

# **SOCIAL MEDIA, INTERNET AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

With the advent of the Internet, new electronic platforms for communication were born - the so-called social networks. More and more people call them "new social media", although the founder of one of them - Mark Zuckerberg, until recently did not call it a media because it is a space for private sharing. Social networks are constantly expanding not only enlarging their scope, but also their activities - through them bloggers promote different points of view and provoke debates, politicians dissatisfied with traditional media, use the Internet to explain their actions to their voters, discussions come out of closed groups and reach to the mass media, various public events and civic actions are organized via the Internet. Social networks are beginning to meet all media definitions - they are a public means of communication that can mobilize civil society for action. What distinguishes them from traditional media is that they are much faster and more dialogical and much more interactive. In addition, freedom of opinion on the Internet seems unlimited, which has a positive and a negative side.

## **DO THE MEDIA CREATE A NEW REALITY? THE PROBLEM WITH FAKE NEWS**

The positive side is that nothing can be hidden and everyone can share what they think. News and ideas spread like wildfire on social networks. This is extremely valuable in countries where traditional media are under strict state or private control. Sharing platforms play a key role in the so-called Arab Spring. It began in the winter of 2010-2011 with mass protests against regimes in Tunisia. Posting photos and videos of them on social media has infected opposition groups in other Arab countries and riots soon erupted in Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain.

The downside is the spread of negative news, describing apocalyptic pictures almost about the end of the world that affect people with weak personal opinion and the elderly with chronic illnesses. People's fears affect the mental health and immune system of the human body to deal with viruses diseases. The exaggeration of the negative consequences of influenza infections has led to the declaration of a global epidemic by the World Health Organization, the closure of state borders and the cessation of economic development.

The downside of freedom on the Internet is the possibility for spreading fake news. This is extremely dangerous, especially in communities and societies where there are illiterate or low-literate people who are easily misled and persuaded.

For example, US President Donald Trump's statement about treating the flu by drinking a disinfectant has led to deaths.

## **HOW TO RECOGNIZE FALSE NEWS**

Media literacy is a key tool in the fight against fake news. This will prevent blind faith in false media reports, telephone scammers, fraudulent e-commerce sites, sham preachers, post-populist slogans by politicians, and hatred of dissidents and minority groups.

Here are some basic rules for recognizing fake news:

- Check who is reporting the news. If the site where you read it is known for its low journalistic standards or its owner has a bad reputation, there is a high probability that the news was manipulated or completely

untrue. If the site has a strange domain, for example - .com.co - it is almost certain that this is an imitation of serious media.

- See if the news has an author, is it known, has he given an email or a phone number to contact him. The absence of these attributes will prove that the news was copied from another site without checking whether it is real or not.

- Pay attention to style and spelling. If the style is cumbersome, confusing, with many repetitions and spelling mistakes, this would lead us to think that we are dealing with fake journalism that we cannot trust.

- Take a good look at the photos or video to the news. Sometimes it is obvious to the naked eye that they have been manipulated, which calls into question the authenticity of the text.

- Check if the same news is published on serious media sites. If it is not, it means that there are doubts about its authenticity.

- Pay attention to who is quoted in the news and what he tells us. Try to understand why he says it. If only one person is quoted, then the news is one-sided and most likely misleading, because the basic rule of journalism is to gather as many facts and opinions as possible about an event or problem.

- Think about how the news reached you: did you search for it on the Internet, or did someone send it to your social network account. Even if it was shared by a friend or relative, don't skip the above checks.

### **Digitization, pandemic and distance learning**

The development of medical science in the field of digital technologies for tracking the causes of respiratory problems has had a negative impact on the world economy and education.

1. Despite warnings from epidemiologists, doctors who are involved in treating virus infections and laboratory physicians about the impact of viruses on patients' health, the World Health Organization has declared a pandemic. Schools and businesses were closed, small and medium-sized enterprises were on the verge of bankruptcy and the entire economy of all countries suffered economic losses.

2. The Heads of State realized that no country's health systems were prepared for effective treatment.

3. Instead of following the advice of specialists, politicians began to give us recommendations on how to maintain our health, announced a complete closure of homes and reorganized hospitals into infection wards, dooming those suffering from chronic diseases to death, stopping operations and treating respiratory diseases over the phone.

4. In order to address the lack of funds for the social sphere, they announced fundraising activities using the media to promote misunderstood solidarity, in which pensioners with a monthly pension of EUR 100 donated all their savings.

5. Announced a financial support scheme for business aimed at preserving jobs, immediately supporting financially the football teams

6. Parliament approved special measures during the State of Emergency, imposing hefty fines for not wearing masks that were not available in pharmacies.

7. Traffic control posts were set up at the exits and entrances of the regional centers for residents arriving and leaving the big cities, who were also fined if they did not travel for valid reasons, excluding going to the residence of elderly parents.
8. Every morning, at any time with interruptions in the programming of television operators, in the evening during the film programs, a general in a military uniform announced on television the death toll, outlining an apocalyptic forecast for the end of the world.
9. Digitalization has played its role in spreading negative information - people have witnessed depopulated world centers, funeral ceremonies, empty shops.
10. Digitalization was also introduced in distance learning, as teachers incompetent in the use of digital technologies had to self-teach for one day and started teaching the educational material remotely.
11. Students, especially those in minority villages, did not have computers and laptops, and their phones could not be used for an effective learning process.
12. Internet connections were not stable and the speed was very slow.
13. The textbooks were not adapted for distance learning. The format in which they were offered was inconvenient, almost illegible.
14. The students did not comply with the established working hours of the teachers and thought that they could disturb the teachers at any time to ask additional questions.
15. Teachers used different platforms and this contributed to students' confusion and ineffective learning.
16. Large families could not afford a computer for every child, especially gypsy families with more than 5 children.
17. Digitalization played a bad joke on modern society - because according to a famous Bulgarian Associate Professor Dr. Mangarov, head of a hospital “years ago we wouldn’t have known about the cause of the disease due to lack of tests and life would have not stopped”. He continues: “ We will all become infected, and our confinement will weaken our immune system and reduce the likelihood of fighting viruses.”
19. Digitization has made it easier for journalists to search for negative information that can be sold.
20. Digitalization has helped politicians instill fear in the population to keep it submissive.
21. Digitalization has clearly shown the different levels of development of societies.
22. Digitalization has helped to suppress civic activism, limit strikes and personal public appearances, and journalists have taken care to spread bans and apocalyptic pictures of the effects of viral illnesses.

### **LIFE INTO VIRTULA SPACE**

The strict restrictions on movement and travel in recent weeks have given a boost to the virtualization of the daily life and work of Bulgarians. More and more activities are being done online and no longer require the physical presence of citizens. This practice is not completely unknown so far in the country, but the current scale of online activities is unprecedented.

This comes to show two things – first, that Bulgarians are trying to both have a normal life and at the same time comply with the restrictive measures imposed by the coronavirus outbreak; and second, that many spheres of life have found their new form of existence and work.

The transition of life into the virtual space is going smoothly and without upheaval for now. Every day, new businesses, organizations, institutions and activities are being integrated into the virtual cloud. "The pandemic situation has accelerated the process of digitalization of business operations and put on the agenda the ability of companies and their people to adapt, as well as issues of cybersecurity, processing of large data sets and counteracting fake news," stressed the Vice-President of the Bulgarian Business Leaders Forum during an online discussion entitled "Business during a Coronavirus" with the participation of more than 30 companies.

The closing of a huge number of people at home, the remote work, the layoffs of personnel and the entire panic surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic have changed the use of the internet. So far, online shopping has attracted the highest interest. It remains at the forefront of Bulgarian internet consumers' preferences, but according to research firms, the growth in interest in this activity is not significant due to the crisis, with the exception of online shopping for groceries, which has seen a boom of more than 400% since March 15 in Bulgaria. On the other hand, the internet traffic generated by Bulgarian tourism and travel sites has literally collapsed.

Online education is experiencing a boom. School and university students in Bulgaria have been on a "virus" vacation, but most schools have managed to move their lectures and courses online. Data from Bulgaria's Ministry of Education show that 90% of students have switched to distance learning.

The closed restaurants are also trying to replace real customers with virtual ones, yet so far without much success and with minimal revenue. By contrast, news websites cannot complain about a lack of interest in their activity, which, however, is at the expense of paper newspapers and magazines that are going through difficult times, despite their attempts to provide original content in an attractive form.

Public administration has been paying close attention to online services, as for a long time it has been making unsuccessful attempts to implement the so-called "e-government" in Bulgaria. Following the example of the European Council, the Bulgarian cabinet also holds the meetings of the Council of Ministers online. In Bulgaria, for a long time, much of the services of the tax administration in the face of the National Revenue Agency, the municipal administrations, a number of ministries and state agencies have been available online, with the desire to facilitate the citizens, giving them the opportunity to receive and send various documents electronically. This is also true of the National Social Security Institute, which thus shows concern for one of the social groups most vulnerable to the coronavirus infection - the elderly pensioners. Not to mention the convenient and fast online banking, a service offered by all banks in the country which has been successful for a long time with banking clients.

The list of online services can also include the online shows of a number of Bulgarian theatres. It is also worth noting that many charity campaigns have also gone online. The Bulgarian Red Cross has launched an online chat for psychological support, which in many cases is just as necessary as material or medical support.

The coronavirus crisis can also have a positive impact on the country. Iliya Krastev, Chairman of the Board of the Association for Innovation, Business Excellence, Services and Technologies, has announced that the state will receive gratuitously at least 15 thousand working hours by companies that offer business services to improve the public systems in the country, specifically the healthcare system. Deputy Prime Minister Tomislav Donchev has explained that this would allow us to build an electronic health system with an electronic health card and e-prescription within a few months.

An important step towards consolidating the available information and assistance to people with coronavirus symptoms is the launch on April 4th of a new mobile application developed by Bulgarian IT companies and donated to the Bulgarian government. The ViruSave system has a central register that collects information and sends it to all state authorities. Every Bulgarian citizen, whether in Bulgaria or abroad and regardless of the mobile operator he or she uses, can download the mobile application voluntarily on his/her personal phone and share his/her health status with the health authorities, as the information will automatically reach his/her doctor.

The days until June 29 in Bulgaria will be days without presence for students at schools, but their distance learning begins in almost 90 percent of schools in the country. The decision is in relation to the complicated epidemic situation associated with the spread of the coronavirus.

A virtual classroom or home assignments and self-preparation are the two main forms of distance learning that will apply. Each school must set up its own organization for distance learning, within which tasks can be assigned even by e-mail or telephone. Students who do not have computers or the Internet at home will be given individual help.

The Education Ministry calls on parents to assist in the distance learning process by joining groups with other parents and class leaders and monitor whether their children are completing their assigned tasks. This is the moment for the process of digitalization in Bulgarian schools to happen faster, Deputy Minister of Education Tanya Mihailova told the BNR.

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Prosveta Publishing House thus joins the initiative of the European Association of Textbook Publishers, major publishers, to provide maximum support to schools in the context of terminated classes in many European countries due to the COVID-19.