

INTERNET PRESENTATION OF MEDIA IN SERBIA: MORE FOR THE INTELLECTUAL ELITE THAN FOR THE DIASPORA

Zoran Stanojevic

June 8, 2004

Although citizens of Serbia living abroad were able for the first time to vote in the June 13 presidential elections, in the country's diplomatic and consular missions, only 10,020 of them decided to use this possibility. Through a private and entirely unrepresentative survey, among friends living abroad, I established that their interest in the country of their origin has a changeable character. In certain periods, they carefully follow news "from home," and in others they do it in passing. The number of those who are regularly informed is essentially small. This sheds a completely new light on the theory that internet sites of existing and online media are intended for "our people working abroad," as they are usually called.

There is no exact data on how many citizens of Serbia live across the world. Depending on need, this figure is estimated from several hundred thousand to several million. The estimate of those who are regular on the internet is up to 300,000 to 400,000, the same as those who are considered serious net users in Serbia itself. Summed up, this is a very decent number of those who may be considered interested in reading news from the internet. In practice, this has turned out not to be exactly so, namely they turn to the internet as a source of information from Serbia in certain dramatic situations (Milosevic shift, Djindjic murder). In normal circumstances, they prefer to follow different contents (and services), something that can also be concluded from what Serbian internet sites bring.

The internet as a medium was well accepted in Serbia from the start, from 1996. Most media outlets created their sites on the net before 2000 and have regularly updated them. Print media outlets exceed in this task, as by the nature of things they produce material (articles and photographs) suitable for being posted on the internet.

Electronic media outlets satisfy themselves with broadcasting via the internet, for listeners out of range, with some other information featured on the site. That information is mostly not news, but rather information related to the outlet itself. An exception from this rule is certainly www.b92.net of the most agile media company in Serbia, B92, which has the best and most frequently updated site. The site collects all material from B92 production, including transcripts of the company's radio and TV programs, with accompanying video material or JPG photographs. The idea is to group everything that the outlet does on the internet, where it is also possible to listen to the radio program and watch some video clips from the TV program. One may say that B92, with regard to internet contents, has gone furthest in the region, but the site still lacks contents made originally for the internet, i.e. exclusive internet material that would certainly considerably contribute to more visits.

In terms of updating, shoulder to shoulder with B92 are sites of the agencies Beta (www.beta.co.yu) and Fonet (www.fonet.co.yu), whose news is also carried by some internet portals. A media site that competes with B92 in terms of updating is the Radio Television Serbia site www.rts.co.yu. However, other than the fact that information on it is regularly updated and that RTS programming can be followed here, the site has no other elements worth mentioning. What remains are print media sites, the majority of which are open for reading, while paying for access is for now cherished by the weeklies NIN (www.nin.co.yu) and Vreme (www.vreme.doc). Still, some articles on their sites can be read for free and subscription is related only to the entire contents. Free content is offered by the weekly Ekonomist (www.ekonomist.co.yu), while some other popular weeklies such as Nedeljni Telegraf (www.nedeljnitelegraf.co.yu) post only selected articles. As far as print media presentations are concerned, worth mentioning are the dailies Blic (www.blic.co.yu), Glas Javnosti (www.glas-javnosti.co.yu), Danas (www.danas.co.yu), Vecernje Novosti (www.novosti.co.yu), the Novi Sad Dnevnik (www.dnevnik.co.yu), the Podgorica Vijesti (www.vijesti.co.yu) and Dan (www.dan.cg.yu). It would be unjust to bypass Politika (www.politika.co.yu), although the internet site of the company with the longest tradition in journalism in this part of Europe is far below expectation.

It is clear already from this cursory list that internet journalism in the real sense of the word does not exist in Serbia and Montenegro. In other words, internet media outlets do

not exist, while internet presentations of existing media do not offer visitors anything beyond their regular production. Internet newsrooms, which exist at some larger outlets, mostly do technical work, transferring existing contents to the internet, and they rarely have a journalist whose job would be at least to adapt these contents to the specific characteristics of the internet.

Despite this, one cannot say, looking at media presentation, that the internet in Serbia and Montenegro is stagnating. Quite the contrary, contents are featured on search engines quite well and constitute an unavoidable archive for any journalistic research related to Serbia and Montenegro. On one hand, deserving for this is a real deluge of new media in Serbia and Montenegro (in Belgrade only, four national tabloids appeared last year!). Also, the majority of them take the internet quite seriously, trying at the end of the day to offer the issue prepared for printing also almost entirely on the internet. This attitude makes the local internet very lively when it comes to information. Here we go back to the beginning of the article, namely the question of who these sites are intended for, since, with the exception of a few cases, the number of visits is not very satisfactory. The answer, of course, is not simple. In the long run, these sites exist because of a potential market (on the internet), which just does not seem to appear in Serbia. Presently, sites are intended for the social elite (primarily intellectual) which uses the internet and which influences creation of public opinion. An important role in all this is played by the fact that posting contents (which exist in the computer anyway) on the internet is extremely inexpensive and, even if it does not bring any direct benefit, it does not constitute a major expense either.

There is another important reason for non-existence of internet journalism. It is in the nature of this medium to spread freedom of information, sometimes ever far beyond the limits of the socially acceptable. In Serbia and Montenegro, especially after the fall of the Milosevic regime, there is no suffocation of media freedom that would be compensated for on the internet. What is more, the process is almost reversed. The media in Serbia is ready to publicize even what can normally be found solely on the net, at suspiciously registered addresses.