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How the Use of the Internet Affects the Attitudes of Serbian Citizens about Public Institutions

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Abstract: *There is no doubt that digital literacy and the increasing use of the Internet are making economies more productive. The free flow of information and the ease with which it can be accessed means that information sources such as the Internet have a great influence on the formation of public opinion and the making of individual decisions. The article investigates how the use of the Internet and the trust Serbian citizens show towards state institutions are connected. For this purpose, data from The European Social Survey (ESS) were used, in which more than 3,500 residents of Serbia were surveyed and the attitudes of Internet users towards the state of the economy, democracy, the work of the national government, the education and health system, as well as trust in the legal system and the police were examined. Respondents were categorized according to the frequency of Internet use, age and gender. The results of the descriptive statistical analysis showed that the more often they use the Internet, the less trust residents have in the state. If we consider that young people spend the most time on the Internet, it is easy to assume that losing trust in institutions and responsible people can have very negative long-term consequences for the entire society.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's media is a multi-layered phenomenon that significantly affects the individual, his personal attitudes and social relations as a whole. With the use of Internet sources, more and more residents show a growing mistrust towards relevant social actors such as the government, politicians and political parties, showing at the same time a completely changed nature of communication and social engagement. What is most often criticized by the creators of macroeconomic policy is propaganda, that is, an attempt to advocate certain ideas of a political and economic nature, to gain personal benefit - either materially or in the form of an increase in popularity. (Stanley, 2015). The unequal distribution of power and the influence on the masses thanks to propaganda and demagoguery in the mass media are, as Chomsky says, an integral part of modern societies - democratic or not (MacLeod & Chomsky, 2019). This is supported by many examples from recent history, such as the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, during which, with the help of certain data collection and processing agencies, he used a large amount of information about voters to subtly deliver hidden messages of his political idea to them (Pomeranstev, 2019; Singer & Brooking, 2018). Zhuravskaya et al. (2020) talk about the obvious connection between the Internet and social media on the one hand and voting, protests, polarization in society, autocratic regimes and the behavior of politicians on the other.

In extreme situations, internet access can be the population's only connection to the outside world and a way to send the true picture of the situation that the authorities are concealing. In recent history, there were more than enough examples – such as the overthrow of authoritarian regimes during the Arab Spring, or the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the way the

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major media reported on that bloody war, which undoubtedly changed the perception and attitudes of people around the world towards America and the European Union.

In this regard, this paper aims to examine how the use of the Internet affects public attitudes on topics of general importance, or more specifically, how the use of the Internet affects the level of satisfaction with the work of state institutions.

2. SURVEY METHODOLOGY

For this purpose, descriptive statistics methods were used to analyze the data obtained by surveying the residents of the Republic of Serbia, within the mentioned European Social Survey, which included 3548 participants, 1768 men and 1715 women, aged 15 to 90 years.

When asked whether and how often they use the Internet, respondents could choose one of the following options: Never, Only occasionally, Several times a week, Most days a week or Every day. Each of the aforementioned groups of respondents declared their willingness to participate in a political group, their willingness to participate in public demonstrations, their satisfaction with the way democracy functions in the country, the current state of the economy, the work of the national government, trust in the legal system and the police, as well as the state of the educational and health system. The relationship between the mentioned variables is given in the following tables:

Table 1. Internet use, how often; Able to take active role in political group – crosstabulation

	20 Able to take active role in political group					Total
	Not at all able	A little able	Quite able	Very able	Completely able	
Never	608	150	64	17	16	855
	71.1%	**17.5%**	**7.5%**	**2.0%**	**1.9%**	100.0%
Only occasionally	185	106	53	9	13	366
	50.5%	**29.0%**	**14.5%**	**2.5%**	**3.6%**	100.0%
A few times a week	39	56	25	10	5	135
	28.9%	**41.5%**	**18.5%**	**7.4%**	**3.7%**	100.0%
Most days	158	161	70	22	21	432
	36.6%	**37.3%**	**16.2%**	**5.1%**	**4.9%**	100.0%
Every day	592	518	332	107	113	1662
	35.6%	**31.2%**	**20.0%**	**6.4%**	**6.8%**	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	351.310[a]	16	**.000**
Likelihood Ratio	358.039	16	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	232.367	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	3450		

Source: Own calculations

Internet use and the possibility of taking an active role in a political group are related ($p < 0.0005$). For example, 71.1.5% of people who never use the Internet are unable to take an active role in a political group, while the percentage of people who use the Internet every day is only 35.6%. Only 1.9% of people who never use the Internet are fully capable of taking an active role in a political group, while among people who use the Internet daily, that number is higher and amounts to 6.8%.

More frequent use of the Internet increases the willingness to take an active role in a political group.

Table 2. Internet use, how often;
Taken part in public demonstration last 12 months - crosstabulation

			33 Taken part in public demonstrations last 12 months		Total
			Yes	No	
14 Internet use, how often	Never	Count	3	164	167
		% within 14 Internet use, how often	**1.8%**	98.2%	100.0%
	Only occasionally	Count	1	142	143
		% within 14 Internet use, how often	**.7%**	99.3%	100.0%
	A few times a week	Count	3	45	48
		% within 14 Internet use, how often	**6.3%**	93.8%	100.0%
	Most days	Count	21	205	226
		% within 14 Internet use, how often	**9.3%**	90.7%	100.0%
	Every day	Count	111	777	888
		% within 14 Internet use, how often	**12.5%**	87.5%	100.0%

Chi-Square Tests			
	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	34.487[a]	4	.000
Likelihood Ratio	47.147	4	.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	32.868	1	.000
N of Valid Cases	1472		

Source: Own calculations

Internet use and participation in demonstrations in the past 12 months were associated with ($p < 0.0005$). For example, 1.8% of people who never use the Internet participated in demonstrations in the last 12 months, while this percentage of people who use the Internet only occasionally is 0.7%, and among people who use the Internet several times a week, 6.3%, among people who use the Internet most days 9.3% and among people who use the Internet daily 12.5%. More frequent use of the Internet has increased participation in demonstrations over the past 12 months.

Table 3. How satisfied with the way democracy works in the country

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	777	**4.54**	3.307	.119	4.31	4.78	0	10
Only occasionally	355	**4.27**	3.208	.170	3.94	4.61	0	10
A few times a week	138	**4.24**	2.995	.255	3.73	4.74	0	10
Most days	426	**3.84**	3.165	.153	3.54	4.14	0	10
Every day	1631	**3.22**	2.856	.071	3.08	3.35	0	10
Total	3327	3.76	3.102	.054	3.66	3.87	0	10

ANOVA					
How satisfied with the way democracy works in country					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
3,21Between Groups	1086.583	4	271.646	29.187	.000
Within Groups	30918.448	3322	9.307		
Total	32005.032	3326			

Source: Own calculations

In addition, the differences in satisfaction with the way democracy works in the country between categories of Internet use are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

The mean value of that satisfaction of people who never use the Internet is 4.54 ± 3.31, for people who only occasionally use the Internet is 4.27 ± 3.21, for people who use the Internet several times a week is 4.24 ± 2.99, persons who use the Internet most days is 3.84 ± 3.16 and persons who use the Internet daily is 3.22 ± 2.86. If the Internet is used more often, the opinion about the way democracy works in the country is worse.

Table 4. How satisfied with present state of economy in country

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	755	**4.36**	3.168	.115	4.13	4.59	0	10
Only occasionally	351	**4.38**	2.902	.155	4.07	4.68	0	10
A few times a week	138	**4.21**	2.941	.250	3.72	4.71	0	10
Most days	421	**4.07**	3.003	.146	3.78	4.35	0	10
Every day	1623	**3.56**	2.695	.067	3.43	3.69	0	10
Total	3288	3.92	2.904	.051	3.82	4.02	0	10

ANOVA

How satisfied with present state of economy in country

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	453.719	4	113.430	13.658	**.000**
Within Groups	27265.721	3283	8.305		
Total	27719.440	3287			

Source: Own calculations

Furthermore, differences in satisfaction with the current state of the economy in the country between categories of Internet use are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

See mean values. If the Internet is used more often, the opinion about the state of the economy in the country is worse.

Table 5. State of education in country nowadays

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	744	**5.33**	3.036	.111	5.11	5.54	0	10
Only occasionally	348	**4.51**	2.907	.156	4.21	4.82	0	10
A few times a week	136	**4.63**	2.938	.252	4.13	5.13	0	10
Most days	422	**4.09**	2.951	.144	3.81	4.37	0	10
Every day	1622	**3.85**	2.758	.068	3.71	3.98	0	10
Total	3272	4.32	2.931	.051	4.22	4.42	0	10

ANOVA

State of education in country nowadays

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1160.488	4	290.122	35.180	.000
Within Groups	26942.402	3267	8.247		
Total	28102.890	3271			

Source: Own calculations

Differences in satisfaction with the current state of education in the country between categories of Internet use are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

See mean values. If the Internet is used more often, the opinion about the state of education in the country is worse.

Table 6. How satisfied with the national government

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	834	**5.40**	3.381	.117	5.17	5.63	0	10
Only occasionally	366	**4.78**	3.158	.165	4.45	5.10	0	10
A few times a week	137	**4.53**	3.176	.271	4.00	5.07	0	10
Most days	423	**4.35**	3.309	.161	4.03	4.66	0	10
Every day	1634	**3.56**	3.039	.075	3.41	3.71	0	10
Total	3394	4.28	3.268	.056	4.17	4.39	0	10

ANOVA

How satisfied with the national government

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1997.488	4	499.372	49.438	**.000**
Within Groups	34232.104	3389	10.101		
Total	36229.592	3393			

Source: Own calculations

Differences in satisfaction with the national government between Internet use categories are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

See mean values. The more frequently the Internet is used, the worse the opinion of the national government.

Table 7. State of health services in country nowadays

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	864	**4.70**	3.341	4.48	4.92	0	10
Only occasionally	377	**4.18**	3.148	3.86	4.50	0	10
A few times a week	139	**4.15**	2.859	3.67	4.63	0	10
Most days	434	**3.96**	3.053	3.68	4.25	0	10
Every day	1681	**3.62**	2.723	3.49	3.75	0	10
Total	3495	4.01	3.010	3.91	4.11	0	10

ANOVA

State of health services in country nowadays

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	679.791	4	169.948	19.144	**.000**
Within Groups	30981.704	3490	8.877		
Total	31661.495	3494			

Source: Own calculations

Differences in opinion about the current state of health services in the country between categories of Internet use are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

See mean values. If the Internet is used more often, the opinion about the current state of health services in the country is worse.

Table 8. Trust in the legal system

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	832	**4.07**	3.387	.117	3.84	4.30	0	10
Only occasionally	373	**3.63**	3.047	.158	3.32	3.94	0	10
A few times a week	136	**4.05**	2.816	.241	3.57	4.53	0	10
Most days	431	**3.49**	3.061	.147	3.20	3.78	0	10
Every day	1677	**3.38**	2.835	.069	3.24	3.51	0	10
Total	3449	3.61	3.039	.052	3.51	3.71	0	10

ANOVA					
Trust in the legal system					
	Sum of Squares	**df**	**Mean Square**	**F**	**Sig.**
Between Groups	297.589	4	74.397	8.119	**.000**
Within Groups	31556.674	3444	9.163		
Total	31854.263	3448			

Source: Own calculations

Differences in trust in the legal system between Internet use categories are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

See mean values. If the Internet is used more often, the opinion about the legal system is worse.

Table 9. Trust in the police

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	850	**5.42**	3.413	.117	5.19	5.65	0	10
Only occasionally	373	**4.71**	3.173	.164	4.38	5.03	0	10
A few times a week	138	**4.93**	2.980	.254	4.43	5.44	0	10
Most days	431	**4.78**	3.167	.153	4.48	5.08	0	10
Every day	1684	**4.40**	3.038	.074	4.25	4.54	0	10
Total	3476	4.75	3.187	.054	4.64	4.86	0	10

ANOVA					
Trust in the police					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	592.634	4	148.158	14.822	**.000**
Within Groups	34695.116	3471	9.996		
Total	35287.750	3475			

Source: Own calculations

Differences in trust in the police between Internet use categories are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

See mean values. If the Internet is used more often, the level of trust in the police is lower.

Table 10. Age of the respondents, calculated

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Never	871	**68.93**	10.915	.370	68.20	69.65	16	90
Only occasionally	364	**59.14**	13.660	.716	57.73	60.55	16	88
A few times a week	136	**58.40**	13.273	1.138	56.15	60.65	17	88
Most days	418	**53.12**	15.086	.738	51.67	54.57	15	87
Every day	1632	**43.65**	16.039	.397	42.87	44.43	15	90
Total	3421	53.48	17.853	.305	52.88	54.08	15	90

ANOVA

Age of respondents, calculated

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	380495.487	4	95123.872	457.913	.000
Within Groups	709618.007	3416	207.734		
Total	1090113.494	3420			

Source: Own calculations

The differences in age between Internet use categories are statistically significant ($p < 0.0005$).

See mean values. The older people are, the less they use the Internet.

3. CONCLUSION

The goal of the work was to point out the fact that the use of the Internet significantly affects the attitudes of citizens toward the state and its institutions. Unfortunately, in the example of the Republic of Serbia, it has been confirmed that regular internet users, in most cases young people, show doubt and skepticism towards the efficiency of the state's work.

To the question of whether they would be able to engage politically, a relatively larger part of those who get information on the Internet answered positively than those who use it less. Also, as many as 12.5% of those who use the Internet daily have participated in some form of demonstration and protest in the previous year, while this percentage among those who do not use the Internet is below 2%. This confirms the fact that in Serbia, a large part of the population shows dissatisfaction with the way social actors lead political life, so accustomed to misleading and inaccurate information, that they look for the truth in alternative sources. On the other hand, overall, there is a small number of citizens involved in activist initiatives, which confirms their apathy and the opinion that "systemic regression" can no longer be cured.

The more often they use the Internet, the respondents show an increasingly negative opinion about the state of democracy, the economy, and the work of the national government, but also less trust in the legal system and the police, which, although they should be independent, are considered an extended arm of the executive power. Also, they are less satisfied with the state of the education and health system in the country.

The reasons for such an attitude can be found in insufficient transparency and lack of accountability for the government's actions, as well as the feeling that the concerns and needs of individuals are not adequately addressed. Considering that public services and official media have taken sides in a polarized society, citizens are increasingly turning to alternative sources of information, such as the Internet, where they can get objective data and hear the opinions of people they respect. Macroeconomic policymakers must in the future take into account the needs

and attitudes of their citizens if they want to raise the level of general satisfaction and efficiency in the country. For this purpose, they must learn as best as possible how to use social media to reach disaffected groups.

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