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Social Networks as a Supplement to the Public Media Service? – An Example of the Vukovar protest in October 2018

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Abstract

Generally, the mass media perform the following social functions: information function, agenda setting, control function and criticism of social structures and institutions, educational function and function of socialization and integration (Jurcic, 2017). Through the digital revolution the number of commercial media has increased considerably. Correspondingly, question arise: in which way, primarily commercial media, are fulfilling these social media functions today? Public media services, with legally prescribed obligation to perform these functions, are losing their audience. Excluding the trends of media privatization, commercialization and commodification through the development of digital technologies active citizen participation in public informing has expanded (Flew et al., 2009). The content produced by "ordinary" citizens placed on social networks prevails in the digital public sphere. The existing public media platforms are expressing the need for shifting their services into the digital public sphere in future business plans and to actively involve citizens (Strömblad et al., 2016). Our research question is to what extent and in which way Croatian citizens are fulfilling some of the social functions of mass media using social networks? To give the answer to the research question, the content analysis will be conducted within all posts published on *Facebook* in the period 10/10 until 10/17/18, which informed the public about the protest held in Vukovar. The Vukovar protest was one of the central social events and it was subject of numerous public and political debates. Nevertheless, the protest itself was not covered by national media broadcasters. This lack of coverage by central media platforms gives us the opportunity to analyse the role of social networks and their possibility to replace the functions of traditional media. We will examine whether the social networks content can adequately replace public media platforms or the content published in the case of Vukovar protest was dysfunctional, primarily regarding information and integration functions.

Keywords: *protest in Vukovar, public content, public media service, social networks...*

Track: *Governance*

Word Count: 5.066

1. Introduction and Background

The media are defined as means of communication or news transmission (Jurcic, 2017), and many authors examine the changes they undergo in step with the development of society, i.e., both the manners of relaying information change, and those who relay the information. Thus society plays an important role in creating the media. At the same time, the media perform certain social functions, such as information dissemination and provision of higher quality information, articulation and framing of problems in real and visible contexts for the public to notice, agenda setting, which involves establishing priorities in the handling of social issues, critique and control, entertainment, education, socialisation and leadership, and integration (Jurcic, 2017). The digital revolution has seen a rise in the number of commercial media and social media and research is increasingly focused on social media as a supplement to public media (Dulcic, 2014). Today many discussions take place on social media which raises the question as to whether social media has begun fulfilling the social functions of the media. It is important to mention the citizens, who are seen as fulfilling certain mass media functions (Dulcic, 2014). According to Jääskeläinen et al. (2018), one such example are political events and everything related to them, such as elections, campaigns and similar. The traditional manner of receiving information has shifted to social media where citizens simultaneously receive information, i.e., media content, as well as provide information by participating in discussions, commenting, sharing etc.

This paper examines the functioning of media, particularly in modern times in which social media dominate, and how citizens participate in the production of information. Focusing on posts about a protest in Vukovar, the paper seeks to establish to what extent and in which way Croatian citizens, via social media, fulfil some of the social functions of mass media. The content analysis, for which an analytical matrix was developed, examined Facebook posts published over a period of 20 days.

2. Mass media, society and social networks

Over the years the media underwent numerous transformations and it can be argued that every change in society in general causes a micro or macro change in the media. Thus, throughout the history of pre-modern and modern society's development, media have served as the means of communication which adjust to social changes and perform numerous social functions (Dulcic, 2014). Generally the media could be defined as means of communication or news transmission (Jurcic, 2017), but media differ based on different views of them – such as scientific, political and similar. Thus, as the process of social development undergoes changes so do the media and ways in which information is relayed, but in recent times those relaying the information are changing as well. The media communicates to the society through messages of certain content (Jurcic, 2017). Furthermore, according to Dulcic, the media can also be examined from the technical aspect, where a message is communicated by the type of media that most efficiently communicates between the holders of social power and the media within the given social structure. As pointed out earlier, the media change in step with social processes, thus society itself plays a major role in creating media content. Dulcic states that contemporary societies are established as mass, modern and post-modern. In accordance with that, certain theory paradigms emphasize the importance of structure for understanding the social system and define it as the pattern of social relations that exists at a certain time and place, which means that the structure, which never ceases to change, determines human behaviour in a certain society. On the other hand, Dulcic also points out that some theories see society as a group of social actions, meaning that people create society and interpersonal relations through their actions. The role of media in society is perceived

from different points of view; thus media can also be the driver and promoter of human actions and/or elements of social structure, which of course changes with regard to social changes (Dulcic, 2014).

The media perform certain functions in society, which has been discussed by various authors. Jurcic (2017) lists several authors and their categorisations of media functions (listed below in bullet points).

Media functions according to Rus-Mol and Zagorac-Kerser (2005):

- Information dissemination (raising the general level of awareness among the population and providing higher quality information to facilitate better decision-making regarding important issues in the community);
- Articulation (articulating and framing problems in real and visible contexts in which the public can notice them);
- Agenda setting (establishing priorities in the handling of social issues and placing them in positions where they need to be solved; presenting issues and topics to the public and to those who must resolve them without delay);
- Critique and control (making it impossible to hide things from the public, overseeing the authorities, politics, businesses and all public authority figures);
- Entertainment;
- Education (the media are increasingly serving as an education tool as they facilitate the acquisition of general knowledge; the media can have a special educational character through specialized educational programmes focused on science, research and popularisation – National Geographic, History Channel, Discovery);
- Socialisation and leadership;
- Integration (the media connect people, cultures, ideas, religions etc. in many ways).

Media functions according to Jean-Claude Bertrand:

- Observing the environment, through the acquisition, analysis, filtering and dissemination of information important to the people;
- Ensuring social communication by creating the conditions for public discussion and connecting individuals through public discourse;
- Presenting a worldview, particularly with regard to distant occurrences that our senses do not perceive;
- Transmission of culture (traditions, values, heritage);
- Contribution to happiness and entertainment (media consumers mostly expect the media to entertain them and motivate them to create);
- Consumption (the media increase sales and further encourage the development of a consumer society; they are the main means of advertising and play a key role in the sales chain).

Media functions according to Martinic (1994):

- Informative function (according to the author, this function is the most important one since the interdependence of wider social communities is far greater than it had been in the past while the individual is more dependent on the environment due to their limited scope);
- Selection and interpretation function (it facilitates the raising of awareness about shared problems and contributes to the community's cohesion);

- Explanatory function (serves to establish and maintain collective awareness, while at the individual level it serves to integrate individuals into shared activities);
- Educational function (cultural content is transmitted from one generation to the other, social cohesion is increased, social norms are expanded, socialisation is continued);
- Entertainment function (recreation characteristic of the collective and the individual);
- Aesthetic function (with their formative capabilities, the media assert themselves as a new artistic expression).

These categorisations show that, despite some of the differences among them, many of the functions of the media are intertwined. This paper follows the categorisation laid out by Rus-Mol and Zagorac-Kerser (2005). The functions they list were used in the analytical matrix, i.e., those functions were one of the criteria used in content analysis.

The digital revolution resulted in a greater number of commercial media, which prompted questions as to how today's media fulfil the above mentioned social functions of the media. The question arises as to whether social media have become a kind of supplement to public media. According to Dulcic, social media are a key characteristic of modern society, one that changes both the media and society. The author points out that many discussions of great importance for society today take place through social media (commercial media), which have a major impact on various political, economic, social and other issues, and in that sense they have begun fulfilling the media's social functions. Citizens play a big role in this regard, and are increasingly believed to be fulfilling some of the mass media's function through their use of social media. The citizens have begun to get actively involved in public information dissemination, while public media with their legislatively regulated obligations of fulfilling functions are losing their audience as a result. In addition to the privatisation of media and accompanying commercialisation and commodification through the development of digital technologies, a more active involvement of citizens in public information dissemination has also occurred (Flew et al., 2009). Thus, today nearly anyone with access to the internet can be a journalist, while content produced by "ordinary" citizens and posted on social media dominates the public. Strömblad et al. (2016) state that the media underwent radical structural changes in recent decades, primarily as a result of globalisation, digitalisation, consolidation and integration of media operators, as a result of which many who operated in traditional media were forced to "abandon" old business models which had become unprofitable. At the same time, the authors argue, these changes created opportunities both for media consumers and for market participants, i.e., for creators of media content because the successful ones adjusted to the new situation on the market. In addition, the citizens have never before had such wide ranging access to news, information and entertainment at the same time, with this content simultaneously serving as a source of information about current events and an opportunity for participation as creators in various unlimited debates. Such new and innovative solutions have also created possibilities for smaller media to communicate faster and reach greater audiences (Strömblad et al., 2016). Furthermore, the authors point out that digitalisation succeeded in erasing and pushing old boundaries and old rules, so that these boundaries are no longer clearly defined or as important. That which used to be available only in newspapers or on the radio is today available through various digital channels. In the past, media content used to be differentiated based on different distribution platforms but today everything mostly takes place via the same platform – the digital platform. Consumers increasingly do not care whether the content they consume comes from daily newspapers, TV or another source. As the authors point out, the use of various new devices has enabled consumers to see anything they are interested in immediately, while also allowing them to participate in creating news. In accordance with said trends, public media outlets express in their business plans the need for shifting the public media service into the digital public

domain and for greater involvement of citizens in the process of distributing public content. In addition, we must mention the manner in which consumers find and read articles. A vast majority of readers access articles directly from social media. Thus, for example, Facebook has its own platform for such media – Instant Articles. This function allows publishers to publish news directly on Facebook, and potential readers do not need to access the article at the official website, instead they see it immediately on their Facebook profile. Today all or most newspaper publishing companies allow users to share their articles on social media like Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus. The authors point out that these Instant Articles present both benefits and disadvantages for media companies. For example, one benefit is that media companies can advertise their content via Facebook – their content is available much faster and is seen by a wider audience, so long as the user is active on their Facebook profile. One drawback is that there is a smaller chance that the user will continue to explore the media company's content on the company's official website.

Flew et al. (2009) point out that various other possibilities presented by modern mobile devices can be connected to these changes. As we have pointed out, consumers access news in a short period of time owing to content available "here and now", which mostly takes place via mobile devices which have partially replaced traditional media such as newspapers, but also computers. Users carry their mobile devices on them at all times, and internet access allows them to access content they are interested in immediately. Geographical availability, i.e. the GPS that all mobile devices are equipped with, also plays a role in this. Internet has been described as "the death of geography" (Flew et al., 2009), meaning that anyone can access information from anywhere in the world which has "erased" borders, however mobile devices are equipped with GPS and, depending on chosen options, users can access information they are most interested in, i.e., this allows users to access content relevant to their geographic location.

Flew et al. (2009) describe the Business Models for User-Generated Content which concerns situations when media companies source and use user-generated content:

- Feeding the hive: an extension of the crowdsourcing model which describes all contributions of content into the produsage environment. Commercial operators may make such contributions in recognition of the beneficial outcomes which can result directly or indirectly from the community's produsage-based processing of the content, even though the specific material fed to the hive will now be governed by commons-based license and is therefore lost to direct commercial exploitation.
- Helping the hive: reversing the 'harvesting' model, here commercial or non-commercial operators provide services aimed at the produsage community itself. Such services may be directed at communities to help them coordinate their produsage processes, or at individuals to help them overcome obstacles to effective participation. The emergence of 'drop shops' for items to be auctioned off on eBay, or production services for the print publication of collaboratively produced texts, are examples here.
- Harboursing the hive: another form of helping the hive, this model points to the provision of hosting services to the produsage community – for example community hosting as it is offered by SourceForge for open source projects, by Wikia for wikibased knowledge management communities, or by Flickr for photo enthusiasts. Again, such practices are mostly benign unless a community lock-in to the harbouring service is exploited by the service provider (and such threats may exist in the context of the increasing reliance of users on Flickr for photosharing or YouTube for videosharing, for example).

Jääskeläinen et al. (2018) in the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) argue that media play a major role in policy creation, which can be seen during elections and campaigns for example, but this differs from culture to culture. Thus the media are characterized either as "conspiratorial, subjective" players or as "promoters of dangerous voices" – in either case, they are blamed for polarizing discussions. This is particularly seen in societies with a shifting political situation where, due to the above, it is very difficult to be a good journalist. According to Jääskeläinen et al., fake news most often concern political topics and they regularly reach a wider audience and continue spreading across media, which mostly occurs via social media. This happens with all topics, but is most noticeable when it concerns political topics. Due to the dominance of social media, such discussion have shifted to unregulated and frequently archaic social platforms where users become loud and uncivilized discussions often occur.

The goal of this research was to establish the frequency of posts about the protest in Vukovar and analyse their content. The period encompassed by the research was 20 days. This included the period when the protest was being prepared, the day it was held and the aftermath of the protest, thus the topic was expected to receive greater coverage either in traditional media or on social media.

3. Methodology

The method used in this research was social media content analysis. The content analysis involves the use of secondary sources of data. The advantage of secondary sources of data is their availability and the speed of data collection and analysis. In this research, the analysis is mostly quantitative and descriptive. In addition, content analysis ensures objectivity through the possibility of repetition, comparison and analysis of the same content in relation to similar research.

The research examined Facebook posts related to the protest in Vukovar. Content analysis was carried out based on established categories and characteristics. The categories were recorded in the analysis matrix, which consists of 17 classification categories which aimed to determine as precisely as possible the criteria which we believe to be important for the research and which were employed in analysing the content of the posts during the pre-determined time frame. The classification categories, i.e., the categories based on which the content was analysed, are: type of content (a post or a comment on a post), author (whether the content was published by the media, politicians, other public persons, citizens or institutions and organisations), main topic of the post, date of posting, tone (whether a topic was covered in a positive tone, negative tone, or neutral or descriptive tone), and the function that the content performs. The main topic of the post was a classification category with which we tried to determine what the main topic of the protest in Vukovar was, i.e., what topic different authors most posted about before, during and after the protest: Vukovar's position compared to the rest of Croatia; position towards war crimes; characteristics of current state laws and regulations; duties of public political figures; state institutions' handling of events and processes; and victims' testimonies. In addition to the topic, the analysis also tried to determine which function the published posts performed: information dissemination, articulation of reality, agenda setting, education, socialisation and integration, critique and control of social functions and institutions, and entertainment function.

The analysis included posts published in the following time frame: posts published before the protest in Vukovar took place (140 posts), posts published during the protest in Vukovar (157

posts), and posts published after the protest in Vukovar (137 posts). In total, 434 posts published on Facebook were analysed.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis found that posts published by media outlets dominated (204 posts in total); among them, the most prominent was the Facebook page of N1 Hrvatska with a total of 22 posts, followed by Narod.hr with 16 posts about the protest in Vukovar. Apart from the media, the largest number of posts were published on citizens' profiles – 185. Politicians published 26 posts about the protest, other public figures published 3 posts, while institutions/organisations published 6 posts. We can conclude that leading public media outlets failed to report on the protest in Vukovar.

As can be seen in Figure 1, when it comes to the observed time frames (before the protest, during the protest and after the protest) the media published 120 posts about the protest before it took place and 45 posts after the protest, while posting the lowest number of posts (39) during the protest itself. Opposite to the media, the citizens mostly posted about the protest as it was taking place (96 posts) and after the protest (88 posts). The biggest change in relation to reporting was observed precisely in citizens who got more actively involved in information dissemination or public discussion during the protest itself, and mostly continued to report in the same manner after the protest ended.

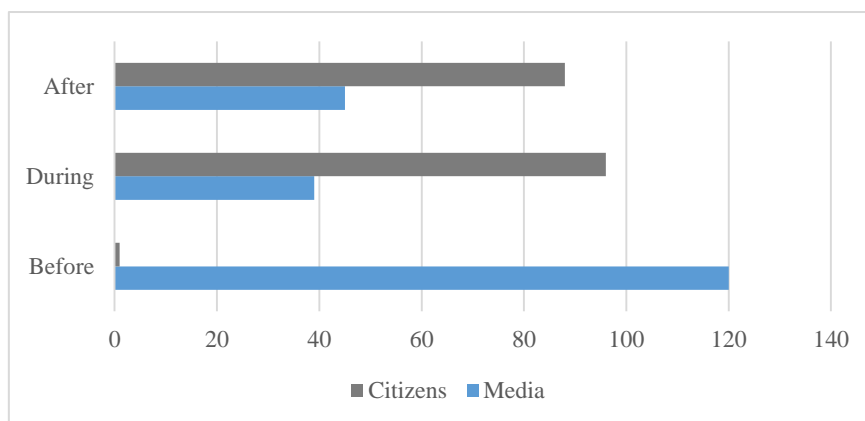


Figure 1: Observed time frames of posting by author

When it comes to topics, we can conclude that the majority of posts were on the topic of "state institutions' handling of events and processes" (153 posts). The second most represented topic was "duties of public political figures" (110 posts) while the rest represented topic was "Vukovar's position in relation to the rest of Croatia".

When it comes to authorship, citizens were the most frequent authors of posts about state institutions' handling of events and processes (76 posts), followed by the media (59 posts). Duties of public political figures were most often the topic of posts published by the media (66 posts), followed by posts published by citizens (38 posts).

With regard to time frames, duties of public political figures (Topic 1) was the most frequent topic of posts published before the protest (60 posts), followed by the position toward war crimes (Topic 2) which was the topic of 48 posts. During the protest itself, the most frequent topic was the state institutions' handling of events and processes (Topic 3) with 78 posts, followed by victims' testimonies (Topic 4) with 36 posts. The most frequent topic of posts

published after the protest was state institutions' handling of events and processes (57 posts), followed by duties of public political figures. We can conclude (Figure 2) that regardless of whether the posts are published by media outlets or citizens, the content performs the function of critique and control of social structures and institutions, i.e., relevant political parties, state institutions, political and state officials.

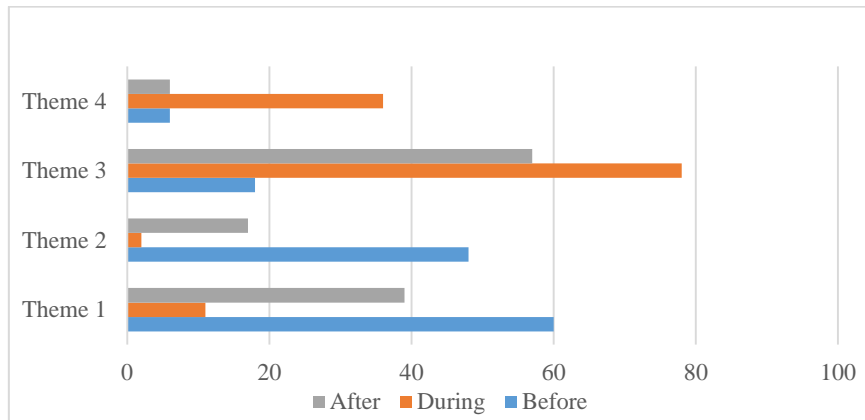


Figure 2: Main topic of posts within individual time frames

Analysis of the tone of the posts gives the following results (Figure 3). The most frequent was the neutral tone or description of an event/person/process/occurrence with a total of 229 such posts. Negative tone was observed in 111 posts. Positive tone was observed in 48 posts in total, while a balanced positive and negative tone was observed in 14 posts.

With regard to authorship, the media most often published posts with a neutral tone (131 posts), while citizens predominantly published posts with a negative (70 posts) or neutral tone (71 posts).

The largest number of neutral or descriptive posts were published before the protest (106 posts). The largest number of negative posts were published during the protest (73 posts), and after the protest (74 posts).

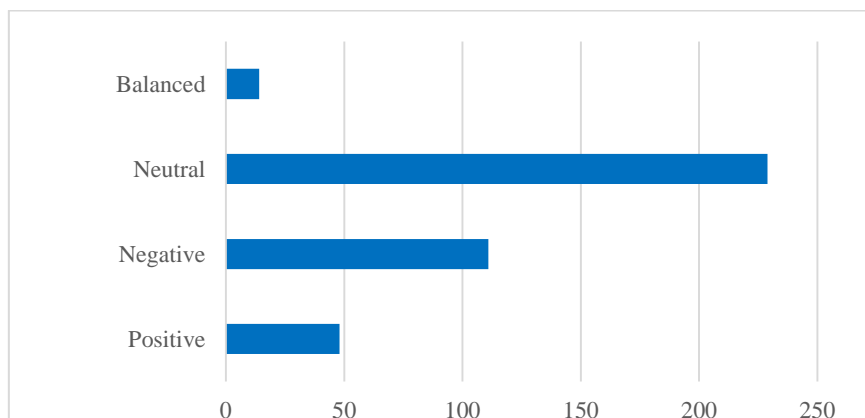


Figure 3: Number of posts by tone

With regard to observed time frames, we can see the differences in reporting on specific thematic categories and the tone of the posts concerning these thematic categories (neutral, positive or negative tone). As can be seen in Figure 4, posts published before the protest were

most often neutral in tone and primarily concerned the "duties of public political figures" (51 posts), followed by posts on the "position towards war crimes" (42 posts) and "state institutions' handling of events and processes". Considering the fact that, as presented above, the media mostly posted about the protest prior to it taking place, we can conclude that the neutral tone is characteristic of posts containing information about the protest or thematic categories related to the theme of the protest itself, which is in accordance with the media's function of informing the public. The positive tone was observed in 5 posts on the topic of "duties of public political figures" while a negative tone was observed in 11 posts on the topic on "state institutions' handling of events and processes" and 9 posts on the topic of "duties of public political figures". In addition, we can conclude that the dominant topic in the reporting ahead of the protest was the topic of "duties of public political figures".

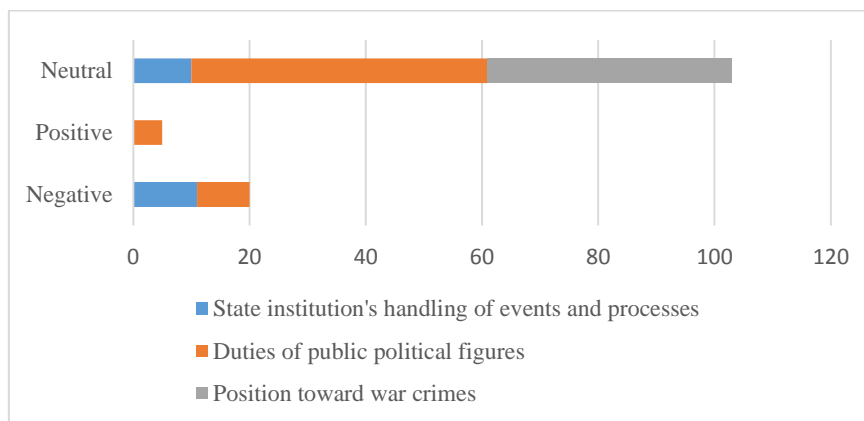


Figure 4: Tone of the posts published before the protest with regard to thematic categories

When it comes to reporting that took place during the protest, two thematic categories particularly stand out with regard to the tone of the content. As can be seen in Figure 5, the posts were most often neutral in tone and primarily concerned the topic of "state institutions' handling of events and processes" (47 posts), followed by neutral posts on the topic of "victims' testimonies" (18 posts). In addition, 17 positive posts on "state institutions' handling of events and processes" and 16 positive posts on "victims' testimonies" were recorded. And finally, 12 negative posts on the topic of "state institutions' handling of events and processes" and one negative post on "victims' testimonies" were also recorded. Unlike the reporting ahead of the protest, the dominant topic that was posted about during the protest was "state institutions' handling of events and processes".

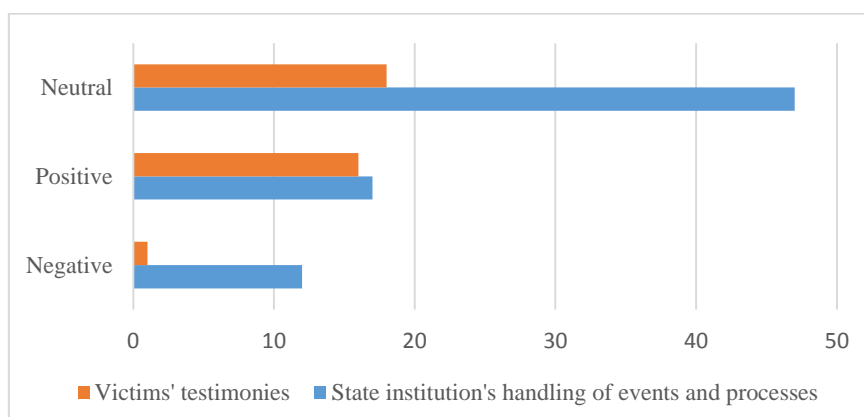


Figure 5: Tone of the posts published during the protest with regard to thematic categories

In the reporting after the protest, the most prominent topics were again the "state institutions' handling of events and processes" and "duties of public political figures" but this time the dominant approach to reporting on these topics was negative in tone. Posts that were positive in tone were the least frequent: there were only 2 positive posts on the topic of the "state institutions' handling of events and processes" and 3 positive posts on the "duties of public political figures". Most of the posts published after the protest were negative in tone: 30 posts on the "state institutions' handling of events and processes" and 20 posts on the "duties of public political figures". Based on earlier data, we can conclude that the majority of posts published after the protest were generated by citizens whose posts primarily performed the function of critique and control of social structures and institutions, unlike posts published by the media which primarily performed the function of information dissemination.

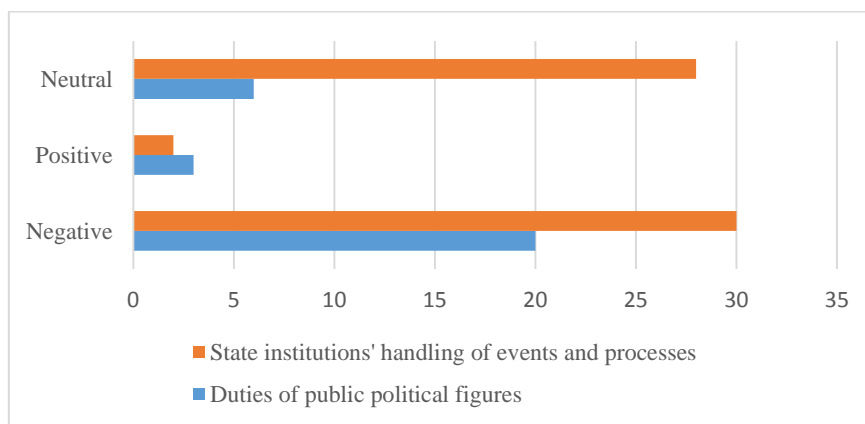


Figure 6: Tone of the posts published after the protest with regard to thematic categories

When it comes to the function of posted content, the function of the largest number of posts was information dissemination (180), followed by critique and control of social structures and institutions (126), articulation of reality (45), entertainment (8), agenda setting (6) and education (1).

With regard to authorship, the largest number of posts whose function was information dissemination was published by the media (135 posts) while posts whose function was critique and control of social structures and institutions were published by citizens (96 posts in total).

With regard to observed time frames, as seen in Figure 7, before the protest the largest number of posts (124) performed the function of information dissemination (Function 1). During the protest, 38 posts performed the same function, while 36 posts performed the function of critique and control of social structures and institutions (Function 2) and 37 posts performed the function of socialisation and integration (Function 3). After the protest, 86 posts performed the function of critique and control of social structures and institutions, while 31 posts performed the function of articulation of reality (Function 4).

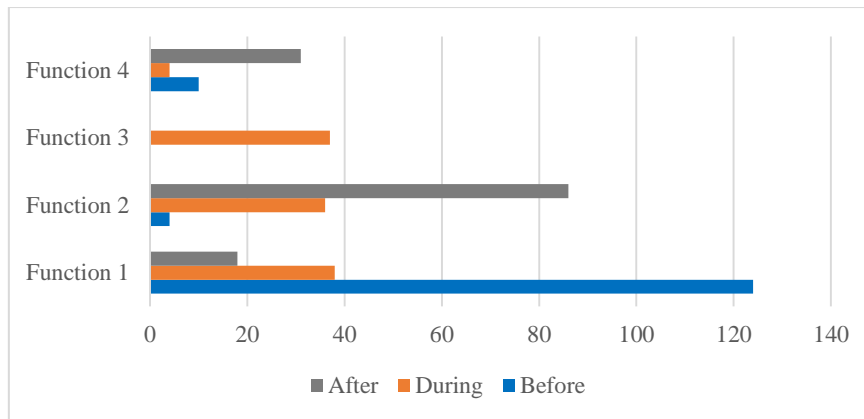


Figure 7: Function of content within individual time frames

5. Conclusion and recommendations

The media (both traditional and digital), which are becoming increasingly accessible, are today the most important means of communication and information dissemination. The importance of media has also been boosted by the accelerated digital revolution, which has been changing the ways in which messages are relayed. Reporting, or informing of the public, takes place in real terms, at the right place and the right time. Apart from the real terms in which reporting takes place, it is also important to mention the ever present growth and development of social media. Apart from performing the entertainment function, today social media have become the means of marketing, advertising and social interaction, but they are also increasingly taking on the role of a public media service – on social media, citizens not only consume but also generate content. Thus it is legitimately to raise the question of whether social media are becoming a supplement to public media which are losing their audience, and whether citizens are becoming not just active consumers of social media but also active content creators who are driving public discussions. In doing so, we must also keep in mind the function of user-generated content with regard to information dissemination, agenda setting, articulation of reality, entertainment, education, socialisation and integration, critique and control of social structures and institutions etc. In order to verify the hypothesis that social media can serve as a supplement to public media and that citizens can be active content creators, we undertook content analysis of 434 Facebook posts. The analysed posts concerned the recent important public protest held in Vukovar that was not covered in national media, which motivated us to undertake this research. The analysis showed that content creators were most often the media and citizens. It should be noted that media reported on the protest in Vukovar or topics related to it mostly before the protest, while citizens participated in posting about it during and after the protest. However, it can be seen that leading public media outlets failed to report on the protest. Thematically, the most prominent topic was that of "state institutions' handling of events and processes", followed by "duties of public political figures". Said topics stood out regardless of the time frame: they were equally prominent in the posts published before, during and after the protest, which may lead us to conclude that, regardless of whether this topic is posted about by media or by citizens on social media, this content's function is to hold relevant political parties, state officials and other public political figures responsible. The reporting was mostly neutral and descriptive in function (which is the media's main function), followed by posts with a negative tone, mostly from citizens who generated public discussions on Facebook. With regard to the function of posted content, the function of the majority of posts was information dissemination, followed by critique and control of social structures and institutions, which is

in accordance with expectations. The largest number of posts which served the function of information dissemination were published by the media, while the largest number of posts which served the function of critique and control of social structures and institutions were published by citizens. Considering the results of the analysis of Facebook posts, we can say that social media can become a supplement to public media which are losing their audience with traditional reporting. Existing media must adjust to the new ways of relaying information and encouraging public discussion. Citizens increasingly take on the role of not just active consumers but also creators of information and drivers of public discussion on social media, particularly when it comes to events of major significance for the entire Croatian society, which leading media outlets failed to support and advertise.

This research can serve to encourage the analyses of public media's functions and of ways in which the media can adjust to the new trends and growing importance of social media like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, which are taking on the role of information dissemination. In addition, it can serve to encourage research into the changing values and functions of reporting, and how to get citizens involved and attract a potential audience.

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