

Radio B92 and its Internet Project: From Local to Global Media

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Abstract

This is close look to the Internet action of Belgrade radio B92. The tactical usage of Internet has given B92 a tool to defend itself against any ban, and moreover to broaden the scope of listeners.

Introduction: Radio B92

Belgrade independent Radio B92 was and still is an organization with an influence that goes beyond the scope of a local radio station. Back in 1989. B92 started as a local radio station with a very limited scope of listeners. But from the start its orientation was on urban music and fast, objective flashing news. A number of intellectuals from urban elite were included in Radio B92 projects from the start. Over time B92 started to use different media, so book and CD publishing, a video department and a cultural center, REX, were opened. In one sentence, B92 is a broadcasting house that broadcasts over any possible media. One of these projects was the hope to establish an Internet site within the nest of B92. That idea goes back to the year 1993. But the obstacles were great, ranging from total misunderstanding by Serbia's official structures to extreme difficulties in finding find foreign partners willing to go into such a project in a country under international sanctions.

A tiny light at the end of the tunnel appeared in the September 1994 when Amsterdam Internet site XS4ALL agreed to become Internet provider for B92. But it took more then a year for B92 to obtain all legislative acts, space, just one leased telephone line to Amsterdam and funding for the venture. Anyway, OpenNet.Org, the Belgrade Radio B92 Internet site, opened on 14 November 1995. The provider was mentioned XS4ALL in Amsterdam.

OpenNet was the first ISP in Belgrade, and was the only provider in Serbia until March 1996. The only organization that was supportive of B92 in Internet project was and still is the Fund for an Open Society. As mentioned, the opening of the site is the result of more then two years of continuous efforts overcoming all kinds of obstacles. The main and hardest obstacle is the long-standing and constant unsupportive attitude of the regime towards both B92 and Internet. The state-controlled PTT was unwilling to sell us any local telephone lines or digital link to our ISP in Amsterdam. So, until recently the site operated just on a 28.8 kbs leased line analog link and seven dial-up lines that have been rented from nearby organizations. Recently, under very expensive terms, OpenNet started another 128 kbps link to Amsterdam.

OpenNet

The general intentions of OpenNet were:

1. To offer Internet access and education to a broad public without any discrimination. In that direction a classroom with a few computers was set up immediately where people can get

access to the Internet together with the education needed. At the start of OpenNet there was a great interest towards Internet, but very little knowledge of services, their usage and scope.

2. To give Internet services to independent media, especially B92. The introduction of Internet as an everyday tool in media work was a new practice. So, the ultimate goal was to introduce Internet services to journalists and also to build an infrastructure that could serve as a carrier of news and articles.

3. To maintain two-way communications with listeners or fans of Radio B92, wherever they are. A lot of young and educated people have left the country during sanctions, so the Internet was a natural means to establish communication with them.

Internet as a tactical tool

The first web site with a host in Serbia, Welcome to OpenNet (<http://www.opennet.org/>), was opened immediately after OpenNet started. Web pages contain information on B92 and its projects (radio itself, publishing, films, books and CD production, REX - European house of culture, etc.). Also, due to very reduced bandwidth, two mirror sites were opened in the USA (<http://moumee.calstatela.edu/sii/b92>, and <http://www2.opennet.org>).

Also, in May 1996 website OdrazB92 (<http://www.siicom.com/odrazb>) and e-mail distribution (subscription at vesti@opennet.org) of Radio B92 news started. News recourses are updated at least twice per day. Starting from the beginning of December 1996, Radio B92 filed news updates (English and Serbian version) in RealAudio format to its XS4ALL page RadioB92 in Danger (<http://www.xs4all.nl/opennet>). The attention that the RealAudio page drew on Internet was beyond all expectations, so OpenNet started live broadcasting of B92 programs. People from all over the world downloaded audio material and rebroadcast it over and over.

Radio B92 was a small local radio station, with an impact that exceeded its covered area and the number of listeners that could pick up the B92 signal from the air. Together with OpenNet, B92 was TAZ or a virtual community embedded in an unfriendly environment. Engagement in all antiwar actions and the 1996/97 protest in Belgrade made it the major carrier of uncensored information. The regime answered with the extreme measure of banning Radio B92 in December 1996. Banning made radio even more virtual, because radio sent its information only to the Net. Also, as the only way out, B92 started its 24-hour program on the Internet as a RealAudio service. So, people from all around the world started using the new channel and found all possible ways to send back information into Serbia. That made the B92 ban virtual and not effective, so within 51 hours the government gave back license to B92.

The success of the Internet action gave momentum to old idea of covering the whole of Serbia with B92 programs. So, the audio signal from Internet, or sent via telephone lines, is now picked up and sent to satellite. The satellite, on the other hand, resends the signal to a series (at this moment 25) of local radio stations in Serbia, which rebroadcast B92 programs. In that way more than 80% of the territory is now covered with news, talk shows and uncensored programs of B92.

Regime and Net - The whole circle

The Serbian authorities are ambivalent regarding the Internet. On the one hand, they anticipate that the Internet is and will be more and more an essential information carrier worldwide. But on the other hand, the regime does not want it to spread on a huge basis within the country. So, at the beginning they totally ignored the Internet as a fact of life, until Radio B92 opened its site. But then the Internet suddenly became a governmental task of the utmost importance. So, a big private bank, BK, at that moment closely tied to the regime, opened its site with all the support of the state-controlled PTT.

The events that took place during the protest of the democratic-oriented public and students threw a new light on the Internet in Serbia. During the previous year, thousands of users and organizations were connected to the Net, and found out that it could be a very important tool of spreading information without state control. So OpenNet, the Radio B92 Internet site, used it to spread news and audio newscasts, as well as programs on-line through the Net. It went on-line even when Radio B92 itself was banned. Also, a student protest web site has started a series of actions on the Net, from letters of support to throwing eggs via mail to governmental institutions. So, by all means one could observe the present situation in Serbia as an Internet revolution. That introduced a standard of protest of free citizens, and the potential of that technology is still to be investigated in full.

From the beginning regime was aware of the fact that the Internet is an open medium, and in this field they do not have much to offer. There were some attempts by the ruling parties to present themselves on the Web, but their presentations just showed more transparently that the king is naked, and that there is very little essence and spirit on their side. On the other hand, the regime reacted to the obvious advantage and far better usage of the Net by independent media and student protesters in the only way it could, by silence and ignorance. It was clear from the start that the only way to control the Internet-related flames they have suffered is to cut off all the telephone lines from the country towards the West. But this is a hazardous and extreme action that will fully show the repressive nature of the regime. So, they just let it be, unable to react and to offer their arguments to the Internet audience. The basic reason for such a sloppy official reaction is total lack of adaptation to new media. They just know that 'Internet' is a word that they should use, but do not know what to do with it when they find themselves there. That behavior emerges from the habit of speaking in orchestrated media, without any dialog.

One of the most recent examples of such an attitude is interview that the director of the Federal Informatics Bearau, Nikola Markovic, gave to the state-controlled newspaper *Politika*. The topic was the Internet in Yugoslavia. In that interview, Markovic gave a lot of disinformation, the top item of which was the statement that Internet access in Yugoslavia was not possible during sanctions. Markovic did not mention Radio B92's OpenNet, although OpenNet was the first provider in Yugoslavia, starting a few months before sanctions were lifted. Markovic is very well aware of that fact, because he had initiated a meeting with OpenNet as, at that time, the only Internet provider in Yugoslavia. Also, the director mentioned a minor Belgrade company as a provider, in spite of the fact that this company is working occasionally over a satellite link without a permit. On the other hand, the institution on which he is director is working without any results on legislative regulation of satellite connections. The director of the state institution that did not produce a law is publicly

mentioning as an Internet provider a company that ignores lack of legislation and works as a pirate!

Conclusion: Open access for all

The present situation in Serbia shows how important the Internet is for each community, and especially for communities trying to reach higher democratic standards. One can push this argument to extremes, and judge the democratic bias of a community by the potential and strength of groups and NGOs that work on the popularization, spread and humanization of the Internet. Also, that 'desire to be connected' of small and undeveloped communities has to be helped and supported by all means by the more developed. The accessibility of the Internet to the general public is not to be left just to each country's authorities and legislation. Some act of recognition of the Internet as a part of basic human rights may be a great help to all organizations and individuals worldwide who find difficulties and obstacles placed by regimes in their efforts to find a way on to the Big Net.