

## 4. Non-formal media education

### A rich border area of learning

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Media education in Estonia is mostly seen as a part of the formal education. However, non-formal, production-oriented media education not only has a strong impact on youngsters' media literacy and self-esteem, it also contributes significantly to the hyperlocal media environment. The media club Meediasüst (*Media Injection*) is an example of the very complex combination of youth work, media education and (hyper) local journalism that sheds light on the problems and advantages of non-formal media education. Our qualitative case study is based on the theory of semiosphere by Juri Lotman,<sup>1</sup> which helps us to put non-formal media education in the broader cultural and social context.

Each year we see in admittance interviews at the University of Tartu in Estonia about 150 young applicants who want to become journalists or communication specialists. Only a few of them remember that a year and a half ago they had a mandatory course called “Media and its influences”, and almost nobody has heard about the cross-curricular theme “Media environment” that has been in the Estonian national curriculum since 2002. Amongst student candidates we also meet some very motivated young people with practical production experience that in many cases comes from extra-curricular activities at school or non-formal media clubs.

In this chapter, we do not look at the problems of media literacy education in schools. Instead, we will concentrate on the lively tradition

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of production-based non-formal media education projects in Estonia, and try to outline some benefits and problems, based on the case study of the Meediasüst (*Media Injection*) project in the peripheral county<sup>2</sup> of Põlva. Our case study focuses on the possibilities of non-formal and informal educational settings in the geographical and cultural periphery – terms we will explain further in the next section.

### Media literacy education as periphery

The Tartu-Moscow semiotic school uses the term *semiosphere* created by the semiotician Juri Lotman (2005), which refers to a more or less homogeneous cultural space where meaning-making processes (or *semiosis*) take place. The main features of any semiosphere are the *metropolis* or centre, the *periphery* and the *boundaries* between semiospheres. As Lotman suggested, cultural processes in the centre are often well structured, stable and regular, express and maintain the identity of a particular semiosphere and, in a way, try to establish rules and values. In the peripheral area, which is (spatially, socially or culturally) close to the boundary, cultural phenomena are more playful and varied, often flirting with “foreign” elements of “other” cultures, adapting them and translating between different cultural fields more freely than the cultural process in the centre. This Lotmanian model serves the media literacy education remarkably well, especially if we look at the non-formal settings.

Firstly, in the field of education, media literacy education has never been a priority in school practice in Estonia – despite national curricula. It is a cross-curricular theme and is either an elective subject or a voluntary after-school activity. Pre-service teachers’ *digital literacy* has been supported for only a few years, and never in the frame of *critical media literacy* – so, even though teachers’ digital literacy (as an ability to use a variety of educational technology and software) is finally moving from the educational periphery towards the centre, critical and analytical media literacy remains in the border area. Non-formal media education is not a “school thing”, but it is definitely learning.

Secondly, speaking of media as a semiosphere, we can distinguish mainstream journalism as a metropolis, whereas vlogging or youtubing, GIFs and memes may be considered a periphery. If formal education

uses mainstream media texts often as supportive material in many subjects, the new media formats are usually neglected. Young people's media production, as we describe it in the context of the Meediasüst example, is peripheral and "in between" in many ways: between formal and informal education, between mainstream journalism and spontaneous funny video clips, between financial/political boundaries and journalistic autonomy, etc.

And finally, geographically speaking, Põlva county is as far from the Estonian capital as possible, making it a spatial periphery with distinct cultural differences (dialect, types of villages, transportation, livelihood etc). However, for young people living there, this geographical area is their real physical lifeworld,<sup>3</sup> while their semiosphere may otherwise be worldwide. Translating local into global (or at least nationwide) can be seen as an enrichment of "metropolitan" media – even if it only means covering youth-related themes that are not so common in mainstream media.

Based on the Lotmanian view on cultural processes, we can assume that learning in the peripheral area is more intense than in the metropolis, where rules, conformism and control are usually stronger.

### Youth-created media: Juvenile joke or real local journalism?

In many cases, videos, photos or GIFs are produced just for fun and not meant for wider distribution. Meediasüst has a different approach: being together and learning new things is just a first step towards media production, which is published to large and demanding audiences. This demands higher-quality standards of the production and adult supervisors – the quality of topics and presentation of stories must be high enough to avoid becoming the target of malevolent feedback. Basically, Meediasüst aims to be a proper part of the hyperlocal media field. In local and hyperlocal journalism, young people are a little more represented than in nationwide media, but often they are "talked about" like great athletes or students. Clubs like Meediasüst give a voice to young people, but clubs aiming towards journalistic values and genres (not just making fun footages) are rather rare in Estonia. Is it more about imitating well-known media personalities, dry learning and drills, or real personal learning and real local journalism?

## Practicalities

Põlva is a town, municipality and county in south-eastern Estonia. Local journalism is represented in the so-called county paper, *Koit*, and two regional papers (*Lõunaleht* and *Lõuna-Eesti Postimees*) that aim to cover three counties (Võru and Valga as well as Põlva). There is also a local radio station, *Marta*, and two regular newspapers that are published in local dialects (*Setomaa* and *Uma Leht*). One news site can also be mentioned ([www.lounaestlane.ee](http://www.lounaestlane.ee)) in terms of journalistic outlets, whereas other local sites, managed by local government, are politically engaged or concentrate on gathering and distributing practical information to citizens.

Kristina Masen, a 24-year-old journalist in local media, started *Meediasüst* in 2013. Her former schoolmate, Kadri Pelisaar, was at this time working as a local youth worker. As Kristina said, the main purpose of creating the club was to offer youngsters the same feeling of trust and support as Kristina felt during her years as editor of the school newspaper, and Kadri as a member of the pupils' council. They wanted to support youngsters from this small and peripheral community by giving them the self-esteem and courage not to stay within the small lifeworld of their childhood, but to chase their dreams. The first participants were recruited through fliers in schools and open youth clubs. Later it snowballed, with participants inviting their friends etc. The number of participants differs from year to year, as does the activity and motivation. At the beginning, *Meediasüst* aimed to support the county's youth portal, but now the target is creating audio-visual content about the county's youth work for Youtube and other social media. With funding from EU foundations and local municipalities, *Meediasüst* has purchased a proper set of semi-professional equipment for audio-visual production and uses the premises of the local open youth club. However, the financing model of this kind of media club is a very complicated issue and needs proper analysis elsewhere. Participants get a full-day training each month and have access to the equipment any time they need to, depending on the production process.

We interviewed Kristina Masen several times and carried out semi-structured interviews with two participants of *Meediasüst*, Kairi (17) and Hanna (16), in order to understand the role of *Meediasüst* in the local media field and in the lives of young journalists.<sup>4</sup>

## Production and audiences in 2018

The more or less stable financial situation of the past few years has carried Meediasüst so far that they are now able to produce an eight-to ten-minute-long TV magazine each month. Usually, a magazine consists of three stories that young reporters have found interesting. The most usual reason for picking a theme seems to be an orientation towards youngsters, or a significant event happening in local settings (for example, the Estonian ballroom dancing championship or big folk music events). The reporters, as well as the editors, camerapersons and other involved members approach the stories quite personally: the reporter of the story learns a new skill (like weaving a carpet), or visits some place for the first time (for instance, a kicksled trip on a frozen river) or asks the sources unusual questions (like asking dancers what makes them happy). At the same time, they try out some production skills for the very first time. In many stories, interviews are used as a main element, and if possible, original soundtracks are used as background music. Almost every story is built around the reporter's personal stand and introduced by anchors in the studio. Stories are planned long ahead since authors need time for both getting to know the subject and practising new skills, whether it is shooting the picture, interviewing, using new technology, editing the video or some other skills.

Kairi, who has literally grown into the role of editor-in-chief, follows the production process from the very beginning, and is (just as are adult supervisors) available when advice is needed. She claims that Meediasüst is aware of the responsibility of having a real audience:

*Kairi:* I think this is real journalism for young people. We share our stories online, so our classmates and friends like and share them too.

*Hanna:* So do my parents – they often ask what I am doing in Meediasüst, and why I sometimes ask them to drive me somewhere. When my stories are published on Youtube, they actually see how I look on the screen and what I have learned.

Each magazine reaches 200 to 500 viewers, which is a considerable number in such a small community.

## Learning every day

There are no formal requirements or tests for the youngsters that join Meediasüst. It is often big cameras and fancy technology that appeal to youngsters. Lots of video analysing in weekly meetings, planning of events to cover and having long monthly training days have a deep effect on the participants' critical thinking and self-reflection skills. The priorities for the participants are clear:

*Kairi:* I was in seventh grade when I came here, and I was really a child. I am very thankful that from the very beginning I was thrown into unknown waters and had to interview people that seemed very important to me. The self-confidence I have gained in Meediasüst is of real value. I am not afraid of anything anymore. And I've gotten an endless list of technical skills too.

*Hanna:* After three years in Meediasüst I have to say that this is more like a lifestyle now. Even when I watch TV, I analyse what I see: What I would do similarly, and what I would never do. Behind the camera I do not feel quite as safe as in front of it, but I know enough to discuss technical details with the cameraperson.

As Kristina claimed, the learning process of every participant is different, and the basis is a good personal relationship:

*Kristina:* Youth work is always personal – you click with somebody or you don't. That's why it's good to have several supervisors or teachers who share the same values but are different personalities.

## From learning to producing to teaching

The chain from beginner to expert is not very long in Meediasüst. Kairi, who joined the project in the very first year, has grown into the position of an editor-in-chief who is able to manage all elements of production. She also teaches and supervises younger participants if adult supervisors are busy.

*Kairi:* We encourage new members to try everything from planning to editing, until they actually find out what their cup of tea is.

*Hanna:* The supervisors don't tell us what to do. They are always there but we have the freedom to come to the studio whenever we like, and work here. We feel like we are trusted.

As a joke, Kristina calls herself a “post censor” – young journalists have a freedom to handle every story as they like, but they have to determine where and when they need some help, and be prepared for criticism too.

*Kristina:* Well, courage and production skills are one thing, facing very critical local audience is something different. I try to make sure that our members are aware of the possible consequences of being a journalist.

Taking into consideration the local context is really crucial since members of Meediasüst (unlike most adult journalists) meet their sources and audiences on a daily basis in the real world.

*Hanna:* Kristina sometimes reminds us about the ethical aspects of our stories. For example, there was a visit from 12th-year pupils from the school for children with special needs. They had to act as teachers for one day, but were actually very shocked. So, we felt that we had to choose shots very carefully and not put everything we shot in the news, since we did not want these 12th-graders to feel bad while watching the video.

### Freedom, responsibility and autonomy in hyperlocal youth journalism

There is a thin line to walk for hyperlocal journalists, young or adult. If experienced journalists can rely on the social capital gained over the years, young ones are just in the process of building up their identity. At the same time, the surrounding environment, which is “hyperlocal” from a media market point of view, is the whole life-world for young people. Although video stories published on Youtube can be watched everywhere, the worldwide reach is usually still an illusion: in most cases young journalists know the people who watch and possibly comment on their production personally. This makes the social control and self-censorship even greater than, for example, in public television. Both supervisors and young journalists claim that giving consideration

to the ethical and communicational aspects of each story is far more important than solving technical problems.

People's complex relations make local journalism very challenging, and this is especially true in youth journalism. Meediasüst has been sponsored by the parish and the county, and has won some EU projects that support youth work on the local level. In 2018, when Meediasüst acts as a part of the open youth centre of Põlva county, they are expected to cover in their magazine several youth events financed by the same sources. Neither Kristina, nor Hanna or Kairi consider this a pressure, since the "obligatory" events are usually interesting for youngsters anyway. However, critical evaluation of information is a daily routine.

*Kairi:* If a friend of mine comes and suggests that Meediasüst could make a story about the event he is organizing, then yes, I consider it carefully. Maybe it is really something interesting, not for big dailies or adults, but for young people. Then we perhaps do the story. If I feel that he's only asking me for cash and fame, then forget it.

Facing undebatable expectations every day at school, young journalists do not find the expectations of financing parties to be a stressor.

*Kristina:* I do not keep financing issues secret from members, but I don't think they're aware of them. I always have room for negotiation with financiers, and so do our participants.

When asked about the core principles of Meediasüst, Kristina replies "teamwork, critical thinking, and self-presentation":

*Kristina:* It's how you behave as a person, when you act as a journalist, but it's also how you represent Meediasüst. It's your personal reputation at stake, but also ours.

Journalists' self-presentation is a serious point of consideration for Meediasüst in order to get sustainable financing for the next election period. In five years, Meediasüst has earned a certain reputation of being a trustworthy media partner, but this quality must be maintained so that younger and less experienced members are not pushed aside, in order to produce high-quality videos – learning is not possible without some room for mistakes. Finding a balance between public relations and a safe space for learning is the supervisors' main task.

## Conclusions

Non-formal, production-focused media education is an intense learning process that can be much more personalized than any activity within formal education. Higher motivation, personal and trusting supervision, learning from peers and the possibility of influencing the learning process are strong elements of non-formal media education. High costs, unstable financing and hints of elitism speak against broader implementation of production-based media education. Since youngsters' lifeworld is local, their production must follow the logic of (hyper)local journalism, but still find new themes and new audiences. Youth journalism is an interesting peripheral area of different fields: education, journalism, creativity, youth work, etc. It can involve a role shift from pupil to interviewer of school principal, finding a way to cover a problematic issue in local life, understanding what is newsworthy for people of different backgrounds or ages etc. The skills and thinking models that are learned in the process of news making (critical thinking, ethical consideration, technical quality, etc.) are usable in many different situations, as is the self-confidence that grows in the process of creating video stories. Last but not least – youngsters from Estonian rural areas really need some support in order to find the courage to chase their real dreams.

## Notes

1. Lotman (2005).
2. In this chapter we use “municipality” for the smallest territorial unit in Estonia, usually 5,000 inhabitants or more. The term “county” is used for the second administrative level, which comprises several municipalities and usually has 20,000 to 40,000 inhabitants.
3. Habermas (1989).
4. It must also be mentioned that both the authors of this chapter have been voluntary teachers for the members of Meediasüst, based on our professional expertise.

## References

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