, Radio B92 was shut down four times. Its transmitters were turned off or jammed, its offices were confiscated, and its reporters threatened. And each time the station returned to the airwaves, thanks to listeners who believed in B92, and to friends abroad and to a wide network of other media companies which took up their programmes and broadcast them to the world that wanted to hear the voice of Serbia and its people, so very different from the official State version. B92 went far beyond the usual limits of a radio station; its journalists were warriors who, microphone in hand, went where ordinary people could not, and fought on behalf of the millions who saw salvation in the radio station. With their direct, ironic style, their way of constantly provoking everyone and anyone, the reporters kept up a steady dialogue with listeners who would also have a go at being correspondents. An independent spirit, harsh truths and alternative music were



Contrasto

the essence of B92.

The station's original goals were superseded as the broadcaster began to take an increasingly active role in all spheres of public life, becoming a cultural and sociological movement that used music, art, and culture to build the road towards a different future. This vital voice that opposed everything which held Serbia back, which struggled for peace and the safeguard of minorities and human rights, had become a movement that transmitted the vision of a different Serbia to the whole world. And stopped the country from being totally cut off, while pricking the West's conscience. B92 pursued investigative journalism, promoting certain ideas, fighting against every form of censure and closure, struggling for the freedom of expression that had been the station's founding principle from the start. The station was first shut down on 9 March 1991, accused of having supported the mass demonstrations against the government and the constitution. It was shut down again in 1996 and in 1999, when the government confiscated the station's premises but continued to transmit completely different information under the B92 name. But the people knew and continued to listen to the station when it came back as B292. When the station was closed down once again in 2000, B92's reporters managed to make their voice heard using the internet, satellite broadcasts and their worldwide network of friends. Finally, after Milosevic's fateful fall on 5 October 2000, a new era began.

In its long struggle for independent information, B92 set up the Association of Independent Electronic Broadcasters (ANEM) which ensured that the station could reach the whole country through a network of 37 local radio stations. It was the first broadcaster to use internet as a means to transmit information to the world, and its site was one of the most visited in East Europe, reaching 500,000 visitors a day. B92 has received major international awards and their example is a case study for other radio stations in countries that today find themselves in the same situation. A number of films on the subject are in preparation and Matthew Collin's book *This is Serbia calling* is a best-seller.

Today B92 is a multi-sector mass media concern, and the new premises in Novi Beograd (New Belgrade), financed by USAID, house not only the radio and TV station, but also a publishing firm, the REX cultural centre, a successful company with over 250 employees. The 13 new transmitters make sure that 70% of Serbia's population can follow programmes, putting the broadcaster in second place for radio audience figures and fourth place for television viewers.

B92 is seventeen years old and it has never abandoned the role it played in the 1990s; it still fights other battles today, perhaps more closely tied to everyday life, but just as important for the country. Looking to its future as a public service, Radio B92 is slowly changing its role. The one in which they always believed.

## See you at "Videoleters"

*Once upon a time, there was a country where everyone was Yugoslav. They were neighbours, friends, lovers, husbands, wives, relatives. Today they are enemies, living far apart, lost in the dark twists and turns of the war in former Yugoslavia. A project set up by two people from Holland helps them to meet again. The initiative is called "Videoleters" and seeks peace in those countries where war has separated entire families and best friends. The concept is straightforward: record a videoletter, send it to a lost friend, and wait for an answer. Once the two have found each other again, they can decide to meet and to start a new life*





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after the war. Thanks to Eric van den Broek and Katarina Rejger, the project's creators, the system works. "Videoletters" have even become a programme broadcast simultaneously in Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia Herzegovina, Macedonia, Croatia, Slovenia and Kosovo, in an unprecedented pooling of the countries' TV schedules.

The project has also moved to the web where anyone can visit [www.videoletters.net](http://www.videoletters.net), post their videos and watch other people's videos. And the idea does not end with the Internet. Buses travel around the Balkans, equipped with video cameras and 60 booths where people can

record their own videoletters. The initiative is hugely popular in Bosnia where it has been promoted by famous singer Rambo Amadeus and where people who have exchanged videoletters have met up in a restaurant with a highly symbolic name: Dayton.

A number of other singers and actors have become ambassadors for the project, recording videoletters and sending them to artists in other countries. The "Videoletters" project was also awarded the Nestor Almendros Prize at the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival in New York.

S. L.

## Aboard Tito's AirForceOne



*The signs of nostalgia for Tito are everywhere in former Yugoslavia. Perhaps it is no more than a passing fad, but a number of books, their covers wrapped in the flag with the red star, talk about the symbols of another age, of a happy childhood. New cafés are dedicated to him, and there is even an entire virtual country called Titoslavija, where anyone can apply for citizenship.*

*The House of Flowers, Tito's memorial tomb, has recently been joined by another tourist attraction: the Blue Train. The train that once served as a kind of Airforce One to the president is today available to all for luxury journeys in true Tito style. This is the same train that the people once thronged at stations and along railway tracks to see, waiting for "him" to lean out the window and wave to them, the same train the president used to travel over 600,000 km in Yugoslavia and abroad. Many heads of State have been guests aboard the train, including Queen Elizabeth II. The Blue Train's last journey was also the last journey for Tito. In 1980 his remains travelled the State across the whole of Yugoslavia, starting out from Ljubljana. For the past 25 years the train, and the country, have stood still. Today the Blue Train is once again on the rails, making a comeback in a new age and with different passengers, but with all its bygone style. The train's first journey after the Tito era was to the spa at Vrnjacka Banja for New Year's Eve 2005. On board an actor dressed as Tito received flowers from children, a sight that stirred memories in passengers of a past age. Travellers can admire Tito's personal carriage, with its lounge, study and the sleeping quarters where a blueroom bath separated Tito's bedroom from his wife's. Opening the train to the public has also opened up a number of secrets: there are no bullet-proof windows, just ordinary glass; there are no solid*

*\_Once the President's fascinating means of transport, the Blue Train is back on the rails and is now open to anyone wanting a luxury trip, Tito-style*

*gold handles; and there is only one train. The arrangement of the train depends on what the client wants and typically includes Tito's personal carriage, a carriage especially made for Charles de Gaulle with ten seats in the lounge, a ceremonial room with 28 places around a huge table and 10 other seats in another part of the carriage. The restaurant car has 36 places and two private rooms seating 15 each. The maximum number of passengers is 120. The train is, in effect, a hotel on rails, and a luxury hotel at that, with silk and velvet curtains, woollen mats, old-style leather seats; everything is made from pear, walnut and mahogany wood. A careful eye is kept on books, lamps, and ashtrays to make sure they do not become tourist souvenirs. The train can be used for cultural gatherings, promotions, presentations, or simply for a pleasant trip aboard this elegant piece of history. For the time being the train travels to Vrnjacka Banja, Uzice, Palic and Nis, and it costs around €3,500 to hire for the day. From May it will be possible to hire the train for the weekend; tourists will arrive in Belgrade by boat and will continue on to an exceptional destination, Sremski Karlovci. Foreign tourists will be able to enjoy a trip around Belgrade. The national railway company's web site has all the information. As a token of a country and an era that no longer exist, and which some people miss, the train still has its original red seats bearing the initials SFRJ.*

S. L.