

How Social Media Enforce Glocalization

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"Imagine if the Internet took hold in China. Imagine how freedom would spread."

George W. Bush, Phoenix, Arizona, / December 1999.

While it might seem odd to start a text on redefining cultural identities with a quote from the former U.S. president, it nevertheless serves a purpose of highlighting one of the main misconceptions in discussions surrounding digital media and the Internet. It is often stated that the Internet has a significant impact on cultural identities. This is certainly true to some extent but should not be left in this unidirectional form. This technological impact thesis, apart from simplifying the Internet, shows a fundamental disregard for social and cultural differences and the ways that the technology is being used or interpreted.

The quote strongly displays a kind of dualism present in the discussions surrounding the history of new media research which some authors describe as a tension between technological and cultural determinism (Lister et. al. 2009). The quote obviously falls into one category of technological determinism because it predicts that a complexly fragmented and hybrid technical medium such as the Internet will cause or have a direct impact on an even more multifaceted legal, political and social phenomenon such as freedom. Of course we could debate whether Bush was thinking about Chinese democracy or market freedom which would make US companies benefit from it. Regardless of his intentions we know today that the Internet as a technical medium is spreading rapidly in China but the state has developed some of the most sophisticated censoring and monitoring mechanisms (technical and social) in efforts to control it. The Chinese case clearly points to a complex interconnection between pre-existing social structures, cultural conceptions and technological capabilities and potentials.

This interconnection between social, cultural and technological has in recent years been further emphasized by the influences and the rise of the so-called social media which bring social and cultural aspects to the fore. These new types of social media are Web 2.0 websites which facilitate, enable, and possess a potential for social action, interaction, communication and identity formation in cyberspace (Bruns, Bahnisch, 2009: 7) as well as supplementing and influencing offline social and cultural processes. Among global leaders are such websites as Facebook, YouTube or Wikipedia. They are, however, not entirely new, since they are a part of a long-term process of socializing cyberspace and populating it with human communication in a process which can be tracked down to early virtual and online communities.¹ What is then new about new social media? They are mostly free of charge, easy to use and access, web based, spread through unprecedented lengths of global populations and technically more developed since they enable manipulating text, images and videos. They are currently dominating the usage of World Wide Web in almost all countries around the world.

Since these processes involving Web 2.0 social media are new and still not a part of substantial social and cultural research we will attempt to describe the main

¹ For an outline of the early development of virtual communities see Rheingold, H. (2000).

mechanisms that can and do influence the reshuffling of cultural identities in a process of glocalization in Central and Southeast European countries. We understand glocalization as the main process of cultural change in the process of globalization. Robertson defines it not as polarity but as a complex relationship between the global and the local (1995: 35).²

The argumentation in the article is mostly theoretical and conceptual. The first chapter deals with globalization in general and the spread of communication structures in particular which influence the processes of shaping and reshaping cultures. In the next chapter we describe how media communication types in contemporary network societies are being fundamentally changed. In the ensuing chapter we discuss how the notions of media space have evolved from hyperreality to virtual reality to digital space. In the following chapter we describe how Facebook as a technological context enables communication and cultural identity reshaping. Finally we discuss the ways of reshuffling national culture through the example of Wikipedia.

1. Riding the Globalization Tide

The main characteristics of globalization are far-reaching changes of nation-states and national societies. Beck describes it as a process in which transnational actors increasingly interconnect and influence the reduction of power of nation states and undermine their influence. Globalization produces different, more or less, autonomous logics: economic, cultural, ecological, political, etc. (Beck, 2003: 28). However, the main characteristic of all these processes is that they change the spatial and temporal coordinates of social relationships. Giddens describes globalization through a “disembedding mechanism” of lifting out the social relationships from their local interaction contexts and their restructuring inside an unspecified time-space expansion (1990: 21). What Giddens means by space is, however, rather vague. Is it transborder space of interconnected national territories or is it perhaps media space in a media broadcasting or network paradigm? What influences most the disembedding of daily lives and everyday experiences are various media by creating new interaction spaces. The Internet is the main facilitator of global communication and “disembedding mechanisms”. It is the communication backbone of globalization processes and it influences the creation of basic communication spaces and structures reaching beyond individual societies.

The Internet evolved into its current shape from the late 1960s through incentives from the state, scientific communities and the market primarily located in the United States. In most countries it is experienced as a process of intense technological and cultural globalization with little possibility for complete control. Giddens describes this global insecurity as a consequence of modernity. This dynamism of modernity is a sort of juggernaut or “a runaway engine of enormous power which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which

² “The global is not in and of itself counterposed to the local. Rather, what is often referred to as the local is essentially included within the global. In this respect globalization, defined in its most general sense as the compression of the world as a whole, involves the linking of localities.” (Robertson, 1995: 35)

also threatens to rush out of control and which could rend itself asunder (Giddens, 1990: 139).”

The Internet certainly influences the creation of a sense of inconceivable complexity. However it also creates a sense of global space due to its global network structure which causes technical innovations to be experienced instantly across nation states. Due to the availability of technical innovations it creates a sense of temporal synchronicity with highly developed countries. However, in the post-transitional societies, as well as any other, it should not be expected that pre-existing cultural values or social patterns would be rejected due to the availability of technological resources.

	GLOBAL	AUSTRIA	SERBIA	CROATIA	SLOVENIA
Internet users (2010)	1,966,514,816	6 143 600	4 107 000	2 244 400	1 298 500
Penetration (% of population)	28.7%	74.8%	55.9%	50.0%	64.8%
User growth (2000-2010)	444.8%	192.6%	926.8%	1 022.2%	332.8%

1. Internet penetration levels. Available at: <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats4.htm> (26/11/2010)

If we look at the above statistics we notice the phenomenal user growth during the last decade. However this is not enough to tell us anything about cultural changes that occurred through its usage.³ As stated in the introduction the Internet is a highly complex and hybrid medium with different technical uses: e-mail, WWW, P2P, etc. Krotz defines it as a hybrid communications medium which enables three different types of communication: communication with people who are not temporally or spatially present, communication through producing and receiving media content and communication with interactive technical systems (2007: 187). Social media fall in the first category since they are mostly used for communication and managing social networks (Facebook) or producing content through community rules (Wikipedia). Riding on the latest globalization tide they are a part of the new generation of Internet media.

2. Mass Media vs. Social Media

What we consider to be a medium is rapidly changing. What was once thought to be self-evident is now being reshaped by processes of commercialization, digitalization and institutional change. In Western Europe in the period after World War II public broadcasting services were places where political, religious, civic, cultural events and entertainments were organized as a common domain of modern public life (Scannell, 1997: 65). In socialist states mass media were predominantly established as state broadcasters or broadcasting centres in all the republics of former Yugoslavia.

³ A valuable point about usage patterns is made through a case of “Internet cabins” in Lima, Peru where access points were being used, and rented to entire communities pointing to fact that one access point can be used by large numbers of users (Powell III, 2003).

However, public and state broadcasting services are experiencing institutional instability in most European countries. It is becoming increasingly unclear what social role can they fulfil and how should they be restructured.⁴ It is justified to wonder if they are becoming what Giddens calls an institutional shell which bears the same name from the outside but, because of globalization, is changed dramatically from the inside (2002: 18).

Public broadcasting media are prime examples of institutional change within nation states caused by the process of globalization. However, commercial mass media were some of the earliest players of media globalization especially in the form of powerful media companies such as CNN or MTV. They were powerful institutions behind global cultural flows or mediascapes (Appadurai, 1990: 298). Unlike most public broadcasting services they were producing and disseminating information and images to global populations. Regardless of reach, their basic communication type was centralized and organized vertically in a one-way communication type (McQuail, 1983: 34, 35) with no or very limited interaction between senders and receivers (Luhmann, 2000: 2). They were recognized as mass media because of the stabilized broadcasting technology, a set of defined institutional rules which defined their structural position and broadcasting content and a reach to mass populations. However the technical process of digitalization reshapes the technical basis of mass media and their public so the new media consumers are searching for information in multiple sources other than broadcasting space.

	GLOBAL	AUSTRIA	CROATIA	SLOVENIA	SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO ⁵
1.	Google	Google Österreich	Google.hr	Google.si	Google
2.	Facebook	Facebook	Facebook	Google	Facebook
3.	YouTube	Google	Google	Facebook	YouTube
4.	Yahoo!	YouTube	YouTube	YouTube	Google.rs
5.	Windows Live	Österreichischer Rundfunk	Net.hr	24ur.com	Yahoo!
6.	Baidu.com	Wikipedia	Index.hr	Slovenski Iskalnik	Blic
7.	Wikipedia	Amazon.de GmbH	Jutarnji List	SiOL	B92
8.	Blogger.com	derStandard.at	Wikipedia	Wikipedia	Wikipedia
9.	QQ.com	Google.de	Yahoo!	Radiotelevizija Slovenija	Blogger.com
10.	Twitter	Yahoo.com	Telefonski imenik HT-a	Yahoo!	Windows Live

2. Top 10 sites on the Web. Available at: <http://www.alexa.com/topsites> (26/11/2010)

From the table we can see that social media occupy highest rankings but that different print or broadcasting media websites also occupy the top ten national rankings. This shows that the interested public is looking for information in media spaces other than broadcasting space. When we compare mass media to social media we can assume that social media owe their popularity to horizontal types of

⁴ For an analysis of institutional instability of the Croatian radio-television and attempts to regulate it during the last 20 years see: Bilić, P., Švob-Đokić, N. (2010). *Croatia: A Dynamic Media landscape* (upcoming).

⁵ *Alexa: The Web Information Company* does not offer separate rankings for Serbia and Montenegro.

one-to-one and many-to-many horizontal communication. Inside the space enabled by the World Wide Web they are competing for popularity in attempts to claim the reach to largest parts of population. The mass becomes a term that is no longer reserved for broadcasting media since social media are being used by increasing numbers of users.⁶

3. The Nature of Borders in Cyberspace

What was considered media space and the reality that it produces has, at least in a theoretical sense, changed in many ways. If we leave aside the “real” as in social, cultural and technical changes that bring about media change, and focus on media constructions or constructions of reality⁷ we can notice a shift towards a certain normalization of cyberspace. Simulations are also becoming increasingly complex and popular (Second life, Sims, Massive Multiplayer Online Games or MMOG, etc.) but their influence on offline relationships remains limited and can be described as a type of entertainment industry which is born in, instead of transferred to, or from, cyberspace.

In Baudrillard’s terms the media create hyperreality in which the reality is “sucked into” code and simulation (2001: 51). Hyperreality is a stage when the contradiction and distinction between the real and imaginary disappears (2001: 102). While his theory was extremely important for the development of cultural theory with the orientation on the study of signs and symbols we need to break free from hyperreality if we are to understand the changes, nuances and social relevance of new web-based social media. Then we can identify the actors behind these representations, and the actors involved in the process of connecting and interacting. If we focus on the transmission model of communication we end up analysing cultural symbol flows but instead leave the analysis actor and power free. As Krotz suggests, the communication as transmission model forgets that the communication is a process of agreement on perspectives and roles and only on that basis is it also an exchange of symbols (2007: 74).

Cyberspace is often theorized and regarded as an open-ended space of free-floating interactions and limitless possibilities. However, in recent years this view has come under some scrutiny in a theoretical as well as in a methodological and ontological sense. Some authors claim that a shift can be seen from early beliefs that computer-mediated communication (CMC) (or communication in cyberspace) is an impoverished type of communication in comparison to face-to-face communication⁸ towards CMC as possessing special and unique qualities (Hine 2000, 2005). Recently,

⁶ In Croatia some 850 000 citizens use social network sites (SNS). According to Gfk Croatia (2009) ‘Gdje smo danas u informatičkoj pismenosti? [Where are we today in ICT literacy?]. Based on a representative sample of citizens older than 15 years (n=1000). Available at: http://www.gfk.hr/public_relations/press/press_articles/005364/index.hr.html.

⁷ As Luhmann noted in his book on mass media, we should not think of the media as creating a “loss of world” in which reality does not exist. Instead we should assume that ...“the world is not an object but is rather a horizon, in the phenomenological sense. It is, in other words, inaccessible. And that is why there is no possibility other than to construct reality and perhaps to observe observers as they construct reality” (Luhmann, 2000: 6).

⁸ It was often sated that CMC is impoverished since it has no para-linguistic cues such as gestures and facial expressions which enrich FTF communication.

some authors have built this argument even further in claiming that the CMC and cyber- digital space is becoming a place where cultural changes and societal conditions can be monitored (Rogers, 2009).

This does not mean that national borders are being transferred into cyberspace although such attempts at regulating national cyberspace do exist.⁹ Cyberspace is not immune to pre-existing power relations and the tension between public and private interests is built into it from its inception. At current stage it does enable communicative potentials but under specific conditions. Through social media cyberspace is a global space which enables a series of attempts at drawing and redrawing social boundaries between dispersed social actors. In that sense we can monitor cultural changes and societal conditions.

4. Technological Context for Cultural Identity Play: the Case of Facebook

When it comes to social media, users do not experience the Internet as a hyperreality nor for that matter as a technical medium but through constructing meanings in relationship to technology (e.g. different web platforms) or other humans. As Hine suggests “[o]nce we think of cyberspace as a place where people do things, we can start to study just exactly what it is they do and why, in their terms, they do it” (2000: 21). Her approach to the relationship between culture and technology is twofold. The Internet is a cultural artefact meaning that people have ideas about what it is through its use in different social contexts (Hine, 2000: 30). The Internet is also culture since it provides an online context for social relationships to be realized (Hine, 2000: 17).

Facebook is basically a result of an agreement between users who use the service without charge and the US company which draws enormous profits from advertising revenues. Unlike earlier forms of virtual communities in which communication was done through undisclosed identities which enabled the possibilities of limitless identity play (Turkle, 2004: 108), Facebook is based on high self-presentation levels (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010: 63). It is not a place where people meet strangers, although it is also possible, but a service which allows individuals to articulate and make visible their pre-existing social networks (boyd, Ellison, 2007).¹⁰

	AUSTRIA	SERBIA	CROATIA	SLOVENIA
Users	2 244 420	2 197 300	1 259 520	611 160
Growth	+196 720 +8.76%	+132 340 +6.0%	+77 630 +6.14%	+35 240 +5.77%
Population penetration	27.32%	29.92%	28.07%	30.51%

3. Facebook user statistics over the last 6 months. Available at:
<http://www.facebakers.com/facebook-statistics/?interval=last-6-months#chart-intervals>
 (29/11/2010)

⁹ The Golden Shield project in China, often referred to as “The Great Firewall of China” or the “National Strategy to Secure Cyberspace” in the US which is a part of the Homeland Security strategy.

¹⁰ Some empirical research results confirm this point (e.g. Lampe, Ellison, Steinfield, 2008; Joinson, 2008).

Returning to the interplay between technology and culture, it is easy to forget human factors and conclude directly from the global spread of the application visible in the above table, that communication through Facebook constitutes a sort of global media flow. This stems from the transmission type of communication and content production that focuses on the transmission of symbols influenced by the media broadcasting paradigm and ignores the inner construction of meaning characteristic of all human communication. Facebook is very powerful in enabling rich human interaction and user generated content across all national borders. But even though it possesses the potential of transnational communication, this does not mean that the potential is being realized by different populations. Facebook is a type of communication with high self-presentation which means that unlike earlier forms of online communities it is in essence a type of communication platform which is based on making one's offline identity visible online. In that process of re-establishing identity in cyberspace it is possible for it to take different shapes and qualities. It is a medium of potentials for connectivity, cooperation and interaction. How will it influence social and cultural change in the future is a matter of speculation especially with regard to its offline social significance.¹¹

We should not expect that communication always crosses national borders because the pre-existing identities as well as individuals' pre-existing social and cultural capital are transferred into this arena of potential transnational communication. Most Facebook users around the world are younger¹² and better educated and it depends on their offline formed social networks whether they will communicate across national borders or not. Whatever the span and reach of communication, by providing a global technological context for identity reconstruction and play, Facebook enables the lifting of social relationships from their local (or territorial) interaction contexts.

5. Glocalizing National Cultures: the Case of Wikipedia

Unlike Facebook which is a social medium with high self-presentation, Wikipedia is a medium with low self-presentation (Kaplan, Haenlein, 2010: 63) but with high level of community organization and with an orientation towards a mutual goal: making an online encyclopaedia free and open for anyone to use and edit. The online community produces content through collaboration while most communication between editors rises when there are problems with editing content: through acts of vandalism on the content or inability to settle an argument. Facebook is a platform for pre-existing social networks and mostly for casual and informal communication. Most Wikipedians, on the other hand, meet online because collaborating in the Wikipedia community and editing Wikipedia content results

¹¹ There were some media reports on political protests organized through Facebook in Croatia but to the knowledge of the author they are still not a part of social science research. On the basis of theoretical research we can infer that Facebook is not the cause of political protest but a powerful organizing tool and communication platform which influences the speed and time of organizing such an event.

¹² In the countries under this study about two thirds of all users come from the age group of 18 to 34 years of age. Available at: <http://www.facebakers.com/facebook-statistics/?interval=last-6-months#chart-intervals> (29/11/2010)

from sharing mutual motives like sharing knowledge or willingness to correct errors.¹³ Editors bring with them their interests and values for editing specific types of articles.

Wikipedia communities produce knowledge through three basic principles based on the possibilities enabled by the so-called wiki-software. They document the current status of available knowledge in the community (content dimension), discuss and construct new knowledge (discursive dimension) through the structure of the community with relative positions of its authors (network dimension)¹⁴ (Halatchliyski et.al. 2010). This type of knowledge is called emergent knowledge since it “occurs at the level of community and is more than the sum total of the knowledge of all individuals” (Halatchliyski et.al. 2010). As Pentzold argues, through the process of knowledge production of social, cultural and historical subjects the community creates globally available collective memories: “Wikipedia is not a symbolic place of remembrance but a place where memorable elements are negotiated, a place of the discursive fabrication of memory. Wikipedia is not only a platform to constitute and store knowledge, but a place where memory - understood as a particular discursive construction – is shaped.” (2009: 264).

	Number of editors	Number of editors (> 5 edits)	Number of editors (>100 edits)	Number of articles	Number of new articles per day
GLOBAL	1 216 739	79 413	10 539	16.9 M	7 517
GERMAN	99 578	6 782	1 026	1.1 M	416
SLOVENE	2 777	123	21	101K	23
CROATIAN	2 414	146	20	91K	57
SERBIAN	2 238	193	48	123K	87
SERBO-CROATIAN	280	34	8	34K	28

4. *Wikistats: Wikimedia statistics for September 2010. Available at: <http://stats.wikimedia.org/EN/Sitemap.htm> (29/11/2010)*

Different Wikipedia versions are organized into language versions. Therefore, there is no Austrian version but a German version in an online transnational community involved in content creation in German language. One curiosity is the existence of Serbo-Croatian language version which was in fact the first online edition established in 2002 for Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian. Single language communities were separated from it in 2003 to form their unique language versions. However the Serbo-Croatian community is still active.

While often criticized for the quality of its content, Wikipedia nevertheless enjoys high popularity and a top ten ranking on popularity for global and national websites. Some recent research results also show that it is becoming one of the most

¹³ These are two of the most common motives for contributing according to Glott, R., Schmidt, Ph, Ghosh, R. (2010).

¹⁴ Wikipedia is highly organized and there is a complex structure of editors which is based on their work history, merits, etc. While there are many different roles and statuses three main editor groups can be discerned: administrators, logged authors and IPs.

trusted sources of information among Internet users.¹⁵ With different or shared language versions and through editing both contemporary and historical national and global events it becomes a powerful online tool for glocalizing national cultures.

Conclusion

While avoiding falling into either one of the two extremes or determinisms (technological or cultural) we have attempted to describe the complex ways in which technology, society and culture interact to influence the shaping and reshaping of contemporary cultures and cultural patterns. Through and with the Internet as a technological and communication backbone of the process of globalization all cultures, whether intentionally or unintentionally, are becoming glocalized. This is a very broad process and taking the complexity of the Internet as a technical medium in consideration, is impossible to comprehend in whole without losing some of the fine-grained and Internet media specific differences. Social media are a broad term that describes one such recent Internet media change. Unlike earlier forms of online communities they are being used on a massive scale reaching very broad parts of global populations. While enabling communication, interaction and community formation in cyberspace (Bruns, Bahnisch, 2009: 7) there are nevertheless very different types of them if we take a look at the ways that they enable these processes to be performed. Concluding from their popularity we cannot assume that they are replacing traditional types of mass media. Based on broadcasting communication from one to-many and a set of institutional rules, mass media are also being transformed due to globalization processes. However they are also looking for new media spaces in struggles for audiences, so they are also launching websites in cyberspace. Notions of cyberspace have also changed. It is no longer considered a poor supplement to “real” communication but possessing special qualities in comparison to face-to-face communication (Hine 2000, 2005). In that sense it becomes a place where cultural changes can be monitored (Rogers, 2009) in a process of drawing and redrawing of social boundaries between dispersed social actors. Facebook is one such technical and cultural platform where people can realize its communicative potentials. Because it is based on making offline social networks visible in cyberspace it becomes a place of re-establishing one’s identity. While not necessarily transnational it nevertheless enables social relationships to be lifted out of their local interaction contexts. Wikipedia as a quite different type of social medium enables the production of emergent and discursive knowledge to be created through community collaboration. By creating online content creation communities and in dealing with specific subjects in specific languages it becomes a sort of global memory place (Pentzold, 2009) which in effect glocalizes all national cultures.

¹⁵According to Gfk and Telekom Austria research, Internet users in Austria, Slovenia and Croatia place the highest trust on Wikipedia as an information source (61%) followed by television (53%) and newspapers (49%), available at: <http://www.vecernji.hr/vijesti/hrvata-facebooku-vice-slovenaca-austrijanaca-clanak-185913>.

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