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# Understanding changing news media use: Generations and their media vocabulary

## ABSTRACT

*The role that age and generation play in shaping patterns of (news) media consumption is a particularly significant issue in current media studies. By virtue of the interplay of the theoretical concept of generations and the critical study of language, the article, empirically rooted in the Estonian context, seeks to outline the ways in which language reflects some media-related practices and perspectives. Analysing qualitative data from focus groups conducted in autumn/winter 2011 among Estonian media users aged 16–72, the article attempts to shed light on the complex nature of the generational consciousness that manifests itself through interaction with people of the same age and with a socially shared framework in terms of the perception of news media's role, as well as the adoption of novel forms of media and technologies. A specific focus is on four generations who reached their 'formative age' in one of four possible periods (1) the post-war period, (2) the Soviet period, (3) the period of restoration of national independence, and (4) the period of transformation into a democratic society and highly technologized media culture.*

## KEYWORDS

age  
Estonia  
media generations  
media use  
media language  
news media

## INTRODUCTION

It is often said that truth and falsehood are inherent in a language, meaning that there is no self-expression without language. Language itself is neither static nor permanent. It is a dynamic phenomenon that develops and changes

over time. It may be assumed that language use, in both general and individual contexts, is like a window on the inner world, gives insight into an individual's or group's beliefs and refers to preferences within a more specific subject field. At the same time, language is informed by the context in which media use and everyday life takes place.

This article considers media generations from the perspective of news media use by examining how media consumers born between the 1940s and 1990s describe their daily media habits, and how they define and interpret the meaning of news media as a genre. The specific aim is to analyse how people of different age groups in Estonia vary in terms of their experiences, attitudes and practices in regard to media technologies and content. Do the expressions of the respondent groups about their media routines, preferred media technologies and personal opinions of news consumption make it possible to comprehend the contingent contours of 'media generations'? The analysis is based on focus group interviews conducted late 2011.

The concept of 'generations' is picked up from Karl Mannheim's ([1928] 1952) 'The problem of generations', in which he identifies generational location as a key aspect of the existential determination of knowledge. The three preconditions postulated by Mannheim for generational belonging are: (1) sudden social changes and their influence on the individual, (2) the generational self-awareness arising from these social changes, and (3) the common aspiration for specific ideals. The focus of this article, however, is on media generations, a concept elaborated by Gary Gumpert and Robert Cathcart (1985), Ingrid Volkmer (2006) and others. Gumpert and Cathcart (1985) suggest that behaviours derived from immersion in various media can become attached over time as repertoires and structures that can be cognitively set among users of those media and, therefore, form a media generation. Based on a methodology derived from Mannheim, Volkmer selected three generations for a research project, 'each of which has experienced very particular roles of the media as mediators of the world' during their childhood and youth (Volkmer 2006: 14).

When they discuss how these theoretical concepts relate to communicative and linguistic aspects, Peter L. Berger and Thomas T. Luckmann (1966) present language as the most important item of socialization, capable of typifying experiences and practices. Thus, one may claim that the journey of the human being to the social landscape goes, to a great extent, through language. Christopher N. Candlin highlights the importance of language in understanding issues of social concern by saying that 'the ways we communicate both influence and are influenced by the structures and forces of contemporary social institutions' (Candlin 1995: xi, in Fairclough 1995), including mass media, which have emerged as a social institution.

The theoretical part of this article is followed by a description of the data set, method and analysis techniques, and a presentation of the main results of the analysis. Before that an overview is given of the general trends in media use that reflect each of the interviewed age group's experiences with media and their current routine of obtaining topical information. A discussion of the results is given in the concluding remarks section.

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENERATIONS

The historian Wilhelm Pinder has postulated: 'Different generations live at the same time. [...] But for each the "same time" is a different time – that is, it represents a different period of his self' (Pinder 1926: 21, in Mannheim [1928]

1952: 283). Pinder's argument suggests that, as perceived time is the only real time, individuals of different generations live in fairly different subjective times. The concept of generations is thus very closely related to the notion of 'chronological consciousness', which, according to Stephen Lovell, can be interpreted as 'a sense of one's own unique position in history' (2007: 8).

## CONCEPTUALIZATION OF TIME

From the phenomenological perspective, Paul Ricoeur analyses three instruments that historians have at their disposal: (1) the calendar, (2) the idea of succession of generations (contemporaries, predecessors and successors) and (3) recourse to archives, documents and traces, as 'connectors of lived and universal time', mediating the past into history (1988: 104). The primary function of the time of the calendar, conceptualized as the first bridge constructed by historical practice between lived time and universal time, is to 'order the time of societies and of human beings who live in society in relation to cosmic time' (Ricoeur 1988: 105). The second mediation suggested by Ricoeur, and quite relevant to this study, is that of the succession of generations. The idea of generations, according to Alfred Schutz's ([1932] 1967) apt formula, finds its sociological projection in the anonymous relationship between contemporaries, predecessors and successors. However, how does this phenomenon affect historical time? Ricoeur finds that the notion of a generation expresses several elementary facts about human biology: birth, ageing and death. He postulates: 'One result of these is another fact, that of the average age for procreation – let us say thirty years – which, in turn, assures the replacement of the dead by the living' (Ricoeur 1988: 110). This measurement of the average duration of life is expressed in terms of the units of our regular calendar. Having said that, Ricoeur concedes that this point of view did not seem sufficient to an interpretative sociologist such as Wilhelm Dilthey ([1875] 1924), who, attentive to the qualitative aspects of social time, asked what one had to add to the undeniable facts of human biology in order to incorporate the phenomenon of generations into the human sciences. Dilthey was interested in those characteristics that make the concept of a generation an intermediary phenomenon between the 'external' time of the calendar and the 'internal' time of our mental lives.

Inspired by these phenomenological aspects of time experience, Aili Aarelaid-Tart (2010) interprets time as a cognitive construction of social reality, and discusses internal and external time consciousness within the framework of an individual lifespan and of social time. She finds this division of time useful, because 'a human being differentiates between the continuity of a personal Self and the perpetual contrasting of this Self with external events and outer personalities (Others)' (Aarelaid-Tart 2010: 414). Therefore, internal time can be viewed through an inner regulation (e.g. ageing), through psychological processes (perception, cognisance, memory and so forth) and through self-identity, while external time, to the contrary, emphasizes the general continuity of human time and controls the duration of time via interpersonal measures (see also Gell 1992; Fabian 1983).

The above is linked to the Life Course Theory, which from the human development and life experience perspective (Elder 1974, 1994) refers to successive stages of life: childhood, youth, adulthood, middle age and pension age. This theory encompasses the social context, an individual's personal choices, social roles and life events, as well as all the interlinked stages of an

individual's life course. According to the theory, the impact of the transitions or events in an individual's life depends on at what stage of life those events occur. Especially meaningful is the formative and impressionable age, when contact with an extensive social transition or critical event may give rise to a new generation.

### **CONCEPTUALIZATION OF 'SOCIAL GENERATIONS' AND 'MEDIA GENERATIONS'**

Such contacts as described above constitute what Mannheim calls 'fresh contact'. According to Mannheim, a shift resulting from a fresh contact that arises from social or historical situations and from the emergence of a new situation may be sufficient to cause a change in mentality and other practices if 'the individuals experiencing these fresh contacts had such a perfect "elasticity of mind"' ([1928] 1952: 293f).

Mannheim argued that not only age, but also the common generational experiences of people born at about the same time, were of significance for the emergence of a new generation. Mannheim made a distinction between generation as 'location' (the basis of this notion is naturally the year of birth), and as 'actuality', referring to those who are located in the same place in the historical process, as well as being bound together through common (active or passive) 'experience of the interactions of forces which made up the new situation' ([1928] 1952: 304). Thus, when facing up to a specific (new) phenomenon, individuals can 'work up the material of their common experiences in different specific ways', which will constitute separate units (Mannheim [1928] 1952: 304). These 'generation units' can be defined as ways of having connection with the same phenomena, which Mannheim ([1928] 1952: 306) calls 'an identity of responses' to current problems or issues.

There are studies that have focused on generational affiliation in the context of mass media consumption. This field of research uses those indicators that give rise to a change in media use, such as the 'breakthrough' of a different technology and the development of a different body of users. Conceptually, the main argument that supports an approach of media generations encourages the idea that media-related experiences from the formative years will shape later relations to the developing media forms and technologies in a variety of ways. Some examples of relevant research projects are briefly presented below.

Gumpert and Cathcart argue that 'the traditional concept of "generation" as the signifier of separate human time relationships' is replaced by 'the concept of human groups based on media relationships' (1985: 23). Through an examination of how media develop 'their own grammars', the authors conclude that every generation possesses certain 'media literacy' and 'media consciousness' in its youth and cultivates ways of representing and experiencing the world differently from other generations. On the other hand, different media experiences can produce 'media gaps', which in turn may separate people.

After initiating an international cross-generational research project on news and public memory, Volkmer (2006) has investigated how different national media users relate to both significant media events (e.g. World War II, the Prague Spring and Watergate) and media technologies. The generations studied in this project were born between the following years: the printed media/radio generation (born in the second half of the 1920s), the black and

white TV generation (born in the second half of the 1950s) and the Internet generation (born at the beginning of the 1980s).

Göran Bolin and Oscar Westlund (2009) have followed through on Volkmer's idea and by studying the use of the mobile phone among three similarly constructed generations. While in Volkmer's work generational consciousness and shared identity evolve through the experience of revolutionary historical events as covered by the media, Bolin and Westlund try to determine the tendency of a common generational media culture by studying the use of media technologies. Bolin and Westlund stress the influence of 'fresh contact' on an individual to the extent that, causing a critical change in a social attitude pattern (e.g. following a certain intellectual trend), it causes the once emerged generational affiliation to continue at a more mature age. They conclude with the expectation that people bring with them their relations to a certain medium (e.g. the mobile phone) that was dominantly used during their youth (in age 16–22 years), and retain these connections for future use (Bolin and Westlund 2009: 110). The core of Bolin and Westlund's study lies in the premise that media consumers belonging to different age groups may be distinguished not so much by the ownership and use of technological equipment as by their application, i.e. the ways in which they are used.

As the present study attempts to apply Mannheim's nearly century-old theory to the study of today's media, it must be noted that, in this digital era, young people's media and computer use begins at a very early age.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in relation to the contemporary media system, the whole of childhood and adolescence may be possibly considered as the 'formative years'.

1. According to S. Livingstone et al. (2011), average age of first Internet use in European countries is 7 or 8.

## CRITICAL LANGUAGE ANALYSIS

Norman Fairclough's (1995) critical study of language has been chosen for this research, since it offers the potential to analyse texts at advanced levels and focuses attention on vocabulary, grammar and textual structures. Fairclough's point of departure is language use as a form of social practice and the aim is to understand how a text works in sociocultural practice. Fairclough's work is based on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 1978), which relies on the idea of the multi-functionality of language. By using one certain vocabulary and grammar, out of the many options offered by a language system, a text of certain attributes and meaning is created. Through textuality, the focus is on which linguistic means would result in a coherent text that has certain attributes and best fulfills the set goals and objectives. Language use is thus always a result of conscious choices, in turn connected with the sociocultural practice and relations dominant in a society (Lepajõe 2011: 24).

Fairclough states that language always simultaneously functions

ideationally in the representation of experience and the world, interpersonally in constituting social interaction between participants and discourse, and textually in tying parts of a text together into a coherent whole (a text, precisely) and tying texts to situational contexts (for example, through situational deixis).

(1995: 6)

Therefore, a text which is used as 'the language "product" of discursive processes, whether it be written or spoken language', forms a meaningful whole and coheres to its context (Fairclough 1995: 96). The source material for this

study is an oral interview text that has been transcribed into a written text. A text – the core unit of language use and a message of varying form, length and ability to convey information – is based on its inherent structure.

The exact delimitation of the content of the multifaceted dynamic concept of ‘discourse’ largely depends on the particular theoretical discipline. This concept was first introduced in order to distinguish between language and speech, but its broadest sphere of meaning is not limited to an individual sentence, act of speech or jargon, but may refer to entire sets of ideas or ideologies, with their historical, social and institutional implications (e.g. Van Dijk 1997). At this point, much of the complexity of ideology as a keyword comes from the impossibility of providing a single definition of it. Stuart Hall (1992) summarises ideology as the frame of thought or a system of representation with which to provide meaning to the world. The carrier of ideology in the broader sense is thus the language use through which it is (often unknowingly) reproduced in discourse.

Fairclough stresses the discussion of discursive usage in its social context, saying: ‘My view is that “discourse” is use of language seen as a form of social practice, and discourse analysis is analysis of how texts work within socio-cultural practice’ (1995: 7). A critical approach to the method, however, mainly indicates the ambition to reveal the hidden links between text, power and ideology, and to point to the linguistic elements of social interaction. Fairclough has also noted that the discourse analysis of linguistic texts that are analysed based on their specificity allows for tracking changes in the content of the discourses and their impact on and consequences for society (1992: 35f). Entire networks of meaning are formed in this way.

Fairclough (2001: 92ff) has proposed ten questions, which are in turn divided into sub-questions that allow for a fairly exhaustive analysis of the structures and discourses constructed through language and text (both oral and written). Of special interest in this study is the question of whether the vocabulary used in the group discussions indicates the existence of media generations and how language shows the contours of these generation units. Of Fairclough’s ten questions, the four most relevant to the current analysis are listed below.

1. *What experiential values do words have?* Experiential value is connected with contents, knowledge and beliefs.

Are there words which are ideologically contested?

What ideologically significant meaning relations (synonymy and hyponymy) are there between words?

2. *What relational values do words have?* This question focuses on how a text’s choice of wording depends on the social relationships between participants.

Are there euphemistic expressions (as a way of avoiding negative values)? Are there markedly formal or informal words? The formality of a situation demands a formality of social relations, expressing respect for status and position.

3. *What expressive values do words have?* Expressive value is connected with subjects and social identities. A speaker usually expresses evaluations through persuasive language.

4. *What metaphors are used?* Metaphor is a means of representing one aspect of experience in terms of another and tends to be associated with literary discourse. Different metaphors have different ideological attachments.

2. Survey 'Me. The World. The Media' conducted by the Institute of Journalism and Communication at the University of Tartu in 2008 and 2011.

Answers to the questions of how the four groups of Estonian media consumers experience the social world when speaking about media use, as expressed by their beliefs, knowledge and opinions, and how they assess the reality created by the media and perceived through media means are examined below after the empirical material has been presented.

## THE ESTONIAN MEDIA LANDSCAPE

Before Estonia regained its independence in 1991, the country was, after gaining its independence from Russia in 1918, occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union. During the most decisive periods in Estonian history, the media landscape has changed 'radically together with Estonian society as a whole' (Vihalemm et al. 2012).

One might think that the Estonian media system has been remarkably influenced by the nearly 50-year occupation, when it was heavily controlled by a totalitarian regime. In fact, this opinion does not correspond entirely to the actual situation, even though after 1940 media began to function as an ideological weapon 'in the hands of the Communist Party' (Lauk 1996: 95). Despite the limitations of the media system and the scarcity of channels, their range was very large. Owing to a historically strong reading tradition, Estonia was among the world's top ten in terms of the circulation of its daily newspapers in the 1970s–1980s, along with the Nordic countries (Vihalemm 2009). Culture was one of the few topics that was valued in the press throughout this period and 'maintained a kind of self-reflective function for its readers'; while issues related to the state and legislation were discussed 'within the limits of ideology and propaganda' (Kõnno et al. 2012: 115f).

In 1987, a wave of protest against plans to establish phosphate mines in northern Estonia grew into a massive public movement. With the formation of popular movements, Estonia reached 'the first stage in the formation of a new public sphere, the stage of growing freedom of information through public communication channels' (Lauristin and Vihalemm 1993: 223).

After independence was restored, the media system also went through major changes. As Peeter Vihalemm (2003: 587) has observed, in the early 1990s, during the rapid shift to an open-market economy, the Estonian media landscape was overwhelmed by far-reaching liberalization. This renewed media system was characterized by a diversity of channels, formats and contents.

In the mid-1990s, newspaper circulation dropped sharply, while the variety of broadcasting channels increased and online media appeared. New commercial and transnational TV channels became available so that the TV-viewing time almost doubled by the turn of the century compared to the 1980s (Vihalemm 2009). In the new century, the circulation of daily newspapers started to increase again as economic growth gained momentum, while recent years have seen traditional media among youth declining. On the other hand, the importance of the Internet as a source of information has grown.<sup>2</sup>

Today Estonia is known as one of the advanced users of information and communication technology (ICT). Estonia's shift towards an information society did not occur overnight. Since the middle of the 1990s, ICT, and

3. For statistics, see Estonian National Electoral Committee, <http://www.vvk.ee>.
4. Data from the Estonian Bureau of Statistics, <http://www.stat.ee>.

widespread and as free as possible availability of the Internet have been (and still are) a part of government policy, as well as shaping general attitudes (Runnel et al. 2009). The provision of free Internet connection to all schools and public libraries, with the help of national programmes at the end of the 1990s, has raised the level of today's users. One of the best-known campaigns for bringing Estonia into postmodernity through advanced digital technology is the Tiger Leap Project. The project was established in 1997 as a result of cooperation between the government of Estonia, private enterprises and individuals. The objective was to modernize the educational system and to decrease regional differences in education by providing for equal opportunities to pupils and teachers to obtain more knowledge and develop their abilities (Runnel 2001).

During the past decade, a huge network of public Internet access points has been built, so that it is now possible for laptop and smartphone users to utilize rapid Wi-Fi Internet connections in more than 1340 public places all over Estonia; in most places that service is free of charge. Even though home and general Internet connection speeds remain around the EU average, the variety and coverage of computer communication-based e- and m- applications are remarkable. For the past seven years people have been able to vote electronically (the scheme is known as iVoting); in the 2011 Parliament elections 24.3% of voters voted electronically.<sup>3</sup> Public debates over the independence and security risks of this form of elections have played an important role in the public acceptance of electronic elections. Most official registers are mutually connectible by the X-road application: the e-Tax Board, through which over 94% of income tax declarations were submitted in 2012, the e-health system, which holds digital medical records, and allows for e-prescriptions and e-consultations, the e-census, through which 62% of the population of Estonia was counted electronically,<sup>4</sup> and so on. For Estonia, the Internet is not just another service but, especially for young people, the Internet has been interpreted as a symbol of freedom and democracy. In 2012, according to the annual report of Freedom House, Estonia was ranked as the freest country in terms of the Internet use (Kelly et al. 2012; Freedom House 2012).

Furthermore, the Internet and social media have opened up new avenues for traditional media. Most professional media organizations and channels use popular social media sites, such as Facebook or Twitter, in an attempt to reach those users who might not regularly follow print or online media. The circulation of content across multiple platforms and mobile devices, such as smartphones or tablet computers, has also led to some noteworthy changes in diversifying the system of Estonian media.

## EMPIRICAL MATERIAL AND DATA COLLECTION METHOD

The larger project from which the data are drawn examines to what extent media technologies and media genres contribute to the generational experience. The data are of two kinds: quantitative data from a bi-annually conducted nationwide representative survey (conducted by Södertörn University via the market research company Turu-uuringute AS); qualitative data, from focus group interviews in both Sweden and Estonia. The article is based on four focus groups conducted in Estonia in late 2011. The particular age ranges for the selection of respondents were derived from the results of the quantitative data analysis. The media usage indices were created and analyzed across all of the survey participants to identify some significant shifts in their media habits.



The main purpose of the focus group research was to stimulate a free exchange of ideas, attitudes, feelings and experiences of people belonging to the same generation. As Jenny Kitzinger and Rosaline S. Barbour (2001) indicate, focus groups help to find out how knowledge, ideas, self-presentation and linguistic exchanges operate within a certain cultural and group context.

The relatively informal discussions, which averaged two hours, were about current habits and attitudes related to the use of media and media technologies. The second main group of topics consisted of aspects of consumption of news material mediated by mainstream media. The discussion started with the most important and frequently used (online and offline) media, channels and formats followed for overviews and for in-depth information on events. Third, the participants were asked to use their own words to define the meaning and essence of news, and to formulate their personal understanding of news and its meaning for the media consumer and the public in general. Finally, the groups discussed issues concerning the use of online social platforms and networking sites – the questions were aimed at people's personal activity in the use of social media networks (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, blogs) and the applicability of social media for news purposes. The group interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded (with NVivo 10) according to qualitative content analysis (Mayring 2000), concentrating on the different meanings given to the news media.

The groups were designed to reflect a range of factors that might impact on attitudes to news consumption, including age, gender, region and ethnicity. Participants were recruited by the research company Klaster and were drawn from a pre-recruited online panel. All participants were recruited from the two largest cities of Estonia, Tallinn and Tartu.

The focus groups included sixteen females and eight males born between 1939 and 1946, 1959 and 1966, 1976 and 1980, and 1990 and 1995. The sizes of the groups ranged from five to nine. There were no media professionals, nor friendship groups represented in the study. All respondents have been anonymized. In the next section is first outlined the predominant habits of the age groups in obtaining news. Then follow a discourse analysis of the way in which respondents talk about their media habits.

## INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Distinct in terms of varied and active use of media was the age group born between 1939 and 1946, whose media day usually began with the radio and/or newspaper and occasional viewing of morning TV news (including BBC, CNN and Russian channels). The day usually concluded with evening TV news. Such an established routine appeared to be age related. The Internet was used quite actively, although it was not the first choice for accessing news. Online journalism was mainly a reading medium for this age group, and the integrated audio and video clips in the news headlines did not get much attention. As the press is relatively expensive to subscribe to, some respondents visited the library to read newspapers and magazines. This was the only age group where respondents regularly read the free weekly *Linnaleht* (*City Paper*).

For the respondents in the focus group born between 1959 and 1966, a newspaper had a role in the morning ritual, but it was used more as a supplement to online news. The digital media were preferred for the comments feature and the links to related texts, which facilitate systematic access to a topic. Some respondents selected longer analytical stories that were more

5. All translations of interview transcripts are the responsibility of the author.

convenient to read on paper. (Web) radio was also considered to be a 'quick reaction' morning medium, while TV news was part of the evening routine:

Liisa (born 1961): I subscribe to *EestiPäevaleht* [*Estonian Daily*] and I read it almost every morning as I drink my morning tea. [...] But my news mostly comes from the Internet. Things that interest me [I find] on Facebook and sometimes I browse through *Postimees* [the largest non-tabloid daily].<sup>5</sup>

Karl (born 1960): There is a time of brief concentration in the morning. [...] I check out the articles that I want to read through in their entirety.

Eva (born 1963): I listen to the newspaper overviews on the radio in the morning and if there is something I feel I must read, I read it on the Internet or at the library.

Marianne (born 1966): The printed newspaper is no longer interesting; you cannot comment on it or read what other people think.

Respondents in the group born between 1976 and 1980 were divided in their preferences between Internet media and the press. Some had given up TV for lack of interest, while radio had remained a trustworthy source of information. It was stressed that the Internet was often used to seek out more thorough information than was available in the news from traditional media:

Joonas (born 1980): I receive my first information during the day from radio news; it is broadcast many times and tends to change over the day. [...] On the Internet, I look for daily political topics. From these two, I get the complete picture.

[...]

Martin (born 1976): I think that the printed newspaper has remained a key part of my day. [...] The Internet is faster, but I have kept my habit.

As regards the youngest generation, born between 1990 and 1995, it should be said that many of them were living independently of their parents. This may partly explain why they were alienated from reading printed newspapers or watching TV, as they had done in their childhood homes. However, the young people declared that they would return to the printed newspaper as they got older and that, in future, when most information appeared in digital form, the printed word would have a more elite status than it did at present.

Sten (born 1992): [...] my vision is that at the age of 55 I will have my own library and I will start each day with coffee and a printed newspaper. And my living room will be filled with books ... madly filled with books. Then I'll be really happy.

For the respondents in this group, the Internet was the most convenient source of news and entertainment (including music, films and other digital content). Many young respondents spent as much time as possible on the Internet, both via PC and smartphone – the group was almost the only one to use a smartphone for news purposes. Information was often sought from English-language

channels (e.g. from Wikipedia and international news portals), which were clearly more trusted than the Estonian online news channels.

The meaning of social networking media both generally and in the role of news media was an issue of its own. The youngest respondents were more open in this respect than any of the other age groups. As some media scholars have asserted, today's youth is characterized by a constant need to be 'online', and one of their serious concerns was 'being switched out' of (social) network (Lauristin 2003), with which the respondents claimed to have 'grown up together'. This tendency seemed to be connected with a certain phase of life. However, the focus group held among the youngest generation showed that Facebook accounted for a very large part of the students' media use,<sup>6</sup> which among other content was used to follow mainstream media fan pages. Mirroring both popular and academic debates, the young respondents expressed their concern about spending too much time on Facebook:

Sten (born 1992): [...] everyone is on Facebook. It is inevitable for me to be there because it makes things a lot easier.

Marilyn (born 1994): It's addictive. In fact, the front page contains complete rubbish most of the time. There is nothing very useful. I can't stop refreshing the page all the time.

Henry (born 1995): I spend all my evenings on Facebook and then I try to understand why I have no time to read books (Laughter).

[...]

Interviewer: How do you think, which generation do you belong to?

Marilyn: I'd say that we are the Facebook generation. How do others think?

Jane (born 1990): I totally agree. [...] It's a great place where everything converge. Nothing better has been discovered yet.

Vivian (born 1990): We are the generation who invests madly in virtual environment.

Although there were Facebook users in almost all the age groups, respondents aged 50 and over considered social networking media to be a channel for entertainment rather than a news outlet. Another significant difference between younger and older respondents derived from their skills in obtaining material (including films and music) independently and subjecting their media use to their personal daily schedules (and not necessarily accepting what was in the media schedules). Young people showed more courage in resisting the normative trajectories of mainstream media and in finding alternatives to satisfy their individual media needs, especially in customising media content that interested them most to suit their personal everyday schedules and routines:

Jane (born 1990): I like the principle of 'tailor-made media', that you can choose yourself what you are interested in and when you consume it.

Sten (born 1992): One reason why I don't watch TV is that it has a lot of things I am not interested in at all. Another thing is that the shows are three years old; it's easier for me to go home and use the Internet. Two clicks and I see the latest episode of *How I Met Your Mother* [US sitcom

6. A survey conducted by the Department of Media and Communication at the Södertörn University at the end of 2012 found that 70 per cent of the inhabitants of Estonia aged 15–19 and 66 per cent of people aged 20–29 used Facebook as the most popular social networking site every day. People aged 40 years and over used Facebook much less.

that premiered in 2005]. [...] I wouldn't have the time to sit down in front of the TV at 6:00 Thursday evening or something. I don't even know what's been on TV for the past two years!

In summary, even though all four age groups used a variety of media platforms and formats for news purposes, the difference between older and younger groups was characterized by different functions of media and expectations for their field of use.

## **VOCABULARY USED IN GROUP DISCUSSIONS**

In recording descriptions of daily media habits and attitudes, and re-reading the transcribed discussions, the micro level of the discussions was examined by looking at different points in the interviews to see whether and how the respondents expressed themselves individually and in interaction with their peers, and what discourses those discussions contained.

### **SLANG**

The nuances or peculiarities characteristic of the respondents were most pronounced when they spoke of newer types of media, including contents, technologies and services. A newspaper was referred to as a newspaper by all the age groups and the same was true of other traditional media channels, except for a few slang words in the retired people's discussion, where the 1950s tedious propaganda radio was referred to as the 'noise box', and the TV as the 'picture box', etc. Those born in the 1960s talked about books that had been 'turned into cabbages' as a result of frequent reading, about the 'cinema craze' that was prevalent during their school days, and so on. The notion that slang or intentionally deviated language is mainly used by young people to express freedom, a spirit of protest and black humour was confirmed in this analysis. The usage of the young respondents contained dysphemisms (the use of funny, vulgar or crude idioms for serious or common notions), which have the effect of rising above a serious topic or showing indifference to traditional etiquette. For example, a woman of 21 referred to the people who wrote comments to online newspapers as 'brainless animals' and 'blockheads', and a young man of 19 ironically promised to 'send his father to see a shrink' because of his habit of indiscriminately watching everything on TV. Girls made fun of sensational news, calling it 'very boring stuff', referring to the tradition of reading this type of news for amusement. Also the word 'crazy' is often overused, for example, 'crazy cool' and 'crazy stupid', and so on. Thus, the slang words used by the youngest two age groups generally consisted of 'innovative' words and distortions that are difficult to translate.

As regards the impact of media on self-expression generally, slang vocabulary may partly be due to television, but is especially connected with web communication, as online media are more flexible and colloquial compared to offline media or proper literary language.

## **LANGUAGE SHIFT**

Sociolinguistics has long focused on the changes arising from language contacts that may occur anywhere people understand and speak two or more languages (Zabrodskaja 2005). Bilingualism on an individual level, which is understood as 'the use of more than one language at the same time at the

same place' (Thomason 2001), is relevant to this study. At some moments during the interviews there was a change from the habitual use of one language to another, which S. G. Thomason and T. Kaufman (1991: 37) describe as 'language shift'. This is not the same as the use of slang words.

The cognizance of the world of young respondents, who felt at home in a virtual environment, differed from that of middle-aged and older people also when it came to their foreign-language communication activities. Shifts occurred in the focus groups mainly to English, especially when speaking about computer use.

A detailed list of examples would be too extensive for inclusion in this article, but the following loans were mostly fused into the speech of people up to the age of 20. Gadgets such as 'laptop', 'iPhone', 'touchscreen', activities such as 'installing', 'refreshing', 'scrolling' and 'streaming', and services such as 'dial-up', 'Google Translate', 'Google Ads', 'Twitter Timeline' and 'podcast' were expressed in English. The latter has various humorous equivalents in the Estonian language, which would translate as 'pocket broadcasting', 'people's broadcasting' and 'pouch broadcasting', but they are not very common in general usage.

Among respondents born between 1976 and 1980, only one of five used such vocabulary, while one member of the group was irritated by the mere mention of social networking media:

Martin (born 1976): It bothers me to hear English words everywhere that already have Estonian equivalents, such as Facebook [...] Well, a 'phiz book' or something [...] Will we all start to speak in English?

During these group discussions, the respondents born in the 1960s and in the early 1940s used English expressions (or other words and phrases in foreign languages) very rarely. For example, such random expressions as 'mainstream media' or 'news history' seemed awkward in their sentences. But in general, although people from all generations were active computer and Internet users and interested in international media coverage, the youngest were the most digitally literate and oriented to English for communicative and educational purposes.

With regard to the influence of the second language on the first language, it should be mentioned that the use of Russian as the dominant official language was characteristic of the Soviet period when many loanwords were taken into common usage (see also Blokland 2009). However, even some of the respondents, who had Russian origin and were educated under the Soviet system, commented in the focus group that they get news also from Russian media sources in order to get a wider understanding of issues related to this region; nevertheless, one could not observe a specific shift in their language use from Estonian to Russian.

## **IDEOLOGICALLY CHARGED TOPICS**

For the respondents older than 30 years of age, ideological charges relate, above all, to communist ideology, to which the Soviet media was subjected, but of which today's youth have no deeper understanding. Ideology was defined by Soviet reference books as a system of 'political, legal, ethical, aesthetic, religious and philosophical ideas and views that reflect class status and express class interests' (Aarna et al. 1971: 118).

The conversation within the older groups contained clear references to the essence of the Soviet period, when newspapers had to be read 'between the lines'. Newspaper texts oozing party propaganda and truth-twisting TV and radio programmes were not taken seriously. Discussions among the older generations revealed how quiet opposition against the official ideology developed:

Paul (born 1940): In Soviet times you had to analyse for yourself what to read and how to understand it.

Interviewer: A certain kind of critical thinking or reading was required.

Paul: 'Red' propaganda was so ... amateurish and the actual effect was the opposite of what they desired.

[...]

Eva (born 1963): *Rahva Hääl* [the newspaper *Voice of the People*] was such rubbish. [...] It was political propaganda. It was not taken seriously.

Maie (born 1959): Everyone knew what was Soviet and what reality was.

For the reasons mentioned above, various ways were sought to access 'open' information channels broadcast from abroad, such as the Voice of America and Finnish Television. Those who had the courage and opportunity would listen to the Voice of America, the US government's external broadcasting station (cf. Andersson 2004). Respondents in the two oldest generations had memories of how the programme was listened to secretly:

Juri (born 1939): In our home, we listened to everything. We listened to the Voice of America. Even though my grandfather was a Party worker and old communist, he always listened to it.

[...]

Karl (born 1960): In the summer at my great-uncle's place in the country ... he was a socialist from the Estonian independence period. [...] My father was somehow more cautious ... In Tartu [the second largest city in Estonia, located in the south] you couldn't listen because the signal was jammed.

Eva (born 1963): You could hear every third word, and the rest you had to fill in yourself (Laughter).

In 1971, a new and higher TV tower was built in Finland, which allowed northern Estonian inhabitants to watch Finnish TV. The authorities, naturally, heightened their vigilance in an attempt to fight against western influence. Therefore, Finnish TV was like a window to Europe at the time, and it stayed wide open for more than three decades. Some people secretly built special antennas and sound devices and continued to watch:

Paul (born 1940): It was not advised, but couldn't be prohibited. People watched.

Interviewer: Did you have this ... special antenna?

Paul: Yes, there was an antenna. Not in my household, but in our block of flats.

Interviewer: What did you watch mainly?

Paul: I didn't have a TV set at that time, but I used to go to other people's houses ... News and other stuff. Many picked up the Finnish language rapidly.

For the generation who were schoolchildren, Finnish TV was an exciting channel for new forms of entertainment:

Eva (born 1963): It was a big deal. [...] There were things that were not included in our TV schedules. Films and all these beauty contests and other stuff were very interesting and awesome for a schoolchild to watch.

To digress, a few examples should be given of the goods and services that were in short supply (deficit goods) in the Soviet period, such as a subscription to *Edasi*, Tartu and the Tartu region's newspaper, with its limited press run and telephone connections. The word 'deficit' only occurred in the usage of interviewees born in the 1940s and 1960s and is an apt term to characterize the times and society in which goods and services were chronically in short supply, even though the shortage was not admitted officially. Acquaintances, job position or Party membership were often helpful in obtaining goods (Ruusmann 2010). Telephone connectivity was a sensitive topic during the Soviet regime and was monitored by the authorities. The waiting lists for telephone connections were still long even in the early 1990s, when every tenth inhabitant of Estonia was waiting for a telephone (Neudorf 2003), something that affected patterns of mobile phone use among the young generations of Estonians (cf. Bolin 2010).

Those born in the 1960s and who experienced the 'Soviet deficit' tried to ensure better conditions for their children. The focus groups revealed that young people had a larger range of means of communication at their disposal than people over 30, and they were also better supplied with the newest technologies (smartphones, tablet computers) and were well informed about their functions, while respondents at the age of their parents half-jokingly tried to explain what a smartphone was:

Interviewer: What about all these new devices, smartphones and others ... Do you personally have a smartphone?

Ester (born 1962): Well, to be honest, I don't know exactly what that is. What its advantages over a normal phone are.

[...]

Silvia (born 1965): [For young people] a phone is more for showing off and playing games than for practical use.

Liisa (born 1961): The younger you are, the more you show off. That isn't so important to my son going to university, but for the child in high school ...

[...]

Karl (born 1960): But I'm thinking that next time I will definitely buy this ... What do they call it? ... a finger ...

Maie (1959): A touch screen ... 'Nifty and new', they say [in Estonian it rimes 'nutikas-tutikas'].

Karl: No-no ... My grandson, a kindergarten child, he called it a finger phone. He said that his friend also had a finger phone (Laughter).

In the opinion of the respondents, ideological bias in the processing of news information also seemed to be a problem in the contemporary media environment in Estonia. The oldest generation, as well as people born in the late 1970s and early 1980s, expressed their annoyance over news coverage of economics and politics as being often unbalanced and biased towards the government and the ruling political parties. Thus, respondents with more diverse interests tried to get a wider picture of current situations with the help of both western and Russian media:

Interviewer: Please describe your present relationship with news media.

Juri (born 1939): [...] our newspapers are so ... subjective. I can listen to the broadcasts in English, Russian, German and Estonian. If you listen, then you are able to understand [what is going on in the world], but if you only read newspapers ... they are totally biased toward our government.

Paul (born 1940): I watch CNN or BBC a lot. [...] I am very critical of the media; they are strongly biased. [...] We have freedom of the press and no censorship, but censoring does take place somewhere. It starts with the choice of what gets published.

[...]

Interviewer: When discussing, for example, the European debt crisis ...

Joonas (born 1980): Here we can see what is the most typical mistake in processing information – all of the politics is done, the decisions are made, in the backroom and just before voters take up issues. [...] The media know what has been discussed in the backroom but do not open up a discussion. [...] I'm used to following CNN, and ITAR-Tass on the Russian side. I don't speak German very well, but I check out Deutsche Welle's site.

Among the youngest generation, the boredom of overwhelmingly negative news reports found expression in straightforward critiques, as exemplified by this discussion related to the massacre in Norway in 2011:

Henry (born 1995): In the Soviet times they showed only positive news and showed how great the world was. Now it is especially bad, only negative news.

Jane (born 1990): The best-selling newspapers are those which report about such horrible things ...

Interviewer: Subjects like violence or death?

Jane: Exactly!



Sten (born 1992): I just wanted to say something similar to Henry, that ... the crowd of death people ... This kind of news is not for me! [...] The same number of people die every day in African civil wars.

Henry: So what?! That's how I felt about Norway. [...] There is so much going on in the world that we have no idea about, like the 'Iron Curtain' still exists.

In summary, the opinions exchanged within the focus groups revealed that an ideological distortion in society and in the media may have occurred both in the past and in present conditions. The aim of the Soviet totalitarian system was not only to restrict freedoms (including the freedom of the press), but also to control individuals as much as possible. In contemporary society, the pendulum has swung to the other extreme and totalitarianism has been replaced by the expansion of the market ideology. As pointed out, some young respondents demonstrated a cynicism towards sensitive matters. This tendency can be explained by the felt over-abundance of negative but easily marketable information in the media.

### **DISCURSIVE FEATURES OF NEWS**

The focus group participants were asked to explain in their own words what they understood to be news and what for them personally was the idea behind news consumption. Those born in the 1990s tended to express themselves using examples rather than explanations; mostly examples of dramatic global events. Their argumentation was characterized by self-centred references, which, considering their current life phase, was fully understandable. It is often argued that young people's relationship to the society is, with some exceptions, quite self-oriented, present-centred and pragmatic. Among the keywords that dominated news discourse verbalized by young respondents, the emphasis was frequently on excitement and novelty of topics. They were also motivated by topicality and the extraordinariness of events:

Interviewer: In discussing the concept of news, what makes information newsworthy?

Sten (born 1992): Generally, I focus on topics that interest me. Topics that don't interest me, I don't follow.

Marilyn (born 1994): For me ... it depends on the topic. Some topics have been ... hmm ... when there are some new viewpoints, new opinions, and when they are reasoned, then I am not bored, I can read them.

[...]

Jane (born 1990): Something that directly concerns me, such as education topics or ... the values that are important to me.

Interviewer: Could you give some examples?

Jane: Human rights are important. For example, if somewhere in Russia ...

Vivian (born 1990): [...] slavery happens ...

Jane: [...] yes, for instance, slavery happens. I notice such topics immediately.

The respondents born in the late 1970s and early 1980s focused more on the significance and impact of a certain event or process and less on excitement:

Joonas (born 1980): News is something I didn't know before, but which is important ... that makes a difference.

Helen (born 1980): Something that you feel that can influence you and other people somehow.

Martin (born 1976): Just any information that is perhaps plentiful, but we make our choice, something you want to relate to, then maybe it becomes news.

Andre (born 1977): When discussing the crisis in Europe, in my opinion, the news about retirement income in Greece was quite striking ... How poor Estonian people are compared to Greeks!

Among the respondents born in the 1960s, a sort of resigned attitude was observed. High interest in updated news coverage had been replaced by a certain apathy. Another notable moment (more characteristic to female respondents) was the importance of interpersonal exchange of information as a potential source of everyday news:

Liisa (born 1961): For me, it's people. When I go to work, everyone has something to say about what they've read, seen on TV or heard on the radio. [...] If it's something I haven't heard about before and it interests me, maybe that's news for me.

Eva (born 1963): I have given up reading newspapers altogether. [...] I don't have to know everything they write about.

Silvia (born 1965): I hear news from my children, friends and acquaintances; I don't read a newspaper myself. I think all the news is about nothing but violence ...

Those respondents who were mainly engaged in work and focused on an active lifestyle attached importance to professional and hobby-related issues:

Karl (born 1960): A piece of each subject area. Things that engage somehow ... and topics that are professionally relevant to me.

Maie (born 1959): Every person sees the world based on their field of professional interest; another thing is that people have their hobbies and this may break the news barrier for them. This is how people's individuality is revealed: speciality or work, plus hobbies.

Karl: Sometimes I ask for a comment from an expert. I communicate to some person I know to explain the problem in detail ... I want to understand the root of the thing.

The oldest group expressed strong disapproval of the low reliability of the Estonian media and increasing tabloidization. Their primary focus was on

economics, politics and social issues – everything crucial and practical that could influence their lives. Old age also forced them to think about their final days:

Interviewer: Could you tell me what is news for you?

Paul (born 1940): Everything real that's going on in the world. And what effect that has on our lives.

Maria (born 1939): When someone you know has died. That's what you find out in the newspaper.

Paul (born 1940): At our age, that's very real.

Linda (born 1946): A rise in pensions would be news, but that will never happen (Ironic laughter).

An understanding of the nature of media and a definition of information preferences within the focus groups were revealed through attitudes connected with various phases of life, for instance, youthful curiosity and a self-centred view of the world changed over time, family- and work-related issues became more important than random information noise, and pragmatic concerns dominated in old age. In addition, extensive summarising and duplication of information was criticized heavily by several groups. Some of the interviewees felt that as the volume of information had grown, original news stories had become rarer; others believed that, because of globalization, more was going on in the world that got more coverage than ever before because of the multitude of channels and platforms.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has provided some exploratory insights into the centrality of generation-based social relations within the process of media use, and especially news consumption. The intent was to fill a gap in the qualitative research on media generations, derived from the common media-related experiences of people born at about the same time and generational fellow-feeling expressed by the form of discussion on the perception of news consumption across multiple media platforms. Based on the turning points, which are defined in the contemporary history of Estonia, these generations could be labelled the post-war generation, the generation of the Soviet period, the generation of the restoration period and the generation of the independence era.

The analysis, even if not representative in quantitative terms, outlines some contours of particular media-related generational units, characterized, for example, by a variety of ways of talking about the media and using different language codes to represent the shared notions of engagement in media use, and the world in general. First, one may claim that the media behaviour of the generations has, at least to some extent, been formed by the critical (media) history of Estonia, as well as by dramatic social and political changes in society. As Volkmer argues in her comparative study on news in public memory, the formative media memories 'seem to provide a framework for today's world perception' (2006: 13), which is 'readable' through the layers of verbal argumentation on these issues. Even though this article makes no attempt to elaborate such an 'archaeological' analysis of media memories (which were, among other things, discussed within the focus groups), stories

told about the perception of media within a relatively homogeneous group of people who share similar pasts and common influential media experiences (e.g. youth programmes on radio or TV, cultural/literary magazines that were especially popular in the 1980s, a public letter of protest written by 40 intellectuals in October 1980, world literature translated into Estonian, foreign cinema screenings, the emergence of music radio, and the arrival of cable TV and the Internet) have encouraged otherwise hidden reflections.

Second, given this specific angle of language as a carrier of culture and ethnic identity that crystallizes in the formative age (Phinney 1990), the study indicates how the generation born in the 1990s has been smoothly integrated into the English-speaking space. The linguists A. Tammemägi and M. Ehala (2012) have recently conducted a representative study among Estonian high school students to get an overview of the attitudes that might influence young people's language preferences in environments and situations where their choice is between Estonian and English. The results clearly indicated the increasing use of English: 87% of the participants spoke English, and 24% of the respondents used English very actively every day (in 2003 this indicator was present in 18% of the respondents) (Tammemägi and Ehala 2012: 245). The researchers interpreted this trend as consistent with the continuous increase of the prestige of English-speaking countries and the extension of their cultural influence. Other generations (30 years old and over) were educated and reached adolescence in different societal conditions and educational systems, which, until the end of the 1980s, placed a priority on the Russian language.

In addition to the previous question of how to interpret the 'language shift' towards English as a global and, moreover, as a computer language, one may link the discussion to the notion of 'digital literacy' (Kress 2003), which has been applied not only to written language, but also to all representational means including computer literacy. The focus group results partly overlap with the arguments presented in the report 'The Estonian language in the digital age', compiled by Estonian language technologists. This report asserts that languages spoken by a small number of people (around one million people speak Estonian as their mother tongue) 'could become irrelevant' because of a lack of technological support in an environment where the English language dominates Internet content and popular culture (Liin et al. 2012: 36ff).

These developments partly reflect the reasons why some of the participants in focus groups, especially the youngest ones, found it more convenient to express themselves by using 'citation loan words' instead of choosing native words. However, communication scholars have been particularly interested in how cultural functions (and language is one of the crucial elements of Estonian culture [Valk 2010: 139ff]) are influenced by the character of the media that have been chosen for the consumption of particular content. As Marju Lauristin (2012) points out, extensive research on the fundamental impact of online and digital media on cultural processes is still in its early stage. Even so, one may outline some conceptual differences between this newest media form and all other channels of mass communication and, moreover, these changes have brought about significant shifts in social relations (Lauristin 2012: 21).

Finally, previous Estonian research has noted a remarkable generation gap in the regular consumption of the news via traditional media, especially via print formats. According to data from 2011, there is a significant gap between people under 30 and people aged 30–44: the young generation 'is most passive in consuming traditional media, particularly news', but is the most

active in the domestication of new media technologies, using the Internet and social media mostly for creative and communicative purposes (Kalmus et al. 2013). This study has highlighted some of the complexities around the media practices that emerge as the social networking sites become further embedded in everyday media use. While online media offer users a variety of opportunities for news consumption across different platforms, enabling continuous updates and constant connectivity, the discussion with participants revealed tendencies of distance between generations, and of estrangement when trying to cope with social networking media as worthwhile and reliable news sources. An abundance of news information, in various formats, thus opens the door to numerous approaches and sets a challenge to researchers to address the various needs of media users. Therefore, further research with more respondents and focus groups is needed to investigate more thoroughly, for instance, how the generations analysed in this study express their views on non-traditional media as a potential media source. Nevertheless, as one may conclude from the discussion with the participants in this study, the young generation has turned their attention to the platform of social media, used as an elementary form of communication and media consumption.

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