

At the Borders of the Digital Divide

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Synergy of media assisted by IT; the strengthening of each individual media outlet through networking and interconnectedness. We often encountered lack of perception of these ideas because of the level of education and acceptance of the IT. Even the consultants from the West for conventional media not dedicated to ideas failed to realise why we use the Internet as a tactical medium for broadcasting in order to outsmart the repression and bans.

Within the B92 it is difficult to give the work of an engineer practicality and efficiency while reconciling this with the creativity of webmasters and content creators in producing daily services and mounting forums and debates, to reconcile educational content with the need for profit, to give priority to the efficiency of the service rather than creative competition.

How to reconcile the spirit of anarchy and unabashed creativity with the necessary organisational discipline and efficiency? If there is too much anarchy, efficiency is often lost; if efficiency is the priority, creative vitality is diminished. Countries in transition don't have enough funds to help reduce these tensions and maintain a high level of creativity without sacrificing efficiency.

The security of the network is a constant problem which wastes an exceptional amount of energy in repressed societies. This is a very important factor in establishing effective communication and networking; a lot of finance and energy was wasted in competing with the powerful repressive apparatus which even managed to jam channels on the satellite transponders. The regime always had more expensive and powerful equipment, stronger jamming devices and so on, but it rarely managed to buy or otherwise lure the numbers of

creative people who can be found in the networked community of the civil society. The creativity of members of the civil society emerged as the way out.

Failure to fully exploit the possibilities of IT, effectiveness stifled in the clash between modern technology and primitive means of communication.

It was often difficult to provide inspiration for the work and the activities, to use the available IT for various purposes rather than merely as a status symbol or as equipment for receiving messages (forcing people to respond and thus become part of a network, reacting and participating in the most primitive way).

Competition from civil networks, the great power of the networked community is perceived as competition by parties, economic lobbies, military and police lobbies and the government itself. For this reason the authorities attempt to destroy the community or block the establishment of it in various ways.

Withdrawal of donors after the political goal which homogenised the society had been reached. Without these donors the civil society could not have been connected into a network, but at this point they usually withdraw instead of working on the transformation of the network society. In this way, large areas of the network crumble. Other parts fall as the new authorities siphon them into their own projects. They then either become part of the authorities or lead a more or less independent life which is nevertheless connected to the life of the authorities. There are almost no assistance packages which will enable survival of the existing networked community with a new and more important mission, one which is a longer haul and demands the more sensitive and general activity needed for reform of the society.

There is insufficient awareness of the strength of virtual community and its ability to help our society catch up with the rest of the world, in the same way that we managed to erase the differences between the centre and the provinces, making every corner to which

our media reached a hotbed for other media and networking through the Internet. Today, with the help of the Internet, we could be promoting new knowledge and, through new and intensive communication, overcome the problem of dated educational systems and the lack of the institutions which have emerged abroad during the fifteen years in which we have lived in a closed society.

Our greatest challenge is to preserve the mission, how to preserve public service content without lowering the odds for survival? How to become commercial “the right way? How to survive without international donors and without donations from a government which perceives your activity as competition, or as insolent criticism. The new challenges are no longer a repressive apparatus, an authoritarian regime, bans and seizure of the premises. Instead they are the market economy, the primary accumulation of capital, raging transitional corruption and the mafia. Our problems and challenges are much greater and demand systematic solutions. We have found solutions in partners who, through loans, have enabled us to survive part of transition and to grow strong enough not to be a bargain basement outfit. Rather, we are a serious partner for serious investors who see the advantage in or experience and the preservation of our legacy.

B92 – At the Borders of the Digital Divide

One of the important challenges for B92 networking has been our position within the “digital divide” between the north and the south (the rich and the poor). Located on the poor side of the digital planet, although using advanced information technology, we encountered the standard problems of undeveloped countries – two of which proved the greatest obstacle.

- 1) A low percentage of the population networked, and

- 2) Poor technical quality of the network – low bandwidth

- 3) During the greater part of B92's history, the percentage of Internet users in Yugoslavia was about two or three per cent. It slowly rose to between four and five per cent at the end of the millennium and today's maximum estimations are about six or seven per cent.

It was this reason that, during the period from 1995 to 2000, the Internet could not be used as a means of mass communications, for the creation of info portals and Websites with massive numbers of visitors. Instead it was used primarily as a tactical medium for the struggle. Through the Internet, B92 distributed sounds and images not only to end users on the Internet, whose numbers were certainly not sufficient, but, more importantly to other, networked, classical media. This destroyed the hype about the Internet fairly early on, along with blind faith in its omnipotence, and instead inspired rational thinking about the real possibilities it offered in conditions of political and social instability.

Despite the small number of users, it became obvious very early that these were mostly people who had similar goals to those of B92: the creation of a democratic civil society. The next step was to use various means to connect a range of groups dealing with the problem of political and social change. The reasoning is obvious – if we were unable to reach more end users with the power of the medium – the Internet – itself, then we would take our mission live, using IT elements, through other social groups, media, NGOs, political organisations and educational projects. The ability of these to penetrate the social fabric was more effective than the Internet during its early days in Yugoslavia. B92 forged links with these organisations and groups in every possible way. IT channels were used for mutual communication (e-mail, open internet classrooms and clubs and so

on), a place for presence on the Internet (Web servers, discussion groups) and others. Over time, the synergy of networking has further strengthened the civil sector in Serbia to a point where this factor can now not be avoided when discussing the success of having ousted Milosevic. The Internet in Serbia has not reached the masses and there never managed to directly implement political change, but played a strong role in creating a civil elite which forced the change using the Internet as the backbone of communication.

It is worth emphasising once more that in poor or digitally unemancipated environments it is fatal to believe in the magic power of the Internet: it is at its most powerful in tandem with other, conventional media when forming a multimedia action front.

- 4) Low bandwidth put limits on content creation, both for the Web producer and the user. This problem, in contrast to the broadband revolution on the Western hemisphere, virtually reduced B92's activity on the Internet to presentations of the most basic kind, dominated by basic text content and low-quality audio more often than video (we're talking here about the period before 2000). On the other hand the bandwidth restriction has its positive side – the imperative to journalists and content creators to present information in the most efficient and simple way.

Instead of existing divisions being reduced by the information revolution, the Utopia envisaged when the Internet began, they are in fact widened, thanks to the inability of the poor to keep up with IT development. This is why successful IT projects on the “poor side”, such as B92, may serve for serious analysis of how to slow down and stop this negative process.