

# Electronic Publishing and Democratization of the Transitional Society in Macedonia

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## Abstract

One of the greatest effects of the digital media and Internet is the birth of a new political sensibility that extends beyond the boundaries of the local politics. Recent studies show that the digital citizens are more optimistic, tolerant and committed to change. And they vote. They vote for a more democratic society. It is not a surprise that the digital media are getting more attention by the participants in the arena of politics. But the true effect of electronic publishing in post-communist countries is still obscure and in need of scientific investigation. The question whether the positive effects of its technologies can overcome the deeply rooted totalitarian forces can only be answered via qualitative and quantitative analysis of the problem, and then conclusions about patterns can be drawn.

## Case study: Macedonia

Our paper presents a case study of the Role of Electronic Publishing in Democratization of the Macedonian society. It provides detailed analysis of the factors connected with electronic publishing and digital mediums that have been affecting the development of democratic processes since the fall of communism.

Emphasis is put on the happenings during critical periods, such as elections, with a spotlight on the acting of the political parties and their activities via digital mediums, as well as from a viewpoint of the general situation in Electronic Publishing. Also included is analysis of the converging roles of the international political situation.

Several typical instances are anecdotally illustrated in detail to provide qualitative information alongside the relations examined via facts and figures.

As the last part is the comparison study with the situation in other countries with emerging democratic system, that will show that the Macedonian experiences can be used to understand more global trends.

## The Digital Citizen

Before I start the paper, I think it would be appropriate to introduce you to some of my background. I am probably quite young to know a lot about democratic or totalitarian societies. Politics is not part of my professional interest either. However, I had a great opportunity to spend parts of my life in a totalitarian system that then became democratic; and I also had the opportunity to live some time in a truly democratic society in Western Europe. I have also been very fortunate to use the Internet and digital communications for quite a while.

Being educated in a totalitarian society, I was well informed about the worst of democracy. The facts I have learned about democracy are true; it is just that we learned only the bad sides of democracy.

After the transition toward democracy truly started in Macedonia, I learned new facts. This time, I learned about the worst nightmares of the totalitarian society. There was this island, I was told, where people that freely spoke about their politically incorrect thoughts were imprisoned. A story I was told, about one woman. An ordinary woman, she was, with an ordinary job. One day a colleague told her a joke about Tito. Not a sarcastic joke, just a simple humor. She did laugh a little and that was it. She was jailed the next day. She spent many many years on that island only because she did not report that man to the police (who was a secret agent checking her).

So, now I know the worst of both systems, but will that help me anything?

Republic of Macedonia is now quite poor country with many problems, and it is not a surprise that people are not very optimistic there. However, we want to know how much they have changed since the fall of communism, and are they committed to change? We also want to check whether modern communications, especially the Internet, do or do not have any effect on them.

Most people in Macedonia have heard about the Internet, most students and professionals have access to the net, all the rest can access the net via commercial providers. Accessing the net in Macedonia is not more expensive than accessing the net in the UK for example, but compared with the average income of a Macedonian citizen can cost a substantial amount.

### **The average citizen**

At the time I am writing this paper a large number of NATO troops are entering Macedonia. There is practically a war going on in Kosovo and Serbia and the actual fighting is about 100 kilometers away from my town. There is a lot of fear around that this war will enter Macedonia too.

In informal conversation with local citizens, I have been trying to gather information about what they think about NATO troops and this war. I talked to people of different age groups, people with different interests and jobs. The results were as follows:

Many people, especially the elderly ones, said that it is up to NATO whether there is going to be war in Macedonia, and that things are not looking good. Their advice was "try to get out of this country". Some of them were optimistic, however, and they said how we could do nothing, but NATO is here, they will solve the problem.

It was also a large number of people who did not want to comment on this. It is obvious that they are scared, but they keep their fear for themselves.

A much smaller number of people compared to the other groups questioned who the hell allowed NATO to enter Macedonia.

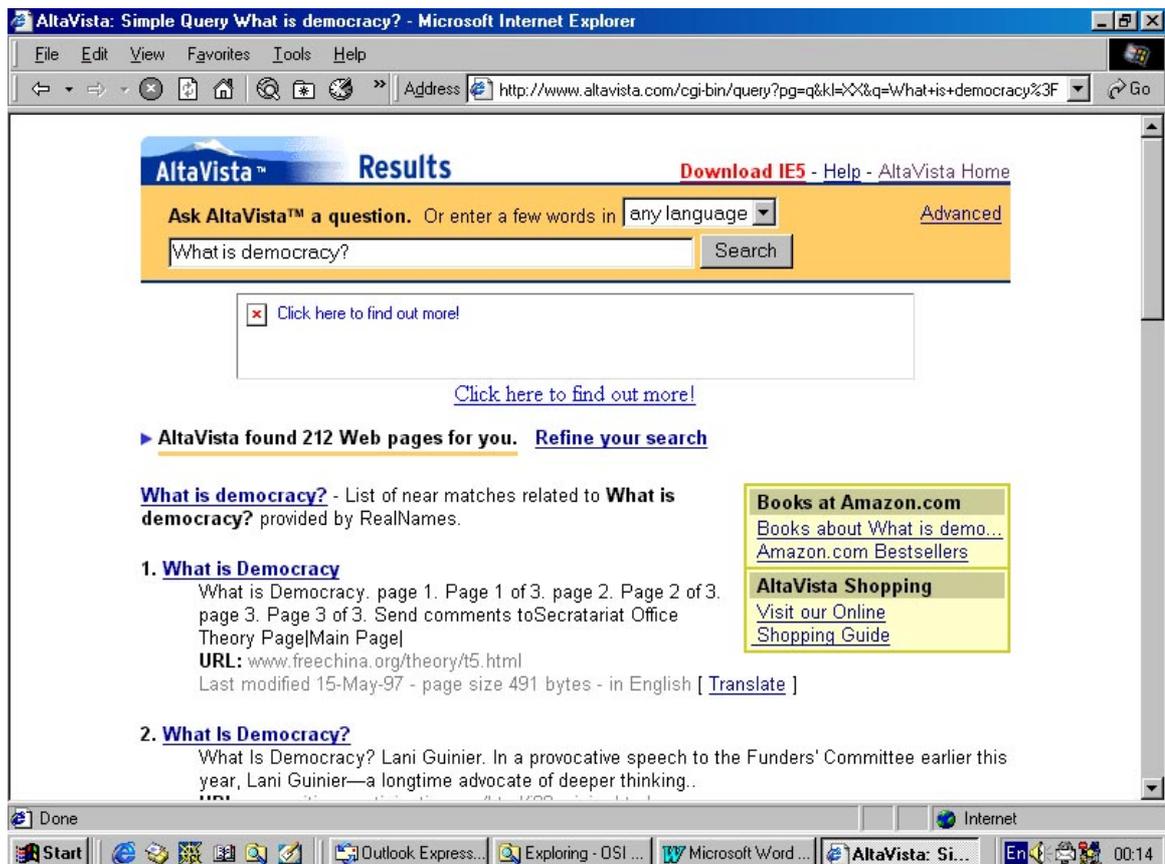
It is not hard to draw conclusions from here about how deeply the totalitarian forces are rooted.

### **What is democracy**

We live in a democratic society today" - I am told. An average citizen has got a foggy vision about what democracy is, mostly based on information learned during the other system. So a question appears: "How can we make sure that this is democracy?"

There are some printed books about democracy, most of them are in English or German language, and few of them are in Macedonian. In order to purchase those books people have to go to the local shop and ask for them. However, the average Macedonian does not understand English, or German. It is also questionable whether a person educated to accept orders without comments is going to look for further information.

How about on the Internet? Can I learn about democracy on the Internet? I have put this question on one of the best search engines (<http://www.altavista.com>) The results follow below: 212 pages were found, few useful ones among the first ten.



It is a lot easier to find information about democracy on the net (assuming that the access to the net is not a problem). However, the results are in English. So we ask the search engine a new question: "Sto e demokratija?" - in Macedonian. It found 31585 matches, but only few were the answer of what we really asked. Those few were on the first page of results.

### Freedom of speech

For most of the modern world today law does not only guarantee freedom of speech, but everyone uses it without any doubt. The Macedonian law guarantees freedom of speech too. Not only freedom of speech, but also freedom of thinking.

However, it is obvious that the totalitarian forces still have their effects on the citizens, and not all will talk freely what they feel and think. This is true especially with the elderly people, those who felt the totalitarian forces on their skin.

Recent studies show that people express their feelings (especially the stronger ones) very freely on electronic systems like bulletin boards, e-mail, newsgroups etc. Freedom of speech seems to be a lot more present with digital communications. The main reason for this may well be anonymity and no human contact.

Digital media, especially the Internet are used for publishing materials that would not be published (or spoken) otherwise. People seem to be a lot more explicit when they use the Internet to express themselves. There is total freedom of speech. However, there is one thing that should be taken to count: the average age of the netizen. Internet in Macedonia, and in most of the World is accessed by young people. And young people are easier to change. The totalitarian forces were not deeply rooted in them. This is good news. Young people that live in countries in transition have practically the same sources of information as anyone else on the Internet. These people are under much bigger influence from the net than from their local system. They often use this opportunity to become extremely knowledgeable about the world around them. Foreign studies show that digital citizens (no matter where they live) are informed, outspoken, participatory, passionate about freedom, and committed to the free nation.

Does this mean that the digital citizen could solve the biggest problems around in transitional societies? Does this mean that the digital citizen has overcome the inter-ethnic relations - otherwise reason for the war in Kosovo?

There is just one problem with the digital communications (and therefore with the electronic publications): there are not enough people, digital citizens, in these countries. Countries in transition are naturally poorer, and not everyone can afford the technology. This may be the biggest problem holding back the great effects of digital communications and electronic publishing.

### **EP and Political Parties**

The power of electronic publishing was seen by the Macedonian parties when they needed it most - during the last elections. Their presence on the Internet was seen from their web pages, newsgroups, Macedonian BBS and on IRC (Internet relay chat). These new forms of presence were mostly made by young members of the parties seeking alternative ways for promotion.

This was a good step forward for our democratic society, but their electronic publishing seems to be only an electronic version of their sweet-worded programme. Most of their web sites offer some information about the parties and discussion forums, but people will learn a lot more about things like democracy if they go to a foreign political site.

Another interesting thing is how much traffic do these sites get. Is their message spread to the people?

The Macedonian Politicological forum, an organization of the students studying political studies, did an on-line voting some time before the elections. The site carried over 4800 votes, but there were only about 240 unique hits. This means that only 240 people went to vote, and some of them loved their parties too much to vote only once, or, maybe, voted for their unconnected friends and pets.

After disabling the opportunity to vote more than once, the site was open again and until the final elections the results were as follows (as given on <http://www.pf.ukim.edu.mk/scripts/ispisk.exe>):

Political Party	Votes
LDP - DPM	6755
VMRO - DPMNE	6660
SDSM	6559
Demokratska alternativa	6376
* I will not vote *	1323
PDP - PDPA - NDP	755
MAAK - Konzervativna partija - DP - Makedonska alijansa	575
Demokratska partija na Srbite	420
Lista na grupa izbirachi	253
SP - PCER - DPT - DPPR	234
Gra ansko - liberalna partija	157
Rabotni~ka partija	131
VMRO - Dvi'ewe za obnova na Makedonija	129
VMRO - DP	96
Sojuz na komunisti na Makedonija	37
Komunistichka partija na Makedonija	31
Socijalistichko - hristijanska partija	22
Partija na penzionerite	21

The site carried impressive 30534 votes. The winning parties, VMRO-DPMNE and Demokratska Alternativa had total of 13036 votes.

Being connected to the net not only gives easier access to the local parties, but also gives easier access to the electronic publications of other parties around the World. This is a great resource for the digital citizen. This is why the digital citizen understands his party a lot better. Suddenly the local parties have to compete with the foreign ones and it is much easier to point out what is wrong and what is right with the party.



### EP and democracy in other countries in transition

Many countries that are surviving the transition from communism to capitalism are or have been in similar situation. It is said that between communism and capitalism there is a lot of alcoholism. While some of those countries can hardly keep the word "democratic" before "society", many actually face the problem of bringing democratic thinking.

The Internet gives the very same resources in all of the countries. Most digital citizens become spirits of democracy everywhere. It is just that there are not many digital citizens. If there were, radio B92 in Serbia would not have to fight so much to broadcast its news to the public.

### Bibliography and Resources

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Constitution (<http://www.erc.msstate.edu/~vkire/faq/politics/constitution.html>)

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Virtual Macedonia (<http://www.vmacedonia.com/>)

Macedonian Cultural and Historical Resource Center (<http://www.rmacedonia.org/>)

Macedonia on the Net (<http://www.unet.com.mk/maknet/>)

The Archive of Macedonia (<http://www.unet.com.mk/arhiv/>)

Macedonia FAQ Politics (<http://www.erc.msstate.edu/~vkire/faq/politics/>)

Open Society Institute (<http://www.soros.org.mk/>)

Macedonian Forum of Political Science Non-governmental organization working on the field of development of democracy, human rights, civic society  
(<http://www.pf.ukim.edu.mk/mpf/>)

VMRO-DPMNE - Demokratska Partija na Makedonsko Nacionalno Democratic Party of National Unity (<http://www.vmro-dpmne.org.mk/>)

DA - Demokratska Alternativa Democratic Alternative (<http://www.da.org.mk/>)

SDSM - Socijaldemokratski Sojuz na Makedonija Social Democratic Alliance of Macedonia (<http://www.sdsm.org.mk/>)

LDP - Liberalno-demokratska partija Liberal Democratic Party (<http://www.ldp.org.mk/>)

LiDeM - Liberalno-demokratska mladina Liberal Democratic Youth (<http://www.ldp.org.mk/lidem/>)

Macedonia for the Macedonians An examination of Macedonian issues with a focus on human rights (<http://www.geocities.com/~makedonija>)

Macedonian Human Rights Movement of Canada Human rights for all Macedonians and ethnic minorities in the Balkans (<http://www.mhrmc.on.ca/>)