IDENTITIES ON THE NET: GENDER AND NATIONAL STEREOTYPES ON CROATIAN BROAD-REACH PORTALS

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This article combines content analysis and semiotic analysis to discuss various ways of perceiving and creating identity of the users of new media products in the transition society of Croatia. The analysis of gender and national stereotypes on the mainstream Croatian Internet portals is meant as a contribution to understanding of what happens when technologies gaining prominence simultaneously with the processes of individualization and reflexive modernization (Beck) meet with a cultural context in which modern and premodern tendencies prevail. The results of our analysis reveal that the owners and editors of the analyzed portals make their business decisions departing from the perception of an 'unproblematic' identity of the users. In spite of a relative scarcity of national stereotypes, the content of the portals is mostly directed at what is perceived as a non-individualized and unfragmented, male-identified audience. Methodologically, the article aims to demonstrate that an essentially old media technique of analysis can be successfully applied to a new media product.

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INTRODUCTION

This article presents the results of an analysis of gender and national stereotypes found on the pages of Croatian broad--reach Web portals. Its conclusions are based on a combined content analysis and semiotic analysis of verbal and visual texts in the sample.

The aim of the article is to offer an example of what happens when technologies gaining prominence simultaneously with the processes of individualization and 'reflexive' modernization (Beck) meet with a cultural context in which modern and premodern tendencies prevail.

The context of Croatian society provides a particularly good example for this, because the 1990s reemergence of traditional structures in that society came about simultaneously with the globally increasing importance of the Internet. In addition to this, the advent of the Internet in the 1990s coincided with the first steps of Croatia as a nation-state. This provides an excellent opportunity for studying the use of an essentially 'postmodern' ('reflexive') technology in a society faced with the processes typical of what according to Beck (1986) can be interpreted as simple ('industrial') modernization.

The text that follows initially describes the context of Croatian society in the 1990s and explains the choice of national and gender stereotypes as indicators of antimodernizing tendencies. This is followed by information on the sample and a discussion of the nature of the employed methods of analysis. Research results are then presented and commented upon in the concluding part of the article.

CROATIAN SOCIETY IN THE 1990s

In light of an overall reemergence of traditional patriarchal structures in Croatian society in the 1990s, fuelled by a process of national redefinition and the war circumstances that accompanied it (Tomić-Koludrović, 1996), the dramatic increase of national and gender stereotypes in the public discourse of that country comes as no surprise.

Our initial hypothesis was that national and gender stereotypes could be used as an indicator of what Beck (1994) describes as antimodernizing tendencies in the postsocialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

However, to achieve necessary analytical specificity, one should also bear in mind the factors that make the present-day Croatian society different from the societies of the majority of other transition countries.

In addition to the fear of globalization, resulting in the 'new nationalisms' (Beck, 1994) in the entire region, Croatian society of the 1990s was characterized by a 'conflict regarding the state' (Touraine, 1985) brought about by the wars in the former Yugoslavia.

But what was different about the use of the Internet in Croatia in the 1990s cannot be reduced to the circumstances of extreme social polarisation in the war period (1991-1995) and to Croatia's relatively developed technological infrastructure.[1]

What was specific about the use of the Internet in Croatian society was also that it took place in a context where postmodern values were partly established even before the fall of the Berlin Wall. This could be seen as an outcome of the specific form of Yugoslav socialism and the cultural history of the Western parts of that country.[2]

The outbreak of the war was strongly detrimental to the processes of individualization and reflexive modernization starting to appear in the late socialist period. In spite of this, recent empirical studies (Tomić-Koludrović and Kunac, 2000; Tomić-Koludrović and Leburić, 2001) of various strata of the population (women, youth population) indicate that there still exist – however slight – intimations of postmodernity in Croatian society, mostly in the choice of leisure activities, values and attitudes.

On the other hand, typical of Croatian society in the 1990s was the reemergence of the collectivist paradigm and its extension even to those parts of the country previously marked by a highly individualist outlook and urban lifestyles. This was a consequence of a general homogenization caused by the war, as well as by large-scale migrations and the changing structure of the political and economic elites (Katunarić, 1996).

This particular confluence of factors makes Croatia in the 1990s a unique case for a study of how various uses of the Internet represent social values in a context where the elements of both simple and 'reflexive' modernizations are simultaneously at work, and are also coupled – to make things even more complicated – with very strong antimodernizing tendencies operating throughout the entire social spectrum.[3]

NATIONAL AND GENDER STEREOTYPES

The research this article is based on set out to analyze Internet-mediated gender and national stereotypes because the wealth of examples of both in Croatian print and broadcast media in the 1990s seemed to indicate their likely reappearance in the new media context. Our premise was also that these two indicators of antimodernizing tendencies in the present-day Croatian society could in some way be connected.

We were led to this assumption not only because, as many authors have noted, the discourses of national identity are frequently gendered (Hogan, 1999: 748). Our presupposition of the potential connectedness of the two sets of stereotypes was based on elements implicit in the very definition of stereotyping.

Stereotyping can be described as a set of representational practices aimed at the maintenance of social and symbolic order. As such, it necessarily involves the construction of 'otherness' as a basis for social differentiation.

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It goes without saying that a high incidence of national and ethnic stereotypes can be expected in a society undergoing war in the process of nation building. Likewise, the strengthening of the patriarchal paradigm necessarily accompanying such processes (Tomić-Koludrović, 1996) was bringing to the fore a male-dominated political culture actively seeking to minimize its 'other'. We have therefore departed from the assumption that the two types of stereotypes discussed in our analysis could be connected by virtue of their common participation in the strategy of 'splitting' resulting in the practice of 'closure' or exclusion (Hall, 1997: 258).

We considered this connection all the more possible because various strategies of 'reduc[ing] people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature' (Hall, 1997: 257), tend to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. Croatia in the 1990s and at the beginning of the 21st century obviously fit this description on several counts, ranging from ethnic, national, and gender issues to the distribution of income and wealth. If strategies of exclusion based on binary oppositions, such as racism and nationalism, are frequently connected, the same could also be true of nationalism and sexism.

CROATIAN WEB PORTALS

Web portals appeared in Croatia shortly after those in the United States. What is known as niche (i.e. topic-specific) portals, aimed initially at a limited population of computer enthusiasts, appeared in Croatia as early as 1995. The Monitor portal, which can be considered as a first attempt to establish a genuine broad-reach portal, began operation in 1997.[4] By the time the analysis this article is based on was carried out, there existed several portals of the kind. In spite of a relative scarcity of commercial services available on them, they clearly qualify as examples of the broad-reach genre.

Croatian broad-reach portals are seen here as a good starting point for an analysis of how the representational paradigm specific to the present-day Croatian society is structured and reproduced on the Internet. The content of these general interest portals is, namely, by definition aimed at the widest cross-section of the potential users and as such comparable to stereotyping practices at work in old media and elsewhere in the society.

In the field of new media, a number of studies are now being conducted that focus upon Web portals as cultural products or commercial entities in their own right (cf. Miller, 2000; Lash, n.d.; Leaning, 2000; Hargittai, 2000). As different from these, the analysis reported on in this article attempted to stu-

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dy the culture of the users as perceived by the editors and owners of Croatian broad-reach portals. In other words, the targeted identities of the users as revealed by the structure and content of the portals were viewed as indicators of the social processes at work in a given social context.

Our sample included home pages of four Croatian portals, downloaded daily in the period between October 18 and October 24, 2001 (a total of seven days). The sample included home pages of two portals that have emerged as leaders in the field in the recent process of ISP market consolidation (Hinet and Iskon),[5] as well as home pages of two general-interest portals maintained by smaller companies whose identities and profits are built around the portal (Monitor) or which maintain the portal essentially to advertise their services in other lines of telecommunications business (Hej). Added to this sample was the page of the Iskon portal lifestyle and entertainment section (Klik Magazin), which can be accessed independently and serve as a portal in its own right.[6]

The structure and visual style of Croatian broad-reach portals are consistent with the revenue generation strategies of their owners. Most features of the globally popular commercial portals are also found on Croatian portals. However, due to the structure of the local economy, their consumer features are in actuality far less developed than those of their counterparts in developed consumer societies.

In contexts with a more developed consumer infrastructure, 'the intention of a portal is to keep the user within a set of boundaries so that their consumption of media can be channeled through the portal's income generating systems' (Leaning, 2000). These systems include the portal-channeled selling of goods and services to the users and providing the space for the advertisers. In other words, 'the longer a user spends within a portal the more opportunities there are to either sell to them or to direct advertising at them' (Leaning, 2000).

In contrast with this, the scarcity of commercial services on the portals associated with the largest Croatian ISPs (Hinet and Iskon) seemed to indicate that the goal of the portal owners at the time of analysis was primarily to advertise their services and to keep the users on-line to generate income from the Internet service provision they offer.[7]

In spite of recent changes, in terms of the choice of content and layout, the major Croatian portals resemble the Web sites of broadsheet newspapers or public service broadcasters such as the BBC more so than those of the popular commercial portals such as Yahoo, Lycos, Excite, and Msn. Generally speaking, they contain more news and offer less consumer services and lifestyle-related hyperlinks. In terms of layout

and content organization, they can more justifiably be described as 'remediated' newspapers than as a medium-specific Internet genre.

OLD MEDIA WITHIN NEW MEDIA: COMBINING QUANTITATIVE AND SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

The sample described above was analyzed by means of a combination of the two techniques which various methodologists (Berger, 1991; Gunter, 2000; Kirby et al., 2000) agree the history of mass media analysis has filtered down as highly successful: content analysis and semiotic analysis. Our opinion was that these two techniques could also be successfully applied to the analysis of select new media products, among which arguably first and foremost the portals.

In the case of the analyzed Croatian sites, this Internet genre conforms quite well to 'the cultural expectation that the Web remediate [...] earlier media' (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 210). Many elements of these sites simply follow the logic of organization of the newspaper front page, with the addition of media-specific elements such as hyperlinks, search engines, interactive polls and advertising banners. In other words, the majority of the Web pages in the sample conform to Rivett's description of the early portals as a genre following the logic of print layout with the addition of hyperlinks (Rivett, 2000: 42). Since the element of interactivity is of secondary importance to almost all of the analyzed portals, it seems all the more justifiable to analyze them using the methods of old media analysis.

In the case of Croatian portals, neither a culture industries approach nor a technological substantivist approach seemed appropriate as methods of analysis. Culture industries approach focuses on 'objects as distinct from representations' (Lash et al., n.d.), while a technological substantivist approach examines their 'potential as an agent in determining the actions of users of the technology' (Leaning, 2000).

While it is beyond doubt that technology partly structures the users in this case as well, the structure of the portals in the sample cannot at present 'affect the presentation of self, the online identity' (Leaning, 2000) to the degree that would warrant the application of such approaches.[8] Croatian portals lend themselves more easily to the type of analysis in which their gate-keeping and agenda-setting functions are approached at the level of content and representations. These, in turn, are indicative of how the editors perceive and try to affect the identity of the users.

Although it is not strictly user-centered, this essentially old media approach can in all probability tells us more about

wider social trends than those viewing the user as affected by technology or approaching technology itself as an object of study. It is certainly appropriate for studying the heavily re-mediated Croatian portals, but should also be kept in mind when approaching more media-specific and up-to-date products of this Internet genre.[9] Namely, the content of the portals in general lends itself to quantification much more easily than, for example, the content of chat lines or ICQ, for the study of which different methodologies need to be devised.[10]

In the analysis this article is based on, we have opted for content analysis, not particularly because it is unobtrusive and yields data that can be quantified (Berger, 1991: 92-93), but because it was inexpensive to build up a sample and gain access to the required material (Kirby et al., 2000: 145).

Essentially, we have applied to the portals what Kirby et al. claim is '[b]y far the easiest and most accessible form' of newspaper content analysis ('the measurement in newspapers of biases in language, pictures, and use of space and headlines') (2000: 146).

In addition to focusing on national and gender stereotypes in the verbal discourse and visual texts in the sample, we have also quantified the analyzed content with regard to the profile of portal sections ('politics', 'business', 'entertainment and lifestyle', 'arts', 'technology', 'sports', 'health', 'environment', 'crime'), as well as the structure of advertising material and hyperlinks. Special attention was paid to the analysis of the number of appearances of male and female characters in the text.

To offset the limitations of quantitative content analysis, we have complemented it with qualitative (semiotic) analysis. The main limitation of quantitative content analysis would seem to be that it 'tend[s] to be purely descriptive' (Gunter, 2001: 81). In spite of this, we were of the opinion that valuable insights could be gained into the representational paradigm operating in a specific context by merely identifying and quantifying the nominated media content. However, it is true that these insights become even more compelling when subjected to a visual semiotic analysis.

What at the same time represents and constructs social relations – in newspapers and portals alike – is both the choice of topics and relative importance assigned to them by various textual and visual cues. In the case of portals and Web sites in general, a visual semiotic analysis would seem to be more important than the other five types of qualitative content analysis outlined by Hijmans (1996) (discourse analysis, rhetorical analysis, narrative analysis, interpretive analysis).

Semiotic analysis, which is 'theoretically inspired and aims at the latent meanings of the media message' (Gunter, 2000:

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86) is, namely, the only type of qualitative content analysis equipped to deal with both verbal and visual messages. It can therefore best explain the connection between the verbal message and the shades of meaning and emphasis given to it by its visual form. This is especially stimulating in the case of the analyzed portals, where verbal text is relatively scarce and the bias of its seemingly neutral content is highly congruent with the visual form in which it is expressed.

The use of visual semiotic analysis is all the more important because, as is well known, the visual element nowadays 'takes centre stage in representation' (Hall, 1997: 226) and studies of representation.[11]

In our analysis, we have mostly engaged in an elucidation of color and layout connotations inspired by Barthes's classical analysis (1964). In the analysis of the photographic and other pictorial materials, we have also distinguished between 'active' and 'passive' representations of male and female characters. This distinction was based on feminist theories of women being objectified by the male gaze initiated by Mulvey (1975), and included a reworking of Berger's (1972) protosemiotic interpretations and visual essays on the topic.

Of special importance to our analysis was the notion of the implied reader, initially developed in literary studies and brought to sophistication in the field of interpretive semiotics.[12] This notion helped us offset the objection that a certain reductionism of content meanings is implicit in content analysis and that it can result in the misinterpretation of media output and audience reactions (Gunter, 2001; McQuail, 1994).

Instead of concentrating on audience reactions, which are by definition inaccessible to content analysis, we have concentrated on an analysis of the conception of the reader that the editors and authors of the texts think they address, and that can be read off as an in-text strategy.

OLD POLITICS DOMINATES THE NEW MEDIUM

After analyzing a total of 1145 verbal texts and 743 photographs and other visual materials displayed on the home pages of the portals in the sample, we were able to reach several conclusions with regard to the topic of our analysis (national and gender stereotypes on Croatian broad-reach portals). In addition to this, we were also able to gain an understanding of several related topics indicative of the social processes at work in Croatian society at the time of analysis. They relate both to an overall conception of politics as well as to a specific politics of gender relations.

An analysis of the section structure of the news material in the total sample indicates that the percentage of materials

classified into the 'politics' section is outstandingly high for the kind of broad-reach portals these portals aspire to be. Namely, the verbal texts on the portals could be classified as belonging predominantly to the section 'entertainment and lifestyle', which is followed closely by 'politics'.

A more detailed analysis reveals that the number of news materials in these two sections is roughly equal: together they make up more than 60% of all the verbal texts in the sample. Entertainment and lifestyle materials actually rose to the initial position on the list only because the new owner (Deutsche Telekom) of one of the portals (Hinet) introduced editorial practices that are standard in the country of the owner, and that depart from the highly segmented and pluralist lifestyle-oriented consumer paradigm. Only 7% of news items found on the Hinet portal could be classified as 'politics', and it was at the time of analysis the portal featuring the lowest percentage of political content.

By comparison, the portal of Hinet's greatest competitor on the ISP market (Iskon) is saturated by politics: 74% of all the news topics on this site belong to that category. Even the Klik portal, which was specifically designated as Iskon's subsidiary entertainment and lifestyle-oriented site, actually featured only 37% of entertainment and lifestyle topics. On this portal, 'politics' came in second and took the high percentage of 21.5% of all the featured verbal texts. Hey and Monitor also featured respectively a high 68.8% and 38.4% of texts with political content.

If an additional criterion is taken into account, the dominance of politics on Croatian broad-reach portals becomes even more pronounced. Namely, to refine the analysis, one should also apply the (qualitative) criterion of relative position and amount of space devoted to various news sections on a Web page. A high 49.5% of all the texts in the sample placed in the most prominent positions and usually accompanied by a photograph belong to the section classified as 'politics'. (By comparison, 'entertainment and lifestyle' follow by a mere 25% of materials placed in the most prominent positions on the page.)

The content structure of Croatian broad-reach portals, such as it was in the analyzed sample, would seem to illustrate a case of social rather than technological determinism in the use of new media.

Namely, it could be said that the editorial preference for 'politics' reflects the general saturation of Croatian society with issues of this kind in the analyzed period. Previous research indicates that Croatian society in the 1990s was a society in which institutional politics dominated the lives of citizens, and in which decisions made at this level translated almost imme-

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diately into economic and other daily realities of their existence (Tomić-Koludrović and Kunac, 2000).

The editors of broad-reach portals obviously operated on the assumption that the average user of their product was highly interested in what Offe (1985) labels as 'old politics'. This assumption would seem to be confirmed by the popularity of Iskon's portal, combining what was at the time of its inception a highly innovative Web design with predominantly political content.[13]

One could also conclude that in the case of Croatian broad-reach portals, at least where political issues that are of central importance to their content are concerned, new media technology obviously did not bring with itself an interest for 'new politics', frequently associated with it in the literature (cf. e.g. Axford and Huggins, 2001; Hacker and Van Dijk, 2000). And not only that: judging by the content structure of the analyzed portals, their editors as well as their users – which by definition represent a wealthier, educationally privileged segment of the population – show very little interest in topics important in the social context of the countries of so-called 'second modernization' (Beck, 1986).

For example, news items related to 'business' are represented by a very low 5.8% of the total of news materials in the sample, and 'environmental issues' take a minuscule 0.2% of the verbal text. Even topics included in the 'technology' section (a relatively high 12.5% in the total sample) are mostly passively consumed news about new technological gadgets or cars.

THE IMPLIED READER IS MALE

As has already been said, our analysis of gender and national stereotypes included news materials and advertisements, as well as both verbal and visual texts. With regard to the stereotypes of gender roles, it is initially interesting to survey the sheer presence of male and female characters in the specific portal sections, as well as in the total of news and advertising materials present on all the portals in the sample.

In the total of the verbal text, there were 81.1% of male characters and only 18.9% of female characters. These figures are telling enough in themselves, but become even more striking when they are further specified. The largest proportion of the very small percentage of women in the analyzed verbal texts is in the 'crime' and 'entertainment and lifestyle' sections. On top of that, the largest proportion of female characters in the crime section are victims, and those that are perpetrators are associated exclusively with sex crimes.

By comparison, female characters are least represented in the section that is obviously considered to be the most important one on Croatian broad-reach portals. In the section clas-

sified as 'politics,' there are no less than 91.2% of male cha-
racters. More than 80% of male characters also appear in other
news sections, with the exception of the already mentioned
'crime' and 'entertainment and lifestyle', in which women are
slightly less drastically underrepresented.

It is interesting to note that there are far more female
characters in the visual than in the verbal texts of the ana-
lyzed portals. In the visual texts accompanying news items
there were 31% of appearances of female characters (com-
pared to the already mentioned mere 18.9% of their appear-
ances in the verbal texts).

To obtain a more profound insight into the nature of
appearances of male and female characters in the visual texts
in the sample, we have introduced an additional criterion of
analysis. Namely, we have tried to establish whether these
characters were represented in positions that could be classi-
fied as 'active' or 'passive'.

This, of course, is a criterion far more subjective than
mere counting of the number of appearances of characters in
the analyzed material. Likewise, objections could be raised
about the choice of labels such as 'active' and 'passive', which
indeed were thought of as provisional designations, meant to
express in one word the postulates of the feminist analyses fol-
lowing Mulvey's (1975) use of the distinction.

In a sentence, characters classified as 'active' were those
perceived as engaged in some activity where they were set-
ting their own agenda, while those that were classified as 'pas-
sive' could be described as objectified, or potentially objecti-
fied. The latter characterization served to depict those char-
acters – both male and female – that even if represented as
engaging in a seemingly independent and self-defined activ-
ity (e.g. seductive behavior) were expected to eventually
become sexual objects.

By applying this criterion – arguably based on too fine a
line between subjective opinion and fact – we have found out
that a high 82.7% of women represented in the visual texts ac-
companying news materials were represented as 'active'. Al-
though there were far less female than male characters repre-
sented on these photographs, when women appeared in the
visual texts they were almost as 'active' as men.

In contrast to that, in the visual texts of the advertise-
ments, which contain more female characters than any other
analyzed category in the sample (a high 66%), more than 60%
of these characters were represented as 'passive', that is as
objectified or potentially objectified.

This fact carries additional weight when compared with
visual representations of the male characters in the analyzed
advertisements, where there was a clear 0% of 'passive' charac-

ters. In other words, all the male characters in the visual texts of the advertisements in the sample were represented as 'active'.

Editorial strategies of representation of female characters in both the visual and verbal texts in the sample appear even more one-sided when additional elements of qualitative research are introduced. We have attempted to refine our quantitative analysis by introducing the criterion of the implied reader, borrowed from semiotic textual analysis, and concluded that even the seemingly gender-neutral materials were most often intended for and directed at the male, or at least male-identified, readers.

This is indicated by means of juxtaposition of seemingly neutral visual texts with content intended for male users. Frequently, this presentation strategy is enhanced by means of the use of subheads and other editorial texts and visual cues. It should also be mentioned that one portal in the sample (Monitor) featured visual material of explicitly pornographic nature, displayed daily at a visually prominent position on the home page.

NATIONALISM: THE HIDDEN DIMENSION

Qualitative analysis, this time a semiotic analysis of color, has also helped us to locate the national stereotypes and strategies of exclusion on the analyzed portals. Namely, in the verbal texts in the sample there were remarkably few national stereotypes (or, at any rate, 'few' in comparison with what one could find in Croatian print media in the 1990s). This would seem to confirm the hypothesis that the global nature of new media invites nationalistic subject matter far less than print media (Keane, 2000).

The majority of the stereotypes identified in the verbal texts were ethnic rather than national, and were found almost exclusively in one specific subsection ('Joke of the day') of one of the analyzed portals (Hinet). This subsection, which presents a selection of jokes sent to the editor by the users, included explicit ethnic markers and specific scenarios of behavior of ethnically marked characters. Stereotypes associated with gender roles, the institution of marriage, and intelligence and fidelity of women, were also found in this subsection of Hinet.

The Iskon portal, on the other hand, featured repeatedly the equivalent of the expression 'piece of ass' ('*komad*'). This could be seen as consistent with the overall treatment of the visual representations of women on that portal.

Finally, while the verbal text on the Monitor portal, frequently taken from other Internet or news agency sources,

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did not contain a large number of ethnic, national or gender stereotypes, the in-house generated editorial text (headlines, leads, and captions) displayed all these kinds of stereotypes.

The general visual profile and graphics of the Monitor portal are an interesting object of study in themselves, because they represent a link to the visual standards established in the early days of Croatian portals.

Monitor's news items are presented as a simple remediation of newsprint graphics. Their basic black backdrop reminds one of what once went as an indicator of powerful Web design. At the same time, one should bear in mind that black color is associated with right-wing political circles in Croatia. Furthermore, this portal regularly features photographs of naked women and very basically designed advertisements for small advertisers. It also displays Croatian coat of arms, positioned close to the hyperlink to the semi-official daily newspaper of the Croatian government (Vjesnik). These features make the Monitor portal a living picture of the marriage of sexist and nationalist preoccupations characteristic of a large portion of Croatian print media in the 1990s.

The design of the Monitor portal can be understood as a visual expression of societal impulses surfacing in the conditions of an uneasy economic transition, combined with Tuđman's authoritarian rule in the war and immediate post-war circumstances. Other portals in the sample do not represent such obvious expressions of the Zeitgeist of Tuđman's presidency (ending with his death in December 1999). However, traces of that era were still present on the Hinet portal as well.

Hinet was the name of the ISP owned by Croatian national telecommunications company Hrvatski telekom (Croatian Telecom). At the time of analysis, the portal's and the company's visual identity were already redesigned, following Deutsche Telekom's initial acquisition of a large portion of HT's shares. However, traces of identification with the previous state ownership of the portal remained visible in the colors used in a central section of its home page.

Amid the orange and gray colors dominating the company's new visual identity, there were sections of blue associated with the portal's previous design, based on the red, white and blue of the Croatian flag. The use of this color was as inconsistent with the new design guidelines as was the inclusion of ethnic and sexist jokes at odds with the editorial policy of the new owner, emphasizing 'neutral' entertainment and lifestyle content.

The inconsistent use of color and the content of the text of the jokes could be interpreted as signs of editorial ambivalence between the globalizing intentions of the new owner and local values (first and foremost of which, in the context of Croatia in the 1990s, were the nationalist ones).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The general conclusion of our analysis is that what could be interpreted as stereotypical more so than any of the specific instances of gender stereotyping in the sample is the general positioning of the user into the social context in which there exist very separate realms associated with specific gender roles.

This traditional construction of gender can be taken as an indicator of the type of society by no means associated with the context of reflexive modernization. Namely, according to Beck (1986), the distinguishing trait of the societies of second (reflexive) modernization is exactly the redefinition of traditional gender and professional identities.

It is obvious that the owners and editors of Croatian broad-reach portals depart in their business decisions from the perception of an 'unproblematic identity' of the users. They direct their content mostly at what they perceive as a non-individualized and unfragmented audience. (The only, partial, exception to this was Hinet's portal, at the time of analysis already reflecting the editorial standards of its new owner.)

Such generalist editorial approaches are indicative of the type of society Croatia still belongs to. This social context could be described as typical of what Beck (1986) labels as 'first modernization'. In contrast, societies associated with Beck's 'second modernization' are characterized by multiple and fragmented identities of the users of new media.

Portals, as the epitome of commercial approach to the Internet, can be expected to help bypass the national level of communication and eventually facilitate a direct contact of the individual user with the global community, as textbook interpretations of new media technologies imply. The ownership structure of both leading Croatian ISPs could facilitate this process.[14]

However, the results of our analysis indicate that the individual-global interconnection by necessity encounters specific local conditions. In the case of Croatia, it is enacted in a context not directly associated with social processes typical of the societies in which new media technologies came about.

Judging by the structure of Croatian broad-reach portals, Croatian society has as yet not reached the phase in which individualism becomes extended to the sphere of consumption (Giddens, 1991). In spite of their obviously commercial profile, the analyzed portals do not address niche audiences and cannot count with a developed market infrastructure typical of late capitalist consumption.

At the time of analysis, the main commercial strategy of the major portal owners seems to have consisted in simply advertising the services of the ISPs they were associated with,

and keeping readers on-line as long as possible in order to generate income from the Internet service provision.[15] This strategy gave rise to the structure and graphic style of the portals, essentially remediating the broadsheet newspapers. (Methodologically speaking, it was exactly this remediated quality of the portals in question that made it possible to apply a proven old media technique of analysis, such as content analysis, to a new media product.)

As regards the national stereotypes, our analysis indicates that there were far less of these present on Croatian broad-reach portals than was still the case in Croatian print media at the time of analysis.[16] What's more, it was possible to precisely identify the sources of these stereotypes, which were in actuality more of ethnic than of national character: they were found either in the sections of the portals where relatively unfiltered opinions of the users were voiced (Hinet's subsection 'Joke of the day'), or in the editorial text of the minor portals (Monitor and Hey). Apart from that, overtones that bring to mind the nationalistically exclusionary 1990s could be identified almost exclusively in the connotative use of color in various sections of the Hinet, Monitor and Hey portals.

The question that remains to be answered is whether this subsidence of national and ethnic stereotypes had to do with the nature of the medium or with the time frame in which the analysis was carried out (in this period, the nationalistic rhetoric had already subsided in Croatian society at large).

Frequent appearance of gender stereotypes and an imbalanced editorial approach to the female characters on the analyzed portals would seem to indicate the latter. While nationalist subject matter gave way to less specifically marked issues associated with 'old politics', the content of the portals still addressed the male or male-identified users. The treatment of gender issues and women in general was in line with what editors saw as the needs of such audience.

The only exception to this rule was the Hinet portal, with a foreign majority owner (Deutsche Telekom), determined to introduce editorial standards valid in the context of reflexively modernized societies with a developed consumer infrastructure.[17] In the future, the most interesting topic of research similar to the one reported on in this article will doubtlessly be the study of the ways in which the predominantly premodern and modern identities of the portal users will become imbued with or remain at odds with the communication practices associated with the reflexive use of technology in a globalized context.

NOTES

[1] Even prior to its secession from Yugoslavia in 1991, Croatia had one of the most developed technological infrastructures among its constituent republics. It connected to the Internet as early as 1992, a real time link was established in 1993 and in 1996 Great Britain and Croatia were the only countries in Europe to have deployed ATM technology (Mrkonjić, 2001).

[2] The results of a large-scale empirical survey of Yugoslav youth carried out in 1986 indicated that only the youth populations of Slovenia and Croatia consistently exhibited individualist values (Ule, 1988; Radin, 1990). The findings of this survey were confirmed by another survey carried out in 1988 (Ule, 1989).

[3] The former Soviet bloc countries were characterized by a lack of the postmodern, 'reflexive' element that began to emerge in certain parts of Yugoslavia in the late socialist period. They also had far less developed technological infrastructures. Slovenia, the closest comparable to Croatia among the countries emerging after the breakup of Yugoslavia, passed through a brief 'ten-day war' and exhibited significantly less strong antimodernizing tendencies throughout the 1990s. The northern Serbian province of Vojvodina and the city of Belgrade, which according to the surveys of Yugoslav youth in the late socialist period were the only parts of Serbia and Montenegro where there existed a pronounced distance to the authoritarian collectivist paradigm, were unable to establish full-fledged Internet connections until much later in the 1990s, because of the United Nations sanctions and various restrictions imposed by the Milošević regime (Pantić, 1997). (The first, limited, connection was established in November 1995, when the Amsterdam provider xs4all became an Internet provider for the opposition B92 radio.)

[4] A Web portal can generally be defined as a Web site or service that organizes information for the users and serves as their point of entry into the Internet. The genre came into existence because of the abundance of information found on the Web. It developed from search engines, but nowadays offers a broad array of resources and services, such as e-mail, forums, and on-line shopping malls. In addition to categorizing searching, the present-day Web portals organize news and entertainment content for their users. The terms "niche portal" (targeting a specific audience) and "broad-reach portal" (addressing a general interest audience) have predominantly been used in the advertising business. (The definition of the Web genre of the portal presented in this footnote has been compiled from several Web sources, as well as from Burnett, Marshall, 2003, and Jones, 2003.)

[5] Analysts in the field would probably object to the term 'consolidation' in this context, since Croatia has been notorious throughout the 1990s for its small number of commercial Internet service providers. However, after a period of virtual ISP monopoly of the then state-owned telephone service provider (HPT – Croatian Post and Telecommunications), the privately owned ISP Iskon took a significant share of the market. According to analysts and insiders in the field (Maštruko, 2001), there is now hardly any more possibility of a new ISP establishing itself as a major player on the market. In this sense,

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a consolidation of sorts has indeed taken place on the Croatian ISP market.

6 The Klik section of Iskon was added to the sample to achieve a necessary balance of the analyzed content. Namely, the internal makeup of the Iskon portal is such that the portal proper carries mostly information on various topics in the field of politics, while entertainment and lifestyle content is relegated to the Klik section. The inclusion of only the Iskon home page proper in the sample would have therefore resulted in an overrepresentation of the political content.

7 Since the beginning (1999) and completion (2001) of Deutsche Telekom takeover of Croatian Telecom (HT) and its ISP Hinet, the content and visual style of the Hinet portal have increasingly resembled the service economy model, although the analysts doubt its efficiency in the Croatian context. According to a prominent analyst in the field, the rationale behind the establishment of the portals of the major Croatian ISPs is 'the surplus of the foreign investor's money' or 'the wish to be different and better from the competition' (Maštruko, 2001, 47) [translation M. P.].

8 The Hinet portal is the only portal in the sample offering customization to the users. With all the other portals, interactivity is mostly limited to navigation and participation in opinion polls. Commercial services are scarce.

9 Our position here obviously echoes Williams's (1990). He argues that the affective potential of technology can be actualized only in interaction with its social context. We view portals not only as affective agents but also as an indicator of the type of society and the processes at work in that society. In other words, even if the analyzed Croatian portals were more interactive and up-to-date, we would not be interested merely in providing answers to the general questions on how the technology structures the users. The question we are interested in is: to which degree can new media technology structure the user in a social context in which the values of individualism and choice are not highly positioned?

10 A recent attempt to approach the study of social effects of chat lines by means of a combination of structured interviews and Web-posted self-completion questionnaires is reported on in Roversi (2001).

11 Semiotic analysis is vulnerable to the objection that the choice of theoretical framework and personal attitudes of the analyst significantly influence research results (Gunter, 2001: 81- 82). However, since the time of Barthes's pioneering 'Rhetoric of the image' (1964), visual semiotics has developed a very sophisticated methodology. It is also worth mentioning in this context that the idea of what constitutes objective knowledge in sociology has changed. For a comprehensive, annotated and constantly updated bibliography of visual semiotics cf. Sonneson (n.d.). For a discussion of various positions on whether sociology can and should seek to be scientific cf. Kirby et al. (2000: 573-580).

12 The notion of the implied reader was introduced by W. Iser (1972) in the field of reader-response (reception theory) studies. Within the field of interpretive semiotics, the related notion of the model reader was elaborated upon in great detail by U. Eco (1979; 1990).

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[13] The highly politicized content of the Iskon portal can be partly explained by the fact that it came to existence due to a grant from George Soros's Open Society Fund. This foundation helped launch Iskon in 1997 in order to break the then state-owned Croatian Post and Telecommunication's ISP monopoly, and to serve as a place where alternative political views could be expressed (Dvornik, 2001).

[14] The majority owner of Croatian Telecom's Hinet is Deutsche Telekom (35% of the shares acquired in October 1999, additional 16% in October 2001). Dresdner Kleinwort Benson acquired a significant portion of Iskon in December 2000, as had previously also been done by the U.S. investment fund Adriatic Net Investors (in April 2000).

[15] Research results indicate that in the case of Croatian Telecom's Hinet, corporate advertisers not associated with the owner commissioned only 37% of advertising banners and sponsored links. 85.7% of the advertising material on Iskon, and 80.4% on the Iskon-related Klik portal, advertise the services of Iskon ISP (these include: Internet service provision, advertising, game servers, Web hosting, Web design). In contrast with this, a small portal not associated with an ISP, such as Monitor, features a 100% of banners and links sponsored by outside advertisers.

[16] A good indicator of the quantity and nature of national and ethnic stereotypes used in Croatian print media is the Feral Tribune magazine's weekly section 'Greatest Shits', which presents the most transgressive quotes of this kind.

[17] In the period in which our analysis was carried out, the Iskon portal had also already been largely owned by foreign investment funds. Initially, its editorial practices did not seem to be affected with the changes in the original ownership structure. However, the July 2002 graphic and editorial redesign of the portal indicates a move in the 'entertainment and lifestyle' direction already pursued by Hinet.

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Identiteti na mreži: rodni i nacionalni stereotipi na hrvatskim portalima širokoga dosega

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Članak razmatra načine percipiranja i stvaranja identiteta korisnika i korisnica novih medija u tranzicijskom hrvatskom društvu, metodološki se oslanjajući na kombinaciju analize sadržaja sa semiotičkom analizom. Analiza rodnih i nacionalnih stereotipa na hrvatskim web portalima zamišljena je kao doprinos razumijevanju susreta tehnologija prominentnih u procesima individualizacije i refleksivne modernizacije (Beck) s kontekstom kulture u kojoj prevladavaju moderne i

predmoderne tendencije. Rezultati analize pokazuju da vlasnici i urednici analiziranih portala donose svoje poslovne odluke polazeći od percepcije "neproblematičnog" identiteta korisnika i korisnica. Unatoč razmjerno malom broju nacionalnih stereotipa, sadržaj portala uglavnom je namijenjen publici koja se percipira kao neindividualizirana, nefragmentirana i muški identificirana. U metodološkom smislu, članku je namjera pokazati da se tehnika analize prikladna starim medijima može uspješno upotrijebiti i u analizi novih medija.

Identitäten im Web: Geschlechtsbezogene und nationale Stereotypen in kroatischen Breitband-Portalen

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Im Artikel wird untersucht, auf welche unterschiedliche Weisen die Identitäten von BenutzerInnen neuer Medien in der kroatischen Transitionsgesellschaft entstehen und perzipiert werden; die Verfasser stützen sich bei ihrer Untersuchung auf die kombinierte Methode einer Inhalts- und semiotischen Analyse. Die Analyse geschlechtsbezogener und nationaler Stereotypen in kroatischen Web-Portalen ist als Beitrag gedacht, der dabei helfen soll, das Zusammentreffen prominenter Technologien, die in Individualisierungsprozessen sowie Prozessen reflexiver Modernisierung begriffen sind (Beck), mit einem Kulturkontext, in dem moderne und vormoderne Tendenzen überwiegen, besser zu verstehen. Die Untersuchung ergab, dass sich die Besitzer und Redakteure der analysierten Web-Portale in ihrem geschäftlichen Vorgehen leiten lassen von den Vorstellungen "unproblematischer" Identitäten auf Seiten ihrer BenutzerInnen. Trotz einer relativ geringen Menge nationaler Stereotypen wenden sich die untersuchten Portale hauptsächlich an ein Publikum, das als nicht individualisiert, nicht fragmentiert und als männlichen Geschlechts identifiziert wird. In methodologischer Hinsicht wollten die Verfasser zeigen, dass die den älteren Medien angepasste Analysetechnik auch zur Analyse neuer Medien erfolgreich angewandt werden kann.