

ALERTS AND AFFAIRS IN THE “BRIGÁDNIK” DOSSIER. THE TRAJECTORY OF PUBLIC PROBLEMS IN (AND BEYOND) ONLINE DISCUSSION SPACES

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Abstract: This article describes the covert seeding by political parties of forums and blogs hosted by one of the leading Slovak daily newspapers, and the techniques developed by journalists, administrators, bloggers and discussants to defend these ‘public spheres’ against perceived colonisation by professional political communicators acting under false identities. We follow a trajectory of accusatory forms and registers—a collective inquiry which gathered and evaluated evidence to support public accusations. The episode demonstrates the vulnerability of the sociotechnical systems used by the media to host e-participation as well as their capacities for self-regulation. It shows how citizens, journalists and party political communicators are engaged in complex boundary struggles for the appropriation and regulation of these new spaces of sociability in order to qualify the forms of knowledge that emerge there, agree conventions for the expression of disquiet and negotiate practically enforceable definitions distinguishing political marketing from free public debate.

Key words: e-participation; alert; affair; online discussion; journalism.

Introduction

In line with the principle that news organisations should develop online discussion spaces as venues for the free expression of public opinion (World Editors Forum, 2013)—the Slovak daily newspaper SME¹ aspires, in the words of its discussion codex, to sustain “a space for cultivated, substantive and non-aggressive communication where people can get to know each other and exchange opinions” (SME, 2012). This story of how a collective investigation developed into the activities of online discussants hired by political parties on the SME website provides an important test of how a threat to this principle was evaluated and countered. I reconstruct the trajectory of *alerts* launched by bloggers, discussion activists and journalists between 2011 and 2013, as they escalated into public *affairs* and back again, using this as a means of exploring the different registers of accusation and counter-accusation that participants mobilised in disputes about identity, anonymity and communication style

¹ SME is the country’s third largest daily as measured by average print sales and the leading online news portal.

(i.e. how they qualified and disqualified other participants or themselves), which I see as a crucial part of the *systems of vigilance* that regulate sociotechnical networks such as online discussion spaces. The analysis consisted of examining the texts of discussion threads, blogs and newspaper articles that contained the phrase ‘brigádnik zo Súmračnej’ (temp from Súmračná street²), references to which almost always constituted accusations of one type or the other. It utilises a corpus of texts both from publicly available online discussion and from the archive of complaints addressed to discussion administrators, which SME made available to me for research purposes. It also draws on numerous interviews with discussion administrators at SME and observations of their work routines.

These (not so) new spaces of e-participation are interesting for their knowledge politics: we encounter powerful social practices of naming, through which actors try to get a grip on emerging phenomena. The case bears witness to the renegotiation of practically enforceable definitions distinguishing free public debate, legitimate political marketing and plain deception in situations where professional communicators intervene in spheres that others would like to reserve for the type of dialogue Habermas (1989, p.30) had in mind when he normatively defined the ideal public sphere as a venue where ‘bracketing one’s status’ is a crucial precondition to ensure that the force of the best argument is what counts.

Conceptual background

I follow a pragmatic sociolinguistic approach according to which an attribution of a category like ‘public problem’ to a certain constellation of events is a social achievement. It is the outcome of successful knowledge work (*generalisation*) that is always also a form of social work (*mobilisation*) (Latour, 2005). I draw a simple heuristic distinction between an alert and an affair, starting from the insight that there are different ways of framing a controversy and making public accusations based on the type/degree of generalisation and mobilisation involved. The couplet alert-affair emerged as a descriptive vocabulary for following the trajectory of public problems or controversies from an attempt, in France, to get to grips with the sociology of risk from an anchoring in the sociology of criticism (Boltanski, 1996, pp.16-17). The proposition is that there may be a useful analogy between the process of launching an alert about a malfunction within a sociotechnical system and the process of creating an affair by means of public criticism and argumentation. A common scenario is for an affair to feed on and escalate an overlooked alert (Boltanski & Claverie, 2007). One of the lessons of this case study is that this sequence of events can be more complicated and reversible as public controversies are played out.

Alerts are accusations made through the ‘proper channels’ of a system of vigilance based on the transmission of signals between captors and operators or regulators (Chateauraynaud & Torny, 2013). Here the system of vigilance is the system of administration of online discussion at sme.sk (the newspaper’s news portal), which relies in part on the distributed attention of users submitting complaints about infringements of the discussion rules (personal attacks, racist speech, spam, vulgarity, etc.). Alerts demand that a suspicion or

² Súmračná street is the address of the party headquarters of Smer-Social Democracy, which was in opposition from 2010 to 2012 and formed the government following the 2012 general election.

prediction is verified in the expectation that the responsible operator (representing a public or semi-public authority) will take appropriate action if the alert is proven to be valid. To qualify as an alert, a speech act has to remain predominantly technical or processual in terms of the action it calls for – a ‘full investigation’, ‘more information’, ‘greater transparency’, ‘establishment of the facts’, ‘better surveillance’, etc. However, contemporary systems of vigilance rely more and more on “the mass collection of signals coming from non-expert sources” (Chateauraynaud & Tornay, 2013, p. 97), presupposing a subtle change in the system’s tolerance for what is admissible as proof or evidence. Inexpertly formatted knowledge, singular, experiential knowledge, intuitions and sentiments have to be taken seriously if the ‘door is to be left open to the unanticipated’ (*ibid.*, pp.77-8).

Affairs are accusations of a more public and less standardised form. They publicise a discovery or diagnosis and make generalisations from it (thus demonstrating why it is important), usually operate through the mass media, often invoke the authority of a public figure and ultimately call on public opinion to act (though sometimes the action solicited is pressure on the same authorities to whom alerts are addressed). To qualify as an affair (or an attempt to launch an affair) a speech act has to make a public accusation (with the risk of incurring counter-accusations) and appeal to the judgement of public opinion, often over the heads of ‘official’ arbitrators (Boltanski & Claverie, 2007).

Alerts therefore expose knowledge to what Boltanski calls a ‘truth test’ based on the indexation of events to ideal types in a relatively uncritical fashion, whereas affairs impose a ‘reality test’ or even an ‘existential test’, installing a more critical attitude towards the semantic order inscribed in institutions and artefacts (Boltanski, 2009; Smith, Ward, & Kabele, 2014). To borrow a legal metaphor, the former apply the law whereas the latter legislate. Correspondingly, affairs usually make personal accusations—someone is to blame—and the affair-launcher (or denunciator) thus incurs a reputational risk if they fail to mobilise support; alerts make more impersonal accusations, pointing towards system malfunctions, and because they solicit an expert or an authority to adjudicate, the alert-launcher does not risk their own reputation to the same extent. That is why the balance between alerts and affairs within the overall configuration of a system of vigilance is fundamental for democracy. Democracy would be unimaginable without affairs, but unworkable without alerts.

In Boltanski’s original schema (1996), alerts and affairs were characterised by different actantial systems, in the Greimasian sense of the term actant (Greimas, 1966). Thus an alert has its launcher (often called a whistleblower in English), a thing that malfunctions, a victim, an authorised expert adjudicator and a sometimes separate decision implementer. The cast list of an affair consists of a denunciator, a perpetrator, a victim and an independent judge, which can be a public. When I reconstructed the actantial system for each event, taking into account not just the content of newspaper articles and blogs—i.e. not only the author’s point of view—but also their accompanying discussion threads, I found only a partial correspondence with these classificatory rules. In fact the generic cast list was basically the same for each event and it always included both a perpetrator *and* a thing that malfunctions. Conversely, it never clearly distinguished an adjudicator from a decision implementer. Hence I use the same template for each event, consisting of a perpetrator, a thing that malfunctions, a victim and an judge/expert. Since we are always dealing with articles and blogs, by implication the

launcher/denunciator is the author. What proved more helpful in distinguishing alerts and affairs was the changing identity of particular actants. For example, it was often possible to recognise affairs by the fact that the judge/expert they appealed to was public opinion, whereas alerts addressed the operators of the discussion system, the administrators. Similarly, the victim is generalised in the case of affairs (democracy, the truth, generic figures of the ordinary or undiscerning person) but particularised in alerts (honest discussants and honest bloggers, implying personal familiarity on the part of the enunciator).

Methodological note

Building on this conceptual apparatus, the empirical part of the paper performs what could be called a *pragmatic actantial discourse analysis* of the assembled corpus of texts.

When selecting significant events from 160 occurrences of the target phrase in the SME online archive, I looked for those that met at least one of the following criteria: the article or blog had a certain quantitative importance, as measured by page views, number of comments, number of Facebook recommendations or number of votes; it was subsequently ‘commemorated’ within the dossier, indicated by the practice of providing links back to them at a later date; and/or it occurred at a strategic moment and may have been precedent-setting for the way in which accusations would be formulated and justified in the subsequent period. The selected alerts and affairs include nearly all the incidences in which the term *temp from Sůmračná street* was used in articles/blogs themselves as well as one in which it appeared only in the discussion below (an interview with Martin Šimečka, ex-editor-in-chief of SME and a prominent intellectual commentator, which was retained for its exceptional public echo and to illustrate a rare example of generalisation by discussants).

I also coded all 160 occurrences of the phrase *temp from Sůmračná street* in order to track changes in the modalisation of the term from its first usage in the discussion to a news article on 20 May 2008 to the end of 2013. Hence it was possible to contextualise the accusatory form of events with a gauge of the dominant accusatory register not just within the same discussion thread but in all the contemporary discussion threads where discussants used the target phrase. The typology was derived inductively by observing the recurrence of a number of tropes in discussants’ formulations and transforming these into propositions in a standardised form. Thus each register could be captured in a simple phrase expressing what disqualifies an opponent from participation in the eyes of their accuser. For instance, I typologised the dominant accusatory register during the first period as: *it’s not qualified to be here because the argumentation is flawed!* An example from the discussion is: “temps from Sůmračná street in their full glory. When they don’t get written instructions, they’re incapable of expressing themselves or writing [good] discussion contributions” (*LuxAeterna*, 27/7/12).

Chronology of the dossier

Table 1 summarises the key events in the dossier, highlighting those factors that are indicative of either alerts (light shading) or affairs (dark shading). In total, three alerts and six affairs were identified between June 2011 and December 2013, with two events qualifying as both (if we assume, somewhat arbitrarily, that having at least two characteristics of

each accusatory form makes for a mixed type). The dominant characteristic of the series of articles, blogs and online discussion threads debating the *brigádnik* phenomenon over the two-year period was an alternation of alerts and affairs as the issue migrated back and forth between an internal arena in which technical questions connected to its regulation and protection predominated, and an external arena in which the wider political and social repercussions of the issue preoccupied participants in the debate. At no stage is it possible to discern a clean break from the former to the latter—by the end of 2013, despite widespread publicity and the accumulation of considerable evidence, events remained on the cusp of a full-blown affair, but still susceptible to technical redefinition, returning to the question of how to monitor and police a particular online space to root out illegitimate participants.

Figure 1 shows the dominant accusatory registers over time in relation to the series of alerts and affairs. The darker shades indicate accusations which a/ are more personal and b/ are phrased as speech acts with greater illocutionary force, moving from assertives through declaratives to directives according to Searle’s well-known classification (Searle, 1989).

Results

Analysis of findings

The main findings can be summarised in five points. Firstly, the changes in the dominant accusatory register have a logical progression that suggests a metaphor of a police investigation or detective story. A problem is first detected (by spotting new patterns in argumentation), then there are attempts to generalise about its importance and implications

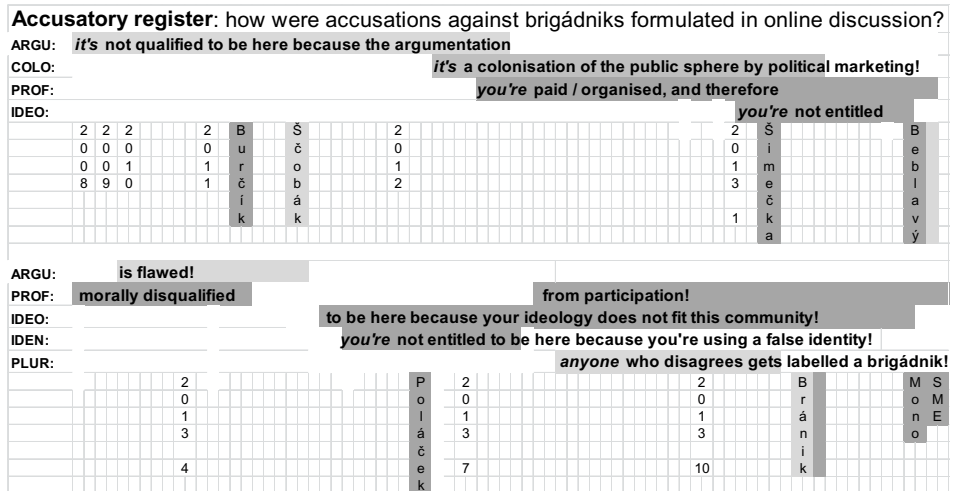


Figure 1. The dominant accusatory registers*

* Time is measured in events, which explains why it ‘expands’ from left to right as usage of the term became much more frequent.

Table 1. The series of alerts and affairs

Event	Date of publication	Echo	Place of publication
Matúš Burčík, <i>Paid discussants on the web? Parties stonewall</i>	4.6.11	382 comments, 429 Facebook recommendations	SME
Jiří Ščobák, <i>Blogger from Sumračná?</i>	23.6.11	243 comments, 179 Facebook recommendations	SMEblog (private)
Martin Šimečka, <i>SME does not look for the truth</i>	14.1.13	313 comments, 1859 Facebook recommendations	SME interview
Miroslav Beblavý, <i>8 rules of a Smer temp</i>	25.2.13	70 comments	Trend blog
Juraj Poláček, <i>Instructive probe into the soul of a Smer temp</i>	27.6.13	14 comments	Blogspot
Radovan Bránik, <i>Rescue blogger Marek Albrecht!</i>	2.11.13	227 comments, 1265 Facebook recommendations	SMEblog (politics)
Mono (collective), <i>Stolen photos, false bloggers. That's how pro-Smer marketing gets done</i>	12.12.13 / 15.12.13	153 comments, 737 Facebook recommendations	Mono / SME

Summary of content	Perpetrator	Thing that malfunctions	Victim	Judge/Expert
Free online debate is being undermined by political parties. Based on leaked emails from KDH and Lubomír Galko's accusations against Smer	Several named political parties	Online discussion everywhere	Party political democracy	Public opinion
Accused a David Halas (discussion nickname Lammoth), of stealing someone's identity. Argues that blogging under a false identity encourages 'kamikaze' argumentation	One named blogger / discussant	SME administration system	Honest discussants	SME admins
Šimečka accuses journalists of writing for politicians and not for readers. It's even worse in the discussion beneath articles, say commenters.	Media-political corporation	Political society	Generic ordinary discussant	Public opinion
Opposition MP accuses Smer and suggests what the hired discussant's manual might look like, based on analysis of a month's discussion on SME	Smer	Political party systém	Public purse	Alerted citizens
Opposition politician accuses Smer of intensifying discussion manipulation to cover up scandals. Analyses argumentation of a single discussant whom he labels sociopathic	Smer	Parliament due to ideological colouration	Truth due to ideological distortion	Public opinion
Exposes three fictitious pro-Smer bloggers and stimulates collective inquiry among discussants that reveals many more. SME admins accused of not checking credentials properly	Smer	SME administration system	Honest bloggers	SME admins + crowd wisdom
Serialises the controversy, provides evidence in attached Excel tables and reports denials from accused. Argues that things could get worse and digital literacy is the only defence	Smer	Online discussion everywhere	Generic undiscerning discussant	Individual alertness

(centred on its colonising effects for the public sphere). The accusations begin to become more personal when the ‘professional’ register is invoked to delegitimise both the practice and its protagonists, and the investigation culminates when the ideological and identity registers are invoked to ‘profile the suspects’, highlight certain types of intruder and point fingers of blame. Indeed, the sociology of controversies has shown that actors often simulate a police investigation (Chateauraynaud, 1996, p.65), collecting evidence and searching for proofs in the quest for a restoration of order, even if they begin from perception, intuition and other tacit forms of knowledge. The final phase of a successful investigation is the production of an accepted, satisfactorily tested fact that enables the resumption of a collective life or a public good and with it the continuity of experience of each affected party.

This case had evidently not achieved any such closure at the end of 2013³. This follows from the second fading—a progressive rise in illocutionary force⁴ of uses of the term, with a transition from speech acts with a word-to-world direction of fit (attempts to describe things as the world is) through the mixed declarative type (attempts to state but also to make things as they are) to speech acts with a world-to-word direction of fit (attempts to make the world conform to one’s description of it) (Searle, 1989). In other words, the accusations *it’s not qualified to be here because the argumentation is flawed!* (ARGU)⁵ and *it’s a colonisation of the public sphere by political marketing!* (COLO) are assertives, the accusation *you’re paid/organised, and therefore morally disqualified from participation!* (PROF) is a declarative, and the accusations *you’re not entitled to be here because you’re using a false identity!* (IDEN) and *you’re not entitled to be here because your ideology does not fit this community!* (IDEO) are directives. The pluralistic counter-accusation, *anyone who disagrees gets labelled a brigádnik!* (PLUR)—which briefly resonated just before the blog by Radovan Bránik (a member of the public, but who has since published several extensive interviews in SME) and quickly disappeared after it—seems to be a return to an assertive form of speech act.

What we can also note, however—and this is the third fading—is a parallel rise in the perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1962) of accusations, suggesting growing efficacy of the term as a discursive shorthand for the expression of a particular disquiet and with it a demand for corrective action. We can follow the fate of complaints about comments sent to the discussion administrators over the period of the dossier, and which used the term *brigádnik*, or close equivalents such as “brigoš”⁶, in their justification⁷. There were about 75 of these. If we look at the action taken by the administrator, a blog by the oppositon member of parliament, Miroslav Beblavý, stands out as a striking turning point. Prior to his blog, only 3 complaints

³ I continue to follow the dossier, and the frequency of accusations in similar registers did not drop in the early months of 2014, indicating continued uncertainty and unease among discussion participants.

⁴ An illocutionary act is defined by Austin (1962, p. 108) as “the performing of utterances which have a certain (conventional) force, such as informing, ordering, warning, undertaking, etc.”

⁵ The abbreviations in brackets refer to the names used in Figure 1. Recall that the accusations are general types derived from observed formulations in the discussion, not direct quotations from the discussion.

⁶ An equivalent term in a west Slovakian slang.

⁷ The system for making complaints does not oblige the user to give a justification, but some users choose to provide one.

out of 30 (10%) which asked the administrator to delete a comment because someone was alleged to be a hired discussant were upheld, suggesting that administrators either treated such accusations with scepticism or felt they gave insufficient grounds for comment deletion; in the rest of 2013, 10 out of 42 (24%) complaints prompted administrators to take action. Something had apparently changed in the power of the word to carry a forceful accusation and the (self)authorisation of administrators to act on them. Even more strikingly, however, before the Beblavý blog there were 11 successful complaints reporting messages for using the term *brigádnik* to disqualify another discussant, whereas afterwards we find only one such successful alert. In other words, until early 2013 *brigádnik* itself was liable to be judged an illegitimate term of abuse, while ‘post-Beblavý’ it became almost impossible to make this case because the term functioned as an accepted description of a recognised, negatively perceived phenomenon.

What had in fact changed was the adaptation of the discussion administration routine to take account of Beblavý’s rules, since they resonated with administrators’ own judgements, and their compilation in the form of a fictitious manual gave them an authority to act and the administrators a feeling of authorisation.

Fourthly, turning from accusatory registers to accusatory forms, we do not see the common scenario in the emergence of public problems, according to which affairs follow alerts that have been ignored or inadequately treated⁸ (Boltanski & Claverie, 2007). The affairs cannot be interpreted as a form of appeal when people feel a continued sense of injustice following the rejection of a complaint submitted through the ‘official channels’. Instead we see an oscillation of the controversy between affairs and alerts, generalisation and particularisation, reflecting ongoing recalculations about the likely effectiveness of interventions at different scales, the reactivity of different addressees and the mobilisability of different kinds of public. Alerts sometimes lay the ground for affairs, but equally, affairs can alter the conditions of possibility for alerts, either by increasing the receptivity of system operators, raising the vigilance of alert-captors and the extent of the network of potential captors, or standardising a template for subsequent alerts (Chateauraynaud, 1996). Indeed, minor, abortive affairs often tended to precede a refocalisation on the original object of the alert and reinstate a less political and more technical logic of measuring and assessing threats to the functionality of an information system and recalibrating that system to protect it from future threats of an equivalent type. A peculiarity of this case is that the final affair was launched by an official agent acting in part on the signals transmitted to him by the alerters, since one of the journalists at Mono⁹ is also a SME administrator and this experience was one of the impulses for the article. One might even see a conflict of interests in this dual identity, although it is commonly found in contemporary mass media organisations. The valorisation of information by professional journalists depends on achieving a shift in accusatory register from an alert to an affair. As administrators, however, the same actors (in another role) have an interest in keeping the controversy within the limits of an alert.

⁸ This sequence is often apparent in the case of organisational whistleblowers.

⁹ An experimental investigative online news portal launched in October 2013, Mono is the voluntary side project of three journalists and a photographer. Two of the journalists work at SME. See www.mono.sk.

Finally, when we examine use of the term in the discussion, and notwithstanding the escalation of illocutionary force, we see what could be called a persistent de-escalation of the stakes and the scale of the controversy by discussants, returning to issues connected to the organisation of online discussion at sme.sk rather than generalising about wider social and political phenomena. I interpret this not an escape into virtual worlds (though it does express a cynicism about the possibility of changing much in political society) but a realistic adaptation of the instruments of inquiry to a grasp of the problematic situation at a scale open to their collective intervention, understanding adaptation through inquiry as a reconstruction of one's conditions of existence. I reflect further on this finding in the conclusion.

Interpretation of findings

There are a number of possible, not necessarily incompatible interpretations of what happened in the *brigádník* dossier. On one level, the competition between bloggers and journalists was a race to break the story first: to achieve recognition as the one who had discovered and investigated a political scandal. A second interpretation is that it is a case of the "primitive accumulation of knowledge" and subsequent *intéressement* of 'experts'—in this case journalists—at the point when a certain burden of evidence had been amassed (Callon, Lascoumes, & Barthe, 2001, p.121).

In a sense, however, journalists are the activists in this story. They took a more radical, more ambitious, more critical and more generalising stance than most of the bloggers and discussants. For example, the two journalistic articles in the dossier are the ones that use comparable examples from around the world to demonstrate that online discussion everywhere is subject to similar failings, whereas most of the blogs confine their analyses to what happens on sme.sk. While journalists wanted to make knowledge act in a critical fashion with respect to the field of power (specifically the realm of party politics) and denounced an actor whose sphere of action far exceeds the confines of an online discussion space, bloggers focused on the online public sphere in an attempt to improve the functionality of the system of vigilance that ensures the latter is a pleasant and trustworthy venue for public dialogue.

Essentially, the contest between the two categories of actor was over what measures to use to identify, appreciate, evaluate, qualify, assess and test the validity and value of information. The familiar journalistic yardsticks of verifiability, newsworthiness and social or political significance were a lesser consideration for most bloggers and discussants. Their accusations were directed towards the functionality of the system of vigilance that regulates the discussion space they value and they were interested in re-equipping this system and reconfiguring its division of labour so that it was more responsive when dealing with alerts. The implicit demand was to place greater value on the experiential knowledge of discussants – their hunches about other discussants – which they alleged had been proven correct by the unfolding of the controversy. A key finding is therefore that alerters are not necessarily interested in creating affairs. What they often seek is a democratisation of the instruments of investigation to make them more responsive to the types of knowledge and evidence that 'ordinary' people can provide (and which is apt to be dismissed as anecdotal or subjective from a scientific or journalistic stance).

Discussion administrators are positioned somewhere between these two extremes: as journalists¹⁰ they are interested in exploiting newsworthy information. But as administrators their programme of action is centred on maintaining a semblance of order, without which their authority is vulnerable, and this can lead them to play down the significance of threats like that posed by hired discussants or to claim that they have a grip on it. Although this claim was readily challenged by discussants (partly because SME administrators choose not to intervene in the discussion itself, so it is always an attributed rather than directly represented and defended claim) there is an obvious intersection between the programmes of action of administrators and discussants. If the latter are interested above all in the quality and sociability of the online environment, administrators recognise a strong business interest in keeping the latter a 'pleasant' place, and invoke this as a rule of thumb when performing their work. Conversely, discussants combine demands for greater reactivity with demands for stricter surveillance and tend to position the SME administrators as the relevant judges/experts, even as they lambast them for their alleged failings. As we saw, the administrators' role was central in a semantic sense also: their *de facto* implementation of Beblavý's eight rules normalised the meaning of an indigenous term (translating experiential into certified knowledge) and legitimised the dominant accusations that it carries.

Conclusions

Naming, translating, categorising and codifying are the central themes of the episode I have described. Such naming practices testify to the centrality of knowledge work to contemporary forms of collective action that social movement theory has difficulty capturing because they hinge on a radical rearticulation of the relationship between knowledge, evidence and expertise (Rabeharisoa et al., 2013). The present case, in fact, shares many common features with the open data movement or with 'evidence-based activism' in healthcare, which also involve a dynamic interplay of singularisation and generalisation, collaboration and competition between lay and expert actors or translations between experiential and codified/certified knowledge. The relevance of the case study is not therefore confined to questions about news production and online discussion, important as these themes are: we can learn much about the processual dimensions of political regimes of action themselves by studying the way actors claim, mobilise and demonstrate, qualify and disqualify competences in situations of critique and dispute (Thévenot, 2001).

One of the key themes that the *brigádnik* dossier dramatises is the conflict for the occupancy of digital public arenas between broad-based non-expert publics capable of mobilising experiential knowledge based on a continuous presence in the course of events and professionals of public communication (Chateauraynaud & Torny, 2013, p. 425). The great promise of digital communication technologies is to give voice to publics and their everyday experiences in 'systems of vigilance' that allow and encourage their members

¹⁰ In larger news organisations, discussion administration can be established as a full-time non-journalistic position or even outsourced to specialist commercial services, but in smaller organisations like SME (or any other Slovak newspaper) it is usually appended to the job specification of a few editors or reporters.

to sound alerts when they sense something wrong. But this requires a revision of the old standards of judgement that interpret public voices only as groans of complaint founded on rumours, misinformation or interests that disqualify them from serving as useful inputs to institutionalised decision-making processes, and that oblige them to conform to the standards of a mass-mediated public sphere, and use the discourse of PR professionals, in order to be taken seriously—to force alerts to be framed as affairs, in effect. In this study, the dynamic was not one of alerts being escalated to affairs, but a constant to-and-fro between the two forms of framing controversies and making accusations. Accusatory voices raised in the blogosphere were not (just) trying to constitute public problems according to the logic of a mass-mediated public sphere. A recurring trend in the whole dossier is the postponement of the passage from an alert to an affair and the de-escalation of crises, getting back to the more technical and practical business of measuring, monitoring and comparing and to the ‘local’ politics of knowledge production, collective action and sociability.

On the one hand, discussants’ preference for alerts indicates an unwillingness to fully step into the public sphere—recall that launching affairs involves a greater degree of reputational risk than launching alerts which ask others to adjudicate and enact solutions, and note that the only text in the dossier that appeals squarely to the judgement/expertise of every responsible citizen was authored by journalists. But to conclude with an attribution of alibiism to bloggers and discussants would miss the point. A distinction can be drawn between two modalities of participation—between participation in substantive societal debates and decisions and participation at the metadiscursive level where the object of co-decision making is to define the grammar or the ‘house rules’ for a community of debate. The latter is also about contributing to and benefiting from the social and sociable aspects of participation. Zask, invoking Simmel’s concept of sociability (1950, pp. 44-5), argues that we can only begin to speak of participation in its ‘strong’ sense when it encompasses these para- or meta-participatory dimensions, differentiating the act of *taking part* from the situation of *being a part of* (Zask, 2011). When discussants in the *brigádník* dossier de-escalated the stakes and refocused their and the administrators’ attention on the experience of participating in the discussion, and when they reminded administrators of the accuracy of their intuitions, they were in effect attending to the para-participatory and literally taking part in an arena whose configuration both mattered intensely to them and felt as if it was within their power to influence, unlike the wider arena of party political or electoral democracy that the episode also plays out in, which they *are part of* without *taking part in*. It is within the small world democracy of the forums themselves that they have a hope of engaging in an enterprise whose form and nature have not been predefined, just as it is within this world that the pleasure taken from the company of others becomes a stake as important as any interest-based calculations and outcomes. The main stake for discussants was the democratic politics of this world and the interest of the public that inhabits it. If the function of investigations is to “procure for a public the data that permit it to define its interests and thence permit decision-makers [administrators] to correctly evaluate problematic social situations” (Zask, 2004, p.163) discussants were enacting just such a public in the mobilisation that occurred under Bráník’s blog. It is in order to facilitate this kind of inquiry that complex societies must be participative, according to Dewey. Inquiries, in the Deweyian sense, are situated not contextualised (Zask, 2008, p. 318), meaning that they always effect a situation-specific

partition of the world between an ‘underlying’ context and the scope for intervention. When bloggers and discussants took a leading role in the inquiry they tended to effect a very broad definition of context. Nevertheless, at the para-participatory level, the trajectory of this controversy demonstrates one of the ways in which contemporary, distributed systems of vigilance can be participatively reequipped with new procedural and discursive conventions that increase the capacities for self-regulation by furnishing new repertoires for the expression of disquiet.

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