



THE IMPACT OF MEDIA DIGITALIZATION ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION IN SERBIA¹

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Abstract:

Success in the political power game is all about how political parties get their messages across to voters, and lately, it's become a significant issue because technological advances have turned the old one-way communication into a two-way discussion on the internet. The concept at the back of this work was to explore the mere development of the shift in attention from traditional to digital media within the political context, highlighting that this phenomenon is often ignored, as authors, due to the rapid development of the internet, have a tendency to presuppose electorate's inclination to acquire political information mainly via digital channels. Drawing such a premature and simplified conclusion is not justified because despite the surging use of digital media, traditional media such as radio and television still have a good number of adherents, so they also play a role in political dynamics. To determine the extent to which digital media have succeeded in becoming substitutes for traditional ones, we conducted research on the political information consumption preferences of Serbian voters. The research was based on the initial hypothesis that contemporary political communication should be executed mainly digitally. The survey participants responded to a series of questions related to their habits related to political news intake from various traditional media and their digital equivalents. Quantitative analysis of responses was conducted using version 26 of the SPSS software. Following this, a qualitative analysis was carried out, convincing the authors to accept the hypothesis, as the results showed that the sample leans towards the preference for digital media in the context of political information gathering. However, said preference is not overly pronounced, considering that traditional media still enjoy a significant level of popularity.

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INTRODUCTION

In the wild world of today's politics, political rivals engage in a constant and merciless battle for public support which would ensure them to grab the reins of power. In the past, said battle primarily unfolded within parliaments and other institutions, as well as through public gatherings, only to then

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shift to traditional and subsequently digital media. The widespread availability of political information has caused interest and participation in political affairs to shoot up, but it has also made the battle for votes more ruthless and uncompromising than ever before. The vicious nature of political confrontations is particularly pronounced today, as communications have largely transitioned into the digital sphere, which is abundant with persuasive and biased media that are mostly aligned with political parties and operating on their behalf, fulfilling the goal of molding public notion.

The inclination of politicians of all allegiances to acknowledge the crucial role and potency of the media, and subsequently tailor their conduct to garner their maximum attention, was demonstrated by Cohen *et al.* (2008) through their research based on interviewing members of The Knesset (Israel's unicameral parliament and supreme authority of that state). Strömberg (2015) discovered the existence of a dichotomy associated with models that explain the impact that media has on voters. Specifically, said models can be divided into two groups depending on the ultimate intention of media moguls behind them: the first group includes those who want to disseminate factual information to a predominantly rational audience, while the second group comprises those willing to engage in forms of propaganda, assuming they can manipulate the cognitive vulnerabilities of the target audience.

In advanced societies founded on democracy, freedom of speech enjoys strong legal protection, meaning that the media are being granted a significant, nearly boundless power, positioning them in a domineering role over political entities. Salh (2017) observed that in the present setting, powers behind the media are in a position to partially or completely manipulate reports on ongoing matters before propagating them to the wide public and concluded that strengthening of media position weakens the political actors and relegates them to an unprecedented level of vulnerability. At once, people being increasingly into online engaging and sharing has brought about a real challenge linked to media consumption and led to the definition of a new phenomenon called information overload, explained as a scenario in which the volume of available data goes beyond the individuals' mental bandwidth for processing information (Bartosz, 2022). The whole complex world of political communications has spurred scholars to scrutinize the distinctive features of traditional and digital media within a political framework.

The intention of this paper is to look at Serbian voters' perceptions of the progression of traditional media to the digital sphere and evaluate their eagerness to get informed on political matters via digital counterparts of traditional media. The research started with setting up the hypothesis that contemporary political communication should be executed mainly digitally. In a scientific context, this paper aspires to contribute to the understanding of the state of media and the potential of political marketing within the territory of the Republic of Serbia, providing at the same time practical value for political subjects by offering insights into voters' political information-gathering preferences and hence aiding in more informed decision-making related to their marketing and advertising strategies.

The paper consists of an introduction and six segments whose aim is to give a review of existing literature and interpret the exploratory research performed by the authors. The theoretical groundwork of this paper is explained in the first three segments: the first one explains the differences between traditional and digital media, the second one examines the exclusive traits of political communication in the digital realm, and the third one assesses misinformation and other practices that challenge the credibility of digital media. In the fourth segment, the methodological framework used for data collection is presented, the fifth one contains tables with values of descriptive statistical measures, as well as a discussion of the obtained results, at the same time as the remaining, sixth segment, includes the authors' conclusions, paper limitations, and recommendations for further research.



DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TRADITIONAL AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Jevtovic and Cebalovic (2018) examined all contemporary strategies applied to the Serbian political scene and explained that the division of media into traditional and digital emerged as a result of the surge of modern communication means based on digital technologies. The modernization of citizens' communication habits has also led to a complete restructuring of the media, most notably in the fields of public relations and information processing.

Media like television, radio, and newspapers follow a traditional, one-way communication pattern that refers to sending messages from a single source to a wide audience (Vidic *et al.*, 2011). In stark contrast, digital media, with its multimedia-rich features, offers users a real-time, two-way, and much more immersive news consumption experience, gradually positioning them as predilected news outlets. People prefer digital media for two main groups of reasons, where the first group is related to technology and explained by open and transparent Internet design, while the second one is related to socio-political context, meaning it's explained by the opportunity of getting a solid political understanding and connecting with thinking alike individuals, adversaries, political parties and their leaders, as well as fostering debates that often go beyond national borders and languages. Communication in the digital sphere, through computers and cell phones with Internet access, combines all the advantages of traditional media in addition to the peculiarity that all actors can assume the role of creator and transmitter of information (Roa Robles, 2019), creating a new order where power is primarily reflected in the possession of information (Bhat, 2019). As noted, digital media as an informational tool strongly relates to individuals' perceptions about being qualified and informed enough to participate in politics (internal efficacy) (Boulianne *et al.*, 2023).

Traditional media, such as newspapers and television, are often considered to be more professional as they generally employ experienced journalists and editors. Furthermore, their advantage lies in the fact that their consumption does not require knowledge about computers and Internet technologies, making them equally accessible to all age and education groups. The primary downside of the traditional media is their tendency to lead readers astray by spinning information to align with mainstream narratives or even downright censoring news that diverges from prevailing ideologies, a practice driven by their ties with ruling parties or coalitions and, occasionally, financial dependence on them. Another disadvantage is the fact that they rely on one-way communication and, therefore, miss out on getting real-time feedback – a situation that negatively impacts their reputation, as it causes the frustration of news consumers deprived of the opportunity to voice their opinions. Yet another drawback in traditional media, particularly the television, is the way too high cost of advertising, which excludes smaller political parties from buying commercial slots, thereby contributing to the dominance of established political entities and the overall hegemony of certain doctrines.

Digital media is known to be a whole lot more cost-efficient, both in terms of establishment and placement of ads, advantage that is further supported by detailed analytics and the ability to target people based on their location or demographic parameters. Besides, in addition to paid promotion, digital media grants the possibility for organic, non-sponsored content to reach a significant number of people (Albadri, 2023). The open nature of the Internet and Internet-based digital media encourages real-time and two-way communication, characteristics that, in the long term, contribute to de-censoring of the media sphere and the opening up of societies to sensitive and sometimes reticent topics.



The swift and advancing development and application of modern digital technologies and tools have revolutionised the working environment and conditions (Lukic Nikolic, 2023). This phenomenon is reflected in the media sector not only in digitalization, i.e., the transition to the online sphere, but also in the need to acquire a variety of new software and skills for content creation to ensure that the messages conveyed stand out from the abundance of available content.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

Traditional media still diligently covers political events. However, the heart of the discussion on these matters is progressively moving to the online sphere, i.e., to a milieu marked by consistently waning user attention, polarized information streams, and the emergence of anti-democratic political entities (Bennet and Pfetsch, 2018).

Koc-Michalska *et al.* (2023) have concluded that the influence of technologies on society consistently intertwines with the social context, while Schäfer (2023) emphasized that the ongoing digitalization process is further reinforcing the competitive nature of the information environment, making it increasingly complex, dynamic, and uncertain. The concept of political participation has been modified and improved to mirror the societal environment, and the popularization of the Internet has further improved this dynamic by permitting new styles of political engagement through digital media (Ruess *et al.*, 2023).

Pilik and Ahmadov (2020) argue that the drawbacks of communication by digital means are most commonly explained by the inherent public aspect of the Internet. This characteristic opens the floodgates to a huge spectrum of critical feedback, misinformation, and outright fabrications, making it tough to separate the wheat from the chaff, i.e., discerning genuine facts from malevolent propaganda and blatant lies.

The aforementioned drawbacks of digital communication pose a significant challenge for political parties that have to figure out how to make their messages stand out and capture voters' attention so that they can foster two-way communication and build trust that ultimately materialises in the electoral choices of the target audience. Karlsen and Aalberg argue that skepticism could be a new normal and that this paradigm implies that sharing news via social media could have serious implications for long-term trust in journalism (Karlsen and Aalberg, 2023).

Spreading political messages and shaping voters' perspectives stand as the paramount objectives behind all political communication endeavors undertaken by political actors and the media (Oparaugo, 2021). According to authors such as Jevtovic and Cebalovic (2018), in the present political landscape, it's not just about the events themselves, but the attention they garner and the lasting impact they have on public views. At the same time, the analysis conducted by Antypas *et al.* (2023) indicated that in recent times politicians' negatively charged tweets have been gaining broader traction. Before defining communication strategies and channels through which they will interact with the target audience, political subjects must take into account two things - that they are addressing an electorate that is more informed about political matters than ever before, and that there is a possibility of suffering damage from rival campaigns based on spreading lies, misinformation, as well as true but compromising information.



Despite the ever-increasing numbers of Internet and smartphone users, digital media are limited in terms of fostering instant change, and the political status quo is firmly rooted in power (Gainous *et al.*, 2019), while at the same time, new issues such as data privacy and algorithm control are arising as a result of digital disintermediation (Gómez-García *et al.*, 2023).

Fueled by all the above-mentioned traits of the online world and the collective aim of politicians to stand out in the midst of information overload, digitally-based communication about politics has adopted a distinctively vibrant, fierce, and aggressive tone compared to traditional media. Kruse *et al.* (2017) have executed research that has validated the hypothesis that the Internet's potential for anonymity diminishes the probability of civil discourse and introduces additional hurdles absent in face-to-face interactions.

The traits of political communication pinpointed by scholars from different countries are likewise mirrored in the political discourse within Serbia. A study by Jevtovic and Cebalovic (2018) found that the Serbian voting population downplays the significance of core party agendas, focusing their digitally-based political communications on discussing pre-electoral activities and head political figures and fostering a hostile and prejudiced approach toward those who disagree with them. Additionally, the study showed that Serbian authorities prefer traditional communication methods, while the opposition favors modern methods centered on social networks.

THE CREDIBILITY OF DIGITAL MEDIA

Velički *et al.* (2017) conducted a survey on a sample of digitally literate Croatian voters and found that they most often run into political propaganda on the internet and the least often through the radio, result which aligns with the trend of increasing reliance on internet-powered devices and a departure from outdated devices which offer limited information and provide a restricted user experience. Websites and social networks have enabled many established media companies, that have recognized the skyrocketing trend of digital communications, to move the focus of their operations to the Internet and thus remain competitive in the broadcast journalism market. At the same time, there has been a surge in purely digital media outlets which are characterized by having a more liberal editorial approach, meaning that they often keep the identity of their owners and authors secret.

As per Flanagan and Metzger (2014) credibility in terms of political communication mostly depends on source information, a requirement that can pose a significant challenge in the context of digital media, as these platforms often lack conventional markers of authority, such as identifiable authors and longstanding reputation. The legal systems of many countries, especially those lagging behind in technological development, have yet to recognise the necessity of establishing a legal framework geared toward digital media. Their failure to do so opens space for forming partisan platforms that intentionally manipulate facts and spread misinformation or even outright lies, aiming to fulfil precarious political agendas. Altay *et al.* (2023) suggest that not all forms of misinformation are equally dangerous, and that the subtler forms that produce biased perceptions of reality are particularly hazardous, as they have a greater potential for harm than fake news and blatantly false information. The problematic information may or may not be spread intentionally and with malicious intent, as the reasons for creating and circulating fake news range from political strategic moves, the aim to manipulate public opinion and obtain money, to mere amusement (Weeks and Gil de Zuñiga, 2019).



Radovic and Dojcinovic (2022) observed that Serbian society is currently dealing with a serious problem, namely the rise of deceptive websites spreading misinformation and sensationalist news, and explained that, as a counterbalance, the digital realm is also witnessing a surge in fact-checking online venues.

Since the current research foundation, based on small samples of the electorate in Serbia and other ex-Yugoslav countries, mainly explores the impact of digital communication channels on voter awareness and political activity, the present study aims to go a step further. The aim of this paper is to examine Serbian citizens' perceptions of the transition of traditional media to the digital sphere and evaluate their willingness to consume political information of traditional media in digital formats.

METHODOLOGY

The authors of this study went with an exploratory approach and relied on the Google Forms interface to construct a survey instrument. The questions in the questionnaire were all mandatory and were delivered online to respondents chosen through convenience sampling, with the only requirement being eligibility to participate in elections organized in the Republic of Serbia, thus including only individuals aged 18 and above. The data collecting process took place from August 29 to September 11, 2022, spanning just over two weeks.

In the first part of the questionnaire, a set of demographic questions were posed, revealing that among 117 respondents, 53.8% were women and 46.2% were men, with the majority falling within the working-age population (35.9% aged 36-45, 20.5% aged 46-55, and 9.4% aged 56-65) and predominantly residing in Belgrade (73.5%), while other Serbian cities and municipalities are represented by only 26.5%.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on respondents' habits regarding the gathering of political information, requiring them to assess the frequency of consuming political news from television and print media, both in traditional and digital formats, through official websites and social network profiles. The questions listed all major media outlets operating in the Republic of Serbia, and Likert scale-based textual response options were subsequently assigned numerical values (1 = very often, 2 = often, 3 = occasionally, 4 = rarely, 5 = never) to enable the calculation of statistical data such as mean, standard error, and standard deviation. The mentioned descriptive statistical measures were computed using IBM's SPSS software (version 26) and summarized in two tables.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Among the calculated measures of descriptive statistics, the one proving most suitable for further analysis is the arithmetic mean. The comparison of those values reveals that, in terms of political information and knowledge acquisition, the most popular television programs in the classic form are (listed in descending order of preference) RTS (Radio Television of Serbia), Happy (Happy), and Pink. This result is expected and sound, as these are three television channels with national frequency, meaning they are national free-to-air channels available to everyone. All of these channels dedicate significant attention to political affairs, and their broad coverage and reputation enable them to engage the most experienced journalists, ensuring as well the involvement of the most well-informed and current political figures as guests.



The hierarchy of preference is entirely different in the context of internet-based political information and communication: our respondents ranked N1 television's digital communication channels as their top choice. Websites and social networks owned by B92 and RTS secured the second and third positions, respectively. The fact that N1's popularity is higher in the digital sphere than in the traditional one is logical, given that it is a television channel that was not granted a national frequency by the Serbian Regulatory Authority of Electronic Media and is simultaneously not part of the offerings of most cable operators. Despite its lower coverage, voters continue to show interest in political information disseminated through N1, as it aligns with opposition views and focuses on entirely different news compared to the majority of other media closely associated with the ruling regime.

Respondents expressed a preference for consuming political news on television media in a traditional format, with only Nova S standing out as an exception, being the sole television channel more readily accessed in a digital form. This preference, similar to the case of N1, can be explained by the fact that Nova S is a media outlet aligned with opposition views, and its internet communication channels abound with differing perspectives and exclusive information, while simultaneously having very limited coverage via TV receivers.

The overall popularity of television media in the context of politics was calculated by comparing the averages of the arithmetic means for all survey options. Such analysis showed that considering both traditional and digital versions, the most popular television channels in Serbia are N1, B92, and RTS (in that order).

Table 1. Statistical indicators related to the frequency of obtaining information through television and digital platforms owned by television media

Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Min	Max	M	SE	SD
RTS (tv)	117	1	5	2,98	0,111	1,196
RTS (net)	117	1	5	3,60	0,109	1,175
Pink (tv)	117	1	5	3,15	0,107	1,154
Pink (net)	117	1	5	3,73	0,108	1,172
B92 (tv)	117	1	5	3,19	0,087	0,937
B92 (net)	117	1	5	3,38	0,109	1,181
Happy (tv)	117	1	5	3,09	0,109	1,179
Happy (net)	117	1	5	3,65	0,118	1,275
Prva (tv)	117	1	5	3,52	0,085	0,925
Prva (net)	117	1	5	3,94	0,097	1,053
N1 (tv)	117	1	5	3,26	0,109	1,177
N1 (net)	117	1	5	2,80	0,113	1,226
Nova S (tv)	117	1	5	3,88	0,096	1,044
Nova S (net)	117	1	5	3,69	0,102	1,102

N=number of subjects, Min=minimum, Max=maximum, M=mean, SE= standard error, SD= standard deviation



Statistical measures have also shown that the leading three newspapers in print form, as far as politics is concerned, are Politika, Blic, and Kurir. The print version of Politika being stated as the primary source of political information is very reasonable, and such a result is in line with this media's more than a century-long tradition, ability to employ top-notch editors and journalists and to obtain interviews and declarations from high-profile politicians. As for Blic and Kurir, their high popularity can be attributed not only to their content but also to their affordable price and well-developed distribution channels.

The same three newspapers are also favored when it comes to political news consumption via the Internet, but in a slightly different order - Blic takes first, followed by Kurir, and Politika takes third. This ranking is likely influenced by the offline reputation of said media, as well as the fact that their websites are updated in real-time and contain a broader selection of news than their printed editions, along with an archive of past news.

Questionnaire respondents have also stated that they are not particularly interested in obtaining political information through weekly newspapers. This can be explained by the relatively high cost of purchasing these media in print and the fact that their digital versions can only be assessed after paying a subscription.

Survey results have also suggested that, unlike television channels, newspapers are preferably consumed online rather than in their physical form.

Table 2. Statistical indicators related to the frequency of obtaining information via print media and digital platforms owned by print media

	Descriptive Statistics					
	N	Min	Max	M	SE	SD
Politika (print)	117	1	5	3,47	0,114	1,229
Politika (net)	117	1	5	2,48	0,114	1,236
Kurir (print)	117	1	5	3,68	0,088	0,954
Kurir (net)	117	1	5	2,10	0,114	1,234
Blic (print)	117	1	5	3,54	0,098	1,055
Blic (net)	117	1	5	1,87	0,106	1,141
Alo (print)	117	1	5	3,83	0,089	0,967
Alo (net)	117	1	5	2,73	0,121	1,304
Informer (print)	117	1	5	3,84	0,093	1,008
Informer (net)	117	1	5	3,11	0,122	1,318
Danas (print)	117	1	5	4,13	0,084	0,905
Danas (net)	117	1	5	3,55	0,114	1,235
Srpski telegraf (print)	117	1	5	3,84	0,092	0,991
Srpski telegraf (net)	117	1	5	3,59	0,115	1,240
Objektiv (print)	117	1	5	4,03	0,087	0,946
Objektiv (net)	117	1	5	3,71	0,11	1,189
NIN (print)	117	1	5	4,00	0,11	1,189



Descriptive Statistics						
	N	Min	Max	M	SE	SD
NIN (net)	117	1	5	3,90	0,107	1,155
Vreme (print)	117	1	5	4,17	0,096	1,036
Vreme (net)	117	1	5	3,97	0,100	1,082
Nedeljnik (print)	117	1	5	4,04	0,104	1,125
Nedeljnik (net)	117	1	5	3,91	0,101	1,095
Tabloid (print)	117	1	5	4,32	0,081	0,877
Tabloid (net)	117	1	5	3,69	0,127	1,374

N=number of subjects, Min=minimum, Max=maximum, M=mean, SE= standard error, SD= standard deviation

CONCLUSIONS

In the largest part of technologically advanced societies, digital communication and platforms play a pivotal role in political information dissemination, especially during pre-election periods. This note led to the initiation of research based on the hypothesis that contemporary political communication should be executed mainly digitally. The findings from our survey-based research revealed that respondents hold differing views on their preference for traditional versus digital media in the context of political information gathering. Among the surveyed Serbian voting population, there is a predilection for acquiring political information through print media via digital means, such as websites or social networks. However, political television programs are more commonly watched through traditional television rather than the Internet. These discrepant attitudes prompted a comparison of arithmetic mean values for responses related to traditional media and their internet counterparts, and the said analyses revealed that the values for this statistical indicator differed less in the case of television than in the case of newspapers and magazines. Although the aforementioned values prompted the authors to accept the initial hypothesis, it would nevertheless be premature and therefore unjustified to conclude that it is about time to leave newspapers and television in the past and implement a complete changeover from traditional to digital political communication platforms. The conducted research has shown that traditional and digital media have almost equal significance in the process of political information gathering, which is why political players should coordinate their approach through all available communication channels. Considering limitations, it should be noted that the research is mainly targeting Serbian voters. This suggests that its relevance in different political contexts may be limited, due to differences in how individuals in different countries choose to acquire political knowledge. Besides, this research can be somewhat time-sensitive, since communication preferences and behavior could potentially change rapidly when influenced by significant political events. Repeating the study with a sample from another country or with a larger group of Serbian voters would undoubtedly lead to more accurate and comprehensive conclusions.



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UTICAJ DIGITALIZACIJE MEDIJA NA POLITIČKU KOMUNIKACIJU U SRBIJI

Rezime:

Uspeh u političkoj igri moći se svodi na to kako političke stranke prenose svoje poruke biračima, što u poslednje vreme postaje značajno pitanje, budući da je tehnološki napredak pretvorio staru, jednosmernu komunikaciju u dvosmernu diskusiju vođenu na internetu. Idejni koncept ovog rada bio je da se istraži sam proces prebacivanja pažnje sa tradicionalnih na digitalne medije u političkom kontekstu, naglašavajući da se ovaj fenomen često zanemaruje, s obzirom da analitičari, zbog brzog razvoja interneta, imaju tendenciju da pretpostavljaju sklonost birača da stižu političke informacije uglavnom putem digitalnih kanala. Donošenje tako preuranjenog i pojednostavljenog zaključka nije opravdano jer, uprkos rastućem korišćenju digitalnih medija, tradicionalni mediji poput radija i televizije i dalje imaju značajan broj pristalica, te takođe igraju ulogu u političkoj dinamici. Kako bi utvrdili u kojoj meri su digitalni mediji uspeli da postanu zamena za tradicionalne, sproveli smo istraživanje o preferencijama srpskih birača u vezi sa korišćenjem političkih informacija. Istraživanje je bazirano na početnoj hipotezi da bi savremena politička komunikacija trebalo da se sprovodi pretežno digitalno. Učesnici ankete odgovarali su na niz pitanja o svojim navikama u vezi sa praćenjem političkih vesti putem različitih tradicionalnih medija i njihovih digitalnih ekvivalenata. Kvantitativna analiza odgovora sprovedena je korišćenjem verzije 26 softvera SPSS. Nakon toga, sprovedena je i kvalitativna analiza, koja je ubedila autore da prihvate polaznu hipotezu, pošto su rezultati pokazali da uzorak teži ka preferiranju digitalnih medija u kontekstu prikupljanja političkih informacija. Međutim, ta preferencija nije preterano izražena, s obzirom da tradicionalni mediji i dalje uživaju značajan nivo popularnosti.

Ključne reči:

politička komunikacija,
politički marketing,
digitalne platforme,
tradicionalni mediji,
digitalni mediji