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BRINGING DISTANT NATIONS CLOSER TOGETHER THROUGH THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS³

ABSTRACT

The Internet as a new form of mass multimedia enables people to communicate from person to person, to send or receive information, to find out about practically anything, to find new friends and lovers, to buy and sell etc. The inhabitants of the ever-shrinking McLuhan's global village have become very sophisticated in the way they use the social networks, spinning new uses all the time. They either want to tell other people about themselves and their attitudes, to share their problems, and to help others by suggesting the solutions. A number of media theorists have been lamenting the furthering fragmentation of society by alienating individuals, while some other analysts have been indicating the risk of criminal abuse of the global cyber networks. Surprisingly, it seems that the cyber environment turns to be a space of the online activism that promotes alternative social platforms, with the impact in "offline sphere", i.e. in the actual public. The authors examine to what extent the virtual public and Internet communities may foster relations between Japan and Serbia, officially established by the exchange of diplomatic letters 130 years ago. The authors discuss human potentials of the Internet communication between 13,000 km away Serbian and Japanese users, with a focus on the online activism grown in the aftermath of the 8.9 magnitude earthquake and devastating tsunami that hit the north eastern coast of Japan in March 2011. The conclusion is that virtual activism can encourage civil actions to bridge the spatial and cultural gaps; it can save the virtual space from alienation in the same time.

Key words: Internet, social networks, global media, solidarity, communication, Japan, Serbia.

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In his influential book *The Wired Society*, published as early as the late seventies, computer programming guru, James Martin anticipated an age when perfected and cheap computers and communication technology would connect all people into one intimate and informal community, a sort of idyllic “electronic village”.⁴ Martin predicted, surprisingly accurately, the network of personal computers that would allow the transmission of not only textual and numeric data, but also imaging, photographs, audio and video recordings, as well as live voice and picture. It was one of the few visions to come true in as quickly as two, three decades. The establishment of the Internet at the end of the twentieth century brought citizens a qualitatively new means of mass communication, which dramatically increased the scope and speed of information exchange in the last few years, and even created new forms of communication. Now using the global computer network, supported by satellite technology and the ready availability of inexpensive technical devices (notebooks, tablets, latest generation cell phones), anyone can communicate from any point on the planet at any time. Information flows faster than ever — instantaneously, and more than ever via social networking websites. The number of users of social networking websites *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Myspace* rivals the populations of the largest countries.⁵

What are the social consequences of the aforementioned technological achievement, valuable as it is? First, the Internet divided everyday reality into the already extant sphere of real life, and the newly added “online” sphere. The Internet as a social phenomenon has been a subject of numerous studies in the last few years. One of the questions that has come to dominate the academic discussions is whether virtual space and virtual communication, within the global network, enrich or impoverish inter-human relations, that is, do they bring individuals closer or push them apart. Communications and global media researchers argue whether the users of popular social networking sites are becoming David Riesman’s “lonely crowd”, or if they are expanding their circle of friends throughout the planet. Also, the question of extent to which the virtual space overlaps with actual reality remains open, and what are the advantages and disadvantages for further development of social relations. Numerous detractors of Internet communication think that the means of virtual communications are the main culprits for the alienation of people one from another, the invasion of privacy, and more generally dehumanisation. On the other hand, those who glorify all things virtual, point out that *offline life* no longer exists, since, metaphorically speaking, we no longer breathe to live, rather we click the mouse and tap the keyboard. There is already a quip: if you do not have a *Facebook* profile, you do not exist.

⁴ James Martin, *The Wired Society: A Challenge for Tomorrow*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey, 1977.

⁵ *Facebook* is an Internet social networking site founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, a former student of Harvard University. This social networking site was initially intended only for communication and information exchange between students of that prestigious university. Later, other universities, high schools, and big companies in the US and other countries joined the network. As of July 2012, the recorded number of open accounts worldwide is 900 million.

Despite dark and catastrophic predictions, social networking websites have already begun to show that they have a strong capacity not only for expanding contacts and leisure, but for becoming an area of important social action and connection. This new medium of communication has an increasing influence on the formation of attitudes, causing offline actions, and stimulating change within society. The growth in power of social networking websites in the public discourse can perhaps best be seen in the examples of citizens' revolutions such as the events of "the Arab spring", citizen activism during the presidential campaign in the USA, environment-related campaigns, the grassroots protest "Occupy Wall Street", etc.⁶ The number of humanitarian actions initiated and organised almost exclusively through social networking websites is also growing: from collecting money and sending help to families in countries affected by natural disasters, conflict, to saving human lives or endangered species.

For that reason, the thesis of this article is that the virtual space can bring peoples together, strengthen both official diplomatic relations and informal relations between commoners, and become a resource for nurturing and deepening morally desirable characteristics in the human character, such as solidarity and empathy, those indubitable psychological corner stones for the survival of humanity and civilisation. The authors will examine to what extent the virtual public and internet community carry within them the potential for the further improvement of relations between Japan and Serbia; what are the humanising potentials of an Internet communication of Serbian and Japanese users, 13,000 km apart, with an emphasis on the online activism that culminated in the period after the earthquake and deadly tsunami that hit Japan in March of 2011.

Welcome to the "digital neighbourhood"

Means, channels, and forms of communication, as well as ways of life and societal needs have been changing throughout the course of civilisation. One fact that has never changed, however, has been the necessity of communication. Every social relation is also a communicative interaction. The exchange of information about what is happening in the environment is not particular to humans, since many animals use various systems of communication. But although animals communicate, and certain higher species, such as primates, dolphins, whales even have a kind of language, human communication, as the German philosopher Ernst Cassirer says, has a symbolic character, making man the *animal symbolicum*.⁷ The British theorist of communications, Rowland Lorimer argues

⁶ One of the heroes of the Egyptian revolution Wael Ghonim, who was arrested for online protest activities, stated the following for CNN: "this revolution began on the Internet, it started on Facebook (. . .) I have always said if you want to liberate society, just give it the Internet." Quoted by Catharine Smith, "Egypt's Facebook Revolution: Wael Ghonim Thanks The Social Network", *Huffington Post*, 11 February 2011, online version, www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/11/egypt-facebook-revolution-wael_ghonim_n_822078.html).

⁷ More see Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man: An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, Doubleday, New York, 1944.

that humans are essentially separated from animals by the ability to conceive objects when not present, something made possible by symbols.⁸ Language is the most widely distributed system of symbols man uses, whereas technical means of communication changed throughout the centuries, starting from Gutenberg's press to the appearance of computers and a global network. With the development of Internet communication, space and time become less important variables, since communication flows regardless of the location of the interlocutors, or when they enter into communication. When writing about the Internet, Michael Strangelove, publisher of *The Internet Business Journal* and author of *How to Advertise on the Internet*, sees communication as its essence:

The Internet is not about technology, it is not about information, it is about communication — people talking with each other, people exchanging e-mails, people doing the low ASCII dance. The Internet is mass participation in fully bi-directional, uncensored mass communication. Communication is the basis, the foundation, the radical ground and root upon which all community stands, grows, and thrives. The Internet is a community of chronic communicators.⁹

As early as the 1960s, the media philosopher and “prophet”, Marshall McLuhan, who became widely known for his claim that “the medium is the message” (the “McLuhan Equation”)¹⁰, advanced the thesis that the development of technology for electronic communication has abolished time and space. The followers and interpreters of this Canadian theorist arrived at the conclusion that the thesis put forth in essence means that each medium changes society more forcefully than particular contents. McLuhan writes:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium — that is, of any extension of ourselves — result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.¹¹

Whenever we create a new innovation — be it an invention or a new idea — many of its properties are fairly obvious to us. We generally know what it will nominally do, or at

⁸ More see Rowland Lorimer, *Mass Communications: A Comparative Introduction*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1994, pp. 1–19.

⁹ Michael Strangelove, “The Internet, Electric Gaia and the Rise of the Uncensored Self”, *Computer-Mediated Communication Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 5, September 1994, <http://sunsite.unc.edu/cmc/mag/1994/sep/self.html>.

¹⁰ This famous thesis first appears in McLuhan's 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, as the title of the first chapter.

¹¹ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA), Reprint edition, 1994, p. 7.

least what it is intended to do. We are often aware of its advantages and disadvantages. After a long period of time and experience with the new innovation, we look backward and realise that there were some effects of which we were entirely unaware at the outset. We sometimes call these effects “unintended consequences”.¹² Many of the unintended consequences stem from the fact that there are conditions in our society and culture that we just don’t take into consideration in our planning. All of dynamic processes that are entirely non-obvious comprise our *ground* or context. They all work silently to influence the way in which we interact with one another, and with our society at large. The best-known McLuhan’s aphorism tells us that noticing change in our societal or cultural *ground* conditions indicates the presence of a new message, that is, the *effects* of a new medium. If we discover that the new medium brings along effects that might be detrimental to our society or culture, we have the opportunity to influence the evolution of the new innovation before the effects becomes pervasive. As McLuhan reminds us, “Control over change would seem to consist in moving not with it but ahead of it. Anticipation gives the power to deflect and control force”.¹³

Following the basic tenets of McLuhan’s theory of the medium being the message, it can be said that the creation of the Internet as a technical innovation caused the conversion of communication from linear to interactive. Although interaction in some form has always been part of human communication, bi-directional, participatory relation between the media and the public could only be developed with the mass use of the Internet, particularly by way of involvement in social networking websites. A social consequence of the Internet is the destruction of a uni-directional, hierarchical communication, since its development meant that the sender becomes the recipient, and vice versa, recipient becomes the sender, often within seconds, regardless of actual distance. The traditional relationship to geographic latitudes, time, and space has shifted.

Umberto Eco regards a computer connected to a network as a sort of promiscuous machine, for it allows everyone to consort with anyone. Virtual communication is characterised by simplicity of approach, seeing as it is enough to own a PC and be connected to a network, thus being able to reach and exchange thoughts with a user from the same city, the neighbouring country, or even a different continent. Network communication allows freedom of communication outside public institutions, official hierarchy, and administrative and other formalities, as opposed to the real, non-virtual world. Apart from that, given that users do not require high levels of technical skill or practical experience to connect into a network, various ideas and contents are distributed through social networking websites, which are then accepted and utilised by members of Internet communities.

Professor Nicholas Negroponte, author of *Being Digital*, wrote in 1995 that the concept of an address, acquires a new meaning. He adds that socialisation is possible in

¹² More see Paul Levinson, *Digital McLuhan: A Guide to the Information Millennium*, Routledge, London, 2004, pp. 35–43.

¹³ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, op. cit., p. 199.

a “digital neighbourhood”, in which physical, geographic space no longer matters, and a new dimension is added to time.¹⁴ Negroponte reminds us that every technology or scientific discovery has a dark side, and being digital is no different. The negative sides of the Internet included abuse of intellectual property, invasion of privacy, digital vandalism, etc. Still, Negroponte placed his faith in the numerous advantages, such as the one stemming from the fact that the new generation, raised with digital media as part of their social world, is not limited by geographic distance, which heretofore prevented or at least hindered the development of friendships, cooperation, playing and neighbouring communities. Digital technology, the author claims, can be the natural force to draw people towards a more harmonious world.¹⁵

Virtual agora or digital surveillance?

Contemporary theories of communication reflect the disagreements among media theorists regarding the effects of digital media on society at large, in particular the socialisation of new generations. Opposing camps defend contrasting positions about the benefits of the development of the Internet, social networking websites, and online communication in general. On one side there are authors who celebrate the possibility of virtual or cyber communication, and see mostly its positive sides. While on the other, theorists downplay the benefits of technology and think that they are outweighed by the dangers and challenges the virtual world poses for traditional values and to the real, offline world. A third group of authors is comprised of those who try to comprehend both the positive and negative sides of Internet communication and this new form of public discourse, and thus give an objective assessment.

The historian and media theorist, Mark Poster belongs to the portion of the academic community that emphasizes the possibilities that social networking sites offer for the rebuilding of a model of direct democracy. In that sense, Poster compares social cyber space with an Ancient Greek agora, New England town hall, a park, or any public space where discussions about things of public interest and common good take place.¹⁶ The virtual public constituted within the borders of the Internet and virtual communication, could prove to be

¹⁴ The term “digital neighbourhood” was first used by Nicholas Negroponte in: *Being Digital*, First Vintage Books, New York, 1995.

¹⁵ More see *ibid*, pp. 227–32.

¹⁶ Mark Poster, “CyberDemocracy: Internet and the Public Sphere,” in: David Porter (ed.), *Internet Culture*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 201–18. The word “cyberspace” was coined by the science fiction author William Gibson in his 1982 story *Burning Chrome*, and popularised by his 1984 novel *Neuromancer*, when he sought a name to describe his vision of a global computer network, linking all people, machines and sources of information in the world, and through which one could move or “navigate” as though a virtual space. The term “cyberspace” is often used to refer to objects and identities that exist largely within the communication network itself, so events taking place on the Internet are not happening in the locations where participants or servers are physically located, but “in cyberspace”.

the renewed sphere of public interaction of citizens who deliberate on key question of communal interest. The appearance of a new, virtual reality in a way represents the rehabilitation and revival of the social role of the public made passive by mass culture. The creation of virtual reality takes place after the crisis in which civic political public found itself. Habermas noted that the importance of the political public was reduced along with the parallel processes of massification of society and strengthening of the state in liberal democracies.¹⁷ The theorist Steve Jones also thinks that cyber space has become a new arena, that is, a *virtual agora*, for participation in public life.¹⁸ Being online means being present in a virtual reality. This new form of reality, characteristic exclusively of the Internet and social networking sites, enables a continuous discussion, with a high degree of interaction and a quick exchange of positions and data.

In the Internet exchange of personal and/or business information, certain authors see an area ripe for a broad spectrum of abuses aimed against the privacy of users of social networking sites. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear one of the most influential activists and open source software theorists of our day, Richard M. Stallman warn that *Facebook* is a machine for digital surveillance of people: “Facebook is not your friend, it is a surveillance engine”.¹⁹ Digital technology, according to Stallman, allows for easier surveillance and thus indirectly offers governments the possibility of increased control over people — certainly not the way towards the achievement of democratic values and civil society. Still, as opposed to previous virtual spaces, one virtue of *Facebook* as a partially centralised network is the ban on pornography and similar contents with questionable messages. In her study *Facebook is a utility: Utilities get regulated*, New York University professor Danah Boyd, considered the thesis that *Facebook* is really a software utility, and that all utilities are paid and regulated:

Your gut reaction might be to tell me that Facebook is not a utility. You’re wrong. People’s language reflects that people are depending on Facebook just like they depended on the Internet a decade ago. Facebook may not be at the scale of the Internet (or the Internet at the scale of electricity), but that doesn’t mean that it’s not angling to be a utility or quickly becoming one.²⁰

¹⁷ Habermas says that contemporary forms of civil society are characterised by the passivity of the public and its uncritical receptiveness. He states that the development of civic public life along with the mass media shows how critical thinking is on the wane and is drowned into an amorphous mass. More see: Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere”, *New German Critique*, No. 3, Autumn 1974, pp. 49–55.

¹⁸ More see Steve Jones, “The Internet and its Social Landscape,” in: Steve Jones (ed.), *Virtual Culture: Identity and Communication in Cybersociety*, Sage Publications, London, 1998, pp. 7–35.

¹⁹ More see the interview: Sriram Srinivasan and Sangeetha Kandavel, “Facebook is a surveillance engine, not friend: Richard Stallman, Free Software Foundation”, *The Economic Times*, 7 February 2012, http://articles.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/2012-02-07/news/31034052_1_facebook-users-mark-zuckerberg-richard-stallman, 20/07/2012.

²⁰ Danah Boyd, “Facebook is a utility; utilities get regulated”, *Danah Boyd — Apophenia*, personal blog, 15 May 2010, www.zephor.org/thoughts/archives/2010/05/15/facebook-is-a-utility-utilities-get-regulated.html, 15/07/2012.

Sociologist and theorist of social networking websites, Nathan Jurgenson makes the bold claim that offline life, outside the framework of the Internet, no longer exists. In an essay published in the magazine *The New Inquiry*, he writes that people who strive for non-digital ways of life, outside the Internet and social networking websites, really live in the illusion since today's communication is digitalized to such a degree:

The clear distinction between the on and offline, between human and technology, is queered beyond tenability. It's not real unless it's on Google; pics or it didn't happen. We aren't friends until we are Facebook friends. We have come to understand more and more of our lives through the logic of digital connection. Social media is more than something we log into; it is something we carry within us. We can't log off.²¹

In opposition to sharp critics of the Internet and social networking websites, Jurgenson claims that the *logged-on* life allows enjoyment of the physical world in a way impossible before the Internet, and that does not necessarily lead to a loss of slow, analog, face-to-face interaction, deep introspection, conversation with friends on long walks, etc.

Facebook doesn't curtail the offline but depends on it. What is most crucial to our time spent logged on is what happened when logged off; it is the fuel that runs the engine of social media. The photos posted, the opinions expressed, the check-ins that fill our streams are often anchored by what happens when disconnected and logged-off. The Web has everything to do with reality; it comprises real people with real bodies, histories, and politics.²²

Facebook was founded on the simple idea that Internet users be offered a simple web page for mutual connecting according to varying criteria of togetherness. It is precisely its free access and infinite possibility of networking that are the basic reasons for its huge and growing popularity among Internet users. From the point of view of communication studies, *Facebook* represents a new medium and way of communication, while for sociology it is a new form of sociability, imposing new patterns of behaviour and ways of social connecting. The gigantic virtual space and the possibility of relatively quick and easy ways of creating myriad contacts that social networking websites such as *Facebook* offer are good preconditions for the initiating and organising of civic activism. This can help people in their practical, everyday life and affect social change in the real world.

The instantaneous nature of Internet communication through social networking websites, particularly in its aspect of quick and mass exchange or distribution of information, has significantly facilitated the introduction of programmatic opinions of small, grassroots groups into the public discourse. Dwelling on the margins of the political system, these groups have lacked access to official and big, commercial media as the main creators of public opinion. Civil protests that took place in the streets of the cities of the most developed countries in the last few years have shown that their efficient

²¹ Nathan Jurgenson, "The IRL Fetish", *The New Inquiry*, 28 June 2012, <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/the-irl-fetish/>, 01/08/2012.

²² Ibid.

organisation was made possible by the dissemination of information through social networking websites, in real time, about the movement of the police. Even in authoritative political regimes, with strong censorship laws, such as Iran, the advantages of civil organising through social networking websites were apparent:

In 2009, social media played a complex role in Iran's uprising against Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's controversial re-election. Text messaging was blocked and websites were screened; and however marginal a role Twitter played in the organization of the protests, it (along with Facebook) was widely used as a communication tool by the opposition.²³

It seems that the Dutch media theorist, Geert Lovink was right in his study *Networks Without a Cause* when he put forward the thesis that the real-time paradigm has become dominant not only in carrying out communication on the Internet, but also as the model for shaping and presenting the news on TV channels.²⁴ In this way, the new paradigm marginalises the importance of the information and its social context. Information circulation becomes more important, mostly thanks to services such as *Twitter* and *Facebook*, which, from a software perspective, abandon the concept of information and take up a continuous stream of data. Still, the instantaneous circulation of information in the virtual space of social networking websites in the form of real time reports about what is really happening on the street, gives strength to civic activism because it acts as a corrosive on the traditional relation of the political centre and margin, thus successfully bypassing institutional barriers to the access to public opinion and after-the-fact speculation.

Is there empathy in virtual reality?

The ability to empathise with others lies at the core of man's ability to act morally. Studies from contemporary neuroscience show that empathy is conditioned by the development of brain functions that enabled the growth of intelligence. Studies in psychology show that empathy represents an element of a special case of general intelligence, so-called social intelligence, indicating that an individual is "intelligent not only through interpersonal relations, but in them as well".²⁵ Social intelligence is made up of two components:

1) Social consciousness which is created when we acquire an idea about other persons through primal (intuitive) empathy, fine tuning (fully receptive listening),

²³ Lev Grossman "Iran Protests: Twitter, the Medium of the Movement", *Time*, online edition, 17 June 2009, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1905125,00.html, 04/08/2012.

²⁴ More see Geert Lovink, *Networks Without a Cause: A Critique of Social Media*, Polity, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 1–23.

²⁵ Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science on Human Relationships*, Arrow Books, London, 2007, p. 11.

empathic correctness (understanding what the other person thinks and feels), and social cognition (knowledge about how society really works); and

2) Social ability, which is built upon consciousness through synchronicity (correct reading and reaction to another's non-verbal signals), self-presentation, constructive influence on others and care that encourages acting to help another, and allows for smooth interaction of individuals.²⁶

In contemporary society made up of atomised and all too busy individuals, the reduced degree of attention people pay one another in mutual communication significantly undermines the capability for empathy. Usually we listen only superficially — if at all — to the problems of family members, relatives, friends or colleagues, without delving into the feelings and needs of our interlocutor. This decreases the possibility of understanding and interpreting of feelings, and the needs of others, which most often causes dysfunction in family, as well as other, relations. A low level of social consciousness breeds social awkwardness, making us lose the ability to share in the pain and problems of others, and consequently, the act of helping someone in need goes missing.

In the broadest sense, social intelligence expressed in social consciousness and social ability influences the communication skills of members of a given political community and their ability to live together despite disagreements stemming from myriad differences in personality, personal needs, and goals. Low levels of social intelligence and apathy in today's alienated individual towards the sufferings of other members of the community undermines the communication between citizens as political actors supposed to deliberate and make decisions together on questions of common interest. Habermas has said that the inability of members of civil society to openly and precisely communicate among themselves leads, in the long term, to a dysfunctional political order that cannot properly establish common political and social goals, nor articulate the meaning of communal values, thus leading to social trauma.

The example of Serbo-Japanese online communication shows that the virtual world allows for the awakening of a social consciousness, and expression of empathy and appropriate action, regardless of geographic or cultural divide. After the devastating earthquake that hit the northeast coast of Japan on March 11th 2011, followed by a tsunami, the social consciousness of people in various parts of the world dramatically increased. No one who saw even a single clip of the tsunami wiping entire neighbourhoods before it could remain indifferent. Personal videos of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan were by far the most watched clips since the inception of *YouTube* (a hosting site intended for posting personal videos). One of the recordings posted on *YouTube* showing the earthquake and tsunami was seen by 20,253,162 Internet users.²⁷

²⁶ More details on the elements of social intelligence see: *ibid.*, pp. 82–103.

²⁷ The clip can be accessed at: www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=-DSSssHxm4Y, 05/08/2012.

The virtual public reacted intensely. Internet users, especially *Facebook*, opened a series of pages and groups for help to Japan. The Japanese government set up special sites in English featuring more details about the natural disaster that had taken place. The *Facebook* page “5,000,000 Support Japan with a click”, had more than three million visitors, while the page “Japan earthquake and tsunami: How to help”, had more than 30,000 members.

Users in Serbia showed unambiguous empathy through the virtual space of social networking websites to the people of Japan. On the *Facebook* page “Solidarity for Japan” (Solidarnost za Japan), Serbian users brought together 13,467 members.²⁸ Several similar pages were opened. Users of virtual communication first sent moral support to the people of Japan, followed by comments emphasising the goodness and honesty of the Japanese, never forgetting how much this far away, East Asian country helped and still helps Serbia, as one of the largest foreign donors. For example, since 2000, Japan has sent Serbia over 460 million Euros in help.²⁹

Japan’s help during and right after the wars was not forgotten by the peoples in the other parts of former Yugoslavia. Despite their recent violent past, users from these countries united to form a *Facebook* page “Support the people of Japan” (Podrška narodu Japana).³⁰ Reminding that Japan had helped Serbia in many situations, the participants of the movement “Solidarity for Japan” called on all members of this social networking website for support by donating money to the people of Japan through the Serbian Red Cross. One of the forms of activism in Serbia was the project www.arigato.rs, where citizens were able to buy t-shirts and buttons with the symbol of Japan, and the money collected was sent to the government in Tokyo to help those in need. The project was promoted through the social networking websites *Facebook* and *Twitter*. The cell phone provider *VIP Mobile* initiated a short phone number, 2001, for its users who wished to help the citizens of Japan affected by the earthquake and tsunami with a donation. All the money collected was transferred to the account of the Serbian Red Cross specially opened for help to Japan. *VIP Mobile* got strong support from the Internet community in Serbia and from the initiators of the project “#jazajap” on *Twitter*, who disseminated the news about the special number, 2001, via *Facebook* and *Twitter*, thus helping the collection of donations.

As Tom Head puts it in his book *It’s your world, so change it: Using the power of the Internet to create social change*, online activism is not a new, controversial form of activism, but activism supported by new tools. Digital activism allowed people to connect, react, and coordinate quicker. Help and support through traditional humanitarian organisation such as the Red Cross and others are strengthened by virtual activism.

²⁸ See more at: www.facebook.com/pages/Solidarnost-sa-Japanom/194971760535231.

²⁹ “Japanese donations to Serbia reach EUR 460mn”, *B92*, online edition, 28 February 2012, www.b92.net/eng/news/society-article.php?yyyy=2012&mm=02&dd=28&nav_id=79017, 05/08/2012.

³⁰ More details at: www.facebook.com/#!/groups/PodrskanaroduJapana/.

Internet users in Serbia not in a position to help monetarily, symbolically supported the people of Japan in their most dire hour since World War II by sending messages. Serbian and Japanese users of social networking websites exchanged messages in the virtual space despite the geographic distance of the two countries. Thus the blogger community in Serbia showed solidarity by starting up the movement “1000 Cranes” on the B92 blog. The movement called on citizens to show symbolic support for the people of Japan by making origami cranes. The social networking website led movement culminated in citizens dressed in the colours of the Japanese flag gathering in the centre of Belgrade and publicly sending a message of support to the people of Japan.³¹ The responses of the Japanese people were touching.³² The ambassador of Japan, H.E. Toshio Tsunozaki thanked the people of Belgrade and Serbia for their sincere support in the difficult moments Japan was enduring.

Presently, some 3.4 million people in Serbia have *Facebook*, with the number of users of that social networking website growing daily. The marketing agency Interactive Advertising Bureau Europe (IAB Europe) conducted research about the frequency and kind of use of media. The results of that project, called “Mediascope Europe 2012”, showed that Internet users in Serbia spend on average of 13 hours a week in various online activities, the most popular of which are e-mail communication, instant message exchange, and social networking activities. However, as opposed to Serbia and other parts of the world where social networking websites, chiefly among them *Facebook*, have exhibited expansion, people in Japan have, until recently, preferred to communicate with their close friends and acquaintances through cell phones. This behaviour started to change, according to the latest NetRatings study from *Nielsen* Japan. Their forecast is that *Facebook* is poised to become “king of social media” in Japan.³³ According to their research from May of 2011, only 8 million Japanese had open *Facebook* accounts; as of May 2012, that number grew to 17 million. The sudden jump in *Facebook* popularity coincided with the deadly earthquake and tsunami of March 2011, and the most common cause is that Internet communication allowed quick and easy locating and connecting of family members temporarily separated by the catastrophe. If not for social networking websites, the search for displaced family members and friends would have lasted longer and depended entirely on the already overburdened public services.

One of the stronger virtual connections was established precisely between Serbian and Japanese users. Numerous groups promoting the strengthening of Serbo-Japanese friendship were formed, one of which is the group “TAGAI”. The association with that name was founded in 2010 by students of Japanese at the Faculty of Philology of

³¹ “Belgrade’s support for people of Japan”, *CNN News*, online edition, 19 March 2012, <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-576634>, 30/06/2012.

³² See users’ comments posted on: www.belgraded.com/japan.

³³ Zach Walton, “Facebook Amasses 17 Million Japanese Users”, *Webpronews*, 25 July 2012, www.webpronews.com/facebook-amasses-17-million-japanese-users-2012-07, 26/07/2012.

Belgrade University, aiming to gather all the people who share a love for Japan. Graduates of the Japanese program continue with their work aimed at promoting the traditions, customs, and the natural beauty of Japan, as well as spreading the word about Serbia's cultural heritage: "(a) little bit of Japan in Serbia and a little bit of Serbia in Japan".³⁴ In the experience of the members of the Association of Serbo-Japanese Friendship, TAGAI, communication in virtual space has an extremely important place in maintaining and advancing relations with the Japanese, but also with Serbian and other foreign citizens who live in Japan. The exchange of information has become quick and efficient, especially among younger people for whom use of virtual forms of communication is a matter of basic literacy and social skills. Older Japanese who are members of the association mostly use e-mail and *Skype*, whereas younger members use *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Google+*, and other social networking websites because they allow dynamic as well as instantaneous communication.

Whenever a piece of information is needed, it is arrived at through virtual media very quickly. And besides, maintaining relations is easy, since being on *Facebook* somehow means that all your friends are always there, in one place, regardless of physical distance. For example, Japanese people who we met in Serbia and with whom we collaborated, by occasionally getting in touch with them through the social networking site, we show them that we have not forgotten them, that we appreciate the time we spent socializing and collaborating, and that they are, of course, always welcome back.³⁵

In addition, Serbian citizens who presently live in Japan convey experiences of living and travelling through this far east country through social networking websites, which could be invaluable to any future traveller from this part of the world. Members of the Association "TAGAI" point out that virtual communication showed all its strengths during the difficult period after the devastating earthquake, since information was quick to come by, not only about acquaintances in Japan, but also about what was happening in the affected provinces:

We did not have to rely only on newspaper articles, either in public media or on the Internet itself, since in these situation it happens that articles are taken over from a third party, or poorly translated, so direct communication with someone on the ground allows a clearer insight into the state of affairs. Worry about friends and loved ones was at least slightly mitigated by the expedience of information exchange.³⁶

Representatives of "TAGAI" cited a case of a Japanese woman living temporarily in Serbia, who communicated daily with her son in Japan via *Skype* in the earthquake aftermath, lessening her concern. There was a similar case of a Serbian woman who was kept informed through the Internet about her son who lives with his family in Japan.

³⁴ www.facebook.com/groups/75572976943/#!/groups/75572976943/.

³⁵ Interview with members of the TAGAI association.

³⁶ Interview with members of the TAGAI association.

This same woman then used online communication to organize sending help to Japan. TAGAI members consider their opening a *Facebook* page for their association one of the best steps, in both the marketing sense, and for information exchange. It turned out that promoting TAGAI through social networking websites allowed a significant number of people in Serbia who respect and love Japan to be put in touch with one another more easily, and then also their involvement in various activities of the Association, either as active participants or as part of an audience. *Facebook* proved a valuable bulletin board, where the Association could present its goals and activities, and be a resource for necessary information. In addition, insights into comments regarding their work, in the form of critique or praise, allowed representatives of TAGAI to establish two-way communication.

Aside from TAGAI's page, there are other groups on social networking websites that maintain connections with the Japanese people and its culture. One group on *Facebook* is "Anime-Overdose", which translates Japanese *Anime* films and *Manga* comic books into Serbian.

Humanising potential of social networking websites

Diplomatic ties between Serbia and Japan began 130 years ago, through the correspondence of the then king of Serbia, Milan Obrenović, and the then Japanese Emperor Mutsuhito Meiji, and remain strong today as confirmed by 26 signed agreements and cooperation-related documents.³⁷ Besides their traditional forms, the so-called *offline* sphere of official, public diplomacy, the connections between the two countries and their citizens are strengthened in the virtual space of Internet communities, where members of social networking websites establish contacts, start up programs, create open friend groups etc.

The altered means of communication between individuals in the form of ever more popular socialisation via the Internet, in which the machine is the main intermediary, does not dissolve human closeness, but rather spreads empathy in the global electronic village. It seems that the so-called digital age ushered in by the latest technological revolution does not have a necessarily dehumanising effect by furthering the alienation of people. In fact, it can encourage the bringing together even of far away peoples. Geographic latitudes and time are no longer constraints, and physical barriers are greatly diminished if not completely swept away before new forms of social media. This seems to justify the supposition that social networking websites are forms of virtual, digital communities and have a humanising potential for connecting peoples and strengthening of ties.

³⁷ Ambassador of Serbia in Japan H.E. Ivan Mrkić, "Ties forged in 1882 continue to strengthen," *The Japan Times*, online edition, 8 March 2011, <http://classified.japantimes.com/nationalday/pdfs/20110308-serbia-visit.pdf>, p. 6.

The example of the tragic events of 2011 clearly shows that the virtual public can initiate the expression of empathy between members of peoples on opposite ends of the globe, in this case Serbia and Japan. Social networking websites offer the potential for developing better and more interactive relations between Japan and Serbia, and those ought to be utilised in everyday conditions, not only during catastrophes. Other cited examples of positive social effects of use of social networking websites on the Internet indicate the growing potential of *Facebook* in strengthening relations between Japanese and Serbian Internet users. Seen in the long term, individual online contacts between people in Japan and Serbia — especially the youth, who embrace digital technology at a very early age — can strengthen connections in the online sphere, and then also indirectly the traditionally good relations of the two distant countries in the *offline* sphere.

Between them, Japan and Serbia have some 20 million users on *Facebook*, a force to be reckoned with as a mass communication resource. Social networking websites do not only serve for leisure and superficial relations. Rather, regular communication between their members can represent a new potential for strengthening traditionally good relations of citizens and governments of Serbia and Japan, learning about the cultural heritage of both countries, and fertile ground for creating new friendships and business contacts. Virtual space should be understood only as a new social space within which it is possible to foster and develop official, as well as unofficial relations, and which reduce geographic distance to merely lines in an atlas or geography textbook. The virtual space of social networking websites is more intuitive to younger generations, and it remains to be seen if, and to what extent, its potentials will be fulfilled.

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