THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN UNCONTROLLED AND ACCESSIBLE CHANNEL OF INFORMATION

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Abstract

With the recent development of the technology and the rise of the number of people that have access to Internet, the traditional channels of information were certainly perturbed. Nowadays, the electronic media have become inevitable as an information medium. But, the appearance of social networks also changed the directions in which information was communicated. Essentially, the consumer has become a potential producer of information and by his activity can influence the way how this information is distributed. This drastic change¬ poses a number of opportunities for the development of free speech and democracy in general, but also poses very big challenges on how to prevent abuses. In this article, we analyze certain concrete events where social media has a central role in impacting the public opinion. Social networks, such as Facebook, allow publishing various events which are then distributed through the network. The impact of such events can be clearly seen through the different actions that were originally initiated through social media, and have led to the fall of dictatorships in some Arabic countries. Such an impact has forced many governments to be proactive in the support or rejection of such events, going sometimes beyond realistic measures to stop legitimate actions when it goes against their opinion. Certainly, it is the articulation of the social needs and interests of people that are expressed in these cases, and such actions can be considered as restrictive toward the liberty of speech. But, we should look at both sides of the medal, since these needs may sometimes surpass this liberty and touch into other human's rights, and therefore requires government intervention. We can consider as such the recent request of the Ministry of the Interior sent to Facebook administration, for blocking some pages that were at the source of interethnic clashes in the Macedonian capital, Skopje. In a short time, the social media has become a very important communication medium. It is clear that it will certainly become the main source of information. The ease of publication, and sometimes the relative anonymity these networks may provide, plays a big role in their promotion. But, such presentation of information without editing and supervision, poses new difficulties on its trustworthiness and it the near future will present one of the main challenges in communication sciences.

Keywords: Social media, communication, information, social impact, social needs and interests.

Introduction

Under the circumstances when an information society is being targeted, the so called social media have to be supported. The Internet and other electronic media are inevitable in modern times, even though, as many authors have already concluded, as far as the Internet is concerned, there is a difference between the real identity presentation and the one that is revealed through this kind of medium.

It is already clear that within the *cyber*-communication, the person can be "constructed" for certain aims and to simulate the state and the conditioned motivating system. [1]The Internet fully allows the anonymous communication; therefore many people decide to take part in it, with anonym roles which represents a primate in the imagination about the motivation for the real social contact.

The Internet culture ignores the nature of motivation of users as well as the issue on the social, educational, ethnical status. According to some theorists, those who spend most of their time in virtual environments are keen to give fewer chances to their real lives. However, we also agree with Hermann's conviction that "the internet has partially inspired the belief that along with the technological advancements the new era of democratic communication is setting in". The Internet utilization in our everyday life, especially with regard to the youth, creates a different reality compared to the previous one. The impact of social networks is increasingly becoming closer to the reality. The provision of opportunities to express one's needs and requirements without having to acquire additional knowledge makes the Internet a more important medium compared to the other types of modern communication.

In our article we will analyze some concrete events which influenced and overcame other traditional networks; i.e. we will dwell on FB networks and the Internet in general. Many events that happen nowadays are due to the impact of social networks. Different such networks, as Facebook, reveal various different events on daily bases. This has made many governments take an active role in supporting or rejecting such events, which sometimes can also be unreal. It is more than obvious that the articulation of social needs and interests is also present in these kinds of media. But, we should not forget the other side of the medal as well. A month ago the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Macedonia sent a written document to the Facebook network administration in order to block some web pages because of the impact they had in the initiation of clashes between different ethnic communities in the Macedonian capital, Skopje.[2] Same cases occurred in many Arab countries in some of which dictatorship structures were even dissolved.

The Internet managed to beat for a very short time all other channels of communication and the creation of the public opinion. This happens because of now well-known practical reasons. The presentation of activities is carried more easily and faster and without great costs. Another very important issue is Internet control. This kind of medium enables the presentation of events without the additional needs of editing and supervision, and in this way it arrives at the final destination in a real time. It is very obvious that in a very short period of time the Internet will become the main medium through which all the communication will take place and the needs and interests of all social strata will be revealed.

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[1] "The Network Society From Knowledge to Policy" - http://www.umass.edu/digitalcenter/research/pdfs/JF_NetworkSociety.pdf
[2] Media, Poverty and Social Exclusion - Novi Sad (7 May 2011)
http://www.ff.uns.ac.rs/biblioteka/digitalna/media_poverty/The_Book_of_Abstracts_Conference_Media_Poverty_and_Social_Exclusion.pdf

The Internet and its Usage

"This isn't just about faster Internet or fewer dropped calls.   It's about connecting every part of America to the digital age.   It's about a rural community in Iowa or Alabama where farmers and small business owners will be able to sell their products all over the world.   It's about a firefighter who can download the design of a burning building onto a handheld device; a student who can take classes with a digital textbook; or a patient who can have face-to-face video chats with her doctor."

– President Obama, State of the Union Address, January 25, 201

The social media are undergoing a very rapid and crucial development phase. They have become and inseparable part of the realization of our daily activities. Facebook remains the most popular social network, which has recently enriched the options for its customers with additional applications such as games and other utilities, which in turn has increased even further the number of subscribers. The marketing part is also important and it occupies a significant part in developing the business, especially e-business. This and many other things comprise the essence of the mosaic that made social media and the Internet increases their impact on the society. Based on the following data, we can see the evolution of internet usage and social networks in particular. This in turn increases the formation of the public opinion and makes the Internet an inseparable part of our lives.
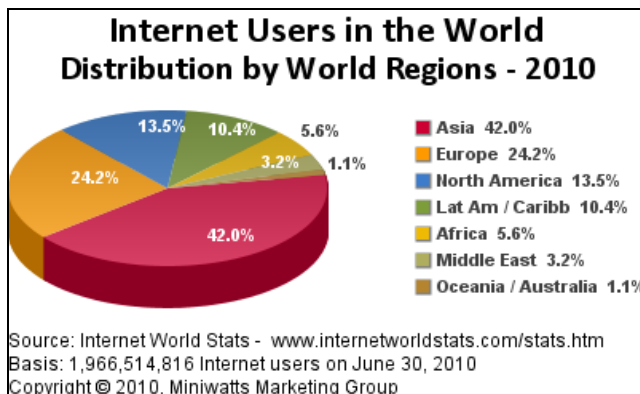
Internet Usage Statistics
The Internet Big Picture
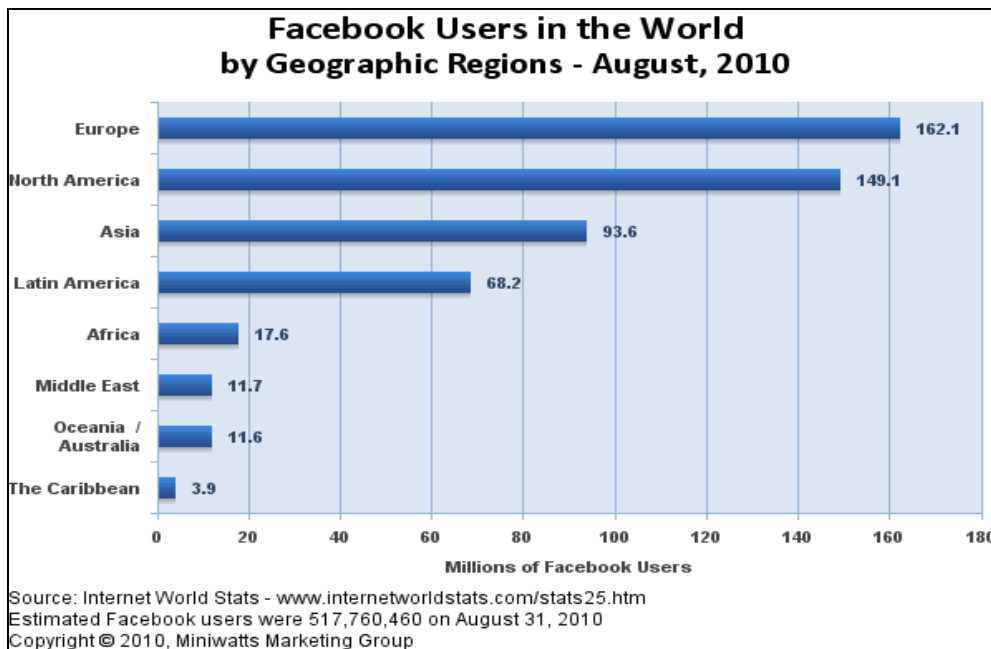**World Internet Users and Population Stats[3]**

FACEBOOK USERS IN THE WORLD						
Facebook Usage and Facebook Penetration Statistics **For The Main World Geographic Regions** **New Facebook Statistics**						
WORLD INTERNET USAGE AND POPULATION STATISTICS						
World Regions	**Population** (2010 Est.)	**Internet Users** Dec. 31, 2000	**Internet Users** Latest Data	**Penetration** (% Population)	**Growth** 2000-2010	**Users %** of Table
Africa	1,013,779,050	4,514,400	**110,931,700**	10.9 %	2,357.3 %	5.6 %
Asia	3,834,792,852	114,304,000	**825,094,396**	21.5 %	621.8 %	42.0 %
Europe	813,319,511	105,096,093	**475,069,448**	58.4 %	352.0 %	24.2 %
Middle East	212,336,924	3,284,800	**63,240,946**	29.8 %	1,825.3 %	3.2 %
North America	344,124,450	108,096,800	**266,224,500**	77.4 %	146.3 %	13.5 %
Latin America/Caribbean	592,556,972	18,068,919	**204,689,836**	34.5 %	1,032.8 %	10.4 %
Oceania / Australia	34,700,201	7,620,480	**21,263,990**	61.3 %	179.0 %	1.1 %
WORLD TOTAL	6,845,609,960	360,985,492	**1,966,514,816**	**28.7 %**	444.8 %	100.0 %

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[3] http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats26.htm

Publish or Perish

Internet Users in the World
Distribution by World Regions - 2010

- Asia 42.0%
- Europe 24.2%
- North America 13.5%
- Lat Am / Caribb 10.4%
- Africa 5.6%
- Middle East 3.2%
- Oceania / Australia 1.1%

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm
Basis: 1,966,514,816 Internet users on June 30, 2010
Copyright © 2010, Miniwatts Marketing Group

				FACEBOOK USAGE AND INTERNET STATISTICS FOR AUGUST 31, 2010		
Geographic World Regions	Population (2010 Est.)	Facebook Users	Facebook Penetration	Facebook Index(*)	Internet Users	Internet Penetration
Asia	3,834,792,852	93,584,580	2.4 %	11.3 %	828,930,856	21.6 %
Africa	1,013,779,050	17,607,440	1.7 %	15.9 %	110,948,420	10.9 %
Europe	813,319,511	162,104,640	19.9 %	34.1 %	475,121,735	58.4 %
Latin America	550,924,250	68,189,920	12.4 %	35.0 %	195,042,230	30.4 %
North America	344,124,450	149,054,040	43.3 %	56.0 %	266,224,500	77.4 %
Middle East	212,336,924	11,698,120	5.5 %	18.5 %	63,240,946	29.8 %
The Caribbean	41,632,722	3,925,060	9.4 %	39.0 %	10,055,240	24.2 %
Oceania / Australia	34,700,201	11,596,660	33.4 %	54.5 %	21,272,470	61.3 %
WORLD TOTAL	6,845,609,960	517,760,460	7.6 %	26.3 %	1,970,837,003	28.8 %
					www.internetworldstats.com.	

Facebook Users in the World
by Geographic Regions - August, 2010

Source: Internet World Stats - www.internetworldstats.com/stats25.htm
Estimated Facebook users were 517,760,460 on August 31, 2010
Copyright © 2010, Miniwatts Marketing Group

Internet users as percentage of population. People with access to the Internet per 100 inhabitants. More info »
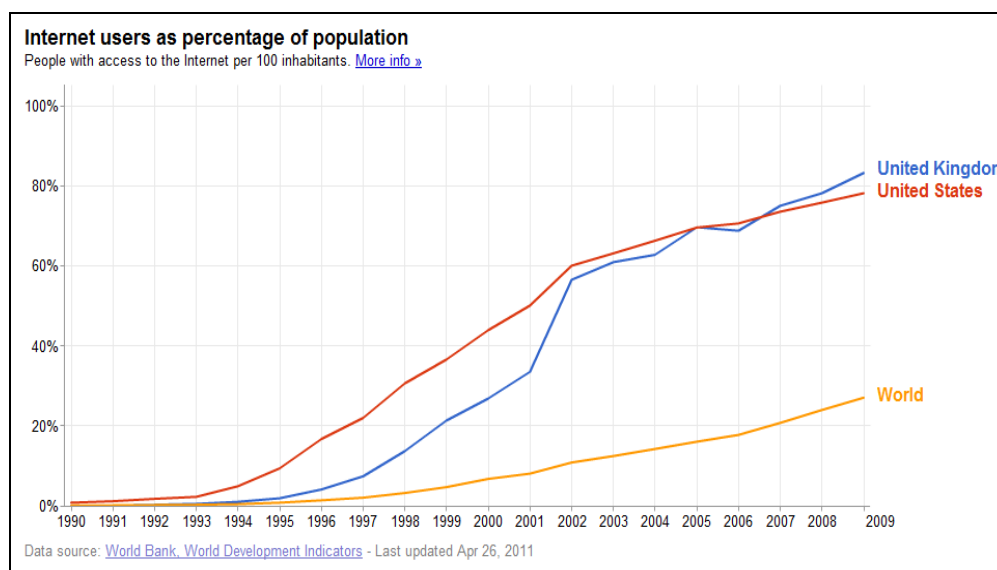
The Internet Potential to Become an Alternative Channel

Under the circumstances when an information society is being targeted, the so called social media have to be supported. The Internet and other electronic media are inevitable in modern times, even though, as many authors have already concluded, as far as the Internet is concerned, there is a difference between the real identity presentation and the one that is revealed through this kind of medium. It is already clear that within the *cyber*-communication, the person can be "constructed" for certain aims and to simulate the state and the conditioned motivating system. The Internet fully allows the anonymous communication; therefore many people decide to take part in it, with anonym roles which represents a primate in the imagination about the motivation for the real social contact. The Internet culture ignores the nature of motivation of users as well as the issue on the social, educational, ethnical status. According to some theorists, those who spend most of their time in virtual environments are keen to give fewer chances to their real lives. However, we also agree with Hermann's conviction that "the internet has partially inspired the belief that along with the technological advancements the new era of democratic communication is setting in".[4]   Just because of this, the European Parliament adopted a resolution in support to civil society media last year.

In a study prepared at the request of the European Parliament called *The State of Community Media in the European Union*[5]*,* it is said that community media represent a very dynamic and various part of the media

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[4] http://www.megatrend-info.com/

[5] The European Parliament has just released a study about European Community Media named "The State of Community Media in the European Union". It was commissioned by the Parliament's Culture and Education Committee, with research carried out by the consultants Kern European Affairs (KEA), Community Media Forum Europe (CMFE), 17 October 2007.

landscape in the EU. However, very little is known about the sector achievements, its potential and the status of community media organizations in the EU member states. The study carried out across the EU concludes that the development of community media is currently underway; therefore efforts should be made in order to get engaged in this sector at a European level. This sector is important for realizing the aims and initiatives that the EU has planned within its agendas. The contribution in the realization of media pluralism and writing for the media is worth emphasizing, among other things, which is in fact a potential that links the EU to the local and regional communities and promotes the dialogue on different topics that are important in terms of the functioning of the EU.

Within the spirit of a more considerable political communication, the new European Parliament President, Jirži Busek, set himself a duty to make the institution that he is currently running friendlier towards the new medium – the Internet, and make the extremely boring debates about the EU's legislation livelier. Busek, now in his 69th year of age, is everything but a typical grandfather who would look forward to his retirement, political analysts say. He not only is the first person from Eastern Europe to direct an EU institution, but he is also a strong supporter of the utilization of new media in order to connect the European citizens with the political life in Brussels and Strasbourg. In his inaugurating speech, Busek spoke about "the great need for using the new technologies" so that political debates could be carried anywhere in the EU. "Voters have to know who they are voting for in a European dimension"[6], he said. The promise to ensure access to satellite TV channels and web sites not only for plenary sessions, but for every single activity within the Parliament has been made. Perhaps parliaments of those countries aiming at joining the EU one day should also do the same.

It is also worth mentioning that social needs, which are a must in our daily lives, have transformed the usage of the Internet into an immediate need. Undoubtedly, the technology development, especially the Internet and the emergence of social networks, have largely influenced the world events. The advantage, according to some, is that these media will replace all other channels for the benefit of the humankind. This comes as a result of the opportunity that everybody has in terms of having access on the Internet. According to the above graphs, we can see that people are increasingly exploiting these opportunities. The leading countries are of course those that are economically more developed. Another possibility is that of controlling information, which means that certain information can be hidden from the public opinion. This is impossible when talking about the Internet, since everyone who creates his/her own profile, has the possibility to publish information based on his beliefs and convictions. The physical and real-time communication is another great advantage of the technology usage and this makes the world look smaller. The realization of conferences, distance learning in real time from different countries and continents, enables no-limit businesses. The wide utilization of these means in education has enabled the emergence of universities where on-line instruction is applied. Another important

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[6] "Predsednik EP uvodi nova pravila u europsko zakonodavstvo", Danas, Beograd 16. 09. 2009.

advantage is the creation of public opinion, which was previously influenced only by classical media such as the newspaper and TV. The Internet is already prevailing upon other types of media, as an innovative technology that offers far better communicational and technological opportunities.

This strong impact of the Internet is evident all over the world, including our Macedonia. In this respect, it is sufficient to mention the case of the construction of a new church in the site known as Skopje Castle by the Macedonian government (this is a place which is protected under the terms of cultural heritage in Macedonia). Having in consideration the historical and political circumstances in the country, there were many contradictions about the above-mentioned governmental project. But, the greatest battle between the supporters and opponents of this project occurred exactly on the Internet, more concretely on Facebook, which later resulted in physical melee between the protesters and the police forces. This was a reason for the Macedonian Government to react to the founders of the social network Facebook in order to disable the account of the protest organizers.[7]

The impact of the Internet in the latest developments in the Arab world

The riots in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, etc., were incited by the deep dissatisfaction towards authoritarian regimes, but the Internet has been one of the crucial factors, which has played a key role in democratic developments in the 21st century across the globe. A huge impact in the subversion of the dictatorship of El Abidine Ben Ali Zine in Tunisia was exercised by the social media, informing the citizens about the ways of organizing the protests. Services like Twitter and Facebook have been playing an increasingly important role in almost any massive protest across the Arab countries. The case of Iran speaks a lot about this. They blocked access to Facebook due to fears of protests during the presidential elections in 2009. [8] The same happened with the Chinese Government during the Olympic Games in the summer of 2008 when a stricter Internet controls were just about to take place. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. were targets to be blocked by the communist regime.

The Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton called upon Egypt not to terminate peaceful protests or blog communication activities, including social media. "The de-blocking of Twitter can be a bad thing," Appelbaum said. Apart from protesters, a service known as cloaking should be used. "You can see it in her face. If the regime does not fall, all Twitter users can be traced."

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[7]   http://www.facebook.com/pages/Crkva-NA-KALE/164751363577803

  http://www.facebook.com/search.php?q=Crkva%20NA%20KALE&init=quick&tas=0.4277847914490849

  http://www.spic.com.mk/kat/skopje/havarija-na-atomskata-crkva-na-skopsko-kale.html

[8]   Social Media for Social Change: Case Study of Social Media Use in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution (http://www.american.edu/soc/communication/upload/caroline-sheedy.pdf)

The radical changes in the Arab world represent in fact, a social media triumph. It is though strange that the Internet usage in these countries is pretty low. E.g. in Egypt 86% of the population has TV sets, whereas 20% are regular Internet users. Only 5% of the population in Libya has access to the Internet. However, during the 2010 and 2011 the Internet usage in these countries has rapidly increased.

Facebook User Penetration in the Arab Region plus Iran and Israel (Dec. 2010)
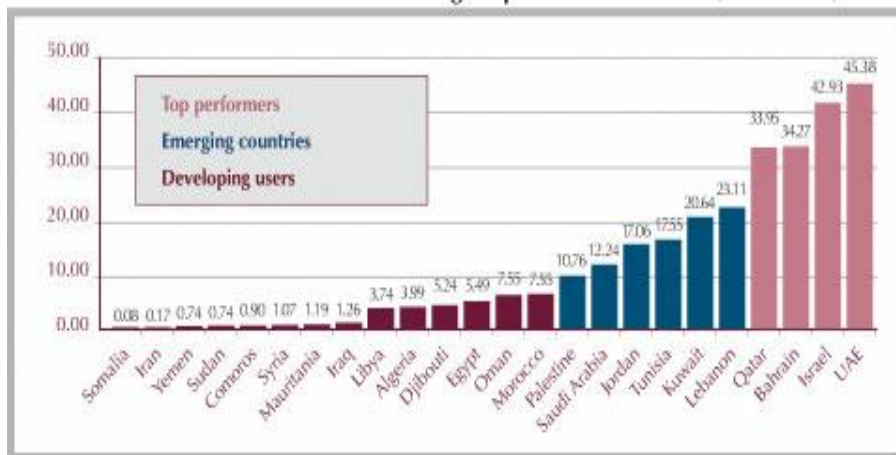
"New media tools have been powerful for insurgent movements but they must be built on a need for larger change in the public sphere." (Clay Shirky)

Conclusion

From what was said above, we can conclude that the increase of the number of Internet users, especially social networks, has contributed to the change of the attitude towards the media in particular and to the people's lives in general. Some years ago the ideas about having advanced technology means which would enable distant communication between people was only a good dream, whereas the time has come when this has actually become reality and everybody is able today to communicate with one another without the slightest problem and obstacle.

The Internet has also highly influenced the business environment, and its usage in this field today can be compared with the beginnings of trade when people started creating money from mere paper. Payments and other transactions today are carried out through e-banking systems and soon the money will actually take the shape of numbers in bank accounts because we will not need it physically in our hands.

Social media, after all, should take the role of unbiased media and offer objective information and communication as well as become a corrective means of government policies. The media in general, should be recognized as it really is – a general cultural, social and public good that creates the public opinion.

Thanks to this, various different debates can be initiated and developed by including a broader audience which, in turn, could help in finding better solutions to issues and problems of concern to the general population. Social media in Macedonia, as in the whole Balkans, are thought to have a great advantage compared to traditional media, since the latter are suffering financial constraints and as such, they are prone to getting influenced by certain political groupings and parties and be used for their political aims and objectives. Journalists are constantly asking for pure capital in their media which would contribute to independent journalism. The impact of the Internet in all the latest developments which have managed to dissolve powerful governments and dictatorships in the world, as was the case with *Wikileaks*, has opened up new paths in the history of the world. [9] This created the opportunity for people to articulate their needs through new channels different from the classical ones. The possibility of free expression and the inability to control that will help in the creation of a different world in the future. The Internet managed to beat for a very short time all other channels of communication and influence the creation of the public opinion.[10]

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6. http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats26.htm

7. http://www.megatrend-info.com/

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9. "Predsednik EP uvodi nova pravila u europsko zakonodavstvo", Danas, Beograd 16. 09. 2009.

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[9] "WikiLeaks and mega-plumbing issues – unresolved dilemmas revisited"

http://www.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/gmjau/archive/v5_2011_1/tiffen_RA.html

[10] *2010: How is the Internet Changing the Way you Think? https://www.edge.org/responses/how-is-the-internet-changing-the-way-you-think*