

## Amused To Death

"Anna Kournikova is sick and tired to be loved by men, so she makes love to herself in a mirror". One day, the above was the beginning of a main story in the Sports News broadcast by a high rated TV station. How was it possible to air such a thing in a prime time program ? This is the story, the true story, of a road from a hell to another.

In the early 90's, the public station was the only one on the market in Romania, at least the only by far with a national coverage. The quality and the shape of the news were determined by the way of thinking of some few journalists who did their job mostly in the communist era. Although the new born (or reshaped) sport newspapers were competing fiercely, the TV remained in its ivory tower. We had colour TV, but black and white news. The news didn't get very fast to the public or going deep into the sports problems of a society in transition. There were very few scandals, investigations or real public debates. This was a patriarchal television, focused on live transmissions and old fashioned programs. The sport was, on TV, similar to the "before 89" news, when it was not allowed to air scandals or problematical issues. Mostly, the sport was the action and the competition, results, highlights of the matches, usual statements. What was happening outside the sport court or sport field was "not our business", most of the time. There was the idea of serving the public with some of the main dishes, but without salt and pepper.

Then, the private TVs came on the market. Their producers discovered easily the lack of entertainment, and they shaped a new face of sport news. The model was the Western way of doing business, with a more "human touch". But in Romania, the tendency was inverted. The items that were elsewhere supplementary became soon the main topic, even though one could see also good reporting (or at least good potential for good reporting), a higher quality of images and hard work. The reason of this "rush for gold" resides in a few causes. First of all, the public was hungry for such a succulent items, after decades of tasteless news, and the ratings went higher and higher. Secondly, there were no moral barriers to the opportunity of making big profit of it. Someone told me that one of the persons in charge with the sport news in private company said once, when asked why promoting such "rubbish", "My boss told me to do anything for the rating, and that's exactly what I'm doing". Then, characteristics of the Romanian sports and its popularity were an additional factor. Football has no match, and there are no very many successful team sports (with weekly fixtures), so the Media focused on one sport, a rush for more and more news and exclusive reports from a limited area. At first there were the football players and the trainers, than the presidents and the girlfriends of the football players, their clothes, their cars, their houses and it all ended with things that had nothing to do with the sport itself. It was pure "Jerry Springer Show". Funny, odd, crazy or full of accusations statements were promoted more than the facts and everybody was searching for scandals. The competition between TV stations became more important than the sport competitions. Everything was good enough to attract the attention of the crowd. All sorts of stupid things, no connection with the truth or reality, were aired in front of the news if it was shocking, or daring, or

funny enough. Sexual TV came also in front of our eyes. If there was the slightest link between a football player and a porn star, this was the occasion to put on the screen as many almost nude photos of the girl as you can get on the Net. Black and white was history. Now the colours became painfully for the eyes.

This kind of doing business had serious consequences : the sport it self was transformed. More and more athletes told the press exactly what the press expected to hear. We started to live in an environment where you had to act like a monkey to get some attention. I know for sure that some reporters make to the athletes, the trainers or their representatives very clear what they wanted to hear in their interviews. It was said that some people practically paid, one way or another, their every day own show in the sport news. On the other hand, big affairs found rarely a place in the sport news, or, if it came somehow to the light, the presentation was not very substantial. In Romania, Media changed in some way the sport.

The pace was set by private TVs, but what about the public service ? As TVR Head of Sport News, and even before achieving this position in the Sport Department, I was one of the journalists to wonder what to do in the new picture. Compared to Denmark, Romanian public television is allowed to air commercials, and the three main stations at national level have their main sport news roughly at the same our. The sport news duration is very long, on evening news, from 12 to 17 minutes (with 14 to 20 items), but some times it can go up to 25 minutes out of little bit than one hour for the whole news. This is a highly competitive situation. Our fault was to come too late in this kind of competition, but still we didn't want to air items that virtually nobody will watch. As the biggest survey of sports journalism undertaken by "Monday Morning" and "Play the Game" underlined, "newspapers readers are incredibly conservative and resist attempts to change the way the sports is covered". If it is so, I can tell you that TV viewers are even more conservative. All the signals told us that people wouldn't follow another kind of sport news. We were aware that if we want to make a place under the sun we have to play more or less by the rules settled by others. The pie was too sweet and the public was too weak to eat correct meals. Viewers were in desperate need of juicy, spicy sport news. And, of course, challenging the world of sports, conducting investigations was and still is much more difficult than to do "monkey business", mostly for the televisions which are also very active on rights market.

There were a lot of debates about how to shape the public television sports news, also because this institution is under scrutiny every day. There was a lot of criticism, but also the recognition of the fact that TVR sport news had more "colours", that there were more valuable news and a spirit of competition. But nevertheless we were more like an entertainment show than a watchdog. Our ratings went higher, in the first place, then, even if we couldn't keep the ratings at same level, we could at least match private televisions as public interest and number of viewers at the evening news. There were a lot of out-side factors that affected latter the results, but globally the sport news were considered as a strong point of the TVR. For a young team dealing with all the inertial characteristics of a multi-thousand employees state company, this was a kind of a bitter-sweet victory. We had the idea that the public service deserve to

have a voice a lot of people would like to hear. We knew the stake for the private companies was big on the prime-time, and that a lot of interests, some of which no related to the sport or its spirit, will be developed, so an alternative was needed. This was the kind of things that, in our eyes, justified our actions. I need to say also that at the TVR we never went as far as in presenting absurd, pornographic or mostly invented subjects.

But some years later the critics became more intense. A representative in the Romanian Parliament wrote an article about how tabloid-fashion are the public TV sport news and the new management of the TVR had the same sort of speech. It was about the same time that, at the sport news desk, we thought that we have to slowly re-orientate our policy. Our decision was determined by two factors: our primordial idea, back in time, was to try, as soon as it will be possible, to have another approach on the sport news, and secondly we thought that some of the public had enough of the "funny-rubbish" kind of news and needed serious items. But some times people say one thing and do another. Many of the viewers, if asked, claim they want proper news, but, back in their homes, they follow all the scandals on TV. In Romania there is a saying: "Be brother with the Devil, till you get out of trouble". I don't know if this was correct in our case, knowing that the devil we work with is a very dangerous one. The pressure from outside and inside TVR was also a factor to initiate some change. Which bring us to the present time.

We are now in a process of reshaping the news. Strange enough, coincidence or not, the private TVs seem also to be a little bit more reasonable. At TVR, we try to have more investigations, to ask more reasonable questions, to show more sport, more real news, but also to put into light what it's most interesting in or around every event, as we need to sell our merchandise. Will we keep the audiences? I don't know. Fore sure, we have to keep people watching to the public TV. The sport news can not be much more "civilized", more substantial than its target, the people. There is no intentional education one can bring to the viewers by the news. And it should not be. News are pure reflection of the facts and behaviour of its target. We have to propose, not to impose, to the viewers also other things than the star-system or the "easy meat". As a public service, we have to pay attention at any positive changes in the way most of the people think, and to follow the second after. That should help our mission ... and maybe also our position on the market.

PS : On a TV show dedicated to kids, one of them was asked by the host who is the football player he likes the most. The boy answered : Gigi Becali (the owner of Steaua Bucuresti). "And where does he play ?", asked the presenter. "On TV !".

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