GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011

INTERNET RIGHTS AND DEMOCRATISATION
Focus on freedom of expression and association online

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

IS ONLINE MEDIA AN ALLY FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE? TRAPPED BETWEEN HATE AND INFLAMMATORY SPEECH

oneworld - platform for southeast europe (owpsee)
Valentina Pellizzer
www.oneworldsee.org

Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a small country in southeast Europe.[1] There are a number of well-known words and phrases that locate it in the geopolitical landscape: "Former Yugoslavia", "Balkans wars" (1992-1995), "Dayton Peace Agreement", "Srebrenica", "genocide", "war", "rapes", "ethnic division", "Serbs", "Bosnians/Muslims", "Croats", "reconciliation", "mass graves"… The list goes on.

If we consider the information and communications technology (ICT) context, there are interesting phenomena that can be observed which are a reflection of the highly fragmented and still conflict-ridden macro-political situation. Bosnia and Herzegovina still does not have a National Agency for the Information Society. However, it has three academic research networks (BiHARNET, FARNET and SARNET),[2] in line with the three ethnic groups in the country, and the top-level domain .ba is not the default for public institutions in the country. The use of the three telecom operators (BH Telecom, M:tel and Eronet) also corresponds roughly to the three ethnic communities. Nationalism is strong and *otherness* is the main draw card used by political parties to divide people.

Policy and political background

If we look at freedom of expression and association, access to information, and media freedoms generally, Bosnia and Herzegovina has an advanced legal framework.[3] But if we scratch the surface, what emerges is a divided country. According to a recent analysis: "Most divisions are along ethnic lines. Public broadcasters and privately owned media reflect this situation. (…) Incitement of ethnic intolerance is present in much of the media, including public broadcasting. Internet fora disseminate discriminatory rhetoric and hate speech."[4] Only half of the existing 12,000 NGOs are active, and, according to another analysis, "The early concentration on service delivery militated against the development of NGOs with a social vision and the capacity to campaign and advocate."[5] Political participation is low. Apathy and disillusionment are common denominators among people.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is still an international protectorate with an ethnic constitution. Due to ethnic vetoes, it is still without a national government after the October 2010 general elections.

The country has a high level of corruption, and is ranked 78 out of 178 on the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI).[6] The unemployment rate is 27%, and there is no strategy to remedy this.[7]

Self-regulation safeguards online media content under the auspices of the Press Council's Code of Conduct, which focuses on professional media. The Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK) is in charge of TV and radio, as well as, more recently, mobile short messaging service (SMS) content.[8]

The role of the internet in public demonstrations in Bosnia and Herzegovina

It is always problematic to say that a specific event can come to define social resistance in a particular context. In my experience, as a feminist and human

1   See the Bosnia and Herzegovina country report in GISWatch 2007: www.giswatch.org/en/2007

2   See the Bosnia and Herzegovina country report in GISWatch 2008 and 2009: www.giswatch.org/en/2008 and www.giswatch.org/en/2009

3   "BH is the most advanced in the legal environment and the least advanced in the quality of journalism." ARTICLE 19, the Global Campaign for Free Expression, International Federation of Journalists (2005) *Case Studies of Media Self-Regulation in Five Countries of South East Europe: Bosnia Herzegovina*.

4   South and East Europe Media Organisation (SEEMO) (2011) *Press freedom in the western Balkans and Turkey.* www.seemo.org; Marko, D. et al. (2010) *Izbori 2010. u BiH Kako su mediji pratili izbornu kampanju,* Media Plan Institute, Sarajevo.

5   Sterland, B. and Rizova, G. (2010) *Civil society organisations' capacities in the western Balkans and Turkey,* TACSO.

6   The Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), compiled by Transparency International, ranks countries according to perception of corruption in the public sector. The CPI is an aggregate indicator that combines different sources of information about corruption, making it possible to compare countries. www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi

7   "By Southern Tier Central and East European (CEE) averages, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) continues to lag considerably in economic and democratic reform progress and remains ranked near the bottom, second only to Kosovo. (…) Democratic reforms have stagnated at best in BH since the mid-2000s. (…) Overall, BH's peace and security score is sub-average compared to its neighbours; only Albania and Kosovo are ranked lower." USAID Strategic Planning and Analysis Division, Europe and Eurasia Bureau (2011) *Bosnia and Herzegovina Gap Analysis*.

8   Press Council and Code of Conduct: www.vzs.ba and www.vzs.ba/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=218&Itemid=9; the Communications Regulatory Agency (RAK) issued a fine for inappropriate SMS content displayed during a TV broadcast. rak.ba/eng

rights activist, I have witnessed a series of small and very often unrelated events that contribute to what we may consider the "story" of social resistance in a country, sometimes culminating in a "big event" that is the start of the realisation of a long-nurtured common social cause.

So, my story would have its prelude in February 2008 and its "happening" during the 2010 political elections and their immediate aftermath. Without the prelude, I would not be able to show how the internet can bypass ethnic divisions and the gatekeeper logic which is rife in Bosnia and Herzegovina society.

In 2008 internet penetration in Bosnia and Herzegovina was approximately 20%, and broadband access was expanding in towns. The use of new media was gaining momentum, with users eager for direct participation. However, websites were not yet seen as relevant to the formation of public opinion[9] by politicians and NGOs.

In February, a seventeen-year-old boy, Denis Mrnjavac, was stabbed to death on a public tram by three boys without any apparent reason.[10] Real-time information provided by internet sites resulted in widespread public compassion and rage. Demands that politicians attend to public safety and develop a youth strategy were met with arrogance and insensitivity. On 6 February, a public demonstration with more than 10,000 people took place. Over the following three months, public demonstrations were coordinated using the net. During the next administrative elections, those politicians who had been scornful of public demands lost their seats in towns and cantons.

In 2008, when the administrative elections took place, the internet can be said to have been *the* tool that led to democratisation and direct participation by the public. Ordinary citizens fought for a cause they felt was worthy enough to stand for. A 360° rebellion against politicians took place; but also against NGOs perceived as being donor dependent (and therefore driving their agendas), or as extensions of political parties – a class that lives off citizens' accounts but are not accountable to them. I would say that the internet opened up a new, free space for civic discussion and activism. Participation in discussion forums broke the feeling of being alone; people had the opportunity not only to safely express their own visions and ideas, but also to discover similar thinkers. Forums were flexible enough to allow a range of people to participate, from professional activists to ordinary citizens, who used the opportunity to define the agenda for discussion.

The anonymity that the internet provided made people feel safe. This is very important in a hierarchical society which very easily stigmatises diversity. At the same time, violent reactions were "only verbal" and controlled by moderators and by the active participation of other users.

In 2010 the political situation had become critical: corruption was worse, and state as well as other institutions had become bankrupt. An increase in tension could be felt throughout the year, as well as a rise in nationalist rhetoric and threats of secession and a vicious cycle of accusing different ethnic communities for the crises.[11] Meanwhile, access to the internet grew and expanded, and in 2010 internet penetration reached 50%. 3G services started to be provided by the three telecom operators.

General elections were scheduled for 3 October that year. With the increase in access, and popularisation of the media (more people began to have access to the media), incendiary comments became a way to increase readers. On the internet, comments showed the face of a polarised society where aggressive, inflammatory, sexist and elitist expressions are the norm.[12] Fights even erupted online amongst the activist community, mainly due to inexperience with online communications, but also because of the rigid mindset that is used to hierarchy rather than horizontal decision-making processes.

The enthusiasm and the connection felt between activists and the online professional media were already a thing of the past. The media became more interested in propaganda than in information. Both online and traditional media,[13] either public or private, had shown their loyalties to political parties and had become an integral part of the electoral machine.

---

9 The internet is the second most-followed medium in Bosnia and Herzegovina after TV. Media Plan Institute (2010) *Internet – Sloboda bez granica*.

10 See the Bosnia and Herzegovina country report in GISWatch 2008 for more information on the expansion of online media and the online community. www.giswatch.org/en/2008

11 "Bosnia and Herzegovina is politically and ethnically divided. Most divisions are along ethnic lines. Public broadcasters and privately owned media reflect this situation. There are three public TV channels: one covers the Bosnian Federation, the second addresses Republika Srpska and the third encompasses the whole territory. The Bosnian-Herzegovina public RTV is under constant political pressure from all ethnic groups. Incitement of ethnic intolerance is present in most media, including public broadcasting. Internet fora disseminate discriminatory rhetoric and hate speech." SEEMO (2011) op. cit.

12 "…destructive, mutually exclusive, ethnic politics." Commission of the European Communities (2010) *Bosnia and Herzegovina Progress Report*.

13 "In addition to the three state- and entity-wide public broadcasting systems, there are a total of 183 electronic media outlets in BiH – 42 television and 141 radio stations. This remains far more than the country's limited advertising market can support. Most radio stations are local and either limit their broadcasts to entertainment or focus on local political and ethnic interests. Most of the 128 registered print media are characterized by strong divisions along ethnic and ideological lines. Total circulation of the seven daily newspapers does not exceed 90,000 copies." Freedom House (2010) *Freedom of the Press 2010 - Bosnia-Herzegovina*. www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2010&country=7786

Once more, but more structured and technically wise than in the past, websites and blogs managed by civil society organisations and activist groups started to appear. They developed online applications to help visualise the political situation, including the corruption and lies of the political elites.

The issue was how to reach people who had lost trust in politics and who preferred entertainment to engagement. How could we provide information to counteract demagogy; how could we bypass the poison of *otherness* and make people feel that diversity was a positive factor, that they could become messengers of possible change? The fact that the majority of this kind of information produced was coming from civil society activists, and was free to reuse, had a multiplier effect on our efforts. Tools such as "Truth-Meter", "razglasaj.ba" and "Clean Up Parliament"; Abrashmedia's online radio and video production; the blog called *Gdjelova* ("where is the money"); the online and offline guerrilla activism done by Pritisak ("Pressure"); the Glavuse ("Bigheads")[14] from Akcija Gradjana ("Citizens Action"):[15] all of these initiatives confirmed the emergence of a network of net activists who collaborated across the main cities of Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Zenica, Mostar and beyond to bring about change.

Civil activists used their own websites and tools not only to produce information and bypass mainstream indifference, but to open a direct dialogue with users/voters. They provided searchable and verifiable information that anyone could access when deciding if and why to vote. Without this strategic online engagement of civil society, clearly supported by foreign donors, voter participation would have been lower. Participation rose to 55% of eligible voters and resulted in a change of government in the entity of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and a troubled victory for the Dodik presidency in the entity of Republika Srpska.[16] It was strategic to gain the trust of Bosnia and Herzegovina's growing community of netizens which, even if still not ready to engage in the street, was hungry to read, search and listen to evidence-based news. Access to the internet, the continuous production of information and citizen journalism had proven successful and made people feel their vote was necessary.

Social networking and building civil society

Facebook is, without any doubt, the key tool used to pass on information and attract readers in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Grassroots and activist groups such as Dosta, Akcija Gradjana, Zenica, Abrashmedia, Protest.ba, Ostra Nula and many others constantly use it to promote their causes, share information and generate debate. In this context the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual and queer (LGBTQ) community is the only community which remains careful to avoid the use of open groups or pages. The patriarchal and sexist Bosnia and Herzegovina society is aggressively hetero-normative and actively dislikes and stigmatises alternative sexual orientations.[17]

Facebook, with all the criticism of its privacy and security, is today the space where grassroots initiatives and informal groups in Bosnia and Herzegovina start their activities, connect with each other and *do* things. It represents the main communication infrastructure for activists, followed by Google Groups, which is considered as the best tool for setting up mailing lists and spaces for private conversation. Both applications answer activists' needs to have access to tools that are free of charge and user friendly. Facebook, and recently Twitter and Google+, are considered a public sphere where the majority of people connect and where activists can promote their causes and reach the support of critical masses. Whenever there is an action to be taken, the first step is setting up a Facebook group and sending out "friend requests". More and more debates are moving from forums to Facebook pages and groups.

Netizens understood that the mainstream media will, most of the time, ignore their calls, or will reformat the information disseminated to suit their needs. Because of this, the trend is moving from social network spaces to the creation of websites where information can be published more formally. Another trend is to publish information on a friend's blog as well as on activist websites. And it is the "share" and "like" features of social networks that bridge the gap between all these disparate groups and initiatives. The "share" and "like" functions that are linked to blog posts have become an index of social consent or dissent on certain issues.

---

14 Caricatures of politicians' heads were made out of papier mâché.

15 www.dosta.ba, www.akcijagradjana.org, www.istinomjer.org, www.rasglasaj.ba, www.pritisak.org, www.izaberi.ba, www.cistparlament.org, www.abrashmedia.info, www.ostranula.com, www.protest.ba, www.pulsdemokratije.net

16 Bosnia and Herzegovina encompasses two entities with their own governments and parliaments: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska (also known as the Republic of Srpska).

17 "In a study from Bosnia and Herzegovina 77% of respondents believed that accepting homosexuality would be detrimental for the country." Council of Europe (2011) *Discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation and gender identity in Europe*. See also the report from the first Queer Sarajevo Festival (2008) at www.oneworldsee.org/node/17219 and owpsee (2008) CoE Resolution Condemns Discrimination and Violence against LGBT Community, 3 October. www.oneworldsee.org/node/17247

Considering the active online links between social networks, it is important to raise awareness on the content and privacy policies implemented by these global providers.

The current scenario shows a slow but constant migration from anonymity/nicknames used in public forums, to people writing under their real names.

At the same time, public discourse remains polarised and trapped in a cycle of hate speech and discrimination. The internet has liberated activist groups from a dependence on editors and journalists,[18] but not from reproducing stereotypes.

Conclusions

Members of the new activist scene were disappointed during 2011 by the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite corruption, poverty and politicians' arrogance, did not follow the examples seen in the Arab world revolution. Activists started accusing what they considered overly easy "one-click activism" and criticised the minimal commitment required from "like" and "I'm attending" functions on Facebook pages when calling for participation in public demonstrations. Too often these amounted to little more than small groups of people.

Netizens seemed to forget the essence of our fragmented and divided society, where people are locked in exclusive collective identities and do not see themselves as citizens. The internet and social networks have created a breakthrough, a space where people can act and communicate more fluidly. At the same time, after an initial period of openness, many comments on websites and on Facebook groups and pages started to reflect a growing presence of extremist and intolerant groups – often from people in the diaspora, who share the language but not the territory. At times this amounted to a rude duel involving religion, ethnicity and identity, which began to monopolise public discourse and divide, threaten and pressurise people.

Nevertheless, the online space remains one of the spaces where identities can be shared, merged, and changed. That is why it is important to learn how to mediate and control online violations, without allowing censorship or control using internet service providers (ISPs).

Disillusionment is good when it generates awareness. Social resistance now involves building up nodes of trust, connected offline and online. Activists have started producing and collecting alternative stories in alternative languages. Social networks can be the gear but never the engine of social change. Technology needs to be understood and learnt, activists need to own and control their communication infrastructure and, in this way, to connect better and in a safer way. Without guaranteeing private conversation, emerging local groups will remain sporadic and fragile. The final stage of Bosnia and Herzegovina's social resistance is the public acceptance of humanist and secular positions, and the authentic protection of freedom of expression of the LGBTQ community.[19] So, to be continued...

Action steps

- There is no technology that can work for social activism if people are not ready to take risks and stand for their opinions, and to defend human rights and freedom.

- Socially engaged ICT geeks should be strategically placed when there is a need for a quick response in setting up online tools and services.

- It is important to always use tools which people already know, share and understand.

- It is important to be aware of existing technology and to adapt it. Updates in local languages on "how to" use the tools and "tips and tricks" for online activists are necessary.

- Privacy and security information sheets are necessary to prevent misuse or damage to activists' reputations and causes.

- The creation of a common, shared communication infrastructure and networks database that can be used on demand is needed.

- Encourage informal meetings of ICT geek and grassroots and social activists, as well as informal meetings on online content, including the use of stereotypes and inflammatory language. ∎

---

18 Media Plan Institute (2010) Op. cit.

19 See the ILGA Rainbow Europe Map and Index (May 2011) at www. ilga-europe.org/home/publications/reports_and_other_materials/ rainbow_map_and_index_2011 and www.pulsdemokratije.ba/ index.php?l=bs&id=1170

In the year of the Arab uprisings **GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH 2011** investigates how governments and internet and mobile phone companies are trying to restrict freedom online – and how citizens are responding to this using the very same technologies.

Everyone is familiar with the stories of Egypt and Tunisia. **GISWATCH** authors tell these and other lesser-known stories from more than 60 countries. Stories about:

PRISON CONDITIONS IN ARGENTINA Prisoners are using the internet to protest living conditions and demand respect for their rights.

TORTURE IN INDONESIA The torture of two West Papuan farmers was recorded on a mobile phone and leaked to the internet. The video spread to well-known human rights sites sparking public outrage and a formal investigation by the authorities.

THE TSUNAMI IN JAPAN Citizens used social media to share actionable information during the devastating tsunami, and in the aftermath online discussions contradicted misleading reports coming from state authorities.

GISWATCH also includes thematic reports and an introduction from Frank La Rue, UN special rapporteur.

GISWATCH 2011 is the fifth in a series of yearly reports that critically cover the state of the information society from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.

GISWATCH is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH
2011 Report
www.GISWatch.org