

Essay:

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF DEEP EUROPE: REVISITING INTERNET CULTURE IN TIMES OF WAR¹

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Abstract: Within the last two decades, the Internet has become one of, if not the most important medium for gathering information and facilitating communication in times of war and crisis. By drawing on the example of the Kosovo War in 1999, which is often described as the “the First Internet War”,² this essay shows how the World Wide Web did not only serve as an important tool of information, communication and intervention, but also how it functioned as an archive for the individual and collective experiences of war. In analysing the virtual archive of the Syndicate and the Nettime mailing lists, I show how media artists and activists contributed to the idea of Deep Europe as an imagined (online) community which overcomes the binaries of ‘East’ and ‘West’, a community which experienced its first major rupture during the Kosovo War. Not only do I discuss how, at the time, the Internet served as a form of shelter in times of crisis, in the face of censorship and cyberwarfare, but also as an emerging social platform, sharing reports on everyday events, war diaries and video material, providing historians with new and valuable sources for contemporary European history. Lastly, contributing to the field of digital humanities, I discuss the potential and the challenges of Deep Europe and the Digital East.

A few days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, I found myself on a train full of Ukrainians who had been forced to leave their homes. All of them were staring at their cell phones with tired eyes, chatting with those who had stayed at home, anxious when they did not receive an answer right away. Videos of rocket attacks and destroyed houses were being played on the phone screens, interspersed with games of Candy Crush. For many of the Ukrainians directly affected by the war, exposed to attacks or fearing for their loved ones, the Internet had become a digital shelter: a place to hide together and wait for the horror to end, a place of distraction and reflection. For quite a few, it has also become a place to bear public witness by reporting in video, voice and written messages about the suffering they have

¹ Essay zur Quelle: Messages to <nettime> Concerning the Kosovo War, in: Themenportal Europäische Geschichte, 2022, URL: < <https://www.europa.clio-online.de/quelle/id/q63-76639>>;

I would like to thank Andreas Broeckmann, who, in long conversations, not only explained the early Internet to me but also the intertwining paths of the Nettime and Syndicate communities. He also provided me with valuable online and offline resources for my research on the Kosovo War. I would also like to thank Katharina Seibert who encouraged me to make more of these excellent digital sources.
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² Thomas Keenan, Looking like Flames and Falling like Stars: Kosovo, ‘the First Internet War’, in: Social Identities 7 (2001), pp. 539–550. See also Philipp M. Taylor, The World Wide Web goes to War, Kosovo 1999, in: David Gauntlett (ed.), Web.studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age, London/New York: Oxford University Press 2000, pp. 195–201; Hans-Jürgen Bucher, Internet und Krieg. Informationsrisiken und Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie in der vernetzten Kriegskommunikation, in: Martin Löffelholz (ed.), Krieg als Medienereignis. 2: Krisenkommunikation im 21. Jahrhundert, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2004, pp. 275–296.

experienced. On returning home, I became part of ten different messenger groups: one organised donations for incoming refugees, another arranged transports for refugees from the Ukrainian border, still others helped with accommodation and medical care or support for cultural workers and scholars at risk. What seemed unthinkable during the long summer of migration in 2015 now became reality overnight. The Internet community did not even ask “Can we do this?”, they simply did. Long before the municipality reacted, volunteers had organised themselves via online lists and messenger services.

What served as a safe haven and networking space for some became a theatre of war for others. The international hacker community *Anonymous* declared cyberwar against Russia immediately after Putin’s invasion in February 2022. As ‘online Robin Hoods’ they undertook virtual crusades against the homepages of the Russian state media, while, at the same time, Russian military intelligence launched cyberattacks against Ukrainian websites. However, not only had the Internet become another battlefield, it had also become a political arena. While Zelensky’s selfie videos, depicting him as a hands-on, approachable soldier president generated millions of clicks on social media, Putin quickly became a meme as a world-weary dictator, keeping his distance at the head of long tables. War has always been the ideal stage for political performances, and the media have served as multipliers and actors on this very same stage. None of this is new. Except for the fact that the Internet changes everything.³

The power over information has always been a decisive weapon of war, which takes on new forms with every technical revolution. Within the last two decades, the Internet has become one of, if not *the* most important medium for gathering information and facilitating communication in times of war and crisis: people set their Facebook status to “I’m safe”, sharing pictures of destruction on Instagram, commenting on world events on Twitter, mobilising support via messenger groups or doom scroll on various news sites for the latest information. The Internet as a new and, in its own way, egalitarian space of knowledge naturally also opens the door to disinformation, lies and speculation. Carl von Clausewitz’ famous saying that *the first casualty of war is truth* takes on a whole new meaning in a space like the Internet, full as it is of unfiltered information. This duality of comfort, support and community, of information and testimony, on the one hand, and of fake news, propaganda and cyberwar on the other, reveals the best and the worst of Internet culture in times of crisis. And it has a European history of its own.

³ For the history of the Internet see e.g. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun / Thomas Keenan (eds.), *New Media, Old Media: a History and Theory Reader*, New York: Routledge 2006; Mercedes Bunz, *Vom Speicher zum Verteiler - die Geschichte des Internet*, Copyrights vol. 20, Berlin: Kulturverl. Kadmos 2008; Mario Anastasiadis / Caja Thimm (eds.), *Social Media: Theorie und Praxis digitaler Sozialität*, Bonner Beiträge zur Medienwissenschaft vol. 10, Frankfurt a.M./New York: Peter Lang 2011; Maria L. Felixmüller, *Produktive Unordnung: Metamorphosen der Wunderkammer bei Aby M. Warburg und im Internet*, Springe: Zu Klampen! 2018; Ricky Wichum / Daniela Zetti (eds.), *Zur Geschichte des digitalen Zeitalters*, Wiesbaden: Springer 2022.

By drawing on the example of the Kosovo War in 1999, which is often described as the “the First Internet War”,⁴ I will show in this essay how the World Wide Web became not only an important tool of information, communication and intervention, but also how it served as an archive for the individual and collective experiences of war. For the first time in history, day-to-day war reporting was no longer the sole preserve of journalists, but in fact any individual — provided they had access to the Internet — could share their testimonies directly and immediately. Examining the context of the Kosovo War offers a micro-perspective of what decisively shapes our view of war today.

Drawing on the sources of the *Nettime* and *Syndicate* mailing lists, both founded by media artists, activists, journalists and curators in the mid-1990s, I analyse how an emergent European online network experienced its first major rupture between the frontlines of NATO and the former Yugoslavia. For various reasons, the so-called humanitarian intervention in the Kosovo War became a litmus test for Europe after the end of the Cold War.⁵ In a controversial and still ongoing debate about whether it is right or wrong to end a war through military intervention by third parties, the Internet became a new discursive space, where contradictory positions were not only taken on the street or discussed in the feuilleton, but directly negotiated via mailing lists. I therefore discuss not only how the emergence of the public Internet in the course of the 1990s coincided with the end of the Cold War, but also show how media artists and activists contributed to the idea of *Deep Europe* as an imagined (online) community which overcomes the binaries of ‘East’ and ‘West’, “based on an attitude and experience of layered identities and histories - ubiquitous in Europe, yet in no way restricted by its topographical borders.”⁶ In doing so, my essay not only contributes to a history of Internet cultures in times of war, but also sheds light on the potential of the concept of *Deep Europe* by highlighting the significance of “the Digital East”⁷ for our understanding of digital humanities.

⁴ Thomas Keenan, Looking like Flames and Falling like Stars: Kosovo, ‘the First Internet War’, in: *Social Identities* 7 (2001), pp. 539–550. See also Philipp M. Taylor, *The World Wide Web goes to War, Kosovo 1999*, in: David Gauntlett (ed.), *Web.studies: Rewiring Media Studies for the Digital Age*, London/New York: Oxford University Press 2000, pp. 195–201; Hans-Jürgen Bucher, Internet und Krieg. Informationsrisiken und Aufmerksamkeitsökonomie in der vernetzten Kriegskommunikation, in: Löffelholz (ed.), *Krieg als Medienereignis. 2: Krisenkommunikation im 21. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften 2004, pp. 275–296.

⁵ Katarina Ristić / Elisa Satjukow (ed.), *NATO and the Kosovo War. The 1999 Military Intervention from a Comparative Perspective*, *Comparative Southeast European Studies* 70 (2022).

⁶ The term “Deep Europe” was first coined by Anna Balint in 1996 and then used as a common theoretical basis by the V2East/Syndicate/Nettime network, see Inke Arns / Andreas Broeckmann, <nettime> Rise and Decline of the Syndicate (13.11.2001), URL: <<https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-bold-0111/msg00494.html>> (11.07.2022). See also Inke Arns / Andreas Broeckmann (eds.), *Deep Europe: The 1996–97 Edition. Selected texts from the V2_East/Syndicate mailing list*, Berlin, October 1997.

⁷ *Digital East* was the name of a lecture series held at the Center for East European Studies at Freie Universität Berlin in the winter term 2021/22. Parts of this essay were presented in a talk given by the author. All lectures are available online, URL: <https://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/institut/mediothek/Vorlesungen/Grundlagenvorlesung-2021_22/17_11_21-Zwischen-Cyber-Warfare-und-Digital-Shelter_-Der-Kosovokrieg-und-das-Internet/index.html>

Bulletins from Serbia

“<nettime> Report from Belgrade, From: S.M., Fri, 30 Apr 1999 07:16:26 +0200

Well, good morning, people! It's 06:13, I am here in Belgrade and few minutes earlier sirens announced the end of tonight's air-raid. I don't know how charming anchors on CNN and the BBC present what happened here, but here's what I experienced... I was sleeping until around 02:20 am, when ROARING sound of airplane flying over woke me up! It was just like in the movie: sssshhhhhiiiiioooooosssshhhhh... [small silence] BOOOOOOOM!”⁸

It was 6 o'clock in the morning when a student from Belgrade sent this message via the international mailing list Nettime. Minutes before, the bombing alert had ended and the NATO planes had started their return for the night. Before people all over the world were to turn on their televisions or open their newspapers in the morning to catch up on the latest news, Slobodan, the author of the message, was the first to offer his personal view of the events to the public. In his digital account, he emphasises his special status as an eyewitness and thus someone experiencing the NATO intervention in the 1999 Kosovo War not only sitting in front of the television, but in person.

Canadian intellectual and politician Michael Ignatieff calls this a “virtual war”.⁹ To the public in the majority of NATO states, on the one hand, the Kosovo intervention had the aesthetics of a computer game with pilots targeting military objectives from the highest heights. On the other hand, to the people on the “receiving end” of the bombings, it looked just like every other war in which houses were destroyed, civilians died and people fled.¹⁰ While it was NATO's declared aim to “act to prevent a wider war”,¹¹ the people in Kosovo and Serbia perceived the reasons and outcomes of this war very differently. For the Albanians in Kosovo, NATO's intervention in the Kosovo conflict was, and still is, perceived as an important contribution to ending a decade of Serb suppression and helping the Kosovo Albanians on their road to independence.¹² Milošević and many people living in Serbia saw the 78 days of air raids as “an illegal aggression against a sovereign country”, denying the atrocities and human rights

⁸ Slobodan, <nettime> Report from Belgrade (30.04.1999), URL <<https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9904/msg00452.html>>

⁹ Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond*, London: Vintage 2001.

¹⁰ Orli Fridman / Krisztina Racz, Special Issue: Memories and Narratives of the 1999 NATO Bombing in Serbia, in: *Südosteuropa* 64 (2016).

¹¹ Presidential Speeches, Bill Clinton Presidency, 24 March 1999: Statement on Kosovo, Miller Center, URL:<<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/march-24-1999-statement-kosovo>>, (16.11.2018).

¹² Anna Di Lellio / Stephanie Schwandner-Sievers, The Legendary Commander: the Construction of an Albanian Master-Narrative in Post-war Kosovo, in: *Nations and Nationalism* 12 (2006), pp. 513–529; Isabel Ströhle, The Politics of Reintegration and War Commemoration. The Case of the Kosovo Liberation Army, in: *Südosteuropa* (2010), pp. 478–519.

violations that Serb troops committed in Kosovo. Carried out without a mandate from the UN Security Council, NATO's military intervention in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) from 24 March to 9 June 1999 was, and still is, controversially discussed. While the question of legitimacy polarised people all over Europe, the Internet became a very special arena for direct negotiations between the various warring parties: both those from NATO countries and the region of Yugoslavia.

In as early as January 1999, the Internet culture magazine *Wired* suggested that “the struggle engulfing the provinces of the former Yugoslavia is the first Internet war”.¹³ With the beginning of NATO's intervention on 24 March 1999, *The Daily Telegraph* also took up this term, announcing “Frontline News Now Travel by Email”¹⁴ in reference to Slobodan and the hundreds of other Internet users living in Serbia, and to a much lesser extent also in Kosovo, sharing their first-hand accounts on the war.¹⁵ Although the Kosovo War was the first time the Internet was used as a communication tool on a broader scale, its roots go back to the early '90s and the war in Bosnia.

Early Internet Culture in Yugoslavia

Unlike in other socialist states, Tito's “credit card communism” in Yugoslavia pursued a liberal foreign policy, which allowed the import of thousands of *Sinclair*, *Atari* and *Amiga* computers into the country in the 1980s,¹⁶ as well as the production of own computers.¹⁷ With the emergence of the public Internet in the early '90s, hackers and media artists were among the first Internet activists, connected through “the cardinal ethic [of] the virtue of information transparency, [...] supporting the continuing role of freeware and shareware.”¹⁸ The value of free information and the importance of the Internet for sharing information, experienced its first proof test during the war in Bosnia (1992–1995).¹⁹ As a communication platform for anti-war

¹³ “Inside the First ‘Internet War’”, in: *Wired* (07.01.1999), p.70, cited in: Thomas Keenan, *Looking like Flames and Falling like Stars: Kosovo, ‘the First Internet War’*, in: *Social Identities* 7 (2001), pp. 539–550, p. 540.

¹⁴ *The Daily Telegraph* (27.03.1999), in: *ibid.*, p. 543.

¹⁵ Such as, for example, the published email diaries by Aleksandar Zograf or Jasmina Tesanovic: Aleksandar Zograf, *Bulletins from Serbia. E-Mails & Cartoon Strips From Beyond the Front Line*, Hove: Slab-O-Concrete 1999; Aleksandar Tesanovic, *The Diary of a Political Idiot: Normal Life in Belgrade*, San Francisco: Midnight Editions 2000.

¹⁶ David S. Bennahum, *The Internet Revolution*, in: *Wired* (04.01.1997), URL: <<https://www.wired.com/1997/04/ff-belgrad/>> (12.04.2022).

¹⁷ A place where one can get a good overview of the development of the computer industry in Yugoslavia and the whole Eastern Bloc is the museum „PEEK&POKE” in Rijeka. I would like to thank Svetozar Nilović very much for the insights.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Bojan Bilic, *We Were Gasping for Air: (Post-)Yugoslav Anti-War Activism and Its Legacy*, Baden-Baden: Nomos 2012; Tanja Popovic, *Vergangenheitsarbeit in post-jugoslawischen Zivilgesellschaften: eine lebensweltliche Analyse anhand von Beispielen aus Serbien, Kroatien und Bosnien-Herzegowina*, Zürich: Pano Verlag 2016.

and dissident forces, the “dramatically low-tech system”²⁰ of the ZaMir (ForPeace) network developed into a counter-public and an activist digital networking medium “to connect groups fighting against war in a country that was being ripped apart by it.”²¹ At the time, the Internet was used to connect besieged Sarajevo with the rest of the world, then later to register and locate refugees from the Bosnian War, and last but not least to enable US soldiers to communicate with their families and friends.²²

While in the early 1990s, the Internet was only accessible for a few people, its importance increased quickly. In as early as 1996/97, it served as an important driving force during the anti-Milošević protests in Serbia,²³ and continued to develop until 1999. Although the protests failed this time, “something was left from 1996: technology.”²⁴ The numbers support this finding. According to Goran Gorić, there were about 15,000 Serbian Internet users before the Kosovo War, but the number tripled to around 55,000 once the NATO bombing started.²⁵ Despite the fact that only between 400,000 and 600,000 people had their own computer at the end of the ‘90s,²⁶ Internet cafes sprung up in the larger cities at the time, offering everyone access to the World Wide Web. If we compare these figures with the total population of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY). Which was around 10 million at the end of the 1990s and the enormous influence of state-controlled television, which reached around 8 million viewers, the Internet community in Serbia was of course a rather small and urban group. Nevertheless, its members were active in creating, sharing and participating in “a seemingly limitless number of websites [which] provided alternative sources of information, commentary and analysis.”²⁷ In doing so, they became an important force for the oppositional circle of intellectuals known as Other Serbia and the emergent *Otpor* movement which ultimately led to the overthrow of Milošević a year after the end of the Kosovo War on 5 October 2000.²⁸

For the time being, the Internet remained one of the few spaces of freedom. The Serbian government already adopted a new and restrictive media law at the beginning of the Kosovo War in 1998 and media freedom was further limited due to the martial law introduced at the

²⁰ Keenan, *Looking like Flames*, p. 541.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ivo Skoric, *Krieg, Wahrheit und Fernsehen*, in: Stephen Kovats (ed.), *Ost-West-Internet: Elektronische Medien im Transformationsprozess Ost- und Mitteleuropas*, Frankfurt a.M./New York: Campus 1999, pp. 303–315.

²³ Stephen Hedges, *Serbs’ Answer to Oppression: Their Web Site* *New York Times* (08.12.1996), URL: <<https://www.nytimes.com/1996/12/08/world/serbs-answer-to-oppression-their-web-site.html>> (11.07.2022).

²⁴ Keenan, *Looking like Flames*, p. 542.

²⁵ Stephen Goric, *Symbolic Warfare: Nato versus the Serbian Media*, in: Phil Hammon / Edward S. Herman (eds.), *Degraded Capability: the Media and the Kosovo Crisis*, London: Pluto Press 2000, pp. 88–110, p. 91.

²⁶ Bennahum, *Internet Revolution*.

²⁷ Gorić, *Symbolic Warfare*, p. 91.

²⁸ Srđa Popović, *Blueprint for Revolution: How to Use Rice Pudding, Lego Men, and Other Nonviolent Techniques to Galvanize Communities, Overthrow Dictators, or Simply Change the World*, New York: Spiegel & Grau 2015.

start of the NATO intervention on 24 March 1999. While critical media outlets had to bow to censorship guidelines, the World Wide Web was not restricted by the government. Especially for the opposition, whose fears turned out to be justified that the violent Milošević regime would take advantage of the state of war to suppress dissident voices,²⁹ the Internet was the most important channel for presenting and sharing alternative and uncensored information on the NATO bombing and the war in Kosovo. The outrage was therefore particularly great when, at the end of April 1999, the rumour circulated that Yugoslavia's Internet access would be cut off by the Americans. In reaction, Serbian non-governmental organisations appealed to US President Bill Clinton, arguing that access to the Internet was vital for their survival:

“For NATO it appears important to cut off all dissenting people and groups from Yugoslavia in order to maintain the image of Yugoslav society as if it is totally controlled by Milosevic regime and made only of extreme nationalists who deserve punishment by bombs. For us who are long time activists of human rights, minority rights, union rights, free press rights, women rights, peace and democracy activists, it is vital to maintain Internet connection to the world in order to get information and communicate with people about our situation.”³⁰

To this day, it remains questionable whether cutting off the Yugoslav Internet would even have been technically feasible. The decision was, ultimately, never implemented. Yet, the threat alone was a powerful weapon, albeit one that predominantly targeted the Internet activist community rather than the Milošević regime. It is even more astonishing that the Milošević government underestimated the power of the Internet this much. According to mathematics professor and politician from the *Zajedno* (Together) opposition movement, the regime did not identify the Internet as a threat because of its limited reach: “The government sees the Internet the same way it sees B92 [the most influential independent radio channel in Serbia in the 90s], as preaching to the converted. They look at who the audience is, and say, Who cares? (...) It is not about 8 million versus 10,000 - it is about who those 10,000 know, and the power that comes with this knowledge.”³¹

However, the power of knowledge and the dissemination of opinions and experiences via the Internet was also the “privilege” of a rather calculable war in Serbia where NATO air strikes targeted mainly military objectives.³² The situation in Kosovo was different, and far worse.

²⁹ Elisa Satjukow, ‘The First Collateral Damage Was to Democracy’ The ‘Other Serbia’ and the 1999 NATO Bombing, in: *Southeastern Europe Perspectives 2019, Kosovo 1999–2019: A Hostage Crisis*, pp. 39–43.

³⁰ Yugoslav NGO's Statement on the Possible Internet Ban, URL: <<https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9905/msg00004.html>> (27.08.2019).

³¹ Benaïm, *The Internet Revolution*.

³² Nevertheless, these targets were sometimes close to civilians or NATO would sometimes mistakenly hit a different target. The use of cluster and uranium bombs was also a focus of criticism. See Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign, Final Report to the Prosecutor by the Committee Established to Review the NATO Bombing Campaign Against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, United

Bulletins from Kosovo

In her article on 20 May 1999 in *The Nation*, the Croatian writer Slavenka Drakulic reflects on whether the situations in Kosovo and in Serbia are in any way comparable.

“I can see this young writer sitting at his computer (there must have been no shortage of power then) in his Belgrade apartment: He sends his e-mail letter, checks the latest war information on the Internet and goes to bed. Meanwhile, his Albanian counterpart, with whose suffering he identifies so much, sits in a tent somewhere in Albania or stands in the mud, waiting to cross the Macedonian border. His house is burned down, his computer—if he ever had one—has been taken by Serbian paramilitaries and he doesn’t know where his family is.”³³

In a way, as Drakulic points out, the Internet became an indicator of the suffering of different actors affected by the war. After the withdrawal of international organisations from Kosovo and the FRY, which happened before the air raids started, civilians were left with no protection from large-scale ethnic “cleansing”. The FRY reacted to the bombing with the declaration of war on 25 March, mobilising the Yugoslav army for the defence of Yugoslavia against NATO. At the same time, Serbian paramilitary troops, which had already been active in the Bosnian War, were called up for the “defence of Kosovo”. As a result of these intertwined conflict scenarios, 758 Yugoslav citizens were killed by NATO, around 7,000 Albanian civilians by the Yugoslav army and Serbian paramilitary troops, and more than 800,000 people fled Kosovo.³⁴

While the Internet became an empowering space for people in Serbia to share their own experiences of war, people in Kosovo were largely unable to access the Internet. Thus, the opportunities they had to speak for themselves were considerably more limited. They were living in shelters, on the run, in reception camps in Macedonia and Albania. They had no computer, no router, no connection and were therefore unable to share their knowledge and experiences in the same way. Others, such as humanitarian organisations or the international media, spoke for and about them.³⁵ There were also certain individuals in Serbia, albeit not many, who, despite their own perilous situation, used their reach, networks and opportunities

Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, URL: <<https://www.icty.org/en/press/final-report-prosecutor-committee-established-review-nato-bombing-campaign-against-federal>> (26.11.2018); Human Rights Watch, Civilian Deaths in the NATO Air Campaign, 2000; Amnesty International, NATO/Federal Republic of Yugoslavia “Collateral Damage” or Unlawful Killings? Violations of the Laws of War by NATO during Operation Allied Force (2000), pp. 1–73.

³³ Slavenka Drakulić, We Are All Albanians, *The Nation*, URL: <<https://www.thenation.com/article/we-are-all-albanians/>> (07.09.2018).

³⁴ Humanitarian Law Center, Kosovo Memory Book 1998–2000, URL: <http://www.kosovomemorybook.org/?page_id=29&lang=de> (12.02.2019).

³⁵ Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: a Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley: University of California Press 2012.

to draw attention to the fate of the Kosovo Albanians and to human rights crimes committed by Serbia. One of these individuals is the founder and director of the Humanitarian Law Center in Belgrade, Nataša Kandić. She made the dangerous journey to Kosovo several times during the war to get a clearer picture of the situation. Her eyewitness accounts also found their way into the public domain via the Internet. People like Slobodan acted as an amplifier within their networks, sharing Kandić's reports from Kosovo, underscoring the value of such reliable sources in a situation where many felt they were in an "information black hole"³⁶ of propaganda, silence and disinformation.³⁷

The Emergence of New Virtual Spaces

However, the digital space of the Internet served not only as a platform for information exchange and communication, but also as an outlet for people's own experiences and emotions. Via the Internet, not only personal accounts of the bombing, but also war-related articles, political statements and petitions were shared. What Twitter, Facebook, Telegram and co. are today, mailing lists and chat rooms were in 1999: virtual spaces where people could interact with each other both locally and across borders.³⁸ The sources on which this essay is based are email messages from the archive of the interconnected mailing lists Nettime and Syndicate.³⁹

The Nettime mailing list "for networked cultures, politics, and tactics"⁴⁰ was founded in 1995 by the Internet activists Geert Lovink and Pit Schultz within the context of the Venice Biennale. It was initially conceived as a means of communication between a small group of people, but within a few years it had developed into a transnational virtual space with over 3,000 subscribers.⁴¹ In addition to these, the most popular international, English-speaking lists, various exchange forums also emerged within the Nettime community, which used regional languages for their communication. With the beginning of the NATO intervention, Lovink recalls that "the list virtually exploded in membership"⁴². Contrary to the Syndicate archive, the

³⁶ Matthew Collin: *This is Serbia Calling: Rock 'n' Roll Radio and Belgrade's Underground Resistance*, London: Serpent's Tail 2004, p. 150.

³⁷ Slobodan, <nettime> Natasha's reports (02.06.1999), URL: <<https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9906/msg00020.html>> (16.08.2019).

³⁸ On the use of chat rooms during the Kosovo War, see Smiljana Antonijević: *Sleepless in Belgrade: A Virtual Community during War*, in: *First Monday 7/1* (2002), URL: <<https://journals.uic.edu/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/920/842>>.

³⁹ In this essay, I am actually only able to focus on a small number of sources. For a more comprehensive analysis, see Elisa Satjukow, *Die andere Seite der Intervention. Eine serbische Erfahrungsgeschichte der NATO-Bombardierung 1999*, Bielefeld: transcript 2020.

⁴⁰ Nettime mailing list, URL: <<https://nettime.org/>> (25.08.2019).

⁴¹ Geert Lovink, *My First Recession. Critical Internet Culture in Transition*, Rotterdam: V2/NAi Publishers 2003, p. 94f.

⁴² Ibid.

mailing list archive of Nettime is still accessible online.⁴³ The Syndicate network shares a similar history. Founded in 1996 in Rotterdam by Andreas Broeckmann and Inke Arns, it served as a mailing list and an open platform for exchange and cooperation in media culture, mainly for artists and activists, journalists and curators from different European states. The list was at its most active in the late 1990s, with more than 500 members from over 30 countries with the aim “to establish an East-West network as well as an East-East network”⁴⁴ after the end of the Cold War. It is noteworthy that Nettime and Syndicate started their projects by providing a transnational digital space of exchange, which over the course of 1999 turned into its own theatre of war. The opinions of the outsiders and of those experiencing the conflict first hand clashed with surprising intensity. Here, the NATO bombing was discussed just as controversially as on the streets and in bars from Belgrade to Berlin, the difference being that here, people from various war contexts and different continents sat directly opposite each other—at least virtually. Slobodan was one of the few participants from Serbia on the list who actually sought dialogue. But even his initially more diplomatic position, arguing for understanding for the ambivalent position of the Serb people in this conflict, changed as the war progressed and the attacks became more intense. In response to a *New York Times* article by Susan Sontag, published on 2 May 1999, stating: “Why are we in Kosovo? It’s complicated, but not that complicated. There is such a thing as a just war”, he responded angrily on the Nettime mailing list:

“I wonder when will those smart-asses, like Susan Sontag, finally understand that: THERE CAN BE NO COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY CRIMINAL ACT! THERE CAN BE NO COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY CRIMINAL ACT! THERE CAN BE NO COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ANY CRIMINAL ACT! EVER! This NATO’s aggression on Yugoslavia is NOT a just war, it is not a humanitarian war, but a dirty war in which civilian targets are legitimate targets, not collateral damage! This is not ‘a war against Milosevic’, but organized terror over 10 MILLION citizens!”⁴⁵

His statement polarised and provoked very different reactions on the mailing list—from demands for Serbia to take responsibility for a decade of war crimes in the former Yugoslavia

⁴³ Although most users use their full names, I quote them only with their first names or with the pseudonyms of their own choice to respect their privacy for the event that the archive should one day no longer be available online.

⁴⁴ Syndicate, Monoskop, URL: <<https://monoskop.org/Syndicate>>, (25.08.2019).

⁴⁵ Slobodan, <nettime> slobogram 050399 [digest]: A Just War; How far? (03.05.1999), URL: <<https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9905/msg00022.html>> (07.09.2018).

to understanding for the difficult position of Serbian dissident voices, who faced both a murderous regime and Western bombs that undermined their trust in democracy.⁴⁶

This is just one of many examples of how the mailing lists were used to debate the war and to share and negotiate different positions and experiences. Despite all the political controversy, with a few exceptions, the (moderated) interactions on the mailing lists were characterised by mutual respect and a willingness to engage in dialogue. Despite the strong criticism of Slobodan and other voices from Serbia, one of the users who was not directly affected by war emphasised: “you are there. not we. we can only support - and comment. and build websites. organize information. and show anger.”⁴⁷ He points to the virtue of the Internet and the potential of such digital exchange forums to enable people to show an “ethical commitment to listening to the other.”⁴⁸ This demand verbalises what the media artists and Internet activists of the first hour imagined when they founded such international digital networks: the merging of Deep Europe. The Internet represented just such a utopian and visionary place in the 1990s. While the Nettime mailing lists continues to operate today, the Syndicate was closed in 2001, not because of a lack of willingness to engage in dialogue but because of cyberattacks and spam, which questioned the very idea of the “romantic utopia of a completely open, sociable online environment”.⁴⁹

Towards a History of Deep Europe

The concept of Deep Europe stands as a metaphor for thinking beyond national identities and binary territorial concepts, such as the East and the West. Instead, the network activists emphasised the “different heterogeneous, deep-level, cultural layers and identities of Europe”.⁵⁰

The Kosovo War and the 1999 NATO bombing was the first major rupture in the young history of Deep Europe.⁵¹ The discussions on the mailing lists not only reflect the controversial positions that divided many people in Europe and the world at that time into war opponents and supporters. It also testifies to how the Internet became a platform for mobilisation, solidarity and resistance. Not only did it serve as a shelter in times of crisis, in the face of censorship and cyberwarfare and as an “an extremely important area for preserving freedom and creating room

⁴⁶ Jasna Dragović-Soso, *The Parting of Ways: Public Reckoning with the Recent Past in Post-Milošević Serbia*, in: Timothy Waters (ed.), *The Milošević Trial - an Autopsy*, New York: Oxford University Press 2013, pp. 389–408.

⁴⁷ McKenzie Wark, *Syndicate: Responsibility*, URL: <Archiv Andreas Broeckmann>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Inke Arns / Andreas Broeckmann, *Rise and Decline of the Syndicate* (13.11.2001), URL: <<https://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-bold-0111/msg00494.html>> (11.07.2022).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Geert Lovink, *Deep Europe and Kosovo conflict: History of the V2_East/Syndicate network and beyond*, URL: <<https://www.kuda.org/en/deep-europe-and-kosovo-conflict-history-v2eastysyndicate-network-and-beyond-geert-lovink>> (11.07.2022)

to fight for freedom”,⁵² but also as an emerging social platform, sharing reports on everyday events, war diaries and visual material. Although, as Geert Lovink rightly pointed out, the concept of Kosovo as the first Internet war is questionable because only a small group actually had the technical prerequisites to participate in the World Wide Web, it is certainly a precedent case worth considering:

“The Internet is with us. Not quite. In the case of the Kosova war, this new medium has proven particularly vulnerable. Not yet waterproof. Not much ‘routing around’, as the official Internet ideology (stated) it so simply (...) With Serbian ‘dissident’ media being shut down, journalists killed and intimidated, and Kosova destroyed and emptied of people, who is there to do the ‘authentic’ Internet reporting?”⁵³

Today, the Internet is everywhere. But if we look at the war in Ukraine, we can still pose the same question as Geert Lovink did in 1999, but for very different reasons: Who is there to do the ‘authentic’ reporting? And what does ‘authentic’ reporting even mean—on the Internet and during times of war in particular? Looking at the most recent war in Europe, we see Internet culture in all its extremes. The best and the worst of Deep Europe is there right in front of us. Due to the mass of data, it is hard to recognise, and even harder to analyse. The case of Kosovo and other early Internet wars helps us understand the dynamics and interactions of the Internet in times of war. With the help of tools such as the Internet Archive and the Wayback Machine, or the archives of mailing lists such as Nettime or Syndicate, we historians can gather new and valuable sources. I see two particular challenges here:

As Malte Thießen recently pointed out, for the digital humanities, not only is important to develop mechanisms to digitalise archival sources, it is also important to see the Internet itself as a dynamic archive, as something whose tracks must be preserved. The footprints of the war in Kosovo, for instance, can only be partially reconstructed using the Wayback Machine of the Internet Archive as it only stores screenshots, which do not allow images to be displayed or menus to be clicked on. A complete reconstruction of the Internet would therefore also need a corresponding technical infrastructure that can still be accessed by users 100 years from now.⁵⁴

The second major challenge is establishing a methodological and theoretical approach to analyse online war testimonies. This includes both privacy issues and the development of quantitative and qualitative methods. While the digital humanities now offer sophisticated

⁵² Veran Matić, <nettime> Dear friends of B92, URL: <<https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9905/msg00310.html>> (11.06.2020).

⁵³ Geert Lovink, War in the Age of the Internet: Some Thoughts and Reports, URL: <<https://networkcultures.org/geertlovink-archive/texts/war-in-the-age-of-internet/>> (14.7.2022).

⁵⁴ Malte Thießen, Das Internet archivieren. Digitale Überlieferung als Voraussetzung zeithistorischer Forschungen, in: Archivpflege in Westfalen-Lippe 96 (2022), pp. 40–46.

technical solutions for the former, the latter—the issue of the empirical quality of the sources—has barely been addressed in the historical sciences so far. Do the emails and social media interactions from the war zones of today’s world have the same source value as the war diaries of our ancestors? These are questions that we as historians will have to give serious thought to in the future. Analyses from previous “Internet wars” like the one in Kosovo can help us develop a methodological and theoretical understanding that goes beyond the mere measurement of big data and explores the qualitative characteristics of Internet culture in times of war. A cultural history of the Internet as a utopian space of the emerging community of *Deep Europe* could be a first step in this direction.

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