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“I really don’t like them!” – Exploring Citizens’ Media Criticism

Abstract

In information and media affluent societies, the critical ability of citizens is increasingly important. This is reflected in a number of political initiatives that aim at engaging citizens in questions of media content and production, often labelled as media literacy. In this context, skills related to media technologies that are often accentuated in media literacy education are a necessary but not sufficient condition for media literacy. Critical reflexivity and critical practices are crucial for media literacy and therefore in the centre of this article. This article proposes an analysis of media criticism from a citizens' perspective. Drawing on solicited, open-ended online diaries as well as in-depth interviews with young Estonian citizens the article applies an inductive approach to media criticism while paying attention to the specific context in which the media criticism arises.

Keywords

Media Criticism, Media Literacy, Civic Experiences, Civic Engagement, Media Citizenship

Introduction

In information and media affluent societies (Löfgren 2012) characterised as media cultures (Hepp 2011), mediatised worlds (Krotz & Hepp 2012), and media life (Deuze 2012), the ability to engage with media critically is increasingly important for citizens. One of the premises of mediatisation is that current societies are dominated by media logics that characterise more and more social spheres (Deuze 2012). This mediatisation process has led to a growing importance of the question of access to media and communication tools as well as the understanding of media content and the possibility to participate in knowledge and information production for the individual citizen. This is reflected in a number of political initiatives that aim at engaging citizens critically in questions of media content and production, often labelled as media literacy. Programmes and policy aiming at the enhancement of media literacy are presented as contributing to the democratic organisation of society, active citizenship and participation as well as economic value production in information and knowledge based societies (Livingstone et al. 2013). It is hence argued that ‘a responsible and accountable media culture [...] depends on a critical and literate citizenry, and a citizenry, above all, which is critical with respect to, and literate in ways of mass mediation and media representation’ (Silverstone 2004, p. 440).

One aspect of media literacy is to develop a critical understanding of media. Instead of regulating media directly there is a tendency, especially in the context of neoliberal politics, to educate and train the individual citizen in developing a critical understanding of content, production and institution related aspects of the media (O'Neill 2010; Silverstone 2004; Teurlings 2010). At the same time, the conditions for and ideas about media criticism have changed through social media that have opened up new possibilities for citizens to engage with mainstream media and respond to specific content publicly (Mansell 2012).

This article proposes an analysis of media criticism from citizens' perspective that is based on material conducted for a study on civic and media experiences (Author 2012a, 2012b),

namely how young Estonians experience themselves in their role as citizens. While investigating civic and media experiences of young Estonians, their media criticism was exceptionally prominent. These young citizens were especially critical of mainstream news journalism. Hence the article investigates how young Estonians formulate their media criticism and what consequences this criticism implies for their civic practices. Based on solicited, open-ended online diaries as well as in-depth interviews with young citizens the article proposes an inductive approach to media criticism while paying attention to the specific context in which the media criticism arises.

Putting Media Criticism into Perspective

Media criticism should be seen in the broader context of media literacy defined as 'an ability to make sense of media messages and the media industries while aware of, or at least attuned to, issues of "how and in whose interests they work, how they are organized, how they produce meaning, how they go about the business of representing 'reality,' and of how those representations are read by those who receive them'" (Masterman, 1997, p. 25 quoted in Gray, p. 223).

James Potter (2008) reflects similar aspects while listing different stages of media literacy, starting out with simple acquisition of fundamental skills such as reading to more advanced narrative acquisition and to finally reach critical appreciation and an understanding of social responsibility. In both definitions the critical reflexivity related to knowledge and skills about media is presented as the most developed and the complex higher end of media competencies. Skills related to media technologies that are often accentuated in media literacy education are a necessary but not sufficient condition for media literacy (Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck 2004). Critical reflexivity and critical practices are, in that sense, crucial for media literacy.

In a more general sense, one can distinguish between liberal or reformist and radical approaches of media literacy (Teurlings 2010). Whereas liberal approaches focus on media literacy as a trade to be developed by the individual to better be able to participate in the existing media system, radical approaches consider media literacy as being crucial for an engaged citizenry that contribute to a fundamental change of the media system as well as society at large. Sonia Livingstone is creating a similar link between media literacy and citizenship by stating that ‘as we move into an information society, is media literacy increasingly part of citizenship, a means, a right even, by which citizens participate in society? Or is literacy primarily a means of realizing ideals of self-actualization, cultural expression and aesthetic creativity?’ (Livingstone 2004, p. 11). Following that idea of linking media literacy to citizenship, I aim to investigate in what ways citizens are critical of the media ecology that surrounds them.

Reviewing Media Criticism

Although media criticism is an important aspect of media literacy and has been apparent ever since there are media (Ross 1997), one can hardly speak of a well-defined field of media criticism studies. Wendy Wyatt (2007) for example, focusing on press criticism, argues that there might exist a rough consensus about conventions of literary and art criticism, but there has never been an agreement on what criticism of journalism is bound to. Despite of the fact that criticism of the media has a long history (Berry 2006), the history of the field media criticism still needs to be written (Kleiner 2006). Where to start with writing the history of media criticism is, however, contested. Ross (1997) argues that media criticism seems to have intensified every time a new medium appeared. He therefore considers not only prominent examples of media critics of the nineteenth and twentieth century, but also publicists and writers of the early eighteenth century when the first periodical newspapers appeared (e.g. Friedrich von Gentz, Ludwig Börne, but also Arthur Schopenhauer). A different suggestion is made by

Joli Jensen (1990) starting her investigation of media criticism discussing the positions of four important critics of the twentieth century, namely Dwight Macdonald, Daniel Boorstin, Stuart Ewen, and Neil Postman. These four however disparate thinkers, she argues, share the idea that media influence how social narratives are constructed (see also Podmore 1992). In contrast, Richard Butsch (2008) provides a historical account of media criticism by discussing the progression from the idea of crowds (crowd psychology of the mass), to public (audience as public sphere) towards the mass of isolated individuals (alienated citizens). Rather than starting from the perspectives of different media critics, he provides a media critique of his own.

A broad perspective on media criticism or, better, media *critique*, is typically employed by scholars of critical cultural theory. John Theobald suggests them as the ‘significant contributors to a developing intellectual continuum with their antecedents’ (Theobald 2006, p. 27), such as Marx. Media critique is here an integral part of a critique of society at large (Kleiner 2006; Oy 2001). Mass media are identified as major vehicles for the circulation of ‘commodities’ of the cultural industry (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969/2002). The character of the cultural industry, in turn, corresponds to the standardisation of mass production. Mass media, such as television, contribute to the commodification of cultural products that have lost their structural difference to other mass-produced products (Horkheimer & Adorno 1969/2002). Hence, the audience’s perception of the media is similarly standardised. As a consequence, the subject appears passive and docile. The cultural industry promotes, in that sense, conformity with the hegemonic social and economic system and its norms. ‘The overall effect of the culture industry was to bring about “mass deception” and the “impoverishment of consciousness”’ (Theobald 2006, p. 28).

Besides the abovementioned approaches that refer to media criticism from a broad, social perspective, classical audience studies have considered criticism as well. Media criticism can, for example, be understood in the light of what David Morley described in 2002 as the tense

relationship between the media and its audience: out of common sense, viewers and readers do not uncritically rely on media content but, at the same time, ‘they are being pushed back into a forced reliance out of a lack of alternatives’ (Morley 1992, p. 142). Hence, we live with a basic mistrust of power, but are rather powerless towards it. In a similar vein, Silverstone states that media criticism is persistent in the scholarly discourse, and is informed by ‘ordinary people who are profoundly disenchanted, and whom, (...) the dominant media persistently ignore (...)’ (Silverstone 2007, p. 21). Liebes and Katz (1989) investigated the *critical abilities of television viewers* and found that criticism is expressed in semantic, syntactic and pragmatic terms by members of the audience. Their analysis of different ethnic groups watching the TV show *Dallas* showed that, with the shift to the *active* audience paradigm, media criticism emerged as an important aspect of the active engagement with media as institution and content, suggesting oppositional critical readings (Liebes & Katz 1989). Both the social as well as the audience approach to media criticism share more or less explicit references to ideas about the good citizen. Having rights, the citizen has, at the same time, the duty to actively participate and contribute to the public (Butsch 2008). In a similar vein, previous studies have investigated critical abilities of audiences in the context of news and entertainment shows (Jensen 1986, 1990; Couldry, Livingstone & Markham 2007; Lewis 1991; Livingstone & Lunt 1994). However disparate the approaches described above are, they share at least implicitly the assumption that audiences become or are enabled in their role as citizens through media criticism. This article aims to contribute to this discussion by suggesting a theoretical approach to media criticism employing Hirschman’s notions of exit and voice as well as providing an analysis from the perspective of Estonian citizens using online diaries.

Defining Media Criticism

Raymond Williams (1985) focuses in his definition of criticism on the underlying negative association it has, i.e. fault-finding and judgment. According to Williams criticism connoted with informed judgment that presupposes learning, scholarship, cultivation, taste is linked to class-based confidence and distinction (Williams 1985). Butlers reading of Williams suggests that criticism goes, however, further than mere judgement and the expression of it: judgements are subsuming specific phenomena under preconfigured categories, while criticism questions the categories as such. In that sense criticism refers to the ‘practices in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing’ (Butler 2001). Steven Maras conceptualises criticism as ‘a space of possibility, generated through different forms of discursive, rhetorical, conceptual and political work that supports different kinds of action’ (Maras 2007, p. 169). Media criticism is here conceptualised as a specific form of criticism addressing ‘our most sure ways of knowing’ in terms of the media on the textual, audience and production level (Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck 2004). Media criticism is furthermore considered as reflexivity and practices that are supported by and are forming a ‘space of possibilities’, as Maras suggested. In that sense, ‘criticism involves organising, systematically and thoroughly describing, analysing, interpreting, and evaluating patterned relationships to share an informed perspective with others’ (Vande Berg, Wenner & Gronbeck 2004, p. 222).

Methodology: Investigating Media Criticism from the Citizens’ Perspective

As indicated in the introduction, the material on which this article is based, was conducted for a project investigating civic and media experiences applying a socially oriented approach to media studies (Couldry 2012). More concretely the project focused on how young Estonians are experiencing the political, politics and their relations to fellow citizens. Furthermore, the project asked how civic and media experiences intersect. Established methods such as interviews and focus groups were considered, but quickly unveiled their constraints of ‘getting close’ to civic and media experiences. Diaries and more in-depth reflections seemed to be more

appropriate for the investigation of experiences (Couldry, Livingstone & Markham 2007; Author 2010). The aim was to let young people tell stories about their everyday lives and issues that are of concern for them.

The sample consisted of students of diverse disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, political science, landscape architecture, pedagogic and computer science. As the main body of material consisted of diaries that were expected to be rather disparate and hard to compare, it seemed more valuable to work with a rather homogenous sample in terms of educational background. Furthermore, open-ended, solicited online diaries lend themselves mainly to participants with a high writing affinity, which students were expected to be (Author 2010). In that sense the chosen method of diary writing stirred the sampling, which of course had consequences in terms of articulation of the participants. Hence, the study should be considered exploratory for a specific group of young Estonians, rather than representative.

Out of the more than 100 students who filled in a pre-questionnaire, 55 decided to contribute further to the study. Out of these, 16 completed a diary, 35 an in-depth interview, and 4 decided on doing both. In terms of saturation, the study aimed to include as many student participants as possible, while keeping the balance in terms of gender, ethnicity and place of residence.

The fieldwork for this study was conducted between March 2009 and March 2010. During that time the financial crisis, which started in 2008 and reached its peak in Estonia in July 2009 was a dominant topic in mainstream news media. The economic boom of the pre-crisis period – also called Baltic Tiger – could not be sustained and financial crisis hit all three Baltic States hard. At the time of conducting the interviews in September 2009, Estonia was faced with negative growth rates of 13.9 per cent (Ummelas 2011). The presence of the financial crisis in public discourse is reflected in the diaries. Taking up the concerns of diarists, a discussion of

the mediation of the financial crisis was included in the interviews, hence the focus of the analysis here.

The instructions for the diaries were open and asked the participating Russian Estonian and Estonian students from Tallinn, Tartu and Narva: to reflect about topics that have been of concern for them during the last week; that they have discussed with their friends, family, colleagues at least once a week over the course of two months. Media or even media criticism were not in the main focus of the instructions for the diary writing. The more surprising are the reoccurring, critical references to ‘the’ media in the diaries. Therefore, the focus for this article was chose to investigate the character of media criticism further. The interviews focused more specifically on questions of media usage, the mediation of the financial crisis and how the students perceive the relationship between Russian Estonians and Estonians.

The ethnic background of the participants is of crucial importance in Estonia especially in the Narva region, where Russians are the biggest group of the population. The two biggest cities, Tallinn and Tartu, have ethnic Russians as 36.5 per cent and 16.6 per cent of their overall populations respectively. This has of course implications for the media diet of the participants coming from the different regions that were part of the study. Russian participants predominantly prefer Russian media outlets either produced in the Baltic Region such as the television channel *First Baltic Channel* that broadcasts in Russian or local newspaper *Narvskaja Gazeta* or produced in Russia such as *First Channel Russia*. Estonian participants prefer Estonian media such as the largest newspapers *Postimees*, *Eesti Päevaleht* as well as *Raadio Kuku* and services by the Estonian public service broadcaster *ERR*. Generally speaking the participants – diarists as well as interviewees – are heavy media users with a strong internet usage: eighteen participants use the internet between one and three hours per day, and sixteen participants between three and twelve hours per day for non-work-related purposes. A rather large proportion of the participants does not watch television at all on an average day or

confirmed a non-heavy usage of less than one hour per day (thirty-eight out of fifty-nine). The majority of participants prefer online newspapers rather than their printed versions. In more general terms, Natalia Chuikina and Aurika Meimre (2007) describe the complex media landscape in Estonia that is still strongly divided along ethnic lines (Vilhalemm 2008), including Russian-language media produced in Estonia, and media from the Russian Federation that is popular among Estonian Russians. In 2007, there were around 30 Russian periodicals, but only four daily regional and local- and three national newspapers available in Russian. The two newspapers that have the widest coverage are the Russian version of the Estonian daily *Postimees*, and *MK-Estonia*, which is the Estonian version of the Moscow-based *Moskovskii Komsomolets*. As for television, TV channels from Russia available in Estonia are far more popular than Russian-language channels based in Estonia – a trend, which is reversed when it comes to the Radio (Chuikina & Meimre 2007).

Marju Lauristin and Peeter Vilhalemm (2002) argue that the commercialisation at the end of the 1990s helped Estonian media to develop and maintain a watchdog position and become one of the main pillars of deliberative democracy. This positive view of commercialisation is embedded in the discourse about Estonia being a ‘winning country’, not only in terms of managing post-socialist transition, implementing democracy and establishing a free market (Charles 2009), but also in terms of the previous economic crisis. The dominant neoliberal tendencies are linked to a strong believe in the democratising potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Being the first country to allow online voting in 2005 and a cutting-edge country when it comes to the implementation of e-services, the spread of free wifi areas, and the development of an extensive ICT-related educational programme – the Tiger Leap Programme - has put Estonia firmly on the map as an ‘e-state’ (Runnel, Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt & Reinsalu 2009). Furthermore, Estonia is one of the most polarised countries in Europe, with a large gap between rich and poor, which of course has implications for the so-

called ‘digital divide’ (Lauristin 2011). Hence, in a country that is heavily relying on ICTs and that actively promotes the currents of an information society, media literacy and media criticism play a crucial role.

In contradiction to the abovementioned, in general the level of civic participation and engagement in Estonia remains rather low (Dyczok & Gaman-Golutvina 2009; Author 2013; Schofer & Fourcade-Gourinchas 2001; Torney-Purta 2002). Compared to other countries being part of the European Social Survey (ESS) a comparably low voter turnout is especially apparent. Whereas in the average rate of participation was around 73 percent for all other ESS countries, it was only around 57 percent in Estonia. The same goes for more unconventional forms of civic engagement such as work for a civil society organisation, signing offline petitions and protesting.

The diary and interview material was consequently thematically coded developing a list of topics based on previous research. Among others, important nodes in the material were practices related to media criticism of the participants. These practices were analysed applying Albert Hirschman’s seminal work on *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970). The starting point for Hirschman’s analysis (1970) is a form of discontent of the consumer or member of an organisation that makes a certain response necessary. Hirschman discusses exit and voice as two distinct ways for malcontents to manifest their discontent. Voice has, hence, an important function to make failing visible to the management or any organization. At the same time, voice is constrained by the structural circumstances in which the consumer or citizen is acting and voice becomes only possible if exit is unavailable. Hirschman refers in terms of social life to basic institutions such as family, the state, or the church that have only little - at least in his understanding – possibilities to exit. In terms of the economic system a monopoly makes exit impossible. Hirschman, hence, sees voice a residual and all consumers or citizens that do not chose to exit become candidates for voice. Whereas exit is most often linked to the economic

sphere namely to changing the supplier of a specific product, voice is more often linked to political participation. Hirschman brings both spheres together and shows that exit and voice are equally necessary to understand the ways in which consumers and citizens manifest their discontent. It is thus not only the practices of the active and involved media criticism that should be of interest, but also the decision not to participate, not to become active, not to criticise and connect, to consequently exit and disconnect.

Following that argument, I treated *connection/voice* as well as *disconnection/exit* as equally important practices that have their origin in media criticism. Consequently the analysis not only considers the practices of the active and involved media users, but also the conscious decision to *not* participate, to *not* get active, to *not* search for information, to consequently *exit*.

Results

The participants in the diary study were openly asked to reflect about issues of concern for them during the previous week. Discussions in the media in general were listed among other topics that they might want to think about for their diary entries. In that sense the diaries were not structure to capture media criticism, however critical reflections about media as institution, text and their reception were re-appearing.

A striking commonality of the media criticism that was expressed is the focus on traditional news media, namely the main daily newspapers *Eesti Päevaleht* and *Postimees* or the television news format *Aktuaalne Kaamera* provided by the public service broadcaster *Eesti Televisioon* (ETV). Hence the criticism that is expressed in the diaries and interviews is mainly directed towards traditional news journalism. This is an interesting finding when it comes to the rather monolithic usage of the term “media” in the instructions for the diaries that could have encompassed all from journalism and the press to electronic media and social media. In that sense, the participants expressed a rather narrow understanding what media could mean.

In the course of their reflections about news media, almost all participants present a critical view. One of the clearest examples of critical reflection, namely *media criticism*, is Kristjan's diary, which is dominated by statements about news journalism such as the following:

My own experience? What I feel is that media are not helping me to fully realise my rights as a citizen, which means that mainstream media is not informative enough. The problem is especially acute when it comes to in-depth analysis of social or political issues (Kristjan – diarist).

Kristjan has a clear idea of the role the media should be playing in society. In his eyes, mainstream news media are crucial for democracy: they, as a whole, are supposed to enable citizens to deliberate and make decisions. For Kristjan, getting valuable information allows him to fully realise his rights as a citizen. In the context of his diary, valuable information meant information about the up-coming elections for the European parliament, which was a reoccurring topic in his reflections.

Another criticism expressed is the lack of certain topics in Estonian news. Kajsa, for example, is particularly interested in environmental questions and animal rights issues. However, these themes are largely missing in the agenda of Estonian mainstream news media, she argues and suggests that interested citizens turn to social media instead.

One thing that I and my friends agreed upon is that none of us wants to consume GMO-food. Unfortunately the government rather supports GMO, although there hasn't been much discussion on that topic in media. There is, however, a petition/NGO also for that: <http://exuyum.nw.eenet.ee/gmo/index.php>. Even though newspapers don't cover these topics of animal rights/GMO-food the petition sites are usually quite popular and information spreads mostly through personal connections: blogs, Facebook, Orkut, Twitter and so on (Kajsa, diarist).

The general finding that media criticism was an important aspect in the diaries and interviews led to a further investigation of the character of media criticism that was expressed. Guided by the definition of media criticism as both a form of reflexivity and practice that are forming a space of possibility in terms of how we understand media, media criticism is analysed as addressing the textual, production and audience level.

Text-centred criticism

Text-centred criticism is directed to different media as text and their narrative structure. Participants criticise here the breadth of topics, voices and arguments as well as the quality of information provided. Another aspect of the criticism considered as text-centred criticism refers to the affordances of a specific medium and how they are enabling and constraining particular ways of engagement (Hutchby 2001).

One example of text-centred critical media connection that was brought up in the context of the mediation of the financial crisis is illustrated by the following quotation from an interview with a female student from Tallinn:

I have studied graphic design and there was also a bit about advertising but that's why I know some tricks about advertising about the psyche and so on. How to project your image, what is important, how a text has to look or image or persons also and so on. And otherwise I don't have so much time, for example, to watch TV and also I don't think it is so important to watch it anyway. For some people it is really important to watch, but there is so much bad and negative information. So I don't really watch it, because good news is really, really rare and that's why I maybe like more paper media and also the internet because I decide for myself what site I would like to see and what I am going read. But I think that TV is really powerful, also for advertisements and what is shown in

the news. And art and culture are not so popular on TV. So I hope that it will change some day (Lisa – interviewee).

The interviewee assumes the media, especially television, to be manipulative. She describes herself as ‘media savvy’, since she has studied advertising. However, she chooses rather not to watch television, which she describes as a continuous flow that the audience has to follow passively, providing narratives that are hard to interrupt. She prefers media that she can choose herself (particular news items, but also the speed of reception). The interviewee acknowledges, at the same time, the powerful position the television has to persuade people and potentially change preferences and consumption patterns. In consequence of her discontent with television as a media text, i.e. what modes of reception television invites to, she disconnects from this specific media text and draws her attention to alternative ones that suit her needs better; she, in Hirschman’s words, exits.

Other critical accounts of the mediation of the financial crisis on the textual level stress the manipulative character of the media in terms of providing misinformation, as presented in the below quotation. Like several other participants, the interviewee emphasises that the media play the ‘real’ dimensions of the crisis down and, in so doing, they contribute to the distraction of citizens from other important issues. The interviewee furthermore utters a specific criticism of the Estonian news media compared to international and Russian news.

Interviewer: And I would like to discuss the financial crisis. How would you describe the media coverage of the financial crisis in Estonia?

Katia: I don’t look at the media from Estonia that much, they are not good. I look up information from the Internet from different countries, like Russia.

The statement by Katia, who is living in Narva with a high density of Russian-speaking population, represents a rather typical context-specific media criticism. The criticism reflects divides and prejudices that Estonian Russians typically have towards the quality Estonian media

texts, which also goes the other way around (i.e., the prejudices Estonians have towards Russian media). Media criticism on the textual level is, then, closely linked to the source of the news, in this case whether it is from Estonia or Russia. The interviewee argues that especially Estonian media manipulate the public. The non-usage of Estonian media by Russian speakers in the Narva region is a rather common pattern. This is not only due to language barriers, but also, as we have seen, due to prejudices about the quality of reporting. In that sense, the interviews and diaries reflect the findings of earlier research that identified separate media spheres for Estonian Russians and Estonians (Vihalemm 2002a; Vihalemm & Masso 2002; Vihalemm 2008). However, this text-centred criticism is less prevalent in the interviews with participants that are living in areas with a more equal share of Russian and Estonian speakers (e.g. in Tallinn) or a strong dominance of Estonian-speakers (e.g. in Tartu).

Production-centred criticism

Production-centred criticism, in contrast, considers the media not as text, but as outcome of a production process that follows a specific media logic, which is embedded in an economic and political structure (Altheide & Snow 1979). The focus is here on questions of how events become news and the character of the journalistic field that generates content.

The following quotation highlights the strong interdependency between the political and journalistic field defining the terms of news production.

Politicians and also journalists seem to forget [about other places than the capital city] and that's why politics looks more and more like big dogged game in a small sandpit of maintaining positions and journalists only focus on this artificial life of Tallinn. Therefore, I have no wish to look at the news and other broadcasts related to actual life

on TV. My partner in contrast wouldn't look any other broadcasts than news and everyday politics. We have friendly fights over the remote control and I feel we should maybe buy another television set, although I don't actually like the idea. (Liisi, diarist interviewee)

Prior to the above excerpt Liisi discussed how the countryside and basically all other places than Tallinn are largely ignored by both politicians and journalists. She criticises, hence, the logics guiding the news production and more specifically the strong connections between politicians and journalists that seem to be living in an isolated bubble in Tallinn. In conclusion production-focused media criticism is not about the content, actors and events that are reported about, but the rules and principles that apply to (news) media production.

Audience-centred criticism

Audience-centred criticism refers to ways in which media texts are selected, perceived and interpreted by the recipients. This form of media criticism was somewhat rarer than the abovementioned forms of media criticism. If the interviewees criticised media at the audience level, they presented the audience as being rather passive, and that they select tabloid and celebrity news before political reporting. It was argued, for example, that through their interest in 'soft' news and entertaining content, the audience is contributing to the growth of non-political media and enhanced tabloidisation. The diarist Kristjan was especially critical of the political phlegmatism of some of his friends, which they mainly expressed avoiding political content. He was therefore aiming at direct exchange about politics with his friends and family. Kristjan is also critical about the tendency of the Estonian audience to not engage with foreign news that are written in English by other news outlets. He argues, they are thereby narrowing their horizon to national information and perspectives. He writes,

(...) The people have access only to a fraction of information about what is happening and what is even worse is the selection of news, which is provided. Most foreign news, say in Estonian newspapers, appear to be dealing with issues, which have a direct impact on Estonia thus, in my mind, bolstering sentiments of petty nationalism, looking inwards and leaving little or no room to voices more favourable of cosmopolitanism. (Kristjan – diarist)

Kristjan's major criticism concerns the apathy and narrow-mindedness of large parts of the audience, which motivates him to consider setting up a blog for in-depth discussion of political issues as mainstream media have clearly failed to engage their audiences.

Furthermore, the study participants were critical of some user-generated contributions to public debate in news portals such as *Delfi.ee* where the comment function is considered to be mainly used as a way to shout at each other as this quote from Kaja's diary illustrates.

Another phenomena in Estonian journalism is the comment section. While reading news from *BBC* or *Independent* comments are usually an interesting part of the stories, especially when they relate to controversial topics or foreign affairs. In Estonian newspapers it is a place not for different opinions and points of views, but for shouting, being rude and offensive. It is not very often that I read comments, but sometimes I still do so, and it definitely is a "verbal shithole" as it has been referred to by many (Kaja, diarist).

In summary audience-centred criticism concerns the selection and engagement with news items by audience members.

Critical practices – Critical Media Connection and Critical Media Disconnection

Besides the reflexivity or critical interpretation that the participants expressed on the textual, production and audience level, they also describe critical practices that are related to the media. These critical media practices will in the following be discussed in terms of critical media connection and critical media disconnection, while connection and disconnection should be considered as translations of Hirschman's exit and voice. Narrations representing critical media disconnectors promote, for example, withdrawal or exit from news consumption, whereas critical media connectors suggest communicative practices that enhance public debate, i.e. voice; both practices are based on the critical assessment of news media in general. As indicated earlier, it was striking that almost all diarists included media criticism in their diaries (seventeen out of twenty). A majority of the diarists and interviewees described consequently also practices that were based on their media criticism, namely either *voice* or *exit*. The practices of critical media connectors and critical media disconnectors are, however, context depended and participants might change in their role from connectors to disconnectors depending on the specific situation in which their critical media practices arise. However, one could say that there is a tendency towards critical media disconnection rather than critical media connection. Among the diarists that expressed media criticism five could be considered as critical media connectors, while the rest are predominantly critical media disconnectors.

Critical media connectors are strongly critical when it comes to the power, influence, relevance and quality of news media. As a consequence of this criticism, they search for possibilities to actively influence public discourse. In that sense, they challenge the powerful position of mainstream media by presenting issues of common concern. Blogs, but also 'tailor-made' information services, are mentioned as examples of such possibilities to create alternative public spaces. One female diarist, for example, mentioned that she might start an

information service, through which she offers her expertise as a trained media-consultant for free in order to improve public discourse.

Kristjan is one of most explicit diarists when it comes to the will to ‘correct’ the public discourse. Although he has not yet set up the blog, he discusses, in detail, potential topics to be included in his diary. He mainly reproduces the narrative of the potential of the internet to serve as a platform for expressing one’s own opinion, and as a space to meet and exchange ideas.

For a while now I’ve been considering the idea of trying to start a web page, which would provide in-depth information concerning politics, media, society etc., and which, at least partially, would be written in easy language, by experts, would be neutral and would have that educational quality I wrote about before. The web page could have other functions as well, besides explaining things it could also be a meeting ground for new ideas, a place for educated discussion. (Kristjan – diarist).

Besides blogs, the *comment function* on news sites was mentioned in several diaries as a space to actively contribute and challenge dominant discourses.

Last week was somewhat different in one aspect – after what could have been years, I wrote another comment on an online article. In Estonia, it’s common to let your anger and frustration out on other people by commenting online. (...) I know that it is an important part of democracy to have an opportunity to let your opinion to be known, but what people forget here in Estonia is that you should also respect your opponent’s insight into the matter. He/she isn’t an idiot just because they hold an opinion that differs from yours (Toomas – diarist).

Toomas presents an ambiguous position towards the comment function. The comment function, in theory, is often seen as one of the major achievements of the internet in contributing to a more vivid civic discussion and opening up new possibilities for direct citizen participation (Manosevitch & Walker 2009), but it causes here a certain pessimism and dissatisfaction.

Participants describe those forms of voicing opinion and exercise of citizenship often as ‘shouting’. In their eyes, only extremists present opinions that have nothing to do with the majority opinion. Cyber bullying, and the ‘extreme’ positions represented in comments on delfi.ee or one of the two national newspapers *Eesti Päevaleht* and *Postimees*, have led to a general public discussion about unedited comment space and exchange on Estonian online platforms. An initiative taken by the Estonian media was launched to provide a general ‘netiquette’ through a code of conduct online. The comment function and option to write blogs gives critical media connectors the possibility of making their voices heard, although they remain generally sceptical about the quality of the discussions triggered online.

Whereas critical media connectors choose to actively voice their opinions, critical media disconnectors choose exit as a logical consequence of their media criticism (Hirschman 1970). Exit refers here to the tendency to consciously avoid mainstream news. Instead of relying on news media as information disseminators, critical media disconnectors rely more on face-to-face exchanges and their personal networks online, without actively seeking information in established news media.

Why I don’t learn from or keep up with the news? Because there is just negative news. I didn’t find any positive news at all. I don’t want to live in a world where everything is bad. Secondly, news just masks or produces illusions. In reality things are even worse than presented in the media. Thirdly, it is just uninteresting for me. The local and national media are cyclic. They repeat the same topics for many years (Maksim – diarist).

The diarist Maksim is generally tired of the flow of mainstream news, and therefore prefers to ignore it. Critical media disconnectors state that they do not read printed newspapers at all, and their online versions only occasionally. A number of the diarists who avoid online newspapers describe them as getting more and more spectacle-centred and entertainment-oriented. Critical media disconnectors prefer to rely on sources from interpersonal networks consisting of the

primary group (such as friends and family members), which often function as gatekeepers when it comes to mainstream news , i.e., those peers and family members who confront them with specific articles. Even in a mediatised world, the personal influence of opinion-leaders and the primary group, as described by Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), is still relevant, as we can see in Grete's description of an encounter with her mother:

Last week or even the week before I hardly read any newspapers at all. My mom just put one article about one old and famous Estonian family under my nose (Grete – diarist).

The seminal work of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955), and numerous follow-up studies (for an overview see Lu 2007) show the importance of the primary group when it comes to information, as well as its credibility and trustworthiness. Though other studies have shown a strong reliance on mainstream media (Petersson et al. 2006), when it comes to political information, critical media disconnectors rely more heavily on information from their peers and family members.

Discussion

In the diaries, news media are discussed as institutions and the main driving forces of discourse production. Most of the participants consider them as not fulfilling their designated role in the democratic system. The diarists were especially concerned about the lack of variety and quality in the mediated discourses. Besides that general reasoning, media criticism was raised in other, more concrete terms such as the over- or underrepresentation of certain groups, values and norms. These findings correspond with the results from earlier research (Couldry & Langer 2005).

While analysing forms of media criticism from a citizens' perspective, it is apparent that the notion of the informed citizen (that was critically examined for example by Schudson (2003) and considered as disappearing by Mindich (2005)) is still relevant to the participants. They consider mainstream news media as crucial for democracy, however, they relate critically to

them. Forms of participatory media were identified by the diarists and interviewees as a major opportunity to improve public discourse. However, the participants develop an ambiguous position to these forums for engagement and critically reflect their constraints.

Teurlings (2010) considers the criticism that was expressed by his respondents as *critical apathy*, namely as engaging critical faculties, but directing the attention from the necessary political actions that contribute to fundamental change. In a similar vein, I consider the media criticism expressed by my participants as an expression of a demanding citizenry that is mistrustful of the political and media elites, which potentially leads to critical media practices. This could be seen in the light of what has been discussed alienation from the elite and the disintegration of politics, in the sense that politics appear more and more as fragmented and opaque (Crouch 2004). In that context a form of counter-democracy evolves, Rosanvallon (2008) argues. He states that Western democracies have entered a stage of democratic diffuseness, where ‘change comes about not through broader political participation as such but through the advent of new forms of social attentiveness’ (Rosanvallon 2008, p. 39). He expands on this argument by stressing that civic vigilance and oversight are both essential *and* threatening to democracy. He concludes, however, that the earlier-discussed change led to ‘an age of problematic democracy’, in which ‘citizens no longer think of conquering power in order to exercise it. Their implicit goal is rather to constrain and limit power, while deploring the ultimate consequences of their own preferred practices (Rosanvallon 2008, p. 258). Instead of aiming for political power, political struggle and political activism now often focus on how to *control* those who have power, rather than to question their position as such. An important role is given to the media in general, and to the news media in particular, when it comes the current culture of oversight, transparency and control. The notion of counter-democracy refers to the growing non-conventional forms of civic practices and orientation, which put the political elite under scrutiny and create a democracy of confrontation. In that sense, media criticism can be

understood as a sign of the vitality of a democratic system, which also bears, ironically, the potential to depoliticise those same agents.

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