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Cyberwar or Sideshow? The Internet and the Balkan Wars

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The war in Kosovo that was fought from March to June 1999 has been characterized as the first “Internet war.” During the conflict, conventional media outlets complemented their traditional publications and broadcasts with up-to-date reporting and background information on the World Wide Web. The home pages of CNN and other

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media received millions of visitors; MSNBC hosted an Internet interview with Serbian paramilitary leader and indicted war criminal Zeljko Raznatovic (known as “Ar-

kan”). In addition, official and unofficial Serbian and Albanian web sites tried to attract international audiences with slick English presentations.

Little attention has been paid, however, to the impact this new medium had inside the former Yugoslavia. Although the Internet had been available since the early days of the wars of Yugoslav disintegration that began in 1991, its reach—because of technical and political constraints—was limited. With the war in Kosovo this changed as the number of Internet users grew dramatically and the medium began to present itself as a significant alternative platform for independent media and for personal reports from the war zone. Yet, the Internet’s influence during the war and since remains ambiguous.

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SPURRED BY WAR

The war in Kosovo had a variety of effects on the Internet in Yugoslavia. Although more users were drawn to the Internet because of the conflict, which doubtlessly helped extend its reach, the war severely limited the activities of Internet providers and Internet-based media.

During the war, the number of Internet connections in Yugoslavia rose from 25,000 to an estimated 55,000. These numbers, however, must be contrasted with traditional media such as RTV Pancevo, which, after the closure of radio station B92, became the main independent radio station in the Belgrade area and had an average of 300,000 listeners daily during the war. The state-run Serbian television station RTS had an even broader and larger audience, reaching practically every household until NATO began targeting its transmitters in late April 1999. Nevertheless, the war apparently triggered an Internet boom in Yugoslavia that has continued as that country has followed a global trend of rapidly increasing connections to the web.

Another event before the war also helped foster this growth. In October 1998 a draconian media law was passed. The law, ratified by parliament quickly and without debate, prohibited the redistribution of foreign news reports and imposed such severe fines for violations that many independent media were forced into financial ruin. Some newspapers, including the popular independent Belgrade daily *Nasa Borba*, stopped publication altogether, while others were printed in the more liberal republic of Montenegro and distributed in major cities in Serbia under the threat of confiscation. This serious reduction in independent media outlets made the

Internet distinctly more attractive as an alternative source of information.

The war led to further restrictions on independent media. Even before NATO dropped its first bombs, the authorities closed the well-known independent radio station B92 (www.freeb92.net) in Belgrade and detained its director, Veran Matic (it later released Matic and allowed B92 to reopen, albeit with a new progovernment staff). Within a few days of the start of the war, all independent media had no other choice but to close down or exercise self-censorship to avoid being banned. The role of the Internet-based media during the war in Kosovo thus became twofold: it had to bridge the gap left by the closure of other independent media while it attempted to provide information on the bombing and its effects. Some sites, such as the Internet-based www.beograd.com, became the most reliable means to keep informed about the destruction caused by NATO bombing.

Although the Internet provided some alternative to the government-dominated electronic and print media—which offered little news and much propaganda during the bombing—the Internet was not immune to government attempts to exert control. The closure of B92 as a radio station coincided with the disappearance of its web page until May 9, 1999, when the site went back on-line. Access to the new site, however, was frequently blocked by government-owned Internet service providers, such as the electronics faculty of the University of Belgrade.¹

The air strikes and the Yugoslav government's response threatened not only the media using the Internet, but also the web itself in Yugoslavia. When the government took over Radio B92, it also gained control of one of the country's largest Internet providers, OpenNet, which was operated by B92. As a result, many web pages that belonged to Serbian nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Serbian Helsinki Committee, became unavailable. The largest Internet provider in Yugoslavia, EUnet, issued a set of guidelines for its subscribers that encouraged users to protest NATO bombing but to

avoid engaging in Internet abuses such as “spamming”—the sending of large numbers of unsolicited e-mail messages—that could lead to the termination of the company's access to the World Wide Web.

As the war continued, the Western governments' intensified attempts to destroy the media outlets of the Yugoslav government by bombing them, and their imposition of harsher sanctions against the country, seemed to threaten all Internet access in Yugoslavia. Even before the bombing by NATO, reports circulated in late April 1999 that a ban on Yugoslav access to the Internet by the United States was imminent. Although the ban never materialized, it led to protests by Yugoslav NGOs against its imposition because of the detrimental impact it would have on communicating to the outside world their work on political and economic rights.

But even without the ban, the Internet proved to be a vulnerable means of communication. E-mails containing “sensitive” words were often delayed for hours by Serbian Internet providers, while other providers canceled the accounts of members of the independent student organization Otpor (Resistance). The destruction of power stations and telecommunications by NATO bombing in the last phase of the war made usage of the Internet increasingly difficult and unreliable.²

THE YUGOSLAV INTERNET'S BEGINNINGS

The Internet became available in Yugoslavia only three months after the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina began in April 1992. It had its origins in the frustration of peace activists throughout the former Yugoslavia, who were unable to coordinate their efforts because of the severing of conventional communication networks with the dissolution of the Yugoslav confederation.

Unlike most other Eastern European communist countries, Yugoslavia maintained close communications links with the West during the cold war. Academic institutions in Yugoslavia were connected to the European and worldwide electronic networks that would later constitute the foundations of the Internet. When these networks were destroyed because of fighting or were put under government control, peace activists began to look for alternatives. A small group of these activists and computer experts from the Center for Anti-War Action in Belgrade and the Zagreb-based Anti-War Campaign and Center for Peace, Non-Violence and Human Rights set up two electronic bulletin boards and linked them in July 1992. Using old equipment and receiving minimal outside help at the outset, this

¹Although a mirror site could have been established at relatively low cost, which would have prevented the Yugoslav government from completely shutting out B92 or any other independent site, few users would have been ready to participate in an electronic “paper chase” across the Internet, with the independent media setting up new sites that were subsequently blocked by the authorities.

²For an assessment of the role the Internet played during the war in Kosovo, see the article by the Association of Independent Media, “Serbia,” in Peter Goff, ed., *The Kosovo News and Propaganda War* (Vienna: International Press Institute, 1999), pp. 332–336.

new network, which was called ZaMir (For Peace), provided a communication link between the two capitals when all other means of communication were limited. By 1993, 375 users in Belgrade and 125 in Zagreb had access to the ZaMir Transnational Network. By early 1994, ZaMir centers had been established in Sarajevo, Bosnia and Ljubljana, Slovenia; at year's end, Pristina, the capital of the Serbian province of Kosovo, was also connected to this trans-Yugoslav Internet network.

NGOs and humanitarian organizations also coordinated their efforts with the help of ZaMir net, thereby bypassing nonexistent or unreliable conventional means of communication. Besides offering access to peace activists, ZaMir net opened channels of communication among ordinary citizens of the former Yugoslav republics and with other countries. This allowed the continuation of cross-national dialogue and contact with Western Europe and North America, albeit on a limited scale. ZaMir proved especially important in besieged Sarajevo; the city's isolation was partly bridged by the Internet link that allowed residents to communicate with relatives and friends who lived abroad.³

The Yugoslav Internet first attracted wider attention in the winter of 1996 and 1997 during student demonstrations in Belgrade to protest the government's attempted fraud in the November 1996 local elections. Radio B92 played an important role by reporting on the events unfolding in the streets, events that were largely ignored by the government media. Because of their coverage, B92 and another independent station, Radio Indeks, were forced off the air on December 3, 1996. B92 continued to broadcast on the Internet, however. Only two days after the shutdown, B92 resumed its regular radio transmission, which helped energize the protests. The government ultimately relented and permitted the station to officially reopen.

While some observers have argued that B92's use of the Internet demonstrated to the government the futility of attempting to ban the station, international protests appear to have played a far more significant role in the government's decision to rescind

the ban on B92. The temporary ban may also have highlighted the ability to bypass conventional technical limitations and to broadcast radio over the Internet. Yet with an Internet penetration of barely 10,000 connections in late 1996 (0.1 percent of the rump Yugoslavia's total population) and with rarely more than a few dozen listeners of the actual B92 web broadcasts, the Internet emerged more as an important symbol of resistance rather than a technology that had a real impact on the Yugoslav media landscape.

PROPAGANDA AND "CYBERWAR"

The early use of the Internet by peace activists was swiftly followed by groups whose interest was not in ending the fighting in Bosnia but in justifying ethnic cleansing and bolstering the nationalist policies of the successor states of Yugoslavia. Both the governments involved and especially the Serbian

and Croatian diaspora communities played a pivotal role. Diaspora communities in North America and Western Europe were exposed to the new

technology at an earlier stage and had greater ability to establish an Internet presence (Croatian sites included www.dalmatia.net/croatia/emigrants/index.htm and hsk.hic.hr/index-en.html; Serbian sites were www.suc.org and www.srpska-mreza.com/mission.html). In addition, the Internet provided a low-cost, quick link to the home country, making it a more attractive medium than traditional electronic or print media. Because of the Internet, many diaspora groups active during the war in Bosnia were able to achieve a far greater audience and influence, despite their small numerical strength and radical nationalist positions.

The governments involved in the Bosnian conflict used the Internet to defend their policies. The majority of the content, mostly in English, targeted international audiences. This crude propaganda had little visible impact.

During the war in Kosovo, the Yugoslav and the Serbian government set up a number of web sites (www.serbia-info.com, www.gov.yu) to counter the Internet presence of Kosovo Albanians who accused the Yugoslav/Serbian authorities of ethnic cleansing. The professional design and frequent updates of the government web pages reflected a new understanding of the medium. The content, however, remained

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³On the development of ZaMir, see Bob Jiggins and Mirko Milivojevic, "Building Bridges: The Internet in Former Yugoslavia," *Balkan Forum*, vol. 3, no. 13 (December 1995).

propaganda, including graphic photographs of alleged massacres by the guerrilla Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) or by NATO in an attempt to counter similar claims leveled against them in Albanian sites (for example, see www.albanet.com). Again, these sites were mainly intended for an international audience. Nevertheless, the sites' clear bias and poor information content minimized their influence.

The war also saw the emergence of dozens of private web pages put up by Serbs in Yugoslavia and in the diaspora that protested the NATO bombing; many carried the image of a bull's-eye as part of a campaign to identify Yugoslavia as the victim of "Western aggression." Others turned to more direct action in an attempt to carry the confrontation to the Internet. Serbian hackers tried to shut down the web sites of NATO and Western governments by spamming. More radical groups, such as the Srpska Vojska Inteneta (Serbian Internet Army) hacked into Albanian sites and changed the content to slander Albanians or proclaim "Kosovo and Metohija [the official Serbian name for Kosovo] is Serbian." Similarly, Albanian hackers who sympathized with the KLA replaced the content of private Serbian sites with messages supporting the KLA and vilifying Serbs. In a climate of mutual recrimination and no dialogue, the Internet provided another stage to proclaim the hatred of the other nation. But these attacks did not constitute a "cyberwar," and did little to significantly affect the already bad relations between Serbs and Albanians.

One of the few web sites not created by the independent media and the NGOs that attempted to bridge the gap between the Serbian and Albanian communities was published by the Serbian Orthodox Decani monastery in Kosovo. An unlikely author of an Internet web page—a monk at the monastery—tried to provide information on the war and encourage dialogue between Serbs and Albanians. The monk, Sava Janjic, is currently the secretary of Bishop Artemije of the diocese Raska-Prizren, which includes Kosovo and parts of southern Serbia; the bishop is one of the most influential political representatives of the Serbs remaining in Kosovo. Father Janjic, frequently referred to as the "cybermonk," established a web presence in 1994 for the Decani monastery (www.decani.yunet.com), where he sought to promote a less confrontational line toward the Albanian community than that promulgated by the Yugoslav government. In an interview with the Belgrade independent daily *Danas* on January 6, 2000, Sava Janjic sharply criticized the regime of Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic for

his repression of the Albanian population in Kosovo, which he said helped bring about the retaliatory ethnic repression in Kosovo since the end of the war.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT

The impact of the Internet on the former Yugoslavia has been complex and is impossible to reduce to a single consequence. By providing a relatively inexpensive means of communication, it has linked across Yugoslavia communities that were separated by war or government repression. Because of it, peace activists have been able to coordinate their efforts and exchange information since the early stages of the war in Bosnia. Similarly, Albanians in Kosovo, lacking access to the traditionally most important electronic media and operating in a climate of Serbian police repression before the summer of 1999, relied on the Internet to build links and maintain contacts. The Internet also helped the people of the former Yugoslavia surmount other difficulties, such as destroyed or underdeveloped infrastructure and blocked borders. This has been especially true for national communities that span state borders and for contacts with members of the Yugoslav diaspora. The impact of the Internet on recent emigrants from the former Yugoslav republics and their relationship with their home countries remains to be seen.

In contrast to conventional media, information on the Internet is not necessarily filtered: anyone with the financial resources and technical skill can

THE INTERNET IN YUGOSLAVIA

IT IS ALMOST impossible to determine the number of Internet users in today's Yugoslavia (composed of the republics of Serbia and Montenegro), since a large number of small providers, and the absence of a clear legal framework, make it difficult to compile reliable statistics. In addition, the impoverishment of Serbian citizens in the past decade because of war, a catastrophic economic policy, and the imposition of international sanctions have prevented many from purchasing a private computer. Users thus resort to other alternatives: Internet cafes are especially popular, for example, and increasingly can be found in smaller towns as well as cities. Still, in early 2000, the number of individual Internet connections was between 100,000 and 120,000. Thus the Internet currently reaches slightly more than 1 percent of Yugoslavia's 10 million people (the coverage in the United States is above 40 percent).

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put up a web page. This means it can serve as a relatively inexpensive platform for independent information in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, where government censorship, limited financial resources, and disrupted infrastructure often render the dissemination of information from conventional media extremely difficult. This platform has also been used for propaganda and hate speech, but these messages have been largely directed at an international audience and have had little impact in the countries themselves.

The Internet has had a clearly negative effect within the countries of the former Yugoslavia when it has been used to spread rumors and conspiracy theories. Relentless misinformation by most government media and the atmosphere of fear created by the fighting that has accompanied the dissolution of Yugoslavia created fertile ground for the rise of rumors and half-truths that sought to justify the policy of ethnic cleansing. Without the misinformation and fear, the relatively dense fabric of multiethnic relations in Yugoslavia could not have been so effectively unraveled.

The Internet also encouraged the distribution of unconfirmed reports by sources whose reliability was unknown. Subsequently, many reports and articles that circulated widely during the war in Kosovo grossly distorted events. Without the Internet, such half-truths would have reached only a fringe audience outside the former Yugoslavia, while now such reports can reach millions. But their impact should not be overestimated. The main sources of information on the Internet during the war in Kosovo remained either the large American or British news providers (even within Yugoslavia), the Institute on War and Peace Reporting (www.iwpr.net) from London, or a few local media outlets, such as Radio B92.

Again, B92 stood out. In early April 1999, at the peak of international public interest in the war, the B92 web page received 8 million visitors during a period of a few days. This huge number of visitors was recorded shortly before the station was closed. Since its relaunch in May 1999, it has continued to attract great interest, with over 400,000 visits per day.

Individuals—both Serbs and Albanians—could also interact with the international media through e-mail. Nearly all Western European and North

American newspapers and television stations used letters e-mailed by Albanians and Serbs to illustrate the “human dimension” of the conflict. While this form of reporting is not significantly different from journalism in the United States, where stories describing the fate of individuals are a mainstay, in Western Europe—with the exception of Great Britain—the factual reporting of events without human interest stories traditionally took priority.

“MASS” MEDIA?

The Internet remains largely an elite medium in most of the former Yugoslavia, and is still far from being a part of the region’s mass media. The majority of these Internet users belong to an urban and relatively well-educated segment of the population, which is the least likely to support Yugoslavia’s authoritarian government. The impact of the Internet in Yugoslavia thus has been limited to this small community, which includes peace activists and others involved in the political opposition, along with members of the independent media. In addition, despite the potential vulnerability, the media published on the net have played a pivotal role in replacing or supplementing the newspapers, radio, and television stations threatened by censorship and other effects of war. Thus the Internet is providing the educated elite of Yugoslavia a significantly broader range of information than it did at the beginning of the Yugoslav wars.

Although the Internet alleviated some information shortages in Yugoslavia during the war in Kosovo, its small audience of users within the country meant that only a minuscule segment of the population was as well informed as many Western media consumers. Even those with access to the Internet could learn just snippets about what was happening in the war zone (which was also the case outside the region). Still, the Internet gave the independent Yugoslav media tremendous support and helped reduce the isolation that had enveloped Yugoslavia. In fact, the Internet helped connect many citizens of Yugoslavia with the outside, and a smaller group with each other across national divides. Both trends are important and encouraging, but should not be overestimated in assessing the impact on developments in Yugoslavia. ■