

The Formation of Public Opinions in Social Media (Case Study: The Media Resonance of “Charlie Hebdo” in Global and Bulgarian Social Media)

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Introduction

The process of public opinion formation is in the focus of many scientists, and in particular of those in the field of sociology, psychology and communication (Ferdinand Tönnies, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, Jürgen Habermas, Roland Burkart, Mincho Draganov, Ivaylo Dichev, etc.) Internet and globalization processes have changed significantly communication and have also imprinted the process of public opinion formation.

In 1996, Prof. Mincho Draganov, famous Bulgarian social psychologist, expressed his opinion that in the end of 20th century in the scope of public opinion “are put in action numerous mechanisms which are unfamiliar to the classic public opinion. Primarily, public opinions (in plural) are being identified even on the first stages of their formation.. This leads to overtaking its (public opinion’s) public approbation” (Draganov, 1996: 6-7).

In the beginning of 21st century, the tendency which has been analyzed by Prof. Mincho Draganov rapidly gained ground.

The problem with the effective and objective measuring of public opinion in social media is related to various factors. Among them are the role of political elites, targeted malign influence on the published sent messages by trolls and manipulated communities with fake profiles, etc.

For the purposes of this research, the authors enclose an analysis of publications in social media, including the following criteria: number of comments; ratio of comments according to the opinions expressed in them; new forms of interaction between the traditional and social media; formation of communities (as a result of the published messages) in social networks and dominating opinions in them.

The case with the cartoons of the prophet Muhammed in the French magazine Charlie Hebdo and the barbaric shooting by Muslims-jihadists of some of the magazine’s authors in its newsroom in Paris on 7th January 2015 had a huge response in the whole world. As a result

of an operatively implemented communication mainly in social media, the case has reached each part of the world and made possible the creation of a global peace message which have united people from different continents, nationalities and religions. This is what makes possible the creation of a global message for peace and shows that thanks to the social media there is a process of accelerated public opinions formation which can be summarized in three main groups.

Firstly, this is the opinion of the 60 world leaders and 1.5 million French citizens as well as many other countries which condemned the shooting of the French cartoonists as a violation against freedom of speech, freedom of expression and the principles of democracy. During the Paris March of solidarity against the terror attacks of 11th January 2015 many citizens of the democratic world, intellectuals and leading public figures supported unquestioningly the right of freedom of the press and freedom of expression of the “Charlie Hebdo” cartoonists.

Secondly, this is the opinion of millions of Muslims around the world who rose in defense of their spiritual leader and accused the French cartoonists of the defamation of the Prophet Mohammed.

Thirdly, this is the opinion of a significant majority who condemned the terrorist act in “Charlie Hebdo” but did not accept the disregard of Muslims religious feelings. The latter has been expressed most clearly by Pope Francis – the head of the Roman Catholic church who condemned the terrorist act, but at the same time called for mutual respect for religious feelings and religious sanctuaries as well as for tolerance in the relations between Christians and Muslims.

In this way, the global peace message which has been widespread not just in the real world, but also in the virtual reality, has acquired various nuances and their studying has become a challenge for the contemporary researchers of public opinions in terms of finding improved methods for their studying, modeling and forecasting.

The response to the dramatic events in Paris echoed in Bulgarian media and a particularly intensive debate with socially responsible citizens’ participation took place in social media. What was the reaction of the Bulgarian public in these media and how it became a part of the international human and journalistic solidarity are questions which will be answered in the recent paper.

The research thesis of the authors is that the new social media opportunities help the accelerated public opinions formation on key public events. Nevertheless, at the same time the comments in these media thanks to the variety of the expressed positions and also to the

varying competence levels, lead to a more nuanced picture of the public opinions and new sociological tools are necessary for its comprehensive, detailed and versatile studying.

New forms of interaction and influence between traditional and social media

Traditional media through their online versions are still the main factor for the formation of public opinions through comments and interviews with leading experts, political and social figures, as well as by current news about Paris and the world, which provoke numerous reactions among the Internet users, varying from anger and outrage to enthusiasm and approval. They are shared in the social networks in order to reach more users and to get their approval or disapproval, mirrored in their sharing and/or commenting on the Internet. In the cases when users' comments are posted under the publications of a certain electronic media, they are usually anonymous or hidden behind a pseudonym. But when the opinion is expressed in the range of the social networks Facebook and Twitter, very often users prefer to use their real names and openly defend or condemn a certain idea/opinion or cause.

One of the social networks' characteristic is related to the possibility to create prerequisites and opportunities for building of electronic communities, united around a certain cause and ready to contribute to its public discussion. In the global network Facebook, for example, these communities can be further developed in groups/pages/events which serve the main purpose of finding more followers and exchanging information among them. The events are related to real offline initiatives and aim to inform simultaneously many users and to draw their attention to future activities, giving them a chance to open a discussion even before the event itself.

Undoubtedly, the role of the media in the formation of public opinions on the Internet is huge but it also has a different value because of the high levels of influence of the electronic communities in social media. In the last years, traditional media have often covered attitudes and opinions, already formed in these communities in the networks or target their own messages towards these communities and choose their interlocutors among their members.

The Media resonance of “Charlie Hebdo” in the Bulgarian media

This research includes an analysis of 32 publications in the online versions of “Tema” magazine, “Pressa” daily, “24 chassa” daily, “Standart” daily and “Dnevnik” daily as

well as postings from the news websites bivol.bg, offnews.bg and webcafe.bg during the period 07 January 2015 – 15 February 2015.

The fifty hours long heavy drama in Paris on 7th January 2015 related to the terrorist act at the “Charlie Hebdo” magazine and the shooting of 12 French citizens – four of whom the cartoonists Stéphane "Charb" Charbonnier, Jean Cabu, Bernard Verlhac and Georges Wolinski, four authors and employees in the magazine, as well as of two policemen - Franck Brinsolaro and Ahmed Merabet have found an extensive resonance in the Bulgarian media.

In the traditional media, there were plenty of publications with enclosed pictures from the scene of the events – the “Charlie Hebdo” newsroom, the Jewish shop "Ypres kosher" in Paris, as well as of the following March of solidarity on the 11th January this year in the streets of the French capital which finished at the Republic Square.

as Articles entitled: “One million cartoons against terror”, “The media: you won’t be able to kill the freedom of speech” and “Pens against bullets” published in “Standart” daily (year XXII, issue 7874, 9th January 2015, pp. 1, 19-21) included some of the cartoons which have been published in some of the most famous newspapers in Europe and the USA as a categorical response to terror.

What does the analysis of the opinions in the chosen 32 publications in leading Bulgarian media show in the scope of this research?

There is a wide range of diverse opinions and appraisals colored in various emotions – from anger, indignation and shock related to the brutality and cruelty of the terrorist act, called “The French 11 September”, through an analysis of the reasons “that have lead to the barbarian revenge of the jihadists”, to forecasts of the future development of the world after the new burning problem on the agenda of European, but also world policy.

If we differentiate the participants in the dynamic public Bulgarian debate on the case “Charlie Hebdo” by their public status, we could define several main groups: politicians, journalists, security specialists, academics and Internet users.

In the group of the politicians, very significant was the position of the highest ranking Bulgarian politician – Director-General of UNESCO Ms Irina Bokova. Right after her participation in the March of solidarity, she said:

“The events in Paris are not just a huge tragedy. They are also a warning for all of us to see our societies which have many and various faces in a different way and with a new responsibility. However, let’s not be trapped in hatred, differences and revenge...” (Stantartnews.com, 12.01.2015).

Among the numerous statements of world political leaders from all over the world, the Bulgarian press paid attention also to the position of Pope Francis who defended the freedom of expression in a statement on the terrorist acts in Paris. However, he also emphasized that it is wrong to provoke other people by offending their religion. “One shall not provoke, one shall not offend others’ religion and one shall not make jokes about faith” (Stantartnews.com, 15.01.2015).

The president of the European socialists Sergei Stanishev who took part in the multithousand gathering at the Republic Square in Paris, wrote on his Facebook page: “The Solidarity March represents a clear resistance by the whole society agansit terrorism which tried to take away liberty that is a part of the French slogan “Liberty, equality and fraternity” (Stantartnews.com, 11.01.2015).

According to the Bulgaria’s president *Mr. Rossen Plevneliev* “*The terrorist act against the French satirical magazine “Charlie Hebdo” proved that the hatred has no boundaries and therefore the fight against terrorism is a common cause, and liberty and tolerance – “our belief”* (24chasa.bg, 23.01.2015). The chairperson of Bulgaria's National Assembly *Tsetska Tsacheva* handed over to the French ambassador to Bulgaria *Xavier Lapeyere de Cabanes* official letters to the chairmen of the National Assembly and the Senate of the French Republic with the words: “*The journalists of “Charlie Hebdo” who paid with their lives, gave an example that nowadays the common sense mind is in a constant fight for human dignity, fight against tyranny and fanaticism, in order to defend liberty, democracy and enlightenment...The world democratic society should be stronger, more decisive and more united in the fight against terrorism*” (24chasa.bg, 23.01.2015).

The Prime Minister of Bulgaria *Boyko Borisov* who joined the world leaders at the Solidarity March in Paris, expressed the clear position of the government and of the people of Bulgaria with the words: “*Bulgaria strongly condemns the attack over “Charlie Hebdo” and the assassinations... There is no cause which can justify terror... Bulgaria expresses its solidarity with the French people in this hard times for Europe and for all of us and its empathy with the families and relatives of the victims...We are confident that terrorism will be defeated, no matter what efforts are necessary* (“Standart”, year XXII, issue 7874, 9th January 2015, pp. 5).

Both in these and in the rest of the opinions shared by Bulgarian politicians, the leading accents are solidarity with the French people, the condemnation of terrorism, the call for a united and resolute fight against it as a serious threat for world peace and security.

Among the journalists analyzing the burning problems of international policy with a lot of personal experience is *Elena Yoncheva*, author of numerous documentaries and investigations from the hottest parts of the world in the last decades. In an interview for *offline.bg* she said:

“The attacks in Paris, with their cruelty are shocking for all of us, but they are not surprising.... The reason for the attacks on “Charlie Hebdo” are the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed. Yet the last cartoons of this type were published in the magazine back in September 2012.... The radical Islamists want to bring the Islam back to the Middle Ages. They believe that this is the way to save it from the corruption of the modern world, from poverty, injustice and exploitation” („Standart”, year XXII, issue 7874, 9th January 2015, pp. 5).

The experienced commentator on international policy issues *Vladimir Kostov* made the following forecast from Paris: *“For shorter or longer time that the events in France will reinforce antiterrorism as a burning problem on the agenda of European and world policy.... Isn’t it the most important prerequisite for the success of antiterrorism to reveal this policy and in which interest it is being implemented”*(*Presa.bg*, 12.01.2015).

In an article entitled “Jihad against humor” the journalist from “Standart” daily *Ruslan Yordanov* wrote emotionally: *“The monstrous slaughter in the newsroom of the satirical magazine “Charlie Hebdo” is a strike in the heart of Western civilization... The mass shootings have shown that for the terrorists themselves, the ridicule and raunchy humor are even worse than any other tortures and bombs ... Confronted with the attack of evil, not just France, but also Europe as a whole should unite forces in order to avoid the eminent immense threats – that media resorts to self-censorship because of fear, that people live in horror or that it leads to fatal violence between Christians and Muslims”* (*Standartnews.com*, 08.01.2015).

The Bulgarian journalists took active part in the campaign “I am Charlie” in the social networks. “Standart” daily for example published a photo of all its journalists holding a sign “I am Charlie” (9th January issue, pp.5). At the same time, Bulgarian journalists took part in the Internet campaign “I am Ahmed”, dedicated to the French policeman – the Muslim Ahmed Merabet who was shot by one of the terrorists.

A comment by Veselina Sedlarska was published in “Tema” monthly magazine in support of the campaign “I am Charlie, I am Ahmed” in which this position was stated clearly: *“To shoot the laughter of the independent person at the workplace of liberty in the city of tolerance looks like a well considered and selected target... Religions are not*

dangerous, dangerous are those who use them. The problem is not in gods, but always in money. Dangers ly not in faith, but in greed.. Greed will find a way to use the executions at “Charlie Hebdo” even before the blood dries up. We are living at the edge where the dilemma still is “ Christians or the Muslims”. But today it isn’t. It’s “I am Ahmed” because it embodies another philosophy – both Christians and Muslims. Either we will survive together or we will be shot dead together” (Temadaily.com, 11.01.2015).

In these hard times for France and Europe Bulgarian journalists turned to security specialists for their assessments for of the terrorism threats in the aftermath of the bloody tragedy in Paris.

General Ivan Chobanov, former Director of the National Security Service (2002-2007) emphasized: “After September 11, 2011 we can say that there are two models of terrorism. In the first model we have had ‘import of terrorism’ – terrorists came to the United States for the specific purpose to fulfil a terrorist operation. In Madrid and London the terrorists were local people. It is the same in France. There is no proved direct logistic link to any terrorist centers outside the country. At the bottom, there are religious, ethnic and social reasons and the international connection – the ideology of Islamic fundamentalism” (Presa.bg, 12.01.2015).

The Arabist and diplomat *Kiriak Tsonev* warned our society that *“The terrorist act in France shows that there is no security guarantee in any country. The world became a witness of a conflict which goes outside the traditional clashes between individual armies and creates a danger of a military conflict of an unprecedented scale” (Presa.bg, 12.01.2015).*

Interesting and multifaceted perspectives regarding the events in Paris have offered also various Bulgarian scientists in philosophy, history, Arabic studies and international relations.

Vesela Tcherneva, Programme Director of the European Council of Foreign Relations in London pointed to the future development of international relations in the aftermath of the bloody drama in the French capital: “The Solidarity March ... was the biggest demonstration in French history which says a lot.... This is a proof for unity outside politics – social unity and a very powerful emotional gesture.... The radical Islam is an ideology and we shouldn’t underestimate it. Right now this is the big challenge which world leaders are facing – whether they can stand up against this threat no matter if they are Christians, Jews, Muslims” (Standartnews.com, 14.01.2015).

The philosopher Tony Nikolov, chief editor of web portal “Culture” entitled his comment “Agelasts, “Charlie Hebdo” and liberty”. He reminded that: “The agelast (from Greek) is “the one who is never laughing, the one who doesn’t possess a sense of humor... To

the confessional slaughters in XVI century, the profound humanist Rable quietly answers with “the irony of laughter”... Because words should be answered with words, not with violence. And this is the big lesson of the past, that we shouldn’t forget after this Wednesday, the 7th January in Paris...”(24chassa.bg, 12.01.2015).

Rumyana Ugarchinska, a writer and lecturer in the Research department of contemporary criminal threats of the Paris Institute in Forensic Science has shared her own impressions from Paris: *“The French mood is a mixture of sorrow, outrage and courage... The terrorists’ aim is not accomplished. They wanted to kill “Charlie Hebdo”. “Charlie Hebdo” is not killed... its spirit has spread all over the planet”* (Standartnews.com, 08.01.2015).

It is worth to draw the attention to the opinions shared by journalists of Arab origin, specialists on the Middle East who have worked in Bulgaria for a long time.

In his comment called “A clash of civilizations or a struggle within the Islam itself?”, Mohamed Hlaif claims that: *“The clash within the Islam is far bigger, than that between Islam and Christianity.... We are witnessing the fight between Islam, on the one side, and the rest of the world, on the other, and not of a religious opposition Islam-the West.... The problem is that Islam is a religion and a state at the same time”* (24chassa.com, 21.01.2015).

Nidal Hlaif makes a thorough analysis in his comment “About Mohamed and hypocrisy” based on concrete facts of the reaction to the bloody slaughter in the Muslim world: *“Numerous Muslim countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria and Egypt hurried to condemn the terrorist act against freedom of speech in Paris. That was tragicomic. Exactly these countries as along with other Arabic states are famous with everyday repressions of freedom of speech... The ordinary Muslims are not less hypocritical than their own leaders. They are ready to organize protests against cartoons, but they are not ready to do the same in support of their brothers Syrians because of the 200 000 killed, thousands of raped women and over 3,000 mosques destroyed in Syria.”* In conclusion, Nidal Hlaif underlines: *“Muslims should realize that they bear much of the responsibility for radicalism and they shouldn’t feel satisfied just with its verbal condemnation, but to become an active part of solving of this problem. And to understand that the main arena for fighting with terrorism is the Islam world. It would be good to start from school, where children have to be brought up in tolerance, and teacher have to use less the stick when a student dares to express a different opinion”* (Standartnews.com, 18.01.2015).

According to BBC the Arabian media and the Muslims in social networks have also condemned the assault in Paris, but there are some who blame the magazine of provoking hatred and terrorism through its cartoons.

To summarize, the comments and interviews in the Bulgarian media cover a wide range of questions related both to the bloody assault at “Charlie Hebdo” and to the opportunities that this terrorist act will bring about concrete solutions and actions to bring together and unite the international community in the fight with Islamic fundamentalism.

There are new forms of interaction and influence between traditional and social media in the dialogue on general hot topics of the day that definitely enrich the discussion on freedom of speech and the role of democratic citizenship for its protection and development.

The analyzed online publications of these leading national press and blogs present the diversity of perspectives and interpretations of the events by focusing on “freedom of speech”, “fight against terrorism” and “religious tolerance in Europe”. Each of the publications is open for comments and discussions, with the possibility for a follow-up (to be shared or liked) in the social networks Facebook and Twitter.

Within the selected period for the purpose of this research 470 comments from Internet users are analyzed.

The biggest part (55%) of the users who have expressed an opinion condemn the terrorist attack on the French satirical magazine “Charlie Hebdo”, 25% of the commenters are negative towards the attitude of the French cartoonists who according to them “ridicule” and “mock” the religion of one quarter of world’s population. Yet others (20%) express their understanding for both points of view and neither justify killings, nor the offences of the Prophet Mohammed that provoke conflicts on religious grounds.

Trolls are definitely also a part of the online discussions and in many cases, they are main factors for changing the accents in the debates or for leading it in a direction which is quite different from the main topic and causing numerous provocations and useless explanations.

The case “Charlie Hebdo” in the Bulgarian social networks

The most popular social network not only in Bulgaria, but also in Europe – Facebook has a rich toolkit for image building in the virtual reality and logically, it is being used more often by institutions, political figures and many organizations who strive to reinforce their brands and initiatives.

On Facebook, there are various pages dedicated to the case “Charlie Hebdo”¹ but just two of them are in Bulgarian. One of them is announcing a public lecture on: “Religion, politics and secularism after “Charlie Hebdo”/Academic discussion/17.02.2015”², and the other one presents the event “I am Charlie. Je suis Charlie”³ which took place in the University of National and World Economy on 21st January 2015.

Also in the social networks LinkedIn and Pinterest there is a lack of information about activities in Bulgarian, and on Google+ and Twitter most of the postings are mainly links to electronic publications in national media. One of the frequently used phrase is “I am not Charlie”⁴, “I am Ahmed”⁵ or a reference to the movie awards “Golden Globe” and the words of George Clooney during its official ceremony – “I am Charlie”⁶.

Nevertheless, it should also be considered that many Bulgarians use foreign languages and have taken part in digital reality with their postings concerning the case “Charlie Hebdo”, although not in Bulgarian.

Some other reasons for not having a large-scale campaign in Bulgarian in the social networks are: the direct geographical proximity of Bulgaria to the region of jihadists in the Middle East, the danger of sharp increase in the refugee flows which requires a lot of efforts and considerable financial means which the country’s economy cannot afford and last but not least the bitter experience of Bulgaria related to the terrorist act on 18 July 2012 2011 against the Israeli tourists at the Sarafovo airport in Burgas.

This is the reason why, rightly, the Assistant Professor *Chavdar Stoyanov*, Doctor in European, international and international criminal law, appealed to Bulgaria to think about all the risks caused by the events in Paris: *“The assault in Paris differs from the latest terrorist acts in other parts of the world. It is a particularly creepy attempt to restore revanchism and obscurantism, it is also an act of denial of democratic values of the Western civilization and human rights. Today, more than always we should assess Bulgaria’s place in this new European context”* (Standartnews.com, 12.01.2015).

CONCLUSION

The effectiveness of campaigns in the social media is measured mainly by the number of comments, likes and shares. There are also mechanisms for measuring the negative and

¹ See: <http://goo.gl/5mEmj3>

² See: <http://goo.gl/76zt2X>

³ See: <http://goo.gl/P7hCdB>

⁴ See: <http://goo.gl/DSVyQB>

⁵ See: <http://goo.gl/Izg0aA>

⁶ See: <http://goo.gl/cIUxVE>

positive comments by keyword and for summarizing the general tendencies in users' opinions. However, in order to analyze the efficiency of online communication in cases such as "Charlie Hebdo" new sociological tools are needed which encompass the interactions and forms of influence in the electronic communities which are the most active in forming public opinions in their entirety and in their multifaceted nature.

The mechanisms for communication and influence provided by social media on the Internet could be used to raise public interest through cases like the terrorist act against the cartoons of the French media "Charlie Hebdo" in Paris to the fundamental questions of democracy such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression and the protection of democratic rights and freedoms of citizens. The protection of these freedoms and rights requires tolerance, understanding and a peaceful intercultural dialogue. Only under these conditions they will find a permanent place in everyday communication in the digital reality. In this regard, the role of the state institutions and political elite of the country is very important.

The formation of public opinions in social media on socially significant cases is a two-way process. On the one side, it requires the active participation of the users united in electronic communities. On the other side, interaction between journalists from traditional and online media, institutions and state is needed which to provide as operatively as possible available and necessary information on each case, as well as to ensure within the country its linking to global problems such as freedom of speech, freedom of expression, tolerance between cultures and religions, as well as the need for a united action of the world community in the fight against terrorism in protecting democracy.

Keywords: public opinions, social media, political cartoons, Charlie Hebdo, international terrorism, media resonance

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