

Dark Side of Social Media

- Case study of social media activities of Serbian nationalist groups -

ABSTRACT

A discourse on change is permeating all discussions surrounding the social media, leading us to assume that transformations both within technology and subsequently society would yield unexpected, yet positive results. Citizen journalism or various global actions carried through the channels of social media come to mind. Yet, we must bear in mind that the same technical affordances are available to a human rights activist and a terrorist.

In this paper, I want to examine the concept of nationalism within social media, by looking at the activities within online social sphere of one particular self-declared nationalist movement in Serbia – Serbian National Movement 1389. Among similar nationalist movements, this one is consciously stepping outside the anonymity of Internet forums, actively using social media platforms (blogs, Facebook, YouTube) as a mobilization tool for their activities. I want to explore whether participation within social media, in this context, can lead to social change, albeit the one not desired by the social media advocates, or whether these activities can not be accounted for more than youthful “impression management” online. Furthermore, it is necessary to relate the activities of young nationalists within social media to the overall tone concerning national topics within mainstream media and the general influence of social media on the Serbian public sphere.

I would argue that extreme nationalism, which is somewhat suppressed in the mainstream media, is reigning free online and that combined with the overwhelming tabloid culture, comprises a new mainstream public sphere.

KEY WORDS: social media, nationalism, UGC

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the social media announced changes in the political sphere. Starting from various citizen journalism projects, leading to “smart mob” protest activities across the globe (Rheingold:2002) and grassroots organizing via social networks, it appears that the new technological possibilities are offering full exercise of civic potential, by recreating the spirit of Habermassian public sphere (Cammaerts:2008). On U.S. presidential elections in 2004, Democratic candidate Howard Dean was the first to use the opportunities granted by various social media, targeting younger voters by organizing rallies via social network MeetUp and blogging during the campaign (Jenkins, 2007). The elections in 2008, introduced the first Facebook President into the White House¹.

All these facts and would lead us to conclude that the social media are increasing democratic participation of citizens in political life. However, some posit the idea in a slightly different way, emphasizing the complexity of interests, motivations and relations in the online sphere. Instead of envisioning Internet as a public sphere, where consensus is reached, Cammaerts (2008) invokes the notion proposed by Moufee of “agonistic public sphere”, which takes into consideration conflict as a driving force of social relations, as well as relations of power in the society, all of which can be transcribed onto the Internet. More importantly, this notion suggests that not all political activity on the Internet is emancipatory, but could be destructive and feeding on conflict.

¹ Talbot, D. (2008) “How Obama Really Did It?”, Technology Review [Online] <<http://www.technologyreview.com/web/21222/>> [Accessed October 2008]

I use this proposition, as a starting point for investigation of activities of Serbian nationalistic groups within social media, trying to determine the principles on which these groups function and whether social media help them gain support for their activities. Furthermore, I am linking the social media activities with the writings of traditional media, which until recently were deemed solely responsible for creating of public opinion. I would argue that nationalist groups engaging into social media activities, along with the overwhelmingly present tabloid culture, contribute towards creating of new public sphere, less democratic and tolerant.

IDEOLOGY OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Many authors testify on the Internet's pervasive discourse of progress – the dominant rhetoric is the rhetoric of democratization (Castells, 2001:36) or so-called digital enlightenment discourse (Gane & Beer, 2008:88), imposing the view that Internet culture will bring more freedom and knowledge, as well increase participation of citizens in the public life.

This view avoids critical assessments of developments on the Internet, some of which might have negative consequences. Nicholas Carr (2005) treats web 2.0 as amoral, as it basically represents a set of technological novelties, whose usage determines whether they are inherently positive or negative. Lovink (2008:xi) sees Internet culture as “torn apart by contradictory forces that make it no longer possible to speak of general trends in either good or evil direction”.

The emerging social media platforms (blogs, social networks – primarily Facebook, video sharing site YouTube), due to the easy accessibility and spreadable nature, quickly became popular (even populist). Among its uses, one of the most striking, is the ability to quickly organize large groups of people around a cause. The recent example would be protest, ignited by Twitter, in Iran². However, not all “smart mob” gatherings (Rheingold, 2002) have democratic potential. For example, coordination by mobile phones, typical “smart mob” tactic, caused an insurgence in Sao Paulo prison³, organized by PCC gang (Lovink,2008:xiv).

Cammaemerts (2008) calls, groups that are using freedoms granted by the democracy, at the same time looking to undermine its foundations “antipublics” (ibid:369). He claims that Internet “cannot be treated as a separate entity from economic, political and cultural realities of offline world; it forms an integral part thereof”.

SERBIAN NATIONALISTS ONLINE

In recent years, Serbia saw the rise of nationalistic right-wing groups, ranging from chapters of racist organizations as Stormfront and Blood and Honour, to those relying on reviving of Serbian tradition (Dveri Srpske), and those basic their “ideology” on protesting against Kosovo’s independence, NATO involvement in the region, pro-European government and its policies (Obraz and Serbian National

² Morozov, E. (2009), “Iran Elections: A Twitter Revolution?”, Washington Post [Online] <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/discussion/2009/06/17/DI2009061702232.html>> [Accessed June 2009]

³ “Prison gang with mobile phones”, BBC News [Online] <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/1178259.stm>> [Accessed 10 September, 2009]

Movement – SNP 1389)⁴. The activity of some of them on Internet forums made headlines in mainstream media, as it included examples of hate speech or apparent plotting against the authorities or other public personalities. Only with the public protests against the independence of Kosovo or anniversary of NATO bombing, some of these groups started actively to promote their activities using posters, press releases or appearing in mass media in the attempt to distance themselves from the violent outbursts and legitimize their cause.

Serbian National Movement (SNP 1389)⁵ was chosen as a case to be studied in this paper, because amid blogs and websites of similar organizations, its activities in the social media showed most consistency and continual effort, using all available channels, thereat achieving different results.

However, before focusing on the strategies they employ within social media, a brief outlook of Serbian media scene, regarding this topic, as well as the influence social media have in Serbian society should be put forward.

SERBIAN MEDIA – OFFLINE AND ONLINE

Without delving into complexities of media scene in Serbia, I would focus on two most pertinent issues for the topic: tabloidisation of

⁴ Brief history, as well as possible reasons for the formation of these groups, are captured in the movie *Heated Blood* (Vrela krv), by Milos Teodorovic and Ivana Lalic Majdak from 2008. Its premiere was followed by the discussion, in which members of several of right-wing organizations participated. Though without violent incidents, the event was full of verbal altercations between participants in discussion on both sides and audience members.

[Online] Available at

<http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=11&dd=03&nav_id=326788>

⁵ 1389 alludes to the Battle of Kosovo, which took place that year. This event plays a huge role in Serbian history and popular memory.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Kosovo

Serbian press and influence of Internet in the public sphere (social media included).

Following the democratic changes in 2000 and a decade in which strict division existed between state media that supported Milosevic's Government and independent media, which advocated democratic changes, Serbian media entered into commercial era, where there is little room for alternative views (Rankovic, 2007). Among the media with highest circulation, there is a conservative, populist newspaper (Vecernje novosti), pro-EU, yet decidedly commercial (Blic) and a tabloid (Kurir).⁶ Tabloids have overwhelming influence on Serbian public sphere, instigating affairs, disregarding privacy issues and using slandering, even hate speech⁷, as a legitimate tactic.

The intake of Internet in Serbia is lower, in comparison to the EU countries, according to the latest research approximately quarter of the population is using the Internet (Sitarski et al., 2007:85). The most popular website is a portal B92⁸, Internet outlet of a media company, comprising of the most popular radio station and a TV station. B92 established its role as a beacon of independent media in 1990's and although the circumstances changed, resulting in adjusting to the commercial demands of the market, the web portal of this media company attracts most visitors from Serbia and abroad. It was the first media outlet to start a blog, which primarily caused a stir in

⁶ Serbia's Media Landscape – Print Media [Online] Available at <<http://www.wieninternational.at/en/node/11459>> [Accessed August 30, 2009]

⁷ Silk, C. (2009), "Serbia: The Great Influence of the Tabloid Press" [Online] Available at <http://www.editorsweblog.org/newspaper/2009/06/serbia_the_great_influence_of_the_tabloi.php> [Accessed August 30, 2009]

⁸ <http://www.alexa.com/topsites/category/Top/World/Srpski>

the public life, however when chief authors stopped blogging, it seems to have lost its momentum.

Regarding the popularity of individual blogs, among the first ten, five are dedicated to IT and online marketing⁹, thus we can conclude that political blog has not found a fertile ground in Serbia.

The situation is markedly different regarding social networks, primarily Facebook – in the whole South East Europe region, Serbia has the most users (849.440, that is 11,32% of the population, compared to 662.100 in the neighbouring Croatia¹⁰). In relation to the topic of nationalism within social media, an interesting phenomena is taking place, which might be termed Facebook wars¹¹. It refers to the gathering of as many people as possible within a group to outnumber the other group – “Let Gather More People That There is in Albania”¹² with 93,507 members is a good example, as well as “Can We Gather 50.000 Serbs in a Facebook Group”¹³ with 94,365 members and “Let’s See How Many Serbs There Are on Facebook”¹⁴. All of the mentioned groups contain proclamations that Kosovo is still part of Serbia; they struggle for preservation of true values, calls to tradition, as well as nationalist and homophobic statements. The peak of the Facebook war

⁹ Data gathered on Blogostaj, regional blog ranking tool. [Online] Available at <<http://www.blogostaj.com/>> [Accessed September 12, 2009]

¹⁰ “U Srbiji najviše Facebook naloga” (The most Facebook profiles in Serbia). [Online] Available at <<http://www.adriatalk.com/u-srbiji-najvise-fejsbuk-naloga/>> [Accessed September 12, 2009]

¹¹ “Facebook Wars”, Belgraded blog [Online] Available at <<http://www.belgraded.com/blog/uncategorized/the-facebook-wars>> [Accessed August 15, 2009]

¹² Ajde da skupimo više ljudi nego sto ih zivi u Albaniji Facebook Group <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=55648479544&ref=search&sid=634286402.234989023..1>

¹³ Mozemo li da skupimo 50.000 Srba na Facebook Facebook Group <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=86648422643>

¹⁴ !!Ajmo Srbi da vidimo koliko nas je na Facebook-u!!!! Facebook Group <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=32474314319>

was reached with the emergence of the group “Noz, zica, Srebrenica” (Knife, Wire, Srebrenica)¹⁵ alluding to the massacre committed by Serbian forces in this Bosnian town in 1995. A counter group, larger in size, was formed, with the request to ban the nationalistic group.

ONLINE TOOLS AND STRATEGIES

For the sake of condensing of the research effort, I will focus on the activities on blog and Facebook of SNP 1389, performing a textual analysis of the two, pointing out differences between them, regarding the intended messages and reception.

a) BLOG

Blog of 1389 movement (<http://www.snp1389.rs/>) looks like semi-professional news site – well designed, utilizing colour pattern of Serbian flag – red, blue and white. It is more than a personal web log, aiming to appear more reliable, most likely it was designed by a professional. Upon entering it, a pop out advert appears with the image of Veselin Sljivancanin, convicted Serb by the Hague Tribunal for war crimes in Vukovar, Croatia; with the statement “We are breaking the Law: Serbian Hero”.

The blog contains various sections: About, NATO crimes, Sacred places – articles and photos from Serbian monasteries in Kosovo; Friends of the site; In Media; Activities; attempting to respond to all matters of interest – from current political affairs (adoption of new Law on Media

¹⁵ Global Voices, [Online] Available at <<http://globalvoicesonline.org/2008/12/12/serbia-facebook-group-of-serbian-nationalists/>>

in Serbian Parliament), commenting on rumours about corrupted politicians, announcing their activities (including the annual march to Kosovo, protests and activities against the EU, advocating for the usage of Cyrilic alphabet) and calling people to action. The example of the former is Family march, due to take place a week before first Belgrade Pride, serving to counter it.

In the research on racist sites and forums, Tynes (2005) noted that antipublics usually use two strategies: objective approach and counterargument strategies. Both are observed on the blog: it is loaded with information, written in high-minded conservative style, aiming at the unique and the only right perception of the reality and tradition. The style moves from academic (blog contains a lot of written materials, e.g. indictment against NATO leaders for aggression on Serbia, as a sovereign state, on more than 250 pages in PDF format) to propaganda outcries, such as "1389 calls you!" or "Serbia will not be silenced".

Despite the invested effort, the level of interactivity is low, most announcements pass unnoticed. Blogs are communities of like-minded people, where real discussion can not be expected (Lovink, 2008:21). Blog is a productive form, it requires more effort from both producer and the consumer, however it does not attract as many followers as social networks, where not much it produced in terms of the content. Social networks represent "produsage of sociality", where produsage signifies an act of simultaneous production and consumption (Bruns, 2008:318), whereby Facebook can be regarded not as collaborative work, but as "collaborative surveillance" (ibid:331).

a) FACEBOOK

Facebook proved to be the most popular platform worldwide among all social media. Thus, activist groups on Facebook seemingly gather more supporters. This proves true in the case of SNP1389, their Facebook group has 6,912 members¹⁶, while their Fan page gathers 697 supporters¹⁷. Group has more members, but rarely anyone comments on the discussion board, as people leaving posts on the Wall are either calling other people to join similar groups or promoting themselves. We can rightfully assume that the core supporters are those gathered on the Fan Page, who are commenting on the items posted in the news feed.

Extreme groups use hate speech and persuasive rhetoric, exemplified by the usage of preaching, urgency, historicism, fake tradition, delegitimization of other discourses (Tynes, 2005), all of which is present on the Fan page of this group. Hate speech against various government ministers, calls for violence regarding the upcoming gay parade¹⁸. One post contains the image of the new flag of the organization, specially made for the Belgrade Pride, showing raised fists and the tag line "Serbia will not calm down", whereby the faces of the people, holding the flag are blurred on purpose. One of the tools,

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<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?sid=ef6c7e61c9cdd0eba5075bf2c218e9b5&qid=25222965726&ref=search> [Accessed October 12, 2009]

¹⁷ <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Srpski-Narodni-Pokret-1389/97434643339?v=wall&viewas=634286402&ref=share> [Accessed October 12, 2009]

¹⁸ For example, they include:

[Damjan Kisić](#)

SMRT PEDERIMA...MARS NAZAD U EVROPSKU UNIJU I VAMA RODNU HRAVTSKU...!!!CEKAMO VAS.....
(Death to gays ... go back to the EU and your home country Croatia!!! We will be waiting for you)

employed by extreme groups is comedie hate (ibid.) - an image is posted with the slogan "Gays to Blenders"¹⁹ showing a blender full of blood, with two male signs, which is also met with encouraging comments.

CLICKING AWAY VS. REAL VIOLENCE

Anderson (1983) claims that nationalism is a social construction, that nations we belong to are imagined communities, held together by common beliefs, strengthened by the use symbols. This is even more valid for all virtual communities, that is communities, whose existence does not depend on the fixity of place, which are loosely organized and non-obligatory. Although, this it is true for online nationalistic groups, that does not lessen their potential threat to the society.

Tynes (2005) claims that clicking away on the net represents a precursor of violent crimes. One of the fans of Facebook page of SNP 1389, wrote about the upcoming Belgrade Pride "... I am worried about only one thing and that is that they have organized themselves so well and that we will not be able to approach them, as the cops will seal all the access points. If the gay ball passes without trouble, it will be a huge problem for us. As far as I know, "our forces" did not organize anything". Though Facebook is organized in groups and personal profiles, Fan Pages are visible to everyone using this social network, the content posted by page administrators to everyone on the Internet. Without a doubt this is a public space, in which members are calling up for violence against targeted groups, without any sanctions.

¹⁹ Plays on the rhyming effect of the same phrase in Serbian (Pedere u blenderu)

Unfortunately, Serbian nationalists are not exercising hate speech solely online. In reporting on the upcoming first gay pride in Belgrade, high-circulation tabloid Kurir reports on the “panic in gay orders”²⁰, quoting statements of a leader of SNP1389, as legitimate source, who is threatening the potential participants²¹. The image, illustrating the article, depicts violent attack on the participators of the attempt to organize Pride in 2001, which ended in bloody conflict. Though most mainstream media ignore the opinion of nationalist groups, only reporting about their activities in public, mostly in critical tone, there is a cause for concern.

The lengthy argumentative writing on the blog and engagement on Facebook serve somehow to introduce activities and beliefs of a group, which openly advocates violence towards other groups, into mainstream public sphere. Under the guise of free speech, nationalist and extremist groups are using all available tools to mobilize their supporters and recruit more members. In the case of Serbia, large part of society, reading tabloids, is ushering hate speech into mainstream discourse, whereby social media activities of groups, such as SNP1389, reach out to youth, by using the communication tools familiar to them.

The social media in general abound with similar cases, thus this concern extends over the border of a particular country, opening a more complex issue of how creators of online content can be held accountable in offline world, as well as whether censorship on the Internet will weaken or strengthen these groups and their beliefs.

²⁰ “Panika” (Panics), (September 1, 2009) Kurir [Online] Available at < <http://www.kurir-info.rs/clanak/vesti/kurir-01-09-2009/panika> > [Accessed 2 September, 2009]

²¹ “The parade will be broken, they will get it by the nose. We are know from the Bible how Sodom and Gomorrah ended, due to pederasty and other diseases. They were burned. ”

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