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Reconfiguring the mediapolis: New media and civic agency

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Abstract
The summer of 2007 marked the growing visibility of blogs and bloggers in the Bulgarian public sphere. A case in point was a spontaneous civic protest spurred by a decision of the Supreme Administrative Court to strip a territory in the south-east of Bulgaria (Strandja Mountain) of its status as a protected natural reserve. Young people and environmentalist groups went out in the streets to challenge the decision, their actions being organized and reported by blogs, websites and text messages. These brief but centrally placed and well-attended civic actions compelled not only the mass media, but also parliamentarians to put the issue on their agendas. This article analyzes the relationship between media messages and street action as well as the dynamics of inter-media exchanges and the profiles of the actors behind them.

Keywords
blogging, Bulgaria, case study, citizenship, civic action, environmental protests, internet, traditional media

Introduction
The study reported in this article is part of a project that examines the interplay between new and traditional media outlets with a view to discerning nascent opportunities for citizen involvement in the public sphere of European societies. The focus is on Bulgaria, a relatively new democracy and a new member of the European Union. The main objective is to discover what, if any, role new media can play in the growth and invigoration
of Bulgarian civil society. Looking closely at a selected case, the study attempts to identify the model of successful infiltration of citizens’ concerns into the discursive space marshaled by traditional media.

Internet observers and researchers have invested much hope in the potential of new media with respect to citizen participation in the political process. Some of the early projections anticipated a dramatic growth of citizen involvement in the political public sphere resulting from wide and easy internet access. Empirical internet research over the past 15–20 years, has demonstrated that the relationship between the internet and civic engagement is much more complex (Dahlgren, 2009). While the numerous online sites and forums offering information and discussion on political issues have had undeniable effect in terms of raising the political awareness of citizens and allowing them to share ideas with each other, the majority of these venues have remained tucked into the obscure corners of cyberspace and outside the scope of actual policy-makers. At the same time, research has registered instances in which content generated by citizens through the new media has been influential in forcing traditional media and governing bodies to shift their foci and to allow issues and concerns stemming from the civic grassroots into their agendas (Bennett, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Farrell and Drezner, 2008; Kahn and Kellner, 2004).

The study presented here is motivated by the belief that to be able to better understand and learn from such instances, it is necessary to examine the successful cases of new-media facilitated citizens’ engagement and action in minute detail. Thus, the central questions guiding the following analysis are: Who are the individuals and groups who manage to employ the new media in such a way? What are their strategies and techniques? What are the conditions under which their concerns have been heeded? In short, what are the mechanisms through which the new media can contribute to putting citizen-generated issues on the agenda of the traditional media and formal policy-making institutions, or in other words, to making citizens’ voices heard in the wider public sphere?

More concretely, the study focuses on a prominent case of effective civic action involving the mobilization of new media that played out in Bulgaria, a country where civil society has been chronically weak both before and after the fall of communism. In Bulgaria, the manifestations of samizdat during communist time were ‘brief and uneventful’ as Vassileva (2009) has noted. The country has no recent history of effective alternative or radical media (Downing, 2001). After a short period of frantic proliferation of ideologically diverse newspapers and radio stations in the years immediately following the conversion to democracy and market capitalism, the media in Bulgaria became heavily dominated by commercial principles and players (Bakardjieva, 1995; Daskalova, 2010, Spassov, 2011). Participation in civil society organizations continues to be insignificant and most of the existing NGOs are elitist, donor-driven and alienated from the majority of citizens (Andreeva et al., 2005). Perhaps justifiably, the prospects of the Bulgarian civic sphere have been seen as not particularly promising (Howard, 2003).

Against this background, the case discussed here is remarkable on several counts: First, this was a unique occasion in recent Bulgarian history when a demand arising from the civic grassroots was attended to and resolved by the Bulgarian parliament within three weeks. Second, the nature of that demand had nothing to do with party politics and power struggles, but was profoundly defined by the broad public interest. This means
that no party agenda and political maneuvering drove the events, as has been the case in previous protests that have achieved their goals (for example the ousting of the Socialist government of Jean Videnov in 1997). Third, this was an exceptional case of a civic movement challenging and reversing a decision of one of the highest judicial authorities in the country. Fourth, for the first time powerful commercial and administrative players found themselves on the losing end of a confrontation with ordinary people, which thwarted their business aspirations and significantly hurt their economic interests. Although corruption was never proven, it was widely suspected to be part of the court decision which triggered the civic actions. Therefore, what happened was perceived as a unique civic revolt against corruption in the Bulgarian judicial system and state administration. Fifth, for the first time in Bulgaria (a relative laggard in internet adoption) new media such as blogs, websites and online forums came to the fore as ready-to-hand tools for civic speaking and organizing. With them, a generation of young people demonstrated their ability and resolve in making their voices heard by the powerful. This spirited overthrowing of its characteristic apathy, silence and fear marked a new stage in the growth of Bulgarian civil society.

Finally, the case brought together a variety of media spaces, elements and practices into a dynamic whole, which makes it an interesting object of analysis with a view to the forces and relations that produced the successful outcome. My intent in this analysis is not to argue for the repeatability or generalizability of the case as such. It is rather to advance the theoretical understanding of the mediapolis (Silverstone, 2007) by capturing the particular dynamic responsible for this *kairos*, or opportune moment, for Bulgarian civil society.

### Theoretical and methodological framework

Since the first steps of computer-mediated communication and later of the internet, both theorists and practitioners have vigorously discussed the potential effect of these new technologies on democratic participation in the political process (Dahlberg, 2001; Friedland, 1996; Street, 1997). Deliberative democracy proponents in particular have been interested in internet-based discussion forums in their capacity as spaces where citizens could come together as a public to engage in a rational-critical debate on issues of common concern along the model of the Habermasian public sphere (Dahlgren, 2005; Ess, 1996; Jankowski and van Selm, 2000). The radical-democratic perspective on the public sphere, for its part, emphasized the ways in which the internet could facilitate the emergence of ‘counter publics’ composed of groups and interests that were not represented in the mainstream public discourses (Dahlberg, 2007).

In another vein of research concerning citizens’ political involvement, analysts have sought a more open and nuanced understanding of democratic participation by looking for its manifestations in the activities constituting people’s everyday lives. Notions such as ‘civic culture’ (Dahlgren, 2003, 2009), ‘cultural citizenship’ (Hermes, 2006; Hermes and Dahlgren, 2006), and ‘public connection’ (Couldry, 2006; Couldry et al., 2007; Livingstone, 2005) represent attempts to grasp the political significance of decisions and actions immersed in the private sphere. This work marks a ‘cultural turn’ (Dahlgren, 2003) in the study of democracy and political communication. It pushes further the
meaning of Beck’s (1997: 94) concept of ‘subpolitics’. According to Beck, subpolitics represents a new mode of operation of the political, in which agents coming from outside of the officially recognized political and corporate system appear on the stage where debates and decisions concerning social design take place. Beck argues that what looked like a withdrawal of the citizenry from politics is actually a withdrawal from the formally recognized political institutions and forms of action. Parallel to that, a struggle for a ‘new dimension of politics’ (1997: 101) has opened up. Individuals abandon the roles and allegiances handed down to them by custom and construct political causes and commitments suggested by their day-to-day life in society.

This project is based on a theoretical framework that combines some of the premises of the deliberative and the radical-democratic perspectives on internet technology, with elements of the ‘civic culture’ conception. It starts out from the proposition that the internet is implicated in politically charged attitudes and actions that proliferate at the level of the everyday life of individuals and groups, or what I have termed ‘subactivism’ (Bakardjieva, 2009). Subactivism involves a variety of inconspicuous processes such as identity construction through subject positioning vis-à-vis social and political discourses and relations, friend–enemy distinction and identification with collective formations, discursive re-enactment of debates and clashes with a political frame of reference in the private sphere (everyday political talk), as well as practical actions and choices regarding matters of daily living that have wider social and political resonance. Typically, subactivism remains subjective and submerged in the mundane course of individual life and because of that it produces no immediately visible consequences in the public and political spheres. However, novel practices intersecting new media (blogs, social networking sites, video-sharing sites and others) and traditional media (press, radio, television) bridge the everyday life of the subject and these previously remote deliberative spheres. The proliferation of such practices creates favorable conditions for subactivism to transform into activism proper.

Because the object of this study represents a heterogeneous web of media technologies, actors and practices that spans the private and the public realms, another productive concept that could be employed to adequately capture its complexity is that of the ‘mediapolis’ (Silverstone, 2007). Following Hannah Arendt, Silverstone (2007: 31) defines the mediapolis as the ‘mediated space of appearance’. In his definition, the mediapolis is where:

the world appears and in which the world is constituted in its worldliness, and through which we learn about those who are and who are not like us. It is through communication conducted through the mediapolis that we are constructed as human (or not), and it is through the mediapolis that public and political life increasingly comes to emerge at all levels of the body politic (or not) (2007: 31).

Like the Greek polis, Silverstone (2007) explains, the mediapolis depends on visibility and appearance, performance and rhetoric. It constitutes the reality of the world and frames the possibilities for collective action. Compared to the Habermasian public sphere, the mediapolis is ‘multiple and multiply inflected’ (2007: 34), it is not based on rationality alone, and it is admittedly not equitable and consensus oriented. On
the contrary, the mediapolis is defined by plurality, empirical diversity, inequality and contestation. Not everyone is entitled and empowered to speak and present themselves in the mediapolis; however, the practices of both communicators and audiences are essential to its constitution. Unlike the public sphere, the mediapolis is not a specialized and demarcated space. It merges with everyday life and contributes to its common sense, action recipes, things taken for granted and resources for judgment. Everyday people are participants in the mediapolis by virtue of their decisions to engage with the media or not and the responsibilities they take in the process. Their participation is minimal in switching the television channel or web surfing and much greater in producing content for the media or talk and action engaging with the worldly affairs that the media construct. In this sense, the mediapolis is more than a space of representation. It is a living space inhabited not only by images and discourses, but also by people with their daily thought and action.

Silverstone’s philosophical discussion of the mediapolis touches on an attribute of contemporary mediation that is of key interest here – the interaction between traditional and new media. Silverstone does not put his faith in the internet by itself as a potential generator of publicness, of spaces of visibility in which public life becomes possible. He sees it as a medium best suited for the private domain of interpersonal interaction:

… a private, exclusive and fragmenting medium: centrifugal rather than centripetal. And it follows that to count on it being the harbinger of a new kind of global political culture, by itself, is a mistake. The Internet is not yet and may never be, strictly a plural medium. It is singular: it significantly relies on and reinforces identity, not plurality. And it has real problems with narrative. (2007: 52)

That is why for Silverstone the significance of the broadcast, disseminative mode of mediation will persist. This certainly controversial claim carries an important insight: namely, that for substantive transformations to occur in the mediapolis, old and new, disseminative and interactive media have to interlock into the same living fabric. The links between the internet and ‘centripetal’ media such as television, radio and the press are, it follows, essential for the new medium to have any significant repercussions for public life. Coming from the opposite direction, it can be proposed that the further integration of the dialogical and interactive internet technologies and practices into the fabric of the mediapolis dramatically changes its structure and dynamics – something that on their own, the broadcast disseminative media would have never been able to accomplish. In what direction exactly does that transformation go? What are the concrete practices that flesh it out and who are its actors and driving forces? The case that will be examined in the following pages is expected to yield some preliminary answers to these questions.

The methodological approach employed in this work is the qualitative case study (Creswell, 1998). A concrete case of new and traditional media interaction is isolated and examined in depth with respect to the texts, individual and collective actors, relationships, activities and communication platforms involved. The case is comprised of the successive media developments and public events centered on the controversy surrounding the nature reserve status of Strandja, a mountain located in the south-east corner of Bulgaria. This controversy was at its highest in the summer of 2007 when along with an
agitated media discussion, a set of civic protests took place in Sofia and other Bulgarian cities. Although I watched some of the television reports and read newspaper stories as the events unfolded in real time, my decision to study the case was made post factum. Thus, for my data collection I relied on the documentation of the events in various formats that can be found on the internet. My approach was based on the idea of ‘web sphere analysis’ put forward by Schneider and Foot (2005) who describe a web sphere as being:

a set of dynamically defined digital resources spanning multiple web sites deemed relevant or related to a central event, concept or theme, and often connected by hyperlinks. The boundaries of a web sphere are delimited by a shared topical orientation and a temporal framework. (2005: 158)

Publications and messages produced by new and traditional media during the period of active debate over the status of Strandja Mountain were traced and analysed from multiple perspectives with special attention to their mutual connections and references. The main thread of this search was offered by the environmentalist portal BlueLink (www.bluelink.net/) that had scrupulously aggregated links to all kinds of publications concerning the issue. Media items were singled out for in-depth analysis based on the prominence they had acquired in the public discussion. Going beyond the virtual method, interviews with authors such as bloggers and journalists, and other participants in the ensuing public events – activists, civic leaders and politicians – were carried out. Individual respondents were selected depending on their centrality as actors in the network emerging from the web sphere analysis. In addition, this network approach in selecting interviewees was extended to include the key participants and architects of the events identified by informants.

In line with the principles of the extended case study method proposed by Burawoy (1998), an attempt was made to interpret the concrete case against the backdrop of larger processes unfolding in Bulgarian society. Admittedly, within the limited space of this article, this macro dimension could not be pursued in much depth.

**Chasing the case**

The nature of the case that I will refer to as ‘Saving-Strandja’ is such that an expedition spanning the contours of Bulgarian geography, economy and politics as well as the exchanges among the actual participants is in order. Expedition is an appropriate term here because after all, Strandja is a geographic site, a mountain in the south-east of Bulgaria bordering on Turkey and on the Black Sea coast. Strandja Mountain is a remarkable treasury of biodiversity harbouring numerous rare plants and species in its unique habitats (Strandja Nature Park Directorate http://www.strandja.bg/bg/, www.nature-sdi.eu/). Strandja’s folklore is also unique and spectacular, specifically with the nestinari, or fire-dancing tradition and the spirituality surrounding it. In 1995, Strandja was established as a nature park reserve by an order of the Minister of Environment and Waters and as such has been subject to a restrictive regime regarding the nature, scope and location of construction projects within its borders. Incidentally, these regulations became an obstacle to commercial interests uniting construction and tourism entrepreneurs with
local municipal administrators in a pursuit of extensive resort development in the strip of the mountain bordering on the Black Sea. Following a series of administrative procedures, in which construction permits were sought by companies and local municipalities and denied by the Ministry of Environment and Waters, the Municipality of Tsarevo and a group of investors filed a complaint to the Superior Administrative Court challenging the legality of the Ministerial Order that established Strandja’s protected nature park status. The complaint was based on administrative technicalities and its validity remains contested among Bulgarian jurists. The Court’s examination of the complaint and its grounds eventually led to the decision that the challenged Ministerial Order did not comply with a number of requirements contained in the Law for Protection of Nature and should be annulled. With this act, the Superior Administrative Court practically stripped the mountain of its nature park status and potentially opened the door to unbridled construction on its territory.

With respect to the case that I wish to demarcate here, this decision and its publication constituted the focal event. News services and electronic newspapers (news.bg, e-vestnik.bg, capital.bg/blogs) were the first to distribute the news across the Bulgarian mediapolis, thus contributing to a degree of modest visibility of the event and the issues at stake. Unbeknownst to the players participating in the juridical process, a networked populace was intercepting the signals emitted by the early news-makers, amplifying and transmitting them broadly with a powerful political inflection. In the terse, but forceful reactions appearing on blogs and online forums, the cancellation of the natural preserve status of Strandja Mountain was construed as more than potential destruction of wildlife and flora. It came to be seen as an epitome of a history of traumatic social and cultural experiences: the sell-out of precious pieces of Bulgarian land to commercial interests by corrupt administrations; the despoiling of the Black Sea coast, beloved summer destination for generations of Bulgarians; and the ineptness of a judicial system widely suspected of corruption. Unexpectedly, by the end of the same day on which the Court decision was published, the electronically built-up indignation spilled out in the street in the form of a spontaneous and relatively small-scale protest staged by young people with improvised posters in hand.

After the fact, the mystery of the spontaneous protest could be unravelled (although not completely) by tracking the topic across media sites. At 3 p.m. on the day of the publication of the Superior Administrative Court decision, the online forum of a national newspaper, (Capital, capital.bg/blogs) announced the plan for street action:

29 June 2007, 15:00

Strandja’s status as a preserved territory was just annulled.
We are doing critical mass at 19:30 at Popa [popular meeting place]
dress code - covered eyes/sun glasses – blind.
Send around http://savestrandja.hit.bg/
(http://www.capital.bg/blogove/pravo/2007/06/29/353963_strandja_ne_e_priroden_park/)

The reconstruction of the events made it clear that the website: http://savestrandja.hit.bg/ had been instrumental in the orchestrating of the heated public reaction in the streets of Sofia. Later, police intervention had corrupted and dismantled the site, so no full record
of its original content exists at present and it remains unconfirmed who the actors behind it were. My own investigation led me to a group of young professionals, engaged and active citizens, not associated with any formal organization. Subsequent calls for more demonstrations issued on the site were reproduced on blogs, forums and other sites. Like the first one, they specified the meeting place and time, the format and symbolism of the protest.

With the help of this viral information exchange and organizing, a series of new protest were staged in Sofia and other Bulgarian cities. While each of these events lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was attended by several hundred people at most, their visibility was significantly enhanced by blog and (initially low-key) news media coverage. Several blogs emerged as the main chronicles of the Saving-Strandja campaign. They interacted with the mainstream media in a variety of interesting ways including reciprocal references and links. Readers went back and forth between new and old media sites and wove them into a common fabric by means of citations, comments and links. Bloggers and readers joined forces in urging mainstream media to give the protest more extensive coverage and more prominent placement.

As the protests gained momentum, the resolve of the law enforcement agencies to show muscle and rein in the unrest grew. Close police monitoring and infiltration of blogs and discussions ensued. The police overcame its initial shock and started acting more forcefully at the stage of the protests, which resulted in dozens of arrests. The presence of uniforms and strong-arm police action was successful in arousing fear and dissuading some from participation. At the same time, it had a powerful dramaturgical effect as it highlighted the significance of the protests and attracted the eyes of the television and photo cameras and with them, the attention of the wide news-consuming public. The arrest of more than 30 protestors at one of the scenes and the use of force against the crowd infused further emotion into the events and prompted an outcry that reached far beyond the environmentally aware and the circles of the internet-savvy young people.

A real publicity explosion occurred when one of the bloggers who had most actively and systematically covered the protests was called in for investigation by the Chief Directorate ‘Combating Organized Crime’. The detectives were interested in the writing on his blog which, they alleged, was inciting civic unrest and disturbance of public order. The Bulgarian networked public, not without the active framing efforts of journalists and bloggers, saw these actions as a direct assault on essential civic rights. The Bulgarian blogosphere went on fire. From a space of marginal visibility and largely personal musings, blogs became a space of solidarity through interlinking and blog lists. Not surprisingly, this turn of events toward a more dramatic clash between bloggers and the establishment precipitated even higher attention on the part of traditional media. Bloggers were invited for interviews in the studios of popular television shows and of course the video recordings of these interviews immediately showed up on YouTube and other popular sites. This led to an unprecedented intertwining and mutual amplification of online and traditional media marking a qualitative change in the structure and dynamic of the mediapolis.

Along with the growing mainstream media attention and the ever more reflexive online discussion and organizing, the wave of protests continued relentlessly in bigger and smaller manifestations lodging terms such as ‘flash mob’ and ‘critical mass’ firmly
into the vocabulary of Bulgarian youth. Across the country, protestors developed common symbols referring to the supposedly blind goddess of justice, Themis, by wearing sunglasses and through various metaphors counterposing the green life of Strandja Mountain to the dead greyness of the concrete developments that threatened it. In the best tradition of radical media (see Downing, 2001), the rich Strandja folklore was also mobilized through song, dance and colourful costumes.

This physical – city-square – dimension of the mediapolis proved to be an essential space of appearance that bridged the online and the traditional media and helped close the circuit of attention to the issues at hand. Numerous documents of the events illustrate the hard work of producing visibility undertaken collectively by netizens (bloggers and forum participants), street protestors and journalists. The picture of a policeman inspecting the camera of a blogger while being photographed by news reporters blends many of these threads into a single image.

Finally, the ultimate space of visibility, the national Parliament floor, opened up to the troubles of Strandja in the form of three independent amendments to the Protected Territories Act introduced by representatives of two parties of the ruling coalition and one oppositional party. All of a sudden, politicians of all stripes rushed to outdo one another in proposing the legislative changes demanded by the protestors, changes that would make the status of the protected territories in Bulgaria much harder to contest. On 19 July 2007, or twenty days after the first protest, the Bulgarian Parliament passed this amendment and the status of Strandja Mountain as a natural reserve was restored. While this legislation is being criticized for intervening into the territory of the judicial power and creating a dangerous precedent of Parliament trumping a judicial decision, it was seen as a major victory by environmental activists and supporters and effectively brought the construction work unfolding at Strandja’s Black Sea foot to a halt.

**Actors and interactions on and behind the scene**

The series of events recounted above demonstrate that the blitz success of the Saving-Strandja movement cannot be construed as an auspicious show of the power of new media alone. Bloggers and conscious citizens who created websites were indeed among the drivers of the protests, but they were only prominent nodes in the complex web of actors that had to emerge in order for the Saving-Strandja cause to obtain the transformative energy that it did. Most importantly, as some of the participants I interviewed insisted, ‘the Strandja events had a pre-history’, the understanding of which could help account for the movement’s success.

**NGOs as experts and policy watchdogs**

That pre-history included the gradual formation, over a number of years, of a multiplicity of eco-oriented non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria. Under the pressure of a series of proprietary and commercial assaults on Bulgarian natural heritage sites, these NGOs had managed to come together into a loose coalition entitled literally ‘So that Bulgarian Nature Remains’, or in English: ‘For the Nature’. Significantly, among these NGOs had emerged what one interviewee called ‘a communication coalition’, i.e.
a system of mailing lists and websites which allowed them to inform one another about issues and developments in a timely fashion and to mobilize their members across organizational boundaries.

Focusing their activities on research and monitoring projects, these organizations had evolved into centers of expertise and watchdogs of the environmental policy and regulation in the country. Their core members and leaders gained a reputation as competent and outspoken critics of the government in environmental matters. A persisting shortcoming of these NGOs, however, had been their small scale, elitist nature and lack of connection with citizens at large. All these have been problems plaguing Bulgarian civil society organizations for many years (Andreeva et al., 2005).

The lawsuit launched against the natural reserve status of Strandja Mountain had attracted the attention of activists participating in the ‘For the Nature’ coalition from its very inception. In the months leading up to the final court decision, these NGOs had undertaken actions aimed at raising consciousness and educating the Bulgarian public about the environmental and legal issues at stake. Their experts had prepared a proposal for an amendment of the Protected Territories Act and had been lobbying parliament members to introduce it for discussion in the parliament. Parallel to that, the coalition member organizations had joined forces to stage a series of public happenings in support of Strandja’s remaining a nature park. The largest of these initiatives lit a fire in the centre of the capital and got dancers to perform the primordial Strandja ritual – barefoot dancing on burning wood coal.

Other forms of consciousness-raising involved a petition signed by 150 Bulgarian intellectuals and prominent figures of art and politics and a multi-religion prayer for Strandja with the participation of the main Bulgarian denominations. Public debates arranged by the coalition’s activists brought together civic experts and representatives of the ministries and other institutions with purview over the matter. These and many other events were carried out in a peaceful and constructive spirit trying to advance public understanding of the concrete issues on which the lawsuit centered. While they had managed to create a solid contingent of interested and informed citizens, their influence was limited to a narrow circle.

When the final court decision descended on the Bulgarian mediapolis on 29 June 2007 the environmentalist NGOs and other civic associations were quick to declare their outrage in a flurry of declarations addressed to the governing bodies. The already functioning communication channels among NGOs and their supporters disseminated the message across an already aware and emotionally charged audience, but their hands were tied in terms of openly calling for wider civic protest. Such protests would have been illegal and uncontrollable in their conduct and that, of course, would run against the formal mandate of these organizations. Thus, the rage of NGO activists and supporters was doomed to boil up within their own small pool.

**Online media as transmitters, translators and mobilizers**

It was the spontaneous appearance of the unofficial site savestrandja.net that served as the lightening rod of the public indignation and set the time, place and tone of the first and subsequent street protests. Its creators were well aware of the issue thanks to
connections with NGO activists, but did not have formal affiliation with any of these organizations. Thus, they were free to act as independent citizens and to face the consequences as such. The initial short instructions published on the site were taken up by the blogosphere and floated through the Bulgarian internet space with its discussion forums, mailing lists and chats, fed into text messages and Skype calls. This cyber frenzy produced, over the span of a couple of hours, the first small crowd of about 150–200 mostly young people with their sloppy, improvised posters, firmly determined to shock and disrupt the complacency of the general populace.

Such a minute and brief incident could have easily remained unnoticed and inconsequential had it not been for its eloquent reporting by bloggers and online forum contributors after the fact. Beyond the simple informative function, blog and forum accounts performed the useful service of translating the legal and technical aspects of the issue into everyday language and youth jargon. Over the course of the events, they demonstrated increasing reflexivity with respect to the court decision regarding Strandja and its possible implications. Several blogs emerged as the central hubs of collective sense-making around the issue. They went on inspecting and criticizing the mainstream media for their indifference or misrepresentation of what was going on. To a great degree, these blogs acted as effective agenda-setters and watchdogs of the media industry.

The mainstream media as visibility amplifiers

The role of the traditional media organizations and their reporting was more ambiguous, but nevertheless critically important. As a space of appearance, the traditional media with their first pages and central news, as Silverstone (2007) insists, hold a key position in the mediapolis. Hence, the events and discourses generated by the NGOs and online media had to make their way, even if briefly and in a curtailed form, into these pages and newscasts in order to be recognized as constitutive elements of the public and political world. Once pointers, passing references or extended interviews with NGO activists and citizen bloggers started to pop up in the traditional media, the gate opened for a wave of public interest and perusal of the actual, previously obscure, sites and blogs of the Saving-Strandja movement.

Reflecting on their exchanges with the traditional media after the fact, activists and bloggers described a rather complex relationship. Both types of actors suspected the media of being ‘bought out’ by commercial interests and thus unable to report the problems and events objectively. They pointed to direct involvement of some news organizations’ owners in development projects that attempted to usurp pristine areas of Bulgarian nature. At the same time, they registered instances when that bias had broken down and the ongoing events were honestly (from their perspective) represented in some news outlets. What, then, could account for these different media images: from a skewed portrayal of the protests as hooliganism to a favorable illumination of the actual issue which had brought out the protestors in the street as engaged citizens? The factors responsible for the direction that a particular media organization would take in their reporting, according to my informants, were two: the editorial policy and the choices made by individual journalists.
Most typically, where direct or indirect connections with particular commercial interests were strong, the reporting of the protests would be either absent, inconspicuous, or unfavorable. On the other hand, there were a few media outlets that had already developed links with the blogosphere and that took to heart the cause advanced by the Saving-Strandja movement. In addition, particular producers and editors within some media organizations saw the possibility of attracting and building rapport with a new, young and educated audience. One of my informants highlighted the intensity of the protests as a factor empowering individual journalists to overcome their compliance with editorial policy and to follow their own convictions and sympathy with the protestors.

Hybrid characters

The close examination of the case’s constitutive elements and dynamics reveals the key role of a number of hybrid characters that resist classification within one or another distinct type of actors, but stand at the intersections between them. These characters represented the living links between the different strands of the mediapolis. The following three examples introduce such characters, although they are by no means exhaustive.

The journalist-blogger

A young reporter working on the staff of a national daily was also a blogger who offered a detailed chronicle of the protests while at the same time writing journalistic reports for his newspaper. In his figure, the analyst can find all dimensions of the mediapolis intertwined: the online new media; the traditional printed page, that also had its projection in cyberspace and as such generated lively discussion and information exchange; and finally, the physical space of the city square where he was present, camera and notebook in hand. When interviewed he admitted that he had been not only an observer of the events in his professional role, but also felt engaged with the civic cause. His blog posted related news before his journalistic publications could appear in the newspaper and gave the tone of these subsequent publications. Examining the two types of texts written by this author, two different language registers could be discerned: one following the rules of journalistic reporting and appealing to a broader audience, and the other, clearly geared toward the young protestors, using their jargon and cultural references. Through his blog, he participated directly in the online conversation among interested followers and participants in the events. In his professional capacity as a journalist with access to the front page of his newspaper, on the other hand, he had persisted in keeping an eye on the fate of the arrested protestors. This, in his view, had been the best way to protect them from the wrath of the police. ‘If it weren’t for the media reports’, he pointed out, ‘people would have been scared away’ [after the first wave of arrests].

The blogger-newsmaker

Another highly visible blog that followed the protests and helped with their organization and conceptual framing was maintained by a web designer who at that time happened to
work on the environmental online portal of an NGO. This blogger insisted on his independence of the NGO and on his individual position and choice of topic and slant in his blog. He was proud of not having an ‘editor-in-chief over [his] shoulder’ as journalists do, and not needing to deal with a formal hierarchy or the pursuit of funding as with non-governmental organizations:

I do not believe in organizations. Individual citizens are stronger. I do not go through a bureaucracy. My strength is in being non-aligned. I do not need financing. One needs money to maintain structures, and the cause is compromised because of that. A free citizen cannot be pressured by anyone.

In contrast with the journalist-blogger, this man was coming to his role as a central node of visibility in the mediapolis straight from his personal everyday life. He did not consider himself to be a citizen-journalist (see Couldry, 2010 on resistance to this label) or activist. He was a private person who chose to act publicly on his convictions in this particular instance and on that particular issue, or in other words, to take his subactivism into the open and visible space of the mediapolis. Otherwise, his blog was his own personal space of reflection.

Apart from writing an intelligent, balanced and eloquent blog, this young man happened to find himself in the eye of the storm by being called in for investigation by the Bulgarian Chief Directorate ‘Combating Organized Crime’ as recounted in the previous section. In his own admission, he was quite shaken by the experience and for a whole day contemplated whether to share it with his audience, or to keep it under wraps. In his late twenties, he belonged to a generation which shared the collective memory of police persecution under communism. Nevertheless, he decided to refuse to be intimidated by the state apparatus, and described what had happened to him in a passionate, proud and indignant post on his blog. His story lit up new anger and a new wave of protest now combining the cause of Saving-Strandja with that of freedom of expression.

While on the surface the position of this blogger may seem similar to that of the samizdat author of earlier times, the differences between the two actors are significant. Decisive political, cultural and technological transformations separate the two kinds of experience. There is not necessarily a sense of dissent, or any fear of persecution in the blogger’s case. He or she takes his/her right to speak freely for granted. That is exactly what made the police action with respect to this blogger so profoundly shocking. The wide publicity of the blogger’s stories afforded by the internet, for its part, allowed the reaction of his followers to be massive and swift. Over the course of a few days, the majority of the Bulgarian blogosphere came together as a united front to defend in writing and in the street bloggers’ right to be free agents of public observation and reflection.

The threatened blogger was subsequently invited for media interviews and his story became the subject of in-studio debates on some of the most popular programs. The overall effect of this publicity was the recognition of the social role of blogging and bloggers in the Bulgarian mediapolis.
**NGO websites**

Another example of a hybrid character can be found in the emergence of NGO websites as new media of public communication. While this kind of new medium is still unsettled in its institutional and cultural form, its instrumental role in the movement is evident. As explained earlier, environmentalist NGOs had done the groundwork of monitoring the legal challenge of Strandja’s natural reserve status and of preparing expert assessments of the risks and alternative solutions. A lot of that work was concentrated on the website of the coalition ‘For the Nature’, which in the course of the public debate became a regular source that the media drew on. The environmental portal Blue Link, another NGO initiative, aggregated links and references to publications appearing throughout the Bulgarian internet space. The special contribution of these otherwise unremarkable and far from glossy sites was that they offered direct access to expert illumination of the issues and alternative solutions. They emerged as a ‘source actor’ (Couldry, 2010: 138) which took on the responsibility of elaborating a rational-critical perspective on the essence of the problems, not just transmitting their emotional or political reverberations.

Predictably, the NGOs’ sites by themselves had generated limited traffic. Once the street actions captured the attention of the broad audience, however, these sites grew in visibility and influence. Thus, for the limited period of the upheaval, they proved their capacity to catalyze a critical public debate, which made them a central pillar of the movement.

If any more general lesson is to be learned from this experience, it is that as places of visibility in the mediapolis, NGO websites have a specific and significant contribution to make. They should not be expected to be constantly in the center of public attention because an ambition like that could bring them closer to the ‘news cloning’ function that Fenton (2010) rightly worries about. Neither should they be dismissed as a mere reaction to what she calls the ‘tyranny of technology’. Most likely, NGO websites will have to be prepared to move between latency and visibility following the shifts and turns of various public discourses, political events and civic mobilization campaigns. The key moment to keep in mind is that at times of heightened public interest and demand, an NGO’s website should be able to offer the knowledgeable and critical voice needed to inform and direct the passion of street action and the colourful, but cluttered, multivo-cality of online discussions.

**Conclusion: the triple helix of the mediapolis**

The Saving-Strandja case was examined in minute detail in this article because of its historic importance for Bulgarian civil society and the Bulgarian mediapolis. The Saving-Strandja movement represented the first notable occasion on which the energy of subactivism accumulated at the level of individuals and informal networks and groups’ everyday lives found access to the public sphere and even more important, spectacularly achieved a concrete goal. The affordances provided by blogs and online communities proved to be instrumental in that process. For the first time, bloggers demonstrated their capacity to act as opinion leaders, agenda setters and shapers of the public discourse around a particular issue.
The online media, the voices and solidarities generated through them, as my informants insisted, gave the generation of the 20–30-year-old engaged Bulgarian citizens the means to collectively experience its civic agency. The success of the campaign convinced participants that an organized internet protest could realistically change policy and law. With that, their practical understanding of the connection between the virtual and the real worlds grew clearer and stronger.

In light of this case and its lessons, we could revisit the early excitement regarding the democratic role of the internet and attempt to rescue the promises it gave rise to, at least in part. It looks like these early hopes were not necessarily wrong or naïve, but somewhat too simplistic. The internet was expected to singlehandedly foster democratic expression and communication in isolation from, or as an alternative to, existing media organizations and practices. What the anatomy of cases such as Saving-Strandja demonstrates is that in actuality, new media join the old to form a complex and multi-layered mediapolis where spaces of visibility of different nature and appeal connect. In the intersections of these various spaces, new roles and opportunities arise for differently positioned actors of civil society. Thus, the structure of the contemporary mediapolis emerges as a triple helix comprising online media, traditional media and the physical spaces of the city. Effective civic expression and action involves creative navigation and visibility work across these strands.

Finally, some caveats and qualifications are in order. The Saving-Strandja case is peculiar in many respects and cannot be taken as an indicator of a general trend, and even less so as an example of a new relationship between citizens and institutions of power. What makes this case special is a combination of cultural and political circumstances including the symbolic status of Strandja Mountain in Bulgarian culture, the first-hand familiarity of many Bulgarians with the coast where Strandja meets the Black Sea, the distinctiveness of the mountain’s legal status as a natural reserve, and the relative insecurity of a coalition government experiencing internal tensions and significant external pressure. The cultural symbolism surrounding Strandja turned it in the eyes of the public into an epitome of a Bulgarian natural asset sold out by a corrupt administration to predatory business interests. The environmental and historical significance of this territory served as a uniting factor for civic groups of different make-up and convictions as well as for Bulgarians at large. The precarious situation of the governing political players, for its part, can explain their heightened sensitivity to the civic actions and their desire to calm the waters and possibly gain political dividends from siding with the prevalent public opinion on the issue. Furthermore, it could be surmised that the commercial interests that had targeted the Strandja Black Sea coast for touristic development had not yet managed to form a powerful lobby at the level of the parliament and state administration.

These peculiarities should deter the analyst from bold generalizations concerning the democratizing promise of new media, and yet they should not stop her from illuminating the case’s instructive value. The close look at the configuration of actors, relationships and interactions that brought about the success of the Saving-Strandja movement presents the contours of an emergent model for employing new media toward making citizens’ voices audible in the mediapolis.
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