

Women-Owned Websites in Croatia

by Kristina Mihalec

There is no doubt that the Internet can contribute to the democratic process of a society in transition. It is equally plausible to say that democracy can contribute to the empowerment of women and uphold their human rights. Potentials exist yet the expectations seldom are met. Columbian anthropologist Arturo Escobar conveys the importance of “to derive theory from practical experience, look at every day life as a source of theoretical insights, and enlist the company of local actors and social movements in their efforts to understand both the world and how we fit into it.” (Escobar 1999:32) The potential of democracy and the Internet are great; however, attempts should be made to understand what this possibility means to individual women and to identify if structures are in place that would allow the expectations of democracy and the Internet to flourish.

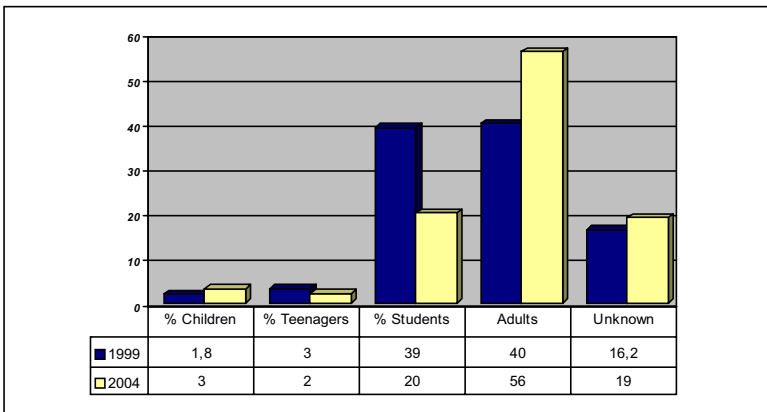
There are two ways to look at the potentials of the Internet and individual women as actors able to create change – what women offer to the Internet (which places responsibility on individual women to make changes happen or at least looks at what has been done), and what the Internet can offer to women (which places responsibility on the Internet to make changes occur or looks at what can be done). Although making this distinction can be tricky as both are undeniably related, for the purpose of this chapter the distinction between the two is made. This chapter looks at what women in Croatia are contributing to via web pages. In the chapter on Women’s Online Activism we looked at how women’s organizations and networks in Croatia use the Internet, and in this one we look at individual use. Do individual women through their web pages challenge the power structures, communicate freely or actively participate in the transformation of post socialist and nationalist ideologies into ideologies of an open and free society? What topics do women dedicate their web sites to and what form does their self-expression take?

The purpose of the research done in this chapter is to develop an analysis of web pages done by women in Croatia. As stated in previous chapters, no or next to none data, statistics, theories or general information on women’s use of ICTs in and from Croatia exist. It is for this reason, the lack of resources and information, that we began to develop a general methodology, which would allow us to summarise the content of the web pages done by women and to interpret the findings from a Croatian perspective.

To gather data on how many women create their own websites and analyze the content we manually clicked all of the linked pages on the Croatian portal, CroLinks.¹ This portal had one of the largest list of links to web pages in Croatia and was used in a similar research in 1999.² For this reason we use the same portal so as to make some loose comparisons between women’s Internet use in 1999 and in 2004.

The portal has 1,437 links to web sites done by women and men of all ages in Croatia. To establish if the web pages were owned by women but created by another author, we looked at the names of the portal links and the authors name on the website. As almost all web sites provide some biographical information, the age/generation was established (see figure 1). We also looked at the language used, accessibility, frequency of update frequency, images and photographs used, and compiled a content analysis divided into 38 themes.

FIGURE 1: Women’s Web Pages by Age/Generation

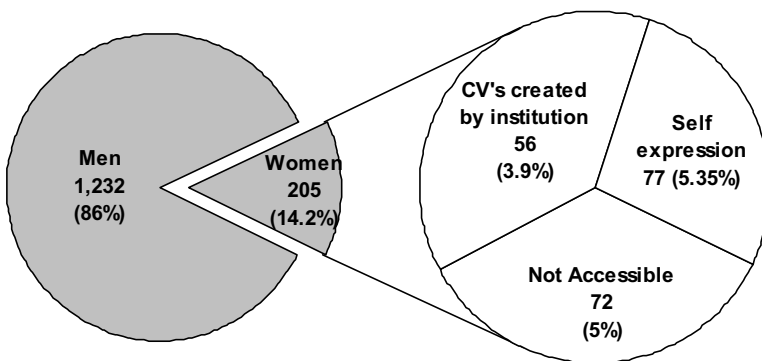


1 See CroLinks at www.crolinks.com

2 See "How Women in Croatia Use the Internet," Nevenka Sudar, <http://www.crowmagazine.com/istraze.htm>

According to the research gathered from this portal of Croatian links, women in Croatia do not have a significant online presence. The total number of sites done by women is 14.2%, compared to the sites created by men which, make up 85%. If we take out all the women's pages that are not found, the access to which is forbidden, plus sites in the form of a CV created by institutions (e.g. staff of universities), we are left with 5.35% of web sites – or a total of 77 sites – created by women that have some form of self-expression (see figure 2). This small percentage represents women's on-line visibility and voice in Croatia.

FIGURE 2: Percentage of Sites Created by Women



The content of women owned websites yields perhaps the most interesting results. No themes or topics from the web site were excluded from the classifications table. We also included a sample of certain topics that may be common for "established" democracies or economies, such as e-commerce, gender, ICT policy, and pornography or erotica (see table 1).

All themes, except for 13 small sites (on politics, feminism, ecology, human rights, women, and e-zines), are general homepages that share personal information in the form of diaries, fan sites, photo albums, etc. Only 2.25% of the women who created their pages update their site regularly. With homepages of such topics which are updated very rarely it is difficult to imagine what purpose they serve and for whom. In all of the 38 themes found, there are only a handful that provide a substantial amount of new information and creativeness. Moreover, it is not possible to speak of an autonomous women's cyber culture or independent women's online activism or independent movement which corresponds with the aims of civil society.

The content of the pages are personal facts that are “safe” to share. For example, homepages with themes of animals contain general facts and provide a brief biographical background of the women’s pet. Written diaries are also “safe” facts of what the woman ate or did, only one diary has two paragraphs dedicated to philosophical issues in which she shared her own opinion.

The three top most popular themes are pages solely dedicated to:

- 1) About Me
- 2) School or Work
- 3) A List of Links

There are no web pages created by women (from this portal) on e-commerce, ICT policy, activism, gender, or ICTs in general – to name just a few. However, we found new themes that did not exist in the year 1999 when similar research was conducted.³ The new themes for 2004 are: ecology and women at 2% or two sites each; human rights and feminism which make up 1% each; and 8% (or six sites) of e-zines (see table 1). Judging by the women’s web sites examined in this research, it seems as though acceptance of what democracy means to the individual is being incorporated into the consciousness of women at very slow rate. An online culture of communication or an exchange of meaningful opinions and debate that contributes to the democratic process or open society, on-line or off, cannot be built on the themes of “about me,” “my school,” or a “haphazard list of links I like.”

“Therefore, in order to challenge the ‘have-nots’ situation, we should not only teach ‘this’ profile of potential computer users the technical aspects of the Net, but also help them to find new creative strategies for community organization and for designing, in cooperation, decentralized ‘soft-hearted’ communication systems...” (Austerlic 1999: 71)

Finding new creative solutions also means challenging the way we communicate and relate to imagination, motivation, feelings of security and confidence to express opinions, as Harcourt states, “imagination without technology can lead to utopias in the desert...” (Harcourt 1999: xiii). It is unlikely that women who are not intensely involved with civil society or

3 Brief analysis of 121 sites can be found on <http://www.crowmagazine.com/istraze.htm>

some form of women's activism will be open or receptive to creative strategies specifically for community building for various reasons (simple existential survival, lack of time, lack of interest, social and family obligations, cultural habits of communication, political and historical background, etc.). Under socialism the only recognized subject was the working class, which was of course genderless in theory. In socialist society everything was done in the name of the working class, then later, everything was done for the greater good in the name of nationalism. The "suppression of individuality, neglect of particular human desires, powers, and potentials in the name of abstract and imposed 'higher' goals," needs to be changed and the way to accomplish this is through affirmation of human qualities and potentials. (Cockburn 1991: 158)

This is the challenge for countries in transition such as Croatia, incorporating creative solutions and developing a new culture of communication based on having the courage to share information (despite criticism and even potential social isolation) and also being receptive to new thoughts and ideas. This may be frightening if one's culture has no or few values to deal with diversity, tolerance and acceptance of differences. "The first reaction, understandably, is one of fear and denial. In such a state women may take refuge behind their traditional customs and be manipulated easily by patriarchs or politicians." (Arizpe 1999: xv). Being a part of the democratic process is a relatively new concept, which entails personal and political changes, as well as reinventing cultural and social norms which would allow the Internet to be used effectively and appropriately.

The content – or lack of it – in women's web pages can also mirror the position and status of women in Croatia. It is difficult to speak of how the Internet can provide the opportunity for democratic development without taking into account individual experiences of women in Croatia and the region. If we take the experience and background of women into consideration we can devise theories and apply appropriate models of communication to enhance online participation.

Culture of Communication: web site content and e-mail use

If the Internet represents democracy and open and free information, how can such a structure flourish in countries that have changing or different political and cultural systems? Although it is true that the Internet provides opportunities for social and democratic development, it is also arguable that the Internet can only flourish in already established democracies or

open societies, or for that matter, that is a reflection of those. This chapter explores the expectations to use the Internet as a tool to interact and share information, in relation to the individual's background and preferred method of communication.

As Sohail Inayatullah and Ivana Milojevic state:

“While new technologies have speeded up time for the elite in the West and the elite in the non-West, for the majority of the world there is no high-tech information era. In the hyperjump to starspace, we have forgotten that while ideas and the spirit can soar, there are cyclical processes, such as the life and death in individuals, nations and civilizations that cannot be so easily transformed.” (*Inayatullah and Milojevic 1999:76*)

We must keep in mind that each so called “poor” or “developing country” has its own specific history, traditions, customs, and challenges. Although the number of women expressing themselves via web pages or use of the Internet may be the same low result in many countries, the reasons for the problems are different, and hence the possible solution may be different as well. Very little is known on how women are using the Internet and how the media is promoting it in post socialist/Communist/Muslim/Christian/patriarchal and sometimes post war societies of Central Eastern Europe and CIS countries. Even with realistic problems, such as poverty and lack of infrastructure, it is still necessary to continually assess and explore the other multilayered barriers of the “have-nots.” There are other barriers and challenges that exist. “Becoming consumers of the information available does not mean communication.” (Farhi 1999: 212).

In the case of Croatia, with a high literacy rate and educational level among women, why is their online presence via web pages so low? What makes women's use of the Internet, or lack of it, special in this region? Most, if not all of the countries in Eastern Europe or CIS are in transition, which entails, social, political, economic instability, and poverty. Changing the status of women and democratization of a society is not just a matter of changing politics or government, but a process which depends on changes in the way each individual thinks and acts upon. (Lackom Vidulic:1)

Social and cultural aspects also influence the way women are able to use the Internet effectively and appropriately. Do CIS and Eastern European countries have a culture of sharing information? The culture of communication is deeply rooted in society's political-social, and even religious structures. From the questionnaire developed to research the ICT needs of

women in the CEE and CIS regions only 22% of women feel they actually have an adequate culture of communication.⁴ In other words, for various political, social, or personal reasons there is a lack of trust among women that hinders the development of sharing information. Placing a high importance on social ties, as it is the case in Croatia, does not necessarily insure the ability to communicate in a healthy and active manner. Many people, especially women who now live in new democracies, are still not comfortable or mindful of how to share information freely with strangers. Although Muller speaks of role-playing, the context is still relevant as it addresses self-discovery.

“The concept of secrecy would relate to issues of personal power and safety, the concept of intimacy to issues of discernment and trust: whom to trust with the sharing of self-knowledge. And the concept of manipulation would relate to issues of action, effecting change, making decisions, doing achieving, controlling the outer world to get our needs made.” (*Muller 1999: 315*)

Government interference or negative social consequences have been engrained into women’s memories. Speaking out or freely expressing thoughts and opinions without self or state censorship is a new cultural practice that has not yet been remotely achieved on the Internet.

Face-to-Face Interaction

In another research conducted in 2003 through phone surveys of 250 women in Croatia who are on-line, shows the most popular ways the women use the Internet.

- Women in Croatia use the Internet mostly to search for useful information (80%), while female students primarily use the Internet for e-mail communication.
- Only 18% of women participate in on-line discussions and “chats”, which disproves the usual stereotype about “women’s usage of Internet.”

Generally, women are not very interested in using the Internet as a means of communication via chats and e-mail. Croatians place a greater value on

4 Needs Assessment Report for Women’s Information Technology Transfer, Kristina Mihalec, 2003.

face-to-face communication, and when necessary use the cellular phone. In 2001, Croatia had more mobile than fixed telephone lines (ITU 2002: 13). Maintaining close ties with family, friends, and to some extent work colleagues usually takes place in public places (e.g. cafés) or homes. The results of this research are similar to the ones found in 2002, Catalonia, among 3,005 adults.

“The interaction of physical proximity and face-to-face contact makes Catalonia a different place than North America where people stay at home at night and drive, phone, or use the Internet to communicate. They are satisfied with their interpersonal lives, and if anything, some friends and many kin are clamouring for more personal encounters. The Internet is used more for acquiring information and making information than for communication with relatives and friends.” (*Welman, Boase, Chen, Hampton, Quan-Haase, and Diaz de Isla: 10-11*)

Personalized physical interaction is the preferred method of communication for Croatians. Theories of women’s preference to use the Internet as the means of communication because it offers the perception of safety through “anonymity and distance,” is not really applicable in the Croatian context. “Writing out thoughts and arguments and posting them to a mailing group or Usenet discussion may be less threatening than speaking to a public audience,” (Brayton 1997: 3) would seem logical given the social status of women in Croatia. However, it is not the case. Women and men tend to share their thoughts to a selected group of people that have some close personal ties in a physical and intimate environment, rather than to share their opinions publicly to people they are not familiar with. When the Internet is used it is done so mostly to gather information, and if used for communication via e-mail it is usually followed up by contacts through other communication technologies.

The culture of sharing information looks at the preferred method of communication and individual profiles that can affect the decision of whether and what to share publicly/globally. Perhaps it is for these reasons that that women’s use of the Internet shows little involvement in the women’s ‘movement’ or general engagement in the democratic process. Despite this, there are of course numerous exceptions of how the Internet is used by activists, designers, programmers, that we must acknowledge. (See chapters on online activism and the interviews).

TABLE 1: Content of Women's Web Pages (Number of women's sites found in 1999 is 121, while in 2004 the number of sites is 77.)

	THEMES	% in 1999⁵	% in 2004
1.	About Me (general)	N/A	48.1
2.	School/Work/University	43.9	37.7
3.	List Of Links	27.1	33.8
4.	Photo Album	19.3	29.9
5.	Family	3.0	15.6
6.	Town	13.8	13.0
7.	Friends	10.8	11.7
8.	Hobby	16.7	10.4
9.	Music	9.6	9.1
10.	Poetry	10.2	9.1
11.	E-Zine/Fanzine	N/A	7.8
12.	Books	3.0	6.5
13.	Business	N/A	6.5
14.	Partners ⁶	5.4	6.5
15.	Animals	10.2	5.2
16.	Computer	3.0	5.2
17.	Likes/Dislikes	15.7	5.2
18.	Sports	3.0	5.2
19.	History	1.8	3.9
20.	Travel	3.6	3.9
21.	Health	N/A	3.9
22.	Art	N/A	2.6
23.	Diary	4.2	2.6
24.	Fan site	6.0	2.6
25.	Fashion	3.6	2.6
26.	Ecology	0	2.6
27.	Women	0	2.6
28.	Astrology	N/A	1.3
29.	Cooking	1.2	1.3
30.	Politics	0.6	1.3
31.	Feminism	0	1.3
32.	Human Rights	0	1.3
33.	Activism	0	0
34.	Beauty	0	0
35.	E - Commerce	0	0
36.	Gender	0	0
37.	ICT Policy	0	0
38.	Pornography	0	0

5 See "How Women in Croatia Use the Internet," <http://www.crowmagazine.com/istraze.htm>

6 Only pages dedicated to women's heterosexual partners or relationships were found.

Table 2: Frequency of Photographs Used

Year	% of Personal Photographs	% of Photographs Relevant to the Site
2004	25.5	32

Table 3: Self Portraits used on Homepage

Year	% of Partly Nude Photographs	% of Clothed Photographs
2004	4	96

Table 4: Women’s Sites Not Accessible

Year	% Forbidden	% Access Denied	% Not Found	TOTAL
2004	2	1	32	35%

Table 5: Language used on women’s Web Sites⁷

Year	Croatian %	English %
1999	62.65	59.63
2004	59	51

Table 6: Authors of Websites

Year	% of Women Authors	% Somebody else is the author	% Unknown
1999	42.77	27.71	29.52
2004	46	16.5	37.5

⁷ Some authors write web pages in Croatian and English.