



# POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN SERBIA – DIGITAL VERSUS TRADITIONAL MEDIA

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## Abstract:

Politics-related communication is exceptionally significant as the messages sent to the electorate have a decisive influence on the formation of their stances on political matters and figures, electoral participation, and, thus, elections outcome. The present study aims to provide insight into contemporary digital political communication in Serbia by exploring voter preferences regarding obtaining political information through television and print media as well as official websites and social networks owned by broadcasters. The majority of existing academic papers belonging to the field of digital political communication emphasise the importance of modern technologies for shaping voters' attitudes and structuring political campaigns, assuming, as a fact, the willingness of citizens to obtain information primarily through the digital sphere. We have recognised the importance of investigating the significantly under-researched process of shifting citizens' attention from traditional to digital media. Thus, we set up a research hypothesis stating that contemporary political communication should be executed mainly digitally. Our hypothesis was evaluated by means of an exploratory study based on a series of questions related to respondents' habits regarding political information acquisition through all relevant traditional or modern media operating in Serbia. The raw data were coded to be imported to SPSS and quantitatively analysed using descriptive statistic measures, i.e., minimum, maximum, mean, standard error and standard deviation. The subsequent qualitative analysis convinced the authors that the hypothesis should be accepted since the respondents undoubtedly prefer to obtain political knowledge via the Internet, although still inclined to be informed through traditional media.

## Keywords:

Political Communication, Political Marketing, Digital Platforms, Traditional Media, Digital Media.

## INTRODUCTION

One of the hallmarks of modern politics is the ruthless and unethical information warfare that is constantly waged between political competitors sharing the common goal of obtaining popular support and rising to power. The battlefield of political competition has shifted from parliament and political assemblies to traditional mass media and digital media, skyrocketing electoral interest and participation. Traditional broadcasting methods, such as radio and television, had a predominantly informative role, while the new internet-powered media is mainly politically controlled, persuasive, and aimed at influencing the outcome of elections by shaping public opinion.

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Research conducted by Cohen, Tsfati and Sheaffer on a sample of 56 members of The Knesset, the Israeli House of Representatives, showed that politicians of all affiliations recognise the importance and the power of the media and, therefore, adjust their public behaviour to attract maximum media attention. [1] Models explaining the influence of media on voters can be divided into two categories, depending on whether they assume that the broadcasters strive to provide factual information to predominantly rational individuals or aim to engage in propaganda by manipulating voters and exploiting their cognitive deficits. [2]

Freedom of speech, guaranteed and protected by the highest legislative acts of modern democratic societies, bestows media with an inexhaustible and almost unlimited power that grants them a dominant position over political subjects. The author Salh noticed that nowadays, broadcasters are capable of altering the information on current affairs partially or even wholly before its distribution to the electorate and argued that the ascend of media into a position of strength debilitated the political entities, placing them in a position of unprecedented weakness. [3] At the same time, the public's eagerness for online interaction and information sharing has caused a significant problem related to media consumption – the phenomenon commonly known as information overload and scientifically described as a situation in which the amount of available information surpasses the individuals' cognitive capacity to process it. [4] The complexity and multilayeredness of political interactions have inspired numerous authors to examine the distinctive characteristics of traditional and contemporary media in the political context.

The present paper comprises six sequential sections (seven, counting the introduction) to visualise the theoretical framework and the exploratory research executed by the researchers. The first three sections constitute the literature review: the first section is about the definition of political communication in the digital sphere, the second deals with the characteristics of digital political communication, and the third evaluates the credibility of digital media. Subsequently, the fourth section refers to the methodology, whereas the fifth section includes the tabular presentation and discussion of the research results, finalising the paper with the conclusion, which is displayed in the sixth section.

## 2. POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Having studied the new political strategies applied in Serbia, the authors Jevtovic and Cebalovic argued that the rise of novel communication forms based on digital technologies has led to the division of the media system into two elementary groups, the traditional and the new. This trend simultaneously caused their restructuring and operational revamp, especially in terms of information processing and PR. [5]

Traditional media in all its forms (press, radio, and television) refers to communication from one source of information to numerous recipients. [6] They are much less user-oriented than new media, which, based on the multimedia nature of the content, provide an intensive, informative, and much more enjoyable user experience. The primary technological reasons for voters' preference for new media lie in the accessibility and open architecture of the Internet. In contrast, the socio-political reasons lie predominantly in the opportunity to obtain political information, exchange opinions and ideas publicly, overcome language and cultural barriers, connect with like-minded people, and receive feedback from politicians and political organisations. Communication in the digital sphere, through computers and cell phones with Internet access, combines all the advantages of traditional media in addition to the peculiarity that all actors can assume the role of creator and transmitter of information [7], creating a new order where power is primarily reflected in the possession of information. [8]

The most common argument explaining the negative sides of digital communication refers to the public nature of the Internet [9], a feature that allows broad access to criticism, negative feedback, disinformation and even lies, thereby encouraging misunderstandings as cybernauts are often unable to distinguish valid information from malicious propaganda. The disadvantages of online communication explained above present political parties with the challenge of making their content stand out from the abundance of positive and negative information available, attracting the target audience's attention, and establishing communication that secures consistent trust confirmed in voters' electoral behaviour.

Informing citizens and influencing their attitudes are the ultimate goals of all political communication activities by political parties, interest groups, or the media. [10] Authors such as Jevtovic and Cebalovic noted that in today's circumstances, the events are less important than the publicity they achieve and the impression they leave on public opinion. [5]



The overload of voters that possess a wide variety of information and the possibility of employing viral campaigns based on the spread of negative and often untrue news are two main factors that political subjects must keep in mind when making decisions about the choice of communication channels and strategies.

### 3. CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN THE DIGITAL SPHERE

Political news still occupies a central place in traditional media. Still, political communication is increasingly shifting to new, hybrid media systems in an environment characterised not only by reduced citizen attention but also by networked and polarised political information flows and the rise of undemocratic movements and parties. [11] Political communication in the digital sphere has taken on a specific tone, considered much more dynamic, aggressive, and competitive than the one used in traditional media coverage. The reason for this is the striving of all political rivals to become maximally exposed in the situation of total information overwhelm. The research conducted by Kruse, Norris and Flichum has confirmed the assumption that the Internet's anonymity potential reduces the likelihood of civil discussion and creates additional barriers, which are inexistent in face-to-face communication. [12]

The characteristics of political communication identified by international authors are also reflected in political communication in Serbia. The research conducted by Jevtovic and Cebalovic showed that Serbian citizens do not recognise the importance of political programs and that they focus their online political communications on commenting on campaigns and party leaders, cultivating an aggressive and intolerant attitude towards dissenters. These authors also determined that representatives of the authorities in Serbia still prefer traditional forms of communication with journalists and the target audience. In contrast, the opposition prefers modern methods of communication based on social networks. [5]

### 4. THE CREDIBILITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA

A 2016 survey of respondents from the digitally literate generation in Croatia found that they perceive political propaganda most frequently on the Internet and least frequently via radio broadcasts. [13] This finding can be explained by the ever-increasing use of devices with Internet access for interpersonal and business communication. Most well-established media companies

have recognised the constant and steady increase in digital-based information consumption and, therefore, transferred a specific part of their activities to the Internet, to specialised portals and official profiles on social networks. New informative media, which are non-existent in the offline sphere and pursue a more open editorial policy due to the anonymity of content authors and the often utterly opaque ownership structure, represent competition for traditional media on the Internet.

Within the scope of a paper dealing with online media and perceptions of source credibility in a political context, Flanagin and Metzger argue that source information is crucial to credibility, pointing out the prevailing scientific view that digital media sometimes lack traditional authority indicators such as author identity and established reputation. [14] The legal systems of many countries, especially those lagging behind in technological development, have yet to recognise the necessity of establishing a legal framework geared toward online media. Their failure to do so opens space for forming partisan platforms that intentionally manipulate facts and spread misinformation or even outright lies, aiming to fulfil precarious political agendas.

Radovic and Dojcinovic noted that Serbian society also faces the surge of predatory platforms that spread misinformation and clickbait news and pointed out that specialised websites dedicated to verifying the truthfulness of information are increasingly counterbalancing the sensationalist online media. [15]

Since the current research foundation, based on small samples of the electorate in Serbia and other ex-Yugoslav countries, mainly explores the impact of digital communication channels on voter awareness and political activity, the present study aims to go a step further. The objective is to find out how Serbian citizens view the process of media transition to the digital sphere, i.e., receive insight into their willingness to receive information through traditional media in digital form.

### 5. METHODOLOGY

The conducted exploratory research relied on the survey method. A questionnaire was designed using the Google Forms platform, which was electronically distributed to the respondents. The sample was prompted to provide their demographic information and answer a series of questions related to their habits regarding obtaining political information from print and television media, as well as from social networks and websites operated by traditional media.



A 5-point Likert scale was used to assess the respondents' habits. Each question in the questionnaire was marked as mandatory. Hence, all 117 questionnaires were completely filled out.

Data collection lasted from August 29 to September 11, 2022. The sample consists of 117 respondents, selected according to the principle of convenient sampling. The main criterion was being entitled to vote in elections organised in the Republic of Serbia, which means that only adult citizens (18 years and older) were considered. The primary survey data was used to achieve insight into the sample's demographics. The demographic analysis revealed that both genders are similarly represented, with a slightly larger proportion of females (53.8%). Most respondents belong to the working-age population (35.9% aged 36-45, 20.5% aged 46-55, and 9.4% aged 56-65). In contrast, the proportion of students and older adults was significantly lower than that of working-age individuals. The majority (73.5%) indicated Belgrade as their residence, whereas 26.5% live in suburban Serbian cities and settlements. Subsequently, the consumption of an extensive selection of relevant daily and weekly newspapers and television stations, as well as their digital versions was assessed. The response options "very often", "often", "occasionally", "rarely", and "never" were utilised. Numerical values were allocated to all response options (1 = very often, 2 = often, 3 = occasionally, 4 = rarely, 5 = never) to facilitate an exhaustive statistical analysis of the data collected through the survey. Since respondents' data could not be explained solely on the basis of the raw data collected, data coding was necessary to explore statistical regularities and anomalies. IBM's SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was utilised for data analysis and management.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A comparison of the arithmetic means showed that the most popular televisions in the classic form in descending order are RTS, Happy, and Pink, which is a somewhat logical result that can be explained by the fact that all three channels have national coverage and that a large part of their program is political reporting. However, the order of popularity is entirely different regarding information via the Internet: the respondents put the website and social networks owned by N1 television in the first place, while the digital channels owned by B92 and RTS televisions came in second and third place. It can be assumed that the outcome of N1 television being more prevalent in the digital sphere than in the traditional

media environment is a result of the fact that it is the opposition medium that offers voters a different and exciting look at the political situation in Serbia. Still, it does not have a national frequency and is not included in the portfolios of the most represented cable operators.

In most cases, television media are consumed in traditional form rather than via the Internet, except for the least popular TV channel Nova S. The fact that the news published by Nova S was predominantly accessed via the Internet can also, as in the case of N1, be explained by the weak coverage, i.e., the lack of national frequency, as well as by the fact that it is an opposition medium whose Internet platforms are constantly updated with exclusive information unavailable to other media.

Comparing the averages of the arithmetic means by survey options allowed to determine the overall popularity of the media companies. It turned out that the respondents preferred to be primarily informed through the televisions N1, B92, and RTS (counting both traditional and digital forms).

Quantitative analysis showed that the three most read newspapers in print form in descending order are Politika, Blic, and Kurir. The daily newspaper Politika occupying the first place might be explained by its long tradition and reputation, which has existed since 1904. The popularity of Blic and Kurir newspapers is attributed to their low cost, high circulation, and mass distribution.

In contrast to television, newspapers are generally followed more closely on the Internet than in print. Interestingly, the three previously mentioned media are also the most popular in terms of information in the digital sphere. However, the order is somewhat different. Blic is in first place, Kurir in second, and Politika in third. This result might be explained by the fact that these are popular and well-established media that have invested heavily in creating responsive, hourly updated websites.

The survey also showed that respondents do not have a pronounced habit of reading weekly newspapers, which can be explained by their high cost and the fact that they offer only abridged versions of texts for free on the Internet.





Table 1 - Statistical indicators related to the frequency of obtaining information through television and digital platforms owned by television media.

|              | Descriptive Statistics |     |     |      |       |       |
|--------------|------------------------|-----|-----|------|-------|-------|
|              | N                      | Min | Max | M    | SE    | SD    |
| RTS (tv)     | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 2,98 | 0,111 | 1,196 |
| RTS (net)    | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,60 | 0,109 | 1,175 |
| Pink (tv)    | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,15 | 0,107 | 1,154 |
| Pink (net)   | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,73 | 0,108 | 1,172 |
| B92 (tv)     | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,19 | 0,087 | 0,937 |
| B92 (net)    | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,38 | 0,109 | 1,181 |
| Happy (tv)   | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,09 | 0,109 | 1,179 |
| Happy (net)  | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,65 | 0,118 | 1,275 |
| Prva (tv)    | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,52 | 0,085 | 0,925 |
| Prva (net)   | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,94 | 0,097 | 1,053 |
| N1 (tv)      | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,26 | 0,109 | 1,177 |
| N1 (net)     | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 2,80 | 0,113 | 1,226 |
| Nova S (tv)  | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,88 | 0,096 | 1,044 |
| Nova S (net) | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,69 | 0,102 | 1,102 |

N=number of subjects, Min=minimum, Max=maximum, M=mean, SE= standard error, SD= standard deviation

Table 2 - Statistical indicators related to the frequency of obtaining information via print media and digital platforms owned by print media.

|                         | Descriptive Statistics |     |     |      |       |       |
|-------------------------|------------------------|-----|-----|------|-------|-------|
|                         | N                      | Min | Max | M    | SE    | SD    |
| Politika (print)        | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,47 | 0,114 | 1,229 |
| Politika (net)          | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 2,48 | 0,114 | 1,236 |
| Kurir (print)           | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,68 | 0,088 | 0,954 |
| Kurir (net)             | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 2,10 | 0,114 | 1,234 |
| Blic (print)            | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,54 | 0,098 | 1,055 |
| Blic (net)              | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 1,87 | 0,106 | 1,141 |
| Alo (print)             | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,83 | 0,089 | 0,967 |
| Alo (net)               | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 2,73 | 0,121 | 1,304 |
| Informer (print)        | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,84 | 0,093 | 1,008 |
| Informer (net)          | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,11 | 0,122 | 1,318 |
| Danas (print)           | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 4,13 | 0,084 | 0,905 |
| Danas (net)             | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,55 | 0,114 | 1,235 |
| Srpski telegraf (print) | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,84 | 0,092 | 0,991 |
| Srpski telegraf (net)   | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,59 | 0,115 | 1,240 |
| Objektiv (print)        | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 4,03 | 0,087 | 0,946 |
| Objektiv (net)          | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,71 | 0,11  | 1,189 |
| NIN (print)             | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 4,00 | 0,11  | 1,189 |
| NIN (net)               | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,90 | 0,107 | 1,155 |
| Vreme (print)           | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 4,17 | 0,096 | 1,036 |
| Vreme (net)             | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,97 | 0,100 | 1,082 |
| Nedeljnik (print)       | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 4,04 | 0,104 | 1,125 |
| Nedeljnik (net)         | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,91 | 0,101 | 1,095 |
| Tabloid (print)         | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 4,32 | 0,081 | 0,877 |
| Tabloid (net)           | 117                    | 1   | 5   | 3,69 | 0,127 | 1,374 |

N=number of subjects, Min=minimum, Max=maximum, M=mean, SE= standard error, SD= standard deviation



## 7. CONCLUSION

The survey results indicate that respondents have conflicting views about traditional and digital media. The sample generally prefers to read print media digitally, on websites or social networks. However, when it comes to television programs, they prefer watching them in a traditional format rather than online. To reach a conclusion about the hypothesis's confirmation or rejection, the arithmetic means values for the responses related to traditional media and their Internet versions were compared. Since the values of the arithmetic means differed less in the case of television than in the case of print media, it was decided to accept the hypothesis. The decision to accept the hypothesis is in accordance with official statistical indicators, showing a constant growth in the number of Internet users among the citizens of the Republic of Serbia and recording their increasingly frequent presence on social networks.

Lastly, we can conclude that voters in the Republic of Serbia undoubtedly follow social networks and content published by political subjects through their Internet communication channels. Considering the growing popularity of the digital communication sphere, there is no doubt that favourable future election results can only be achieved by those political subjects who recognise the importance of political marketing on the Internet and develop a suitable strategy for communicating with the electorate.

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