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IMAGINARY INACTIVITY AND THE SHARE BUTTON

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Political participation is seen as a prerequisite for democratic governance (Lampranou, 2013) but past decades have seen a steady decrease in electoral turnout and voting among younger generations in most European countries. This paper explores youth's social media practices and the social imaginary of their political passivity. Using Estonian data from a 14-country European study Memory, Youth, Political Legacy And Civic Engagement (MyPLACE, 2011-2015) we thematically analysed in-depth interviews (60) in 2 contrasting sites and contextualized it with survey results from all participating countries.

Instead of questioning how social media enables activism (Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2012, Coleman, 2013) or contrasting political commitment in internet based and physical-space activism (Morozov, 2011), our interest lies with understanding young people's social media practices that could be considered a form (political) participation (liking and sharing political critique and parody, signing petitions), but which young people themselves do not recognize as such. Our central research interest lies with young people's own social imaginary of youths' political participation and social media practices.

Cultural context

Post regaining its independence in 1991, Estonia chose a distinctive path compared to other Eastern European countries by undertaking neo-liberal economic and political reforms that lead to the popularisation of a success oriented, materialistic and individualistic public discourse. Civic activism and protests are rare in Estonia. While the recent years have seen a rise of social or community movements and there was a protest against ACTA (2012), being an activist has a rather negative connotation due to the Soviet history, where 'activism' meant state mandated communist practices (Allaste 2014). Participation is much lower than in neighbouring Western countries - 58% of young people in Estonia belong to an organization, compared 73% in Finland 73% and 87% Denmark.

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Theoretical Context

Recent approaches to activism stress cause-oriented repertoires that have broadened to include 'consumer' and 'lifestyle' politics (c.f. Norris 2007). That relates to a new perception of politics as a concrete handling of difference; actors are seen as 'everyday makers' (Bang 2005), who, through their daily interactions seek to create small and local change. Bakardjeva (2009) offers the concept of 'subactivism', which refers to the kind of politics that unfold on the level of subjective experiences and are submerged in the flow of everyday life.

Considering the constitutive nature of social imaginary (Ricoeur, 1994) and building on work regarding imaginary audiences (Litt, 2012) we are working with an assumption that young people's own social imaginary of youth participation is influential and important in determining their behaviour. Notably, this social imaginary is situated within a larger one of political passivity of youth and radical individualism and anti-activism of Estonians.

Finally, important to our argument is the constructive power of social media 'buttons' (i.e. sharing, liking) on our values and cultural practices. Based on van Dijk (2013) we argue, that the coded structure of social media draws young Estonians into subactivism that they don't experience as activism because of their social imaginary of political participation.

Results and Discussion

Based on our survey data, we found that 10% of young Estonians in the region of Tartumaa had uploaded political material to the Internet and 21% had signed petitions in an online petition platform. Both of these can be seen as fairly intensive forms of (online) political participation (compared to, for example merely liking, sharing or following). In addition our interview data uncovered a variety of less-engaged forms of participation. Our informants said social media has jumpstarted their awareness of hot topics (i.e. ACTA) and that they do read articles posted on Facebook to help them become better informed of political issues.

Interestingly, from the perspective of understanding the social imaginary of youth participation – our interviewees interpreted sharing political or civic content on social media primarily as self-presentation and impression-management. Yet, looking at how 'sharing' and 'liking' are contrasted in the following quote, an awareness of the participation element of these social media practices is evident.

Tarmo, 21, Tartu County: I know a couple of people who constantly share something, one of them is the former president of the Students' Union who shares political articles and what Ministers have said all the time. So I read these sometimes. I very rarely share. Especially political messages. I `like` things but I keep a low profile with it. I just give my small approval to something, but sharing means it has to be something I really want all my acquaintances to know about.

Young people were most comfortable with sharing political content on social media, when it was packaged as humour or parody. While media remix and parody are legitimate forms of political critique, it is our argument that in this case, some of its appeal stems from the political being somewhat hidden.

Karmen, 24: the last thing I shared was a joke guideline from the Estonian Tax Board that said: 'please don't add the members of the parliament to your dependents list on your tax declaration'. You know, because they are actually dependents for Estonian people.

On the other hand, the belief in efficacy of distributing political messages on social media sites to influence politics was low (24%) compared to Denmark (44%) or Finland (32%). It seems then, that Estonian youth may use social media as everyday makers – they may share a critical joke, press a like on a campaign or even sign a petition about something that directly influences their everyday life, yet the discourse they employ in interpreting this speaks of the individual decisions and actions and thus the social imaginary of non-activism.

Conclusion

Estonian young people, similarly to their peers in many countries of the world, do not believe in politics, politicians or see a point in trying to do anything. We need to consider, whether in a Post Soviet country like Estonia, where civic engagement is low and 'activism' has a negative connotation, signing petitions, sharing, commenting and 'liking', is something that can be seen as 'gateway activism', which will lead new generations of people towards participation, or whether what we see are practices the coded structure of social media mandate and which are not, in fact indicative of any interest in politics or desire to participate.

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