INTERNET ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL NETWORKS USED IN SOLVING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN BRATISLAVA[1]

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ABSTRACT

The research deals with the topic of internet activism through social networks which are today perceived not only as a phenomenon of civil activism but also – not only for the millennials - as the standard means of public participation. The paper focuses on how internet activism can help to solve environmental issues such as littering, light pollution, vandalism in an urban area. The city of Bratislava was used as a case study. In terms of research data, the paper provides a number of perspectives: one of the general public; relevant stakeholders; and of a selected environmental group operating in Bratislava – Green Watch [Zelená hliadka]. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to support our findings. One of the key findings is that implementation and the rise of internet activism through social networks can help, but is not significant in achieving certain goals and does not automatically make environmental groups more successful.

JEL: *Q53, Q55, L31*

KEYWORDS: *internet activism, social networks, public participation, environmental protection*

INTRODUCTION

The research deals with the topic of Internet activism through social networks which are today perceived not only as a phenomenon of civil activism but also – not only for the millennials - as the standard means of public participation. The concept of Internet activism[2] has received considerable exposure in the last two decades and is often defined as the "use of electronic communication technologies such as social media (especially Twitter and Facebook, YouTube, e-mail, and podcasts) for various forms of activism to enable faster communications by citizen movements and the delivery of local information to a large audience". [1] [2] [3] [4] [5; p. 121] Internet activism deals with a plethora of topics and issues, and can be divided into a number of subcategories. For example, Vegh divides Internet activism into three main areas: awareness/advocacy, organization/mobilization, action/reaction. Internet activism has also been on rise in recent years in Slovakia. [6] Bútora et al. argue that people who had not been previously active are now able to voice their concerns and fight – at least in the online world – for what they believe is important. [7]

On the other hand, the authors also mention that Internet activism can be easily misused and is misused by extremist antidemocratic initiatives. Ľapinová and Mazureková add that one of the areas in which Internet activism proves useful is environment and environmental protection. [8] Internet made it possible for people who previously were either unaware of the various environmental issues, did not have sufficient time, resources or were unable to physically be present at the events, to at least digitally participate and deal with environmental issues, problems and effects such as littering, illegal dumping, different kinds of pollution, climate change, resource depletion, etc. In this context, the article deals with the possibility of Internet activism to act as a catalyst or a stepping stone towards greater public participation and finding solutions to environmental problems. The paper focuses on one type of electronic communication technology only and that is social media and in particular social networks such as Facebook.

In connection to the possible expansion of public participation or activism, Ágh points out the so-called participatory paradox which refers to the situation when despite the expansion of space for public participation, citizens do not use this option. [9] This phenomenon, according to the author, relates in particular to the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Furthermore, Bútorová and Gyarfášová add that this participatory paradox signifies a decrease in aspiration to engage in public life and active citizenship. [10] Note the emphasis on the word "active". It can be argued

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[2] Also known as online activism, digital activism, cyberactivism, e-activism, digital campaigning, etc.

whether Internet activism can be still regarded as an active form of activism. Some authors have increasingly dubbed the term as "slacktivism" and "clicktivism" which refer to Internet activism in a derogatory way due to many of the online activists being "slack" and merely clicking and flicking through web pages rather than doing anything worthwhile leading to real physical change.

The paper attempts to add Slovak experience to the discussion of Internet activism and environmental protection. It focuses on the aspects of the success of Internet activism through social networks. Within this framework, the authors analyze the position and importance of Internet activism through social networks as an efficient means of public participation and the extent to which it is a useful tool to stir active (i.e. physical or financial) participation in order to tackle common environmental problems in Bratislava, the capital city of Slovakia. It is important to note that by active environmental participation, the paper refers to concrete physical or financial support by Bratislava residents. In terms of environmental groups, we examine the impact of Internet activism on achieving the objectives of environmental groups in Bratislava. Torgler and Garcia Valino argue that environmental groups largely depend on their social capital when dealing with environmental protection. [11] Hence, the paper will also examine the extent to which social networks help to build this social capital.

The City of Bratislava faces a number of environmental problems such as littering, light pollution, vandalism, etc. The paper focuses on how Internet activism can help to solve these and other environmental issues. In terms of research data, the paper provides a number of perspectives: one of the general public; relevant stakeholders; and of a selected environmental group operating in Bratislava – Green Watch[3] [Zelená hliadka]. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected in order to support the findings. Based on the research questions, methodology and case study approach, one of the key findings is that Internet activism through social networks can help, but is not significant in achieving all goals and does not automatically make environmental groups more successful in terms of real physical changes.

METHODOLOGY

The authors used both quantitative and qualitative approach to data collection. Due to the local nature and scope of the study, a limited sample of respondents from the City of Bratislava was approached in order to deliver statistical data and to select a case study which would bring more

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[3] Not official translation but for the purposes of the paper, the authors will refer to this English translation. Other translations include for instance Green Patrol.

light to the issue and try to provide answers to the research questions. The key research question was whether Internet activism through social networks helps to increase **active** public participation regarding environmental issues in Bratislava. The secondary research goal was to examine the impact of Internet activism on success of Bratislava's environmental groups in achieving their objectives. The authors collected 100 questionnaires from the following age groups (18-30: 62; 31-50: 18; 51+: 20). The research sample was divided into two general groups: 37 students of the masters' programme of public administration at the Comenius University in Bratislava and the rest 63 local citizens, all of whom reside in the City of Bratislava. The reason for including 37 students of public administration was the effort to also include a sample of more informed public. The authors expected that students of public administration would be much more aware of issues such as Internet activism and environmental protection. Student questionnaires were distributed electronically via email and the answers from Bratislava citizens were collected physically in the Bratislava city centre.

It is worth mentioning that the authors are well aware of the limited scope of the quantitative survey conducted. Drawing any decisive conclusions from this preliminary survey would be unwise. In order to bring more objective results, a bigger and a more representative sample of respondents should be employed. Nevertheless, the following quantitative results could be interpreted as a sign of certain trends and can be used as a basis for further research. Also, the collected answers were crucial in identifying environmental groups active in Bratislava. Authors believe that even increasing the research sample would not have significantly changed the selection of the case study.

After selecting the case study, authors contacted the representatives of Green Watch. Matúš Čupka, the founder of the environmental group provided a semi-structured interview. In order to attain more objective and scientifically reliable results, the authors also consulted a representative of Slovak Governance Institute - a professionally run non-governmental organisation which has its own alternative environmental project in Bratislava – *Odkaz pre starostu*. Furthermore, representatives of local authorities were approached in order to comment on the conduct, cooperation and results of Green Watch. After a number of attempts, the authors received one e-mail reaction from an employee of the Bratislava City Hall responsible for environmental issues and city greenery.

1 RESULTS

1.1 Quantitative results

Based on the conducted survey, the following results were among the most significant:

- 80% of respondents were aware of environmental groups active in Bratislava,

- 24% of respondents could name at least one environmental group in Bratislava,

- 20% mentioned Green Watch (others being Bratislavský okrášľovací spololok [3%] and Bratislavská občianska samospráva [1%]). There has not been a significant difference between the students' answers and the local citizens' answers. 81% of students who could name at least one environmental group named Green Watch whereas 88% of Bratislava local citizens who could name at least one environmental group mentioned Green Watch,

- 62% of those respondents who knew at least one environmental group found out about it on the Internet and/or on social networks. The rest learnt about it either from the school (12%), from somebody they know (12%) or from television and advertisements (14%),

- nobody from the research sample was either a member or at least a donor of any of the environmental groups in Bratislava,

- 2% of people from the research sample were active participants – i.e. members and volunteers or financial donors (both regular and single donations) of environmental groups,

- 49% of respondents said that the rise of Internet activism and the existence of social media has increased their active interest in dealing with environmental problems in Bratislava.

Perhaps the most intriguing result of the quantitative survey was the last one. 49% of the respondents believed that they are actively interested in dealing with environmental problems in Bratislava. If we compare the "active interest" of 49% and the "active participation" of 2%, it is possible to argue for a clear participatory paradox in Internet activism concerning support of environmental groups. One could argue that the question concerned an interest in dealing with environmental problems whereas the questions before concerned environmental groups in general. Hence, it is possible that an individual could be an individually active participant or an environmental activist. However, the authors consider this option as a very unlikely. Instead, the results signify the existence of participatory paradox.

1.2 The Case Study

Based on the collected quantitative data, the authors selected Green Watch as the focus of the following qualitative and a more in-depth study. Green Watch was founded by Matúš Čupka and

his brother in 2011. Čupka defines it as an informal volunteer "Facebook page" group with its main goal to make Bratislava cleaner. [12] Their main activities include physical cleaning up and combating illegal dumping, and fighting visual pollution in Bratislava. Green Watch is based on a high degree of social capital (i.e. network or group, trust, cooperation). According to Čupka, one of the group's aims is "connecting the virtual and physical activity with an emphasis on the physical." [13] When asked about the number of participants, Green Watch has more than 12 thousand Facebook supporters but only about 70 core and active members. If we consider the fact that there are 420 thousand citizens with permanent residence (not including tens of thousands of students residing in Bratislava), then both Internet activism/support and active participation in Green Watch activities is minimal. However, Čupka says that Green Watch is a "positive product of social networks" and that it would be hard to imagine the current functioning of the group to the same extent without the use of social networks and Internet activism in general. [14]

When confronted with the issue of participatory paradox, Čupka admits that there are certain negative effects of Internet activism and of the group's online activities – an illusion of a great number of activists but only a limited increase in their numbers over the years:

"People in Bratislava live in a bubble, thinking that there are plenty of activists and therefore they don't need to be active themselves." [15]

Čupka considers Internet activism and the use of social networks as an information and name recognition tool rather than a tool to increase active participation. The relative success in Bratislava based on the number of active participants, and scepticism of the founder lead to a similar conclusion as the quantitative survey. The authors are tempted to confirm the participatory paradox based on the qualitative study too. However, based on Green Watch's both online and physical activities, since 2011, there have been 15 other Green Watches independently set up and run all around Slovakia. Hence, one could argue that Green Watch was very successful in terms of its Internet activism and its key aim making Bratislava cleaner was even surpassed by a national effort of making Slovakia cleaner through independent environmental initiatives all around the country.

The authors also contacted and asked a number of relevant stakeholders and potential partners to comment on the activities and results of Green Watch: Slovak Governance Institute (a professionally run non-governmental organisation in Slovakia which has its own alternative environmental project in Bratislava – *Odkaz pre starostu*), and the Bratislava City Hall which is responsible for environmental issues and greenery in Bratislava. SGI appreciates activities of Green Watch although they take a different approach. [15] SGI created an online application which

allows not only environmental activists but also general public to notify local authorities of any faults and damage to public property. This for example includes littering, overgrown hedges, illegal dumping, missing traffic signs, pot holes, etc. However, instead of solving the issues themselves, they send the notifications via the online application automatically to the relevant public officials. The website includes statistics and history of the reported tasks which puts further pressure on the responsible authorities. SGI representative refused to comment any further on the conduct of Green Watch. Bratislava City Hall employee responsible for environmental issues and city greenery was also reluctant to comment on activities of Green Watch in much detail. He only expressed willingness of the City Hall to cooperate with the environmental group. [16] After a number of attempts, the authors did not receive any other reaction from relevant public authorities.

CONCLUSION

The Bratislava case confirmed a relatively small degree of interest from citizens to actively participate in solving environmental problems. In addition, the paper argued that the rise of Internet activism through social networks and public perception of active support does not automatically lead to an increase in the success rate and/or achieving the objectives of environmental groups. Instead, Internet activism through social networks can help, but does not lead to active public participation or active support (i.e. physical or financial) of environmental groups. Conducted research also confirmed and illustrated the presence of participatory paradox in Internet environmental activism in Bratislava.

It would be unwise and premature to draw any decisive conclusions based on the conducted research – both quantitative and qualitative. Instead, further research and an increased research sample is necessary to confirm our observations. Nevertheless, the authors suggest that the published findings support theoretical approaches and previously conducted research described in the paper and provide an intriguing illustration of Internet activism, participatory paradox and other related phenomena in Slovakia.

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