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Serbia: "Better on Facebook Than in the Streets"¹

The new school year in Serbia is about to start, and Serbian daily newspapers and journals publish numerous articles on the bad effects of the most popular social network², Facebook, frightening both parents and young people with negative and techno anti-utopian statements. A survey³ on the usage of Facebook among the youth in Serbia has been published recently, too, however, and its results suggest that things aren't really that bad.

Serbia is a country in transition; the political, economic and social turbulence of the '90s has influenced its culture and ethical values, as well as information and communication technologies (ICT's) and the creation of the online public sphere. It's not surprising that the younger and older generations in urban areas have embraced the new social media forms very quickly. But what about information, digital and media literacy, and critical thinking skills that will enable the people to use Internet services wisely and selectively?

For my doctoral research, I've gathered ethnographic data, and recently I was talking with Nikola, an undergraduate student of the School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Belgrade, an open source activist and geek, and he told me how his generation was spending time in the socially (and ethically) distorted surrounding:

...in Serbia, the parameter of success represents a few statuses: a well-paid job in some government institution, or a marriage to a foreigner, an athlete or some businessman. For young men, similar values can be found. The idols are [popular Turbo-folk⁴ singers] Ceca, Karleusa and Seka, Paris Hilton, politicians, war criminals, criminals. The only thing that young people think about is money, hanging and fooling around, and instant success.

Even at universities! Recently I enrolled at the Faculty of Engineering. In my department, during the freshman welcome party, they played house music for two hours, domestic/local dance/turbo music of the '90s for another four hours, and kitsch folk music for the rest of time. [...]

Few of them are interested in open source software, which is tragic: those are the future

¹ Also available in: Spanish · [Serbia: "Mejor en Facebook que en la calle"](#) Polish · [Serbia: „Lepiej na Facebooku niż na ulicy”](#) Serbian · [Srbija: "Bolje na Facebook-u nego na ulicama"](#) Italian · [Serbia: i giovani e facebook](#)

² This article is a part of the Interdisciplinary conference talk, "Problems of Adolescence" at Magdalen College, University of Oxford, 26.6.2010.

³ Belgrade Open School survey: <http://www.bos.rs/cepit> [downloaded 7.9.2010]

⁴ Wikipedia source <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turbo-folk> [downloaded 7.9.2010]

software developers, so they could learn a lot, but all they see is [Microsoft] and \$\$\$\$. It's humiliating that some kids from my department don't understand the basic concepts of the Internet service usage, and yet they are hanging out on Facebook day and night.

This is not the first time that I hear from the young people who think differently than the majority of the young population in Serbia about the difficulties of growing up in an environment where there is the lack of a communication culture and education on the one hand, and the existence of kitsch on the other, and these forms of behavior are perceived as “correct” and desirable.

Many of these young people have left the country for postgraduate studies or to work abroad. Political events, social and economic changes, brain drain, high rate of unemployment, a visible gap between the nouveau riche and the lower classes, distorted values presented in the media and through street propaganda – all this has influenced the situation in the households and educational institutions, and is reflected every day in the (lost) art of communication.

Having in mind such an environment, the online public sphere created on the networking sites is no different, and the problems are magnified. There are numerous places where young people in Serbia spend their time online, and one of the most popular ones is Facebook.

Of the 7.3 million inhabitants of Serbia, 55.9% are Internet users, and over 2 million of them are on Facebook. They use the Internet for communication⁵ (sending/receiving emails) - 79.2%; for playing or downloading games, photos, films or music (64%); for sending chat messages to groups or forums (42.3%), and only 26.4% use the Internet to search for information regarding education, training or courses.

Recently, the Belgrade Open School carried out a research⁶, asking this question: What high school students like to do on the Internet? It was conducted among 300 high school students taking the School's training program on online reputation. One should have in mind that these 300 young people use Internet every day, and they should not be considered as a representative sample, as it says in the survey's introduction. The results of the survey can be taken as indicators of some basic trends in online behavior of young people. According to the data, 55% of the respondents would rather spend more time online than studying for school.

When online, the Serbian youth are frequently on social network sites (Facebook, My Space, Twitter), chatting with their friends or downloading entertaining multimedia. The survey also showed that 75% of the respondents meet new people online as well, and for almost half of them these sites are an important source of information. Every third high school student says that they spend time with their friends equally face to face and online, while more than a half of the respondents spend their day in traditional forms of communication.

What do they do on Facebook? The two most frequent activities that this group of Serbian high school teens indicated are: making contact with their friends (61%) and “like”-ing their statuses (66%). Then: sharing content and information (56%), writing private messages (47%). Asked if they would add their teachers as Facebook friends if they asked them to, they said they wouldn't mind (70% accepted their professors as contacts). Same about their parents (18% have a parent as their contact).

It's interesting that only 22.4% of the respondents play online games on Facebook: they'd rather spend time chatting with friends who are online (78%). Also, 13.4% of the respondents answered they would use Facebook for school and collaboration with their teachers, while 31.6% actively participate in groups, causes and fan pages they have joined.

5 Statistical office of Republic of Serbia <http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/axd/index.php> [downloaded 7.9.2010]

6 CePIT: Belgrade Open school <http://www.bos.rs/cepit/> [downloaded 7.9.2010]

One of the numerous comments on Facebook from a Serbian daily newspaper⁷:

I think that the Facebook mania was created by the media who write about it non-stop! Each generation has something that differs from the previous one. A long time ago, the youth were obsessed with cinema, then with music and concerts, motorbikes, and now, in the computer era, it's time for the Internet and Facebook.

Sanja made an interesting comment:

Considering the tough times and the surroundings we live in – it is better to be inside the house with Facebook than in the streets with criminals... at least you know where your children are.

Milos says:

Facebook is a great way to get connected with friends abroad, I have a lot of them, so this way we can communicate much better and I can see what is going on in their lives. Also, Facebook is saving the time and money for mobile phone... While I was in school, it was much easier to send a message to my entire classroom on Facebook if we needed to make plans for something than to send text messages to all of them, individually. Facebook flaws? When you're spending time on Face and you don't have a reason for that... you waste time browsing other people's profiles.

However, the Serbian youth do not differ in their communication practices from their peers elsewhere in the world, or, at least, in Southeastern Europe, as my preliminary dissertation research data indicate. They are interested in the same things as the previous generations, they spend their time online and on Facebook for very clear, understandable, social reasons: they want to interact with their peers, friends from pre-existing networks in analogue life. They want to stay informed and exchange either information or gossip, as well as goofing, hanging around, joking, flirting, poking, “like”-ing on Facebook.

The social dynamics has not changed, but the new technologies have: it is always the same motivation, but different environments.

It is very important that both parents and educators on the one side and the Serbian media on the other side realize that the Internet is yet another channel for communication, not an evil tool, but also not some magic wand that will solve all their problems. Young people and their parents should build some trust in communication and help each other to understand the new technologies, introducing them to each other. Educators could work with students on information and media literacy, teaching them to think and process information online, to develop critical thinking skills, so they could navigate and grow up to be smart, young professionals.

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⁷ Obsessed with Facebook. BlicOnline. <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Tema-Dana/197743/Opsednuti-Fejsbukom/komentari#ostali> [downloaded 7.9.2010]

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