Pressing the Independent Bodies: Trolling the Serbian Ombudsman

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Abstract

This paper looks at the activity of Twitter users who took part in a series of interconnected online disputes that developed as a result of the executive government’s escalating pressure on Serbian Ombudsman Saša Janković to resign. During the four month long smear campaign a group of trolling accounts were used to orchestrate organised online/Twitter astroturfing attacks against the Ombudsman, with many Twitter users responding by offering their support for the Ombudsman through the use of supportive hashtags and mentions.

The tweets and other relevant data were gathered through the use of Twitter’s public API and later fed to the NodeXL to examine the behavioural patterns of groups that campaigned for and against the ombudsman. A qualitative analysis of the tweets was performed to identify the common concepts, topics, words and images utilised by the users involved, while the results of the quantitative analysis serve to show the power, outreach and patterns of the online communication strategies that were employed. Findings reveal that the trolling attacks on the Ombudsman were coordinated, organised and used as part of a wider strategy of exerting pressure on a holder of Office of an independent institution, but also that such a strategy resulted in a semi-organised reaction-campaign.

The case is significant as it looks at new online communication strategies that were applied with the purpose of discrediting/defending an overseeing institution in Serbia, a country where such bodies are still fragile due to their lack of tradition and power. The online disputes fueled the conflict and had a polarizing effect on society.

Keywords: Social media, Online communication strategies, Astroturfing, Twitter, Serbia, Ombudsman
Overview

Being that an ever-larger number of people residing in Southeast Europe choose the internet as their primary source of daily news and other information, social media are becoming an increasingly important media-space for drawing the attention of citizens to various political agendas in the developing democracies of this region. Recent research\(^1\) has indicated that various social media websites such as Facebook and Twitter are utilised as voter recruitment and mass mobilisation platforms not just through the use of traditional web-ad campaigns, but also through subtle communication strategies such as ‘astroturfing’, i.e. the tactic involving “…communication teams using social media tools to transmit a message that aids the cause of their favoured potential victor.”\(^2\) Astroturfing is still a relatively new and developing form of online communication, meaning that its utilisation is rapidly changing and evolving, which makes it an important opinion-making strategy to examine.

Descriptive studies of the phenomenon have been conducted, with the field of online marketing being the primary focus of researchers (and political campaigns being one other field of popular interest), but more in-depth studies of the ways in which online users reply to and engage with social media astroturfing political campaigns are yet to be conducted. Unlike traditional campaigns which consist of one-direction communication, astroturfing acts within interactive social media platforms, making such campaigns very prone to impact from the very audience they are intended for, which makes researching the ways in which social media users respond to astroturfing campaigns (and the way in which the campaigns are shaped as a result) valuable, as such results offer new insights with implications for social influence theories and communication theories.

Finally, astroturfing takes different forms in relation to the socio-political context it is utilised in and in-depth empirical studies of political astroturfing in Southeast Europe, where this strategy is ever more applied, are yet to be provided, which would enrich the field of social media and political communication studies with new empirical data. This research thus strives to closely look at one of the most notorious examples of a political astroturfing campaign in

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\(^1\) Zhang, Jerry; Darrel Carpenter and Myung Ko. Online Astroturfing: A theoretical perspective, Completed Research Paper, University of Texas at San Antonio, 2013, pp. 1-7.

Serbia and to analyse how online users responded to the campaign, as well as the ways in which the campaign was shaped by their response.

**Aim**

The example in question is related to the astroturfing campaign that took place during the 2015 conflict between Serbian Ombudsman Saša Janković and various ruling party (Serbian Progressive Party - SNS) MPs, ministers, government spokespersons and pro-government media moguls, all of which were seen as acting on Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić’s behalf. The conflict began when Ombudsman Janković steered public attention towards one potential case of misconduct by requesting to take a closer look at the incident involving the Prime Minister’s brother, as the ruling party responded with a coordinated online, electronic and print media campaign that intended to discredit the Ombudsman; portraying him as a politically motivated and biased individual with a shady past. Prominent public figures, intellectuals, leaders of the opposition and NGO representatives soon responded to the anti-Ombudsman campaign by offering their support for Jaknović, with Twitter being perhaps the most important online platform utilized by both sides in their efforts to implement their communication strategies.

In order to better understand how astroturfing is applied as a political communication strategy and in order to provide the reader with a better understanding of the power-struggle that took place during the four month long conflict which bares important implications for the future of government control in Serbia, the following analysis aims to 

**a)** provide a chronological overview of the conflict by mapping a timeline of key events

**b)** utilize the “Mecodify” open-source tool to analyze how the conflict developed and played out on Twitter during the specified timeframe. The questions that the Twitter related inquiry aims to answer are the following: Who were the main actors involved in the conflict on Twitter? How did key events in this conflict shape the discussion on Twitter and did the Twitter discussion shape the conflict in any way? What communication strategies were utilized by pro and anti-Ombudsman Twitter users to defend/attack the Ombudsman on Twitter? How did the involved actors respond to these strategies and how did the strategies develop in relation to those responses? What insights does this instance of astroturfing offer in regards to social influence theories and communication theories (such as the theory of reasoned action; a theory used in communication discourse as a theory of understanding persuasive messages and a theory which predicts that
an actor’s decision to engage in a particular behavior is based on the outcomes the actor expects will come as a result of performing the behavior)?

**Detailed information about the dynamics and events of the conflict**

The campaign against Saša Janković developed over several important events, lasting from mid-January until mid-May 2015. It took place in a context characterized by the growing political influence of the executive branch of government, which materialized at the expense of the already weak judicial and legislative branches, as well as at the expense of independent governing bodies. Such an inner-government power-shifting trend was evident even between 2000 and 2012 (the period during which the country was led by parties that rose to power from the anti-Milošević revolution), but it began to intensify after SNS (a party founded by former members of the Serbian Radical Party that were in power during the Milošević era) won the 2012 and 2014 parliamentary elections, thus creating a growing need for the independent governing bodies, such as the Ombudsman and the Commissioner for Information of Public Impotence and Personal Data Protection, to utilize their power-control mechanism in order to point to any instances of abuse of power.

The campaign itself started on the 14th of January 2015, when the Ombudsman filed criminal reports against two military police officers who provoked an incident at the 2014 Pride parade in Belgrade. During this incident, the two military police officers clashed with the riot-police, as they wanted to pass through a police blockade together with Andrej Vučić, the Prime Minister’s brother, and Predrag Mali, the brother of the Mayor of Belgrade, even though they had no authority to pass through a blockade installed by the riot-police. The Ombudsman filed criminal charges against the two military policemen based on suspicion that they attacked officials who were performing their duties and asked to view the Military Security Agency’s (VBA) official report on the event so that he could investigate the case further. The VBA was quick to deny his request and ruling party officials criticized the Ombudsman because of his intentions to obtain classified documents, while activists and representatives of the NGO sector defended the Ombudsman’s right to do so.

At the same time, Janković also stated that he has reason to believe that the Military Security Agency was illegally monitoring opposing party members, judges and trade union

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activists. He was unable to investigate the case further because the Ministry of Defense and its Minister Bratislav Gašić (a member of the Serbian Progressive Party) refused to cooperate and provide relevant documents and answers, which triggered a public debate over the Ombudsman’s powers and jurisdictions, which culminated in parliament debates in the days to come. “At the end of January, the parliament’s Committee for Control of Security and Intelligence Services concluded that the Ministry of Defense and the VBA were not obliged to hand over any information and documents to the Ombudsman’s office. In turn, legal experts expressed their concerns, claiming that politically appointed persons, such as the minister and parliament committee members, are biased and as such could easily undermine independent institutions.”

A full-scale media campaign against Ombudsman Janković followed, and it included insults made by members of the ruling party, as well as statements made by various ‘experts’ that had the obvious aim of discrediting the Ombudsman’s work and Janković as a person. As a result, the Ombudsman stated that he does not feel safe because of all the threats and allegations he has received since filing charges against the two military policemen and since attempting to investigate the VBA’s activities.

After a tragic crash of a military helicopter in March that year, which was ordered to continue with the mission even though the flying conditions weren’t safe (thus causing the death of 8 people), the Ombudsman said that the Minister of Defense must be held accountable for his part in this tragedy, due to fact that he expected blind obedience from those subordinated to him and since this sort of behavior is one of the factors that led to the crash. As a result, the standoff between the Ombudsman and members of the executive branch of government continued during the weeks that followed. However, the harshest media campaign against Janković started on April 18th, when ‘Informer’, a tabloid newspaper, published that in 1993 Janković's friend Predrag Gojković committed suicide in Janković's apartment using Janković’s revolver. Basing their assumptions on incomplete documents, tabloids alluded that

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4 Marko, Davor. 2015 Conflict over the Ombudsman – Conflict Summary, Summary, Project MeCoDEM, 2015, p. 2.
7 Informer. Najmračnija tajna Saše Jankovića! On ne želi da ovo znate! (Saša Janković’s Darkest Secret! He doesn’t want you to know this!), Informer newspaper, Belgrade, 2015, Available from:
Janković did not hold a proper license for the weapon. The Ombudsman responded by stating that the revolver was duly registered in his name, that the police returned it to him after the investigation, and that he sold it several years later.

In the meantime, the Ministry of Interior, led by Minister Nebojša Stefanović (a member of the Serbian Progressive Party) selectively published case-related documents, while the minister made public statements that alluded to the fact that Janković could be responsible for his friend’s death. Soon after, a representative of another independent governing body, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection, insisted that the Ministry publish all relevant information about the case and the weapon used in the suicide, as unpublished documents made it obvious that Janković was cleared of any charges after a thorough investigation was conducted back in 1993.8

At this point Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić got personally involved in the conflict, as he stated that he respected the institution of the Ombudsman, but he was not sure whether he should respect Saša Janković.9 He also exploited the tragedy of the Gojković family, using emotional and pathetic language to attract attention and demonstrate his empathy for their loss, asking Janković to come out with the truth.

Due to this campaign and a series of very negative articles, TV broadcasts, and online floods of anti-Ombudsman internet comments and tweets, many of which bordered on hate-speech, Janković’s personal integrity was brought into question, which ultimately had negative consequences for the institution of the Ombudsman. In turn, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights expressed his concerns and stated that “The attacks have been further fueled by negative statements from high-level state officials. Most worryingly, it has been suggested that Janković was in some way involved in the death of a person who committed suicide in 1993, and media reports have referred to the Ombudsperson as a 'killer', 'gun smuggler' and 'suspect'”."10

Finally, the conflict was settled on May 15th when the Prime Minister and the Ombudsman held an official meeting and agreed to cooperate, communicate and meet regularly. This was an indirect result of external pressure from the EU and its Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, who urged the two sides to cooperate.

Table 1. List of dates and events related to the 2015 conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Number</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14 January</td>
<td>The Ombudsman filed criminal reports against military police members due to the incident that took place during the 2014 Pride Parade. Janković also declared that he has reason to believe that the VBA was illegally monitoring the activities of specific politicians, judges and trade union activists. As a result, he was publicly criticized by several politicians and ministers of the ruling party during the days that followed. Activists, NGOs and members of the Independent Association of Journalists of Serbia expressed their discomfort with the way in which the media spoke about Janković.</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>28 January</td>
<td>The Serbian National Assembly’s Committee for Control of Security and Intelligence Services concluded that the Ministry of Defense was not obliged to hand over any information or documents to the Ombudsman. Using his constitutional rights, Janković urged the minister to submit all the documents without further delay, asking for the reports on the 2014 Pride Parade incident as well. This sparked major criticism from the ruling party.</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>6 February</td>
<td>The Prosecutor’s Office dismisses the criminal reports against military police members filed by the Ombudsman.</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>9 February</td>
<td>Informer, a tabloid newspaper, published that Janković was a very close associate of some Democratic Party members (the Democratic Party being the leading opposing party).</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>13 February</td>
<td>The Minister of Defense submitted a four page report about the Pride Parade incident to the Ombudsman in order to compensate for no allowing him to view VBA files. The Ombudsman stated that the report was nothing but a mockery.</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>17 February</td>
<td>Ministry of Defense’s monthly magazine uses its cover page to accuse the Ombudsman of being a threat to Serbian security.</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>18 February</td>
<td>The French Ambassador to Serbia stated that Ombudsman Janković will receive the French National Order of Merit, as he is recognized by the French state as a true protector of citizen’s rights.</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>14 March</td>
<td>A rescue helicopter crashed while carrying a newborn baby to the hospital. The Ombudsman stated that the Minister of Defense bears a certain degree of responsibility because he expects blind obedience from those subordinated to him.</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>16 March</td>
<td>The Ombudsman submitted the 2014 report on the state of human rights in Serbia to the National Assembly, warning that the state of human rights was worrying during the past few years. Several MPs who belong to SNS demanded his resignation, claiming that his 2014 report on human rights was arbitrary and politicized.</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>19 March</td>
<td>Based on documents submitted by the Ombudsman, the Serbian National Assembly’s Committee for Control of Security and Intelligence Services concluded that the VBA was illegally monitoring the activities of specific politicians.</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>23 March</td>
<td>Ombudsman Janković received the French National Order of Merit.</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>18 April</td>
<td>Informer claimed that Janković was interrogated by the police in 1993 for keeping an illegal weapon that his friend committed suicide with. Informer claimed that the case was covered up and that the former Democratic Party-led government used the case to blackmail Janković. The report was followed by verbal attacks against Janković made by SNS officials.</td>
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<td>Date</td>
<td>Event</td>
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<td>20 April</td>
<td>Željko Mitrović, the owner of TV Pink, insulted Janković publicly, calling him “Sale pranigija”, meaning “Saša the gunman.”</td>
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<td>21 April</td>
<td>NGOs launched a petition with the aim of supporting Janković. It was signed by more than 4,000 people, including prominent public figures.</td>
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<td>22 April</td>
<td>In his open letter to the public, Janković stated that tabloids are under the ruling elite’s control. Serbian opposition leaders supported the statement, claiming that campaign against Janković had the aim of making the institution of the Ombudsman vulnerable to political influence. The Prime Minister responds by stating that he respects the Ombudsman as an institution, but is not sure that he should respect Janković as a person.</td>
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<td>24 April</td>
<td>Parents of Janković’s friend who committed suicide in 1993 made an open statement for the public. They complained that nobody really cares about their son, as the public only wants to defend the Ombudsman. Later that day, the Ministry of Interior published police files related to the suicide. Janković claimed they didn’t publish all the relevant files, as they only intended to show the side of the story that suited those opposed to him.</td>
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<td>27 April</td>
<td>SNS attempted to amend the Law on the Ombudsman in order to weaken some of the government control mechanisms that Janković had at his disposal.</td>
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<td>30 April</td>
<td>TV Pink aired a special interview with the Gojković family during prime time, with the emphasis being placed on Janković’s potential involvement in his friend’s death.</td>
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<td>5 May</td>
<td>The UN High Commissioner for the Human Rights Office expressed his concerns due to the continued and increasing pressures that the Ombudsman had to face.</td>
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<td>6 May</td>
<td>The Ombudsman abruptly left the VBA during his control visit due to the misbehavior of the Minister of Defense. Later that day Minister Bratislav Gašić published an open letter asking Janković to stop spreading misinformation about the VBA. In the same letter he asked the Ombudsman how Predrag Gojković was killed.</td>
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<td>7 May</td>
<td>EU Commissioner for Enlargement, Johannes Hahn, met Serbian Ombudsman Saša Janković and supported him during his visit. He urged the Serbian authorities to stop their campaign against the Ombudsman.</td>
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<td>15 May</td>
<td>The Prime Minister and the Ombudsman finally met, and agreed that there was a need for better cooperation between public administration institutions and independent control bodies, all in the best interest of Serbian citizens. This event pacified the conflict.</td>
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Twitter-Data Collection Methodology

The Twitter-data collected for the purposes of this descriptive analysis was extracted from the World Wide Web with the help of Mecodify (mecodify.org); an easy to use open source tool created for the purpose of the MeCoDEM project. Besides extracting Twitter data, the tool also allows the user to systematically analyze and present the gathered information through the use of various variables. The tool has the potential to extract numerous variables, but for the intentions of this paper using the following proved to be sufficient: user name, user image, the total number of tweets and retweets posted by a user, tweet content and the distribution of tweets over time.

Mecodify works by allowing the user to place specific inputs into its search engine, information based on which it then creates a case that stores relevant Twitter data through “…a two-step process which involves crawling the website for the initial results based on a regular search query and then using the retrieved tweet IDs as input to a Twitter API to retrieve the full details of the tweets.”11 After a few pilot datasets were generated, a final Mecodify case was created under the title “Anti Ombudsman Campaign FINAL”, using the following search query: @kihat_ex_of (the Ombudsman’s official account) #SasaJankovic, #SalePrangija (Saša the gunman), #prangija (gun), #pistolj (gun), #PorodicaGojkovic (The Gojković family), #Gojkovic, #ostavka (resignation), #podrska (support), #istina (the truth), #zastitimo_zastitnika (protect the Ombudsan), #SNSbot (SNS troll), #boticnablokic (obvious troll), #DSdno, (Democratic Party lowlifes), #samoubistvo (suicide) and #legijacasti (legion of honour). By entering this data, Mecodify was tasked with storing tweets that contained the particular hashtags and mentions, tweets that were tweeted during the time of the conflict.

The case accumulated relevant tweets posted between the 1st of January and the 1st of June 2015. This timeframe encompasses not only the period within which the conflict occurred, but also the two-week period before and after the conflict. Comparing Twitter activity that took place prior to the conflict with activity that occurred during the conflict allows the researcher to see whether the distribution of tweets is significantly different during those two timeframes, as observing such a difference indicates to the fact that a meaningful dataset was created. Observing Twitter activity that followed after the conflict ended serves to show whether there was an online ripple effect related the conflict.

General Overview of Twitter Activity during the 2015 Ombudsman Conflict

A brief look at graph 1 shows that increases and decreases in Twitter activity (represented by graph peaks and troughs) did correlate with the pace at which conflict-related key events (marked by numbers 1 to 22) took place. An evident increase in Twitter activity is apparent during the same dates that events 2, 13 and 18 took place, while next to all of the 22 events correlate with a smaller or greater peak on the graph. The only exceptions in this regard are event number 4 (when Informer published that Janković had close ties to the Democratic Party) and event number 22 (which marked the end of the conflict).

While a closer qualitative look at the content of the tweets that were posted on these two days doesn’t suggest anything too different when compared to the other 20 events, a chart separating the number of tweets from the number of retweets shows a significantly smaller tweet to retweet ratio on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of May (event 22) when it is compared to the tweet to retweet ration of other key events (chart 2). This suggests that the original tweets weren’t ‘retweet worthy’, which would make sense as most of the retweets up until that point referred to a tweet that took a clear side in the conflict. Being that the conflict ended on that day, as the Prime Minister and the Ombudsman met and agreed to cooperate, the tweeters most likely had no means of reacting to this news in the pro/anti Ombudsman fashion, leading to no peak in the number of tweets and to a considerably smaller number of retweets.
It is also interesting to notice that a decrease in Twitter activity did occur in-between events number 7 and 8 (graph 1), which once more goes to show that there is a correlation between key conflict events and online activity related to the conflict. But while this sort of correlation seems to exist, there are several spikes that do not have a matching conflict event related to them. On a closer qualitative analysis of tweets that caused these spikes to form, it became apparent that they can be sorted into three categories: those that appeared as ripple effects of an event that took place a few days earlier, those that were the result of increased anti-ombudsman trolling activity and those that occurred due to a particular hashtag (that was inserted in Mecodify’s search engine) being used in a context unrelated to the Ombudsman conflict. Peaks a and b, for example, can be viewed as ripple effects related to the Ombudsman’s decision to file a report against the two military policemen, since most of the tweets that compose the two specified peaks are either reactions to the Ombudsman’s initial action or reactions to the manner in which government and ruling party officials responded to the event in question.

Peak j formed as a result of hashtag #podrska (support) being used for purposes other than just to provide the support to the Ombudsman. Although this was an important hashtag in the context of this particular conflict, as Ombudsman supporters posted the mentioned hashtag as a means of showing their approval of Janković, it was also used by other Twitter users who offered their support to unrelated causes. Even though this hashtag might have affected the graph 1’s relevance to a slight degree, the choice was still made to include it in the case as during the specified timeframe it was predominantly used as a means for supporting the Ombudsman (with peak j being an exception).\textsuperscript{12}

On the other hand, peaks e and f represent an increased activity of pro-government trolls, which spammed Twitter during the latter period of the conflict in an attempt to discredit Janković by reproducing the accusations made against him by the members of the ruling party, thus potentially discouraging his supporters from further engaging in online commenting. Previous studies have defined pro-government trolls as persons using one or more unverified Twitter profiles that are most commonly characterized by the following traits: a generic avatar image (no real person on the photo), a false name, sudden massive activity in relation to a

\textsuperscript{12} Meanwhile, the pilot cases created for the purposes of this paper revealed that hashtags #VBA (Military Security Agency) and #helikopter (helicopter) needed to be removed before the creation of the “Anti Ombudsman campaign FINAL” case, as Mecodify accumulated many case-irrelevant tweets that contained those two particular hashtags, thus making the output data less relevant.
certain topic that they had no interest in before, generic and repeating messages, liking and/or retweeting tweets of other trolls, lack of activity after their task (regarding the conflict in question) ends.\(^1\) A rise of generic tweets coming from such profiles played an important role in creating peaks \(e\) and \(f\).

The response from Ombudsman supporters to the rise of generic tweets and spam tweets aimed against Janković was mixed. According to the tweets that were qualitatively analyzed, certain Twitter users did respond to them with the aim of defending the ombudsman from the comments made against him, but soon decided to cease their activity when noticing that the same accusations were being repeated over and over again, without any attempt from the accusing side to dwell into meaningful discussion. Other decided to label such commentators as trolls and pro-government bots by using hashtags and mentions in order to mark them out as spam accounts. This did not have much effect on such users as they were persistent in repeating the messages that had the aim of discrediting Ombudsman Janković. Such a strategy did not contribute to any raise in support for their cause, but it was a very efficient manner of over-flooding discussions and ending any sensible debates that were taking place.

The over-flooding strategy wasn’t the original strategy utilized by the troll accounts. While at first the attacks on the ombudsman were made less frequently and discussions on who was right did develop to a certain degree, findings show that at one point (a point that correlates with the intensification of the media smear campaign against the Ombudsman) the anti-Ombudsman team switched their strategy from arguing to comment flooding. This indicates to the fact that the anti-Ombudsman Twitter campaign was coordinated and that it did change its manner of action in accordance to the situation that unfolded and in accordance with the responses received from the opposing side. Once the outlining of opposing arguments ceased and a flood of one sided comments began, the pro-Ombudsman side was left with no choice but to label the trolling accounts by mentioning them and using hashtags which would describe

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\(^1\)“Astroturfing u Srbiji: Društveni eksperiment i digitalna pismenost (Astroturfing in Serbia: A social experiment and digital literacy)”. Blogopen, Liber New Media Centre, Belgrade, 2015, p. 4.
them as pro-government bots or trolls. However, such a response was a weak one, as they were forced to act within the playing field of their opponents, thus having their strongest weapon (sensible discussion and arguments) neutralized. The troll flooding strategy did seem to achieve its goal to a certain extent.

*The Main Actors on Twitter*

Although trolls played an important role in the way in which the online conflict developed, they weren’t the only actors carrying out the anti-Ombudsman campaign. Chart 1 used Mecodify’s ‘Tweeters’ tool to present the most active Twitter users when it comes to this conflict, with the total number of conflict related original tweets being the unit of measurement. Chart 2, on the other hand, shows which actors’ tweets received the highest number of retweets by other users, a measurement that can be used for making a rough estimate when it comes to the influence of the involved tweeters and the impact they made on the development of the conflict online.

**Chart 1. The main actors on Twitter based on the number of original tweets**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Tweets</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nenad0406</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GospodinKtice</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>djucicovic</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masa_Begorad</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bellav11</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MarjanRisticv</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BogovicSasa</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>izeljko77</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maja_ljicho</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skmbgd</td>
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**Chart 2. The main actors on Twitter based on the number of retweets made by others**

Out of the ten people with most tweeted tweets related to this case (chart 1), nine belong to the anti-Ombudsman team, while only one (izeljko77 – eighth on the list) took a clear anti-government stance. However, on closer qualitative inspection of the content of this user’s tweets, it becomes apparent that he cannot be classified as a clear Ombudsman supporter. Most of his tweets are directed against the government, with the Ombudsman being mentioned, but without clear support being offered. On the other hand, when it comes to the top ten retweeted
profiles, three belong to the ‘pro-Ombudsman’ camp (the first, ninth and tenth one), six take an anti-Ombudsman stance, with one account (N1infoBG) being a verified news agency profile. However, while the tweets of the six most retweeted anti-Ombudsman campaigners predominantly target the ombudsman, the three Ombudsman supporters’ retweeted tweets don’t give center stage to Janković as often, instead focusing on topics related to the conflict. This sort of data seems to confirm the notion that tweets made against the Ombudsman did not occur randomly as a part of a wider discussion, but rather intentionally pinpointed Janković as the primary target.

Thus, it should be mentioned that the empirical results of this research do seem to be in line with the theory of reasoned action, as the different actors involved in the online conflict (individual and collective actors) did develop their communication strategies as the conflict unfolded, thus purposely engaging in the kind of behavior that best enhanced the power of their messages or that most successfully decreased the strength of their opponent’s messages.

**Communication Strategies utilized by the Opposing Sides**

A prominent communication strategy utilized by all Twitter users wishing to get their message across is to use hashtags and mentions in order to draw the attention of the Twitter community to their posts. A hashtags is a hyperlinked word or phrase preceded by a hash mark (#), used within a message to identify a keyword or topic of interest and facilitate a search for it. A mention is hyperlinked username of another user, preceded by the "@" symbol. Those targeting the ombudsman naturally mentioned his profile in their posts. Graph 4 exemplifies the number of times five most active troll accounts (identified through the use of criteria mentioned on page 8) mentioned the ombudsman or used a hashtag alluding to him.
The trolls primarily utilized the ‘comment flooding’ astroturfing strategy that involves the process of forcefully repeating a single agenda/frame countless times through similar tweets and retweets until all meaningful discussion ceases. It is interesting to notice that their coordinated activity began only during the latter part of the conflict, having little or no reactions to the Ombudsman’s work prior to late March (with skmbgd being an exception to this rule). Such a lack of interest for an ongoing conflict and sudden organized and correlated online engagement indicate to the fact that the ruling party does indeed stand behind the massive Twitter attempt to discredit Janković. What goes to prove this hypothesis even further is that the identified trolls used a large amount of unique images in their tweets; images aimed at ridiculing the Ombudsman and discrediting his work, with such large and varied visual content being hard to produce by unorganized tweeters acting individually without logistical support.

An additional hint to the fact that Twitter was used in an organized campaign against the ombudsman as a part of the ruling party’s wider communicational strategy is the fact that certain hashtags that aimed at making fun of the Ombudsman appeared online only after they were introduced in other media by persons tied to the regime. The best example of this is hashtag #SalePragnija (Saša the gunman), a term was first used on the 20th of April by media mogul and TV Pink owner Željko Mitrović and later continuously utilized as a hashtag in twitter posts that spoke of the Ombudsman in a negative context.14

Graph 5. #SalePragnija (Saša the gunman)       Graph 6. #zastitimo_zastitnika (protect the Ombudsan)

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The side supporting the Ombudsman evidently didn’t have such a well-planned out Twitter strategy, at least not at first. For the most part, it relied on uncoordinated individuals willing to fight against the pro-government trolls on the virtual battlefield. However, the upside for their cause was that many of these individuals were prominent and well-known public figures from various professions, such as actors, other independent body representatives, professors, NGO representatives and even representatives of the international community in Serbia. The #zastitimo_zastitnika (protect the Ombudsman) hashtag was started early on during the conflict, but it lost steam as time passed. Yet, although their action was uncoordinated (or semi-coordinated, but to a far lesser degree than the opposing side in the conflict), the prominence of the people supporting the Ombudsman on Twitter and in other media proved to be an important part of the strategy, as it drew the attention of the international community, which eventually helped end the conflict.

**Conclusion: Did Twitter discussions shape the conflict in any way?**

Twitter thus did play an important role, as it proved as an important platform for the pro-Ombudsman side to express their views on the issue at hand in a situation where many of the most read tabloids and most viewed TV stations were made unavailable to them, as those tabloids and TV networks clearly participated in the anti-Ombudsman campaign. However, the exact extent to which Twitter helped the pro-Ombudsman side draw attention to their cause would be hard to determine without further inquiry into the influence that pro-Ombudsman tweets had on other media, the general public and other key actors. Still, the conclusion that the online disputes did fuel the conflict to some extent and that they did have a polarizing effect on society can be drawn. For instance, the term “bot” is evermore present in online and regular public discourse and it is used as a term that labels SNS members and their supporters, and such development is a result of this and similar social-online conflicts that have taken place in recent times. Also, a clear line between those that do support the Ombudsman’s work and those who don’t think highly of his work has been drawn (and it is especially visible in the print and electronic media), whereas before most people had neutral or no opinions regarding the work done by this independent governing institution.
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