



KosovaLive Thrives

By Terry FitzPatrick

When the KosovaLive independent news agency was launched last October, nobody was sure it could survive. The goal seemed simple enough: provide unbiased journalism about the grassroots issues of everyday life—health care, education, good governance—to media outlets where neutral, unbiased reporting is lacking. But the project was surrounded by doubt. Would local newspapers choose to run wire-service stories instead of their own by-lined reports? Did they really want unbiased news? Would they think that KosovaLive was a stealth project funded by international development agencies to promote an international point of view?

Now, ten months later, the problem—if you can call it that—is too much KosovaLive content in local publications, not too little. Newspapers fill entire pages with KosovaLive stories, and some observers are beginning to wonder if KosovaLive content is keeping weaker papers alive. For many radio stations, KosovaLive is the only source of news.

Such are the burdens of success.

Kosovo is still recovering from its war, when the Serbian Army forced at least 740,000 ethnic-Albanian inhabitants to flee in early 1999. Most refugees returned, and more than 40,000 multinational troops are now keeping the peace. There has been remarkable progress since the war, but Kosovo is still in the early stages of economic, physical, political and social recovery. Unemployment has been estimated to be at 60 percent and organized crime is firmly entrenched. Many buildings are under reconstruction, but ghost towns of bullet-riddled structures dot the countryside. The electricity fails several times each week and the water is turned off nightly. Evening curfews are imposed to combat criminal activity and ongoing political violence. Unrest in neighboring Macedonia has brought a flood of 80,000 refugees to Kosovo.

Amid this unsettled climate, Kosovo's news outlets appear to be thriving. The media sector is one of the most visible examples of an optimistic post-conflict entrepreneurial spirit. As is common in newly-liberated societies, there's an explosion of free speech and self expression. There are now six daily newspapers, 24 television stations and 92 radio stations. The reality, however, is that they can't all survive, the subscription and advertising base of approximately two million people is simply not large enough.

Enter www.KosovaLive.com. Under the stewardship of editor Kelmend Hapciu, the internet-based news agency has flourished. KosovaLive publishes 30 stories per day in Albanian and a dozen stories per day in English, all available free of charge. The agency

has five staff reporters in the capital city of Pristina and 20 stringer correspondents in outlying towns and villages. With one editor for every six writers, there is time to work and rework the copy before publication. The quality shows.

At first, the project relied on intensive story coaching and extensive rewriting by international advisors. But KosovaLive has developed a substantial degree of editorial self-sufficiency in less than a year. The service has also established remarkable reach and credibility for a start-up operation. This reputation exists in two languages: thanks to an English editor and two translators, KosovaLive has been quoted on CNN and the BBC. Members of the international press corps here—from Reuters to VOA—check KosovaLive daily.

There have been some bumps in the road. An erroneous report that agricultural authorities were investigating a case of Mad Cow Disease forced KosovaLive to publish an embarrassing retraction in April. The agency received a generalized e-mail death threat in May, from someone calling himself "Serb Sniper." He promised that he'd be "coming to see you soon."

The biggest challenge, though, will be to convert KosovaLive from a free Internet site to a subscription-only service. Initial support has come from the Soros Foundation's Open Society Institute, Press Now, the International Research and Exchange Board (IREX), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the governments of Switzerland, Germany, Austria and the U.S. KosovaLive will remain a non-profit, unaffiliated non-governmental organization, but it must begin to generate its own revenue—with a goal of financial self-sufficiency.

It's a daunting task to get people to pay for something they've grown accustomed to receiving for free. Even though KosovaLive can be viewed as a model of how to launch an independent news agency, its ultimate survival remains an open question.

(Terry FitzPatrick is a journalism advisor at KosovaLive, supported by the U.S. State Department's Professional in Residence Program. In September, he will begin a Knight International Press Fellowship at Bush Radio in South Africa.) 2001