Co-construction and Deconstruction of Poverty on Serbian News Websites

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SUMMARY

Users' comments posted on the news websites of traditional media organisations still pertain to asymmetric relations between producers of mainstream news and interactive audiences. Yet, when structurally positioned on a website interface to immediately follow the news, users' comments are user-generated content most directly linked to journalists' stories and they constitute discursive space in which mass media representations of the world are legitimised, negotiated and contested. The aim of this study is to examine these relations between mainstream news discourses and the discourses of users' comments about the specific societal issue – poverty. By adopting methods of critical discourse analysis performed on 121 news stories about poverty and corresponding users' comments posted on the two most popular news websites in Serbia B92.net and Blic.rs, the article reveals how the two media construct poverty and social exclusion, and how users in the comments contest these discursive constructions. The results show that there is a significant level of contestation and that the most contested aspects of news stories are boundaries of poverty, legitimacy of sources and attribution of responsibility.

Key words: audience, journalists, poverty, discourse, user comments, Serbia

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Introduction

Complexities of the changing relations between journalists and their audiences are captured by a number of perspectives, ranging from news audience studies (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham, 2007) and technology-oriented interaction analyses (Chung, 2008) to the studies investigating news production and journalistic identity in the digital world (Boczkowski, 2004; Singer et al., 2011). New terminology of the last decade of communication and journalism research, with terms such as participatory journalism (Bowman & Willis, 2003), citizen journalism (Allan & Thorsen, 2009) and produsage (Bruns, 2004); indicates that there is a growing number of conceptual frameworks for understanding these complexities. The diversity of approaches obviously reflects the diversity of participatory practices which are found in user involvement in all segments of journalistic work (Singer et al., 2011) and in citizens' performance of the activities previously reserved for the news media (Bowman & Willis, 2003).

The focus of this paper is on users' comments to the traditional news found within the confinements of online editions of mainstream media. This type of users' interactivity is among the most frequent audience engagement functionalities used by online news media (Hermida, & Thurman, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008; Singer et al., 2011) and among most frequently taken opportunities by online users (Purcell et al., 2010). Users' comments capture scholarly attention – more frequently as a challenge (to be) addressed in newsrooms, and less as a content to be studies. Research oriented towards content is more concerned with the interaction between commenters (Singer, 2009; Ruiz et al., 2011) or with the language of the comments (Hughey & Daniels, 2013). Relatively little attention is given to the content of comments in relation to the content of news and this is the topic addressed in this paper.

The content of news stories and user comments will be viewed as a discourse, which means that the content is approached as a discursive representation of the world. In this framework, news and the comments to it are a space in which two previously disparate discourses meet, and possibly, collide with each other. To be specific, we will look into the discursive relations between online news published on Serbian news websites *B92.net* and *blic.rs* and the comments posted as a response to them. This approach is necessarily bound by the topics addressed in the news and its comments. In this paper we will analyse the discourse about poverty and social exclusion in the belief that numerous other topics of interest both for media and for audiences can be examined using a similar method.

Conceptual Background

Previous research about user comments concentrated on properties of the news items that yielded comments (Weber, 2013), characteristics of those who post comments (Larsson, 2011; Bergström, 2008) and the perception of comments among journalists (Hermida & Thurman, 2008; Domingo et al., 2008; Reich, 2011; Hermida, 2011). Another strand of research addressed the topics discussed in comments (Hughey & Daniels, 2013; Singer, 2009), and yet another, the effects of comments on readers' perception of new issues (Yang, 2008; Lee & Jang, 2010).

Placed in the context of other participatory practices, user comments are usually seen as least innovative and as descendants of letters to the editor characterised by the asymmetric relations of producers and users. They are seen as "something that occurs after journalism is finished" (Hermida, 2011: 185). Compared to other forms of citizens' intervention in the journalistic field, commenting is conceptualized as an extension of interpretation to the traditional realm of audience activity (Singer et al., 2011).

On news websites, comments are visually presented as a side dish of news, served with traditional news stories as the main course. As sites of conversation, they are under relatively strict supervision – media organisations are introducing barriers for participation (disabling commenting of some stories, or requiring registration), and to a higher or lesser degree they gate-keep the commenting space and impose editorial control. Anonymity of the commenters and lack of true dialogue (Wright & Street, 2009) are another argument used in comparing commenting to traditional audiencehood.

These are the attitudes commonly held by news organizations (Singer et al., 2011; Oblak Črnič & Vobič, 2013). Although editors and journalists are worried about the liability their organisations have for comments, this type of user activity comfortably fits into their previous conceptions of the audience. Engaging after the journalistic product is finished, they are seen as "reflectors" and "commentators" and the commenting space as "a tool for measuring audience pulse" (Heinonen, 2011: 40-41). Other studies also show that commenting is seen as an interactive option which provides journalists with feedback (Oblak Črnič & Vobič, 2013) while still pertaining to the trustee journalism (Domingo et al., 2008).

Similar results are obtained in the Serbian context (Tomka, 2012; Vobič & Milojević, 2012); although it should be noted that internet usage in Serbia is below that of the EU. According to the Serbian Statistical Office data from 2012, 48.4% of the population used Internet in the last three months (Vukmirović et

al., 2012: 23); whereas in the same year 69% of the EU population used internet at least once a week (Standard Eurobarometer 78). Reading news content online is among the top three most frequent types of Internet usage in Serbia, and it is slightly more popular than the usage of social networking sites (Vukmirović et al., 2012: 27).

According to Tomka (2012), users' comments are the most common way of audience engagement on Serbian news web sites. Studying journalists' perceptions of audience Vobič and Milojević show that journalists in Serbia "parallel audience involvement with online readers' activities in comment sections" (Vobič & Milojević, 2012: 481). Tomka's research about the management of user participation in four Serbian media confirms the results obtained in other countries – users' comments are predominantly seen as an audience barometer and as a source for news (Tomka, 2012). As Vobič and Milojević established, the online journalists in Serbia (and in Slovenia) are trying to preserve their traditional gatekeeping role (Vobič & Milojević, 2012: 484).

It is mostly in light of these observations that authors evaluate the participatory potential of the comments. For example, after distinguishing between open and closed online environments, and between websites oriented towards editorial content and those oriented towards public connectivity, Deuze concludes that users' comments provide "moderated participatory communication" (Deuze, 2003: 205), with the main function of "orientating journalism" (Deuze, 2003: 217). Quinn and Trench claim that this kind of interaction is "a supervised playground for users where their contributions never impinge on or shape the news" (Quinn & Trench, 2002: 33 cited in Matheson, 2004: 454). Describing "the reluctant audience" on Swedish news website, Bergström, (2008: 60) concludes that commenting audiences seem to consider these activities as "part of a creative leisure-time, rather than as partaking in democratic activities".

Discursive approach to users' comments as participation

Beyond the questions of editorial control and users' motivations, conceptualisations of participatory potential of comments (and other practices) will depend on how participation is defined. Taken as an individual intervention in the space of public communication, and compared to one-way mass communication, commenting is part of general "participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2002). The mere existence of the diverse voices from the previous periphery can be taken as a sign of participation. This would, however, mean to strip the concept of participation of its political blade and to adopt a different approach.

Arguing for maximalist versions of participation, Carpentier (2011a, 2011b) claims that power is its key ingredient, and warns that participation, access and interaction should not be conflated. Access and interaction differ from participation because they include "less explicit emphasis on power dynamics and decision-making" (Carpentier, 2011b: 28). Even though in Carpentier's framework, users' comments would not cross the participation threshold because they do not involve egalitarian power relations between participants (Carpentier, 2001b: 31), his contention that power is constituent to participation can be used in the analysis of comments.

The approach taken in this paper belongs to counter-public perspectives identified by Dahlberg (2011) in his classification of different theoretical approaches to participation and digital democracy. In comparison to other approaches, it emphasizes production and circulation of discourse as "a contingent and partial fixation of meaning that constitutes and organizes social relations" (Dahlberg, 2011: 861) and that necessarily includes contestation over the discursive resources and discursive products that guide social cognition and social practice. Power in this framework, is the power of access to discourse production and dissemination and, most importantly, power over meanings constituted in discourse.

The power of news as a discourse is that it provides definitions of reality. News is a social product that depends, to a lesser or greater degree, on economic, political, social and cultural contexts (Schudson, 1978). These contexts, as the sociology of news production (Schudson, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Tuchman, 1978) informs us, lead to the discursive work which "normally takes place with reference to a relatively small set of institutional agendas, which tend to be reinforced as reporters interact with their institutional sources" (Tuchman, 2004: 87). This means that media discourses and mediated discourses of institutional sources hold a hegemonic place among others in the society.

The expansion of this theoretical framework to users' comments and their relations to news brings several notions: 1) comments as discourse are a specific world view contingent not solely on news production but on the individual and micro social experiences of commenters, 2) comments as discourse are a result of different discursive and social practices (Fairclough, 1989) than the ones shaping news as discourse and this 3) opens the possibility of discursive collision between meanings constituted in news and meanings inscribed in comments. In Couldry's words "to contest media power is to contest the way social reality itself is defined or named" (Couldry, 2003: 39) and thus the extent to which comments actually do that can be regarded as having participatory qualities.

Situated within these theoretical notions, the objective of this paper is to investigate the meaning of poverty and social exclusion in the news and the meaning of poverty and social exclusion in comments. Thus, the first research question of this study is:

RQ1: *How is the mass mediated image of poverty contested in the discourse of users' comments?*

As we are interested not in discourse of comments as such, but in its relation to news discourses, the topicality of discourse plays a significant role. For this reason, in the next section, we turn to the question of media representation of poverty and social exclusion.

Portrayal of poverty in mass media

Previous research in the media portrayal of the poor is scattered across diverse methodological perspectives (Golding & Middleton, 1982; Iyengar, 1990; Devereux, 1998; Fairclough, 2000; Larsen & Dejgaard, 2013). From the perspective of discourse analysis, for example, Faircoulgh (2000) analysed the birth of the new left in Great Britain and the discursive shift from poverty to social inclusion as a "combination of the social integrationist discourse (the focus on shifting people from welfare to work) and moral underclass discourse" (Fairclough, 2000: 57). Working on frame analysis Iyengar (1990) established the existence of two news frames for representing poverty. The thematic frame exists when poverty is presented as an object of public policy. Within the episodic frame, poverty is portrayed as an individual experience. Further, when the episodic frame is employed, poverty is seen as an individual problem and when the thematic frame is used, it is perceived as a societal issue. As Iyengar (1990) concludes, the prevalence of the episodic frame can explain the dominant view about poverty as held by U.S. citizens. A similar conclusion is reached in previous studies, which show that the media represents poverty as "congenital defect of individuals rather than as a relational aspect of social structure" (Golding & Middleton, 1982: 240).

Devereux (1998) uses the terms "devils" and "angels" for two dominant representations of the poor. The devilish poverty is putting society at risk, and the poor, as other excluded groups, are often linked to crime (Entman, 1995). The angelic image is that of the 'deserving' poor, mostly children and elderly, whose "photogenic poverty" (Hutnyk, 2004) provokes sympathy. Further, in some countries authors noticed a strong link between racial stereotyping and poverty representations (Entman, 1995; Bullock, Fraser Whyche & Williams, 2001). Recently, Larsen and Dejgaard (2013) demonstrated that there is a link between the institutional arrangement

of welfare systems and the portrayal of the poor and found significant differences between media coverage in the UK, Denmark and Sweden.

This conclusion indicates that previous studies cannot be easily translated into other (in this case Serbian) contexts. In contrast to capitalist societies, Serbians still have a vivid memory of the communist times during which the state provided employment, subsidies for (state) companies, as well as free education and healthcare. Political and economic transitions effectively started in 2000 and the transformation is reshaping the economy, social welfare, health care and other systems toward more market oriented models. In such a situation, there is a growing number of the poor. After the initial success in the reduction of poverty, the absolute poverty rate increased from 6.1% in 2008 to 6.9% in 2009. The upward trend of absolute poverty persisted throughout 2010 and reached 9.2% in 2011. According to the database of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, more than 700,000 people live below the absolute poverty line. Even though these numbers do not make the Serbian case unique, it should be noted that citizens still hold a vivid image of the "good old times" as a form of "socialism nostalgia" (Mihailović, 2005: 211).

The research on media representations of the poor in Serbia was done at the Department of Media Studies, University of Novi Sad (Valić Nedeljković, 2011; Valić Nedeljković & Kleut, 2012). The analysis of 445 news items released in 2010 and 2011 showed that the key characteristic of media coverage is the salience of official voices. In 2010 they made up 35% of all the actors of the news, whereas in 2011 they made 28%. Other voices, those of non-governmental organizations, experts, as well as of poor individuals; are almost absent. Those struck by poverty are voicing their opinions in 13% of news stories in 2010 and in 9% in 2011.

The representation of the poor in Serbian media is built around two main discursive strategies: strategy of symbolic naturalization and strategy of symbolic marginalization (Kleut, Drašković & Prodanović, 2012). The more prevalent strategy of symbolic naturalization is characterised by frequent usage of a quite shallow and wide label – the poor, portrayed as a social group on their own. Within this strategy, poverty is reduced to a category of economic deprivation; which means that complexities as well as extremities of exclusion are mostly neglected. Those economically deprived poor are voiceless (they do not articulate their world views in the media) and faceless (the photos, if any, accompanying the news are those of politicians speaking about the poor). The poor are further de-subjectivised by referring to them in terms of numbers and statistical data. Being nobody in specific, the poor are represented as everymen/women and in that way, the status of the poor is being naturalized and translated into the meaning of ordinary life (Kleut, Drašković & Prodanović, 2012).

The strategy of symbolic marginalization, works in the opposite direction. Typically, the stories employing this strategy are about the poor individuals who do not have the basic existential means – food and housing. These, very rare, stories provide detailed and vivid images of conditions of extreme poverty. Still, the poor do not gain subjectivity, but are presented as rather helpless benefactors of others who take care and speak about them. By constructing poverty through the most extreme cases, the media are setting 'the poverty bar', as an imaginary threshold between the poor and non-poor, very low. In doing so, they are portraying poverty as something in-ordinary, something that is, in these very extreme cases, individual and rare. Represented as such, poverty is placed at the very margin of the society (Kleut, Drašković & Prodanović, 2012).

The two strategies encompass different, rarely overtly articulated, attributions of blame for poverty. The first strategy, in its illusiveness and comprehensives, leaves the question of blame unanswered. In its 'natural state' poverty usually has no origin, except in 'master causes' such as socio-structural abnormalities or world economic crises. In the second strategy, the blame is implicitly placed on individuals as their poverty conditions are presented as the breach from 'normal'.

With the exception of blame attribution, the findings from Serbia (Valić Nedeljković, 2011; Valić Nedeljković & Kleut, 2012; Kleut, Drašković & Prodanović, 2012) are relatively consistent with those obtained in other countries (Iyengar, 1990; Jucker, 2012). This could be expected because previous research focused exclusively on traditional media, which share the practices of news gathering and news processing. In light of our main aim, and that is to investigate online news media discourse and the discourse of the users' comments, this body of literature pertaining to traditional media needs to be supplemented with the analysis of online news media reporting about poverty and social exclusion. Thus the second research question of the study is:

RQ2: *How is poverty discursively represented in online news?*

Methodology

Part of the research of the Department of Media Studies done in 2011 dealt with online news and users' comments and in the following parts of the paper we will concentrate on these. The sample of online stories and comments was gathered from two mainstream online portals *B92.net* and *blic.rs*. B92.net is the portal of the television station B92, whereas blic.rs is the portal of the daily newspaper *Blic*. As such, both portals are focused on providing information services, though they have

other sections that were not included in the analysis. Both portals are very popular in Serbia and according to alexa.com web analytics, service usage frequency of blic.rs and B92.net follows virtual giants such as Facebook, Google (.com and .rs) and YouTube.

The sample was gathered in October 2011 and it was cyclic to include seven different days of the week. This was done to avoid one single event dominating the sample. The sample included all texts about poverty and social exclusion posted from 00-24 on the given day. The sample of users' comments included posts made until midnight, with an exception of comments made to news released after 8PM when the comments were collected till noon of the following day.

A discourse analysis of media texts and comments was performed. The specific thread of discourse analysis that was used was socio-cognitive approach in critical discourse studies formulated by Teun Van Dijk (1998, 1977). Following Van Dijk (1988a), news as discourse can be analysed on the micro and macro levels. Macro level analysis includes thematic and organisational structure of a text, selection and organisation of micro level units. All these elements guide the reader in comprehending global meanings and propositions of a text. At the level of micro structures, the analysis includes lexical units and lexical sets, nominalisation or various discourse strategies which are realised at the micro level. Both levels of analysis, complementing each other, were employed in the research.

News discourse structures and news discourse production are interconnected aspects of news. As Van Dijk observes, "Processes of production are a function of the structures of source texts but they also depend on the structural plans that underlie the news text to be written by the journalist" (Van Dijk, 1988b: 95). Production of news entails processing of the discourses of different social actors and their selection is seen as one of the most important aspects of journalistic work (Tuchman, 2004). For this reason, the analysis of news stories also included the selection of sources whose statements are translated into news discourse.

In the analysis of comments' related to a text, the concept of proposition as a basic unit of semantic structures (Van Dijk, 1980) was used. Proposition was defined following Van Dijk (1977: 59) as "n-place predicates followed by n arguments which may be bound by quantifiers". We distinguished between agreement of comment proposition with the media text proposition, contestation and negotiation. On the level of its global structure, news usually has one macro proposition provided in the headline and lead (Van Dijk, 1988a) and various micro propositions that are coherent within the macro structure. Comments are, by rule of a genre, related to macro and micro propositions of the news. The three positions – agreement, con-

testation and negotiation – were used to classify how the comments respond to any of the news propositions. Those positions are realised in different ways and, though interesting, this question remained beyond the scope of the present analysis.

Results

In response to 121 stories about poverty, the readers of B92.net and blic.rs have posted 3,709 comments. Among those, 2,090 comments were about poverty while others were either topically non-related to the news stories or they were responding to non-poverty related episodic topics of the news. On average, each story received around 30 comments. Still, the actual distribution of the number of comments to news varied greatly, from no comments at all to 263 comments made to the story about social exclusion in higher education. There were seven news items that attracted more than 100 comments: three of them were covering the activities of political leaders and two were about access to higher education. While the first group indicates that party struggles provoke more action (Weber, 2013), the second group could be taken as an indicator of internet demographics. The stories portraying poor individuals or their families, as well as the stories about extreme exclusion (children with autism, street children, and disabled persons) received no more than 5 comments.

Poverty in the online news

Critical discourse analysis of online news stories is consistent with the findings of media coverage of poverty in Serbia. Domination of official, administrative sources and prevalence of naturalization strategy is also found in the news on two websites. To provide detailed accounts of this discourse, four news stories will be analysed in detail. These stories are selected because they are published on the occasion of the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (17th October). The predictability of this occasion left more space for journalists to prepare their stories and, in comparison to other stories from the sample; news production is guided less by an immediate event and more by the journalistic routines. For this reason we can take these four stories to be more illustrative of the way media treat the topic of poverty.

In the Appendix we provide details on the key elements of the analysis – 1) headlines and 2) leads which are the carriers of macro proposition of the whole news stories, 3) social subjects who act as sources whose voice is presented in the stories, 4) lexemes used to describe the poor and 5) direct quotations occurring in the stories that act as a legitimizing force behind news facticity. This detailed information will further be used in the analysis of discursive responses found in the comments.

Macro propositions of the four texts are different realisations of the theme poverty in Serbia. In the first story, the proposition is built as a metaphor of the poor being invisible to the authorities. The weak cohesion between the headline and lead is achieved by visual metaphor ("see the poor", "real image of the poor"). It is weak because the presupposition in the headline (there are poor in Serbia) is extended in the lead with the causal link manifested in temporal terms. However, there is no cohesion with the sentence about authorities not seeing the poor. This lack of cohesion continues through the text, and the only connection between the headline and the remaining part of the text can be found at the end of the second direct quote ("so the official organs do not register them"). However, this subordinate clause is in consequential relation to another micro proposition ("They are the only ones who should not be ashamed for reaching the situation of bare survival"). This lack of structural cohesion in the first story gives little cues to readers as to how to create macro propositions from the micro ones and opens up the creation of meaning to subjective interpretation.

In the second text, headline and lead are straightforward in the claim that poverty is below 8,500 dinars (about 80 euros). Poverty in the headline is subject to specification in the lead as the status of "every tenth citizen of Serbia". In the remainder of the story two moves can be established. First, there is generalisation in the direct quote of the Minister's words ("many European countries") which expands the geographical scope of poverty and possibly acts as an explanation of poverty in Serbia. Second, in the elaboration of poverty in Serbia the focus of the story is, starting from the 8th paragraph, narrowed to the poverty of children which functions as a specification of the main macro proposition given in the headline and lead.

The headline of the third text uses medical metaphor for the macro proposition 'economic developments leads to poverty reduction'. The lead contains modal "must" that signals necessity or strong recommendation, and which supports the inference that currently the whole society is not taking responsibility. In the first direct quote, scope of poverty is being presented and evaluated ("disturbing") and it is given the status of the cause of necessity for joint social action.

The fourth text, similar to the second, has a propositional structure built around the verb 'be', as the statement of facts. This is further elaborated by providing additional facts per employment types, monthly and yearly comparisons. The second proposition is introduced by the subtitle "9.2 per cent of citizens lives in poverty" and although the unemployed are not explicitly labelled as poor in the first part, the second part of the story puts the previously given unemployment data in context. The remainder of the news follows the pattern of the second story, but instead of

accentuating one of the groups affected by poverty, one short paragraph is dedicated to five different poor groups. There is no attempt at establishing links between them, and cohesion is achieved only at the end when the poor are again generalised as beneficiaries of state aid.

The structure of news sources in all four texts is very similar – those are high officials and administration members. It is also important to notice that the four analysed leads consist of reported speech of elite sources. The only exception to this pattern is the non-profit working with children. The usage of this source and accentuation of children in poverty creates a positive image of the poor, as "angels" (Devereux, 1998) in need of assistance. This image of the deserving poor is also explicitly given in the second quotation in the first text ("They are the only ones who should not be ashamed") and implicitly in the lead of the third text in which responsibility is placed on "the whole society".

The lexemes used in identifying the poor are very simplistic in the first and third texts, while the second and fourth use a number of different identifications to suggest the scope of those affected by poverty. Distinction between the jobless and the ones who have a job is also used as a differentiation between the poor and non-poor. Beyond these explicit labels, there is a number-oriented and administrative representation of the poor. In the first text, the poor are described as those "living below the poverty line" – the term used by administrative classifications. In the second and fourth texts, the experience of poverty is determined by the amount of dinars. This administrative view is reinforced by portraying the people becoming poor as entering the administrative category. Finally in the third text, eradication of poverty is presented as "winning over the numbers".

In contrast to research in other countries, the reasons for poverty are found neither in individuals nor in the social structure, but in the world economic crisis. It is given the agency on its own and the generalization ("our country") indicates that the poor are not the only ones affected. Interestingly, in two stories, the cause-effect between economic crisis and increase in poverty is presented in temporal terms, which further strengthens naturalisation of the causes of poverty.

The quotations are reserved to institutional actors. They provide additional legitimacy of the data, its interpretation and most importantly they serve as a space for institutions to explain the measures taken by the authorities. The "number game" (Van Dijk, 1988b) serves to demonstrate that the importance of problems are indirectly resolved by addressing the question: what is being done. Implicitly, the claim is that institutions are responsible for answering this question, but no additional context is given to evaluate the self-promoting statements.

Contesting the media representation of poverty

The analysis of the entire sample of 2,090 comments shows that the propositions in the news are frequently subject to contestation. The analysis revealed that in 45% of comments, the readers are rejecting the proposition given in the media texts, in 26% they are supporting them, while in 23% of all comments they are negotiating with them – rejecting some and approving others. In 6% of comments the relation to the texts remained unclear due to non-standard grammar or possible, but not definite, irony.

These relations between a news story and a comment are sometimes overtly expressed. In commenting on the proposition that the whole society should combat poverty, one of the commenters uses negatively marked 'blah, blah' and says: "A bunch of blah, blah and nothing concrete. 'Whole society' this, that. Nothing about who, when, what, how, only decades of blah, blah." Another overt form of contestation is when commenters refer to the facts presented in the news. For example, in response to the figure presented in the news, one of the comments briefly states: "Unemployment rate is close to 40%".

Disapproval in the comments is often expressed in the form of ridicule, irony and cynicism. In one of the comments, the user is comparing the main idea of the third text to the famous quote from Alan Ford comics: "If there is no economic development it is hard to speak about poverty reduction. This is like No. 1 saying: 'If you want to win, you can't lose'". In a more bitter tone the other comment ridicules the good news and provides his/her own interpretation of the proposition that there is less unemployed people: "This news is encouraging, unemployment slowly reduced, number of the poor as well. The number of citizens of Serbia is smaller every year, they leave or die, so they are neither unemployed nor poor."

The contestation is not limited to propositions. Analysis shows that it includes four other ways in which comments respond to the media discourse. The first can be labelled as the battle over definitions of poverty in which comments reject the symbolic boundaries between the poor and non-poor created by the media. The second is related to the legitimacy of the sources who are given voice in the media. The third is contestation over attribution of responsibility for poverty. We explore these further below.

Definition of the poor

In the four texts analysed in the previous section, the poor are defined in the administrative terms through numbers. In the series of comments, users are rejecting the bar that is placed at 80 euros thus implicitly and explicitly contesting the official

data on the number of poor: "Poverty is measured with 8,500 dinars, where's the soul of those who reached this figure", "I think that similar line is used by UN as the threshold for hunger", "Authorities do not see the poor because there is more than 70% of us. Look how many people live below the poverty line"; "Statistics is great, poor with 8,000 dinars. I use that money just to pay electricity and phone bills!!! 63% of citizens are poor, and 30% is extremely poor".

Further, users recognise the implicature of the stories that those having more than 80 euros are rich. As one of them claims: "What does it mean to other 70%. If I have 15,000 dinars to pay for bread and bills that I'm rich". In a longer comment, another user is referring to the amount as being sufficient only for basic food:

> "8,500 as poverty line! With that money you can survive until 15th of the month, but only if you don't pay the bills, not to speak about meat, clothes… the poverty line is at least 15,000 dinars… Look at them, you are not poor if you had a piece of bread in the last week".

It should be noted that this battle over the boundaries of poverty is present in comments to other stories as well. While in previous examples the citizens objected to 'the poverty bar' being set very low, they also responded to the bar being set high. This is especially the case with the news coverage of the strikes of police, students and taxi drivers. This is the active process of negotiations not only in relation to the news but among the comments as well. In response to news report about police strike, one user writes, "Police gentlemen, it's not that I'm not on your side, you have families, children… but you could earn your annual budget only if you wanted (…)", the second one continues: "To be honest, their income was higher than professors' even before the strike" and the third responds "Professors are in classrooms in dry and warm weather, unlike constables who are exposed to all conditions".

As this example shows, the battles over definitions are at the same time negotiations between the allocation of public money, and socio-economic status; working conditions and the societal value of the groups claiming their right to it. Interestingly, news stories giving rise to these negotiations do not offer the incentives for such discussion. Instead of treating policy issues, media coverage provides decontextualized reporting about the most immediate events and it seems that the policy debate moved from news to comments.

Legitimacy of the sources

Comments about the legitimacy of the sources are usually commenters' recognition of the social status of the ones speaking about poverty. In the first text, the users recognise the rhetorical move of the President of the Parliamentary Board for Work

who speaks about authorities as a group to which he does not belong. Bluntly, one commenter points to that: "You are the authority, man". By excluding himself from the authorities group the source of this article also mitigates his responsibility, and it is noticed in the comment "Mister Omerović speaks when his party is not participating in the government, as if he is not the one who should solve those problems".

There is an understanding among commenters that the sources are elite representatives ("And you who have (elite), you could show some solidarity and help them"). Very strong delegitimisation of political elite is accompanied by delegitimisation of other institutional and organisational representatives such as students or union representatives. As the example above shows the lines of separation between the two groups – elites with access to the media and citizens – are constructed as us–them opposition even though commenting that "us" is not necessarily related to poverty.

Attribution of responsibility

A stark difference between citizens' and mass media discourse was found in the attribution of responsibility. Contrary to news, in more than a half of the analysed comments, the readers mention the ones responsible for poverty. This discourse of responsibility, similar to delegitimisation, is highly anti-elitist and political parties and state officials are most frequently mentioned as being responsible for the citizens' poor social status.

The politicians are identified both as a source of poverty ("Thanks to incapability of this government, people are led to despair…") and as the ones who should take action to reduce poverty ("This government advertised itself as being socially responsible. It is neither responsible nor social"). The government is blamed for its incapability and even more frequently for overspending ("How much money is needed for one salary in comparison to the costs for representation of some leaders of the ruling party") and corruption. In that respect comments often point to the ties between politicians and tycoons. As a typical example:

> *"I can't stop thinking about the rich in Serbia who live in wealth. About insanely rich, about Misković and Beko [tycoons] who possess 90% of Serbia and together with Boris Tadić [Serbian president] they rule and make people poor."*

The image of "devils of poverty" (Devereux, 1998), found in the institutional contexts dominated by neoliberal philosophies, was not found in Serbian media. In the comments, however, the macro proposition of irresponsibility of undeserving poor is found, but only in response to the texts in which the strategy of symbolic marginalization is employed. Prevalently, individual responsibility takes the form in which individual agency is preserved, but individual activity is conceptualised as making the state doing its job.

Discussion and conclusion

The results of this study can be seen as part of the research corpus aimed at furthering our understanding of audience relations to journalism in a time when it has become more apt to provide citizens with options to voice themselves. The analysis of news and users' comments shows that active readers engaged in deconstructing media discourse and offered their own. That way the commenting, as the practice of re-reading and re-formulating what is in the news, challenges the previously dominant status of the media as constructors of reality. Even though this work might originate in "particitainment" (Saffo, 1992), it moves the discursive power of news back to the audience.

In many respects, the communities formed in the comments bear more resemblance to "homogenous communities" than to "communities of debate" (Ruiz et al., 2011) in that expression of feelings dominates over argumentative debate. In a way, they act as counter-deliberative counter-public (Dahlberg, 2011), but their formation into public is still under question. Placed symbolically below the news, within the lines of other comments, the contesting comments lose their participatory force. Even though the discursive power of news becomes contested, the contesting comments are tamed by their very presentation as a voice of anonymous mass.

This interpretation can account for the reasons why the editorial control over the comments, if we judge by the analysed sample, is so much against the editorial decisions behind the news discourse. Another possibility of this editorial openness to contestation might be, and this should be investigated further, is that there is a sort of awareness among journalists that a) what the commenters contest is not their discourse but the discourse of their sources and that b) citizens should not be included in the news but that they should be given the commenting floor. Further, the commenters are maybe asking questions and providing opinions which the journalists and editors in Serbia cannot, and perhaps in this respect Serbia is not an isolated case.

The key question of participatory journalism is whether the activities of non-journalists, though this separation becomes blurred, matters to journalism. In the maximalist notion of participation (Carpentier, 2011a; 2011b) this would happen if the citizens' definitions would be integrated in further stories or if journalists responded to any of them. In the research presented, no indication of the latter was found, though possibility of anonymous commenting leaves room to think that some journalists contributed to the conversations. Nagar (2011) found that talkbacks do influence media agenda, but this finding is not supported by this research. Still, two

years after the empirical material is gathered, in 2013, the newspaper *Blic* started a practice of making news stories, both for online and offline editions, which are basically a selection of comments to their own news. Interestingly, one of the first such stories is the one about comments responding to the new government proposal for welfare system.

In interpreting the results, it is necessary to point out two limitations – topical and geographical. Although poverty is institutionally and globally defined using various parameters, it is still a phenomenon with a strong subjective dimension. In comparison to media reporting about distant events, citizens are much more able to relate to stories about poverty through their own personal knowledge. Analysis of different topics of news and comments would possibly lead to different results. The geographical limitation is that the research was done in one country and the results are necessarily tied to specific circumstances. With the country's overall transition, institutional philosophies and poverty reduction measures changing; this opens the poverty signifier to possibly higher degrees of contestation than in other countries. Part of this geographical limitation is also connected to journalistic performance in different media systems. The Serbian media landscape still has strong elements of etatism (Milojević & Kleut, 2010) and rising clientelism, and it shares many characteristics with Hallin and Mancini's (2004) polarized-pluralism model. The discursive power of user comments' as audience participatory potential thus needs to be further investigated in different journalistic contexts if we are to reach generalised conclusions.

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APPENDIX: Elements of analysis in the four selected news items

Headline	Lead	Actors/Sources	Lexemes used in identification of the poor	First quotation (source)	Second quotation (source)
Omerović: The authorities do not see the poor (blic.rs, 17.10.2011)	The president of the Parliamentary Board for Work Meho Omerović said the real image of the poor in Serbia is worse today than before the economic crises.	1) The president of the Parliamentary Board for Work	1) The poor, 2) The most vulnerable citizens, 3) People living below the poverty line	*We cannot build the society that approaches the EU with the increased number of people living below the poverty line.* (The president of the parliamentary Board for work)	*The real image of the poor in Serbia is worse today than before the economic crises because a number of people lost their jobs, but not their dignity: They are the only ones who should not be ashamed for reaching the situation of bare survival, so the official organs do not register them.* (The president of the parliamentary Board for work)
Poverty is measured with 8,500 dinars (b92.net, 17.10.2011)	Every tenth citizen of Serbia lives with less than 8,544 dinars a month, says Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy Suzana Paunović.	1) Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy, 2) Minister of Labour and Social policy, 3) Association of organisations for children	1) Rural areas inhabitants, 2) Five and six member families, 3) People without education, 4) Unemployed, 5) Citizens of central Serbia, 6) Children, 7) Single parents, 8) The poor	*Many European countries have reduced social welfare. With a new Law on Social Protection and with the help of IMF we managed to raise direct payments for social care from 6.000-12.000 dinars to 6.500-25.000 dinars* (Minister of Labour and Social Policy)	*Unfortunately, this is the everyday life of more than 140,000 children in Serbia. The poor families are receiving child support in the amount of 2,205 dinars. It is 300 dinars per child more than last year* (Association of organisations for children)
Economic development cure for poverty (17.10.2011, b92.net)	President of the Serbian Parliament Slavica Đukić-Dejanović says the whole society must take responsibility for overcoming the growing problem of poverty.	1) President of the Serbian Parliament, 2) President of the Parliamentary Board for Poverty Reduction, 3) Leader of the government Team for Poverty Reduction	The poor	*The data from 2010 show that more than nine per cent of the population entered the category of the poor: This is very disturbing and demands that all social actors unite to win over the numbers that work against us.* (President of the Serbian Parliament)	*These numbers show that the economic crisis has struck hard our country in the last three years.* (President of the Serbian Parliament)
Unemployment in Serbia higher for 1.2 per cent, 9.2 per cent of citizens are poor (blic.rs, 17.10.2011)	The official statistics estimated that at the end of August there was 1.75 mil. employed persons and in comparison to the same month last year it decreased for 1.2 per cent, states the latest edition of the Chamber of Commerce bulletin.	1) Chamber of Commerce, 2) Deputy Minister of Labour and Social policy	1) Rural areas inhabitants, 2) Five and six member families, 3) People without education, 4) Unemployed, 5) Citizens of central Serbia, 6) Elderly households, 7) The poor	*There is 9.2 per cent of poor citizens, and the most vulnerable are the citizens of rural areas.* (Chamber of Commerce)	*In comparison to 2006-2008 period, when the number of poor decreased, during 2009 and 2010, primarily because the economic crisis, their numbers increased, so in 2009 there was 6.9% of poor, and a year later there was 9.2%.* (Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Policy)

Konstrukcija i dekonstrukcija siromaštva na srpskim internetskim stranicama vijesti

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SAŽETAK

Komentari korisnika ispisani na internetskim stranicama tradicionalnih medijskih organizacija još uvijek pripadaju asimetričnom odnosu producenata mainstream vijesti i interaktivnih publika. Ipak, kada su strukturno smješteni na sučelju internetske stranice tako da izravno slijede nakon vijesti, komentari korisnika su sadržaj koji su kreirali korisnici (user-generated content), najizravnije povezan s novinarskim pričama. Taj sadržaj čini diskurzivni prostor u kojem su reprezentacije svijeta masovnih medija legitimizirane, pregovarane i osporavane. Cilj je ovog istraživanja ispitati te odnose između diskursa mainstream vijesti i diskursa korisničkih komentara o specifičnoj društvenoj temi – siromaštvu. Primjenjujući metodu kritičke analize diskursa provedenu na 121 novinskoj priči o siromaštvu i odgovarajućim korisničkim komentarima napisanim na dvjema najpopularnijim internetskim stranicama u Srbiji B92.net i Blic.rs, članak otkriva kako ta dva medija konstruiraju siromaštvo i društvenu isključenost, a kako korisnici u komentarima osporavaju te diskurzivne konstrukcije. Rezultati pokazuju da postoji znatna količina osporavanja te da su najosporavaniji aspekti novinskih priča granice siromaštva, legitimnost izvora i pripisivanje odgovornosti.

Ključne riječi: publika, novinari, siromaštvo, diskurs, korisnički komentari, Srbija

TENA PERIŠIN

televizijske vijesti