

Croatian civil society and media from the perspective of two civil society organisations

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Keywords: civil society, participation, internet, interactivity, civil society media

Contemporary media and civil society seem to be connected and mutually dependent, no matter how civil society is defined. Researchers and theorists have studied this relationship in a number of ways and have found either a positive or negative impact of the media on civil society and civic participation.

Media malaise theories suggest that media consumption, primarily television, leads to a highly passivised and individualised society, which in the end results in the decline of social capital (Putnam 2000, in Livingstone, Markham 2008); therefore, there is less potential for active engagement in public issues. However, regardless of the potential negative role the media has in declining social capital, it is undisputable that civil society cannot spread significantly and perform without the media. As Castells noted, “If communication networks of any kind form the public sphere, then our society, the network society, organises its public sphere, more than any other historical form of organisation, on the basis of media communication networks” (Castells 2008: 79). Mobilisation theories and research that came out of this model show positive correlations between media exposure and participation (Strömbäck, Shehata 2009; Livingstone, Markham 2008).

The emergence of the new medium, the internet, and its wide spread usage, could also be seen in the light of these two opposing models. The internet provoked enthusiastic predictions that it would facilitate new forms of participation, especially in a form of Web 2.0. It offers interactive communication much more difficult to regulate and is seen as a medium with potential to produce a global public sphere (Castells 2008). It surpasses

geographical obstacles and provides communication which hides actor's race, gender and social status. It enables users to easily create and publish content, not just consume it. Therefore, it is potentially a very democratic medium which could enable the formation of rational debate on public issues. However, inequality in access to this medium brings a sobering effect to these views. Individuals or groups on the other side of the digital divide, lack resources to use this information and democratic potential. Secondly, most internet users are from a younger population which shows lower interest in public issues. This brings us to the paradox of interactive audiences (Peruško 2008). Audiences that have greater competences to use interactive media show interest mostly in entertainment content, while the audiences that seek information on public issues, lack the technical competence for this new medium. Lastly, the internet is seen as a tool for businesses to expand its activities and offer new means of advertising. Audience participation may not have such a democratic form, it can also be commodified and disciplined in order to attract new and strengthen current consumers (Burwell 2010).

This essay aims to shed light on the role of media in civil society and civic participation with an emphasis on new media, based on experiences and attitudes of members of civil society organisations (CSOs). For this purpose two interviews were held in September 2011, with representatives of acknowledged CSOs in the democratic human rights realm, whose activities get good media attention.¹ Eugen Jakovčić is a media campaign coordinator in Documenta² and Saša Šegrt, and he is an executive director at Transparency International Croatia (TIH).³

The interviews showed that both CSOs are very satisfied with their relationship with the media and pay high attention to the way they communicate with the media and the public. Communication with the public is important to legitimise their role and activities and the media is an important asset in their work because educating or sensitising the public is also a part of their mission. There are several ways in which they try to achieve greater media coverage of their activities. Press releases and conferences are standard ways in which they present their work, and they both emphasise the importance of establishing firm contacts with journalists who are interested in the topics they deal with and who will be more inclined to write about their work. Documenta representative revealed interesting ways in which Documenta makes its communication more successful.

They realise the importance of educating not only the public but journalists as well. To achieve this, they held various workshops for journalists on issues of civil society and on issues their CSO deals with. They also realise that the messages they publish ought to be understandable to the wider audience and in suitable form, so that the media would be more ready to publish them. The press releases they produce are short, interesting and in accordance to current issues interesting to the public. Flexibility, fast reactions and recognising the right moment to get media coverage, is also seen as an important part of successful communication. Perhaps this is a sign of improved communicative strategies in Croatian civil society. Studies on civil society and the media in Croatia showed discontent with CSOs' communication strategies both from the perspective of CSOs and the media

(Popović 2008). Media representatives criticised the CSOs' "heavy" discourses not understood by the wider public. On the other hand, CSOs saw a problem in the media's misunderstanding of the role of civil society and in sensationalist bias. Journalist education and adapting messages for the wider public may be a way to avoid these problems. This also indicates that social movements, institutionalised in civil society organisations, have professionalised their communication and developed public relation techniques in order to gain positive media coverage. CSOs have now adapted the techniques of communicating with the public similar to those of political parties. They have provided the 'permanent secretariats' of movements that are in charge of the organisation of events and actions, and of media relations (Garcia-Blanco 2006: 98).

The trend of focusing on the media and campaigning has undoubtedly helped CSOs to establish a certain status in legitimacy with the public, but has also brought to question the independence of their activities (Garcia-Blanco 2006). As for the new media, although both CSOs point out the importance and potential it has, it seems that they have not grasped all the possibilities the media offers. They have websites and profiles on social networking sites, but they mainly see internet as an addition to traditional forms of communication. For instance, Documenta goes on the web only after releasing messages through traditional media. TIH uses social networking sites only as another space to publish content and a reminder for the public to visit their website for news. Documenta uses the internet much more actively and emphasises the importance of new media in providing greater support for their initiatives, the potential it has in transgressing geographical boundaries⁴, and new forms of civic participation it provides (online petitions, Facebook groups). However, they don't see internet as an important place to foster discussions on certain issues. Some authors have noticed the trend in political campaign websites that moved from using websites as a digital version of the print material, to taking greater advantage in the interactivity the internet has to offer (Janack 2006). It seems that interviewed CSOs still haven't found the way to fully explore this medium's interactive potential.

TIH is slower in coping with new media and also has a more critical view on news portals. As Saša Šegrt says, "It seems to me that news portals haven't used all the possibilities they could have used...copy/paste journalism is very present, in other words, some text appears somewhere, either in print or elsewhere, and the next day it appears on news portals and vice versa...it doesn't mean that news portals are faster...". She also thinks that the advantage that news portals have on print media in the form of audience feedback is not so promising, "Comments mostly don't have any relation with the text itself and we can often see obvious examples of hate speech...". This is also one more example which shows that the role given to the internet in fostering rational debate might be too optimistic in some cases. Anonymity hasn't only got a positive effect by hiding social, racial, gender or other differences and therefore reducing bias in communication, but it can also serve as a shield and remove inhibitions which usually prevent actors forming hate speeches. Documenta representative has a different view and perceives portals as flexible, more open,


plural, and less burdened with strict editorial policy. However, they both agree on the significance of civil society media.⁵ Civil society media cooperates closely follow activities of CSOs. The role of H-alter, online news portal, is especially emphasised because as Saša Šegrt, also one of the H-alter founders, says, “H-alter tried from the beginning to break the barrier of ‘preaching to the choir’... to interest the wider public...” Civil society media is recognised by the mainstream media as well, mostly by news portals that transfer their news and ensure wider coverage of civil society issues.

The interviews show that CSOs invest a lot of effort into communication with the media and the public, however, more emphasis could be given to interactive aspects of that communication. Interactive components of the internet could have a role in creating new networks, social capital and influence political and civic participation (Skoric, Ying 2009; Kee, Park, Valenzuela 2009). More importantly, enabling audiences to participate and give feedback reduces the control on messages and makes the communication more accountable (Janack 2006). As TIH representative said, internet should serve as a platform where government institutions can publish all important information and where rational debate on public issues can be initiated by all interested citizens. This would give everyone the chance to directly influence certain policies or agendas.

The following should apply for CSOs: Interactive, non-regulated communication with the public would make them more accountable and perhaps bring back some of the independence lost in the process of professionalisation.

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Notes:

¹ If CSOs public recognition is taken as one of the indicators of media coverage, results of a survey conducted by Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences could serve as a good reference (Franc, Kunac, Lalić, Šakić, Šalaj 2006). Although war veteran's CSOs are recognised the most (39.2%), human rights CSOs are also well recognised in the public (15.1% of the respondents mentioned human rights CSOs). Survey was taken on national representative sample of 1008 adults in 2005.

² Documenta is a centre for dealing with the past (war crimes and other war incidents between 1941-2000 in Yugoslavia and post-Yugoslavian states).

³ Transparency International Croatia was founded in 2000 as a locally established branch of Transparency International. TIH deals with governmental accountability and suppression of corruption.

⁴ Documenta cooperates with CSO's from other post-Yugoslavian countries in establishing factual truth on war incidents and war crimes from 1991.-2000.

⁵ Documenta and Transparency International Croatia representatives mentioned H-alter (<http://www.h-alter.org>) and Cenzura plus (<http://www.cen-zura.hr>) as the most important civil society media in Croatia.