



On the Record: Civil Society in Kosovo - the Crisis Years

Issue 8: The Internet and the Disintegration of Yugoslavia, October 5, 1999

Contents

- **From the AP Editorial Desk**
- **Transcending Ethnic Divisions in Bosnia**
- **Milosevic and His Critics Fight Out on the Internet**
- **Supporting the Parallel Society in Kosovo**
- **Serbian Hackers Retaliate**

From the AP Editorial Desk by Iain Guest

Over the last few weeks, subscribers to this series have been reading profiles of civil society in Kosovo. During this period one of the series editors, Teresa Crawford, has been working in Kosovo trying to link these and other organizations to the Internet.

This represents a change of direction for The Advocacy Project. The Project was created last year to help community activists make better use of information technology. But so far, this has involved getting their messages out through our on-line newsletter *On the Record*. We have not offered technical support, for three reasons. First, we wanted to consolidate *On the Record*. Second, we did not possess the technical capacity. But mainly, it was a question of the opportunity not presenting itself.

That opportunity has occurred in Kosovo. As subscribers will know, Teresa traveled to Kosovo in June, soon after the end of the bombing, to edit this series of *On the Record* with Peter Lippman. But Teresa wanted to do more than observe. She wanted to help some of the activists she had met in Kosovo on a previous visit in 1998.

Once in Kosovo, Teresa linked up with Paul Meyer from the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Paul is another web enthusiast. During the refugee crisis earlier this year, he initiated an imaginative project (the Kosovar Family Finder) to download thousands of refugee names from the Internet and help reunite families. The third member of the project, Akan, is a Kosovar technical expert who formerly managed the computer network of the US Information Service (USIS) in Prishtina, and the first Email provider in Kosovo (Zana.net).

Working together, Akan, Paul, and Teresa have spent the last two months under the auspices of the International Rescue Committee, trying to provide civil society in Kosovo with an electronic outlet. After many frustrations, their efforts finally paid off on September 20, when they sent out their first message from their small office in Prishtina. The next three issues tell the story of this experiment, and place it in context. *

In addition to a new departure for The Advocacy Project, this is the first time that the Internet has been centrally integrated into a major UN peace-building mission.

It would be irresponsible to exaggerate the importance of electronic information to a people that is struggling to cope with mass graves, landmines, and the departure of its minorities. But Kosovo's unique post-war situation is also proving to be an important test case for those who want to see the Internet put to a constructive use.

On the one hand, it is clear that communications have a critical role to play in rebuilding war-torn societies like Kosovo. On the other hand, Kosovo is another reminder that the Internet cannot function in a vacuum. It needs money, computers, electricity, and a legal and administrative framework. All are in short supply in countries just emerging from war.

It has not been easy for our colleagues in Kosovo to steer their project through these shoals. Even when the technical obstacles are overcome, there will be larger questions to answer: who takes over running the project? Which civic associations will be the first to benefit? Can the project be made commercially viable – or will it always depend on donations?

Such questions face all aid agencies working in Kosovo – and to this extent, the Internet project is merely one more aspect of the larger task of reconstruction. It is a reminder not just that the Internet is now a part of peace-building, but that peace-building has entered the information age.

Transcending Ethnic Divisions in Bosnia

Electronic information became an instrument of war and peace during the collapse of Yugoslavia. When the history of the information age comes to be written, it will be associated with some of the worst crimes committed in Europe this century – but also with heroic resistance.

The first major experiment in email was launched in June 1992 in Zagreb and Belgrade, almost exactly a year after Croatia seceded from Yugoslavia, triggering a brutal response from Serbia. The violence of the conflict provoked a vigorous response from the international peace movement. With support from the Soros Open Society Institute, Eric Bachman – an American peace activist who had been living in Europe since 1969 – established an electronic network between peace groups in the region. It was named ZaMir ("For Peace") Transnational Net.

The ZaMir network was described by one article in Wired Magazine as a "tangled fishing line tossed out between cities in the rump of Yugoslavia, and a server in Germany." By 1995, it had "nodes" in Belgrade (Serbia), Zagreb (Croatia), Tuzla and Sarajevo (Bosnia), Ljubljana (Slovenia), and Skopje (Macedonia).

This network allowed beleaguered peace activists in these countries to talk to each other and also to friends outside the region. This was crucial in Bosnia, which had been turned into a patchwork of besieged communities by the war. When ZaMirNet reached Sarajevo in 1994, the city was still ringed by Serb tanks. Apart from the UN humanitarian flights (which were restricted to non-Bosnians) the only physical way in and out of the city was through a tunnel under the airport. In

northern Bosnia, entry into the ZaMir network was provided by the Forum of Tuzla Citizens (CTF) set up in 1993 with the goal of promoting inter-ethnic contact. The Forum was to provide an electronic mailbox for 700 Internet-users in the Bosnian Federation during the war, receiving and transmitting 70,000 messages. Many of them concerned life and death issues.

The Bosnian war showed that email could be an instrument of peace in interethnic conflict, because it could allow people to cross ethnic frontiers and bypass centralized authorities that were utterly opposed to free expression and interethnic contact.

This email network was able to vault over a telephone system that also acted as a barrier to inter-ethnic cooperation. Bosnians who lived in the Serb and Croat regions of Bosnia could only talk by phone after passing through Belgrade or Zagreb. In contrast, subscribers to ZaMirNet would dial up through the server in Germany, passing through one of the six nodes, and talk to anyone on the network. As one article noted: "Email has taken root in the scorched earth of the Balkans."

But ZaMirNet also demonstrated the limitations of electronic communications. First, it still depended on telephone lines, which were increasingly degraded by the war. Second, it required computers and electricity, which could certainly not be guaranteed in war-time conditions. Third, it required money. When the war ended in Bosnia, in September 1995, Soros stopped supporting ZaMirNet. Presumably, the need was felt to be less compelling and ZaMirNet was expected to become self-supporting. But this was unlikely, given the desperate economic conditions in the region. The 800 or so subscribers in Bosnia paid between five and 200 marks to the German server. But this was not enough to cover costs. Charging commercial rates would mean losing customers.

Peace brought other pressures, including increased government regulation. This might have been benign if the new Bosnian government had been committed to inter-ethnic cooperation and free speech. But Dayton produced a government that reinforced and legitimized the divisions between the three major ethnic groups. Added to this, the state-owned Bosnian telephone company was reluctant to open up lines for Internet use.

This delayed one well-meaning initiative by the University of Villanova, which collected scores of donated computers in the United States for the Bosnian Constitutional Court and the Bosnian Federation's Human Rights Ombudsmen. These two bodies were obviously dedicated to inter-ethnic cooperation, and by helping them, the University of Villanova could presumably be assured that it was also helping to promote peace.

But it proved impossible to get enough phone lines from the Bosnian PTT (Post and Telecom). Over a year passed before the project was able to install Netscape and email programs on the computers. It was a sober reminder that the Internet does not exist in isolation. Even email requires an administrative, legal, political, and financial framework.

Milosevic and His Critics Fight it out on the Internet

During the late 1990s, electronic information emerged as a key player in the titanic struggle between the regime of Slobodan Milosevic and his democratic opponents in Serbia. It was a

dramatic example of the cat and mouse game that was increasingly being played out on the Internet between repressive regimes and their critics.

At the heart of the confrontation was B 92, Serbia's renowned independent radio station. Initially, to aid in them in their work, B 92 used an Internet service provider (ISP) in Amsterdam. In November 1995, with help from Soros, B 92 founded OpenNet, Belgrade's first Internet service provider and the only provider in Serbia until March 1996. In the restricted environment in Serbia starting OpenNet was possible only because it was made available to Serbia's academic network, and could be justified as an educational tool.

B 92 thus had a connection to the Internet backbone in 1996, when protests erupted in Serbia following Milosevic's decision to annul the results of 18 municipal elections. Via the Internet the station began to broadcast detailed accounts of the protests to the outside world, and became a focus for democratic opposition to Milosevic.

In November 1996, the government responded by jamming B 92's radio signals. B 92 replied by relaying its material through the Internet, using a computer program called RealAudio, which allows sound to be carried on the Internet. RealAudio carried B 92's radio signals over low-speed connections to B 92's Internet service provider in Amsterdam, where they were uploaded to B 92's home page. This meant both the outside world and those with an Internet connection in Serbia could still hear B92's broadcasts. Even if B92's phone lines had been cut they could have found another phone connection to Amsterdam. Their re-broadcasting could only have been prevented by shutting down the entire Serbian telephone system.

RealAudio's US manufacturer donated more powerful equipment, which allowed more than 500 Internet users to hear the broadcasts at once. On December 3, 1996, the Serbian government shut down B 92's transmitters altogether. But this did not shut down the Internet to Amsterdam. Round one to democracy.

The next major threat came two years later, on October 20, 1998, in the form of a draconian information law, which banned all broadcasts that spread "fear, panic, and defeatism," as well as the re-broadcasting of foreign news programs. Two radio stations, three newspapers, and a weekly news magazine were shut down. One firm was fined US\$500,000.

B 92's server, OpenNet, found itself under pressure. It was difficult to obtain phone lines, which would allow subscribers to dial in and log on. The Serbian authorities were aware of the threat created by the Internet by now, and were looking for ways to discourage its use. At one stage, they thought about taxing Internet-users, but found it extremely difficult to identify them. (This has frustrated other regimes. China has created a cyber police force, dedicated to tracing those who use "subversive" sites.)

The Serbian government then placed a filter on web browsers at the university, blocking sites such as B92's. OpenNet immediately asked international friends to "mirror" (copy) its information onto other unblocked sites, and distribute it by Email. Ten sites responded, and the material began to circulate via distribution lists, and find its way back into Serbia. Once again, the Serbian authorities had been thwarted. On December 28, 1998, the filter was removed.

Round two to democracy.

Supporting the parallel society in Kosovo

By the time that Milosevic confronted his critics in Belgrade, Kosovo's civic organizations were using electronic information to bolster the parallel society described in this series. One of the first email systems used in Kosovo, ZanaNet, was run by Koha Ditore, the largest Albanian-language newspaper distributed in Kosovo. ZanaNet was established in 1994 and was part of the ZaMir network described above. The Zana connection allowed subscribers in Kosovo to communicate with the outside world through the server in Germany. These were early days in the evolution of the Internet: it was used almost exclusively for email (as opposed to websites, downloading files etc).

By March of this year, there were four Internet service providers in Kosovo - Pronet, EUNET, Co.yu, and the PTT. Of these, only Pronet was owned and managed by Albanians.

Pronet became operational earlier this year, just before the NATO intervention. The staff designed and maintained web sites for many Kosovar organizations including the Mother Teresa Society, but they were constantly being forced to hide their equipment from Serbian forces. They also found it difficult to get access to enough telephone lines. Pronet was operational for about a month before the bombing, serving several hundred users.

Somewhat ironically, throughout the second half of the 1990s, Kosovo's parallel society was dependent on three Serbian ISPs for their connection to the outside world. Both EUNET and the PTT ISP, based in Belgrade, had offices and equipment in Prishtina. This meant that subscribers in Kosovo were able to call a local number and get access to Internet and email, instead of dialing long distance to Belgrade. This kept the expense down, but the connection speed was slow and there were very few numbers to dial in on. As a result, during peak times it was difficult to connect and the modem would hang up regularly.

However meager, these opportunities were exploited to the full. Radio 21, the independent Albanian radio station, broadcast through the World Wide Web and was also able to get most of its international content from the Web. Koha Ditore also took much international content from the Web.

Of the groups profiled in this series, ELENA used Email to stay in contact with friends and supporters abroad, and was sufficiently connected to send a member to the Human Rights Defenders Summit that took place in Paris in December 1998. (Editor's note: This meeting was covered by On the Record - Volume 4). The Center for the Protection of Women and Children sent out reports via email on their work with women and appeals for support.

The Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms kept its sensitive findings hidden in computers. It distributed reports on Albanews, a distribution list of about a thousand subscribers, and posted a webpage on albanian.com.

The main focus of electronic activity in Kosovo, as well as opposition to Serbian rule, was to be

found at the parallel university, with campuses in Prishtina, Peja, and Mitrovica. The university had 17,000 students and a faculty of 880. Following the suppression of autonomy in 1989, students were only able to spend about 15 minutes a week on computers in makeshift labs. Like students everywhere, they were hungry for more. Those that could afford computers and access, opened private Internet accounts.

By late 1997 students were impatient with the results of peaceful opposition, and in October protests began at the University. They were organized by the student union and led by Albin Kurti and Bujar Dugolli. Expressions of solidarity began to spring up on the Internet. Kosovar websites were hosted on servers outside Kosovo and exiled Albanians sent messages of support on distribution lists created to inform the Albanian diaspora.

The following year, 1998, saw the partial implementation of educational accords that had been negotiated between Milosevic and Ibrahim Rugova, the Kosovar political leader. These allowed for a limited return of Albanian students and faculty to the University buildings. When professors and students returned to study in the early part of 1999, they set up computer labs with support from Soros.

But by now the crisis in Kosovo had passed the point of no return. In February 1998, Serbian forces attacked the villages of Drenica with tanks and artillery in an attempt to crush the KLA. The photos of crushed houses and bodies were put up on the web by Koha Ditore. This was the first time that the world - and many Kosovars - had seen what was happening.

Teresa Crawford was at the Council for the Defense of Human Rights and Freedoms in Prishtina when the photographs first came in. She recalls how the photographer's hands shook as he passed them around. Soon afterwards, the photos appeared on the Web - on the web pages of Koha Ditore and of the students.

Albanians in exile were also learning to exploit the Internet. In the early 1990s there was relatively little information on the web about Albanians and no way for Albanians in the diaspora to talk to each other. A group of young men, two Albanians from Macedonia and two from Kosovo, started the Albanews email distribution list and the Albanian discussion list. During the NATO bombing this year, the Albanews list was to become one of the most important sources for information about what was happening inside Kosovo and how the international community was reacting. At the height of the bombing there were over forty postings a day to the list from civil society in Kosovo, news outlets, humanitarian agencies and people from all over the world.

In early 1999, the same group created a website, Albnet.com, and set up an extensive web presence. This allowed them to post pictures and history, and post the addresses of agencies that were working with refugees. They developed and supported websites and pages for numerous other Albanian civil society groups.

Serbian Hackers Retaliate

As the parallel society in Kosovo assumed a higher profile in emails and on the web in the late 1990s, it also attracted the attention of nationalist Serbs, who also knew how to exploit electronic

information. On October 24, a group of hackers, calling themselves the Black Hand, declared "electronic war" against Albanian websites. One called a Belgrade newspaper and issued a warning that they would "remove Albanian lies from the Internet," and attack the NATO site.

The hackers sent a flood of email messages to **one of the more outspoken Albanian sites**, causing it to crash several times. Hackers also took over the website of Zik, an Albanian news site published in Switzerland. According to the BBC, the owners of Zik.com wanted to take legal action against the hackers, but decided it would be hard enough to trace the source of the sabotage, and almost impossible to prosecute.

(For details of this episode consult the International Justice Watch Discussion List archives, "**Serbian hackers declare computer war on 'anti-Serb' websites**", Friday, 23 Oct 1998.)

After attacking the Albanian sites, the Serbian hackers moved against Croatia, where they attacked the **largest Croatian daily English pages**. Croatian hackers retaliated swiftly by tearing down the pages of Serbian National University Library (NSB). The cyber war was truly under way.