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**ORLIN SPASSOV**

**BULGARIAN PERSONAL HOME PAGES  
AND BLOGS ON THE WEB:  
HYBRIDIZATION OF THE PUBLIC  
AND PRIVATE SPHERES IN CYBERSPACE**

Although they do not lead to radical changes in publicity, phenomena like blogs and personal homepages have the potential to stimulate the renegotiation of existing relationships between society and the internet. A number of new questions appear. What are the effects of the hybridization of the public and private spheres in cyberspace? How does the Internet, characterized by non-hierarchical communication, gradually sprout new, non-standard forms of institution-alization? How does software and the statistics of sites and blogs serve to regulate the user's behavior, roles and expectations? What are the democratic potential and the social efficacy of these new practices? I will try here to answer some of these questions by looking into the development of Bulgarian personal homepages and blogs.

The Internet arrived to Bulgaria in 1991, but it became more widely available after 1994, when user-friendly browsers appeared and Internet service providers started offering packages for ordinary users. Nevertheless until around 2002 the Internet remained more or less an elitist medium. This elitism determined the style and to some extent even the socio-demographic profile of a significant part of the users. A survey of the users of the biggest Bulgarian portal (*dir.bg*) in this period found that 98% of them were urban residents. They described themselves explicitly in terms of specific 'lifestyle' characteristics: mostly young people with high income, high educational status, social mobility, consumer culture, high spending on entertainment, high-tech products and luxury goods, and so on.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the last four or five years have seen steady growth of Internet users who are not necessarily 'elite' in terms of consumption; the most significant group here is that of the teenagers. Parallel with that, there has been a slow but steady growth

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1 For details, see <http://www.dir.bg/survey/> [accessed on 29.11.2003].

of netizens at the other end of the age scale. The diversification of the Web content is leading to growing fragmentation of users. As a result, Internet culture is becoming less and less homogeneous. In their turn, users themselves are increasingly using the Web not only as a passive audience but also as authors. Since the end of the 1990s, the number of Bulgarian personal home pages has grown exponentially, introducing a distinctly 'personal' element into cyberspace. The cultural specificity of this practice is related primarily to the eroding boundary between the public and the private sphere. At the same time, this development is the product of a phenomenon that is specific to the Internet: the 'self-evolution' of the Internet, shaping the Network by using it (Castells 2000). Personal home pages and blogs play a key role in this process. Their increase indicates growing popularity and importance. We are practically witnessing the emergence of a new phenomenon in the virtual public sphere. Whilst communication in virtual communities tends to be anonymous, personal home pages and blogs offer authorised self-presentations. One of the main questions here concerns the ways in which these individual worlds are constructed.

### ***The Internet and Changes in the Public Sphere***

In his classical study Jürgen Habermas defines the public sphere as a mode of interaction between a public of independent citizens and the State. Habermas repeatedly stresses the critical function of the public sphere and places public debate and deliberation at the centre of social life. Habermas's main idea is that people must express their opinions freely and publicly, thus influencing social and political processes. But he thinks that precisely those properties of Western democracy are in danger of becoming an empty slogan because of structural reasons. The mass media, their advertising departments, marketing and PR practices play a crucial role in this context. The result is the privatization or refeudalization of the public sphere, in which public debate is tamed and formalized. The public sphere starts being initiated by the media „top-down,“ itself becoming a commodity. This process eventually leads to the decline or crisis of publicity, to the „collapse of the public sphere,“ as Habermas puts it (Habermas 1989).

The rise of the Internet in the 1990s has led more and more people to believe that the new information technologies could be an alternative to this process. John Keane, for example, points out that the traditional forms of public life dominated by government and territorially-bound media are on the road to extinction. New Web-based spaces of communication that are not directly connected to a particular territory are gradually proving to be more important. As a result, the properties of a stable and connected to the nation state

single public sphere have started disintegrating. To quote Keane, “In their place figuratively speaking, public life is today subject to “refeudalization”, not in the sense in which Habermas’ *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* used the term, but in the different sense of the development of a complex mosaic of differently sized, overlapping and interconnected public spheres that force us radically to revise our understanding of public life and its „partner“ terms such as public opinion, the public good and the public/private distinction“ (Keane 2000: 76). Scholars concerned with changes in the public sphere often criticize Habermas’ over-pessimistic conclusions. For example Peter Dahlgren, one of Habermas’ critics, notes that “with desktop facilities, electronic mail and faxes, it is possible to carry out organizational, informational and debate functions in ways not possible in previous decades” (Dahlgren 1991: 14).

Of course, the rise of the virtual public sphere and the expectations for further development of the democratic character of the Internet have, in turn, been quickly criticized as utopian. Indeed, in the course of the historical development of the Internet people have become masters of self-construction and self-presentation. This, however, has rendered the very idea of the “true” self problematic. It is now possible to be who you claim to be. It is also possible to experience in cyberspace things that would hardly be achievable in real life. These transformations of identity have raised fears that the very existence of group identity, of community, is endangered.

Ultimately, in contemporary society the individual is torn between the tendencies of globalization and local developments, which are often in conflict; in this situation the individual is under pressure to choose from many different options. Such a situation, however, inevitably leads to a fundamental change: life planning itself becomes impossible or very problematic; it remains a privilege of the globalized elites only (Castells 1998).

It is precisely this situation in which the traditional community is in crisis – life planning is impossible or uncertain, and the individual is compelled to constantly revise his or her choices or to play with uncertain identities — that has created favourable conditions for the rise of personal home pages and blogs. They are an attempt to cope with uncertainty. Through them the individual looks for points of reference to re-situate himself/herself, to self-position more successfully within his/her personal network. All this is part of the transition from a group-based society to a network-based society. Personal home pages and blogs are based precisely on the personal network and its potential for communication.

In this new situation they function as multimedia texts which raise, in a more intensive way, the question that is fundamental to identity: *Who am I*. And to the extent that the Internet is a new global system of publishing, they have

the potential to hybridize the private and the public spheres while looking for an answer to this question. The access of the self to the public sphere increases the possibilities for identity construction, meanwhile also offering diverse understandings of publicity, and thereby prompting redefinitions of publicity itself.

Personal home pages and blogs, however, have not appeared in a void. Their character may be understood only as part of the internal logic of development of the Bulgarian Web.

### ***An Overview of Personal Home Pages***

At the beginning, creating a personal home page was possible only for users with advanced computer skills. The first personal website, launched on the Bulgarian Internet in 1998, belonged to Karlos Boichev. The website was set up more as a joke, in connection with a New-Year party of a group of friends who were system administrators. In the next few years the number and diversity of personal websites grew rapidly. From the very beginning the newly created big portals, which would become the “backbone” of the Bulgarian Internet in terms of content traffic, started indexing personal home pages. Thus in a period of about two or three years those pages partly made up for the lack of sufficient content on the Bulgarian Web, that is, they filled the void. It is no accident that the portals indexed mainly personal home pages at the time: there simply wasn’t enough other content yet. As more and more government institutions, media and business structures went online, personal home pages gradually lost priority. Even so, their number and popularity continued growing.

According to a poll conducted by the biggest Bulgarian portal, *dir.bg*, in June 2005 a total of 15.85% of its visitors had personal home pages (22.09% said they had a corporate website and 8.54% had both a corporate and a personal website).<sup>2</sup> In January 2006 a search on Google returned 188,000 results in Bulgarian for “personal home page” of which 1,983 were personal home pages indexed by the portal *dir.bg*. A few months later, in mid-May 2006, their number was 2,051, which shows that the growth of personal home pages in Bulgarian has slowed down and that they are near saturation point. There is also strong dispersion of website hosts, many of which are physically located on servers abroad. This development explains the recent slow growth of personal websites hosted by the big Bulgarian portals and the slow increase of websites indexed by the latter. As a result one of the specific features of Bulgarian cyberspace is the absence of truly large ‘clusters’ in which personal

2 See: <http://dnes.dir.bg/mainizbori/anketas.php?id=124&r=1> [accessed on 18.09.2007].

home pages are classified by content-related criteria. Bulgarian personal websites tend to be “scattered” in cyberspace among numerous Web platforms. Unlike blogs, they are not classified by thematic criteria when indexed by Bulgarian portals. Consequently personal home pages are less organized than blogs and have fewer links to other relevant websites. They are less communicative and more static, more self-sufficient. In a sense, this is what enables them to fix their owners’ self-presentation strategies in a more stable manner, highlighting their uniqueness. At the same time, this kind of presence on the Web largely limits the potential audience of such home pages to the small circle of immediate acquaintances, who have been personally informed about the existence of the relevant home page, and to a small number of users, who might chance upon it while surfing the Web. Ultimately, the possibilities for browsing personal home pages by subject are much more limited than those in the sphere of blogs, where precisely classification by subject allows the formation of separate thematic zones in the blogosphere thus making it easier to search for particular information and for particular authors.

Some of the major Bulgarian portals provide options for browsing the indexed pages by personal name, family name or nickname of their owners. In *dir.bg*, as in many other places on the Web, personal home pages are classified by number of hits, time of creation and alphabetical order. This makes the popularity and age of a given page immediately obvious, practically ranking home pages by those two crucial criteria. While some of the pages have scored more than twenty thousand hits, the majority have several hundred or less. Among the most popular ones are those related to the Internet and to software and games; the websites of photo models and attractive young women are equally popular. Less attention is paid to home pages that focus on the person’s professional profile and to personal family websites. They have fewer visitors, mostly people belonging to a limited circle of specific stakeholders. Such home pages rarely score more than several hundred hits.

The majority of Bulgarian personal websites are more or less passive and do not have external links. Most commonly, they have an e-mail link for contact and offer no other way of communicating on the Web. Quite a few allow visitors to leave a comment in places that are especially arranged for the purpose and that are often called ‘guestbook’. However, more and more websites have started integrating templates that are much more interactive. The presence of an integrated forum, chat, blog and external links is gradually becoming a standard for a growing number of personal pages, especially for those belonging to Internet users from the newer generation. Of course, the presence of all those options is often driven by the technical possibility of integrating them into the website rather than by a genuine need for simultaneous communication through so many channels. The presence of parallel synchronous and asynchronous channels of communication on the websites does not automatically lead to more intensive communication through them. In this respect

personal home pages, as well as blogs, are up against competition from ICQ and Skype, which provide independent opportunities for real-time communication. Either way, however, the very existence of more opportunities for interactive communication stimulates the opening up of personal pages towards the Internet environment and the achievement of wider publicity.

The appearance of personal home pages in Bulgarian cyberspace is part of the evolution of the Internet from a medium of IT elites towards a more commonly used medium. The most interesting thing here is the foregrounding of personal, private motives. For the first time the user is able to make a relatively complete and lasting self-portrait. Privacy foregrounds also a more personalized discourse that must help the individual position himself/ herself successfully in his/ her network of online contacts. That is why personal home pages very often actively present the person's friends or family. In this sense, somewhat paradoxically, many personal websites are conservative and even patriarchal in spirit. In the majority of cases, they are meant to serve the so-called 'strong' relationships including precisely relatives and the circle of closest friends rather than the more typical of online communication "weak" relationships or relationships that are less binding in terms of frequency and intensity (Wellman and Gulia 2001). At the same time, personal pages provide a potential opportunity for transforming "weak" relationships into stronger ones by gradually widening the circle of visitors and the ways of communicating with them.

Although this form of communication presupposes interaction between private individuals, personal websites actually extract personal problems from the world of everyday life and place them in an environment that is more or less governed by the principle of publishing. Thus anything "personal" instantly becomes potentially "public" by the very act of its appearance on the Web. It is a different matter to what extent the relevant personal home page will become really public. This depends on its author's desire to address it to a larger audience as well as on the quality of its content and possibilities for communication. Thus, the character of personal websites ultimately depends directly on their target audience. Somewhat paradoxically, they are similar in this respect to the way readers, listeners or viewers influence the character of classical media. Whatever its scale, publishing is always a potential meeting with a public and this imaginary public largely predetermines the relevant strategies for construction of identity by the authors of home pages.

Self-construction is achieved by specific means. A main feature of the dominant discourse here is the principle of collage, of eclecticism. Personal home pages easily mix building materials from different sources – from personal biographies and fantasies, from personal works, literature, history, collective memory, the popular media, the Internet, and so on. In this way hybridization has become a basic principle in the construction of online identity. The

borrowing of ready elements from popular media culture and their rearrangement in a personal context stimulates individual creativity, practically paving the way for a new popular culture that is largely produced by “end” users themselves. In this process the products of media culture and of commercial culture play the role of “raw materials” that are reprocessed to serve the author’s personal needs. It is precisely this reprocessing that can make personal websites an alternative to commercial culture. They are not only diversifying the Web; non-commercial in spirit, they also serve as a counterpoint to websites providing paid content. Precisely their non-commercial character gives a chance for self-expression to individuals and groups that are often marginalized. These last include hackers, hacker groups, subcultural groups formed around different cultural practices or lifestyles, and so on. Such individuals and groups promote on the Web alternatives to the official forms of publishing involving traditional channels of selection, editing and approval. In this way, a parallel system of institutionalization of authorship is gradually developing in cyberspace, where supervision and assessment are done not by specialized editing groups but by the public itself (directly, by immediate response; and indirectly, by the number of hits indicating the level of interest in the offered content).

What makes people display their personal life on the Internet? It is not difficult to see that the common content of all personal home pages is centred precisely on the implicit question of *who am I*. Personal home pages are used less to publish something than to produce identity. Sometimes the motives for creating a personal website are related to the nostalgic or utopian idea of building the ideal home. The layout of some websites literally replicates rooms in cyberspace (dining-room, guestroom, kitchen, and so on). Literally conceived as a “home,” such home pages further develop the practice of referring to private space, a practice whose origins can be traced back to chat culture and the creation of “rooms.” At first glance, such “parallelism” between the real and the virtual worlds is indicative of a literal and somewhat naïve interpretation of the very term «personal home page.» It may be that the utopia of the ideal home and, by extension, of the ideal personal place, proves easier to achieve in the virtual world. What we have, however, is not replication of familiar places and symbols from the real world in cyberspace but, rather, their transformation so as to make virtual personal space more intimate. In such cases, the construction of personal websites is opposed to the common templates of pages which offer options for personalization but nonetheless remain largely uniform. The construction of personal pages as virtual „homes” can also be interpreted as an attempt to fix more stable virtual identities, to give more „authenticity” to the author’s virtual image, as well as an „invitation” for transforming „weak” online contacts into more serious relationships by communicating in a space that is marked as more intimate.

In other cases, website authors are obviously driven by a desire to demon-

strate a unique personal design and content of their pages. In final analysis, the personal home page becomes an occasion for and means of seeking recognition and improving the author's positions in his or her own circle and in a wider context. Having a personal home page is very often a matter of prestige, whereas direct competition between pages of the same type is an additional incentive for self-affirmation.

From a technological point of view, among the reasons for the popularity of personal home pages are the availability of ready models and the possibilities for free hosting up to a particular space. In Bulgaria, templates are offered by many specialized websites, including some that are quite "exotic" – for example, the website "Bulgarian Sex Pages" offers forty-one templates. Quite a few specialized websites offer paid templates (for instance, netpointbg.com). On another level, the popularity of personal home pages is due also to the fact that they provide more opportunities for control over the personal image than can be found in real life. That is why personal home pages are quite often far too idealized. At the same time, the majority of them are updated relatively rarely and do not expect particular feedback. Therefore they are less flexible and harder to adapt to fast-changing events, including events in the author's personal life. Perhaps blogs have appeared precisely as an answer to this requirement. While the number of the classical in form personal home pages has started stabilizing, the merging of pages with blogs has increased.

### ***The Rise of Blogs***

It is obvious that the new forms of online publicity emerge on some sort of basis, on the basis of practices established in older forms. What we have is super-struction. In essence, blogs are improved personal home pages, enabling far more dynamic communication with the audience. Basically, blogs have adopted the content of the personal home page but in a new, more flexible format. It is no accident that precisely the hybrids between personal home pages and blogs have proved especially popular.

It is assumed that the first blog in Bulgaria was posted on the Web by Georgi Varzonovtsev in February 2001. Varzonovtsev is into computer design and information architecture. As usual, the pioneers of the new online platforms in this case, too, were more or less professionals in the field of information technologies. The situation, however, has changed quickly. Blogs have become so popular mainly because they are very easy to make. Specialized websites offering ready templates from which users can choose and which are easy to personalize have mushroomed on the Internet in recent years, effectively removing the psychological barrier that prevents people lacking a particular level of computer skills from creating their own personal space on the Web. Personal

home pages, for example, or at least their more designed versions, still require such skills. Registering a functioning blog takes literally a couple of minutes.

There are many sites in Bulgarian cyberspace that offer ready modules of registering blogs, but the leaders are again big portals like *dir.bg*. This portal introduced the first Bulgarian blog system. Specialized websites for blogs have appeared quickly too; for example, *BgLOG.net*, was launched on the Web on 14 January 2005. In April 2004 the popular website *cult.bg* launched a pay-free platform for creating blogs. Blogs have rapidly spread beyond the purely private sphere and are now used much more widely than personal home pages.

The possibilities for communication and, consequently, for broadening the field of self-presentation and construction of identities are embedded in the very software of blog systems. For example, the standard templates offered by *dir.bg* integrate several interactive options. They include: forums enabling users to discuss issues of common interest; external links, including links to friends and “fans;” an integrated option for polling blog users; an option for uploading music, videos and trailers; an option for adding content through SMS and for mobile phone messaging. Together with the blog itself, where thoughts are shared or opinions are exchanged, the software offers additional options like posting photos, publishing personal “news” about the author’s life, creating a catalogue providing information about a particular issue or subject and sharing this information with visitors, creating an organizer, address book, and so on. Such modes are practically found on all blog platforms in Bulgaria. One of the latest novelties is an option for mobile phone blogging.

In this context, it is obvious why classical personal home pages are gradually giving way to blogs: advance in software development. In fact, blogs can largely be defined as the “new” personal home pages. They offer virtually everything that a standard personal page can provide, plus many new possibilities, the most important one being the possibility to support the author’s communicative intention itself. Blogs create a much more dynamic model of representation than home pages in which the personality of the author is revealed more directly. The question remains, however, whether the need of new platforms for personal publishing and of new channels for communication has led to the rise of blogs or whether the development of standardized blogging software has sparked the new wave of communication, self-presentation and expression on the Web.

The actual number of postings varies greatly from blog to blog. The majority of postings are few compared to blogs. *BgLOG.net* ranks the content by most popular categories, most read postings, most discussed postings, highest-rated postings (rated by voting), most discussed bloggers, most read authors, and most active authors. These statistics do not simply make navigation and

search easier – they encourage competition in the blogosphere and establish an internal hierarchy. The fight for popularity functions as a mechanism of internal regulation of the community of bloggers on platforms. It naturally has an impact on the thematic content of blogs and on the quality of postings (this impact is not necessarily positive).

Blogs are basically developing along two lines. They give bloggers a chance to speak out on publicly important issues. At the same time, however, a large part of the blogosphere is dominated by purely private motives, personal sensations and gossip. That is why in comparison to personal home pages, blogs, as a media phenomenon, are potentially more schizophrenic. Maintaining a blog has quickly become a fashion – something which is encouraged at the technical level by the availability of software that is easy to use, thus making the blog maximally democratic. The fashionable aspect of blogging, however, can also potentially diminish its quality, turning blogging into something done mainly by teenagers. Many blogs are inferior in quality to personal home pages, which require more patience, careful design and, most importantly, the existence of a particular project related to identity. Paradoxically, the rise of blogs has threatened precisely identity with regression: many blogs have reverted to the anonymity that personal home pages have been trying so hard to expel from cyberspace.

The motives for blogging are connected with the lack of direct external moderation, of any sanctions whatsoever (which are applied to a greater or lesser extent in chat and discussion forums). These motives, however, are perhaps formulated most clearly in some of the texts by the bloggers themselves, who often explain what prompted them set up a blog. As a result, the blogosphere has failed to avoid one of the diseases of communication on the Internet: the strong self-thematization of communication. In this respect the online environment has directly borrowed models from the world of offline media. Yet even so, blogs most often define themselves precisely as an alternative to the traditional media and traditional politics.

Even though precisely teenage (and female) blogs prevail, the public image of the blogosphere is shaped by the most influential blogs, by those that have the resources to attract mass media attention. The blogging scene in Bulgaria is obviously no exception in this respect. There are a number of factors conducive to a rise in the political and commercial price of Bulgarian blogs, to their potential use in political and PR campaigns of large institutions and companies. Thematic media-oriented communities of bloggers have been created on some platforms, for example *BgLOG.net* (here ironically but aptly named “Gazette, an information-disinformation organ of BgLOG”). Specialized writing of commentary and news has made this segment of the blogosphere a potential rival of traditional media. In fact, however, blog authors are driven less by a desire for rivalry as such than by the crisis of the political

and, more generally, the crisis in institutional discourse. Especially “motivating” in this respect is the crisis of media discourse and of media authority. It is those crises that largely account for the popularity of blogs, which are often read precisely because people are eager for fresh voices that have not been rendered stale by public usage.

In most cases, however, the development of the blogosphere does not involve “superfluous” reflections on social and political issues. Writing for writing’s sake prevails. Often authors do not really have anything to say and merely record momentary moods or trivial episodes from everyday life. The excessive expectations created in the past few years regarding blogs (not least by the very fact that blogs have grown so rapidly on the Internet) are seldom justified when one actually enters this otherwise diverse communication field.

Still, the blogging scene produces its stars. They may be journalists, or talents unknown outside the blogosphere and living mainly in cyberspace, or anarchistically inclined writers who say “no” to any norm. The stars, however, soon become a magnet for copycats who try to take away the initiative. In its turn, the copy/paste method is not infrequently used as a means of supplying content. The very idea of authorship is often quite blurred. At the same time, the slogan of *BgLOG.net*, for example, insists: “The author is you!” Thus, blog platforms are promoting an ideology of easy authorship, of easy publishing, of easy access to the public sphere. In its turn, the anonymity re-embraced by many bloggers often encourages a somewhat irresponsible attitude to content and to disclosure of private information about other people without their explicit consent.

By the time mass blog platforms appeared, users had acquired some technical competency and experience in online communication. Nevertheless, quite often blogs are not regularly updated, authors do not use the opportunities for interactive contact with readers, and content is posted without the necessary editing. At the end of the day, many of the blogs are short-lived and die together with the momentary enthusiasm of their authors which was stimulated, in its turn, by the easy access to blogging technology. Keeping a blog is often replaced by reading and writing in somebody else’s blog. The overwhelming majority of active writers and readers in the blogosphere are surfers.

Personal home pages and blogs alike suffer from uniformity, not least because of the standard templates that are widely available on platforms. Not infrequently, the migration of users from one platform to another or the very choice of one blog system rather than another are motivated by their functionality, user-friendliness, the quality of web design, the character of the integrated advertisements, and so on. Ultimately, uniformity is the price for the exponential growth in the popularity of blogs. In fact, we are witnessing

a paradox: wanting to express your unique qualities, you start doing what many others are doing, i.e. blogging. The growth of the blogosphere has had another unexpected effect: shrinking publicity. The majority of blogs have only several readers and can hardly claim to be really public. Their publicity remains forever *in potencia*: a utopian horizon that always remains open just like the very identity of the average blogger. What is more important, however, is less the effect of publicity than the desire for community. In this respect, blogs have succeeded in creating an effective new form of group experience. Yet as we know from Howard Rheingold, precisely „[Virtual communities] are in part response to the hunger for community that has followed the disintegration of traditional communities around the world.”<sup>3</sup>

### ***A Brief Conclusion***

Limited possibilities for individual self-expression have probably been one of the main problems of the Bulgarian public sphere since the start of reforms in 1989. The Internet is providing a wider range of possibilities in this respect. This is also one of the main political effects of the functioning of the Web.

The traditional media gave an impetus to Bulgaria's democratization after 1989, but they have ultimately failed to assert an adequate model of publicity. The problem is that audiences have remained practically excluded from or just formally represented in the public debates on key issues. As a result, the public is feeling increasingly isolated from key decision-making processes. The public's impossibility for self-expression has driven the media to speak directly on its behalf. This has asserted the dominance of populist media discourses which represent the picture of the world mainly in terms of private life and in everyday language.

The arrival of the Internet has gradually offered possibilities for a new type of participation. The private sphere is opening up to new activities on the Web, making individuals much more active. This has led to the emergence of zones for self-expression and debate, for mutual help in virtual special-interest clubs, chat forums, and so on. Attitudes to the traditional media are changing, and many traditional media are launching lively online forums. Yet even though they are extremely active, these communicative practices tend to have a limited social effect and impact on real policy-making, which remains the domain of traditional non-Web-based networks. One of the reasons for their insufficient effectiveness is the anonymity of this type of online communication.

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3 See: Rheingold, H. (1992).

The newly found opportunity for self-expression, however, does not remain limited to the mostly anonymous postings on the discussion forums of virtual communities. The Internet offers an opportunity for full rediscovery of the individual and for his or her self-presentation in the online public sphere. Personal home pages and especially blogs have proven to be an appropriate tool for the construction and public promotion of individual identities. These identities vary greatly, and they may be associated with intimate elements of personal and family memory, with individual perceptions of national identity, with professional or sexual identity, with various forms of artistic expression, and so on. At the same time, they are a tool for constructing a wide range of personal roles.

One of the main questions in this context concerns the social effectiveness of personal home pages and blogs. They are particularly popular among people who have no other alternative for access to the public sphere. That is why the creation of such pages has a huge democratic potential. At the same time, personal presence on the Web is important also for people with guaranteed access to traditional media (such as politicians, academics, writers or artists). Personal home pages by rule offer channels for communication with visitors, thereby broadening the field of dialogue and debate on key issues of public interest. Still, the effectiveness of this kind of communication currently remains relatively limited; personal web pages and blogs are weak in comparison to the established positions of commercially oriented institutions on the Internet.

But the online public sphere cannot be viewed in isolation from developments in the classical publicity, in the traditional media. The relationship is two-way, with the influence of offline media on the online environment being stronger for the moment. For example, the prevalent language in the online public sphere (here I have in mind the language of users) follows already established forms of media discourse which, even though they might now be outdated or marginalized, have existed long enough to become firmly established in the mind of the audience. It is no accident that blogging is sometimes defined as “amateur journalism.” In other words, in terms of language online publicity cannot be too innovative; it follows particular, already established styles and norms imposed outside cyberspace. Hence the myth that we are witnessing the birth of something radically new should be taken with caution – at least as regards language in cyberspace. What we actually have is, rather, reproduction of familiar language behaviours in a new context. Even the colloquial style itself, which at first glance is one of the main characteristics of blogs, basically reproduces the colloquial style as “filtered” through the traditional media. In terms of language, online discourses commonly follow the traditional public sphere, which is continuing to set the standards.

On the other level, it seems that blogs can provide the ideal opportunity for

social criticism. Here anybody can express themselves, so to speak, politically (but not necessarily as a supporter or opponent of a particular political party) and contribute to the solution of some important problem. Above all, blogs reproduce the lifestyle culture. In other words, the style of living and writing is more important than actual social problems. That is because the political potential of blogging to influence particular large-scale processes outside the Internet is seen by bloggers themselves as limited. In this sense, maintaining blogs is less a form of resistance against some unacceptable status quo than an attempt to find a more adequate form of communicating with like-minded people. In fact, blogs conveniently channel possible social discontent into a more or less dead-end street.

One of the most optimistic views suggests that blogs are the ideal form of debate and deliberation, because here all participants in the debate are equal. That is why blogs are often seen as representing the advantages of virtual publicity probably in the best way: lack of hierarchy, democratic principle, accessibility, free expression and defence of opinion. Admittedly, there *is* debate in blogs. Yet, due to the lack of a serious potential to influence key decision-making and public opinion, which continue being shaped by the traditional channels of power and communication, the debates are driven by other motives: fascination with playing with technology, narcissism or childishness, desire for self-presentation and self-expression in groups that actually lack resources for serious influence. In addition, control of the content on the part of the blog owner can be greater than in other forms of online communication.

Let me highlight some of the main observations made in this article. In Bulgaria, for the time being, the virtual public sphere remains quite marginal. Key agendas concerning key issues of public interest continue to be set by means and media other than and outside the Web. On the Bulgarian Internet anarchy prevails and network activities rarely produce concrete results. Active as they might be, debates on the Internet are not in the centre of public life.

At the same time, blogs and personal home pages are contributing greatly to the networking of users into virtual communities. One of the basic principles typical especially of blogs is the integration of numerous links to other blogs and sites. In this way the zones of personal presence on the Internet are literally being filled by 'clusters' of interlinked sites. With their growing integration into personal home pages, blogs are contributing to their greater openness on the Web. This increases the potential for greater visibility on the Internet because search engines rank indexed websites by the number of links to a given page.

One of the important phenomena of the blogosphere is connected with the self-institutionalization of this online environment. Contrary to the view that the Internet is amorphous and has no hierarchies, perhaps precisely person-

al home pages and blogs demonstrate the Internet's potential for internal structuring. But unlike the logic outside the Internet, where hierarchies are constructed by institutions and publicly recognized authorities, in the world of personal home pages and blogs hierarchies are built on the basis of the statistical principle. The rankings of the most read, most discussed, and so on, blogs not only create a strictly hierarchical environment but also have the potential to map out the most likely routes of movement in the blogosphere. It seems to me that those routes unavoidably follow the trajectory of the most common, mass online taste.

The software-assisted institutionalization eventually leads to the imposition of specific formats, technical characteristics, standards of prestige, etc. The freedom of expression is thus set within certain frameworks. As an effect, the overcomplicated statistics on a meta level is potentially capable of diverting attention from the content. The accent is transferred to the "commodity" character of the personal webpage or blog, which have to perform well on a statistical/software level if they are to "sell" well in cyberspace.

The software institutionalization, however, is supplemented by the power of traditional top-down structured organizations operating on the internet, such as big web portals or platforms acting as traditional commercial organizations. Blogs and personal websites are strongly dependent on the character of the online environment they inhabit. The institutional features of the portal or the platform determine to a large extent the character of the individual blogs. For example, the bloggers publishing in *dir.bg* are younger and teenage-oriented; the blogs published in the online version of *Capital Weekly* are mostly politically oriented; those included in economical-oriented platforms tend to discuss the market, etc. Thus the institutional character of the respective infrastructure largely determines the thematic zones, the distribution of bloggers into clusters and even, to an extent, part of the content. In this way, without any effort for direct standardization and normalization of users, there is an implicit imposition of shared habitués in the platforms and the acceptance of certain common grounds in discursive behavior. The big commercial structures on the internet often engage in competition for getting the presence of bloggers and personal website authors precisely in their function as institutions with a clear profile.

In the light of the influence exerted by software and the traditional institutional principles, there is a powerful process of self-regulation in the content of blogs and personal websites. Nevertheless, they are ultimately unable to become a strong alternative to traditional institutions, because they are not fully outside their range of influence. Their alternative character remains largely contained on the level of subjective opinion, emotional response and the lack of any claims to authenticity. Here's why the possibilities for a flexible game of roles and identities are unlimited only at first glance. One can say

that confidence in the web environment as a source of identity is decreasing and this is directly related to the increasingly stronger presence of institutions of the traditional type, trying to «cover» the zones of freedom and innovation. The legitimacy of these institutions is preserved and in some aspects even strengthened. Blogs prove unable to question the positions of the media or state institutions. The opinion of bloggers or personal homepage authors might often be more attractive than of traditional media institutions, but it remains limited in its range and resources.

Ultimately, the virtual public sphere in Bulgaria is developing as a complex, multifaceted phenomenon which, as a whole, tends to have problems analogous to those of the classical public sphere, rather than providing actual solutions for overcoming its crisis. In this perspective, the long-awaited revolution of the public sphere is still not occurring where it is most expected, i.e. close to the person's own level of activity in the cyberspace.

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