MEDIA STUDIES AND APPLIED ETHICS

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CONTENTS

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

The Motivation for Using the Social Media Platform TikTok from the Perspective of the Uses and Gratifications Theory

Ivana Stamenković[12], Faculty of Philosophy, University of Nis, Serbia

Marta Mitrović[3], Faculty of Philosophy, University of Nis, Serbia

Abstract

The way we communicate on a daily basis has changed significantly since the turn of the 21ˢᵗ century. Besides communication platforms, social media has become the leading generator of opinions, ideas, thoughts, and emotions, especially among younger populations. The circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic further stimulated the popularity of certain social media platforms, with TikTok being at the forefront (Fratila, 2021; Kennedy, 2020). Previous research has shown a wide range of motivational factors for using the TikTok social media platform, including entertainment, which is the most prominent, followed by social interaction and connection. Additionally, social media is often used for leisure, self-expression, archiving, escapism, learning new skills, following celebrities and influencers, trends, and more (Berthon et al., 2008; Muntinga et al., 2011; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Yaqi, Lee & Liu, 2021; Khairul Nuzuli, 2022). The theoretical framework of the study is based on the Uses and Gratifications approach, which will be used to interpret the results. The aim is to examine which gratifications drive the use of TikTok. The sample consists of 135 students from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Niš. The data collection method used is a questionnaire. The questionnaire includes items that were developed and used by Omar & Dequan, (2020) and Khairul Nuzuli, (2022), covering five categories of motives: information, personal identity, interaction and social integration, entertainment, and self-expression.

Keywords: social media, TikTok, usage motives, uses and gratification, youth

Introduction

Social media have become dominant platforms for establishing personal and professional connections, maintaining relationships with close friends and a broader

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[1] Corresponding author: ivana.stamenkovic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

[2] ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3612-1659

[3] ORCID https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0549-7808

circle of acquaintances, as well as increasingly prevalent means of advertising and political propaganda. Moreover, social media are recognized as successful channels for spreading and distributing information among official media. The context in which the number of users of any network increases is an important indicator of the reasons for its popularity, and thus the circumstances of the coronavirus pandemic have led to an increase in the number of users of most social media, as well as the expansion of the media that was not previously attractive to users. This social media is TikTok, which joined the community of other networks in 2016. It was launched in China in September 2016, and already in the following year, ByteDance company launched the international version of this network[4]. TikTok, a video-based social network, quickly gained immense popularity (Khairul Nuzuli, 2022) and became the most downloaded app in 2019, with 693 million downloads, and in 2020, with 850 million downloads[5]. The TikTok "fever" has spread worldwide, and Serbia is no exception, aligning with global statistics that indicate the growing popularity of this new platform.

For years, the most popular applications worldwide, Facebook and Instagram, have been surpassed by TikTok, whose community is rapidly growing. Compared to the number of Facebook users, TikTok is growing faster on an annual basis[6]. According to the data from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia in 2021, the number of Internet users increased by 7% compared to 2020, with 81.2% of the population using the Internet during the previous year. The highest percentage of younger people aged 16 to 34 used the Internet for accessing social media platforms (96.2% for those aged 16-24 and 92.3% for those aged 25-34). According to research conducted in Serbia by the agency Pioniri in collaboration with the research agency Smart Plus Research in 2022, the social media platform TikTok experienced the highest annual growth in the number of users. While in 2021, 20% of Internet users had a TikTok account, there was an increase to 25% in 2022, meaning that one-quarter of Internet users have access to and use this new video social network. The data from this research also reveal the motivation of using TikTok among participants in Serbia, with 67% using the platform for entertainment and time consumption, 33% for following TikTok creators, and 28% for finding new ideas and inspiration. An equal number of users are looking for interesting tips on TikTok[7].

The rapid growth of TikTok is explained by the characteristics of short video clips, which can more easily attract and retain the attention of an increasingly distracted, selective, and interactive audience (O'Hara et al., 2007; Wang, 2020). The trend of consuming shorter video clips is related to modern lifestyles, and despite their duration being less than 15 seconds, these videos can contain significant content (Wang, 2020), users communicate with each other by watching, liking, commenting on, and

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[4] Data taken from the website: https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/

[5] https://www.businessofapps.com/data/tik-tok-statistics/

[6] https://www.cenzolovka.rs/svet/tiktok-presao-instagram-i-fejsbuk-najpopularnija-aplikacija-u-2021/

[7] https://pioniri.com/sr/socialserbia2022/

sharing video clips (Jenkins et al., 2006; Wang, 2020). Members of Generation Z are the primary consumers of short video clips on TikTok, and their emotional and social immaturity increases vulnerability to the content they are exposed to (Fan, 2023). A positive correlation has been found between the mental health of users and their use of TikTok, with depression, anxiety, and stress increasing with continuous and intensive use of this social network (Maguire & Pellosmaa, 2022). These findings are in line with previous studies on the mental health of users and the use of social media (Beeres et al., 2021; Houghton et al., 2018, as cited in Fan, 2023). Adolescents are particularly sensitive to the TikTok content through which they construct their self-image and form relationships with others. Research has shown that their stress and anxiety levels increase with more time spent on TikTok, which can be explained by the specific developmental tasks, socio-emotional, biological, and cognitive changes that adolescents go through as they navigate the challenges of building relationships with their peers (Fan, 2023). Furthermore, besides impacting the health of younger users, content posted on social media also has a significant effect on users' cognitive assessments, with younger adolescents lacking the ability to distinguish between reliable and false information and not critically evaluating stereotypical messages (Fan, 2023). In addition to the negative impacts, positive effects of TikTok have been recognized, including its marketing potential, which helps advertisements for certain products reach a wider audience (Dewa & Safitri, 2021, as cited in Khairul Nuzuli, 2022). Simplified video production processes enable anyone to promote their creative abilities and talents, making TikTok a platform for personal branding (Susilowati, 2018, as cited in Khairul Nuzuli, 2022). Besides the marketing potential of TikTok, young people see TikTok as a platform for connecting with others, for fun and relaxation (Dilon, 2020). Furthermore, youth perceive TikTok as a tool to enhance their self-esteem, to promote their talents or skills, to share their beliefs, or for realization of their self-actualization (Guo, 2022). Some authors also emphasize the use of this application for educational purposes to illustrate an idea or example, to draw attention to a social issue, and to make appeals for help (Guo 2021; Jaffar et al., 2019).

In the digitized world that encourages open and free content creation and distribution through various platforms and networks, the central idea revolves around a personalized approach, tailoring content delivery to individual users. TikTok not only follows this trend but also successfully implements the core idea, thanks to the analysis of big data. By understanding users' interests and needs, TikTok can recommend desired content to them effectively (Jaffar et al., 2019). With users playing an increasingly active role, searching, selecting, creating, sharing, and publishing information and content, the question of what needs are met through the use of social networks arises. The uses and gratification approach is commonly used as a theoretical framework to provide an interpretation of responses to such questions. This theoretical model has gained significance, particularly with the emergence of the Internet, online services, and new forms of communication in the online space (Ninković Slavnić, 2016), where user-initiated actions are perceived as the first step, and understanding their needs and motivations takes center stage in research.

This study is dedicated to identifying the dominant ways in which students at the Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, use the TikTok social network. Data were collected through a questionnaire, gathering information on the reasons why and how the respondents use this increasingly popular social network. The questionnaire considered five categories of motives: information, personal identity, interaction and social integration, entertainment, and self-expression. The SPSS program and descriptive statistical methods were used to analyze the collected data.

Uses and Gratifications Theory in the Digital Environment

The main objectives of the research within the framework of this tradition, according to scholars like Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, are to interpret how people use media to meet their needs. This leads to an understanding of audience behavior motives and the identification of media functions (Rubin, 2009: 166–167). The authors mention five fundamental elements of the uses and gratifications model:

1. The audience is active, and media use serves a specific purpose.
2. Individuals manage the relationship between meeting needs and media choices.
3. Media compete with other sources in meeting needs (human needs are diverse, and some can be satisfied through media use while others through different means, with the level of need satisfaction through media being variable).
4. Methodologically, it is important that people consciously use media and can identify interests and motives that provide an appropriate image of media usage.
5. Audience orientation should be investigated from individuals' personal perspectives, separate from value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1973: 510–511).

Katz et al., (1973) investigated the role of media in meeting psychological and social needs. They highlighted that media can contribute to understanding oneself, family, friends, others, and society; personal and social status and connecting with family, friends, culture, and society (Rubin, 2009: 168). Additionally, Rubin distinguishes between two different types of media use: ritualistic and instrumental media use. While ritualistic media use involves using media to fill leisure time and divert attention from problems, instrumental media orientation is based on actively seeking content that will satisfy the need for information. Instrumental media use emphasizes the purposefulness and usefulness of content, intention, selectivity, and active user engagement (Rubin, 2009: 171-173).

The activity of the audience depends on many factors, among which are social context, opportunities for interaction, and expression of opinions. Reflecting on social situations that stimulate the need for media, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch pointed out the following factors: 1. Social situations create tension and conflicts, and media content can offer guidance for problem-solving (seeking advice, instructions, etc.).

2. In social situations, awareness of existing problems can increase, and people can inform themselves through media sources. 3. Media can serve as a substitute and can fulfill needs when social situations reduce the possibilities of satisfying them in other ways. 4. Social situations reveal certain values that the media can reinforce. 5. Social situations can impose knowledge of a specific type of media content, which then becomes an identifier of group membership (Katz et al., 1973: 517).

Considering the interactivity and increased user engagement in the era of digital media and social networks, many authors have perceived the Uses and Gratifications Theory as an adequate model for interpreting the motives behind Internet and social media usage. The categorization of motives operationalized in research is diverse, and some authors highlight motives such as informational-cooperative use, relational, expressive, and strategic motives (Eginli & Tas, 2018), cognitive and affective needs, personal and social integration needs (Papacharissi, 2002), utilitarian motives, the need for leisure fulfillment, the need for information, the need for emotional release, and the need for entertainment (Khairul Nuzuli, 2022).

Studies on the motives for using TikTok, related to the youth, have found similar categorizations of needs, such as informational motives, personal identity motives, integration and social interaction motives, and the need for entertainment (Khairul Nuzuli, 2022). The results of a study conducted with a sample of Semarang residents (Indonesia) who use and post videos on TikTok showed that the dominant motives are integration, social interaction, and entertainment. Additionally, in one study, factor analysis identified three groups of needs: 1. The need to fill leisure time (relaxation, stress relief, escape from boredom, and achieving happiness) and social needs (the need to communicate and discuss with others, commenting, sharing content with others); The need for knowledge and information (the need for information that is difficult to obtain through other means, personal interests, the ability to record information about one's own life); Business-related needs (the need to buy, sell, advertise, and sponsor something) (Yaqi et al., 2021). Research on the roles of personality traits and motivation as predictors in the context of consumption, participation, and content production on TikTok has shown that personality traits are not significant predictors of behavior on TikTok. The types of motivation considered by the author are social interaction, archiving, escapism, self-expression, and peeking into the lives of others. Unlike personality structure, social interaction, archiving one's life events, and escapism are significant predictors of consumption as a form of behavior on this platform. Participants engage in TikTok to express themselves, to communicate with others, and to escape from everyday obligations. The motivation to produce video content on TikTok arises from the desire to fulfill the need for self-expression and archiving (Omar & Dequan, 2020). Similar results have been found by other researchers who emphasize that TikTok's popularity is also driven by the opportunity to follow celebrities and influencers, express one's own ideas, and achieve what is referred to as "micro-fame" (Jaffar et al., 2019). Jaffar and colleagues provide a roadmap to micro-fame, which is manifested through recognition by others, becoming social influencers, various opportunities in the entertainment industry, and the number of online followers (Jaffar et al., 2019: 192).

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Hence, the active involvement of TikTok users, manifested both in sharing other people's video content and creating their own content online, is driven by the need for users to express themselves publicly (Omar & Dequan, 2020).

Methodology

Given the diverse needs underlying the use of the social network TikTok, the research focuses on the motives for using this social network. The goal of this research is to determine which motives for using this social network are dominant, i.e., what needs the respondents satisfy by using TikTok. The data collection technique used was a questionnaire. It encompasses five dimensions of motivation: the information motive, personal identity motive, integration and social interaction motive, entertainment motive, and self-expression motive. Each of these motives is presented as items in the questionnaire, and the investigation of these four motives was conducted using items and questions that researchers have used in previous studies (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Khairul Nuzuli, 2022). The sample consists of 135 students from the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Niš.

Table 1: *The sample structure according to gender, years of study/age, the social network most frequently used by respondents, and the time spent on social networks is as follows:*

Gender	Male		Female		
	26 (19,3%)		109 (80,7%)		
Year of study	Second	Third		Fourth	
Age	(20-21 years)	(21-22 years)		(22-23 years)	
	15 (11,1%)	57 (42,2%)		63 (46,7%)	
The social network most frequently used	Facebook	Instagram	Twitter	TikTok	Other
	13 (9,6%)	88 (65,2%)	3 (2,2%)	27 (20%)	4 (3%)
The time spent on social networks on a daily basis	Around half an hour	From half an hour to one hour	Up to two hours	From two to five hours	More than five hours
	4 (3%)	5 (3,7%)	58 (43%)	48 (35,6%)	20 (14,8%)

In the sample, a larger percentage of female respondents (80.7%) participated compared to male respondents (19.3%). Fourth-year students accounted for the highest percentage of participants (46.7%). Respondents most frequently use the social network Instagram (65.2%), but TikTok is the second most used network (20%). This indicates the growing popularity of TikTok, which has been experiencing the highest annual increase in the number of users[8].

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8 These data align with the findings reported by the agencies Pioniri and Smart Plus Research in 2022,

Table 2: *Distribution of responses regarding the informational motive*

Item	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I am undecided	I mostly agree	I completely agree
1. I use TikTok to find practical guidelines and suggestions when I need someone's opinion and when I have to make a decision.	43%	14,8%	17%	14,8%	10,4%
2. I use TikTok to satisfy my interests, hobbies, and/or curiosity.	21,5%	6,7%	16,3%	30,4%	25,2%
3. TikTok helps me with my education.	45,9%	22,2%	16,3%	11.9%	3,7%
4. After gaining knowledge through TikTok, I feel calm and peaceful.	51.9%	19,3%	23%	3%	3%

Table 2 shows that the highest percentage of respondents mostly agree (30.4%) or completely agree (25.2%) that they use TikTok to satisfy their own interests, hobbies, and/or curiosity. Additionally, nearly a quarter of the respondents (25.2%) seek practical guidelines and suggestions on TikTok to make decisions or form opinions on subjects of interest.

Table 3: *Results of the distribution of responses regarding the personal identity motive*

Item	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I am undecided	I mostly agree	I completely agree
I use TikTok to discover things that can enhance my personal values.	41,5%	18,5%	20,7%	13,3%	5,9%

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which indicate that TikTok is experiencing the highest annual growth in the number of users in Serbia. In their publication, it is mentioned that one-quarter of Internet users in the age group of 16 to 24 years old use the social network TikTok. The trend of a rapid increase in TikTok users has been observed worldwide, and data suggests that in the second half of 2022, TikTok surpassed one billion monthly active users. For more detailed statistics, you can visit the website: https://influencermarketinghub.com/tiktok-stats/

TikTok helps me to discover patterns of behavior in everyday life.	45,2%	17,8%	15,6%	17%	4,4%
I use TikTok to help me identify with the values presented in the media.	48,1%	18,5%	17,8%	11,1%	4,4%
I use TikTok to increase my knowledge and to better understand myself.	3,8%	24,4%	14,8%	17%	5,9%
TikTok helps me find ideas that will assist me in presenting my identity and image to others.	44,4%	15,6%	19,3%	14,8%	5,9%

The results in Table 3 show how TikTok is used to enhance personal values, build the user's identity, and improve self-understanding. In the sample, the majority of respondents do not use TikTok for these purposes. The only statement with which most respondents agree is the one stating that TikTok serves to increase knowledge and better self-understanding (22.9%). For the other statements in this section of the questionnaire, less than 20% of respondents agree.

Table 4: *Distribution of responses regarding the motive of integration and social interaction*

Item	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I am undecided	I mostly agree	I completely agree
TikTok allows me to learn more about the activities of other people.	17%	14,1%	23,7%	31,9%	13,3%
TikTok allows me to find material or topics for conversation with others.	43%	18,5%	17,8%	16,3%	4,4%
TikTok helps me fulfill social roles.	48,9%	24,4%	16,3%	8,1%	2,2%

TikTok helps me to connect with family, friends, and the community.	57%	18,5%	13,3%	6,7%	3,7%

Based on the distribution of responses regarding the items in the questionnaire section that examines the motive of social integration and interaction, one-third of the respondents use TikTok to inform themselves about the activities of other people (44.9%). This data supports the argument that in the participatory culture of users in Serbia, a passive style of using social networks still dominates, with a reluctance towards producing content. Such an attitude is evident in the consumption of content that others post, while very few respondents take the step towards active participation.

Table 5: *Distribution of responses regarding the entertainment motive*

Item	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I am undecided	I mostly agree	I completely agree
TikTok helps me escape from problems.	59,3%	17,8%	10,4%	8,9%	3,7%
I use TikTok to relax.	18,5%	5,2%	16,3%	28,9%	31,1%
I use TikTok to achieve peace and satisfy the need for aesthetics.	37%	21,5%	18,5%	15,6%	7,4%
I use TikTok to fill my free time.	17%	13,3%	11,9%	25,9%	31,9%
I use TikTok to regulate my emotions.	68,1%	16,3%	11,1%	2,2%	2,2%

Table 5 provides information about the types of behavior directed towards entertainment that are facilitated through the use of TikTok. Among them, leading needs such as relaxation and filling leisure time have the strongest relationship with

TikTok. Nearly half of the respondents (60%) agree with the statement that they use TikTok for relaxation as a form of entertainment, and 57.8% of the respondents use TikTok content to fill their free time. Enjoying what TikTok offers with minimal effort and without engaging in activities that require more effort, such as content creation, is in line with the findings of the research conducted by the Center for Media and Media Research at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade. Their research, conducted in 2020, showed that the highest percentage of respondents in the online environment most often rate, like, or mark as favorite a news article, indicating that activities requiring minimal engagement dominate the online space[9].

Table 6: *Distribution of responses regarding the motive of self-expression*

Item	I completely disagree	I mostly disagree	I am undecided	I mostly agree	I completely agree
I use TikTok to showcase my personality, who I am.	78,5%	7,4%	5,9%	3%	5,2%
I use TikTok to show my interests, hobbies, and talents to others.	64,4%	18,5%	6,7%	4,4%	5,9%
I use TikTok to express my lifestyle, values, and opinions.	63,7%	17%	9,6%	5,9%	3,7%
I use TikTok to promote my business or profession and express my professional identity.	75,6%	5,2%	5,9%	5,2%	8,1%

The lack of a need to express one's own views, opinions, values, feelings, as well as personal and professional identity on TikTok is prevalent among the respondents in the sample of this research. Such data can be explained by the existing habit of concealing one's beliefs and opinions, as well as anything that represents one's authentic self, as seen on other social networks. This phenomenon can be attributed to the dominant culture in Serbia, where for decades there has been a tendency not to express personal views but rather the collective opinion, i.e., the opinion of the majority. Since any critical and analytical thinking about social events is met with condemnation from certain groups of people on social media, it can be expected that this trend of passive observation, reading, and occasional but

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[9] https://centarzamedije.fpn.bg.ac.rs/informisanje-u-digitalnom-okruzenju-u-srbiji/

controlled commenting on others' content will become ingrained in the behavior of users on all social networks. Therefore, user passivity is an expected outcome in an environment that disapproves of any authentic and creative thought.

Conclusion

The extensive usage of social media platforms as venues for engagement, communication, entertainment, and information seems to be falling short of their potential. The social media landscape has undergone changes recently, and these changes are a reflection of user interests that are more drawn to short video formats. When TikTok became one of the most popular platforms in 2016, the social media landscape underwent a change as a result of the ability to communicate a variety of content through extremely short video materials. TikTok is a network whose app is downloaded by a lot more users on a monthly basis compared to other networks like Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, which have more users overall[10]. Considering that these are platforms that provide users with opportunities to fulfill various needs, from communication and interaction with others to information, entertainment, and self-expression, the data obtained from this research offer significant insights into the motivation of users in the sample. The leading motivations among the five categories are the informational motive, the motive for social integration and interaction, and the entertainment motive. Interests represent one of the key reasons for joining TikTok, as this platform is seen as a source of significant information that aligns with the needs and hobbies of the respondents (55.7%). Learning about the activities of other people on TikTok is another reason for joining this network (44.9%). In the realm of entertainment, the need for relaxation (60%) and the need to fill free time with TikTok content (57.8%) dominate. This motivational structure suggests the existence of a passive attitude among the respondents towards the possibilities of this platform. This is manifested through a consumption-oriented approach in which users maintain a position of using others' content rather than engaging in the production of their own content. Considering that respondents more often follow others, seek content on TikTok that relaxes them, and use the network to fill their free time through continuous usage, these results may lead to several conclusions. First and foremost, TikTok is not perceived as a safe space where users can freely express themselves. Hence, the majority of respondents hardly publish anything about their personal beliefs, feelings, needs, ideas, and do not use this social network to discover their own identity. Hiding behind the position of a passive consumer also reflects a trend observed on other networks, which involves minimal user participation, mainly in the form of liking or disliking, less frequently commenting, and very rarely sharing and/or producing authentic content. The reason for such an attitude towards any social network, including TikTok, can be linked to a non-critical stance, resistance

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[10] For more information on these statistical data please visit: https://datareportal.com/social-media-users

to publicly expressing personal beliefs and opinions, as well as the reluctance to showcase creativity and authenticity in any online segment, especially on a platform that involves physical presence in video content. Therefore, the non-constructive practice of hiding behind watching and following other people's content, which minimally reveals users, may have its roots in a social environment that does not encourage diversity but rather reinforces existing dominant views of social reality. A social environment that does not nurture and stimulate genuine participation may contribute to the creation of passive consumers liberated from the "weight" of critical thinking and analysis towards everything. This can lead to the development of masses of apathetic, uninterested individuals who do not create different content but instead align themselves with the popular wave of mediocre and non-creative content devoid of any inventiveness.

This study focuses on examining the dominant needs of a sample of students from the Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, providing insights into the researched topic. However, it does not address the motivational profile of other demographic groups. Future research should aim to include different age groups, which might reveal a different structure of needs concerning TikTok content. Moreover, while quantitative research offers insight into common characteristics of respondents' needs in the sample, qualitative methodology, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups, would add additional value to the topic under investigation. Additionally, considering other dimensions of motivation would contribute further to understanding the needs satisfied on TikTok.

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Motivi upotrebe društvene mreže Tiktok
iz perspektive teorije koristi i zadovoljstva

Ivana Stamenković
Marta Mitrović
Departman za komunikologiju i novinarstvo,
Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Nišu, Srbija

Apstrakt

Početak XXI veka obeležen je korenitim promenama komunikacijske svakodnevice. Osim platformi za komunikaciju, društvene mreže postale su vodeći generator stavova, ideja, mišljenja i afekata, pogotovo među mlađom populacijom. Okolnosti pandemije koronavirusa dodatno su stimulisale popularnost pojedinih društvenih mreža,

međe kojima je na prvom mestu Tiktok (Fratila, 2021; Kennedy, 2020). Prethodna istraživanja su pokazala da postoji čitav motivacioni spektar upotrebe društvene mreže Tiktok, poput zabave, koja se nalazi na prvom mestu, zatim društvene interakcije i povezivanja. Takođe, društvene mreže se često koriste radi ispunjavanja slobodnog vremena, radi samoizražavanja, arhiviranja, eskapizma, učenja novih veština, za praćenje slavnih ličnosti i influensera, trendova i slično (Berthon et al., 2008; Muntinga et al., 2011; Omar & Dequan, 2020; Yaqi, Lee & Liu, 2021; Khairul Nuzuli, 2022). Cilj ovog rada je ispitati dominantne načine upotrebe društvene mreže Tiktok. Uzorak čini 135 studenata Filozofskog fakulteta Univerziteta u Nišu. Metoda prikupljanja podataka je upitnik. On obuhvata stavke koje su određeni istraživači razvili i koristili u ranijim studijama (Omar & Dequan, 2020; Khairul Nuzuli, 2022), a kojima se razmatra pet kategorija motiva: informacija, lični identitet, interakcija i društvena integracija, zabava i samoizražavanje. Teorijski okvir rada čini pristup koristi i zadovoljstva koji će poslužiti za interpretaciju rezultata.

Ključne reči: društvene mreže, tikotok, motivi upotrebe, korist i zadovoljstvo, mladi

23

Unraveling the Narrative Structures in YouTube Vlogs: A Qualitative Content Analysis

Andrea Vlahović[1],
Faculty of Social Sciences, University Business Academy
in Novi Sad, Serbia
Ivana Ercegovac,
Faculty of Applied Media, Fujairah Women's College,
Higher Colleges of Technology, UAE
Mirjana Tankosić,
Faculty of Social Sciences, University Business Academy
in Novi Sad, Serbia

Abstract

Vlogging, a primary content form on YouTube, employs the power of narrative to engage audiences and convey meanings. This research undertakes an exploration of the narrative structures within YouTube vlogs across various genres, providing insights into how these narratives are constructed and the implications they hold for audience engagement and perception. By leveraging a qualitative content analysis methodology, a diverse set of vlogs was selected, a coding scheme was developed to classify different aspects of narrative structure, and an in-depth analysis was conducted. The findings reveal a dynamic interplay of narrative elements that heighten viewer engagement and shape perceptions. Also, the research discusses how these narrative structures contribute to the semantics of the vlogs, bringing to light the subtleties of message conveyance and storytelling in this digital medium. The research unveils the semiotic richness of vlogs, elucidating how signs and symbols are used within narratives to create deeper meanings. The study uncovers key findings, including the prevalent narrative elements, the strategic use of semantics and semiotics, diverse imagery choices, emotional tones, and audience engagement tactics, offering valuable insights for content creators and researchers in understanding YouTube vlogs' narrative complexities. This study contributes to a nuanced understanding of digital storytelling on YouTube, offering valuable insights for content creators, researchers, and digital media strategists.

Keywords: YouTube Vlogs, Narrative Structures, Digital Storytelling, Semiotics, Semantics, Audience Engagement

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[1] Corresponding author: vlahovicandrea@yahoo.com

Unraveling the Narrative Structures in YouTube Vlogs:
A Qualitative Content Analysis

Introduction

As a groundbreaking medium for storytelling and information sharing, YouTube ushered in a new era of user-generated content in 2005. Vlogging, or video blogging, has become a prominent form of content on YouTube, leveraging the power of narrative to captivate audiences and convey meanings. The narratives within these vlogs are not random; they are carefully crafted structures that play a pivotal role in audience engagement and perception (Tripathi et al, 2022). However, the underlying mechanics of these narrative structures, and their implications in terms of semantics and semiotics, are areas that warrant further exploration. Understanding the semantics and semiotics within the narrative structures of vlogs is crucial for a deeper comprehension of these digital narratives for several reasons:

Complexity of Meaning: Semantics pertains to the study of meaning in language and visual elements (Palmer, 1981). Within vlog narratives, semantics assists in decoding complex messages and deeper meanings that vloggers intend to convey. Understanding semantics enables analysts to interpret how language and visuals shape the perception of vlogs.

Creating Deeper Messages: Semiotics, dealing with the study of signs and symbols, plays an important role in vlogs. Vloggers employ visual elements, symbols, and signs to create deeper meaning beyond verbal expressions (Stoker-Walker, 2021). Understanding semiotics allows analysts to identify how visual elements are used to add depth and complexity to vlogs.

Influencing Viewer Perception: Vlog narratives often aim to shape viewers' perception (Luong & Ho, 2023; Ercegovac et al., 2022). Understanding semantics and semiotics helps analysts uncover how specific linguistic or visual techniques impact how viewers experience and interpret vlog content.

Creative Analysis: By analyzing the semantics and semiotics within narrative structures, researchers can discover creative strategies vloggers use to engage their audience. This understanding assists researchers in better assessing the effectiveness of various narrative techniques.

In essence, semantics and semiotics make in-depth analysis of vlog narratives possible, enabling researchers to uncover hidden layers of meaning and understand how vloggers use language and symbols to shape the narrative perception of their viewers.

The study as a part of a wider study of narrative structures in YouTube vlogs is significant as it offers a lens through which to understand the strategies employed by content creators to engage their audience. Understanding the semiotics and semantics embedded within these structures can provide insights into how meanings are created and interpreted within this digital space. This is crucial given the influence of YouTube as a social media platform and the role it plays in shaping the online culture and public discourse (Ercegovac, 2014; 2017a).

The primary objective of this study is to unravel the narrative structures within YouTube vlogs across various genres, to understand how these narratives are constructed and the implications they hold for audience engagement and perception. Further, it aims to explore how these narrative structures contribute to the semantics of the vlogs, and to elucidate the semiotic richness of vlogs. The central research question guiding this study is how narrative structures in YouTube vlogs across various genres are constructed and what implications these structures have for semantics, semiotics, and audience engagement and perception.

This research employs a qualitative content analysis methodology to address the research question. This approach allows for a systematic examination of the narrative structures within YouTube vlogs, providing a comprehensive understanding of their construction and implications. A diverse set of vlogs across different genres will be selected to ensure that a wide range of narratives are represented. A coding scheme will be developed to classify different aspects of narrative structure, allowing for an in-depth analysis of each vlog. Through this process, the study will reveal the dynamic interplay of narrative elements that enhance viewer engagement and shape perceptions, while also highlighting the semiotic and semantic richness of these narratives.

Literature Review

Vlogs, a portmanteau of 'video' and 'blogs', have become a staple of YouTube content. As a user-generated form of media (Tankosić & Grbic, 2022), vlogs offer unique perspectives and narratives that have transformed the landscape of online content consumption (Uricchio, 2009). They give the audience a window into the lives of content creators, allowing them to connect with viewers in an intimate and authentic manner (Burgess & Green, 2018). With the role of opinion leaders in online society that the influencing vloggers have (Ercegovac, 2017b; Ercegovac et al. 2022), these personal narratives, shared through the lens of the vlogger, have reshaped the relationship between content creators and their audience, making it a significant area of study.

Narrative structures play a critical role in digital storytelling, especially in vlogs. They help organize the content and guide the viewer through the story, thereby enhancing the viewing experience (Ryan, 2015). Research indicates that well-structured narratives can significantly increase audience engagement (Alexander, 2011). They also help content creators convey complex meanings, making them an essential tool in digital storytelling (Jenkins, 2009). Stokel-Walker (2021), in his book "YouTubers", analyzes the narrative styles of YouTube influencers and their methods of maximizing viewer engagement. Additionally, Van Dijck's work (2007; 2013) on the evolution of content creation and consumption on YouTube provides insights into the development of narrative structures over time. Exploring these narrative structures within the context of YouTube vlogs can thus provide valuable insights into their effectiveness and impact on audience perception.

Semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, and semantics, the study of meaning in language, are vital components of vlogging content. Vloggers often use signs and symbols to communicate deeper meanings, making semiotics a powerful tool in their storytelling arsenal (Chandler, 2022). Similarly, the semantics of vlogs—how language and images are used to convey meaning—plays a crucial role in shaping viewer understanding and perception (Van Leeuwen, 2001).

Narrative structures refer to the organization and framework that underlie storytelling, outlining how a story is constructed, the elements it comprises, and the sequence in which they are presented (Abbott, 2008). These structures are indispensable for crafting narratives that captivate and maintain coherence across various mediums such as text, speech, and visuals (Ryan, 2004). Understanding narrative structures involves deciphering key components of storytelling, such as exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement (Prince, 1982). Comprehending how these elements collaboratively craft a compelling narrative arc is crucial in holding the audience's attention and guiding them through the unfolding story (Sternberg, 1978).

In-depth research into narrative structures necessitates the exploration and analysis of a spectrum of storytelling techniques, genres, and media, identifying prevalent patterns and conventions (Abbott, 2008). Investigating how various narrative structures influence aspects such as audience engagement, emotional impact, and the conveyance of themes and messages is fundamental (Ryan, 2004). Semantics and semiotics are the main elements of narrative structures. Semantics, concentrating on the meaning encapsulated within language and symbols, intertwines with narrative structures, shaping storytelling (Trask, 1999). Semiotics, as explored by Eco (1979), delves into the interpretation of signs and symbols, illuminating their capacity to impart profound, multifaceted meanings within narratives. Eco's insights into semiotics elucidate the interconnectedness of signs and symbols with narrative structures, emphasizing their collective significance in the effective communication of narratives. Understanding this interrelationship is quintessential for both the creators and analyzers of narratives, spotlighting the mechanisms through which storytelling is imbued with meaningfulness and resonance.

Ercegovac's study on the adaptation of traditional television formats into user-generated content on YouTube (2022) and Lotz's examination of the transformation of television in the digital era (2014) provide insights into how semiotics and semantics are employed in vlogs. Examining these aspects in the context of vlogs can illuminate the subtleties of message conveyance and storytelling in this digital medium.

Audience engagement and perception are significantly influenced by the narrative structures of vlogs. Engaging narrative structures can foster a strong connection between the content creator (vlogger) and the viewer (Ross, 2011; Vittadini et al. 2013), leading to higher audience retention and interaction. Similarly, the perception of the vlog content is largely shaped by how the narrative is structured and presented (Lindgren, 2021). Understanding these dynamics can offer valuable insights into how to effectively engage viewers and shape their perceptions through the power of narrative.

Methodology

Qualitative content analysis, as a research method, enables the subjective interpretation of textual data through a systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The qualitative content analysis employed in this study is designed to be inductive, allowing the research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data (Thomas, 2006). The qualitative aspect of the analysis entails a detailed examination of the narrative structures in vlogs, drawing out their implications on semantics, semiotics, and audience engagement.

To ensure a wide representation of narrative structures, vlogs from various genres on YouTube will be selected. These genres include lifestyle, gaming, beauty and fashion, travel, education, health and fitness, food, tech reviews, and daily vlogs. The selection will involve choosing vlogs that have been posted within the last year, have at least 10,000 views, and come from creators with a minimum of 50,000 subscribers to ensure the vlogs are from active and relatively influential creators. Approximately 5 vlogs from each genre will be randomly selected, totaling about 45 vlogs. This sample size will provide a broad view of narrative structures while ensuring the manageability of data for qualitative analysis.

To conduct the qualitative content analysis (Tankosić et al. 2017), a coding scheme which will serve as a guideline for the classification and interpretation of narrative structures within the selected vlogs will be developed. The scheme will include codes related to narrative elements such as introduction, problem or conflict, climax, resolution, and conclusion, as these are core elements of traditional narrative structures (Labov & Waletzky, 1967). Codes relating to semiotics and semantics, including the use of signs, symbols, language, and imagery will be developed too. Specific codes will also be established to capture elements relating to audience engagement such as calls to action, questions, direct addresses to the audience, and use of viewer-generated content. As the analysis progresses, additional codes may emerge and be included in the coding scheme.

The process of qualitative content analysis will begin with a careful viewing and transcription of each selected vlog. The transcripts will be used to gain an in-depth understanding of the content, and the videos will be watched to discover visual elements for particular categories. Following this, the coding scheme will be applied to each transcript and its video, with segments of text and visuals being categorized according to the established codes. This process will facilitate the organization of data and the identification of patterns and themes. Once coding is complete, the coded segments will be analyzed to explore the construction and implications of narrative structures within the vlogs. This analysis will consider the frequency, relationships, patterns, and trends of the coded segments to draw out meaningful insights regarding narrative structures, semiotics, semantics, and audience engagement and perception.

To provide a more precise explanation of this analysis framework, it is important to clarify what is encompassed by the codes assigned to the elements of narrative structure for both text and video recordings. The codes related to narrative

elements include key components such as introduction, problem or conflict, climax, resolution, and conclusion. These elements are central to traditional narrative structures, as established by Labov and Waletzky (1967). The framework incorporates codes related to semiotics and semantics, encompassing the use of signs, symbols, language, and imagery within the narratives. Specific codes are established to capture elements associated with audience engagement, including calls to action, questions, direct addresses to the audience, and the utilization of viewer-generated content. The selection of these particular codes is based on their significance in understanding the overall narrative structures and their potential impact on audience engagement and perception. These codes provide a comprehensive framework for the systematic classification and interpretation of narrative structures within both text and video vlogs.

Regarding the rationale for explaining only a subset of categories within the broader narrative structure, the decision is guided by the need to focus on the most salient and relevant elements for the research objectives. The criteria for selection are based on their potential to shed light on the research questions and goals effectively. This approach ensures a manageable and focused analysis that yields meaningful insights while maintaining the feasibility of data handling.

Findings

Across the sample vlogs, several distinct narrative elements were identified. The Analytical Framework for Identifying Narrative Structures (Table 1) provided a structured approach to understanding how vloggers construct their narrative content. This framework aided in recognizing recurring elements that contribute to viewer engagement and message conveyance.

Table 1: *Analytical Framework for Identifying Narrative Structures*

Narrative Structure Element	Description and Examples
Introduction	Greeting, topic introduction.
Conflict/Issue	Central event or challenge.
Development/Resolution	Steps taken to address the conflict/issue.
Climax	Unexpected twist, height of tension.
Conclusion	Recap and reflection.
Audience Engagement	Questions, calls to action.
Semantic Elements	Language, imagery, symbolism.
Semiotic Elements	Visual cues, props, symbols.

Within Table 1 various elements were found to be prevalent in the vlogs, aligning with the core components of narrative structure. For instance, the "personal experience" emerged as a recurring element that anchors the narrative within the context of the vlogger's life (Huh et al. 2014), often weaving anecdotes into the overarching storyline. The presence of "audience address" was also notable; vloggers

directly spoke to their audience, inviting them into a conversation or sharing personal insights. Elements such as the "call to action", where viewers were asked to interact, and "teasers" hinting at future content, were also commonly found across various genres. Interestingly, gaming vlogs uniquely incorporated "challenge narratives", where the vlogger attempts to overcome difficulties in the game, thereby adding suspense to the storyline. This identification of narrative elements within the vlogs was made possible through the systematic application of the analytical framework, shedding light on the complex layers of storytelling present in YouTube vlogs.

Table 2: *Complete coding scheme*

Category	Codes	Subcategory	Description	Examples
Narrative	1	Personal story	The vlogger shares personal experiences or stories	Talking about their day, sharing a personal experience
	2	Day-in-life	The vlogger shares a typical day or a special day in their life	Morning routine, a day at work, a day of travel
	3	Travel adventure	The vlogger shares experiences from a trip or an adventure	Visiting a new city or a country, going on a hike,
	4	Product or service review	The vlogger reviews a product or service	Reviewing a gadget, a makeup product, a restaurant
	5	DIY	The vlogger explains how to make or do something	Cooking a meal, fixing a car, making a product at home
	6	Educational	The vlogger offers knowledge and expertise in a certain area	History, art, math, media literacy, science, photography, cars, fitness, digital marketing, nutrition
	7	Professional advice	The vlogger offers the advice on how to act in certain situations	How to create social media campaigns, how to eat healthier, how to style your hair according to the face shape, how to preserve the motor in your car during the wintertime.

Patterns	1-0	Recurring themes Y/N	Themes or topics that recur across multiple vlogs of the same author	Fitness, technology, fashion.
SIGNS AND SYMBOLS	1	Logos and brands	Presence of specific logos or brands	Clothing brands, tech gadgets
	2	Visual motifs	Recurring visual elements or styles	Specific camera angles, color themes, relevant product placement, settings of the area according to topic or the genre.
	3	Editing styles	Distinctive ways of editing videos	Fast cuts, slow-motion scenes, use of music
Language	1	Use of informal language	Use of informal, colloquial language or slang	"Hey guys", "What's up"
	2	Use of formal language	Use of formal language or jargon	Use of informal vs. formal language
	3-4	Use of humor or sarcasm (informal/ formal)	Presence of humor or sarcasm	Jokes, funny anecdotes
	4	Specific phrases or words	Recurring phrases or words unique to the vlogger	Catchphrases, unique greetings, personalized intro or outro
Imagery	1-2	Urban/rural settings	Depiction of cityscapes or countryside	Shots of city streets, landscapes
	3-4	Indoor/outdoor scenes	Scenes shot indoors or outdoors	Home tour, beach scenes
	5-6	Use of close-ups/ wide shots	Types of camera shots used	Close-ups of the vlogger, wide shots of the surroundings
	7-8	Use of color/ lighting effects	Use of specific color themes or lighting effects	Specific color grading, night scenes
Audience Interaction	1	Calls for likes/ subscriptions	Requests for viewers to like the video or subscribe to the channel	"Don't forget to like and subscribe"

	2	Call for comments	Request for viewers to comment	Asking people for suggestions or to comment certain issue, experience or express feelings
	3	Response to comments	Acknowledgment of or response to viewer comments	Reading out comments, answering questions
	4	Giveaways or Q&A sessions	Conducting giveaways or question-answer sessions	Announcing a giveaway, a Q&A vlog
Production Quality	1	Video/audio quality	Quality of the video and audio	HD video, clear audio
	2	Editing complexity	Complexity and sophistication of the video editing	Use of transitions, overlays
	3	Special effects or animations	Use of special effects or animations	Animated intros, visual effects
EMOTIONAL TONE	0	Regular emotional expression	Dominant emotions expressed in the vlog	Happiness, sadness, excitement
	1	Happy/Cheerful		
	2	Sad		
	3	Sarcastic		
	4	Excited		
	5	Dark		
	6	Funny		
	7	Melancholy		
SOCIAL ISSUES	1	Discussion on current events	The vlogger shares thoughts on social or political events	Discussion of elections, social movements
	2	Advocacy	The vlogger uses their platform to advocate for a cause	Promoting environmental awareness, mental health awareness
COLLABORATION	1	With other YouTubers	The vlogger collaborates with other YouTubers on a video	Joint vlog, challenge video with another YouTuber

	2	With brands	The vlogger collaborates with a brand for a sponsored video	Product review for a brand, sponsored travel vlog
CULTURAL REFERENCES	1	Popular culture	The vlogger references movies, music, TV shows, or internet memes	Quoting a movie line, mentioning a popular song
	2	Traditional culture	The vlogger references traditional or cultural practices	Discussing a holiday tradition, traditional food
PERSONAL BELIEFS	1	Personal values	The vlogger shares their personal beliefs or values	Discussion on the importance of family, hard work
	2	Religious beliefs	The vlogger discusses their religious beliefs	Sharing a religious practice, discussing a religious holiday
VIEWER ENGAGEMENT	1	Viewer challenges	The vlogger involves viewers in a challenge or task	Asking viewers to share a photo, complete a challenge
	2	Polls/Quizzes	The vlogger engages viewers with polls or quizzes	Asking viewers to vote on something, quiz about the vlogger
MONETIZATION	1	Advertisements	Presence of ads in the video	Pre-roll ads, mid-roll ads
	2	Affiliate links	The vlogger shares affiliate links	Links to buy products in the video description
	3	Patreon or other fundraising	The vlogger mentions Patreon or other fundraising platforms	Asking viewers to support them on Patreon

Table 2 presents a full and comprehensive coding scheme developed for the purpose of analyzing various components within the selected YouTube vlogs. Each category and subcategory outlined in the table represents distinct elements that contribute to the overall content and narrative of the vlogs. These elements include narrative patterns, signs, symbols, language use, imagery, audience interaction, production quality, emotional tone, engagement strategies, cultural references, personal beliefs, and more. By employing this structured framework, the research aims to systematically explore and understand the complex layers of vlogging content, shedding light on how these elements collectively contribute to the overall

semantics, semiotics, and aesthetics of the vlogs. For the purposes of this paper several categories have been chosen and analyzed.

Signs and symbols

The presence of signs and symbols in the analyzed vlogs (Lacsina, 2023) is notable. Code 2 appears frequently, indicating the use of visual motifs and recurring visual elements. This suggests that vloggers are intentional in their visual representation, utilizing consistent camera angles, consistent design of the shooting set as well as color themes to enhance the visual experience for viewers. Also, Code 3, which represents distinctive editing styles, is also quite prevalent. This implies that vloggers are employing specific editing techniques such as fast cuts, jump-cuts, frequent change of the shots or slow-motion scenes to create dynamic and engaging content.

Language

The language used in the vlogs showcases a mix of informal and formal styles. Code 1, representing the use of informal language, is frequently observed. This aligns with the conversational and relatable nature of vlogs, as vloggers often use phrases like "Hey guys" to establish a friendly rapport with their audience. Code 4, which signifies the presence of specific phrases or words unique to the vlogger as well as personalized intros and/or outros, also appears frequently. This indicates that vloggers are developing their own catchphrases or personalized greetings to distinguish their content.

Imagery

The analysis of imagery in the vlogs reveals a diverse range of visual elements. Urban and rural settings (Code 1-2) are commonly depicted, suggesting vloggers' engagement with different environments. Indoor and outdoor scenes (Code 3-4) are also frequently observed, reflecting the vloggers' versatility in capturing various settings. The use of close-ups and wide shots (Code 5-6) is prevalent, indicating an intentional visual strategy to highlight both details and broader contexts. Interestingly, Code 7-8, which pertains to the use of color and lighting effects, appears in a substantial number of instances, suggesting that vloggers are attentive to visual aesthetics, applying specific color themes and lighting effects to enhance the visual appeal.

Audience interaction

The analysis of the audience interaction category revealed several noteworthy findings. Vloggers actively engaged with their viewers through calls to action (Code 1), often encouraging them to like, comment, and subscribe, thereby fostering a sense of community and interaction. These strategies have effectively increased viewer interaction by observing a noticeable uptick in likes, comments, and subscriptions

when vloggers issued these calls to action. Vloggers frequently responded to viewer comments (Code 2), creating a dynamic and participatory environment where audience input was acknowledged and integrated into the ongoing narrative. This approach was found to boost interaction levels as evidenced by increased viewer comments and ongoing discussions. Some vloggers organized giveaways or Q&A sessions (Code 3-4), which not only incentivized viewer participation but also strengthened the sense of connection between vloggers and their audience. These interactive elements within the vlogs were found to be highly effective in increasing viewer interaction. The success of these strategies was evident in the heightened engagement levels, including increased entries for giveaways and active participation in Q&A sessions. These findings underscore the vlogger's role as a facilitator of audience interaction and community building within the vlogging platform.

Emotional tone

The emotional tone conveyed in the vlogs is diverse. Code 1, representing a happy and cheerful tone, is frequently observed. This aligns with the positive and upbeat nature of many vlogs, where vloggers often share joyful experiences and interactions. Code 3, indicating a sarcastic tone, appears occasionally, suggesting vloggers' use of humor and irony. Code 0, which represents regular emotional expression, is present in several instances, showcasing the vloggers' genuine sharing of their emotions. The presence of other emotional tones such as excitement (Code 4), funny (Code 6), and melancholy (Code 7) reflects the varied emotional range presented in the vlogs.

The semantics of the vlogs, namely the use of language and images to convey meaning (Sujaya et al. 2023), varied across genres but consistently served to enhance viewer understanding and perception. The study noted the adept use of rhetoric, metaphor, and symbolism to communicate complex ideas. For instance, beauty vloggers used specific jargon and visual demonstrations to articulate makeup techniques (Bhatia, 2023), while travel vloggers used descriptive language and immersive footage to convey (Li & Hayes, 2023) the experience of different locales. The narrative was further enriched using music and sound effects, which subtly influenced the tone and mood of the storytelling.

Vloggers also used semiotics, the study of signs and symbols, to create deeper meanings and communicate on a non-verbal level. Visual elements, such as thumbnails and on-screen graphics, served as signposts to guide viewer expectations (Abbasi et al. 2022). The use of props and settings were also prevalent; these served as symbols, providing additional context and contributing to the overall narrative. For example, in lifestyle vlogs, home settings created a sense of personal intimacy, while in gaming vlogs, the virtual environment of the game served as a significant symbolic element. In fitness vlogs, attire and equipment served as symbols representing the fitness culture. These signs and symbols added a layer of semiotic richness to the vlogs, allowing vloggers to communicate beyond words (Tankosić et al. 2020) and deepen the narrative experience.

Discussion

The study's findings reveal the complexity of narrative structures in YouTube vlogs and their significant influence on viewer engagement and perceptions. The recurrent use of personal experiences, audience address, calls to action, and teasers across vlogs (Haseet al. 2022) suggest that these are fundamental elements of vlogging narratives, contributing to their relatability, interaction, anticipation, and intimacy. These elements are not only instrumental in enhancing viewer engagement but also pivotal in shaping viewer perceptions, leading to stronger viewer-vlogger relationships.

Semantically, vloggers employ a rich arsenal of language and imagery techniques to deliver nuanced messages and stories. The use of jargon, metaphor, symbolism, and music/sound effects all contribute to a compelling storytelling atmosphere that invites viewer understanding and participation. The significant role of signs and symbols in vlogs illustrates the deep semiotic richness in this digital medium. Vloggers use visuals, props, settings, and more as semiotic tools to communicate non-verbally and deepen the narrative experience (Vasudevan & DeJaynes, 2012).

The findings provide valuable insights for content creators, particularly vloggers, on how to construct narratives that enhance viewer engagement and shape perceptions positively. The use of personal experiences, audience address, calls to action, and teasers can be strategically incorporated into their narratives. Semantically, they can leverage language, imagery, music, and sound effects to enrich their storytelling. Understanding and employing semiotics in their content – the use of meaningful signs and symbols – can add depth to their narratives.

For researchers, the study offers a comprehensive understanding of vlogging narratives, semantics, and semiotics, which can be used as a foundation for future research. The methodology used can also be replicated or adapted to study other digital media or narrative structures. For digital media strategists, the research provides insights into the elements that drive engagement and shape perceptions in the context of YouTube vlogs. These insights can be used to develop effective content strategies and guidelines for brands and influencers on YouTube.

This research contributes to the field of digital storytelling by offering an in-depth understanding of the narrative structures in YouTube vlogs, their semantic and semiotic elements, and their implications for audience engagement and perception. It sheds light on the strategies used by vloggers to captivate audiences, convey meanings, and create deep connections. The research also adds to the literature on the semiotics and semantics of digital content, particularly user-generated content. By unraveling the narrative structures in vlogs and illuminating their implications (Rahmeh, 2023), the study provides a valuable lens through which to understand and appreciate the art and power of digital storytelling in the YouTube era.

Conclusion

This study has delved into the narrative structures in YouTube vlogs across various genres, seeking to understand their construction and implications for viewer engagement and perception. It found that personal experiences, audience address, calls to action and teasers, as well as particular language and imagery are common narrative elements across vlogs. These elements enhance viewer engagement, which could further lead into shaping viewer perceptions, fostering a sense of authenticity and relatability. In terms of semantics, the study found that vloggers use language, imagery, music, and sound effects strategically to convey nuanced messages and enrich their storytelling.

The study also revealed the significant role of semiotics in vlogs, where visual elements, props, and settings serve as signs and symbols, adding a layer of meaning beyond the verbal narrative. These findings offer valuable insights for content creators, researchers, and digital media strategists and contribute to the field of digital storytelling by highlighting the strategies vloggers use to engage audiences and convey meanings in this digital medium.

One limitation of this study is that it analyzed vlogs across various genres, and did not examine genre-specific narrative structures. Future research could delve into this aspect to understand how narrative structures may differ based on the genre of the vlog. Another limitation is that this study examined narrative structures from the content creators' perspective. A viewer-centric study could be conducted to understand how audiences interpret and react to different narrative elements. This could provide additional insights into viewer engagement and perceptions.

As the field of digital storytelling continues to evolve, longitudinal studies could be conducted to understand how vlogging narratives adapt and change over time in response to shifting viewer preferences and technological advancements. Such research could contribute to the ongoing exploration of digital storytelling and its impact on audience engagement and perception.

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Razotkrivanje narativnih struktura u Jutjub vlogovima: kvalitativna analiza sadržaja

Andrea Vlahović,
Fakultet društvenih nauka, Univerzitet privredna akademija
u Novom Sadu, Srbija
Ivana Ercegovac,
Fakultet primenjenih medija, ženski kampus u Fudžeiri,
Viši tehnološki koledži, Ujedinjeni Arapski Emirati
Mirjana Tankosić,
Fakultet društvenih nauka, Univerzitet privredna akademija
u Novom Sadu, Srbija

Apstrakt

Vlogovanje, kao primarni oblik sadržaja na Jutjubu, koristi snagu narativa za angažovanje publike i prenošenje značenja. Ovaj rad istražuje narativne strukture unutar Jutjub vlogova kroz različite žanrove, pružajući uvid u to kako su ovi narativi konstruisani i koje implikacije imaju za angažovanje i percepciju publike. Koristeći

metodologiju kvalitativne analize sadržaja, izabran je raznovrstan skup vlogova, razvijena je šema kodiranja za klasifikaciju različitih aspekata narativne strukture, i sprovedena je dubinska analiza. Nalazi otkrivaju dinamičnu interakciju narativnih elemenata koji pojačavaju angažovanje gledalaca i oblikuju njihovu percepciju. Takođe, istraživanje ukazuje na to kako ove narativne strukture doprinose semantici vlogova i ukazuju na suptilnost prenošenja poruka i pripovedanja u ovom digitalnom mediju. Istraživanje otkriva semiotičko bogatstvo vlogova i objašnjava kako se znakovi i simboli koriste unutar narativa za stvaranje dubljih značenja. Studija otkriva važne nalaze, uključujući preovladavajuće narativne elemente, stratešku upotrebu semantike i semiotike, raznovrsne izbore vizuelnih elemenata, emocionalne izraze i taktike angažovanja publike, nudeći vredne uvide za kreatore sadržaja i istraživače u razumevanju narativnih kompleksnosti Jutjub vlogova. Ovo istraživanje doprinosi detaljnom razumevanju digitalnog pripovedanja na Jutjubu, nudeći vredne uvide za kreatore sadržaja, istraživače i profesionalce koji se bave digitalnim medijima.

Keywords in Serbian (Italic): Jutjub vlogovi, Narativne strukture, Digitalno pripovedanje, Semiotika, Semantika, Angažovanje publike

Ukrainian Crisis on Twitter:
Sentiment Analysis - Possible Interpretations[1]

Svetlana Slijepčević Bjelivuk[2][3],
Institute for the Serbian Language of SASA, Serbia

Abstract

The mass use of social media has enabled users to reach out and share opinions, attitudes, and emotions on various topics - current events in particular - almost instantly. In this paper, we analyze the attitudes of Serbian speakers toward Russia and Russians during the ongoing war in Ukraine, based on the material obtained using an application for collecting and processing comments on Twitter. The study covers the period from February to September 2022. Starting with the assumption that Twitter users tend to be freer and more spontaneous in expressing their views compared to users of other social media (Facebook, Instagram, etc.), about 11,000 tweets were collected using the BigBoxData application based on keywords (Russia, Ukraine, war, special operation, Putin, Zelensky...), and were subsequently manually filtered and annotated. The goal was to find out if and how the attitudes of Serbian speakers toward Russia and Russians have changed with the ongoing war in Ukraine compared to associations and stereotypes toward Russia and Russians reported in previous papers. The combination of qualitative (positive, negative, and neutral sentiment) and quantitative (percentage share of each of the three sentiments) sentiment analysis showed that the attitudes of Serbian speakers toward Russia and Russians have changed compared to the previous period (using as a reference the Associative Dictionary of the Serbian language and the Reverse associative dictionary of the Serbian language, both of which report extremely positive associations). The methods used in this study and the research results can serve for further research and attitude change within the crisis discourse on social media and the Internet in general.

Keywords: crisis discourse, social media, stereotypes

[2] Corresponding author: s.slijepcevic@gmail.com

[3] ORCID: 0000-0002-9528-1970

Ukrainian Crisis on Twitter:
Sentiment Analysis - Possible Interpretations

Introduction

The widespread use of social media has enabled users to express and disseminate their opinions, attitudes, and emotions on the widest possible range of topics, particularly regarding current events. Twitter, in particular, stands out for having served in recent times as a platform for both spontaneous and planned clashes among political figures, public personalities, and anonymous citizens (Zuckerman, 2013). In this regard, this social medium represents a valuable resource for studying the attitudes of Serbian language speakers on various current topics. After the coronavirus pandemic, a new major social crisis emerged: the war in Ukraine. In this paper, we analyze the attitudes of Serbian language speakers toward Russia and Russians during the war in Ukraine, based on the material collected through an application designed for gathering and processing comments on Twitter. In this study we have aimed to incorporate both a broader (global) and narrower (local, domestic) social context, while considering them in relation to the social and political activities in question, we consider critical discourse analysis to be a suitable framework for this type of investigation. Persuasive and manipulative objectives are often pursued by specific linguistic-stylistic means both in crisis discourse, and in the political discourse that invariably accompanies it. These objectives are achieved through word choice, word order, pronoun use, and employment of metaphors and metaphorical extensions, as already evidenced across materials in various languages and within diverse crisis corpora, such as the financial crisis (e.g., Silaški, Đurović 2011), the political crisis (Musolff 2016), the pandemic (Nikolić, Slijepčević 2022), and so forth.

It is important, moreover, to note that, in methodological terms, when applying sentiment analysis to tweets, numerous issues arise the specificity of which derives from the distinctive nature of the tweet itself: we are dealing with a very concise form (constrained by character count), frequently containing emoticons, often elicited by other tweets (a response to a preceding comment), and so forth.

The primary objective of this study is to examine whether the attitudes of Serbian language speakers toward Russia and Russians have changed compared to the period preceding the crisis. The secondary objective of the study is to explore the possibilities and limitations of sentiment analysis in discourse research on social media in the Serbian language. In this regard, attention was drawn to linguistic-stylistic means and linguistic procedures of distinctive function.

Serbian-Russian relations are traditionally considered friendly and warm. This is confirmed by research based on the Serbian language corpus, wherein the Russian stereotype is characterized as stable and positive, and based on tradition: "Mutual contacts and relations between Serbs and Russians are based on a common Slavic heritage and a shared Orthodox faith, reaching far into the past. More immediate connections were established in the late 17th, and the 18th century, following the great migrations of Serbs from Kosovo, Metohija, and North Macedonia" (Lazić Konjik, Ristić 2020: 164).

Starting from February 24, 2022, the armed forces of the Russian Federation have been conducting missile strikes on military targets within the territory of Ukraine, while ground forces have entered the Donbas region. Russia asserts that this is a special operation aiming at the denazification and demilitarization of Ukraine, as well as the protection of the residents of Donbas, whom Ukrainian authorities purportedly subjected to genocide for the past eight years. The Ukrainian government, on the other hand, views this as an act of aggression.

Initial media studies suggest that in their coverage of the war in Ukraine, the pro-regime media have aligned themselves with Russia, often attributing blame to the United States and NATO (e.g., CRTA, and later Drašković 2022: 189). These comparative analyses of informative broadcasts on the N1 and RTS TV stations conclude that the discourse is oriented toward assigning blame, singling out victims, characterization and the like, more so than toward information dissemination, thereby enabling manipulation, but it was not research of attitudes. Investigations into the attitudes of Serbian language speakers toward Russians based on cognitive ethnolinguistics, as illustrated by the works of I. Lazić Konjik and Stana Ristić, were considered as comparative elements for this type of analysis, along with associative fields from the Associative Dictionary of the Serbian Language. In connection with this aim, it was crucial to delineate the mechanisms and concepts that played a role in the formation of a positive or negative stance toward Russia and Russians.

The ethno-cognitive school equates the term "concept" with the notion of a stereotype and describes the stereotype of Russians in the Serbian language within this framework. However, seeing as we are reevaluating the existing stereotype in this study, we refer to a stereotype as a collective perception and understanding of phenomena within a socio-linguistic community (which is largely reflected in the vocabulary and phraseology). The term "concept" encompasses a representation that can be negatively or positively characterized but does not necessarily have to be stereotyped. The mechanisms involved in constructing a concept are common cognitive mechanisms: metaphor and metonymy, and often personification (according to the determinations of cognitive-linguistic schools).

Methodology

The study examines the period from the onset of the war in Ukraine, specifically from the end of February, to September 1, 2022. Proceeding from the assumption that Twitter users, given the choice to communicate under pseudonym if desired, tend to be more unrestrained and spontaneous in expressing their viewpoints compared to users of other social networks (Facebook, Instagram etc.), we employed the BigBoxData application to collect approximately 10,993 tweets based on keywords (Russia, Ukraine, war, special operation, Putin, Zelensky, Donbas). It is also worth noting that this analysis was conducted on a social medium known for often magnifying the negative side of things (Blazsetin 2022).

The researchers identify five phases of sentiment analysis (Lui 2012; Ivaninić 2021; Blazsetin 2022), which we applied in the research:

1. Data Collection (raw, unstructured data);
2. Text Preparation and Pre-analysis Cleaning;
3. To establish categories, it is necessary to discard sentences that are objective and strictly informative, containing facts, and retain those expressing personal opinions, emotions, beliefs, etc.;
4. Assign categories to the extracted sentiment: positive, negative, neutral;
5. Present the results using graphs.

During the initial phase of the research, the BigBoxData application collected tweets. The keywords were searched for as hashtags as well as within the texts of the tweets. As certain words are visually similar across multiple languages, tweets from German, Albanian, Croatian, and even Hungarian-speaking regions were also gathered. The filtration process involved discarding comments that were collected by the algorithm but did not belong to the Serbian language, duplicate comments, as well as insufficiently informative ones or those not aligned with the research topic (e.g., "Vucic said PRIDE WON'T HAPPEN, even if Biden and Putin call him themselves; You will be responsible for War and Peace (I do not mean the readers' section); I implore you, for God's sake, do not turn to your people, I survived one war, enough for a thousand lifetimes, etc.").

After the filtration process, 864 comments remained that correspond to the subject of our research (i.e., less than 10% usability).

Annotation was conducted on several levels: sentiment analysis, linguistic-stylistic means within microgenres, metaphorical scenarios (from a cognitive-linguistic perspective). The present study focuses on sentiment analysis. All tweets were annotated manually.

As established in the literature, sentiment analysis pertains to the study of opinions, attitudes, and emotions toward individuals, issues, events, and phenomena (Liu 2011: 474). In our study, sentiment is determined at the level of an individual tweet (comment), and the primary criterion is based on lexicon and pragmatics (word choice and contextual meaning). While categories of positive, negative, and neutral sentiment tend to be presented as distinct and well-defined in scholarly and scientific literature, in practice, there are often transitional categories between them, and their boundaries are fluid. Sentiments were classified based on the following discursive and linguistic-stylistic markers: lexicon type (for instance, negatively marked lexicon, swear words, and vulgar expressions reflecting a negative attitude toward Russia and the Russian people indicated negative sentiment), hyperbole, sarcasm, irony (depending on the target, whether directed toward Russia or Ukraine, also determined the type of sentiment), formulations of encouragement, cheering, support, admiration (likewise contingent on the recipient). In the following example, an ironic statement is made to the effect that Russia is the second strongest military power in Ukraine, preceded by a statement that positively portrays Russia as the second military power in the world. However, it remains unclear whether this irony

laments past times or acknowledges that the war in Ukraine is indicative of a new order that is better than the previous one: "Rusija je pre rata slovila za drugu vojnu silu u svetu i sada je je druga vojna sila ali u Ukrajini!" (Before this war, Russia was considered the second military power in the world, and it's still the second military power, but in Ukraine!). With this in mind, we tried hard to assign only one sentiment category to each comment, based on the dominance criterion.

Results

Sentiment analysis on the collected and filtered corpus yielded the following distribution: 326 tweets were found to be positive (38.58%), 459 negative tweets, slightly more than half (54.32%), and 60 tweets showed neutral sentiment (only 7.10% of tweets). While negative sentiment dominates, we can conclude that this dominance is relatively weak.
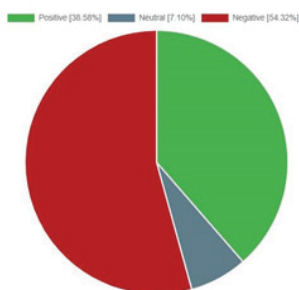

Figure 1: *Sentiment analysis*

Analysis

Our research of the Ukrainian crisis shows that the negative sentiment is constructed metonymically, mainly by equating Putin with the entire Russian people, as exemplified by statements like "Trenutno je najveći tiranin na svetu Putin i Rusija. Tačno zlu treba stati za vrat." (Currently, Putin and Russia are the biggest tyrants in the world. Evil really does have to be trampled down.). Negative sentiment is also constructed by way of critiques of political decisions, such as "Pomalo neočekivan osvrt na kontekst u kojem je rusko društvo pripremano za ono što Putin danas definiše kao 'vraćanje a ne otimanje'" (A somewhat unexpected commentary on the context during which Russian society was being prepared for what Putin today defines as 'return rather than seizure'). It is furthermore fostered by suggesting consequences, as, for instance, in "Rusi su bedna stoka, Putin zvani 'kepec' ih je obrukao, da sledecih 200g. nece moci da operu ljagu sa sebe" (The Russians are miserable livestock, Putin 'the dwarf' has disgraced them so badly that they won't be able to wash the dirt off of them for the next 200 years). Lastly, it is considered to be tied to the political situation in Serbia, which will be discussed in further detail later on.

Similar conceptual mechanisms are also employed in the case of positive sentiment: the exaltation and glorification typical of personality cult construction are

metaphorically extended to the entire Russian people metonymically. For instance, "kad Srbija stane na stranu Rusije pa Putin dodje i vrati sve Srpske zemlje pod okrilje Srbije, e pa dabogda se desilo nama." (When Serbia stands with Russia, and Putin comes and returns all Serbian lands to Serbia, well, may God make that happen.) The concept of friendship is a traditional ethnic stereotype. Research indicates that various historical periods during which Serbia and Russia shared diplomatic, military, and especially cultural and religious ties have contributed to the formation of a positive Serbian stereotype about Russians as a fraternal and friendly people (Ristić, Konjik 2020: 165).

Neutral sentiment is characterized by attempts at objective observation, assumptions, and rhetorical questions, such as "Da li je moguća pobeda jedne od strana?" (Is victory possible for either side?) // "Ako bi Rusija izgubila šta bi se desilo s njom." (If Russia were to lose, what would happen to it?) // "Da se ne (za) varavamo ovo u Ukrajini je rat Rusije i NATO-a." (Let's not fool ourselves, the war in Ukraine is between Russia and NATO).

Discussion

When considering the positive associations from the associative fields of Moscow, Russians, and the Russian language in the Associative Dictionary of the Serbian Language, we can infer that the attitude of Serbian speakers has undergone a drastic transformation. The concepts of fraternal and friendly love, warm emotions, and closeness, based on Orthodox Christianity, were activated in the minds of Serbian speakers.

Moscow Russia 228; city 54; winter 48; Kremlin 42; snow 25; coldness 21; church, Red Square 16; vodka 15; cold 14; hotel 13; Russians, square 11; theater 10; Stalin 7; red, vodka 6; Orthodoxy, fig 5; communism, beauty, metro, Russian language, fur hat, size, desire 4; churches, capital city, KGB, ice, vastness, Putin...

Russians vodka 70; folk 50; brothers 36; Russia 28; Moscow 25; winter 22; people 14; Slavs 13; Siberia 12; friends 9; Orthodoxy 8; Serbs 7; language, Orthodox Christians, Russian language, great 6; red, communism, big 5; close, soul, cold, song, blues, blue, width, fur hat 4; good, spirituality, English, east, literature, Kremlin, nation, ours, friendship, strength, snow, USSR, Stalin, Ukrainians, army 3; brother, brotherhood, church, red, good people, state, communists, culture, love, mafiosi, mine, drink, drunkards, pride, friend, downfall, Prussians, Pushkin, rakia (brandy), Russian navy, alliance, power, poverty, steppe, fur hats, art, great people 2.

Even in the associative field of the Russian language we find the same positive associations such as brotherly, brothers, home, love and Orthodox.

The metaphor of kinship, especially brotherhood, is still a characteristic of public discourse when discussing international relations, and it also appears in this corpus for the relations between Ukraine, Russia, and America, where it is used to build a positive sentiment toward Russia: "Sta je to u glavi prosečnog Ukrajinca da misli i ubeđen je da mu je Amerikanac veći brat nego Rus?!" (What is in the mind of

an average Ukrainian that he thinks and believes that an American is a bigger brother to him than a Russian?!) // Predsednik Vladimir Putin je veliki prijatelj ove zemlje zahvaljujući kome ne mogu da nam otmu naše Kosovo i Metohiju i naravno da ga poštujem. Tačka. (President Vladimir Putin is a great friend to this country, thanks to whom they can't take away our Kosovo and Metohija, and so of course I respect him. Period).

The metaphor of friendship, however, has also been used in an ironic tone in instances of negative sentiment such as:

In the early 90s, the Russians incited our generals to war, then sold weapons to the Croats, and voted for sanctions against us, so yeah, we should trust such "friends."

A small number of associations from the Associative Dictionary of the Serbian Language, such as "power," "size," "military," "navy" speaks to the fact that speakers of the Serbian language have traditionally perceived Russians and Russia as socially and politically superior. In our corpus, certain positive sentiments have been built around this concept, glorifying Putin:

"Putin im je napravio najveći problem. Međutim s obzirom da su svi u Putinovom džepu, moraju da slušaju." (Putin has caused them their biggest problem. However, considering he has them all in his pocket, they must obey.) // "Ništa se ne pitaju.. Pita se samo PUTIN" (They have no say. Only PUTIN has a say.) // "On je Bog-Otac. Tačno ga treba klonirati da svaka zemlja ima po jednog Putina. I eto nam utopije." (He is God the Father. We ought to clone him so that every country could have its own Putin. Then we'd have utopia.)

These instances exhibit intriguing characteristics both in terms of vocabulary and grammar, as they depict an imbalanced relationship between the East and the West: on one side, an individual figure (Putin), and on the other, a collective plural (they must obey).

What is interesting, however, is how a previously positively connoted concept such as "size," "strength," and "power," which was used to extol and admire, is transformed into the foundation for negative sentiment:

"Putin je ratni zločinac. Užasavajuće je to kako Rusija gazi sve pred sobom; civile, žene, decu, sve." (Putin is a war criminal. It's horrifying how Russia is trampling everything in front of it: civilians, women, children, everything.) // "Kako to mislite svaka čast Putinu što zakone mijenja tako da u zatvor šalje svakoga ko progovori protiv rata i to je ok jer je ratno stanje, a istovremeno i nije ratno stanje jer Rusija ne vodi rat nego specijalnu operaciju?" (What do you mean congrats to Putin for changing the law so that he can put in jail anyone who speaks out against the war, and how that's ok because it's wartime, and at the same time you're saying it isn't war at all Russia is in, but a special military operation?).

The negative sentiment directed toward the criticism of Putin and his politics, expressed as mockery, is evident in the following example, which also includes an analogy with the Serbian geopolitical situation: "Jao stvarno nisam znaooo da je on ovde BOG I BATINA. Na nebu bog na zemlji Putin. Sve je Rusija samo Kosovo je Srbija" (Oh, I really had no clue that he's the be-all and end-all here. God in heaven, Putin on earth. Russia is all, only Kosovo is Serbia) // "Putin nam ispira mozak za

naše pare. Vučić se samo privalio." "Putin is brainwashing us at our expense. Vučić is just tagging along." // "Dao im je Happy, i tamo svaki dan "analiticari" vidjeniji rusofili i drugovi iz DB pričaju kako Putin grabi ka tituli gospodara sveta. Ustvari prvo pravi SSSR, a onda osvaja svet! Sve deluje prilično infantilno a namenjeno je putinofilima. Kao da prave neku bajku za laku noć." (He gave them Happy [TV station], where every day, 'analysts', prominent Russophiles and comrades from the DB [Intelligence agency] talk about how Putin is on his way to become the master of the world. Actually, he'll bring back the USSR first, and then he'll conquer the world! It all seems quite infantile and is aimed at Putinophiles. It's a production of bedtime fairy tales.) // "Svi vi koji kličete Putinu, kličete zapravo i Vučiću. Vi ste njegovi a on je vaš. Podržavate autokratiju, uzurpaciju medija, klepotkratiju, tajkune, proganjanje političkih neistomišljenika, platu od 300 usd, otimanje državne imovine. Sve to radi Putin i sve to radi Vučić." (All of you who cheer for Putin are effectively cheering for Vučić also. You belong to him and he belongs to you. You support autocracy, media usurpation, kleptocracy, tycoons, persecution of political dissidents, $300/month salary and confiscation of state property. Putin does all that and Vučić does the same.)

Negative attitudes toward the Russian president often center around comparisons with Hitler: "Prevedeno na razumljiv jezik - Putin postaje Firer. // Putler i bukvalno ubija Donbas." (To put it plainly - Putin is turning into a Fuhrer. // "Putler" is literally killing Donbas.")

The portmanteau "Putler" is particularly interesting linguistically because it showcases not only the speaker's creativity, but also the need to further discredit the Russian president in ever novel way, considering how strong the historical concepts activated in this way are.

Additionally, there are instances where negative sentiment takes on the form of some explicit warning (expressed through shouting, capital letters, etc.), thus increasing the drama:

"Uvek imati na umu! NIKAD NE VERUJTE RUSIJI. LAZU DOK U OCI GLEDAJU i kad ugovore potpisuju! Ruske rakete gađale su danas crnomorsku luku Odesu, dan posle "istorijskog" sporazuma o deblokadi izvoza žitarica.Takvo ponizenje celnika UN, Turske i svetske javnosti niko nije napravio." (|Always remember! NEVER TRUST RUSSIA. THEY LIE TO YOUR FACE, even while signing agreements! Russian missiles targeted the Black Sea port of Odessa today, a day after the "historic" agreement on lifting the grain export blockade. No leader of the UN, Turkey, or the global public has ever suffered such humiliation.

Conclusion

Considering the complexity of the relationship between language and opinions, reliable results and conclusions can be obtained only through a multi-faceted linguistic approach that encompasses all levels of linguistic and stylistic analysis. Considering that sentiment analyses of the Serbian language material and

crisis discourse on social media remain extremely scarce, and given that the goals of our work align with critical discourse analysis, we deemed it appropriate for this research to compare the results with the attitudes of Serbian language speakers as demonstrated in the associative fields of stimuli in the Associative Dictionary of the Serbian Language.

In this study, the combination of qualitative sentiment analysis (positive, negative, and neutral) and quantitative analysis (percentage distribution of all three sentiments) has shown that the attitudes of Serbian language speakers toward Russia and Russians have changed compared to previous periods (taking prior research and the mentioned Associative Dictionary of the Serbian Language as points of comparison, all of which indicate positive associations and stereotypes toward the Russian people). During the Ukrainian crisis, a negative attitude emerges, based on the current socio-political situation and other factors (historical, for instance) It is also evident that the positive sentiment rests on tradition and ingrained stereotypes, collective expressions rooted in fraternal and friendly relations, and the concept of religious closeness.

Certain problems arise when sentiment analysis is applied to tweets, which stem from the peculiarities of this format: a tweet is a very short form, often contains emoticons, frequently provoked by another tweet (a reaction to a previous comment), etc. At the same time, the methods employed in this study and the results obtained can serve for further investigations and identification of positive, negative, and neutral attitudes in crisis discourse on social media and digital media in general. It is clear that the first and last phases can be automated, but the second, third, and fourth phases of sentiment analysis, at least for the Serbian language, still require manual intervention, especially due to stylistic devices like irony and sarcasm, and the intricacies of portmanteau words that cannot be predicted ("Putler," for example), and so on.

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Ukrajinska kriza na Tviteru:
analiza sentimenta − moguće interpretacije

Svetlana Slijepčević Bjelivuk,
Institut za srpski jezik SANU, Srbija

Apstrakt

Masovna upotreba društvenih mreža omogućila je korisnicima da u kratkom vremenskoom roku izraze i rašire mišljenja, stavove i emocije u pogledu raznih tema, a naročito društveno aktuelnih. U ovom radu analiziramo stavove govornika srpskog jezika prema Rusiji i Rusima tokom rata u Ukrajini, na materijalu pribavljenom pomoću aplikacije za prikupljanje i obradu komentara na Tviteru. Posmatran je period od februara do septembra 2022. godine. Polazeći od pretpostavke da su korisnici Tvitera, slobodniji i spontaniji u pogledu izražavanja stavova, pomoću aplikacije Bigboxdata prikupljeno je oko 11.000 tvitova na osnovu ključnih reči (Rusija, Ukrajina, rat, specijalna operacija, Putin, Zelenski...), a zatim smo ih ručno filtrirali i anotirali. Pri primeni analize sentimenta na tvitove javljaju se problemi čija specifičnost potiče iz osobenosti samog tvita: u pitanju je kratka forma, neretko kombinovana sa tzv. emotikonima, često provocirana drugim tvitom (reakcija na prethodni komentar) itd. Cilj je bio otkriti da li su se i kako menjali stavovi govornika srpskog jezika prema

Rusiji i Rusima pod aktuelnim društvenim okolnostima. Kombinacija kvalitativne (analize sentimenta: pozitivnog, negativnog i neutralnog) i kvantitavne (procentualni udeo sva tri sentimenta) analize pokazala je da su se stavovi govornika srpskog jezika prema Rusiji i Rusima drastično promenili u odnosu na prethodni period (a uzimajući kao referentni izvor Asocijativni rečnik srpskoga jezika i Obratni asocijativni rečnik srpskog jezika, koji svedoče o izrazito pozitivnim asocijacijama). Istovremeno, metode korišćene u ovom radu i rezultati istraživanja mogu poslužiti za dalja ispitivanja i identifikovanja stavova u kriznom diskursu na društvenim mrežama i digitalnim medijima uopšte.

Ključne reči: krizni diskurs, društvene mreže, stereotip

Audience-generated Feedback on Conspiratorial Content on Facebook and Reddit in Serbia

Nikola Doderović[1],
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia

Abstract

Conspiracy theories are a ubiquitous phenomenon in the socio-political discussion. By trusting these theories, society justifies possible events like the COVID-19 pandemic. Through mixed methods research, the article seeks to provide the amount of page-generated and user-generated conspiratorial content that links chemtrails with the COVID-19 pandemic, along with audience-generated feedback on social media content. Facebook and Reddit have been chosen for this research because of their inherently contrasting approaches to content regulation. Facebook's content moderation tools lacked the impact to remove misinformation, as only 8% of content was flagged as false information. Additionally, even if researched subreddits had two times the amount of relevant content in comparison to relevant Facebook pages, most of the content had 0 upvotes, meaning that the content was either negatively received or lacked adequate support. Serbian-speaking Facebook users expressed support for conspiratorial content on this platform, while Serbian redditors used conspiratorial narratives to ridicule conspiracy theorists. Likes were the most utilized type of feedback on content of relevant Facebook pages, while comments were the most utilized type of feedback on content of relevant subreddits. The importance of this research lies in understanding what conspiratorial narratives try to imply through social media and how the audience interprets and communicates with this content.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, social media, chemtrails, pandemic, COVID-19

Audience-generated Feedback on Conspiratorial Content on Facebook and Reddit in Serbia

Introduction

It is not uncommon for conspiracy theories to emerge during widespread illness outbreaks, as was seen during the Spanish flu pandemic during World War I. During this time, certain individuals crafted a conspiratorial story around the pharmaceutical drug aspirin, which was produced by the German company Bayer

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[1] Corresponding author: doderpress@gmail.com

(Stange, 2003). While immunization has long been considered the most effective method of safeguarding against disease during pandemics, some conspiracy theorists hold alternative beliefs. For instance, some have linked chemtrails with the West Nile virus, alleging that chemtrails are being used to coerce widespread immunization (Stange, 2003).

The Internet is frequently utilized by conspiracy theorists to disseminate their ideas across a range of platforms with a plethora of different content, such as posts, images, videos, and similar content. Ignoring the power of viral content on the web would be imprudent, as it can manipulate people's beliefs and actions for ulterior motives. These beliefs are not restricted to obscure websites, social media, or YouTube videos, but can also be found through traditional (Uscinski et al., 2018) contemporary media outlets. Conspiracy theories can be connected to certain dangers and/or events, whether they are related to the past or future (Leone et al., 2020), and can be socially constructed to instigate intolerance toward certain social groups (Bojanović, 1998). The fact that cultural context can be distorted in such a way as to fit a conspiratorial narrative is dangerous. When a person in power, US senator Tom Cotton, claims that COVID-19 originated from a Chinese biological laboratory without solid evidence (Budryk, 2020), the ever-present Sinophobia increases, which affects and can continually affect this ethnic group in the future. The ever-growing xenophobia can lead to negative feelings toward them, as was the case with Chinese and Italian people, who are now often associated with the first wave of the pandemic (Šrol et al., 2022) and can be later targeted and intimidated because of these relations.

Multiple factors can contribute to the human reasoning for accepting and interacting with conspiratorial beliefs, and Bojanović (1998) cites psychological factors such as *aggression*, *fear*, *cognitive motives,* and to *reduce frustration*. Because of aggression and fear of the unknown, Facebook and Instagram users claimed that SARS-CoV-2 does not exist and that mass vaccination aims to connect people to the 5G network (Reuters Fact Check, 2021). Cognitive motives are a construct in which conspiracy theorists justify their beliefs by claiming to know the truth as a way to reduce frustration and dissatisfaction (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020). Conspiracy theorists always view the conspirators' motives as malignant and harmful (Wood & Douglas, 2015) while perceiving themselves as *persecuted victims* of organized conspiratorial actions and as *heroes* who are desperately trying to sabotage conspirators (Lewandowsky & Cook, 2020).

Contrails, short for *condensation trails*, are a common sight in the skies, especially in areas with high air traffic. These trails are formed when hot exhaust fumes from aircraft engines mix with cold air, causing water vapor to condense and freeze (US Air Force, 2005). The resulting white streaks can persist in the atmosphere for minutes or even hours, prompting skepticism from various individuals and groups. While some people view contrails as harmless byproducts of modern air travel, others have raised concerns about their potential impact on human health and the environment (Shearer et al., 2016). In particular, a subset of conspiracy theorists has promoted the idea that certain contrails, known as *chemtrails*, are deliberately

sprayed by governments or other entities to achieve various sinister goals. The origins of the chemtrail theory can be traced back to the 1990s when the US Air Force conducted research on weather modification and cloud seeding (Smith, 2017), provoking a negative reaction from the public (Simons, 2013). Some individuals began to speculate that the military was secretly using particular aircraft to disperse chemicals or biological agents for purposes such as spreading flu-like epidemics and nuclear radiation (James, 2003), or to control the population and the minds of individuals (Bell, 2018). These claims have been widely debunked by scientists and experts in atmospheric studies, who point out that the persistence of contrails can be explained by a range of factors, including the type of aircraft, the altitude and speed of flight, and the atmospheric conditions, such as wind shear and advection (Shearer et al., 2016). Despite these explanations, the chemtrail theory continues to enjoy a following among certain fringe groups and has even spread to other parts of the world such as Europe and Australia (James, 2003).

The definition of chemtrails has changed over the years, but for the supporters of this conspiracy theory today, a new threat has appeared – the COVID-19 pandemic. In an attempt to justify their beliefs, chemtrails are defined as a tool to spread the aforementioned virus. On social media, Serbian conspiracy theorists made several accusations concerning chemtrails and COVID-19. Influential figures like Nikola Sandulović (2020), the president of Serbia's Republican Party, posted images taken out of context and claimed that people were being poisoned as part of a plot orchestrated by German chancellor Angela Merkel and Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić (Tančić, 2020). Certain Serbian medical doctors have created fertile ground for a plethora of conspiracy theories about COVID-19, including chemtrails, through various social media and media outlets, spawning like-minded support and numerous fan pages. These pseudoscientific claims included *COVID-19 denial* (Dedeić, 2020; Dautry & AFP Beograd, 2021); *anti-vax narratives* (Šljukić Bandović, 2021; Marković, 2021); that *sarin/ricin was masked as COVID-19* (Slavija info TV, 2020; FBU1,[2] 2020); and *COVID-19 was a biological weapon* (Balkan INFO, n.d.; FBU2, 2020).

In today's digital age, misinformation and conspiracy theories abound online. Even though conspiratorial beliefs are easily found through Internet search engines (James, 2003), social media sites are often cited as platforms where this misinformation finds new light and circulates through personal profiles, pages, groups, or chats. Studies have also shown that relying on social media as a legitimate source of information is linked to believing in conspiracy theories (Allington et al., 2021). In May 2020, over 53 different conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic were available on Facebook, with many of them directly or indirectly providing skepticism toward recommendations of public health administrations (Innes & Innes, 2021). Most of the narratives came from English-speaking pages,

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[2] Facebook users serving as references will be codified in the text as FBU1, FBU2, etc. as a way to prevent possible misuse of their data. However, to maintain the credibility of the presented information, links to all of their posts will be made available in the reference section.

while a third of the content came from other non-English pages (Innes & Innes, 2021). However, even if conspiracy theories are available through social media, some researchers argue that the web does not play an extensive role in crafting these conspiracy theories (Uscinski et al., 2021), while others cite word-of-mouth as a better tool because initial theories are available outside the Internet (Astapova, 2020). However, we cannot ignore the fact that social media sites seem to have a significant influence on Serbian adults, as 53.4% of them use social media as the leading informational source, according to research by the Center for Policy and Strategy Creation (2021).

Social media cannot be solely held responsible for its users' freedom of expression. Nevertheless, social media platforms must prioritize the safety of their users from harmful content. To combat the spread of misinformation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, each social media site had implemented its own set of regulation guidelines that range from permissive to restricted. Although Twitter and YouTube have been linked to the indirect spread of conspiracy theories (Enders et al., 2021), the contrasting approaches to content moderation which can be seen on Facebook and Reddit make them more favorable and interesting for this research. For example, Facebook employs human moderators and automated regulation tools; while Reddit employs administrators to regulate content as a whole and moderators for each subreddit (Singh, 2019). Facebook's regulators follow the Social Standards policy, which is either enforced manually or through image recognition tools, NLP, and other content detection tools (Singh, 2019). These automated tools have proven to be most successful for images, as opposed to text, given that text can be more easily manipulated to avoid detection and removal. Reddit's regulators follow the platform's content policy, but moderators can employ their own set of rules (per the initial policy) on the subreddits they regulate (Singh, 2019). Unlike Facebook, which had initially updated its policy for misinformation and the COVID-19 pandemic (Facebook Help Center, n.d.), Reddit had no restrictions on coronavirus-related information or misinformation in general (Reddit Inc., n.d.).

According to the 2020 Social Serbia survey, 88% of respondents had a Facebook account, whereas only 4% had a Reddit account (Pioneers, 2020). Unlike Facebook, where individual users and/or organizations can establish several pages for a single topic, Reddit normally has one or two active subreddits for a single topic. In the context of this research, there have been subreddits that exclusively featured content about conspiracy theories, the COVID-19 pandemic, and chemtrails, but this will be addressed further in the article. There are language-specific subreddits, such as Serbia's main subreddit *r/serbia* (n.d.), which has over 144.000 members; its theme is not centralized to the three aforementioned ideals, but may potentially contain a small but significant amount of user-generated content containing conspiracist beliefs.

This research aims to highlight the fact that conspiratorial narratives available through social media pages and user-generated content lead the target audience and/or users to share their opinions on said content using different types of feedback, such as likes, comments, shares, or other types of feedback. Depending on the audience

and social media platform, certain types of feedback can be primarily utilized to show support or dissatisfaction, while other types of feedback can be underutilized. Also, it is important to analyze how two contrasting platforms, such as Facebook and Reddit, regulate their content, if users respect their content guidelines, and if their content regulation tools are adequately implemented.

Methods

This paper analyzes audience-generated feedback regarding conspiratorial content that links chemtrails with the COVID-19 pandemic, whose proliferation is largely facilitated by social media platforms such as Facebook and Reddit. The qualitative analysis will first focus on content generated by relevant Facebook pages and user-generated content (UGC) on relevant Reddit subreddits, after which specific audience-generated feedback on said content will be introduced to show its relevance, by applying mixed methods research, consisting of quantitative and qualitative analysis. The research period covers only content that was available through social media platforms from February 2020 to May 2022, while the data itself was collected in July 2022. The research aims to answer the question of ***what the audience-generated feedback is on relevant conspiratorial content spread by social media conspiracy theorists***.

Firstly, we must define what the criterion for the ***relevant conspiratorial content*** is. **In the case of Facebook**, the platform's advanced search was utilized by inputting specific keywords related to chemtrails and/or COVID-19. To find relevant pages that discuss this specific conspiratorial content, the keyword *chemtrails* was used, while employing Serbian Latin (*kemtrejls*) and Cyrillic (*кемтрејлс*) variations of the keyword as well. Applying the keyword *chemtrails* to Facebook's advanced search yielded 97 results, 10 of which were irrelevant due to being musician pages (7), chemtrail debunk pages (1), and chemtrails meme pages (2). Out of 87 relevant results, 69.8% were categorized as a *community*. Applying the keywords *kemtrejls* and *кемтрејлс* did not yield any results. However, four pages participating in chemtrails theories were found in the Balkans: Serbian pages *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.), *Hemijski tragovi iznad srbije / Chemtrails Serbia* (n.d.), *Hemijski tragovi na nebu Balkana - Balkan chemtrails* (n.d.); and a Croatian page, *Chemtrails – Kemijski tragovi* (n.d.). However, most of these pages either had less than 200 followers/likes and/or were inactive for several years. Out of 87 relevant Facebook pages, the research is mainly focused on researching the Serbian-speaking page *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.) with over 5.800 likes and over 6.000 followers (as of July 2022), while adding two English-speaking pages *Global March Against Geoengineering* (n.d.) with over 33.000 likes and 32.000 followers (as of July 2022); and *CA Chemtrails* (n.d.) with over 24.000 likes and 25.000 followers (as of July 2022) as they might provide relevant data to compare how these conspiracist narratives are shared in Serbia and outside its borders. The content of the pages was then researched through different keywords. For English-speaking pages, researched content had to contain two or

more keywords from the keyword pool: *covid*, *corona*, *spraying*, and *poison*. For the Serbian-speaking pages, the exact keywords were used but translated into Serbian and divided into two scripts: Serbian Latin (*covid*, *kovid*, *korona*, *zaprašivanje*, and *otrov*) and Serbian Cyrillic (*ковид*, *корона*, *запрашивање*, and *отров*). To measure the activity of the researched Facebook pages, the content was divided into three periods or years: 2020 (from February to December), 2021, and 2022 (from January to May).

In the case of Reddit, the platform's advanced search was utilized on each researched subreddit by inputting specific keywords related to chemtrails and/or COVID-19. In order to be considered for the research, subreddits had to fall into one of the following three categories: the subreddit had to be related to conspiracy theories; the subreddit's main focus was chemtrails as a conspiracy; and the subreddit had to contain any discussion regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Subreddit *r/serbia* (n.d.) was an exception, as it had the most significant number of Serbian members, with the possibility of containing conspiratorial content. The chosen subreddits were then researched with a two-keyword system. For English-speaking subreddits, the first keyword was always *chemtrails*, while the second keyword could be one of the following: *covid*, *corona*, and *coronavirus*. For the Serbian-speaking subreddits, Serbian Latin (*kemtrejls* with *kovid*, *korona*, *koronavirus*) and Serbian Cyrillic (*кемтрејлс* with *ковид*, *корона*, *коронавирус*) variations were employed along with English keywords, as they had a chance to be more prominent on this subreddit than the latter. This research focused on four subreddits, three of which meet the aforementioned criteria: *r/conspiracy* (n.d.), with 1.8 million members; *r/coronavirus* (n.d.), with 2.3 million members; *r/chemtrails* (n.d.), comprising 2.700 members, with the added exception of subreddit *r/serbia* (n.d.), consisting of 144.000 members. Unlike Facebook, the content could not be divided into three periods, because the content on Reddit is focused on user-generated content of individual users and not on subreddits as a whole.

Secondly, we must first define what ***audience-generated feedback*** is for this research. In the case of Facebook, we refer to *likes on relevant content*, *comments on relevant content,* and whether or not the *content was shared* only on personal profiles or other parts of the website. For posts, the number of likes was analyzed through a scale of: *0 likes*, *1-10 likes*, *11-50 likes*, *51-100 likes*, *101-500 likes*, and *501-1000 likes*. The number of comments on relevant posts was analyzed through a shortened scale: *0 comments*, *1-10 comments*, *11-50 comments*, *51-100 comments*, and *101-500 comments*. For the shares, we used the same scale as the latter: *0 shares*, *1-10 shares*, *11-50 shares*, *51-100 shares*, and *101-500 shares*. The sum and averages of all audience-generated feedback types available across all relevant Facebook pages will be provided through positive integers in the Discussion section of the article. In the case of Reddit, we refer to the number of *upvotes on relevant* content and *comments on relevant content*. Two types of feedback could not be utilized in the research – *downvotes* and *shares* – because the number of upvotes and downvotes are a sum shown through a positive integer and they are never provided separately;

another reason is that the number of shares is never provided on the posts, unlike the number of likes and comments. For posts, the number of upvotes was analyzed through a scale: *0 upvotes*, *1-10 upvotes*, *11-50 upvotes*, *51-100 upvotes*, *101-500 upvotes*, and *501-1000 upvotes*. The number of comments on relevant posts was analyzed through a shortened scale: *0 comments*, *1-10 comments*, *11-50 comments*, *51-100 comments*, and *101-500 comments*. The sum and averages of all audience-generated feedback types available across all relevant subreddits will be available in the Discussion section of the article. Because the number of upvotes already represents a sum of positive and negative feedback on a single post, the research will employ the aforementioned scaling system when discussing Reddit upvotes on average, while the number of comments will be analyzed through positive integers for the sum and averages.

Results: Facebook

The research of relevant Facebook pages yielded a total of 51 results, 82% of which were published on *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.), even though the initial page had four- or five-times fewer followers and page likes. All comments on researched relevant content were supportive and contained no skepticism regarding shared information on this page. Some comments have even criticized the restrictive nature of Facebook's content moderation, even if the platform's flagging system was not exceedingly active on the researched pages. Only three posts (11%) available on *Chemtrails report Serbia* (n.d.) were flagged as false information, while most of the content on this page and other researched pages remained unflagged.

Chemtrails report Serbia (n.d.) was, by far, the most significant chemtrails-related Facebook page in Serbia. Categorized as a *non-profit organization*, it had a dedicated Blogger (Blogspot) site and Twitter account, however, unlike the Facebook page, they were last active on these platforms in 2021. Using the Serbian Latin and Cyrillic keywords, a total of 42 results were found on this page, where 79% of the content (33 results) was posted in 2020. The year 2021 had eight results, while 2022 had only one result in March. The total amount of likes achieved across all relevant posts was 720 likes, with an average of 17 likes per post. More than half (55%) of content had between 1-10 likes, while only 5% of content had more than 100 likes. Regarding comments, a total of 116 comments were present on all researched content, with an average of 3 comments per post. The most comments on a single post amounted to 44 comments, while more than half (55%) of the content had no comments at all. Finally, regarding shares, all researched content was shared a total of 615 times, while the average number of shares amounted to 14 shares per post. Over 80% of content had been shared on other parts of the Facebook platform, while only one post had over 100 shares. Most of the page's posts (55%) contained original content, while the other 45% was other user-generated content that the page found interesting enough to reshare. Certain posts on this page referenced conspiracy theorist Alek Racić's claim that COVID-19 was sarin gas, while other content shared had mentioned Slađana Velkov, a medical doctor and well-known anti-

vaccine advocate. Additionally, certain content about the original chemtrails theory was updated with the COVID-19 conspiratorial narrative to include 5G networks, another popular conspiracy theory during the pandemic. If we compare the audience-generated feedback and the size of the audience, it can be concluded that 12% of the total audience used likes, 2% of the total audience used comments and 11% of the total audience used the share option to express their feedback on relevant content during the research period.

Global March Against Geoengineering (n.d.) was the biggest English-speaking and overall chemtrails-related Facebook page (as of July 2022). The page provided two external links to their official site (which were inaccessible in July 2022) and a Twitter profile (last active in May 2019). The page's latest post was from May 2020, after which it was considered inactive. As a result, research was conducted over one period alone, from February 2020 to December 2020. Using the English keywords, only three posts related to chemtrails and COVID-19 were found. All three posts were in the 11-50 likes and 11-50 comments thresholds, while only one post had more than 10 shares. The first post (2020, April 7) claimed the existence of an "Agenda 21" or "Agenda 2030", while also using conspiratorial platitudes, such as "*open your eyes*", and "*connect the dots*", and numerous hashtags, such as *#Covid19*, *#Chemtrails* and *#Geoengineering*, to make their content more visible. User-generated comments were unequivocally positive, supporting the information while also citing famous conspiracy theorist, David Icke. Their final post (2020, May 2) noted similarities between COVID-19 and high-altitude pulmonary edema (HAPE), which is a severe lung condition. This post contained 13 different links leading to other Facebook posts. However, most of the external links were inaccessible, while the post was flagged as false information by a Facebook fact-checking site Health Feedback. They noted no correlation between 5G and COVID-19, suggesting that the external links might have contained other conspiracy theories about the pandemic. However, user-generated comments were, as expected, very supportive, acknowledging the bravery of sharing the "truth", while mocking Facebook's fact-checking partner.

The second largest English-speaking and chemtrails-related Facebook page (as of July 2022) is *CA Chemtrails* (n.d.). A total of six results were found on this page, out of which five (83.3%) were published in the year 2020 (most active in December). In 2021 we had only one result, published in February, while 2022 (from January to May) yielded no results. Three posts, or 50% of the content had 11-50 likes, while only one post (17%) had over 100 likes. In the case of comments and shares, 66% of content had 1-10 comments and 11-50 shares. Facebook's content flagging system was inactive on this page since no relevant post was flagged as false information. Five posts were statuses, one of which contained an image (in May 2020), one had an external link outside of Facebook, and there were no relevant videos or livestreams.

Results: Reddit

Using the combination of given words from the keyword pool on the subreddit *r/conspiracy* (n.d.) yielded a total of 96 results, with 4 pieces of content being repeated across all variations (counted only once). During the research period, 28% of content

had 0 upvotes, while most of the posts (36%) had 11-50 upvotes. Only one post (2%) had over 500 upvotes, specifically 951 upvotes. All relevant user-generated content had at least one comment and generated a sum of 2276 comments, with an average of 23 comments per post. The aforementioned post (bumbacorn, 2020) had the highest number of comments (394) as well as the highest number of upvotes (951) and was not only focused on chemtrails but on many other conspiracy theories discussed on the subreddit. Other posts conveyed false information through text, images, or videos, and either independent theories about chemtrails and COVID-19 or images of contrails claiming to be chemtrails. One user (hands_can, 2022) linked a post from Twitter that claimed COVID-19 was not a virus, but fungi in the air produced by chemtrails. The original Twitter post could not be reached since it was removed, and other information regarding this theory was unavailable through Reddit, Twitter, or Google. However, some posts (beerathegreat, 2020) were critical of conspiracy theories, serving as an open letter to like-minded theorists to stop ruining themselves, their own families, society, and the environment with their conspiratorial beliefs by suggesting ways to overcome their fear-induced skepticism, garnering 383 upvotes and 96 comments.

Unfortunately, using the combination of given words from the keyword pool on the subreddit *r/coronavirus* (n.d.) yielded no results. This was, however, expected, because of the following reason: the fifth rule of the subreddit's personal content policy stated not to share conspiracies or speculation about the coronavirus but to reserve those discussions for other online places. This shows that the subreddit is very strict in enforcing its personal policy, which has granted no conspiratorial content a way to be shared through this community.

Using the combination of given words from the keyword pool on the subreddit *r/chemtrails* (n.d.) yielded a total of 7 results, while the combination of *chemtrails* and *coronavirus* yielded no results. The average number of upvotes belonged to the 1-10 upvotes threshold, with a sum of 30 comments and an average of 4 comments per post. Although this virtual community consisted of 2.700 members, not enough audience-generated feedback was provided (upvotes and comments) to support the claim that the subreddit strongly influenced the distribution of conspiratorial beliefs that had a significant impact on the audience.

The final subreddit explored in this research was *r/serbia* (n.d.). Using the combination of given words from the English keyword pool yielded no results. Surprisingly, applying the same two-keyword approach with Serbian Latin and Cyrillic variations yielded no results as well. Thus, we can confirm that this subreddit does not propagate or justify conspiratorial beliefs that link chemtrails with the COVID-19 pandemic. However, employing Reddit's advanced search on comments alone for the entire subreddit (with Serbian keywords *kemtrejls* and *кемтрејлс*) did yield some results, but comments from certain users implemented chemtrails narrative as a way to ridicule said conspiracy theorists.

If all user-generated content and comments published during the research period across all four relevant subreddits are taken into consideration, the average number of upvotes and comments on posts was 11-50 upvotes and 1-10 comments.

Discussion and Conclusion

Before the results are further discussed, it is crucial to point out certain limitations of this research. Firstly, the relevant content was compiled manually by the researcher, leaving a possibility for incomplete data. Secondly, although the research period lasted from February 2020 to May 2022, data collection started in July 2022. Links containing unavailable content during the research period were only utilized in the data collection period if certain "snapshots" of the links were available through tools like Wayback Machine, Archive.today, or Perma.cc, which was not always the case. Furthermore, content was prone to removal by the platform's moderators or content creators themselves, preventing the researcher from finding said content. Thirdly, the numbers and sums of audience-generated feedback from these two platforms are representative of the data collection period in July 2022. Certain audience-generated feedback can have changes in numerical ratios, meaning that these changes in data will not be addressed, as these changes have happened after the data collection period, or after July 31st, 2022. Finally, the fourth limitation lies in how the advanced search functions on Facebook and Reddit. Even if keywords narrowed down the amount of content, certain content was codified in such a way that it could not be detected by Facebook's search system or their regulation tools. One instance was noted on the page Global March Against Geoengineering (2020, May 2), where the word corona was written as *C0R0N4*, which was found because the post had other relevant keywords defined by the research.

Regarding content regulation, Facebook's regulatory framework has proven to be successful for images (Singh, 2019). As mentioned in the Introduction, it requires an overhaul to be more effective and accurately target misinformation which includes other types of content such as textual posts. Even if the forthcoming data precedes the initial research question and defined boundaries, it must be noted that over 60% (31) of researched content were images that contained conspiratorial narratives, but only three of them (6%) were flagged as false information. Additionally, out of 51 Facebook posts, only four pieces of content (8%) were ever flagged as false information. Conversely, Reddit, due to its liberal regulatory system, had double the amount of conspiratorial content but proved that the individual rules implemented by these subreddits are enforced with utmost precision. On the restrictive subreddits, like *r/coronavirus* there was no content discussing conspiracy theories, while *r/conspiracy* and *r/chemtrails*, users had complete freedom to express their critique or support of conspiracist narratives.

Based on the gathered data, the **main research question** regarding the type of audience-generated feedback used on relevant conspiratorial content mainly involved the use of likes on Facebook and the use of comments on Reddit as a means to express their reactions or to support said content. On Facebook, all relevant posts across all three Facebook pages had at least one like and generated a sum of 1073 likes, averaging 21 likes per post. Regarding other feedback utilized on Facebook, the share option was the second most utilized (784), with an average of 15 shares

per post, while comments were underutilized (245), with an average of 4 comments per post. However, posts with more comments had immense support from the target audience, expressing their dissatisfaction with Facebook's content regulation, sharing contrail images, and supporting the pages and their alleged "fights for the truth". Conversely, when it comes to Reddit, all relevant user-generated content across all four subreddits had at least one comment and generated a sum of 2306 comments, averaging 22 comments per post. As for upvotes, the average was between 10-50 upvotes, while 31% of content had 0 upvotes, demonstrating that a third of content was either negatively received by the audience or was unsupported by not providing feedback at all. Unlike Facebook's commenters, the audience on relevant subreddits expressed a wide range of reactions, from support and amusement to skepticism and mockery. Redditors were not biased toward the content shared by other users but would elaborate their own theories and arguments on why they support or do not support the claims. Relevant user-generated content would sometimes clash with other user's posts, where one user in February 2022 would claim that chemtrails have become prevalent since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, while another user in April would claim that chemtrails cases have lowered since the pandemic.

Finally, audience-generated feedback can be crucial in providing us with information if certain content has achieved relevance or has been left to an echo chamber that shares similar views. The impact of conspiratorial content is noticeable when interaction, support, and (re)distribution are placed in context. Furthermore, conspiracy theories tend to be shown through their original narrative on social media or they tend to be socially adapted through other languages, as was the case with the Serbian language. Along with the conspiratorial narratives shared through media outlets, other narratives have included other Serbian conspiracy theorists (Slavija info TV, 2020; FBU1, 2020) and medical practitioners (Marković, 2021). Some audience-generated feedback included disdain toward the West and NATO, further bolstered through narratives provided by certain media outlets (Voice of the People, 2020) and influential political figures (Nikola Sandulović, 2020; Tančić, 2020, M.Z.B., 2020), which feed on the traumas that Serbian people acquired during the Yugoslav Wars. Even if Serbian users took the lead on consuming misinformation on Facebook, Reddit's Serbian-speaking users have expressed their dislike for conspiratorial content, by ridiculing these narratives through the comment section of posts that were not initially related to conspiracy theories. This research tends to imply that audience-generated feedback is crucial to understanding how certain narratives are accepted and denied by users who interact with conspiratorial content, whether they are page-specific followers on Facebook, or come from specific virtual communities with their own set of rules similar to Reddit. Users reserve the right to express their skepticism, but only if their doubts are based on cognitive reflection and scientific discourse, not quack or other pseudoscientific narratives, which have not been sufficiently, or at all, verified.

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Povratna informacija publike o konspirativnom sadržaju na Fejsbuku i Reditu u Srbiji

Nikola Doderović,
Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Nišu, Srbija

Apstrakt

Teorije zavere su sveprisutan fenomen u društveno-političkoj raspravi. Verujući ovim teorijama, društvo opravdava moguće događaje poput pandemije bolesti COVID-19. Kroz istraživanje mešovitih metoda, članak nastoji da obezbedi količinu konspirativnog sadržaja generisanog na stranicama i pomoću individualnih korisnika, kojim se kemtrejlsi povezuju sa pandemijom bolesti COVID-19, kao i da obezbedi povratne informacije članova publike o datom sadržaju na društvenim mrežama. Fejsbuk i Redit su izabrani za ovo istraživanje zbog svojih inherentno suprotnih pristupa regulaciji sadržaja. Fejsbukovi alati za regulaciju sadržaja nisu bili uspešni da adekvatno uklone dezinformacije, pritom što je samo 8% sadržaja označeno kao lažna informacija. Pored toga, čak i ako su istraženi sabrediti, odnosno, podforumi imali dva puta više relevantnog sadržaja u poređenju sa relevantnim Facebook stranicama, većina sadržaja je imala 0 glasova, što znači da je sadržaj bio ili negativno prihvaćen ili mu je nedostajala adekvatna podrška. Korisnici koji govore srpski jezik na Fejsbuku su izrazili podršku zavereničkim sadržajima, dok su srpski korisnici Redita, koristili konspirativne narative da ismevaju teoretičare zavere. Sviđanja su bili najkorišćeniji tip povratnih informacija o sadržaju relevantnih Facebook stranica, dok su komentari bili najkorišćeniji tip povratnih informacija o sadržaju relevantnih podforuma. Važnost ovog istraživanja leži u razumevanju šta konspirativni narativi pokušavaju da impliciraju putem društvenih medija i kako publika tumači i komunicira sa ovim sadržajem.

Ključne reči: teorije zavere, društvene mreže, kemtrejls, pandemija, COVID-19

Promoting Philosophy, Undermining Philosophical Ideals: The Case of the Radio Show "Gozba" and its Treatment of the COVID-19 Pandemic and the War in Ukraine

Rastislav Dinić[12], Faculty of Philosophy in Niš, University of Niš, Serbia

Abstract

According to philosopher Anthony Cashio, radio possesses a power to create a deep and intimate connection between speakers and listeners, and therefore to forge strong communities. It is this power that makes radio a potent instrument both of populist propaganda, disinformation, conspirology and fear-mongering, on the one hand, and of public philosophy fostering critical and reflective capacities of its listeners, on the other. Following Cashio's insight and drawing on Jason Stanley's work propaganda, I will analyze one of the longest running philosophy themed radio shows in Serbia, "Gozba", which airs every week on Radio Belgrade Channel 2 (RB2). By focusing on the way "Gozba" has covered two significant recent events – the COVID pandemic and the Ukrainian war, I will demonstrate that in dealing with these topics, the show undermines the philosophical ideals it claims to promote, and instead serves primarily as an instrument of spreading conspiracy theories, dangerous anti-science views, vaccine hesitancy, fake news and Russian war propaganda. Also, I will analyze the dangers of promoting such deeply anti-philosophical stances under the guise of philosophy and critical thinking.

Keywords: philosophy, radio, propaganda, conspiracy theories

Introduction

Anthony L. Cashio, philosopher and the co-host of the award-winning radio show and podcast: Philosophy Bakes Bread, begins his article on philosophy on the radio by offering a stark contrast between what radio is so often used for in USA today, and the typical methods and aims of philosophy. Using the example of Rush

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[1] Corresponding author: rastislav.dinic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

[2] ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5188-8204

Limbaugh, a famous right-wing shock jock, whose widely popular Rush Limbaugh Show spread conspiracy theories, fear, xenophobia and extremist politics for more than three decades, Cashio points out the power of the radio to bypass our rational and critical capacities. As he writes: "Radio hosts like Limbaugh give word and form to a chaos of emotions and vague ideas. They don't worry about telling the truth, except by accident, and they don't encourage thoughtful engagement with ideas except to give the listener a sense of power and certainty that comes from believing they have already arrived at the right conclusion. Playing off the illusory intimacy of the radio broadcast, they provide the appearance of engaging in intellectual conversation. In other words: they are sophists. They offer worldviews and answers to difficult and important questions, but the substance of their answers is shallow and misleading, and works to undermine a spirit of philosophy that is marked by serious, humble, critical inquiry. In short, they use the radio for demagoguery and manipulation instead of as a medium that encourages critical engagement with the world" (Cashio, 2022, p.211-212).

In spite of the fact that radio can be, and often is, used in this deeply anti-philosophical way, Cashio believes that the power of the medium can be articulated in a completely different way – "to create the space for reflection and dialogue key to a philosophical community that values a pluralistic and democratic approach to community building" (Cashio, 2022, p.212), and in order to show this, he goes on to review the work of Walter Benjamin in the 1920's Germany, but also contemporary radio shows and podcasts dedicated to promoting public philosophy.

In this article, however, we will not deal with one of the numerous examples of successful public philosophy on the radio, but with something else – a radio show putatively dedicated to promoting philosophy, reflection and critical thinking, but that in many cases promotes "demagoguery and manipulation", not dissimilar to those Cashio identifies in Limbaugh's show. In the first part of the article, I will present the show and its treatment of two topics of public significance, the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, and also, demonstrate why this treatment is inappropriate for a show dedicated to promoting philosophy and critical reflection. In the second part of the article, I will use Jason Stanley's concept of "undermining propaganda" to explain how it is that a show that is supposed to promote critical reflection and reasoned debate, actually subverts the very thing it is supposed to promote. In the third part I will give a speculative explanation for the conditions that are conducive to the development of this kind of subverting propaganda, and also offer some concluding thoughts on the consequences and dangers of such propaganda, especially when it is being promoted under the label of philosophy.

"Gozba" and its Treatment of the Covid Pandemic and the War in Ukraine

Radio show "Gozba" (Serbian for "Symposium"), dedicated to promoting philosophy on the radio, has been aired on Radio Belgrade 2 (Channel 2 of the national public radio) for more than a decade (RTS, *n.d.*). During this period, it has covered a

range of topics and hosted hundreds of different guests, not all of them philosophers. Its author and host from 2011 till 2023 was Aleksandar Lukić, who left the position at the beginning of 2023 and was succeeded by Nikola Tanasić. Both Lukić and Tanasić have graduated in philosophy and Lukić even holds a PhD in the field (Daničić, 2016), which demonstrates the importance of authorial vision for the show itself: the author is not *just* a journalist talking to philosophers (or non-philosophers) on philosophically relevant subjects, but is a philosopher himself, actively choosing the topics and guiding the conversation. The radio channel the show is aired on is one of the most listened to radio channels in Serbia (RTS PR agency, 2023). The very name of the show, a clear allusion to Plato's famous dialogue, suggests a Socratic approach to philosophy and public discussion – based on open and free exchanges of arguments, not on rhetoric or sophistry. But as I will demonstrate, in practice, the show frequently betrays and even undermines this valuable ideal. In order to show this, I will focus on the period from 2020 to 2023, and two topics especially – the COVID-19 epidemic and the war in Ukraine. These two topics stand out both by their undisputable public importance, and by the attentiveness demonstrated by the authors of the show. Due to the abundance of material, I will offer a detailed analysis of only a few representative examples. It is however important to note the following: although the episodes of the show dedicated to the two mentioned topics do not represent the majority of the episodes aired in the period, the persistence with which the authors of the show return to them with a clear agenda analyzed in the following pages, gives a clear political bent to the identity of the whole show. So, although the conclusions that follow certainly do not generalize to all episodes of the show (many of which are much more standard discussions of academic philosophy), they do uncover something significant about the show itself and the way it is perceived.

On the topic of the pandemic, Aleksandar Lukić, the show's author and host at the time, held an openly skeptical line toward the official anti-pandemic measures, and targeted the medical authorities that stood behind them. Although not all of the guests invited to the show to speak on the topic shared these views, most of them did. For instance, among the guests in the period from 2020 to the end of 2022, there were many infamous vaccine skeptics and COVID conspiracists, such as Jovana Stojković, Branimir Nestorović, Valentina Arsić-Arsenijević and Alek Račić (*Etika i pandemika*, 2020; *Filozofija i medicina*, 2020; *Pandemija, nauka, etika*, 2020; *Filozofija, medicina i politika*, 2021; for a history of their conspiracist and anti-vaccine statements see Komarčević, 2021; Tančić, 2021; Radojević, 2022). Short descriptions of some of these shows often clearly reveal their nature and intentions. For example, announcing the show with Jovana Stojković, a long-time vaccine denier and an extreme right-wing politician and activist, the short description on the official RTS website says the following: "The current global crisis which has been caused by the virus infection has a huge influence on economic, social, educational and moral realms. The situation is marked by numerous controversies and debates between experts and 'non-experts', to whom it is said that they should stop meddling into their own lives, stick to their jobs and 'just keep hitting the ball'. However, the fact that the director of the World Health Organization is not a medical doctor, but

a microbiologist from Ethiopia, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, does not seem to present a problem, etc. It seems that a lot more attention is being paid to the medical and epidemiological, and a lot less to the ethical aspect of the current situation" (*Etika i pandemika*, 2020). In this short text there are clear implications that Novak Đoković's opinion on COVID is being unjustly disregarded by experts, while at the same time it is implied that the director of the WHO is not an expert in the relevant field.

In other cases, the guests are themselves neither vaccine skeptics nor conspiracy theorists, but are in different ways "drafted" by Lukić to support his own position. This is the case with Divna Vuksanović, an accomplished Serbian philosopher working in the fields of aesthetics and philosophy of media. The short description on the RTS website wears its conspiracist intentions on its sleeve, starting from the title of the episode, "The Global reset and the New Totalitarianism": "History has its own crucial periods in which the old paradigm that lays in the foundations of social relations changes and the new one arises. The declared pandemic resembles such a crisis which is caused in order to establish a new normality in which what was previously abnormal or even intolerable, because of endangering freedom and the foundations of civic society, becomes normal. In the social conditions such a condition, if it would ever get established, could be defined as the new totalitarianism" (*Globalni reset i novi totalitarizam*, 2021). To claim that that pandemic was caused with an intention of producing certain social changes is already a conspiracist claim by definition, but the phrases used in the description, such as "The Global Reset" and "new normalcy" are also clear references to COVID-conspiracist narratives (ADL, 2020; Siraki & Mohammad, 2023), and the same goes for the hypothesis that the pandemic has been declared in order to curtail some crucial individual freedoms (Arnold-Forster & Gainty, 2022). Although in the show itself, Vuksanović never engages in spreading conspiracism or misinformation, but rather deals with ideology criticism of the Klaus Schwab's document on the "great reset", her contributions are garnered with Lukić's explicitly conspiracist comments that remain unchallenged.

On the topic of the Ukraine war, the situation is similar, although slightly less explicit. Here, the prevailing strategy seems to be the following: in the face of brutal Russian aggression in Ukraine and the simultaneous crackdown on opposition and anti-war voices in Putin's Russia (Amnesty International, 2023), it is important to point out only the faults and hypocrisy of the West. For example, the short description for the episode that aired four days after the beginning of Russian invasion of Ukraine, titled "Totalitarianism of Liberal Democracy", says the following: "Totalitarianism as a social arrangement is not necessarily connected to the poor and so-called undemocratic states. Contemporary history demonstrates that such an order based on violence that is turned both outward and inward, also appears in the so-called democratic states of the Western type. A possible justification of the Western imperial wars by the liberal political order of these states is difficult to defend, taking into account the obvious fact that that these societies are increasingly becoming ideologized societies of quasi-liberal dogmatism, imperial towards the outside and very aggressive towards their own citizens" (*Totalitarizam liberalne*

demokratije, 2022). This exercise in applied Orwellianism in which democracies are totalitarian, and authoritarian regimes are "so-called undemocratic" is a good illustration of the method that the show uses to address the war in Ukraine.

The rest of the episodes dealing with this topic follow the same pattern. For instance, the episode with sculptor and philosopher Dragan Radenović, on the topic "History as a Struggle of Good and Evil" is described thusly: "Evil often wins, but only temporarily, until it gets uncovered or unmasked as evil. That is why evil has always presented itself as good. Many evils were committed in the name of the good". (*Istorija kao borba dobra i zla*, 2022) Although this sounds extremely abstract, by listening to the show itself, it becomes evident that abstract metaphysical concepts of good and evil are just thinly veiled stand-ins for Russia (good) and the West (evil disguised as good). Radenović, who is presented as a freshly awarded winner of a medal by the "Russian International Peace Fund", explains that he got the medal due to his active struggle for "world peace", and expresses his hope that "this Special Operation will be finished as quickly as it can… and that the children that represent the future of this planet will get a chance to grow up in a spirit like the one after WWII… outside these newly invented needs that are a sign of a perverted value system" (*Istorija kao borba i zla*, 2022). The "Special Operation" is, of course, nothing else but the Russian propaganda euphemism for invasion of Ukraine (Arkhipova, 2023; Spišiaková & Shumeiko, 2023, p. 377.) – the "peace activist" Radenović is actively cheering for the victory of the aggressor, and repeating another Russian propaganda cliché about the "perverted West" (Rettman, 2023). This is applied Orwellianism once again – war is peace, at least if it is the Russians who are waging it. To this, the author and host, Aleksandar Lukić, replies that in the Russian language, there is still a symbolic connection between concepts of peace and world. If the listener still had any qualms about whether Russia is on a side of peace, this etymological argument should settle it once and for all (*Istorija kao borba i zla*, 2022).

The episode with philosopher and publicist Nikola Tanasić (who will later become the author of the show, replacing Lukić), with the title "Philosophy, Politics and International Relations", is described this way: "The world is in a crucial time of crisis, but also of hypocrisy, that consists in moving away from the proclaimed values of the West. Democracy, human rights, media freedom and the like, it turns out, apply only if they are in accord with the Western interests. Otherwise, they are just of secondary importance" (*Filozofija, politika i međunarodni odnosi*, 2022). The episode itself brings us many well-known elements of Russian propaganda, such as those that the West has provoked the war in Ukraine, and that it fans the flames of conflict, but also some original contributions by Tanasić who claims that the war in Ukraine is best described as a "civil war" between "Russian speaking people", thus relativizing the crime of aggression. To leave no space for guessing, Tanasić concludes: "Westerners may believe that Russians are conducting an invasion of the Western city of Kiev, but when Russians say – we are going to take Kiev, that is just as if Serbians would say – we are going to take Bjeljina, or Podgorica, or Banja Luka… or Sarajevo" (*Filozofija, politika i međunarodni odnosi*, 2022). The point being – Russian invasion of Ukraine isn't an invasion at all, but "a civil war".

As if all this was not enough, Aleksandar Lukić asks Tanasić whether Ukrainians are informed about biological laboratories operating on their territory (*Philosophy, Politics and International Relations*, 2022) – another conspiracy theory, this time originating in Russian war propaganda and being spread by the US extreme right (Chappell & Yousef, 2022). Tanasić appears to disbelieve this conspiracy, and does not agree with Lukić on the existence of the laboratories, but he does not challenge him on it either, so the listener is likely to leave convinced that this claim is not really up for debate (*Filozofija, politika i međunarodni odnosi*, 2022).

Unreality and Undermining Propaganda

All this is very far from Socratic thinking as "the idea that one will take responsibility for one's own reasoning, and exchange ideas with others in an atmosphere of mutual respect for reason, is essential to the peaceful resolution of differences, both within a nation and in a world increasingly polarized by ethnic and religious conflict" (Nussbaum, 2010, p.54). On the contrary, what these fragments reveal are deep anti-intellectualism and distrust towards experts and expertise, science and scientific institutions, as well as an abundance of conspiracy theories and conspiratorial thinking in general. Both of these – distrust towards epistemic authorities and conspiratorial thinking – undermine the possibility of meaningful public debate about important issues, and in order to show this I will turn to Jason Stanley's account of fascist propaganda in his book *How Fascism Works* (2018).

According to Stanley: "Intelligent debate is impossible without an education with access to different perspectives, a respect for expertise when one's own knowledge gives out, and a rich enough language to precisely describe reality. When education, expertise, and linguistic distinctions are undermined, there remains only power and tribal identity" (Stanley, 2018, Anti-intellectualism, para. 1). What we have in the cited excerpts from the show are good examples of exactly this kind of undermining of intelligent debate. When the opinions of scientific authorities are casually put into question, while scientific institutions are intentionally maligned, informed debate on complex issues becomes impossible.

Furthermore, by replacing scientific expertise and verified data with conspiracy theories, the show does something else that Stanley recognizes as crucial for destroying the preconditions for reasoned debate: it undermines the sense of shared reality. As Stanley argues, the so-called marketplace of ideas, of which John Stuart Mill famously claimed that it will always lead to knowledge, only does so if the public in which different opinions are being aired is already receptive to reasons and attuned to reasoned debate. Otherwise, flooding the public sphere with misinformation, paranoia, impassioned rhetoric and propaganda, will leave the citizens unable to find firm ground in shared reality, and thus unable to deliberate together. Stanley's example for this kind of intentional creation of "unreality" with an obvious goal of undermining trust in democratic institutions is the Russian television network "Russia Today". Explaining the challenge that media like RT present for Millian optimism regarding the exchange of ideas, Stanley writes: "Mill seems to think that knowledge,

and only knowledge, emerges from arguments between dedicated opponents. Such a process, according to Mill, destroys prejudice. Mill would surely then be pleased with the Russian television network RT, whose motto is 'Question More.' If Mill is correct, RT, which features voices from across the broadest possible political spectrum, from neo-Nazis to far leftists, should be the paradigm source of knowledge production. However, RT's strategy was not devised to produce knowledge. It was rather devised as a propaganda technique, to undermine trust in basic democratic institutions. Objective truth is drowned out in the resulting cacophony of voices. The effect of RT, as well as the myriad conspiracy-theory-producing websites across the world, including in the United States, has been to destabilize the kind of shared reality that is in fact required for democratic contestation. What did Mill get wrong here? Disagreement requires a shared set of presuppositions about the world. Even dueling requires agreement about the rules. You and I might disagree about whether President Obama's healthcare plan was a good policy. But if you suspect that President Obama was an undercover Muslim spy seeking to destroy the United States, and I do not, our discussion will not be productive. We will not be talking about the costs and benefits of Obama's health policy, but rather about whether any of his policies mask a devious antidemocratic agenda. In devising the strategy for RT, Russian propagandists, or 'political technologists,' realized that with a cacophony of opinions and outlandish possibilities, one could undermine the basic background set of presuppositions about the world that allows for productive inquiry" (Stanley, 2018, Unreality, para. 23-25).

We can easily recognize the same pattern of producing "unreality" in the previously cited examples from "Gozba"[3]. No doubt, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a serious challenge for whole societies, and the anti-pandemic measures presented a legitimate and urgent topic for public discussion, but spreading conspiracy theories about the "Global Reset" was no way to make such a debate possible, much less to further it in any meaningful way. On the contrary, it was a way to further deepen the citizens' distrust in institutions, and weaken their sense of shared reality, and all this in an extremely vulnerable moment in which collective compliance with anti-pandemic measures was necessary. Similarly, the war in Ukraine is a tragic and world-changing event that allows for different legitimate interpretations, but spreading the belief that there are "biolabs" in Ukraine aimed at producing viruses that specifically target Russians, is not one of them – it is a bizarre conspiracy theory that puts into question the very sense of what is and is not possible and realistic. By promoting this and similar theories, "Gozba" effectively makes reasoned public debate on the issue of the war in Ukraine much less likely.

In his book *How Propaganda Works* (2013), Jason Stanley makes a distinction between two basic types of propaganda – supporting propaganda, which he defines as "a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to increase the realization of those very ideals by

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[3] Incidentally, both Aleksandar Lukić and the current author and host of the show, Nikola Tanasić write for the Russia Today Balkan (see Lukić, 2023; Tanasić, 2023).

either emotional or other nonrational means", and undermining propaganda, which is defined as "a contribution to public discourse that is presented as an embodiment of certain ideals, yet is of a kind that tends to erode those very ideals" (Stanley 2013, p.53.). As Stanley himself notes, the second type of propaganda is certainly more interesting and more puzzling of the two. While the phenomenon of supporting propaganda seems to be relatively straightforward (Stanley's example is waiving the national flag in order to strengthen patriotism in the audience) there seems to be something paradoxical about the undermining propaganda, since it undermines the very thing it is supposed to promote. One of Stanley's examples is a Nazi propaganda message presenting Jews as a public health threat ("Jews are the Black Death") – this message was presented as promoting public health, but was actually undermining it by working directly against the health of all the Jewish citizens of Germany (Stanley 2013, p. 62.). A less drastic example, also offered by Stanley, are studies on climate change funded by the fossil-fuel industry, which are presented as promoting the ideal of scientific objectivity, but which are in reality undermining this ideal by presenting biased research and results that put into question the reality and seriousness of climate change (Stanley 2013, p. 60.).

What makes undermining propaganda puzzling is the fact that the audience does not notice the contradictions between its stated ideals and its actual goals. Stanley solves this puzzle by introducing the concept of "flawed ideology". According to him: "Flawed ideological belief masks the contradictions of undermining propaganda by erecting difficult epistemic obstacles to recognizing tendencies of goals to misalign with certain ideals: for example, obstructions to understanding liberal democratic concepts and what they entail" (Stanley 2013, p. 57). For instance, flawed ideology of Nazism that rationalized the inhumane treatment of Jews by inculcating dehumanizing beliefs about them (Stanley 2013, p. 3), made it possible for many Germans to overlook the contradiction in the message equating them with Black Death. At the same time, this message further strengthened the dehumanizing ideology of Nazism, which is according to Stanley, what undermining propaganda typically does – after being enabled by flawed ideology, it further strengthens it in return (Stanley, 2013, p. 4).

The analyzed episodes of "Gozba" are, I would argue, a clear example of Stanley's undermining propaganda. Starting with its very name, the show presents itself as promoting Socratic ideals of reasoned debate and rational reflection, but in the analyzed cases, it actually undermines these very ideals by spreading fear, paranoia, misinformation, conspiracy theories and distrust of experts. However, as with undermining propaganda in general, the most interesting question is – how does it work in spite of its own contradictions? Here, it is important to note that "Gozba" is aired on the national radio, and that among its guests are some of the prominent academic philosophers in Serbia, so the question naturally arises of how its contradictions manage to pass by unnoticed? Following Stanley, we should assume that there is a flawed ideology at work which produces necessary preconditions for smoothing out these contradictions or not recognizing them as such. Just like biased climate reports funded by corporate money manage to pass as promoting

objective science due to a flawed ideology that has already laid the groundwork for believing that "climate change legislation is not in the service of doing anything about the climate, but rather in the service of changing lifestyles to accommodate a socially progressive agenda: climate change policy as gay marriage" (Stanley 2013, p. 19), so the flawed ideology at work in the case of "Gozba" has obviously made at least parts of the public receptive to the idea that scientific organizations and most Western media sources are tools of a conspiracy, and that critical reflection consists in uncovering conspiracies such as these. To try and give a detailed account of this flawed ideology would go beyond the scope of this article, but existing literature on the issue could help us make some tentative assumptions about it.

Conclusion

In his book *Teorija zavere: Srbija protiv "novog svetskog poretka"* (2006)[4], Jovan Byford notes that in Serbia during the 1990's, a decade which was otherwise marked by wars, militant nationalism and international isolation, there was a surge in conspiratorial thinking and a proliferation of conspiratorial explanations. Byford treats conspiracy theorizing as a specific ideological tradition, and describes this tradition as "a loose network of ideas, arguments, beliefs and rhetorical instruments that conspiracy theorists around the world use to construct and explain the idea of an insidious plot intent on world domination" (Byford, 2006, p. 1). However, although Byford recognizes that this tradition is a worldwide phenomenon, he also notes that there was something specific in the way it was treated in Serbia under the regime of Slobodan Milošević – while in most other countries in the West, conspiracy theorizing was on the margins, in Milošević's Serbia it was a part of the mainstream: "In Milošević's time, Serbian conspiratorial discourse did not have a subversive or rebellious spirit typical for contemporary conspiracy theories in the western world. This was due to the fact that unlike their western colleagues, Serbian conspiracy theorists did not feel threatened in their environment. Milošević's Serbia proclaimed itself to be the last bastion of resistance to the world conspiracy and the New World Order, so it was an ideal base for conspiracy theorists of different stripes. While Milošević was in power yelling a thunderous 'no' to the New World Order, conspiracy theorists were in the very epicenter" (Byford, 2006, p. 171). Numerous examples Byford cites in his book, of conspiracy theories published in mainstream media in Milošević's Serbia, some of them verging on explicit antisemitism, prove that this was indeed the case (Byford 2006, p.108-114). Byford ends his book on a cautiously optimistic note, stating that after the fall of Milošević's regime, on October 5. 2000, the situation has changed for the better, and that conspiracist discourse has largely withdrawn to the margins. However, there is reason to believe that this frail progress has been rolled back during the last decade which has witnessed the return of many political and media actors from the 1990's into the mainstream, together with the

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[4] *Conspiracy Theory: Serbia Against the „New World Order"*

conspiracist discourse they openly promote (for example, see Pavlović, 2022). There is, therefore, a reason to believe that the flawed ideology from the 1990's had so thoroughly permeated Serbian society and its public sphere that contradictions present in cases of undermining propaganda such as the one we see in "Gozba" easily go unnoticed.

Cashio ends his text by noting a clear connection between Rush Limbaugh, who was awarded a Medal of Freedom by Donald Trump in 2020, and the insurrectionist attack on the Capitol on January 6. 2021. Cashio concludes: "The transformative power of radio has real-world consequences that can surpass its ethereal medium" (Cashio 2022, p. 219). It would be much less convincing to claim that there is a similarly clear line between "Gozba" and some other real-world consequences such as vaccine hesitancy (Tuvić, 2021) or relatively high levels of support for the Russian war of aggression (Bjeloš et al., 2022). While it is true that "Gozba's" influence can hardly compare to some other shows and media that spread similar type of content (Prešić, 2022), what sets it apart and makes it especially significant is the fact that it does this in the name of philosophical ideals of reasoned debate, critical thinking and rational reflection. That modern public sphere leaves little space for philosophical reflection and is constantly in danger of being hijacked by powerful special interests is hardly a new insight (see Habermas, 1991), but the situation becomes doubly problematic when what little space is left for philosophy's participation in the public sphere is being used to undermine key philosophical ideals and to replace them with their counterfeit versions based on fear, paranoia, propaganda and sophistry.

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Promovisanje filozofije, podrivanje filozofskih ideala: Slučaj radijske emisije „Gozba" i njen pristup pandemiji *Covid-19* i ratu u Ukrajini

Rastislav Dinić,
Departman za filozofiju, Filozofski fakultet, Univerzitet u Nišu, Srbija

Apstrakt

Prema filozofu Entoniju Kešiju, radio kao medij poseduje moć da stvara duboke i intimne veze između govornika i slušalaca, a samim tim i da gradi snažne zajednice. Upravo ova moć čini radio moćnim instrumentom za širenje populističke propagande, dezinformacija, konspirologije i straha, ali isto tako i za javnu filozofiju (public philosophy) usmerenu na razvoj sposobnosti kritičkog mišljenja i refleksije. Sledeći ovaj Kešijov uvid i oslanjajući se na rad filozofa Džejsona Stenlija na temu propagande,

analiziraću jednu od najdugovečnijih filozofskih radio emisija u Srbiji, „Gozba“, koja se emituje svakog ponedeljka na Drugom programu Radio Beograda. Fokusirajući se na način na koji se „Gozba“ bavila pandemijom kovida i ratom u Ukrajini, pokazaću da, kada su u pitanju navedene teme, ova emisija podriva filozofske ideale koje navodno promoviše i da služi pre svega kao instrument za širenje teorija zavere, opasnih antinaučnih gledišta, antivakcinalnih stavova, lažnih vesti i ruske ratne propagande. Na kraju ću se osvrnuti na posebnu opasnost koja vreba u promovisanju ovih duboko antifilozofskih stanovišta pod krinkom filozofije i kritičkog mišljenja.

Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste

Ilija Milosavljević[1][2],
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Niš, Serbia

Book cover: Frey, Mattias. Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste. University of California Press, 2021

The digital age has initiated many changes in the sphere of media and the way entire society functions, and the two, probably, most specific changes are datafication and algorithmic utilitarianization of those huge databases. In the light of this fact, the book Netflix Recommends: Algorithms, Film Choice, and the History of Taste by Mattias Frey presents a very interesting and deep analysis of the modern trend of creating and directing the taste through recommendation systems of streaming services. In this book, the author, professor of Film, Media, and Culture at the University of Kent, analyzes and explains, using Netflix as an example, the connection between collected data, algorithmic processing, and recommendations to users that arise as a result of this automated procedure, but also questions necessity, effectiveness and consequences of recommending systems for media use. Those questions, apart from the introduction, afterword and appendix, are discussed in five chapters.

In the book's introduction, the author emphasizes that modern times are characterized by globalization and technological changes that transform the cultural sphere and expand the possibility of choice, and that transformation is reflected in the sphere of films and series. The introduction of Netflix and other video-on-demand services, with their vast catalogs and offerings, has brought fundamental changes in how these cultural products are perceived, viewed, and chosen by audiences. The way films and series become part of media repertoires changes significantly with the introduction of algorithmic systems based on big data and personalization. The author states that he analyzes these systems, primarily the Netflix recommendation system, but that he replaces the popular technological deterministic approach with an analysis that takes into account all social components and their relationships. Furthermore, he takes the perspective of

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[1] Corresponding author: ilija.milosavljevic@filfak.ni.ac.rs

[2] ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2341-7637

users, their choices and tastes instead of the producers' perspective, which is most often used to analyze digital technologies.

The first chapter, *Why We Need Film and Series Suggestions*, discusses why users of digital media platforms, particularly SVOD services, require algorithmic content recommendation systems. The author focuses on two aspects: quality and quantity. According to Fray, the user's need to choose and obtain what he considers to be of high quality has always existed, but when it comes to media content, the role of filter or gatekeeper is now in the hands of automatic algorithms and their recommendation systems. What distinguishes them from previous models (advertisements, critics and word of mouth) is that they are highly personalized, based on the preferences and needs of each individual user. Their role is to reduce the risk of selecting something that does not meet the user's quality standards. Furthermore, the author emphasizes the importance of the recommendation system in the case of media products, films, and series due to the unique way in which they are consumed. He pinpoints these distinctions by contrasting them with detergents on the one hand and luxury goods on the other: "A consumer may decide on a laundry detergent brand once or vary his or her choice each month according to the price; he or she may take great pains to decide which camera or car to buy but will only purchase such an item once every several years. In contrast, films and series maintain vastly more variety and most people consume them much more frequently". Another reason why we need algorithmic recommendation systems is the hyperproduction of serial and movie content. For example, from 2008 to 2020, the number of films with a theatrical premiere in the United States increased by 41%, while in the United Kingdom, the percentage increased by 71% from 2006 to 2019. The situation is similar when looking at the number of series produced, but also when we analyze the number of SVOD services that are available. In such an environment, users require a tool to help them navigate the chaos of countless potential contents available to them, and recommendation systems are that tool.

The second chapter, *How Algorithmic Recommender Systems Work*, discusses all the specifics and reasons that make system recommendations more distinct than other recommendation systems, such as posters, trailers, or reviews, which the author emphasizes have existed since the beginning of movies and series. Stating that algorithmic recommendation based on data is just an old solution to a new problem, he identifies six key characteristics that distinguish this phenomenon from all previous recommendation models. The first and most fundamental is that it is based on data that is unique to each user and that, through algorithmic processing, it can instrumentalize their data in such a way that it "knows" each user individually. This leads to another feature known as personalization, which makes recommendations of potentially interesting content to users based on a huge database's overall regularities and the specific behaviors and preferences of users. According to Frey, this is the manifestation of Nicolas Negroponte's concept of narrowcasting and hyperpersonalizing information. The third crucial characteristic is that recommendation systems function as a result of scale and aggregation; in other words, by analyzing vast amounts of data and finding patterns among them, they

can become extremely accurate at determining someone's liking without any kind of subjective judgment. Additionally, the fact that these systems are nontransparent, to be more specific, nobody outside the organization is aware of how they work—indicates the significance of their operating procedures for the provision of the service. The issue of credibility, which each system bases on algorithmic objectivity and the wisdom of the crowd, is the fifth point of distinction. The sixth difference is the capability of algorithms to detect potentially new developments of taste within the audience and even to steer him in a specific direction.

The author presents the history and development of Netflix's recommendation system in the third chapter, *Developing Netflix's Recommendation Algorithms*, pointing out that this company does not have the greatest influence when it comes to the distribution, presentation, or production of series and film programs; it is the most significant in the sphere of directing and defining taste through algorithms. It's worth noting that Netflix's Cinematch algorithm was not originally designed for the purpose it serves today. As an online DVD rental site, the company aimed to combat the company's limited supply by providing users with accessible alternative content if their primary preference was not available for rental. Frey not only explains the development of this unique recommendation system, but also analyzes how, as the market has evolved and the transition to the streaming business took place, the task of the recommendation algorithm has become to keep the subscriber on the site for as long as possible. In the chapter's continuation, a special section is devoted to the analysis of the famous Netflix award and how it highlighted the importance of algorithms in the world of streaming, as well as new methods of framing and analyzing user behavior, and the need to always find something new and fresh within the framework of recommendations, which points to the problem of the personalization paradox. According to the author, it represents a departure from echo chambers and filter bubbles into which one can enter with complete personalization and unified taste, by always offering something unexpected. "Guided by viewers' behavioral data rather than stated preferences, the company largely ignores what customers say they want and instead provides them with what it thinks they need".

The fourth chapter begins with an explanation of why it is incorrect to claim that the recommendation system is completely novel and has never been seen before because it is based on quantification of taste and mathematical calculation of recommendations, as many authors claim. The author explains in this chapter, *Unpacking Netflix's Myth of Big Data*, that the belief that algorithmic analyses of big data guarantee objectivity of truth and accuracy is a myth. That myth is largely based on the fact that very little is known about Netflix's data and algorithms, which are strictly kept secret. Conversely, it is precisely on the basis of these analyses that the company argues for the objectivity not only of recommendations, but also of production, as was the case with the first series, House of Cards, which was claimed to have been created entirely on the basis of big data. The author refutes such claims, pointing out that the draft of this series was created long before Netflix's algorithmic dominance, while also raising questions about how the data analysis, which is reliable to that extent, recommended the production of some of this service's

series that received very low ratings, viewership, and criticism. Fray really explains this by saying that the algorithm itself, tags, models on which it operates, as well as interpretations of the gathered data, are the product of people who give them meaning, and that the illusion of Netflix's infallibility is a marketing strategy on which trust is based.

In the final chapter, the author presents the findings of his research on the use of streaming services based on algorithmic content recommendation, which he conducted using quantitative research - questionnaires and qualitative research - in-depth interviews. He administered the questionnaire to 2123 people from the United Kingdom and 1300 people from the United States, and 34 people from various regions of the United Kingdom took part in the interview. The data from these studies revealed that the process of deciding which movie or series to watch is very complex, multi-layered, and can sometimes take a very long time, and that it heavily influences traditional sources, advertisements, posters, and reviews, in addition to the recommendation system. In fact, only 10 to 15% of those polled ranked algorithmic search as one of their top three recommendation and selection methods. Frey questioned how much they understand how algorithmic recommendations work, in addition to how they use it. The conclusion is that the majority of interviewees do not have a complete and clear understanding of how algorithms work, and that the majority of what they know comes from the services themselves and their announcements. It is interesting to note that one of the segment's conclusions is that there is a significant percentage of those who understand how algorithms work to a greater extent, but do not care how much they affect them. The author demonstrates that there are quite strong opinions on the credibility and effectiveness of algorithms, ranging from completely positive to completely negative. The latter, in particular, raise concerns about the filter bubble, freedom, but also the precision of the defined taste and the lack of variation in proportions. Frey classifies several types of users at the end of this chapter based on the responses from the interviews. As a result, he categorizes them as Information Limiters and Information Gluttons, Lazy Choosers, Heavy Users and Light Users, High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Users, and those who prefer algorithms versus those who prefer people for recommendations.

The author pointed out in a lengthy afterword that when it comes to algorithm interpretations, neither utopian nor pessimistic views are complete, and even the segments in which they agree, which are primarily based on technological determinism, are not complete. Primarily, he concludes from the discussions with the interlocutors that algorithmic recommendation systems haven't fully replaced traditional forms of recommendation, that they frequently do not function satisfactorily, and that they are far from omnipotent and omniscient. Their job is to fill the void left by the constant need for a gatekeeper, but not a critic, because human-written reviews currently carry more weight in defining taste than algorithmic recommendations. The author comes to the conclusion that the process of forming taste is ongoing and that, despite being a significant technological and mathematical achievement that will undoubtedly alter the current situation, algorithmic recommendation systems won't completely replace the traditional journalistic and expert reviews and other methods of guiding

taste and attention. As he points out, no new media replaced the old one; rather, it coexisted with it in a modified new media system.

This book has enormous significance in two ways. The first is that it describes the historical origins, the evolution of the recommendation systems, their significance, complexity, and the application of big data extremely carefully, fully, and persuasively in the first three chapters. Without the methodologies, concepts, and other elements outlined in this section of the book, it would be impossible to grasp algorithms and recommendation systems. The author's rejection of the notion of technological determinism and focus instead on the viewpoint of VOD service customers and their experiences with algorithmic recommendations is another crucial aspect. Although it can be argued that such an approach is problematic due to the practical impossibility of users to objectively see how something affects them and give reliable interpretations, especially something that the author admits is very new and unknown, it certainly enriches the theory and our knowledge about algorithms, and contributes to the overall understanding of the processes of datafication and algorithmizing of our societies.

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