



## **Between ‘Dear Diary’ and Changing the World: Assessing Motivations and Impact of Bloggers in Bulgaria**

Christopher D. KARADJOV

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication  
California State University, Long Beach, USA  
chris.karadjov@csulb.edu

**Abstract.** This study provides for the first time an overview of Bulgaria’s blogs as a new yet already established feature of media landscape in this Eastern European nation two decades after the fall of the communist regime. In addition to examining the existing literature, the study uses in-depth interviews with bloggers to highlight pertinent characteristics of Bulgarian blogosphere. Bloggers’ motivation and perceived impact are scrutinized, and examples are added to illustrate recently featured topics from their blogs. Contrary to expectations, Bulgarian blogs do not seem to have developed as a mere extension of online discussions but rather as an independent platform with new participants who defend fiercely their right to free speech. Since blogs have become an intrinsic part of the media landscape in this South-East European country, future directions of research are suggested.

**Keywords:** blogosphere, media in South-East Europe, freedom of speech

### **Introduction**

In July 2007, the police in Sofia, Bulgaria’s capital, detained briefly a young computer programmer named Michel Bozduganov (Capital, 2008). His blog ([www.optimiced.com](http://www.optimiced.com)), which normally sticks to ‘nerdy’ topics such as software tips or quirks in the latest Photoshop, had published this time an open call from ecological activists for a series of demonstrations. The protests were targeting

possible changes in the protected statute of Strandzha National Park, which would have allowed for the construction of new tourist resorts. Dissenters, mostly young people, decried authorities for the failure to halt such an encroachment on Bulgaria's nature (Aneva and Dachkova, 2007).

It turned out that the planned demonstrations had not secured a proper advance clearance from the Sofia Municipality, as required by the law. Instead, ecologically minded youth intended to put pressure on authorities through flash-mob gatherings promoted through participating blogs<sup>1</sup>. While at the police station, Bozduganov was asked to sign a document promising he would not popularize what the police termed "illegal citizen protests" through his web site (Capital, 2008, paragraph 2).

This episode received abundant media attention. Apart from the inexplicable detention of just one blogger among all those who had posted similar announcements about forthcoming protests, it underscored two nascent trends. One was the growing prominence of blogs as a means of news communication in Bulgaria – in this case, the protest was not foreshadowed by any mainstream, traditional media. The other was the ambivalence that authorities in this newly admitted EU member must have felt about the power of online media to incite crowds, among other things.

Certainly blogs in Bulgaria are more than just a 'fad', even though not too long ago they were labeled as such by a high-circulation daily (Trud, 2009), likely with some degree of jealousy in a shrinking news media market<sup>2</sup>. By late 2011, few can deny that blogs have become a noticeable feature of the Bulgarian news media landscape, providing information that fills the gaps traditional media cannot or do not want to fill.

Internet use in Bulgaria has increased five-fold between 2000 and 2009, reported the most recent representative study (AMI Communications, 2010). Even though still only about 10 to 15 percent of the households have broadband Internet connection, virtually every office has online access (Capital, 2010). Furthermore, researchers (e.g., AMI Communications, 2010) have observed that about two-thirds of Bulgarians aged 20-39 spend significant time online (defined as 4 or more hours a day).

Part of this audience's attention certainly goes toward news blogs as an alternative means of receiving information, and, more importantly opinion (Spasov, 2009). Tobloglog.com, the only truly comprehensive site that monitors active blogs written in the Bulgarian language, lists some 3,240 active blogs as of

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<sup>1</sup> Since Facebook was in its infancy at the time, this otherwise powerful means of organizing protests did not play any role in these events.

<sup>2</sup> TNS-Gallup (2010) estimates that print media revenue (that is, 'traditional' newspapers and magazines) has decreased some 55% from January 2008 to January 2010; circulations have dropped accordingly by at least 25-30% in the same period.

June 2010. The software employed by this site omits any possible Bulgaria-related blogs published in other languages, which leads to undercount of the overall blog activity of Bulgarians worldwide (Elenko Elenkov, personal communication, June 29, 2010). A review by the author and an associate determined that at least 361 (or a bit over 11%) of those contain at least some news and commentary on the news (broadly defined as material that is related to current political, social, economic, cultural developments in Bulgaria and abroad) and have been updated at least once a week between June 2009 and June 2010. Only these blogs were studied because they encroach into terrains traditionally held by mainstream media such as news reporting and news commentary. Other types of blogs – for instance, those devoted to music, poetry, arts, personal hobbies, and the likes – were not of interest to this particular research project.

The primary motivation of this study was to compile for the first time an overview of Bulgaria's news blogging landscape, since academic research in this area is lacking. In addition, news bloggers' motivations were to be probed through a series of in-depth interviews with active news bloggers in the country. This was considered especially important, because without understanding the reasons behind their activities and perceptions of their impact, the contemporary media landscape in Bulgaria could not be presented truthfully. Finally, media researchers contributed comments and interpretation in an attempt to make the overview as comprehensive as possible.

## **Methodology and research questions**

Online media in Bulgaria have only recently attracted the researchers' attention and this country's blogosphere has not been studied in any depth. Therefore, this project had little available scholarly literature from which to draw insights. The bulk of the analyses of blogging in Bulgaria so far has been conducted by journalists in the 'traditional' media and thus lacks in methodological rigor, even though such analyses may be helpful as a starting point. Therefore, this project contributed to the field by aggregating the available information on Bulgarian news blogging and supplementing it with semi-structured qualitative interviews.

The in-depth interviews were conducted in June 2010. Altogether, 14 active bloggers agreed to be interviewed in person. They were selected by contacting known administrators and authors of the 25 most visited Bulgarian news blogs using Topbloglog.com rankings as of June 20, 2010. These qualitative interviews ranged between 25 and 45 minutes each. Only two of the study participants were female; however, this disparity seems to reflect the overall predominance of males among Bulgaria's news bloggers – in 50 top news blogs (or top 8.2% by number of visits), only six were authored or administered by females, including two co-

authored with males; in two cases the gender could not be verified. This disparity in itself may be a subject of future research, since the author does not have a ready explanation for it. In 'traditional' Bulgarian journalism, the situation is reversed: Karadjov (2007) found out that between 61% and 72% of full-time reporters and editors in mainstream print and broadcast media were female as of 2006.

The small sample size made most other demographics (i.e., age) meaningless for interpretation, although relevant information was collected. Therefore, it falls to future studies to quantify any commonalities and differences among Bulgarian news bloggers. It will suffice to say here that of the 14 participants, seven had some background in information technologies, and four were formerly or presently professional journalists.

During the analysis of transcripts, themes recurring throughout the interviews were extracted and interpreted by the researcher. This approach, which is a simplified version of Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparative method, relies on researcher's interpretation of the overall meaning rather than on selecting particular words or phrases. The analyst looked for similarities among categories and their properties, and grouped them accordingly (as suggested by Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Lindlof, 1995). This required going back and forth between different parts of the transcript until all relevant variations of meaning were extracted and exhausted.

As a divergence from the standard constant comparative method, this simplified approach did not use strict coding schemata and did not develop theoretical expectations, which was due primarily to the limited amount of data available for work. It also did not deal with deeper levels of language (e.g., as advised by Severin and Tankard, 2001) – again, because of the small data set.

Additionally, two media scholars and two journalists covering online media were interviewed to help clarify and explicate findings. All but two of the participants in this study agreed to have their names revealed in the subsequent report. Therefore, most specific references and direct quotes from interview participants, whenever used, are cited and dated as *personal communication*.

The study aimed to answer the following research questions:

Research question 1: What is the motivation of Bulgaria's news bloggers (that is, what prompted them to start and continue blogging on current events)?

Research question 2: What is the perceived impact of Bulgaria's news bloggers, especially with respect to enhancing the freedom of speech?

The questions about bloggers' motivation and their relative influence in the society were considered important in establishing a baseline for future scholarly exploration, akin to similar studies of media professionals in which this author has been involved (Hanitzsch et al, 2010; Karadjov and Kim, 2000).

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## Online discussions – (not) the birth of news blogging?

As the author was starting this research project, the expectation gleaned from preliminary reviews of literature and interviews was that online discussions, which came to prominence in Bulgarian media by the late 1990s, served as the ‘breeding grounds’ for present-day news bloggers. Indeed, the sites of daily newspapers such as *Sega* ([www.segabg.com](http://www.segabg.com)), *Dnevnik* ([www.dnevnik.bg](http://www.dnevnik.bg)) and *Standart* ([www.standart.bg](http://www.standart.bg)), the online-only *Dir.bg* and *Mediapool.com*, and the weekly *Capital* ([www.capital.bg](http://www.capital.bg)) provided numerous participants with an outlet they did not have before. This is still the case, of course, and discussion forums are a power into themselves in Bulgaria’s public space (Open Society, 2009).

Yet it turned out that it is more likely that such discussions (that is, expressing opinions on already published news stories) and blogs (by definition, posted original news or opinion related to actual events) have developed more or less independently of each other. None of the Bulgarian bloggers interviewed for this study claimed any substantial forum experience or cited the need to break away from the set discussion topics as a motivation to start blogging on current events. While evidence exists of some promotional crossover between news blogs and discussions, for instance, a practice derided as “link farming” by some bloggers (Elenkov, personal communication, June 29, 2010; Lazarov, personal communication, June 22, 2010), the two online communities share distinct features. They also likely consist of different people and should be regarded as independent, just as Facebook’s estimated 1.5-million current users in Bulgaria did not necessarily emerge from the ranks of bloggers and forum participants (Capital, 2010).

New material gathered in the course of this project led to a re-assessment of expectations stemming from previous research findings. A recent study of online forums in Bulgaria by this author concluded that many of the participants actually wished to write under their own names, that is, shed their anonymity (Karadjov, 2009). This desire, however, existed only in principle, as will be explained below, and did not seem to affect substantially the evolution of blogging in Bulgaria.

It was not surprising in itself, though. As much as 30% of comments posted under articles on the forum for the daily *Sega* ([www.segabg.com](http://www.segabg.com)) during 2005–2008 were not related to the original topic at all; 36% were replies or clarifications to others’ comments; and only 25% could be judged as contributing to or enhancing the newspaper’s article (Karadjov, 2009). Such a high rate of ‘deviance’ betrayed interest in self-expression going beyond mere comments on someone else’s published material.

In the mini-universe of *Sega*’s forum, 19 discussion participants logged more than 15,000 postings between 1998 and 2008, and overall 36 had more than 10,000 (Karadjov, 2009). For instance, Чичо Фичо, or ‘Uncle Ficho’, the nickname for

Valentin Hadzhiysky, a Bulgarian living in New York, has some 18,000 postings on a wide variety of topics in the Sega forum, some of them running to 800-1,000 words apiece. One might think that such a remarkable activity would be grounds for considering a more substantial career as a news blogger. Yet when questioned, 'Uncle Ficho' repeatedly expressed lack of interest in such a cross-over and so have most other prominent forum participants interviewed in 2008-2009 (Karadjov, 2009). To repeat the point, surprisingly little evidence has been found that the lively online discussion scene in Bulgaria's mainstream publications motivated some of its participants to become news bloggers.

The explanation may be as follows. Anonymity, which initially helped these online discussions to flourish, in fact quickly became the undoing of Bulgarian forums when it allowed also for displays of rudeness and even outright vulgarity. Personal attacks and off-color remarks contributed to the lack of desire among even the most prolific participants to "come out" with their names, no matter how much they wanted to do so in principle. Slavi Kasharov, who had been one of the regulars in the Sega discussion forum with some 4,000 posts under the nick Ъори (which is Bulgarian for Winnie the Pooh's friend Eeyore), explained this phenomenon:

From the very beginning, most active participants in discussions were people who had just 'discovered' the internet and were eager to express themselves. Sooner or later, though, they got into personal conflicts, some of which involved salty language. Sooner or later, too, they wanted to meet each other, and these meetings inevitably led to disappointments (Kasharov, personal communication, June 22, 2010).

In his words, familiarity with someone – and presumably, knowledge of this person's fallibilities – tended to lessen the respect for this person's opinions as well. Writer Boyko Lambovsky apparently concurred with such a pessimistic conclusion in his review of the first *Sega* forum participants' meeting (Lambovsky, 2005). As Kasharov pointed out (personal communication, June 22, 2010), many forum participants have in fact stopped contributing to the discussions because of the disappointment with the vitriolic reactions they encountered – but 'they continue reading'. He added that Bulgaria's online forums have been in a steady decline, which opinion is shared by some (such as blogger Eneya Vorodetsky, personal communication, July 1, 2010), but opposed by others, particularly by most researchers (e.g., Open Society, 2009).

At any rate, transitioning from online discussions of news stories to news blogging did not seem to be the most plausible route of development for Bulgaria's blogosphere. A recurring pattern in all interviews indicated that bloggers had started publishing without much prior experience in online discussions (at least in

their own words). Thus, the initial expectation that ‘seasoned hands’ from online forums have become bloggers sometime between 2001 (when first blogs in Bulgaria emerged) and 2007 (when blogs became a recurring topic in the media) received no confirmation whatsoever.

The conclusions along these lines from the in-depth interviews are somewhat corroborated by the existing literature. In an extensive early review of Bulgaria’s blogging, for instance, editors of the respected weekly *Capital* posited that most bloggers are ‘fresh faces’, that is, people who picked up this activity because of their need for self-expression, or interest in current affairs, society, technology, and so on, or professional journalists, who had found yet another outlet independent of the tumultuous world of Bulgarian media (*Capital*, 2008).

Of course, while forum participants likely number in the tens or even hundreds of thousands (*Open Society*, 2009), the blogging community in Bulgaria is considerably more limited, with maybe only a couple of thousand active members (*Capital*, 2010). Of those, even fewer (361, to be exact) post materials that cover news and current events.

### **Bloggers’ motivation**

Bulgarian bloggers, just as their peers elsewhere, can be broadly classified into two types: they are either motivated to maintain an online log of their activities and thoughts (a personal cyber diary of sorts, the very definition of ‘web log’), or have the desire to influence others by weighing in on issues of some impact in politics, society, culture or economics.

The former category seems to be migrating increasingly onto social media platforms such as Facebook. As of June 2010, the latter occupied 17 out of top 25 spots among the most widely read Bulgarian blogs, as ranked by *Topbloglog.com* (to remind the reader, this is despite the fact that overall only 361 of the 3,240 recorded blogs in Bulgaria, or 8%, can be classified as news blogs). It seems that during the past few years in Bulgaria Facebook has taken the steam out of the majority of blogs based solely on private, ‘dear diary’ type of material. Almost all interviewed bloggers said something to this effect. Only Melissa from *www.positivnoto.info* maintained that ‘little things still matter and are worth sharing’ (Personal communication, June 29, 2010). Her contributions, however, also tend to be more broadly targeted than she seems to claim, since they also address news events, but in a ‘positive’ manner.

On the other hand, ‘ego and exhibitionism’ seem to be still among the prime motivators for Bulgarian bloggers’ activity (as formulated by blogger Eneya Vorodetsky, personal communication, July 1, 2010). This is probably the case everywhere, too. Each of the interviewed bloggers unfailingly pointed out they were driven by the need to “say something” to the society at large. In the words of

Elenko Elenkov (Personal communication, June 29, 2010), "I had interesting observations and pictures and wanted to share them."

This common theme was exemplified well by the blogger and former full-time journalist Ivo Indzhev (Personal communication, June 30, 2010). He started writing online by necessity after losing his broadcast job in 2006. "I was prompted initially by my daughter, who works for the online version of the German newspaper *Bild Zeitung*," Indzhev said. "It did not feel right just to go around asking to get published, so starting a blog gave me a natural opportunity for unlimited expression" (Personal communication, June 30, 2010).

No participant in this study admitted starting a blog for financial gain, which seems plausible given the common difficulty in turning a profit by publishing online. Not that bloggers in Bulgaria would be averse to making money – Google Adworks seems to be widely employed on most web sites, but apparently brings only marginal income. One of the interviewed bloggers (Elenkov) had just started using advanced advertising software, and another had been soliciting donations on his site (Indzhev). Nobody seemed to believe, though, that their online entrepreneurship may become one day a strong enough source of revenue to offset a regular salaried job.

Some bloggers might be considered even altruistic in their effort to advance the common good, albeit still with a touch of personal satisfaction in the motivation mix. For instance, in June 2010 blogger Boyan Yurukov created [www.lipsva.com](http://www.lipsva.com), a site for the missing people in Bulgaria, which employs an interactive Google map. This became the first such site in Bulgaria, fulfilling a task that normally is carried out by the law enforcement and non-profit organizations. Yurukov, who writes mostly about technology, actually resides in Germany. He said that opening such a web site was his way "simultaneously to help and practice technical skills" (Setian, 2010, para. 8).

Apparently, blogs have also caught up among still-employed professional journalists, too. In an Arbitrage Research & Consultancy study, 13.9% of full-time reporters and editors in Bulgaria said they were publishing their own blog, and 9.6% reported contributing to a blog maintained by their media outlet. The rest regularly read blogs, and only 13.5% said they have absolutely no use for such a platform (AMI Communications, 2010).

Such data are a bit suspect, though, because the number of journalists in Bulgaria has been estimated at about 5,000 (Karadjov, 2009; Nikoltchev, 1998), which would mean that if the AMI survey is spot on, virtually all of the 361 news blogs must be maintained by journalists. This is not true on its face value. As already mentioned, among the 14 participants interviewed for this study, four were professional journalists, and nothing indicates that this proportion is much higher in general.



It seems likely, though, that having a news blog is considered professionally desirable, maybe even fashionable, which leads to over-estimation in such self-reported surveys. At least this has been the impression the interviews left during the course of this study. All these facts suggest that media professionals regard blogs – at least normatively – as a part of their craft and therefore have become if not early adopters but certainly steady devotees of this platform.

### **Bloggers' perceived impact**

A high-brow, now defunct television called Re:TV used to make a weekly review of most important blogs in 2009. Ivan Bedrov, an active blogger himself, invited “blogosphere colleagues” every Friday to discuss current events, similarly to the panels with journalists from major media, which are still a mainstay of Bulgaria's broadcast talk shows. This was, in effect, an attempt to bring bloggers into the mainstream and “legitimize” them to the public (Bedrov, personal communication, June 29, 2010). The experiment was terminated with the closure of Re:TV in late 2009.

A recent analysis published in the popular daily *Trud* concluded that the most influential blog ‘is a non-existent animal’ (Trud, 2009, paragraph 2), because blogs are ‘not too consequential’ in the first place. This skeptical article was prompted by the subtitle ‘The most influential blog for analyses and politics’ on the web site of journalist Ivan Barekov ([www.barekov.com](http://www.barekov.com)). Another web publication, Naked words (<http://golidumi.com/>), which in a bit over a year underwent the transformation from an outlet for erotic poetry to a full-blown celebrity gossip site, also sports the motto ‘Blog #1 in Bulgaria’ on its home page.

Earlier, high-circulation daily newspaper 24 Hours had come up with a list of 10 “most active” bloggers as a measure of their relative influence (Setian, 2008). Such rankings drew some skeptical responses, even from blog authors included on the list such as Todor Hristov, who noted in his blog Alabala.org on December 30, 2008, that the “frequency of postings by itself is neither a sign of authority, nor a good way to evaluate quality” (paragraph 3). The lasting impression left from reviewing such materials and analyzing interview transcripts was that a) impact (or influence) is routinely conflated with self-promotion in Bulgaria's blogosphere, and, b) the societal effects of bloggers' efforts are presently not known with any degree of certitude.

Of all the various aspects of media effects, political communication often generates the most interest and expectations because of the high stakes of electoral campaign outcomes. In 2007, daily *Dnevnik* analyzed for the first time the potential of blogs in Bulgarian politics by reviewing their fledgling presence in local elections. Even though by then only a few political leaders have embraced

this new platform, prominent blogger Yulian Popov was quoted as giving a prescription for success:

Only those who do not misuse the blogosphere as a pulpit for sermonizing are successful. The voters sympathize with people they feel they know and can identify with. They want great ideas, not deep analysis. You have to surprise them every day (Dnevnik, 2007, para. 1).

Unfortunately, no further academic (or even journalistic) research exists on the effectiveness of blogs in the realm of Bulgarian political communication. Younger, Western-educated political leaders – such as Georgi Kadiev, a 44-year-old candidate for the 2011 mayoral elections in the capital of Sofia, or Simeon Dyankov, the 40-year-old finance minister – maintain blogs as of this writing (respectively, [www.kadiev.bg](http://www.kadiev.bg) and [www.simeondjankov.com](http://www.simeondjankov.com)). They, however, seem to prefer Facebook as a more useful platform for political mobilization (Kadiev, personal communication, June 28, 2010). The widely popular Prime Minister Boyko Borissov does not maintain a blog (albeit, a “fake” Twitter account exists in his name). Instead, he relies on a Facebook group with some 58,000 members as of June 2010.

Marketing and public relations consultants, on the other hand, have consistently probed various aspects of blogging in Bulgaria with an eye on their potential commercial promise. Arbitrage Research, for instance, found out that most bloggers might be inclined to seek information from public relations agencies – similarly to ‘traditional’ journalists – and thus not necessarily insist on a maverick status by researching everything themselves. A whopping 87% of surveyed bloggers expressed desire to receive such ‘canned’ information, and 61% said they already had it on a regular basis (AMI Communications, 2010). The study does not specify the background of the responding bloggers, although, presumably, they were among those writing on issues of some social and political impact and not merely sharing their ‘Dear Diary’-type ruminations. This likely susceptibility of Bulgarian bloggers to persuasive influences might be utilized in the future by political consultants, marketing gurus and public relations specialists alike.

A study by Popova, Dermengieva and Tochev (2008) set out to explore whether professional journalists’ blogs are a departure from the traditional media in terms of topics and language, or they are a continuation of these media on a new platform. These scholars from Sofia University researched “official” media blogs and personal blogs of reporters working in these media. They also analyzed blogs maintained by people who were not employed by any Bulgarian media outlets, but whose regularity in online presence made them ‘non-professional’ or ‘citizen’ journalists (Popova, Dermengieva & Tochev, 2008).

The authors acknowledged that when they compared 15 blogs offered by reporters from the weekly *Capital* with the print articles published on the same topics, the results stood out as somewhat surprising. Overall, these researchers found out that the interpretation (framing) was very similar in blogs and “traditional” publication, even though blogs were ostensibly not subjected to the same editorial control. Indeed, the headlines of the blogs were more colorful, playful and prone to wordplay – but that was all the essential difference. Popova, Dermengieva and Tochev (2008) concluded that blogs maintained by *Capital*’s professional journalists are mirroring the weekly’s print edition, which is also published online. Blogs offered a few interactive “extras,” but did not provide an alternative take on issues and events. This author does not share the surprise of Popova, Dermengieva and Tochev (2008), because it is more likely than not for the same people writing on the same issues to stay consistent in their views regardless of the platform – if only for the lack of time to be original twice!

The aforementioned researchers also conducted a case study of two former professional journalists – Kalin Manolov (<http://kalin-manolov.blog.co.uk>) and Julian Popov (<http://julianpopov.com>) – who publish their own blogs without a direct affiliation with any media outlet. Popova, Dermengieva and Tochev (2008) concluded that these blogs captured authors’ individuality based on residence-specific differences (Manolov lives in Bulgaria, while Popov resides permanently in the United Kingdom). Manolov exhibited a highly partisan frame of mind fighting with much passion for his right-wing persuasions, while Popov could afford addressing “broader, more philosophical topics” as someone more or less detached from the daily life in Bulgaria (Popova, Dermengieva & Tochev, 2008: 7). The researchers conceded that it is difficult to gauge the impact of such online opinionating.

Another case study from this scattered, albeit interesting research article, illustrated the case of ‘non-journalist’ bloggers stepping in and filling an information void left by mainstream media. During the holiday period of December 29, 2006 – January 2, 2007, when Bulgaria was celebrating its long-awaited accession to the European Union and few regular newspapers came out, several blogs provided full coverage of the execution of Saddam Hussein (Popova, Dermengieva and Tochev, 2008). Particularly, news bloggers Angel Grancharov, Grigor Gachev and Tervel Nyagolov wrote interpretative articles and started often heated discussions related to this event. Not until after the holidays did mainstream media catch up with the topic, and by then the interest of the audience was waning. Thus, citizen journalists emerged as a natural bridge between mainstream media and the general public, concluded Popova, Dermengieva and Tochev (2008).

Some bloggers may think of themselves as ‘agent-provocateurs’, as evidenced by the case of a highly unpopular former Bulgarian government, which was subjected to a so-called ‘Googlebomb’ in January 2009. It is not clear who

originated the idea, but blogger Ognyan Mladenov, who usually writes about search engine optimization, gave advice on January 25, 2009, on how to embed the code that would send all Google searches of the word “провал” (failure) to the site of the then Prime Minister Sergey Stanishev ([www.government.bg](http://www.government.bg)). This act was highly symbolic and received abundant media coverage (Beekman, 2009). Virtually all interviewed bloggers mentioned this episode as an example of their determination to rouse the authorities’ feathers, when necessary. The only exception was – once more – Melissa from [www.positivnoto.info](http://www.positivnoto.info), who said she would do no harm or inconvenience to anyone, because that contradicts to the idea of her blog, which has an emphasis on ‘positive’ news.

Again, overall no unity exists as to what is the influence of Bulgarian bloggers, who – to the extent they were interviewed – seemed to express disbelief that their work can currently match the potential of traditional media, particularly television.

### **Bloggers as free-speech champions**

A major recurring theme traced through most interviews was the notion that blogs have made a noticeable contribution to the freedom of the speech in Bulgaria since the demise of the communist regime in 1989–1990 and the subsequent boom in Bulgaria’s media (Ognyanova, 1997). In other words, blogs at least in theory have allowed numerous citizen journalists to come out, although not all study participants shared the same optimistic expectations about the consequences of this emerging trend. At least half of the interviewed bloggers lamented the fact that too many among their peers (that is, outside of the “dear diary” category) refuse to deal with “hot-button” political issues and instead concentrate on “vague social criticism” or “useless opinionating” (Lazarov, personal communication, June 22, 2010). Some bloggers (i.e., Elenkov, Vorodetsky) defended their avoidance of politics, but insisted that there are plenty of other ways to promote civil conscience among the populace, while others (Indzhev, Kanev) insisted that politics is all there is worth talking about in the public sphere.

Blogger Assen Genov said that the internet space in Bulgaria is the only “free and alternative zone, where you can find objective information about the political life... and criticize the current government” (Personal communication, June 20, 2010). Hussein (2010) reviewed the case of three journalists who lost their jobs with mainstream media and resorted to publishing online as a means to maintain their standing with the audiences. Two of them, whose names were already mentioned, Ivan Barekov and Ivo Indzhev, left the best-rated private television bTV, while Georgi Koritarov lost his job with Nova TV.

All started blogs; Indzhev, for instance, makes 3-5 posts (articles) a day and receives 5,000-6,000 unique visitors daily (Hussein, 2010; Indzhev, personal

communication, June 30, 2010). Such an activity is admired by other bloggers, who ostensibly crave a higher impact as judged by audience numbers, even though few would admit that ratings drive them (i.e., Bedrov, personal communication, June 24, 2010).

Indzhev's highest response to date – 26,000 visits – came from the publication titled “Ленин се крие, но е тук” (Lenin Is Here, But Hiding) on September 28, 2009, which gives clues to the type of materials (or, rather, headlines) that draw the attention of Bulgarian audiences online (Hussein, 2010; Indzhev, personal communication, June 30, 2010). In fact, the material was not as controversial as one might suspect – it was a tongue-in-cheek 370-word essay about a forgotten portrait of Lenin on the side of some local school in Sofia. Furthermore, Indzhev's blog has been quoted by international media outlets such as *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* (Hussein, 2010).

An important insight from Indzhev's relative popularity in the face of decreasing newspaper circulation is that people in Bulgaria care about politics, but need it to be presented in a more interesting and engaging manner (Hussein, 2010; Indzhev, personal communication, June 30, 2010). A nagging question after a non-systematic review of his blog content emerged whether Indzhev succeeds largely because of his highly polarizing opinions on various political issues (similarly to the effect that conservative AM radio talk shows have had in the United States).

On the other hand, many of the interviewees contended that while blogging in Bulgaria may provide unimpeded free speech, it is also a lot less potent than the “traditional” mainstream media. An example in this direction has been the series by Elenko Elenkov on his negative experience with the Bulgarian customs officials (Elenkov, 2010). Not until he got published by the daily *Dnevnik* his otherwise incisive and spirited writings got any significant public notice. The single newspaper article got some 127,000 unique visitors, close to 1,000 comments and was widely distributed among the Bulgarian Diaspora abroad. Elenkov's blog – featuring similar material – received roughly the same readership, but in the entire six-month period before this story (Personal communication, June 29, 2010).

This led observers such as journalist Alex Lazarov to conclude that blogs will likely remain secondary to traditional media and their web versions in terms of audience reach, although they will continue to provide free-speech alternatives not available before (Personal communication, June 22, 2010). Most of the interviewed bloggers shared such views, and many acknowledged that their influence as agents of free press in Bulgaria is curtailed by factors such as still limited internet penetration or lack of wider familiarity with online environment, especially among the elderly and in rural areas.

All participants agreed, though, that blogs provide their authors with an opportunity to share information in unprecedented ways, and thus help to foster the growth of a civil society in Bulgaria. Any time this ability has been encroached

upon by the government, the reaction has been conspicuous. For instance, the police effort to intimidate the aforementioned blogger Michel Bozduganov has prompted at least one interviewed blogger (Ivan Bedrov, personal communication, June 29, 2010) to commence online publishing. Several others said they were reinforced in their decision to begin blogging after that case and the protests against possible construction in Strandzha National Park received a lot more public attention than they would have probably had (Capital, 2008). In this sense, one blogger's publicized harassment by the authorities ended up stirring the country in ways that were not possible before. This must be taken as an encouraging sign by all proponents of civil society in Bulgaria.

More recently, in June 2010, two other issues seemed to grip the attention of the blogosphere. One of them was the closure by the authorities of a web site, *www.chitanka.info*, accused of letting its users download free books in a violation of copyright laws. The closure was widely ridiculed by all bloggers interviewed for this project, with one of them calling it "patently stupid" (Veni Markovski, personal communication, June 20, 2010). Virtually all top blog sites in the country published some reaction or linked to such.

Another case was even more interesting, because it stemmed not from a real act, but from a perceived intention of the authorities. Essentially, a "cyber-rumor" appeared that Bulgarian lawmakers were plotting to include a text in the new electoral regulations that would impose penalties for libel on online publications – particularly blogs – similar to those existing for traditional media (Petkova, 2010). (A discussion on the related subject whether bloggers are journalists or not is available at *www.capital.bg/interaktiv/debati*). Pundit and blogger Veni Markovski wrote in his blog *http://blog.veni.com/* on June 25, 2010, that to hold the administrator of a blog for libel because of its content is akin to "demanding accountability from a library for a note stashed into one of the shelved books." Again, all interviewed bloggers agreed with the absurdity of a potential libel clause in the electoral law – even though this has not been an option yet put on the table by the lawmakers! It is such apparent sensitivity, though, that suggests how Bulgarian bloggers feel strongly about any potential infringement upon the freedom of speech on the Internet.

## Conclusion

Contrary to the expectations, Bulgarian blogosphere did not seem to have developed as an extension of online discussion forums, which became popular in the late 1990s. Rather, news blogs appeared as an independent platform with mostly new actors who wished to play an alternative role to the mainstream news media.

A number of journalists from traditional media have made blogging either an extra activity, or used it to continue working after losing their jobs. Bulgarian

bloggers seem to be devoted to the idea of free speech and believe that their contribution in this respect is substantial. Bloggers started their publishing activity for a variety of reasons, but their motivation could be reliably traced to a mixture of altruism, ego, exhibitionism and desire to influence others. Overall, blogs are perceived as an important new tool for the development of civil society 20 years after Bulgaria shed its communist government, one-party system and planned economy.

Little agreement exists on what is the relative impact of Bulgarian blogs on the audience(s), even though this is perhaps the most interesting and important question that could be asked of any type of media. Study participants differed widely in their opinions as to what constitutes “influence” in the first place. Bulgarian news bloggers seemed to disbelieve that their work may have similar effects to traditional media, particularly television. Available literature is at best ambivalent on the issue as well. We can safely say that the relative weight of blogs in Bulgaria’s media mix is difficult to pinpoint.

It is this author’s expectation that further ‘professionalization’ of news blogs in Bulgaria is likely, with more citizen journalists using this online platform to encroach upon the terrain of ‘traditional’ media. Whether this will change significantly the media landscape in the country remains to be seen.

A series of content analyses of Bulgarian blogs must classify comprehensively the recurring themes and topics with all due methodological rigor. This study presented briefly several common blog subjects gleaned from the literature or interviews with bloggers. Since exhaustive content analysis was beyond the scope of such a pilot research project, a lot more remains to be accomplished in this respect. Furthermore, a study of the actual – not perceived – influence of blogs seems long overdue. Similar research is conducted for various media audiences in the country, primarily for marketing purposes, but also close to elections. The absence of blog-reading audience from such surveys is inexplicable. A national representative sample would provide a better picture as to the reach and role of blogs in Bulgaria’s society. This will suggest why bloggers such as the aforementioned Ivo Indzhev have achieved higher popularity than some other, probably equally talented, online authors.

Finally, a comprehensive study of the top 50 or even 100 news bloggers in Bulgaria would be a worthy research idea – and the sooner, the better. Such a project should look at their attitudes, beliefs, practices, backgrounds and related issues. Current data already exists on professional routines, problems and demographics of journalists as part of a growing research trend toward international comparative studies (e.g., Hanitzsch et al., 2010). Adding bloggers to this milieu will help us understand better the media diet that contemporary audiences in Bulgaria (and perhaps in Eastern Europe, too) consume.

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