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INTRODUCTION: MEDIATED PARTICIPATION IN A DIGITAL AGE

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The role of the Internet, digital communications and mobile technologies have changed our understanding of the world, politics, religion, culture, science and many other spheres of societal life. Today's world, once defined as a *mediapolis* (Silverstone, 2007), is a mediated public space where media reinforce and reshape everyday life experiences. However, the main changes penetrating different layers and structures of society are not technological or institutional per se, but rather cultural and social, embodied in individual practices and interactions (Castells, 2009). Therefore, while addressing the changes in relationship to the public and politics, not only technological, institutional, structural, but also social and cultural implications have to be considered.

Communication processes, at some point having been rather homogeneous and dominated by the national media, have transformed into a diversified media system with an abundance of different channels, modes, platforms, publics, etc. In this new media ecology, the way media penetrates social structures and our lives is also changing; audience loyalty for a single channel is disappearing, while engagement in a more active, selective, creative and critical media use is growing. What is emerging nowadays is a completely new *communication infrastructure of everyday life*, which provides people, as well as institutions, with new incentives for interaction, communication and participation (Livingstone, 2004, 2009).

The changing role of media is also transforming and challenging the political field, democratic processes and public participation practices. On one hand, new media is seen as an important pledge of deliberative democracy, while promoting the public sphere and providing a platform for citizens' participation, which is one of the key dimensions and theoretical conceptions of contemporary democracy (Carpentier, 2011). On the other hand, media have always played an important watchdog function in democracy, while overseeing the performance of official representatives and authorities. However, media coverage of political issues has often been criticized for one-sided, scandalous, populist and superficial reporting, which makes the public disappointed with the current political situation and skeptical about the political world (Cardoso, 2008). The more citizens are aware of political scandals, crises and malfunctions, the more they become intolerant of many things taking place inside and

around politics, such as corruption, political party scandals, conflicts between public and private interests or other ways of abusing authority. The idea of modern politics being shaped by professional information and communication management, political PR, and marketing techniques has been disputed by political science and communication researchers (Curran, 2002; Putnam, 2004; De Vreese et al., 2008; Castells, 2009; Norris, 2011). In mediated politics, a crucial role is played by the professional advisers, political campaign managers and public relations consultants who shape the media, public and political agendas, predetermine the news content and induce public support or disappointment. Rather than informing and supplying citizens with quality information, constructive and thorough coverage of political and social issues and, what is more important, stimulating citizens' interest in public affairs, the news media have been more successful in entertaining the public and increasing its disengagement and cynicism.

Indeed, the late modern democracies have been characterized by civic apathy, public skepticism, disillusionment with politics, and general disinterest in the conventional political process, and yet, public interest in blogging, online news, web-based activism, collaborative news filtering, and online networking reveal an electorate that is not disinterested, but rather, fatigued with the political conventions of the mainstream (Papacharissi, 2013). Even though the media have been always seen as a vital democratic institution, the advent of new technologies, different approaches and considerations towards new media roles and functions in political processes evolved. The proponents promised a rapid democratization of society, as information and tools provided by the new media would encourage public engagement in social and political life, and promote public activism. For instance, we can witness a certain invigoration of political action groups and online community movements in social networks, as well as online polling, e-referenda, and Internet voting. Moreover, it has become *fast, easy, cheap, and convenient* to use political information online (Papacharissi, 2002). On the other hand, critics of the virtual public sphere have emphasized fragmentation and political and social divisions, as well as the lack of substantial reforms of political thought and action. Indeed, recent technological revolution has created a new public space, facilitated mainly by online and mobile communications. However, if such a public space can transform political

culture and stimulate a qualitatively new public sphere, meaning an alternative way and forum for political deliberation, still remains an open question for experts and researchers (Papacharissi, 2013).

The shifting relationship between the public and politics can also be approached and analyzed as institutional and structural transformations, which have been explicitly demonstrated by changing power relationships of traditional institutions, like politics, religion, family, and media (Bauman, 2005; Deuze, 2008; Hjarvard, 2013; Hepp, 2013). In the global, and increasingly individualized, society, also marked by precipitating mediatization, the media as *modus operandi* affects public institutions and practices, and encourages them to endorse and follow the new media and communication principles. Therefore, in a mediated cyberspace, the normatives and practices of politics, religion, culture, education, and other social and cultural structures are also changing. People receive more opportunities to choose between the different alternatives available for them, which doesn't necessarily mean they are disengaged from political life:

This individualized act of citizenship can be compared to the act of the consumer, browsing stores of a shopping mall for that perfect pair of jeans, comparing prices and sizes with online offerings. Monitoring is indeed the act of the citizen-consumer, participating in society (whether that "society" equals virtual, topical or geographical community, one's role within a democratic nation-state, or within a translocal network) conditionally, unpredictably, and voluntarily (Deuze, 2008: 852).

In the turbulent times of change, the relationship between the public and politics becomes more and more individualized, based on our personal likes, wants, and needs, rather than institutional commitments, responsibilities and loyalties (Deuze, 2008). Instead of voting, joining a political party or trade union, or demonstrating, people look for more meaningful, self-expressive, less hierarchical and more engaging activities. The new conditions that new communication technologies have created, while penetrating into very different spheres of life including politics, science, religion, and culture, require researchers to rethink many issues related to social and political development, interaction, participation, identity formation, etc.

No coincidence, then, that this current issue of *Media Transformations* is also addressing the changing media role and its implications for democratic political culture, citizens' participation and public mobilization.

The first article in this volume, "Digital Worlds and Civic Opportunities: Connecting Online and Offline Activism in Lithuania" by Liepa V. Boberienė, examines how the new media environment is promoting the digital generation and changing the way people experience citizenship through more active, selective and creative engagement. The author argues that these changes can be addressed while comparing the online and offline practices in which young citizens of Lithuania are engaged. Even more, online participation can provide favorable conditions and some kind of springboard for offline citizenship practices, community action and political discourse. It is true that over the past two decades of liberal democracy, market economy, and free media, the democratic transition in Lithuania was faced with the difficulties of developing a strong political and civic culture and overcoming public fatigue and alienation. The study shows that the most common online activities among Lithuanian youth is information exchange, followed by social networking and eventually political expression, which is the least common type of engagement among the students. Those who are more active online as organizers or content generators were also more empowered offline. They expressed more confidence in public institutions, had more positive perceptions of government responsiveness, and engaged in different organizations, community activism and political discourse. In general, multiple online activities, including networking, learning, and expressing oneself, provided new opportunities for *decentralized and individualized participation* outside traditional power structures.

The idea of new communication and information technologies creating a new virtual environment is also at the center of Inesa Birbilaitė's article "(Dis-)respectful Public Discussions Online: Insights on Audience Polarization and Formation of Radical Hate or Support Groups". The author is focusing on the quality of online public spaces and political discussions that are taking place on the social network site Facebook with regard to climate change issues. Following the Habermasian conception of the public sphere, as well as the empirical measurement of discourse quality index, the author approaches

respect as an underlying value and category indicating the quality of online public deliberation. Even though there have been more respectful rather than offensive language expressions on Facebook, discussions on climate change provided certain patterns of indirect offensive language. One of the conclusions the author comes up with is audience polarization, meaning that particular support or hate group formations can be observed and characterized by narrow, one-sided and dogmatic discourse often involving confrontational and offensive behavior. For instance, people are more likely to offend outsiders rather than direct participants of the discussions. Also, public figures, such as politicians, government representatives, and local and national institutions, as well as experts, scientists and the media are most often being referred to in an offensive way in the online discussions. Thus, apart from the technological innovations and facilities available for citizens' more active engagement into deterritorialized online communities, the quality of deliberated content depends on other factors like online culture and civic values.

While communication technologies are creating new cultural and social environments, bridging geographical locations and time barriers, individuals are exposed to new opportunities to observe, experience and engage with the society, politics and community life through more active self-expression and participation in the mediated public sphere. The media have become one of the most important means of representing our social reality, while mediated communication definitely affects our daily lives, identities, self-presentations and interactions. In her contribution, Stacey May Koosel questions the role of social media networks, namely Facebook, in affecting Estonian artists' professional and social reputations. Trying to identify the ways social media are used for self-presentation and personal information communication, on the basis of mediated identity narratives of the Estonian artists, the author disputes fundamental cultural transformations in *a new era of digital dependence*. The paradigmatic shift, the author is underlining, refers to the virtual reality which is gaining more and more relevance and diminishing the importance of the offline world. On one hand, the new social and cultural environment reinforces changing interactions, blurring lines between professional and personal information. On the other hand, it recreates and demonstrates social and professional alliances, and restructures the sense of self.

The discourse of democratic media and sociopolitical change require one to consider other forms of mediated participation as a key category and condition for democracy. In the joint contribution “Local Radio – an Endangered Species? The Polish Case” by Stanisław Jędrzejewski and Urszula Doliwa, a community media concept is examined conceptually and practically, on the basis of international, as well as Polish, experience of local radio management. Following the authors, community radio is usually operating on a voluntary and non-profit basis. Even more, it is built on the belief that community radio has to promote democratic processes, pluralism, diversity, tolerance and media autonomy, while focusing more on community development and identity building. However, local radio stations are also going through fundamental changes and are experiencing challenges related to commercialization, competition, and funding that makes their mission hardly reachable. In the second part of the paper, the authors discuss practical challenges and controversies local radio stations in Poland are facing from the legislative, organizational, technological and financial sustainability perspectives.

The last two papers shed light on even more controversial and complex media challenges in the post-communist and authoritarian Belarus. Despite promising transformations that penetrated major political, economic, social and cultural structures in the beginning of 1990s, the democratization period was too short in the country. After two decades of Aleksandr Lukashenko’s presidency, the national media have been under state censorship and control, while the regime practices have remained antidemocratic, authoritarian and repressive with regard to journalists and the public. In her article “Two Realities of One Revolution: Coverage of Mass Protests of 2011 in State-Run and Independent Belarusian Media”, Tatsiana Karaliova compares media representations and discourses of the 2011 mass protests organized through social networks and covered in major Belarusian state-run and independent media. Despite a huge expansion of the Belarusian media market in the post-communist years, the challenges for democratic media market still persist. With significant state support, state-run media is much stronger and more influential in the country, while independent media is playing quite a marginal role as an alternative information source. The author identifies clear ideological cuts and contradictory realities in terms of news framing, diversity of voices, discursive strategies, language and rhetoric in the

state-run and independent media in Belarus.

Taking into account limited freedom of information in Belarus, Dzmitry Yuran's research on audience choices and rationalities is particularly relevant. In his article "The Point of No Return: Belarusian Audience Refusal to Use Western Broadcast Media after Exposure to the Content", the author argues that though media users are aware of the state control over the local media, they do not trust the Western media channels, either. People are critical about the Belarusian media, however, they are even more skeptic about the foreign media discourse, which is often regarded as irrelevant, misleading, opinionated and biased. In other words, while applying normative criteria towards Western media, research participants are less critical about the Belarusian media, which have become quite a sensitive, strategic and tactical mean in public opinion formation. The main research question raised by the author explores why alternative media sources, mainly Western media channels, do not gain public attention and are lacking legitimation in the Belarusian population.

Even though access to different media channels and content are useful tools the democratizing potential of the new media depends on additional factors, namely social, political and economic structures that have been developing for centuries. On the other hand, no doubt that the precipitating processes of mediatization induce changes on the structural and individual levels that need to be addressed and negotiated from different conceptual and methodological outlooks. On behalf of the editorial board, we hope the critical issues approached, reasoned and deliberated in the contributions of this issue will enrich and stimulate academic discourse of media(ted) transformations with regard to political communication, public participation, democratic engagement, and the democratizing role of media in a political culture.

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Media Transformations (ISSN 2029-865X) is a peer-reviewed academic journal of media and journalism studies, particularly focusing on the comparative aspects of media transformations. We invite papers addressing a wide range of topics around the global and local transformations of media and journalism, including technological diffusion and convergence of media industries, commercialization and homogenization of journalism, changing media values and policies, journalism training and media education. Contributions which address the above mentioned topics from the conceptual, empirical and methodological point of view are welcome.

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