

## **From one transformation to another:**

Towards an understanding of challenges for media  
accountability online in Serbia

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# **From one transformation to another: Towards an understanding of challenges for media accountability online in Serbia**

*Michał Głowacki & Michał Kuś*

## **Summary**

This report on innovations of media accountability and transparency in Serbia underlines the main tendencies related to the current discussions on the challenges for media in an era of social changes and technological development. On the basis of available literature and the interviews conducted with Serbian media experts, scholars and practitioners in Belgrade (December 2010) several trends have been observed. Hence, the paper deals with cultural, social and political context, the level of journalistic professionalization as well as the effectiveness and legitimacy of existing media accountability and transparency institutions. An in-depth analysis of the development of new media platforms and Internet users' culture helps to define some of most significant examples of external and internal practices, strategies and cases maintaining media accountability and transparency in the online space. The research on the usage of social networks and blogs, as well as on practices fostering actor and production transparency as well as the level of media responsiveness underlines the current stage and future scenario of the evolution of system making Serbian media organizations accountable and transparent.

## 1. Context factors in the development of online MA practices

### 1.1 Social context. Towards an understanding of media accountability and transparency

Serbia has gone through a lengthy development over the last eleven years. The war and transition towards democracy had a huge impact on the transformation of the national media system as well as the development of journalistic professionalization. Like many other Central and Eastern European countries the introduction of freedom of speech was followed by the adaptation of free market economy ideals in the press market and an establishment of the dual system in the sector of broadcasting. However, Serbia is still in the process of directing media strategy by creating legislative developments that would be the most appropriate for Serbian situation and at the same time would be completely in line with European standards in the media {Rakovic}<sup>1</sup>. Social and cultural changes, as well as the current development of new technologies, requires Serbia to jump from one transition to another, bearing in mind that the country has not yet managed to complete the first transition {Rakovic; Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}.

Hence, the current discussions on media accountability (MA) and self-regulation in Serbia are still related to the performance of traditional media organizations, which have yet to fully develop their own MA system {Rakovic}. This sentiment matches the comments of two of our interviewees:

“The media hit by the war and transition, are still debating the classic forms of accountability. They didn’t even come to the conclusions: what is accountable and what is not?” {Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}

“So you still can see that in the media (...) we haven’t done much, both as a state and as journalists association over the last ten years. And the development of new media just spills over this situation into new media”. {Markovic}

Furthermore, although technological developments may bring a wide range of new opportunities to strengthen the media accountability system (MAS) and transparency, the debate on the development of MAS in Serbia is still far away from dealing with the web {Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}.

Maja Rakovic agrees there is not much discussion about media ethics in the context of new media in Serbia:

“I’m not sure that this topic is quite relevant at this stage, which may not mean it will not be relevant tomorrow, or in two months from now. At this stage I think we are still in discussing about media accountability in general and new media in general in terms of what is changing”. {Rakovic}

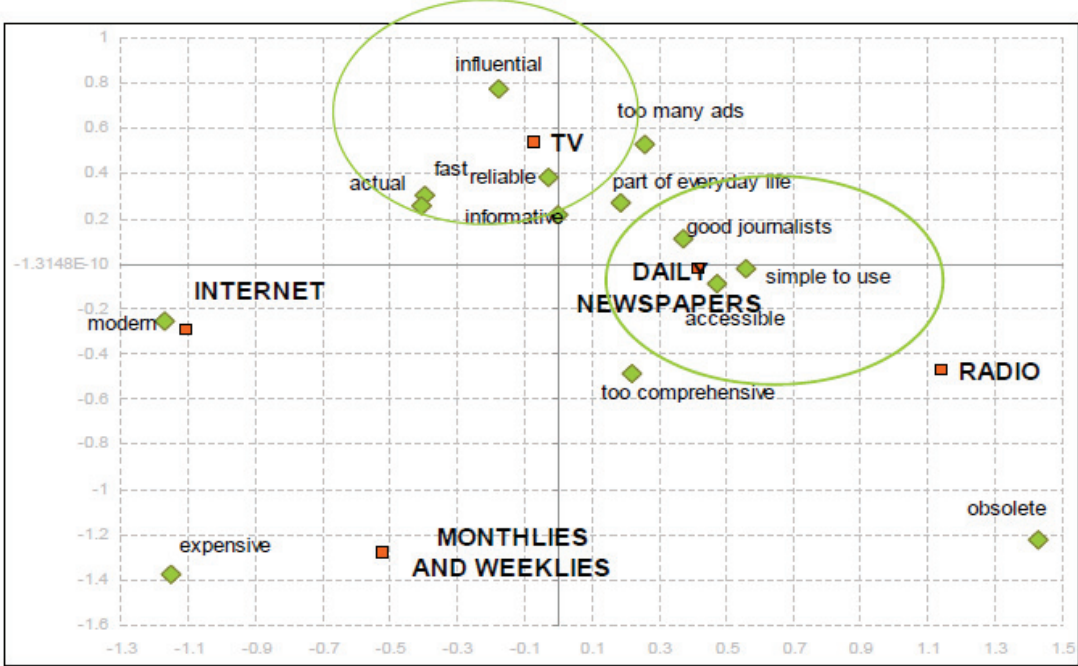
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<sup>1</sup> All the interviews were conducted in 2010 and are indicated by the names of interviewees in curly brackets, e.g. {Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}.

1.2 Media legitimacy and existing MAS institutions

The legitimacy of media in Serbia has so far been mainly discussed in connection to the different types of media. According to the Media Trust Survey conducted by Irex Serbia in 2008, television remains the most reliable format of information. Similar research proved that the online media may be still defined as modern and expensive platforms for new forms of communication (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Aspects correlating to news media in Serbia



Source: New Technologies and Media Survey, Irex Serbia (2008)

The existing MA and transparency instruments that have emerged in Serbia include the development of media regulation, the existence of journalistic associations and some of the most recent attempts towards the creation of the Press Council.

Media legislation in Serbia has been developed after the democratic changes in 2000. The most important changes occurred after 2002 when the broadcasting law and the law on public information were adopted {Rakovic}. Other regulations relevant for the performance of Serbian media include the criminal law and rules related to posting an offensive and illegal content online {Markovic}.

However, the law relating to the performance of Serbian media has not yet been fully developed in accordance to some of the most current standards defined at the European level. For instance, media regulation in Serbia is still not in a line with the EU’s Audiovisual Media

Services Directive (AVMSD) and, thus has not yet emphasized a distinction between linear and non-linear media services. In addition, the rules defined in the law on public information primarily deal with the traditional media and their online platforms. Thus, the regulation does not relate to the performance of non-professional content creators who are using new platforms to communicate with each other. Moreover, there is no clear legislation, which is relevant to the ownership of media companies {Rakovic; Markovic}. To this end, the Republic Broadcasting Agency, the regulatory authority relevant for the audiovisual sector of media, does not operate with full capacity to monitor all broadcasting programs, for which it is responsible {Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}. Serbia is among the countries that have not introduced the institution of ombudsman relevant to any of the media sectors.

The journalistic associations in Serbia, including the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), the Journalists' Association of Serbia (JAS-UNS) and the Journalists' Union of Serbia (JUS-UNS), represent in total over 7000 journalists. Over recent years, the journalistic associations have been politically divided between the pro-Milošević and the anti-Milošević, and developed their own codes of professional ethics. However, the opposing groups have finally managed to cooperate and now for the first time they sit together and talk {Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}. The journalistic associations in Serbia have created a quite normal, good code of ethics, which is now general for members of all the associations. Political separation between the journalistic associations in Serbia was one the main factors responsible for the late introduction of the Press Council {Radojkovic}.

The discussion on the introduction of the Press Council (PC) in Serbia started in 2009. PC was finally established with help from the Norwegian State in 2010, when both the media industry and media associations appointed four members each for the Press Council of Serbia. At the time members were chosen by public representatives and the editor-in-chief of 'Blic' was elected as the Council's chairman (Zlatev, 2011). However, Miroljub Radojkovic suggests the existence of the Council was seen by the owners of Serbian newspapers as useless, since most of them did not want to financially support this kind of activity:

“And the council exists now, sits and waits if something happens. (...) But still they don't have regular meetings, they don't have court of honor, they don't know procedure (...). So far, no reaction, no decision, no practical result.” {Radojkovic}

Generally, both media practitioners and scholars have underlined many negative aspects when discussing the online development of existing MA institutions. For instance, the current regulation does not cover in a good way the opinions that are expressed online and thus it does not cover the accountability mechanisms in the sector of new media {Markovic}. In addition there is the argument that traditional MA instruments that might be recognized in Serbia do not deal with the new media at all {Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}.

In taking a closer look at the practices introduced by the journalistic associations there is clear evidence that only few have significantly developed their online services. Moreover, although the website of the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS) offers subscription to a newsletter and has integrated its operations with Facebook and Twitter the popularity of new platforms has not yet developed. Indeed, as of 13 February 2011 only 195 Facebook followers and 22 followers of Twitter were identifiable. In addition, only seven topics have so far been published on the forum introduced by the NUNS official website, of which only two have received user comments. The most recent comment was published on 10 September 2009.

### 1.3 Internet user cultures

Despite the rapidly changing media landscape, television remains the most popular medium in Serbia. The country, as Radojkovic explains, has been one of the world's leaders in the duration of TV watching with an average per head of population of five hours in recent years. The popularity of television has a tendency to increase:

“And that's not difficult to explain because lot of people are in transition and they are so-called transition users. Lots of them lost their jobs. Young people cannot find jobs. The population is rather old and the average age in Serbia is 41. So most people are retired. Lots of people are poor and they have a lot of free time because they don't work and they don't know what to do with themselves. People don't have money and what they do, they sit and watch television”. {Radojkovic}

There are around 80 registered online media in Serbia. According to the Internet World Stats, the Internet penetration rate in 2010 had increased to 55.9 per cent equating to 4,107,000 Internet users (Internet World Stats, 2010).

However, typical users of online media are less than 35 years old {Radojkovic}, which means the majority of the population does not have any idea what the Internet is about and does not enjoy using it. In 2008, Internet users were typically residents of Belgrade and other urban areas, more educated and with higher incomes. The Internet was the most popular for 15-29 year olds (see Table 1).

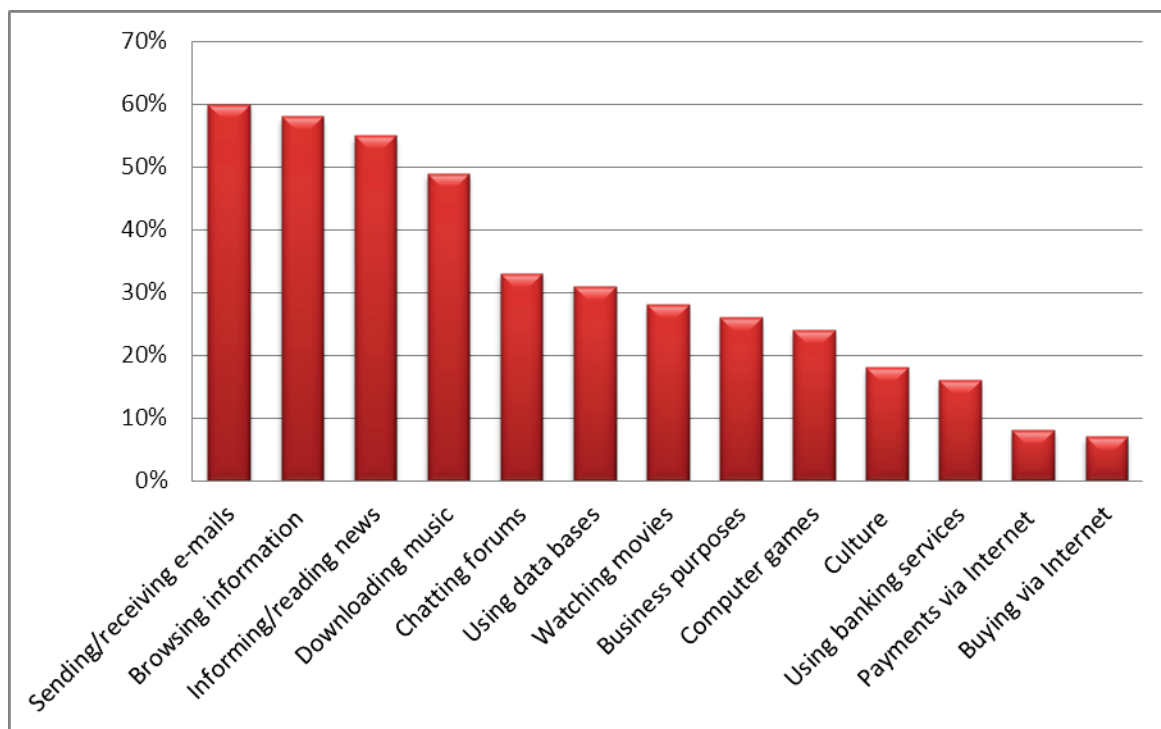
*Table 1: Internet usage (%) by age groups*

<i>Age group (years)</i>	<i>Internet users</i>
15-29	55
30-39	46
40-49	25
50-64	14
+ 65	2

Source: New Technologies and Media Survey; (Irex Serbia 2008).

Research conducted by Ipsos Strategic Marketing and Irex Serbia indicates Internet usage was dominated by searching for information (90 per cent), reading news (77 per cent) and email (71 per cent) (Radojkovic, Milojevic, 2010). This research proves the general trends observed in 2008 when e-mail usage was dominant over browsing and gaining information about current events (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Internet usage in Serbia, 2008



Source: New Technologies and Media Survey, (Irex Serbia 2008).

So far, several attempts have been already made to improve the level of media literacy among the citizens. The topic has been discussed in the Ministry of Culture as well as the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Society, which focused on media literacy for the youngest audiences. In addition, the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Society deals with different projects concerning on-line schools, development of Internet infrastructure as well as safe chat-rooms and the usage of television.

#### **1.4 Professionalization of journalism and development of online journalism**

Limited attempts have been made to evaluate the level of journalism professionalization in Serbia. One of the studies dedicated to the development of journalism was conducted within a regional research project of the South East European Network for Professionalization of Media “Ethics in Media – did Anything Change” conducted in 2005 by the Media Center in Belgrade. On



the basis of interviews conducted with 30 Serbian journalists several trends, including close relations between journalists and politicians as well as the crisis of professional values were emphasized (Journalism Ethics. Journalism in Serbia). Most recently, a team of the University of Belgrade coordinated by Miroljub Radojkovic has made attempts towards evaluation of the level of journalistic independence in an era of new technologies. However, the main results of the study have not yet been defined. The Press Freedom Index prepared by the Reporters Without Borders for Press Freedom in 2010 listed Serbia at the 85<sup>th</sup> place with the score of 23.00 placing the Press Freedom Index of Serbia next to Zambia, Nicaragua and Liberia (Press Freedom Index, 2010).

There is still an extraordinary amount of bad journalism in a most basic sense when discussing the development of journalism in Serbia and, as such, Slobodan Markovic argues that Serbia has not done much to improve the quality of journalism over the last ten years:

“You have maybe 20 per cent of good journalists, and 80 per cent of them are those who are just copy pasting and adapting the news from news agencies”. {Markovic}

Among the biggest problems for the journalistic profession in Serbia are interplay between journalists and politicians and insufficient levels of journalistic education. These problems are prevalent due to the Internet, because traditional media are re-transmitting, re-broadcasting and re-printing information that originated on websites and the social networks of Twitter and Facebook without making a significant effort to check or confirm the stories or conduct an in-depth analysis. Indeed around 90 per cent of topics are just ‘copy-pasted’ between the media and there is a lack of awareness of copyrights and consequences of publishing media content online {Markovic}.

The development of new platforms and actors has just changed the perspective for defining the users of media who now have the chance to be more active in terms of content distribution and creation and become less dependent on the content of traditional media. However, journalists in Serbia feel themselves threatened by the development of the Internet {Radojkovic}. Due to most journalists in Serbia beginning their careers in the print media there are only few people who are technologically more adapted to test new technologies and ways to interact with the publics {Stjepanovic}. A large number of the media practitioners in Serbia still do not have a good perception of Internet {Novakovic}.

Generally, the technological development and the emergence of new platforms for communication might have already improved the level of MA and transparency in Serbia. However, the country has not yet fully completed the first transition and needs to deal with all the additional developments today. Therefore, there has to be a broad public debate about contemporary changes in society and media and people need to understand that this issue needs

to be on the agenda {Rakovic}. As Rakovic claims, “the fight for accountability” has to be done by media themselves:

“Media need to prove that they are responsible and accountable to the general public”.  
{Rakovic}

Among the factors that may improve the level of MA and transparency in Serbia in the era of new technologies are (i) the multi-stakeholder approach in the process of media governance, (ii) the development of media legislation in accordance to the standards of the European Union and the Council of Europe, (iii) the development of self-regulation and media literacy among the citizens {Rakovic}. Furthermore, there is a need for the adoption of the law on financing of political parties and attempts towards strengthening and protection of independence of regulatory bodies and the newly formed Press Council {Radojkovic}. The provision of new legislation should be followed by the improvement of transparency with regard to the ownership of media organizations {Radojkovic}. To this end, a huge effort is needed to improve the quality of journalism and the editorial processes {Markovic}. Journalists need to learn how to use blogs and other Internet platforms promoting interaction with the publics {Stjepanovic} since the future of media in Serbia will be connected to the development of modern mobile services and social media {Novakovic}.

## 2. Online accountability practices initiated by the media

Practices initiated by media fostering both accountability and transparency online in Serbia are not that common for the present. A limited number of media organizations have started to develop platforms for strengthening the level of creativity, innovation and interaction as well as provision of feedback on the content published in the media and policy proposals.

One of the best examples of online journalism development may be observed in the case of Serbian public service broadcasting (RTS) {Radojkovic}. The online services of RTS allow users to use and develop media products, as well as to be informed about the company’s financial situation and the content that is produced in addition to the regular television programs or magazines. Other significant example includes the online operations of B92, maintaining a high level of credibility and journalistic professionalization {Rakovic}.

## 2.1 Actor transparency<sup>2</sup>

Actor transparency involves practices where media organizations offer contextual information about their ownership and ethical codes, as well as about the journalists producing the news stories. So far, only a few mechanisms supporting actor transparency online have been introduced by media organizations in Serbia (see Table 2). In most cases instruments such as bylines, public mission statements or the information on the internal codes of ethics are missing. In addition, a small number of media organizations are publishing links to their stories online as well as profiles of journalists:

“Some websites of traditional media categorize the articles by the author and on some of the websites you can click at the names of the authors and get the list of their articles. So you can track their history and see what they were writing about, but it’s not a common case in Serbia. And this would be a good mechanism to introduce but now is not available in easily accessible form”. {Markovic}

Table 2: Practices fostering actor transparency in the Serbian online news websites

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Available at online news websites</i>
Bylines	Usually no
Profiles of Journalists	Few
Journalist blogs	Few
Published mission statements	Usually no
Published Code of Ethics	Few
Published in-house code of ethics or news policy documents	Usually no
Public information on company ownership	Few

While some of the major media have made efforts to publish online blogs of their journalists, there are only few journalists who are running their own blogs and most are operated by hobbyists rather than real citizens and journalists {Radojkovic}. However, there were some interesting examples when regular journalists decided to publish a story using a blog instead of traditional media {Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic}. Journalist blogs have already been introduced by B92.net, the online operations of public service media as well as by “City Magazine”, which has introduced blogs written by the staff members and the local authorities relevant for the urban scene.

<sup>2</sup> The typology of practices has been defined by the research team in the Work Package 4 of the MediaAcT project. We reproduce an excerpt of the definitions in each section, but the reader is invited to see the introductory document for this collection of country reports for more details.

### Case 1: Practices fostering actor transparency. The case of B92.net

B92 was founded in 1989 as youth radio broadcasting to Belgrade audiences. Radio B92 quickly took the position of one of the leading representatives of independent journalism during the regime of Slobodan Milošević. Over the last decade B92 has grown to become a media company consisting of a radio and television station, a web page, an internet service provider, video and film production, a cultural center, a publishing house, a music label and a concert agency.

So far, B92 has introduced a significant number of the practices towards strengthening the level of actor transparency. For instance, on the online platform B92.net one may find information on the company's mission statement emphasizing independence, impartiality, objectivity, social responsibility, creativity and cultural diversity as values relevant for B92 operations as well as the ability to be open and responsive, defined with regard to the vision of the company. Hence, part of the B92 website is dedicated to communication and blogs where the journalists have the opportunity to raise social issues and further promote other ideas in connection to preventing problems with racism, violence or corruption. The online instruments strengthening the level of actor transparency in B92.net are additionally supported by the information on the company's ownership, the process of governance as well as profiles of journalists available on the website {Novakovic}.

Links:

B92. O nama: [http://www.b92.net/o\\_nama/index.html](http://www.b92.net/o_nama/index.html)

B92. Blog: <http://blog.b92.net/>

B92. Misija: [http://www.b92.net/o\\_nama/misija.html](http://www.b92.net/o_nama/misija.html)

B92. Vlasnistvo: [http://www.b92.net/o\\_nama/vlasnistvo.html](http://www.b92.net/o_nama/vlasnistvo.html)

B92. Lica: <http://www.b92.net/lica/>

## 2.2 Production transparency

Production transparency denotes practices where media organizations disclose to users information about their sources and the professional decisions made in the process of producing news. The process of news production in Serbia is not transparent at all, and thus people do not have a clear idea how the news is being produced and, by which standards the news is being approved {Markovic}. In Markovic's opinion Serbian media do not provide the audiences the possibility to find out more information on particular topic:

“What is really bad is that really small number of media that publish online link to sources. They practically don't do that (...) Even the media that do publish some links like B92, they usually link to their own news, not elsewhere. And this is really bad”.

{Markovic}

Hence, in taking a closer look at the list of the available online instruments, the usage of social networks has so far been defined as the most important tool fostering production transparency (see Table 3).

Table 3: Practices fostering production transparency in the Serbian online news websites

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Available at online news websites</i>
Links to original sources	Rare
Newsroom blogs	Usually no
Presence in Facebook	Yes
Presence in Twitter	Usually yes
Collaborative news production	Usually no
Citizen journalism, initiated by the news media	No

There are more than 2,500,000 registered Facebook accounts in Serbia. However, Facebook and the other social networks are mostly popular among the young audiences, who are ‘internet-natives’ and very literate with computers {Radojkovic}. There have been examples of topics being discussed on a Facebook group spilling over to traditional media organizations. Similarly, content published on YouTube has drawn the attention of mainstream media, which has picked up the story and presented it within traditional media content {Rakovic}.

### **Case 2: The impact of social networks on B92 operations during the 2010 earthquake in Central Serbia**

In 2010 a Serbian city of Krajlevo was hit by an earthquake, killing two people. The usage of social networks improved the level of its media coverage, since the first news on the catastrophe was posted by the users of social networks.

Within a minute of the earthquake occurring, 20 posts appeared on Twitter and within five minutes around 20 posts on Facebook. The first traditional media coverage started to report on earthquake 40 minutes after the occurrence started {Novakovic}.

Links:

B92 Twitter Account: [http://twitter.com/#!/who to follow/search/b92](http://twitter.com/#!/who%20to%20follow/search/b92)

B92 Facebook Account: <http://www.facebook.com/home.php#!/RTVB92>

Most journalists in Serbia are involved in the usage of social networks for personal gains rather than for professional profits. Yet despite this the level of journalistic awareness of the importance of the social networks and other tools of modern communication is still at a very low level {Stjepanovic}. Similarly journalists who are active on social networks or running their own blogs do not use these platforms as a dominant method of saying what they want to say. In order to improve their usage, the online platforms of Ringier Axel Springer Serbia have recently introduced the post for a social media manager. This position takes into account the most recent developments on forums, blogs and fan pages on Facebook and further tries to connect the process of news making with the comments posted by the social media users {Stjepanovic}.

### 2.3 Responsiveness

Responsiveness denotes news organizations' reactions to feedback from users related to news accuracy and journalistic performance. MA practices that maintain responsiveness in Serbia have been mostly connected to the possibility of commenting on stories published online. Online audiences of the major Serbian media organizations are active and they like to comment on the story and they are often following the comments in addition to following the news {Markovic}. However, very few media organizations are correcting the story in accordance to comments provided by the news followers {Markovic} (see Table 4).

*Table 4:* Online practices fostering user-generated content in Serbian online news websites

<i>Practice</i>	<i>Available at online news websites</i>
Feedback form and tip-offs	Rare
Correction buttons	No
Online news comments	Yes
Audience blogs	Experimenting

Forums developed by B92.net encourage users to discuss whatever they want, and thus the network is gaining hundreds of daily comments on the most recent news as well as B92's performance {Markovic}. Between 12 per cent and 20 per cent of B92's followers are using those parts of the website that are dedicated to comments and interaction {Novakovic}. So far the B92 forum has been successful in gaining opinions on a wide range of issues, including politics, economy, technology, language, environment or religion. Another tool for the registered users has been introduced by the media owned by Ringier Axel Springer Serbia, where users are allowed to comment on almost every news item without going through the internal editorial processes. The development of this particular instrument has raised the number of comments from 100 to 1000 for the most recent top stories {Stjepanovic}.

The level of responsiveness by B92 is further supported by the usage of mobile services, where the users are able to post and read comments through their mobile devices. The operations of B92 are focused on multimedia, online games and mobile services providing the opportunity to listen to radio or watch the news on the go {Novakovic}. Some of the most current investments include developments with respect to the usage of Android applications since the latest statistics have just indicated that the number of pages viewed by a single Android user is four to five times more than a single web user. However, the usage of mobile Internet is still rather expensive and thus not yet well developed for the online services of Ringier Axel Springer Serbia {Stjepanovic}. To this end, the company is planning to develop the

applications for iPhones and Android platforms to improve the level of integration with their followers.

### **3. Practices outside media**

Practices outside media that strengthen the level of accountability and transparency in Serbia have been mostly analyzed with regard to the performance of traditional media companies and complaints submitted by the audiences, as in the cases of 'The Moment of Truth', the 'Survivor' or the 'Farm' (Radojkovic; Rakovic; Solomon, Stankovic, Jankovic). This may suggest, that the impact on media performance from the users of online platforms has not yet developed. However, some positive trend in this context may be observed, particularly in the context of social media performance, citizens' blogs and mediawatch initiatives.

#### ***3.1. Journalist blogs, citizen journalism and social networks***

There are not any reliable data on the usage of blogs in the country. However, Maksimovic (2010) claims the number of blogs in Serbia should be estimated at 100,000. The most popular blogs are run by public figures, such as sportspeople, politicians, drama writers or pop singers who often through their artistic forms are critical of society. Although the number of thematic blogs is increasing (Kocul, Herman, 2008) there are not that many platforms related to making comments on the performance of media and, as Kocul and Herman (2008) observe, citizen journalism in Serbia is still in its infancy.

One of the good examples of interesting and high quality blogs related to the field of media may be found in the case of Media Mix written by Larisa Rankovic, a media researcher, consultant and freelance journalist from Belgrade. Current developments with regard to social networks and technological development has also been discussed on the platform Digital Serendipities, written by Danica Radovanovic, as well as on the blog Eniac's Ground, written by Nebojša Radovic. In addition, some journalists have just recently started to run their own 'whistle blowing' blog Pistalka.rs, a portal through which Serbians can report suspected corruption while remaining protected from retaliation. All the reports prepared on the basis of citizens' information are being further edited by the portal staff, consisting of journalists and lawyers. The site has already received the first report of corruption in the national healthcare system and has also investigated a state retirement fund.

### Case 3: Citizen blogs and websites related to media performance

Links:

*Media Mix:* <http://www.mediaserbia.blogspot.com/>

*Digital Serendipities:* <http://www.danicar.org/sr/>

*Eniac's Ground:* <http://www.eniax.net/>

*Pistaljka:* <http://pistaljka.rs/>

As mentioned, Facebook is the most important social network in Serbia:

“You can see that on Facebook every day, the group can quickly gather 40 000, 100 000 users and they express some opinion, judgments about things around us. People can form groups and influence public opinion through these groups, which are formed for good and bad purposes. We saw only this year groups that were in favor of women’s discrimination which gathered enormous amount of followers on Facebook, and this story spilled over the traditional media and on the other hand you have groups formed by regular people, not journalists, condemning for example discrimination against homosexuals”. {Markovic}

However, there are not many examples of relevant Facebook activities related to media performance. One of the significant exceptions is provided by Facebook group dedicated to facts on death of independent journalist Slavko Ćuruvija during the period of the Milosevic regime.

### Case 4: Facebook Appeal to Find the Murderer of Slavko Ćuruvija

Slavko Ćuruvija, a Serbian journalist and newspaper publisher, was brutally murdered in the centre of Belgrade on 11 April 1999. Ćuruvija was in close personal contact with Mirjana Markovic, the wife of former Serbian president Slobodan Milošević. Tensions emerged in the relationship between Mirjana Markovic and Ćuruvija in the summer of 1998, when Ćuruvija's publications became increasingly critical of the regime and of the developments in Kosovo. No one has yet been convicted for the crime (International Press Institute. Slavko Ćuruvija).

The Facebook Group created by Jovo - brother of Slavko Ćuruvija - has quickly gained popularity with 1,362 followers by January 2011 registering under the appeal “Please help me demonstrate that Serbia is not a country in which it is possible to kill a journalist with impunity”.

Link:

*Apel za pronalaženje ubica Slavka Ćuruvije:*

<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=102539839784002>

## 3.2 Other external initiatives supporting media accountability and transparency online

In addition to the usage of social networks and the growth of citizen journalism, several trends towards strengthening accountability and transparency of media organizations have also been observed. For instance, in taking a closer look at initiatives undertaken outside the media organizations one may find the mediawatch initiatives promoted by the Media Center in



Belgrade. The Media Center was founded by the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia in 1994, as the only multimedia organization to provide wide-ranging services covering the development of media in the rapidly changing information society. The activities of the Center include the provision of training in communications, organizing conferences and media events as well as maintaining cooperation in the region of South East Europe. In 2005 the Media Center, in cooperation with UNESCO, established the Press Council (Media Watch Serbia Research Group) to monitor and analyze the observance of professional standards and codes of ethics in the print media in the forthcoming year, as well as to indicate examples of their violations (Media Watch Project). Most recently, starting from 10 April 2010, the Media Center has organized a meeting called the Press Club, transmitted via the Media Center's Web TV.

#### **Case 5: The Press Club Project**

Every Monday at 12.00 the Media Center in Belgrade organizes a discussion held in the premises of the Media Center focused on highly topical issues prepared as a result of investigative work by Media Center's expert team. The debates are attended by two or three guests who are directly involved with the topic and the discussion is moderated by an expert who is a partner of the Media Center. The audience consists of other media outlets, journalists, students from journalistic fields. Individuals who are related to the topic under discussion participate in the last part of the debate. The debate lasts for 90 minutes, but if necessary it can be extended to 120 minutes. The discussions are broadcasted by several traditional media organizations, including TV 5 Nis, TV Cacak and RTV Kraljevo.

Link:

*The Press Club Project:* <http://www.mc.rs/code/navigate.aspx?Id=1934>

#### **4. Conclusions**

Social, political, economic and cultural changes in Serbia had a huge impact on the media system and the professionalization of journalism. However, the process of directing media strategy has not yet been completed and the development of new technologies, in addition to social change, calls for a jump from one transition to another. The current debates on both accountability and transparency of media in Serbia are still related to traditional media organizations and are still far away from dealing with the web. Hence, the problems with the effectiveness of media regulation, codes of journalistic ethics or the newly formed Press Council, are often followed by negative assessments when discussing the online development of existing MA institutions. Television remains the most popular medium in Serbia although the popularity of online services has just grown to a penetration level of 55.9 per cent.

Yet, very few media organizations in Serbia have introduced online practices supporting transparency and accountability. With few exceptions, including B92.net, online activities of

public service media as well as the outlets of some organizations belonging to Rignier Axel Spinger Serbia do not display instruments of media accountability, such as bylines, public mission statements or information on the internal codes of ethics. Moreover, only a small number of media organizations do publish the profiles of journalists and links to their stories online. In addition, the process of news production in Serbia is not transparent at all, and thus people do not have a clear idea how the news is being produced and, by which standards the news is being approved. The usage of blogs, social networks and online comments in news are among the most important practices fostering production transparency and the proper level of responsiveness of media organizations. However, in line with these developments, journalistic awareness about the importance of the social networks and interaction with media users remains at a very low level.

So far, only a few external initiatives supporting MA and transparency have been recognized in Serbia. Although the number of thematic blogs is increasing there are not that many platforms related to making comments on the performance of media. However, the examples of Facebook groups and the growing importance of citizens blogs proves that attempts have been made to change the current situation. Initiatives undertaken by the Media Center in Belgrade provide a good example of the introduction of the multi-stakeholder approach when discussing the current developments of policy standards and initiatives in an era of convergence and technological development.

The low level of journalistic professionalization, defined with respect to close relations with politics and the low level of professional standards' perception, does not help to hold the media organizations in Serbia transparent and accountable to the public. Hence, the development of self-regulation, the improvement of media literacy among citizens as well as a huge effort to improve the quality of journalism and the editorial processes should be among the guiding principles when discussing challenges and the future of the Serbian media accountability system today. All of these are vital to preserve the necessary independence of media and strengthening the level of interaction with the public in order to support the ability to think beyond the existing business models.

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