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Anne Kaun

Being a Young Citizen in Estonia:
An Exploration of Young People's
Civic and Media Experiences

Politics and Society
in the Baltic Sea Region

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Politics and Society in the Baltic Sea Region is a series devoted to contemporary social and political issues in the countries surrounding the Baltic Sea. A specific focus is on current issues in the Baltic states and how these relate to the wider regional and geopolitical challenges. Open to a wide range of disciplines in the social sciences as well as diverse conceptual and methodological approaches, the series seeks to become a forum for high-level social science scholarship that will significantly enrich international knowledge and understanding of the Baltic Sea region. All books published in the series are peer-reviewed.

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Introduction

The last number of years have seen massive mobilisations of disappointed citizens all over the world forming a set of new bottom up politics (Kaldor et al., 2012). In a social environment, where citizens have been mainly addressed as consumers rather than citizens, protestors took the streets and squares to reclaim the public and to be taken seriously as citizens again. Estonia too saw some grass-root mobilisation in form of protests proclaiming “Enough with Fraudulent Politics”, these emerged after several scandals involving high-ranked politicians. While revising this study, which originates from my doctoral dissertation, defended in 2012, these latest developments naturally informed my re-thinking of the core message of this book. The aim that lies behind the arguments presented here is to take young adults seriously as citizens and to focus on the question of how their experiences as citizens intersect with media experiences. In this context, the media are considered as a space of possibilities for civic experiences with the potential to both enable and constrain civic engagement.

Current research suggests that we should move from the question of *the* media to mediations.¹ Consequently, we should not be studying the media, but the media in society. However, media are still considered as focal points around which, for example, social change might crystallise. It is not my attempt to question the usefulness of media and communication research with media as its object, but to follow the old suggestion that we need to understand and research them in their specific contexts.

¹ In this context mediation and mediatisation scholars, such as Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp and Fredrich Krotz, often refer to Jesus Martin-Barbero’s *Communication, Culture and Hegemony. From the Media to Mediations* (1993).

This study therefore chooses an inductive approach for discussing the role of the media, namely to let the participants discuss the way media are interwoven with their everyday lives and the extent to which media are constitutive of their social reality. At the same time, I am interested in the question of whether young adults think the media have a growing importance in their lives (mediatisation). In that sense, the project aims to introduce an alternative way of analysing the processes of mediation and mediatisation, namely through analysing the media perceptions of media users themselves. Hence, the focus changes from the question of whether media are changing social and cultural spheres to how this change is perceived and understood by participants in these very spheres, and how they relate to certain ideas about the potential of media to realise social cohesion and establish a common frame of reference. In other words, it is the *experience* of constant mediatisation and mediation that is of interest here. This is in line with Nick Couldry (2000), who suggests that the tremendous importance of media in our everyday lives should be analysed not by focusing on, for example, specific audiences of specific formats, but by deconstructing the idea that the media are the main – and maybe only – entrance point to society's social centre.

More concretely, I am interested in the extent to which media are mentioned when young adults describe their experiences as citizens. In what ways do the media enable or constrain engagement or disenchantment, connection or disconnection? I approach the question of mediatisation in an open, non-media centred, non-technology-driven fashion, which is guided by the participants themselves. While I, of course, ask for their media preferences and usage, this is not the main focus of the project. It is the embeddedness of the civic experience in a media-dominated environment that is of interest, not focusing on certain forms of media.

This makes the aim of the book different from other current approaches used to analyse social change, political engagement, or the state of democracy in relation to the media. Former studies are often – and perhaps unjustly – discussed in terms of optimism and anxiety, especially when it comes to the potential of new media to improve democratic behaviours. For instance, scholars have discussed the fragmentation (Downey and Fenton, 2003; Habermas, 2006) and *ludification* of the public sphere, which is increasingly dominated by entertainment-orientated consumerism (Postman and Postman, 2006; Putnam, 2001; Saxer, 2007). At the same time, numerous studies are optimistic about the potential of all kinds of media to promote democratisation and support alternative forms of civic engagement including fun and recreation

(Hartley, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Micheletti, 2006, 2010; van Zoonen, 2005). This research often concentrates on certain forms of media such as news portals or forums (Freelon, 2011), social networking platforms (Marwick and Boyd, 2011), or activists connecting via social or alternative media (Kavada, 2009; Uldam, 2010).

In that sense, an engagement with civic culture and its relationship with the media can hardly be described as unprecedented. With the growing interest in questions of mediated and mediatised democracy, the field has become fragmented, polarised and contradictory. As indicated above reviews of the field tend to develop utopian versus dystopian perspectives when it comes to the essential question of whether media enable or constrain civic culture. By taking up ideas about the enabling potential of the media and combining it with critical reflections of the conditions for civic culture, this book aims at something in-between. Driven by the experiences of citizens, I aim to reflect the complexity of what it means to be political, and relate to both politics and one's fellow citizens. This hopefully opens an alternative avenue for the investigation of civic culture in relation to media without giving a final answer that might not even be possible or desirable. As a consequence of this aim, I was faced with the challenging question of how to research civic and media experiences in an appropriate manner without excluding or pre-configuring a certain set of experiences.

Researching Experience and the Use of Diaries

Civic experiences as the object of this book, implies engagement with one of the fuzziest notions in the humanities and social sciences, namely experience (Throop, 2003). Definitions of experience, if given at all, refer to a broad range of phenomena that are partially contradictory. Most often, however, experience remains undefined and taken for granted. As an example, I would like to recount Raymond Williams' engagement with experiences. Williams, as one of the central figures in cultural studies connected to the notion of experience, suggested that the purpose of cultural analysis was to explore and analyse the recorded culture of a given time and place in order to understand and reconstruct the specific structure of the feelings of that given culture (Williams, 1961/2001, 1981, 1985). Even though *lived experiences* was, hence, a key notion used to define the object of cultural analysis in *The Long Revolution* (1961/2001), Williams did not discuss experiences in the first edition of

Keywords. A *Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), only the revised second edition from 1983 includes an entry on experience (Williams, 1976, 1985).

Nonetheless, experience is one of the foundational notions in anthropology, cultural studies and philosophy (Pickering, 2008; Throop, 2003) and, although some reject experience as an analytical concept (Scott, 1991), it remains of crucial importance for cultural analysis. This study does not aim to provide an all-encompassing review of the scholarly work on experience or come up with an original definition. Rather, the aim is to provide the context for understanding civic experiences for the analysis, drawing on the broader discussion of experiences in anthropology, cultural studies and critical theory. In this sense, the book seeks to make a conceptual contribution by proposing an analytical approach to civic experiences that includes both action- and non-action-based understandings.

Experiences are here understood as both a stream of encounters (*Erfahrung*) and as disruptions to the stream of everyday life and, in that sense, as specific, consummated episodes (*Erlebnisse*). However, the analytical focus that the book proposes stresses the latter aspect, namely *Erlebnisse*. The episodes in the diaries and interviews are specific and discrete in their narrative form. However, they take shape against the background of a stream of unspecific experiences. They are, hence, related to a superordinate, culturally shared structure of *Erfahrung*. Civic *Erlebnisse* are, in my understanding, citizens' concrete encounters, such as a protest. The book relates civic *Erlebnisse* to experiences as *Erfahrung* by discussing their relevance to civic culture in Estonia as a "structure of feelings" (Williams, 1961/2001).

Civic experiences are often intermingled, enabled, opened up and constrained by the media. As John B. Thompson (1995) argues, people experience the world beyond their immediate surroundings with the help of media and no longer only through the face-to-face exchange of symbols. Through the media, the world of experience is extended far beyond direct encounters. Thompson argues further that

the sequestration of experience in the spatial/temporal locales of our daily lives goes hand-in-hand with the profusion of mediated experience and with the routine intermingling of experiences, which most individuals would rarely encounter face-to-face (Thompson, 1995, p. 209).

I consciously refer collectively to “the media”, since I would like to grasp the complexity of the spaces that all kinds of media open up. In his analysis, Roger Silverstone included simultaneously:

the mass, the globalized, the regional, the national, the local, the personal media; the broadcast and the interactive media; the audio and audio-visual and the printed media; the electronic and the mechanical, the digital and the analogue media; the big screen and the small screen media; the dominant and alternative media; the fixed and the mobile, the convergent and the stand-alone media (Silverstone, 2007, p. 5).

By consciously referring to these diverse media forms and formats, I aim to be open in my approach to the mundane experiences of the participants, in which the media are increasingly integrated in diverse ways. Media are thus of special importance for all dimensions of citizenship in relation to public spaces, not only as epiphenomena that accompany citizenship, but as constituting moments for the possibility and impossibility of citizenship and public spaces, especially the cultural dimension of citizenship that involves media, and which provides the means by which “to know and speak” (Miller, 2007). Civic experiences are therefore related to what Thompson (1995) calls mediated experiences as re-contextualised experiences that reach beyond the immediate surroundings and connect the individual to distant locales. Mediated experiences are experiences that are re-embedded through the use of media.

The intention to engage rather openly with media and civic experiences must of course be translated into a particular method. I considered established methods such as interviews and focus groups, but quickly felt unsatisfied with the way they constrain the process of “getting close” to experiences. Diaries and more in-depth reflections on the other hand fascinated me and inspired by the study *Public Connection* (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007), I decided to engage open ended diaries to capture civic and media experiences. The aim was to let young people tell stories about their everyday lives and issues that they are concerned with in 20 open-ended online diaries. These were further contextualised through 39 in-depth interviews with the writers. The instructions for the diaries were very open and asked the participating Russian Estonian and Estonian students from Tallinn, Tartu and Narva to reflect on issues that have been of concern for them during the last week; that they have discussed with their friends, family or colleagues at least once a week over the course of 2 months.

By applying this method, I followed in the footsteps of a long research tradition of unsolicited and pre-existing dairies, especially in literature studies (Serfaty, 2004). With Philippe Lejeune's work on dairies, a new and enhanced interest in (unsolicited) dairies and their writers emerged during the 1980s. Lejeune dedicated an immense proportion of his research to privately-written, unpublished dairies, and to the history of the diary. Lejeune (2009) systematically traced the diary back in time to its origin in trade. The initial purpose of keeping a diary was to organise one's work life. However, over time the subject matter transformed from spiritual reasoning about the relationship between man and god, to a dialogic relationship between the diarist and an imaginary addressee, this practice crystallised in the heading "dear diary." Lejeune further extended his research to the internet and studied the phenomenon of online dairies. Besides studying these dairies, he asked the diarists about their motivation to keep a diary, and about the relationship they had with their dairies.

By contrast, the scholarly application of *solicited* dairies can be traced back to the early time-use dairies that were widely used in the 1920s (Gersbuny and Sullivan, 1998). Even though dairies have this long history in research, there is a general lack of theoretical reasoning and methodological discussion about them. A review of textbooks dealing with qualitative research methods supports this argument. If dairies are mentioned at all, they are discussed as supplementing in-depth interviews or focus group discussions, and are used by researchers to organise field notes. However, open-ended, solicited dairies – as opposed to pre-existing dairies – can be of great use in capturing subjective states and the perceptions of participants. Using dairies allowed me to get close to the experiences of my participants that took shape in their stories. The openness of this method allowed a broad variety of experiences to be included. The challenge was to bring this diversity over time and between the different participants together. Hence, the diary material was contextualised through in-depth interviews with diarists, non-diarists and representatives of non-governmental organisations, the latter mainly in order to develop a better understanding of the Estonian cultural and political context in a more focused manner.

The aim of this book is to explore civic experience openly, without applying normative definitions of civic engagement. For this reason, a holistic approach is chosen, using a broad definition of the political to investigate all kinds of engagement and orientation without starting from a specific form of political activity. This is consequently mirrored by a methodological approach

that allows for a diversity in civic experiences. The research design is a combination of new and established methods for the empirical investigation of civic experiences. By applying this inductive approach, I also suggest an alternative way of looking at the processes of mediatisation and mediation, starting from lay persons' perceptions of both mainstream and alternative media in connection with their civic experiences. In this sense, this book is an attempt to explore the possibilities and challenges of non-media-centric research from a methodological point of view.

The book begins by providing background information about the historical, socio-demographic and media situation in Estonia today in order to explain the relevance of this particular case for studying the civic experiences of young adults. Part two then proceeds to lay out a detailed theoretical framework. At the same time, chapter two seeks to conceptualise civic and media experience by relating its empirical study to the notion of public connection.

The analytical parts starting with chapter three are introduced by providing information on the participants for this study as well as outlining the data collection process and the basic analytical methods. This is followed by a discussion of civic experiences as they appear in the diaries thus making a theoretically informed distinction between conventional and non-conventional forms of civic participation on the one hand and media-related and non-media-related public connection on the other.

Chapters four, five and six then analyse the diary and interview data along the three key concepts of *critical media connection*, *playful public connection* and *historical public connection*. Critical media connection is discussed as coming in two main formats, labelled as critical media connectors and critical media disconnectors. Playful public connection is presented as a way to investigate the link between orientation (public connection) and practices. Finally, historical public connection is investigated as experiencing history in different contexts: language, places and discursive spaces. Here the complex inter-ethnic relations, especially with regard to contrasting historical narratives among Estonians and Russians, play a significant role.

In concluding the study, I will discuss how we can develop an understanding of a given civic culture through the lens of civic experiences, namely mundane experiences that are anchored in the life worlds of citizens.