

METHODOLOGY

Subject, Objective, and Relevance of the Research

Raskrikavanje's research focuses on the network of connections among 25 selected right-wing oriented news portals in Serbia and the region, prone to spreading unfounded claims and disinformation.

The websites included are: **informer.rs, novosti.rs, alo.rs, sputnikportal.rs, sd.rs, politika.rs, srbinfo.info, pravda.rs, webtribune.rs, rt.rs, fakti.org, intermagazin.rs, in4s.net, stanjestvari.com, vasseljenska.net, happytv.rs, srbijajavlja.rs, borba.me, vostok.rs, pecat.co.rs, nacionalist.com, serbiantimes.info, borbazaistinu.rs, glas-javnosti.rs, srbijadanas.net.**

Using backlink analysis method and analyzing sources that most frequently reference them, our goal is to identify where these media receive the most "support" through links recorded online over the past two years, which domains redirect readers to these media the most, and who are the key players in this part of the media landscape that strengthen and spread their influence and messages in this way. We are investigating the network of connections among them in an attempt to uncover paths of support or cooperation through which they enhance each other's visibility. In other words, the goal is to discover which sites have the most influence and who are the key actors in disseminating specific narratives and potentially unreliable information.

This research provides a new, different insight into the structure and functioning of the online right-wing media sphere, primarily within Serbia but also in parts of the region. It outlines the patterns of information dissemination and influence formation within this segment of the media ecosystem and enables a better understanding of how "digital alliances" among ideologically aligned media are formed.

Sample Definition:

The Raskrikavanje study included 25 news portals which, according to Similar Web's visitor statistics, ranked among the top in Serbia in the "News and Media" category from early April to late June 2024. While predominantly domestic portals, the list also includes two from Montenegro and one from the diaspora, though all have a significant readership in Serbia.

The selection of these 25 media from the most-read list is based on two key criteria:

- 1. Positioning on the Right Political Spectrum and Pro-Russian and/or So-Called Anti-Globalist Orientation in Reporting and News Transmission**

To determine a site's ideological stance, we employed qualitative content analysis methods: by reviewing published articles, we identified and categorized dominant narratives reflecting political orientation. We analyzed the presence and intensity of views characteristic of the local right-wing stance, which include, but are not limited to: nationalism, Euroscepticism, anti-globalism, traditionalism, affirmation of authoritarian systems, militarism, criticism of Western values, promotion of conservative and heteronormative ideas, opposition to the expansion of human and minority rights and freedoms, and animosity toward "the other" (manifested in anti-migrant sentiments, racism, chauvinism, etc.).

It is essential to note that the right-wing spectrum (like the left) is not monolithic but encompasses a wide range of views—from moderately conservative to extreme. Not every portal necessarily meets all these criteria, nor to the same extent. While some remain within

moderate conservatism, others cross into radical territory, like overt hatred towards minority groups. Also, not all analyzed sites focus equally on all these topics. Some portals may be intensely nationalist but moderate on LGBT rights issues. Others may strongly promote anti-globalist views but focus less on daily political topics like the war in Ukraine. These differences further illustrate the complexity of their political positioning and the nuances within the right-wing media space.

2. Tendency to Spread Unreliable or Inaccurate Information

The second and crucial criterion for further narrowing the sample was a previously established and proven tendency of the site to disseminate unreliable or inaccurate information. For this, we relied on findings, analyses, and databases from fact-checking organizations in the country and region. Besides Raskrikavanje's archive, we searched for whether our sites had been "caught" publishing and transmitting false news, disinformation, and manipulation by journalists from Istinomer, Fejknjuz Tragač, Raskrinkavanje.ba from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Raskrinkavanje.me from Montenegro, and Croatia's Faktograf.

Analysis Method

1. Backlinks

1.1. What are Backlinks?

Backlinks are hyperlinks that lead from one site to others. For example, if a link to site B is embedded in an article on site A, it is considered a backlink directing the reader from site A to site B.

Linking to other sites is not unusual or necessarily problematic. Sometimes the goal is to reference a source, i.e., to point readers to the source of information or claim, sometimes to direct readers for further independent research on a topic, and other times to redirect traffic from one site to another, especially among sites that are ideologically or ownership-connected. In this way, sites support each other and amplify the dissemination of specific messages and influences.

When it comes to this last point, backlinks, besides being suitable for quantification, analysis, and visualization, can show where content is being sourced or cited, to which sites readers are redirected, how frequent or strong the connections between sites are, and how certain messages are disseminated.

When one site consistently links to another, it can indicate:

1. **Amplification of Certain Narratives:** Sites may mutually reinforce specific stories or viewpoints, creating an echo chamber.
2. **Common Interests:** Frequent linking may suggest shared goals or ideological positions.
3. **Influence and Authority:** Sites receiving many backlinks may be considered more influential within a specific network.
4. **Content Dissemination Strategies:** Reveals how certain narratives or information are disseminated through a network of sites.

In other words, backlink analysis helps us uncover groups or “clusters” of media within the network that mutually support, link, and aid each other in spreading certain messages, amplifying them and reaching a wider readership.

It’s also important to note that backlinking in this scenario is done in various ways. A site might sometimes take content from another site and link back to the source, so the backlink is embedded in the text. In other cases, the backlink might appear as a banner, clickable text and image blocks that directly link to the text on the main site, or even be hidden somewhere on the page. Their purpose varies—they might guide to content, or serve as a simple SEO strategy to gain backlinks for better ranking on Google.

1.2. Sampling of Backlinks

Backlink data was collected by analysts from Pikasa Analytics, a Skopje-based agency specializing in media market analysis.

Using the Ahrefs application, backlinks recorded online in the past two years, from September 1, 2022, to September 1, 2024, were automatically gathered, redirecting readers to the 25 selected sites from various web addresses across the internet.

The initial sample thus contained over 79 million backlinks originating from around 36,000 unique online addresses.

However, as the majority of this sample consisted of sites irrelevant to this analysis, Raskrikavanje had to conduct additional, manual filtering of this list.

This was done based on three additional criteria - for a site to be included in the final analysis, it had to be (1) media-related or information-focused, (2) in regional languages, and (3) have recorded at least 10 backlinks over the two-year period.

These criteria excluded a large number of irrelevant sites, such as e-commerce sites, SEO optimization pages, link-only pages created solely for search engine ranking manipulation, as well as a significant number of irrelevant personal and corporate blogs, sites in foreign languages like Brazilian, Indian, and Chinese, gambling and online gaming sites. Many sites with automatically generated content, malware-distributing pages, defunct pages that did not provide information, and for accuracy, fact-checking portals, irrelevant forums, and news aggregators were also removed.

A relatively minor number of backlinks leading from sites like Danas, Vreme, Nova, N1, etc., which are known for their critical stance toward the Serbian authorities, were also excluded. When these media reference any of the 25 portals, they do so precisely for criticism, so their presence in the visualization, through established links among these sites, could be potentially misleading.

Through this “cleaning” process, the sites Glas Javnosti, Srbija Javlja, Nacionalist, and Srbija Danas (.net) were excluded from the analysis – as it turned out, all backlinks to them were deemed irrelevant, leaving 21 media outlets as network hubs in the final visualization. However, these media were retained in the narrative analysis due to their readership and influence on the audience, achieved through other means.

Thus, the sample was filtered from the initial 36,000 unique domains (web addresses, sites) to about 800 included in the final analysis, but the number of backlinks remained high – around 51 million.

This is the sample used for visualization.

It is noted that among sites backlinking to the selected group of media, not all are right-oriented sites, nor are all exclusively disinformation-spreading sites, and this analysis does not imply that backlinks necessarily indicate an interest-based connection aimed at spreading propaganda.

1.3. Visualization

Pikasa analysts visualized the filtered sample using a so-called neural network to display how the universe of backlinks appears, leading from various internet addresses to selected influential sites.

1.4. Limitations

Backlink analysis has its limitations.

It's worth noting again that backlinks are not solely intended for sharing and spreading certain content, referencing media, and reinforcing specific messages. The reason for backlinking may also be a targeted SEO strategy, i.e., the strategy of internet portals to enhance their relevance on search engines and improve their ranking by using backlinks. However, even in such cases, good SEO optimization will mean better ranking for internet media, but it will also mean strengthening their influence regarding the messages they convey.

Furthermore, backlink analysis cannot capture cases where sites direct traffic or republish content without linking. Such connections remain beyond the reach of this type of analysis, which can somewhat underestimate the actual extent of connection and content exchange among sites, particularly in cases where "copy-paste" journalism or informal content sharing without proper hyperlink attribution is frequently practiced.

2. Content Analysis

For this reason, the second, complementary part of this research is a content analysis aimed at deepening the existing analysis on a narrowly focused sample of five selected sites out of the 25 – Informer, Alo, Večernje Novosti, Srbin Info, and Pravda. Although these are not necessarily the top five in terms of readership – as Srbin Info and Pravda lag far behind the top three – the selection criterion was their stance towards the Serbian government.

The idea was to see which media most frequently reference these five in their articles, through citations or indirect references, even when not backlinking to them.

One part of the focused analysis, conducted via Pikasa Analytics' automated monitoring, specifically concerned the number of citations. A sample of 57,000 articles on 85 different sites citing one of these five media was selected, specifically those articles with the most interactions (likes, comments, shares) on Facebook over the last two years.

The other part analyzed who and to what extent cites these media in articles addressing particularly sensitive issues, primarily those on which political and ideological positioning in Serbia hinges today. The focus was on topics grouped around the following keywords and phrases: Russia, Ukraine, Vladimir Putin, European Union, EU, NATO, the West, Kosovo, LGBT, Pride Parade, Serbian Orthodox Church, lithium, Rio Tinto, sanctions on Russia, war crimes, Hague tribunal, Republika Srpska, patriarch, Srebrenica, Ratko Mladić, foreign mercenaries, and patriotism.

The software analyzed approximately 57,000 articles published on 85 sites about these topics over the past two years, referencing any of the five selected media. The results were presented in a visualization showing the topics each of these media is an “authority” on, depending on the number of citations. For instance, it is possible to see which medium is most frequently cited (and by whom) regarding Srebrenica, or regarding the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and so on.

It’s important to note that this analysis did not address the “sentiment” of the citations – whether the references were positive, negative, or neutral. Nonetheless, the frequency of citation, regardless of tone, strongly indicates the power these media have in shaping public discourse.

Even critically oriented media that disagree with the views of the cited sources confirm their influence simply by referencing them. For example, an opposition portal that criticizes Informer’s reporting on Srebrenica, and thus references it, demonstrates Informer’s significance in shaping the narrative on that topic and its influence on public discourse.

Use of AI Technology

In this analysis, Pikasa Analytics experts used artificial intelligence (AI) technology primarily to automate the process of searching, collecting, and initially classifying data.

Raskrikavanje’s Methodology in Content Analysis

In conducting the content analysis, we consulted Raskrikavanje’s methodology, which our team has been using for years to detect and explain media manipulation. You can find it at this [link](#).