MEDIATIZED PARTICIPATION AND FORMS OF MEDIA USE AND MULTIPLE MEANING MAKING: THE BALTIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: In this paper all arguments move around the idea that there is a very close interrelationship between the status of being an informed citizen, and public participation, activism and engagement in social life. For that reason, contemporary media are seen not just as separate channels representing ideas and interests of different groups and social divisions of society. While providing news and information, and conveying common values and ideals, any media has potential to gather people with similar interests and to encourage their involvement in public activity. Holding on such normative vision of media’s role for democracy this paper, however, shows that ‘political alienation’ (low political and associational participation, distrust in public institutions, low readership of newspapers and engagement only with entertaining content, and other issues) is among the biggest drawbacks and challenges for young democracies. Based on data from representative public opinion survey on media access and use in Lithuania, the paper further argues that the registered data of public distrust in media and general ‘apoliticism’ may be permanently reinforced by conventional mass media.

KEYWORDS: mediatization, participation, engagement, media use, young audiences, Baltic states
INTRODUCTION

No matter how broad or specific academic debates on changes in media and communications are or could be, in any of them it is almost impossible to escape any of the subsequent themes such as the globalization of media messages and growing multiculturalism, poly-centrality and the heterogeneity of local media systems, domination of media in public and personal life, technological diffusion and increasing individualism, supremacy of social networks, or other contemporary media developments.

The magnitude of changes our present-day societies and their media systems undergo is indeed striking. The new epoch of liquid (late or second) modernity is charged not only with visions and ideals of technological improvement and increasing effectiveness, of complex and global economies, of faster flow and contra-flows (Castells, 2009; Thussu, 2007), but the new era is also filled with new types of crises, losses, fears, uncertainties, and devaluations (Bauman, 2000).

Change takes over in all spheres of human life, so it is also shadowed with sweeping social and cultural alterations. Hence, a general feeling of liquidity and temporariness, of weaker social structures and routines, traditions and customs, of fluidity of connections and bonds seems to penetrate all social relations and cultural forms. Even more, these changes and developments are further charged with ideas of local responsiveness, cultural specificity, heterogeneity, images and simulations transforming both public and private spheres, individual activities, and everyday lives.

Those widely discussed and registered social and cultural changes and developments towards more individualized, more personalized engagements, information access and consumption, furthermore, smoothly diffuse and mix into all arenas of human activity. In the political context, for example, another face of increasing individualization, of so-called ‘becoming’, turns out to be evident. As already observed in various studies, the idea of individualization is specifically related to the slow collapse and disintegration of citizenship, to the loss of community feeling, and to the loss of an understanding of what ‘togetherness’ means (Bauman, 2000). According to Zygmunt Bauman – one of the most influential thinkers of our times – in contemporary societies “the ‘public’ is colonized by the ‘private’; ‘public interest’ is reduced to a curiosity about the private lives of public figures, and the art of public life is narrowed to the public display of private affairs and public confessions of private sentiments” (Bauman, 2000: 37).

Furthermore, the demise of citizenship in the political sphere means that the public arena is filled with the concerns and preoccupations of people as individuals,
leaving little room for other concerns. “What prompts people to venture onto the stage is not so much the search for common causes and for the ways to negotiate the meanings of common good and the principles of life in common, as the desperate need for ‘networking’” (Bauman 2000: 37). Accordingly, the preferred method of ‘community-building’, idea contribution, or finding consensus on important issues is simplified and reduced to attempts of sharing intimacies.

Likewise, political participation and political communication matters also enter a stage of flux. All rules and routines that seemed to have worked in political life before have been changed and are further changing with the arrival of new requests of strategic communications, news management, and image making. It is likely that, with continuing globalization, Internetization and mediatization, everything will change and flow, and everything will become liquid. Contemporary change has the all-inclusive character that smoothly goes into the sphere of media access and use, public engagement, development of informed attentiveness to public affairs, and issues of general public participation.

The idea of engagement seems to be an interesting concept and also a fairly descriptive metaphor, denoting additional aspects of social changes, particularly in the types of media accessed as well as the informational preferences of media users. As shown in different studies, people tend to exchange newspaper reading with Internet-using activities. Their thematic preferences are also less and less attached to political matters but center around entertainment. Also, there is a significant body of research that identifies obvious shifts away from traditional types of public engagement, such as voting or party membership, participation in different associations, and voting in elections, to general apathy and decline of participation and engagement in political and civic life (e.g. Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Norris, 2003; Dahlgren, 2009; Coleman and Blumler, 2009).

Meanwhile another line of thought was developed in parallel, which rests on the idea that all the types of new media means (such as online alternatives on the Internet or social networks, or, to say it more generally, the Internetization as general tendency in the modern world) could contribute significantly to the fostering of democratic processes through knowledge exchange and deliberation that, consequently, could lead to public engagement and participation. At the same time, although raising appropriate concerns, this line of thinking also leads to a number of subsequent questions: Who those new media users and online participants are, and what preferences in contemporary media do they have? What do they think of public issues and public life in general, how do they use media, and how do they act in public life?
The constantly growing numbers of such questions proves that studying media use and its treatment characteristics by different audience groups is especially needed. As some studies keep pointing out, it appears that individual citizens – particularly younger audiences – take the complex matrix of lifestyle (issue-based, micro-oriented) and local politics and incorporate these with their personalized expectations of politics shifting the main emphasis in their public interactions towards sharing. Whether such social shift grounds the activities of all media users, or whether this is mainly associated with the life styles and media use habits of younger, Internet-savvy audiences, remains to be seen.

Altogether, among those different findings and critical views on changes in the sphere of political communication and transformations of the roles of media and its audiences, one idea seems to become especially strong. Briefly, it is more and more noticeable that, as it turns out with assessments of any changes and developments, it is not possible to approach new developments and understand these by applying old concepts and established theoretical constructs.

In attempts to describe all changes and transformations of late-modern society – to scrutinize the issues of public engagement in the mediated environment – we need to take a new perspective. We need to develop a new, all-inclusive approach. Only with such an attitude will we be able to approach the unknown, will we be able to develop an understanding of changes and social and cultural shifts in the way societies think about and enact modern democracy.

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As suggested earlier, among those theoretical constructs and concepts directly associated with the changes observed in contemporary societies, is the idea of media supremacy and power, popularly described as the process of ongoing mediatization. Generally speaking, mediatization is the process whereby society, to an increasing degree, is submitted to, or becomes dependent on, the media institution and its logic (Stromback, 2011; Hjarvard, 2010). As a process, mediatization comprises dual developments – on the one hand, the media have become integrated into the operations of other social institutions and relations such as politics or business life, whereas, at the same time, the media have also acquired the status of social institutions in their own right. As a result of these complex and parallel developments, all social relations within the respective institutions, between institutions, and in society at large, are formed and their interactions occur and take place via the media. Contemporary media is not only an arena. Media is not only a mediator of communication flows and contra-flows. Media (and its logic) is an active agent of modern life.
The term ‘media logic’ refers to the institutional and technological logics and influences in which actual communication takes form. It, for example, is related to how (or whether at all) politics is described in media texts, or what other means are used by media to dominate political life. As such, media logic also influences the nature and function of social relations as well as the sender, the content and the receivers of the communication actions.

Briefly, mediatization acts as an indispensible factor within the all-inclusive and continuing modernization of society and its culture. Mediatization is observed not only as a process; it is also a factor of equal significance and status as much as other modern-day issues such as globalization, Internetization, individualization, commodification, or secularization.

Although mediatization is often addressed as mediation, such description lacks accuracy. If mediation refers only to the aspects of communication by the means of media, mediatization acts as an influential factor by itself. It commences social and cultural changes and refers to a more long-lasting process whereby social and cultural institutions (and modes of interaction within and between them) are changed as a consequence of the growth of the contemporary media’s influence.

It is not difficult to observe that among those essential characteristics of mediatization is a strong drift towards domination, power-establishment, and market orientation. The latter tendency has an adequately strong focus on audience reception and needs satisfaction as well as gratification. In such context, and with the increasing centrality of media and its omnipresence in all social processes thus leading to the creation of the ‘mediatized public sphere’ where it actively involves the political discourse (among all other discourses) and symbolically embodies, as well as represents, political artifacts, practices, arrangements and actors via its own, media-shaped and media orchestrated logic (Blumler and Kavanagh, 1999; Coleman, 2005; Couldry, 2008; Bennett, 2008; Balčytienė, 2010; Lievrouw, 2011), it seems to be a reasonable step to approach and study participation and engagement as predominantly communicative activities.

Briefly, the proposed approach puts the strongest stress on the need to look at democratic participation primarily as a process of communication. It furthermore stresses the need to study the forms of media use as aspects of mediated engagement.

There exits a significant number of studies that demonstrate close interrelationships between the status of being an informed citizen and higher levels of participation in public and social life (Vihalemm, 2012; Zhang et al., 2010; Tolbert
and McNeal, 2003; Scheufele and Nisbet, 2002). Even though different arguments about ‘media malaise’ and ‘time displacement’ (Putnam, 2001) are listed in other studies declaring that time spent with media can be meaningless and harmful to extensive engagement, still a number of studies show positive relations between different forms of civic and political engagement and the use of traditional (Eveland and Scheufele, 2000) or new media (Tolbert and McNeal, 2003; Quinteller and Vissers, 2008). Generally, all these findings suggest that it is impossible to study engagement as a process of its own, and not take into the account a complex set of other issues (such as media type and access preferences among different audience groups and the like). In short, all these debates and studies prove that the contemporary notions of communication, media, and public participation mix and mingle, creating new engagement and participation models.

We indeed live in media saturated environments where different media and different actors, contexts and cultural frameworks, power relationships and communicative styles mix and mingle, thus creating niche-oriented, specialized and alternative interest-oriented projects. Empowered with networked character and an adequate means of interactive communication, all these new projects gradually develop into online social networking platforms, expanding far beyond the conventional mass media. Even more, it is not only the issues of media diversification, ‘de-massification’ or media expansion that need to be looked at with ‘new eyes’. The attempt to draw the line between civic, private and political is no longer an easy thing to do, since “it is not always clear, where participation in broader social and cultural activities, including consumption, ends, and where civil society and politics begin” (Dahlgren, 2011: 1).

Such a ‘cultural turn’ in media engagement and participation analysis might be the most attractive perspective to explain the ongoing changes and to shed light on the meaning, practices, communication and identities (Dahlgren, 2006). As noticed, an essential part of the conditions for a functioning democracy are connected to subjective life experiences, hence the idea of ‘life politics’ (as the concept of late modernity) dedicated to the politics of individual style and transformation of self, dominates the realm of the contemporary.

All these new forms of political organization (and of understanding of what constitutes ‘political’), furthermore, can be supplemented by Ulrich Beck’s (1997) notion of ‘sub-politics’. The author refers to these as to new modes of operation of the political, in which agents are coming from outside of the officially recognized political and corporate systems, and they appear on the stage of social design, including different professional groups and organizations, ci-
tizen’s issue-centered initiatives and social movements, and finally, individuals. As for Beck, new forms of politics do not directly address nation-states; they, nevertheless, alter it from below.

Likewise, the concept of ‘mediatized citizenship’ (Dahlgren, 2011) portrays a new form of participation, where people and organizations link up with each other for purposes of communication – of sharing information, providing mutual support, organizing, mobilizing or solidifying collective identities.

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Among those essential driving forces of contemporary networked and individual-interests-focused societies are initiatives based on ‘bottom-up’ approaches as well as other appearances of networked individualism, engagement, and activism. As identified, contemporary media and information users are furthermore confronted with additional requests. They are expected to have skills and abilities to navigate complex and interactive social and technological networks on their own. They are also requested to learn to cope with the consequences of the freedom of experimenting. These requests, in fact, lead to another essential observation – to an important social shift associated with the decreasing authoritative and meaning-making power of various expert institutions and public systems such as public bodies, academia, and even professional journalism.

In spite of a number of justified worries, these developments are also charged with a firm degree of optimism. As proposed by proponents envisioning the Internet as a network offering different alternatives, these online networks possess a unique intellectual power and interactive potential which can assist in the development of the so-called Fifth Estate in our societies (Dutton, 2009; Boyd-Barrett, 2007).

As argued by William Dutton and other followers of the idea of the Fifth Estate, this new social knowledge and public potential comes as a completely new and individually acquired knowledge that people may obtain through their engagement and participation in socially constructed virtual dynamic networks. The obtained knowledge can later be used as a controlling power in the real-life situations against all other public authorities and estates with official power in a society; such as mass media, politicians, community representatives, different businesses, teachers, medical doctors, and so forth (Dutton, 2009). In other words, the Fifth Estate – as a collective power of ordinary people – generates a form of combined intelligence where public knowledge about any given topic or subject is based on the ongoing exchange of views, opinions, and information between many, rather than pulling the wisdom of only a privileged few.
At the same time, despite these hopeful visions, it became evident the implications of increasing Internet use and online individualization are indeed unclear. As it seems, the goals, ideals, and expectations of public political visibility in these networks of networks are often not so much related to a search for the common causes and principles of well-informed and responsible public and citizenship, as to a desperate need for networking, bonding, socialization, and relationship-building. If individualization enables experimentation, its creative potential is rather short-lived and gradually socially and culturally disintegrating. Thus different studies, observations and reports (Gross, 2009; Nieminen, 2010) have sounded warning bells reminding us that modern societies are at risk of being divided into too many different niches – into too many ideologically-shaped virtual and physical associations and formations that, while they may inspire and offer solace, in fact lead to societal fragmentation and social polarization rather than a common space for meeting, discussion and public dialogue.

But individualization is here to stay, as Zygmunt Bauman noticeably stresses, and it is all of us – contemporary media users, content contributors, and consumers – who face the task of solving all these critical matters. It may happen that the Fifth Estate will grow and will find adequate responses to all the emerging questions and difficulties of liquid modernity. Or maybe other instruments (such as professional journalism and its enduring ideals) will be re-discovered and their ideals re-thought to meet the challenges of the new epoch of uncertainty and liquidity.

Generally, all these factors of individualization and mediatization should be viewed as an ongoing process where media involvement and contributions are studied as reflecting, taking-over and dis-embedding social relations from existing contexts and, furthermore, re-embedding these into new social conditions and emerging contexts. Understanding and comprehending these new situations requires careful analysis.

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The main goal of this paper, therefore, is to look at how contemporary media is used by different audience groups, and to question whether certain strategies and forms could be identified as leading to engagement with issues essential to political meaning and participation in public life. By aiming at this task, we also look at the driving forces and the consequences of change observed in audience thematic preferences and choices of media channels. By analyzing obtained results, we also concentrate more closely on the ideas of social fragmentation and individualism – those opposing and combining trends observed both locally and globally – and observe more carefully how these ideas are contextually ve-
rified through, for example, individualized media access and information consumption in selected media cultures and specific news markets.

Among other distinctive features of this paper are its exceptional attention to media and audience changes in the small Baltic nations. Broadly speaking, all post-communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe (including the three Baltic States) already have the historical experience of approaching, dealing, and assigning meaning to very rapid change. Only over the two past decades these countries had to undergo complete transformations in the fields of politics and economy as well as in their social and cultural relations, traditions, and also their mentalities. If assessed from today’s perspective, for the three Baltic countries, these two decades were the time not only for rapid changes, adoptions, and adaptations. It was also the time for authentic discoveries and learning.

**METHOD AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

All concepts discussed so far – media access and use, and mediatization of participation and public engagement – are closely linked to the idea of quality of democracy. As extensively discussed, assessments of the qualities of democracy are achieved through studying several issues. In most cases, attention is paid to the level of political support and public participation, and also to respect for civil liberties. The role, function and democratic performance of mass media are analyzed as well – its democratic performance and levels of professionalism are measured according to media’s role as information provider, interests’ mediator, and watchdog (Trappel et al., 2011). Another issue to be looked at is the representation and public engagement and the strength of civil society (public involvement and participation in social and public affairs). Or, alternatively, levels of public distrust in public institutions, institutional corruption or clientelism in a society in general could be studied as well.

As argued by many, any explanations of the quality of democracy in a country, however, would be incomplete without the analysis of the characteristics of a given society’s political culture. Particularly through this perspective, the light is shed on cultural aspects of existing social structures and the particularities of prevailing relations and functions as well as actual performance.

As popularly conceived, the development of a democratic political culture’s individual characteristics seems to be fundamental as they refer to the will of the people to take part and be responsible for the outcomes of social life. According to this line of thinking, development of a civil society is crucial for democracy. As some scholars identify it, civil society itself is democracy. Both in civil so-
ciety and democracy the citizens must be willing and also have competences, thus be able, to assume responsibility for public life. They must be willing to get involved in public life and have certain capacities. But, most importantly, they also must be free, ethical human beings – they must possess certain skills, empathies, and features needed to maintain social partnerships and sustain mutually built social structures.

As discussed elsewhere, socially divided and traumatized post-communist societies have their own attributes and ‘illnesses’. Most importantly, these are the societies where public trust and support is fundamentally destroyed. Re-building such new qualities – democratic social relations, trust, and social capital – takes time.

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In a representative democracy, voting in elections is a minimal form of involvement, engagement with politics, and participation. Higher political involvement also means higher quality. Associational and voluntary involvement in different types of organizations is crucially important because of reasons already explained, however in CEE countries (or more specifically – in the Baltic countries) general involvement is still very low – party membership, trade-union membership, and electoral turnout, in general, are lower in Central and Eastern Europe than in Western countries; associational engagement is also low.

Another important aspect of political support is trust and confidence in public and political institutions. Institutional trust is crucial for the effective functioning of the political system. The absence of political trust and confidence in institutions fosters corruption, and further impedes the development of civil society. But, as the available data also suggests, public confidence in political institutions is also determined by the actual performance of political authorities (EHDR – Estonian Human Development Report, 2011).

Public trust in institutions is quite low in all three Baltic countries, but it is especially low in Lithuania. Even stronger parallels could be drawn here between political expectations accumulated by the public (especially in the pre-elections period) and the institutional performance of public authorities in administrative apparatus in general. Certain contradictions were observed in Lithuania in the years of very high economic success and growth – although economic life in the country was booming, the levels of trust in political institutions did not improve. In contrast, Estonia stands out among the three Baltic countries with higher trust accomplished through better institutional performance, higher economic indicators, and more effective government (EHDR, 2011).
Comparatively low public trust levels among all three Baltic countries show that those countries are trapped in a vicious circle of ‘political alienation’.

Distrust in political institutions stimulates the rise of populist parties, whereas the growth of populism in turn increases popular disenchantment with the political system. On the same note, it is important to stress that corruption levels are fairly high and the situation has worsened in recent years. This has happened in all spheres of public sector institutions, media included. For example, as regards journalism, 72% of Lithuanians say the media is corrupt (19% say it’s ‘very corrupt’); 78% of Lithuanian company representatives say the media is corrupt (31% ‘very’); 83% of Lithuanian civil servants say the media’s corrupt (32% say ‘very corrupt’). The ‘good news’ is that people say the media is less corrupt than parliament and the courts (Lietuvos korupcijos žemėlapis, 2011).

The persistence of corruption undoubtedly ruins democratic political culture. Corruption can easily become the rule rather than the exception. In a society where clientelist relations are dominating, this corruption involves trying to gain access through unofficial means, through bribery, and its specific act is an attempt to sell influence and abuse one’s power position.

It is indeed possible to explain low political participation numbers through such observations in modern life as the ongoing political individualization, the rise of consumer-oriented life-styles, the increasing role of television and strategic communications in communicating popular messages to voters, and so forth. However, what may sound as an appropriate explanation in the countries with longer democratic traditions than those of CEE appears to be insufficient argumentation to explain low party or associational membership in post-communist countries – countries that have entered the field of global changes only very recently.

Although qualitative studies report about the potential rise of participatory consciousness in Central and Eastern Europe, the participatory political culture there is generally absent. Research studies confirm the main reasons for political alienation is distrust in politics, persistent and negative views about politics in general (sustained through sensationalist media messages), and critical assessment of an individual’s abilities and qualifications to be active in politics. At the same time, party membership is also low in CEE countries because parties themselves do not invest in having more members. Indeed, it seems that both ordinary people and political elites treat and understand political party membership as a distant function, a more elite-activities focused occupation, but not an instrument through which a coherent, collective identity could be
developed. Naturally, it becomes very difficult (if not impossible) to develop political relations and to build up political membership in a society where such views and opinions prevail.

Generally speaking, there exists a strong direct interrelationship between public engagement, social affairs, public awareness, and participation. As mention, public engagement and participation is a necessary precondition for democracy.

At the same time, we need to remember that participation is a voluntary act. People decide to participate. The quality of participation also increases depending on the availability of channels and resources, e.g. financial and intellectual. Both conditions are equally significant (public willingness to participate, and availability of channels in a certain cultural setting), and they both depend on many factors, such as the presence of a democratic political culture with high levels of public confidence and the readiness and willingness of the people to participate, but also on more practical functions and appearances, such as the attempts of elites to fight all social negativities (corruption, the non-institutionalized or unregulated lobbyism and protectionism).

On the other hand, there is research data proving that if existing conditions do not favor public participation, and when channels do not function as they should, or when civic participation is suppressed and trustful sources of information are not officially available (media is instrumentalized, self-censored by journalists, or is not functioning to meet its democratic performance functions), other forms – alternatives to conventional modes of participation – become a useful soil to cultivate a common understanding between the people (Balčytienė, 2011; 2012). As discussed, throughout the soviet decades a cultural sphere in the subdued nations of Central and Eastern Europe functioned as a sphere relatively free from the powers of the dominating ideology of those times – therefore it had the biggest chance to become a mobilizing agent in a society and thus turned out to be an alternative space, a so-called ‘substitutional channel’, where public ideals and concerns could have been nourished through the language of cultural metaphors, allegories and symbols.

All things considered, it could be envisioned with the help of both – this short excursus to CEE journalism’s history and contemporary media developments towards individualized access and use – that certain alternatives, for example through new media and social networking means, may also be developed for the modern times.

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1 In Soviet Lithuania, poetry, literature, drama, and other forms of the arts functioned as an alternative cultural sphere and promoted public consolidation. In this respect, the arts (reading of literary press, attendance of theatres, also environmental protection) were a way of informal public participation. To be more specific, the cultural sphere and the arts acted as a ‘substitutional channel’, through which the Lithuanian nation was consolidated and quasi-participation was manifested. Despite the fact that quasi-participation leads to an observational mode that is passive by its nature, in Soviet Lithuania the cultural sphere acted as a form of silent resistance, and its political powers were liberated as soon as the political and ideological control was removed.
In this paper, the discussion moves around the results obtained from the Representative National Public Opinion Survey on Media Use⁴, conducted in Lithuania (N=1023) in October 2011. Respondents aged 12–75+ were selected randomly, with datasets covering all regions of Lithuania. The survey was outsourced and conducted by trained interviewers of the public opinion research company RAIT, using a face-to-face interview method. Probability sampling was used with a margin of sampling error for the complete data set of ±3.1%. The interviewed sample was weighted in relation to the census of Lithuania and balanced to match general socio-demographic parameters for age, gender, education, income and type of community. A multiple-choice questionnaire (containing 100 questions) was specifically designed to draw the parallels between a mediated environment and the participatory activities of media audiences within this environment. Particular attention is given here, therefore, to the analysis of media consumption patterns and routines and media social connectivity assessments.

MEDIA INCLUSIVENESS

As discussed, associational membership is generally considered an important qualitative indicator that is used to measure social integration, such as public participation, in various voluntary organizations, issue-oriented clubs, or other associational groups and circles. As the obtained data from the public survey shows, more than two thirds (69%) of survey respondents have never been involved in any civic organization or association (such as a professional union, church community, sports team or cultural/art club of any kind, youth organization or initiative, political organization or activist group, etc.). The tendencies are quite similar in all demographic segments (see Figure 1). However, people aged 75+ appear to be most active participants: elders (aged 75+) are more likely to belong to social organizations than adolescents and youngsters (40% compared to 23.2% in group 15-24 and 17% in group 25-34). Differences in other measures of socio-demographics such as income, education, or gender did not show any significant differences, except for the greater involvement of people living in middle-sized towns (30–180 thousand inhabitants) – 45.8%.

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⁴ The survey was conducted as a part of the research project "Journalism in Lithuania: Context and Culture" (MIP012/2011) funded by the Research Council of Lithuania.
Having in mind quite low numbers of civic involvement it is still important to analyze whether more socially engaged media users possess different attitudes towards the media.

As popularly agreed, media functions as one of the most powerful agents of socialization and plays a significant role in shaping the attitudes of individuals. It also should act as a ‘watchdog’ or a ‘Fourth Estate’ in a society. Generally, media is an important medium related to the active engagement of citizens and is used to gain information on social, economic, and political affairs.

In the audience survey, ‘media-citizen/user relationships’ were measured by assessing respondents’ answers to a number of questions related to media’s role and performance (see Figure 2). Most of the interviewees agreed with the statement that ‘an active citizen should follow news in media on a regular basis’ (77,1%). Interestingly enough, socially more active individuals (who are involved in various organizations, associations, etc.) tended to agree with this statement more (82,4%) than those who did not belong to any organization (74,6%) (Figure 3).

**Respondents of the survey were asked: ‘Are you involved and participate in any (at least one) civic organizations or associations (such as professional union, church community, sports team or cultural/arts club of any kind, youth organization or initiative, political organization or activist group, etc.)?’
***% of all survey respondents in different age groups.
People of all age groups were worried that media does not meet their expectations. Less than half agreed that ‘local and global news in media are not too complicated for ordinary citizens to understand’ (42.2%); and less than one third (27.2%) said that ‘opinions in the media are similar to ones of ordinary people’. It appears that a smaller group of respondents, who are more socially active, understand the content provided by the media better (51.6% of them claimed that in comparison to 38.7% among the rest). Moreover, the signs of media alienation are being documented as well: both groups seemed to be mostly uncertain about the proximity of opinions and views in the media to the ones of ordinary citizens (40.8% and 42.3% respectively).

**ENGAGING THE DISENGAGED**

Internetization and technological diffusion can be thought of as recent and distinguishing developments in the Baltic communication markets. In small Baltic countries, as everywhere else in the world, the Internet has significantly transformed the roles and habits of its audience, especially of young media users. Moreover, in these countries, due to the high Internet penetration and outstanding online media popularity, some unique tendencies of individualized media use, as well as a rapidly evolving culture of more active involvement (through niche, alternative and, mainly, online media initiatives), can be witnessed. A digital media explosion followed the technological advancements (such as rapid yearly growth of the Internet together with the dynamic growth in the numbers of technological devices) in all countries around the world; and the latter tendency was succeeded by the growth of ‘next generation users’ (Dutton and Blank, 2011).
Online media use and engagement is a phenomenon of a new generation of media consumers who are embracing the opportunities new technologies and social communication means are offering. Results from the public opinion survey convey that engaged audiences (usually younger media consumers) browse online portals, forums, blogs, and comment online more often – indeed, their online activities are rich and diverse. Overall, Internet penetration in some age groups (12-14 and 15-24) reaches nearly 100% and online social networks are gaining power as well (see Figure 4).
Mediatized participation and forms of media use and multiple meaning making: The Baltic perspective

Young people and students between 15-24 are the most active Internet and media users – 81.4% of them use the Internet 6-7 days a week, more than half (55.9%) spending several hours a day browsing for daily news online; additionally, 74.6% connect to social media at least once a day and 45.8% do it more often, spending several hours a day in total on social networking sites (see Figures 5 and 6).
Activism online goes far beyond traditional forms of participation (e.g. voting) and offers diverse types of everyday, extra-institutional activities – civic-oriented acts, which are undertaken on a more regular basis than elections, or other acts that lie within the institutional framework, e.g. signing petitions, boycotting certain products or marching against corporate interests, celebrating ‘Earth hour’ or ‘Buy Nothing Day’ (Theocharis, 2011; Christensen, 2011). Various political activities online – such as looking for information on the websites of political parties, commenting on public interest topics, contacting officials via electronic means – might be called as extra-institutional activities (Theocharis, 2011).

Generally, all types of more active (political) engagement online still attracts quite small numbers of the general sample. Only 2.2% of survey respondents admitted they have contacted politicians or political party members via e-mail, 2.5% have signed a petition, 4.1% have taken part in political discussions online (or in social media) and raised their opinion or commented anonymously (4.9%), 9.9% have searched for information on websites of political parties and 14.5% have done at least one of these activities online (see Figure 7).
Interestingly, those survey respondents who, in real life, are more civically and socially active (belong to civic organizations, associations, etc.) are more brave about raising their own opinions on political affairs directly by contacting politicians or commenting on Facebook and other social networking sites, whereas
those not belonging to any organizations are more passive observers and information consumers, as well as preferring to comment anonymously (see Figure 8).

MEDIA CHOICES AND POPULAR THEMES

Another important finding is that different types and channels of media serve different functions when it comes to the informational needs of news consumers. Clearly, people in Lithuania turn to TV mostly for crime news (77.4% of all respondents search for this type of information) and political affairs (72.3%) (see Figure 9). The same is applicable to print press (28.8% and 25.7% accordingly). Cultural affairs on TV are mostly viewed by senior audiences (e.g. 72% of people between 55-64). For sports news they rely on TV as well as go online: 82% of teenagers access sports online in both media types, and of youngsters (15-24) 63% watch sports on TV. Interest about celebrity news stands out in the case of magazines (20.8% of respondents look for this type of information). Meanwhile, activities online are more directed to the subjective, self-reflective actions – most active users of the Internet associate this medium mostly with leisure, hobbies and personal interests (30.1% of all respondents search for this type of information). However, when they look for news it is mostly specialized professional information (31.4%) or technology and science news (29%) that attracts their attention.

**Respondents of the survey were asked: ‘What types of news do you follow or search for information in different types of media?’.

***% of all survey respondents (N=1023).
The study discloses that in news consumption, private interest topics (crime news, ICT & science news, celebrity news, leisure, traveling and information about a particular country, and specialized/professional information) prevails over public interest topics (political affairs, cultural affairs, and sports) in all media types, especially magazines and online portals (see Figure 10). It is particularly noteworthy that approximately the same percentage of people search for crime news as for political affairs (accordingly 35.3% and 31.9%) as well as are interested in corruption and scandals as in business news and economics (accordingly 24.6% and 22.1%). Also, many participants of the survey expressed a strong desire to be more informed about matters of more private than public interest – social issues (29.6% of all respondents seek more of this type of information), student life and youth activities (20.3%), health and medicine (19.5%), family, children and household (18.6%), nature and environment (18.4%), science and research (14.3%), and so forth.

**Figure 10.** Information, news topics that are mostly searched for and mostly lacking in the media.
Based on data from a representative public opinion survey on media access and use in Lithuania, one can argue that observations of public distrust and general apoliticism may also be permanently reinforced by mass media. Sensationalist or cynical connotations, overall negativism, and increasing attention to crime news and disasters that media convey are even more internalized by citizens. In other words, by directing public attention to sensationalist issues, the media actively contribute to this general alienation procedure, thus becoming an ‘escapist’ medium functioning for the needs of unengaged and passive audiences. At the same time, the results of the public opinion survey also convey that engaged audiences follow their own preferences as well as niche and specialized agendas.

SEARCHING FOR ALTERNATIVES

Socio-demographic characteristics of the audience sample shows people engaged and active online are equally represented by four different age groups from 15 to 54 years (among them 19,5% 15-24 year-olds, 21,3% 25-34 year-olds, 21,8% 35-44 year-olds and 19,2% 45-54 year-olds). They are higher educated, mostly employed (64,5%) and live in the major Lithuanian cities (45,7%). When asked to assess the opportunities and drawbacks of online political participation, the majority of these respondents acknowledged that ‘new technologies stimulate the human interactions’ (73%) and were aware of their own possibilities to create online content (66,8%) (see Figure 11). However, merely half of the sample agreed with the statements that ‘Internet helps to solve problems that are important to communities’ (50%) and ‘Internet creates a possibility to gather for collective actions’ (50,5%). It shows more skepticism towards the Internet space as an effective platform for community-building, civic matters to be discussed and real decisions to be made. Moreover, nearly half of the sample (48,6 %) did not know what sources to trust, and only 27,1 % felt their data was safe online.
When talking about online activism, their enthusiasm to search for alternative, niche sources of information is extremely high; the same goes for the audience’s involvement in online content creation. Surprisingly, there is no direct connection between associational participation and blog readership; the majority of online content contributors are also not among those who are socially active and involved in civic organizations (see Figure 12).
It becomes clear from the research data that the main readers and writers of online blogs in Lithuania are people in their teenage years or devoted Internet users – i.e. 48.6% of young people between 15-24, 35% between 25-34, 25.5% between 35-44 and 23.1% between 12-14 search for alternative information and read blogs in both Lithuanian and other languages; 23.1% of 12-14 year olds and 16.9% of 15-24 year olds, followed by smaller percentages of people in other age groups, write their own blogs or have a personal website (see Figure 4).

The reasons behind the reliance on alternative media, i.e. blogs, is mainly looking for new, original ideas (12% of all survey respondents stated this) or alternative opinions on various public matters (7.2%), but also searching for specialized information related to one’s profession (8.7%) or hobbies (5.7%) (see Figure 13). All in all, 74.3% of all blog readers turn to blogs for alternative information not available in mainstream media and 46.5% of them are searching for profession- and hobby-oriented information. Accordingly, people who write their own blogs or have a personal website do so equally because of personal and professional reasons.
Evidently, the proliferation of media channels and converging communication technologies of networked character, stimulate bottom-up projects providing the exchange of user-generated content. As observed from our study, the Internet is mainly associated with richer knowledge and information access, and grassroots and global virtual participation activities. The Internet is also a channel for alternative communication. At the same time, less structured, more open and accessible online channels still lack this all-embracing character. These claims open new perspectives for discussion on how online media use by certain audience groups effects the general participation culture in the country and vice versa.


**Respondents of the survey were asked: 'Do you read or follow any blogs online in Lithuanian or other languages and why (mark all relevant answers)?' and 'Do you write a blog or have a personal website online and why (mark all relevant answers)?'

***% of all survey respondents (N=1023).
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

All these developments and changes discussed above prove, once again, that the surrounding media realities are very complex and ambiguous, hard to identify and recognize. It is becoming more and more difficult to make predictions about a world in which a multitude of simultaneous processes is at play, including rapid globalization, technological diffusion, cultural convergence and differentiation, as well as the struggle for, and even death of, ideals.

It is precisely due to this multiplicity of factors and processes that existing empirical instruments and social theories are becoming powerless and cannot explain what is happening around us. The new times call for new tools and completely new theoretical constructs that would allow us to describe and analyze these new social and cultural formations.

As observed and discussed with the help of concrete examples, fundamental changes are also taking place in the fields of media and communications. It is not only the technological diffusion or the mainstream media’s loss of its central power in a society that installs all social changes in contemporary Europe. It is not only the arrival and the rise of new communicative online spaces that have become a common place and practice for millions of writers, public intellectuals and bloggers to offer their audiences and followers to choose and read their commentary, recommendations and input on things that interest them, which calls for attention. And it is not only the voicing of diverse and alternative opinions that counts on these new channels.

The biggest qualitative change in modern communications and democracy comes from the new media’s potential to have an impact on public discourses by changing, re-framing or adapting to new technological and social requirements. The change is also coming from the rise of human agency and user control. How and whether these new forms of media use and engagement will develop to accommodate the new needs and adapt to these rapidly changing situations, remains to be seen.

In addition to the general changes in the young democracies of Central and Eastern Europe – and mainly those associated with rapid economic and social restructuring – another factor seems to be an important observation in the development of certain moods in a transitional society. This is particularly linked to the role and function of conventional mass media. As demonstrated in our study, negative content is among the dominant themes in media. The rise and increasing focus on negativism, crime news reporting and sensationalism also
affects how people feel, what they concentrate on and what they determine are important issues to think about. These effects are especially dangerous for their long-term consequences – such types of media-sustained narratives charged with the virus of negativism could further penetrate other spheres of public life and become dominating issues in popular discourses, etc.

Transferred to other contexts of social life, such moods also affect the general public’s views on institutions and structures. Dominating news about corruption and dysfunctions in the public sector magnetize public attention and opinions, thus becoming prone to all types of sensationalism. The dominating negativism also affects popular moods in the sense that disappointments become claimed on the misbehaviors of others. Thus a blame culture persists and is further captured and creatively maintained by the mainstream mass media.

What we are discussing here – the rise of media alternatives, information inclusiveness, and public engagement and participation – is actually becoming a regular, well-developed and also rewarding activity for many users and communications professionals in many countries around the world.

Furthermore, basic media use and access trends are showing that traditional media consumption is going down, and consumption of new media – Internet media and social networks – is increasing. It is not only that the Internet is a major driving force here – it seems that technological advancements are coupled with other social changes in contemporary societies such as increasing individualization, but also consumerism. Contemporary societies are indeed divided into many different niches, and media fragmentation can indeed lead to social polarization and not to a common space for meeting and discussion.

All in all, contemporary societies are fragmented by the choices of individual consumers. One very clear version of such development could be visualized through the growth of interest-shaped communities, through ‘diasporic’ neighborhoods detached from geographic space but migrating around the issues of similar concern. Likewise, the Internet is not just a crucial medium for spreading the idea of individualized engagement and access. It is also not a new medium offering more choices, more views, and more opinions. It is also a cause of the fragmentation of contemporary societies and their audiences.
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*Mediatized participation and forms of media use and multiple meaning making: The Baltic perspective*


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