

# ♀ & Internet

*Croatian perspective*



Kristina Mihalec & Nevenka Sudar  
♀ & **INTERNET** – CROATIAN PERSPECTIVE

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# INTRODUCTION

Kristina Mihalec

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Although Croatia may<sup>1</sup> have a small amount of women online and a significant digital gender gap, it is still valuable to explore how this tiny percent of “average” online women use the Internet. With Croatia, we have the opportunity to document what occurs with women’s Internet use in a transition country. Lidija Lacko Vidulic observes that the period of Internet expansion corresponds with the post-war period of the formation of the independent state of Croatia and the transition from a totalitarian system to democracy. This is a noteworthy coincidence as the goals set by a society on the path to democracy correspond to the expectations related to the Internet (Lacko Vidulic: 1). Theories on technology such as the Internet can not claim to transform society, facilitating and allowing for participation in an open society, if women are largely excluded. The effectiveness of the Internet as overcoming inequalities also depends on the way women use ICTs (Information Communication Technologies), not just on the number of women who use it.

However, to date, there is next to no research or data on how women in Croatia use the Internet, general sex-desegregated statistics, or theories that can be generally applied. Thus, making conclusions on the effects of the Internet on women and society were difficult to make. As Pippa Norris states, the challenge is to integrate the findings from other disciplines into current Internet research (Norris 2001: 35). However, as regional and national research on the Internet or sex-desegregated data barely exists in any area, it is difficult to integrate other disciplines to even make a general synthesis. Norris also notes that, “burgeoning literature is available in the United States, but so far the broader picture across the globe remains unclear” (Norris 2001: 35). Our research endeavours to include Croatia in the “broader picture” in the global discourse on women

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1 The term ‘may’ is used instead of ‘has’ because there are no statistics available to confirm that there actually *is* a gender digital divide. The authors’ assumption, based on their experience as activists, participants in the Croatian women’s “movement,” and expertise in ICTs, is that a gender digital divide *does* exist.

and ICTs. This book is one starting point, which can lead to more in-depth research or follow up studies in the future. The research is far from over; rather, it is a beginning which will be hopefully followed by other research.<sup>2</sup> Due to lack of resources, we focused our research on women in Croatia. We hope that similar local-based research will be made with a gender sensitive approach, incorporating both men and women in ICT analysis.

This book looks at how women in Croatia use the Internet, linking theory, and analysis with everyday lives and realities of women. With the little information that exists, we developed a quantitative and qualitative research that looks at the way women in Croatia use the Internet and some of the possible challenges that exist other than lack of telecommunications infrastructure.

While keeping the social context in perspective Chapter 1 introduces an international overview of ICTs discourse in the region and gender indicators can be used as a method of analysis and evaluation. While Chapter 2 focuses on Croatian statistical data we gathered, Chapter 3 – Women-Owned Websites – also looks quantitative in addition to qualitative data, specifically what the women are expressing via web sites and why. The way women’s organizations and activists use ICTs can be found in Chapter 4 – Online Activism. While typical research addresses lack of resources as playing a large part in limiting women’s use of ICTs, Chapter 5 looks at indirect aspects of society, – the portrayal of women and new technologies in mass media – which can influence people’s perspectives of women’s ICT use even when resources are available. The final chapter is a collection of interviews, offering a space for women who are in some way connected to ICTs to share their stories and experience. Several indicators, such as data collection, free time, the way people communicate, and the mass media, represent just a sample of items that point to diverse areas of women’s lives that can affect the ways in which ICTs are used.

By looking at the expectations and potentials the Internet can provide to a society in transition we can measure the status of new democracies by evaluating how the Internet, as a tool of and for an open and free society, is being used by women. Are democratic attempts to incorporate women’s human rights and greater public participation on a political and cultural level being achieved in everyday lives of women?

As the Internet and the formation of Croatia as an independent state began approximately at the same time these two seemingly separate aspects actually mirror one another in their development. It can be said that the Internet as well as the country is in a period of transition, where we have the opportunity to witness and document its potential growth and transformation over time.

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2 Possibilities for similar research in the Czech Republic are being discussed.