
Special issue

*Political communication in
Uncertain Times*

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Do not mess with a meme: the use of viral content in communicating politics

Abstract

Political memes are no longer rare flashes of uncensored personality or intensely manicured visual messages; they have grown into a form of anarchic folk propaganda (Guardian, 2016). The role of the current research is to explain the role and significance of the Internet meme in political communication; to do so, the study takes on the case of former Croatian prime minister, Ivo Sanader. This paper provides the content analysis of the sarcastic Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” (*The Father Is Coming Back*) and the content analysis of the most popular news portals in Croatia in period of Sanader release from prison. Pilot analysis detected four main thematic issues (typologies) of memes in which Sanader was presented: domestic political issues, domestic social issues, foreign political issues, and foreign social issues. Data show that Sanader was the main actor of the most memes and was presented usually in a positive tone and as a problem solver. In addition, research confirms that this initiative influenced the way media reported about Ivo Sanader in period of media debates about Sanader release from prison. Moreover, in all news where Sanader was mentioned as “ćaća” in selected time period it was always in a positive tone, which is true for all three of the most read news portals in Croatia.

Keywords

Internet meme, viral content, political communication, social media, content analysis.

1. Introduction

If you use Facebook or Twitter, have a Wi-Fi connection, watch television, or have been to an office Halloween party, you’ve probably encountered them: Internet memes (Guardian, 2016).

On the surface, Internet memes might appear shallow or insignificant, silly jokes sent around and soon forgotten. Yet although they often lack seriousness, memes are a distinctive product of current digital culture and typify many of its underlying qualities (Milner, 2012; Shifman, 2013). Alice Marwick (2013) explains that insider slang, chain e-mails, and

trendy videos that fill inboxes and news feeds, the ones circulating from user to user, are the new kind of news that gain users' attention. The aim of a meme is simple: become popular, actual, and humorous content that can be easily noticed in a social network but also easily spread. These shareable, sometimes pithy, and often puerile units of culture have emerged as the lingua franca of the 2016 US election and have given the American people an entirely new way of articulating their beliefs. For example, Clinton's top tweet was a meme (Guardian, 2016). As Barnhurst (2011) mentions, politics now seems to happen in intimate spaces (Jones, 2006), where YouTube videos go viral, and e-mail blasts inflame computer users one by one. But wait: worldwide media conglomerates are also pushing government policies through legacy media. Barnhurst (2011) concludes that one can make no better case for the need to update and innovate political communication (p. 585).

Therefore, with the rising interest and popularity of the Internet meme, the aim of the current study is to explain the role and significance of the Internet meme in political communication, specifically here in the case of former Croatian prime minister, Ivo Sanader. Ten years ago, Sanader was one of the most popular Croatian politicians. Nevertheless, from 2010 on, he became one of the most negative public and political personas, being arrested for several indictments regarding bribe, corruption, and the abuse of the position. For years, Sanader was known only for his crimes and accusations, and he spent a few years in prison while waiting for his trial. But in 2015, the satirical initiative "Ćaća se vraća" (Father is coming back) was launched on Facebook, gaining significant popularity by posting funny memes in which the main actor is Ivo Sanader who is shown as a savior of Croatian society and as an authority of social and political issues not just in Croatia, but in the world too. Because this Facebook initiative garnered a large amount of user attention in Croatia, by using a content analysis of the citizen's Facebook initiative "Ćaća se vraća," the primary goal of the current paper is to detect how and in what context the former Croatian prime minister is presented in these memes. In doing this, the goal is to analyze tone, issue, and the way the civic initiative used Sanader to ironically communicate the main social and political issues.

When Sanader was released from prison, one of his first statements was "I will follow you on Facebook," which was aimed at the followers of the Facebook initiative "Ćaća se vraća." This became news in every Croatian media outlet. In addition to the content analysis of most popular Croatian news sites in period of Sanader release from prison, the goal is to detect if this citizen's initiative influenced media reporting and if the Croatian media reported about Sanader as "ćaća" (the father) and in what tone: positive, negative, or neutral.

2. Theoretical part

2.1. Memes as powerful media content

Worldwide, as of the second quarter of 2016, Facebook had 1.71 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2016), and Twitter had 313 million monthly active users (Statista, 2016). Moreover, in Croatia, with its 4.2 million citizens (Croatian Bureau of Statistics, 2015), Facebook is the most popular social media platform with 1.75 million Facebook users (Statista, 2016). As they gain more and more users, social media platforms are becoming more influential and important in all communication spheres. Social media has redefined the way we communicate and interact with products, brands, social, and political issues (Alhabash et al., 2014: 1317). Social media platforms not only changed the way we communicate, but also the way that we access news and information. Data show that users worldwide are using social media platforms, especially on their smartphones and especially for news (Reuters Institute Digital News report, 2017). Therefore, the content published on social media can gain unimaginable popularity and attention and break through time, spatial, and geographical

boundaries globally. The media content is becoming like a virus in the global communication network, and users are the key distributors of this content. In communication theories, Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) explain this with the term “spreadability,” which refers to the potential—both technical and cultural—for audiences to share content for their own purposes and interests. In addition, Gladwell (2000) uses the term “stickiness” to describe the aspects of media text that engender deep audience engagement and might motivate them to share what they have learned with others. Douglas Rushkoff (1994) also explains this trend as a “media virus,” and Bebić and Volarević (2016) use the term “viral journalism” to explain the creation of content that is interactive, interconnected, emotional, interesting, and immediate and that can gain a viral effect on social media platforms. Today, we are witnessing the complete change of the media paradigm: with users as the key distributors of the content, as journalists who use social media as a source of news, and as a new form of media content (short video clips, infographics, graphics, etc.). One kind of this content on social media are memes. As Kien (2013) defines, the “media meme” or “Internet meme” (often shortened to just “meme”) has become a way to describe content that takes on distributional characteristics and has immense reach, appearing to an observer as if the meme has a life-force of its own (Kien, 2013, p. 555). The term “meme” was first coined in 1976 to refer to the viral spread of an idea (Dawkins, 2006). The root of the word is from the Greek word “*minema*,” meaning something that is imitated (Shifman, 2013). Gal, Shifman, and Kampf (2016) explain that although this term was conceived long before the digital era, it has recently been revived by Internet users, who invoke it to describe their mundane cultural activities. A growing body of academic research (e.g., Burgess, 2008; Knobel and Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012; Miltner, 2014) strives to decipher the unique qualities—as well as the social and cultural implications—of Internet memes.

Viriya Taecharungroj and Pitchanut Nueangjamnong (2015) explain that memes are often viewed as organic ideas because they undergo a process of variation, competition, selection, and retention. Bradley Wiggins and Bret Bowers (2015) define Internet memes as spreadable media that have been remixed or parodied as emergent memes, which are then iterated and spread online as memes. Viral media content can be viewed as a form of spreadable media content, one which has enjoyed massive popularity over a distinct period of time, such as Psy’s Gangnam Style, which has nearly 2 billion views since it was uploaded to YouTube on 12 July 2012 (p. 1186).

Noam Gal, Limor Shifman, and Zohar Kampf (2016) treat Internet memes as groups of items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance, which are created, transformed, and circulated by many participants through digital participatory platforms (Shifman, 2013).

The Internet and its various applications provide an ideal environment for large-scale meme distribution because digital memes can propagate both quickly and accurately on the Internet (Heylighen, 1996). In addition, the Internet’s flexibility, ubiquitous presence, and accessibility enable users to transform existing memes and create new ones very easily. Thus, the Internet has been described as the facilitating force behind the accelerated spread not only of texts that were previously identified with oral traditions, such as urban legends (Fernback, 2003) and jokes (Laineste, 2003), but also as a nesting area for the creation of spreadable new visual genres of expression (Kuipers, 2002; Shifman, 2007).

However, despite memes being visually attractive and simple to understand, memes can also achieve significant visibility and reach on social media platforms. Memes become successful when they achieve virality (Heylighen, 1995; Shifman, 2013). The goal is to be recognized on social media platforms and then distributed within the network from user to user. To describe memetic transformation, Bradley Wiggins and Bret Bowers (2015) explain a tenable genre development of Internet memes: spreadable media, emergent meme, and

meme. The authors argue that memes are remixed, iterated messages that are rapidly spread by members of a participatory digital culture for the purpose of continuing a conversation.

Compared with other content on social media (short video clips, infographics, etc.) the main characteristic of memes is humor. Viriya Taecharungroj and Pitchanut Nueangjamnong (2015) analyze the communication process of humorous memes in the most vibrant online social media network: Facebook. Through a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 1,000 memes shared on a Facebook page, they tested the effect of various styles and types of humor on the virality of memes. By applying the typology used in the context of broadcast and print media, Viriya Taecharungroj and Pitchanut Nueangjamnong (2015) conclude that although sarcasm and silliness are the two most prevalent types of humor used in Internet memes, no obvious differences can be observed in the effects of the seven types of humor used—comparison, personification, exaggeration, pun, sarcasm, silliness, and surprise—on virality.

2.2. Role of memes in political communication

Viral content on social media like memes are becoming frequent content in political communication too. Recent years we have witnessed satirical, funny and very popular form of presenting political candidates in memes on social media. This trend became most obvious during the last American presidential elections in 2016. As Jessica Williams explains (2016) that in the world of political posts, memes have stolen the show. Furthermore, author explains that their popularity and spreadability on social media platforms makes them one of the most popular content formats on social media and their reach can gain huge audience. In the context of political communication Williams (2016) mentions several pros and cons of political memes. Pros, as the author mentions are the humor of the memes, their relatability, inspiration, shortness and they can inspire research on political issues, have a pretty equal playing field and provide a positive approach to something otherwise possibly depressing. On the other side, author mentions cons of political memes. Political memes create a false sense of political action, they can misconstrue the issues and may not take the election seriously enough (Williams, 2016).

In additional explanation of the role of memes in political communication, Kim N. Bernardino and Mr. Francis Sollano (2017) explain that the prevalence of internet memes has contributed to the worldwide contribution of statements and discussion of issues about politics. Authors describe that though pop culture is usually related to entertainment and politics is to literacy and seriousness, people use the mode of popular culture in order to talk about politics. Authors conclude that memes create an online culture of emancipation and debate in generating political statements by promoting an innovation of awareness and freedom of expression. People use the online public space with the use of memes in order to engage people in a debate (Bernardino & Sollano, 2017, p. 5). This provides additional confirmation of using popular, visual and viral content in engaging users about political issues. With the reach that memes can achieve and their viral potential, or spreadability (Jenkins, 2006), their role in political engagement in recent years is becoming more and more obvious in public, political and media discourse. Ryan Frazer and Bronwyn Carlson (2017) in their paper “Indigenous Memes and the Invention of a People” describe that work on Internet memes has largely taken this less prescriptive and more performative approach to online political participation and activism (Frazer & Carlson, 2017, p.3). Beside engaging users, memes influenced on political communication, but also on the way news are presented and distributed. Authors mention that through memes, humor and politics often mix playfully in what Tay (2012) has called “LOLitics” (i.e. “laugh-out-loud politics”). This term Troy coined to describe the combination of Internet memes and political humor.

Memes, she argues, encourage people to “play with the news” (Tay, 2012, p. 48). This means “treat[ing] the news as an open text, reinterpret[ing] it in a language that one can make sense of, and experiment[ing] with its meanings” (Tay, 2012, p. 46).

Kim N. Bernardino and Mr. Francis Sollano (2017) furthermore mention that meme-making process is always a meaning-making process that can provide genuine interventions into mainstream political discourse. Memes may become entangled in the achievement of new political arrangements and the production of new political subjects. (Bernardino & Sollano, 2017, p. 4).

The research presented in this paper is focused on explaining the impact that memes can make in presenting the politician, but also on media reporting in political discourse on specific example of Ivo Sanader in Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća”.

2.3. Ivo Sanader – from politician refugee to the great Facebook comeback: Padre is coming back

For Croatia, the 1990s were difficult as the country gained its independency in the Patriotic War. Since its secession from Yugoslavia in the early 1990s Croatia, experienced war, a democratic transition, and long and demanding NATO and EU accession negotiations before finally becoming a consolidated democracy.

Since the country’s separation from Yugoslavia and establishment as a new democracy, the Croatian Democratic Union, one of the most important and biggest political parties, has played a major role in the political landscape. In this landscape, Ivo Sanader had an important political role, including being elected two times as prime minister. To date, he is the longest-serving prime minister since Croatian independence, holding the office for over five and a half years before resigning in July 2009. He was first elected in 2003 before being re-elected in November 2007. In 2004, while Sanader was prime minister, Croatia was granted official EU candidate status before then starting actual membership talks in October 2005. At the time, Sanader was voted the most popular Croatian politician (Euobserver, 2009). However, the entire nation was shocked when Sanader resigned as prime minister in 2009. And in 2010, Ivo Sanader was arrested for several accusations involving corruption, bribery, and abuse of power. Croatian authorities issued an international arrest warrant for Ivo Sanader, and soon after, he left the country amid a corruption inquiry. He has been linked to various criminal cases during his time as prime minister from 2003 to 2009 (BBC news, 2010). He spent most of these years in prison in Croatia and was ejected from his own party and the political landscape.

And then, in 2015, Ivo Sanader returned to the scene when the Croatian Supreme Court dismissed the claim against him; it was here the viral and satirical Facebook initiative appeared on social media and flared the public’s and the media’s interest. In Croatia, 2015 is known as the “Comeback of Padre,” where the first claims against Sanader were dismissed and the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” became viral and popular. This initiative presented Sanader as “ćaća” (father, padre) regarding major political events and issues in Croatia using funny and satirical memes. The initiative became so popular that when coming out of jail, Ivo Sanader spoke to reporters regarding the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” and said: “I will follow you on Facebook” (Dnevnik.hr, 2015).

The Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” (Padre is coming back) launched January 15, 2015. Today, the page has 165,447 users (Facebook, 2017). Eight users from the Croatian town of Split founded this page after Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović was elected to be the Croatian president in 2015. The page became popular after the Supreme Court overturned the verdict against Ivo Sanader (HRT, 2015). Today, the page is active and popular, but the identities of

the founders of the initiative are still unknown. However, they call themselves “Dica ćaćina” (Children of Padre).

The content on the Facebook page “Ćaća se vraća” is related to and up-to-date with the actual socio-political actualities in Croatia. The authors for each socio-political actuality create a meme where Ivo Sanader is presented as “ćaća” (padre, father) and gives his approval for each topic or person. With this initiative, the former Croatian prime minister is settled as an authority for each situation or issue. The main goal of the Facebook page is visual, viral, and satirical content in the form of an Internet meme to make fun of the Croatian and global reality through the former prime minister.

The year 2015 was dynamic for the Croatian political landscape. While the beginning of the year was marked with the election of the new president, Kolinda Grabar Kitarević (Croatian Democratic Party, HDZ), the end of 2015 brought new Parliamentary elections. Although everyone thought that this would be a standard political fight between the two major Croatian parties, the Social Democrats (SDP) and Conservatives (HDZ), the political context was disturbed by citizen initiatives that seriously influenced the election’s outcome, the formation of the Parliament, and all political events and issues over the last two years in Croatia. With the rise of new political initiatives such as MOST and Živi Zid, the Croatian political landscape was disturbed, and these changes still influence the political and social issues in Croatia.

3. Methodology

3.1. Method of analysis

The goal of the current research was to analyze the content on the Facebook page “Ćaća se vraća” and news portals to detect how and in what context former Ivo Sanader was presented in media content (memes on Facebook page and in media text on news portals). A content analysis was selected as the best method for answering the research questions, first by investigating the memes on the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” and then by analyzing content on news portals in Croatia. Weber (1990) explains that a content analysis is a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text (p. 9), which is one of the main reasons it was selected as for the current research.

3.2 Sample and time span of analysis

The content analysis was conducted on 1190 memes that were published in 2015 on the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća.” For each meme, we coded every image published on the Facebook page that had additional text on it. We coded only the content of the meme: the image and the text to detect how and in what context the former prime minister was presented. For this analysis, all other published content (such as photographs without texts, links, and videos) were excluded. In addition, memes that were repeated (with same photo and text) were also excluded.

In addition, a content analysis was conducted on 102 media links dating from October 1 to December 31, 2015 while in this period Ivo Sanader was realized from the prison. This sample was selected by extracting from the selected news portal archives all the articles from the period in which Ivo Sanader was a main actor in the news. A content analysis was conducted on the three most read news portals in Croatia (Gemnius, 2017): 24sata.hr, vecernji.hr, and dnevnik.hr. This period of analysis was selected because in that time, the media reported about the possibility of Sanader being released from jail, which finally happened on November 25, 2015. Moreover, in that period, the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” gained significant popularity, so the goal was to detect if the media reported Sanader as being “ćaća.”

3.3 Pilot analysis

A pilot analysis of the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” was conducted to reveal the main thematic categories of the memes. By using a deductive approach for the content analysis, four main thematic typologies of memes were established: domestic political issues, domestic social issues, foreign political issues, and foreign social issues.

3.4 Research design and research questions

The main focus of the current study is to answer to the following research questions:

- RQ1: How and in what context is Ivo Sanader presented in memes on the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća”?
- RQ2: Did news portals report about Ivo Sanader as “ćaća” in the period of releasing from prison, and if so, in what tone?

To answer these questions, two separate matrixes were created.

The first matrix was created to code memes on the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća.” With the first part of the matrix, the goal was to analyze if Ivo Sanader is main actor of the meme, and if yes, how so: in a superior position, as a criminal, as a hero, or as a subordinate to someone else. Then, the aim was to look at in what tone the meme presents Ivo Sanader: in a positive, negative, or neutral light and if Ivo Sanader is presented as a problem solver or as a person who committed a crime. In the third part of the matrix, we wanted to analyze what the main issue of the meme is; and here, we used the four categories detected from the pilot analysis: domestic political issues, domestic social issues, foreign political issues, or foreign social issues. In addition, we wanted to find the tone of the meme: if it is emotive, vulgar, using language against certain groups of people, using racist comments, using certain naming of certain groups, and satirical, cynical, or ironic. Finally, we wanted to code other persons found on the meme: are they persons from the same party as Ivo Sanader or the opposing party, or is meme is using other groups, such as media, citizens, or Facebook users? In addition, is the other person in the meme the main or supportive actor from a domestic or foreign political or social context?

With the second matrix, the goal was to analyze news portals in period of Sanders release from prison to detect is the Ivo Sanader main actor in the news, and if so, in what context he is presented: positive, negative, or neutral. In addition, the goal was to look at if Ivo Sanader is mentioned as “ćaća” in these news portals, and if so, in what context: positive, negative, or neutral?

4. Analysis

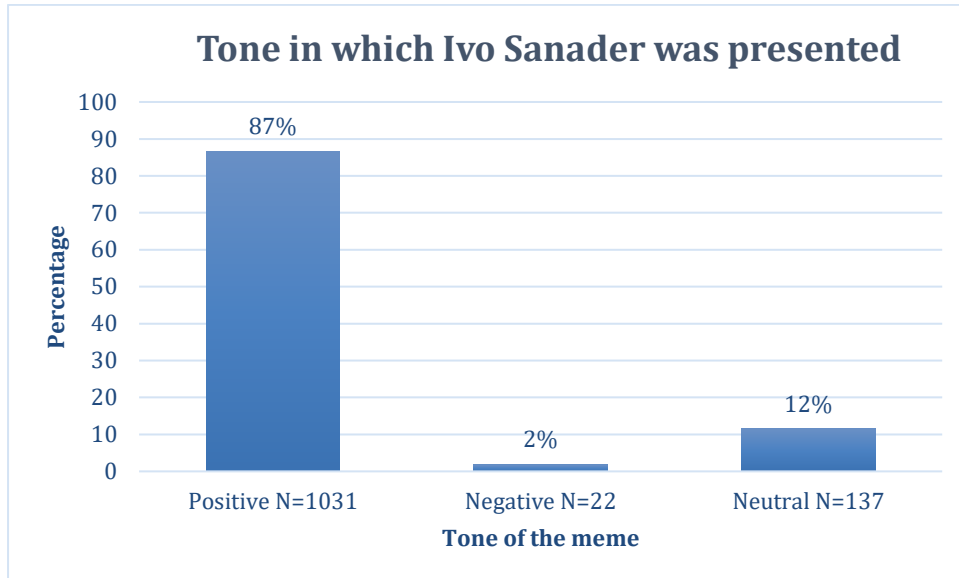
The analysis is divided into two main parts: first, for the content analysis of the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” and second, for the content analysis of the three most popular news portals in Croatia in period of Sanders release from prison.

4.1. Analysis of the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća”

An analysis was conducted on content from January 15 2015, when the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” was launched on Facebook, until the end of 2015. The analysis included 1190 memes published on the selected Facebook page. The content analysis of the memes showed that Sanader was the main actor in 89% of the memes (N=1063 memes), and in 39% of the memes (N=464), he was the only actor. The analysis revealed that in most cases (76%), Sanader was presented as the superior actor. Regarding how Sanader was presented in the meme, the analysis showed that in 35% of the memes, Sanader was presented as the hero, and in 42% of the memes, he was displayed as a person who can solve the problem. Only in

5% of the sample was Sanader presented in a subordinate position, in 9% as a criminal, and in 7% as the person who committed the crime.

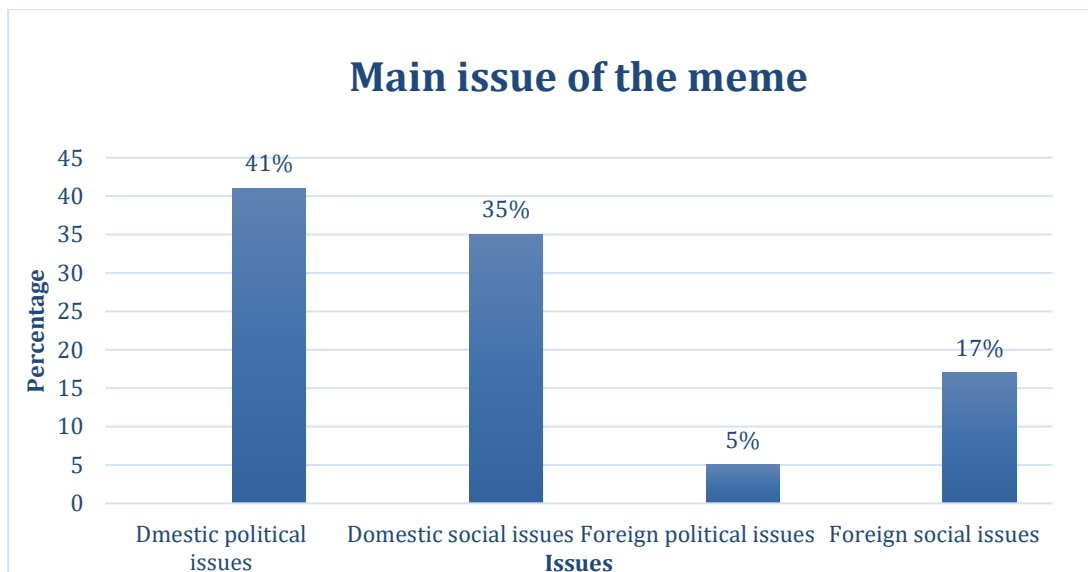
Graph 1. TIne of the meme in which Ivo Sanader was presented



Graph 1 demonstrates the ratio of the tone of the meme and the way Sanader is presented in the meme. The goal was to determine in which tone the meme presents Sanader: positive, negative, or neutral. Data show that Sanader was mostly presented in a positive context, while in an insignificant number of memes, he was presented in a negative tone.

Pilot analysis detected four main thematic issues (typologies) of memes in which Sanader was presented: domestic political issues, domestic social issues, foreign political issues, and foreign social issues.

Graph 2. Main issue of the meme



The analyzed data show that the memes were presenting Sanader mostly within political (41%) and social issues (35%) in Croatia. Although it was dynamic year with a new president and Parliamentary elections, Sanader is used as an important figure in this context and mostly as an authority or as a problem solver of political and social issues in Croatia. In addition, in a considerable number of cases, Sanader is used as an actor in foreign political and social issues.



Photo 1: Example of Facebook meme with Ivo Sanader in domestic political issue



Photo 2: Example of Facebook meme with Ivo Sanader in domestic social issue

¹ Photo 1 presents conversation between former prime minister Ivo Sanader and actual Croatian president Kolinda Grabar Kitarević.

Ivo Sanader: I have to tell you something
Kolinda Grabar Kitarević: say father
Ivo Sanader: Leave you nails and start working
Kolinda Grabar Kitarević: mute

² Photo 2 presents Ivo Sanader with famous Croatian assembly singing the line of their famous song: “Father, I love you from my soul“



Photo 3: Example of Facebook meme with Ivo Sanader in foreign political issue



Photo 4: Example of Facebook meme with Ivo Sanader in foreign social issue

Regarding the tone of the meme, the analysis revealed that 99% of the memes are cynical and mocking social or political issues. In addition, 48% of the memes report to certain groups of people: usually Croatian politicians and especially politicians from the Croatian Democratic Party (from which Sanader was ejected). In 14% of the memes, the Facebook initiative presents politicians from the same party Sanader was from, and 11% of memes present other politicians (from other parties and countries). Also, 57% of the memes present other groups of society: mostly the guard that was present with Sanader at court, public personas, journalists, and so forth. Seven percent of the memes are emotive, usually revolving around the idea that “Sanader was innocent in jail”; and 8% of the memes use vulgar language. Every meme in the sample refers to Sanader, even if he is not presented in the meme. In most case, the other person in the meme (53%) is presented as a supportive actor, mostly from the political (19%) and social (29%) Croatian landscape.

4.2. Analysis of news portals in Croatia in period of Sanders release from prison

We excluded 102 news articles from the most read Croatian news portals in which Sanader was the main actor in period of Sanders release from prison: from 1st October till the end of

³ Photo 3 presents Ivo Sanader with US president Barack Obama and Croatian president Kolinda Grabar Kitarević, as Sanader’s secretary.

Barack Obama: Connect me with father

Kolinda Grabar Kitarević: One moment please

Barack Obama: Father, it’s me, I need you urgently

Ivo Sanader: I am at home, come.

⁴ Photo 4 presents Ivo Sanader with Bono, lead vocalist and primary lyricist of rock band U2

December, 2015. From the whole sample, 38% (N=39) of the news was from 24sata.com, 33% (N=34) was from dnevnik.hr, and 28% (N=29) was from vecernji.hr.

The data show that the selected news portals in period of Sanders release from prison reported about Sanader mostly in a neutral tone, stating the facts and information about the court process and issues related to Sanader. 24sata (24sata.hr) reported on Sanader mostly in a neutral context 64% of the time, dnevnik.hr in 47% cases, and vecernji.hr in 76% cases. There are significant data about positive reporting of Sanader in the selected period. Also, 31% of the time, 24sata.hr reported positively about Sanader, dnevnik.hr 24%, and vecernji.hr 14%. Surprisingly, there were not many negative reporting about Sanader in the period of analysis. 24sata.hr reported negatively about Sanader 5% of the time, dnevnik.hr 29%, and vecernji.hr 10%.

An important part of the research was detecting media reporting of Sanader as “ćaća” in period of Sanders release from prison. The analysis detected that news portals in the selected period reported Sanader as “ćaća”: 24sata.hr in 26% of the news articles, dnevnik.hr 6%, and vecernji.hr 10%. This was important data, indicating that the citizen’s Facebook initiative and its popularity influenced the media’s perception and reporting of Sanader in period of Sanders release from prison. In this context, an important media moment was the statement of Sanader when coming out of prison: “I will follow you on Facebook.” This statement was aimed at the fans of the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća” who were naming themselves “Dica ćaćina” (children of father) and which was reported in all Croatian media. In the period of analysis while there were media, court and political debates about Sanaders release from prison, in all news where Sanader was mentioned as “ćaća,” the news was in a positive context. There are no data that any of analyzed media reported negatively about Sanader when reporting about him as “ćaća” in period of releasing Sanader from prison after years being held in custody for numerous accusations dealing with corruption, abuse of position, etc. The results indicate that by reporting about Sanader as “ćaća,” even the media reported on him in a positive tone.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Recently, the role of the Internet and social media has been particularly vital to the dramatic rise of online memes (Shifman & Thelwall, 2009). With the rise and popularization of social media platforms, there has come a new form of content that is visible and that attract users’ attention. In the last decade, social science theorists significant contributed to the usage and influence of the Internet and social media on political communication. To provide a theoretical and empirical background to the role of “viral content” such as memes on the presentation of the politicians, the current paper provided a content analysis of the sarcastic-meme initiative “Ćaća se vraća” (the father is coming back) and the way Ivo Sanader is presented. Started as a sarcastic initiative against the former prime minister, it soon became a viral political movement in Croatia and gained significant users and media attention. We wanted to examine if memes can influence the way that a politician is perceived and if memes can influence the way a politician is presented in the media.

The first part of the research focused on an analysis of the Facebook initiative “Ćaća se vraća”. With pilot analysis four main thematic issues (typologies) of memes in which Sanader was presented were detected: domestic political issues, domestic social issues, foreign political issues, and foreign social issues. In most of the memes, Sanader was presented as a person who can solve problems and issues mostly in a domestic political or social context. The data showed that in most of the memes, Sanader was the main actor and was presented as the problem slover. Although 99% of the memes were cynical and were mocking social or political issues, Sanader was presented in positive context in most of the memes.

In the second part of the research, the goal was to detect how the most read news portals in Croatia reported on Sanader when the Croatian Supreme Court dismissed the claim against him. The research showed that in period of Sanders release from prison media reported mostly in a neutral way about Sanader. However, a significant number of news showed Sanader being mentioned as “ćaća.” Moreover, in all news in period of Sanders release from prison where Sanader was mentioned as “ćaća,” it was always in positive tone.

The current research indicates that the satirical Facebook initiative in Croatia of Ivo Sanader gained significant attention and may have influenced the media reporting on Sanader in period of Sanders release from prison. Further research should include a longitudinal period of the analysis because the initiative is still active today and also the way the Ivo Sanader is perceived in media. With extended period of analysis would be possible to track data curve of Sanader presentation in media and by that it would be possible to make concretely conclusions about media presentations of Ivo Sanader as “ćaća”.

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