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## **SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE INTERNET IN NEW REALITY DUE TO COVID-19**

### **Resume**

The social implications of information communication technology (ICT), the Internet and cyberspace depend on economic, legal, and policy decisions. The Pandemic made a new reality that is shaping the Internet as it becomes institutionalized in each domain of its usage. This paper discusses the new reality of social existence during COVID-19 using three levels of analysis: macro, mezo and micro level analysis. During the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing became part of everyday life worldwide and the home became an office. How does the COVID-19 threat suddenly transform institutional priorities and burst public-private sphere boundaries? Much of the debate over pandemics, the Internet and their influence on social capital is about whether the Internet attenuates users human relationships, or whether it serves to reinforce them in this new reality. There is a need to study the Internet more actively and, particularly, to synthesize research findings on the social implications of the Internet.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, new reality, Internet, social isolation

### **INTRODUCTION**

The questions we ask and the answers we provide depend heavily on the socio-political climate we live in. The COVID-19 pandemic made a new reality all over the world. The paper offers a general analytical framework for future researches. Three levels of analysis were applied in the paper: macro, mezo and micro

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level analysis. The first part of the paper, macro-level analysis, discussed the COVID-19 pandemic's influence on international relations and geopolitics. This level of analysis shows that there are three most significant changes. Second, mezzo-level analysis deals with government local issues towards health measures. Ahead of policy makers is task how to make best local practices and outcomes in health, economy and policy using worldwide prescribed and proposed health measures. Third, micro-analysis further investigates and compares various COVID-19 background impact on personal level - changes in communication and social isolation. Crises appears at each level of analysis, which reflects uncertainties at all three levels of social existence. The Internet is the technology with which real life, the offline world, can be enhanced, revitalized or even radically changed. An analysis of the impact of the Internet needs to consider the Internet's place in new a reality due to COVID-19. It helps to understand exactly how it is being used and what are the social implications of its use.

## NEW REALITY

The COVID-19 backdrop is ongoing uncertainty, which has become a part of everyday life worldwide, creating a new reality. Health and safety measures are at play around the world and have impacted both the public and private sphere of social life. In the *new reality*, many questions (“how,” “when,” and “where”) get done continue to unfold. Social distancing and isolation appeared as rapid necessary response in terms of public health programming to mitigate the health impacts of COVID-19. In considering a new reality, multilevel analysis appears as a key method.

*Macro level analysis* – Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused an international lock down, some authors (Burrows & Engelke 2020, 12–14; Luknar 2020b, 33) point to its impact on international relations and geopolitics. First, there is potential for open conflict. COVID-19 caused economic crises which at one side can slow down the economic progress of developed countries to which they are accustomed, trying to get used to new reality and make opportunity to developing world economy rising on the other side. Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has tilted the geopolitical balance in favor of developing powers such as China and Serbia (Table 1), while western democracies are unable

to deal effectively with the pandemic. According to the USA Congressional Budget Office (CBO) deficit in 2020 was 14,9% of GDP; the deficit on average over the past 50 years was 3,3% of GDP (CBO 2021). The International Monetary Fund (IMF) on April 2021 increased China's growth projection to 8.4 percent for this year, as effective COVID-19 containment measures boost the economy's strong recovery (IMF 2021a). While, the Russian Federation's real GDP is 3.8 percent and the USA 6.4 percent for this year (IMF 2021b). Third, it may lead to a new renaissance of global cooperation and the inclusion of new developing powers in combat mutual interests. The Russian space agency Roscosmos made an agreement in February to announce the intent of China and Russia to develop an "International Lunar Research Station" (Foust 2021). As Schröder (2021) mentioned: "The stakes are high and too much is on the line to let the US-China rivalry escalate into a military conflict. Instead, both countries need to come together to develop a joint vision for a sustainable and peaceful world."

Table 1: Serbia - Projections of public revenues, expenditures and debt (% of GDP)

	2019	2020	2021	2022
Public revenues	42,1	40,3	40,4	40,5
Public expenditures	42,3	49,2	43,4	42,1
Public debt	52,9	59,0	58,7	57,9

Source: Ministry of Finance (China-CEE Institute 2021)

*Mezzo level analysis* When World Health Organization (WHO) strivings become subject to the logic of the civil sphere, widespread anguish emerges about the future of humanity and concern for its survival, best public and social policies. Pandemic "limit conditions" makes cyberspace one of the most important social and media spheres, while the Internet becomes the door of the locked world. Civil sphere agents, the journalists, bloggers and legal investigators became important authorities. "Boundaries between spheres can be breached only if there is code switching" (Alexander 2018, 1049). "The civil sphere, moreover, is not only discursive. It possesses powerful materiality, via factual and fictional communicative institutions

and powerful regulative institutions backed by state coercion” (Alexander 2018, 1050). Once admired institutional elites come to be depicted as perpetrators of new social reality, and the civil sphere becomes critically intrusive, leading to consideration and repairs that aim for social and public policy purification. Crises ensue, institutional elites make efforts to juggle between socio-economic policies and health measures. Such a situation leaves room to strengthen the political and media influence of social media actors. As Wellman argues: “In networked societies, boundaries are permeable” (Wellman 2001, 227). According to Ku, the civil sphere is at once oppositional and aspirational (Ku, 1998). The Internet and cyberspace allow fast and easy communication no matter the distance and make everyone’s voice heard. Nothing about the location and traction of civil boundaries is certain. So, social media actors appear as loud voices beside policy makers and experts in looking for the best solutions to preserve both health and the economy.

*Micro level analysis* This level of analysis deals with new reality, ICT and Internet use from a personal perspective, as well as considering the term social isolation.

## THE INTERNET’S PLACE IN NEW REALITY

Structural features of new ICT induce social change by enabling new forms of communication. Some authors critically problematize the effects of technological change on political deliberation and the integrity of civil society (Habermas 1989; Calhoun 1998). According to Manuel Castells, digital information technology “provides the material basis” for the “pervasive expansion” of “the networking form of organization” in every realm of social structure (Castells 1996, 468). As Castells notice the world is entering in “information age”. The Internet offers new forms of communication and identity. Initial expectations were enthusiastic. Some authors point to the benefits of the Internet. “The Internet would boost efficiency, making people more productive and enabling them to avoid unnecessary transportation by accomplishing online tasks like banking, shopping, library research, even socializing online. The results (less stress, more time, new online contacts) would make individuals more fulfilled and build social capital for society at large” (DiMaggio et al 2001, 314).

The fact that people are interacting on the Internet in “invisible” cyberspace does not mean that they aren’t connected. Going online offers people many activities: chatting and exchanging short text messages, visiting online communities, playing games etc. According to Wellman et al (2002, 4): “The Internet makes it necessary to redefine our understanding of what social capital is and, hence, to introduce new ways to measure it.” He suggests “a set of current and imminent changes that creates possibilities – social affordances – for how the Internet can influence everyday life: 1. Broader Bandwidth (The rapid exchange of large amounts of data); 2. Always Connected (People value 24/7/365 connectivity more than sheer speed); 3. Personalization (This form of communication is more tailored to individual preferences and needs); 4. Wireless Portability; 5. Globalized Connectivity” (Wellman et al 2002, 5).

Analysts (Kraut et al 1998; Nie 2001; Wellman et al 2002) of the Internet’s Effects on Community have pointed to different effects, both positive and negative effects. First, “the Internet decreases community” (Wellman et al 2002, 6) by offering worldwide information, communication and entertainment. All these capabilities may reduce people’s interest in the local community, its politics, family and friends (Nie 2001; Nie and Erbring 2002). Many researches confirm that Internet use is a substitute for other interactions. Kraut et al (1998), studying 169 Pittsburgh-area families who were given computers and Internet connections over a two-year period, reported that higher levels of Internet use were “associated with declines in communication with family members, declines in social circles, and increased loneliness and depression.” Second, “the effect of Internet use may vary with user competence” (Neuman W.R., O’Donnell S.R., Schneider S.M. 1996. In: DiMaggio et al 2001, 316). The novices compared to experienced Internet users were less successful in finding information, and were more likely to experience frustration and negative reactions. Third, the Internet provides inexpensive and convenient communication (Barlow et al. 1995), especially with those who are far away and „transforms and supplements the community” (Wellman et al 2002, 6). Authors (Koku, Nazer and Wellman 2001; DiMaggio et al 2001) suggest that the Internet helps maintain contact over long distances. And, mostly e-mail contacts are between people who interact face-to-face (Koku, Nazer and Wellman 2001). Further, the Internet facilitates existing

social relationships, offers electronic hobbies and political interests online and “follows patterns of civic engagement and socialization” (Wellman et al 2002, 6). As DiMaggio et al (2001, 318) mentioned: “The Internet sustains the bonds of community by complementing, not replacing, other channels of interaction” (DiMaggio et al 2001, 318).

Further, the Internet has contributed to a network-based society and appears as the main tool in the new reality to maintain communication and cooperation on all three levels of analysis: 1. macro (global, international); 2. mezzo (national, local) and 3. micro level (personal).

## **SOCIAL ISOLATION AND THE INTERNET**

“Coronavirus will push advanced technology and its adoption forward in almost every field of our existence, including: E-government, medicine & healthcare, application of robotics, agriculture and food production, distance learning etc. While the use of IT (information-technology) appears as the main tool to communicate and minimize the pandemic’s impact of social distancing, the availability of the Internet and online communication has become essential for any person, institution and even government” (Luknar 2020a, 621). Parallel to growth of the internet, IT possibilities and increase number of the users, continues to grow negative effects and uncertainties of their uses. IT possibilities have changed human social interaction as people spend more time online. Within a few studies (Kraut et al 1998; Nie and Erbring 2000; Shah et al 2002, 965), frequent Internet use has been related to withdrawal from family and community life and Internet users have become increasingly removed from meaningful social relationships and less likely to engage the community.

The Internet may induce anomie and erode social capital by enabling users to retreat into an artificial world (Kraut et al 1998, Nie and Erbring 2000). Some researchers argue that the Internet contributes to social isolation. Even though ICT communication offers a number of emotional-verbal cues and intonations, it does not replace a personal visit. Nie (2001, 432) argue “It is not that well-written e-mail is incapable of expressing important emotions; it is simply that written communication is not equivalent to face-to-face interaction”.

Information Communication Technology and the Internet have profoundly reshaped the ways in which people relate to each other and the meaning they derive from such relationships. According to Segal (1994), technology is a disruptive social process. Contemporary ICT and Internet allow people to connect with each other, quickly and easily like never before. “Social isolate is no longer (exclusively) a person with no friends but rather includes a person with so many friends that her resulting cognitive cost of navigating the social space generates the feeling of loneliness” (Parigi and Henson 2014, 155). Isolation can be studied both as „negative outcome of processes related to modernization” and “as a structural position potentially capable of delivering positive returns” (Parigi and Henson 2014, 153). Goffman (1990, 13) briefly explained the way people look at ‘self’ and socially interact: “When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information ... or to bring into play information ... already possessed.” The Internet and ICT users can be able to alleviate that feeling of isolation by creating an online sense of ‘self’.

## CONCLUSION

With the technological revolution, online interaction has become a regular part of the daily life of people worldwide. But, in new reality caused by COVID-19 it becomes necessity. These cyberspace interactions generate new social implications. While the pandemic prescribed measures of social isolation and work from home, “boundaries” between private-public spheres have become more fluid than ever. This fluidity of the boundaries re-examines earlier social settings. State and institutional authority are diminished by social network authorities (bloggers, influencers, agencies) and the trust they enjoy. Some research findings suggest that the Internet has no negative effects on people’s social networks (Franzen 2000), while other findings contradict and report that the Internet diminishes people’s social networks (Kraut et al. 1998). With respect, the above mentioned researchers gave no clear answer and we do not yet know what the long-term effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and Internet use will be. The variables used in many studies researching social implications of the Internet and ICT use, depend to a large extent

of the questions which society considers relevant at the time. Also, those studies emphasize that the nature of this research question is historically situated. The COVID-19 pandemic push forward ICT and Internet use. This study deals with new reality due to COVID-19 as analytical framework for studying social implications of the Internet in contemporary society. The results of this study, indicate that social implications of the Internet and ICT use are long term issue that needs to be examine.

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## ДРУШТВЕНЕ ИМПЛИКАЦИЈЕ ИНТЕРНЕТА У НОВОЈ РЕАЛНОСТИ ТОКОМ КОВИД-19

### Сажетак

Друштвене импликације информационо-комуникационих технологија (ИКТ), интернета и сајбер простора зависе од економских, правних и политичких одлука. Пандемија је створила нову реалност која обликује интернет који проналази примену у готово сваком домену. Овај рад разматра нову друштвену реалност насталу услед КОВИД-19 помоћу три нивоа анализе: макро, мезо и микро ниво анализе. Током пандемије изазване вирусом КОВИД-19, социјално дистанцирање постало је део свакодневног живота широм света, а дом канцеларија. Како опасност од вируса КОВИД-19 мења досадашње институционалне приоритете и руши некадашње границе јавно-приватне сфере? Значајан део расправе о пандемији, интернету и њиховом утицају на друштвени капитал односи се на то да ли интернет слаби међуљудске односе својих корисника или пак доприноси њиховом јачању у постојећој новој реалности. Неупитно постоји потреба за активним проучавањем интернета, а нарочито за систематизацијом досадашњих налаза истраживања о друштвеним импликацијама интернета.

**Кључне речи:** Ковид-19, интернет, нова реалност, друштвена  
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