

**ETHNICITY ONLINE: THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA
IN EVERYDAY LIFE OF SLOVAKS IN VOJVODINA (SERBIA)**

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18509/GBP.2019.48>
UDC: 004.77:316.77(497.113:=162.4)

Bojan Đerčan
Tamara Lukić
Milka Bubalo-Živković
Milica Solarević
Dajana Bjelajac

Department of geography, tourism and hotel management, Faculty of Sciences,
University of Novi Sad, **Serbia**

ABSTRACT

The information-technological revolution has resulted in new forms of connection and communication among people. The development of new technologies has led, among other things, to the development of applications known as social networks, which allow people to interact quickly and exchange information. Social networks are widely available to the general public, which makes them a powerful social media. The communication role of social networks is particularly interesting in multiethnic and multilingual areas such as Vojvodina. This paper analyzes the use of language on social networks within one minority group in Vojvodina. For this purpose, 233 members of the Slovak ethnic minority were surveyed. The research showed that the Slovaks in Vojvodina use their native language on social networks primarily in communication with members of their ethnicity.

Keywords: Internet, Slovaks, social media, communication, ethnic groups.

INTRODUCTION

Communication, socializing and acquiring new acquaintances in the 21st century has never been easier or quicker, thanks to the Internet. Social networks have become a kind of personal online diary or scrapbook. However, instead ending up in a notebook, thoughts, photos, individual statuses end up on the Internet. And just like in real diaries, by scrolling the mouse down you can see all the activities on a social network. That is precisely one of the reasons why Facebook, Twitter and similar websites became the phenomena of the global era, and not a transitory pastime.

A brief definition explains globalization as a rapidly growing network of interconnections and interdependencies which characterize the life of a modern society [1]. New forms of communication culture enable better quality of connection, faster dynamics of exchange development, and interdependence. Of all the forms of globalization, the cultural is the one that people perceive everyday and the one which is most visible. However, other dimensions, including political and economic, that, although less noticeable, do not necessarily have less influence on our experience, must be taken into consideration [2]. Globalization can thus be seen as an integrative and interactive communication process, much of which takes place in the virtual space of new media. In the process of spreading knowledge, sharing ideas and technology, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, religious, political and many other barriers fall.

Media such as satellite television, the Internet, computers and mobile phones are among the primary forces behind the process of restructuring social and cultural geography [3]. New media comprise a technology and communication platform that ensures that the globalization process takes place. Friedman compares the media to a general knowledge store, and explains the platform itself as one of the agents of the new leveled world [4]. In this process, the Internet plays a primary role. Internet sites represent the new area which is used for expressing and representing personal and cultural identity. Using the Internet for the purpose of practicing social communication enables people to acquire new knowledge, rehabilitate quickly, eliminate the feeling of being rejected, especially those less wealthy. It also promotes the overall feeling of complacency and progression. Older people involved in online communities remain healthy and satisfied for a longer period of time [5].

COMMUNICATION ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

What social networks differs from other forms of computer communication means is not solely connecting, networking with less known or unknown members of the system, but the ability to make this form of communication interactive and accessible, visible to all users of social networks.

The most popular social networks are: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WeChat, Snapchat, MySpace, YouTube, VContact, LinkedIn, Foursquare, SecondLife, ResearchGate, Google+, Weibo.

A large number of authors emphasize the importance of the Internet and social networks for the establishment of desirable group social interactions [6], [7], [8]. They consider that the Internet and social networks contribute to the preservation of family ties, enable easier and quicker inclusion in the new social environment, e.g. change of school or relocation [9]. Everyone agrees that the benefits of social networks are particularly apparent in the possibility of converging spatially distant people with the same or similar interests, needs [10], [11-12], [13], [14]. Facebook and other social networks allow young people to socialize with their friends, even when they are not able to meet up in real life [15]. Facebook supports the maintenance of existing offline relationships and deepens them [16]. The special value of social networks lies in the fact that they serve as platforms for direct introductions and continuous socializing [17], to remove age constraints of its actors, provide constant contact with remote network members, regardless of weather conditions or some other organizational restrictions. Social network users contribute to the community, making it more informative, more efficient, more meaningful and diverse, providing good and timely information about the desired content, etc.

A new form of communication attracts users of all generations, the young as well as the old. It is evident that there are more and more users every day all over the world, which has encouraged many companies to use the popularity of social networks for their own marketing purposes by offering their products and services in a new and different way.

Although there are differences between the numerous online social networking platforms, it can be said that each of them, in essence, represents a simplified platform that allows the user to personalize a certain space on the Internet in a short time and in a simple way. These online platforms enable the creation of public or semi-public accounts, organizing a list of other users with whom the users are connected and browsing their links, as well as the links that other users make within a given online platform [18].

Social networks have become a new space for expressing and presenting personal and cultural identity. Therefore, a place for expression in the mother tongue, networking with members of the same interests, aspirations, ethnicity or religion.

Slovaks from Vojvodina are often referred to as a phenomenon that has been resisting the influences of a multiethnic environment for more than two and a half centuries. They are the leaders when it comes to the preservation of tradition and developing new forms of Slovak culture beyond the borders of the Slovak Republic. The identity of the Vojvodina Slavs, with all its particularities and specificities, derives from the Slovak culture and influence, which resulted from changes in the circumstances in which the community was found at a certain historical moment.

Strengthening awareness of national affiliation is a result of changes in the social structure, which results in an intensification of the relationship between the Slovakian community and the country of origin and the inclusion of numerous individuals in public social life. In this sense, there are numerous associations that deal with certain segments of culture, which later become the most important bearers of the Slovakian-Vojvodinian culture.

The association of the Slovaks had other goals than the preservation of cultural heritage. They exist because the Slovaks want to belong to the time in which they live, to decide on their position, to be equal, contemporary, informed, educated citizens of the country in which they live, useful members of the society. In order to preserve their identity, they want to print their own press and books, to educate themselves in their mother tongue, to inform about the achievements of the time they live in. Information in the mother tongue of the Slovaks in Vojvodina is realized through 16 printed media, a program on 14 radio stations and a program of nine TV stations [19].

According to the last census (2011) [20], Vojvodina has 1,931,809 inhabitants, which accounts for 21.56% of the total population of the Republic of Serbia. Vojvodina is inhabited by more than 26 ethnic groups. Slovaks in Vojvodina constitute one of the larger ethnic minorities of the population of the northern Serbian province with the population of 50,321 (2.60%).

METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted in the area of Vojvodina, among members of the Slovak national minority. In order to obtain the data on the way of communicating on social media and the usage of mother tongue, A survey of the attitudes of members of the Slovak national minority in Vojvodina on the use of social networks was conducted.

The instrument used for the research is a non-standardized questionnaire created by the authors/researchers themselves. The questionnaire consisted of 13 questions. It was written in Serbian and distributed electronically (Facebook, Gmail, Yahoo mail). The research was conducted from September 3rd, 2018 to September 16th, 2018. A total of 233 completed questionnaires were collected.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first three questions in the questionnaire were related to the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. In the demographic structure of the sample, women are dominant (56%) compared to men (44%). The most represented were respondents aged 18-29 (49%), followed by respondents in the age category 30-49 years (41%), while the lowest number of respondents were in the age category of 50 years or more (10%).

Regarding the education of the respondents, the largest part of the sample consisted of respondents who graduated from college or university (57%), followed by respondents who graduated from high school (38%), while the smallest number of respondents finished primary school only (5%).

The group of questions that followed was aimed at finding a response concerning behavior on social networks, i.e. how often and for what purpose respondents use social networks. Most respondents, 84% said they often use social networks. They are followed by occasional users of social networks (8%) and those who use them rarely (8%).

When it comes to social networks most used by respondents, Facebook occupies the first place. Even 70% of respondents use this social network, which is in line with some previous research [21].

Already in September 2006, Facebook became available to every user over thirteen years old who has an open electronic account on any server. Facebook has provided easy and simple online communication to a community that already existed in real, the so-called, offline world. He gathered micro-communities which, initially, were interconnected in terms of geography and interests, which made this social network extremely popular.

Instagram is used on a far smaller scale, around 30%. This share is also confirmed by some earlier research [22]. However, Instagram has a double-digit growth among the younger population, according to research by the online market in 2017, which is a great success if it is known to be established only in 2010. What attracts young people to the application are "stories", i.e. video messages that are visible to followers for 24 hours.

Although the offered responses were Twitter, MySpace, Vkontakte, LinkedIn, as well as the ability to subscribe to another social network, only the two previously listed were found in the most frequently used list. However, this does not mean that individuals do not use more social networks at the same time.

The most common reason for using social networks is communication with friends (55%), entertainment (40%) and business (5%).

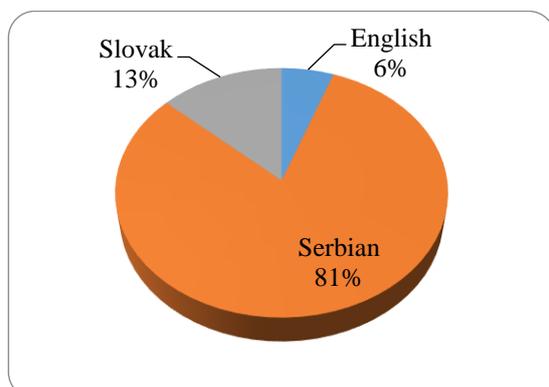


Figure 1. Which language do you usually use in order to communicate on social networks?



Figure 2. Which language do you usually use in order to communicate with members of your ethnic group on social networks?

Of particular interest was the knowledge of the use of languages on social networks. When asked which language they most often use in order to communicate on social networks, the majority of respondents said that it was the Serbian language (81%) (Figure 1). About 13% of respondents use Slovak language in daily communication on social networks. Interestingly, about 6% of respondents use English. Although, English is learnt from the first grade of elementary school and represents the most common language on

the Internet, it is nevertheless unexpected for this language to be used among the Slovakian population in Vojvodina.

When asked which language they most often use in order to communicate on social networks with members of their ethnic group, as many as 86% of respondents said they communicate with one another in their mother tongue. The remaining 14% of respondents communicate in Serbian (Figure 2). A large share of users who use Slovakian mother tongue in their communication on social networks reflects multilingualism and multiculturalism that has been cultivated for years on the territory of Vojvodina. Citizens in AP Vojvodina are equal in exercising their rights, regardless of race, sex, nationality, social origin, birth, religion, political or other belief, property, culture and language.

Further analyzes reveal some more details of behavior on social networks. The content on social networks is most often navigated in Serbian (63%), followed by English (21%), and native Slovak language (16%) (Figure 3). About 70% of the respondents monitor the content on social networks from their home country, and as many as 81% of respondents establish contacts with residents from Slovakia through social networks (Figure 4). Maintaining contact with the country of origin certainly positively influences the preservation of the national identity, the tradition and language of the Slovaks in Vojvodina.

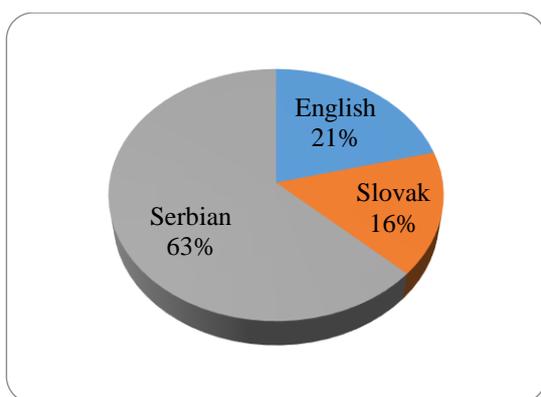


Figure 3. Which language do you most frequently use in order to browse through social networking content?

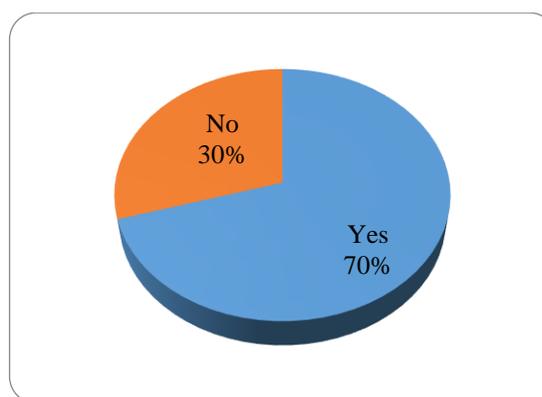


Figure 4. Do you track content on social networks of your home country?

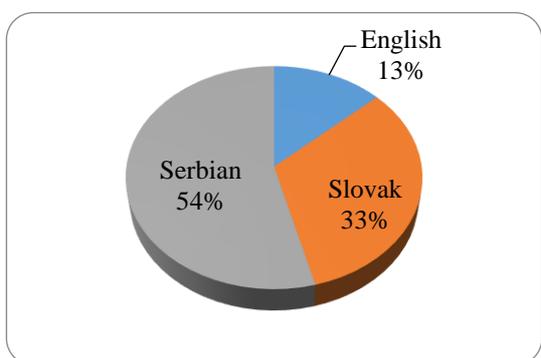


Figure 5. Which language you often use when writing your personal announcements?

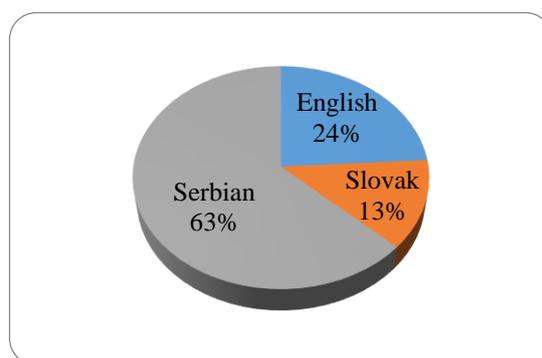


Figure 6. Which language you most often use when you look for certain groups, pages, statuses/announcements (depending on the network)?

When it comes to advertising on social networks in the form of statuses and personal announcements, slightly more than a half of the respondents (54%) use the Serbian language for this purpose (Figure 5). This is perhaps the easiest way for everyone to understand them. A slightly smaller number of respondents (33%) do this in their native language, and only 13% of the respondents use the English language when writing personal announcements.

When it comes to browsing groups and pages on social networks, similar ratio was found. About 63% of the respondents perform their searches in the Serbian language. The English language is used by 24% of respondents, while 13% of them use their mother tongue for this purpose (Figure 6). While browsing the social networks, the English language is used more often due to the interest differences but also the desire to get more search results.

The importance of national and ethnic in preserving the language and identity of minorities is immense. Vojvodina, as a historical province and a special economic, geographic and cultural entity, in which the citizens of all faiths, nationalities and ethnicities lived and live, traditionally presents an example of civic and national tolerance that were not significantly disturbed even during difficult moments of history, when the countries to which it belonged confronted each other. For many years, in Vojvodina there were no problems between the majority and minorities, according to the ethnic criterion, because simply - majority did not exist. When in the recent history, an ethnic majority was created by the occupation of the former states, thanks to the constitutional treaty and historical habits, this relationship did not provoke conflicts and greater tension.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that other cultural influences are being mixed with the help of new media, on an everyday basis, there is a higher level of awareness of the existence of other and different cultures, and therefore insights into the particularity of one's own cultural identity. Along with this process of cultural exchange, which is lowered to the level of communication between individual users of new social media, comes a creation of a general, global cultural entity in which there is no place for separating acquaintances from strangers and neighbors from foreigners.

By communicating through global social networks, a new dimension of human right to freedom of speech has been created, due to the fact that traditional obstacles, spatial and temporal ones are lost. New information technologies allow every individual the right to access to the computer network. What makes the world of social networks different and incomprehensible is precisely that rebellious freedom and the possibility of a different one. Because, what else would attract hundreds of millions of users to sign up and create their own account. In other words, people voted primarily for a new idea and possibility, not excluding psychological, sociological or cultural aspects.

Social networks have emerged as the need of a modern man for constant communication in the lack of free time. They have changed the way we talk, wish happy birthdays, choose partners or politicians to vote for. In a world which is always in a hurry, communication is reduced to quick messages, and direct human contact is replaced with messages on the screen. Taking care of your mother tongue is a way of demonstrating awareness of your own identity. The Slovaks in Vojvodina try to preserve their language, even when communicating on social networks. As the research showed, Slovaks in Vojvodina use their mother tongue primarily in communication with members of their ethnicity. Since

the young people comprise the biggest share in the sample, it seems that they are on the right path to preserve their national identity through language preservation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is part of project No. 142-451-2356/2018-02 funded by the Provincial Secretariat for Higher Education and Scientific Research of the Vojvodina Province, Serbia.

REFERENCES

- [1] Tomlinson J. *Globalization and Culture*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1999.
- [2] Hopper P. *Understanding Cultural Globalization*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007.
- [3] Kaul, V. *Globalization and Media*, *Journal of Mass Communication & Journalism*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, pp. 1-8, 2011.
- [4] Friedman T. L. *The World is Flat*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, NY USA, pp. 50-100, 2006.
- [5] Leung L. and Lee Paul S. N. Multiple determinants of life quality. *Telematics and Informatics*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, pp. 161-180, 2005.
- [6] Poole, M. S. and DeSanctis, G. Understanding the use of group decision support systems: the theory of adaptive structuration. In: Fulk, J. and Steinfield, C. W (Eds.) *Organizations and Communication Technology*, pp. 173–193, Newbury Park, CA, Sage, 1990.
- [7] McLaughlin, M. L., Osborne, K. K. and Smith, C. B. Standards of conduct on Usenet. In: Jones, S. G (Ed.), *Cyber Society: Computer-Mediated Communication and Community*, pp. 90–111, Thousand Oaks, CA, Sage, 1995.
- [8] Wellman, B. and Haythornthwaite, C. *The Internet in Everyday Life*, Edited by: Wellman, B. and Haythornthwaite, C. Oxford, Blackwell, 2002.
- [9] Hampton, K. and Wellman, B. The not so global village of Netville. In Wellman, B. and Haythornthwaite, C. (Eds.) *The Internet In Everyday Life* (pp. 345–371), Oxford, Blackwell, 2002.
- [10] Culnan, M. J. and Markus, M. L. Information technologies. In: Jablin, F. M., Putnam, L. L., Roberts, K. H. and Porter, L. W. (Eds.) *Handbook of Organizational Communication: An Interdisciplinary Perspective* (pp. 420–443), Newbury Park, CA, Sage, 1987.
- [11] Rheingold, H. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, MA, Addison-Wesley, Reading, 1993.
- [12] Rheingold, H. *Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution*, New York, Perseus Books, 2003.
- [13] Constant, D., Kiesler, S. B. and Sproull, L. S. The kindness of strangers: The usefulness of electronic weak ties for technical advice, *Organization Science*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, pp. 119–135, 1996.
- [14] Wellman, B., Salaff, J., Dimitrova, D., Garton, L., Gulia, M. and Haythornthwaite, C. Computer networks as social networks: collaborative work, tele-work & virtual community, *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 22, pp. 213–238, 1996.
- [15] Boyd, D. Why youth (heart) social network sites: The role of networked publics in teenage social life, In D. Buckingham (Ed.), *Youth, Identity, and Digital Media* (pp. 119–142). Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2008.
- [16] Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C., Lampe, C. The benefits of Facebook "friends:" Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites, *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, Vol. 12, Issue 4, article 1, 2007.

- [17] Kendall, L. *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002.
- [18] Petrović, D. *Društvenost u doba Interneta*. Novi Sad, Akademska knjiga, 2013.
- [19] Đerčan, B., Lukić, T., Bubalo-Živković, M. *Media of National Minorities in Vojvodina*, 4th International Scientific Conference GEOBALCANICA, Republic of Macedonia, 2018, pp. 261-268.
- [20] SORS. *Religion, mother tongue and ethnicity, 2011 Census of Population, Households and Dwellings in the Republic of Serbia*, Statistical Office of The Republic of Serbia, 2013.
- [21] Mirković, A. *Društvene mreže-društveni fenomen*. Retrieved: February 2, 2019, from https://www.profitmagazin.com/izdanja/broj_16-17.199.html (2015).
- [22] Ellecta Digital *Instagram u Srbiji – Svi smo tu!* Retrieved: February 2, 2019, from <https://ellectadigital.rs/instagram-u-srbiji-svi-smo-tu/> (2017).