Digital Culture in South East Europe

The rapid developments in the area of information and communication technologies influence societies more than any other innovation nowadays.

When the new technologies of communication were introduced, such as the Internet and mobile phones, they were mainly implemented as additives in the work environment. However, shortly afterwards they have spread into our private and social lives as well. The changes were on such a large and extensive scale that they eventually revolutionised our culture of communication. The rapid spread of digital technologies and their importance in our daily lives prove the existence of a "digital culture", which can be especially characterised by its possibility to enable participation. In the time of Web 2.0 the boundaries between producer and consumer vanish increasingly. Today's users do not consume the information on the internet passively; they can react, create and share content and data on social media. Their engagement is spontaneous, quick and effective and it also addresses events which are often neglected by the mainstream media.

Boundaries between consumers and producers of content are blurred

Within Europe, the Balkan states are catching up in terms of distribution of digital technologies. In comparison to the very low level of access to internet during the last decade, its usage has increased tremendously. Today, around half of the population of Serbia and Romania use the internet; front runners in the Balkan region, with almost 65 percent of the population,

are Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia[1]. Although these numbers still lie behind the 84 percent of users in Germany, the Web has become an indispensable part of daily life among the young, urban and well-educated citizens in South East Europe. Their possibilities to access the internet are comparable to those in Germany. Though, the urban lifestyle within the Balkan states differs extremely from the rural areas and the lower-income classes of the population.

Mobile phones play a crucial role for the communication in South East Europe. Particularly a growing number of young people voluntarily abstain from using landline telephones. The cell phones represent an important alternative, especially in some Balkan areas without a well-developed landline connection. As in other parts of Europe there are more mobile phone contracts than residents. Moreover, a modern smartphone with various multimedia functions is an integral part of the young people's lifestyle.

Balkan states catching up digitally

The usage of social networks is as widespread as it is in Germany, even with an upward trend. For many citizens, Facebook and other social platforms provide the opportunity to exchange information. The importance of communication via digital technologies is steadily rising.

Communication in social networks is not limited to private matters. Discussions about political themes can also be found online. News platforms and online

---

[1] Social, Digital & Mobile Worldwide in 2014: http://wearesocial.com/uk/special-reports/social-digital-mobile-worldwide-2014 (01-04-2014)

newspapers fill a part of the gap in the polarised media landscape of South East Europe. Nowadays they represent a serious alternative for exchange and gathering of information. In 2012 more than 30 percent of Bulgarians and Romanians as well as more than 40 respectively 50 percent of Macedonians and Croatians took advantage of reading news magazines or newspapers online. The usage of web radio and television has also increased.[2]

The digital culture has social strength

The new technologies open up a new chapter in alternative ways of communicating and informing in South East Europe. Corresponding to a digital culture which does not solely consume, the citizens of the Balkan countries produce their own content as well. They keep records of socially relevant developments and upload self-created content on publicly accessible websites – in Bulgaria and Romania around 20 percent of the population, in Croatia and Macedonia after all 15 percent.[3]

These contributions are complemented by a phenomenon normally known from the West: platforms of whistle blowers which have dispersed rapidly among the Balkan countries and boost thereby investigative journalism. Weak judicial systems and close connections between media, economy and politics constitute unfavourable conditions for journalism in general. The strong development of online media and the establishment of the platforms "Bivol" and "Balkanleaks" in Western European countries – in order to deepen transnational cooperation – empower investigative journalism in South East Europe.[4]

How powerful this new digital culture is became evident during the last few years. Citizens' protests within three Balkan states emerged to such an extent – thanks to social networks – that they could be described as a South East European 'spring'. Bulgaria was the first country in which people took to the streets on an unprecedented scale since the beginning of the transition. The first wave of protests of ten thousands of Bulgarians was triggered by inflated electricity bills and eventually led to the resignation of the Prime Minister Boyko Borissov. The second wave of protests in summer 2013 prevented a controversial personnel decision by the following socialist government. Media mogul Delyan Peevski abstained from taking office as new director of the inner security service due to public pressure. The protest activities had been organised quickly and unstoppable via Facebook. Their dimension and suddenness had surprised everyone involved – most of all, however, the then government of Plamen Oresharski, the successor of Boyko Borissov. The protest marches were composed of various groups which had arranged their common protests via internet – another reason why they disappeared afterwards as quickly as they had emerged.[5]

Protest actions were organised via social networks

In February 2014 protest activities started with 200 factory workers in Tuzla, Bosnia-Herzegovina. The initially violent demonstrations spread like wildfire via Facebook. Later on citizens' meetings were organised in over 20 cities. In this way, Bosnians who were disappointed with their politicians could exchange their opinion on the economic situation, mismanagement, corruption, unemployment and the failure of the government in general. The floods in the spring of the same year put an end to the protest movement.[6]

[2] Eurostat statistics as of 22-05-2015: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/de (Exported: 17-08-2015).
[3] Eurostat statistics as of 22-05-2015: http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/de (Exported: 17-08-2015).
[4] Sazonova-Prokouran, Alexandra, "Francophone and Eastern European media landscapes summon whistleblowers": http://blog.wan-ifra.org/2015/02/18/francophone-and-eastern-european-media-landscapes-summon-whistleblowers (18-02-2015).

[5] Marco Arndt, „Lautstark gegen die alten Eliten", KAS-Auslandsinformationen 5/2014.
[6] Denis Dzidic, "Bosnia-Herzegovina hit by wave of violent protests", http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/07/

In 2015 a third wave of protests, which attracted huge media attention, took place in Macedonia. More than 30'000 ethnic Albanians and Macedonians demonstrated side by side against corruption, vote rigging and a bugging scandal in the country. In order to discredit the protesters, government supporters and certain media reacted with a propaganda strategy – they marked their political opponents and members of notorious civil society groups with red rings in commentaries and photos on internet platforms. The strategy backfired as participants of the protests made fun of it by marking their Facebook profile pictures with a red circle. The slogan "I think, therefore I am marked" exemplifies the symbolic protest on the web.[7]

The protesters in the three Balkan states wouldn't accept any longer the deplorable state of affairs, corruption, nepotism, organised crime and oligarchic structures. The new channels of communication which enjoy increasing popularity in South East Europe had a considerable stake in the organisation of the protests. The dimensions of the protests in Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Macedonia took by surprise the respective governments. The fact that digital culture can move masses of people is being regarded as an encouraging sign for the development of a Western-oriented civil society. Thanks to social networks the passivity of citizens – characteristic and precondition for oligarchic systems – has been partly overcome.[8]

Insufficient use of the Web by politicians

Many citizens in South East Europe have discovered the potential of social networks and digital technologies and use them on a large scale. However, the use of information and communication technologies for interaction between politicians and citizens

is still in its infancy. Professional communication of politicians and state actors is of great significance in terms of transparency of political processes. "Political communication today is more than just propaganda. Citizens expect to be taken seriously as dialogue partners", explains Christian Spahr, Head of the Media Program South East Europe.

While the Balkan countries are catching up with the use of social networks and online communication, additional requirements are needed for the interaction with state authorities. In comparison with EU average, at best half as many people in the Balkans use the internet to interact with state authorities. Talking about the usage of public websites, the Balkan states reach only roughly a third of the EU average[9].

According to a survey among citizens in Bulgaria and Romania, commissioned by the KAS and carried out by the independent opinion research centre Market Links, politicians use the opportunities of social media and internet far too timid. In Romania only a minority of 38 percent state that their representatives search for dialog with the citizens on the web. Two thirds of Bulgarians feel poorly informed by politicians about decision-making in general. More than half of them complain that Bulgarian politicians don't search for dialogue with citizens via social media or the internet.

These results contrast extremely with the digital culture of private online communication, the use of social networks to organise protests, the creation of whistle blower platforms or new alternatives for information gathering. State departments and other political stakeholders do not take full advantage of the opportunities provided by digital technologies which means that (so far) we can speak about a lack of digital culture in the public sector.

bosnia-herzegovina-wave-violent-protests (07-02-2014).
[7] Ljupcho Petkovski, „From student protests to movement – the (un)expected reinvention of politics in Macedonia",
http://www.suedosteuropa.uni-graz.at/biepag/node/131 (16-12-2014).
[8] Marco Arndt, „Lautstark gegen die alten Eliten", KAS-Auslandsinformationen 5/2014

[9] Eurostat statistics as of 22-05-2015:
http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/de (Exported: 17-08-2015).

Outlook

In the area of information and communication technologies, Balkan states are catching up with Western Europe, e.g. in terms of mobile phone contracts. Technical development provides a precondition for digital culture. Understanding the relevance of digital culture not only in the private life, but also in the political sphere, is still a very young phenomenon in South East Europe.

New, alternative information and communication channels were the starting point of this development. The strong political networking of citizens made the organisation of protests possible and brought a civil society to life. So far, it didn't lead to a fundamental change, because of profound and ongoing structural deficits. But still: The way how civil society implements digital culture warrants a certain degree of hope. Social networks as instruments of social mobilisation won't disappear from the scene anymore. Thus, protest activities can upraise at any time. With the phenomenon of mass protests the digital culture has become analogue.

Besides that, it can be hardly referred to a "digital culture" in terms of communication and interaction between citizens and politicians respectively national authorities. As Eurostat data and surveys by KAS show, the modern digital technologies are insufficiently used in Southeast Europe. Indeed, the citizens wish for more direct dialog. A more trustful relationship that can be achieved through direct communication is important for the shaping of opinions, political participation and transparency of political processes.

"Thus, KAS will advocate for a political communication which is oriented towards transparency and public welfare", reaffirms Christian Spahr. The Head of the Media Program South East Europe set the digital dialogue between citizens and authorities as focal theme on his team's current agenda. The information and communication technologies should help to develop a digital political culture and ensure a rapprochement between citizens and politics.