

What does frustration, serendipity and uncertainties of global media and communication means? Some versions from Latvia and Estonia

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In a short novel by contemporary Russian writer Vladimir Sorokin “White square” (2018), the moderator of the show with the same title gets killed during the show in which four guests express their visions of present society. Everyone can follow the killing on-line, having voted shortly before for the most entertaining guest. After having received an injection of a new chemical formula which is supposed to entertain the audience, the four participants get wild and destroy the whole show enjoyed by the audience. A new moderator is being engaged to let the show go on...

This rather gothic plot shows another part of the reality – the memories of the director of the show about someone, a person unknown to the reader, who has been killed to start the bloody entertainment. The ring, made of the skin of this unknown person gets lost and lands in a realm beyond the on-line entertainment culture: poor workers, their uneducated wives and alcoholics, who still inhabit the off-line everyday life of low wages, heavy physical jobs and simple joys ignored by blood thirsty audience, voting and selling advertisement time for higher prices. Both groups, digital media users and poor underpaid blue collars are in contemporary Europe and the USA targets for populist messages in media.

Sorokin, a well-known and scandalous writer, represents a critical discourse of the usage of new media in literary domain and is one of the author among many European intellectuals who are worried about the condition of digitalised societies, shaped by new realities and new escape options for the masses. Linked to anti-totalitarian and anti-populist

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discourses, Sorokin is close to the sociologist and cultural historian Zygmunt Bauman. In his work "Retrotopia" (2017) Bauman reflected upon the trend in societies all across the networked world, including old democracies, to turn back time in their collective political imagination, to return to the myths of populism and close communities, based on blood and fatherland ideas of the 20th century totalitarian regimes. Stability in an unstable world is the key promise which helps populists in various European societies to win the elections, to form governments and to support the restoration of radical ideologies with state financed activities. The new digital media are, according to Bauman, the very centre of the new ideologies of national romanticism. Similar vision of the European fragile democracy is represented by Jacques Rupnik, who, in summer 2019 published a detailed analysis of the populist strategies to question the legitimacy of liberal culture by replacing the concept of democracy by the new populist version of "power for people by people". Control over public media by conservative oligarchs in Eastern Europe is one of the features of the weakened democracy, according to Rupnik (2019). Linked to the creation of collective frustrations and negative images of LGBT community, refugees and feminism, these controlled media are only a part of the tendency to limit liberalism culture in Europe 30 years after the peaceful revolutions and breakdown of the Soviet regime in Eastern Europe. Another issue which is rarely discussed in liberal discourses, but it is of vital importance for media politics in Europe, is the popularity of populism. Following the concept of analyst of right-wing movements Chantal Mouffe, populism critique of liberal democracy can be expressed in xenophobic vocabulary, but the content of the critique is the voice of the masses who, in various countries at various times, have felt muted for a long time, their problems ignored, their worries made banal. Mouffe suggests to develop a left-wing populism, which would present inclusive and democratic alternative to the popularity of right-wing populism. The space for this future clash will certainly be social media, where identitarian movements are already active, offering their visions of stability and community bonds. One of the tendencies which are developing at the moment in European politics is transposing the identity discourses and history (memory) politics into digital space inhabited by communities. The dominance of the past in the contemporary societies of Eastern Europe has been noted but various scholars during last decade. Dietmar Rothermund (2015) speaks of the true storm of memories which is whirling across the world. An essential part of the mnemonic culture is the culture of trauma, which is, according to Martin Modlinger and Philipp Sonntag (2011), in danger to become all-encompassing discourse of wound and thus self-centred, which would leave no place to talk about the trauma of others. Traumatic experience of a group may help to build identities in the age of global uncertainties, fluid identities, hybridities and growing populism, which stresses ethnicity as a common ground with exclusive tendencies (Rupnik, 2009). Thus, another question related to media culture in the Baltics is the issue of developing a social cohesion within media politics, which would provide recognition of mnemonic diversity and at the same time would secure common, democratic media space.

How are communities interacting and what strategies to catch the audience are being developed by political ideologies? Both questions are related to issues of limits and shape of future on-line democracies. How are communities dealing with cultural frustrations

of the age (Foroutan (2019)? This is another issue which is touched upon in this volume. Artistic forms of public discourses and off-line media in urban areas and no-spaces.

Media as the performative space of the political debates in a society can be defined as the frame of public discourses on various issue of democratic society. Collective identities and individual scenarios of life – styles are being defined, changed and become hybrid in the space of media. Images and choices of languages are linked to power relations in the media culture of today. Audiences, fragmented and often in their bubbles, are parts of urban cultures which create and stage their social dramas by presenting their versions of meanings, constructing the We and Them communities and borders. This is how culture of media works and this cultural terrain is the major object of interest for the authors of this special issue. In methodologically very diverse and provocative articles, the authors reflect on the culture of media in public space and individual identities, interpret media content and attempt to understand various audiences as media consumers.

The major questions of the articles are linked to new patterns of media usage, and media perception, of ways how media communities are created, re-shaped and act in various public spaces. What changes are to be identified? How do off-line and on-line communities interact? What are messages and what carriers are used to present views and opinions of communities in various media? These and other questions will be reflected upon in the special issue.

Growing anxieties in the global fluidity world (Bauman, 2018) have been closely read by representatives of various disciplines, thus creating a pluralistic space of debates.

This Special Issue of journal *Informacijos Mokslai* is a result of research projects and ideas that was discussed in Communication science studies section at International scientific conferences *PLACES* in April 2019 in Riga Stradiņš University.

The title of conference *PLACES: Challenges and Agendas in the Age of Uncertainties* show both main concerns of societies and scientists that represent social sciences. Since decades, science has been reflecting on everlasting transformations of social spaces, its growing plurality and uncertainties which exist at various levels, starting from individual identities in the postmodern diversity, growing beyond conventional borders of social groups, nations and states. What and where are places in which the changes take place? Who and how transform these places, work to restore, threaten or rethink places where collective identities take place?

Questions of durability of various explanatory paradigms produced by social sciences arise. Are social sciences still capable of anticipating future challenges? Can social sciences explain rapid growth of populism and spreading disinterest in democracy across Europe? How can we resist control of mass media and abuse of social media by unclear global capital aligned with political populism? Is there still a place for social activism in the totality of consumerism?

In this issue of the journal, we're not just asking questions, but thinking about the answers by keeping in the focus very special place – the Baltic States. The research project's authors seek to analyse the uncertain truths of changing reality and addresses very important issues. The answers found by the researchers are not easy. They are more than complicated. They catch ideas, moods and processes. Researchers record them as

accurately and deeply as if they had sensitive radars. The published research results are very important in the context of the Baltic States, as they reveal unique processes that have not been identified and analysed so far.

The collection of seven scientific papers reflects three important areas whose interaction is influenced by communication processes – politics, society and health communication. The authors have been very courageous, as each article opens the door to a little researched reality so far.

First, the group of authors **Anda Rožukalne, Sergejs Kruks, Alnis Stakle, and Ilva Skulte** present a study on how mass media in Latvia were dealing with information related with migration crisis in EU. Their article **“Representation of migration in Latvian mass media (2015–2016): Deny voice to the voiceless”** sketches the framing of migration representation and discourse in the media.

Second, the article **“The notion of state. Connotations of topical usage using discourse analysis”** by Aija Kažoka reflects how Latvian parliamentarians interpret the concept of the state. Within the framework of this study, it was found that politicians in their speeches deviate from the definition of state, verbalizing it as an alienated, autonomous entity.

The third article on politics and political communication **“MAX share this! Vote for us! Analysis of pre-election Facebook communication and audience reactions of Latvia’s populist party KPV LV leader Aldis Gobzems”** written by Anda Rožukalne shows the Latvian version of populism and analyses how populist politicians succeed through social media’s ability to evoke and manage individuals’ emotions.

Forth, the invisible societal processes and struggles are revealed in the article **“The Critique of Technocracy in Riga Stencil Graffiti”** written by Ilva Skulte and Normunds Kozlovs. The authors evaluate youth subcultures such as stencil graffiti by interpreting it as a battle to both directions against overwhelming technocracy and the as a struggle that is taking place for the aestheticization of public space.

Next, health communication research projects are launching a whole new but very important topic in communication research in the Baltic States. Given that much of misinformation is related to health themes and quality of life issues, these studies can help to protect the public from serious problems. The article **“Behaviour change promotion in breast and cervical cancer prevention”**, written by communication researcher and practitioner Vita Savicka and gynecologist Ingrīda Circene, aims to determine the effectiveness of the behavioural economy “nudge approach” in the process of behavioural change communication to target the use of government-paid cervical and breast cancer screening.

By offering these five articles and this introduction to a very Special Issue of *Informacijos Mokslai* (Information Science), we hope that our study ideas and findings will enrich understanding of important communication processes and phenomena in Baltic States.

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