

The People Formerly Known as the Oligarchy

The Cooptation of Citizen Journalism

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The concentration of media, business and political power in the hands of few oligarchs was targeted in a series of popular protests in Bulgaria throughout 2013-2014. In a situation of increasing media monopolization and unclear media ownership, the importance of independent sources of information was acknowledged by all protesters. And yet, as this article demonstrates, the citizen media that flourished during that period of popular unrest conformed to the already existing patterns of unclear ownership, low quality journalism and promotion of oligarchic interests. The citizen journalism efforts that emerged with the mission to target the oligarchy and the party model clearly served the interests of the main oligarchic circles in the country while hiding behind the rhetoric of democratization and participation. Evidence to support this argument is drawn from the accusations exchanged between *Bivol* (Bulgarian version of *Wikileaks*) and ANONYMOUS BULGARIA, and between the two circles of media around the sites *NOresharski.com* and *Noligrach.com*. Instead of addressing the shortcomings of traditional media, these citizen media initiatives are shown to have simply reproduced the same problems online and failed to meet the standards of media accountability.

In his well known blog piece 'The People Formerly Known as the Audience', Jay Rosen (2006) quotes the founder of blogging Dave Winner who said that "once the users take control, they never give it back". I claim exactly the opposite in this article: that the users can give control back, that this is already happening and that it is dangerous precisely because it is not a transparent process but one hidden behind the rhetoric of citizen participation. To support this claim, I explore the boom of citizen journalism projects during the various stages of anti-government mobilization in Bulgaria in 2013-2014, a troubled period that saw the rise and fall of five consecutive governments and a series of mass protests throughout the country.

I start by presenting various definitions of citizen journalism, and discuss the high expectations associated with it, including the claim that it stimulates political participation and democratization. Counter arguments are also discussed, including those that focus on the dangers of group polarization online (Jamieson and Cappella 2008), structural problems such as the lowering of journalistic quality and standards with the advent of new technologies (Curran et al. 2012), and the troubling state of media accountability (Domingo and Heikkilä 2012). In the following section, I survey the field of audiovisual and print media in Bulgaria and examine the concentration of power in the hands of few powerful oligarchs, arguing that it is precisely the worrying monopolies over traditional media outlets that have raised the expectations for citizen journalism as an alternative. I then move on to demonstrate that citizen journalism has also been co-opted in the current model of entanglement between media, business and politics, focusing on two specific cases of conflict between 'citizen journalists' online as

indicative of the interests that stand behind them. The first case is the war between *Bivol* (often labelled as the Bulgarian *WikiLeaks*) and ANONYMOUS BULGARIA. The second concerns the mutual accusations between the 'independent news agencies' *NOresharski* and *NOligarch* and their respective circles of satellite web sites and Facebook pages, which were established during the 2013-2014 protests in Bulgaria with the purported aim of providing non-mainstream information. I conclude that instead of offering an alternative, citizen journalism in Bulgaria during this period was successfully incorporated into the already existing media universe of unclear ownership, scandalous content, and promotion of oligarchic interests.

1. The Media Are Dead, Long Live the Media

As early as 2001, Frank Webster identified two main components of the 'crisis' of journalism: the first is the growing trend of concentration of the media in the hands of few individuals and consequent rise in commercial pressures, and the second is the development of new electronic forms of communication. One type of response to what was seen as the increasing void between citizens and government and the failure of journalism to foster public debate and participation was the development of the public journalism movement in the United States (Webster 2001:25). This started in the late 1980s and early 1990s to address conventional journalism's loss of credibility and was billed as an invitation for journalists to treat the press as "an agency not only of but also for communication, a medium through which citizens can inform themselves and through which they can discover their common values and shared interests" (Glasser and Craft 1998, quoted in Webster 2001:27).

The advent of digital and social media, including blogs, social networking sites, collaborative projects such as Wikipedia and content communities (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010:62), took the democratizing potential of public journalism to a whole new level by enabling a strong interactivity with and among publics and the generation of a new kind of public discussion forum. Thus, citizen journalism emerged as a second phase of public journalism (Correia 2012). Rosen (2006) argued that so far "[a] highly centralized media system had connected people 'up' to big social agencies and centers of power but not 'across' to each other" and that "[n]ow the horizontal flow, citizen-to-citizen, is as real and consequential as the vertical one". While Carr et al. adopt a broad perspective in defining citizen journalism as a "range of amateur information reporting and sharing activities" (2014:3), others such as Nip (2006) and Veenestra et al. (2015) introduce an important distinction between participatory journalism, where audience members contribute their voices to a centralized information news source, and citizen journalism, which is not dependent on the central presence of third party organizations. Correia (2012) accepts this distinction and notes that in participatory journalism user contribution is solicited within a frame designed by professionals embedded in a mainstream context and functions as a corrective to mainstream journalism. On the other hand, "citizen journalism is no longer just about overcoming the limits of journalistic professionalism but goes further and tries to overcome the limits imposed on citizenship by a certain kind of journalism conditioned by primary definers and powerful sources" (2012:108). In this sense, citizen journalism could be perceived as giving voice to those whose voices are ignored or suppressed and as capable of producing counter-publics and counter-discourses.

Homero Gil de Zuniga claims that “blogs may facilitate the creation of a common public sphere – a space that, albeit virtual, contributes to a better informed citizenry and a healthier democracy” (2009:117). In a similar vein, Sharon Meraz (2009) notes that “[c]itizens can now leverage their Web-based social networks for creating knowledge and meaning outside elite cueing, which is transforming how information is created, interpreted and diffused in the Internet age”. Such claims are supported by a wide range of studies. For instance, in a detailed empirical analysis of the Russian blogosphere, Etling et al. (2014) demonstrate some of the ways in which it opens up a space for civic discussion and organization that differs significantly from that provided by the mainstream media, TV and the government. Nevertheless, both Gil de Zuniga and Meraz warn against the hidden dangers associated with new technologies. Starting from the much discussed ‘echo-chamber effect’ – the fragmentation of web publics into homogenous communities of practice – and moving on to ‘cyber-balkanization’ – the phenomenon of group polarization online – there is an always present danger that citizen journalism might not facilitate dialogue but rather obstruct it and keep people enmeshed in the comfort of their own circles of interest (Jamieson and Cappella 2008). In *Misunderstanding the Internet*, Curran et al. offer compelling evidence that “the internet did not inaugurate a renaissance of journalism; on the contrary, it enabled leading news brands to extend their ascendancy across technologies, while inducing a decline of quality not offset, so far, by new forms of journalism” (2012:179). The influence of the Internet is filtered and organized through the structures and processes of society. The impact of citizen journalism thus cannot be understood without placing it within the broader system of interdependencies involving mainstream traditional journalism and other citizen media practices such as graffiti, protest art and rap/hip hop, among others.

The focus in the current study is on the former type of interdependence, namely that between mainstream journalism and the self-proclaimed ‘alternative’ citizen journalism online. I claim that in Bulgaria there has been an increasing convergence between the two in terms of ownership, working methods and writing style. In this respect, the process described by Natalie Fenton (2012) as ‘de-democratizing the news’ is particularly interesting. The prominence of online tools and platforms for information gathering and production has resulted in a decline in advertising revenue for traditional media outlets, “combined with increased investment in new media technologies to attract audiences online, alongside cuts in personnel as profit margins have decreased, resulting in negative impact on journalism” (Fenton 2012:122). Ever smaller teams of journalists are forced to cover more and more fields, resulting in a decrease in specialization and a lowering of journalistic standards both online and offline. At the same time, citizen journalism projects cannot come up with a viable business model in order to compete with major news organizations. Fenton (2012:124) quotes data from the Open Society Institute relating to Eastern Europe, according to which

media across the region had lost 30 to 60% of their income and were forced to adopt cost-saving measures, including reduced volume, staff layoffs, reduced investigative reporting, and cuts in international and provincial coverage. They relate the changes to the global financial crisis that brought about severe constraints in news production as well as ownership changes resulting in an overall drop in the quality of news delivered to citizens and as a consequence a news media that has become shallower, more

entertainment centred, increasingly isolationist, more prone to political and business influences, and lacking in investigative bite.

These critiques aside, it is also important to note that even though new technology provides increased opportunities for media accountability, these opportunities have not been sufficiently explored. Domingo and Heikkilä (2012) distinguish three types of media accountability practices with regard to different phases of news production: (a) actor transparency – practices situated *before* the act of publication and addressing norms and expectations of public communication; (b) production transparency – practices situated *during* the production process and related to managing access, selection and presentation of news; and (c) responsiveness – practices relevant *after* the production stage and involving responding to questions and criticism. Domingo and Heikkilä found that “online media organizations in general have not placed development of media accountability practices as their top priority ... [and] have not taken advantage of their technological high ground compared with offline media to facilitate actor transparency, production transparency, and responsiveness of journalism”.

In what follows I set out to examine patterns of group polarization, de-democratization and lack of accountability that plagued both mainstream journalism and citizen journalism in the Bulgarian context in 2013-2014. In conducting the current study, I started by drawing on existing research to identify the main problems of media freedom and pluralism in Bulgarian traditional media. I then engaged in monitoring the Bulgarian online space for an extended period of time (from February 2013 until January 2015) in order to trace the connections between the self-proclaimed ‘alternative’ citizen media sites that emerged during this period. I focused on blogs and websites that presented themselves as ‘anti-government information agencies’ and ‘anti-corruption and anti-mafia media’ and the series of Facebook pages directly related to them. These websites and blogs were identified on the basis of three original pieces of investigative journalism (Gadjokov 2013, Manolova 2014, Kichashki 2014), which I supplemented by content analysis of over 100 articles from these sources, outlining the most important topics in each of them and comparing the texts of the articles in order to identify practices of direct copying and reposting of content. Instead of focusing on just one type of media, I explored the use of multiple platforms in a complex media environment (Mattoni 2009) and the flow of information between them, in an attempt to avoid what Treré calls a “one-medium bias”, i.e. the focus on the use of single technologies at the expense of the broader media spectrum with which actors engage (2012:2362).

2. Concentration of Power: The Entanglement of Media, Business and Politics

The first wave of the 2013 protests in Bulgaria erupted at the beginning of February over high electricity bills and increasing poverty and inequality. The mobilization quickly attracted thousands of people throughout the country and continued to escalate until the then Prime Minister of the centre-right government, Boyko Borisov, submitted his resignation on 20 February. After a short period of rule by a caretaker government, a new cabinet led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party in coalition with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS) was formed at the end of May 2013, with the finance expert Plamen Oresharski as Prime Minister. A mere two weeks later the cabinet was shaken

by a new wave of protests: on 14 June people took to the streets again to oppose the appointment of Delyan Peevski, a media oligarch with an astonishingly fast growing political career, as the new chief of the national security agency DANS. The appointment was rescinded by the Parliament on 19 June but the protests continued in one form or another throughout the year, and in July 2014 the Oresharski cabinet also resigned, leaving the country to a new caretaker government. A new centre-right government was formed in February 2015, with Boyko Borisov as Prime Minister once again. The circle closed, with the political landscape returning to where it was before the protests.

This confused political situation has led to a regrouping of the main political actors and clarified their alliances. The main source of division between different political factions in Bulgaria is the attitude towards Russia and Euro-Atlantic politics: the leftists and the nationalists have traditionally sided with Russia, while right wing parties are more pro-EU and US. This ideological conflict has had direct financial repercussions for each of the political groupings involved. The period from the beginning of the financial crisis to 2013, when mass protests erupted, was characterized by a rapid and comprehensive consolidation of political, business and media power. The figure of Peevski came to symbolize this unholy trinity: with his talent for finding “good deals”, he provided a “media umbrella” for criminal bosses and every party in power (Peevski 2014) in exchange for privileges in securing state public bids for his firms. These, in turn, received credit from Tsvetan Vasilev’s Corporate Commercial Bank, where many government agencies held their accounts (Peev 2014). The appointment of Peevski as chief of the National Security Agency – which would have provided him also with important intelligence and investigative power – outraged people, and they spontaneously took to the streets. However, the protests were soon hijacked by right wing groups who saw an opportunity to seize power and promote their own political and financial interests. The protests were not only reported, but also choreographed on the pages of the right wing newspapers *Capital* and *Dnevnik*, both owned by Ivo Prokopiev. Prokopiev is a powerful businessman whose name is often associated with GERB, the centre-right party of Borisov.

At the time when the February 2013 protests started, the media landscape in Bulgaria was organized as follows, in terms of ownership. Peevski and Vasilev controlled the newspapers *Monitor*, *Telegraf*, *Presa*, *Novinar*, *Maritsa*, *Struma*, *Weekend*, *Show* and *Meridian Match*; the web sites *Blitz.bg*, *Vsekiden.com*, *Monitor.bg*, *Inews*; and the radio channels *Magic*, *The Voice*, *Vitosha* and *Veselina* (Antonova and Bosev 2014). It further became clear in 2014 that the duo had also financed other major daily newspapers such as *24 chasa*, *Trud* and *Standart*. Another major newspaper group, *Economedia*, owned for over a decade by the previously mentioned Ivo Prokopiev, published *Capital* and *Dnevnik* and their extended online versions *Capital.bg* and *Dnevnik.bg*. The last important player in the printed press, the newspaper *Sega* and its online version *sega.bg*, was owned by Sasho Donchev, executive director of the private gas company Overgas. But ownership – whether full or partial, including vertical integration from advertising to distribution – is just one among various subtle and not so subtle ways in which journalism is controlled. Current strategies of control over the media include direct pressure on journalists working for both commercial and public media, who risk losing their jobs if they overstep the mark; indirect pressure through control of key appointments such as head of programme, head of news, marketing managers and lawyers, among others; direct financing with public resources, for example, budgets and

operational programmes; encouraging pro-government behaviour and sanctioning attempts to institute independent decision-making; corporate financing – direct or indirect, in particular financing through advertising; influencing the choice of regulators and the fact that chief regulator positions can be taken by members of the former State Security agency; appropriating self-regulation; and pressure exercised by Parliament on the Council of Electronic Media (Ognyanova 2014).

If we accept that media freedom means the independence of media from government and from government authorities' control and intervention, and that media pluralism means the independence of media from private control and the disproportionate influence of one or a few economic, social and/or political sources of power (Calderaro and Dobрева 2013), it becomes clear that in the Bulgarian context it is hard to speak of either media freedom or pluralism. Although few people have a full picture of the extent to which media are entangled with oligarchy, the lack of media independence is widely acknowledged and there is a drastic decline in trust in media (Nasimento 2013). This troubling situation is addressed in many of the emerging online platforms for citizen journalism that promise to provide uncensored news and an objective impartial account of current affairs.

3. My Oligarchy Is Better Than Your Oligarchy

3.1 *Anonymous Versus Bivol*

The first case to discuss against this background is the 'war' between ANONYMOUS BULGARIA and *Bivol.bg*, the Bulgarian partner of *WikiLeaks*. It is difficult to speak of *Anonymous* in the Bulgarian context as a single entity because in fact there are several different constellations of web sites, Facebook pages and online forums that share the same name and claim to be *Anonymous* (Rone 2014). Here, I focus on one particular constellation of *Anonymous* which consists of the Facebook page ANONYMOUS BULGARIA¹, with more than 25,000 likes, and the Wordpress blog ANONYMOUS BULGARIA². The motto of the blog is "Води се война за нашите съзнания. Война, която губим" (There is an information war going on for our consciousness. A war that we are losing). The authors of the blog declare the following in the 'About us' section (my translation):

В общият ни профил на всички в екипа ни, можем да заявим, че сме общо погледнато анти-глобалисти, патриоти, свободно мислещи и общо, хора които гледаме на нещата противно на общопредставяното от политици, масмедии и съвременното обременено с измами общество.³

Gloss: In the common profile of everyone from our team, we can say that we are, generally speaking, anti-globalists, patriots, free thinkers and generally, people who perceive things contrary to what is presented to us by politicians, mass media, and the contemporary society burdened by deception.

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/AnonyBulgaria?fref=ts> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

² <https://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

³ Available at <https://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com/за-нас/> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

The main topics that are dealt with on the ANONYMOUS BULGARIA blog are think tanks, in particular the role of Soros in funding civil society in Bulgaria, the identity of the June 2013 protesters and their relationship to the Open Society Foundation, Genetically Modified Food, Zionism and Bulgarian history. The blog has been very active in establishing the term *сорос-тутка* (Soros-tute) – a combination of the name Soros and the word for ‘prostitute’. The blog post ‘Соростуция For Dummies’ (Sorostution for Dummies) engages in an elaborate gendered metaphor:⁴

Всяка соростутка си има също сводник. Този човек е шефа, ‘el papi chulo’ за соростутките. Той си има собствен ‘think tank’ (мозъчен тръст). Този мозъчен тръст е като сградата, в която работят соростутките, нещо като ‘el puticlub’, чрез който ‘el papi’ представя ‘програмите’ на големите ‘публични домове’ (тръстовете донори), които ако останат доволни им пускат пари за ‘бизнеса’. Тогава ‘el papi’ си вади хуя (химикала) и нарежда на соростутките да се захващат с ‘работата’ по ‘програмите’.

Gloss: Every sorostute has a pimp. This man is the boss, ‘el papi chulo’ for sorostutes. He has his own ‘think tank’. This think tank is like the building in which the sorostutes work, a bit like ‘el puticlub’ through which ‘el papi’ presents the programmes to the big ‘brothels’ (the donor trusts), who, if they are content, give money. Then ‘el papi’ takes out his dick (pen) and orders the sorostutes to get to ‘work’ on the ‘programmes’. (my translation)

Bivol, on the other hand, is a web site that focuses on investigative journalism. It has received from *WikiLeaks* the rights to publish the US State Department diplomatic cables relevant to Bulgaria. The main topics that *Bivol* discusses include energy development, investigations of ecology-related themes (e.g. illegal deforestation), political corruption, and shady practices in political marketing. *Bivol*’s Facebook page has more than 124,000 likes. The ‘About Us’ section of *Bivol*’s website states:⁵

Създадохме този частен независим сайт, за да дадем още една възможност да достигнат до вас качествени журналистически разследвания, както и обективни мнения на специалисти и анализатори по най-горещите теми от ежедневието ни... Без цензура и без автоцензура, безпристрастно и коректно ние предлагаме разискване по най-актуалните теми. Бивол е и трибуна на своите читатели, той е място за обмяна на идеи и бъдещо сътрудничество. Защото ние искаме да сме коректив, а вие, нашите читатели, можете да ни помогнете.

Gloss: We created this private independent site to give you, the readers, another chance to have access to quality investigative journalism and to objective opinions of experts and analysts on the hottest topics of everyday life. Without censorship and without self-censorship, impartial and honest, we offer a debate on the most

⁴ Available at <https://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com/2015/01/19/соростуция-for-dummies-преди-първи-урок/> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

⁵ Available at <https://bivol.bg/about.html> (last accessed 11 June 2015).

current topics..Bivol is also a tribune for its readers; it is a place to exchange ideas and a place for future collaboration. This is because we want to be a corrective, and you, our readers, can help us.⁶

While ANONYMOUS BULGARIA and *Bivol* had cooperated for a long time, a rupture occurred at the end of June 2013 amidst the popular protests against Delyan Peevski and the left-wing Oresharski cabinet in general. The reason for the argument was Harta 2013 – a document drafted by Bulgarian intellectuals to propose specific measures for fighting the current oligarchic model. Tens of academics, public intellectuals and prominent figures of Bulgarian civil society signed the document. On 24 June *Bivol* issued a statement on their website to the effect that they support Harta, though with some reservations, and urged others to support it.⁷ On the same date, ANONYMOUS BULGARIA posted an article on their blog entitled Хората, които стоят зад ‘Харта 2013’ ви използват! (The People who Stand Behind Harta 2013 Use You).⁸ The blog post claimed that at the historical moment in which Bulgarians took their own freedom in their hands, a huge manipulative machine was trying to capture this process of liberation and take advantage of it for its own purposes. It further argued that every single person who signed Harta had connections with the Open Society Foundation and was financed by the US, and that the signatories included journalists from *Economedia* – Ivo Prokopiev’s media group. The text ended with an emotional appeal to the ‘citizens of the Republic of Bulgaria’, urging them not to believe that this was their revolution because middle class intellectuals were going to trick them again.

The discourse of ANONYMOUS BULGARIA points to the contested origin of Bulgarian civil society, which has traditionally been perceived as imported from abroad (Kabakchieva and Hristova 2012). The idea here is that the ideology of bottom-up organization has been implanted top-down by Western think tanks and that funding is made accessible only to people who have the necessary cultural capital, including knowledge of foreign languages and skill in ‘writing up’ projects. Beyond the immediate context of Bulgaria, ANONYMOUS’s suspicion towards civil society reflects a global trend of increased tension between civil society (contested on similar grounds in other geographical locations) and new social movements (Esteves et al. 2009). Against this background, the ANONYMOUS attack on *Bivol* for its support of Harta included accusing *Bivol*’s two main authors of “being members of civil society” and revealing detailed information about their biographies and possible conflicts of interest in another blog post, Биволчетата по бели гащи (*Bivol* members caught red handed).⁹ ANONYMOUS launched a DDoS (Distributed Denial-of-Service) attack against the website of Harta 2013 and took it down on 25 June.¹⁰ On 26 June, they published an open letter in which they threatened to do the same thing with the website *Bivol.bg* if *Bivol* failed to withdraw their support for Harta.¹¹ Several days of intense attacks against the *Bivol* web

⁶ Available at <https://bivol.bg/en/about-bivol.html> (last accessed 17 June 2015).

⁷ Харта 2013/‘Harta 2013’. Available at <https://bivol.bg/harta2013.html> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

⁸ Available at <http://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com/2013/06/24/хората-които-стоят-зад-харта-2013-ви-изпо> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

⁹ Available at <https://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com/2013/06/28/биволчета-гащи/> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

¹⁰ Available at http://offnews.bg/news/Общество_4/Анонимните-свалиха-сайта-на-Харта-2013_211523.html (last accessed 30 May 2015).

¹¹ Available at <http://novinite.bg/articles/42374/Anonimnite-zaplashiha-sajta-na-Bivola>. (last accessed 11 June 2015).

site followed in which the war was fought on two fronts: ideological and technical. *Bivol* claimed that ANONYMOUS BULGARIA were pseudo-*Anonymous* who did not have the technical capacity to take down their website. Screenshots of the web site were regularly published and the fans of both groups, ANONYMOUS and *Bivol*, had to choose which side to believe and support.

In response to the public campaign against it, *Bivol* published an article on 27 June entitled Харта 2013 и българските пишман Анонимни – самые анонимные в мире (Harta 2013 and the Bulgarian Wannabe Anonymous: the most anonymous in the world),¹² in which it pointed out that bringing down the Harta 2013 website was met with glorifying reports in the media of Delyan Peevski. The implication is that support from Peevski's media means that the ANONYMOUS attack against the protesting intellectuals served the interests of the government. *Bivol* further outlined areas of strong similarity between the anti-Soros, anti-Western conspiracy theories in Putin's Russia and the arguments put forward by ANONYMOUS BULGARIA. It insisted that ANONYMOUS BULGARIA was a fake: it had nothing to do with the tech-savvy global *Anonymous*. In truth, *Bivol* argued, it was a nationalist, pro-Russia group supporting the leftist government and using the *Anonymous* brand to misinform people.

With the passing of time it became clear that there was some truth in the accusations published by both sides. One of the two founders of *Bivol*, the journalist Atanas Chobanov, previously a candidate of the right wing Blue Coalition in the European Elections in 2009, headed the list of the predominantly right wing Green Party¹³ in the 2014 European Elections. And while Chobanov insists that *Bivol* has never been funded by right wing parties but exists only thanks to donations, the site clearly gravitates towards the right in relation to most internal and external policy issues. On the other hand, while there are other factions of *Anonymous* in Bulgaria that are closer to the global image of the movement as networked, international and open to diversity, the particular constellation I am examining here has become increasingly exclusive, discriminating and nationalist in its rhetoric (Rone 2014).

To conclude, the global projects of *Anonymous* and *WikiLeaks* (the latter represented by *Bivol* in the Bulgarian context) have been appropriated in Bulgaria by local leftist-nationalist and right wing networks of influence with their own domestic agendas and conflicts. Instead of providing alternative information that is independent of party politics, these citizen media groups have become themselves part of the networks of power they were supposed to challenge. There are of course crucial differences when it comes to the quality of journalism provided. Both *Bivol* and ANONYMOUS BULGARIA claim to bypass traditional media and provide alternative information, but the authors featured on the *Bivol* website follow journalistic standards, check their sources and provide original investigative journalism, while ANONYMOUS BULGARIA are still immersed in conspiracy theory allegations.¹⁴ On a broader level, the conflict between

¹² Available at <https://Bivol.bg/anonymous-balkanicus.html> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

¹³ The Green Party in Bulgaria has traditionally attracted supporters both from the political left and from the political right. However, during the June 2013 protests the Bulgarian Green Party clearly positioned itself at the right of the political spectrum by signing a joint declaration with 4 other right-wing parties in the country. The Declaration is available at <http://izbori.zelenite.bg/8109> (last accessed 11 June 2015).

¹⁴ Articles posted on the ANONYMOUS BULGARIA blog include the following: Илюминати – елитът управляващ живота на земята (Illuminati – the Elite Ruling Life on Earth). Available at

Bivol and ANONYMOUS BULGARIA can be interpreted as one instance of the growing global tension between civil society and the type of expertise it promotes and produces, on the one hand, and on the other, new social movements and the kind of collaborative knowledge they engage in developing from below.

Popular dissent in Bulgaria, as I have argued so far, has been appropriated by groups that present themselves as citizen-led but in fact reproduce the politics of the right and the left in the country. Since ANONYMOUS BULGARIA could not oppose the protests without losing popularity, they targeted the protesters and used any possible means to destroy them. Providing independent news slipped into performing ad-hominem attacks and waging a propaganda war. Similar battles were fought on several other online platforms as well, as I demonstrate in the next section.

3.2 *NOresharski Versus NOligarch*

The main sources I draw on in this section are three investigative articles that address the lack of media accountability and the problematic nature of ‘citizen journalism’ web sites that emerged in the course of 2013-2014. The first article, entitled ВНИМАНИЕ: анонимни български “медии”. Избягвайте на всяка цена! (ATTENTION: Anonymous Bulgarian ‘Media’: Avoid at All Costs!), is by Krasimir Gadjokov and includes a list of more than 40 online news media that have failed to disclose important information, such as the name of the owner or company behind the initiative, a phone number or an address for contact (Gadjokov 2013). The second article, entitled Средства за масова дезинформация (Media of Mass Disinformation), was published in *Capital* by journalist Maria Manolova and revealed that several self-proclaimed ‘independent’, ‘alternative’ and ‘free thinking’ media initiatives in the Bulgarian online space were in fact taking part in a carefully orchestrated disinformation campaign (Manolova 2014). Ironically, Manolova failed to highlight the no less problematic connections between *Capital* itself and *NOresharski* – an ‘independent information agency’ established during the protests. The third article that informs this discussion is entitled Корпоративните медии - инструментите на подмяната (Corporate Media: The Instrument of Substitution) and claims that there are two interdependent circles of online and offline media that promote the interests of their respective oligarchs (Kichashki 2014).

To begin with, Manolova (2014) distinguishes two large waves of emerging ‘citizen journalism’ websites during the period of popular unrest. The first wave coincided with the winter 2013 protests against the centre-right government of Borisov and is marked by the appearance of sites such as *dnes-24.com*, *nakratko.bg*, *bgmak.eu* and *svobodnoslovo.eu*. The second wave of emerging ‘independent’ sites coincided with the summer protests against the left-wing cabinet of Oresharski and is marked by a strong rhetoric of suspicion towards the protesters. Sites established during the second wave

<https://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com/2013/04/29/илюминати-елитът-управляващ-живота-н/>; Как Западът Унищожава България, докато тя му ръкопляска. (How the West Destroys Bulgaria While the Country Applauds). Available at <https://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com/2015/03/02/как-западът-унищожава-българия-докат/>; Световната конспирация срещу здравето (The World Conspiracy against Health). Available at <https://anonybulgaria.wordpress.com/2013/09/18/световната-конспирация-срещу-здраве/> (all last accessed 15 June 2015).

include *silnabulgaria.com*, *hashtag-bg.com*, *expressnews.bg* and *bezpartien.com* (Manolova 2014). *Bezpartien.com* states in the 'Goals' section of the website:¹⁵

За съжаление медийното пространство в България е наситено със сервилни 'репортери', отразяващи дадени събития, особено тези, свързани с политиката, само от едната страна... Именно затова ние сме тук – за да дадем на гражданите място, в което да могат да формират своето мнение на база на информацията, която идва от двете страни за всяка тема. Корумпираната журналистика не е журналистика. Политически интереси пречат на журналистите да си вършат нормално работата

Gloss: Unfortunately the media space in Bulgaria is saturated with servile reporters, representing events, especially those related to politics, from one perspective only ... This is precisely why we are here – to give citizens a space where they can form their own opinion on the basis of information that presents both sides of each topic. Corrupt journalism is not journalism. Political interests prevent journalists from doing their job properly. (my translation)

Silnabulgaria.com describes itself on its Facebook page as "a project to create online news without censorship. Articles are republished from many websites with the goal of quickly informing the Internet society". *Svobodnoslovo.eu* claims to be:¹⁶

бързо развиваща се медия с основна цел – безпристрастно и обективно отразяване на всички важни за обществото новини. Основен приоритет за нас са политическите новини от България, като се стремим да покажем всички гледни точки. Освен това провеждаме собствени разследвания по сигнали на читатели и наболели теми.

a quickly developing media with the main goal of impartial and objective coverage of all news important for society. The main priority for us is the political news from Bulgaria and we aim to present all view points. Apart from this we engage in our own investigations with topics pointed out by our readers and with topics of broad relevance.

All these websites claim to share the goal of providing non-corrupt, impartial journalism. Interestingly, several also share the same design and/or the same physical address where their domains are registered. These websites also widely share content among each other. As Manolova notes, they are popularized by a series of fake Facebook profiles which repost their content and create a hype around it. This whole mini media eco-system is engaged in promoting a leftist/nationalist agenda. The problems of media concentration in the hands of a few players and unclear ownership that plague traditional journalism reappear in such online spaces in an even more radical form. As already pointed out, none of the 'free', 'independent' citizen media initiatives mentioned above provide any information about their owners, authors, sources of information or

¹⁵ Available at <http://bezpartien.com/%D1%86%D0%B5%D0%BB%D0%B8/> (last accessed 11 June 2015).

¹⁶ Available at <http://www.svobodnoslovo.eu/primerna-stranitsa/> (last accessed 11 June 2015).

contact address. The irony is that the largest website in this group, *Noligarch* defines itself as an anti-corruption and anti-mafia media.¹⁷ *Noligarch* appeared 'spontaneously' on 16 August 2013, with a website that mirrored that of *NOresharski*, established one month earlier by protestors against the Oresharski cabinet.

The Anti-government Information Agency *NOresharski*¹⁸ joined Facebook on 8 July 2013. Their declared initial aim was to provide accurate and objective information about the protests, but they later included among their objectives investigating the mafia structures that underpin Bulgarian political life. *NOresharski* is a pun on the name of Plamen Oresharski, the coalition prime minister responsible for the appointment of Delyan Peevski as chief of the national security agency DANS in June 2013. In order to avoid dependence on corporate funding, *NOresharski* seeks alternative funds through a system for online donations (Lambrev 2013). It works in close collaboration with *Protestna Mrezha* (Protest Network)¹⁹ – described as a place for interaction and contact established on 7 August 2013 with the major goal of forcing the resignation of the Oresharski government by maintaining the momentum of protests. *Protestna Mrezha* states that it seeks to facilitate coordinated citizen participation and control in order to oppose any government which supports oligarchic structures and corporate interests, or acts against the values of freedom, democracy and citizen-led society. *NOresharski* presents the tasks of organizing protests and disseminating information as interdependent. The investigations published on its website have targeted mainly the deals of Delyan Peevski and the scandals around the Corporate Commercial Bank owned by Tsvetan Vasilev.

While *Noligarch* clearly promotes a left-wing, nationalist agenda, *NOresharski* and *Protestna Mrezha* are aligned to centre-right and right wing political parties and to the media empire of Ivo Prokopiev, which publishes *Capital* and *Dnevnik*. I see *Noligarch* and *NOresharski* not only as mirror websites (the former copying the rhetoric and visual identity of the latter) but also as fronts for the political circles they represent. Each occupies a position at the centre of an enclosed network of digital and social media that are linked to each other and republish each other's material. These two alternative universes of media content transcend the boundaries that separate offline and online journalism, as well as traditional and citizen media, and take media concentration, de-democratization and lack of accountability to a whole new level. In addition, the two self-enclosed groups of media around *NOresharski* and *Noligarch* do not engage in dialogue but instead demonize each other, a situation that leads to further group polarization and radicalization of opinions.

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4. Conclusion: The People Formerly Known as the Oligarchy

During the mass protests in Bulgaria in 2013-2014, many 'independent', 'alternative' news sources emerged online with the self-proclaimed mission of challenging the monopolies that control traditional media. The protests themselves had been triggered by the extensive overlap between media and political structures and the concentration

¹⁷ <http://noligarh.com/> (last accessed 30 May 2014).

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/NOresharski> (last accessed 30 May 2014).

¹⁹ Available at <http://noresharski.com/protestna-mrezha-izolirajte-provokatorite-na-protesta/> (last accessed 30 May 2015).

of power in the hands of a chosen few. The 'citizen' media initiatives that emerged in 2013/2014 however failed to keep their promise and provide a genuine alternative to corporate media. Global and far reaching projects such as *WikiLeaks* and *Anonymous* were appropriated locally and tailored to fit the needs of established networks of power. The multiple online media sites that emerged with the declared mission of undermining the oligarchy and the party model clearly served the interests of the main oligarchic circles in the country – a right wing circle and a left-wing/nationalist one – with all their complex internal divisions and differences. The two media circles formed self-referential universes consisting of blogs, web pages and Facebook pages. Instead of resolving the traditional media problems that triggered the protests, these orchestrated citizen media initiatives furthered the process of de-democratizing journalism.

Superficial critiques of traditional journalism and unconditional praise for online citizen journalism, then, obscure more serious issues and make it difficult to identify extensive problems that pervade the entire media ecosystem. The analysis of the Bulgarian media environment presented here has demonstrated that both online and offline media are plagued by a serious lack of accountability that undermines their credibility as sources. A possible scenario for fostering a more authentic and lively democratic dialogue could include returning to the three principles of media accountability proposed by Domingo and Heikkilä (2012): actor transparency, production transparency, and responsiveness. Fostering media accountability is a question of political will and public discussion and pressure. The use of digital tools might be helpful in this respect but, as we can see from the current analysis, increased media accountability is not an automatic consequence of technological affordances. Above all, any evidence suggesting that the people formerly known as the Oligarchy are embracing 'citizen journalism' must be treated as a warning: a call for citizens to be more careful than ever and to take a closer look at the links between 'independent' initiatives and established structures of power.

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