



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

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From the AP Editorial Desk: The Dilemma of Hate Mail on the Internet by Iain Guest

This issue of our series is late in reaching subscribers. The reason has to do with censorship and propaganda.

The issue deals with the role of the Internet during the war in Kosovo and NATO's bombing campaign over Serbia. It is important to recall that the media contributed greatly to the violence that accompanied the break-up of the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s – by fanning ethnic hatred, confirming ethnic stereotypes, and supporting nationalism.

Can the same be said of the Internet? The last issue of this series (#8) suggested not. In fact, the Internet arguably served as an instrument of peace in Bosnia, where it helped to unite different ethnic groups that had been isolated by the war. In Serbia, the Internet provided the democratic opposition to Milosevic with a way to make their voices heard.

The record is less clear when it comes to the recent war in Kosovo, and the NATO campaign against Serbia.

On the one hand, the Internet once again proved its value as a method to voice democratic opposition. Milosevic's critics were instantly muzzled when the war began. As NATO bombing took its toll, the Internet became virtually their only means of communication.

Milosevic's critics received little sympathy from NATO. NATO was determined to destroy Serbia's telecommunications system, regardless of the fact that this would also destroy the sole remaining means of expression (the Internet) open to those who opposed Milosevic. So relentless was NATO in its attacks, that some Serbians felt this was not only deliberate on NATO's part, but an indirect form of propaganda, because it suppressed the voice of Serbian democracy. This helped NATO to portray all Serbs as nationalists, solidly behind Milosevic's wars of aggression, which in turn made it easier to justify NATO's highly controversial bombing campaign.

Many would see this as an argument in favor of the Internet. On the other hand, it is also clear that the Internet was used as an instrument of propaganda by both sides of the war.

We give several examples in this issue. The most troubling are the expressions of hatred that were sent from Serbia and Russia to Alb-net.com, a website that serves as a clearing house for material on Albanians worldwide.

Alb-net is run by four Albanians, two from Macedonia and two from Kosovo, and their purpose during the war was to present the Albanian perspective. For some months, they were assisted by Advocacy Project member Teresa Crawford who managed a list on the alb-net.com server.

Why did Alb-net post these hateful messages by Serbs on their website? Teresa feels that the intention was to contrast the hundreds of messages that were coming in daily in support of the Albanians. But at the same time, there must have been an element of self-interest in it. These messages were intended to shock and to disgust, and the posters knew that they would confirm the stereotype of the violent Serbian – and feed their own pro-Albanian propaganda. There is little evidence of similar messages by Albanians being posted to Serbian sites. Indeed in the cyberwar, Albanians exercised considerable restraint, knowing that this would reflect well on them in the battle for public opinion.

The question for us is whether the Advocacy Project should reprint these expressions of hate in this issue. Some of us feel that by reprinting any of the messages, we are falling into the trap and adding to the misconception that all Serbs are evil and violent. They say it will make the entire series (already biased in favor of Albanian civil society) appear more biased against Serbia. In addition, there is the question of journalistic responsibility: we have no way of knowing if these messages were meant to be published for the public or if the apparent sender was in fact the author.

The other argument is that if hate mail happened – which is not disputed – it cannot be ignored in a discussion about the role of the Internet. Whether it is offensive cannot count, because war and genocide are offensive and the only way for groups like ours to respond is by stating the facts. Once we start omitting offensive material on the grounds that it "confirms stereotypes" and "offends" readers, we are surely on the slippery slope to self-censorship – and playing into the hands of the killers.

We have ended up by compromising the issue. We have run four messages, without identifying their authors. These extracts have been carefully chosen to make different points. One is an expression of hatred, pure and simple. Another comes from Russia and shows the depth of Russian sympathy for Serbia. The third refers to NATO's campaign. The fourth questions the veracity and neutrality of the Alb-net website.

It has been a useful discussion for us as a group. But it has also produced a difficult compromise. We would appreciate any thoughts and opinions from you, our subscribers.

War in Kosovo, War in Cyberspace

On March 24, NATO began bombing Serbia, and the Serbian forces in Kosovo accelerated their attacks on civilians and the expulsion of refugees. Within six weeks, over 700,000 Kosovars had fled into Albania and Macedonia.

This real war found its echo in cyberspace.

There was an eerie silence from the epicenter of the crisis, in Kosovo itself. The destruction of electrical power sources, NATO attacks on the communication towers, the expulsion of people, the marauding bands of militia – all this shut down regular communications.

Almost all local telephone numbers were blocked, local access numbers for the Internet were not operating and the only way to log onto the Internet was by phoning Belgrade. One journalist who wrote for the **Institute for War and Peace Reporting** was able to get some information out this way, and a young Kosovar woman achieved brief prominence after her e-mails to a friend in Berkeley were reprinted on CNN and AOL websites. As long as telephone links lasted between Serbia and Kosovo, activists in Serbia called their friends in Kosovo, and put the information out in e-mails. But as NATO attacks and the expulsions intensified, even these tenuous connections were snapped. Darkness and silence descended on Kosovo.

Inside Serbia, the Internet was used extensively during the war. Serbians would turn on the television, witness a place being bombed, and then log into chat rooms to inquire after relatives and friends who might have been affected.

But this became increasingly difficult as NATO battered away at the regional system of communications. Extended power outages also made logging onto the Internet difficult. In Kosovo, NATO bombs destroyed the telephone trunk links between the exchange systems, the main intercity link towers on Mount Golesh, the center of the Kosovo Post, Telegraph and Telecommunications in Prishtina (Pristina), and towers in Southern Serbia.

In a highly controversial move, NATO also decided to attack media outlets, in an effort to squash Serbian "propaganda." One of the targets was RTS, the Belgrade television station. In April, it was rumored that Loral Orion, a satellite company that provided links to the Internet for two major Serbian Internet service providers (ISPs), would break ties with them in order to comply with a US Presidential Order banning trade with Yugoslavia. This would have almost completely severed all ties to the Internet for Serbia. The US Government decided that Internet connections did not qualify as trade so the break did not in fact occur.

This combined assault provoked a lively debate on the Internet itself. Some recalled the way Milosevic had exploited the media in fanning ethnic hatred in the early days of the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, and felt that NATO's attacks were justified. Others pointed out that NATO was itself spreading propaganda, and viewed the attacks as an unconscionable assault on freedom of speech and expression.

One early casualty of the information war was the democratic Serbian opposition, which had used the Internet so effectively since 1996 in its struggle against Milosevic. Not surprisingly, it came under immediate pressure from the Serbian authorities, who closed the offices of B 92 and seized its equipment on April 2, ten days after the start of the NATO bombing.

But NATO's assault on telecommunications and the threat to Serbia's satellite links, combined

with the draconian information law put in place by the regime in Belgrade, threatened to deprive them of access to the Internet, which was again proving to be something of a lifeline. As **Ivo Skoric** pointed out on May 1, unlike television, which is "top-to-bottom, one-way communication that somehow symbolizes totalitarian structure, Internet is a democracy-promoting media."

An important analysis by AIM (**Alternativna Informativna Mreza** – Alternative Media Network for the former Yugoslavia) suggested not only that NATO was aware of the damage it was inflicting on Serbia's democrats, but that it was quite deliberate. NATO's assault, suggested AIM, was part of an attempt to portray all Serbs as unsympathetic, in order to justify the bombing:

"Western electronic media do not hesitate to bombard us with voices from Serbia which...present an image of a society drowned by nationalist passions and anti-democratic sentiments with no individuals, no opposition, and no democratic rights' culture.

"Western electronic media has also ignored half a dozen statements made by representatives of civil society. On April 6, 17 Belgrade NGOs (nongovernmental organizations) recalled their courageous struggle both against war and nationalist propaganda, their support of human rights, their struggle against the repression of Kosovo Albanians, the necessity to respect their liberties and guarantees for their rights, and the return of autonomy of Kosovo. They also stressed that only through civil society institutions was any connection and cooperation ever preserved between Albanians and Serbs. On 16 April, another statement was signed by 27 democratically-minded intellectuals from Serbia.

"With the exception of a few Western newspapers, these courageous and very meaningful texts went unnoticed. [The] lack of coverage...only makes these people even more vulnerable, as they have been repeatedly threatened, individually or collectively, to be punished as traitors. Moreover, those journalists and activists that the West was heralding before, but has now forgotten, feel almost betrayed by the international community, which is shaped so decisively by the dominant electronic media.

"[Their messages] are distributed through the Internet, the last resource they have to communicate to the West. In the long run the biggest collateral damage will be the shattered possibilities for democracy in Serbia."

As if to confirm this charge of Western censorship, 20 Serb NGOs issued a statement on April 26, warning that by severing Serbia's satellite links, NATO would also deprive Serbian civil society of their last means of expression:

"We, the representatives of the Yugoslav civil society...now have to deal with other problems that could uncouple us from the world and practically forbid our free expression and dissent. "One threat is coming from Yugoslav Government agencies and the controlled domestic Internet providers. For them it is important to shut up all independent voices. For NATO it appears important to cut off all dissenting people and groups from Yugoslavia in order to maintain the image of Yugoslav society as if it is totally controlled by the Milosevic regime and made only of

extreme nationalists who therefore deserve punishment by bombs.

"For us who are long time activists of human rights, minority rights, union rights, free press rights, women's rights, peace and democracy activists, it is vital to maintain an Internet connection to the world in order to get information and communicate with people about our situation.

"We are using the Internet with respect to the etiquette and urge all Yugoslav users to avoid hostile and insulting vocabulary. We also pledge to all our international contact people to exercise their influence on Internet public opinion to avoid aggressive language and hate speech in correspondences to people in Yugoslavia. PLEASE HELP US TO STAY IN TOUCH WITH THE WORLD!"

If this was an argument in favor of the Internet, the opposite case could also be made. Truth is always the first casualty in war, and NATO certainly flooded the Internet with press releases aimed at shoring up support for the bombing. These press releases also served to explain away NATO's "collateral damage" bombing blunders, such as the destruction of a refugee convoy, a commuter train in Serbia, and the Chinese embassy. Serbian hackers tried to retaliate by attacking NATO's home page, Albanian sites, and even the White House home page.

Mostly, the Internet was used to express anguish and grief. The Kosova Crisis Center (a page on the alb-net.com website) lit up with messages: "My heart is bleeding for you. It is shameful to be human and witness this. God be with you in the times ahead," wrote Lisa from Washington.

Aaron, from Newfoundland, mixed humor with sympathy: "When I was a kid I wondered how Hitler got away with what he did. It's the same answer now. Apathy. Yes, I would fight with you. But since I'm an old fart, I'll pray for you instead and support you with my voice and keyboard."

Generally speaking, Albanians let their sites – and the actions of the Serbian forces – speak for themselves. Mentor Cana, co-creator of the pro-Albanian **Alb-net** used his influence with the Albanian technical community to urge restraint and asked them not to hack Serbian websites. Early on in the crisis, the creators of Alb-net.com were told by a State Department official that in the view of the US, the Albanians had already won the information war. This was due, or course, to the horrific images emerging from Kosovo. But it may also have been helped by the factual presentations on Alb-net.com and the news distribution list they created, **Albanews**.

Certainly, with an acknowledgment like that from the US government, it was easier for Alb-net.com to get a donation from the Kosovar Albanian Government in exile to buy new computer equipment and expand their work.

And there was a practical use to the Internet: Alb-net.com set up a page on their site for "Homeland Calls" ("Vendlindja Therret") appealing to Albanian exiles for funds on behalf of the incipient Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA), and even provided details of bank accounts.

Some Albanian exiles were definitely ready to take the offensive via the Internet. At the height of the war, they threatened a consumer boycott against the products of companies that advertised with beograd.com, a pro-Serbian site managed from Toronto, Canada. Beograd.com opened a

special "war edition" and competed for visitors by trying to be the first to post a NATO hit and debunk lies by the combatants.

The consumer threat forced advertisers to withdraw their support and starve the website of funds. This was denounced by beograd.com as an attack on freedom of expression: "Our effort to earn money through advertising to keep beograd.com alive has been cut short today. An Albanian-organized campaign called advertisers around the country whose ads appeared on our Ad Network banners, threatening boycott of their products. Major advertisers, including Microsoft, in turn threatened Ad Network with pulling their ads if our account is not canceled. This morning our account was canceled.

"We find it shocking that advertisers would pull out of the news site whose reports are timely and accurate and often quoted by Reuters, CNN, Sky, Fox News and other major news organizations in the country and the world, simply because our editorial position does not appeal to one small market segment.

"We feel this is an attempt to silence beograd.com which has, after NATO bombing of Yugoslav TV and Radio facilities, remained the only accurate and timely source of information from within Yugoslavia. We are attempting to attract other advertisers, but in the meantime we appeal to beograd.com visitors to continue their financial support so that we may stay in operation."

The Internet allowed trapped Serbian intellectuals to cry out. Some responded with black humor (the time-honored response of artists under siege). Artist Andrej Tisma organized an Internet contest for the "humanitarian bombing of Serbia" in which contestants contributed bomb designs. The winner was awarded with a set of Monica Lewinsky's lips.

The Kosova Crisis Center also ran some hateful messages from Serbia and Russia.

[Editor's note: Please refer to the editorial above. Some of the following language is offensive.]

"Hello motherfuckers! If you don't know where to go, come to Serbia. We are known as land full of hospitality, sharp knives, strong arms to hold your necks tight and fire in our hearts to burn your motherfucking families all together. Right now, we are searching for a big, big field to prepare it for your last rest. Hope you won't mind if we make just one big hole in ground and put you together. Anyway, we are just sitting here and sharpen our knives, drink sljivovica and sing a song "Sprem'te se, sprem'te Cetnici". Hope to kill you soon. Your's trully Zoran and Kole (called butchers from Croatia) "

"Happy birthday NATO ... over how many dead bodies?" Cetnik from Valjevo "Sasa Milovanovic"

"Yankee!! SERBIA is not Monika!!!! From Russia and "S-300" with DEATH!!!! Oleg" (From Russia)

"What a crap you put on your site. I wonder, who is paying for it. Definitely not "free Kosovorians" Long live Serbian Kosovo!!!!!! MCS" (From Russia)

Some will see these comments as an exercise of the right to free expression, others as the propagation of hate. It is difficult enough to find the right balance in the most self-confident of societies, with a commitment to law, and a mature press. This was dramatically different. Here there was a war in place, abominable cruelties being committed, and international law being violated. Most important, it was all playing out in a new and untested medium.

By way of a postscript, even Serbia's first family put out their own electronic propaganda, as was noted by Ivo Skoric:

"Milosevic's official homepage is at <www.sps.org.yu/ljudi/smilosevic.html>. His wife's personal page has its own domain: <www.mmarkovic.com/> ...and opens with a flower in her hair and a calming message of peace: 'The new world is coming. More rich, more just and more universal.' Their son, Marko (notorious for his opulent style of living) has a page so powerful and new, that it requires a machine capable of running macromedia shockwave and real-video. <www.discomadona.co.yu>" (Email from Ivo Skoric, forwarded by Frank Tiggelaar, Cyberwars)

The Internet and the Kosovo Humanitarian Crisis

The Kosovo refugee crisis opened up new possibilities for electronic information. The brutal and sudden nature of the expulsions created two immediate needs, both of which provided an opening for the Internet. In the first place, thousands of families were split. In the second place, they arrived in the camps without any identity cards – all forms of identity had been taken by the Serbians in an attempt to condemn the refugees to permanent exile.

During the refugee exodus from Rwanda in 1994, radio had been used by relief agencies to reunite unaccompanied children with their families. During the exodus from Kosovo, in the spring of 1999, the Internet was also employed.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has a mandate to trace missing persons and 6,000 names were entered in the **ICRC website**. Several Albanian relief agencies also set up websites for split families. One was organized by El Hilal, a Macedonia-based NGO that was established in 1991 and profiled earlier in this series. El Hilal quickly set about serving the refugees. It had 60 full-time workers in its 14 branches and more than 150 sub-branches, and was able to mobilize several hundred more at short notice. It used this network to collect over 70,000 refugee names, which were entered into a database and posted on a web site.

This data provided the raw material for another imaginative project. Working under the umbrella of the International Rescue Committee, Paul Meyer developed the "Kosovar Family Finder" project. Working with a budget of \$50,000, he and several Albanian technical experts were able to collect tens of thousands of names from electronic databases like El Hilal's, and publish them in the form of printed Yellow Pages; 4,000 copies were subsequently distributed inside Kosovo and another 6,000 in the camps. Family Finder also opened a website, which allowed Kosovars to search for names of friends and family members. The site received over a thousand hits a day, but it was the combination of the printed and electronic versions that made the list widely accessible.

International relief agencies also used the web to showcase their work and raise funds. Some developed individual pages that followed the journey of their workers in the field, describing first-hand experiences in text and photo. CARE International gave a laptop to one of their local staff workers who wrote of his return to Peja (Pec) after living as a refugee. With the help of IBM and CARE, this was broadcast on the web.

The most ambitious experiment was launched by the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in an effort to provide the Kosovar refugees with identity cards.

Neither the Governments of Macedonia nor Albania had succeeded (or bothered) to register the refugees in a consistent manner. This was creating chaos – and making it hard to ensure the proper distribution of relief aid. There was also a real risk that the 800,000 Albanian refugees would return to Kosovo without documents, making their orderly reintegration considerably more difficult.

By this stage of the refugee crisis, several computer companies had spotted a business opportunity and contacted UNHCR with offers to provide computers and service in return for a guarantee of sales at a later stage. But it was left to the industry giant Microsoft to make a donation that directly addressed UNHCR's dilemma over registration.

Microsoft put together a consortium of its business partners (Compaq, Hewlett-Packard, Securit World Ltd., and ScreenCheck B.V.), and made a donation of \$2.4 million to develop digital registration kits capable of taking a photo and producing an ID card that could serve the refugee's needs in exile and be substituted for a permanent ID card on return.

Each kit contained a laptop computer, digital camera, specialized ID card printer, and specially designed software applications and hardware. Initially, it was hoped that the cards would have a magnetic strip that would allow them to be digitally scanned.

The results of the experiment are still being analyzed by UNHCR, but like so many innovative ideas it proved much easier to conceive than implement. Twenty Microsoft volunteers went to the camps with laptops donated by Hewlett-Packard and Compaq.

It took a lot longer to develop the registration kits than expected, because all kinds of questions had to be answered: Would every individual refugee receive a card, or just the family head? What kind of information would be needed – date of birth? Place of residence? Occupation? Reason for flight? Language spoken? Medical details? Obviously, the type of information would depend on the purpose of the card (protection, potential employment, nutritional status, census, etc). The more information that found its way into the form, the longer it took to input by hand.

No sooner had the process started to run smoothly, than it was swept aside by the sudden return of the refugees in early June. According to one report, 400,000 names were entered in a database, but fewer than 50,000 cards issued. The information was never made public to those people searching for family and friends on the web. The experiment is now being analyzed by UNHCR, as part of a review of its response to the refugee crisis.

The United States government also experimented with the new information technology during the crisis. The United States Information Agency (USIA) wanted to inform the Kosovar refugees as well as provide them with an opportunity to keep in touch with each other and with their families abroad. Some would see this as humanitarian, others as ensuring that the refugees remained solidly behind NATO's war aims.

This information campaign took several different forms. The US subsidized the production of an online magazine for the refugees, named "Kontakti." It also funded the establishment of several cyber cafes in refugee camps in Poland, Germany, Macedonia, and the US (New Jersey). Here refugees could search the web for news about family members.

The centerpiece of this was a large satellite dish in the Stenkovac, Macedonia refugee camp and an Internet link via satellite. Both were owned by a private firm (Interpackit), and were loaned to the US humanitarian effort. The USIA turned to the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) to manage the equipment and the link and to make the Internet available to the refugees.

None of these initiatives were as successful as might have been hoped. IOM's function is to transport refugees, not develop Internet connections – and it had more than enough work to do transporting and evacuating refugees. It also proved much more difficult to open cyber cafes than imagined.

To top it all, early in June the refugees suddenly began to return to Kosovo, leaving the expensive Internet donation stranded. The huge dish sat forlornly in the deserted camp at Stenkovac, while the Pan-Am satellite circled high above. Quite clearly, this presented an opportunity of some sort – but what kind?

One thing was clear: for better or worse, humanitarian aid had entered the information age.