

Media Pluralism in the Digital Environment From the Users' Point of View

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Abstract

The rapid development of communication platforms and services on the Internet created the conditions for greater audience participation in the online sphere. Parallel to the emergence of new communication spaces in which different ideas, opinions, and attitudes can be generated, there is a trend of algorithmic arrangement of content that is distributed to media users. Cognitive horizon narrowing, fake news, and public polarization are just a few of the consequences of these algorithmic calculations. Media pluralism, which is seen as an essential quality and norm of a democratic and informed society, is facing unique challenges. Given that previous researchers of media pluralism did not consider users' perspectives, this exploratory study aims to identify media users' perceptions and interpretations of the phenomenon. From the perspective of the user, the paper examines four dimensions of media pluralism: access to news sources and quality journalism; credibility, trust in the media, and attitudes toward misinformation; media transparency, and the ability to locate or avoid news (Klimkiewicz, 2019). An online questionnaire was used to collect the data. The conclusion is that ignoring citizen journalism and communication with media users, as well as the lack of opportunities for users to manage information in the online space, leads to an increase and deepening of the gap between the media and users.

Keywords: pluralism, digital media, media, algorithms, users

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Introduction

One of the terms that is often used to describe the desired characteristic of modern media is media pluralism. It is considered a norm and an essential value of a democratic and information society, established on the basis of the principle of

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the free flow of information, ideas, opinions and diversity as an important quality of contemporary forms of expression in art and culture. Media pluralism can be defined from different perspectives, so that external and internal pluralism are highlighted as the dominant angles of interpretation. While the first implies the existence of various media and diversity of media ownership, internal pluralism refers to the diversity of content, topics and perspectives within the same media (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd, 2015). Given that the boundaries between different forms of communication and actors are blurred and indistinct in the convergent media environment, this distinction is also becoming less apparent and more difficult to detect (Bayer, 2019). According to Dennis McQuail (1992), pluralism is associated with the independence of media from the state and from hidden finance mechanisms, and is defined as the result of the efficient free market. The outcome of such a model of pluralism is the protection of the media from centralized control and uniformity (McQuail, 1992: 142).

Taking into account that the ownership structure of the media affects the expansion of a certain political, economic and cultural ideology, the emergence of the Internet and new communication platforms is perceived as the liberation of alternative voices from the margin of society. The modern, digitalized world has eliminated the communication barriers that marked the era of the analog media. Access to information, creation, shaping and distribution of news are no longer the exclusive domain of traditional media; instead, citizens are increasingly involved, resulting in the creation of an entirely new social reality. "Information gates" are widely open for new actors of the communication process, as well as for different ways of production and distribution of information. However, the availability of such opportunities does not guarantee that they will be most effectively used or that those who more or less participate in the process of online communication have the potential to provide an authentic, creative and significant contribution to information flows. In addition, the majority of media users who do not know or do not understand the mechanisms of online and offline media operations, their relations with other economic organizations, institutions and political parties, remain outside the zone of authentic action. Moreover, the implementation of non-transparent practices and algorithms which direct media users to content that serves the interests of new intermediaries, such as search engines, Internet service providers, content aggregators and similar actors, poses a threat to the achievement of the desired plurality of opinions, attitudes and ideas (Jakubowicz, 2019). Issues regarding the concentration of audience in the online space, which is frequently misled by the ideology of an individualized, personalized access, are added to the issues caused by the accumulation of ownership in the media (Valcke, Picard & Sükösd, 2015).

From the digital user's perspective, there are four aspects of media pluralism that are analyzed in this paper: access to news sources and high-quality journalism; credibility, trust in the traditional and online media, and attitude towards misinformation; media transparency and the ability to find or avoid news (Klimkiewicz, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Media policies and modern democracies that acknowledge the fact that freedom of expression is essential to media freedom and media pluralism strive to create a pluralistic media environment. Also, they form the foundation of the rule of law and introduce an atmosphere of a healthy political climate and debate. As stated in Recommendation 1 of the Council of Europe on Media Pluralism and Transparency of Media Ownership: “They are essential to the functioning of a democratic society, because they help to ensure the availability and accessibility of different types of information and opinions, which people may use to create and express their opinion and exchange information and ideas”.

Most frequently, media pluralism, in this case external, is associated with the diversity and transparency of media ownership where increased market accumulation can result in the development of monopoly and oligopoly (Brogi, 2020). In addition, it can threaten the democratic debate by narrowing the media space for different opinions and attitudes. Moreover, the transparency of ownership in the media can be an indicator of the degree of ownership concentration in the market, which also gives the audience an orientation for determining the importance of information they receive from those media sources.

Taking into consideration the changes in the media-audience relationship in the digital universe, Karol Jakubowicz states that there are two approaches to media pluralism that can be observed; one is defined as “public service”, while the other is “free market”. The first approach emphasizes that diversity and pluralism are the goals of media policy, which establishes cultural and political norms of cultural diversity, civil equality and universalism. This type of pluralism serves the entire society whose members have different cultural values and political views. The policy of the so-called “principled pluralism” is organized (pluralism ensured by law and regulations that leads to the representation of different social groups, cultural communities and political parties), proactive (a diversity of opinions, political attitudes, identities via media services, contents and structural aspects are actively generated and shaped), open (social diversities are reflected, such as political, cultural, ethnic, linguistic, religious, and other structures), and polarized (media are identified with ideologically opposed options, so that advocacy journalism and commentary journalism are dominant).

Free market policy, on the contrary, is based on the neoliberal conception of media pluralism, which includes deregulation, free consumer choice and a free market of ideas. This policy is spontaneous (media system and contents have a more flexible and spontaneous structure, the representation of diversity is individualized, while the interactions between media providers and users provide the foundation for media pluralism), reactive (reflects the diversity of opinions, political attitudes, cultural representations), reflexive (reflects existing population preferences), external (a variety of independent and autonomous media and providers) and moderate (the ideological differences between the media are small, while cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences do not affect the media structure) (Jakubowicz, 2015: 33-34).

The era of new media services, digital communication services and content generated by citizens has introduced new challenges to media researchers and creators of media policy. In modern society and modern democracies, non-media sources are gaining dominance and influence and the content produced and distributed from these centers has a significant social impact. However, citizens are not entirely free in the new communication environment, since between them and the desired information, as well as the relevant content of public interest, there are new factors of influence and actors who take over the control of the informative online space. The previous “information gatekeepers” of the analog age were replaced by new ones, the intermediaries, the mediators in the distribution of information, such as search engines, social media, applications, non-linear audiovisual services, etc. (Brogi, 2020: 2). Thus, the initial enthusiasm that new technologies would enable a cheap and universal system for distributing information of any kind, has been replaced by a justified concern about how to ensure media pluralism in the digital environment, which through algorithmic programming, tends to narrow down the information horizons, and under the pretense of personalization, eliminates alternatives and the complete picture of social reality. The availability and pluralism of the new media environment are threatened by other phenomena on social media, such as echo chambers (Sunstein, 2001) and filter bubbles (Pariser, 2011), thanks to which communicators reinforce the existing beliefs by communicating with like-minded people, while keeping their distance from those whose beliefs and opinions they do not share. In addition, they remain closed to the topics of public interest and to a common perspective which would enable the development of a dialogue and a critical debate. In that way, many users of digital information remain deprived of different points of view, attitudes and opinions, which is limiting their participation in a democratic spirit. In order to overcome the discovered inadequacies and improve the conditions for the development of media pluralism and plurality of information, algorithms should be developed in a way that exposes users to a variety of information of public interest, and not just to personalized and/or popular content (Brogi, 2020; Helberger, 2015). Also, other authors have expressed similar thoughts. In order to highlight the fact that media users are significant actors in a democratic mission of media pluralism and media policy, Napoli added a third dimension, the exposure diversity, to the already existing forms of diversity, the diversity of source and content, which are already recognized as the key dimensions of media pluralism (Napoli, 1997: 63). Therefore, this type of diversity refers to the audience dimension, and examines the extent to which the diversity of content leads to the audience’s diverse consumption. Its importance is particularly emphasized from the point of view of the advantages and disadvantages in the era of new information intermediaries, whose primary goal is to attract the attention of the audience, to influence the access and choice of the audience (Helberger, 2014: 4-5). Given that the scope of media users’ actions is greater in the era of the digital media and new online communication spaces, Napoli implies that anyone having the appropriate technology and necessary communication skills can produce content, but the main issue is its distribution (Napoli, 2009). This issue is particularly visible in the modern

methods of conducting business online, where the paid dissemination of information and ideas in search engines and intermediary services of content selection determines the winners and the losers. In this way, when compared to others, some sources of information can provide themselves more prominence and priority in demonstrating the public, while algorithms and search engines also contribute to that. For that reason, they “have become an important issue in the debate on the effective dissemination of information and ideas, both from the perspective of information providers and the perspective of end users” (Van Hoboken, 2012: 260). Considering that the policy and content of media pluralism are undergoing drastic changes as a result of new spaces, services and actors of communication in the digital era, the term hybrid media pluralism has started to be increasingly used in the academic discourse to indicate the new reality. “Hybrid media pluralism can be seen as a dynamics between the forces of commonalities and differences; the ground of shared knowledge and contesting differences; the existence of shared values and common standards (such as media freedom that safeguards the hybrid media infrastructure of public communication) and culturally different and geographically specific experiences” (Klimkiewicz, 2019: 4). Despite the fact that the audience plays an important role in the hybrid media environment, it has been often overlooked in examining media pluralism and defining media policies. Referring to Potter, Klimkiewicz states that there are three types of false impressions that are prevalent in contemporary society. Firstly, a high saturation of information and news is often falsely identified with a variety and diversity. Secondly, there are both the false sensations of being well-informed and having control. Furthermore, Klimkiewicz indicates that the deliberative and representative value of pluralism in the hybrid media environment can be observed from four aspects from the media users’ point of view: 1. access to news sources and high-quality journalism; 2. credibility, trust in the traditional and online media, as well as dealing with misinformation; 3. media transparency; 4. findability and news avoidance (Klimkiewicz, 2019: 5).

The first aspect, access to news sources and high-quality journalism, implies the existence of professional frameworks, including quality of journalistic training, professional associations that protect the professional autonomy, efficient self-regulatory measures and standards, as well as quality of content and journalistic performance, which is reflected in accuracy, impartiality, comprehensibility, explanatory value and the like.

Another aspect of media pluralism refers to the credibility of news and dealing with misinformation. Credibility affects the improvement of content quality, as well as the trust of users in a content provider and news in general. The reliability of information depends on the factors such as the level of competence of a source, their reputation and authority, the recency of information and its corroboration. Also, when examining media pluralism, it is important to consider how users interact with misinformation. If users do not distinguish between the quality of news, as well as which news to trust, then their autonomy concerning the selection of news would be futile. The research *Citizens and the Media: Consumerism, Habits and Media Literacy*, conducted by CESID in Serbia in 2020, showed that 24% of participants

trusted the traditional media more, of which a fifth of participants (19%) trusted television the most, while the same percentage (24%) declared that they trusted Internet portals and websites. While younger participants are more oriented towards Internet portals and websites, older and less educated participants express their trust in television. It is significant that even a third of participants do not trust either traditional or online media. When it comes to news and information sources, it is notable that almost 50% of participants never or very rarely pay attention to the sources of information. If attention is not paid to the source of information, then it becomes challenging to evaluate the received information and develop a proper attitude towards the source and content of news.

The third aspect of media pluralism refers to media transparency. Furthermore, Klimkiewicz points out the three levels of the interpretation of transparency. The first is the structural level and refers to the means and processes by which the media inform citizens about ownership structures, sources of finance and control arrangements. This includes information on the ownership structure, links with other businesses, companies and organizations, political affiliation of a newspaper owner, organizational control and the editorial independence. On the second level, the level of provision and distribution of content, transparency refers to information on how the content is edited, distributed and created and on how algorithmic decision-making processes work. At the level of practice, transparency is created by making newsrooms and journalists responsible and checking the credibility of information (Klimkiewicz, 2019: 12).

The fourth aspect related to hybrid media pluralism from the user perspective is news findability and information overload. Despite the greater control that users have over information, they spend more time searching for and consuming the content that does not meet their demands. Additionally, users who are overloaded with news may avoid them and other information necessary for a critical evaluation of reality (Klimkiewicz, 2019: 13).

Paradoxically, having a greater control of the time and form of media use, users spend increasingly more time on searching and using the content that does not necessarily meet their personal purpose (Klimkiewicz, 2019: 13). Although users may be guided by various reasons in news avoidance, it can be a cause for concern if they “cut themselves” from a potential usage of news diversity. It might also be a reason for consideration if growing numbers of citizens seem to be disconnected from the news at all, whether this happens as a deliberative strategy of news avoidance or as a more accidental consequence of marginalization (Schröder, 2016).

Method

In the previous studies of media pluralism, the position of media users was disregarded (Klimkiewicz, 2019; Napoli, 2007). Therefore, this paper focuses on users and their perception and interpretation of pluralism. The aim of the paper is to examine the four aspects of media pluralism from the user’s perspective: (1) - access

to news sources and high-quality journalism; (2) - credibility - trust in the traditional media and dealing with misinformation; (3) - media transparency; (4) - findability and news avoidance (Klimkiewicz, 2019). In this study, a survey was used as the method of data collection. It was conducted online using the Google Forms tool in April and May 2022. The obtained data were analyzed using the Microsoft Excel program

Research Sample

Taking into account that the survey was conducted online, among the Internet population, the survey sample was random and it included 200 Internet users.

Table 1
Gender of the respondents

Gender	N	%
Male	68	34
Female	132	66
Total	200	100

As shown in Table 1, of the total of 200 respondents who took part in the survey, 68 respondents, or 34%, were male. In addition, there were 132 female respondents, which comprises 66%. The largest number of respondents belonged to the group between 25 and 34 years of age (39.5%), whereas individuals over 55 comprised the smallest percentage of respondents (1.5%). The respondents aged 18-24 made up 28% of the sample, while those aged 35-44 made up 25%. Also, only 6% of respondents belonged to the age group 44-55. As far as the level of education is concerned, the majority of respondents (45%) have a university degree and slightly less is the percentage of those having a master's degree (36%). There were 16% with a high school diploma and 3% of those with a doctoral degree.

The respondents generally spend less than two hours on the Internet (35%) or two to four hours per day (32%). However, 15% of respondents tend to spend time online between four and six hours per day. Only 9% of respondents say that they spend more than six hours a day on the Internet, while 3.5% declare they do not spend more on media content at all. In addition, 5.5% of respondents expressed uncertainty on this issue.

Most respondents (46.5%) obtain information through social media and online media portals (21.5%). Moreover, 17% of respondents use Internet browsers for obtaining information, while 7.5% use media applications on mobile phones for the same purpose. Traditional media are used by only 7%, while 0.5% use different communication applications such as Viber to get information.

The majority of respondents (44%) use between two and four media outlets and news sources daily, while 19% use between four and six. On a daily basis, media are not used by 14.5% and 9% of respondents expressed uncertainty about the amount of media content they consume on a daily basis. Only 9.5% stated that they use more than five media or sources every day, while 8% tend to use only one.

Results and Discussion

Dimension 1 - Access to news sources and high-quality journalism

Although there are several journalistic associations in Serbia, such as the Journalists' Association of Serbia, the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia, the Association of Online Media and others, the largest number of respondents (36.5%) is not certain whether there are professional journalistic associations that safeguard the autonomy of the journalistic profession. Furthermore, 27.5% of respondents mostly agree with the statement that such bodies exist, while 18% mostly disagree. In addition, 8% completely agree, while 10% completely disagree with the statement. Also, 24.5% completely disagree with the statement that there are effective self-regulatory measures and standards related to the journalistic profession in Serbia, while 22% mostly disagree. Only 14.5% of respondents hold the opposing view, while as many as 39% of them are uncertain on this matter.

A negative trend is also noticeable when examining opinions about a sufficient number of online media in Serbia, whose work is characterized by accuracy, impartiality, groundedness in facts, comprehensibility, etc. Moreover, as it can be seen in Table 2, only 4% of respondents completely agree that there is a sufficient number of such media, whereas 10.5% mostly agree.

Table 2

In Serbia, there is a sufficient number of online media whose work is characterized by accuracy, impartiality, groundedness in facts, comprehensibility...

Level of agreement	N	%
I completely agree	8	4
I mostly agree	21	10.5
I'm not sure	78	39
Mostly I don't agree	44	22
I completely disagree	49	24.5
Total	200	100

Nevertheless, the negative views prevail, according to 46.5% of respondents, whereas 39% express uncertainty. However, on the issue of increasing citizens' participation in political life, 40% of respondents agree that online media contribute to it, while 35.5% think the opposite. Still, what is noticeable is the high degree of uncertainty on this issue as well (24.5%).

Therefore, in terms of examining the access to information sources and quality journalism, a third of respondents (36.5%) are uncertain whether there are journalistic organizations that preserve the autonomy of the profession or whether media houses apply self-regulatory measures to verify the compliance with the fundamental professional standards (46.5%). It is possible to differently interpret the respondents' uncertainty - either as a consequence of a fundamental lack of interest in the principles necessary to preserve the credibility of professional journalism, or, conversely, as a result of the current state of the media. The second assumption is based on the fact that almost half of the respondents mostly or completely disagree with the statement that accuracy, impartiality, groundedness in facts and comprehensibility are the qualities of online media (46.5%). While a third of respondents believe that online media contribute to the increased male and female citizens' participation in political life, a similar percentage of them believe that the media fail to perform this important function. It is important to take a qualitative approach to this issue, which includes examining how people perceive the media's role in enhancing political participation of citizens and media polarization.

Dimension 2 - Credibility - trust in the media and attitudes toward misinformation

None of the respondents expresses complete trust in online media, while 5% indicated they mostly agree with the statement that the majority of the online media in Serbia are reliable.

Table 3
I trust most of the online media in Serbia

Level of agreement	N	%
I completely agree	0	0
I mostly agree	10	5
I'm not sure	23	11.5
Mostly I don't agree	90	45
I completely disagree	77	38.5
Total	200	100

There is a large percentage of those who mostly (45%) or completely disagree (38.5%) with this claim, as is the case with the traditional media. Only 9.5% state that they trust most of the traditional media, while 77% have the opposite opinion. In addition, they are regarded as the unreliable sources of information by 60% of

respondents. Under such a perception of the media environment, 26% say they have difficulties recognizing fake news, 12.5% are uncertain, whereas 60% state that they have no difficulty identifying fake news. However, when interpreting this answer, it should be remembered that it represents a socially desirable answer. Only 4% of respondents believe that the online media respect ethical principles, compared to 73.5% who believe the opposite. In addition, 22.5% remain uncertain on this issue.

Based on the collected data, it can be asserted that when evaluating the credibility of the online media in Serbia, the largest number of respondents express a negative attitude and distrust in the online media (83.5%), do not believe they are reliable sources of information (60%) and believe they do not adhere to fundamental ethical principles (73.5%).

Dimension 3 - Media transparency

As far as media transparency is concerned, Internet users have a very negative perception of it, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4

I think that online media in Serbia are transparent in terms of their financing.

Level of agreement	N	%
I completely agree	10	5
I mostly agree	2	1
I'm not sure	61	30.5
Mostly I don't agree	58	29
I completely disagree	69	34.5
Total	200	100

Another notable finding is the high percentage of respondents (30.5%) who are uncertain on the issue of the transparency of online media (Table 4). Also, the respondents express uncertainty (32.5%) on the matter of media transparency in the context of their ownership structure, relations with other media and non-media actors, political affiliation of media owners and other factors. As many as 57% of respondents believe that the media are not transparent regarding this issue. This finding is not surprising, given that the ownership of the media in Serbia is not sufficiently transparent, and this lack of transparency is seen as one of the major issues affecting Serbia's media system (Petković, 2014).

Furthermore, 30% of respondents are not certain whether the online media provide information about the creation and editing of content in the online environment or whether they offer information on how algorithmic decision-making processes function in their media. Almost 60% of them believe that the media do not provide such information. As can be seen in Table 5, there are different viewpoints on the matter of clear instructions for commenting on content and moderation rules.

Table 5

Online media have clear instructions for commenting on content, as well as moderation rules.

Level of agreement	N	%
I completely agree	13	6.5
I mostly agree	65	32.5
I'm not sure	62	31
Mostly I don't agree	39	19.5
I completely disagree	21	10.5
Total	200	100

Therefore, there is a very negative assessment of media transparency. Bearing in mind that the importance that users give to the content of such media is also influenced by the assessment of various dimensions of transparency, the obtained results are expected.

Dimension 4 - The ability to find or avoid news

Only 16.5% of respondents state that they have a certain level of difficulty finding information in the online environment, while 14.5% are uncertain. Although the majority of respondents declare that it is easy to find contents they are searching for (69%), a higher percentage of them feel overwhelmed with irrelevant information in the online space (82.5%), as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

I feel overwhelmed with irrelevant information in the online environment.

Level of agreement	N	%
I completely agree	74	37
I mostly agree	91	45.5
I'm not sure	14	7
Mostly I don't agree	14	7
I completely disagree	7	3.5
Total	200	100

Furthermore, 31% of Internet users declare that it is difficult for them to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information in the online media, whereas 12% express uncertainty. However, 57% of respondents state that they do not experience such difficulties.

Table 7

Occasionally I avoid the news because of the clutter of information when searching an online post.

Level of agreement	N	%
I completely agree	71	35.5
I mostly agree	69	34.5
I'm not sure	21	10.5
Mostly I don't agree	28	14
I completely disagree	11	5.5
Total	200	100

The data also indicate that the majority of respondents occasionally avoid searching for news due to being overloaded with different information in the online sphere (70%).

Conclusion

In order to reinforce the importance of media pluralism, it is necessary to ensure diverse news that can be created by a combination of high-quality journalism, credibility and media transparency, as well as the availability of information. In the hybrid media environment, the accomplishment of this goal depends on the various aspects of the relationship between the media and the audience. According to the research, the respondents in the sample have a negative opinion about the online media, believe that they are not reliable sources of information, they are uncertain of the features of the ownership structure, the relationships between other institutions and the political establishment, as well as what models of creation, management and delivery of information are being applied. In addition to the results indicating that the respondents' trust in the online and traditional media is at a low level, there are other findings that point to the respondents' difficulty navigating the new, digital conditions of communication and indicate the lack of skills in critically approaching information in the online media and the online space in general.

The mechanism of withdrawal and news avoidance prevents people from the opportunity to participate in modern information flows and search more purposefully for alternative information and interpretations, in order to obtain a comprehensive view of social reality. If the online media do not discover adequate business models focused on developing a dialogue with media users and improving citizen journalism, and without citizens being trained to manage information in the online domain, the disparity between these parties will only widen and deepen.

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Medijski pluralizam u digitalnom okruženju iz ugla korisnika

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Sažetak

Sažetak: Eksplozivni razvoj platformi i servisa komunikacije na internetu stvorio je uslove za aktivnije angažovanje publike u onlajn sferi. Paralelno sa pojavom novih komunikacijskih prostora, u kojima je moguće generisanje različitih ideja, mišljenja i stavova, pojavljuje se trend algoritamskog uređenja sadržaja koji se distribuira medijskim korisnicima. Sužavanje kognitivnih vidika, lažne vesti i polarizacija javnosti samo su neke od posledica ovih algoritamskih proračuna. Posebni izazovi nalaze se pred medijskim pluralizmom, koji se percipira kao suštinski kvalitet i norma demokratskog i informisanog društva. Imajući u vidu da raniji istraživači medijskog

pluralizma nisu uzimali u obzir perspektivu korisnika, ovo eksplorativno istraživanje ima cilj da ukaže na percepciju i tumačenje pojave među medijskim korisnicima. U radu se analiziraju četiri dimenzije medijskog pluralizma iz korisničkog ugla: pristup izvorima vesti i kvalitetnom novinarstvu; kredibilitet, poverenje u medije i stavovi prema dezinformacijama; medijska transparentnost i sposobnost lociranja ili izbegavanja vesti (Klimkiewicz, 2019). Podaci su prikupljeni metodom online upitnika. Zaključak je da zanemarivanje građanskog novinarstva i komunikacije sa medijskim korisnicima, kao i nepostojanje mogućnosti da korisnici upravljaju informacijama u onlajn prostoru, vodi u povećanje i produblivanje jaza između medija i korisnika.

Ključne reči: pluralizam, digitalni mediji, mediji, algoritmi, korisnici

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