

Introduction

Articles in this special issue put the audience in the forefront of examining new communication platforms, narrative structures, as well as new challenges to the freedom of expression and audience participation in public and political life, such as the war in Ukraine, widespread misinformation and conspiracy theories.

The new communication technologies have fundamentally changed how we communicate and connect with each other from the interpersonal level to the mass level. In seeking information, entertainment, diversion, socialization, and expression, people turn to diversified communication platforms and channels. Individual media repertoires have become so complex, fluent, and unpredictable that academic research is constantly struggling to keep up with emerging trends. On the one hand, new media and new ways of using existing media constantly emerge, while scholars strive to understand it. On the other hand, diverse malicious phenomena appear, limiting possibilities for expressing thoughts, emotions, attitudes, as well as participating in public and civic life. Articles in this special issue examine how we use new media and address disinformation on the Internet and in traditional media.

In the first article, Ivana Stamenković and Marta Mitrović examine how young people in Serbia use TikTok, the fastest growing social media platform today. The authors apply uses and gratification theory and explore which motivations drive TikTok uses, including the needs for information, building personal identity, integration and social interaction, entertainment, and self-expression. According to their results, TikTok is a relevant source of information for the students from the south of Serbia, especially about hobbies. Students commonly join TikTok to learn about the activities of other people and gratify needs for relaxation and filling spare time. Most students are not active content contributors on TikTok but rather behave like traditional TV viewers.

After TikTok, Andrea Vlahović, Ivana Ercegovac, and Mirjana Tankosić turn our attention to narrative structures in YouTube vlogs. Relying on qualitative content analysis, the authors analyze narrative structures in lifestyle, gaming, beauty and fashion, travel, education, health and fitness, food, tech reviews, and daily vlogs. This research shows that although vloggers cover different topics, they employ similar narration elements. To engage the audience, vloggers share their personal experiences, often weaving anecdotes into the overarching storyline. Vloggers also address the audience directly, ask for interaction and tease the audience by giving hints about future content. In gaming vlogs, the main way of engaging the audience was building suspense in overcoming challenges in the games. Overall, this study revealed the complexity of narrative structures and identified common elements that vloggers use to engage the audience.

In the next contribution to this special issue, Svetlana Slijepčević Bjelivuk conducts a sentiment analysis of Tweets in the Serbian language about Russia from the beginning of the war in Ukraine. This analysis shows that Serbian people expressed strong emotions, almost equally positive and negative, toward Russia during the first six months of the conflict. Going into more depth in analyzing Tweets, the author relies on critical discourse analysis and uncovers that the attitudes of Serbian speakers have undergone a drastic transformation in comparison to the positive associations from the associative fields of Moscow, Russians, and the Russian language in the Associative Dictionary of the Serbian Language. Among other, previously positively connoted concepts such as “size”, “strength”, and “power” which were used to extol and admire, were those transformed into the foundation for negative sentiments in Tweets.

The final two articles deal with the issue of conspiracy theories. Nikola Doderović explores Facebook and Reddit pages in the Serbian language that were connecting the chemtrails conspiracy theory with Covid-19, blaming the Western forces for spraying viruses over the Serbian sky. After identifying relevant pages, the author further analyzes reactions of Facebook and Reddit users, showing that Serbian users took the lead in consuming misinformation on Facebook. In contrast, users on Reddit disliked conspiratorial content, and ridiculed chemtrails through the comment section of posts that were not initially related to conspiracy theories.

In the last article, the author, Rastislav Dinić, provides us with the philosophical reading of the longest running philosophy radio show “Gozba” aired on the public radio of Serbia. Following Anthony Cashio’s insight about public philosophy on radio and drawing on Jason Stanley’s work on propaganda, the author analyzes treatment of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine in the radio show. Despite the public mission of the radio, and philosophical aspirations of the show, this analysis concludes that in dealing with these topics, “Gozba” serves as an instrument of spreading conspiracy theories, dangerous anti-science views, vaccine hesitancy, fake news and the Russian war propaganda.

The additional contribution to the special issue is a review of Frey Mattias’ book “Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste” by Ilija Milosavljević. The author finds that the book offers insightful critique of ubiquitous data collection of users’ online behavior and respective recommender systems on the example of Netflix.

This special issue was edited by Ana Milojevic, assistant professor at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Political Science, while holding a postdoctoral researcher position at the University of Bergen, Department of Information Science and Media Studies, as part of her project “Datafication, Media and Democracy: Transformation of news work in datafied society – DataMeDe” funded by the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement No 895273.

*Guest editor, Ana Milojević, assistant professor at the University of Belgrade,
Faculty of Political Science
e-mail: anamilojevic@gmail.com*