

# ISU professor examines media impact on campaigns

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Scrutinizing media coverage by reading a daily rotation of seven or eight newspapers has become part of Daniela Dimitrova's regular routine.

Bulgarian newspapers dating back to 1990, that is.

Dimitrova, a journalism professor at Iowa State University, is conducting two research projects on European media coverage during national elections. A third project, which focuses on the Iowa caucuses, is also under way.

One of her tasks, which looks at how media coverage of politics in Bulgaria changed after the fall of the Berlin Wall, has taken Dimitrova to her home country and back, resulted in a prestigious grant and led to an unlikely collaboration with an ISU undergraduate.

After she received the go-ahead to take a sabbatical in Europe, Dimitrova finalized the plans for her dual-pronged research project: Evaluate the role of social media during Sweden's national election in the fall of 2010 and chronicle the changes in Bulgarian media's coverage of elections in a post-Soviet Union world.

She's not quite done analyzing her results. But when she is, her findings will likely have a considerable impact on anyone with an interest in social media, politics or the future of journalism abroad.

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When she arrived in Bulgaria in spring 2011, Dimitrova didn't expect her research methods to mimic the ones she would have used back in the days when the dusty newspapers she was pouring over were hot off the press.

"It was very tedious because they do not have LexisNexis," she said. "I thought for sure they would have a digital database. Well guess what? They didn't."

For hours at a time, Dimitrova researched in the national library located in Bulgaria's capital city, Sofia. The purpose: photograph as many newspaper articles as she could find on Bulgarian elections between 1990 and 2009.

Analyzing thousands of articles proved too big a chore for one person to handle. After returning to Iowa, she sought out the help of a Bulgarian international student at ISU.

"It was kind of funny because she had the same last name and she had an interest in journalism even though she's not a journalism major," Dimitrova said of Maggie Dimitrova, who now is the lead student researcher on the project.

Maggie Dimitrova, a senior studying apparel merchandising, spends three to four hours each day coding newspaper articles and looking for trends.

"They are old for me, so it's interesting to read most of them," said Maggie Dimitrova, who came to the United States from Bulgaria six years ago. "At the time that these things were happening, I was very little, so I don't remember any of that."

So far, both Maggie Dimitrova and Daniela Dimitrova have found Bulgarian media outlets became increasingly "Americanized" since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Horse-race political reporting has replaced issue-driven coverage. Voices of political elites, Daniela Dimitrova said, also tend to dominate.

Daniela Dimitrova's preliminary findings earned her a \$6,000 grant to travel back to Bulgaria this summer to complete the research. The project, she said, could benefit emerging democracies in Europe or the Middle East.

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In the fall of 2010, Daniela Dimitrova set off for Sweden.

Her research there focused on citizens' consumption of both traditional online and social media sources during the Swedish parliament's national election. Dimitrova and a team of three of her Swedish colleagues collaborated to sort through the responses to a national survey of over 4,000 Swedish voters.

"We looked at how the media influenced what people know about politics or the election and especially how social media impacted that," she said.

But while almost all survey participants were using some form of online media, social media mavens weren't any more politically savvy than their newspaper-reading counterparts, she found.

"What we found is these digital media didn't particularly influence peoples' knowledge of issues," she said. "But they did influence participation. And that's kind of what I call 'the dilemma' because we would ideally like for people to learn more and to participate more. But, that wasn't what was happening."

Soon after, she found the trend wasn't unique to Sweden.

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It wasn't long after returning to Iowa that Dimitrova found fresh applications for her research.

When she got back, Iowa was already in the midst of its own political horse race. Up-and-coming politicians and their handlers had begun flooding the state in preparation for the Iowa Straw Poll.

As Iowa became the centerpiece of national political discussions and predictions, Dimitrova started formulating a new research design.

Using themes she learned in Sweden and a partnership with her old friend Dianne Bystrom, the director of the Carrie Chapman Catt Center for Women and Politics at ISU, Dimitrova decided to investigate the types of media caucus-goers consume, and how it impacted their likelihood of voting.

Bystrom, who's published a number of research papers on media coverage during American presidential elections, said the survey measured everything from voters' use of Facebook to how frequently they watch political comedy shows.

The findings so far: Out of the 1,200 people surveyed, a little more than half frequently consume online media and of those that do, they are not likely to be any more informed at the polls than if they hadn't used Facebook or Twitter to keep up on politics.

Both Dimitrova and Bystrom said they are in the early stages of analyzing the research. They cautioned against taking these preliminary findings too seriously but said their final analysis will have information of interest to any campaign strategizing to win America's first-in-the-nation caucus in the future.

"I'm excited about the fact that through the Catt Center's sponsorship of this survey, we are going to get more out of the survey than just predicting who people are going to caucus for, for which to me ... is just a flash in the pan," Bystrom said. "What we really got out of this survey, I think, is really important data."

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By Hannah Furfaro  
Staff Writer

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*Contributed photo*

*Daniela Dimitrova, right, traveled to Bulgaria in spring 2011 and collaborated with professors Greta Dermendjieva, left, and Minka Zlateva, to edit a book.*