

Perceptions of Participation and the Share Button

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Abstract

This article analyses Estonian youth's perceptions of their own political participation and their practices of participation on social media. We analysed 60 interviews with Estonian informants in a MYPLACE study and relied on a conceptual broadening that acknowledges the political potential of everyday. We rely on theories of standby citizenship and spiral of silence to understand signing petitions, commenting, liking and sharing politically minded content online. Based on this we suggest that young people in Estonia are interested in political issues and public opinion and their social media use represents a diversification of how citizens take part in civic matters. However, youths do not necessarily believe in the efficacy of social media in enacting political change and their reasons for not participating can be seen as indicative of a desire for both impression management and being affected by the spiral of silence.

Keywords: new repertoires of political participation, youth social media practices, social media and political participation, perceptions of participation.

Introduction

Political participation in its conventional, institutional form is often seen as a prerequisite to democratic governance (Lamprianou, 2013), yet both European electoral turnout and party membership has been waning since the 1970s. Young people's participation in institutional and electoral politics, in particular, has severely decreased (Van Biezen, Mair & Poguntke, 2012). Pessimistic scholarship has interpreted this as a sign of youth disengagement, apathy and low levels of informedness (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), which might toll the bell for democratic ideals. A contesting body of academic work has noted that some forms of non-institutionalised participation (volunteering, boycotting and buycotting) are actually rising among the young (Zukin et al., 2006; Quintelier & Vissers, 2008) and is thus attempting to redefine political participation to acknowledge the youth's changed life circumstances in the 21st century (cf. Bennett 2012; Loader, Vromen & Xenos 2014). One of the phenomena often interrogated for its potential influence on the scope and nature of political participation among the young is the emergence and increased popularity of the social web, or Web 2.0. In the EU, internet penetration ranges from 83% to 99% among the 16-24 year olds and from 66% to 97% in the 24-25 age group (UNECE, 2014). The European average for social media penetration is 40%; the global average, in comparison, is 26% (We Are Social, Feb 2014).

Public discourse surrounding the Arab Spring, Occupy as well as their European counterparts – Occupy LSX (London Stock Exchange), 15-M (Spain), and the Wutbürger (Germany) – attributed mobilising and organising people in these protests and movements to social media. A wave of scholarship (cf. Papacharissi & de Fatime Oliveira, 2012; Tufekci & Wilson, 2012; Breuer, 2012; Kaldor et al., 2012; Postill, 2014; Kaldor & Selchow, 2015) followed, most of it celebrates the democratic potential of the social web. In addition to exploring overt political activism on/through/with social media, researchers are increasingly questioning the relations between social media practices and less overt forms of non-institutional political participation. There is a burgeoning body of literature that links

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social media practices with a perception of increased participation opportunities (Dimitrova et al., 2014) and thus more political participation (Wolfsfeld, Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2015), whereas other authors deny that online forms of participation have any value and employ concepts of slactivism (Morozov, 2012) and clickism (e.g., Amin, 2010), or see social media as fostering a logic of self-centred participation that is a threat to collective action (Fenton & Barassi, 2011).

This article adds to the growing scholarship that examines connections between social media use and non-institutional political participation, but brings to the table a previously unresearched group (post-Soviet Estonian youth), as well as a focus on specific social media practices (sharing, commenting, signing petitions) and the meanings they carry for the youths themselves in the context of political participation. Our goal is to explore the social media practices of Estonian young people to understand whether they can be considered a form of political participation.

New participatory repertoires

The social context young people live their lives in is significantly different now than it was even twenty years ago. Austerity politics, social fragmentation and individualisation of the life-course are just a few of the major influencers often implicated in young people's changed social, political and economical experiences (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010). A variety of concepts have been introduced since the turn of the century to account for these changes. Bang and Sørensen's (1999) everyday makers; Micheletti's (2003) reflexive politics, Bakardijeva's subactivism (2009); Ekman & Amnå's (2009) latent political engagement; Bennett's (2012) self-actualising citizens and personalisation of politics; or Loader, Vromen and Xenos' (2014) networked young citizen all work to broaden the definition of political participation in ways that reflect youths lived experiences. The gist of this conceptual broadening lies in acknowledging the political potential of everyday, 'transient and self-expressive' (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010, p. 13) participatory practices, and the importance of online interactions in young people's experiences of both the personal and the collective. Our approach to political participation in this article falls in line with this broadening, and we use the term new participatory repertoires (Thorson, 2012; Bennett, 2012) when speaking about it.

Acknowledging the 'small-scale, often individual decisions and actions that have either a political or ethical frame of reference (or both) and remain submerged in everyday life' (Bakardijeva, 2009, p. 96) allows focusing our analytical gaze on ordinary youth. As Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010) point out, there are many young people, who are neither at the forefront of Occupy protests nor apathetic. They may express little interest in conventional politics, but 'continue to struggle to find ways to be heard and make change both within and outside of state politics in relation to their social and political concerns' (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010, p. 22). Working with young adults in the US, Thorson (2012) too offers empirical examples of youths, who possess high levels of political knowledge, yet are inactive by conventional standards. These young people, according to Thorson (2012), try to embody the change they want to see through their personal dealings with others and through consumption choices. This may seem merely like individualised action, but Thorson's respondents experienced it as 'uncoordinated but intentional collective action', which raises the question of how collectivity is interpreted and experienced by youth in the networked society.

Also, theorising youth who are well informed but whose participation is subdued, Amnå and Ekman (2014, p. 262) offer the concept of alert and informed 'standby citizens'. Amnå (2013, p. 19) further specifies that standby citizens do sometimes become overtly active, and when they do, it can stem from (1) a sense of duty; (2) importance of issues at stake; (3) being asked to join in; (4) efficacy or feeling you can make a difference; (5) effectiveness or an assumption your activity will work; and finally (6) meaningfulness or a feeling that the activity adds to your life-satisfaction and self-realisation. Standby citizens are not hostile towards politics, nor inactive in the rest of their lives.

Participation and social media

There is a lack of consensus on what kinds of social media practices have political potential; their self-expressive forms, which emphasise individual identity, ‘often straddle the political and non-political’ (Theocharis & Quintelier, 2014, p. 820). However, according to Dimitrova et al. (2014, p. 97) social media gives people a perception of an opportunity to participate, which may contribute to ‘higher internal and external self-efficacy’ and make the public feel more engaged. Theocharis & Quintelier (2014, p. 820) claim that posting, commenting, tweeting and joining groups have a ‘democratic value, since they have the potential to involve people in forms of engagement that conforms to classic definitions of participation’.

In terms of the internet’s affordances for political engagement, Quintelier & Vissers (2008) offer a fourfold overview of existing research, where the internet is seen as (a) providing increased opportunities for political engagement by (b) lowering the cost of participation and, thus, equalising participation opportunities; (c) providing quick and up to date information needed for participation in civic life; and (d) strengthening the workings of direct democracy by creating new pluralistic public spheres. Drawing on more recent studies, Theocharis & Quintelier (2014) point out three social media mechanisms that affect engagement – (1) providing information, (2) introducing social pressure and (3) enhancing discussions among peers. It can be said then that social media is a part of people’s new participatory repertoires (Bennett, 2012), new ways of discussing and diffusing causes of interest (Theocharis, 2012), and may lead (depending on type of use) to richer political information repertoires, which in turn lead to more political participation (Wolfsfeld, Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2015). Certain uses of social media can be considered an important gateway for enhancing political participation (Östman, 2013).

An equally vibrant discussion exists among scholars, who are more sceptical. Ekstrom, Olsson & Shehata (2014) found that frequent engagement on Facebook doesn’t necessarily lead to the development of public orientations; Cantijoch, Jorba & San Martin (2008) found social media use to lead to a widening of the knowledge gap between the politically interested and those actively screening out political information; Groshek & Dimitrova (2011) observed no impact on vote intention from social media use, and Gustaffson (2012) has pointed out that using social media alone will not mobilise previously inactive people.

What we find significant in both the optimistic and the sceptical approaches is that just being on social media (having an account) does not offer enough analytical detail to explore the possible connections social media use may have with political participation. It is important to pay attention to specific, situated social media practices and how they slot into young people’s social and political lives.

Speaking up on social media

What is it that motivates people to post and share politically minded items, friend political causes or participate in politically relevant conversations on social media? Alternatively, why would a person interested in politics refrain from visibly chiming in on social media?

To explain nonparticipation, we start with Noelle-Neumann’s (1974; 1984; 1991) seminal theory of the spiral of silence. It holds that people’s perception of public opinion is tilted and they do not express ideas that diverge from it because they fear isolation. Further research on the spiral of silence has revealed that civic duty, perceptions of issue importance, and the degree to which people are confident in their attitudes are linked to the likelihood of communicating on an issue (cf. Moy, Domke, & Stamm, 2001; Matthes, Morrison & Schemer, 2010). While this theory has its share of critics, it has been empirically backed up (for a meta-analysis of 10 studies cf. Glynn, Hayes & Shanahan, 1997) and explored in the context of online communication. Woong & Park (2011, p. 216) found people to be

less likely to post online, when they perceived their opinions as minority or if the previously posted opinions were opposing to theirs. Gearhart & Zhang's (2014) study showed that the spiral of silence is particularly applicable in social networking sites that are based on real-world relationships (i.e., Facebook). Hayes, Scheufele & Huges (2006) found that people, who are reluctant to publicly comment on social media, are often the ones who are attentive observers of what others are posting.

Thorson's (2014) work on young people's political talk on Facebook adds issues of impression management to the previously mentioned questions of self-censorship. She argues that the ambiguity of the audiences, the lack of control over how the content spreads and who reads it, as well as the constantly changing affordances of the platform promote a sense of 'social groundlessness;' wherein, to avoid offense, misinterpretation and inaccurate presentation of self, her respondents employed two strategies: (1) creative modes of political interaction with the help of humour and occasional purposeful provocation, and (2) 'civics without politics' by only endorsing 'neutral' versions of politics or avoiding expression on politics altogether (Thorson, 2014).

Political activism in Estonia

Young people in post-socialist countries are even less likely to participate in formal ways than youths in mature democracies. This has been explained with general low levels of engagement that citizens have inherited from the centralised socialist party system, which offered no real ways to be a part of decision-making, as well as with the negative effects (poverty, corruption) of post-socialist transformation (Vukelic & Stanojevic, 2012). Yet, young people in Eastern Europe are similar to their Western counterparts (albeit on a lower level) in that they are more likely to engage in alternative cultural and political activities than previous generations were (Vukelic & Stanojevic, 2012; Hearpfer, Wallace & Spanning, 2002).

Estonia chose a path of radical neo-liberal economic and political reforms after regaining independence, which led to the popularisation of a success oriented, materialistic and individualistic public discourse. Overall, social movements, protest and civic activism are rare in Estonia. While recent years have seen a rise of social or community movements, being an 'activist' has a negative connotation due to the Soviet history, where activism meant state mandated communist practices (Allaste, 2014).

The MYPLACE survey showed that while young people's organisational membership was lower than in Western countries (in Finland 73% and Denmark 87% of young people belong to some organisation, in Estonia the corresponding percentage is 58%) online political participation (internet activism) was roughly on the same level. Yet, the percentage of youth who consider social media to be an efficient tool for influencing politics is lower in Estonia (24%) than in Nordic countries (Finland 32%, Denmark 44%). A recent study with Swedish youth found that non-organised and non-active people were much more likely to doubt the efficiency of participation through Facebook than those actively engaged, just like the non-organised saw political issues to be reduced to a for/against dichotomy on social media and considered expressing political views on Facebook as inappropriate (Gustafsson, 2012). This further emphasises how different the meanings young people attribute to their own social media practices can be.

Methods

This paper explores youth social media practices and the youth's own perceptions of the meanings these practices carry to understand whether these can be interpreted as new participatory repertoires (Thorson, 2012) of standby citizens (Amnå, 2013). We relied on Estonian data from a 14-country

European study 'Memory, Youth, Political Legacy and Civic Engagement' (MYPLACE, 2011-1015), which consisted of a survey conducted among young people and in-depth interviews in from the survey sample.¹ While we used survey data for comparative contextualisation, this paper mostly relies on the analysis of in-depth interviews.

The main section of the interview that was analysed for this article was called 'participation and', which asked informants to For data analysis, all collected interview materials were transcribed and coded using Nvivo 9.2 software. The coding process itself consisted of three stages. The first level included separate open coding (Charmaz, 2006) in accordance with the subjects that emerged from the material. The coding was performed with the aim of identifying central topics and forming relevant categories. For the purposes of this article, material coded under the category 'informal political participation' was mostly used with the focus on the subcategories 'petitions' and 'internet related activism'. All statements in this article are based on an analysis of all materials, and extracts are used to illustrate the arguments. All interview extracts are identified by the informant's pseudonym, age, and field site.

Results

Survey data from MYPLACE paints a fairly bleak picture of Estonian youth's perceptions of politics and political participation. According to this data, young people's trust for social institutions was below the average point of the scale, while their trust for political institutions such as that of the prime minister, the political parties or the Parliament was even lower (and lower still in Ida-Viru County, as compared to Tartu County). About half of the young people thought politics to be corrupt, which was considered a remnant of Soviet occupation. Similarly to studies conducted elsewhere in the world, youths doubted politicians' interest in young people (~20% of youths believed politicians to be interested). An activity index that combined membership in organisations, movements and various activities revealed that 12% of Tartumaa youths and 45% of Eastern Estonia youths considered themselves completely inactive.

However, we know from existing studies (Thorson, 2012) that young people's citizenship vocabularies may differ significantly from those of the researchers and the political class. The youth in the MYSPACE survey defined political participation in the most conventional sense – as formal institutional. Furthermore, even the young who participated in activities that fall into the new participatory repertoires failed to see how their practices have anything to do with political participation. Yet, Estonian youth is online almost in corpore (internet penetration is 99% among the 16-24 YO), so it is prudent to take a closer look at their social media practices to explore whether there are elements of new participatory repertoires there. Are Estonian youths standby citizens? If so, what are the implications? For that we rely on interview data and what it says about youth practices and perceptions on signing petitions, liking, sharing and commenting online.

Signing petitions

According to our survey data, 21% of the respondents in Tartu County and 8% in Ida-Viru County had signed petitions. Causes that young people thus supported fell into the categories of 'new participation repertoires' (Thorson, 2012; Bennett, 2012). The petitions signed ranged from higher education reform, building nuclear power plants, secondary education in Russian, Charter 12,² nature protection and medical reforms to saving local parks from being demolished or TV shows from being cancelled.

1 For details see Introduction of this special Issue.

2 Open letter from intellectuals, which initiated public meetings.

We have this Raja park and now they plan to build apartment houses there. I go running there in the summer, so when they opened the petition on the internet, I signed it. I gave a signature that I am against the construction. (Lembit, 17, Tartu County)

People seem to be quite aware of what happens to the petitions they have signed and whether the change they were petitioning for happens or not. We take this as an indication of investment in the cause. Yet, while describing which petitions they have signed, people's reasoning indicates certain self-censorship for the purposes of impression management and/or attempts to conform.

I've occasionally signed things. In general I sign petitions about nature preservation. It's a good topic. Nature preservation has a good message. It's necessary, nobody will doubt whether it's needed, everyone understands, why I do it, especially since I'm a biology teacher. (Oliver, 24, Tartu County)

We could interpret this as a strategy of dealing with the sense of the 'social groundlessness' of social media (Thorson, 2014), where 'neutral' politics are endorsed to avoid offense, misinterpretation and inaccurate presentation of self. However, in Thorson's (2014) theory context collapse (on Facebook) played a significant part in people's need for impression management. The petition signing platform does not have the same affordances, raising the question about Estonian young people's general sense of apprehension towards (somewhat) publicly taking a stance as well as their overall assumptions regarding privacy and security on the internet.

People's reasons for not signing petitions were given within narratives that emphasised rational, conscious choices. Interviewees refer to the care they take in deciding what to sign and cite fear of being judged as the main cause for foregoing signing, which justifies framing this in the context of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1974; 1984; 1991).

I signed Charter 12, but yeah ... I am very careful. The things I have signed, they're all ... no one can really judge me for signing them. I could do more, but yeah, if I did, then I'd approach it differently, just to be careful again. (Andrus, 21, Tartu County)

As for perceptions of effectiveness, our interviewees seemed to doubt whether signing petitions really works, but they interpreted it as making a statement or taking a stand, which lends itself well to being interpreted as a form of 'self-expressive' participatory act (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010, p. 13) characteristic of new participatory repertoires of the networked society.

Commenting

Both our Ida-Virumaa and our Tartu County respondents put a strong emphasis on staying informed and monitoring ongoing discussions and other people's comments, while not actually visibly contributing themselves. Like the quote from Afanasi shows below, some informants used comments as a barometer that helps them situate their own opinions within the larger public discourses. We see this sensitivity to how one's opinion compares to other people's as an indicator of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann 1974; 1984; 1991) at work.

Well ... what happens is that I'll read something that other people have written and then I just think whether I agree with them or not. (Afanasi, 21, Ida-Viru County)

Others framed their desire to observe comments and forums without adding to them as a strategy of staying well informed, keeping an eye on things, thus being a good standby citizen (Amnå & Ekman,

2014). Not commenting was, in these cases, framed as a rational choice (similarly to decisions about signing petitions). Comment threads were, despite being followed to keep informed, not portrayed as sources of quality information.

In general, I just go on forums to read, to stay informed. The same with comments on news I ... well ... these comments are a load of crap, but ... um ... I read them to be informed, not to put in my two cents. (Tarmo, 21, Tartu County)

However, there was a lot of self-censorship evident in our interviewees' explanations of their preference to read and not write. Two kinds of explanations surfaced. First, like Tarmo below, interviewees claimed their opinion to be so similar to that of others that there is no need to vocalise it.

Well ...by and large I think that there are so many others, who share my opinion and they've already been very vocal about it, so I don't think it's necessary for me to do it. (Tarmo, 21, Tartu County)

Conversely, a second way of explaining one's choice to not comment was based on the exact opposite perception, where commenting was framed as nonsensical because people thought their own opinions to be so different from others.

I don't know, I don't think there's much point ... after all, everyone has their own opinion, I can say things, I can not say things, it's not like anyone will listen. I'm not that starved for attention. (Silvia, 19, Tartu County)

Both are examples of forgoing self-expressive participatory acts based on comparison to an (imagined) existing opinion, which justifies interpreting them as indicative of self-censorship within the spiral of silence. Also indicative of the spiral of silence are some of our interviewees' commenting decisions, which they based on their desire to avoid conflict that might stem from manifesting an opinion.

I've given up on commenting a long time ago. People's perspectives almost never coincide and then they start with arguments and comments on the personal level... (Vladimir, 26, Ida-Viru County)

In the previous section, we pointed out our Tartu County respondents' fears that the traces of their signed petitions could disadvantage them. Some of our Ida-Viru respondents felt similarly apprehensive about commenting.

I'd rather say what I think without it being written down somewhere, it's possible that it will get warped later on ... that can't be good for me. So I try to not write comments... because what if someone reads these comments later, and they don't like what I have said – maybe an employer ... so who knows what it could lead to. (Georg, 16, Ida-Viru County)

In practical terms, this could be explained by the fact that the main petition signing platform in Estonia is petitsioon.ee, which is in Estonian, and there are currently no equivalents for Russian-speaking people living in Estonia. Alternatively, it can be said that Estonian speakers' fear of judgement regarding signing petitions – a more overt and insistent form of political participation compared to public commenting – and Russian speakers' apprehension towards commenting can be interpreted as a sign of both groups' levels of perceived safety and comfort in the society. A minority, in this interpretation, is more apprehensive towards divergent, traceable, public, archivable self-expression than the majority, which would indicate at least a two-tier hierarchy of silence in the spiral of silence.

Sharing and Liking

The majority of our informants focused on Facebook and Twitter when talking about their sharing practices on social media. We divided their experiences roughly into two categories significant for the current discussion. First, there is sharing for the social good. This means sharing charitable content (e.g., solicitation of financial help for a child that needs surgery), sharing content meant to help fellow people (e.g., lost pets), and sharing content to warn fellow people (e.g., police notices of dangerous criminals on the loose).

Well ... there was this time when there were these paedophiles and their pictures were posted online, then I shared them to warn other people, so they'd see that there is a maniac like that in Narva. So I do share important information. (Olga, 18, Ida-Viru County)

We've placed sharing political content in the second category. The only kind of explicitly political content our interviewees shared, however, was humour and satire.

The last thing I shared was a fake 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 all living off of Estonian people. (Karmen, 24, Tartu County)

On the one hand, we could interpret sharing political humour as critique via parody or satire. Parody and satire have been around as forms of criticising those in power for centuries. According to Bakhtin (1984), the critical power of parody lies in carnivalesque laughter, which makes much more permissible than is permissible in serious discourse. This understanding of humour's function in political talk is also reflected in Thorson's (2014) two strategies (creative political interaction and civics without politics) of combating the social groundlessness on social media. Thus, we can interpret our participants sharing political humour as either a way to make political content more palatable for their audiences or to neutralise politics to avoid conflict.

When our interviewees addressed their reasons for limiting or refraining from sharing political content, uncertainty of their audience's reactions was the typical reason offered.

I'm not very active on Facebook because I don't want to ... like ... I don't want to share my ...um ... opinion with all of the people, because they may interpret it differently. When you share some kind of content on the internet, well then people can just interpret it however they want. (Kristel, 25, Tartu County)

It is important to contextualise this need to self-censor with the fact that they are describing their Facebook experience specifically. Facebook is largely based on real world social ties and its affordances bring about greater context collapse than perhaps other social media platforms that are less draconian in their push towards users having a single, nominal account that links to their legal person. Existing research (Gearhart & Zhang, 2014) makes a case for interpreting self-censorship in such environments within the framework of the spiral of silence.

In terms of offering reasons for why they do share or describing criteria according to which they decide what to share, our interviewees decide based on how important they considered the problem to be and how much they need to make their voice heard in addition to whether other people would like to or need to know about this. These reflect Amnå's (2013) list of motivators that bring standby citizens to action.

And I share Youtube video blogs on Facebook if I think the topic is really important or I think that other people should know it too. Like things about bullying in school. (Liisa, 17, Tartu County)

Liking was perceived as different from sharing in terms of the intensity of approval that it indicates as well as the level of investment it demands. Unsurprisingly, liking was considered to be a lower engagement/lower investment form of participation, while still allowing one to demonstrate some approval.

Conclusions and implications for future research

Institutional political participation among the youth in the US, Australia and Europe has been decreasing for decades (Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2014). Similarly to other Eastern European countries, young people in Estonia tend to be even less politically active than in Western Europe. Non-institutional political participation, however, offers a less clear cut picture. In this article, we have looked at accounts of young people interviewed for the MYPLACE project from the perspective of their social media practices in light of new participatory repertoires (Thorson, 2012; Bennett, 2012). It is important to note here that these youths were drawn from a systematic sample of survey respondents rather than being a group of young people selected due to their activism profiles, which means their practices and perceptions of participation do not reflect those of particularly active youths. Similarly to existing research, we find that these ordinary young Estonians, while unvoiced and inactive in the conventional sense of political participation, express interest and keep informed about politics and practice 'transient and self-expressive' (Harris, Wyn & Younes, 2010, p. 13) participatory repertoires even if they occasionally seem to fail to see the political potential of such acts. Thorson (2012, p. 81) writes that young people's citizenship vocabularies are more than just a way to talk about political participation, she suggests that they are resources of thinking about and understanding their own actions and potential for action. This means that we need to question the implications and meanings of Estonian youth's tendency to not situate their participatory repertoires within the realm of the political, which is a question that needs to be addressed in further research.

In looking for explanations beyond prevailing assumptions regarding youth political apathy within the European context (citizens' disappointment in institutions and changing relationships between political agents), we might also want to consider that in Estonia the term 'activism' has negative connotations. Because of its associations with the Soviet era, state-mandated, socialist activity, it can be argued that 'activism' as such is not attractive in a success-oriented society that stresses individualistic and materialistic values (cf. Raudsepp, Tart & Heinla, 2013). It may, therefore, be the case that the prevailing mentality of individualistic and materialistic goals creates scepticism towards collective action, leading young people to distance themselves both from conventional participation and grassroots activism. However, prior research (Thorson, 2012, p. 78) has pointed to the possibility that the youth also understands collective action, as such, differently, and assumes an 'amorphous, likeminded community of self-changers' that they believe exists based on their conversations online.

In this article, we argue that while on the surface there is estrangement from participation signs of young people 'taking sides and choosing positions' (Bakardijeva 2009) through different online means, such as sharing and 'liking' a particular point of view or signing petitions can be observed when we look deeper. This means that social network sites and petition platforms have become a space for young people wherein they 'keep themselves informed about political issues in everyday life context' (Amnå & Ekman, 2014), even though they do not necessarily believe in the efficacy of these channels in enacting political change or influencing public officials. On the other hand, this way of staying alert and keeping informed, 'in order to be prepared and be ready if something would happen that should deserve their active participation' (Amnå, 2013, p. 18) is rather distanced and creates a relatively safe and comfortable position from which political views can be expressed or public discussions entered. Paired with the reasons youths offered for not participating – which we have interpreted as creative modes of political interaction and 'civics without politics' (Thorson, 2014) or indications of the spiral

of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1984; 1991) – we need to question whether young Estonians are influenced by neoliberal and individualistic discourses: being more interested in their own careers than social issues; or if they are truly apprehensive of publicly taking a stance because of their mistrust of political institutions and their perceptions of futility of action. This is especially evident among Russian speakers, whom we can see as being in a weaker position in society, thus more afraid to risk losing reputation in the eyes of potential employers via such forms of participation.

What we are illustrating here is a change of medium in how young people mobilise or express their opinions, but more than that we are offering further support for the frameworks and theories that have elaborated on political participation as such. Signing petitions, commenting or sharing and ‘liking’ can be interpreted as representing a diversification of how citizens take part in civic matters. Ordinary young people who tend to prioritise safety over self-expression hardly participate in radical activism, but these everyday forms of new participation repertoires may engage new people rather than decrease the willingness of potential activists to act more radically. Optimistically, we found grounds to interpret Estonian youth’s social media practises as those of standby citizens (Amnå & Ekman, 2014) – they keep informed, and when they do become activated and sign petitions or share political humour or content meant for social good, they do so based on perceived issue salience, a sense of duty and their own efficacy. However, we also saw young people opting for neutralisation strategies through ‘civics without politics’ (Thorson, 2014) and self-censoring in ways that speaks of the spiral of silence (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; 1984; 1991); both of which suggest a more disheartening read of their sense of efficacy as members of the society. Why young people fear judgment, repercussions and need to self-censor their participatory repertoires in a democratic society is particularly worrisome and needs further exploration.

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