

DIGITAL ACTIVISM AND HUMAN SECURITY: TWO CASES OF CROATIAN LEAKS

Abstract. Digital platforms are increasingly being used in liberal democracies for socially and politically motivated activism. Whenever individuals or groups of people use digital media or social networks to campaign for social or political change – digital activism is entailed. However, it can have several negative effects on human security; sometimes, it can harm individual rights, privacy, and private property. In this paper, we focus on human security threats in two Croatian ‘leaks’: the complete list of veterans of the Homeland War, and the Croatian Electoral Register. The analysis focuses on three research questions: whether publication of this information was in the public interest; whether publication of the leaked information threatened human security by disclosing personal data and, if so, which harmful consequences may have resulted.

Keywords: digital activism, digital media, civic engagement, public interest, human security, Croatia

Introduction: Media, Journalists and Citizens in Changing, Digital Societies

Since the early 1600s, journalists have been professionally engaged in collecting, analysing and publishing ‘news’. The emergence of written journalism was

Clearly related to what has come to be called a ‘modern’ society [...] such societies were more free and individualistic, more secular and dedicated to material progress based on commerce and the application of science and technology. (McQuail, 2013: 2)

Within the next 100 years, journalism became “a vehicle for the propaganda of established authorities and interests, and a key instrument in the activities of opposing factions in political and religious struggles, reform movements and challenges to authority” (McQuail, 2013: 4). Therefore,

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prior to the 2000s, as their role expanded especially in relation to politics, journalists had an exclusive opportunity to spread the news to mass audiences. Editors were particularly important as gatekeepers by overseeing, filtering and selecting information and sources (for more on gatekeeping, see Barzilai-Nahon, 2006; Shoemaker and Vos, 2009; Ristow, 2013). In the pre-Internet age, citizens wishing to share information with society could only be successful with the support of journalists and the media. In their politically motivated and socially-engaged activities, citizens were limited to passing out leaflets or writing graffiti in public spaces. Beside events like revolutions, citizens could only successfully communicate and achieve typically minor and local goals at the micro-level, in the community.

Democracy brings social requirements; it is *for* and *about* its citizens. The freedom of information that gives citizens the right to access government information is a critical prerequisite of democracy, something that is impossible to achieve without a free media. The struggle for media freedom is a continuous, never-ending process as there is always material that governments do not want to share with the public. As Peter Dahlgren states (2009: 12), it is “the engagement of citizens that gives democracy its legitimacy as well as its vitality”. Therefore, citizens should work, as opposed to the state, as the ‘watchdog’ of the public interest.

In the 21st century, all manner of activity (e.g. social, political, business and economy) can hardly exist without being complexly intertwined with the media (Curran, 2002; Nunes, 2006; Shirky, 2008; Kadushin, 2012). The development of the media is transforming societies while media proliferation means a whole lot more channels of communication are available, especially social networks that connect people. Media content that is facilitated by digitisation, the Internet and Web 2.0 technology has become globally and instantly available and shareable for many kinds of social interaction purposes, while there are numerous platforms to publish information to ever larger numbers of citizens around the globe, thereby affecting the transparency of information and communication.

Citizens who participate in socially-engaged activities are aware of and interested in the expanding use of social media and digital technologies in their communication (Car, 2014: 214). Previously leaflets and posters, today it is the communication forms of blogs, online forums, online petition platforms, tweets, Instagram, and Facebook posts that are used in campaigns for social and political change. In this article, we refer to such actions not as ‘citizen journalism’ but ‘digital activism’. Citizen journalism should reflect the idea that citizens without a professional journalist education and training can report on actual, important or simply interesting issues and events by using the tools of digital technology (Allan, 2013). They can do this on their own or in collaboration with others. However, journalism as a general

notion includes professional reporting standards – implicitly double-checking the facts, reliable sources, responsibility, trustworthy, fairness, ethics etc. (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2014). Sometimes, especially in non-democratic environments where censorship exists, or during periods of conflict, citizens do not have the time or know how to follow such journalistic principles, yet they still report facts and about events. This reporting may be very important for the local community, the whole country or for a global audience. Yet, this kind of reporting is not journalism; it is more an activity in the area of digital activism. In the following chapter, we define digital activism.

Digital Participation: Digital Media and Civic Engagement

Democracy is a never accomplished goal. It is questioned and redefined daily, while simultaneously threatened by attempts at political, economic and cultural enclosure. These social issues are wide, sometimes defined around national interests, sometimes around class, minority, ethnic, immigrant, gendered or environmental interests. In this process of questioning and redefining social issues, and when taking the initiative for social change, the media plays a crucial role. Therefore, the concentration of media ownership, the influence of advertisers and corporate lobbyists, and control and securitisation of the state are issues to be discussed as part of social reforms as well (McNally, 2002). According to Carroll and Hackett (2006), “social movements have long been the carriers of liberatory social change”. They define critical social movements (CSMs) as “movements committed to empowerment of the marginalised, movements that challenge the hegemonies of dominant groups and institutions” (ibid.).

A recent example of such social movements was the Arab Spring in 2012 (Moaddel and Gelfand, 2017). It showed that digital media and social networks can be a very important instrument for organising social protest and revolutionary movements. It also entailed violent protests and revolutions bringing material and human losses in Libya and Egypt (see Moaddel and Gelfand, 2017).

Since the mid-1990s, criticism in both the USA and Europe about the media’s accountability and independence started to become louder and louder. In the USA, criticism included, for example:

the lack of investigative news coverage during and after the 2000 and 2004 U.S. presidential elections, the failure to question governmental information leading up the Iraq war in 2003, the persistence of a national health care crisis that is consistently reduced to the status quo versus socialised medicine, and continued obstruction of political groups that attempt to buy airtime on commercial television and radio. (Proffitt et al., 2009: 318)

Europe is also witness to “an emerging culture of criticism and cynicism about the current structure of commercial media” (Car, 2014: 226). Critics complain about harmful concentrations of media ownership and the excessive influence of advertisers (Media Reform Coalition, 2017). They stress that the media’s independence is suffering due to political and business interests, especially news programming that is turning from quality journalism towards trivia, while investigative journalism is disappearing. That is one reason practices like hacking and publishing leaks have become more common, and citizens are trying to become watchdogs of the media and social policy. Therefore, “public attention to and awareness of the influence of the media has developed into a kind of social movement” (Car, 2014: 227). Since 2003, the hacktivist group Anonymous has been acting anonymously in a coordinated manner, primarily concentrating on entertainment. However, since 2008, it has become associated with collaborative, international hacktivism and organised many global protests and other actions against Internet censorship and surveillance. Anonymous has organised many campaigns against anti-digital piracy. It has hacked various government websites and targeted major security corporations (Murdoch, 2010; Coleman and Ralph, 2011; Cammaerts, 2012: 128).

The cases of WikiLeaks in 2010 and 2011 (Karhula, 2011; Domscheit-Berg, 2011; Leigh and Harding, 2011; Roberts, 2011), which compromised the national security and credibility of the USA and other countries by leaking the largest collection of military and diplomatic secrets in history, confirmed that, once in digital format, information is not protected from being published. It has triggered many reactions in different countries since it touched sensitive political issues for different governments. The leaks were large and indiscriminate, and Wikileaks appeared to suggest its aim was to upset the existing order as much as it was to correct specific injustices (Roberts, 2011: 19). According to Roberts, Wikileaks only created the illusion of a new era in transparency (Roberts, 2011: 2).

During the time after the US 2016 presidential election and all the reactions to ‘fake news’ and the ‘troll farms’ used for trolling on social networks (Chen, 2015; Persily, 2017), skills in data mining and data journalism started to become essential for any quality media, while efforts to strengthen the media’s independence are constant.

When journalistic freedom or journalists’ engagement are lacking, activism steps in. When citizens band together with intentional efforts to bring about political, economic, social or environmental changes, they are civically engaged and their efforts are actual activism (Car, 2014: 2016). Activism can take a wide range of forms, from writing e-mails to the media or politicians, political campaigning, social media campaigning, organising public discussions, economic activism such as boycotts or preferentially patronising

businesses, holding rallies, street marches, strikes, sit-ins or hunger strikes. Whenever citizens use digital media to help them build social reforms, fight for human rights and social justice, or to fight against them – digital activism is entailed.

Mary Joyce (2010) argues there is no consensus on use of the term ‘digital activism’, and there are many other similar phrases. While “‘cyber-activism,’ ‘online organizing,’ and ‘online activism’ are not exhaustive because they refer only to activism on the Internet, excluding the use of mobile phones and other offline digital devices in activism” (Joyce, 2010: viii), ‘social media for social change’ refers solely to the use of social networks, while ‘e-activism’ and ‘e-advocacy’ are terms denoting the use of electronic devices (Joyce, 2010). There is no unique system of rules and instructions to organise social campaigns or activities. Digital activists use digital technology to reach out to the public and to call for action, or just to spread information about a person, an issue, politics, political decisions etc. They harness digital network infrastructure for social and political campaigning practices. There are many different types of approaches, with various strategies and tactics, and activists employ a range of tools, applications and media (e.g. ‘Internet activism’, ‘hacktivism’, ‘cyber attack’, ‘cyber campaign’ or ‘cyber war’ (see Vegh, 2002/2003)).

In this paper, we focus on digital activism, especially hacktivism (Vegh, 2002) which relies on hacking and is considered illegal. Still, hacktivists argue there is a symbolic dimension to their actions and that their performance’s goal is not to break the law. Notwithstanding this, such digital activities can have several negative impacts on personal/human security.

In the international relations literature, ‘human security’ is referred to using various terms (Buzan, 1991; Paris, 2001; Gregoratti, 2007¹; Neack, 2014). Although there is no final definition of human security, there is a consensus among its advocates that attention should shift from state-centred security to a people-centred approach to security. In this sense, the subjects of the human security approach are individuals, and its end goal is the protection of people from traditional (i.e. military) and non-traditional threats such as poverty and disease, violence against human rights and repression. Oberleitner (2002: 5) offers a simpler human security definition since for him ‘human’ means a focus on the individual and ‘security’ means protection from threats as well as the provision of a safe environment. Similarly, Lodgaard (2001) regards human security as synonymous with ‘the security of people’ and ‘societal security’. Understood in these terms, human security

¹ According to Gregoratti (2007), the first authoritative definition of human security was provided in 1994 when Mahbub ul Haq drew attention to the concept in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Human Development Report. Beyond territorial and military concerns, the report argued that human security is fundamentally concerned with human life and dignity.

requires freedom from fear, freedom from want and freedom to live in dignity (Neack, 2014: 174).

Cases of the non-authorised and uncontrolled publication of classified or sensitive information or content (audio, video, photo etc.) via digital media are increasingly frequent. According to Alasdair Roberts (2011: 2), new information technologies have made it easier to leak sensitive information and broadcast it to the world. A generation ago, the need to physically copy and smuggle actual documents limited leaking activity. Today, it is a matter of dragging, dropping, and clicking send.

'CroatiaLeaks' – Two Case Studies of Digital Activism and Hacktivism in Croatia

Ever since the first instance of digital activism in Croatia² when high school students organised a Facebook protest against the “national exam” (Car, 2014: 221–223), social activists in Croatia have used social media and other digital platforms ever more often to publish data the government is unwilling to publish, or to call an action. While the Croatian branch of Anonymous is not very active (Car, 2014: 227), there are many ‘concerned citizens’ who happen to be skilled in IT and digital technology who are used to publishing socially engaged articles, including leaks appearing on Pollitika.com³ and Vjetrenjaca.org – a non-government organisation to promote the freedom of information.

The following sections present two cases of ‘CroatiaLeaks’. In this qualitative research, the focus is to answer three main research questions and explain:

RQ1: Were the leaked data in the public interest?

RQ2: Did publication of the leaked information jeopardise human security by disclosing personal data?

RQ3: If yes to RQ2, which harmful consequences may have resulted?

In considering RQ1, we will use the variables defined in the Act on the Right of Access to Information (Hrvatski sabor, 2013). Among other listed information, bodies with public authorities are obliged to publish “registers and databases or information on registers and databases within their jurisdiction and the manner of access thereto” in an easily searchable and

² The first research on digital activism in Croatia was done within the Mapping Digital Media project (Car and Andrijašević, 2012).

³ From October 2017 there are no new articles published on this webpage. The founder and owner of the webpage Marko Rakar wrote an article in which he explained that Pollitika.com is ready to become an online museum as a read-only webpage, and the reasons for that are the outdated software used by the webpage and users who prefer to be on social networks instead of reading articles published on a webpage (mrak's blog, 2017).

machine-readable format on their websites (Hrvatski sabor, 2013: Article 10/5).

When considering RQ2, we will use the variables defined in the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Hrvatski sabor, 2010) and the Personal Data Protection Act⁴ (Hrvatski sabor, 2012a: Article 2):

Personal data shall be any information pertaining to an identified natural person or an identifiable natural person (hereinafter: data subject). An identifiable person is one who can be identified, directly or indirectly, particularly on the basis of an identification number or one or more factors specific to the person's physical, physiological, mental, economic, cultural or social identity.

The Homeland War Veteran Register The complete list of veterans of the Homeland War was one of the biggest national secrets in Croatia ever since the end of that war (1991–1995) (Car, 2014: 227–228). In a country with a population of 4,290,000 (2011 census), it appeared as if about 11 per cent of the population was made up of Homeland War veterans because some 500,000 people were included in the register. Yet this was just speculation since the register had not been published. People holding the War Veteran status were entitled to many benefits (e.g. veterans' pensions were double, even three times the average pension in Croatia; veterans did not have to pay customs when importing a car, which was quite a common way to buy a car in the 1990s because the market generally was not developed in Croatia, the war had destroyed the industry and it took a while after the war had finished to restore the trade business and the market in general; the children of veterans had the right to unconditionally enrol any university programme, irrespective of their high school score etc.)⁵. The greatest public speculation was that many people on the register had been given veterans' benefits via political and personal connections, some even without having fought in the war and some who were not in the country at the time. Given that all of these benefits relied on public funds from the state budget, it was in the public interest to publish the register (RQ1) and finally enable the media and the citizens to verify the credentials of individual beneficiaries.

⁴ As a Member State of the Council of Europe, the Republic of Croatia has accepted the provisions of Convention 108 – the Convention for the Protection of Individuals regarding Automatic Processing of Personal Data (AZOP, 2018). The EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Eugdpr.org, 2018) which replaces the Data Protection Directive 95/46/EC will be enforced 25 May 2018, namely, after the submission of this paper. The GDPR was designed and formulated to harmonise data privacy laws across Europe.

⁵ The full list of benefits is included in the Act on the Rights of Croatian Homeland War Veterans and their Family Members (Hrvatski sabor, 2017).

Fifteen years after the war had finished, the government was still refusing to publish the register because politicians did not want to deal with many of the 'fake' veterans and their political sponsors. In this environment, activists or, better put, hacktivists emerged – with the register anonymously appearing online in April 2010 at www.registarbraniteljia.com⁶.

The interest of the public was huge. Although the register was not published as a list, the published database was searchable by name, and citizens immediately started to search for people they knew, individuals they knew had not fought in the war were not even in Croatia at the time. Whenever they found a 'fake' veteran, citizens started to report the name to the Ministry of Croatian Veterans, but also to the media which was covering this growing political scandal with great interest. The webpage featuring the register collapsed on the same day it was published due to the overwhelming interest of citizens all searching at the same time. In the next 10 days, the webpage received about 14 million visits. The identity of the publisher has never been revealed.

Still, the Register remained unchanged until a new government came in December 2011 when the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (*Hrvatska demokratska zajednica*, HDZ) with partners lost the election, and a coalition of four centre and centre-left parties won the parliamentary elections. It took another year and, finally, the official list of veterans was published in December 2012 (accessible at <https://registar.branitelji.hr>)⁷.

The second research question (RQ2) of this paper is whether publication of the Homeland War Veteran Register jeopardised human security by disclosing personal data pertaining to the soldiers?

According to the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia (Hrvatski sabor, 2010: Article 37) and the Personal Data Protection Act (Hrvatski sabor, 2012a), the published data from the Homeland War Veteran Register are personal data or information about one's personal life. The information contained in the Register is: name, name of one's parent, last name, date of birth and place of birth, number of days participated in the war, combat or non-combat affiliation sector. The Constitution of the Republic of Croatia guarantees the security and confidentiality of personal data and prohibits the use of such data contrary to the purpose of their collection:

⁶ The content of the original page Registarbraniteljia.com was deleted and, although the page is still available, the content appearing there does not have any relation with the Homeland War Veteran Register.

⁷ It was after the first version of this paper was submitted, in December 2017, when the Ministry of Croatian Veterans decided to withdraw the register from the Ministry's webpage. The register has become an internal document under the name *Evidencija hrvatskih branitelja iz Domovinskog rata* (Record of Croatian Homeland War Veterans) and is no longer publicly available. At that time, there were 505,694 persons on the list (*Večernji list*, 2017).

The safety and secrecy of personal data shall be guaranteed for everyone. Without consent from the person concerned, personal data may be collected, processed, and used only under the conditions specified by law. Protection of data and oversight of the operations of information systems in the state shall be regulated by law. The use of personal data contrary to the express purpose of their collection shall be prohibited. (Hrvatski sabor, 2010: Article 37)

The Constitution also guarantees the observance and protection of personal life (Hrvatski sabor, 2010: Article 35). The mentioned human rights are not absolute, meaning these rights may in certain situations be suspended to protect certain other rights or interests.

Freedoms and rights may only be curtailed by law to protect the freedoms and rights of others, the legal order, and public morals and health. Any restriction of freedoms or rights shall be proportionate to the nature of the need to do so in each individual case. (Hrvatski sabor, 2010: Article 16)

Three of these assumptions (the freedoms and rights of others, the legal order, public moral, and health) must be met cumulatively to allow the restriction of human rights and freedoms. In the same way, the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (Council of Europe, 2010) governs the protection of human rights and the restriction of those rights. The Convention requires the limitations to be prescribed by law, necessary in a democratic society, and in pursuit of one of the specified aims – “national security”, “territorial integrity”, “public safety”, “the prevention of disorder or crime”, for the “protection of health or morals”, for the “protection of the reputation or the rights of others”, for “preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence”, or for “maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary” (Council of Europe, 2010: Article 10).

While the previous Act on the Rights of Croatian Homeland War Veterans and their Family Members stated that information from the Register should be published “in order to strengthen the dignity of the Croatian Homeland War and the promotion of the War, as well as strengthening the reputation and honor of the Croatian Homeland War” (Hrvatski sabor, 2012b: Article 109c), the new version of the Act states that such information shall not be made publicly available and that the data serve the needs of procedures conducted by the Ministry and other competent authorities and for other purposes envisaged by a special regulation (Hrvatski sabor, 2017: Article 151).

According to the Constitution, these objectives are insufficient for limiting human rights (Hrvatski sabor, 2010: Article 16). It follows that revelations

of personal information about individuals contained in the Register are in breach of Articles 36, 37 and 16 of the Croatian Constitution (Hrvatski sabor, 2010). Krubhala, Niranjana and Priya (2015: 2) define information privacy, or data privacy (or data protection), as the relationship between the collection and dissemination of data, technology, the public expectation of privacy, and the legal and political issues surrounding them. Privacy concerns exist wherever personally identifiable information or other sensitive information is collected and stored – in digital form or otherwise. Improper or non-existent disclosure control may be the root cause of privacy issues. In this respect, it could be said that this is exactly what happened when the registry was published.

Based on the above, this is not about restricting the freedom of information; it is an attack on privacy. This conclusion is supported by the fact the law did not mandate that the Register would be published to achieve the freedom of information. Once publicly available, citizens can join in the review of data and, based on personal experience, report persons who have illegally acquired veteran status (RQ3). Still, it is inappropriate that citizens must become the ‘policemen’ and to do the job of employees at the Ministry of Croatian Veterans. Further, citizens could be motivated to take some other actions (e.g. personal revenge, vandalism, assault etc.) against a ‘fake’ veteran (RQ3). It must be emphasised that war veterans are an extremely vulnerable social group, and many veterans suffer posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). On the other hand, the disclosure of the ‘War time’ part of the Register does not alter the essence of the problem of its (un)constitutionality. The point is that it is a violation of the confidentiality of personal information and the use of such data is inconsistent with the purpose of their collection, and the violation of privacy is not justified by any legitimate, constitutionally-defined goals.

Although it is beyond doubt there is a legitimate public interest in knowing who has unlawfully acquired the status of veteran (RQ1), and it is clear had the hacktivists not published the Register it is possible the people who illegally acquired that status would today still be receiving benefits and no one would intervene, that does not mean there is a legitimate public interest in disclosing information on *all* the veterans, especially those who do not want their names to be published (Hrvatski sabor, 2012a: VIII). According to Latonero and Gold (2015: 15), it is very important that policymakers, technologists and human rights practitioners develop new tools to allow citizens to safely share information relevant to human rights while protecting their identities. Where data allows for the individual identification of victims of abuse, they should develop protocols for communication and intervention that consider individuals’ privacy and dignity. The State must find ways to perform an audit and take away the veteran status from all who have

acquired it illegally. However, that should not be done in a way that harms the human rights and freedoms of all the other veterans who acquired the veteran status lawfully, properly and justly.

The Croatian Electoral Register

The Electoral Register was another topical issue in Croatia. Since Croatia declared its independence and became internationally recognised in 1992, special care has been paid to the electoral rights of the Croatian diaspora (Croatian citizens living abroad) (Sajfert, 2013). The electoral system was not very transparent from the outset and how many voters were in Croatia was always a question. For example, at the 2007 parliamentary election there were 4,478,386 voters, whereas according to the 2001 census the population of Croatia was 4,437,360. Out of the total number of voters, 405,000 were registered abroad. Many social activists and non-government organisations had warned that the Electoral Register was not credible, that it contained names of people who were deceased, or people who did not live in Croatia but were registered with an address in the country.

In 2009, the Croatian Electoral Register was published by way of a leak on the Popisbiraca.pollitica.com site. The founder and owner of that webpage is Marko Rakar, publicly known as a social activist, especially a hacktivist, and a specialist in political communication. After it appeared online, journalists and citizens started to search the register and discovered many omissions and considerable inaccurate data. For example, in a village of Vrgorac, at the address of Dusina 0 (where no big property stands) 405 persons were registered. All were citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina and registered in Croatia so as to be eligible to receive social security benefits, parental allowance, pensions, health insurance etc. – and for this they were supposed to come to Croatia and vote in favour of the local politicians.

There was not only a political reason to have transparent data about the Croatian electorate (only living people, Croatian citizens, with an electoral right to vote for a future Croatian parliament and government), but also a political issue considering the spending of state budget money on social security benefits and the other mentioned benefits (RQ1).

After journalists and citizens reported much of the inaccurate data in the Register, some 750,000 names were deleted from the list. For his socially-engaged activism, Marko Rakar was given the World e-Democracy Award in 2009.

To compare, according to Ministry of Public Administration data in September 2016 there were 3,799,609 voters: 3,740,200 with residency in Croatia, and 59,409 voters living abroad – about 345,000 fewer than in 2007 (Središnji državni portal, 2016).

By revealing information that included the first and last name, address, and personal identification number (OIB), human security was jeopardised (RQ2). For example, it was unpleasant for the 405 persons registered at the Dusina 0 address to have their names published in the media and presented as an example of illegal residency (RQ3). Further, there was a real likelihood of disclosing personal information about people wrongly recognised as misusing the system (Krubhala et al., 2015: 2; Latonero and Gold, 2015: 7–8).

Finally, since 2014 an official website run by the Ministry of Public Administration publishes the Electoral Register (accessible at <https://biraci.gov.hr/RegistarBiraca/>). Yet it is not enough to know a person's first and family name to conduct a search since the ID number and Master Citizen Number (MBG, *matični broj građana*) must also be known, which reduces the possibility of misusing the register.

This case is an example how a hacktivist action of publishing a leak helped strength Croatian democracy by pushing the State's institutions to handle this situation in a transparent way, following the Act on the Right of Access to Information (Hrvatski sabor, 2013) and at the same time taking care to ensure personal data protection (Hrvatski sabor, 2012a).

Conclusion: Digital Activism as a Fight for Freedom of Information or an Attack on Privacy?

The Internet age and Web 2.0 technology have brought more multidirectional forms of communication and participation, which is very important for democratic societies. In this paper, we question citizens' use of digital media to create social and political change, especially to make the public administration work better, be more transparent, more accurate and efficient, and especially to fill the gap caused by insufficient investigative journalism. As elaborated in the introduction of this paper, due to the complex network of corporate and political elites' interests, only a few of today's media establishments can financially support journalists in the role of the first raw independent (not embedded) 'watchdogs' to react whenever is government willing to hide information or retain the status quo on some politically and socially topical issues. Globally, investigative journalism is not as powerful as it was during the 'golden era' from the 1970s to the 2000s (de Burgh, 2008). Julian Assange and Edward Snowden are symbols of citizen activism, relying on publishing leaks of information that governments wanted to hide from the public (Leigh and Harding, 2011; Brickell, 2014). Particularly during the Arab Spring, citizens were an important source of reliable information by sharing pictures and videos on social media (Howard and Hussain, 2013).

On one hand, freedom of information is a priority of any liberal democracy. However, when gatekeepers (e.g. politicians, government, corporate elites) close the 'gate' on information, citizens are there to find another way to let the information out. As a form of citizens' social and political engagement, digital activism can be democratic and progressive. It is valuable whenever it fights for a more equitable share of political, social, economic, cultural and informational resources in society. The skills of hacktivism can be particularly prized because without such IT skills and knowledge citizens cannot be successful in bringing information to the public's attention.

Still, the right to information and the freedom of expression have some limits; namely, individual freedom, privacy, and safety. Confidentiality and transparency are not mutually exclusive but two sides of the same coin. Whenever personal data are published, there are many possibilities for the confidentiality of personal information to be violated, as explained in the previous section.

In this paper, with its focus on two case studies of Croatian leaks, we wanted to examine whether the publication of personal information from the Croatian Homeland War Veteran Register and the Croatian Electoral Register jeopardised human security. In both cases, neither the state nor the media wanted to publish the information because that would reveal more than a few cases of individuals misusing the system and there was no political interest in dealing with the issue. The first case was an act of hacktivism, where the leak was published on a webpage whose IP address could not be linked with any individual, organisation or institution from Croatia. In the second case, a Croatian social and political activist published data on his own webpage but without disclosing his sources.

However, in each case confidential personal data were published, thus being in breach of the Constitution and not in line with the Personal Data Protection Act (Hrvatski sabor 2010, 2012). As explained, individuals whose personal information was revealed were exposed to possible harm from a third party.

This article was submitted just prior to the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Eugdpr.org, 2018), which replaces Data Protection Directive 95/46/EC, being enforced. It is hoped that the GDPR will harmonise data privacy laws across Europe, strengthening the freedom of information on one hand, and instructing those who publish data in the public interest how to publish it in a form that does not harm the privacy and human security, and will generally be in line with protecting human rights.

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