# SLIGHTLY NONSENSE?

## Questioning the Impact of Academic Work in Balkan Studies (and Beyond) on the Public and Non-academic Sphere

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1 »In Albanien ist das Hören von Manele verboten und kann mit Gefängnis, Geldbuße und Peitschenhieben bestraft werden.« http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manele (January 26, 2009).

2 Cf. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crank_(person) (July 27, 2009).

3 An impressive survey of the ›common crackpot‹ is found at http://www.crank.net (July 27, 2009).

4 For those sincerely interested in this topic, I recommend *de.science.geschichte* on *google.groups*: http://groups.google.com/group/de.sci.geschichte/topics (July 27, 2009). Entering the name of Heribert Illig (»Phantom Time Hypothesis«) in the search function will illustrate »crackpotism« and its destructive force.

5 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Edit_war (July 27, 2009).

»In Albania it is forbidden to listen to Manele, and doing so can be punished with prison, fine and whip blows.«[1] This is what one can read when visiting the German *Wikipedia* in search of information about the Romanian music genre *manele*, which also exists in Albania but under a completely different name – *tallava*. But this is just one example of what can be found on the internet. Following the discussion forums of major newspapers (like this author did for the Austrian daily paper *Der Standard*), or the different threads with Balkanic topics on *de.science.geschichte* on *google.groups*, one will always encounter plenty of nonsense. The internet is only a part of the problem, however. Occasionally interviewed regarding Romania, in which I specialize, the »gruesome regime of the Wallachian Prince Vlad III the Impaler who impaled at once 20.000 Turkish soldiers« is one of the nearly classical clichés I am typically confronted with. When the purveyor of such a claim is asked for the source of her or his information, reference is usually made to some obscure site on the internet.

What can the academic community of historians do to change this sorry situation? The first impulse may be to get involved in online discussions and become part of the already existing web communities. Entering this system has the advantage of being introduced into well-defined and functional structures enabling a swift participation in the relevant discussions. Doing so, one will quickly recognise two structural problems in the composition of their members: on the one hand, there is a large number of »lurkers«, i.e. those reading but not contributing. In principle, this causes no harm, but it is deceptive in one sense: the number of members in a discussion list stands in no relation to the number of those productively contributing. On the other hand, there is the problem of the so-called »crackpots« or »cranks«, the troublemakers of a discussion list. They tend to overestimate their own capacities or information while underestimating that of acknowledged experts or other knowledgeable list members. They also rarely (if ever) acknowledge errors in their own »theories«, often misunderstand or fail to use standard methods and terminology, ignore the nuances essential to assess popular mythology, and tend to see any official statement or generally acknowledged theory as evidence for a unique conspiracy against them and/or the ideas they stand for.[2] Their number is not to be underestimated.[3] By their very particular behaviour they are not only capable of souring the atmosphere of a list or a community, they also often manage to suppress any attempt for a real discussion by redirecting a debate into »their« direction.[4] It makes little sense to engage with them, and attempts to discuss with other members are destroyed by their attacks, insults, and sometimes simply by their deleting and ignoring of posts they do not like.

Beyond discussion groups and lists, one must address *Wikipedia*. It offers the opportunity to contribute to a well organized, serious internet project. But even here we have to state that the interested academic can encounter unpleasant difficulties in the form of an »edit war«, defined by *Wikipedia* itself as follows:

> An edit war occurs when contributors, or groups of contributors, try to impose their view by repeatedly *reverting* each other's contributions, rather than resolve the disagreement by discussion. [...] Edit warring is the confrontational, combative, non-productive use of editing and *reverting* to try to win, manipulate, or stall a content dispute [...] ›Edit warriors‹ are users who fight aggressively, or try to *game the system* or *stack the discussion*, rather than *seek consensus*. Such behavior is disruptive, harmful, and unproductive, and often leads to external intervention by other users.[5]

Here the academic may be confronted with a dynamic contradicting the methods of productive discussion known to her or him. Of course, an »edit war« will occur only in the case of articles on topics open to misrepresentation by »cranks«. The number of candidates for an edit war is quite high: they range from the Moon Landing Hoax, 9/11, Hiroshima, or Pearl Harbor, over the theories of Heribert Illig, WWII, the whole Nazi regime, fascist leaders of other countries, and to articles on the ethnogenesis of various peoples. It must be stressed that these troublemakers are not seriously interested in discussion or even in a good argument with peers. Rather, it is ideology that leads these men (and most of them are really

6 http://www.esoturio.com/de/
wahrheit/mondlandung.php (July 27,
2009), No. 16.

7 http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/
Verschw%C3%B6rungstheorien
_zur_Mondlandung#Blick_auf_die_
Landestellen (July 27, 2009), http://
www.nasa.gov/mission_pages/LRO/
multimedia/lroimages/apollosites.html
(July 28, 2009).

8 http://www.gernot-geise.de/apollo/
apollo.html (July 28, 2009).

men, not women) to such kind of actions, pursued with an almost religious zeal. Of course one can take up the gauntlet and enter the struggle, but to what avail?

To give but one example: an often cited component of the Moon Landing Hoax, a conspiracy theory according to which the Apollo team members never actually set foot on the moon, was based on the argument that, while technologically feasible, no images of lunar landing sites shot by telescopes on the surface or in the orbit of Earth had ever been made available to the public.[6] No such photographs existed indeed until this year, providing the ground for the blossoming for such theories and their dissemination by »cranks«. On July 15, 2009, the Lunar Reconnaissance Orbiter finally took pictures of the landing site of Apollo 11 and other missions,[7] but this evidence is ignored by many of the most prominent of the »believers«, who continue debating nevertheless.[8] *Wikipedia*, while a remarkable project, provides a platform for such discussions, and although its designers have devised instruments to react to »edit wars«, there is great risk that the well-meaning participant may lose a lot of time in the process. As a result, many potential contributors choose not to participate.

Another, third, way for the historian to communicate with an interested public are the mass media, esp. radio and television. Here the major enemy is the »time factor«. I myself have often been admonished to keep within the limits of, say, only 2 minutes and 30 seconds for a statement about vampire belief. In live situations this is seldom a problem; one has to keep the answers short and the grammar simple. But if the editor has to reduce 25 minutes of talk to 2 minutes and 30 seconds the outcome may differ greatly from what was intended. On television, even 45 minutes can be too short. But the most intriguing moment comes always when the supposed expectations of the viewers, human beings with specific needs, are explained to the invited expert in an almost ritualistic way. One of these needs seems to be the rumination of stereotypes. With rare exceptions, the viewer is thought of as someone who can barely process a small amount of input. An attempt to enter into the fascinating world of research stands little chance. This is not to say that there is no genuine interest among the editors; it must be acknowledged, however, that today »infotainment« has largely replaced documentary programmes as we know them. In contrast to the latter, infotainment works like a real business, and patterns for stories and contents are field-tested and respond to the market.

This may have been a rather pessimistic way to look at the whole question. Is there a solution? There has to be one, because the Internet cannot just be ignored, and the interest in our research by a broader public is vital to our existence as the academic community. Thus, we must not just respond to existing problems but take the initiative to create our own resources: large-scale academically-based media initiatives, using print media and esp. the Internet, in order to establish low-threshold platforms for use by both experts and the interested public. Much can be learned from existing projects like *Kakanien Revisited*, which makes up-to-date research available *also* to a public without access to academic libraries, and thus provides such an interface for communication.

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