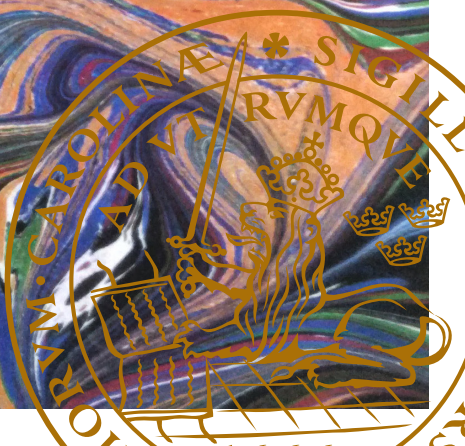# Excellent MSc Dissertations 2018
Media and Communication Studies, Lund University

**DENIZ NERIMAN DURU (ED.) WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
LESTARINI SARASWATI HAPSORO, MAGNUS JOHANSSON,
ANTENEH TESFAYE LEMMA, KRISZTINA ORBÁN, HARIO PRIAMBODHO,
CHRISTINE SANDAL, STEPHEN RADING-STANFORD & AXEL VIKSTRÖM**

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Lund University

Ed. Deniz Neriman Duru

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Introduction

Deniz Neriman Duru

This edited volume, *Excellent MSc Dissertations 2018,* is the third in the series that brings a selection of eight postgraduate dissertations, written by the students who undertook the MSc degree in Media and Communication at Lund University, in Sweden and graduated in June 2018. During the Masters Programme in Lund, students develop their curiosity for global issues that concern us all and are trained theoretically and methodologically for two years to ask critical questions and explore the place, the role and the use of media in people's lives. The thesis is the opportunity for the students to discover their passion for research, to be creative and original in their research design and to seek answers for the burning question that they are curious to find out. This volume seeks to inspire future students and media scholars with the originality of research design, the use of multi-methods in qualitative media research as well as critical and analytical thinking in investigating contemporary issues that challenges the world we live in.

The studies in this volume draw our attention to the multi-faceted media use and production in people's everyday life that impacts political, social, economic and cultural structures. The authors in this volume stand out by their critical approach to media production and audience engagement. The chapters talk to each other within two underlying threads. The first one examines issues concerning politics, power and inequality through investigating both traditional and new media practices. The chapters range from asking for a critical media representation that challenges economic inequality, to exploring political engagement, civic agency and the role of mediated practices in the process of democratisation in non-western contexts. For instance, Axel Vikström and Anteneh Tesfaye Lemma explore production of news media in Sweden and in Ethiopia. Vikström criticises the fact that Swedish newspapers 'grant' silence and invisibility to the super-rich and by representing them as 'philanthropists', instead of criticising the increasing

gap between the rich and the poor. Lemma juxtaposes policy documents with media practices in his thesis, highlighting how the politically oppressive media environment in Ethiopia and executive intervention hinder democratisation; such barriers restrict the diversity of citizen voices despite developmental media policy. Hapsoro and Rading-Stanford explore how audiences challenge and practice power. Rading-Stanford explores the ways in which Youtube audiences use their clicks and commenting in order to challenge the content creators who compromise their finances over creativity. Hapsoro investigates digital humour and the role and the potential of political memes in youth's civic engagement in Indonesia, where audiences actively negotiate their position as citizens. These four chapters, hence, remark both the importance of media producers and media environment in providing the space for democratic development and fighting for inequality as well as the pro-active role of the audiences in challenging power relations as citizens and media consumers.

The second thread delves into the place of media practices in social and cultural processes, exploring the nexus between identity, the self, the family as well as the wider society we live in. Orbán scrutinizes how audiences construct their sense of self through reading novels, arguing for books as a mobile media that is a resource for identity work. Sandal investigates people who post vlogs on their daily eating habits on Youtube as part of a broader lifestyle trend that says something about societal values of food cultures. As another example, Priambodho inquires how audiences construct meaning and enjoy the experience of watching a 'bad and rowdy' movie, constructing a culture of watching cult film *The Room* which is completely different from film audience etiquette for cinema going. Finally, Johansson explores the tactics parents utilize for inclusion or exclusion of digital games in the construction of the moral project of the home. Thus, in these chapters, audiences consume, use, practice and engage with all sorts of media, whether they are books, films, social media or games to make a place for themselves in the society they live in, to relate to other people, as well as to give meaning to their lives.

In chapter one, Axel Vikström draws our attention to media's uncritical take on economic inequality. Despite research showing that higher inequality within a society corresponds with a higher rate of public health and social problems, there exist little resistance against the policies that allow the super-rich to pull away from the rest of the population. With the aim of enhancing our understanding of

the growing gap between rich and poor, chapter one investigates how a selection of billionaires was discursively represented in Sweden's four largest newspapers during 2017.

By using tools from critical discourse analysis, Vikström argues that the news media are more interested in gazing at the spectacle of the super-rich than critically examining them. The super-rich are represented as a secret community that rarely talks to the press, and while media silence and absence has usually been linked to powerlessness, this piece of work, instead, considers this "struggle for invisibility" as a powerful strategy for maintaining the inequality gap. The analysis further shows how the philanthropy of the super-rich is represented as acts of admirable charity, rather than expressions of absurd inequality. These representations are linked to ongoing trends where neo-liberal discourses have come to enjoy increasingly hegemonic positions, affecting both the production and content of journalism.

In chapter two, Anteneh Tesfaye Lemma explores the Ethiopian media by analyzing the guiding policy document and the operation of media houses to examine its potential in enhancing citizen engagement and participation. To look at how the synergy of regulatory structure and day to day media operation contribute to civic engagement, this chapter uses a multi method approach which includes policy analysis and expert interviews backed by relevant and contextualized theoretical frameworks. The chapter brings the emerging scholarships in African media studies and the idea of Afrokology combined with other theories contextualized to the specific case. By building on Peter Dahlgren, Brian McNair and Nancy Fraser, Lemma provides a critical review of Habermas' public sphere by pointing out that he overlooks multiple and parallel counterpublics within non-bourgeois, non-liberal settings/contexts. He remarks that this is very important for a country like Ethiopia, which is ethnically and religiously as well as culturally diverse. The study points out to the danger of western-centric theoretical influences in African media research by suggesting contextualisation of the political structure, postcolonial setting and the cultural diversity in Africa. By building on theories on democratisation, the chapter explores how media offers opportunities for citizen engagement and political participation and hence aids the process of democratisation.

The findings indicate current challenges in the media environment, ideological shifts following local and global media developments and future directions to be

followed by the government, the public and media institutions. Lack of investigative, critical and opposing views caused by direct and indirect influence as well as extreme allegiance by media professionals diminished plurality of voices in the Ethiopian media environment. Even though the implementation of development media is deemed to be revitalized by enhancing the democratic element, the day to day operation of media institutions is found to be influenced by executive intervention. This highlights how the political institutions fail to deliver the promises of the policy document which reflects back on the 'overall political ecology' and infant democratic system.

Chapter three continues shedding light on the role of media for political engagement and democratisation. Lestarini Saraswati Hapsoro explores the roles of Internet memes as a form of contemporary political discourse in Indonesia from the individual perspective of audience members. In-depth qualitative interviews with fourteen Indonesian young adults were conducted to understand the ways in which they engage and create meaning of political memes, allowing for an examination on the media's potential for contribution to civic cultures. The research is based on two case studies in Indonesia where memes perform as distinctive modes of discourse: political dissent, to challenge a figure of authority; and partisan opinions, in the context of electoral politics.

While existing studies suggest that memes have broadened opportunities for political discourse and empower civic engagement, results from the thesis suggest a nuanced view of memes' civic potentials. Political memes serve as an avenue to undermine the political elite by exposing their perceived absurdity, yet certain modes of discourse also facilitate argument and antagonism. Especially in the case of election memes, the empowering nature of the media was subject to challenge as audiences indicate the likelihood for institutional influence to play a part in the discourse. The findings further reveal the audiences' active negotiation of their position as citizens and meme audiences in the digital environment. This translates into dynamic forms of engagement that may subsequently foster their civic agency and citizenship in the nation's democracy.

Chapter four turns our attention to the world of books for the migrants. Krisztina Orbán presents an ethnographically informed audience study based on the case of Hungarian readers around Lund. Two understudied fields are in focus of the research: white displaced audiences and books as mobile media. For a deeper understanding of the two, Orbán builds on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity

and Andreas Hepp's concept of transculturality as cultural mobility between several locally defined socially constructed realities. The chapter aims to answer what role books play in the everyday lives of Hungarians in Sweden and how they articulate cultural identities through reading. Orbán conducted semi-structured interviews with eleven women having lived in Sweden from 10 months to 33 years. The unfolding rite of passage, the articulation of the cultural identity and the reading experience all stress the importance of the language as a means of symbolic survival, even for transcultural or integrated migrants. The results point out the importance of readdressing the place of books within media inventories by media studies and call for further research on the new, digitalised, generations of displaced audiences.

The next four chapters continue to explore different media audiences. Chapter five examines the live experience of Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (2003) in Copenhagen, Denmark and Malmö, through qualitative interviews and personal observations at the cinema screenings of *The Room*. The chapter analyses how individuals conduct readings of aesthetically 'bad' texts and how they appropriate knowledge based on the screening. Hario Priambodho asks three main research questions: How audiences are understanding *The Room* as a cult film, the role of camp sensibility and taste, and how audiences shape the live experience of *The Room*. The findings explicate how such reading protocols produce an atypical and transgressive live experience where that is distinct from a normal cinemagoing experience. The nuances of taste and how camp sensibilities give rise to numerous social implications such as the creation of bonds and the ability to obtain discursive resources were one of the key contributions to knowledge in media and cultural studies. Priambodho argues that the camp sensibility is crucial for audiences to find pleasure in a text that is objectively poor in terms of aesthetics. Camp capital is defined as a form of capital valued within the camp context that functions as a discursive resource and also signify one's place within the hierarchy of *The Room* culture.

The following two chapters explore social media audiences, in particular Youtube audiences, and engage critically with their agency and power. Chapter six explores the recent 'Adpocalypse' phenomenon to have hit YouTube, in which an algorithm glitch led to a platform wide advertising boycott that, arguably, changed the platform. Stephen Rading-Stanford tells the story of the post-Adpocalyptic landscape where clicks are currency, and investigates the battle over creative

freedom for Youtube produsers, a term coined by Axel Bruns. Through a detailed study combining audience research and participation action research, Rading-Stanford investigates how the brand boycott affected two key, and under-represented parties; smaller creators and YouTube audiences. Despite a number of academic work on audiences, participation and social media, Rading-Stanford seeks to bridge the gap between the three to gain a deeper understanding of life on the platform, both before and during the 'Adpocalypse', and how these events have changed the way creators and audiences go about creating and consuming content, as well as highlighting the importance of every click made on the platform. The analysis further shows the relationship between YouTube and the more mainstream media, exploring the impact this relationship has had on all those involved. Rading-Stanford concludes by exploring what the thesis' findings could mean for the short and long term future for the platform, the creators and those who use it.

Chapter seven explores Youtube vloggers, this time focusing on mediated food practices. Through the use of practice theory, Christine Sandal presents the case study on Swedish "What I eat in a day" vlogs; these vlogs balance individual agency regarding lifestyle-diet choices with structures of underlying food rules and regimes. Sandal points out that eating has become an entanglement of offline and online practices due to the increasing mediatisation processes in Western societies. Food as carrier of values has never merely satisfied bodily needs, which makes it essential to investigate mediated eating practices in order to understand how they change everyday life, but also culture at large by providing insight into more general processes of cultural reproduction and renewal. By investigating how the food vloggers scenically, visually and narratively perform their lifestyle-diets, chapter seven provides insight into the inner workings of the cultural field of food vlogs. Mechanisms of unspoken foodie hierarchies, internal struggles for positions and the negotiation of moral imperatives become visible. These processes, moreover, illuminate how every day, bottom-up expertise in combination with the authority of a micro-celebrity can grant the position of cultural intermediary. As such intermediaries, the vloggers, in cooperation with their online community, define, change and spread everyday eating practices online as well as offline.

Following the theme of everyday life and media, the last chapter of this volume 'The particular politics of the home' aims at providing a closer look at how games played on phones, consoles or computers are regulated within the everyday of

family life. Through semi-structured interviews with nine parents, Magnus Johansson creates understanding for how digital games are not only tied to the moral project of the home, but have their values negotiated in relation to public discourses around games, focused on the perceived harmful aspects. The chapter deals with both the domestication process of digital games as media technology, as well as the social construction of digital games and their perceived harms. The families in this study use regulatory tactics in the everyday to construct moral continuities, which are 'defended' from the perceived harms of digital games. The meanings of digital games are evaluated as active or non-active in relation to the building of the moral project of the home, visible through varying forms of negotiations and regulations. The chapter contributes to a vision of an inclusion of these 'wild' technologies and content into the moral production within the home.

All eight texts published in this edited volume were originally presented and evaluated as part of the final thesis exams in May 2018, in which they were awarded top grades. During the autumn of 2018, they were revised and edited for publication in the publication series Förtjänstfulla examensarbeten i medieoch kommunikationsvetenskap (FEA), which was launched in 2008 to bring attention to and reward student work of a particularly high quality. They were selected because they possess solid theoretical analysis and analytical thinking, are methodologically rigorous and empirically grounded.

With this publication, we hope to inspire future students who will write their dissertations, and contribute to debates inside and outside of academia on media, communication and cultural studies. In particular, the work in this book asks us to critically reflect on media's relationship with power, inequality, politics and democracy, and make us think, question and understand ourselves within the socio-cultural, and mediated environment we live in.

Deniz Neriman Duru

Lund, November 2018

Silence is Golden

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Representation of Billionaires and Economic Inequality in four Swedish Newspapers

Axel Vikström

Pushing the super-rich into focus

In January 2015, I was interviewing the Swedish cartoonist Liv Strömquist at a busy Thai restaurant in Malmö. She had recently been awarded *Dagens Nyheter*'s prestigious culture award, and our conversation centered on the political power of the so-called 'cultural elite'. Strömquist had thought a lot about this topic, and in between bites of chicken, she argued that the high media visibility that cultural profiles receive should not be equated with a platform for exercising power. On the contrary:

> What characterizes really powerful people is that no one knows who they are. That is how they want it [...] If one is really powerful, then there is no need to manifest this power in the newspapers. Expressing one's opinions in public is only for losers. (Vikström, 2015)

While it would be misleading to claim that all powerful people are silent in the news media, Strömquist's hypothesis springs to mind when turning the attention to a particular segment within the population: the super-rich billionaires[1]. Granted, some billionaires are famous worldwide (e.g. the likes of Bill Gates and Jeff Bezos), but the vast majority of them could hardly be considered to hold the

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[1] The definition of how wealthy one has to be in order to be deemed "super-rich" varies between different researchers (see Haeseler 2000: 2; Lansley 2006: 6; Oxfam 2017). This thesis project uses the term in reference to those with a net worth of at least 1 billion SEK (= around 120 million USD). It should be stressed that the term is not used in reference to any objective "wealth line", but more as a way of highlighting that these billionaires are radically wealthier than other "wealthy" groups in society (e.g. doctors and lawyers).

same celebrity status as top politicians or pop culture stars. However, regardless of their level of visibility – what the super-rich have in common is that they are growing wealthier. According to Oxfam (2018: 8), 82 percent of the growth in global wealth in 2017 went to the richest one percent, whereas the bottom 50 percent saw no increase at all. Another report suggests that if the current trend were to continue, the richest percent will hold on to two-thirds of the world's wealth by the year 2030 (Savage 2018).

The fact that economic inequality is accelerating worldwide is a serious matter. Research shows that higher economic inequality within a society corresponds with a higher rate of health and social problems, such as child mortality, adult life expectancy and drug abuse (Wilkinson & Pickett 2009; Payne 2017), while the opportunities for social mobility weakens (Lansley 2006: 203; Preston 2016). Considering that lobbying and influencing politicians requires "deep pockets" (Davies 2011: 2), the concentration of wealth to a small group of super-rich individuals further suggests that democracy is the main victim of excessive inequality (Bauman 2013: 2). Policy changes in favor of an increasingly globalized economy – which have ensured that capital is now free to move wherever the potential for making profit is the most beneficial – have raised concerns that the super-rich are dragging the nation-states into a taxation race to the bottom by forcing governments to compete over their assets (Bauman 1998). These voices suggest that the gap between rich and poor should in itself be seen as a social problem (Connor & Rowlingson 2011: 438).

Considering that the dangers of economic inequality have become well known, it raises the question why there is relatively little resistance against the political and economic mechanisms that allow the super-rich to pull away from the rest of the population. History shows that people have only infrequently contested inequality, arguably "because they were led to believe that their inferior status in terms of income, wealth, and privilege was just […] or that it was necessary for their future well-being" (Wisman & Smith 2011: 974). The existence of inequality in democratic societies thus presupposes an ideological system that legitimizes the status quo. While there is a political debate about the responsibilities of the poor (e.g. they should be more responsible with their money, work harder and make themselves more employable, see Linkon 2015), not much is spoken about the super-rich. Whereas the post-war years were characterized by taxation policies aimed at limiting the wealth of the super-rich in many western countries (Harvey 2005), the decades following the 1970's have seen a reversed trend where poverty increasingly has come to be viewed as an individual problem that can be solved without worrying about the rich (Lansley

2006: 201; Mau 2015). Despite the fact that the inequality gap has continued to grow – suggesting that "the causes of poverty cannot be separated from the causes of wealth" (Scott 1994: 18) – the belief that the wealth at the top will "trickle-down" to benefit the rest has maintained a strong foothold, despite no evidence of this actually happening (Connor & Rowlingson 2011: 449). These trends suggest "a fundamental shift in our cultural and political attitudes towards the very rich" (Lansley 2006: 29).

As "the full range of economic inequality is not assessable through everyday life experiences", the media serve an important role in shaping the public discourse on the issue (Grisold & Theine 2017: 4266). Considering that the wealth of the super-rich allows them to live isolated lives, the public is left with little choice but to turn to the media for information about them (Kendall 2011: 22, 49). The stories that the news media choose to tell about the super-rich are – explicitly or implicitly – stories about inequality. Thus, the representations in the news media undoubtedly play a role in legitimizing, challenging or in other ways affecting the extent to which the super-rich are regarded as morally deserving their wealth in times of growing economic inequality.

In a recent literature review, (Grisold & Theine 2017: 4265) lament that the issue of how "economic inequality is being mediated to the public is not discussed in economics at all, hardly mentioned in communication studies". Seeing as the authors' overall impression is that the news media generally do not provide the public with the information required to understand the structures behind growing economic inequality, the lack of research on the subject can be said to be quite startling. As the inequality gap keeps growing, it is consequently all the more important for the field to lose its innocence and stop treating inequality as some kind of taboo topic (Preston 2016: 53).

While there exists a small body of research scrutinizing how "the rich" are represented in the news media (Hartley & Melrose 1999; McCall 2013; Kjærsgård 2015), little is known about how *the actual super-rich individuals* that make up "the rich" are represented. Using Sweden – the OECD country where income inequality is currently growing fastest (OECD 2017) – as a case study, the aim of the present thesis is to investigate how the super-rich and their relation to economic inequality are represented in the news media. This is done through analyzing how a selection of Swedish billionaires was discursively represented in the country's four largest newspapers during the year of 2017. By shifting focus from the poor to the richest in society, the project wishes to supply contextual knowledge that enriches our understanding of how economic inequality is mediated to the public, which further can serve to enhance our knowledge about

the growing gap between rich and poor. Particular attention will be devoted to scrutinizing how – and subsequently why – the super-rich are represented as deserving or undeserving their wealth, and how the super-rich's efforts to manage their media visibility shape these representations. This boils down to the following research questions:

1. How are the super-rich discursively represented in the Swedish news media?
    a. How are the super-rich represented as deserving or undeserving their wealth?
    b. How does the visibility management of the super-rich shape the representations?
2. How can the societal context explain why certain representations are occurring?

Theoretical framework

The present thesis will rest on a three-part theoretical framework. First, the larger social context of growing economic inequality and the legitimization of wealth concentration in Western societies will be scrutinized in the light of ongoing processes of neo-liberalization. The second part takes this argument further by scrutinizing three distinct arguments – reward, incentive and character – that will be used when analyzing whether the news media are representing the super-rich as deserving or undeserving their wealth. Finally, the section wraps up with a discussion on the visibility management of the super-rich with an emphasis on how an ideological perspective on silence can function as a theoretical tool for analyzing the construction of a neo-liberal hegemony.

Neo-liberalization: theory and practice

In its very essence, neo-liberalism can be summarized as:

> [A] theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. (Harvey 2005: 2)

In short, the market is hailed as superior to the state as a means of effectively resolving social problems. Thus, the role of the state should be limited to upholding a structural framework that allows the competition of the free market to work its wonders (ibid.; Crouch 2011: 7). The fact that economic inequality has increased in countries that have adopted neo-liberal policies during the last decades cannot be brushed aside as a mere coincidence (Mau 2015). The influential Marxist geographer David Harvey highlights the distinction between neo-liberalism as *theory* (presented above) and the actual *practices* of neo-liberalization. Even though neo-liberal theory does not officially proclaim that society should grow more unequal, Harvey (2005: 16) argues that the increasing social inequalities "have in fact been such a persistent feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project". According to him, inequalities are growing because the *utopian* project of neo-liberalization always has been subordinated to its *political* project, which is "to re-establish the conditions for capital accumulation and to restore the power of economic elites" (ibid.: 19). This does not mean that this practice always occurs consciously, nor that the economic power necessarily is restored to members of the old upper class (the growing number of tech-billionaires being one example of this).

One could have expected that the financial crisis of 2008 – which hit the ordinary shareholders and taxpayers significantly harder than the super-rich – would have resulted in a restructuring of the economic system similar to the reforms that were put in place after the Great Depression of the early 1930's. Even if protest movements do spring up (e.g. the Occupy Wall Street-movement), neo-liberal discourses "continue to exert a huge influence across the globe" (Freedman 2012: 42). Following this logic, neo-liberalism has become "hegemonic as a mode of discourse" because a sufficient share of the population accepts and legitimizes the current economic order – even though it does not work to their advantage (Harvey 2005: 3). This consent has been manufactured through the selective use of certain discourses while disguising other realities. Talking openly about "restoring power

to an economic elite" would hardly gain much public support, but proclaiming to advance "the cause of individual freedom" from state interference is more likely to appeal to a wider audience (ibid.: 40). Mau (2015) argues that discourses advocating for individualization have played a particularly important role in naturalizing neo-liberalism and legitimating economic inequalities. Even though people find the growing inequalities problematic, they are not met with collective resistance because poverty has come to be viewed as an individual problem caused by personal failure.

In order for an ideology to achieve hegemony to the point where it becomes "common sense", there needs to be a diverse number of influential institutions that channels some discourses at the expense of others (Harvey 2005: 40). This creates a need to look into the discourses occurring within think tanks, political parties, universities and – not least – the news media.

Neo-liberalization and the news media

Sean Phelan (2014) identifies two perspectives on the relationship between neo-liberalism and the media: a political economy and a cultural studies perspective. In a slightly simplified manner, one could summarize that "political economy studies focus on *structure*, [i.e.] the capitalist system, while cultural studies focus on *agency*: as the language of the system" (Jacobsson 2016: 2). Even though this thesis embarks from a cultural studies perspective by studying media discourse, it seems fruitful to link it with a political economy perspective in order to highlight how neo-liberal structural changes within news media production could be affecting the representations of the super-rich. The political economy perspective entails acknowledging how the rise of media conglomerates and an emphasis on maximizing profit could be affecting the media discourse, e.g. through neglecting coverage on social issues by instead focusing on "infotainment" that will appeal to advertisers and satisfy wealthy owners that themselves benefit from increasing inequality (Conboy 2006; Fenton 2011; Phelan 2014). McChesney (2001: 14) argues that it is precisely in the current "de-politization" of the masses that the commercial media system is important to the neo-liberal project, because "it [the news media] is singularly brilliant at generating the precise sort of bogus political culture that permits business domination to proceed without using a police state or facing effective popular resistance".

Granted, there is a danger that neo-liberalism becomes "the singular, grand narrative which provides an explanatory framework for the world's problems" (Freedman 2012: 40), which can lead to researchers neglecting "the more complex

and precise accounts of the agents, arguments and mechanisms" operating within every-day life activities (ibid. 2008: 37). Even though referring to neo-liberalism (similar to globalization, digitalization or any of the contemporary meta-narratives) runs the risk of simplifying the issue at hand, it arguably remains a significant explanatory tool. Thus, in order to acknowledge the different, complex and sometimes contradicting discourses that inhabit neo-liberalism, this thesis will henceforth instead refer to different neo-liberal discourses, or "neo-liberal logics" (Phelan 2014: 32), instead of using neo-liberalism as a singular mode of discourse.

The neo-liberalization of Sweden

Using Sweden as a case study on economic inequality might – at first glance – be perceived as an unexpected choice. After all, is Sweden not known worldwide for its strong welfare state legacy, rooted in social democratic ideals about redistributive socialism accompanied by a remarkable "passion for equality" (Kjærsgård 2015: 1)? It is striking how researchers regularly refer to the Swedish taxation model as a shining example of successfully reducing economic inequality (Rosanvallon 2013: 3; Stiglitz 2012: 127). However, as observed in the introduction, income inequality is currently growing faster in Sweden than in any other OECD country.[2] In fact, in 2015 Sweden actually hosted more billionaires per capita than any other country in the EU (Brinded 2015). The main factor behind the growing gap has been escalating capital incomes (Roine 2014: 31). This is indisputably a consequence of political decisions such as the removal of the inheritance tax (2004), the removal of the wealth tax (2007) and a significant lowering of the company taxation (today at 22 per cent). Even though Sweden remains one of the most equal OECD countries, these measures have resulted in claims that Sweden has been turned into a tax haven for the rich (Henrekson 2015: 173).

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[2] In 1999, 50 persons made it onto the list of Swedish billionaires that the business magazine *Veckans Affärer* composes annually. Their aggregated wealth amounted to a fifth of the Swedish GDP. In 2017 there were 184 individuals on the list, whose aggregated wealth amounted to around half of the Swedish GPD (*Veckans Affärer* 2017). According to a recent report (Allelin et. al, 2018), the 15 most wealthy business families in Sweden controlled companies with an amounted value of 4 935 million SEK in 2017. That is more than the Swedish GDP for the entire year (4 604 billion SEK).

The (un)deserving rich

Just as "rich" and "poor" essentially can be defined as moral categories (Hartley & Melrose 1999: 1), the question whether people should be seen as deserving or undeserving their wealth or poverty boils down to a question of morality. Using the concept of the (un)deserving rich not only allows the researcher to identify the actors who are perceived as part of the problem of inequality, but also the ones who ought to be a part of the solution (McCall 2013: 52). Building on Connor and Rowlingson (2011), I explore three broad criteria by which the rich might be judged deserving or undeserving: 1) *rewards* for hard work; 2) *incentives* to create wealth; 3) the *character* of the rich.

Rewarding hard work

The first argument justifies inequality on the basis of individual effort, where the rich may be seen as deserving their wealth if their fortune is created through hard and responsible work (Connor & Rowlingson 2011: 440). The language of merit and ability thus operates as a double-edged sword: while these rhetorics legitimize privileges as the reward of effort, they simultaneously pave the way for a discourse where poverty is legitimized as resulting from a *lack* of personal effort and hard work (Scott 1994: 157).

This argument raises at least two imperative questions. First, who gets to define and measure what constitutes as "hard work"? If, as a recent study suggests, Swedish CEOs earn 55 times the salary of an industrial worker (LO 2018) – is it fair to claim that the CEO is in fact working 55 times harder or doing work that is 55 times more important than the ones on the factory floor? Second, much of the wealth of today's rich is still due to inheritance or other forms of wealth accumulation that have more to do with social background than personal effort. According to Oxfam (2017), as much as one-third of the world's billionaire wealth is derived from inherited wealth. As Johnson and Reed (1996) laconically concluded over twenty years ago, the best way to become rich still seems to be to choose your parents wisely.

Incentives to create wealth that trickles-down

The second argument suggests that people need economic incentives to work hard, which in turn will create wealth that trickles-down to benefit the rest of

society (Connor & Rowlingson 2011: 444–445). However, most research suggests that the tax reductions that have followed in the footsteps of neo-liberalization have resulted in wealth trickling-up rather than down (Bauman 1998; Orton & Rowlingson 2007) In 2015, even the International Monetary Fund, one of the institutions that most eagerly have encouraged neoliberal economic reforms (Harvey 2005), released a report stating that trickle-down economics do not work in times when the income share of the top 20 percent increases (IMF 2015).

A benign character – philantrocapitalism

Finally, the third argument draws on the perception that the wealthy may be considered more deserving if they "behave more responsibly and generously" by giving something back to the community through philanthropy or charitable work (Connor & Rowlingson 2011: 446). However, even though the charity foundations set up by the super-rich undoubtedly have played a role in the fight against poverty it should be underscored that this manner of giving is ideologically charged. The concept of "philanthrocapitalism", originally coined with a positive connotation (Bishop & Greene 2008), has developed into a term for explaining how the philanthropy of the super-rich serves as a tool for promoting neo-liberal capitalism.

> The term "philanthrocapitalism" expresses the idea that *capitalism is or can be charitable in and of itself*. The claim is that capitalist mechanisms are superior to all others (especially the state) when it comes to not only creating economic but also human progress; […] that there is no conflict between the rich and the poor but rather that the rich are the poor's best and possibly only friend. (Thorup 2013: 556, italics in original)

Thorup further argues that philanthrocapitalism should not be regarded as an expression of extreme charity, but rather of absurd inequality. The increasing philanthropic ventures of the billionaires should not suggest that the super-rich are becoming more generous, rather, it is the growing gap between the rich and the poor that are forcing the super-rich to legitimize the current economic order by engaging in charitable giving (ibid.: 568). By celebrating the benign character of the super-rich, one simultaneously runs the risk of neglecting the de-politization of welfare policies that is taking place when individual billionaires increasingly want to decide who is worthy of financial support at the expense of elected politicians (Callahan 2017).

Visibility management and silence

Reversing Thompson: The struggle for invisibility

The emergence of the modern media has changed the relationship between visibility and power, and in the process blurred the boundaries between the public and the private (Thompson 1995: 135). On the one hand, this new society of self-disclosure enables the powerful to appear before the people on a never-before experienced scale. On the other, it has created new risks as the inability to fully control visibility in the media more easily can lead to public scandals (Thompson 2005: 42).

As with most research on powerful groups, Thompson is primarily concerned with the visibility management of the political elite. However, his thesis can fruitfully be applied to the economic elite as well. In a study of business content in the Swedish media conducted back in the early 1990s, Hvitfelt and Malmström (1990: 48, quoted in Grafström 2006: 4) argues that corporate leaders have "stepped into the limelight, alternatively been brought out by journalism". Yet, the visibility of the super-rich in the media has remained rather restricted. Bernhardtson (2013) shows how the Swedish business elite to great extent chooses to hide away from the media limelight by regularly refusing to speak to the press about their wealth. This does not refute Thompson's thesis (2005) that the "struggle for visibility" has come to be of great significance if one is to advance one's cause, take for instance the high visibility on social media pursued by contemporary terrorist groups (Mortensen 2018). However, I argue that the visibility management of the super-rich does challenge the often taken-for-granted notion that invisibility in the media necessarily confines one to obscurity. Unlike elected politicians, the super-rich do not depend on the support of the public opinion to maintain their power and, as such, they do not need to constantly remind the public about their agendas in order to attract voters. Thus, the visibility management of the super-rich could better be described as a *struggle for invisibility* where the ambition is to shed away from the dangers of public sphere as much as possible. This struggle could arguably be regarded as a strategic part of the self-chosen social disengagement from society that is characteristic among today's super-rich (Lansley 2006: 203).

The power of silence

Silence is "a rhetorical art that can be as powerful as the spoken or written word" (Glenn 2004: 9). History has shown that the *silencing* of certain topics or groups has been one of the most effective strategies in the wielding of power (Jaworski 1993; Clair 1998). Achino-Loeb argues that the broad consensus, needed in order to establish hegemony, is largely based on silence:

> [T]he road to overt ideological domination rests on a bedrock of silence running through different layers of suppression that […] rest on the groove of various self-interests ranging from linguistic continuity to economic and political hegemony. (Achino-Loeb 2006: 13–14)

Building on Taylor and Schröter (2018: 7), I ascribe silence to "individual speakers when they make a more conscious and intentional choice about what (not) to say – when they choose to say nothing, but instead could have said something". Silence is not only limited to the absence of speech; it can also manifest itself when a person avoids talking about a sensitive topic by instead talking about something else (Schröter 2013: 18). And just as invisibility in the media should not be solely seen as a symptom of powerlessness, a silent individual or group should not be equated with powerlessness. As stressed by Baker (2006: 19), "hegemonic discourse can be at its most powerful when it does not have to be invoked, because it is just taken for granted". Adopting this ideological perspective on silence (Clair 1998: 6) as a theoretical tool thus complements the analysis of how the news media responds to the visibility management of the super-rich.

Data gathering and methods

Sampling

The sample was chosen according to what Flyvbjerg (2001: 79) describes as an information-oriented selection, where the researcher aims to "maximize the utility of information" from the sample by selecting cases "on the basis of expectations about their informational content". In order to achieve this maximization, the ten billionaires who topped *Veckans Affärer*'s (2017) list of the wealthiest Swedes in 2017 were initially selected as cases. By figuring at the top of this well-known

annual ranking, these billionaires could be expected to draw the attention of the news media (Bernhardtson 2013: 139).

After noticing that four of the billionaires in the original sample came from the same family, three of them were replaced by three tech-billionaires in order to include billionaires who have made their fortunes in a variety of ways (e.g. through inheritance, retail trade, tech start-ups).[3] Furthermore, as it soon became obvious that quite a few other billionaires from *Veckans Affärer*'s list appeared in the same articles along with the original cast members of the study, a decision was made to also include these in the analysis.[4]

The empirical material for the present thesis consists of 152 pieces of journalistically produced material (i.e. opinion pieces, news articles, feature articles, items and lists) from 2017 published in Sweden's four largest daily newspapers[5]: *Dagens Nyheter* (*DN*)*, Aftonbladet (AB), Expressen* (*EX*) and *Svenska Dagbladet* (*SvD*).[6] The choice to focus solely on 2017 is motivated by the fact that the number of billionaires in Sweden reached a historical high point during that year (*Veckans Affärer* 2017), while concentrating on the largest newspapers is a choice made in order to maximize the discursive impact of the material (Kjærsgård 2015: 240). The selection further allows for a variety of journalistic and political profiles.[7] These differences suggest that different logics could be affecting how the

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[3] The final ten billionaires used as search terms were Ingvar Kamprad (owner of retail company IKEA), Stefan Persson (chairperson of clothing company H&M), Hans Rausing (former CEO of packing company Tetra Pak), Frederik Paulsen Jr (former CEO of Ferring Pharmaceuticals), Melker Schörling (founder of investment company Melker Schörling AB), Antonia Ax:son Johnson (former chairperson of Axel Johnson AB), Ane Mærsk Mc-Kinney Uggla (heiress to the Mærsk-fortune), Markus Persson (co-founder of video game developer and publisher Mojang), Daniel Ek (co-creator of music streaming service Spotify) and Niklas Zennström (co-creator of the telecommunication application software Skype).

[4] However, the analysis of these "non-original" billionaires was restricted to the articles that showed up when a member of the original 10-person sample was used as the search term in the media archive. No further search was conducted using the names of the non-original billionaires.

[5] The original sample consisted of 359 articles, but a vast majority were excluded on the basis of them being doublets or dealing exclusively with the billionaires businesses or in other ways being considered less irrelevant for the present project.

[6] Henceforth, "the news media" in the present thesis refers to these four outlets. It should, however, be acknowledged that left-leaning outlets within Swedish news media (e.g. smaller outlets such as *Dagens ETC*) are known for their critical approach towards the super-rich.

[7] Using the classification scheme from Larsen & Dejgaard (2013: 290), *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* are labeled as "newsstand tabloid press" while *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet* are labeled as "semi-serious broadsheets". Considering the political orientation, *Aftonbladet* is independent

super-rich are (if at all) represented in the different newspapers, which should provide the analysis with material representing "a broader journalistic logic" (Jacobsson 2016: 71).[8]

Critical discourse analysis and thematic coding

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) provides a fruitful methodological framework for the present study, considering that the approach is particularly concerned with deconstructing power relations through "addressing social wrongs in their descriptive aspects and possible ways of righting and mitigating them" (Fairclough 2010: 11). This approach defines discourse as a form of social practice with the aim of analyzing the dialectical relationship between news media language and the social context. CDA supplies the researcher with an extensive analytical toolbox for conducting a linguistic analysis that allows one to critically investigate *how* and *why* the text is designed in a certain way, i.e. what wider sociocultural processes the text is a part of (ibid. 1995: 202). Furthermore, the path from a strong welfare state towards an increasingly neo-liberal state that Sweden is currently walking along makes the country's billionaires an intriguing case to investigate using CDA, considering that the approach is particularly useful for studying ideological change (ibid. 1992: 90).

The project makes use of a selection of analytical tools that have been chosen based on their ability to help analyzing the ideological function of language in the news media's representations of the super-rich. These include *wording* and *vocabulary* (Fairclough 1992: 190; Richardson 2007: 47), *functionalization* and *identification* (van Leeuwen 2008: 42), *modalities* (Fairclough 1992: 158) and *metaphors* (ibid.: 194). Considering that what *is not* being said might say more about the values of a society than what *is* said (Huckin 2002: 348), particular emphasis has been devoted to identifying meaningful absences in the material through *comparisons* and *looking for "instabilities" within the data set* (Patricia von

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social democratic, *Svenska Dagbladet* conservative, while *Expressen* and *Dagens Nyheter* are independent liberal.

[8] It should be acknowledged that one of the four newspapers in the sample quantitatively stands out: 50 percent of the articles that were deemed relevant for the study were published in *Expressen*, placing the tabloid way ahead of *Svenska Dagbladet* (21 percent), *Aftonbladet* (16 percent) and *Dagens Nyheter* (13 percent). The defenders of the tabloid press could claim these quantitative results as an example of how these newspapers are "every bit as preoccupied with social differences […] as serious journalists" (Connell 1992: 82), and that these accounts can serves as "discursive gateways" (Dahlgren 2000: 314) for bridging the question of economic inequality to a broad audience.

Münchow 2018: 224). In order to argue for which social presentations that could have been present in the material, but for some reasons are left out, the researcher naturally has to be familiar with the social context for the study. In the case of Sweden, a non-mentioning of the growing economic inequality in the representations of the super-rich could arguably be seen as a meaningful absence. Together, these tools serve to analyze to what extent the *communicative event* (a news article) serves to challenge or reproduce the *order of discourse* by identifying whether any hegemonic struggles are taking place between different discourses in the material (Fairclough 1995: 56).

The coding of the material was conducted along the lines of a three-phase thematic content analysis (Rivas 2012: 367). After an extensive process, and with the help of the analytical tools from CDA, three themes that together seemed to cover most of the relevant findings emerged. Even though there was the option of including more themes (e.g. "The super-rich behave like us"), I chose to limit the number of topics in order to perform a deeper analysis of the ones included. The three themes – *The struggle for invisibility*; *Crumbs from the rich man's table*; and *The VIP-club* – form the structure of the upcoming analysis.

The struggle for invisibility

On October 4th, *Expressen* runs a story headlined "Stefan Persson's *unknown life* as English pub owner".[9] The article tells the reader that the owner of H&M *in silence* has built a business empire in Ramsbury, a rural town outside London where his family owns a manor. It is further stressed that *not much is known* about Persson's *unknown* business empire, and that *few outsiders* seem to be aware that the local pub is owned by one of the richest persons in the world (*EX* 2017-10-04b).

The article is rather representative for how the news media – not just *Expressen* – sell stories about the super-rich to the public. When scanning the vocabulary of the material, one encounters an abundance of words that serves to discursively construct the super-rich as a secret community that prefers to stay silently away from the media limelight. Below follows a brief extract of recurring words and phrases:

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[9] All quotes have been translated by the author. Italics (used for emphasizing key words and phrases) are added by the author unless explicitly specified otherwise.

Hidden; Mythical; In silence; Chosen to remain anonymous; Hardly gives interviews; The unknown heiress; Sliding into [something] in silence; Behind the scenery; Known for keeping a low profile; Lives discretely; In the dark; Stays in the background; Very low-key

These words and phrases frequently occur in the headlines, which further underlines the element of secrecy as a major selling point for the news media due to its prominent foregrounding (Fairclough 1992: 83). This is hardly a surprising finding, considering that revealing details from the private lives of celebrities has long been a feature in the news media – especially in the tabloids (Turner 2004: 71–86). However, several researchers have argued that the supply of sensationalist stories has accelerated as part of an ongoing tabloidization of the news media (Gripsrud 2000; Conboy 2006: 208). As noted in the theoretical section, this development has been linked to the commercialization of the news that has increased as neo-liberal discourses have become increasingly hegemonic.

This chapter will henceforth not be concerned with tabloidization. Instead, its focus will be on analyzing the super-rich struggle for invisibility and the news media's discursive representation of this visibility management in relation to neo-liberalization.

"It is a no winner" – The silence of the super-rich

The main reason that the news media are able to continuously utilize the secrecy of the super-rich as a selling point is rather simple: the super-rich rarely talk to the media. Even though the sample for this study consisted of 152 articles, only seven of these contained an original interview with a billionaire.

How can we interpret this absence of speech? The wealthy business owners in Bernhardtson's interview study (2013) generally conceived the public sphere as a threatening place that they prefer to stay out of. Hence, the relationship with media publicity is described as a problem. The owners explained their reluctance to answer questions about their wealth and personal lives by arguing that talking about these issues is dangerous as it increases the risk of kidnapping. They also claimed that the general public does not have an understanding for the wealthy, and thus it is better to remain silent. Bernhardtson critiques this self-victimization by arguing that the owners' choice to only talk about their wealth in terms of "outside threats" discursively shifts the conversation away from the wealth itself.

The super-rich's fear of the public sphere is highlighted in a four-page story in *Aftonbladet* (2017-11-05) under the banner "The lives of the rich". The article argues that growing economic inequality has made the rich all the more scared of their surroundings. The reporter interviews the founder of a security company, who says that they provide up to fifty instructions to their wealthy costumers for how to minimize the danger of being robbed or kidnapped. The article suggests that the super-rich would mentally feel better if economic inequality were to decrease, an argument that also has been put forward by researchers (Doring 2010; Payne 2017). However, this account stands out and mostly serves to highlight the absence of problematization that characterizes the sample as a whole.

In one of the rare first-hand interviews in the sample, count and financier Gustaf Douglas talks to *Expressen* about his life. When the reporter steers the conversation onto Douglas' two sons (both of whom are also billionaires), Douglas attempts to explain why the sons refuse to talk to the news media:

> – Carl and Erik absolutely do not want to meet, says Gustaf Douglas.
> **Why is that?**
> – Because they do not see… *It is a no winner* [eng. in original]. I could also have said that, but one should not throw a rotten fish in someone's face before you have spoken to them, he says. (*EX* 2017-07-23a)

So the explanation is that "It is a no winner" – neither the billionaire, the news media nor the public would benefit from more media visibility of the super-rich. Douglas' statement could surely be problematized with a follow-up question, as comments like this obstacle any further discussion on the silence of the super-rich. This privilege of choosing whether to remain silent or invisible in the news media further entails the power of maintaining silence over certain topics, which serves as an effective way of preserving the status quo (Jaworski 1993: 110; Bernhardtson 2013: 264). In other words, silence operates as a strategic tool in the struggle for maintaining certain discourses in hegemony. Considering that an "explicit assertion always leaves the door open for disagreement" (von Münchow 2018: 227), remaining silent signifies that one does not fear that one's status (e.g. as deservingly rich) is threatened to the level where it needs to be to constantly reasserted.

The silence of the super-rich can thus be interpreted as an attempt to discursively shift the conversation away from the moral question of wealth possession. When the super-rich refuse to take part in the public sphere, they are contributing to the de-politization of economic inequality that Harvey (2005) identifies as one of the

main characteristics of neo-liberalization. When the journalist settles for vague explanations such as "it is a no winner", it brings the moral discussion of wealth to what Bernhardtson (2013: 228) calls "a discursive end". This would not be the case if the reporter responded by questioning whether it is true that there really are "no winners" (or no losers) in this struggle for invisibility.

Another example of this de-politization is *Expressen*'s interview with Ikea-founder Ingvar Kamprad's personal advisor Göran Grosskopf. Ingvar Kamprad's three sons have hardly given any interviews to the press, a decision that Grosskopf explains the following way:

> He does not think that they [the sons] will ever be public figures – not even after Ingvar Kamprad has passed away.
> – They have *chosen* to be *shy* and *anonymous* in order to be able to live *a normal life* like *you and me*, and to *avoid getting recognized* in the street. It is their *choice*, he says. (*EX* 2017-10-04a)

Here the privilege of *choosing* ones visibility is once again prevalent. Moreover, Grosskopf's reference to silence as a way of allowing for a *normal* life seems worthy of problematization. According to *Veckans Affärer*'s (2017) latest numbers, the three brothers are estimated to be worth 9 billion SEK each. The question that begs to be asked is whether any person this wealthy could be said to live a normal life. When the reporter does not problematize this argument, it serves to further de-politicize the reality of economic inequality according to neo-liberal logics. Furthermore, talking in such generalizing terms as *you and me* obfuscates the profoundly different economic realities that people live under.

"We kindly refrain from answering" – Searching for the super-rich

According to Strömbäck (2009: 147), content analysis of the news media can never account for what has occurred beyond the publicized story, i.e. which sources have remained anonymous and which ones the journalists disregarded in the final product. However, parts of the production process can still be traced in the material. In fact, *Expressen*'s articles about the super-rich turned out to include several detailed accounts of how the journalists try to get in contact with the super-rich. This is where one needs to highlight the discursive practice of media production (Fairclough 1995).

An article about Biltema's founder Sten-Åke Lindholm raises the question whether the complex ownership structure of the company is part of an attempt to decrease taxation. The piece concludes with the following statement:

> Expressen has attempted to reach Sten-Åke Lindholm for an interview and has even, on appeal from Biltema's press officer Henrik Jarl, sent questions via e-mail.
> The questions have, among other things, concerned the ownership structure, taxation advantages and the grandchild who will be taking over the power.
> But, six days after the e-mail has been sent, Biltema chooses not to answer any of the questions. In his answer, Henrik Jarl writes: "We kindly refrain from answering the questions". (*EX* 2017-09-12)

In the run-up to Stefan Persson's 70th birthday, *Expressen* runs a story that – while mostly written in a positive tone – brings up accusations regarding child labor that have been aimed towards H&M. The reporter has tried to contact Stefan Persson for a comment on these accusations, but according to H&M's press office, Persson is "out travelling and is therefore sadly not able to answer your questions" (*EX* 2017–10–03b). Later in the same article, the reporter further describes the problems with finding sources for the article:

> No one wants to say anything "needlessly" about the richest man in Sweden and his family.
> When we call a person who for a long time has collaborated with H&M and the Perssons and ask whether the person wants to say anything for Stefan Persson's 70th birthday, the question is rejected.
> The person, who otherwise is known for talking openly to the media, says "they are so secret" and ends the conversation. (ibid.)

The silence of the super-rich is not always invisible and the news media does – at least occasionally – try to get in contact with them. However, these attempts never seem to be followed up. If *Expressen* thought that the question of Biltema's ownership structure or the child labor accusations against H&M were truly relevant, one could assume that they would keep writing articles questioning this silence until the super-rich felt pressured enough to defend themselves in the media. Timothy Cook (2005: 102) argues that a negotiation of newsworthiness is always taking place between the sources and the news media, where the two parties often have different opinions regarding what counts as newsworthy. Since the super-rich regard their wealth and personal consumption as private matters, they logically do not see any reason to talk about these matters in the media.

Nevertheless, the news media has the final word in deciding which elements will be included in the story (ibid.: 105; Strömbäck 2009: 152). What the present study shows is that even though the silence of the super-rich occasionally is highlighted, it is seldom problematized or followed up in any way. Thus, the super-rich's struggle for invisibility through silence seems to be working efficiently in halting the moral debate about wealth possession.

On June 22nd, *Aftonbladet* publishes a rewrite based on an article in the left-magazine *ETC* that highlights "how much, or rather how little" some of the richest Swedes pay in taxes as a proportion of their wealth. The article lists a number of billionaires but pays particular attention to Antonia Ax:son Johnson, who despite making 5.4 million SEK per month only pays 18 percent in taxes. *ETC* has interviewed a cashier at Willys – a supermarket chain that Ax:son Johnson's family owns – who says that the fact that she pays a higher percentage than the billionaire-owner "pisses her off". The article concludes with stating that ETC has unsuccessfully tried to reach Antonia Ax:son Johnson for a comment (*AB* 2017-06-22).

Even though *Aftonbladet* recalls the story of Ax:son Johnson's taxation on a few occasions during the upcoming weeks (2017-06-23; 2017-06-26; 2017-07-03), the newspaper makes no visible attempt at forcing her to break her silence.[10] If the issue of her taxation really was perceived as a vital matter, surely the news media would not stop until the billionaire felt the need to go out and defend herself. Now, all she has to do is remain silent and wait until the story fades out. The next time Ax:son Johnson personally appears in the empirical material, it is in the form of a flattering portrait that emphasizes her charitable giving (*SvD* 2017-07-11). One can make an intriguing comparison with the silence of politicians, who are "picked apart" (Jaworski 1993: 106) when refusing to talk to the press, because this refusal almost always creates an aura of *uncertainty*, *passivity* and *relinquishment* (Brummett 1980: 289). Similar expectations on the super-rich in the present thesis seemingly do not exist.

Rather than publishing articles criticizing the super-rich for their refusal to talk, the response of the news media is usually either to talk to (often anonymous) sources that know the billionaire or to simply use quotes and photos from old interviews. This serves to further construct the super-rich as mythical beings that seldom graces us with their presence. So when they do choose to make a physical

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[10] *Aftonbladet* is the only news media in the sample that chooses to highlight the story (at least in printed form). Considering that *Aftonbladet* is the only social democratic newspaper in the sample, this could be regarded as an expected finding.

appearance, the news media makes the most of the event. *Expressen*'s interview with the Norwegian hotel mogul Petter Stordalen is the most extreme example of this, seeing as it even contains an entire fact box entitled "This is how the meeting was":

> Petter is incredibly charismatic, but not shallow. On the opposite, he takes the questions seriously and seems genuinely interested in both his co-workers and us from Expressen. He generously stretches the duration of the interview to twice the length that was promised. (*EX* 2017-05-19).

This flattering description resembles Thompson's (1995: 124) depiction of how powerful elites – before the emergence of the mass media – used to limit their physical appearance to a few staged events where the masses were allowed to gaze upon them. In between, they successfully hide away from the limelight. The fact that the super-rich often choose to remain silent even when critique is posed against them arguably goes to show how little they worry that the silence will have negative consequences for them. To recall Gans' (2004) famous metaphor regarding the dance between journalists and sources: The news media may have the last word in their tango with the super-rich – but it seems rather obvious that their partner is leading the dance.

Crumbs from the rich man's table

Ljungby is a rural town of 15 000 people, located in the southwestern part of Småland, a 45-minute drive from Ingvar Kamprad's estate in Älmhult. The town's emergency hospital is one of the smallest in the area: whereas most emergency hospitals operate with two CT-scanners (used in emergencies when a person has had a stroke), Ljungby only has one. When the hospital requests a second scanner from the county council, the request is turned down. Chief physician Anders Ebbesen chooses to contact Ingvar Kamprad, who "more or less offhand" agrees to personally donate the 4.5 millions needed to purchase the scanner. On December 8th, *Expressen* headlines: "The hospital is saved by Kamprad". Fredrik Larsson, operations manager for functional medicine at the county, explains to the journalist how "the device saves lives". Towards the end of the article, Larsson adds: "State and county do not have endless resources. When we ask for help and reach out our hand, it is amazing that Ingvar Kamprad is kind enough to grab it with a promise of the money that is needed" (*EX* 2017-12-08).

At first glance, this appears to be nothing but a sunshine story. When the authorities' resources were insufficient, a local billionaire benignly stepped in with the money needed to purchase a device that potentially will save many lives. Why should the news media not unanimously celebrate Kamprad for his generous donation? This chapter will problematize that question by arguing that the mainstream news media's reporting on the philanthropic character of the super-rich runs the risk of legitimizing economic inequality and a neo-liberal individualization of welfare redistribution.

"With the money I can spare" – The super-rich as philanthropists

Thorup (2013: 567) describes billionaire philanthropy as "one of the most high-profile and mediatized expressions of philanthrocapitalism". Indeed, the philanthropic ventures of the super-rich turned out to be a quite often-recurring element in the Swedish mainstream news media as well. A total of 29 articles that mentions some form of charitable giving (including sponsorships) were found in the sample, *Expressen* once again dominating the content with almost two-thirds of the articles. Hans K. Rausing (including other family members) and Ingvar Kamprad are the two billionaires who most frequently are associated with donating money. In the case of Hans K. Rausing, philanthropy is clearly represented as a sign of his rehabilitation after years of drug-abuse: "Free from drugs and with a new wife by his side, the Tetra Pak-billionaire has devoted his new life to philanthropy" (*EX* 2017-06-25). Throughout the year, *Expressen* writes a series of articles where this mantra is repeated:

> *A large share* of the philanthropist Hans Rausing's money has gone to charity. (*EX* 2017-01-09)

> British Daily Mail has previously written that he is '*extremely generous*' (*EX* 2017-08-12)

> *It is not uncommon* that they run their own charities that donate *large sums* to selected purposes. (*EX* 2017-08-20)

As emphasized in the italics, the degree of affinity (Fairclough 1992: 158) that accompanies *Expressen*'s statements leaves the audience with some gaps to fill in. First of all, what is to be regarded as "a large sum" of money? *Expressen* does not supply the readers with any substantial amount of how much money Hans K. Rausing actually has donated, nor how regularly these donations occur. The

closest we get is an article referring to the *Daily Mail*, which claims to have revealed that Rausing's charity has donated "some ten millions" to a charity run by Prince William and Prince Harry (*EX* 2017-06-25). This absence of information is imperative to highlight, because it exemplifies the lack of perspective that is typical in the reporting on the super-rich's donations. "Some ten millions" of course comes off as a huge amount of money, but one has to consider that Hans K. Rausing is estimated to be worth approximately 2.6 billion SEK (*Veckans Affärer* 2017). Previous studies have shown that the rich actually pay less to charity, as a proportion of their income, compared to those on lower incomes (Breeze 2006; Gose 2012). When the news just report on "large sums" or refer to the super-rich as "extremely generous", it may arguably serve to legitimize the super-rich as deserving their wealth due to their presumed charitable character (Connor & Rowlingson 2011). Even though the "sacrifice" they are making with their contribution might proportionally be rather insignificant.

It is also striking how the articles referring to the Rausing family as philanthropists also describe their luxurious residences. Sigrid Rausing's house, which she bought for 200 million SEK, is described as "something as rare as a mansion in the center of London" (*EX* 2017-08-20). One of the articles about Hans K. Rausing's is headlined "Here Rausing is building his new life in luxury", and describes how Rausing has bought a new place in London for 380 million SEK (paid in cash) after previously having resided in a mansion that included a cinema auditorium, a ballroom, a garage for six cars and a library (*EX* 2017-01-09). Since this luxurious consumption is not problematized in the articles, one can argue that the mentioning of philanthropy serves to legitimize the huge amount of money that the super-rich spend on themselves. Thorup refers back to Thorstein Veblen's (1899) writings on the "conspicuous consumption" of the leisure class, but advocates that the growing economic inequality has made it harder for the wealthy to morally defend their consumption of luxury items. Thus, "the 'conspicuous consumption' must now be supplemented by conspicuous non-consumption in the form of charity in order for the consumption to be both legitimate and enjoyable" (Thorup 2013: 568). As long as they occasionally give something back to the community – and attract the news media's attention – the super-rich are free to continue their lavish spending without being questioned. Thus, the Swedish mainstream news media's way of discursively representing the super-rich as "pursuing the public good" (Edwards 2008: 82) may implicitly serve to legitimize the dominating neo-liberal economic policies that allow the billionaires to grow ever richer.

Figure 1.
Ingvar Kamprad visiting a retirement home in Älmhult (Screenshot from Expressen 2017-02-07, photo: Henrik Palmberg/Älmhults kommun).

Ingvar Kamprad explains his philanthropic awakening in a way similar to Rausing. Kamprad describes how, he, as a young man spent his money to attract women, but later in life decided that he would "try to help troubled people with the money I can spare" (*EX* 2017-04-30). The articles about Ingvar Kamprad's philanthropy provide more specific accounts regarding the size of his donations – but the discursive representation of the IKEA-billionaire is even more glorifying compared to the Rausing family. This could be because Kamprad's donations mostly go to the elderly. A project centered on creating activities for senior citizens results in the headlines "Kamprad gives 5 millions – wants to reduce loneliness" (*EX* 2017-02-07) and "Kamprad gives millions to elderly" (*AB* 2017-02-08). The former article displays a picture of Kamprad standing among senior citizens in a retirement home, spreading his arms in an almost Jesus-like manner (Figure 1). The image can showcase an ongoing trend where it is no longer enough to just give lavishly – the super-rich need to get "personally involved in the charitable acts" and "go out [and] feel a moral obligation and an emotional attachment to the ones getting the charity" (Thorup 2013: 567). The news media's representation of Kamprad as a billionaire who "feel[s], engage[s] and participate[s]" (ibid.) is a recurring theme throughout the articles:

– Ingvar is *very active* and *passionate* about this. (*EX* 2017-02-07)

– Ingvar is an amazing person and when he heard our proposal, I looked at him and saw that this was something he wanted to do. There really was *a flash of lightning in his eyes*. (*EX* 2017-05-11)

The commitment in Silviabo is *highly personal* for him.
– He thinks that care for the elderly and life quality for the elderly is important, she says. (*AB* 2017-05-14)

The news media's representation of Kamprad's giving echoes of Kendall's "admiration frame", where the media serves as "a public relations outlet for the wealthy, helping to smooth the rough edges of their business dealings and (sometimes) unscrupulous acts by letting others know about their good deeds" (Kendall 2011: 34). The functionalization (van Leeuwen 2008: 42) of the super-rich in the articles raises the question why this representation (philanthropist) has been chosen over other available ones (e.g. capitalist). This choice could signify how the media text implicitly is working ideologically (Fairclough 1995: 14–15), in this case reproducing a neo-liberal logic.

Saving the poor – Three-step neo-liberalization

To fully scrutinize the media's discursive representations of Kamprad's giving, one has to turn to the larger social context and ask what is absent in the articles. For one, there is no mentioning of the tax-cuts that has made the super-rich increasingly wealthy. When the media choose to admire Kamprad for his charitable giving without contextualizing it within the neo-liberal economic policies that have resulted in increasing economic inequality, the nature of philanthropy as an expression of "absurd inequality" (Thorup 2013: 568) becomes sidelined. This is especially important to acknowledge since the super-rich often have supported these reforms, for instance in 1997 when a number of Swedish billionaires lead by H&M's Stefan Persson threatened to leave the country if the government did not abolish the wealth tax (Sandberg 2017).

One could conceive this form of neo-liberalization as a three-step process. First, the super-rich demands tax-cuts from the government. Second, this leads to a weakening of the welfare state. Third, when the government no longer can supply enough welfare, the now increasingly wealthy super-rich step in to "save the poor" (e.g., by purchasing a new CT-scanner). Callahan proposes that:

> It's hardly far-fetched to think we've witnessed a brilliant power grab: First, the wealthy helped knock out government. Now, they're taking more direct charge of society themselves, using philanthropy as a tool. (Callahan 2017: 285)

Horvath and Powell (2016: 121) argue that many private philanthropic actions contain "an implicit critique of the state, either with a disdain for its bureaucracy or a larger sense that government has become too cumbersome or slow to come up with new solutions". When *Expressen* emotionally describes the hospital in Ljungby as a "smaller hospital that struggles in the shadow of the larger care units" and portrays how the county council has failed to grant their request for a new scanner, it is arguably an implicit critique of the local government. Other times, the critique is rather explicit. This is not least the case when *Svenska Dagbladet* interviews Antonia Ax:son Johnson after the billionaire has promised to donate 50 million SEK to Stockholm School of Economics. Ax:son Johnson says that the decreasing respect for facts, knowledge and the media worries her. According to her, the solution to these problems is to be derived from the world of business:

> She is convinced that neither politicians nor international organizations will solve the planet's big questions. This conviction has been strengthened after Donald Trump was elected President and chose to withdraw the USA from the Paris Agreement against climate change.
> – It is definitely the corporations that can be the greatest driving force for change. (*SvD* 2017-07-11)

This is where one starts to arrive at the core of how philantrocapitalist discourses operates as part of the neo-liberalization of society. The super-rich do not necessarily oppose giving something back to the community – but many of them want to *individually* decide where their money is going. The state is dismissed as being unable to live up to the challenges and thus it is up to the corporations to save the planet through efficient and "anti-political problem-solving" (Thorup 2013: 568). There is something inherently ironic in that Ax:son Johnson uses Donald Trump to exemplify the shortcomings of the political system, considering that Trump is a businessman who has spent his entire life within the corporate sector. By claiming to represent the good in the battle for a brighter future, the moral question of economic inequality is once again being obfuscated.

The news media's representation of philantrocapitalism could ideally serve as a gateway to criticizing the economic inequalities that exists in contemporary Sweden. Instead, the news media regularly chooses to paint flattering portraits of benign individuals. This tendency to emphasize the charitable character of the

super-rich may "serve to divert attention from structural accounts of society and change" (Connor & Rowlingson 2011: 446). Edwards argues that we need to ask ourselves whether the existing inequalities are better fought by increasing philanthropy or by changing the current economic system. We can either opt for more "meaningful redistribution" or hope for "larger crumbs from the rich man's table" (Edwards 2008: 59).

The VIP club

While the news media do represent the super-rich as a privileged group, the overarching lack of explanatory perspectives and critiques contributes to naturalizing the current spectra of economic inequality. This argument will be developed throughout three sections: *comparison*, *socializing* and *inheritance and succession*.

Two billion hot dogs – Comparison

One of the most featured genres in the material is the top list. These lists work from a few different perspectives: The wealthiest Swedes (*AB* 2017-08-11a); the wealthiest aristocrats (*EX* 2017-07-25); the Swedes with the highest incomes (*DN* 2017-01-01) and the women with the highest incomes (*EX* 2017-12-17). Other articles in the sample refer more loosely to top lists without actually publishing the full ranking. This is not least the case in articles presenting which Swedes have made it onto global rankings of the wealthiest people on the planet. Here, the super-rich are explicitly referred to as *Swedish*, e.g. in terms of "*Sweden's* foremost representative on the list" (*SvD* 2017-04-24) or "Two *Swedes* amongst the world's 50 richest" (*SvD* 2017-02-12). This identification turns the super-rich into representatives for Sweden in a similar way as, for instance, Swedes figuring on the world ranking in tennis.

Speaking of tennis – it is striking how frequently the news media adopts metaphors from the world of sports when presenting the lists. *Dagens Nyheter* (2017-01-01) describes how Ane Uggla has "knocked out" the Swedish big shots on the stock exchange, and how she is "sailing high above the competition" in the "league of income". *Expressen* (2017-03-28) describes how 31 Swedes have "qualified for" Forbes world ranking, and that Ingvar Kamprad has been "dropped" from the list that is currently "topped" by Bill Gates. These metaphors serve to construct wealth creation as a game played between the super-rich. This

way of playfully referring to extreme wealth as a competition amongst the super-rich serves to obscure the full spectre of growing economic inequality, considering that "the causes of poverty cannot be separated from the causes of wealth" (Scott 1994: 18).

Hartley and Melrose (1999: 11–12) argue that a main reason as to why economic inequality persists is that people only have limited awareness regarding the magnitude of inequality. When the news media report on the wealth of the super-rich, the numbers are usually just reported in a neutral way without any comparative perspectives. On the few occasions when the news media actually attempts to put the wealth of the super-rich into perspective, it is partly done in a somewhat humorous way:

> Sten-Åke Lindholm is today worth 11 billion [Swedish] krona. For 11 billion krona you can buy 2.2 billion Biltema-hotdogs. If you put the hotdogs in a row, they would be able to reach 11 laps around the globe. (*EX* 2017-09-12)

> This is what he [Ingvar Kamprad] can afford to buy:
> – 59,5 Hallandsås Tunnels
> – 436 666 Tesla Model S
> – 62 380 952 381 liters of milk
> – 8 175 500 000 7,3 Big Mac-menus
> (*AB* 2017-08-11a)

Even though these examples do highlight the absurdity of the billionaires' wealth, using hot dogs and Big Macs as examples hardly makes the inequality gap more tangible. More comprehensive comparisons do occur in the material as well, for instance accounts that the amounted wealth of the 178 Swedish billionaires is "more than twice the size of the Swedish state budget in 2017" (*AB* 2017-08-11a) or that the amounted wealth of the thirteen richest aristocrats amounts to "slightly more than half the size of the annual cost for Swedish health care" (*EX* 2017-07-23b). This notwithstanding, the extreme wealth is still not compared to the incomes and assets of, say, an average working-class citizen. The wealth may be depicted as "breathtaking" (ibid.) or "implausible" (*DN* 2017-01-01), but these descriptions still do not problematize inequality or explicitly question whether the super-rich deserve their wealth.

The frequent recurrence of top lists also exemplifies how economic inequality is discursively represented as an individual concern. They function as a display window for the wealthiest individuals who are primarily compared with other

wealthy ones. This "reinterpretation of economic inequality from a collective experience to an individual" is one of the central changes that occur when a society is in a state of neo-liberalization (Mau 2015: 18). Instead of comparing themselves to the ones who clean their houses, the affluent are comparing themselves to each other (Doring 2010: 125).

Nonetheless, there are still some articles that are critical towards the super-rich and growing economic inequality. A review of a new book[11] about the 15 richest families in Sweden is bombastically headlined "Unbridled flannel for the economic upper class" (*SvD* 2017-11-05). The reviewer laments that the book only supplies "indolent Wikipedia-presentations" that glorifies the super-rich while ignoring all instances where they have been subjected to criticism. The review further highlights the need to represent the super-rich in relation to economic inequality:

> When writing a book about the richest families in Sweden in 2017, paying no attention whatsoever to the fact that economic inequality has gotten out of hand during the last decades is as hard to defend as writing a book about the world's largest oil corporations without mentioning how they affect the environment. (ibid.)

The reporter in *Aftonbladet* (2017-11-05) contemplates in his article how "the development within society is often a slow process, imperceptible as we are living in the middle of the change". He argues that there exists a breaking point where a society can no longer stand more inequality. Bypassing this point will result in the collapse of solidarity. A set of articles also criticize the super-rich for dodging taxes, for instance an opinion piece in *Svenska Dagbladet* (2017-11-25) where it is described how Ingvar Kamprad, dubbed the "The master of tax planning", allowed a "horde of solicitors" to build "a veritable Scrooge McDuck-vault" around his money.

However, despite these scattered critical accounts, the news media do not evaluate any concrete solutions as to how inequality should be reduced – besides encouraging the super-rich to pay their taxes. This once again boils down the question of economic inequality to a neo-liberalized question of *individual* responsibility, not a question of collective action (Mau 2015). If one holds that the role of news media indeed should not only be to identify problems, but also explore and value solutions to them (Champlin & Knoedler 2008: 136), it is

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[11] Ström, A. (2017). *Svenska mäktigaste familjer*. Stockholm: Lind & Co.

problematic that the Swedish news media rarely moves beyond merely stating the problem of economic inequality. Discourses that either ignore the gap or frame it as an individual problem appear to be enjoying the upper hand against discourses stressing solidarity through redistribution of wealth.

The financial elite - Socializing

Even though discourses constructing economic inequality as an individual concern are dominating the hegemonic struggle, this does not mean that the super-rich are exclusively referred to in individualized terms. On several occasions, the news media address them in collective terms such as "the economic overclass"; "the economic elite"; "the financial elite"; "the business elite"; and "a power group". This echoes Kjærsgård's (2015) study, where "the rich" in Sweden were to a much greater extent referred to as a "power elite" by the news media compared to their Danish counterparts. This representation of the super-rich as a group separate from the middle class is to be expected, considering the historical political economy of Sweden as a class society (ibid.: 5).

In the material, the connection between the super-rich is narrated in roughly three ways: 1) red carpet-articles about weddings and parties where the elite socialize with each other 2) articles describing the friendship between the super-rich 3) articles mentioning how the super-rich function as board members of each other's companies.[12] Throughout these categories, the private and professional networks amongst the super-rich are hardly problematized.

This absence is problematic from two perspectives. First, one could question why there does not exist a critical debate regarding the potential impacts these elite networks have on the workings of democracy. The more powerful (and wealthy) the elites become, "the greater the danger that they undermine the democratic process" (Lansley 2006: 142). The super-rich might be described as belonging to a powerful elite, but the news media are seemingly more interested in gazing at the spectacle of celebrity friendships instead of scrutinizing the 'elite'. In this regard, the news media can contribute to manufacturing consent for the powerful by delivering entertainment that serves to divert the public from the political dimension of inequality (Herman & Chomsky 1988: xi).

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[12] The articles within the first two categories are almost exclusively from *Expressen*, while the last category also includes articles from *Svenska Dagbladet* and *Dagens Nyheter*.

Second, the super-rich's choice to socialize amongst each other could be regarded as part of their withdrawal into a "private" world where their participation in the public sphere becomes limited (Scott 1994: 154). While the term "social exclusion" is most often used to describe the effects of poverty (Lansley 2006: 203), we can also speak of a voluntary self-exclusion where the wealthy choose to socially and physically isolate themselves (Barry 1998; Bauman 1998; Giddens 1998). Daniel Doring argues that the super-rich have become the most segregated group in contemporary society as a result of escapism from the moral dilemma of vast economic inequality. Surrounding themselves with their own peers allows the super-rich to escape into a fantasy world where they are "over-taxed, much aligned and misunderstood" (Doring 2010: 133). Divorced from the experience of "ordinary life", the risk is that the super-rich lose their sense of solidarity with the society that enabled them to build their wealth (Lansley 2006: 214). The exclusive networks in combination with the super-rich's silence in the press contribute to a social disengagement from society as part of what has been described as "the revolt of the elites" (Lasch 1995). Considering that this behavior has the potential of trickling down to the rest of the population, one could question why the news media do not problematize the existence of these social circles.

Passing the torch – Inheritance and succession

Scholars arguing for why many of today's super-rich do not deserve their wealth tend to point out that a large proportion of the super-rich have earned their wealth through inheritance, which hardly can be seen as compatible with the meritocratic (and neo-liberal) rhetorics of hard work, free competition and merit (Lansley 2006: 208; Connor & Rowlingson 2011: 440). Logically, inheritance and succession pose a legitimacy problem for wealthy families wishing to pass the torch on to the next generation. Hence, the ideals of the family business have to be adjusted to the "hegemonic ideals" of the market (Pedroso de Lima 2000: 41).

When discursively representing inheritance and succession, the news media operates with an array of metaphors to describe these processes:

> Advancing one's position; Accepting more responsibility; Taking one step up; Changing of the guard; Handing over the baton; Taking over; Filling the gap; Taking the lead.

Only on a few occasions do the news media actually use the word "inheritance" to describe how power is passed on from one generation to the next (see *EX* 2017-

07-23a). By instead opting to use metaphors, the controversy surrounding the word "inheritance" is bypassed and the change-of-generation becomes naturalized as a positive process. This is further established by phrases expressing a high degree of affinity, such as "*It is not strange* that Märta and Sofia Schörling enter several of the Schörling-sphere's boards" (*SvD* 2017-07-02) and "Christina Stenbeck was *the natural* heir to the throne" (*AB* 2017-07-24). These metaphors and modal choices serve to "reduce the complexity" (Fairclough 1992: 196) regarding the issue of inheritance.

Instead of 'inheritance', the use of 'long-sightedness' arguably advocates that family businesses, made from "flesh and blood", are more reliable than other companies due to their "long-sightedness, experience and drive" (*SvD* 2017-08-28).[13] "Long-sightedness" also occurred in Bernhardtson's (2013: 230) interview study with business owners, suggesting that super-rich prefer this wording to be used instead of the more controversially charged "inheritance". The news media have seemingly adopted the discourse, thus contributing to legitimizing the process of inheriting wealth.

The word "Long-sightedness" is found mostly in *Svenska Dagbladet*, which should not be surprising considering its conservative profile. Many of these articles further describe the competence of the successors, arguing that they possess the right qualities and experience to take over the company:

> Many of the children to these company leaders *have been fed* with this at the dinner table. (*SvD* 2017-03-30a).

> Rune Andersson, Melker Schörling and Fredrik Lundberg *have systematically educated* the new generation. (*SvD* 2017-03-30b)

> She [Louise Lindh] knows the company well, has *a solid experience* and *knowledge*, as well as a high level of energy. (*EX* 2017-05-14a).

It is here one finds the intersection between the neo-liberal ideas of market rationality and the super-rich families desire to hang on to their wealth. In order to legitimate the succession, the new generation today needs to fulfill the

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[13] A counter-argument is that "long-sightedness" instead could be referring to the fact that some big family companies are not launched on the stock market, which makes them less dependent on delivering positive results on a quarterly-basis. However, considering that long-sightedness is used to describe the succession within companies such as H&M and Melker Schörling – who have been on the stock exchange – the term arguably does not only signify the advantages of being off-exchange.

meritocratic criteria by appearing as the most competent people to lead the company into the future. However, claiming that family members are recruited to the top of company under the principles of equal opportunity is dubiously a fair conclusion (Pedroso da Lima 2000). Besides passing on knowledge that is learned inside the family, the significant capital of the wealthy gives them access to the most prestigious schools. Due to the restrained access to these exclusive social and relational capitals, the family "guarantee(s) their member's access to high managerial positions and, thus, informally, impede the entrance of outsiders" (ibid.: 43). The liberal and conservative news media's discursive representations of the successors as the most competent ones thus obfuscate the economic and social inequalities that pave the way for acquiring this presumed competence.

The overarching absence of critique is yet again made visible when one searches for silence in "cracks, breaches and faults" in the material (Orlandi 1994/1996: 42, quoted from von Münchow 2018: 224). In a book review in *Dagens Nyheter* that philosophizes on the essence of power, the writer recalls an article from *Svenska Dagbladet* that has reported how three billionaires, with an amounted wealth of 900 billion SEK, "will soon be passing the torch to daughters and sons":

> The little twist "will soon passing the torch" gnaws like a rat in my head. I cannot get rid of the formulation. The cruelty, the given fact and the brutality in the same sentence. (*DN* 2017-04-07)

Even though this thesis does not explicitly discuss the super-rich through an intersectional lens, it would be indefensible not to address that the vast majority of the billionaires appearing on *Veckans Affärer*'s list are white men. The wealth of all the women who appeared in the sample is due to inheritance, suggesting that wealth creation in Sweden – like in the UK (Lansley 2006: 140) – has remained an almost exclusive male endeavor under "the fair competition" of neo-liberalism. Thus, this enormous gender asymmetry could pose a legitimacy problem for the neo-liberal economic logics.

One of the more unexpected findings in the material was how the liberal and conservative news media are using the female inheritors as a way of displaying how the top of the corporate ladder is becoming fairer. An article in *Svenska Dagbladet* (2017-07-02) describes how whereas family businesses with only daughters used to recruit men from outside the family to run the company, they have now "seemingly become aware of that it is the year 2017". In another article, headlined "The financial daughters are taking over", Suzanne Sandler, CEO of StyrelseAkademien in Stockholm, makes a similar point: "the ones who became

chairmen the old way became that because they knew the right people" (*EX* 2017-05-14a). A portrait of Ane Uggla recycles a quote from an interview in 2013, where Uggla explains how her father during a joint trip to Sweden "discovered his daughter's sharp brains" and that "girls also can" *(EX* 2017-07-25).

These depictions arguably represent a neo-liberalized view of gender equality, where the concept becomes equated with counting how many men and women are occupying different positions of power. This individualistic reasoning obfuscates complicated power relations and aggravates feminist perspectives that advocate for political mobilization (Fahlgren et al. 2016: 55–56). It further showcases the flexibility of neo-liberal practices, supporting Harvey's (2005: 19) claim that "when neoliberal principles clash with the need to restore or sustain elite power, then the principles are either abandoned or become so twisted as to be unrecognizable". Thus, these discourses in the news media serve to strengthen the construction of a neo-liberal hegemony.

Concluding discussion

This thesis has argued that the public discussion regarding the problems of poverty and inequality is incomplete without asking whether we are not simultaneously experiencing "a problem of riches" (Orton & Rowlingson 2007). The discursive representations of the super-rich in this study suggest that this question is rarely asked in the Swedish mainstream news media. The super-rich are depicted as a secret community that are reluctant to speak to the media, and prefer to hide inside their luxurious mansions away from the gaze of the masses. When they do grace us with their appearance, it is often connected to a charitable event where they get to present themselves as benign philanthropists. The super-rich socialize and network primarily amongst each other, and when reaching old age, they pass on their companies and fortunes to the next generation.

Focusing on the super-rich Swedes supplies contextual knowledge that enriches our understanding of economic inequality and how the issue is mediated to the public. I argue that the Swedish news media are implicitly legitimizing the billionaires as mostly deserving their wealth, mainly due to the overall absence of problematization of the super-rich's astronomical assets. This deservingness is further highlighted in the articles about their charitable acts, where the philanthropic ventures – to rephrase Thorup (2013: 568) – are described as expressions of "extreme charity" rather than "absurd inequality". Neo-liberal discourses are also traceable in the articles about succession, where metaphors,

modal choices and the choice of vocabulary ("long-sightedness" instead of "inheritance", "competence" instead of "socioeconomical privilege") serve to construct the transmission of wealth and power as both rational and taken-for-granted. Acknowledging these predominantly positive or neutral representations of the super-rich in the news media enriches our knowledge of why there exists relatively little resistance against the politics that allow for an increasingly unequal society.

The visibility management of the super-rich could – in my own wording – be described as a "struggle for invisibility", suggesting that the super-rich do not conceive participating in the public sphere as necessary for the legitimization of their wealth. Even though the news media occasionally highlight their silence, e.g. by explicitly writing out the billionaires' argument for not giving interviews, they overall settle for questionable arguments (e.g. the super-rich want to live "a normal life") without further problematizing these statements. Considering that the silencing of uncomfortable topics plays a vital role in hegemonic struggles (Clair 1998: 52), the news media's acceptance of the super-rich's reluctance to talk about their wealth discursively shifts the discussion away from economic inequality. Thus, vital parts of the social practice of neo-liberalization – the increasing social inequalities and the restoring of power to an economic elite (Harvey 2005: 16, 19) – are being obfuscated.

When the issue of economic inequality is explicitly mentioned in the Swedish news media, it is represented as bringing along undesirable consequences. However, these accounts are so few that they mostly serve to highlight the absence of problematization and contextualization that characterizes the vast majority of the articles about the super-rich. The content is thus rather paradoxical: if economic inequality is deemed as problematic, why do the articles about the luxurious mansions and charities not reflect this? This study shows why researchers adopting a CDA-perspective should not only focus on the linguistic elements that are present in the text, but look towards the social context and ask why certain representations are absent (Taylor & Schröter 2018). The few cracks that disrupt the overarching representations mostly serve to highlight the absence of a hegemonic struggle.

Considering that neo-liberal logics affect both the *practice* of journalism (e.g. fewer employed journalists, focus on profitable entertainment) and the *content* of journalism (neo-liberal logics affecting the representations), it would be imperative for the news media to find a model that is less occupied with profit-seeking, and more with advancing its relationship with democracy (Fenton 2011: 70). Ideally, articles about the super-rich could serve as a fruitful gateway for a

fairer and more constructive debate on the morals and mechanisms maintaining a vast unequal society. As it is for now, the Swedish news media are clearly more interested in gazing at the spectacle of the super-rich than critically examining them. If the relative economic equality – in the context of world history – that has characterized the last two generations is not to become "a historical aberration" (Lansley 2006: xvi), the news media need to take its democratic responsibility and reverse these priorities.

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A glimpse into the Ethiopian media

In Search of Democratic Promises

Anteneh Tesfaye Lemma

Introduction

In 2016, when the Ethiopian Broadcasting Corporate (EBC), the oldest media institution in the country, was celebrating its 50ᵗʰ anniversary, the country was being engulfed with nationwide antigovernment protests. Questions related to freedom of the press, marginalization of political groups and repression of dissenting voices clouded over the festive celebrations of EBC's golden jubilee. Despite these protests, the government, on the other hand, was highlighting the achievements of the national media which it claimed to be the Voice of Diversity and Ethiopian Renaissance. The government capitalized on the contribution of the national media to the social, economic and political transformation of Ethiopian people. This thesis lays its foundation on this symbolic and rather intriguing anomaly.

The Ethiopian media, with overwhelming government monopoly, is largely considered a political powerhouse of the ruling elites. The national media has been the subject of serious criticisms for being the propaganda mouthpiece of governments throughout its 50 years history. Following recent crackdowns on opposition political groups and private media institutions, it has become quite common to see Ethiopia in the last rows of global media freedom rankings.

With the expansion of digital media technologies and the increasing literate population in Ethiopia, political forces have recently gone online to mobilize the youth along ethnic lines and challenge the political system. These movements exposed fundamental political questions, created deadly protests and put the very existence of the federal state at stake. The media has been at the center of these protests as a tool for mobilization, a medium for creating and distributing political narratives and counter narratives. The mainstream media has also been a direct target of the protests for failing to serve its objectives.

As a new democracy, which has been under a repressive military regime until 1991, this development is proving itself to be a decisive stage in the political and democratic transformation of Ethiopia. Looking at the recent media expansions, political instabilities, ethnic conflicts and strong yearning for a democratic system, this paper takes a normative position to assess the current state of media in Ethiopia and examine to what extent it is living up to the standards set by guiding media principles, thereby contributing to the country's democratization process. In doing so, the paper will analyze how the interplay of overarching policy framework and the actual operation of media institutions contribute to the advancement of citizen's participation. The thesis will examine existing structural adjustments, power relations and their implication on citizen participation in Ethiopia. Accordingly, the major research questions this paper attempts to answer are:

1. How does the synergy of media policy and regulatory structure contribute to the democratization process in Ethiopia?

2. In what ways do the basic convictions of the policy document translate in the functions of the media and overall democratization process?

3. What opportunities exist in the media environment for citizen engagement and political participation?

In order to shed light on these ideas, the existing media policy document and its ideological foundation will be analyzed. The research will also approach the main actors in the Ethiopian media including media executives, journalists, regulatory government bodies and academicians to examine how they interact, observe and reflect on the policy framework.

Background

Failed Expectations: 1991 to post 2005

The current Ethiopian government came to power in 1991 through a two decades long guerilla war which eventually overthrew the communist military regime. The coalition of different political groups set up a new constitutional order and a federal state structure: Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia (FDRE). The new government promised to address the long-awaited questions of democracy, equality and economic development. Regarding freedom of expression, the early 1990s in Ethiopia exhibited unprecedented media freedom with the

constitutional guarantee of human and democratic rights, the emergence of hundreds of privately-owned newspapers mostly critical of the new ruling elites.

According to Gagliardone (2014:284) these experiments were aimed at consolidating political legitimacy and thus were short lived. The increased access to media and the rise of public participation led to the emergence of serious anti-government political narratives which resulted in the defeat of the ruling party in the first democratic election in 2005. The government, however, claimed victory despite nationwide protests. Thus, began a different era marked by unprecedented effort by the government to consolidate power.

In terms of regulating the media operations, the government came up with the idea of Development Journalism in 2009 as the guiding policy direction. This has been later developed into a comprehensive de facto policy document entitled "Development Media and Communication for Ethiopian Renaissance" (Meles Zenawi Leadership Academy: 2012). This document, which this thesis will closely analyze as an empirical material, currently serves as the guiding document for the operation of national media and communication efforts. It has been integrated in the editorial policies of government and some private media institutions and charts all communication efforts by national and regional governments.

Defying the Status Quo: Protests

Lack of access to the media sphere and restrictions on the discursive machineries by privileged elites naturally leads to opposition and resistance (Carpentier, 2011). This has been practically observed in the latest anti-government protests in Ethiopia. With the mainstream media under the total control of the ruling elites, social media has been found to be the alternative way in the political movements by creating open platform for vibrant political engagement and participation. These protests were predominantly organized along ethnic and religious groups and called for political reforms.

As the protests intensify, the mainstream broadcast stations owned by the regional governments have also started to voice the grievances raised by the protestors in their respective regions. The cumulated effects of these developments put the very state structure and national unity at stake. The years between 2014-2018 in Ethiopia exhibited frequent protests, thousands of human causalities and extensive global media coverage. Following these developments, the government declared a national state of emergency twice in two years (2016 & 2018). It also began negotiating with opposition political groups, releasing political prisoners

and called for a national reconciliation in 2018. Examining these topics is important to understand the relationship of media and democracy in countries like Ethiopia with recent history of democratization.

Review of Relevant Literature

Public Sphere: critical reflections, major revisions and normative relevance

The concept of public sphere was created by Habermas in the 1960s. Dahlgren (1995:7) summarizes the idea of public sphere as 'the realm of social life where the exchange of information and views on questions of common concern can take place so that public opinion can be formed.' Habermas's public sphere is much more than a communicative platform and incorporates the whole discursive practices of the public. Fraser (1990:59) explains the dual function of the public sphere both as a 'discursive interaction' which will eventually create a public opinion and an institutional mechanism which helps 'rationalize' political domination by making governments accountable to citizens. McNair (2003) elaborately summarizes how the concept of public sphere gradually evolved from its initial normative position as a discursive arena for elitist deliberations to later become a more inclusive space for the general public. The role of mass media as a public sphere therefore includes serving as a tool for information circulation which will eventually lead to the creation of common knowledge (McNair 2003:18-21). Despite the increasing scholarly interest in the idea of public sphere, it has also been the subject of strong criticisms and essential revisions.

According to Fraser (1990) Habermas's public sphere lays its foundation on the liberal public sphere and completely ignores non-liberal and non-bourgeoisie public spheres. Fraser recalls the example of feminist arguments which assert how women have long been excluded from the public sphere. She also explains how Habermas overlooks multiple and parallel 'counterpublics' which may exist along the bourgeoisie public sphere. This is particularly important in countries like Ethiopia where gender divisions, ethnic relations and religious groups form several parallel and counter spheres to challenge dominant narratives and assert their political, cultural and religious interests.

This perception of public sphere has also neglected multicultural societies and the power imbalances which may exist therein. Fraser (1990) uses the term 'stratified societies' to represent such groups and defines them as societies whose

institutional frameworks creates power imbalance and thereby result in the structural relation of domination and subordination (Ibid. 66). The revision on the notion of public sphere in this regard lies on the need to have multiple and parallel public spheres which can counter the domination of the overarching public sphere (Fraser 1990; Mustapha, 2012). Mouffe (2002) also backs this argument from a political science vantage point and argues the 'agonistic struggle' in an interactive medium is an important building block for a functioning democratic system (Mouffe 2002:58).

Furthermore, public sphere focuses solely on political and literary public sphere giving no regard for cultural public sphere. Habermas 'reduces democracy's communication in a manner that excludes affective, rhetorical, symbolic, mythic, bodily, humorous, and other dimensions' (Dahlgren 1995:2). Habermas (1992) himself acknowledged this in his later works explaining how 'the resisting power and above all the critical potential of a pluralistic, internally much differentiated mass public whose cultural usage have become to shake off the constraints of class' (Habermas 1992:438) This is particularly important in most African countries with authoritarian tendencies as rational political debates in the media are hampered by repressive laws leading the public to seek alternative ways to take part in the political deliberation.

Despite these and many more revisions on the idea of public sphere, its normative relevance in the discussion of media and democracy is widely acknowledged. Dahlgren (2005:9) stresses the importance of the concept of public sphere as it sheds light on 'institutional constellations of the media and other fora for information and opinion - and the social practices around them - which are relevant for political life.'

Media as Public Sphere

According to Habermas (1991), media's role as a public sphere has observed a rapid explosion during the second phase of the early capitalist system. This development in turn resulted 'publicness' and 'visibility' making power relations and the political process more transparent (Dahlgren 2005:2). Coleman and Ross (2010) trace how the relationship between media and political engagement evolved from the early Habermas time to recent traditions. According to their analysis, contemporary understanding of media lies in its role as a means for citizen engagement and participation (Coleman & Ross 2010:30-31). Dahlgren explains the media achieves these democratic objectives by promoting the culture

of political expression and serving as a 'communicative link' between citizens and authorities in a given society (Dahlgren 2005b:148).

One of the most important developments in the 20th century which gave increased legitimacy for participation and civic engagement is the increasing democratization which redefined the relationship between audiences and authorities (Coleman and Ross 2010:39-44). This is particularly relevant for most African countries including Ethiopia which are going through an ongoing democratization process. This will help to see how far the democratization process has come in terms of transforming the media's role towards inclusive citizen participation.

The other development which is related to the 'empowerment' of the audience in the alternative media has resulted in scattered voices which will not lead to constructive consensus based on dominant or opposing viewpoints (Coleman and Ross: 2010). The rise of multiple ethnic and religious voices in Ethiopia following the federal state structure in 1991 coupled with the increasing access to mainstream and digital media should therefore be examined for its democratic promises.

In researching issues of media, engagement, participation and democracy, it will be wise to look at an important framework by Dahlgren highlighting the three overarching elements for an effective public sphere (Dahlgren 2005b: 148). The first dimension focuses on structures including media institutions, policies and legislation. Dahlgren explains the difficulties of having a functional public sphere in societies with less democratic tendency. The representational dimension aims to look at the contents of media, how politics is covered or ignored and what forms of new representation are there to voice the political. Previous researches in Ethiopia are highly focused on this dimension looking at the representation of political issues in the media (Abate, 2010, Lencho, 2012). The third element, claimed by Dahlgren to be one of the most ignored dimensions is the interactional element which goes beyond audiences and refers to the general principles of democracy and citizenship, message reception, interpreting and output (Dahlgren 2005: 4-5).

Africanizing Media Studies: Theoretical Revisions, Contextualization

The rapid increase in access and use of media technologies in Africa necessitate researches based on closer analysis of the specific context using relevant theories and methodologies. Attempts in this regard have been made by African scholars

to highlight the major problems of using Eurocentric and positivist theories in African media studies. Mano (2005), Tomaselli (2009), Ngomba, (2012) have tried to provide alternative theoretical frameworks to 'reposition' or 're-conceptualize' media studies in the African context. Tomaselli (2009) examined contemporary issues related to African media studies by focusing on issues such as culture, meaning making, policy and ideological shifts. Regarding research dynamics in media studies, he examined the research trends in countries such as Ethiopia, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Swaziland and Kenya and found out most of the researches focus on the old media effect and linear communication model ignoring issues of reception, representation and the active audience.

Focusing on pedagogical problems, Mano (2009) argues early theoretical frameworks and academic literatures in many African countries are borrowed from the western concepts of liberalism, rationalism and pragmatism (Mano 2009:277-279). To counter 'west-centric' theoretical influences, African media scholars have provided solutions which range from contextualized revision to a more radical deconstruction of the existing theories in general. In relation to 'de-westernizing' media studies, there have been two different approaches. While scholars in the west decided to demonstrate 'cross cultural inclusiveness' as part of the 'De-westernization', non-western scholars have attempted to provide alternative theoretical frameworks (Ngomba 2012:165). Ngomba (2012), however, argues that there are currently no 'pure' Afro centric theories which are coherent, empirically tested and thus useful to research (2012:165). He, therefore, recommends that 'de-westernizing' media studies should be less 'dramatic' and should involve selecting useful 'western' theories and contextually applying them to relevant cases (Ngomba 2012:166). Mano (2017) also suggests 'De-essentializing' and 'Provincializing' media studies by taking different cases from different regions which will provide specific vantage points to see the bigger picture in African media studies.

Media, Public Sphere and Participation in the African context

In the discussions related to democracy and media, repositioning African media researches should be based on acknowledging the significance of public and counter public spheres (Tomaselli 2009). Tomaselli explains how post-colonial African leaders took an absolute control of the public sphere and failed their role of regulating the proper functioning of the public sphere (Tomaselli 2009:7). Mustapha (1992) takes the examples of Nigeria and South Africa to shed light on some of the particularities to be noted while studying the concept of media and

public sphere in Africa. Building on colonial legacy, he explains the emergence of a private realm and two public spheres in Nigeria as a result of colonial configuration. The two public realms are the primordial which is based on ethnic groups and the civic based on the colonial state (Mustapha 2012:34-36). In the case of South Africa, the economic and political inequality which followed the apartheid rule has been bridged by media which served as a platform for sharing the voices and interests of marginalized groups.

There are, however, two perspectives to look at this rather optimist and simplistic statement. On one hand, the rise of digital technologies transformed media from being tool of oppression to become tool of power for the majority in Africa (Mustapha 2012:34-36). An example in this regard can be the Slum Radio Project which served as a public sphere for the marginalized voices of slum dwellers in Kenya and Ghana (Davies & Morrison: 2014). On the other hand, as exhibited in South Africa, new communication technologies became online replications of the ethnic divide intensifying the conflicts on the ground (Mustapha 2012:36).

The communicative action in Habermas's public sphere aims to create a collectively agreed common understanding through engagement and deliberation. This is particularly important in multi ethnic communities in Africa which exhibit 'contestatory interaction of multiple publics' Fraser (1992). An important suggestion in studying this function is provided from Mano who indicated the significance of focusing on issues of power and domination following the political and technological reordering through global media (Mano 2009: 290)

Mustapha (1992) indicates despite the progress made in democratizations and increased access to media technologies, many African countries are still having the spiral of autocratic governance. This is mainly attributed to lack of good governance, institutional and policy frameworks as well as low civic culture. He therefore confines the normative relevance of African media to a specific objective:

> "The importance of the concept of the public sphere in contemporary Africa lies precisely in the opportunities it gives to transform electoral democracies, prone to authoritarian tendencies and instrumentalist elite capture, into deliberative democracies, oriented towards inclusive social dialogue and the recognition of common citizenship right" (Mustapha, 2012:37)

These revisions and attempts to derive a contextualized theoretical framework have been summarized by the emerging idea of 'Afrokology'. Afrokology goes beyond theories and methodologies and implies 'the need for Africans to redefine their world which can enable them to advance their self-understanding'

(Nabudere 2006:18). Applying this concept to media and public service broadcast services, Milton (2018) indicated that Afrokology 'advocates for a more progressive policy framework that places the emancipation of the African people at the center of media and PSB principles'. She also stresses that Afrokology questions liberal theoretical notions of media and attempts to gap between development and liberal media [14].

'Emancipatory Promises' and Neo-Colonial Threats

The economic liberalizations and political transformations in the 1990s have significantly increased access to media technologies in Africa. These developments and their impacts on political participation and economic development have been analyzed using different theoretical vantage points. The first line of argument has been studying new media technologies for their 'emancipatory promise' in democratizing political systems and leapfrogging economic development in Africa (Wasserman 2011a:3). Some scholars, on the other hand, have taken a different stand questioning the commercial and market imperatives of such global media expansions relating the trends with colonial capitalism. Mano (2005:51) reiterates Morris and Waisbord's (2001) argument that 'global media and commercial expansion have reduced (African) 'states' ability to exercise power and maintain full sovereignty'.

According to Harindmnath (2012), 'this cultural imperialism ranges from spreading western values through media to fundamental reorganization of local cultures' (2012:381-387). Focusing this discussion to the media, Harindranath (2012) discussed some of the core ideas related to post-colonial intervention on media and audiences. According to his analysis, media had 'revolutionary and transformative' role in the creation of national culture in China and India. He explains how the Indian television legitimately articulated fundamental Hindu moral and legal discourses as a counter narrative to the presumed imperial discourses of westernization. In the case of China, media reforms and advertising regulations have been used as a counter action to western democracy and the presumed colonial threat (Harindranath 2015:384-385). In the case of Africa, however, national governments and elites are blamed for opening door for colonial imperialism by failing to adjust market structures and transform the economic conditions of their countries (McLeod 2000:88). In terms of national

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[14] Presentation: (Milton:2018) *Afrokology, Public Service Broadcasters and the Right to Communicate in Africa* International Symposium on Media Freedom: Lund University Department of Communication and Media

regulatory frameworks to counter presumed colonial threats of liberal media expansions to create a national media system, one of the important mechanisms is articulating ideological and political positions in the guiding media policy document. The following section, therefore, reflects on media policy combining conceptual and methodological discussions.

Methods and Methodology

Policy analysis as a gateway to the heart of the matter

The idea of public sphere is closely related to the 'political ecology' of the specific context (Dahlgren 2005a:3). In addition to the legislative and policy frameworks, the overall political structure of a given country determines the effectiveness of the media in the creation of a common public opinion. In order to examine these structural dimensions, policy analysis can be a gateway as it incorporates and reflects the power structure, political ideology, interests of stakeholders and the main actors in the process.

Des Freedman suggested a comprehensive approach in studying policy documents (Freedman, 2010, 2014, 2015). Conventional media research has been criticized for being inconsiderate of the complex relationships in the media ecology (Freedman: 2010). Freedman hence suggests a nuanced approach towards media policy analysis to understand 'ideologies, power and institutions' (Freedman, 2010:12). Media policy research framed in this way will help to understand 'what voices are represented, and which voices are marginalized in the media' (Freedman 2010:12-13). Freedman (2015) goes beyond the 'phantom objectivity' of policy documents and suggests methodological revision focusing on the creative practices, media institutions, and flows between and among various actors. Herzon and Ali (2015) reiterate Freedman's argument by focusing on the need to combine elite interviews with policy document analysis. The two writers explain how elite interview and policy research can be used together to provide a micro and macro level analysis to a specific research topic. This will help to 'go beyond the often procedural and technical accounts of media policy to offer a broader picture of the voices, arguments, actors, arenas and controversies that dominate contemporary media policy making' (Herzog & Ali 2015:40).

Expert Interviews

Policy documents are lifeless texts without their operational meaning and relevance. These documents, at their face value, are just 'landmarks, albeit of relevance' (Abel & Behrens 2009:151). In matters of multifaceted complexity such as media, democracy and political engagement, analysis of policy and legislative documents doesn't fully show the 'empirical complexity' of political matters and a sound analysis should be supported with expert interviews (Ibid.).

Expert interviews have been the subject of academic discussion in terms of their methodological validity, their similarity/difference with elite interviews and the basic question of 'who constitutes an expert/elite"? Despite the thin line between elites and experts, Littig briefly defines elites as 'the influential, the prominent and the well informed" (Littig 2009:100) She, on the other hand, identifies experts as people with technical and interpretive knowledge who are in decision making responsibility (Ibid.). Despite these differences, expert interviews and elite interview are similar on a methodological level, access to the field and the actual interview process. (Ibid.) This research acknowledges these classifications. However, instead of making simplistic distinction between elite interviews and expert interviews, the combination of both backed by the commonalities stated by Littig will be used to examine the case. Given the subjective and ideological positions of the selected experts, the analysis will be triangulated as suggested by Herzog & Ali (2015:47). This implies analyzing the interviews together with the policy text, other primary and secondary sources, press accounts and documents.

Sampling and Interviews

The quantitative conception of representative sampling doesn't apply to elite/expert interviews but rather the attribution of elite/expert interview is determined by the specific field of research and research topic (Littig 2009:103). In this regard, one of the conventional ways to select experts is through a theory driven approach or by using priori framework where conscious decisions are made beforehand about the status of potential informants (Herzog & Ali 2015:42). In this regard, experts were selected from the national public service media, private media corporate, government regulatory office, media professionals' association and academia. The experts include five males and a female representative from the National Broadcasting Corporate. They were selected based on their participation in the policy formulation and implementation, their interpretive roles or their knowledge and role in the overall Ethiopian media and political landscape.

Since experts are selected with the belief that their knowledge has an effect on practice and structure, the aim of expert interviews is to reconstruct and examine a 'specific configuration of Knowledge' (Bogner & Menz 2009:55). Therefore, there is no significant difference in the interview method and it can be approached as 'qualitative interview with a particular social group' (Ibid.:55). Semi-structured qualitative interviews have been conducted with enough reflexivity to modify the questions based on the specific experience and professional position the experts hold. Five of the interviews and the discussion with the representative of the policy research institute have been conducted in Amharic and one interview was conducted in English.

Consideration is taken to the political nature of the topic at hand which may lead to opposing or even polarized viewpoints. In a polarized media structure and highly contested political landscape of Ethiopia, this is a valid concern in academic research which is dealt with using the suggestion by Ceale (2007) who advise incorporating varying perspectives with open and strong theoretical and methodological reflexivity. The ethical considerations are also duly noted, and all interviewees have explicitly consented to the interview.

Coding and Analysis

The policy text and interviews have been transcribed and translated with due consideration to context and meaning. The empirical material which constitutes both the policy text and the transcribed interview data has been analyzed through a qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is found preferable due to its suitability for various theoretical frameworks and its flexibility in terms of approaching the empirical material (Herzog &Co 2017:2-3). This has been particularly important while examining the interviews and the policy text together to identify the commonalities and differences. Following the five-phase methodological guideline for thematic analysis by Herzog &co (2017:8-11), the empirical data was first manually coded using open codes. The codes were then grouped into broad categories and later to themes and sub themes in a two-step process. The themes were 'carefully crafted to highlight the interpretative choices of the researcher' (Herzog &Co 2017:10). Since the research focus on policy analysis is directly or indirectly related to the guiding media practices in the media institutions, the interview data and the policy text have been found in a reasonable harmony. Whenever discrepancies and differences happened, they have been acknowledged and their implication is reflected in the analysis.

Analysis

As indicated in the previous section, the discussion of public sphere is closely related to the political structure of a given country. The legislative and policy documents regulating the media form the structural dimension informing the overall political economy of the country. Dahlgren (2009:5) in this regard indicates the public sphere tradition of studying media and democracy should focus on the political economy of the media. The Ethiopian operational media policy document, entitled *Development Media, Communication and Ethiopian Renaissance (DMCER, 2012)* acknowledges this fact and emphasizes that the starting point to understand a given media system should be properly analyzing the political economy as the two are interdependent (Ibid.:3). Since media policy aims to shape the media environment, market structure, production and circulation, a closer look should therefore be directed to ideologies and power structures (Freedman 2014:12). The following section therefore attempts to briefly touch up on these issues examining how they are manifested in the Ethiopian policy document.

Polarization, 'Contentious Pluralism', 'Counter Public Spheres'

> *Elias:* "The media is neither liberal nor developmental. It is just against the government."

Based on the policy's assessment and the discussions with the experts, the Ethiopian media has been described as extremely polarized between government owned and private media institutions. There are, however, differences on what constitutes the root cause of such polarization. Elias, who is working as an editor in Fana Broadcasting Corporate,[15] mentioned the polarization can be traced back to the time when the government began condemning the activities of the private media in the early 1990s. Asefa, who leads the policy research department in the same institution, however argues otherwise in concurrence to the statement in the policy document:

> *Asefa:* "In my opinion, what hurt the private media is the private media itself more than the government. The private media has been associated with

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[15] Fana Broadcasting Corporate: The biggest and oldest private media corporate in Ethiopia. It owns Fana FM, Fana TV, Fana MW

opposition groups. That was the trend in the early years. When the private media blossomed, it took on the role of being an opposition and the government has deemed it enemy ever since"

Such polarization is a common trend in most African countries since the 1980s due to the 'entrance and re-entrance' of marginalized groups in the public life (Skjerdal 2011:63, Mustapha, 2012:28) This has resulted in the generation of 'contentious pluralism' in Africa. The policy document corresponds with this argument by emphasizing how the transition period after 1991 "ended the period of government's domination in generating ideas and ensured ideological diversity though the media" (DMCER 2012:61). The document describes the early 1990s as

"a time where Ethiopia was reformed to become a county where freedom of expression is guaranteed ... It became a country where both liberal market and democratic media can flourish based on constitutional order" (Ibid.:61).

The document builds on this historical anecdote and explains how the private media then became a power of destruction by serving as the hub for extremist forces (Ibid.:60). In describing the role of the private media in the early 1990s, the document states:

"Even though the private press mushroomed during this time, its content was against the democratic reforms initiated by the new government. It promoted chaos and conflict. **The press rejected the idea of equality and federalism**. It continued to be against legal and peaceful order. By taking advantage of the new and tolerant regime, **it campaigned to delegitimize the government**. This laid the foundation for the polarized media landscape in Ethiopia" (Ibid.: 61). (emphasis added)

The document highlights the problems of the free media experiments in the early 90s which are widely believed to be the heydays of the Ethiopian free media. The vibrant political debates during this period have been researched quite extensively for their ephemeral democratic promises. The post 1991 years marked contestation between the new ethnic based federalism championed by the government and the opposing voices of a one unified nation which were articulated in most of the private newspapers (Price, al Marashi & Stremlau 2009:7). The private media during this time served as a 'parallel arena' (Fraser, 1990) where different ethnic forces and political parties, who believed their voices were silenced by the new government, articulated their counter discourses against

the new federal state. The 'unilateral constitution making' in 1991 which set in place the new federal state structure has been contested as an attempt to destroy the Ethiopian nation state (Prince, Al Marashi & Stremlau 2009:7). According to Fraser, counter public sphere in such cases provide the platform for different groups to voice their concerns and 'permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1990:67). In terms of articulating identities, counter public spheres can transcend from being 'arenas of deliberation' to become 'arenas for the formation and enactment of identities' which implies 'constructing and reconstructing' identity (Fraser 1990:69). The contestation, therefore, was between and among different ethnic groups and the federal government which were trying to form new ethnic and national identities within the new federal state. The policy describes these developments as efforts to 'delegitimize the government'. Despite the attempts by the private press to discuss on issues of national identity, the polarizations and marginalization of opposition voices made it impossible to create one common national agenda (Prince, Al Marashi & Stremlau 2009:7).

In addition to reflecting on the experiments during the transition period, the policy also asserts the private media still has no positive role in the ongoing democratization process:

> 'The Ethiopian private media has continued to play its role of opposition and extremism. It has even intensified its destructive role based on current national problems" (DMCER 2012:62)

This labelling ignores the 'dual function' of counter public spheres in 'stratified societies' like Ethiopia (Fraser:1990). They can serve as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment or become "training ground for agitational activities directed towards the public' (Fraser 1990:68). The government of Ethiopia tends to highlight the second function as it states how the private media played a destructive role since its early years. In his revision of the idea of public sphere, Habermas (1993:426) states 'the exclusion of the culturally and politically mobilized lower strata entails a pluralization of the public sphere in the very process of its emergence". Given the then new federal state arrangement and the free media introduced in 1991, the collective deliberations among different 'political communities' (Dahlgren 2009:121) would have had an empowering role enhancing their participation and representation thereby developing the country's infant democratic culture. The policy document however argues this trend was destructive and the post 2005 regulatory frameworks have been tightened to punish private media owners who went against the law (DMCER 2012:62).

International reports[16] and researches, however, argue that these measures were deliberate attempts to crush the private media which resulted in the demise of robust political discussion (Abate, 2011), (Skjerdal, 2011) (Gagliarddone, 2014). Asefa explained how these laws and regulations intensified the polarization:

> *Asefa:* "There were laws and restrictions which came out in different periods. And the problem is we don't have negotiating institutions such as professional associations or press council. There was no need to go to courts if we had these. Now the government and the private media are enemies."

Tamrat, Head of the Policy Reform Program under the Government Communications Affairs Office believes the cynicism towards the private media was the results of the infant democratic system in Ethiopia back in early 1990s.

> *Tamrat:* "We didn't have the big media corporates we have now. The regional public media was not that much strong. There were also problems the government was witnessing from 1991 to 2002. In fact, these problems were quite common in any new democracy and the government should have been more tolerant instead of labelling the private media. That was lack of experience from our end. The idea of free press was quite new and the way the policy defined the private press is the result of the hangover which followed the press developments after 1991"

The developments which put the government in a 'hangover' were the heated political debates and criticisms which contributed to the defeat of the ruling regime in the national election in 2005. Despite massive public protest, the ruling party managed to stay in power by taking serious measures against the opposition political groups. The policy document therefore lies in such polarized media landscape still haunted by the government's traumatic experience of free media. The 'hangover' forms part of the 'rhetorical frame' (Freedman, 2010) with which the policy defines the actors, the power dynamics and future direction of the media.

Ideological Departure: Against Liberal and Neoliberal Media

A significant part of the policy document deals with liberal and neo-liberal media highlighting the problems it created in different parts of the world. It describes

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[16] Human Rights Watch, Freedom of the Press, CPJ published series of reports on this

how the liberal media in the developed world created problems related to the spread of false information and eventually caused an economic crisis. The document recalls the financial crisis which happened in 2002 and argues it has not been well covered in the 'western' media despite frequent public protests and political movements:

> 'The media in the prosperous world which worked round the clock to cover the Arab Spring was not willing to report the protests in its own big cities and towns including the 'Occupy Wallstreet" movement. This explains how the media and communication industry in the developed world works to protect the interests of the rich neo liberal groups' (DMCER, 2012:16)

By contrasting inadequate media coverage of the Occupy Movements to the extensive attention given to 'Arab Spring', the policy questions the objective function of media in the 'western liberal' world and concludes that the liberal media has clearly committed itself to the neo-liberal interests at the expense of the public interest (Ibid.).

Curran (1991) forwards a detailed discussion of how the notion of media as a public sphere can be understood in a wide range of political economies (1991:27-57). He mentions the liberal understanding of media and public sphere fails to take into consideration how power is exercised through capitalist structures (Ibid:29). This is attributed to different factors such as the narrowing in the ideological and cultural diversity of liberal media to market distortions, restricted market entry and monopoly of media institutions (Ibid:47). Curran therefore argues the market monopoly has created cultural uniformity which, in light of media's role in democratic political system, fails to serve the full representation of various political and economic interests (Ibid:47). Habermas attributes this structural transformation to the general tendencies of centralization and concludes the media has evolved from the journalism of private letters to the public services of the mass media to finally be influenced by the market and private interests making it 'a gate where 'privileged private interests invaded the public sphere' (Habermas 1989:181-189).

The policy statement corresponds with the above notion of questioning media's role as an inclusive and functional public sphere in liberal democracies. It acknowledges the 'Occupy Wall Street' movements as legitimate political voices which should have been given space in the media. Considering the occupy movements as examples of counter public contestations (Wright, 2012), it is

important to question how and why the policy then decided to label similar local counter publics as destructive and anti-democratic.

Under the section entitled *'the negative impacts of liberal media and communication on the developed world'*, the document reads:

> "In the free market economic system, the media and communication industry has evolved through different stages. In its early stage, the liberal media played the role of facilitating public participation. Gradually, it has been **monopolized by few big corporates**. In the neo liberal times, it has become political and ideological with **the aim of silencing alternative voices and making sure the system will continue to serve the rich forever**" (DMCER, 2012:16).

At this point, it is important to note Freedman's (2010) suggestion to examine policy text implications and ideological footsteps to understand principles which can't be seen at the surface. In this regard policy analysis should attempt unravel the political myths and dominant values behind policy statements (Freedman 2010:349). The above excerpt manifests a Marxist understanding of media which considers the liberal media as a means of creating ideological hegemony by the bourgeoise (Curran 1991:36). The Marxist tone in the policy's description can be traced back to the early convictions of the ruling party which championed Marxist-Leninist ideologies during the guerilla war. Stremlau (2014) argues this ideological inclination can be seen in the government's aspiration to create a one dominant-party and ethnic based federal state arrangement.

Skjerdal, who conducted several researches on Ethiopian media, states the policy lies under the political economy of Revolutionary Democracy. This ideology of revolutionary democracy, championed by the Ethiopian government, is fundamentally against liberal democracy putting strong emphasis on group rights and consensus (Stremlau 2014:244). This, in one hand, can have a positive role in creating strong national unity incorporating several political interests. On the other hand, it can also be used to reaffirm government's domination by excluding alternative voices. The document states such labeling of Marxism has been propagated by the liberal forces against the Ethiopian government due to its resistance to ideological pressures by western powers (DMCER 2012:23):

> "At a time where the beginning and end goal of neo liberal forces is expanding their liberal political economy, Ethiopia, like most countries in Africa, has been pressured to follow the liberal media but instead decided to follow its own way. This has made Ethiopia the victim of neo liberal media and communication's propaganda.". (Ibid:23)

"The extremist market forces of the neo liberal media and communication industry have forwarded deliberate attacks on the Ethiopian developmental democracy calling it a system with Marxist and Leninist ideology." (Ibid:24)

The document therefore stresses that the direction of the government in this regard has been continuously defending these influences and making sure Ethiopia has its own policy direction based on national priorities (Ibid:57)

Media Content, Political 'Passivity' and Disengagement

One of the main criticism the policy document forwards against the liberal media relates to content. It reflects on liberal media content, highlights the problems it has created and attempts to chart the way to be followed by the Ethiopian media. The major criticism the document forwards against the liberal media is its focus on trivial issues ignoring people's fundamental political questions.

"Since the system protects the interests of the few, it doesn't promote the existence of active and progressive society which understands its rights, challenge and eventually change the system. The guardians of the system who don't want this to happen have done a successful job in altering the media's focus on trivial issues" (Ibid:13)

It adds on this to argue that this trend has created a politically 'passive' and disengaged society:

"The media in the developed world has created and exacerbated society's political passivity. Because it works to weaken the organized struggle of the people, the media and communication system has created disengagement, disintegration and separation." (Ibid:14)

This argument can be seen in two different perspectives. First, the liberal media system marked by oligopoly control has indeed been criticized for 'depoliticization' of content (Garnham 1993:363). Dahlgren also explained how the rise of global commercial media has resulted in 'media modulations' and restructuring of national media. This has in turn resulted in 'danger to citizen's participation in public affairs' (Dahlgren 2010:29). On the other hand, the policy's conclusion can be considered simplistic and theoretically debatable. In discussions about engagement and participation, lack of engagement doesn't necessarily imply 'passivity' and can sometimes be a form of political engagement

which implies mistrust in the political system rather than being unaware of basic rights (Dahlgren 2009:82). In relation to media content, the policy's statements about liberal media have also been reaffirmed by the media experts. Tamrat explains this trend of focusing on trivial issues doesn't apply in the case of Ethiopia due to differences in media philosophy and the overall social context:

> *Tamrat*: "The neo liberal ideology of news involves the idea of bad news/good news. They state bad news attracts the audience. But this doesn't apply to our case based on the psychological make up and the local context"

Neo-Liberal Media and Africa: Charting the path towards the African way

The policy document discusses the relationship between neo-liberal media and the African continent which it claimed to be based on the political and economic interests of the western nations and corporations.

> "The relationship between the western world and Africa has gone through different stages of slavery, colonization and indirect influence which contributed to underdevelopment and poverty of the continent" (Ibid:18).

According to the document, the media plays a key role in covering these facts and stereotyping the continent for 'inferiority and backwardness'.

> "The neo liberal media and communication system portrays Africa as the epicenter of economic crisis, conflicts and epidemics such as Ebola and HIV. It assumes the continent has no hope of change. Most of the reports on Africa emanate from this belief. Portraying the negative images of Africa is one way of making the people grateful for what they are and what they are given thereby hiding the crimes and injustices the rich in the west commit on their own people" (Ibid:19).

This argument resonates with discussions regarding the shift in the role of media over the years. Mustapha (2012:32) recalls Habermas's lamentation based on the commercialization of media and the shift from deliberation and public opinion to publicity and public relation. He argues the basic notions of communication action including truthfulness, rationality and verifiability have ceased to exist following the emergence of new communication technologies mostly owned by white, English speaking male citizens and big corporates in the western countries

(Mustapha 2012:31-32). This will give the opportunity for such media institutions to paint the image they want about a given country or continent. Habermas, in his later work, also reflected on how media power restructured media activities and led to a 'battle fought not only over influence but over the control of communication flow that affect behaviors while their strategic intentions are kept hidden' (Habermas 1993:437).

Going further from media content and coverage, the policy also examines continuous efforts by western powers to impose neo liberal policies on Africa and argue that these influences hampered the existence of structural changes and gave rise to chaos (DMCER 2012:18). The policy therefore stresses no meaningful change will come from the neo-liberal forces and suggests African countries should stand to defend themselves (Ibid:21). Wondwosen mentioned these influences and capitalized on focusing on national identity and local priorities to resist the pressure.

> *Wondwosen:* "When we talk about the external influence, there is the issue of national identity. They want you to lose your national identity. That has always been the case since the old times. That is the only way they can exploit your culture and your resources. We have our own identity and long history. We need to keep that as we go towards civilization. Take the example of China or even Russia. They resisted every pressure and influence and went their own way."

In relation to this, Gumede and Co (2017:3) state that in countries where there are fragmented ethnic groups and where there is a need to build national consensus, the normative role of western liberal media and democracy is not entirely applicable and needs further contextualization. The policy in this regard seems to follow an even more radical stand. Instead of shifting ideologies and practices to better serve the liberal notions of media and democracy, the policy document clearly stated the Ethiopian government is in a continuous struggle to come up with local and contextualized paradigms related to media and democracy. The experts also reaffirmed this conviction:

> *Wondwosen:* ". . . one thing we should note is media should have national identity and national brand. They serve the Ethiopian people, serve the Ethiopian national interest and reflect its culture. The thing with globalization is it has a spirit of controlling and influencing the whole world. This doesn't go with our culture. We have our own culture. Our own way of doing things. One of the ways in which they impart their ideologies is the media. That is why we

say it is a powerful tool. It is a psychological warfare. So, we need to work on a media which upholds our way without losing our identity, our culture.

Such kind of 'Romantic essentialism' for national values has sometimes been criticized as it disregards the developments in flow and space which followed globalization (Nyamnjoah 2010:20). Nyamnjoah advises taking these developments into consideration at the same time addressing 'power imbalances and material inequalities' (Ibid.) Elias reaffirmed this argument based on the ongoing developments in Ethiopia but stressed on the need to follow the policy direction to address local problems.

> *Elias:* "In all these, the issue of globalization is a big factor. Now international media and social media reach to the public. So, you see the youth looking for liberal type of media. No matter how much we need it, there are things right in front of our eyes which we can't avoid. In a country where we don't have a developed mindset and a vague historical narrative, liberal media and social media will take us back to chaos"

The policy stipulates development media and communication as the most preferable national policy for Ethiopia and delves deep into theoretical and ideological explanation, practical implementation and challenges.

Development Media and Communication, National Priorities

> ". . . our media and communication policy, in short, should **highlight the futility of rent seeking and neo-liberal alternatives. It should fight to death to ensure the triumph of the political economy of developmental democracy**. There should not be a distraction or a step back in this" (DMCER 2012:59) (Emphasis added)

This rather bold statement encapsulates the guiding policy direction and political conviction in the Ethiopian media environment. According to Freedman (2010:351), these convictions help to understand 'structures of belief, perception and appropriation which underline policy position'. While researching these issues, Freedman suggests focusing on "ideological assumptions that define policy "problems," shape policy debates, and guide policy objectives" (Ibid.). As can be seen in the above excerpt, the document has explicitly put its ideological position against the liberal media philosophy. The objectives it sets out to achieve have also been influenced by this conviction as it aims to champion development media

over the demise of neo liberal, 'rent seeking' media and political economy. In line with the overall political economy of the nation, the policy sets the objectives of the media as follows:

> "The ongoing path of developmental democracy will be sustained through popular participation which ensures equitable sharing of benefits thereby achieving a middle-income society. To bring about this change, the public's democratic and developmental thinking should be promoted" (Ibid:69)

Considering this ideological position and the overarching objectives, the following section will attempt to analyze the document through a political lens as suggested by Dahlgren (200). Using Braman's suggestion indicated in Freedman (2010:352) the analytical focus will be on *"how a policy "problem" is defined, how a "solution" is chosen* and *how that "solution" is implemented".*

How the problem is defined: Political Economy, Content, Organization

In relation to how the policy defines the problem, it is important to briefly examine the policy's assessment of the overall political economy, the media operation and content as well as pressing national priorities.

In relation to the overall political economy, the document problematizes the existing structure in Ethiopia as follows:

> "The objective reality of the time is defined by the contestation of two political economies. They are rent seeking and developmental democracy and the forces that represent and support these two" (DMCER 2012:58)

Reiterating its previous arguments, the document states neo-liberal media and the interest of rent seeking forces are challenges for the Ethiopian national media and the overall democratization process (Ibid.:59). Regarding media content, as the policy doesn't provide detailed discussion, it will be wise to extract micro level insights from the experts working in the sector:

> *Enatalem:* "Well, it is good that the media is there. But it is not tailored with the policy framework. First of all, the society is not getting the necessary information diet. Our people need information on personal identity, working culture, rationalizing. We are still telling people to wash their hands before eating. On our media, where we tell these kinds of information, we watch a story of a girl

who throws herself from a building just because she had a fight with her parents. People are like babies. We need to guide them. Forgiveness, family value, tolerance should be advocated"

Regarding the differences in media content, the document also indicates that one of the major problems specially in public service broadcasting is its tendency to follow the examples of liberal media. Asefa argues the national media cannot replicate the liberal media content as it is not relevant for the Ethiopian people:

Asefa: "The western countries have done their homework on this. You see a blind horse walking in a mud. That is what you get from them. It may be fun for them. But it is not fun for me. A society which is hungry for bread can't laugh with the western human-interest news."

The experts have frequently mentioned the current media contents are not in line with national priorities and basic economic, cultural and political realities. Describing the national priorities identified by the government, Tamrat explained:

Tamrat: "We have over 20 million people who live in absolute poverty. You know about the democratic culture. We have problems related to governance. These are the agendas. Development, democracy and good governance are our priority. There is no other philosophy. It is about basic national questions"

In addition to national priorities, Wondwosen argues any media policy or law should be based on cultural and historical values as well the diversity of Ethiopian people as an important foundation.

Wondwosen: "We are pioneers. Ancient and one of the oldest kingdoms in the world. But we don't have written texts which tell our history. So, we need a media policy which is based on the diverse culture. Diverse and one which respects the diversity. We don't need media monopoly which leads to dictatorship

In relation to diversity, the experts argued that both the national and private media failed to voice the interests of diverse ethnic, religious and political groups. Terje, however, suggests examining the issue of diversity in two dimensions. Regarding 'cultural diversity' he mentioned the national media has been highlighting the diversity of Ethiopian nations, nationalities and people in the past two decades. He, however, argues there has not been much work done in

accommodating 'political diversity'. The policy identifies this as one of the major problems in the national public service media but doesn't provide the reasons. The experts mentioned it is attributed to the demands from the government to capitalize on its own agenda which in turn influences journalists to avoid critical, and investigative contents. These exclusions will hamper political groups from voicing their concerns. Carpentier (2007) states that representation of citizenry in the public sphere is much more than its individual effect and involves representing citizenship which includes "the creation of imaginaries of citizens organizing themselves in order to rationally and emotionally defend their (collective) interests" This complex relation will in turn create a nation as a political community (Carpentier 2007:163).

How is a solution chosen?

> *Asefa:* 'A media that looks like Ethiopia is Development Media'

The policy provides theoretical, historical and political explanation of the rationale behind the adoption of development media and communication as the guiding media concept in Ethiopia (DMCER 2012:38-59). It traces back the inception of the development media to the post second world war period when the liberal political economy failed to uphold the interest of the majority and proved itself to be the powerhouse of the rich (Ibid.:38). The document also recalls the role of development media in less developed countries in their fights against anti-democratic regimes (Ibid:39). Emphasizing the success stories of African countries in the struggle against colonialism, it argues development media, which went along the efforts of democratizing post-colonial Africa, has been successful in creating progressive society (Ibid.:40). Musa (2010:133) states development media is necessitated by the practical problems of implementing liberal media in less developed countries due to limitations in infrastructure, skilled man power and technology.

Development media is defined by its emphasis on national culture and strong focus on the role of media in development. With regard to the defining features of the development media, the policy states its emphasis on success stories will inspire people towards a better future (Ibid:43). In this regard, Asefa explained the relevance of this approach in the case of Ethiopia:

> *Asefa:* "What will help us is a media that capitalizes on success and indicates problems. A successful farming in one area can be a good example for other areas.

The same is true for problems. If a given project is delayed, the media should report on that. But when reporting, it shouldn't be about just the delay but why the delay occurred after all. Is it corruption? If it is, we should expose it."

The inclusive nature of the development media and its tendency to accommodate diverse interests has also been mentioned in the document (Ibid.:45)

"Development media promotes diversity . . . In a country where there are diverse and conflicting interests, the media and communication system should be able to reflect such diversity. It should promote debates and deliberations between opposing ideas thereby letting the public have its opinion based on the debates" (Ibid.:45)

Based on these theoretical merits and the experiences from other countries, the policy explicitly puts how development media should be applied in Ethiopia:

"Above all, our media and communication structure should **protect and promote the developmental democracy** political economy which is at its infancy. It is also a must that it should fight rent seeking. Therefore, the media and communication structure that we build is expected to **take side with developmental and democratic forces**. Because the rent seeking forces have their own media and communication structure, and because it is still building its capacity, our direction should be **towards building a strong national media and communication system tuned to developmental democracy** (Ibid.:59) (Emphasis added)

It is quite clear that the policy document openly advocates for the media to take side with the developmental and democratic forces labelling others as anti-democratic 'rent seekers' and 'neo-liberals. In defending its position, the document states there is a reciprocal relationship between the developmental state and development media and one cannot achieve its objectives without the support of the other (Ibid.:53). According to Carpentier (2007), this is a common tendency by developing countries which avoid the principle of neutrality to justify intervention when universalized values such as peace, democracy, human rights and equality are at stake (Carpentier 2007:160). Regarding the need to have a strong national media, the policy's position is explained by the global power contestations. According to Dahlgren (2009), transnational flow of capital and neo liberal policies pushed by countries like the United States have hindered nation states' ability to respond to local problems. The policy, therefore puts a clear direction against such influences stressing the need to have a media system

which responds to local priorities. This, however, has been contested by many scholars such as Skjerdal who argues that development media only focuses on ideological contestations giving lesser emphasis to the media (Skjerdal, 2011). Quoting Oreh (1978) Skjerdal describes development media as an 'offshoot of global political contestation', rather than a response to pressing demands in societies.

The policy identifies poverty and backwardness as the pressing challenges in Ethiopia. It emphasizes the overarching mission of the media and communication system should therefore be addressing these problems

> "Developmental and democratic communication is against poverty and backwardness. It champions developmental democratic missions. Democracy and development can only be achieved when all conflicts and contestations in a society are democratically solved. Development communication, hence plays a role in securing peace. In light of this mission, **all other objectives are secondary priorities**" ((DMCER 2012:42) (emphasis added)

The Ethiopian government has made an important adjustment on the development media by laying its foundation on local problems related to poverty and economic development (Skjerdal 2011:70). This contextualization, however, is prone to the criticisms on "structural and functional weaknesses" which will open room for potential abuses (Musa, 1997). Musa stresses that development media overlooks the importance of press freedom giving rise to the breach of fundamental democratic rights. In the case of Ethiopia, the secondary priorities indicated in the policy document can be put in perspective by referring to the global press freedom rankings where Ethiopia holds the last rows in media freedom (Freedom House Report, 2015: Civil Rights Defenders, 2016: Amnesty International, 2016: Human Rights Watch, 2017). Once again, the policy document attempts to address these criticisms on development media its implementation in Ethiopia. In relation to suppression of alternative voices, the document argues this allegation is the result of the early experiences of East Asian countries which suppressed opposition voices during the implementation of development media (DMCER 2012:54). This, according to the document, gave a 'fertile ground' for the liberal forces to criticize development media and justify their own ideological agenda (Ibid.:54-55)

How the solution is implemented: Power Dynamics, Strategies, Practical Problems

The policy document lays down strategies and tactics to be used in the implementation of the policy (Ibid.: 69-89). The issue of implementation was also one of the much-discussed topics during the interviews. All experts have mentioned challenges and opportunities in their day to day operation and as they observe it in the overall media environment. In the first part of the implementation section, the policy stipulates how implementation strategies of any media policy should be designed based on power dynamics between different actors with in the political economy (Ibid.:70). In doing so, the document begins by identifying 'reliable forces of change', 'evident forces of impediment' and 'wavering forces' in the implementation of developmental democracy (Ibid:70). 'Reliable forces of change' are low income citizens living in rural and urban communities and different institutions which uphold their interest. These include farmers, pastoralist communities, small scale businesses, students, elites, women and unemployed citizens (Ibid:70). The policy then describes the 'forces of impediment' as follows:

> "The forces which are against our reliable forces of change are those who have rent seeking tendencies. These forces aim to destruct the developmental democratic system for their market driven ideologies. The local actors, in this regard, include those who breach laws and regulations to create market monopoly. There are also political forces, who believe in zero sum game, terrorists and extremist forces. On the other hand, the foreign actors include some International NGOs, media institutions and well-known individuals" (Ibid.:71)

After clearly identifying these forces, the document charts the necessary steps to ensure the policy objectives will be met. In this regard, the first step is 'conducting practical and ideological struggle through the mobilization of those benefiting from the policy'. The second step involves getting the 'wavering forces' out of the way (Ibid.:70). This explicit statement of the power dynamics and the government's position reflects the question of 'who governs' as reiterated in Freedman (2010:348). He recalls the explanation of power as exercised in policy formation and argues that policy formation is beyond administrative process and involves a process "that reproduces the frameworks and priorities of particular groups (by definition, the "powerful" ones) and marginalizes those who challenge these priorities" (Ibid.:349). The explicit labelling and undermining of the role of

the private media, coupled with the outright exclusion from a positive 'force of change' hence creates a question about the real commitment of the government to create an all-inclusive media environment in Ethiopia.

The document states one of the most important strategies for implementing the policy is through capacity building in media content provision and by creating public platforms for debates and deliberation (DCER 2102:71). In terms of evaluating the practical steps towards achieving these objectives, the Government Communications Affairs Office has conducted gap analysis through continuous evaluation researches. Tamrat, who is leading this reform project, mentioned some of the challenges include lack of subsidizing mechanism to enhance the role of private media, reluctance of the executive branch in the provision of information and absence of capacity building mechanisms to create common understanding about the policy direction. As the practical implementers of this policy, most of the experts agree that the legislative and regulatory frameworks for implementing the policy objectives are in place. These include the constitutional guarantee of Freedom of expression, Freedom of the mass media and access to information proclamation. The experts, however, raise concerns and challenges they face in their day to day operation:

> *Asefa:* "There is a tendency of demanding everyone to think like the government. This is against the idea of political pluralism. This is one of the challenges to be met by this policy. The democratic culture should be promoted. There is a political plurality here. There are different voices. There are different political parties which have members. So, we should respect the people. No matter what their ideologies are, we should respect the people"

The experts mentioned despite the policy's statements and convictions to incorporate diversity and popular participation, the practical implementation faced different challenges related to executive intervention and professional incompetence from journalists.

> *Elias:* "There are also some serious questions in relation to political identity. The tendency is to cover these issues when there is conflict. They are not usually addressed early. The media institutions want to work on these issues. But there is a pressure from the government. Sometimes there is a strategy to divert a given issue from the media to another government organ. That is one of the problems of the development media. What has been done on the differences doesn't match on what has been done on national consensus.

In relation to the developmental democratic ideology marked by strong interventionist government that prefers to highlight success stories, it is only valid to use Corner's (2011) argument and assume that the political and economic systems are 'in broad harmony' and the media's role is 'power reinforcement' (Corner 2011:20). This has also been reaffirmed by the 'formal and explicit arrangement' of media aligned with developmental democratic forces (Corner, 2011). In analyzing the implementation of the development media policy, especially in public service media, the policy identified challenges related to media access, professionalism and low democratic culture in the media institutions. It also discusses limitations in properly understanding the development media and implementing it based on the local context. (DMCER 2012:62). The Ethiopian Policy Study and Research Center has conducted a study on good governance and found out the same problem in media institutions:

> "There have been problems observed in terms of properly understanding the development media. Since the idea of development media emanated from anti-democratic countries, there has not been much done to remedy this problem. Journalists learn neo liberal media concepts in universities and the efforts to properly understand and implement development media policy in their media institutions is not satisfactory"

Elias and Enatalem, both graduates of media and journalism, concur with this statement and stress it as one of the challenges in implementing the policy. Elias argues the problem lies in the media and communication curriculum which doesn't give much emphasis on development as the guiding national policy. Enatalem, brings the problems to the media institutions and attribute it to political intervention and managerial incompetence:

> *Enatalem:* "This policy helps people learn about farmers, about the rural communities. The policy gives attention to the farmers. But the way we furnish it is poor. For example, a given topic is supposed to be initiated by media leaders who then research it and pass it to the journalists. But in our case, journalists take on all the tasks because the leaders are focused on the politics. Plus, they don't have the professional touch."

Citing Habermas's recommendations for institutions functioning in the public sphere, Sunt & Livingstone (2013) suggest media institutions, as one important actors in the public sphere, should contribute to participation and deliberation by 'inviting (or researching) the expression of public discourse and then translating the key issues and concerns of the public into a language that is intelligible to the

political administrative complex' (Ibid.:8). Tamrat indicated this is one of the main problems identified in the gap analysis. He and other experts mentioned that the cumulative effects of various implementation problems have resulted, among many things, a dissatisfied and disengaged public:

> *Wondwosen:* "You see frustration. The people feel like they have said enough and said in vain. They think there has not been change. This has led to silence. But despite all these, the people still love their country. They have strong attachment to their country even compared to other people in the region. So, I don't think it will lead to a sad future"

This is an ironic contrast to the policy's fundamental criticisms against the liberal media as indicated in previous sections. The experts' opinion is against the policy objectives of promoting popular participation replicating what it claimed to be the major shortcoming of 'western' liberal media. Elias explains the implication of such disengagement in his day to day activity:

> *Elias:* "The people don't know which media to follow. The elite is dormant. Silent. They are trying to punish the government by silence. So, as a journalist, God forbid, if you have to work on issues like election. You won't find anyone to talk to you. It has created a silent society. The same is true in the private media. It is always someone who is already labelled as anti-government who is confident enough to participate in media discussions"

Skjerdal concurs with these arguments and adds two important developments within the existing media structure in recent years. The first development is the increasing popularity of regional mass media in contrast to the national TV and radio. This trend, according to Asefa, followed latest protests and antigovernment movements in different regions in Ethiopia. Following the intensified tensions between the federal and regional government, the regional broadcasters have started to provide contents related to the concerns of their respective audiences and the public has turned its back on the National Broadcaster. Asefa, however, raised concerns related to the potential consequences of this development:

> "The media is not functioning. The people have stated this. People have been following the regional media: OBN[17]. Then the media itself became part of the protest and started inciting violence. Some media stations have identified people by their ethnicities and highlighted conflicts. One of the problems was our way

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[17] OBN: Oromo Broadcast Network is the regional broadcast media of Oromia region.

of solving conflicts. When you tell the public that one ethnic group has killed the other, what do you expect to follow? Who is going to take the risk?" (Asefa)

The second development, according to Skjerdal, is the expansion of online media and involvement of the diaspora who use digital platforms to organize antigovernment movements in Ethiopia. Enatalem mentioned the National Broadcasting Corporation has tried using digital platforms including social media to enhance public participation:

> *Enatalem:* "Let me give you an example. Social media and blog. I once saw a blog on The Economist. I liked it and we created one for EBC. We called it EBC Blog. We had one topic for a month. People got in the platform and abused it. They insulted the government officials… We tried to moderate it, but the leaders got frustrated. The people needed a place to vent. It gave them the freedom to say what they wanted to say.

> Q. So, why did you shut it down?

> *Enatalem*: "Because the policy makers got frustrated. … of course, the people also misbehaved. I was involved in there… you get one good comment among ten others. There was pressure both from the internal and external bodies. We still try these on our Facebook page.

The pressure from the political leadership and the decision to shut down such platforms manifest what Tamrat called 'Hangover' of the early 90s. Considering the 'affective' (Dahlgren, 2009) element of political engagement and the nature of the digital communication technologies, it is valid to argue that a decision to discontinue of initiatives needed careful examination and consideration that goes beyond 'frustration' of political leaders. Reflecting on these trends and current developments, the Government Communications Affairs Office is now spearheading the policy reform project to remedy the problems. Tamrat indicated the latest protests have proved that the old way of doing things has not been successful and the reform will primarily focus on advancing the democratic element while addressing basic national problems.

Conclusion

This thesis attempted to take a glimpse into the Ethiopian policy document and explore its democratic promises. Particular emphasis was given to power dynamics, ideological departure and national context to properly examine the media environment and answer the research questions. In examining the structural arrangements and power dynamics as laid out in the policy document, it was evident the policy is still haunted by the political 'hangover' which followed early experiments of free media in the early 90s. This has led to the repression and marginalization of opposing voices from the media sphere. By anchoring the media policy on developmental democracy and orienting media content towards one hegemonic idea, the policy aims to use the 'discursive power' of media to 'wield discursive and ideological power' (Street 2001:233). Street (2001) suggests examining the implication of this approach in media content. Through the expert interviews, this thesis highlighted how this dominant power reflects in media content. Lack of investigative, critical and opposing views caused by direct and indirect influence as well as extreme allegiance by media professionals diminished plurality of voices in the Ethiopian media environment.

On the other hand, the negative influences of liberal media and the increasing ideological pressure were countered by alternative media philosophy rooted in local priorities. The government championed development media as a means to foster economic development and protect 'subordination of citizenship to market imperatives' (Dahlgren, 2009). This development has two implications. First the development media, as a theoretical concept has been criticized to be prone to dictatorial manipulation. It is also stated how it overlooks freedom of expression focusing on ideological contestation. The policy document explicitly indicates economic development as a top priority despite the claims it made about democratizing the concept of development media. Analyzing this with the current reality of media freedom in Ethiopia does not provide a solid ground for any kind of assertion about media's essential role in the democratic transformation.

Secondly, the extensive discussions about liberal media in the policy document, the frequent comparison of national media efforts with the downsides of liberal and neo liberal media indicates 'repositioning' of the place of media (Curran 1991:37). The document openly stipulated the national media should take side with developmental democracy as a counter effort to liberal media expansion. The media, instead of becoming a 'servant of the social order' has therefore been 'caught up in ideological crossfire'. To remedy this problem, the policy document

stressed on the need to put citizen participation at the core of economic and political transformation. This inclusive participatory promise is however challenged by practical limitations related to government intervention, market monopoly and the existence of tight legislative frameworks.

The policy stands in tandem with the revolutionary democracy political economy. The experts agree that the government has established constitutional guarantee of Freedom of Expression and enacted laws that promote media's role in the democratization process. Even though the implementation of development media is deemed to be revitalized by enhancing the democratic element, the day to day operation of media institutions is found to be influenced by executive intervention. This highlights how the political institutions live short of the promises of the policy document which reflects back on the 'overall political ecology' and infant democratic system.

The repressive measures taken against the private press in the early 90s and the repeated crackdown on opposition forces has also created political disengagement. The existence of counter public with counter political narratives, however, is revitalized following the increasing literacy and access to digital technologies among the youth. Different political groups/political communities (Dahlgren, 2009) are being organized along ethnic lines demanding equality and representation. The early conflicts between and among various ethnic groups, the contestation between federal state structure and one unified Ethiopian nation state has spiraled for the last three decades and resurfaced in the online political movements in the last five years.

In the broader scheme of global developments, this can be attributed to the declining legitimacy and sovereignty of national governments following global flow of information and power (Castells, 1997). The ethnic based federal structure which was espoused by the media for the last two decades has resulted in grouping and regrouping in political communities which enhances the sense of empowerment. This, coupled with access to new media technologies and transnational political activism, has seriously challenged the existing political arrangement in Ethiopia. The potential of online public spheres in terms of democratic transformation lies in their potential as 'domains of journalism, the domain of pre or proto political and the domain of activism' (Dahlgren 2009:167-168). This results in the pluralism of political voices challenging the government's attempt to create one hegemonic idea. On the other hand, the 'electronic democracy' (Castells 2009), itself can be exclusionist in light of the questions regarding access, literacy and overall enhancement of citizenship. In a country

with about 15%internet penetration rate[18], the potential of online counter spheres based on 'small, educated and affluent elite' in promoting citizen participation and overall democratization is questionable (Ibid).

These periods of transition, marked by socio-cultural changes, increased literacy and civic consciousness usually lead to internal protests and political turmoil (Dahlgren, 2009). The last five years in the Ethiopian political scene have been defined by contestations and protests. This development is followed by horizontal tensions between the national media and regional broadcast institutions putting the whole idea of national consensus at stake. Beyond these concerns, these developments are also deemed to be 'turbulent modernization processes' which will eventually lead towards democracy' (Ibid). The government has realized these problems and ongoing developments and took the initiative to reform the policy. The question, once again, remains whether it will take the necessary steps to incorporate these concerns, consider the inevitable force of change and come up with an inclusive, truly democratic policy framework that can ensure the country's democratic transformation.

Further research in relation to the research topic can examine the interplay of other dimensions such as civic culture, media content and the overall political system to better understand the media's potentials for leapfrogging the democratization process. This will demand in-depth study of the local context, cultural and historical factors informing the overall political psyche of the Ethiopian people.

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[18] Freedom House 2017

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Beyond the "lulz"

Audience engagement with political memes in the case of Indonesia

Lestarini Saraswati Hapsoro

Introduction

2017 marks a tumultuous year in Indonesian politics, where a heated contest for the governorship of the nation's capital, Jakarta, took place against the backdrop of a divisive campaign period over the course of six months. Throughout this period, various political discourses emerged on social media, fuelling conversations surrounding the candidates' qualifications. Among these communicative forms were Internet memes, often used to illustrate the contradictory or incongruous campaign promises made by the candidates. While the contents primarily demonstrate both capacities and weaknesses of the opposing candidates, sectarian and racial sentiments also surfaced; reflecting the polarised nature of electoral politics in the country[19]. These heavy contestations were facilitated predominantly through social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

Several months later, Internet memes made headlines in the news as several individuals were arrested for spreading satirical memes to mock the former parliamentary Speaker, Setya Novanto (often abbreviated to *SetNov*); a politician notorious for avoiding numerous corruption charges. These memes point to an image that was circulated shortly after SetNov was due for hearing with the Corruption Eradication Commissions, where he was pictured resting on a hospital

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[19] This links to the election's deep political, religious divide between supporters of then-incumbent Basuki "Ahok" Tjahaja Purnama, an ethnic Chinese Christian who was charged with blasphemy for allegedly insulting the Qur'an in a speech, and his rival Anies Baswedan, a former Education Minister who made overtures to hard-line Islamist groups (Kwok, 2017). Wimar Witoelar, a political analyst, observes that in its normally secular politics, Indonesia's pluralism came to challenge in this election (Allard & Suroyo, 2017).

bed in a setting that appears to be staged. Over 20 Internet users who circulated the SetNov memes were identified as suspects on the grounds of defamation, which is subject for criminalisation under Indonesia's ITE law[20]. Few weeks following this incident, and officially named as a prime suspect in a graft scandal, the politician was reportedly missing and subsequently found in a car accident where his car came into collision with an electricity pole. This time, Internet users circulated even more memes and pictorials that satirise the incident with more "lulz"[21].

Internet memes—characterised by satirical humour, often referencing pop culture, typically created anonymously and circulated online—have received growing scholarly interest and are treated as fundamental to the various aspects of contemporary digital culture. In recent years, research has examined the potential of memes in broadening opportunities for political discourse (Milner, 2012) and electoral politics (Heiskanen, 2017). In the case of Indonesia, academic and popular debates question its implications, as digital humour appears to spark new hopes for civic engagement and electoral participation through free artistic creation in the participatory culture of social media. Some have pointed out its ability to drive resistance, while others caution against reading too much into its roles. Yet, studies have paid scant attention to how meme viewers engage with the media content, particularly when the subject touches on electoral politics.

Aim and Research Questions

The present study therefore seeks to explore the roles of memes within the context of Indonesian politics based on two political events in 2017, where the media performed as distinctive means of discourse. Firstly, the Jakarta gubernatorial election or *Pilkada DKI*[22], where election-memes predominantly conveyed expressions of support or opposition toward the candidates, hence contained partisan cues (Kurniasih, 2016). Secondly, the *SetNov* memes, which acted as a tool for political dissent by exposing the politician's continuous attempt to avoid

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[20] Indonesia's Electronic Information and Transactions Act, also known as UU ITE or the ITE law, criminalises the act of distributing, transmitting and/or making accessible any form of electronic media communication that could be considered defamatory or slanderous. The act allows for a maximum penalty of four-years prison term and maximum fine of 750 million Indonesian Rupiah (approximately US$54,000).

[21] Lulz is typographical subversion of "LOL", an acronym "for laugh(ing) out loud" which denotes a type of humour that is derived at another's expense.

[22] The Jakarta gubernatorial election is termed as "Pemilihan Kepala Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta" and commonly abbreviated as "Pilkada DKI".

prosecution of corruption charges, while challenging the enforcement of Indonesia's media regulation under the ITE law.

The following research questions have been formulated to address the main objectives of this thesis:

1. How do audiences define and engage with political memes on social media?

2. How do audiences construct the implications of memes on contemporary political discourse, in the context of Indonesian politics?

3. In what ways do political memes foster or hinder the Indonesian youth's civic engagement?

This research aims to contribute to the scholarship of memetic media and provide contextualised study on political memes to fill the knowledge gap on the mediation of politics through humour, that is predominantly analysed in the context of modern western societies. Through in-depth interviews with Indonesian young adults, the thesis examines the ways they view and engage with Internet memes to provide a closer understanding of the cultural and political values of Internet memes within the participatory culture of social media. The way these values are understood has an inference on how memes are treated as a form of political discourse in the contemporary digital culture. This, in turn, allows for further exploration of the political memes' roles and implication on the civic agency, which is crucial in determining the media's potential in promoting, or impeding, the audiences' civic engagement.

Literature Review

The functions and forms of humour

Using humour as a mechanism for political discourse is not a new concept. Referring to the Middle Ages, Bakhtin (1981:23) stresses the importance of humour in advancing civilisation for 'laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it.' His notion of the Carnivalesque crowd in the streets or marketplaces during the Renaissance designates an alternative social context, where the established order is reversed and ridiculed, therefore connecting humour to the common people (Bakhtin, 1968).

Adapting Bakhtin's Carnivalesque concept, Hariman (2008:247) holds that 'parody and related forms of political humour are essential resources for sustaining democratic public culture' which allows for 'social levelling' where democratic citizens are equally entitled to public speech, just as democracy is defined as a domain of public debate. The use of humour can therefore be perceived as subversive and empowering to the people.

Adding more nuance on the scholarly arguments regarding humour, Billig (2005) highlights the negative implications or 'the cruelties' of humour, which he argues, is under-researched in contemporary academic and popular debates. Most researches have created an overemphasis on the positive or empowering aspect of humour and lack focus on the ridiculing aspects of it. Goodall et al. (2012:73) moreover put a caution to humour as a weapon with 'a sharp double edge', stressing that the rhetoric of humour may both unite and divide audiences from intended outcomes by making it open to interpretation and change (ibid.:76). In other words, humour can be both alienating and motivating in ways that are obstructive to greater goals. To underline this aspect is important, as it contrasts with the inviting nature of humour, in the sense that it can be rather excluding, than including.

Humour is exhibited in many modes of discourse: wit, parody, slapstick—and satire, which is commonly characterised in Internet memes. Prior to engaging in the discussion of satire manifested in memes, it is crucial to render its concept as intelligible. A special attention to the media's generic form serves to demonstrate its connections with the individuals' consciousness and subjective perception (Corner, 2011:51), which is necessary when promoting an audience view on the media. In her dissertation on political comedy engagement, Doona (2016:33) illustrates the ways in which genre work offers insights into more diverse constructions held by audience members in relation to present 'political media, citizenship and democracy'. It is necessary, she holds, to 'define what it is we are studying "prematurely", because we need a working understanding of the genre' (ibid.).

Colletta (2009:860) offers a brief definition of satire, which is 'not a comic device––it is a commentary, but uses comedic devices' that combine the pleasures of humour and the morality of social critique. Ziv (2010:16) corroborates this distinction by defining comedy as a form of criticism which 'emphasises the human side of events and behaviour, the good aspects and the bad ones,' whereas satire concentrates on situations that are specific to a given society and period and 'scourges certain events, sometimes with brutality, and emphasises their negative aspects almost entirely'. Satire, which has historically been used to discredit

individuals in authority (Cameron, 1993:6) is an immensely diverse comedic form as seen through recent works on political entertainment media, such as Internet memes.

Defining and contextualising Internet memes

The term "meme", coined by biologist Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*, is originally defined as 'self-replicating units of culture' (Dawkins, 1976). The word, however, has been appropriated to refer to a specific form of Internet ephemera. In this regard, Internet memes represent remixed and iterated messages that are rapidly spread by members of the participatory digital culture (Wiggins & Bowers, 2014). The media can be treated as a '(post)modern folklore, in which shared norms and values are constructed through cultural artifacts such as Photoshopped images' (Shifman, 2014:15) and structured by five fundamental logics: multimodality, resonance, reappropriation, collectivism and spread (Milner, 2016). Another key facet is the intertextual quality of memes, which adapts humorous texts to a particular culture, language, and context, often with references to popular culture (Shifman, 2014). As they contain attributes like simplicity and whimsical content, Shifman concludes that the "incompleteness" of memes may serve as a hook for further dialogue and successful circulation in the participatory network (ibid.:86).

According to Ryan Milner (2013), memetic media manifest as a 'lingua franca' for digitally mediated participants that is decided by social processes, enabling geographically-dispersed audiences to connect and share. Through the memetic process, memes shape public conversations that are made more dynamic by the participation of many public voices, leading to a new kind of participatory conversation that disrupts the traditional culture industries (Milner, 2016:7). Memes have changed the nature of contemporary media discourses; in line with Carpentier's (2011) definition of an alternative media, which 'enable citizens to participate in content creation and exercise their right to communicate' (ibid.:68) and include forms of media that 'provide a different point of view from that usually expressed by the mass or mainstream media' (ibid.:98).

Central to the recent debates on Internet memes is whether they should be defined as principally "cultural" or "political" (Heiskanen, 2017). In examining the relationship between political and popular culture, Tay (2012) demonstrates how the latter is employed in memes as a common ground to discuss politics. Being part of people's everyday lives and cultural identities, popular culture allows the subject of politics to become more accessible to viewers (ibid.), thereby serving as

a channel through which digital participants can communicate about politics with each other in a light-hearted and engaging manner. Taking Jenkins et al.'s (2013) assertion that acts of remix and circulation, as demonstrated in meme communities, mould the cultural and political landscape, the present study stresses the interdependent character of culture and politics; politics do not take place outside of culture, and vice versa.

Online public discourse & audience engagement

A growing area of memetic media research has pointed to Internet memes' implications for public discourse and commentary (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Milner, 2012). Memes, through their peer-to-peer sharing characteristics and communal participation, offer citizens the means to voice political dissent by undermining the elite influence of the mass media and political figure (Hristova, 2014). For instance, Mina (2014) analyses the relationship between memetic media and political subversion in China, where the meme culture offers citizens an outlet for new forms of public conversation and community building in response to the country's Internet censorship regulation. In the context of Western democracy, Heiskanen (2017) reveals the role of memes as alternative parallel discourses to the mainstream media perspective during the US presidential election, as they enable Internet users to respond to political events in real time.

When considering memes as a form of public discourse, it is useful to approach the theory of 'the public sphere' to put memes in context. Coined by Habermas (1989), the political 'public sphere' is a normative concept regarding citizens' discourse. The tradition sees civic interaction through the public sphere as being comprised of institutional communicative spaces, where citizens listen to each other in a process of reasoned and rational debate to form public opinion and political will-formation (ibid.). However, the rise of the Internet has renewed interest and debate regarding the public sphere, as it generates new possibilities for citizen interaction than do the traditional forms of mass media (Dahlgren, 2005).

Dahlgren (2006) argues that the Habermasian view of the public sphere limits our interpretation of the kinds of cultural practices that should characterise civic agency in the public sphere—which in turn, pushes away certain forms of communicative competencies and practices that are important for democracy, such as the role of everyday talk. On this note, he has pointed to the Internet's contribution to the public sphere with the expansion of communicative spaces for politics, such as discussion groups, chat rooms or grassroots advocacy sites

(Dahlgren, 2005:152). While online discussions are not always rational, and various forms of interaction may lack tolerance toward those holding opposing views, specific public spheres on the Internet enable engaged citizens to play a role in the development of democracy through political communications that result in deliberation (ibid.).

Van Zoonen (2005:10) speaks of popular culture as 'the discourses of everyday life' which can create an act of 'opposition to elite affairs and politics', wherein 'popular genres and means' facilitate greater participation in public discourse. This notion is adapted by Milner (2012:52), where he points to the diversity of voices in the public sphere of memetic participation: 'polyvocality'. The hope for mediated polyvocality, he infers, lies in the interactivity and reach to form new avenues for public discourse – that is, 'having the means to find information and engage with public dialogue' and 'interact with diverse members of the public' (ibid.).

Moreover, as memes exist within a political environment larger than their own, it is productive to account for the 'alternative avenues of participation' and 'alternative means of argumentation' manifested in political commentaries on the sites through which they circulate, as the discourses are 'interdependent and interdiscursive with broader narratives' (ibid.:284). In his subsequent analysis on memetic public participation, Milner points to the evidence of memes' polyvocal nature; 'that is, many voices can connect and converse, as well as argue and antagonise' (2016:111). In this sense, the ambivalent potential for polyvocality in memes complicates how public participants engage with the diverse identities and ideas that are manifested in the online public discourse (ibid.:112).

Regarding the emergent 'participatory culture', where members of the society simultaneously consume, create and distribute media content (Jenkins, 2007), memes may provide a strong support not only for free artistic expression, but also civic engagement. Yet, in theorising agency within user-generated content, van Dijck (2009) argues that the emergence of Web 2.0 applications cannot be presumed to turn everyone into "active participants". She indicates that only a small percentage of Internet users actively create content, whereas the majority consists of viewers who may engage in activities like rating, commenting, or simply reading and watching online media content (ibid.:44). From this viewpoint, "participation" is not necessarily equated to "active contribution" to user-generated content platforms (ibid.), such as creating memes. Not every media interaction embodies participation (Carpentier, 2011:69), as not all Internet users participate equally or for similar reasons.

Because viewers may engage in an array of practices within the participatory network of social media, what constitutes for participation have evolved (Shifman, 2014); and this arguably reveals a change to the civic cultures where citizenship is performed (Dahlgren & Olsson, 2007). The present research thus asserts the need to analyse memes from the perspective of viewers as audiences, to provide a holistic approach in tracing the civic potentials of the media. Guiding the perspective on audience participation is Carpentier's (2011:67) use of the interrelated terms 'participation *in the media*' and 'participation *through the media*'. The former concept refers to everyday practices of citizens such as the production of media content, whereas the latter denotes 'opportunities for mediated participation in public debate and for self-representation' (ibid:68), which is adopted in this thesis.

The work of Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst (1998) is also used to inform the concept of audiences in this study, who are understood as the 'diffused audience' that are dispersed and fragmented, yet embedded in the closely interwoven aspects of the media and everyday life (ibid.:69), such as being connected to the Internet routinely. Because of the intrusion of the media into everyday life, people simultaneously perceive themselves as audience members in an imagined community, where their sense of belonging connects to the construction of identity (ibid.:117). Combining this perspective with that of Carpentier's conception of audience participation, it can be deduced that while being engaged in identity formation, there are possibilities and hopes for audiences as citizens and Internet users to take part in a democratising mediated participation.

Information & influence in the digital environment

Because political memes are often humorous and devised as entertainment, it is useful to delve into studies on other related forms of media in the field of political entertainment. Political entertainment media can cover everything, from talk shows to satirical sitcoms (Holbert, 2005). News readers, especially the youth, have been found to rely more heavily on such alternative information source in order to escape the perceived bias and unreliability of mainstream news (Tsfati, 2010; see Baumgartner & Morris, 2006). Brewer et al. (2013) indicate that the meta-coverage of political satirists, when introducing complex policy issues to viewers, can lead to knowledge gain and internal efficacy, as they simultaneously entertain their viewers. Moreover, viewing satirical political entertainment may

produce outcomes on the viewers' perception and feelings toward political actors that prompt political participation intention (Hoffman & Young, 2011).

Yet, in relation to political memes, Shifman (2014:138) critically suggests that the dependence on pop culture, at certain lengths, creates a process of "depolitisation" where the political and critical facets of Internet memes are diminished in favour of pure enjoyment. Seiffert-Brockmann et al. (2017:2) also assert that through Internet memes, digital participants engage in interactions that 'represent a re-appropriation of the original image according to some set of internal political schema, which may result in an active battle over the preferred meaning' as individuals attempt to express their respective political preferences. This becomes problematic if, for instance, audiences scrutinise contents that are opposed to their ideological position for "flawed logic" and as such, disengage from the conversation rather than seeking truth within them. In addition, Shifman et al. (2007) argue that online humour is likely to have a limited role in making viewers more politically engaged. The deployment of humour can be useful for mobilising those who are already politically committed, but unlikely to achieve much beyond that (ibid.).

Furthermore, political satire in the form of news may convincingly instil a false sense of truth in the viewer if taken at face value (Rubin et al., 2017). This discussion is in reference to the hotly contested debate surrounding the notion of "fake news" in post-truth politics, which has been linked to political satire and parody shows (Amarasingam, 2011). Heiskanen (2017:21) points to the epistemological debates regarding memetic representations for electoral politics that have been intensified with reference to discourses in the post-truth era within the US context. There is a need to account for this phenomenon because at present, Indonesia is similarly encountered with a wave of fake news which ran rampant during Pilkada DKI (Pearl, 2018). While the present study does not delve deeper into the notion of post-truth politics, it reveals that the link between satire and misinformation must be accounted for as it potentially influences the audience's subjective interpretation of satirical humour, which is manifested memes.

Another aspect to account for is the role social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, through which these memes are circulated. This is where the notion of power arises; in discussing the systemic power of the media, both the power over the media along with the common notions of power of media ought to be considered (Dahlgren, 2009). Facebook's algorithmic power has been analysed in relation to visibility, or the lack thereof, in granting viewers with different information; hence confining them to a "filter bubble" which isolates them from

a diversity of viewpoints (Pariser, 2011). In a world where people's subjective constructions are driven by data processes or 'datafication' (Couldry & Hepp, 2017:139), the Internet users' behaviours are guided by the systemic infrastructure of the social media platforms that they use on a day-to-day basis. This phenomenon, as Couldry & Hepp (2017:141) posit, may pose a challenge to Internet users' social knowledge and everyday awareness.

In addition, this research considers memes containing partisan cues that were circulated during the Pilkada DKI period, where heavy contestations took place regarding the candidates' eligibility. Studies in media and politics have pointed out the ability of partisan media to reinforce the opinions and attitudes of viewers, which as a result contributes to political polarisation (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016). More specifically, Merlyna Lim (2017) discusses the relationship between social media and electoral politics, and how it was instrumental in the increasing polarisation among ordinary Indonesian citizens during Pilkada DKI. However, by taking these factors into account, this is not by any means done to undermine the agency of audiences. On the contrary, the present study seeks to identify the ways in which audiences, with their political subjectivities and beliefs, interpret and formulate their perception of the memes they have engaged with; and how they negotiate their position within the intertwining of systemic power and perceived institutional forces.

Memes within civic cultures: performing citizenship through engagement

Dahlgren (2009) holds that for democracy to function properly and thus be legitimised, it requires many conditions to be met; including, the engagement of citizens. Engagement, he argues, is the prerequisite for participation and requires 'not just cognitive attention and some normative stance, but also an affective investment' which involves a form of passion (ibid.:83). In order to give rise to civic agency, 'there must be a connection to practical, do-able activities where citizens can feel empowered' (ibid.:81). Few scholars indicate the importance of considering the 'affective investment' of citizens (van Zoonen, 2005:65) and the view of modern era citizenship which is suffering from an 'affective deficit' (Coleman, 2013). Accounting for the role of emotions on a subjective level, which is inseparable from the rational (Coleman, 2013; Dahlgren, 2009), hence becomes crucial in order to examine why and how audiences engage with political memes.

Stephen Coleman offers a useful framework of engagement that links to the contemporary development in political citizenship among the youth, which is useful in clarifying the perspective on citizenship presented in this study:

> …to be a democratic citizen is, at the very least, to be informed – not about everything but about enough to feel capable of contributing to the political conversation; to be encouraged to participate – not all the time, but at least some of the time; to feel engaged – at least to the point of not feeling like a permanent outsider; and to experience a sense of political confidence – a subjective belief that one has at least some chance to influence the world around one, and particularly its institutions of governance […] In the face of the complex and paradoxical forces that are opening up and closing down contemporary democratic space, it is important to look at emergent spaces of political communication. (2013:378)

Political memes, as a form of alternative media by Carpentier's (2011) definition, may therefore be considered as one of the 'emergent spaces of political communication' through its ability to make the youth 'feel capable of contributing to the political conversation'. In addition, because this study points to the interdependence of the cultural and political aspects of memes, rather than *either/or*, it can also benefit from approaching political memes through the study of 'cultural citizenship' as developed by Joke Hermes. This term is used to describe the ways in which the Web 2.0 has promoted new forms of communications, where people through text-related practices can read, consume, celebrate as well criticise ideas or issues provided 'in the realm of (popular) culture' (Hermes, 2005:10). In her discussion on *Citizenship in the Age of the Internet*, she states:

> Web communities serve different types of citizenship goals […] political, national and cultural. All, however, should be understood from the broad, cultural definition of citizenship: they involve a great variety of knowledges and activities; they include emotion, sensation and experience and deliver, in varying degrees, a state of being informed and of commitment to larger communities. (2006:304)

The concept therefore helps make visible the foundation of the willingness to engage with the political, which she argues, requires motivation (ibid.). Taking this approach would deepen our understanding of citizenship as well as adding to the analytic capacity in exploring the civic potentials of memes. On this account, this thesis is informed by Dahlgren's (2009) circuit of civic cultures which combines cultural and political perspectives to the study of engagement. Civic

cultures refer to cultural patterns where 'identities of citizenship, and the foundations for civic agency, are embedded' (ibid:103) and can be used as an analytic framework to explore citizens' engagement and participation in democracy. The circuit includes six interdependent dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, spaces, practices and identities. As unfolded in the analytical chapter, analysing political memes with respect to the six dimensions informs the research in understanding how the political memes serve to facilitate, or inhibit, civic engagement.

Methodology & Method

It is crucial to note that this study is contextualised within the rise of personalised forms of political engagement of the educated urban middle-class youth. Over half of Indonesia's population is comprised of people under the age of 30 (Index Mundi, 2018); and with a mere 44% active social media penetration rate nation-wide (Statista, 2017), access to social media is highly concentrated in urban areas. The use of social media in politics—for both political activism and electoral politics—has become embedded in the day-to-day social and cultural activities of the urban middle class youth (Lim, 2013). The research thereby employed qualitative semi-structured interviews with 14 urban Indonesian young adults who are engaged in social media on a daily basis. The recruitment was premised upon the subject's following of Indonesian political memes directly from political entertainment accounts on Facebook, Twitter and/or Instagram (8); or indirectly from the network of friends on social media (6). The distinct classification of respondents was included to identify and delve deeper into the nuanced interpretations of political memes from the standpoint of viewers who are engaged in the media content on various levels.

Selecting the case(s) and method

Using two case examples was a strategic approach to allow for a grounded analysis on the wider phenomena of political memes within the context of democracy in Indonesia. Since 2014, memes have become a vehicle for political expression among the Indonesian youth to challenge legislations, by highlighting the absurdities in politics involving individual and political elites (Allifiansyah, 2016). Within the same year, the nation had witnessed the growing presence of memes in electoral discourses through social media, many of which contained partisan

cues. Acknowledging the parallel between these events with those that took place in 2017, the cases selection of SetNov and Pilkada DKI is useful to provide broader insights into the prevalence of memes and how they have become pertinent to politics in the nation, as two distinctive modes of discourse: political dissent and partisan opinions.

Flyvbjerg (2011) argues that "the power of example" serves to increase the generalisability of events—something which has been criticised for lacking in social science researches. In his rebuttal of the term 'case study' in the *Dictionary of Sociology*, he notes that while a case study does provide in-depth analysis of 'a single example', it is not correct to assume its inability to provide reliable information about the broader phenomenon (ibid.:66). Flyvbjerg further holds that in-depth, qualitative cases can in fact be productive at contributing to scientific development, especially when serving as a supplementary method (ibid.:77). As such, taking on two representative cases that illustrate the polyvocal nature of memes, in support of conducting interviews, can provide a contextualised analysis of how audiences define and engage with political memes, as well as determine the wider civic potentials that the media carry.

In exploring the concept of the civic, Dahlgren (2003:155) argues that instead of analysing media for their direct influence on publics, researchers should 'underscore the processual and contextual dimension' because the political and politics are not merely prescribed, 'but constructed via word and deed'. Adopting an audience-focused research therefore prioritises the contextualisation of people's engagement with media within the everyday—whereby people, in their reception of media, actively participate to seek meaning, yet not always accept, and at times negotiate or even resist the textual meanings (Livingstone, 2005:30). This approach is constructive to analyse, for instance, how viewers make meaning of political memes, or scrutinise the use of satirical humour in extending political commentaries.

When conducting qualitative audience research, Hermes (2009:124) contends that comprehending media power and audience agency is important, especially to gain an understanding of how the world is changing. Especially in a social world that is continuously mediatised, or changed in its dynamics as media take part in its everyday structures, how audiences make sense of the world becomes intertwined with 'the constrains, affordances and power-relations that are features of media as infrastructures for communication' (Couldry & Hepp, 2017:15). With their social knowledge being shaped by media practices, it is useful to consider the audience's mediated perception toward memes on top of their agency

in negotiating positions within the entanglement of data infrastructures, such as algorithms.

Through an in-depth guided conversation, qualitative interviewing explores respondents' feelings, emotions, experiences and values within their 'deeply nuanced inner worlds' (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001:57). With this method, the researcher may gain access into the interviewees' subjective construction in order to obtain a better understanding of one's beliefs and attitudes. It also enables the researcher to approach sensitive issues by accommodating the subtle differences in people's positions and to respond accordingly, followed by reflecting on the complexity (Seale, 2012:210). Audience research would first and foremost require a strong reflexivity on my part as the researcher (Hermes, 2009), which is unravelled in the subsequent section.

Reflecting on knowledge and social positioning

While qualitative interviews are often scrutinised for bias, or presenting a distortion of the truth to a certain extent, the method is heavily influenced by the theoretical orientation which considers reality to be socially constructed (Brennen, 2013). Rather than treating audiences as passive receivers of information, they are important meaning-makers in the sense that knowledge is sustained by how informants interpret and negotiate meaning (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Svend Brinkmann and Steinar Kvale (2015) moreover set a distinction between 'knowledge collection' and 'knowledge construction'; in the former concept, the researcher collects knowledge that is already given and merely obscured; whereas the latter explores the topic together with the informant, thereby knowledge becomes constructed between the interviewer and interviewee (ibid.: 57). As such, in lines with the aim of this study, taking the latter approach allows me to explore how interviewees create meaning of political memes based on the two case studies according to their subjective interpretations, while acknowledging issues of objectivity.

As the interviewer in this study I had to be aware of the issues of power, in terms of who controls the direction of the interview, the results and ultimately who benefits (Seidman, 2006:99). To build an equitable relationship is thus crucial in addressing issues of power within interviewing (ibid.). On this aspect, my shared social identities with those of the interviewees in terms of age group, nationality, language and social class helped negotiate these variables and develop equity. However, to discuss about memes in the context of politics means to touch on the interviewees' ideological views regarding issues like freedom of expression within

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Indonesia's democracy or identity politics when speaking of Pilkada DKI. As interviewees acknowledged my profile as a researcher, they might engage in what Goffman (1959:208) refers to as 'impression management', where their conscious and subconscious selves attempt to influence the perception of their image to give a positive impression (ibid.). Impression management risks preventing interviewees from expressing personal thoughts in entirety, especially if their views on a particular phenomenon are articulated for the first time during the interview (Jensen, 2012:270).

As an attempt to remove hierarchies between the researcher and respondent, I engaged in 'a mutual self-disclosure', which Rapley (2014:19) suggests 'can encourage 'deep disclosure'' on the part of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted by developing an approach which Seidman (2006:96) denotes as a balance between an 'I-Thou' relationship and a 'We' relationship. Through this method, I could act as an equal participant where the outcome of the discourse would be a conversation, instead of a rigid data-gathering interview, but at the same time allowing the participant to express one's responses as independently as possible (ibid.). Offering information on my own subjectivities in this case helped reinforce the respondents' collaboration in the interview process, while also easily set aside for more normative objectives of the research.

Piloting, sampling and treating the data

Pilot interviews began to be conducted in January 2018 via Skype, as opposed to face-to-face, due to geographical restrictions. Initially, the research design only considered to explore the roles of memes in the case of SetNov's hospitalisations. However, after conducting two pilot studies it became evident that the respondents' understanding of memes was greatly informed by the media's pervasiveness during Pilkada DKI, further revealing the need to account for the two separate events to fully comprehend the civic potentials of political memes within the context of Indonesian politics. This is fitting to Corner's (2011:86) suggestion where scholars need to 'assume less and investigate more, to place the relations between 'media' and 'selfhood' within a denser sense of plurality'. In total, 4 pilot interviews were conducted to ensure that the finalised interview guide covered themes that are central to the study. As minor revisions were made to the interview questions following the first two pilot studies, the remaining two were incorporated to the main empirical data.

While simultaneously conceptualising the literature framework in accordance to the finalised interview guide, the recruitment process began. Within the research's

time constraints, the study additionally recruited an adequate number of 12 respondents. Although convenience sampling dominated through colleagues and acquaintances, the research also included the snowball sampling technique where initial contact with one participant generates further contacts (Jensen, 2012:239), as is the case on four occasions. During this process, 10 interviews were conducted in person, whereas the remaining two took place via Skype to further accommodate the informants' schedule. In total, 14 interviews were treated as the main empirical data, where the median age of participants is 26; ranging from 20 to 32 years old.

Following the data-collection process, all interviews were fully transcribed and analysed by means of open coding, combined with deductive and inductive approaches. Each interview transcript was coded sentence by sentence to ensure that every part of the data is treated equally. While the overarching themes had been deductively formulated prior to the analysis, inductive coding was applied to leave more room for capturing new and unexpected themes that may emerge throughout the analysis. In this sense, the process was motivated by grounded theory, through which the data were allowed 'to speak for itself' prior to finalising the theoretical frameworks which they correspond to (Seale, 2012:372).

During the coding stage, critical quotes that support the main arguments of the research were highlighted. Around 690 open codes were generated from 14 interview transcripts. Consistent with the deductive and inductive approaches, the open codes were respectively assigned to the corresponding sub/categories and overarching themes that were developed before, as well as during, the coding process. In total, 10 categories that fall within four main themes were identified. These main themes include: Memetic Media, Engagement, Citizenship and Context. The categories within the themes were afterwards examined carefully to develop the main analytical points of the study in correspondence to the research questions.

Exploring the ambivalence of political memes through engagement

This chapter explores the civic potentials of memes from the standpoint of Indonesian youths who form their perception of the media's use for political discourse. As the analysis reveals, their nuanced views are constructed by two momentous events in 2017 where memes play a significant role in shaping the

online discussions surrounding the phenomena, and set against their everyday awareness of contemporary political issues. With the memes' distinct modes of discourse: political dissent and partisan opinions, audiences in this study are confronted with diverse identities and ideas that are further complicated by the systemic power over the media, on top of a perceived institutional influence. Altogether, these factors are surveyed in reference to the agency of audiences that points to their various levels of engagement as citizens in the nation's democracy.

The blending of culture and politics in the online sphere

Internet memes have gained attention from scholarly and popular discourses for serving as a vehicle for public voice during the 2014 Indonesian presidential election campaign. This is acknowledged by few respondents, as reflected in the following:

> I think I started seeing political memes since the 2014 presidential election campaign. Before that, there weren't as many political memes in Indonesia, right? After Jokowi[23] became nominee, many people of my age started to care about politics. Before Jokowi, I didn't bother as much about Indonesian politics, but ever since, I became interested, and started reading more [news]. Around the same time, we used memes – so we mixed memes with politics. (Eko, 25)

Eko states his growing investment in politics and current affairs following Jokowi's candidacy for president based on his perceived electability. The use of the terms 'care' and 'interested', which leads to his increasing news consumption, reflects a motivation that entails the investment of both the emotional and the rational, which is the foundation of being engaged as a citizen (Dahlgren, 2009:80). Subsequently, he ascribes the growing popularity of political memes to the election period, where people of his age—young adults—began to use memes as a medium for political discourse, by 'mixing' politics with a product of popular culture.

As Shifman (2014) notes, popular culture is a constitutive element of the everyday life, hence using it to extend political discussions allows for politics to be more inclusive and approachable. Similarly, audiences indicate the ability of memes to generate interest toward politics; especially among the youth. To be heavily

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[23] The 2014 Indonesian presidential election matched former general Prabowo Subianto against the governor of Jakarta, Joko Widodo (also known as Jokowi). Jokowi's victory was announced on 22 July, where he was subsequently sworn-in for a 5-year term.

engaged in political news and conversations could be mundane, or in the words of Melati (age 20), 'plain and boring, just old people's stuff'. On this note, many participants designate memes as a generational phenomenon; where the youth enact as the key players—creator and/or viewer engaging in the media content—who popularise ideas that would be unthinkable to people of older age groups. Yet, to attribute a common age group to the concept of "generation" here is not sufficient to give an account of the entire phenomenon. For instance, few respondents point to memes' potential for serving as a bonding mechanism among Indonesian Internet users, by combining politics and popular culture with the use of contextualised humour.

> [With memes] I feel entertained, personally. And it's just funny, to see how Indonesians make jokes out of politics. Sometimes it's pretty good, like "cheap" or lame, in a particular Indonesian way. In a way, it can serve as a bonding mechanism. (Dian, 25)

To describe the humour as '"cheap" or lame, in a particular Indonesian way' translates into an interpretation of a nationwide inside joke, which adheres to the concept of memes as a 'media lingua franca' that touch on culturally resonant ideas (Milner, 2013). The 'bonding mechanism' between meme creators and audiences reflects a sense of belonging between individuals within the participatory network or 'imagined community', wherein members of the group, marked by predominantly symbolic boundaries, have something in common with each other (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998:117). As Hermes (2005) notes, when being engaged in media we actively connect to others by producing, and reproducing, feelings of belonging to them.

In analysing the Internet as a generation phenomenon, Miegel and Olsson (2012) adopt the work of Karl Mannheim (1936), wherein the term generation signifies members who are in a position to understand and make sense of social and cultural processes in a similar manner. Not every particular age group shapes a force in social development, hence in order for a generation to become a dynamic factor for social change, it must be realised through what he describes as generation as actuality, or the potential to destabilise the premise of established beliefs and values in a society (ibid.). The same understanding can be applied to the context of the "meme-generation" presented in this analysis; as a form of alternative media, in accordance with Carpentier's (2011) definition, memes may change the nature of civic agency by interplaying with the audience members' mediated engagement in politics—through the media lingua franca.

Political memes are enticing to members of this generation for various reasons. One includes the inter-discursive combinations of popular culture and political commentary through satirical humour and creativity. For instance, in the series of SetNov memes, respondents indicate the heavy use of pictorials integrated with intertextual references to multiple texts, which captured their attention and draw them into the construction of the argument. The appeal of memes is moreover found in a number of key attributes such as simplicity and flawed text.

While memes are normally expressed in an understood vernacular, an implication of their visual and intertextual nature is the polysemic potential; or the tendency to be open to contrasting interpretations, which brings ambiguity to the message (Shifman, 2014:150). As Milner (2016:109) argues, 'the interactions between participants within the lingua franca are as varied as their perspectives, relationships, and contexts'; to which the memetic lingua franca can be applied to the participants' own contexts and needs. In this regard, participants describe the satirical element in memes as an aspect that requires contextual understanding since, as indicated by Eko, 'it doesn't point out the obvious'. On the one hand, the sarcastic nature of memes is appraised by participants for being a 'smart' type of humour or 'savage'[24], particularly when used to convey issues of often sensitive political relevance with an amusing anecdote on a perceived absurdity. On the other hand, respondents point to satire's ability to instil a false sense of truth, if taken at face value.

The common conception of Internet memes is its ability to diminish structural power as they are characterised as being informal, casual, and spontaneous; in the way that they typically come from the bottom up, rather than being dictated by a powerful organising force (Shifman, 2014). This attribute is evident in the SetNov memes, where respondents discuss the powerful role of humour in challenging the injustices carried out by individuals of the governing institution. An interviewee apprehends the hospitalisation incidents as follows:

> Everyone was talking about it, it was hilarious, and to me, it became an example of how people in power in Indonesia, will not get away with just doing things the way they wanted. And that people will call them out for it. Because somebody, among the hundreds of millions of people in Indonesia, will speak up. (Surya, 28)

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[24] Savage is used as a slang term to describe an act of rebuttal toward someone or something in a manner that is very well-put.

Following Surya's statement, the power of the individual elites in this context can be challenged by "the people" through the use of humour. Memes, in line with Bakhtin's Carnivalesque theory (1981:23), enable the subject of ridicule to become an object of familiar contact, which clears 'the ground for an absolute investigation of it'. However, the empowering nature of memes is subject to question, as respondents reflect on the growing presence of media contents with strong partisan cues especially throughout the Pilkada DKI period. The notion of anonymity is heavily discussed by participants of this research, to which the possible sources and motive are scrutinised, such as the question of whether the memes are created to steer a particular political agenda.

> When I chance upon a meme, I don't even know if it's "organically-created" or informed by some candidate's political campaign volunteers. That's very possible, I think. (Dian, 25)

The term "organic" in this context refers to Dian's perception of memes that are typically characterised as being grassroots. With the possibility of being appropriated by institutional forces such as 'volunteers'[25] of the political campaign, the preconception of memetic participation adding a democratic voice to mediated political discourses becomes challenged. Many respondents indicate their vigilance toward the information they engage in, as memes may be appropriated by institutional forces that are established within a top-down system. Such an instance is further supported by a respondent who critically observes and reflects on the possible gatekeepers of the political meme Facebook pages that he follows:

> I can't really say it's from the political elites or the authorities themselves... but for some [Facebook] pages, it looks like it's systemic. You can see the pattern. If you follow or observe the posts in order, it looks like it's guided by a certain party. (Adi, 29)

Memes that contain partisan cues contribute to the scrutiny level which one applies to the content's persuasive arguments, based on the remarks made by participants in this study. As Adi remarks, the memes and platforms through which they circulate may be guided by structural processes that are 'systemic', as is the case with the Facebook pages he follows. The notion of anonymity is subject

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[25] As part of their branding strategy, each of the gubernatorial candidates for the 2017 Pilkada DKI designated a social media team during the campaign period that enact as "volunteers" who claim to be unpaid.

to greater scrutiny, as several respondents speak in regard to anonymous groups and "bot"[26] accounts that had made accounts in the news during the period in which the interviews were conducted[27]. Combining these factors together, the civic value of memes becomes strongly contested as audiences reflect on the media's vulnerability to be created and spread by anonymous networks for a top-down political agenda. This adds to the challenge that respondents face in navigating the media's civic potentials.

Subsequently, the notion of algorithms is discussed at great lengths. Most point to the problems imposed by the systemic power over memes, especially when engaging with the ones containing partisan cues. In the wave of 'datafication', Couldry & Hepp (2017:139) assert that 'data transform the nature of the self's reflexivity and performance in the processes of operating within social media platforms'. This very notion is registered in one of the interviewees:

> I see memes on my Facebook page, but this is what I notice […] memes that do not conform to my beliefs, or to my political leanings, they don't show [on my feed]. Which further shows you that these things create a confirmation bias, and then I think that, "Oh, this guy is right! The other people are stupid," and I don't even know what the other side is saying. So, that risk of confirmation bias, it is real. And it is something was made worse by the fact that there are Facebook algorithms. You tend to click something that you agree more, and it tends to appear on your news feed. It makes you lazy – it prevents me from looking from the other side of the angle. (Yuda, 25)

As Yuda suggests, memes can be manipulated to echo commentaries of partisan perspectives and create 'confirmation bias' among meme audiences. Added with algorithm's role in placing people into their own "filter bubble", this potentially leads to an increasingly polarised public which may inhibit discussions among citizens in a democracy (Levendusky & Malhotra, 2016; Lim, 2017). Yet, Yuda's awareness of such implication, and that of the other respondents, indicates a form of agency; which involves the ability to make decisions and act according to a coherent sense of self and identity (Dahlgren, 2009:102). How this agency is

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[26] An Internet bot refers to a software application or system that runs automated tasks over the Internet, which can be used to share information online.

[27] A cyber network was identified and charged for spreading a wave of fake news and hate speech on Twitter, in an operation that was allegedly designed to destabilise the government (see: Lamb, 2018).

translated into the ways they negotiate their position as meme audiences will be treated in the following sections.

Memes as political discourse: opportunities and challenges

Memes are characterised for being spreadable; their accessibility allows for audiences to easily engage with the content, and the variety of communicative modes they convey, on social media. As political memes predominantly contain references to events in the news, respondents see their potential in raising awareness on certain political issues, such as SetNov's perceived attempts at avoiding prosecution and the outcome of the series of public election debate between the gubernatorial candidates. Some further suggest the potential of memes to act as a gateway to acquiring more knowledge on recent political events.

Online competition for attention is massive; and in this sense, the spreadability of political memes may draw the audiences' attention to specific developments of political news. The accessibility of memes gives rise to awareness, which may contribute to their willingness to obtain more knowledge on particular issues. All interviewees stress the importance of keeping oneself informed, and for some, to be engaged with memes also serves as a coping mechanism to address their frustrations regarding politics.

> I have a motto in life. "Life is a big joke, the only thing that you can do is just to laugh." And I think that's the only way that I can react [to] Indonesian politics, to be honest. I mean you read the news, it's depressing, so the best thing we can do is to make a joke out of it. (Agus, 29)

To Agus, the fact that SetNov managed to avoid yet another hearing from the court indicates a sign of weakness on the part of the nation's judicial system in tackling issues of corruption. Through satirical humour and comedic relief, he finds himself capable of tuning in to recent political events, despite finding them emotionally-draining or 'depressing'. Yet, most participants remarked that the heavy reliance on humour causes a process of "depolitisation", where the political and critical dimensions of memes become devalued for pure enjoyment (Shifman, 2014:138).

> I think the negative thing about having all these memes around, is that it just… you know when you do research, an interview, there's this thing called the respondent fatigue. So when you see something so much, so often, you just sort of, don't want to see it anymore. I became 'meh, I don't want to look at it'. I

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guess that's where memes are right now, it's just purely for the entertainment value, and there's so many of them out there, it's so common. (Sinta, 24)

By making reference to the term 'respondent fatigue', Sinta discusses the pervasive spread of memes, which at a certain point may lead to oversaturation of the issue at hand. In this case, while the media have the capacity to raise awareness by highlighting issues about situations that require change and improvement, spreadability may also impede their civic potentials in extending social awareness, as the value can be diminished in favour of 'the entertainment value'.

As a product of the participatory media culture, memes enable diverse participation in online public dialogue. What is denoted by public dialogue here does not solely refer to engagement with the media content, but also the political commentaries that manifest on the sites through which they circulate, such as the comments section. Participants of this research point to the role of public commentaries in sparking conversations that lead to discussions. For example, Yuda believes that the SetNov memes create an avenue for the exchange of dialogues to take place between Internet users, where 'the wisdom of the crowd' through the online commentaries helped 'crystallise' the events leading up to the incidents. Referring to the same case, Taufik (age 25) states he was capable of deducing that the first SetNov hospital incident was evidently fabricated, after his Facebook friends pointed out the inconsistencies in the hospital scenario. In this case, memes not only serve to crystallise matters, but also provide an outlet for 'the wisdom of the crowd' to transpire through the role of everyday talk.

At the same time, participants are doubtful that such mediated participation can be generally democratising. The issue of authenticity comes to mind again as respondents question if the conversations are generated by bot accounts, or simply populated by Internet "trolls"[28]. Many remark that the discursive participation lack a sense of reasoned deliberation, as most conversations that take place turn into senseless debates where the discussion points become completely derailed from the original subject. Yet, the same respondents appear to have ambivalent attitudes toward the political commentaries, as they find them to be entertaining too, and at times, even more amusing than the memes. Eko and Taufik, for instance, frequently go through the comments section to observe if any participant is able to rebut the claims made by the meme while providing factual evidence. Eko particularly finds amuse in reading the conversations that transpire between

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[28] The term trolls in this context refers to an Internet slang which describes individuals who deliberately post aggravating, irrelevant or off-topic messages in online communities to provoke readers to an emotional response, often for the troll's personal enjoyment.

Internet users, particularly if they begin to "roast"[29] each other through savage commentaries. In various degrees, these commentaries invite audiences to be engaged in the discursive process.

When participants are further enquired about memes' potential for political discourse, some express their doubt for several reasons. Firstly, the intertextual nature of memes that is associated with attribution can be problematic (Milner, 2016:208), as it may perpetuate logical fallacy. For instance, Guntur (age 24) believes that memes do not qualify as a constructive means of discussion, as they represent a re-appropriation of images that may be guided by an internal political schema. He observes, while an active battle over preferred meaning may be taking place, the majority of meme audiences would only engage with discussions that further reaffirm their political predispositions. In this context, respondents reflect on the controversy surrounding memetic representations for electoral politics. A lot of the memes they have encountered appear as a tool for negative campaigning by making "deliberate attacks" toward political opponents, often containing sectarian sentiments.

> Based on my personal observation, memes that are political seem to be guided by specific parties […] especially since the recent *Pilkada DKI*. It became really evident—like if we refer to the previous presidential elections when Jokowi became presidential nominee, there were already partisan memes, but they were used to address the weaknesses of the opposing candidates and not done blatantly. Now, it's more like war. (Bima, 26)

By referencing 'war', Bima indicates the polyvocal nature of memes; as memes facilitate voices to connect and converse, they also enable arguments and antagonism to take place. While the affordance of contestations demonstrates the potential for memetic media to facilitate counter-political discourses, audiences in this research become cynical about the promise of voice in public commentaries through memes, as they actively question their positions within the diverse identities and ideas of memetic participation that can easily play by the 'mob rule' (Milner, 2016:112).

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[29] The act of "roasting" someone is to publicly make a joke at the person's expense, often in a humiliating manner and intended to entertain the wider audience.

Dis/engagement? Reflecting on the civic potentials

As previously discussed, the ability of memes to generate interest and draw the audiences' attention to current affairs may contribute to their willingness to acquire knowledge. With simplicity being one of the main attributes of memes (Shifman, 2014:81), participants note that the information becomes relatively easier to be grasped, especially when the subject of discussion contains technical discourses. Memes' simplicity serves to navigate viewers to the construction of the argument that would otherwise be difficult to follow.

The modes of communicative discourse in memes prove to be appealing to the respondent's emotion, as they are often entertaining in addressing certain political subjects. As issues of political relevance became increasingly complex during the election period, Darma (age 32) turns to memes as alternative source to keep oneself 'updated', since they are able to form multiple framings of the news into easily grasped ideas. As a form of alternative media, memes allow him to assess which recent topics are actively discussed or hotly contested by the public, without having to browse through the ceaseless flow of news 'one by one' and feeling overwhelmed by the complexity of political discussion on conventional news format. Yet, most respondents do problematise the same notion of simplicity, as it implies that a singular Internet meme does not capture enough nuances when used to provide information.

Participants in this study question the ability of memes to offer an in-depth picture to relevant issues or news events. For instance, the policies proposed by the gubernatorial candidates during the election debates are undoubtedly nuanced, and to criticise their implication through memes would be reductive of its actual complexity. This becomes problematic when, as cautioned by Milner (2016:208), Internet users create and transform content with inconsistent accuracy and credibility, which potentially leads to the spread of both information and misinformation. Interviewees cast further doubt on the potential for knowledge acquisition through memes, due to the perceived unreliability of the mainstream media which few political memes base their content from.

> For me, [political memes] only serve to entertain. Cause whoever makes the content, bases the information from online mainstream news media, which actually lack depth to begin with. (Krisna, 24)

For Krisna, he mainly recognises the cultural, rather than political, value of internet memes due to his declining trust in the online mainstream media. He

attributes his scepticism to the pervasiveness of clickbait headlines, inaccuracy of information due to struggle for timeliness, as well as the increasingly biased and partisan news coverage. Other respondents also refer to instances where memes, particularly ones that are partisan, manipulate news article screenshots in the media content as a baseline of their proposed argument. Although this is not particularly reflected across the multitude of memes that went viral over the course of Pilkada DKI, such technique certainly challenges the core conception of memes as a form of alternative parallel discourse to mainstream media viewpoints.

Apart from the perceived bias of the mainstream media, participants also attribute their distrust toward institutions and their representatives. This is especially highlighted when discussing regulations that are deemed restrictive to freedom of expression and may benefit the political elites, such as the ITE law, or a controversial law referred to as UU MD3[30] that was recently passed by the house of representatives when the interviews in this study were conducted. The notion of trust performing in an ambivalent manner in civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2009:112) is evident in this case: by exposing the perceived absurdities of those in power, the value of memes as a form of alternative media to voice political dissent is still considered by some respondents.

Referring to the growing distrust in mainstream media among the youth, Yuda reflects on memes' potential as 'a tool for mass movement'; or the potential of memes for social change which does not necessarily coordinate or mobilise activist movements, but more towards how citizens are able to articulate and discuss about conflicting ideas in the society. Political memes may be in line with certain values of democratic principles, which according to Dahlgren (2009:110) include 'substantive values' such as justice and liberty and 'procedural' ones, like openness and discussion. Respondents point out that due to their subtlety, satirical narratives enable both meme creators and spreaders to offer their dissenting critique while avoiding prosecution under the ITE law. Therefore, memes spark hope for broader discussions to take place and explore or even challenge the limits of governmentality, as exemplified in the series of memes that emerged after SetNov's hospitalisation.

On the other hand, it must also be noted that different types of satire would have different persuasive influence on the audience (Holbert et al., 2011). Participants

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[30] The legislation concerning the People's Legislative Council, Regional Representatives Council, and Regional House of Representatives, also known as *UU MD3*, contains a new law under Article 122 that gives the House of Representatives' Ethics Council the power to criminalise individuals, groups or legal entities that "degrade the honour" of the members of the House of Representatives. In this article, what constitutes "degradation" is undefined.

in this research similarly indicate their concern over viewers who may not understand the context of the media content due to its polysemic potential. Satirical humour also becomes problematic when used to spread antagonistic voices, which ran rampant during the Pilkada DKI campaign period. Few respondents found these types of satire to be juvenile and offensive on a personal level. Moreover, the notion of anonymity is another paradoxical aspect to the empowering nature of memes.

Being exposed to memes with antagonistic voices, according to Melati, causes emotional distance, thus hindering her from engaging with the broader discussions of the political issues at hand. Especially for modes of discourses that contain sectarian and racist sentiments, which, as Surya asserts, can be created and spread anonymously 'nearly, without consequences', such attributes are contradictory to the civic values which according to Dahlgren (2009:111) must be upheld in a democracy, such as responsibility and accountability.

Throughout the interviews, participants in this research are visibly reflexive about their sense of self in relation to others, which in turn contributes to the ways they engage with memes. For instance, some deliberately disengage themselves from political memes which they deem "toxic" by "unfriending" or "unfollowing" Facebook friends who tend to share media contents that are disagreeable to their political subjectivities. The potential to be grouped into filter bubbles, or the personalisation of information that effectively isolate them from a diversity of viewpoints, comes to mind, and some indicate the implication it brings to their opinions and attitudes.

> Since we're talking about memes that are political, clearly this would affect my opinions. Although I'm seeing memes from the comedic value, but like it or not, this would have an effect on me. Since I'm only following memes that are in line with my political views, when they're being criticised by an opponent, this would form my opinion to despise that person. (Darma, 32)

While 'like-minded spheres' may serve to strengthen collective identity, they also risk encouraging 'one-dimensional mentalities' (Dahlgren, 2009:165). In this regard, Darma reflects on how engaging with memes that reaffirm his preconceived notions may not only reinforce his confirmation bias, but also intensify the antagonistic view he holds toward his perceived 'political opponents'. As Livingstone (2005:19) suggests, because political engagement is increasingly a matter of identity and of belonging, these matters may overflow into notions of identity politics, as well as social inclusion and exclusion. In Indonesia, the

polarisation between two political camps based around identity politics has become increasingly evident after the divisive gubernatorial election in Jakarta (Lim, 2017). Participants of this study opt to avoid showcasing their political views "publicly" on social media out of the fear offending others, or the regard that their opinions would not matter. This includes preventing oneself from "sharing" memes that are evidently partisan.

> By satirising a political figure, somehow you show who you're siding with. Memes are one of the ways to showcase your identity; showing your political preferences to people, so-called, implicitly. (Krisna, 24)

Krisna's statement reflects that being engaged in a meme is not merely a matter of being entertained, but also identifying with the media content based on the political subjectivities which one holds. As Abercrombie & Longhurst (1998:117) assert, the construction of identity links to one's sense of belonging as a diffused audience in an imagined community. Although few respondents distance themselves from further engaging in memes to avoid expressing their political views openly, more in fact indicated their continued engagement in various ways. Many actively rate or "react" to the content; "tag friends" under the post's comments section; share the meme on their timeline or newsfeed; as well as "export" the content to other social networking sites for private exchanges. One of the criteria for such modes of 'participation through the media' (Carpentier, 2011:68) is the extent to which respondents find the meme to be informative and amusing at the same time. This is exemplified in Sinta's case; in spite of not "following" any political entertainment site on social media, she is engaged with memes that are shared by her peers.

Dahlgren (2009) maintains that engagement emerges via talk, which is shaped by discourses. Sinta's deliberate discussions with her peers, while taking place privately, reflects the significant role of communicative competencies and practices like the role of everyday talk in characterising one's civic agency. Indeed, in 'doing citizenship', civic competence cannot be acquired solely from political society; it is manifested from the entire development of the subject (Dahlgren, 2006:273). In reference to online discourses that take place under the comments section, one interviewee, Adi, particularly indicates his frequent interaction with other Internet users through memes.

> Normally I just leave a reaction, but if it looks very, very interesting, I would leave a comment to burn up "the battle". Usually I get positive responses because I'm on the right side – like, aligning with what is right, based on facts.

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> Sometimes people don't agree with the content but their understanding is false to begin with, because the meme is based on a hoax. So I just tell the truth, and people support me. I don't think I have any special role, just having fun while making people realise what should be right. (Adi, 29)

By 'burning up the battle', Adi contests the credibility of the information constructed in memetic contents which may at times contain misinformation. In this sense, his ability to determine and challenge misinformation reflects his identity construction as an empowered civic agent, which requires a set of knowledge ('aligning with what is right, based on facts'), emotions ('if it looks very, very interesting') and activities ('tell the truth'). In line with Hermes' (2006) concept of cultural citizenship, Adi's mediated participation in this political discourse illustrates a state of commitment to larger communities, through the affordability of everyday resources, like social media and memes.

Another aspect to focus on is the role of motivation, which sets the foundation of willingness to engage with the political (Dahlgren, 2009). Participants in this study, despite coming from various ethnic and religious background, as well as field of education and profession—express their collective desire for the nation to advance with pro-diversity and progressive ideals. They exhibit genuine concern over the growing political tension, especially in response to the divisive election and growing threat of identity politics. On this account, a respondent who articulates his sense of nationalism actively negotiates his position as a citizen and member of the meme-generation by following Twitter accounts that circulate partisan memes from both sides of the polarising camps. Being aware of the challenges imposed by algorithms and the filter bubble, he attempts to confront his viewpoints, instead of reaffirming his preconceived notions, as follows:

> From memes and social media, I get to learn a lot more about the current [state] of Indonesian democracy and what is actually happening. I think the reason why people have become less "chill" lately is because they only see the picture from one perspective. Like what they call it… the media bubble. They only see, what they want to see. So I think that's what I'm always trying to do, to follow the [conversations] from both sides, then try to understand more about it. (Guntur, 24)

Guntur expresses his aspiration to enlighten those around him by acting as a mediator between the divisive political rhetoric and rampant hate speeches which have dominated debates in social media. Following Coleman's (2013) framework of engagement, the subject's construction of identity and engagement in

communities may be translated into his agency as a democratic citizen. Being part of the meme-generation to him, means to have access to multiple online sites and to engage in the multiple voices within the polyvocal conversations. This illustrates the potential of meme engagement, which mobilises the rational—being engaged with both sides of the discussion, and the affective response—the passion to witness progress in the nation, in shaping his civic agency to participate in the nation's democracy.

Conclusion

Building on the theoretical perspectives of online public spheres, public discourses in memetic participation and civic cultures, the study explores the implications of political memes in facilitating, or inhibiting, the everyday civic engagement of audiences. This research acknowledges the different modes of discourse employed by political memes, by focusing on two case studies in order to gain a comprehensive outlook on the media's civic potentials in the context of present-day Indonesian politics. It is discovered that memes as a tool for political dissent and partisan opinions pose varying outcomes on the nature of public discourse, where they consequently negotiate their position as meme audiences and citizens in the digital environment.

The analysis begins by answering the question of how audiences define and engage with political memes on social media. Participants in this study reflect on a notion of being part of "the meme generation"; setting themselves apart from the older generations of society and bonding over the media lingua franca of memes. Through memes, discussions about politics can be packaged in a fun, humorous way—often with satirical, whimsical content and "savage" commentaries—and only be understood by members of the meme-generation. Furthermore, the potential of memes to empower citizens, by serving as an alternative, dissenting critique against corruptors is demonstrated. Such civic potential, however, is challenged by issues of anonymity. In relation to political memes containing strong partisan cues during the gubernatorial election campaign period, audiences indicate the likelihood for the media content to be appropriated for institutional influence and integrated as part of the candidates' campaign strategy on social media. Such perception contributes to the scrutiny level which one applies to the content's persuasive arguments; contesting the nature of memes which are supposedly "organic" or "a product of the mass", rather than coming from the top-down.

In the discussion of engagement, respondents demonstrate various forms of online activities. While few appear to be merely observing political memes that appear on their social media, most actively rate or "react" to the content; "tag friends" under the post's comments section; "share" the meme on their timeline or newsfeed; or "export" the media to other social networking sites to discuss the content through private exchanges. The basis for these modes of participation to take place includes the extent to which respondents find the meme to be informative and entertaining at the same time, which showcases an interplay between one's cognitive attention and affective investment. Yet, some participants also point to their deliberate disengagement from partisan memes which they treat as "toxic" or disagreeable to their political subjectivities. This perspective generates the discussion of algorithms and the risk of being confined into "filter bubbles". In this regard, few respondents attempt to minimise such risk by actively seeking information from a variety of political meme sites in order to acquire a diversity of political viewpoints. Such awareness and effort are an indication of their civic agency as meme audiences, as well as citizens of the nation.

The implications of memes on contemporary political discourse are subsequently discussed. Memes serve an inviting function; they are communicated in a mode of discourse familiar to the youth, through online channels that allow for ease of access that are complemented by the media's spreadability. However, the findings also suggest that spreadable media and heavy reliance on popular culture can lead to a process of "depolitisation", which risks taking the critical facets away of the issue. Through political commentaries that manifest under the comments section, respondents can engage in dialogues that enable them to read between the lines and crystallise issues that are contested in the media content. For instance, it became clear to a respondent that the SetNov incidents were likely to be fabricated after engaging in online discussions which reveal the inconsistencies in the scenarios. The role of everyday discourse, in this sense, allows for "the wisdom of the crowd" to transpire.

However, respondents also express their doubt in the ability of the mediated public discourses to be democratising since they generally lack the sense of reasoned deliberation. With memes being perceived as a re-appropriation of images guided by an internal political scheme, disagreeable information and discussions that take place among Internet users may only serve to confirm their political predispositions, as senseless debates appear to dominate online public discourses. This transpires into discussions surrounding the use of memes for electoral politics, where often times partisan memes generate conflict or "battle" between supporters of each candidate, especially when the media contain

antagonistic views. As such, audiences are sceptical about the promise of voice in public commentaries that manifest under memes due to their general incompatibility in achieving rational consensus.

With regards to how political memes may foster, or hinder, the youth's civic engagement, the present study analyses the postulation through Dahlgren's (2009) circuit of civic cultures through its six dimensions: knowledge, values, trust, practices, spaces and identities. Respondents indicate that memes have the ability to spark their interest on particular issues and serve as a gateway to acquiring *knowledge* by seeking additional external sources. However, due to the simplicity of the content's format, they also address its inability to capture nuances. In the case of election memes, being extensively exposed to narratives that are one-sided may lead to uninformed opinion. Few audience members are moreover cynical about memes' potential for knowledge acquisition, as the media have increasingly based their content from online mainstream news that are often perceived as biased and unreliable. This links to the notion of *trust* and how the incorporation of news article screenshots in building the base of the content's argument further complicates the very notion of memes as an alternative media in Carpentier's (2011) term.

Similarly, as respondents attribute their distrust towards the governing institutions and their representatives, they also acknowledge memes' potential as an alternative dissenting critique; particularly in response to problematic policies that may put the common people at a position of disadvantage, such as the misuse of the defamation clause under the ITE law. In this context, the subtlety of satirical humour is discussed in relation to the *values* it shares in a democratic system, for it sparks hope for broader discussions to take place under a media regulation that is deemed restrictive to freedom of expression. At the same time, satire may also convey divisive rhetoric by spreading hate speech or antagonistic voices, as in the case of Pilkada DKI. Such modes of discourse can be emotionally distancing to the audience members, on top of being problematic on an ethical level.

Finally, the notion of *identities* is reflected across the findings. In general, participants in the study express their desire for the nation to advance with progressive ideals. This outlook translates into their motivation in engaging in an array of practices through memes in ways that promote their civic engagement, such as seeking political knowledge from various sources and participating in discourses through numerous online *spaces*. As they take on meaningful *practices* like actively discussing about recent development that are made aware through memes, and addressing misinformation that is depicted in the media content in

public commentaries, these activities reflect a form of engagement that enhances their civic agency. Through political meme sites on social media, audiences have the avenue to contribute to political discussions and simultaneously receive support from fellow Internet users engaged in the conversation; this illustrates the media's role as an everyday resource that facilitates the state of commitment to larger communities (Hermes, 2005) in an imagined community (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 1998).

In relation to the growing political tension following the Pilkada DKI campaign period, audiences actively negotiate their position as citizens and members of the meme-generation. While few appear to be disengaging themselves from the issue, as they do not perceive any purpose beyond acquiring general knowledge on the subject, some also attempt to attain a broader picture of the current state of democracy in Indonesia. A respondent perfectly exemplifies this instance, as he critically reflects and attempts to challenge his personal subjectivities by engaging in conversations that take place on various political meme sites to better understand the present political polarisation in the country. He constructs his role as an active mediator between the rampant, discordant political rhetoric that has dominated the debates on social media. This identity formation and engagement in communities ultimately connects to his agency as a democratic citizen, which is in line with Coleman's (2013) view on political citizenship.

In retrospect, there are many ways of being a citizen and of 'doing citizenship' (Dahlgren, 2006). The contribution of political memes to civic cultures remains equivocal, with challenges that may hinder the civic engagement such as the potential for "depolitisation", the interference of antagonistic voices and perceived institutional influence, on top of the systemic power over the media. Yet, memes also offer resources for audiences to explore various political discourses that may touch them in various ways. As the findings indicate, political memes hold the potential to incite knowledge, inspire values, suggest practices and mobilise identities, which altogether foster the civic engagement of the Indonesian youth. Therefore, despite the media's limitations, to reflect on political memes as a space for civic cultures allows us to go beyond the mere "lulz" and narrow definition of politics, and identify their civic potentials.

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Reading the Diaspora

Krisztina Orbán

Introduction

> I can't tell what this land could mean for someone else,
> for me it is my homeland, a tiny place, up in flames,
> it's the ever rocking cradle of childhood memories.
> I grew up out of all this, a twig out of the tree,
> and I hope it will be this soil where my body returns one day.
> I am home here…

/Miklós Radnóti: I can't tell.../

Miklós Radnóti (1909-1944, Hungarian Jewish modernist poet) wrote his poem in the grip of the anti-Semitic regulations during World War II. *I can't tell* is not as harsh in its patriotism as the national Romantic poems that hold statuses as anthems, but similarly takes up the idea of a lifetime spent from birth to death in the same country. Home is given and exclusive: this is the dominating sentiment yielded to Hungarians by the canonical literature.

Do books create imagined communities like the news and television in their golden age or a space for articulating multiple belongings? According to Anderson (1983), books have been part of the birth of nations. This idea is still well and alive when we try to understand the media consumption by ethnic groups in Europe. However, books are missing from this discourse on diasporic media use, and they are barely investigated within a digitalized media environment either.

There are around 30-40,000 Hungarians living in Sweden according to official estimations (Magyarország Nagykövetsége, 2017). Thanks to EU mobility and the cheap flights between Malmö and Budapest, or Debrecen and Budapest taking only an hour and a half, the immigrant group in Scania is a potentially mobile audience. They are also in a host country that encourages multiculturalism. The Hungarians in Sweden constitute a population diverse in age, gender, class and generation. After World War I, Hungary's borders shifted, which led to the formation of Hungarian-speaking minority groups of considerable numbers in the

surrounding countries. As a result, the waves of migration towards Sweden after WWI are further diverse in origin country. Three significant waves of migrations took place in the latest 100 years. After the revolution in 1956 came the biggest (Magyarország Nagykövetsége, 2017), and arguably still the most influential, Hungarian refugee group to Sweden. They fled the Socialist regime, most of them did not move back after 1989, and identify through traditions: they illustrate the diaspora identity. Another significant wave comprised of Romanian Hungarians fleeing the Ceauşescu regime at the end of the '80s, and others leaving Vojvodina, the mostly Hungarian-speaking region in what was then Yugoslavia, now Serbia (Magyarország Nagykövetsége, 2017). The newest wave has been arriving to Scandinavia since 1989, the fall of the Soviet Block. Workforce moved North in even higher numbers after 2003 (Magyarország Nagykövetsége, 2017), when Hungary joined the European Union. The children often spend the summers in the home country with grandparents, and sometimes the families still own real estate in Hungary.'

Midst this diversity, the local diaspora organization in Lund – *Lundi Magyar Kultúrfórum* (LMKF) or *Hungarian Cultural Forum in Lund* – calls itself cultural, suggesting an educated, middle-class membership. LMKF finds that the old-school touring of prominent actors or musicians by invitation is losing significance when it is easy to travel home for the premiere of a theatre play. This direction and approach is quite unique among the Hungarian organisations in Sweden, but is seen as progressive by many of its members. Readers centred around Lund who arrived in the newest wave of migration were then chosen as an extreme example of the role of books for cultural identity, because an atypical case study could shed more light on a potential underlying paradigm change by illuminating the processes through its extremity (Flyvbjerg, 2001:78-79).

Based on the literature review presented in the first chapter, it seems that the field lacks the meticulous work needed to see the shades and details. Books in the diaspora are not researched enough to form an academic discourse within which differences or similarities between different waves of migration and ethnicities could be spotted. I, as a researcher, have to step back, and investigate the more general articulation of identity through cultural consumption first. How and what do the displaced read, are the grassroots characteristics of diasporas brought into play? Are transcultural practices followed?

This thesis sets as a goal to illuminate the role of books as mobile media within the wider media environment of displaced people. Further, the research aims to shed light on how displaced people make sense, not of certain texts, but of reading itself, from a contemporary point of view.

Research questions:

Q1: What role do books play in the everyday lives of Hungarians in Sweden?
Q2: How do they articulate cultural identities through reading?

After the literature review that maps the existing research at the intersection of diaspora and audience studies, the second chapter transparently looks at the research process. It considers the influences of recent ethnographic tendencies for audience studies and specifically for this research. Finally, the analysis will lead through four themes that emerged during the thematic coding in order to answer the research questions.

Mapping the field

From diaspora through transnationalism to transculturality

In the 1990s, several social scientist schools attempted coming to terms with the widening concept of diaspora in a globalising world of migration. For instance, post-colonialist, postmodernist cultural scholars including Hall, Gilroy, Bhabha and Bauman argued for a paradigm change in the research of diasporas. Hall (1990:235) positioned his paradigm against the Jewish diaspora, defined by trauma and history, but incorporated trauma into the hybridization of cultural identities (Hall, 1992:310). It is partly the Jewish and Armenian scattering's influence on academic discourses why Hall (1996) stressed that origin is not an eternal determining force, consistently throughout his lifework:

> identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become... (Hall, 1996:4).

Hall (1992:277) called this formation that is never ready and does not have a core the 'postmodern subject'. It is 'increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions' (Hall, 1996:4). While displaced identities might seem 'more fragmented', caught up between nation states, Hall's approach, in which national identity is but one of the plural cultural identities, is applicable to any person, subculture and nation in modern times, even without a history of movement.

Several concepts were proposed and applied to dislocated people, some got more ingrained in the discourse than others: changing same (Gilroy, 1991), routes and roots (Gilroy, 1995), hybridity (Hall, 1992), translation (Rushdie, 1982; Hall, 1990; Hall, 1992), traveling cultures (Clifford, 1994). In newer definitions of diaspora, dense connections to the homeland are incorporated, and even the dichotomy of homeland and settlement is completed with onward migration (Faist, 2010:12-13).

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham, where Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy worked for shorter or longer periods, created cultural theory, the interdisciplinary field that ventured into popular culture not losing its anthropological approach. Thanks to Hall's analyses on films and representation (e.g. 1990), and Gilroy's on Black popular music (e.g. 1999) theorisations of diaspora within cultural studies have their roots in the postcolonial, postmodern angle. Research still proliferates on the media use of Black, Indian, Arabic and Turkish settlements in Europe (e.g. Aksoy and Robins, 2000; Smets, 2013; Vandevelde et al., 2015).

'Identifications not identities, acts of relationship rather than pre-given forms: this tradition is a network of partially connected histories, a persistently displaced and reinvented time/space of crossings.' (Clifford, 1994:321) This paraphrasing of Gilroy by Clifford could be a motto for diasporic audience research, warning against essentialism.

The struggle with definitions persists in the new century, with further diversification. The concepts are so not clear that Faist and Bauböck dedicated a multidisciplinary volume to the discussion – in an attempt to solve the tensions between diaspora and transnationalism, 'the awkward dance partners' that 'are sometimes used interchangeably' (Faist, 2010:9). Transnationalism at a first glimpse seems to be a much clearer term than diaspora. It describes 'migrants' durable ties across countries – and, more widely, captures not only communities, but all sorts of social formations, such as transnationally active networks, groups and organisations' (ibid:9). Contemporary uses also refer to immigrants besides migrant entrepreneurs. This convergence of diaspora and transnationalism might be misleading, because they were coined in the same decade, as an answer to a similar quest: to acknowledge the agency of under-represented groups.

Vertovec (2001:578), applying transnationalism to immigrants, combined it with identity because transnational networks are often based on the perception of something common. 'Each habitat or locality represents a range of identity-conditioning factors,' and the 'experiences gathered in these multiple

habitats accumulate to comprise people's cultural repertoires' (Vertovec, 2001:578). Ultimately, he agrees with Robins and Aksoy, and Cağlar that transnationalism is a facilitator to 'unfix identities', 'and arriv[e] at new, cosmopolitan perspectives on culture and belonging' (Vertovec, 2001:580).

Following Vertovec; Bradatan, Melton and Popan (2011) theorised transnationalism as a social identity. 'A transnational would interact in one way with the fellows from his/her origin country while s/he would use a different set of rules and behaviors when interacting with the host country's natives, as a way to respond to different expectations' (Bradatan, Melton and Popan, 2010:11). Transnational as an identity then is more than an expansion of the national frame or the multiplication of it: nationality is 'discontinuous in one's everyday experience. ... [O]ne can experience two different national identities in various interactional settings.' (Bradatan, Melton and Popan, 2010:11)

Utilizing transnationalism within audience studies, first the border-crossing of the structural, the media was in focus, and this is reflected in cross-national, comparative reception studies of widely distributed media, such as the reception of Dallas (Liebes and Katz, 1990). Only more recently has research turned from the media to the audience as the starting point, and investigated the multiplicity in their choices (Georgiou, 2006; Guedes Bailey, 2007). Madianou (2011:455) proposed 'transnational' as a more diffused term for ethnicity-based audience research to avoid the closed connotations of 'diaspora', just as she preferred the more open working concept of culture to the essentialism in race and ethnicity. However, transnationalism for Aksoy and Robins (2000:345) and Georgiou (2007:19; 2006:4) is not a move away from diaspora, but a distantiation from nation states. Smets (2013:104), in his turn, seven years later, claimed that the deconstruction of the national had already happened in favour of complexities unearthed by a transnational or cosmopolitan approach in the development of diasporic audience studies during the previous decade.

This thesis argues that in order to fully leave the restrictive and bias-inducing frame of the nation, the research should leave *trans-nation-alism* and the still influential concept of imagined communities. Even in studies that argue against the nation as the unit of the research, the concept of 'imagined communities' (Anderson, 1983) is utilised through innovations such as '(re-)imagined communities' (Georgiou, 2007:29), 'diasporic imagined communities' (Georgiou, 2006:155), 'hybrid imagined community' (Georgiou, 2006:21); or referenced in its original form (Guedes Bailey, 2007:223; Budarick, 2011).

This thesis will use the concept of *transculturality*, based on the seamless switch element in the identity that Bradatan, Melton and Popan (2010:11) theorised as 'trans', and Hall's framework (1992:274) that highlighted the cultural side of diasporas. The two theories are close to each other, in that it is not enough to extend nationalities but one needs to be 'translated' (Rushdie, 1983), in order to perform the switch between locally defined social worlds without being perceived as the Other. Although the proposed concept is based on transnationalism, the -ity ending is used to acknowledge Faist's critique (2010:11) that it is not an ideology. The other reason for the choice of wording is Hepp's (2009:2) proposal for a comparative media research perspective and Couldry and Hepp's (2017:36) transcultural perspective on socially embedded mediatization. Their concept will be applied wider for the research of a culturally distinct audience that does not necessarily maintain 'durable ties' (Faist, 2010:9) in the meaning of 'racialised socio-economic hierarchies' (Vertovec, 2001:578). Transculturality, then, does not need to involve the transgression of borders as transnational entrepreneurs and organisations do, but rather symbolic boundaries of culture, that often are connected to nation states as source territories.

Transcultural migrants as an audience live in 'media nomadism' (Georgiou, 2013:91), a complex media environment originating from and informed by several cultures whose codes, symbols, myths they are acquainted with, regardless of their level of identification with them. *Transculturality* is fruitful for research according to Hepp (2009:4), because 'all media cultures had been more or less hybrid, had to translate, change their identities and so on.' This approach is proposed to leave behind the essentialising bias that national frames of reference often result in; a paradigm shift increasingly important for Hungarians. Due to historical border shifting, Hungarians have arrived to Sweden from various countries and might not hold Hungarian citizenship, thus, nationality is not that evident as their cultural identification.

Georgiou (2006:14), who contributed to the understanding of how identities and media use are negotiated in the everyday with several researches among Cypriot, Greek and Arabic audiences in Europe, stated that '*[w]hite* minorities are understudied', because of their relative invisibility. Whiteness can be a source of creative hybridization, in which the displaced person might experience less pressure to assimilate. Similarly, the newest, voluntary Hungarian migration wave opens up possibilities for negotiated and reflexive acculturation.

Ethnic audience sitting in front of the TV or the silver screen

Harindranath (2000:161) called for a more detailed theoretical framework paying attention to the actual frames of reference of the audience. There are a lot of differences, even divides, when it comes to displaced audiences, reflected in their media use: waves of migration (Sreberny, 2000), generation (Guedes Bailey, 2007:223; Smets et al., 2013; Noorda, 2017), age (Georgiou, 2006, 2013), gender (Sreberny, 2000; Madianou, 2005; Georgiou, 2012), class (Georgiou, 2006), language knowledge (Madianou, 2005; Dali, 2013; Hosoya-Neale, 2016), and taste (Dali, 2012; Quirke, 2014). Vandevelde et al. (2015:102) went as far as to state that the 'centrality of ethnic identity for diasporic' audiences needs to be questioned, or even 'downplay[ed]'. This echoes what Hall (1992), Clifford (1994) and Gilroy (1999) had highlighted two decades earlier, that the home country is not the unitary definition of displaced groups and their cultures; turning against their host countries in their media use (Georgiou, 2013:80). Besides, the ethnic media use might be de-ethnicising the audience, because it is the home country media that does not position them as Others, rather it is ordinary media culture for them (Aksoy and Robins, 2000; Madianou, 2005).

Recent research unearthed a more complex articulation of multiple belongings, more layered than 'taking its audiences "home"' (Aksoy and Robins, 2000:355). More so when there is no evident home. One example against this traditional view was Budarick's research (2011) among Iranian Australians who mostly felt belonging in Australia, even if they did not 'feel at home' (Budarick, 2011:13), or viewed Iran as their homes, too. The findings showed that they did not use Iranian media to sustain a connection with that home (Budarick, 2011:7). Ang's findings (2001) showed that identity affirmations do not 'privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but precisely keep a creative tension between "where you are from" and "where you are at"' (Ang, 2001:35).

Homeland media helps to keep track of the political life at home (Georgiou, 2006:111) and can serve nostalgic desires (Guedes Bailey, 2007:223), often most characteristic for middle-aged, first generation immigrating men who attempt to 're-cover' their exclusivist identities in the home sphere and community centres (Georgiou, 2006:109) and keep it separated from the public sphere (Sreberny, 2000:194) forming a resistance against the new country.

In other ethnic formations, however, host country or international media enters their mediatized transnational space when the available media in the native language does not cater to other tastes and interests: soap operas, blockbuster films, TV formats, women's and entertaining magazines are sought out by socially

defined parts of the audience (Guedes Bailey, 2007). Women, middle-class immigrants, LGBTQ people or those pursuing non-traditional lifestyles then are resisting their origin culture (Georgiou, 2006:67). The media use is characterised by self-reflexivity (Georgiou, 2006:132) and a distantiation from both media spheres (Aksoy and Robins, 2000:363).

Most research so far has been interested in news (Budarick, 2011; Madianou, 2005), and television (Gillespie, 1995; Aksoy and Robins, 2000; Georgiou, 2012) because these media are more directly connected to the nation state. Television is very often not actively forming national sentiments, rather it is on in the background (Madianou, 2005:530); a centre of social life (Georgiou, 2006:109). This banality of the media-saturated environment and the routine-like circumstances are what make the media use contradictory (ibid:52). There is also an abundance of research on phone (Benítez, 2006; Lopez, 2017), Internet (Benítez, 2006; Georgiou, 2013), and social media use (e.g. Godin and Doná, 2016; Imani Giglou, d'Haenens and Ogan, 2017), because they facilitate keeping contact with those left home, and thus new media are seen as giving the diaspora audience a sense of control (Georgiou, 2013:92). Very few researches looked at the media environment in its entirety, with the notable exception of Guedes Bailey's (2007) exhaustive investigation of the lives of Latinos/as in the United Kingdom, taking into account CDs, dance classes and radio among other media.

Closer to books stand the readings of films and cinema-going (Smets, 2013; Smets et al., 2013; Vandevelde et al., 2015). They create bubbles of interpretation afterwards, in which the film-viewing itself does not connect the local diaspora together permanently (Vandevelde et al., 2015:101-102). Instead, the moving pictures are interpreted between parties mutually interested, from the homeland or from another community, at the intersection of fan activities and diasporic communication networks. Likewise, the connections on facebook are also useful when it comes to choosing which film to watch. Cinema-going is 'not an exclusivist expression of diasporic identity, but an assertion of the multifaceted sociocultural identities of their audiences.' (Smets, 2013:108) Sometimes because of (un)availability of ethnic films (Vandevelde et al., 2015:95), 'diasporic media cultures are often interlaced or sidelined by the ordinariness and wide circulation of more mainstream media industries, particularly Hollywood' (Smets, 2013:108), the equivalent of what in literature is the classics and international bestsellers.

Films are also seen as 'sources for cultural knowledge' (Smets et al., 2013:127), another trait that is mostly attributed to books (Dali, 2012:270). Both media help language acquisition of the host or home culture (Smets et al., 2013:127).

Research among Australian Hungarians states that they are 'language-centred — that is, they consider their mother tongue to be one of their core values' (Andits, 2017:361), a tool of symbolic, even against, practical survival. Thus, it is not only the author or the original language of the books that plays a role for cultural identity, but any translated book can also serve maintenance purposes.

'Bookish' audiences

Reading is most often perceived as a solitary act (Burwell, 2007:284), though books have a social side, providing opportunities for interaction and engagement. With the spread of e-books and audio books, the possibility of the same distant consumption appeared as for films and news, thanks to the consumption-changing effect of digitalization (Couldry and Hepp, 2017:40). Books are more directly discursive than audio-visual media, and their consumption is less rooted in the there and then, potentially yielding more sense of freedom. Reading is thus a mix of mobilities and fixities.

Books are a part of

> *the narrative of the nation,* [that] is told and retold in national histories, literatures, the media, and popular culture. These provide a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, national symbols, and rituals which stand for, or *represent*, the shared experiences, sorrows, and triumphs and disasters which give meaning to the nation (Hall, 1992:293).

Books do not need to be part of the literature critic's canon to tell the national narrative, and they definitely do not need to be non-fiction to do so. As the rather few studies on the cultural identity's role in book consumption in the diaspora showed, entertaining historical fiction and romance can be preferred for heritage protection (Noorda, 2017), and classical works can join recent novels on bookshelves, and travel between continents in suitcases (Dali, 2012).

Anderson (1983) incorporated the modern novel in his theory as media that supported the creation of imagined communities of nation states. On the other hand, the simultaneity of reading was crucial in Anderson's theory for creating the imagined national communities of reading audiences, while the simultaneity for books nowadays cannot be taken for granted by any means, neither that the audience would read the same books at all when even national cultures are increasingly pluralistic. De Certeau (1984) reflected on the traditional Book,

religious for many societies, and the loss of its significance. Although my researched group presumably read the same novels and poems in school as an obligatory part of their education, and there is an overlap in their reading inventories, probably it is less so in their contemporary leisure reading. Instead of a nationally shared corpus of novels, 'in the current convergence culture, book consumption is more than the solitary practice of reading a paper book' (Dörrich, 2014:4), rather constituting a part of multimedia repertoires that include adaptations, author's websites, e-books or audio books (ibid:50). These provide dozens of possibilities to transgress borders.

This thesis refers to 'bookish' audiences and networks in order to refer to reading and to books at the same time, unlike 'readers as audiences' that would prioritise the activity. Books are not only about reading, they serve as taste markers in public. A well-equipped bookshelf as a status symbol and cultural capital (Griswold, Lenaghan and Naffziger, 2011:26;32) can become significant when a migrant is building up a social status again, in a new country. What the sociology of reading does not cover, is the individual experiences while consuming page after page.

In literature critique and theory, Barthes's (1968) claim that the author is dead and the reader does the interpretation work was an early literary predecessor to hypertexts that do not exist without the reader's productive interaction with them. In Barthes's theory, the 'work' can be closed between the covers of a book. The 'Text', on the other hand, is open, and its reading is an unfolding of infinite meaning (Barthes, 1971). Different elements in literature history can contain work and Text to different levels, but the Text is also '*experienced only in an activity of production*' (Barthes, 1971:157), thus, it is a field of meaning-making of the sign. The work instead is closed around the *signified*, and its reading is a pleasurable consumption (ibid:163).

According to Littau (2006:6), a media history perspective is missing from the study of literature, that is excluded from mass media studies because literature is seen as too highbrow. She claimed that 'texts also act on readers' (2006:134), but from this point of departure found that audience studies, Radway's work (1984) on the female audience of serialised romance novels included, attribute too much agency to the audiences. Nonetheless, Radway's study (1984:20) had contributed to filling in the gap that Littau identified. Radway presented an audience-centred approach to literature that takes into consideration the economic, social, and industrial factors leading to extensive novel reading, and the sense-making of romance readers without patronising them for reading misogynistic texts.

Bookish audiences have been investigated even less from the perspective of ethnicities or cultural identities. Hosoya-Neale (2016) researched the library use of Japanese women in New Zealand. The politics of reception of orientalised texts within white women's book clubs (Burwell, 2007), and Benwell's (2009) ethnographic study on book clubs discussing racism in novels, further, the sense-making of Black women readers (Bobo, 1995) have highlighted the embodied reader. Or, 'texts do not read themselves, readers do, and [...] audiences do so at a specific intellectual moment.' (Allen, 2001:198) Dali (2012) stated that:

> [T]he role of books in the lives of immigrant readers has escaped the attention of reading researchers in the two largest immigrant-receiving countries, Canada and the United States. […] No data are available about what kinds of books immigrants read, how many, how frequently, and in what language (Dali, 2012:261-262).

Therefore, Dali (2012) conducted research among ex-Soviet émigrés in Canada, from a library and information science angle. In the other single example of research on the issue, arriving from a publishing research background, Rachel Noorda (2017) interviewed chairs of Scottish heritage organisations, thus both were conducted outside media studies. Both research illustrated the connection of conscious and unconscious identity-maintenance to reading.

Dali (2012:263) was interested in reading habits adding a psychological aspect, assuming that books can be key as 'doctors' as well, providing remedy and entertainment during the difficult acculturation period, when home sphere and public sphere are separated. The former is often kept for the familiar, for the home media (ibid:263-264), in order to psychologically comfort the migrant. Reading favourite books again can especially provide this reaffirmation. From the host media's side, however, reading as language acquisition also inscribes cultural codes. Fiction and even speculative genres were grasped in their depiction of the American dream or child education by the interviewees in their meaning-making (ibid:270-271).

Dali's research (2012:269-270) highlighted the home as the sphere of reading, while Noorda (2017) focused more on reading as heritage protection, as mainly a social activity. Both research relied on interviews to get access to identities and motivations behind reading habits; but while Noorda (2017:4) approached the ethnic media use, and its significance for identity-maintenance exclusively, Dali (2012) looked at the acculturation period and so looked at the reading habits in their complexity, including books from both countries.

Turning towards research

With ethnicity as its point of departure, diasporic audience research often reaches the only conclusion that the audience is socially divided, and their media use alike (Benítez, 2006; Vandevelde et al., 2015). Critical research, however, needs to reach beyond and investigate how displaced identities motivate their media use and are reaffirmed by it (Guedes Bailey, 2007), and further address the reasons behind (Sreberny, 2000; Madianou, 2005; Georgiou, 2006).

Mapping the field, a media studies perspective is missing from the study of literature, as it has been studied from the perspectives of literature theory, history of books, sociology of reading, library and information science and publishing. Audience-focused research assigning agency and gaining standpoint is rare, with the notable exceptions of Radway (1984) and Bobo (1995) providing examples in the last century. It is time to re-investigate the role of reading and the embodied reader.

Reflections on the research design and process

A qualitative approach was chosen to collect empirical material in order to grasp the richness and ambiguity of the everyday. For a case study that does not yield predictive results, qualitative research methods can provide the context needed for gaining standpoint (Harding, 2008:120), before 'studying up' (Harding, 2008:108). Flyvbjerg (2001:30, 63) also argued that narrative case studies are needed in social sciences.

'Exploring media among diasporas makes audiences "visible"' (Livingstone, 1998:250, cited in Smets, 2013:106), because it sheds light on 'media cultures that are marginalized, under the radar, structurally informal or pirated' (Smets, 2013:106). Qualitative interviewing, both individual (Noorda, 2017) and in focus groups (Georgiou, 2013) has been a popular choice in diasporic audience studies combined with media ethnographic methods in longer term research (Gillespie, 1995) because of their bottom-up approach, comparable to the grassroots community-building in diasporas.

In order to avoid methodological nationalism (Beck, 2007), and answer Madianou's call (2011:451) to conceptualise identity and culture, I approached the Hungarian cultural identity as a matrix of place, folk traditions, habits, values, food, history, art and language, in which not two individuals connect the same dots. This methodology draws on social or mediated constructionism. It was used

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as a methodology 'to distinguish ideas from objects' (Hacking, 1999:28) and understand 'the social world as fundamentally interwoven with media' (Couldry and Hepp, 2017:16). As a de-essentialising strategy, Madianou (2011:451) proposes to focus on people's own narration and re-narration. Hall's (1992:277) essay *The Question of Cultural Identity* similarly described 'the post-modern subject' as a discursive entity. Both arguments support interviews as a suitable method for researching identities. Preparing the interview guide, I paid attention to avoid phrases such as nation, Hungarian culture, Swedes and ethnicity (Byrne, 2012:220), not to 'construct' what I claim to 'describe' (Gray, 2003:18). At the same time, I kept in mind that 'diasporic audiences might still essentialize/ethnicize themselves in a process of differentiation.' (Smets, 2013:108)

In order to fit the open-ended 'articulation of a matrix of geographical, cultural, and historical elements that inform diasporic identity' (Georgiou, 2013:84), spoken language formed the basis of recruitment providing more neutrality (ibid:88). For the investigation of the ongoing acculturation and negotiation process in the latest migration wave, first-generation immigrants living in the diaspora for 2-10 years seemed like the richest case, however, the whole research design was assembled in the spirit of 'planned flexibility' (Bazeley, 2013:33). Regarding years of settlement, it would be hard to draw a clear line at the end of acculturation, as Dali's results (2012:268) showed: 'some people drown in nostalgia and depression many years after the actual move.'

I recruited by snowball sampling (Byrne, 2012:218) to get an insight into the social side of reading. My main my entry point or gatekeeper (O'Reilly, 2008:132; Byrne, 2012:218) to the field was the chair of LMKF with whom I have established an informal relationship during previous research (Orbán, 2017:3). The fact that she asked on my behalf the people she assumed would be interested bore twofold consequences. First, this established trust and willingness and made the recruitment process much quicker. Second, the sample started to lean towards participants based in Lund, members of the local diaspora organisation, middle-class women of relatively high level of education and literacy. A sample of demographically very similar participants is the common flaw of snowball sampling (Byrne, 2012:218). To balance this, I asked other former contacts, with no known relation to LMKF, to recommend names; and posted a call for participants in the facebook group *Hungarians in Malmö and Scania.* These acts yielded one participant who diversified the data with her resistance towards any diaspora organisation.

In the end the sample was based on and extended from this core of a network of friendships, defined by gender similarity, also taking up the core of the organisation. It turned out to be a relevant range (Byrne, 2012:216) of the female membership of LMKF, with the one outsider, but two participants being in the management, which gave me a more nuanced look at this loosely organised group of people. One interview conducted with a man was taken out of the sample so that his differences would not be attributed to his gender and thus mislead the results.

The interviewed women readily talked about coping with emotionally overwhelming periods in their lives (Gray, 2003:76). Thus the research turned out to tackle wider questions than cultural identity in diaspora; the complexity of the emotional-intellectual experience of reading (Littau, 2006:133), and its role if isolation is experienced on both community and personal level (Dali, 2012:261-262), due to being a full-time mother, for example.

The similarity caused by my entry point turned out to be a unitary force when I needed to broaden other sampling criteria. The original intention to interview first-generation immigrants in Scania who have been living in Sweden for 2-10 years was quickly compromised when migrants who arrived in 1993 or 1985 were reading more avidly than newer arrivals and offered a more advanced outlook on the research problem thanks to their degree of acculturation. This resulted in time lived in Sweden from ten months to 33 years (Figure 1).

	Years lived in Sweden	Age	Occupation	Interview length
Nóra (pilot)	10	57	psychologist	1:25:35
Kitti	5	30	digital strategist	37:10
Julianna	17	43	administrator	46:18
Gizella	2.5	51	teacher	52:29
Titanilla	8	40	remedial teacher	58:20
Zsófia	1 (+3.5)	36	full-time mother	1:02:23
Anita	33	61	economist	1:25:51
Karolina	25	46	occupational therapist	46:04
Alma	20 (+6)	65+	retired teacher	1:18:13
Anett	<1	35	customer service representative	57:11
Mária	4	34	special education assistant	48:07

Figure 1:
Demographics of sample. All names have been changed.

Most participants, however, can still be categorized in the newest wave of migration after the end of the Socialist era in Hungary, and were not fleeing political systems. Only one interviewee had left the Ceaușescu-eran Romania, and other two came from Romania and Slovakia respectively, but the latter two after the political changes. Thanks to widening the criteria it was possible to see the route of becoming transcultural readers with the decades by comparing the newcomers and the earlier arrived.

The interview guide was assembled with special focus on the role of everyday reading, including rituals, banalities and the experience of both reading as a process and books as material objects. This was a pathway to focus on the affective and cognitive identity work based on similarities, differences and politics of place. The pilot interview was conducted before finishing the literature review, as a testing of the theoretical framework and design of the research. The long and deep conversation with an avid reader yielded such rich data and supported the preliminary interview guide so fully that I included it in the research with her written consent as was the case for all interviews.

Ethnographic methods in operation

I do not claim that the research conducted for this thesis was ethnographic, acknowledging Marie Gillespie's critique (1995:54-56) that audience research tends to forget the lengthy and observational character of fieldwork ethnography requires. Nevertheless, the research design was heavily influenced by contemporary anthropology's critical approach to the alternately insider-outsider perspective research offers (Hage, 2009:166, Colic-Pleisker, 2004), and the embodied gaze (Hastrup, 2010; Cook, 2010). As part of the mentioned critical discussion Hastrup (2010:191) encouraged ethnographers to internalise the sense of space the participants have. Following her work, I argued previously (Orbán, 2017:2) that the researcher had to learn 'being on the way' or 'having two homes', and what it entailed in order to understand transcultural people.

I positioned myself as an expatriate Hungarian, and consequently, like Colic-Peisker (2004), I have been offered lunch and traditional hospitality and had to answer questions (Colic-Peisker, 2004:88), explaining what I personally think of Swedes and what I plan on doing after I graduate, a form of testing (Crapanzano, 2010:65). My position unavoidably influenced the research but also offered me the opportunity to be accepted as one of them, one they trust enough to talk with about the struggles of in-betweenness.

Out of 11 interviews, 5 were conducted in participants' homes where they could give me a bookshelf tour and we could sit down next to their books, perhaps at their reading spot. This method turned out to be fruitful because looking at the bookshelves made it easier to recall titles, jump up and look for a book to put in my hand – to share their reading worlds. During the other interviews conducted in cafés or at Folkuniversitetet I tried to ask them to recall the latest ten books they had read, so that these conversations would be anchored in details as well.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with a focus on own narratives and choice of words, and for these reasons face-to-face, one-on-one interviews were chosen. Most women confessed not having a friend to talk about books with, and the majority expressed sadness over this, that such a company was missing in the diaspora. I temporarily filled this friend position in our interviews, so that the participants asked me if I knew the books they were talking about or recommended cultural products to me, then and again turning the interview into a two-way conversation.

Immersion in the interview texts

After 11 interviews, the topics reached saturation, and I decided to stop conducting interviews. Transcripts had been sent to the interviewees to check if it only included their willingly given words. A thematic analysis was applied to the transcripts based on Rivas's (2012) three-step thematic coding method. Coding was seen as a method 'both to represent and to access' (Bazeley, 2013:125) data. This text-close, rigorous method was chosen to ensure that no chunk of data was left uninterpreted due to the researcher's bias, instead let unexpected themes and connections to be found (Rivas, 2012:370). The inductive coding started with open coding, including many in vivo codes (Rivas, 2012:370; 372), and even whole sentences taken word by word because of the use of metaphoric language and revealing formulations by the interviewees.

Codes formed categories until all pieces of information were part of a bigger grouping. All codes were re-read while forming circles of themes, to make sure that none of them were forced into a higher category which were merged or renamed when their contents made it necessary. Six themes emerged – rite of passage, reading inventories, identity, reading experience, books as a physical experience and cultural embeddedness. For the sake of this edited volume, only the first four will be discussed in the following chapter.

It was kept in focus, due to the sensitive nature of cultural identity, to interpret the data in a way that makes sense to the participants in line with Luhrmann's (2010:235) warning that the analysis 'must persuade the audience independently of the ethnographer's experience in the field'.

Analysis

The majority of the 11 Hungarian women read one book a month or a week, thus they are 'frequent readers' according to Griswold, Lenaghan and Naffziger's criteria (2011:24), out of which two can be called 'avid readers' who read more than one book a week. Three interviewees have real estate in their origin country, thus live at two places (Zsófia, Alma, Anett), a characteristic of being transnational, according to Portes (1997:812). One interviewee expressed her plan to move home in the coming few years, three are insecure about their futures. But staying was implied in most interviews, especially by those having lived here for over a decade, who could be called integrated. Most of the women hold one (or more) degrees and five had experiences in foreign countries like Australia, France or the Soviet Union before. Except three of them, all speak Swedish frequently. Knowledge of English is very common, but German, Russian, Arabic, Romanian and Slovakian are also spoken. All interviews were conducted in Hungarian, consistent with the language-based sampling criteria.

It is important to acknowledge the 'language use in the interviews' (Blommaert and Dong, 2010:72-75), 'especially for cultural identities that partly live through language' (Orbán, 2017:6-7). Therefore, without a linguistic analysis, it is worth to look at the trilinguality and the use of 'itthon' and 'otthon' below. Foreign phrases such as 'chick lit' and 'balans' were uttered but the interviewees primarily strove to remember phrases in Hungarian to keep the conversation consistent. Titles were generally referenced in the language they had read the book, but from time to time they translated titles to Hungarian automatically, made clear by the fact that the mentioned verbatim translations did not coincide with the titles of the published translations. Hungarianised words popped up often e.g. 'abszolút' or 'organizál', reflecting their struggle motivated by Hungarian's role as a tool of symbolic survival (Andits, 2017:361), and the cognitive affects of living in another country. Secondly, the pair of words 'otthon' and 'itthon' is used by most diaspora Hungarians in a way that itthon (literally 'here home') refers to Sweden and otthon ('there home') refers to the origin country. The pair of words is part of the common Hungarian language and is usually used to reveal if the person speaking

is inside the home or referring to the home from outside; thus, only their usage in the diaspora is a creative linguistic innovation. In the case of Romanian and Slovakian Hungarians, there is a distinction between itthon, otthon, and Hungary.

The rite of passage

The integration, also reflected by the bi/trilinguality, however, needed to be reached through the rite of passage. Moving one's life across countries can be demanding, and books are not a priority afterwards in favour of settling practical matters. Nevertheless, Kitti remembered that she had said there was no way she was going to live without books at all. 'I don't remember this exactly, but knowing myself, I had rather escaped back to familiar soil, so that I would have re-read things' (Kitti). The coping mechanism of re-reading – that Dali's (2012:267) research only highlighted as re-reading books from there home – is what she resorts to in her current life situation when staying home with a baby does not enable the time and energy needed for enjoying new books.

Kitti had experienced another emotionally heavy move twenty years before, when her family had moved back from the UK. She had been reading frantically then, and admittedly did so 'to keep the continuity in [her] life' by reading British children's books. Continuity is part of the nation's mythology in large (Hall, 1992:294) and in micro-narrations of the identity, and Kitti carries on today with the help of British romance and Harry Potter. Meanwhile she does not give up the hope to move to Britain in the future which counteracts any possible interest in Sweden's culture. Hers is thus a case of the 'marginalisation' form of 'psychological acculturation', in psychologist John Berry's categorisation (2001, cited in Dali, 2012:263) that Dali made use of for the research of migrant readers. According to Berry, 'marginalisation' is when the migrant withdraws from the host and the home country's culture at the same time, but in Kitti's case it is in favour of what is perceived as 'another home country', thus a peculiar 'separation' from Sweden, on the level of her reading habits.

However, for those migrants who had known they were going to stay, and wanted to learn the language in order to find jobs, this was the period of reading for language acquisition. Astrid Lindgren (1907-2002, Swedish children's book author) was the most popular for this purpose, because Pippi *Lå*ngstrump (Pippi Longstocking) or Emil i Lönneberga (Emil in Lönneberga) had been read before, besides international children*'s* fiction like Micimackó (Winnie the Pooh). When

confidence in children's fiction was reached, popular genres followed, because they comprise 'simple thoughts, simple problems, simple situations formulated in simple sentences in a simple way', reflected Nóra.

Six women reported on having read Swedish literature for learning, and two were reflexive on also learning cultural codes with the help of popular literature, just like Dali found *(2012:270-271)*. Personal aesthetic judgements are overwritten by displacement. In spite of its devalued status, 'pulp fiction' reading in Swedish still provides catharsis besides language knowledge. In-between the semi-utilitarian reading for learning, pleasure can also be squeezed in via reading in the mother tongue, like Alma who sometimes sat down to read 10 pages from well-known Hungarian classics for the sake of the knowledge of having read home literature. This psychologically reaffirms the migrant thanks to the power of the familiar against the challenging Other, bringing into play the affective aspects of identity. The initial interest in the Swedish literature is the past of those having lived in Sweden for 8-33 years. The newcomers have not reached this phase in the passage yet, despite being here for up to five years. This points to a potential shift in attitudes towards cultural identity in the newly arrived that then leads to a different acculturation.

By the point of moving, interviewees had collected a decent library that could have amounted to 300 volumes. These collections made the migrants face practical decisions about storage. In the most optimistic of cases, they were put into boxes in a relative's attic where they are waiting until 'they will be with me again', as Kitti put it with a pinch of anthropomorphism that revealed her affections. In Anita's, Zsófia's, Alma's or Julianna's case, however, they were merged with others' bookshelves. Thus, the media collection was still available to them when they visited their childhood home or siblings, but was not a distinct, personal collection anymore. When Nóra sorted her bookshelf, she had thrown away obsolete psychological literature – but not books that symbolise 'what [she was] when [she] had read them for the first or second time.' The simultaneous renewal and preservation can be metaphoric of the dynamics of the more abstract choices made, the negotiations of hybridization.

Titanilla is the only one who had lived through giving up her whole library, when moving to Syria in 2006.

> And my heart was breaking, but I couldn't take it with me. And I decided that never ever was I to buy books again. Everything can be ... borrowed from the library or from someone, or now even digitally, although that I dislike – but buying I would not do any more.

Interviewer: Was it because you didn't want to start from scratch again, then?

Exactly. Exactly. And, and those books that meant such dear memories for me, those are gone already. And those I won't be able to purchase again. And since I am living in the fourth country already – and at every switch I needed to leave something there, I needed to give up on something – now it's so much already, you know? And then to start collecting again… And… when do I have to leave it behind again? (Titanilla)

This traumatic move, giving up on an extension of her identity, can best be seen as a translation – even if none of the life stories in this thesis include escaping regimes with no possible future return. The concept, connected to Salman Rushdie (1983), theorised by Hall (1992:310), has its core in the irreversibility of being 'borne across the world' (Rushdie, 1983:17). But just as Rushdie believed that something can be gained, not only lost, Titanilla is more open as a consequence to locally available novels than any other Hungarian in Sweden I have spoken with.

This trauma sheds light on the duality of books – besides the reading experience of the text they also play a role as the affectionate objects that Griswold, Lenaghan and Naffziger (2011:22) already highlighted that reception studies should take into consideration. They are attached memories and emotions and can be very close to the identities. For Titanilla, one significantly irretrievable volume was the copy of *Szív* (Heart) by Edmondo de Amicis that she had gotten from her mother as a child. Mentioning this volume brought her to tears. She had read the novel in Swedish as well, even if finding it within the library network required some effort. Physical and textual aspects interplay in the decades-long relationship towards her favourite Text that 'cut[s] across the work, several works' (Barthes, 1971:157).

After the initial phase of settling down, once there is money and physical capacity for books, the accumulation starts again. The building up of the bookshelf and the cultural capital it represents (Griswold, Lenaghan and Naffziger, 2011:26) thus happens simultaneously to acquiring a class status in another country.

Every visit home means carrying the brick-like objects in suitcases and handbags. The books to be brought can be chosen from the brother's, aunt's bookshelf from the previously owned collection (Anita, Kitti) or can be newly bought. This gradual building up results in libraries of 20-50 volumes after 1-5 years, the point that at the time of the research the 'newly' arrived have reached which the readers labelled 'not too much', as mentioned by Kitti.

The half-empty bookshelves in Sweden are a constant reminder of an absence and a change. However, this is not necessarily a source of nostalgia for the homeland, rather, for the stable home lost, as Georgiou's (2006:87) research on other media also disproved. Nostalgia is a desire to 'revisit time like space' (Boym, 2007:8). A wish to continue without disruption what has already been 'built up', and provided convincing self-narratives even if they were constantly in formation in Hall's terms (1992:277). The past bookshelf, very often collected since childhood, provided a discursive repertoire for a life story. What is 'not sufficient' is the uncertainty of having to build a new discursive field, and how much of the home country can find its place on the new IKEA bookshelves.

Those who arrived in the beginning of the wave and already had a final move of all that was deemed possible and necessary to be moved to Sweden, might describe their library as: 'what one saves from a shipwreck, what one quickly snatches out of a burning house (Nóra)'. This move could be a result of one definitive moment of realisation that there will be no moving back. If there was still any, the real estate at home was sold or the parents died, thus, the past library or the parents' inherited library needed to be taken care of. This again points out a difference between media: books can follow one for a lifetime which is much rarer for a film or a magazine. This bridging of multilocalities is also different from the transnational mediated spaces digital media create that previous diaspora audience research illustrated (e.g. Georgiou, 2006:75,97). This requires much more effort on the migrant's side, and creates a more personalised 'mental space' (Robins and Aksoy, 2001:705) to experience belonging through. The move of the library, be that one grand transportation or a process during the first years, is a significant element in the hybridization of book lovers in diaspora. The move of the library is symbolic since it is not practically needed for the new life, but intellectually. Therefore, its pure weight and size anchors one down – where the library is, home is. Considering that even after 17 and 26 years there are still books dispersed among relatives in the homeland, the here home is not exclusive, but rather in-between. The integrated carry books towards Hungary as well, to balance the size of the library in Sweden – the rite of passage is negotiating transculturality. There is no definitive end to it, rather, it is an opportunity for constant formation.

Books are transported to the host country thanks to guests as well. Mária also spoke of friends and her partner occasionally calling her from bookshops to ask if she had a book in mind they should buy for her; and she only reads new books based on others' recommendations. Kitti's father chose a grandiose gesture when he had sent fifteen of Kitti's favourite books by post as a Christmas present.

These family and friend recommendations and presents, when forming a denser network connecting to the there home, add a social side to book consumption. Three participants never had a network. For the others, if the pre-existing relations from before the move also include discussions, the network can support interpretation by book talk across countries. This links books to films rather than the audiences of television, creating interpretational bubbles that do not connect the diaspora together as an active local audience (Vandevelde et al., 2015:101-102). For Zsófia, her network had always been her family, they not only give books to each other and share a book collection, but had read each other's temporary favourites. Now that Zsófia mostly reads on her iPhone, her e-book library is shared with her father so that he has access to see it. This is very different from how Anett exchanges e-mails with a friend living far:

> we go on and on, woohoohoo, this character... and I would have written it in the following way, or, or, I intend the following ending for the protagonist, and oh, this is unfair, that they have to suffer so much.

Titanilla also recounted an online form of literary talk, via messenger with friends, that they answer each other in poems, sometimes written by themselves. This associativity, the intimate knowledge of literature she understood as a lifestyle. Reading is more, 'definitely not a hobby' (Julianna) for the interviewees, closer to their self-images.

Parallel to these connections, it was not unique to claim that reading is 'theirs' (Titanilla). Less protectively, most of the women expressed a certain sadness over the fact that they cannot share the reading with friends here home. The existing social network that the snowball sampling was based on, albeit indicating that the chair person knows about the readers, does not result in active bookish relationships and shared reading. Their differences in taste suffice to stand for this.

These solitary interpretations link to the more general question if readers can be seen as constituting an audience, an attempt that had been made by theorists Griswold, Lenaghan and Naffziger (2011:20-21). They claimed that shared identification or demographic criteria can constitute an audience, albeit it will still mostly be the scholar finding patterns in the 'private engagements'. The current thesis questions if such sporadic and low-numbered sense-making as found among the Hungarian women based in Lund can be fruitfully conceptualised as an audience in lack of book circles and other social ways to share the reception.

The friend and family relations that bridge the displaced readers home are closer to an interpretive community, but scattered. From Griswold, Lenaghan and

Naffziger's (2011:20) sociological point of view the latter could not be called a reader audience, not being a 'mass phenomenon'.

It is worth noting that between 2003 and 2008 there used to be a book circle in the LMKF, led by Alma, and thus the findings of this research only reflect the present situation of Hungarians in Lund, but cannot be generalised.

The reading inventory

One to four visits per year cannot possibly provide a sufficient amount of books for reading all year. Obstacles in availability often only spark the purchase or library loan of books that are in Swedish or in English, but not necessarily originally written in those two languages. First, language tactics are taken into consideration. A 'tactic', according to de Certeau (1984:xix), is 'a calculus which cannot count on a 'proper' (a spatial or institutional localization)'. A tactic is thus the act of the 'ordinary' person, between institutions, in this case nation states. In this area the realities of the everyday and the intentions are conflicting:

> Like I said, I prefer to read in Hungarian. Although, in any language, it doesn't matter. In Swedish and in English and in Hungarian one after the other. (Anita)

There are different tactics employed by the Hungarians based in Lund, at one extreme stands Zsófia, who only reads in her second language if she really wants to read a specific book. The reading inventory is similarly mainly in Hungarian for the newly arrived, who, as discussed before, do not find it necessary to read for learning. As an opposite, Titanilla nearly exclusively reads in Swedish.

Most Swedish speakers, who arrived at the beginning of the wave, on the other hand, read diversely, sometimes the same book or the same author in different languages. Nóra had an explanation other than availability issues, rather one of literary joy:

> I think one can play around and experiment in which language a certain writer is more worth it or better or more exciting to be read.

Two phenomena were connected to the Swedish reading inventory by the participants. The Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded by the Swedish Academy and is thus seen by many as a Swedish event that is the most important annual

event in the literary world. While the local connection should not be overestimated, three out of the four readers who follow critically acclaimed literature discussed their relationship to the Nobel Prize. Because the prize is usually awarded in November, Anita's efforts of seeking out, in Hungarian translation, the books she is interested in are counterpoised by the wish to read the winner as soon as possible. Therefore, her other principle of trying to read the text in its original language is dominating. She had read recent winners in English. Alma, who does not read in English, read books by the same authors, like Orhan Pamuk or Kazuo Ishiguro, in Swedish, because her sons buy it for her for Christmas traditionally.

The prize also has Hungarian associations. When discussing Elie Wiesel with Alma, the Nobel Peace laureate writer was defined as a 'Jew of Hungarian origin' and Herta Müller as a 'Romanian Hungarian', despite actually coming from the German-speaking ethnic minority; two telling examples of the similarity element important in identities (Vertovec, 2001:573).

Secondly, the international popularity of the Scandinavian crime fiction is shared by the women in Lund as well. Nevertheless, this again is not necessarily connected to a hybridized mediated interest, since it might have started before the move, as it did for Anett, and the only series mentioned by several interviewees, the Millennium Trilogy and Jo Nesbø's novels are international bestsellers.

This does not exclude local appropriation. Because most of the women prefer 'realistic' novels and focus on the content more, it is no surprise that Alma said:

> I was encouraging my younger brother and sister-in-law that they would read the Swedish crime novels, that not only a crime novel results from it, instead the whole Swedish society is in there. With all its goodness, hardship, sin, everything.

Dali's findings of enlightening reading experiences among the ex-Soviets in Canada that 'explained' the society for the migrants (Dali, 2012:270-271) can be contrasted by this kind of reader reflexivity when the pre-existing conclusions about the host society are found mirrored in literature. Nóra reflected upon this when she said that a certain 'exposure to culture' is needed in order to fully grasp writing from other cultures than one's own.

Because of pluralised cultures and a socioculturally divided displaced audience that previous research on the media use already showed in the case of other media than books (Georgiou, 2006; Guedes Bailey, 2007:223; Smets et al., 2013), very

few concrete authors or titles were mentioned by three interviewees, and none by more than four. Such shared Swedish authors are Astrid Lindgren, August Strindberg (1849-1912, Swedish poet, novelist and playwright of the Modern Breakthrough) and Vilhelm Moberg (1898-1973, Swedish folk novelist and journalist). The first two are also the ones that anyone interested in Swedish literature in Hungary could name, so this again can be traced back to international critical acclaim, and an entry-level interest in the here home's classical culture. Vilhelm Moberg will be explained later in connection to diaspora fiction.

Interest towards getting a taste for Swedish literature exists among those who have been living in Sweden for more than eight years. But it does not necessarily lead to enjoyment. Titanilla, fulfilling her desire to try different literary periods or the latest fiction from Malmö 'could not quite comprehend' that 'this really [is] the Swedish fictional literature'. Somewhat similarly, Julianna concluded her attempts as not being 'impressed'. On the other hand, Anita liked Torgny Lindgren (1938-2017, Swedish poet and novelist) whose North Swedish dialect she found interesting. Alma had even been to a lecture of Ann Heberlein's (Swedish author and politician born in 1970 and based in Lund), and a signing with Sigrid Combüchen (Swedish author and journalist born in 1942 and based in Lund). Afterwards she read books by the two local writers.

While interest towards classics is more of a question of cognitive efforts at getting to know the host culture, contemporary literature enters the life-worlds of migrants more organically and sometimes unavoidably, once integrated into Swedish-speaking communities. Anita got to know the popular science bestseller Omgiven av idioter (Surrounded by Idiots) by Thomas Erikson (1956- , Swedish consultant, lecturer and author) on a group travel because seemingly every participant was talking about it. The fact that she did not want to be left out not only points to Anita's wish for integration but also proves that interpretive communities can exist in the case of books. In this case study however, examples of Swedish bookish connections were sporadic in the narratives, regardless of the degree of integration.

The relationship towards the Hungarian literature is not evident, either.

> I am not biased towards the Hungarian literature- I know that it is good, but at the same time there are sixty-six others that are very good, too. (Nóra)

When asked about favourites in the beginning of the interviews, in nearly all cases examples from world literature were mentioned. Since Hungarian is a small language, around two times more foreign books are published every year (based

on the Central Statistical Bureau's data) than books written by Hungarian authors. Furthermore, the country has always only been on the periphery of Western art movements, and thus traditionally the aristocracy or 'reading class' followed German and French literature that is mirrored in the canon. Up till today, world literature is valued and provides a richer corpus. Especially in genres like fantasy, romance and crime fiction, foreign variety is stronger and more diverse. But as the conversations evolved, it became clear that a Hungarian inventory is in there deeply and sometimes traumatically. This again can be approached through the division of classical and contemporary works.

The cultural canon is ingrained thanks to the education system that includes mandatory reading which only makes the students have an ambiguous relationship towards the critically acclaimed works according to the accounts of the interviewees. Julianna and Kitti respectively described the Hungarian system as 'literature is pouring' and such that certain authors are 'very pushed', both with sentiments of resentment. The very fact that Gizella only 'realised' recently that Endre Ady (1877-1919, Hungarian modernist poet) is her favourite poet points out how the relationship towards the classics is not an evident foundation of the cultural identity that one could lean on once displaced.

Titanilla discussed at length how this cultural canon is the 'narrative of the nation' (Hall, 1992:293). She referred to the role of literature to retain the national identity, and how the literature that is seen in a heroic light, never the 'beautiful poems' are used for that. She found the use of literature during commemorations in minority communities in Romania and in Sweden similar, and suggested that it is still the very same poems recited at every occasion, even though 'we are not there anymore'. This is also connected to the plurality of the culture and the choices that need to be made in the diaspora between the differently patriotic lived identities, like the plurality of cultures, 'imposed' on society that is itself the book and its producer (de Certeau, 1984:xxii).

Following contemporary Hungarian literature, however, might require more effort than the Swedish ones, because it is not a lived cultural environment. Alma saw herself standing against the elderlies of the previous migration wave. While they are out of touch with Hungary's present according to her and do not accept, nor understand György Spiró (1946- , Hungarian writer) or Kriszta Tóth (1967- , Hungarian poet and novelist) who she likes, following the new writer generation. The most mentioned writer was Magda Szabó. (1917-2007, Hungarian poet and novelist). György Dragomán (1973- , Hungarian novelist born in Transylvania) and Péter Nádas (1942- , Hungarian novelist), critically acclaimed novelists followed her. Dragomán provided opportunity for a rare case when

Hungarianness of a writer was stressed. Anita became interested in Dragomán's novel because of the book review on it in Sydsvenskan, the Scanian daily newspaper, and inquired about it when at home in Romania. She was told that he is Transsylvanian, a fact that only made her want to read him more due to the relatability aspect, then she bought it in Budapest, where it was cheaper. The price factor formed a part of the banalities of the everyday and informed the tactics to keep the continuity of the life-narrative.

The reading inventories do not align host and home country. This can partly be explained with Hungary's position in Europe. 'There home' the bookshelves in shops, libraries and living rooms are unavoidably very diverse in terms of country of origin of the books, and this is the continuity striven for in the diaspora as well. If it is in Hungarian, it is 'ordinary media' (Aksoy and Robins, 2000).

Yet, the bookshelves reflect roots and routes (Gilroy, 1995) at the same time, not defined by single origins, but by complex ongoing histories. Swedish books 'wander' to the bookshelves 'here home', to continue with Zsófia's anthropomorphism. The difference from the bookshelves in the home country is unavoidable, this again points out that the bookshelf is a fruitful metaphor of cultural identities.

The cultural identity

As a continuation of the discussion on the relation to the two cultures, this section will briefly look at the changes in identity with the years spent in Sweden, then at what aspects of the identity are expressed through reading choices to shed more light on the second research question.

Only Nóra expressed a certain nostalgia and missed the city of her youth, thus implying a diaspora identity that manifests itself in reading already-known literature. For her, sadness over the changes in Budapest is fed by not being able to identify any of the two countries as home. A few Hungarians, however, are so not 'torn apart from the Hungarian... reality' that their reading can be called transcultural. Alma, Julianna, Anita and Karolina follow home news media besides the newest books, but have no trouble switching to Swedish, either.

Titanilla identifies vehemently as Hungarian, but uttered her sentiments like:

> I don't really care about Romanian anymore, nor Romania as it is. I don't really care about Hungary, either.

Her case can be seen as a book version of the resistance towards homeland culture, traces of what Georgiou's previous research (2006:67) found among Greek Cypriots. This thesis argues that it is a form of radical claiming of the cultural identity without the references of any nation state, explained by her previous struggles to be seen as a Hungarian in both Romania and Hungary. All these six women have been living in Sweden for over eight years. The commonness of the rite of passage does not define the resulting cultural identities.

The newly arrived, however, are mostly segregated from Sweden in their reading, and though acquired confidence in the language might change this alongside their acculturation, their current narratives point towards different future conclusions, more cosmopolitan reading habits than ever. But the underlying difference of the displaced position is there for all of them, that 'we are not what we were' (Gilroy, 1995:26), or, that the move 'unfix[ed]' their identities (Vertovec, 2001:580).

Reading choices are more informed by other aspects of the identity than cultural, be that an interest, a profession or a self-image. Alma, who used to work as a teacher, has a professional interest in childhood development, and thus her readings include descriptions of famous people's childhood. Kitti likes to cook and bake herself and enjoys her career, and on the list of her favourites, Jenny Colgan's romances present heroines who turn baking into a business.

The connection between reading choices and identity have been commented on by the interviewees themselves, because they are part of their narratives:

> who I am, who my favourite is, Madame Bovary. That I have read around three times, perhaps three times. Four times. (Alma)

Zsófia reads many Éva Fejős novels, a combination of romance and travelling. This selection could be approached from the romantic side, however, the travel element of the combination is not less interesting, on the contrary, it reveals a narrative of Zsófia's displacement. When asked about diaspora fiction by listing a few recent Hungarian titles, she answered by taking control over the approach to the topic:

> No, no, these I haven't read.

> The traveller books, the travels of Éva Fejős, they don't live abroad, that is never about that, right, that someone should live abroad, instead one travels somewhere for self-awareness and adventure.

But there is Vilhelm… Moberg. (Zsófia)

The three sentences are revealing. Zsófia – and nine others – had not heard about the non-fictional and fictional books published in the last 15 years about/by emigrating Hungarians. Nor are they interested in this form of representation, unlike Dali's participants (2012:268), because what they depict is believed to be too well-known or too painful. This brings their reception attitude closer to the Black women Jaqueline Bobo (1995:17) interviewed who saw their reality as troublesome enough, and did not wish books to depress them by depicting this situation. Yet, right after this, Zsófia turned to the contemporary Hungarian books she knows and loves and explained that they are journeys of self-exploration. Her family moves around a lot, and her answer reveals that she sees the displacement as adventure, rather than any form of exile, as mirrored in her current favourites. Finally, she recalled diaspora fiction, but from Sweden. Moberg's Utvandrarna and its sequels – thanks to their canonical status – were mentioned by two further interviewees. Zsófia connected it to the Hungarian emigrants and thus to herself, revealing that the migration element in her life story she connects to the host country.

Reading experience

Reading creates a comfort zone, is done in the evenings and at weekends, at home by most interviewees. Mária voiced that it is 'me time',

> I make tea, bit of snacks, and book. So that it is a bit of a ritual for me (Mária).

The participants had a lot of picturesque phrases for this pleasurable consumption of the work (Barthes, 1971:163) that is their main reading experience. 'Flow', 'the stream catches you', 'I can switch myself off', 'I am in the present', 'the images were coming', 'I can stay in that world', 'and you are there, like a little stowaway on the horseback', 'the text goes', 'I cannot put it down',

> I can get into it so, so much… The last time there was an Australian seaside scene, and then I looked out the window, what do you mean it's snowing? (Titanilla)

Admittedly, entertainment, escape and relaxation are the goals of such reading, connected to the 'me time' role. It is easy to get caught up in the everyday, as

Titanilla reflected, and then it feels good not to think about the past or the future, instead be able to experience the present, as Mária put it, distancing oneself from the running thoughts and anxieties. This feverish reading explains why they do not have a time frame for reading, rather, start to read, then let themselves sink into it, be that until midnight.

Such a reading experience is also an affective process, here this research answers Littau's theory (2006) of affect and bodily reactions. Anett, Gizella and Zsófia, all mothers of young children, reported of difficult readings when children were harmed in the plot. Furthermore, Anita 'properly got chills' when she was reading Szegény Sudár Anna, because she 'actually experienced [her] own past through the book'. Such 'realistic' or 'relatable' readings are preferred among the Hungarians around Lund. Books about families, middle-aged women or people who 'could be real' are sought out. However, unlike by the women in Radway's study (1984), this is not seen as gaining practical knowledge by the women, rather as curiosity or a form of gossip. Thus, they rarely venture far from the everyday they are escaping, but immerse themselves into a more interesting fictional version of reality.

The less directly pleasurable, deciphering form of reading, closer to Barthes's (1971:164) production of the Text, is practised as well. In the category of 'functions of books', 'intellectual necessity' and the joy of the beautiful style were present. For Nóra, Julianna and Alma, reading has a role in the everyday that exceeds pure escapism. Titanilla and Gizella can appreciate the sign itself instead of using it as a transparent window to the realistic content, the fixed signified. This overlaps with the group of women who read Swedish for language acquisition after the move, as discussed previously. The acknowledgement of the construction of the text thus is twofold, it can be the source of artistic catharsis, and seen as language repertoire.

One final linguistic element to highlight in the interviews is the use of the word 'reading'. Reading is seemingly monopolised by literary theory, but is not exclusive for books, nor was it so for my interviewees. Albeit I made it clear before the interviews that the research is about 'book reading habits', during the conversation the participants regularly blurred the lines between reading books and reading blogs, chat messages and glossy magazines. This is very much in line with their aesthetic evaluations, and the role of reading in their lives. Book reading does not need to be put on a pedestal, praised as an art form, but rather it is another way to 'enrich one's life' (Nóra) compared to travelling in its such capability. Kitti called chick lit 'a bit more than the [glossy] magazine, but a bit

less than a real – book'. Books have their place in the media environment as they have their in the ambiguous everyday that is saturated by media.

Conclusion

Books are valued as collections, they are smelled, their weight felt, they are taken to bed. Reading is an intellectual and emotional necessity or a narcotic. By the Hungarian female readers around Lund, fiction is taken seriously, a coping mechanism in life. It is important to see that in spite of reading being a cultural activity, the average reader does not expect Aristotle's purging catharsis but an entertaining end to the day. This case study of 11 Hungarian female readers around Lund showed that everyday needs and banalities meet cultural identity maintenance in reading habits.

The qualitative interviews offered a view at acculturation from ten months to 33 years lived in Sweden, including transcultural practices and the diverse life stories that can lead to becoming transcultural. The pattern that emerged depicted a rite of passage of moving to Sweden, and moving the library along with settling down in the host country; defined by the spatiality of diaspora (Gilroy, 1995:26) and mobile materiality of books. Unless the previously accumulated collection is transported in one big move, boxed then unboxed, it can only be determined retrospectively when the move became final. Once the library is in Sweden, it anchors one down, thus marking the home.

Nevertheless, there is no definitive end to the carrying of books, just like the identity, the book collection is always a future project. 'Here home', Hungarian and Swedish books get piled on the shelves besides English, Russian or Slovakian ones, just like the migrants become integrated, bilingual, in some cases even transcultural. Other aspects of the identity: age, professional belongings, taste, gender are more evidently communicated through the content of the reading choices than culture, but the language is crucial. The books themselves are diverse, but bought at home whenever visiting, and thus the reading could be happening in the home country. This reveals symbolic survival tactics even when reading in the mother tongue was more highlighted on the level of the cognitive identity work, than in their actual reading inventories.

The focus on content thanks to the seamless reading in the mother tongue is significant, because joyful reading was connected to 'realistic' stories by the bigger group of the sample. This 'realistic' is however not the aesthetic attribute,

characteristic of art in the late 19th, early 20th century by any means, but the readers' way to describe stories that 'could be real' or are relatable. This closeness in topics is reminiscent of the preferences of the Smithton women in Radway's classic study (1984) who saw an idealised reality in the romances. On the other hand, books are only desired as an intensified reality as long as they provide an immersive, escapist rush, but unlike the ex-Soviet émigrés Karen Dali interviewed (2013), the participants in this thesis were not interested in diaspora representation, or their emotional journey expressed by an author's words.

Reading diaspora fiction was assumed to be a more painful experience than a comforting one.It is not hard to see why the diaspora does not want to buy and carry the books that they imagined to be traumatic. This kind of content does not collide with the identifications of the bigger group of the participants. Rather, they saw themselves as simply Hungarians and so they read contemporary Hungarian literature.

Nevertheless, there are a few women who read for aesthetic pleasure, too, and appreciate literary style and language. It should be pointed out, that this correlated with being avid readers and having humanities education: two teachers and a psychologist were readier to take literature very seriously, see books as their personal friends, and also as sources of life lessons. These women expressed that messages in books can be used in life, a mode of reading that previously has not been elaborated on within media studies, and the books might answer

> how do we live, do we get on our feet, do not get on our feet, what do we cling to, who has a backbone, who has not, who is the strong, who is the weak, who is the decent, who is the indecent (Alma).

For them, reading in Swedish was a way of learning, that can be connected to their attitude not to 'see through a text'. This mode of reading also correlates with a higher level of multilocal picking and choosing according to their own tastes, their reading inventories being less distorted by the language barrier and the availability issues. Those reading for artistic pleasure were also reflexive to express their idea that a knowledge of other cultures was needed for better quality reception.

The thesis further attempted to contribute to the understanding of the place books have in the media environment in order to add to the ongoing discussion about diasporas. The audience without doubt treats it less as art than the academic disciplines, and they are also experienced through their material qualities. Albeit this physical aspect grants books a unique position among other media, perhaps

only comparable to vinyl in its cult and television in its home-making capabilities, they need to be incorporated in any research that aims to understand media repertoires in their entireties that has not been done in the diaspora before.

This thesis argued that books in diasporas are not a given, but considerable effort is put into their presence. Hungarians in Sweden were found to be less a community than what most diaspora audience studies supposed. Rather, they found their 'here home' in Sweden, and even if it never can reach up to the 'there home', a seamless switch and limited interchangeability is possible. The results call for a reinvestigation of diasporic media use in a mediatized society, as the new migration wave points towards a more cosmopolitan cultural identity articulation than ever, but future studies are needed to understand the changes.

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'The Mother of All Bad Movies'

An audience research on the culture of Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* based on the live cinematic experience

Hario Priambodho

Introduction

The experience of going to the movies in contemporary society can be seen as a form of escapism in which we are immersed in a world that is not our own through the power of audio and visuals that unfold in a meaningful narrative. Once the lights go out in a movie theatre, we become a part of a temporary gathering where certain rules and restrictions are enforced. We are typically encouraged to remain silent throughout the movie and discouraged from using our cell phones as a part of the general cinemagoing etiquette. One such film experience where going against the rules are considered normal, is Tommy Wiseau's *The Room* (2003), regularly hailed as one of the worst movies ever made[31]. This thesis is an audience research on how individuals are finding meaning and obtaining pleasure from a film that is aesthetically deficient. The research critically examines the values and opinions of individuals based on their experience of attending a screening of *The Room*. Through the use of audience interviews and observations within a Northern European context, it sheds a light on how an appreciation towards such films can give rise to a particular viewing culture centred on the live screenings of *The Room*.

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[31] See for example https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/12/2/16720012/the-room-tommy-wiseau-backstory-explained

What is *The Room*?

> [*The Room*] is a very unique experience you won't get from any other movies.
> […] It's like the master of all bad movies, the mother of all bad movies. (Freja,
> 29, F, Media Researcher)

It all started with a vision from Tommy Wiseau, to be able to make it in
Hollywood by writing a movie script. He took it upon himself to self-finance the
movie and eventually managed to finish the film. Because nobody wanted the
movie in their cinemas, Wiseau rented out a theatre and screened *The Room* only
for curious people that passed by. The history of *The Room*'s rise to fame was well
documented as a then-college student named Michael Rousselet was credited to
have started the whole sensation[32]. He sat alone in an empty theatre and eventually
asked some of his friends to come with him again to the next screening. As a result,
a number of interactive rituals such as throwing spoons, yelling out lines from
particular scenes, and the freedom to shout out commentaries developed as the
hallmark characteristics of a screening of *The Room*. Little did Rousselet know
back then, this was the birth of a global phenomenon that has a lasting power 15
years later. What started out with a hundred people at one screening evolved into
multiple monthly events that spanned multiple cities within the United States and
eventually numerous countries worldwide.

Researching *The Room*

It was based on the reputation of the *The Room*'s badness and the rowdiness of its
screenings that this thesis found its impetus: an interest in unpacking the
experience and feelings of individuals who attended the live screenings of *The
Room*. This thesis adopts a methodological approach that is rooted in audience
research. Here, significance is placed on the cultural and social values of the
audience. It embodies an approach that shifts the centre of attention to other
aspects aside from the aesthetics and textual qualities of the film, which is the
more common approach in analysing cult film texts. Individuals who have
recently attended a screening of *The Room* were interviewed in regards to their
experience.

This research aims to critically examine how individuals engage and interact an
aesthetically 'bad' text and how they appropriate knowledge they have gathered in

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[32] http://edition.cnn.com/2011/SHOWBIZ/Movies/01/14/the.room/index.html

the screening. It would explicate how analysing audiences' reading protocols provide an understanding on the 'social dynamics' (Klinger, 1989, p.4) of the viewing culture that is characterised by an atypical and transgressive live experience where a 'multilayering of ancillary content' creates an event-like atmosphere (Dickson, 2018, p.99) that is distinct from a normal cinemagoing experience. The thesis analyses how the culture of *The Room* socialises the audience into an understanding of the 'meanings and values of the culture' (Thornton, 1995, p.3).

Built upon these aims, three research questions frame the theoretical and empirical research:

- How are audiences defining and understanding *The Room* as a cult film?

- What role does the camp sensibility and taste play in the way audiences are viewing *The Room*?

- How do audiences shape the live experience of *The Room*?

Literature Review

The Audience Perspective

In studying audiences of *The Room*, we must establish that this thesis acknowledges the audience as having power to 'distil' meaning from a performance (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998, p.43). One example of a research that has shaped this thesis into centralising the audiences as the main focal point was Hermes' (1995) work on readers of women's magazines. She demonstrated that even though certain texts might have little to no cultural value, they still possess practical value that may shape an individual's everyday life (Hermes, 1995, p.143). Alongside this, the thesis is acknowledging the role of the audience in regards to the 'Spectacle/Performance Paradigm' (SPP), posited by Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) where research in this sense is defining the audience as closely intertwined with their identity and 'intimately bound up with the construction of the person' (p.37). This harkens back to Goffman's (1959) idea in that an individual's mobilisation of his/her activity is the materialisation of that person's identity in 'performing' (p.19-20).

For screenings of *The Room*, the notion of performance not only applies to the film being watched by the audience, but also applies to the audience themselves

due to the interactive nature of the experience. This draws parallels with wrestling audience where they are engaging in a form of 'emotional work' constitutive of their individual performance, allowing them to become active audiences rather than passive (Hill, 2014). In her case, Hill drew upon Barthes' idea of 'spectacle of excess' where she established that fans and anti-fans performed a collaboration of 'passionate labour' with both event organisers and wrestlers. As a conclusion, she noted that the aforementioned 'emotional work' becomes a determining factor that 're-enforces' and shapes live wrestling events (Ibid.), in which the same could arguably be said in regards to audiences of *The Room* screenings.

Cult Cinema

In regards to studying cult films, Mathijs and Sexton (2011) identify four contexts that scholars utilise in defining such movies: sociological studies, reception studies, textual interpretations, and aesthetic analysis (p.6). Based on this, this thesis is more aligned within reception studies as it is the context most concerned with how the audience views the subject matter. McCulloch and Crisp (2016) considers cult cinema to be amorphous in that most academic research on the subject has been focused on its 'contextual as well as its textual dimensions' (p.194). This thesis is deeply rooted in qualitative methods and allows the voices and opinions of the audiences to shine through processes of reflection and the production of narratives (Couldry, 2010, p.8). This is important because in the case of *The Room*, it is the audience that shapes the experience. Tommy Wiseau didn't intend to make a film that can be categorised as comedic, but due to the text's filmic incompetence it is only considered comedic 'when the audience communally deems it so' (Popescu, 2013, p.3). Therefore, audience voices give us 'fragments of stories' that allows this research to map out their knowledge that are used to obtain enjoyment. (Hermes, 2005, p.85).

Austin (1981), in the conclusion of his *Rocky Horror* study asked a few unanswered questions, one which is pertinent to this thesis: 'Why are [components of a cult film] important to the audience?' (p.53). These questions are still relevant when studying *The Room* considering that there are strikingly similar behaviours and habits of audience members who are in attendance at a screening of both films. People dress up, talk back at the screen, and carry out pre-existing rituals that are triggered by specific on-screen cues -either visually or auditory. Furthermore, the aforementioned questions are not questions that surveys or questionnaires can answer. Hence in this audience-centred study of *The Room*, we will get to pinpoint exactly how cult audiences are formed and shaped.

It's worth noting previous research on *The Room* has been conducted within the last decade (see McCulloch, 2011; Pavlounis, 2012; Foy, 2012; MacDowell and Zborowski, 2013). Pavlounis' article (2012) on *The Room* suggests that there is a need for audiences to consider Tommy Wiseau as a sincere filmmaker by 'legitimately and genuinely' celebrate 'Wiseau's failure on its own terms' (Pavlounis, 2012, p.28-29). Additionally, Pavlounis is implying that an ironic viewing of *The Room* is required as it would 'not only signal the acknowledgment of failure, but also the acceptance of it' (Ibid., p.29). This sentiment that an enjoyment of *The Room* can only be attained through ironic means is echoed in MacDowell and Zborowski's (2013) work, where in their analysis of the aesthetics of *The Room*, they infer that any pronouncement of the film as a 'masterpiece' can only be 'tongue in cheek' and never threatens the most traditional ways of aesthetic evaluation (p.23). What this means is that from a purely aesthetic point of view, it's never worth one's time to argue whether *The Room* should be considered a good film, because aesthetically the answer is always unquestionably no and thus never challenging the 'traditional standards of aesthetic evaluation' (Ibid.).

McCulloch's (2011) study on *The Room* is an audience-focused research, where he conducted a combination of online surveys and phone interviews of audience members who were present at two screenings at the Prince Charles Cinema in London (Ibid., p.190-191). His main aim of the research was to question 'how' and 'why' participatory behaviours are evident within a screening of *The Room* and also explores how 'individual members view themselves in relation to others inside the cinema' (Ibid., p.191). Specifically, his study linked audience participation with the concept of comedic relief by 'exploring the social functions of comedy as they relate to cultural texts.' (Ibid., p.189). In his conclusion, McCulloch (2011) noted that the audience of *The Room* find pleasure in their attempts of reading the text as something ironic or comedic where these readings 'must subsequently be justified and legitimated by the reaction of others', in which he remarks that the appreciation of the film itself, categorised as 'so bad it's good', is 'only concerned with cultural capital' that may be utilised to enhance a person's social capital (p.212). In addition to providing a different geographic context (Northern European compared to British in McCulloch's case), this thesis would extend the understanding of camp and irony -as only briefly touched upon by McCulloch, how it relates to audiences' perception and how it shapes the live experience.

Live Cinema

Once the audience in a movie screening begins to embody numerous elements of 'liveness', the audience itself becomes an even more intelligible target of inquiry, as compelling as the text they are experiencing themselves. In the case of *The Room* screening, the audience complements the movie and also vice versa. It can be said that the quality of a *Room* screening is established by the audience's embodiments of these live elements. Therefore, live cinema has often been a reoccurring component when it comes to cult films. The concept of live cinema itself was mostly defined through a borrowing of terms that describes 'live performance' such as musical concerts in that 'performers and the audience are both physically and temporally co-present to one another' (Auslander, 2008, p.60). But as Auslander acknowledges afterwards, the definition of 'liveness' has significantly evolved and changed and 'live' has been used to describe situations 'that do not meet those basic conditions' (Ibid.).

Even though some scholarly work on cult cinema (e.g. Austin, 1981; Klinger 1989) has been conducted for decades, academic research on this front is still considered to be an emerging field of study mainly due to the increasing advent of new, different forms of live cinema such as Secret Cinema[33] and Edible Cinema[34]. Secret Cinema for example, have been the subject of few studies (Atkinson and Kennedy 2015, 2016) where they elaborate the complex dynamics between audience participation and the structure of the event itself. McCulloch and Crisp (2016) also conducted a study on the notion of event-led cinema experiences where they targeted the audiences of the Prince Charles Cinema in London as the subject of study through questionnaires. Based on the above, it is still acknowledged that comprehension surrounding live cinema in academic terms are still underdeveloped and 'remain illegible and are hard to apprehend without [a] common understanding and shared language' (Atkinson and Kennedy, 2018, p.267).

We can infer that today's cinemagoing etiquette, such as no talking during the movie, didn't really come into being until sound became an integral part of films, enhancing the immersion factor of being at a movie screening. It became widely enforced that the silence of audience members is presumed to be a requirement in order to have an enjoyable moviegoing experience. It channels the notion of 'ideal spectatorship' and how oppositional audience responses 'are clearly incompatible

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[33] https://www.secretcinema.org/

[34] http://ediblecinema.co.uk/

with dominant formulations of spectatorship that define the spectator's response as a product of the specific operations of a text' (Klinger, 1989, p.3). In this case, *The Room* and the boisterous nature of its screenings can be seen as a violation of various 'protocols' that are to be observed within a movie theatre. The rowdy and raucous affair in essence 'express a huge variety of social, economic, and material relationships' (Gitelman, 2006, p.7). The 'digressions', as Klinger (1989) terms it, does not necessarily 'reproduce the single intended structure and meaning of a text' and hence the uniqueness of one's reading and meaning, experience and knowledge can be commodified and used by individuals as material for promotional discourses that extend into the social realm (p.16-17).

Camp and Taste

In regards to the audiences themselves, there has been much discussion on taste and live or cult cinema. Sconce (1995) has written extensively on the paracinematic taste culture, in which he defines the culture as the valorising of numerous cinematic 'trash' that for the most part has been 'rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture (p.372). He draws upon the concept of 'excess' and identifies it as a central operating component of the paracinematic taste where audiences are also focusing their attention beyond the narrative aspects of a certain film. 'Excess' in this case, can be described as an existing value that is situated beyond a text's motivated use (Thompson, 1986, p.130). What this means is that when an audience member starts to consider a text does not provide enough 'thorough motivation', excess will then take over and affect the meanings of its narrative (Ibid., p.132). Because audiences are concentrating more on the text's 'bizarreness and stylistic eccentricity' they have emphasised the film's material identity enabling it to become the primary focus of attention towards the movie where excess would push the audience 'beyond the formal boundaries of the text', rendering its diegetic components as something trivial (Sconce, 1995, p.386-387). Sconce would then argue that because excess provides the audience with freedom that enables them to view a film with a 'fresh and defamiliarized perspective' (Ibid.).

Sconce (1995) observed on both paracinematic and camp sensibilities that they 'are highly ironic, infatuated with the artifice and excess of obsolescent cinema' (p.374). The notion of irony is a key component within the discussion of both paracinema and camp. When it comes to the irony in camp, Pavlounis (2012) notes that some of these discussions on irony are binary in nature, in that they regard a film as either a success or a failure and doesn't deal with the film 'on their

own terms' (p.27). Perkins also addresses irony in film by remarking that it should be 'investigated as a mark of distinction' and is 'something that is not reducible to story, style or authorial disposition alone' (2012, p.13). And hence this is an area where this thesis is geared for, by providing qualitative data on how the film's audience regards both the cinematic text and also themselves in relation to the text they are experiencing. Based on this, we can explore how the ironic mode of engagement constitutes a form of capital -'camp capital'- that can be utilised to enhance not only one's experience, but also providing a sense of place within the general culture of the film.

Dyer (2002) latched the notion of ironic enjoyment with that of camp culture, specifically in how it is appropriated in gay culture. He posited that camp and irony has been utilised by individuals who belong in that culture as a form of 'self-protection and thorns' (p.50) in the face of a normative society. Dyer drew upon the historical experiences of the gay culture where camp has been used as a tool to keep 'awfulness' at bay (Ibid., p.49). Camp in this sense, is not masculine but more on the embodiment of being 'human, witty, and vital' not conforming to 'the rigidity of the hetero male role' (Ibid.). In terms of film, Dyer noted that the ascription of camp is fluid in nature and it is in essence how individuals are looking at it. He utilised the example of John Wayne films, which at face value is the 'very antithesis of camp' (Ibid., p.52). However, if one looks past the masculine qualities of John Wayne and how he's an embodiment of machismo, you will be able to find camp value. The camp sensibility in this research's sense and context could then be seen as a resistance against the normative discourses and practices around film, 'a weapon against the mystique surrounding art' (Ibid.), in which the dominant belief is that in order for a film to be considered as 'good' it needs to be aesthetically good as well. Camp culture could then be defined as a collective of individuals who holds a high appreciation towards camp texts where irony is a key component in finding pleasure. Dyer (2002) then notes that being a part of a camp culture would give us 'a tremendous sense of identification and belonging' as it 'expresses and confirms' a host of values that would otherwise be drowned by the normative society (p.49).

More specifically, camp in itself is a 'love of the exaggerated, the 'off', of things-being-what-they-are-not' (Sontag, 1966, p.279). In other words, it is not a sensibility that places great value on objective beauty, rather it elicits enjoyment from the opposite side of the spectrum in which irony can arguably be considered as a central mode of cognitive operation. Sontag (1966) however, remarks that camp cannot be exclusively confined to the gay culture even though this is considered to be the 'vanguards' of camp (p.290). Therefore, we can still consider

The Room to be a camp experience because camp is first and foremost a mode of enjoyment and appreciation (Ibid., p.291). Its main patrons are instances of the 'off' and circling back to Sconce, 'excess'. *The Room* is undeniably aligned with what Sontag calls 'the ultimate camp statement': 'it's good *because* it's awful' (Ibid., p.292). Audiences for both movies were able to find pleasure not because of aesthetic qualities, rather the degree of artifice and stylisation, of 'excess', and of the 'off' (Ibid., p.277).

Bourdieu (1979) provides us a foundation on thinking about distinction through taste, in which he notes that the individual's cognitive processes allow the acquirement of cultural codes (p.3). He recognizes that 'a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence' (Ibid., p.2). The fact one has to be initiated in the culture itself in order to gain proficiency, in a way creates a reflexive relationship with a previous notion that being a part of something would give us a sense of belonging.

As such, taste is defined by Bourdieu (1979) as the 'practical affirmation of an inevitable difference' (p.56). It can either unite or separate and when taste needs to be justified, it is characterised by the rejection of other tastes. Bourdieu (1979) maintains that cultural competence – as an important element if one were to fit in – is clearly defined by its 'conditions of acquisition' where such conditions in regards to their relationship with the culture, engender a manner of applying said competence whose meaning and value are determined by both the perceivers and the producer (p.65-66). This thesis does not wish to construct a system of taste that's present in a screening, rather the research explicates – as Sontag (1966) puts it – the 'logic of taste', which is the underlying sensibilities that produces a certain taste (p. 276). In other words, this thesis is less concerned with ascribing audiences with 'good' or 'bad' taste in which there is a clear semblance of structure, rather it is more concerned with the rationale of audiences on how they appreciate and respond to a cultural text.

Qualitatively Researching Audiences of *The Room*

Methodological Approach

Holistically this thesis is rooted in social constructivism, in that it is examining the 'taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world' (Burr, 1995, p.3). It is more about how individuals are ascribing meaning to a cultural text, how they act on it, and the nature of enjoyment itself. It has been established that the research

is interested in the personal experiences, opinions, and values. Because of this, qualitative methods take precedent in order to produce a robust empirical material and extract rich narratives from the subjects of study. The research looks at the individuals as persons 'who *construct* the meaning and significance of their realities' (Jones, 2004, p.257). It acknowledges that 'cultural artefacts' can bestow individuals with a 'sense of identity' which enables them to orient themselves in a social setting (Jensen, 2002, p.236). By adopting the qualitative perspective, this thesis is channelling what Hermes (2012) considers to be the purpose of audience studies which is 'to give voice to groups of audience members' (p.198). Furthermore, qualitative audience studies are even more important for this thesis because studies in film have long held a normative and dominant pedagogic practice that emphasises the text itself as the object that is to be analysed, viewed, and discussed (Allen, 2011, p.45). Therefore, in-depth qualitative interviews became the main method of data collection as it allows respondents to create 'thick descriptions' in the form of 'elaborated and detailed answers' (Rapley, 2004, p.15). *The Room* as a film plays an indispensable role in understanding how and why audiences of that film extract meaning from the text. It is also a reason as to why in addition to qualitative in-depth interviews, personal observations were carried out at screenings of *The Room* in order to inject a sense of 'critical subjectivity' (Ladkin, 2006, p.480). It would allow the researcher to obtain a more encompassing sense of the ways audiences are engaging with the text, responding to the text, and interacting with both the text and other individuals.

Location of Research

The empirical material for this study was sourced from two locations: Huset-KBH in Copenhagen, Denmark and also Biograf Spegeln in Malmö, Sweden. Huset-KBH is a self-proclaimed 'culture house'[35] in Copenhagen, Denmark. Founded in 1970, Huset-KBH is comprised of a number of cultural venues such as a board game café, a music venue, and a movie cinema. But during the nascent phase of this thesis, it was announced that Biograf Spegeln[36] would also be holding a one-time screening of *The Room* on 19 February 2018 with Greg Sestero (the actor who plays Mark in *The Room*) in attendance. And therefore, that screening at Biograf Spegeln also became a recruitment venue for respondents of this thesis.

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[35] https://huset-kbh.dk/about/?lang=en

[36] http://www.biografspegeln.se/#/home

Design, Sampling, and Conducting the Research

Prior to the actual research, an interview guide was formulated paying particular attention to questions that were fit for purpose towards what this thesis aimed to achieve. Sampling was then carried out at a total of five screenings: one at Biograf Spegeln in Malmö[37] and four screenings at Huset-KBH in Copenhagen[38]. At each screening that I attended, I would converse with a number of individuals or groups of people and ask them if they wanted to be a part of this research. A form resembling this thesis' consent form was given to those who were willing to be interviewed, where they would fill out their personal and contact details. It's worth noting that the actual interviews themselves weren't conducted on the spot at the theatres, rather they were conducted at a range of two to three weeks after the initial contact in locations that were decided by the respondents. This yielded a total of 11 interviews that includes a re-interview with the pilot from a total of 18 respondents who signed up, in which some were physically unable to meet up in person during my data collection period. Of the 11 interviewees, four were from the Malmö screening and seven were from the Copenhagen screenings. Six of the interviewees were male and five of them were female. Four of the interviewees have been to screenings of *The Room* before and the other seven were first-timers to the live experience.

Analysing the Data

All recorded interviews were first transcribed, in which the transcriptions became the foundational empirical data for the thesis. During the transcription process, particular attention was paid to the respondents' vocal intonations while simultaneously recalling their facial expressions and other body languages during the interviews themselves. I would refer back to my field notes based on my observations to see if there were any connections between what the respondents were saying to what actually transpired in a screening of *The Room*.

Afterwards, transcriptions were transplanted into a heuristic coding scheme where the role of the coding was to provide resources in identifying sequences of data that are 'related thematically' (Jensen, 2002, p.246). Ultimately, the categories and themes functioned to uncover the 'potential motives' for the respondents'

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[37] Screening on 19 February 2018

[38] Screenings on 2 February 2018 at 19:00, 2 March 2018 at 21:30, 16 March 2018 at 19:00 and 21:30

actions (Brennen, 2013, p.22) in relations to the context of *The Room* screenings. In extracting the conceptual findings from the data, the analysis was conducted in a manner that followed Bazely's (2013) guidance of 'read, reflect, and connect', which allowed the construction of a 'holistic understanding' of the individuals and subject matter that is being investigated (p.101).

Reflection on Methods

In terms of ethics, a consent form was given to the respondents before any form of interviewing started, in which it gives a brief outline of the research, states that their identity shall remain anonymous, and lastly it asks for their permission in recording the interview. The consent form here symbolises 'informed consent', which is an important part in qualitative research ethics that signifies the interviewees' voluntary nature of participating without coercion (Christians, 2005, p.144). The fact that the consent form also ensures each respondent's anonymity also embodies an ethical consideration in qualitative research, namely the notion of 'privacy and confidentiality' as a 'safeguard against unwanted exposure' (Ibid.).

Audiences' Perception on *The Room* as a Live Experience

Camp Appreciation

> It feels like a movie being made by an alien trying to imitate humanity and trying to make a film like a human being would. (Victor, 27, M, Student)

What exactly makes *The Room* bad? Ella (29, F, Social Media Manager) recalled an example of the film's badness where characters in the movie were 'throwing a football while standing two feet away from each other and wearing tuxedos' in which she remarked as 'just so absurd.' Ella elaborated further:

> It's not bad because it's boring or the dialogue is boring. It's because it's so absurd, like the dialogue doesn't make any sense. [It] doesn't make any sense at all and combined with horrible acting, it's just entertaining. (Ella, 29, F, Social Media Manager)

Ella was definitely not alone in finding the aesthetics of *The Room* as bad or horrible. Other interviewees who also translated the film's badness into something that's entertaining:

> I mean it's not an Oscar worthy film, but it's a great film in that it's so bad. […] I mean the dialogue is just nuts. If you kind of put that aside and if you just see it for the trainwreck it is, then it's good. (Sofia, 24, F, Student)

The reading protocols conducted by audiences based in *The Room*'s failings invokes the camp sensibility where the key element of enjoyment is found in a 'seriousness that fails' but only in instances where there is a 'proper mixture of the exaggerated, the fantastic, the passionate, and the naïve' (Sontag, 1966, p.283). It is evident that *The Room*'s claim to fame – as is the case with numerous camp texts- is partially based on its 'remarkable lack of artistry or their bald, contradictory or even hypocritical, ideological position' (Jancovich, 2002, p.317). In essence, camp is a love of 'the unnatural', of 'artifice and exaggeration', and the 'off' (Sontag, 1966, p.275), where audiences of *The Room* have recognised these qualities within the film. The recognition would then lead to an understanding of *The Room* as bizarre and weird as exemplified in previous discussions on why *The Room* embodies something that is 'so bad it's good'. Susan (21, F, Student), who has been to a live screening once likens *The Room* to Rebecca Black's song 'Friday'[39], which at the time became an Internet sensation due to its sub-par lyrics, odd music video, and its catchy tune. She noted that there's 'fun in ironically joining in' and considers *The Room* as something 'so bizarre that it's sort of its own thing'. Oscar (37, M, Student), who has seen *The Room* only once conceded that the movie itself is a failure and that Tommy Wiseau is trying to do something 'but fails again and again.'

> I think that's the point with [The Room], it tries to be technically great, it has its green screens, it has these sets. […] Tries to have this emotional tie with everything and then just fails on every part. (Oscar, 37, M, Student)

Based on this, irony plays a key role in how audiences of *The Room* find pleasure that derives from the film's shortcomings. It is in line with one of camp's tenets, which is a sensibility that's 'an aesthetic of ironic colonization and cohabitation' (Sconce, 1995, p.374). Oliver (43, M, Senior Media Researcher), who has seen *The Room* twice almost ten years apart, explained that people who don't enjoy

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[39] Released in 2011

can't put distance between themselves and the movie. 'Irony wasn't part of their experience, so they saw it one to one […] and when you look at it [that way], it's terrible,' he said. In this sense, irony is anchored in the viewer's belief and perception if *The Room* was supposed to be a comedy or as something else. Therefore, Tommy Wiseau's intentions are a central component in understanding how audiences find enjoyment in something that is unequivocally bad.

It has been well-documented[40] that Wiseau in producing *The Room* had always wanted to create a movie that was positively adored by both film critics and movie audiences. But ever since *The Room* gained notoriety across the cinema world, Wiseau has been adamant that his initial vision for the movie precisely mirrors the end product, which is a dark comedy[41]. However, those who have seen *The Room* are not buying it plainly because there are never hints or clues in the movie that demonstrates it is 'self-aware' of its own 'de-based status' (Kleinhans, 1994, p.183). Sofia (24, F, Student) who has seen the movie only once, remarked that 'there's just this mismatch or dichotomy between [Wiseau's] vision or maybe how he views the final product and what it really is'. Oscar (37, M, Student) had this to say in regards to Wiseau's vision:

> His self-perception is probably where everything's wrong. […] I think in some scenes he sees them in his head and I think if I'm going to be honest, when he sees the movie he still sees those scenes as he sees them in his head. But it doesn't come out that way. (Oscar, 37, M, Student)

An 'imagined depth' -as Carl (27, M, Student) said, is arguably *The Room*'s biggest asset as a cultural text. As mentioned earlier, the textual qualities of the film become a resource for the audience. The whole culture of *The Room*, revolves around how audiences are appropriating these assets dependent on their reading protocols. McCulloch (2011) posits that the culture surrounding Tommy Wiseau's film works specifically 'towards the production of a shared reading' (p.205) as exemplified by how audiences are nurtured to call out each mistake or idiosyncrasies that transpire on-screen. It is here that the true value of the culture around *The Room* is based on. It is not entirely on the quality of the text, rather more on 'what audiences *do* with it' (Hermes, 2005, p.13). Dyer (2002) would also agree that the culture surrounding *The Room* is determined more on how

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[40] See *The Disaster Artist* (Sestero and Bissell, 2013)

[41] See for example http://ew.com/article/2008/12/12/crazy-cult-room, where Wiseau insists that *The Room* was intended to be "partly comedic".

people respond to the text 'rather than qualities actually inherent in [the text]' (p.52).

The ironic mode of appreciation would struggle to flourish if the individual does not allow it to exist in the first place. Because of this, the question of the types of people that can enjoy *The Room* is a matter of difference in personalities and ultimately taste. Susan (21, F, Student) admitted that if she were to take her parents to a screening of *The Room*, they would get annoyed with the fact that they're watching a horrible movie and not 'get the whole experience'. Oliver (43, M, Senior Media Researcher) explained that individuals need to acknowledge that the 'badness' is the 'whole foundation of the experience' and if you take it too 'one to one' you probably wouldn't enjoy it. Michelle had similar sentiments that in order to be able to enjoy *The Room* you have to accept a degree of weirdness:

> If you're not willing to accept things that are a little bit out there […] then you're not going to be able to embrace the different aspects of [The Room]. So you just need to be able to accept that it's going to be weird as fuck. (Michelle, 25, F, Content Manager)

The difference in taste immediately creates a sense of distinction among those who 'get' *The Room*, which -by channelling Bourdieu (1979)- is the 'practical affirmation of an inevitable difference' that are marked 'by the refusal of other tastes' (p.56). Bourdieu would further explain that taste has the power to unite and separate based on each person's conditioning that will later on distinguish themselves from others who are not of the same conditioning. Audiences made projections on who they think would be able to enjoy *The Room* based on their own experiences and their perceived similarities by gauging if they are indeed aligned before deeming them – in a way- worthy of seeing *The Room*. The reason is because some interviewees felt a sense of responsibility towards a first-time viewer who they brought to a screening. For example, Michelle (25, F, Content Manager) came to a screening of *The Room* in Malmö with her boyfriend who has never watched it nor been to a screening. She admitted that one of the reasons of bringing her boyfriend was to 'indoctrinate him in the ways of *The Room*'. Michelle remarked that she 'felt responsible for his experience' and if he ended up not liking it, that would 'make me sad'. In a way, bringing a first-timer to a *Room* screening becomes a calculated risk based on the individual's appraisal of other people's taste. For Freja, it was a risk worth taking:

> I knew somewhat of what I was getting into, but to watch people be so astonished by this movie and expressing 'what!?!' sooo many times, is a lot of fun

and made my experience even better. And I feel like I could give something, give an experience to whom I brought. (Freja, 29, F, Media Researcher)

Bringing her colleagues from work who were mostly first-timers, enhanced Freja's experience. We can see that she used similar wordings to what Michelle had also used before, signifying a sense of 'responsibility'. Their enjoyment is very much intertwined with the quality of the experience of others they brought with them.

Being in the Live Experience

During the screenings that I attended, it can be seen that just about everybody came with someone they knew. The social aspect of *The Room* plays an important role in how audiences enjoy the experience, as Victor said:

It's a movie that hasn't at all got the same appeal if you watch it alone. […] I would never put myself through it without anyone around me because it's […] the movie to watch with other people. It's a common experience…it's a group experience. (Victor, 27, M, Student)

Victor's statement is just one of many examples where audiences of *The Room* are adamant that the live screening experience is meant to be enjoyed with other people. Sofia (24, F, Student) noted the importance of a communal setting by saying that 'you have to share the madness with everyone else'. Noah (30, M, Research Assistant) remarked that he needs other people around in order to be able to share his 'amazement, […] frustrations, [and] disbeliefs'. This establishes the nature of the screenings to be social:

I know that I watched like these bad movies [,,,] and I would be like 'oh god I need to watch this with someone!' […] It's not something I can experience on my own. I need to experience it with someone else, I need to share it kind of. (Oscar, 37, M, Student)

There is a continuous acknowledgement that in order to endure the badness of *The Room*, one has to share it with others because it would allow them to alleviate any – or at least most- discomforts that can arise from watching an aesthetically bad film. Furthermore, it's not just about seeing it with people that you personally know, there is also the importance of seeing with complete strangers. Michelle (25, F, Content Manager) remembered that she didn't understand the 'full appeal of it' until she watched it in a movie theatre.

We can then argue that the live screening gave audiences a 'sense of identification and belonging' that arises from a shared 'distinctive way of behaving' (Dyer, 2002, p.49). In Dyer's mind, camp gives way to a sense of belonging because it projects a form of self-defence against the 'awfulness' that the gay culture has endured in the past by injecting 'fun and wit' by not taking things too seriously (Ibid.). In the context of *The Room*, it can also be said that ironic component of camp has become the preferred mode of enjoyment simply because it has been established that *The Room* is objectively awful. Therefore, the shared sense of belonging in *The Room* emerges from the interactions conducted by audiences aimed at the film's deficiencies, akin to how gay culture utilised 'fun and wit' to distance the 'mystique' of masculinity (Ibid., p.52). For example, Sofia (24, F, Student) admitted that because she finally threw a spoon during the screening, she feels like she's now 'part of the thing'. Such interactions can be argued to be a rite of passage that initiates the individual -especially first-timers, into the culture of *The Room*. Victor had this to say in regards to going to the live screening:

> I guess now I'm in on the joke. Now I can finally talk about the good stuff and the funny stuff of the film as a person who has joined the club. (Victor, 27, M, Student)

Victor wasn't the only one who seemed to imply that the culture of *The Room* is exclusive much like a 'club'. Noah (30, M, Research Assistant) also used the word 'club' while describing *The Room*'s 'following' as a unique group of people. Additionally, Carl (27, M, Student) perceived himself to be a part of a group that appreciates a certain type of humour, harkening back to the notion that you have to be able to appropriate the right comedic knowledge in order to enjoy *The Room*. Therefore, individuals would only gain the aforementioned 'sense of identification and belonging' only if they adhere to the set of applicable norms inside a screening of *The Room*; which will be elaborated in the next section. As Freja (29, F, Media Researcher) stated, once you 'know the rules' you become integrated and get a sense of being 'a part of something bigger'.

Building up on the above, we can see that unlike a typical cinemagoing experience, *The Room* screenings are distinct not only because of their inherent social nature, but also due to the level of interactivity that occurs within a screening. Freja had this to say:

> You engage more in the experience because it's fun and it's something that you usually don't get to do [in a theatre]. So if you've ever been to the cinema and

seen a horrible movie, you kind of feel like shouting out stuff once in a while, and you can't do that because it's a theatre. (Freja, 29, F, Media Researcher)

Freja's statement encapsulates the experience of being in a live screening of *The Room*, including the little nuances of what's possible within that context: freedom, catharsis, and a rebellious sense. Screenings of *The Room* are mainly characterised by people throwing spoons at the screen[42], people yelling obscenities and verbal abuses towards movie characters, and the reciting of infamous lines that has established *The Room* as a cultural phenomenon[43]. It goes without saying that these types of actions would not be tolerated if conducted within the setting of a normal cinema. Carl (27, M, Student) admitted that if people were to do the things they do in a normal cinema context, him and other people would probably get annoyed and 'they'll get thrown out because they would be like disturbing the order of the cinema'. In a normal cinema setting, we are used to be governed by cautionary placards shown on-screen prior to a screening of a movie, advocating that we should never talk, or use our cellular phones, or anything else that may disturb others. However, when taken into the context of *The Room* screening, audiences are given license to go against the rules of the cinema. What this brings are feelings of catharsis and exhilaration as experienced by Freja:

> I almost felt…a relief. I feel lighter because you have been able to shout things a screen, you have been able to laugh, you've been able to express your awe about this movie out loud, instead of holding in like you usually have to in a theatre. (Freja, 29, F, Media Researcher)

For Victor (27, M, Student), the notion of letting go was embodied by throwing spoons and likened it to when he was a teenager when he would occasionally throw popcorn in the cinema, noting that it's 'nice to combine [a] still activity with something that is more […] based on movement', exuding a sense of catharsis 'to be able to throw stuff around'. Susan also shared similar accounts of how it felt:

> It's sort of…exciting and a little bit rebellious almost. […] It's sort of the same feeling you get when going on a rollercoaster you know. It's like 'whooo…'

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[42] When photos of spoons in a picture frame make an appearance on-screen

[43] For example: "You are tearing me apart, Lisa!", "Oh hi doggie!", or "I did not hit her, I did naaaht!"

you're throwing a spoon! But I don't think I can describe it with a feeling. It's more like a thrill I guess. (Susan, 21, F, Student)

However, not all respondents were in agreement that the spoon throwing for example, added value to the screening itself. Oscar (37, M, Student) said that he 'didn't really get that' and admitted he 'could've done without it' in regards to the spoons ritual. Oliver (43, M, Senior Media Researcher) echoed Oscar's sentiments and thought 'it was an okay gimmick' that 'didn't really do much' for him, partially because he never actually saw the spoons in the picture frames. Sofia (24, F, Student) who found the throwing of spoons to be 'tolerable' albeit 'a bit annoying', did take issue with the amount of people who were talking back at the screen and yelling out lines because she 'found it a bit annoying' and 'unfunny'.

A Realm of Freedom and Constraint

A movie theatre is often like you sit silently and don't speak [and] all these things you have to follow, [a] social etiquette kind of. And it's nice to just be able to scream at the screen, like it's very liberating kind of. (Oscar, 37, M, Student)

As briefly explained in the previous section and as illustrated by Oscar above, audiences at *The Room* screenings are allowed a degree of freedom that embodies certain aspects of the Rabelaisian notion of 'carnivalesque' as elaborated by Bakhtin (1965), where speech and gestures are characterised by frankness and freedom, liberated 'from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times' (p.10).

In essence, what goes on inside a screening of *The Room* can be considered to be the polar opposite to the everyday life. Due to the film's textual qualities (i.e. campiness, bizarreness, and excess), it has provided audiences with a 'freedom from constraint' and a chance to approach *The Room* from a 'slightly defamiliarized perspective' (Sconce, 1995, p.391). An example of this is Carl's (27, M, Student) perception towards *The Room* as a film and the screenings in which he believed that the experience becomes like a 'canvas where people can apply pretty much anything they want'. The significance of this shared freedom according to Bakhtin (1965), is to 'create a special collectivity' where a distinct group of individuals is 'initiated in familiar intercourse' (p.188). Noah (30, M, Research Assistant) noted that the sense of freedom was what made the whole experience great as he remarked that you're given free rein to express your emotions by being 'allowed to shout [and] allowed to say 'what the fuck?''. Susan

(21, F, Student) said that because there are 'sort of no boundaries', people can become 'creative' by yelling out ideas, where occasionally someone will 'yell something appropriate and then it would be hilarious.' Michelle (25, F, Content Manager) admitted that everyone will most likely have a running commentary going through their heads while watching *The Room* and said:

> You have free rein to yell out that commentary in a scenario like this. So yeah, I let myself off the hook for a little while and I was yelling a lot. I'm not sorry [laughs]. It was fun. (Michelle, 25, F, Content Manager)

Ella (29, F, Social Media Manager) remarked that the portrayals in the movie are 'over-caricatured', 'so over the top', and 'right in your face' and admits that because of its extremity, 'it's hard not to find humour in it'. Michelle (25, F, Content manager) noted that the gender stereotypes are 'so blatantly outrageous' that it 'makes it easy to laugh at'. In this regard, Oliver (43, M, Senior Media Researcher) believed it is important to be able to 'make fun of even the most serious things' but only if it's within 'the right context'. Susan (21, F, Student) stated that people who experience the 'because you're a woman!' yell should understand that it's rooted in irony and that it's meant to be a joke and 'that it should stay there [in the theatre]'. She further elaborated:

> Once you leave, that's not you anymore…that was your experience in there. Whatever [laughs] happens in *The Room* stays in *The Room*. […] I don't think you should bring a sexist attitude outside and continue yelling 'because she's a woman!' […] cause it's not fine. (Susan, 21, F, Student)

In this sense, *The Room* screenings can be seen as an 'emotional public sphere that parallels the rational public sphere' by way of encouraging, managing, and reflecting upon emotional conflict as an alternative to the rationalisation of critical discussion, which is a hallmark of the Habermasian public sphere (Lunt and Stenner, 2005, p.63). Much like *The Jerry Springer Show* that was the focal point of Lunt and Stenner's study, *The Room* screenings have manifested into 'an ironic engagement' where the affective takes precedent (Ibid., p.64). What this means is that the intense interactivity nature of *The Room* screening and the freedom to do so acts as a vehicle 'for the expression of everyday experiences' that may not be possible in other contexts of the everyday life (Ibid., p.63); as a way to include certain conducts (e.g. swearing, throwing objects, or verbally abusing fictional characters) that are otherwise excluded from the dominant culture (Ibid., p.70). The notion of 'ironic engagement' resurfaces again and harkens back to the camp

mode of enjoyment in that audiences of *The Room* cannot appraise the movie at face value or otherwise face a depletion in pleasure.

Carl (27, M, Student) acknowledged that humour is one way of disarming blatant stereotypes and 'perhaps ridiculing them'. Michelle (25, F, Content Manager) also admitted that finding humour in the 'because you're a woman!' line is a good way of 'recognising the things that can happen in society and how things go wrong'. She then added:

> Society lives by rules […] and in this case you're kind of flipping those rules and saying, 'you know what, some things are acceptable, but just for this movie'. And I think it's good for people to let that out a bit, in a controlled setting of course, and then we can move on with our lives. (Michelle, 25, F, Content Manager)

Based on Michelle's quote, we can see that audiences have freedom where they can make fun of sensitive topics, but we can also see that even she perceives the nature of the screening to be 'controlled'. It illustrates how public screenings of *The Room* is in reality a realm that is marked by a struggle between freedom and constraint. Even though *The Room* screenings are characterised with 'freedom and familiarity' where impropriety has a place to flourish (Bakhtin, 1965, p.247), it still doesn't escape the enforcement of certain rules, boundaries, and constraints. The terms 'wild', 'rowdy', and 'anything goes' has been utilised by the respondents of this research to describe the nature of these screenings. However, the rowdiness and the wildness to the live experience can only be extended to a certain point before other individuals would start exhibiting displeasure. Here, an unwritten rule of *The Room* screenings surfaces: you still have to be considerate of other people. You cannot plainly walk into a screening and be completely obnoxious in which Michelle (25, F, Content Manager) also said that you can 'interact with the movie' but only if it's 'relevant' and you cannot be yelling 'just to be a loud asshole' because 'there are still some rules.'

Attaining Camp Capital

Due to the free flow of expressions and opinions, it enables audiences to attain a certain form of knowledge based on the interaction of others in what can be termed as *camp capital*. Much like the obtainment of cultural capital, a person's camp capital functions as a form of 'social orientation, 'a sense of one's place'' that guides the individual towards their appropriate position in the appropriate context (Bourdieu, 1979, p.466). Here, context is paramount in the application of camp

capital because it does not necessarily denote an individual's position within society in general. Where if cultural capital according to Bourdieu's elaboration is garnered and nurtured based on an individual's upbringing and education, camp capital can only be obtained within the camp environment that appreciates the value of such knowledge. In other words, camp capital exists only within the realm of camp culture as a means for individuals to achieve distinction based on their knowledge on camp texts. As such, camp capital is a form of situated knowledge as a result of situated affective practices arising from audiences' ability to 'recognise, endorse, and pass on the affective practice' (Wetherell, 2012, p.79).

For audiences of *The Room* obtaining knowledge from the interaction of others is one of the main modes that an individual can garner camp capital that may be utilised in future engagements and also 'enhance one's social capital' (McCulloch, 2011, p.212) through discursive practices that occur after the screening. Noah (30, M, Research Assistant) admitted in the following days after he went to a screening he asked a lot of people if they have seen *The Room* because he was 'hungry' for answers on *The Room* and wanted to talk about the movie with as many people as possible. Oscar (27, M, Student) remarked that being 'able to talk about it and understand it' is an important outcome from the whole screening experience. Ella (29, F, Social Media Manager) admitted that after her screening, she felt different from if it were a normal movie because she continued on talking about different scenes from *The Room* with her colleagues and wanted to 'quote the movie all night long'. We can see that the knowledge individuals gained from the screening experience becomes a resource for social functions such as conversing with others as well as a personal identifier, signifying that they've experienced a 'specific cultural experience' (Noah, 30, M, Research Assistant) and eventually perceiving themselves as someone who has 'joined in on the joke' (Victor, 27, M, Student).

In obtaining camp capital itself, respondents of this research noted the importance of 'instigators' who were present during a screening in regards to their role in shaping the experience and bestowing knowledge. For example, Ella (29, F, Social Media Manager) noted the importance of going to the screening with others who have experienced it before because 'they were supportive and telling us what to do'. Victor (27, M, Student) noticed in his screening that there was one girl who 'catalysed' certain yells, in which he started noticing her voice and eventually others in the audience would join in. Susan (21, F, Student), who went with a friend, remarked how others who have seen the movie acted like a guide and others who weren't as well-versed could pick up stuff just by listening to them:

> So at first I got right in, I started yelling along with everyone. She [referring to her friend] was sort of sitting there like 'umm…so what am I expected to do?' But then half way through the movie she started yelling along with everyone else. She got it straight away. (Susan, 21, F, Student)

The 'instigators' and the actions they carry out in their physical or verbal manifestation acts as an educational tool of sorts that may be utilised by first-time attendees. Due to the repetitive nature of a lot of these rituals, first-timers were able to pick up and practice the acts themselves. Freja (29, F, Media Researcher) noted that many in her group of friends who hadn't seen it before started to pick up on 'some of the screams we hadn't talked about before because they could hear other people screaming' after which they started doing so themselves. In this sense, *The Room* screenings becomes an embodiment of a 'viewing protocol [that] holds a pedagogical purpose' because the audience 'performs its own structure by individuals patenting witticism' (Vivar, 2018, p.128). Carl contemplated on the meaning of the actions that people do and thought they can be considered to be an auditory cue to something important within the film:

> It's like they're shouting this thing at this moment it must mean this moment in the movie is significant in some way. […] So in one way it's like educating the people who come there for the first time. (Carl, 27, M, Student)

Not only do audiences learn interactions from others, but they also had to overcome their own personal dispositions by learning that it is acceptable in these screenings to throw spoons or yell out obscenities. Noah (30, M, Research Assistant) admitted that it took him a little while because he still felt strange doing these interactions in a movie theatre and felt that he needed to 'win myself in that sense'. For Oscar (37, M, Student), he finally chimed in and yelled out something original towards the very end of the movie by shouting out 'great job taking responsibility!' at the character of Mark as he stood over Johnny's dead body. He explained that he finally 'felt experienced enough' by the end of the movie and found joy as he perceived that there were other people laughing at his comment. Oscar then pointed out that if he were to go to another screening in the future, he would probably be 'a little bit more active'.

Oscar's experience illustrates how the obtainment of camp capital could possibly shape their future engagements differently, especially if their initial attempt at exhibiting said capital was reinforced with laughter. Susan (21, F, Student) reflected that in future screenings, she would do a few things differently, specifically during the sex scenes in which she felt there were 'missed opportunities

within the gaps' and would like to 'make a joke or do something interactive'. Victor (27, M Student) admitted that 'when you're there for the first time, you don't know the traditions' and believed that he would allow himself 'to be more active in yelling at the screen' in later engagements. Noah (30, M, Research Assistant) said that he considered himself to be an 'outsider' the first time he saw it and that he didn't know what to shout:

> […] If you watch it again and again you can let go of […] those boundaries […] try to participate some more. Not that I didn't participate, but again, relax more in the participation but because you know more. (Noah, 30, M, Research Assistant)

The individual's knowledge of the visual cues, the flow of the film, the important plot points, and also the witty lines to yell out are then compounded that would establish her or himself within an unwritten hierarchy of *The Room* fandom; a classic case of distinction where individuals are guided towards their social orientation. Lucas (21, M, Sales Assistant) for example, has seen *The Room* at least nine times and five of those was in the theatre. However, he does not consider himself to be a veteran but that he's 'getting there' and wouldn't consider himself as 'hardcore' even though he's won numerous free tickets[44] based on his knowledge of *The Room*. Oliver on the other hand (43, M, Senior Media Researcher) said he was mostly going with the flow of the audience and would probably do so again in another screening because it would only be his second screening and would still feel like a 'novice'. He does note the importance of gaining enough camp capital by saying that if you can come up with a lot of original commentaries or interactivities, 'that way you kind of become the creator yourself'. Susan had similar aspirations in future screenings:

> Maybe…try to be the person to lead the crowd. Because it was the first time I went to a screening, right? So I wasn't really sure when to yell, but now I do! So I might add a bit here and there. (Susan, 21, F, Student)

In this sense, a possible end-goal for anyone who has gone through the live experience of *The Room* screening is becoming one of the 'instigators' that

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[44] At the beginning of each screening of *The Room* at Huset-KBH, a person from the theatre would ask the audience a number of *Room*-related questions, in which if an audience member answers correctly, they would win a pair of movie tickets valid at Huset-KBH. Examples of the questions are: What is the real-life occupation of the actor who played Chris R in *The Room*? Or How long have Johnny and Lisa been together?

potentially shapes the experience of others present in the audience. The 'instigators' ultimately acts as a facilitator -more so for first-timers- that imparts knowledge to produce a 'shared reading' of the movie (McCulloch, 2011, p.205). This is important because harkening back to previous discussions, enjoyment of *The Room* is very much entwined with a specific reading protocol involving an ironic mode of enjoyment. One has to acquire enough camp capital through experience in order to be able to embody the persona of the 'instigator'. It can be argued then, that such individuals who have accumulated competence would sit in the upper echelons of *The Room*'s hierarchy of fandom because they become 'a source of inculcation' (Bourdieu, 1979, p.65) that convey information in the form of interactions where others in the audience will ascertain its value (i.e. others will laugh, repeat the comments, or perhaps dismiss it).

Conclusion

Within the context of the live screenings of Tommy Wiseau's *The Room*, this thesis has examined the audiences' values and opinions based on their viewing experiences. What's written above demonstrates what has been observed and uncovered throughout the course of this research. As the concluding chapter of the thesis a detailed reflection on the aforementioned findings in relations to the key research questions is pertinent:

How are audiences defining and understanding The Room as a cult film?

Respondents of this thesis have consistently noted the importance of *The Room*'s poor textual qualities. It was established that in relation to the overall live screening experience, *The Room* is in a way irreplaceable and that other similar bad films would not be able to recreate what *The Room* has achieved since the beginning of its release. This demonstrates what Hermes (1995) had posited in that audience studies of cultural artefacts, the text plays a crucial role in conceptualising the topic of interest. As a point of reflection, it is because of this, that the research makes reference to the text and how it plays a role in the way audiences are ascribing meaning.

For audiences of *The Room*, they noted the degree of the film's poorness and bizarreness have crossed an imaginary line that situates the film a notch beyond just plain bad, but into the realm of 'so bad it's good'. Particular attention was

paid to the film's non-sensical plotlines, absurd scenes, bizarre dialogue, and most prominently, Tommy Wiseau's acting. The notion of 'so bad it's good' in the case of this research, was rooted in the audiences' disbelief that someone has actually produced a film as poor as *The Room*. In this way, as Carl (27, M, Student) stated, *The Room* was perceived to have an 'imagined depth' as a reactionary mechanism in trying to rationalise why and how Wiseau constructed each individual scene. What this means is that because the textual qualities of the film have surpassed the point of 'normal weird', audiences begin to extract their own narratives from the unbelievable components of the film's more outlandish scenes. The 'hi doggie!' scene in the flower shop exemplifies this well, due to the scene's hasty pace and abrupt ending, audiences were left to wonder for example, why that dog was up on the counter, who that dog belongs to, and even the reason as to why Johnny would greet the dog in the first place. In other words, individuals are creating their own narratives in their heads, shifting their focus away from the diegetic components of the film (Sconce, 1995, p.387) and instead into something else that is not explicitly portrayed.

It can be argued then, the aforementioned 'imagined depth' creates a distance between audiences and the film itself. Instead of feeling invested and empathising with *The Room*'s characters and their predicaments, audiences are instead ridiculing them due to their 'unintentionally heightened awareness' (MacDowell and Zborowski, 2013) of the film's bizarreness and excess. Here, the notion of distance can be further unpacked. Pavlounis (2012) posits that the audiences' ability to find enjoyment from *The Room* is less 'predicated on distancing' but is in reality a 'genuine enjoyment' (p.27). However, this thesis would argue that the audiences' main source of enjoyment is based on the film's unbelievability. Even if audiences are genuinely enjoying the film, they would not be able to do so without that sense of unrelatability. It is the aforementioned distance that instils an additional value into an otherwise inadequate piece of cinema and pushes *The Room* into the territory of 'so bad it's good'.

What role does the camp sensibility and taste play in the way audiences are viewing *The Room*?

After identifying exactly how audiences are perceiving *The Room* as a film, this thesis has identified the camp sensibility in which irony is key, as the main mode of enjoyment for audiences. Camp in the case of this research, was anchored on the notion that Wiseau was sincere in his efforts at producing *The Room*. Audiences *need* to accept this idea because it would allow audiences to 'disavow

the broader implications of failure itself' (Pavlounis, 2012, p.28). In spirit, it is similar to how Dyer (2002) views camp in that it creates enough distance from something that is objectively awful (p.49). Thus, camp functions as a tool for audiences to find pleasure from something that is aesthetically poor. Instead of cringing or feel embarrassed of what transpires on-screen, they are instead ascribing a different meaning from what can be interpreted at face value. In this sense, a dichotomy of vision emerged from the differing perspectives of audiences and also Wiseau's perceived true intentions. It is as Sontag (1966) posits, that if a subject is embodying 'camp', then a duplicity is constructed in which exists both the 'straight' reading and also the 'zany experience' of said subject (p.281).

Based on the above, camp is established as the preferred sensibility in viewing *The Room*. However, this research had also shown that camp itself would not be able to develop if the individual in question does not 'get' what it's all about. Hence, the matter of taste surfaces and acts as a means of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) that provides a guideline on who would appreciate camp. Respondents indicated that they are reluctant to bring others who they deem would not 'fit' with what *The Room* and its experience are. In this way, they are projecting their own tastes onto others and gauge whether other people would also be able to enjoy *The Room*. We could argue that audiences in a way, created boundaries (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013, p.184) rooted in their perception of another person being able to discern that *The Room* is indeed camp and that a specific mode of enjoyment is necessary. Determining the taste of others was important because as this thesis illustrated, audiences who wanted to bring their friends or partners placed a great sense of responsibility upon themselves in that their own enjoyment of the experience was very much linked with the enjoyment of the individuals they brought to the screening. If the friend or partner had a great time, then it would arguably enhance their relationship. If not, the opposite may also happen and there is one less thing they can share. It exemplifies what Bourdieu (1979) posits about the nature of taste, in that it can both unite and separate individuals. By that same logic, taste in camp would also establish that the experience of *The Room* screenings is social in nature. Audiences of this thesis have remarked that they simply cannot attend a screening without being a group of friends or colleagues. In this sense, other individuals function as a support in enduring the badness of the film itself. For returning viewers, respondents noted that seeing *The Room* with first-timers actually enhanced their experience because they were able to witness how others would react for the first time.

How do audiences shape the live experience of The Room?

The Room invites audiences into a secondary reading protocol where the irony of camp is paramount, and audiences in turn shape the live screenings of *The Room* to embody an atmosphere of the 'carnivalesque' (Bakhtin, 1965). Considering that audiences don't take the film itself at face value, it is no wonder that the screenings themselves are dissimilar from anything in 'normal' society. Respondents have noted how carrying out actions in the form of throwing objects or yelling out their thoughts and opinions exuded a sense of liberty, freedom, and catharsis. These senses arose from the camp viewing of audiences in which they were 'diverted' from the objective meaning of the film (Klinger, 1989, p.5). Audiences have remarked that the transgressive nature of *The Room* screenings are evidently incompatible with the typical cinemagoing etiquette. Even if that were so, this thesis would argue that by no means are *The Room* screenings to be in direct opposition towards society in general, simply because audiences of this research were not exhibiting a sense of hostility towards the normal cinemagoing experience and weren't actively promoting 'an alternative vision' (Sconce, 1995, p.374) of going to the cinemas. Instead, it can be argued that *The Room* screenings can be considered to be a form of escapism. A respite from the typically silent and orderly experience of going to a movie theatre.

The sense of freedom offered by the live experience of *The Room* would then allow audiences to be able to express their thoughts and opinions uninhibitedly, constituting a form of 'emotional public sphere' where there is more of a focus on emotional expressions instead of rational discussions (Lunt and Stenner, 2005). Such freedoms have even given audiences of *The Room* some leeway into addressing and acknowledging sensitive topics, particularly that around gender stereotypes. *The Room* screenings become a conduit of free expression for audiences that would otherwise be considered offensive if taken outside the context. Here, the importance of camp and irony resurfaces in that it gives individuals the license to be playful (Sontag, 1966) towards politically incorrect statements. This was illustrated by audience responses in that they believe humour is a way of disarming such sensitive topics and that it's acceptable having fun with them.

Even though audiences have free rein to yell out commentaries and conduct physical actions, they still have to be considerate of their surroundings and in particular other individuals. Susan (21, F, Student) encapsulated this best when she said that 'whatever happens in *The Room*, stays in the room'. Some respondents in this research recalled a moment in their screenings when another

audience member became overly obnoxious and almost ruined their enjoyment of the experience. Additionally, audiences have also remarked that there are certain unwritten rules in *The Room* screenings and you are encouraged to adhere to these rules. For example, as explained by some of the respondents, you are expected to participate in one way or another throughout the course of the film, and that you have to yell certain lines at specific moments. Based on what's written above, we can argue that in *The Room* screenings, both freedom and constraint almost equally characterise the nature of the screenings themselves. On one hand, the 'carnivalesque' is upheld where all hierarchical elements are suspended (Bakhtin, 1965, p.10), but on the other, rules of the greater society still apply in that we are encouraged not to offend or hurt other people.

As one of the last talking points of the thesis, it could be argued that because of the shared reading of the text that creates a 'carnivalesque' atmosphere, it would bring about a sense of belonging. Respondents of the research -especially first-time attendees- have remarked that after attending the screening, they now feel they 'get it' or being 'in' on the whole culture. Because of the rowdy nature of the screenings where the camp sensibilities flourish, Dyer (2002) characterises this as having a 'good camp together' which provides audiences with a 'sense of identification and belonging' (p.49). This was illustrated in this thesis through both my personal observations of creating bonds with strangers and also respondents' statements where they said that *The Room* screening makes you feel like you belong to something bigger. Some had also noted that they felt like being in a 'club', in which there are undertones of exclusivity. This harkens back to the matter of taste and how it functions as a form of identifier if a person likes *The Room* or not. The perceived similarities among audiences of *The Room* 'breeds emotional closeness and trust' (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013, p.187).

The aforementioned sense of identification and belonging could also be sourced from the obtainment of camp capital. Here, this thesis argues that camp capital is a value within *The Room* experience where an ironic mode of engagement is necessary. It emerges from the screenings' affective climate where situated affective practices are conducted. Audiences first exemplified camp capital through their recollection of utilising the camp knowledge as discursive resources in talking with other individuals. It can either be utilised as a talking point with those who have seen *The Room* before, or a means to persuading others who have never seen the film. Camp capital also channels the function of being a personal identifier in that it signifies that a person has experienced a 'specific cultural experience' (Noah, 30, M, Research Assistant). In this way, camp capital certainly has the ability to constitute what is 'us' and 'them' (Friedman and Kuipers, 2013, p.193) and as

mentioned before, marking a boundary between those who are 'in on it' and those who are less so.

McCulloch (2011) argues that any form of capital obtained in a screening of *The Room* can only be utilised as so far as enhancing a person's social capital (p.212). In that vein, camp capital also functions to enhance one's standing within the hierarchy of *The Room* culture. One such role that embodies the upper echelon of the hierarchy is that of the 'instigator', in which audiences have noted their importance during the live screenings. Here, 'instigators' can be defined as an individual who has accumulated enough camp capital and hence are comfortable in making their interactions known. As perceived by the respondents, 'instigators' lead the crowd by spearheading actions or yells based on specific scenes of the movie. They would impart valuable knowledge on others who were in attendance that would materialise into camp capital. Their actions would signify to other audience members that the scenes in question are an important part of the screening experience. Because of this, *The Room* screenings represent an environment where the processes of learning can be observed. Therefore, we can infer that camp capital produced by the interactive nature of the screenings, shapes the audiences' personalities and identities within the context of *The Room*'s culture and affirmed by their ability to appropriate their readings of the film into interactions (Bourdieu, 1979, p.281). Camp capital would then also shape the live experience itself through these audiences who are exhibiting their camp knowledge throughout the screening.

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YouTube and the Adpocalypse

How Have the New YouTube Advertising Friendly Guidelines Shaped Creator Participation and Audience Engagement?

Stephen Rading-Stanford

Introduction

When you consider how many millions of people access YouTube every day, it is no wonder that it is the second most visited website on the internet (Alexa.com. 2018). Since the video hosting service was launched in 2005, YouTube has rapidly become a ubiquitous element of our contemporary, mediated society. Van Dijck (2013) writes:

> What is most striking about sites like YouTube is their normalization into everyday life-people's ubiquitous acceptance of connective media penetrating all aspects of sociality and creativity. Millions of users across the world have incorporated YouTube and video sharing in their quotidian habits and routines (p. 129)

However, how many of these dedicated or casual visitors are aware of the unseen impact of every click they make?

Across an 18-month period starting in 2016, YouTube was subjected to a major advertising boycott, most often referred to as the 'Adpocalypse' (YouTube, 2017), a term coined by the creator PewDiePie. During this time a large number of high profile brands began to quickly and quietly withdraw their adverts when it was

discovered that a number of them had been placed, via the platforms automatic algorithm, in thousands of videos expressing hate and extremism[45].

The platforms' response was twofold. The first one was a complete reform of the YouTube advertiser-friendly guidelines[46] to which the content creators must adhere if they are to become eligible for advertiser revenue through the YouTube Partnership Programme (YPP)[47]. The second was to carry out a wide scale, retroactive demonetization of the millions of videos that now breeched the new guidelines. This process was not on a case-by-case basis, instead it was a blanket one, placing the emphasis on the creator to appeal the ruling in an effort to regain monetization status.

Most controversial of all, was that these processes were undertaken without YouTube notifying creators. The hope was that a quick solution could be found to stem the exodus that was taking place. It did not take long for companies from the United States and the United Kingdom such as the BBC, McDonalds and Starbucks to pull all their adverts. It was not until 2017 that YouTube's attempts were uncovered. A number of the sites popular creators began to notice large discrepancies between the number of views their channels were getting, and the amount of advertising revenue that should have equated too. This prompted many of them to bring the events to the wider audience, and raise deeper questions about the future of YouTube.

By the end of 2017, YouTube appeared to have recovered. The advertisers had returned, encouraged by the large scale changes. The site was regaining back its financial losses, and at face value, all was well. Behind the scenes however, the platform was still in turmoil. The creators, those responsible for YouTube's success, were still embroiled in a bitter and lengthy battle. For many, the new guidelines were too restrictive, punishing creativity and guiding creators towards making a more simplistic and inoffensive style of content. Those previously operating as gamers, news or films makers for example, were now unable to make money through adverts. As a result they were either having to source income

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[45] This was discovered during an investigation carried out by *The Times* newspaper, and can be read here (subscription required) :https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/youtube-hate-preachers-share-screens-with-household-names-kdmpmkkjk

[46] The current YouTube advertiser-friendly content guidelines can be viewed here: https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/6162278?hl=en

[47] The YPP is the programme put in place by YouTube that, once a content creator reaches certain requirements, entitles that creator to monetize their content through the placement of adverts.

through sites like Patreon[48] or Twitch[49], adapting their content to fit in within the new guidelines, or in some cases, completely leave the platform.

This was the fate of many of the smaller creators, those without a large enough fan base to seek external income, and who now found themselves caught between producing the type of content they wanted, or the type of content YouTube would allow. As such felt as though they were finding their content largely ignored.

Now, in what could be classed as the post-Adpocalyptic landscape, clicks are, quite literally, currency. In order to be eligible for advertising revenue, a creator must have accumulated a combined total of 4000 hours worth of views across their channel[50]. This places a greater emphasis on the creator, particularly those with a smaller fan base, to produce and upload a large number of videos in a quicker fashion. Subsequently, this has changed the role of the Youtube audiences, too.

The audiences have recently discovered how the impact of the brand boycott has affected them. For one, creators now appreciate more the importance of every click the viewers make, and as such have begun to treat and target them very differently. The viewers have also begun to learn of the power they wield. This has led to periods of intense back and forth between both parties, as they attempt to discover how they fit into the post-Adpocalyptic landscape. The constant negotiation that take place between creators and audiences is one that is rarely looked at, yet is one upon which could change how YouTube operates.

 Thus this thesis seeks to answer: How have the new YouTube advertiser-friendly guidelines shaped creator participation on the site, and by extension, audience engagement? In order to attempt to answer this, this thesis will need to carry out a number of investigative measures. This thesis places itself within research on participation, audiences and YouTube as a digital media platform by using participation action research, interviews and coding process. It concludes with a detailed breakdown of the findings.

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[48] Patreon is a fund raising website, through which people within the creative industries can appeal to fans or members for funding, often in return for exclusive benefits, such as unseen content. It saw a huge rise in usage immediately during and after the boycott. The site can be viewed here: https://www.patreon.com/

[49] Twitch is a live streaming platform, owned by Amazon. It is primarily used by gamers. Audiences can donate directly to a streamer, allowing them to retain a greater share of revenue. Again, the site saw a large spike in usage during and after the boycott and can be viewed here: https://www.twitch.tv/

[50] It is important to distinguish that there is no difference between a view and a click. Simply by clicking on a video constitutes a view, regardless of how much, or how little, of the video is actually watched.

Literature Review

How to conceptualise and describe audiences has always been complex, especially in today's mediated society. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) put forward the that 'audiences […] are changing with wider social and cultural changes' (p. 3), and so definitions include McQuail (1987) suggesting an audience is made up of 'a collectivity which is formed either in response to media […] or out of independently existing social forces.' (p. 215). A more updated view would be that of Hartley (2002), who states that 'The term audience is used to describe a large number of unidentifiable people, usually united by their participation in media use' (p. 11). Before the advent of Web 2.0, Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) themselves described 'audiences are groups of people before whom a performance of one kind or another takes place' (p. 40).

While the definition of audiences varies, it has long been accepted that the nature of what it means to be 'an audience' is changing, or it could be argued, evolving. Livingstone (2005) suggests that '[…] both popular and elite discourses, audiences are denigrated as trivial, passive and individualized.' (p. 18). Ross and Nightingale (2003) echo that audiences have grown 'from passive saps to interactive critic(s).' (p. 120). On this understanding, it is easy to track the evolution of audiences. From those attending theatres in 1800's America, passively absorbing the performances before them, to audiences of the 1900's British musical hall, during which time engagement was more common, elevating them to more active audiences. This culminated in the 2000's with the introduction of Web 2.0, allowing audiences a greater degree of interaction through social media platforms. Jenkins (2002) would label this evolution as being a new form of 'interactive audience' (p. 1). However, this is not a view shared by Napoli (2011) who argues that, in fact:

> The history of audiences has frequently demonstrated that the early manifestations of the audience were very much participatory and interactive. […] It was only with the development of electronic mass media […] that the dynamic between content provider and audience became increasingly uni-directional (p.12)

As opposed to the notion that audiences are evolving in a simple, binary way, audiences change with the tide of social, political, technological and economic challenges. With the nature of Web 2.0 and access to portable and internet ready devices being easier than ever, it is returning audiences to the more dominant and active end of the spectrum. Abercrombie and Longhurst (1998) 'there is little

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doubt, that over the last 10 or 20 years, the pendulum has swung more towards the Dominant Audience end of the spectrum.' (p. 29). Web 2.0 platforms have now completely changed what it means to be both audience and producer. The lines between the two have blurred, and as such it would be difficult, if not impossible, for the pendulum to swing back. This combination of what were previously two very separate and clearly defined roles, has led to what Bruns (2008) labels as 'Produsers', a term which carries, among others, the definition that users:

> [...] no longer produce content, ideas, and knowledge in a way that resembles traditional, industrial modes of production; the outcomes of their work similarly retain only few of the features of conventional products, even though frequently they are able to substitute for the outputs of commercial production processes. (p. 1)

It is a difficult term to shake off when it comes to any research case on YouTube. This new concept also brings with it a huge shift in the power dynamics. The notion of audiences being, as Tulloch (1995) described them, a 'powerless elite' (p. 16) is outdated, at least in terms of the mechanics of Web 2.0. Instead now, audiences and producers work side by side to create, enhance and contribute to the Jenkins, Ford and Green's (2013) idea of the 'spreadability' (p. 3) of content. With this new shift, audiences find themselves charged with ever growing degrees of power. However, with that comes a heavy degree of responsibility, as they become targets for advertisers and creators who look to exploit that. It is difficult to argue with Ross and Nightingale's (2003) suggestion that 'today, being an audience is more complicated than ever.' (p. 1).

Technological advancements have made it possible for audiences to be reached by more digital media while on the move. With audiences now expecting content faster than ever, creators are under greater pressure to keep up with demands or risk being left behind. While this is not a new aspect of audience evolution, it is one that, when coupled with the Adpocalypse, has taken bold leaps forward. The YouTube algorithm that promotes regular uploads has almost turned the demand for more content, into an expectation.

YouTube: Structure and Business Model

Nowhere is this concept of dominant and interactive audiences more evident than on YouTube. The platform's business model is framed around audience

engagement and creator participation. Burgess and Green (2009) describe the platform as being 'a platform for, and aggregator of, content, but not a content producer itself' (p. 4). This description is rather apt, as YouTube serves only as the framework upon which the content, conversations and community are built. Burgess and Green (2009) again suggest:

> YouTube's value is not produced solely, or even predominantly by the top down activities of YouTube, Inc. as a company. Rather, various forms of cultural, social and economic values are collectively produced by users en masse, via their consumption, evaluation and entrepreneurial activities. (p, 5)

It is through the use of free labour of users that YouTube has become a success. The time it takes to compose a status on Facebook, or upload to Instagram, is incomparable to the time spent filming, editing and uploading a video to YouTube. As such the labour involved takes on a greater significance. Terranova (2000) describes free labour as the 'moment where the knowledgeable consumption of culture is translated into productive activities that are pleasurably embraced, and at the same time, often shamelessly exploited.' (p. 333)

While YouTube has always made use of its users' willingness to spend time and effort to produce content, it may not have entirely been the case in the platforms' early days. Van Dijck (2013) suggests that while 'YouTube […] did not produce any content of their own; they merely accommodated the distribution and storage of content produced by their users' (p, 113).

The platform was initially designed as a site on which users could store digital home videos. The idea of audience interaction and engagement was more of an afterthought, evidenced in the platforms' initial launch tag-line 'YouTube: Your Digital Video Repository' (2005). This drew in amateur video producers, who had been attracted to the idea of a platform that would allow them to emulate the professionals. This gave rise to a new form of user generated content (UGC) which was rapidly then able to compete with the content being generated by professional producers (PGC) for a variety of reasons. Chiefly, it could be argued that it was able to bypass a lot of the restrictions placed on professional producers, allowing fans to become producers for the type of content they wanted to see.

Van Dijck (2013) states that if one were to 'look at much of YouTube's current content, it is hard to tell any distinction between typical YouTube channels and broadcast content.' (p. 119). It would be hard to completely agree with this statement, as doing so would undermine the very purpose of the platform. One which has been moulded into something that can allow for amateurs to fill gaps

for the content they wanted to see. While advances in technology have allowed for greater professionalisation in how to create content, the style of content itself is very much noticeable against that of a professional. This applies in both the technical aspects of production and the subject matter. For example, if a professionally produced video were to include as many jump cuts or zoom ins as a YouTuber like *How to Basic,* it would be considered unwatchable. Equally the subject matter of a creator such as *iDubbbz* dedicating a whole series to bad unboxings, would be a commercial failure. Yet on YouTube these and other types of obscure and niche content, not only have a home, but a dedicated and loyal fan base.

As YouTube began to grow in popularity the platform quickly learned it was important to recognise and reward those creators responsible for aiding the platforms growth, introducing its YouTube Partnership Programme (YPP), though which the most popular creators received a small amount of advertising revenue shared by YouTube. For many, this unique business model would present the opportunity to earn a high enough revenue to turn content creation into a full time career. In return, YouTube would offer further boosts in popularity to the videos of those in the YPP, by pushing them up the ranking systems. The benefit for YouTube here was offering further promotion to content they know is already drawing a large number of views, which, by extension, draws in more advertisers and revenue.

Many creators however were unhappy with this, arguing that it allows YouTube to determine what sort of content should be seen and that those who could not, or did not want to join the YPP were instantly alienated, regardless of their popularity. In their work on attempting to understanding YouTube uploaders, Ding et al (2011), suggest that 'YouTube's recommendation system seems to be biased towards less popular uploaders.' (p. 363). It is difficult to agree with this idea and simultaneously view the YouTube business model as something that could work successfully.

The recommendation system put in place by YouTube needs to constantly push the most popular content, by the most popular creators, in order to generate advertising revenue. This is backed up by YouTube software engineer, Zern, (2011) who claims that 99% of the views YouTube receive is spread across just 30% of content. With a large number of creators now trying to find that balance between content that is popular and monetizable in a post-Adpocalyptic landscape, the percentage of content receiving the most views has actually narrowed somewhat. The uncertainty caused by the boycott has meant fewer, and less diverse forms of content that are now being seen on the trending rankings.

Advertisers have long been a part of the political economy of social media, and so for them to wish for a deeper involvement on YouTube is not a new idea. What the Adpocalypse has done, is to allow advertisers the opportunity to take greater controlling shares in their relationship with YouTube. For example, advert placement is now something advertisers have more say in. This has allowed them to benefit greatly from the labour of creators, and treat audiences more as commodities. Toffler (1980) posits that the line separating producers and consumers has become blurred (p. 267). Fuchs (2013) takes this notion of prosumption, and expands upon it as being 'social media that are based on targeted advertising sell prosumers as a commodity to advertising client.' (p. 33).

When speaking of the capitalist nature of advertisers and social media, Fuchs (2013) brings up the notion by Marx (1867) of relative surplus value production, which put simply, 'productivity is increased so that more commodities and more surplus value can be produced.' (p. 31). By working with the platform to put in place new, and what some consider, overly restrictive guidelines, the type of monetizable content is drastically reduced. This means in order for creators to maintain good levels of income, they must upload more regularly. This is further evidenced by the changes to the YouTube algorithms that promote consistent regularity of uploads, as opposed to the considered quality. This, in turn, offers the advertisers a wider scope of content in which adverts can be placed. There is also greater emphasis on targeted advertising. Adverts that will most often be targeted at specific audience demographics based on their collected user data. Fuchs (2013) backs this up by stating that, 'the more targeted advertisements there are, the more likely it is that a user will recognise ads and click on them' (p. 31). As a result, the political economy of YouTube will have completely changed.

This is often the case for free-to-use social media platforms. A perfect balance needs to be struck between the free labour of users and the relationship with advertisers. Van Dijck (2013) citing Clemons (2009) backs this up:

> social media's business models are a delicate harmonizing act between user's trust and owner's monetizing intentions. If users feel they are being manipulated or exploited, they simply quit the site, causing the platform to lose its most important asset. (p. 40)

Participation Culture

According to Jenkins (2006):

> a participatory culture is also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connections with one another (at least they care what other people think about what they have created) (p. 7)

Even as far back as the 1990's, the idea of the internet being a tool to aid the early advancement of audiences to participants was evident. Ross and Nightingale (2003) wrote of the number of fans and audiences who had 'moved over to cyberspace with enthusiasm, quickly realizing the medium's potential to share discussions, writings and ideas'. This could be considered a precursor to the web as we know it. Delwiche and Henderson (2013) add that:

> functions once monopolized by a handful of hierarchical institutions (e.g. newspapers, television stations, and universities) have been usurped by independent publishers, video-sharing sites, collaboratively sustained knowledge banks, and fan-generated entertainment (p. 1)

YouTube, much in the spirit of those audiences of the 1990's, embraces the notion of participation culture. It has cultivated an ever growing number of users whose constant uploading, discussing and sharing of content has meant the site has been able to thrive. Livingstone (2013) puts forward the notion of a participation paradigm, in which 'audiences are becoming more participatory, and participation is ever more mediated.' (p. 25). The line between audience and participant is a thin one. For many the simple act of an audience member clicking a 'like' or 'share' button is enough to class them as a participant. For others more is needed. Livingstone (2013) again argues:

> Where once, people moved in and out of their status as audiences, using media for specific purposes and then doing something else, being someone else, in our present age of continual immersion in media, we are continually and unavoidably audiences at the same time as being consumers, relatives, workers and, fascinating to many, citizens and publics. (p. 22)

This causes Livingstone (2013) citing Rosen (2006) to suggest that 'audiences are dead-long live the user' (p. 22). It could be suggested that once audiences would just view something, in this mediated society they are now more likely to interact

via a platform's 'like' button or comment section.This is a key core value of YouTube. Gauntlet (2011) suggests:

> [...] YouTube's huge popularity, and dominance in the online field, is due to its emphasis on establishing its framework as one which primarily supports a *community of participation* and *communication* amongst everyday users, rather than elite professionals. (p. 90)

Participation has long been engrained into the YouTube core values. Indeed, YouTube, until 2011, championed the slogan 'Broadcast Yourself' (2007). Changing from simply being a platform upon which people could store content, to one though which users could broadcast themselves in both senses of the term. They broadcast themselves, their lives and interests, while they simultaneously upload to the platform themselves. Thereby, they are cutting out the professional aspect of media production and distribution.

The very concept of participation invokes ideas of freedom. A point made by Livingstone (2013) that 'participation represents a positive freedom' (p. 25) and while that statement may have been true pre-Adpocalypse, there is an undercurrent across YouTube that suggests that may no longer be the case. The participatory freedom that was once so large a part of the YouTube framework has now been called into question.

Situating this Thesis

There has been much academic work on YouTube, audiences and participation, yet there has been little that looks at the three together in the way this thesis intends to. This study will hope to understand, firstly, what it means to be small stature creator on a platform that has, or is still undergoing, a major shift. By speaking to those directly involved at the ground level of participation, this thesis seeks to determine what the impacts of the boycott have been to them. By looking to determine whether or not the boycott has changed the way they go about content creation, we can aim to find out whether the nature of participation on YouTube has changed, and what this could potentially mean for the platforms future.

Secondly is to look at YouTube's audience. Again, by speaking to the audience community, the hope of this thesis is to discover a different perspective on the same event, and to discover how these events have potentially changed the nature of being a YouTube audience member. It is unclear as to whether the two are

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linked, but it not too far a leap to make that if the nature of the participants has changed, so too must the audiences.

Thirdly, by gaining a deeper insight into the potentially changing roles of participants and audience, through the processes of interviews, coding and analysis, this thesis will hopefully determine in some small way what this means for the future of the platform.

Methods and Methodology

For this case study, it is important to speak to those directly involved with the creation and viewing of YouTube content. The two chosen methods of study therefore are; Audience Research and Participation Action Research. These best allow for the opportunity to find, through a process of sampling, a cross section of people and afford them the opportunity to speak openly about their own direct experiences.

This is an important factor for having selected both methods, as while there have been many studies that use YouTube as a basis (Burgess and Green (2009); Van Dijck (2013)) there are few studies have that focused directly on those who interact with the platform, and those who watch or follow without comment. Even studies such as Ding et al (2011), who have looked at attempting to understand YouTube users, have done so from a data analysis point of view, rather than through a more qualitative method. Now, given the potential upheaval the boycott may have caused, it is more important to explore this as a case study, by building on Flyvbjerg (2001) to speak to those directly involved with the platform.

Participation Action Research

First Stage Action Research

Before conducting the first stage of any Participation Action Research it was important to address any researcher bias. Ladkin (2009) states that it is import to recognise and adhere to the 'commitment to rigorously question, examine and reduce one's own blindness to those biases' (p. 481). It is important to identify what these biases are, examine how they could influence any part of the

investigation, and seek to minimise any potential impact or influence they may have on the findings.

While it is impossible to completely eliminate all bias, by highlighting and bringing attention to it, the researcher is then able to greater shape the investigation, and become a more active participant rather than a passive investigator. By fully being able to embrace the cycles of investigation, interviews and reflections, it allows for a more detailed level of understanding that other methods may not ordinarily uncover.

Once the subject of internal biases has been addressed it was important then to focus upon any external sources of influence. This is more important in any case involving social media, as often audiences and researchers may not be fully aware of what these influences are, or how they can be effected by them. In this instance there is the necessity for this researcher to sign out of their personal YouTube account and disable any AdBlocker software. This removes the possibility of having previous viewing habits or subscriptions influence what is found during the first stage of research.

For this case study it was important to begin by gaining an understanding of the type of content that was considered most popular. This is so as to discover how the content is marketed to the audiences, by whom the content was uploaded and how many views it has received. This will help to determine if the brand boycott has affected the type and genre of content being produced or at the very least, that is being promoted by YouTube which, as a result, will receive higher viewing figures from audiences.

In order to ensure the findings were fair and accurate, it was important to approach the platform as if a first time viewer. Once the aforementioned steps to reduce biases have been implemented, the investigation could then turn to the YouTube homepage. As the home page is the first point of entry to YouTube for visitors to the site, it is where the platform itself focuses much of its influence in regards to content promotion. As such, much of what can be seen would be from perspective of what YouTube wants to promote, with little of it being influenced by audience viewing figures.

In order to gain a better understanding of what content the audiences are viewing, this investigation focused on the 'Trending Now' section of YouTube. Through here viewers will be able to see which content has been most viewed over the previous seven days, by whom it was uploaded and how many views it has received. During this, it was important to maintain detailed field notes that cover

the researchers own discoveries. These would be used to form the groundwork for the interview stages.

These field notes provided a number of interesting findings. For instance, 25 of the 50 videos that were trending for the week had been uploaded by the YouTube channels of major television networks (HBO, CNN), celebrities (Taylor Swift, Will Smith) or sporting leagues (Allsvenskan). While this was an unexpected finding, it was not entirely surprising. Content like this is more likely to reach the trending chats, as unlike channels with one creator, or one maintained by a small team. Major networks and celebrities are able to rely on whole teams dedicated to creating, editing and marketing their content.

What was most surprising however, was that once the 25 uploads by established networks and celebrities had been discounted from the findings[51] , the remaining 25 contained 11 videos that could be defined as vlogs. This was surprising, as while vloggers have always used YouTube, it has only been within the last two years that they have become such a ubiquitous element of the platform.

Second Stage Action Research

For the second stage of this case it was important to speak directly with those involved in the process of creating, producing and marketing content. This is so as in order to try to better understand, from their perspective, how the current YouTube landscape operates. This would also serve to see if they believe the brand boycott impacted how they go about creating content, or if there is something deeper behind the perceived shift on the platform.

Before any interviews could be conducted, it was first vitally important that a detailed sampling process was carried out.

The idea of going against random or cluster sampling was that the possible data collected was considered too vast, and as such not a true representation of the current YouTube landscape. So, narrower approach was needed. As a result, two subcultures of creators were chosen through a process of targeted sampling.

The first was gaming. This would include any form of content in which a video game was the main focus, such as game plays, reviews or tutorials. This genre was selected on the basis that gaming is considered the most popular form of content on the platform. Many of the 'YouTube Celebrities' of today began out on the

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[51] These were discounted, as while the findings were surprising, they were not part relevant to the overall project.

site as video game players. However, the popularity of gaming content has experienced a sharp decline over the last two years as the new guidelines have made it harder to earn revenue from this content.

This has resulted in many video gaming creators either changing platforms, such as the shift to Twitch, or continue to upload on YouTube, but run it alongside another genre of content, one which can be profitable, yet easy to make, with little extra time demands needed, while still maintaining their existing content.

The second subgenre was determined as a result of the surprising findings of the previous stage. Vlogs have seen a rapid increase in popularity. They are considered easier to produce, edit and market. As a result, a vlog creator can, and often will, upload several times a day. Vloggers, unlike gamers, are also not tied into certain content expectations. A vlogger can upload various videos showcasing their everyday lives, their holidays or hobbies. The main reason why vloggers make for an interesting sampling choice is that content creators of this particular genre, at face value, do not seem to value YouTube as a platform as much as other genre creators. YouTube appears as just a platform upon which they can facilitate the sharing of their lives to a wider degree, but often as part of a larger social media branding. Often vlogs feature a creator mentioning usernames of their other social media sites, such as Snapchat and Twitter, suggesting they are better for engagement.

As well as having to meet the requirements of creating the outlined content genres, other guidelines were set. Such as the length of time a creator had been uploading to YouTube having to exceed two years. This ensured they were present on the platform before the brand boycott. Another was the regularity at which they uploaded had to exceed two videos a week. Finally, the number of subscribers each participant had on their channel/s had to be above 1,000 and below 500,000. This second number was decided upon, by the researcher, on the basis that once a creator exceeds that number, their subscriber base is large enough to become a source of external income. As such it was important to decide upon a fixed bracket in which to source creators, as the focus of this project is on the experiences of the smaller creators.

The ages ranged between 21 and 30. There was no restrictions on the nationalities of the participants, or any relating to education level or field of work. A number of posts were made across various social media platforms, and into YouTube related forums that focused on the Malmö and Lund area, asking for interview participants. From this the required number of 10 participants were found, and eight interviews conducted.

Audience Research

While it was important to this case study that the voices of smaller creators be heard, it was just as important to focus on the voices of YouTube audiences. Audiences have always had a huge impact on the platform, more so it could be argued than on other media sites. However, this is something that is overlooked when studying YouTube, and so for whatever power they may hold, there is often little opportunity for them to voice themselves. This is more relevant now in the post-Adpocalypse landscape. Audiences are being appealed to on a greater scale than before, by creators who know their clicks now carry more weight. Despite this, audiences have rarely been given the opportunity to have their say on the brand boycott outside of YouTube comment threads and social media platforms.

The processes of recruiting audience members for interviews was different to that of creator recruitment. There was a greater degree of freedom in the sampling process, as there was no specific genre viewing requirements that had to be met. Only that the audience members engaged with the platform on a regular basis[52] and been doing so for a period greater than two years. This was so as to have a clear definition between an active audience member and passive viewer.

As with the creators, 10 participants were interviewed for this project, and were found using the method of snowball sampling. This was better suited for recruiting audience members as no two shared the exact same tastes in genres. There were many overlaps in the content they did enjoy, but also many differences which opened up a greater number of perspective interviewees. This allowed for a greater knowledge base on their behalf.

Ethics and Interviews

YouTube is a keen talking point for a lot of people, more so for those who are so deeply involved with it. It was important for the study that those taking part in interviews were allowed a greater degree of freedom to speak. For this to happen there was only minimal guidance from the researcher when necessary. As such all the interviews were conducted in an informal and semi-structured manner. This was most conducive for an environment in which the participants could speak openly and with honesty, allowing for a deeper level of qualitative empirical data.

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[52] Regular engagement in this instance involved regular viewing of more than 7 hours a week, and regular commenting and/or sharing of content (more than 4 times a week)

It was also important for a study of this nature that pilot interviews were conducted. While only a small number of questions differed between the two groups, one pilot interview for each group was still conducted. This allowed for an opportunity to try out the initial set of interview questions to determine if they allowed for the greatest amount of data to be found. It also allowed for the opportunity, should it be needed, to frame the questions differently, to make them more effective.

Before the conduction of any interviews all participants were given details of what the interview was being used for, an outline of the project and made aware of their right to withdraw from the process, with the immediate deletion of any data collected. They were each then asked to sign a consent form, containing details of the above, as well as guaranteeing anonymity.

After the completion of the interviews and transcriptions, the process of thematic coding was started. All the data that had been gathered thus far were broken in to three separate groups; field notes, creator interviews and audience interviews. They were then subjected to open coding over a period of several days, allowing for several cycles of action and reflection. This proved to be vital, as with every new coding cycle that was carried out, new data was being found that had previously been missed. Once the coding of the three separate groups had been completed all the lines of data were then combined, and placed into a number of broad categories. These were then analysed with the aim of discovering a number of narrower themes into which the broader categories could be assigned and the findings could be analysed.

Throughout the entire process of Participation Action Research, it is important to remember the advice of Ladkin (2009) who suggests the conduction of 'cycles of action and reflection' (p. 478).

Analysis

Power Relations: Adpocalypse and Conflict

If one were to look at many of the leading Web 2.0 era social media platforms, it would appear to be a very one sided relationship in which the platform itself has complete control, with users expected to understand their role and abide by the

guidelines put in place. Recent events with Facebook[53] have shown what can happen when power and control are abused, and while any ramifications from this, at least from the average Facebook users perspective, have been minor, it has highlighted the issue of power within social media. However, if one were to look deeper at the YouTube structure, they would see what is, in essence, four pillars that support the platform; Audience, Creators, Platform and Advertisers.

When one pillar tries to take a greater or lesser share of responsibility, the whole platform becomes uneven, requiring more from the remaining pillars to ensure an equilibrium. Depending on which viewpoint one takes, the Adpocalypse was the result of advertisers asserting a degree of power over the other three, and by doing so throwing the whole platform out of balance. The resulting confusion and chaos led to a major shift in the landscape, with advertisers taking advantage and asserting a greater degree of pressure onto YouTube, in order to achieve their aims. Van Dijck (2013) writes that '[...] platforms like YouTube epitomize the new concentration of capital and power' (p. 128).

This imbalance bought with it a number of conflicts, in which YouTube found itself caught in the middle. Creators argued that without them YouTube would not be the successful platform it had become, and that they were having their creativity held hostage by overly restrictive guidelines, which in turn was repressing their creative freedom, and was detrimental to the democratic environment YouTube encouraged:

> I saw one video in which the guy said the Adpocalypse, if it went as far as advertisers would have liked, then it would have turned YouTube from a democracy to more of a dictatorship, with creators being punished for not following a strict set of rules. (Audience. Interview Five)

Alongside this they were suggesting that the removal of advertising revenue was punishing the majority over the actions of the minority, and that YouTube needed to do more to protect the rights of the creators.

On the other side was the advertisers, who argued that the platforms' automatic algorithm had not done enough to prevent incidents, such as the placing of adverts in extremist videos from happening. As a result the algorithm had become unreliable in protecting the brands image. Furthermore, the brands argued that

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[53] The scandal revolved around users data being collected and sold, and from this users became subject of 'social media manipulation' that included pro-Donald Trump and pro-Brexit material. More information can be seen here... https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-you-need-to-know-about-facebook-cambridge-analytica/

the previous guidelines needed to be tightened in order to prevent repeated incidents in future. This is power as best described by Corner (2011) citing Lukes (1974; 2005) when they put forward the notion that 'power needs to be thought of in relation to the potentially positive, affirming, enabling idea of 'power to' as well as the dominative, negatively constraining idea of 'power over'.' (p. 17). The action taken by the advertisers could be considered an example of one exerting 'power over' another. The removal of adverts and the revenue they bring in, hurt not only YouTube, but the creators as well. As a result, the creators needed to find a way to reclaim their share of the power.

Smaller Creators and the Adpocalypse: Money vs. Creativity

For bigger creators, the most common avenue was to look to external sourcing sites. Patreon and Twitch saw a major increase in popularity during the boycott, as it allowed those seeking income to use their fan base. By extension it allowed the creators to bypass any restrictions put in place by the new YouTube guidelines. This is an example of the aforementioned 'power to', as it allows creators, of a certain subscriber level, to continue creating content that may otherwise lose its monetization status. This does come with its own set of problems. Across the interviews a number of creators and audience members did speak of the added pressure of working across multiple platforms:

> Gaming is hard to make money from now, so they have to think of new ways to make money. A few of them use Twitch, which is a good way to make money, but can be quite time consuming. They do two or three streams a week, on top of what they do on YouTube, and you can just see the effect the pressure to constantly be on the go has on them. (Gaming Creator. Interview Three)

> I used to watch a couple of YouTubers who would do Twitch streams as well, and during Twitch streams they would often just complain about the stress and pressure of having to upload enough on YouTube to get promoted in the rankings, and to compete with the easier to make content that YouTube was really pushing. (Audience. Interview One)

While using external fund sourcing sites ensures the money raised goes directly to the creator, it does not fully return the power back. Instead this places the YouTube audiences, knowingly or otherwise, in an interesting and unique

situation. By being the main source of income for many creators, it means the audience themselves have been granted an equal share of both 'power to' and 'power over'. Both of these elements result in the audience being granted access to a conversation they previously may have been excluded from. Many of the interview participants, from both sides of the camera, see this as a welcome, and necessary evolution:

> Before the Adpocalypse, at least to me, it felt that we were, not ignored, but that our input was not as valid. Not in a bad way you understand, just that we were not as important to the conversation. (Audience. Interview Two)

> I think it's important to engage with them. Especially if you want to grow. People like to be included, and that can only be a good thing. (Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

As the boycott showed little signs of slowing down it had become important that the platform was able to maintain a certain degree and equal share of 'power over', by working with the advertisers to ensure they are fairly represented, and that their brands are not associated with potentially damaging and harmful content. In return, the advertiser revenue that YouTube relies so heavily on, would continue to come in.

Conversely it had become essential to maintain an equal degree and share of 'power to' with the creators, empowering them to continue creating popular and profitable content. If YouTube were to stray too far to one side over another, they risk alienating a large part of their business model, and the knock on affect would undeniably hit YouTube the hardest.

For those small to mid-level creators, seeking revenue from other sources was not a viable option. Instead they were left with having to adapt or change their content to fit in with the new guidelines, or accept the possibility of making non-profitable content until they were able to source income through external sites, in-video sponsorships[54] or even the sale of merchandise:

> A lot of them [creators] like me kept doing the stuff we did pre-Adpocalypse, but set up another, more advertiser friendly channel to try and keep some flow of money coming in. (Gaming Creator. Interview One)

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[54] Different from ad revenue. In-video sponsors are from companies that target specific content creators, regardless of content genre, to promote their products within their videos.

I've completely given up trying to make money from YouTube now. They've really cracked down on what could and could not make advertising money. As someone who not only plays games, but age restricted games, […] I have no chance. So I just stopped trying (Gaming Creator. Interview Three)

Conflict Over Content

As more established creators attempted to strike a balance and find their place in the new landscape, the uncertainty and confusion surrounding the boycott had paved the way for many new creators and different forms of content to raise up the ranking chats. As such, content such as vlogs and reaction videos were rapidly replacing the more long-standing popular form of content.

This is backed up by both the initial and deeper findings of the field notes:

This is interesting, as vlogs make up a greater share of trending videos than both reaction and gaming, and also how few established YouTubers are currently trending. (Field notes)

Interesting to see that the 2 most popular videos are from vloggers, one of which (KSI) is most famously known for being a gaming YouTuber until a couple of years ago. Also interesting to see that the remaining 3 videos are all from creators with less than a million subscribers, yet also fit under the banner of vlogs. (Field notes)

The popularity of vlogs was also something that had been picked up by the audience and creators interviewed:

I think vlogs are a really popular type of content. People seem really interested in other people's lives (Gaming Creator. Interview Two)

I'm seeing a lot more videos that you could class as vlogs than say, two years ago. (Audience. Interview Three)

Vlogs have also long been a YouTube staple, yet it was not until to the restrictions put in place by the boycott and guidelines fully took hold, that this genre was able to fill the gaps. The reasons for this are many and varied. The new algorithm put

in place promoted quantity of uploads, as opposed to content that could be considered of a higher quality. Therefore, a creator who uploaded three or four times a week, as many of the vloggers interviewed for this project do, it would automatically give them a boost in the YouTube rankings. Much more so over a creator, such as the gamers interviewed, who given the nature of what they do, were unable to compete. Instead only being able to upload once or twice a week:

> We upload a few times a week, maybe four or five. That seems like a lot, but we don't need to do a whole lot of editing […] we can just film, edit and upload. (Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

> We do about three a week […] A lot of ourselves is just done in front of the computer, so it isn't difficult to make. (Vlog Creator. Interview Five)

Another reason for the rapid success of vlogs, is that they are a flexible content. A vlogger can, and often does, upload on a range of topics, from food, hobbies, travel, advice and even more specific videos such as a house tours. This makes them more personal to the viewer. An entry point into the life of someone who, to many, are celebrities of the online community. When PewDiePie makes a 10 minute video[55] on how to make meatballs[56], it gives some indication as to, not only how simple a vlog can be to produce, or how simple a topic has to be, but the sort of attention it can garner. While PewDiePie is at the top end of the spectrum and far removed from the level of creators interviewed for this project, it does serve as an indicator as to the sort of topics and viewing numbers on offer.

With the potential to make money from something as seemingly simple as recording vlogs, many creators turned to this form of content to take advantage of the possibilities. This immediately created a number of problems for both creators and viewers, as with a large number of creators now uploading so many videos a week, it became harder to make one video stand out over another. This led a large number of creators to adopt more extreme methods to ensure their content was more appealing, and therefore pushed higher up the rankings. Van Dijck (2013) argues that 'Rankings such as 'Most Viewed' and 'Most Popular' are prone to manipulation' (p. 125), something that is more possible now through the use of a number of common tactics used on social media. For example,

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[55] 10 minutes is the minimum length of time a video has to be for a creator, who is part of the YouTube Partnership Programme, to include adverts on their content. As a result many creators, especially vloggers, will upload videos that just break over the 10 minute mark

[56] The video can be viewed here. Viewing figures correct at time of writing: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4awKvTfgKfU

thumbnail images featuring large red rings or arrows. These have been given the name 'Red Herrings', and are used to suggest something that needs to been seen closer. Another is the use of video tags, or search engine optimisations (SEO) that often have nothing to do with the video itself, but will cause them to appear in wider searches.

However, the most ubiquitous form of audience manipulation across YouTube, social media and even mainstream news sites is click baiting. The act of using a provocative, or deliberately misleading title has become an ideal tactic for many creators. As YouTube measures the number of clicks a video gets, rather than the length of time watched, a creator could afford to employ these manipulation tactics. Knowing that even if a viewer switched away a few seconds through, the click was registered as a view. This, and similar methods, quickly became unpopular amongst both creators, who felt it was disrespectful, and audiences who had grown tired of being deceived into watching content:

> You have to be pretty desperate to use click bait and stuff. (Creator. Interview Two)

> [...] it just makes me angry to see how little respect these people have for the viewers by completely misleading them. (Creator. Interview Three)

> I actually unsubscribed from a lot of YouTubers when their click baiting got too much. (Audience. Interview Two)

> It's impossible these days to go on YouTube, and not be confronted with hundreds of videos with click bait titles. I see a lot of vloggers use that sort of thing, but if I was to film myself talking about what I ate that day, I'd be doing whatever it took to get people watching. (Audience. Interview Four)

These methods are still in use today, post-Adpocalypse, as evidenced through the field notes taken in the first stage of action research:

> Of the 5 [top trending uploads] only one didn't use a clickbait title and was the only one not to include any adverts. The two most clickbait titles come from small creators (in terms of subscriber base) and each feature a large number of adverts during their videos considering their length. (Field notes)

The reasoning for using such methods, beyond that of simply obtaining clicks, could pertain to the idea that creators hope to generate the idea of what Hill

(2015) describes as a ''did you see that' moment' in which creators aim to 'grab audience attention and generate social media gossip.' (p. 69). For this to happen, a creator may often have to blur the boundaries of what Goffman (1956) coined as front and back stage self, in which creators may not be putting forward the reality of events in their videos. All of this is in an effort to produce content that will get viewers clicking, sharing and ultimately returning to the creators channel.

However, sometimes this can be taken too far. The now ubiquitous appearance of such audience manipulation methods, coupled with those in which creators have been caught out staging events for dramatic effect[57] have harmed the delicate trust relationship between creators and audiences . As a result, the act of the minority has had long lasting damaging effects for the majority. Dahlgren (2013) writes that for a democracy to function a 'minimum degree of trust in society are necessary and assuming they are appropriate, can certainly enhance the quality of life.' but also warns that 'excessive trust is unsuitable'. (p.113), and this is no different on YouTube. A minimum trust is required on the part of audience towards creator, between creators and platform, platform and advertisers and vice versa between all.

The boycott has seen what has happened when trust becomes excessive, and now a fragile balance has to be struck in which clearer definitions of the two forms of trust, put forward by Dahlgren (2013) citing Putnam (2000:136) can be found:

> 'Thick' trust, based on established personal relationships, and 'thin' trust, the generalized honesty and expectations of reciprocity that we accord people we don't know personally, but with whom we feel we can have a satisfactory exchange. (p. 112)

However, this sort of trust can be hard to recognise, especially given both the fast paced nature of digital media and how it has to be shared amongst and within the four pillars.

Knowledge and Awareness

One way in which the trust can be slowly rebuilt is through knowledge. For many who visit YouTube occasionally, it can appear as nothing more than people talking

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[57] Content Creators such as Sam Pepper, Tara Mongeau and Jack Jones are just three of the biggest creators caught out as staging events to gain views.

at a camera to an unseen audience. However, the reality of the matter is very different, and a lot more in-depth than many might expect. In order to become a successful creator, one needs a deep level of knowledge. Much of which is underlying and unspoken. At a base level this knowledge revolves around more technical and start up issues experienced by all creators at one point or another, such as the best camera equipment, editing software or production values, if any of which are considered lacking, it places a new creator on the outside by both creators and audiences.

By extension then, to become a successful creator one would also require deeper knowledge of things such as YouTube etiquette and YouTube politics. One of the more interesting findings from the interview and coding, was the number of creators whose knowledge in this area is lacking. When asked about their understanding of the Adpocalypse and the new guidelines, creators, especially vloggers, were unable to go into great detail about their understanding:

> I have no idea, they are just the things we keep getting asked to read and agree too, but I never read them. Who actually does that? (Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

> What are they? Haha. I have no idea, I'm sorry. (Vlog Creator. Interview Four)

> That was that Adpocalypse thing, wasn't it? […] I don't know what they are now, but the whole issue seems to be over. (Vlog Creator. Interview Five)

Those who confessed to having very little knowledge all identified as vloggers, whereas those with the most knowledge of the boycott were the gamers, presumably because they had been hit hardest. This lack of knowledge could be seen one of two ways. First is simply that vlogs were not hit by the same monetization issues as other genres, and so may not have needed to pay deeper attention to the guidelines or their changes. The second is that for some YouTube is part of a more diverse social media portfolio:

> I use them all. […] so it is all part of the same 'brand' I guess […] I think social media is such a huge part of life now that you need to be involved in all of it, especially if you do what we do. (Vlog Creator. Interview Two)

For many, YouTube had always been the main outlet for them and their work. Now however it seems a polymedia approach has seen YouTube become one of many platforms from which creators operate. The suggestion that for many

YouTube is not something they truly invest themselves in must be considered a contributing factor to the idea of a changing landscape. As this generates further conflict between creators of different genres, each with different ideas on what and how YouTube should be used for, it too must lead to further and wide sweeping changes to the platform.

Audience Empowerment: Post-Adpocalypse

The role of the audience has changed considerably over the course of the brand boycott. While the relation between creators and audiences has always involved a strong degree of give and take. Creators used to be in a position whereby they could afford to ignore a large part of audience interaction and forgo a degree of engagement. This was made possible by the freedom at which creators could operate relatively unrestricted.

Now however, the requirements needed to generate revenue has meant a stronger reliance on clicks, and more importantly, the audiences to be responsible for them. The new guidelines require a channel to have reached, and then to maintain, a certain number of views within a certain time frame, and while we have already discussed the methods creators go to in order to earn those clicks, it is now time to turn our attention to the audiences behind them.

Audiences have always been able to hold a certain degree of power when it comes to media. This power has usually resided in the ability to switch channel or turn off. In recent years that audience power has evolved to the ability to vote for a particular outcome, as seen in reality shows. Now however, the modern audience is an online one, and as such their power has evolved further.

During the brand boycott, the YouTube audience were very much relegated to the sidelines, watching on as creator after creator reported on how the boycott affected them personally. Yet when the new guidelines were introduced, the audiences very quickly learnt that if creators wanted to make money, they had to earn it more. Some creators in their efforts went too far in their endeavours, and ended up turning audiences against them:

> There was that one YouTuber, a British guy, a YouTube 'prankster' which was basically his excuse for being a sex pest and an arsehole. He went too far with a couple of his 'pranks' and in the end the viewers, even his own fans, had enough, and those that didn't immediately unsubscribe from his channel, left really negative comments. Eventually they drove him from the platform. I think he's

back now, and does regular vlogs, but he's not nearly as popular as he once was. (Audience. Interview Seven)

This is just one example from the audience interviews in which an example of audience power post-Adpocalypse was exercised. It is undoubtedly a more extreme example, but it does show how far audiences are willing to go in order to make their feelings known. More commonly though, audiences are quite happy to simply register their thoughts and opinions through the use of the 'thumbs up/down' feature, or through the comments. While in almost all contexts, creators actively encourage comments, with a key phrase mentioned in almost every YouTube video; 'Let me know what you think in the comments below'. This does open up the creator to the full fury of the audience:

I don't have a problem telling a YouTuber I think they're shit. Even if it's someone I'm a fan of. You make me waste 10 minutes of my life watching your shitty 'try not to laugh challenge #17' I'm going to tell you what I think. In detail. (Audience. Interview Eight)

I tend to just leave a thumbs up on the stuff I like, but I'll leave a comment on the stuff I don't like. I think that has more impact, as I can express why I didn't like it, and maybe someone will read it and agree with me. (Audience. Interview Six)

This rather goes against the idea put forth by Ross and Nightingale (2003) when they adopt Jenkins' (2002:13) example of fan cultures as being 'dialogic not disruptive, affective rather than ideological, and collaborative rather than confrontational.' (p.148) though this was written on the subject of fans, as opposed to the vaguer concept of audiences, it could be argued that the two terms are very much intertwined with a digital audience. As a result, YouTube audiences now feel more empowered to become more confrontational if they feel they are not being given the required level of entertainment. This is not a new idea, but we now live in an age in which social media can carry so much more weight. It has become more important in this 'entertain me, now' age, that an instant return can be given by those unsatisfied.

The power of the comments cannot be understated. While it is easy, and indeed sometimes smarter, to ignore the block of text beneath each video, they do serve a grand purpose. Reagle Jr (2015) writes:

the *intentions* and *effects* of comments are important. A comment can affect another's standing, it can help others make a decision, or it can alter a person's behaviour (for example providing feedback about someone's actions). (p.17)

It is this last point that is playing a much larger role on YouTube. The weight a singular comment carries can mean a huge difference to a creator and the way they think and act in relation to their content. The power, then, of several thousand comments, can really have an impact on the career of a creator. More so when considering a surprising number of creators rarely watched any form of content that was dissimilar to their own. Whereas the audience members interviewed seemed to be open to a wider range of content, affording them a deeper level of knowledge. The large majority of creators use this to their advantage, taking the feedback of the audiences, and using them to enhance and better their content:

> They actually have a big part in shaping my channel, in what I do, and I think that is really important. (Creator, Interview Seven)

There are still a few instances in which a creator who has fallen foul of disenfranchised audiences, will disable comments and ratings, yet this will often do little to curtail any negativity. Instead this may serve only as a warning to other viewers that this particular piece of content is, at the very least, questionable, and driving audiences to other platforms to register their distaste towards the creator.

The deeper takeaway from this may be that the power has always been there for the audience, but it just took an event such as the boycott for them to realise it. There is now a large degree of negotiation that takes place between creators and audiences. Creators are more open and accepting of feedback, positive and negative, and as a result this feeds back into the content they create.

YouTube vs. Mainstream Media

Over the course of the interviews, both creators and audience members hinted at the notion that the relationship between YouTube and mainstream media has also contributed to the changing landscape of the platform. While it was only mentioned in passing throughout the interviews, it did correlate with the findings of the first stage of action research. Initially these findings had been discounted from the case study, yet throughout the interviews it became clearer that these findings could not be ignored:

> I see a lot of stuff that isn't really grounded on YouTube, like a lot of American chat show stuff, Ellen, Jimmy Fallon, that sort of thing. (Gaming Creator. Interview Three)

> I notice a lot more of the big British and American chat shows being promoted. I like them so I don't mind, but I can see why people might think they are taking space away from main YouTubers. (Audience. Interview Seven)

Of the 50 videos that were considered trending at the time, the first stage of research found that half comprised of official clips from various sports leagues, official channels of celebrities, and overwhelmingly clips from chat shows belonging to major television networks:

> Also surprising, but not shocking, is the amount of major television networks making up this list. It shows how much they have embraced YouTube and it audiences. […] Of these 50 videos, 25 (major networks, music labels, sports, politics and celebrity channel) will be discounted from the study, as they do not come from YouTube content creators, instead they are videos that have been released or broadcast elsewhere, and then placed on YouTube. (Field Notes)

This trend has also not gone unnoticed to media academics. Van Dijck (2013) suggests that platforms like YouTube would:

> [...[] not be half as effective if they had not also progressively aligned with the mechanisms of 'old media' such as television. YouTube in particular has made serious inroads on television's mass audience. (p. 129)

This would suggest that the choice to align with more mainstream media was actively taken by YouTube. While that may have been true pre-Adpocalypse, nowadays it feels very much as if the decision is more one sided, with YouTube increasingly having to give more ground to accommodate the demands.

While the clips often found are small segments, interviews or opening monologues, as opposed to full shows, it still showcases that the networks responsible for producing these types of shows see the potential of YouTube for reaching a wider, more international audience. This also provides a greater opportunity for audience engagement with the show and other fans. It also shows that these networks see the potential of making money through YouTube, as the number of advertisers they can receive revenue from widen. All content is subjected to the same rules and guidelines, regardless of the stature of the

uploader. This means that clips from the channel of a major network show like *Ellen* (27 million subscriber) is treated in the same manner as clips from vlogger *Cody Ko* (970k subscribers).

It is not uncommon to find that within moments of the latest episode of *Ellen* or *The Late, Late Show with James Corden* having finished airing, clips from the show will be posted onto YouTube, quickly finding themselves in the 'Most Viewed' lists. This could be put down to three key elements; shareability, regularity and commerciality.

 The first is that this form of content lends itself ideally to what Burgess and Green (2013) would class as having 'higher potential for spreadability' (p.196). It is content that is designed to be shared, talked about and to go viral. To make that ''did you see that' moment' (Hill, 2015:69). Burgess and Green (2013) say that entertainment industries put in place:

> technical and strategic considerations that ensure content is made available in forms that audiences will most likely find useful and approaches for understanding what motivates audiences to circulate content. (p.196/7)

This is manifested in what Burgess and Green (2013) later refer to as being the five key requirements for spreadability (p. 197) of content. The idea that spreadability is something that can be manufactured is not a new concept. For years, reality television and talent shows have been playing on this concept. Every moment from *Big Brother* or *Britain's Got Talent* that has gone viral, has done so because producers have been able to manipulate and manufacture content to fit the five key requirements. Content for YouTube is no different.

Second is regularity. Given the aforementioned shows and others like them, air on average five times a week, with an episode often lasting an hour, and complied of a number of segments, the number of potential clips that can come from them will far outweigh anything realistically achievable by a 15-year-old vlogger, or a 30-year-old gamer. As a result, this content will be given greater promotion in the platforms algorithm.

Thirdly, commerciality. It could be suggested that it is in YouTube's best interest that content produced by the likes of *NBC* or *TBS* is seen more than that of the participants interviewed. By promoting their content, it will appease the major networks. This in turn, will lead them to continue to post their content. YouTube benefit from this, as they have a reliable source of monetizable content. The advertisers benefit from this, knowing the content will not only fit with their

expectations of advertiser-friendly content, but that each video will receive millions of views. Thus generating more potential income for them.

The triangle is completed by the long standing relationship between the advertisers and mainstream media. As many brands will already have an established relationship with these networks, they are more willing to place adverts across the platform again, and those brands that do not advertise directly during the actual broadcasts, will know the content meets their standard for advertising on YouTube. This builds a commercially viable relationship between platform, network and advertisers, ensuring a steady stream of revenue continues to flow to and between them all.

All of these factors then, tie in with the suggestion of Van Dijck (2013) that:

> Google wielded technologies, governance, and business models to shape new forms of sociality and connectivity and, in the process, established a new paradigm for communication traffic. Indeed, YouTube and its owner, Google, will gain more control over users' online video-sharing experiences by giving amateur videographers less exposure, funnelling viewers towards fewer choices, and shepherding them towards TV-like channels (p.131)

Indeed, while this may not be seen as a direct concern by those participants interviewed, there are a growing number of creators who have noticed this new shift towards more mainstream content. Long-standing creators such as *Philip DeFranco* and *PewDiePie* have both made a number of videos that have suggested the Adpocalypse was drawn out and made worse by a number of brands seeking to exploit the situation for gain. Going further to suggest it was the intention to hurt both YouTube and parent company, Google, in the process. In one video, PewDiePie, who has long been targeted as the reason for the Adpocalypse by mainstream press[58] suggested that:

> Companies are companies, they are not moral beings. They pulled out advertisements, not for the sake of being manipulated by the media, or having some sort of bigger moral idea about it. A lot of advertisers pulled out just so they could hurt Google in the process. (YouTube, 2018)

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[58] The *WSJ* suggested the Adpocalypse was bought about as a result of this: https://www.wsj.com/articles/disney-severs-ties-with-youtube-star-pewdiepie-after-anti-semitic-posts-1487034533

Throughout the video, Felix points out that companies pulling their adverts from YouTube, did so because they were invested in, or in the case of Verizon, owned a direct competitor to Google:

> Verizon own Yahoo […] They can basically negotiate for better pricing, along with TV networks using this as an opportunity to hopefully pull more ads back to TV, which they have been losing out on for so long. (YouTube, 2018)

This has led to a culture of 'Us' vs 'Them' in which Van Dijck (2013) suggests 'original YouTubers started to refer to themselves as 'us', while the 'them' designated the commercial YouTube channels deployed by media corporations.' (p.116) and the gap between the two has widened as a result of the boycott. While there has always been an element of 'us' and 'them' on YouTube, it has generally been between the more established content creators. Those who know how the platform works, and who helped set up the unspoken guidelines. The 'them' being the newer creators. Those that see YouTube simply as a money making platform, or those that have come from other social media platforms, such as Vine[59], and as such were not versed in the etiquette established by the former.

This long-standing tension between the two parties has always existed, but for a short term at least, the brand boycott did serve to bring the two disparate groups together. And so maybe the biggest battle on YouTube is not between the individual creators, or between genres such as vloggers and gamers, or even for that matter between the creators as a whole against YouTube. It seems the real battle for the future of YouTube is set to be between the UGC and PGC, with the platform once again caught in the middle.

Conclusion

On the 3rd of April 2018, Nasim Aghdam, a creator who operated a number of channels covering art, music and veganism entered the YouTube headquarters in San Bruno, California, and opened fire on a number of YouTube employees, severely wounding three, before turning the gun on herself[60]. The event was

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[59] Vine was a short-form video sharing site that ran from 2012 to 2017, on which users could create and upload comedy clips lasting no more than 6 seconds. Once the platform shut down, many of its users made the move to YouTube, often making vlogs. Former Viners include the Paul Brothers. Two of YouTube's most popular, but controversial creators.

[60] The full story can be read here: Https://www.bbc.com/news/amp/world-us-canada-43638221

discovered to be the culmination of an 18-month campaign, in which Aghdam had accused YouTube of deliberately attempting to minimise her viewership, by negatively filtering her content, and as a result limiting and reducing the amount of revenue her content could make. She blamed the changes in guidelines which would not allow her to make profit from her videos highlighting animal cruelty and promoting veganism, and after posting a number of videos[61] regarding this, she eventually took the most extreme measures.

The event, while tragic and isolated, served to reignite the boycott discourse. For many the Adpocalypse was over, and had been for some time. Advertisers had returned and the creators and audiences were quickly adapting to their new surroundings. For many others however, the Adpocalypse was over in name only. For them the impact of the boycott was still being felt, and many creators and audiences spoke of feeling alienated from a platform for which they had laboured to help grow. The events of that April day became a catalyst for many to highlight that the effects were still being felt, and that YouTube was in the process of abandoning creative freedom in favour of profits[62].

As a result, the seeds of division were once again being sown, with creators now turning against fellow creators. Two key camps were quickly established. One side arguing that these new guidelines were negatively shaping the platform, and to adapt content around them was to abandon the core principles around which YouTube was built. The other side countered that the platform had grown as much as it could have, and that something like this was inevitable if the platform ever hoped to expand.

This raised a key question. One which, despite the data being collected and analysed before the event in California, was hinted at during the interview and coding process. The very notion that the platform had reached as high as it could under its own terms is a controversial one. The suggestion leads to the idea that the Adpocaypse was not a one off event instigated by a freak glitch in the algorithm, but rather an evolutionary step, necessary for the platform to grow.

Which returns us to the overall research question: how have the new YouTube advertiser friendly guidelines shaped creator participation and audience engagement? To determine if that question has been answered, it is important to

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[61] YouTube has since removed all of her channels, and any videos of Aghdam that have appeared on other channels.

[62] While a number of videos were available about this at the time of writing, they have since been taken down, with the creators citing the new guidelines restriction on uploading content surrounding tragedies.

recap over three key points. First, is to discover whether or not the new guidelines have had any impact on the shaping of the YouTube landscape. The answer to that, quite simply, is yes. The findings from every stage of this process do support this.

The second point is to what extent have these guidelines shaped participation and engagement, and the answer to this a little harder to get. It is clear to see that the guidelines have shaped what is produced and how it is viewed, so in that regard the way these guidelines have shaped the platform is large. Yet there are very few complaints from the majority of users. Many, even those who have been heavily impacted, continue to upload the content they, and their fans enjoy. In that respect, the answer would suggest that the guidelines have actually had little impact in shaping participation for the majority.

For the audiences, it would seem as though the opposite has taken place. The changes in guidelines appear to have contributed to a major reshaping of audience engagement. This was most evidenced during the interviews, in which both parties recognised that the channels of dialogue were now more open than before. This was acknowledged by both sides as being a benefit to content shaping, sharing and engagement.

While there are still those creators who seek to manipulate audiences in pursuit of financial gain, audiences are now wiser to these tactics, and now feel more empowered to counter them when, in their eyes, a creator goes beyond a reasonable level. Overall, it would appear that of all the parties involved, it has been audiences that have benefited most.

The third point is perhaps the most difficult to answer; that of what the future holds. While the rest of the platform seems keen to move forward, there are still a dedicated number who wish to raise greater awareness for what this means for the future. The stronger relationship between creators and audiences is one thing, but it is the relationship between platform and advertisers that has them concerned. The evidence gathered across this case study has found that the platform appears to be placing a greater emphasis on both marketable and more mainstream content. However, there has also been evidence gathered to counter this. The fact that creators are still able to exercise a large amount of control in the creation, production and marketing of content, suggests that YouTube is still the creative outlet many seek. For them, the extra money that is now being generated can only be a benefit for the platform, and those involved.

However, it is still worth keeping an eye towards the future. A delicate balance has been struck, and while things are progressing forward, its fragility must be

noted. The actions taken by Aghdam may have bought forward a degree of tension, but the conversations now taking place seem to be less heated than before. All parties being painfully aware of how little it could take to undo.

As mentioned at the opening of this thesis, YouTube is a ubiquitous aspect of contemporary society. It would be difficult to think of a world now in which almost every kind of content could not be accessed at the click of a button. It has an ever growing and dedicated user base, who seek to create, view and share content that is, above all else, enjoyable, regardless of the financial aspects of creation. So while the boycott and guideline changes have impacted on the platform, and markedly changed the landscape, for many this is just the next step for YouTube, and one that was a long time in coming.

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You are what you eat online

Mediated eating practices and their underlying moral regimes in Sweden

Christine Sandal

Introduction: We are what we eat

> 'Tell me what kind of food you eat, and I will tell you what kind of man [or woman] you are.'
>
> Brillat-Savarin (1825)

What we eat determines who we are. Quite literally, through bodily ingestion, but also mentally through cultural values and rules attached to the food we ingest, making foodstuff far more than a means for satisfying biological needs (Poulain 2017: 155; Eder 1999: 15f.). Rather, what we eat becomes part of a 'food culture', a symbolic language to communicate with (Tellström 2015: 9). Consequently, we make statements with our food – both unconsciously, through our everyday eating habits which are very much guided by customs and routines, and consciously, like when we choose a diet – about who we are, which communities we belong to and which morals we stand for. Throughout human history sharing food has thus not only meant sharing the food itself, but has also been one of the most immediate ways of expressing culture and exchanging meanings (Eder 1999: 103f.; Tellström 2015: 280).

Today too, we share our experiences with food. However, in contemporary Western societies, where everyday experiences have become entanglements of physical and mediated spaces, statements are increasingly made in mediated forms (Silverstone 2007: 5f., 13). The public interest in food as a topic of leisure, entertainment, health and politics has been growing since the 1980s, which, also not surprisingly, means food has become a staple of modern media, especially on TV and the internet (Johnston & Baumann 2010: xviii; Warde 2016: 1). While

traditional food media, like gourmet magazines or TV cooking shows continue to thrive, social media has provided new spaces to satisfy food interests (Rousseau 2012: xiif.). Lay people with a genuine food interest regarding cooking and eating, as well as an interest in voicing their food opinions, are called foodies (Johnston & Baumann 2010: xviii, 61). For foodies the innumerable new online spaces – like online recipe sites, Instagram pictures of meals, food blogs and YouTube videos – provide opportunities for making mediated food statements, which in turn, tell something about who the foodie is or wants to be. Such statements are deserving of scholarly attention, in order to understand the mechanisms of contemporary, mediated food cultures. Another significant concern is that because eating is such a basic ingredient to life, food-rules and values affect us all in very fundamental and bodily ways and moreover entail consequences for the environment and humans' as well as animals' quality of life. In order to explore mechanisms of food culture, this thesis investigates the concrete case of 'What I eat in a day'[63] vlogs on YouTube. The specific 'What I eat in a day' format seems to have emerged organically, both in text-picture-form on blogs and Instagram, but especially in vlog-form on YouTube, where the format has been growing in such a way that it has become a genre in itself.[64] However, no genre comes into being in isolation and the 'What I eat in a day' vlogs show traces of both reality TV (like 'everyday' and 'real people' aspects) and lifestyle TV (for instance TV cooking shows' camera work). More explicitly the 'What I eat in a day' vloggers showcase their eating habits by filming how they prepare and usually eat their meals of the day, meanwhile talking about anything from cooking instructions or their diets to their lives in general. Thereby, the vloggers, as foodies, not only present food, but a whole way of life, built on specific lifestyle-diets which, according to Tellström (2015: 198) are chosen actively with the intent to represent who one is or strives to turn into. It has become expected in contemporary Western societies that each person makes her or his own diet choices based on, for example personal ethics or scientific nutrition models, rather than communal eating traditions or religious rules (Higman 2012: 207). Such

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[63] The vlog format (a merging of video and blog) usually means one person is talking about her or his life into a camera or films experiences directly (which has become a lot easier with smartphone cameras). Thereby a filmed kind of diary is created for which new entries are aired in any periodical frequency the vlogger sees as appropriate (Abrudan & Chiţea 2017: 58ff.; Berryman & Kavka 2017: 310).

[64] The popularity and up-to-dateness of the "What I eat in a day" format can be exemplified by the fact that a search on YouTube on the 25th April 2018 gave 27.400.000 (international) video results, while the search interest on Google for the term "What I eat in a day" has shown an upwards trend over the last decade. For an early example of a "What I eat in a day" vlog on YouTube from 2010 see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o2iOW2FhaRs.

choices induce increased personal responsibility, implying individual obligation both towards one's own body (fitting into current body ideals, keeping fit and healthy) and wider societal issues like environmental impact or animal welfare. In Western contexts, people are forced to think and make choices in order to confirm their individuality, nonetheless, this does not mean that there are no underlying structures guiding our choices – for instance one such structure is that people are constantly forced to make decisions in order to be individualistic (see Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002). That is to say, on the one hand, socio-cultural context and structures impacts which eating practices are seen as appropriate. On the other hand, many everyday activities, such as eating, become so habitual that they're performed without a lot of thinking, embedding individual choices in societal structures and everyday routines (Warde 2016: 6).

Such structures are guided by underlying systems of rules and values, which in this study will be called *regimes*. The term is loosely inspired by the Foucaultian (2004) take on regimes as definers of what comes to be perceived as the 'truth', the taken for granted state of things, which leads to a pervasive power guiding what ought to be seen as 'right' or 'wrong' and which creates an unspoken set of rules. Such guidelines will henceforth be referred to as *moral imperatives.* In accordance with Immanuel Kant's thinking, moral imperatives are defined as internal feelings, creating a consciousness, which directs a person's actions and results in guilty or shameful feelings should they be violated (Sullivan 2009). Moral guidelines do not only have to concern questions regarding justice or responsibility towards other people, but can also be about individual conceptions of what makes the world and one's own life desirable and 'good' (Jansson 2001: 128f.).[65] Consequently, diet choices as well as food styles can be perceived as morally right or wrong, depending on the regime which guides a person's diet choices.

Most existing food research, however, neglects such underlying value systems and places the individual food relation above the socio cultural aspects. Therefore, this study will be positioned within the field of food culture and focus on food vlogs as lifestyle media (re)presentation of online eating practices. More concretely, practice theory will be merged with structuralist and cultural perspectives. These can be said to have different, even oppositional outlooks on the world, regarding their focus on structures, agency and the role of texts (Inglis 2012; Lorimer 2005; Warde 2016). However, the new phenomenon of mediated eating practices can

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[65] While moral beliefs are moulded by individual social circumstances and everyday experiences, they are also grounded in socio cultural values and customs (Jansson 2001: 128f.). Thus, media too, have come to form a crucial construction site for moral creeds (Silverstone 2007: 7).

best be understood by attuning all of the named aspects, as the boundaries between text and practice are getting blurred, when actual eating practices are simultaneously turned into 'What I eat in a day' representations.

Accordingly, the aim of this thesis is, firstly, to attain a social understanding of the cultural phenomenon of mediated everyday food practices, and secondly, to gain insight into underlying regimes which govern such practices. By investigating food cultures' dynamics, furthermore, light can be shed on wider mechanisms of reproduction and renewal in societies characterised by mediation processes. In order to achieve these aims Swedish 'What I eat in a day' vlogs as lifestyle media, will serve as a case study, exemplifying one instance of contemporary mediated eating practices. Apart from giving access to mediated eating performances, the vlogs also, through the comment sections, make it possible to investigate how underlying regimes are approached and negotiated by vloggers and followers in cooperation. To this end the following questions will be asked:

1. How can the phenomenon of 'What I eat in a day' vlogs on YouTube be understood in relation to scenic, narrative and visual aspects?

2. How are these vlogs used (by vloggers and followers) in negotiating, appropriating and fixating lifestyle-diet beliefs as morally 'right'? And in which ways do these beliefs, expressed in the vlogs, reflect symbolic value systems (regimes) regarding food and eating practices in contemporary Sweden?

Theoretical framework: Positioning online eating practices

A socio cultural approach towards food and eating

Even if there is a growing field of food studies today in academia, most existing food research appropriates a nutrition oriented view, which neglects underlying value systems and places the individual food relation above the equally important socio cultural aspects (Poulain 2017: 128; Tellström 2015: 10, 43f.; Warde 2016: 1-16, 58). In the 1930s Norbert Elias (1978) was one of the first to research food as part of the own culture, while, later on, Barthes (2008), Lévi-Strauss (1990) and Douglas (1972; 1997) all adopted structuralist perspectives when focusing on meaning and language in search for invisible patterns underlying food systems and eating habits. During the last decades the rising popularity of food images has emphasised aesthetics and pleasure over a functional, nutritional discourse (Lewis

2008: 57f.). Aestheticisation can be regarded as a kind of language with its emphasis on visuals, or symbolic value over function. As Featherstone (2007: 66ff.) points out, aesthetic preferences are not given, but constructed by the time and space in which they arise. Highmore (2011: xff.) furthermore suggests that aesthetics found within the everyday – like a nice meal – affect subjective experiences emotionally, but also connect the individual (either through affirmation or guilt tripping) to the bigger social realm and its values. Thus, lifestyles presented in media are not trivial, nor are they neutral, but part of defining which kind of self is encouraged and normalised within a culture (Raisborough 2011: 46).

In addition to the need for socio cultural research, there is also a need to de-individualise (diet) lifestyle choices. For instance, Jack Goody (1982) or Pierre Bourdieu (2010) balance how much influence is given to either structure or agency when they show how food cultures and eating practices define relations between social groups. Just like Bourdieu in his research allows for personal agency while, through his notion of habitus also implies people have their society's structure 'programmed' into their bodies, the early 'practice theory' approach in the 1970s tried to neither take a too individual or too holistic approach (Postill 2010: 1ff.; Warde 2016: 32). Furthermore, the so called 'practical turn' around the millennium shift resulted in a second wave of practice theory, which, led on by Theodore R. Schatzki, included more focus on the human body as well as cultural and historical aspects (Postill 2010: 4). The early practice theory was thereby critiqued by showing how routines change when new guidelines emerge (Warde 2016: 138). Another critical response called for a cultural turn and emphasis on lifestyle, identity and cultural choices, or more generally put, on representations and discourses, at the expanse of the everydayness of consumption, as well as social structures' impacts on supposedly individual choices (Warde 2016: 4, 28ff). Warde can in this context be named as one of the few recent works that explore activities around food by using practice theory.

Food and eating in the media

While the 'What I eat in a day' vlogs bear some resemblances to researched genres of food and mass media – like cookbooks (Appadurai's 1988), TV cooking shows (Ketchum 2005) or food reality TV (Viviani 2013) – the vlog is also distinct as it is produced by amateurs, who, opposed to reality TV participants, are in control of how they become represented. The aspects which the vlog borrows from reality TV, however, are that genre's diary form and public confessions, as well as its

focus on the banal, with actual locations and people performing themselves. All these aspects provide a sense of authenticity, which plays a big role in reality TV's appeal, as it seemingly gives access to the backstage of who someone 'really' is (Berryman & Kavka 2017: 311; Hill 2014: 159f.). This, moreover, turns reality TV into a mediated (and somewhat more extreme) form of the 'everyday role playing' everyone always does (Hill 2014: 52). These notions lean on Goffman's (1956) concept of the 'presentation of the self', and how everyone, through *impression management*, tries to appear at their very best in order to fit in and be accepted. Thereby the self becomes presented on a *front stage*, while less favourable aspects are kept hidden in the *backstage*. Especially since webcams have become more common everyone can produce his or her own reality TV and broadcast it online, making reality TV more of an attitude than a genre, which can take place anywhere (Hill 2014: 141ff., 160), such as in a vlog.

Moreover, media, as part of society and not detached from it, plays a big part in the construction of people's social and cultural realities (Featherstone 2007: xv). Especially so called lifestyle media contribute to the construction of ideals about how a life ought to be lived (Featherstone 2007: 19; Raisborough 2011: 5). Lifestyle media thus also adopt a moral, fostering aspect. Like Skeggs (2005: 976f.) or Littler (2011: 28ff.) show, middle class values are enforced in various media and become markers of distinction. Regarding food culture, lifestyle media hence partakes in (re)presenting what should be seen as good taste and provides guidelines, for example, on how to choose the appropriate diet (Poulain 2017: 60; Tellström 2015: 176, 246).

Blogs and vlogs too, can be counted to the genre of lifestyle media. Also, although similar to other lifestyle media, like magazines or TV, blogs enable interaction. Vlogs even take that one step further, in their capacity as a 'televisual and interactive medium'. This particular combination tends to deepen emotional bonds between vloggers and followers (Berryman & Kavka 2017: 310ff.). Such interactivity is, furthermore, part of web 2.0's participatory culture, in which theoretically everyone can create content, share it and thereby build communities in which the audiences become 'co-creators' or 'prod-users'[66] – a dynamic which may even initiate social change (Drakopoulou & Gandini 2017: 5; Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013; Olsson & Svensson 2012: 46).

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[66] Of course there are also many lurkers who are not interested in commenting or interacting, but they may still be called followers, as they nonetheless become part of a community and the values it stands for (Lundby 2014: 31).

One of the first to connect web 2.0's social media with food was Rousseau (2012). Until then, food and social media are, once again, mostly investigated through the lens of the nutritional value of online recommendations (Missbach et al. 2015) or health issues and body control (e.g. Depper & Howe 2017; Tiggemann & Slater 2017). Similarly, studies concerning food and YouTube are dominated by either a focus on eating disorders (e.g. Holmes 2017; Pereira, Quinn & Morales 2016) or weight loss (Basch et al. 2017). All these different approaches, however, suggest that a high degree of reflexivity around food is taking place.

Diving deeper into lifestyle and taste advisers

There are different norms regarding eating, which people get their food-values from and attach their practices to. As Bourdieu (2010: 169) states, people's tastes get expressed both materially and symbolically through their lifestyles. Hence, choosing the 'right' lifestyle has become an important quest and lifestyle media is one source which offers advice in order to make those 'right' decisions, which will supposedly change the self into something better and give social status (Featherstone 2007: xv, 19). The same applies to diet choices, which, especially because of the large amount of accessible food to choose from, become markers of distinction (Poulain 2017: 45; Warde 2016: 26). However, an overly focus on self-betterment through lifestyle choices hides structural issues (Eriksson 2015: 35). Even in Sweden, which tends to be seen as a very equal country regarding class and gender, different socio-economic backgrounds affect lifestyle preferences on various levels (Oskarson 2008: 125-131). A distinction which is further fueled by media (Jakobsson & Stiernstedt 2018; Eriksson 2015).

Lifestyle media gives advices and recommendations on new consumer trends and their appropriation for the construction of one's own lifestyle (Featherstone 2007: 19). The people involved in such promotion, like lifestyle media vloggers, can be called in Bourdieu's (2010: 323) terms, *cultural intermediaries.* According to him, cultural intermediaries would be people who produce cultural content for (mass)media, like TV or radio. Consequently, they were not the original producers of the cultural topics in question, but presenters (intermediaries) conveying them to an audience (ibid.: 324).

However, as Lewis (2008: 9; 2010: 580) points out, in a contemporary context, the cultural intermediaries have rather become comparable to lifestyle-experts, who base their cultural authority as presenters of 'good taste and style', in everyday experiences. Additionally, as Baym and Burnett's (2009: 1, 23f.) research illustrates, within web 2.0, amateur expertise is not only based in everyday, but

moreover in personal experiences, making it possible for potentially anyone to generate and spread expertise. Consequently, vloggers, too, can be seen as cultural intermediaries, not only in Bourdieu's sense as presenters, but as actual creators *and* mediators of cultural values.[67] Nevertheless, even if everyone can potentially be a cultural intermediary there are differences regarding how much weight opinions are ascribed and how far they get spread. As in every field, people fight for and occupy different positions within the field, while yet agreeing on the underlying values. This struggle results in a strict hierarchy of interdependent positions (Bourdieu 1992: 127ff., 214; 2005: 37). Regarding lifestyle experts, these may gain a high position by either having the authority of being 'one step ahead' regarding taste or by having become famous through media (Lewis 2008: 9).

While Bourdieu's concepts originally are class-bounded, the logics of his field theory can be adjusted to be used as a tool for investigating, for example, the journalistic field (Schultz 2008), the field of fashion (Rocamora & Smelik 2016), or indeed the *field of food vlogs*. Through such an application, field theory can moreover, not only be used to examine how specific fields function, but can also contribute to a more general understanding of field mechanisms (Bourdieu 1992: 127) – which in turn can tell us something about how cultural production and symbolic power work in society.

Methodology and methods: Approaching the case of 'what I eat in a day' vlogs

One way of looking at food vlogs is through the methodological lens of practice theory. Practices can be seen as individual performances, yet also as embedded in structures, like customs and routines, which partly put the practitioners on 'auto pilot' (Postill 2010: 1ff.; Warde 2016: 32). In order to investigate these structures, aspects from structuralist perspectives need to be added, which entail that there are underlying systems of cultural meanings and rules, which navigate people through their lives (Warde 2016: 26; Poulain 2017: 124). For instance, in this view, food as a language, conveys codes which mirror bigger societal patterns (Douglas 1972: 61). However, in accordance with practice theory's methodology, such structures shall not be viewed as all-determining. Rather, the individual

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[67] Even if the term "influencer" might also come to mind in this context, an influencer is more directly connected to brand promotion and advertisement (Berryman & Kavka 2017: 307).

performance is also recognised, by adding aspects of cultural perspectives, the methodology of which assumes that humans as cultural beings constantly are engaged in cultural meaning making (Du Gay 2013: xvff.). Such cultural production, for example, takes place when eating practices are turned into representations by being posted on YouTube. Thus, even if the methodological view-points of these three perspectives are not in agreement, new phenomena, such as mediated eating practices, may benefit from new combinations of perspectives. As Fay (1996: 223f., 238) points out, the choice of perspectives does not have to imply an either or situation. Instead, a merging of perspectives can prove to be constructive and complementing, as it creates new frames, or ways of seeing.

However, I'm of course not saying that I, as a researcher, am somehow aloft and outside of society, able to see invisible structures no one else sees. Rather, I'm embedded in socio cultural frames just as much as everyone else. But as Bourdieu (2010:4) points out, even if everyone is embedded in the inescapable 'game of culture' through the use of theories [and methods] it becomes possible to glimpse the mechanisms of how this 'game' works.

How to examine online eating practices

Regarding the concrete procedure, the first step was the decision to only use Swedish 'What I eat in a day' vlogs as a case study. This delimitation was made in order to ensure an adequate contextualisation of the vlogs, which would enable the investigation of changing eating practices within the frames of a specific culture.[68] Furthermore, the aim was not to investigate the individual vlogger, but underlying, shared mechanisms. Subsequently, an extensive search on YouTube was conducted in order to make sure the whole panoply of different Swedish vlogs was found, including less popular videos. While some vloggers may have been missed, the search was stopped when the same vlogs repeatedly turned up in different searches and the vlogs' content started to resemble each other, indicating saturation. Out of the resultant 56 vloggers a strategic sample of 16 vloggers, with 28 vlog-videos amongst them, was selected by creating vlogger-profiles. These profiles allowed comparison and the detection of distinct examples and thereby ensured a diverse array of lifestyle-diets. The time span from January 2016 to

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[68] Of course YouTube is international and Swedish vloggers and followers will not limit themselves to Swedish vlogs. However, the other way round, only people speaking Swedish can take part of the Swedish vlogs. (Vlogger Sv3rige is the only one to speak in English in my sample).

February 2018, was selected to ensure up-to-dateness, while also providing enough time for comment accumulation.

The empirical material was then coded. Firstly, by the use of a small narrative analysis, as people's most basic way of making sense of the world is narrating experiences as coherent stories (Bazeley 2013: 201ff.; Plummer 2001: 185). Secondly, loosely led by Rose's (2016: 56-81) guide for compositional interpretation, the visuals, which besides the sayings and doings are another major part of the vlogs, were coded. Visuals, as Plummer (2001: 59ff.) points out, have become a central part of how people document their lives. Especially in the case of online eating the imagery becomes important, as it's the main access to the virtual food, deprived of taste and smell. Finally, not only the vlog-texts needed to be investigated, but also the comment sections, as the vlogs derive part of their meanings from the interaction with followers. As Hall (2013: xxviff.) points out, it is in 'shared cultural spaces' that meaning and reality are produced amongst senders and receivers through the use of a mutual language. Thus, all 28 vlogs' comment sections were coded (on average 270 comments per vlog).

After all the empirical material had been gathered, openly coded and sorted into preliminary categories, the findings were analysed, resulting in the themes 'The performance' (both as a literal performance and as an instance of a practice) and 'Regimes' (underlying guidelines arising out of moral imperatives).

Performing food

Narrating food practices

For a vlog to work, it needs to follow vlog-logics of 'communicative performances', which direct the vlog to foremost become a vlogger's self-presentation, and only secondary a conveyor of content (Nørgaard Kristensen & Christensen's 2017: 241). 'What I eat in a day' vlogs, consequently, are not merely about communicating food, but also become performances of lifestyles, which become meaningful by being put into the form of day-narrations.

Concretely, the first act of the performance is staging the morning and the breakfast. The day then takes its course, all vloggers pursuing different activities, yet all displaying a similar structuring of the day through lunch, dinner and some snacks. Such a day-narration shows there is a basic, collective routine of eating times, the internalisation of which gets further confirmed by the vloggers' need to

justify themselves if they should violate the routine: 'Now it's one o'clock so this is actually totally wrong […] but I've been up all night yesterday so it gets wrong now, but I'll pretend it's morning, ok?' (Kristian Taljeblad 2017; 01:10).[69] Without this breakfast-catch-up the 'What I eat in a day' narration would be incomplete. But outweighing that, eating at the 'wrong' time means de-attaching personal eating habits from collective meal patterns (Warde 2016: 71). This also shows how socially constructed patterns of meal-times have come to feel 'natural' and necessary and get followed out of habit.

Depending, not only on when, but also on where and with whom, very different food-occasions arise (Warde 2016: 61). For instance, vlogger Emil, when alone, eats at his desk while working, but with his girlfriend the dinner eaten at the dinner table with lit candlesticks becomes symbolic, communicating romance and presence (Wilma & Emil 2016; 02:46). What the actual meal consists of is also crucial. Vlogger Sv3rige's (2016; 02:50) habit, for example, of eating a piece of raw meat whenever he feels hungry, is not what most contemporary Western people would call a meal. As Douglas (1972: 67ff.) states, certain structures need to be followed in order for a meal to legitimately be called so.

Moreover, by (mostly) presenting their cooking and diets embedded in recognisable patterns of eating-times, eating-manners and food-preparations the vloggers make any 'new' elements in their diets seem less alienating. For example, if a traditionally typical Swedish breakfast could be oatmeal porridge, the vloggers might latch on to this by enhancing the porridge with toppings or by exchanging the oat for buckwheat. By imitating existing structures new dishes thus get more acceptable, fitting into a recognisable food language (Poulain 2016: 156) and thereby are guided through, what Tellström (2015: 96f.) so aptly terms, *food limbo*. Consequently, behaviours and actions are molded and facilitated by structures, while these structures simultaneously are created by people's activities (Shove, Pantzar & Watson 2012: 3). Which, in turn is what fabricates the dynamics of culture.

This also illustrates how humans, while liking structures which give security, at the same time are curious and wish for new experiences (Jansson 2001: 124). In regard to new food, Poulain (2016: 71f.) bases such ambivalence on humans' biological urge to eat diversely while simultaneously facing the need to keep the eating habits in accordance with prevailing cultural agreements of what is edible. Thus, even if new food always starts in limbo, it will become categorised as either

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[69] All vlog quotes, except for those from vlogger Sv3rige, who uses English, have been translated from Swedish by the author.

edible or not edible within a community (Tellström 2015: 97f.,169). When vlogger Therese Lindgren (2016b; 02:05) expresses that, 'I had no idea of how to prepare it [gnocchi] or how it tastes or how you eat it in the first place. But the way I did it turned out to be really yummy', she takes a new food item and guides it out of food limbo.[70] However, such an individual assessment still needs to get legitimised. In this regard, the comment sections serve to reflect whether a vlogger's classification gets accepted. For instance, one follower comments: 'I tested this gnocchi lunch and it was very, very good!' (Therese Lindgren 2016b).

Vloggers thus contribute to make individual changes spread wider, but only if they do not deviate too far from established practices.

Visually performing food practices

For a successful vlog-performance of the meals of the day, besides a narration, visuality is of immense importance. This is especially so, as Western societies have come to mainly rely on sight when interacting with the world (Rose 2016: 3).

As Bourdieu (2010: 70) states, a lifestyle is also represented through the looks of the home and the way a person dresses. Thus, the home and vlogger's personal appearance can be said to provide a 'scene' for the food-vlog performance. Especially the vloggers' outer appearance can be used consciously as a narrative device: for instance, a bathrobe indicating morning (Wilma & Emil 2016; 00:05) or heavier make-up accentuating the dinner as a more important food occasion (2GETHER 2017; 11:05). Moreover, the outer appearance, together with the interior design of the home, helps to establish a *lifestyle package,* for instance by matching clothes with the environment of the home, like Gabriella Joss' (2017; 01:50) clothes which are as colourless as her apartment or Anna Maja Astrid's (2017; 01:18) more bohemian home and dressing style.

Apart from the aesthetic backdrop for the visual performance the visuality of the food itself is crucial. The preparation and cooking process is similar to TV cooking shows, for instance with pre-chopped ingredients, various machines, or the vloggers explaining each step like TV chefs. After preparation, the food is set up for eating. In this context, especially the plate acts as a scene, or as a 'cultural food space' (Tellström 2015: 22). The plates steer the focus towards the food, putting a kind of halo around it or intensifying its colours. Usually the food is carefully

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[70] With gnocchi being an Italian food, this also shows how food limbo is not only influenced by the newness of dishes, but also by different cultural tastes.

placed in eye-pleasing arrangements on the plate, like vlogger Green Warrior's (2018) sweet potato chilli which gives an overall impression of harmony and cleanliness.

Figure 1:
Green Warrior (2018; 01:29) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0vlLgXgbNCc

Figure 2:
Sara Nygren (2017; 05:30) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z7uIZY9y-DI

Contrary to that, vlogger Sara Nygren's (2017) banana-peanutbutter-snack is less carefully arranged and instead calls forth associations of aesthetic discordance and

loss of control. Such feelings, according to Douglas (1997), are mainly evoked when disorder emerges. Even at a micro level disorder uncomfortably disrupts the illusion of an ordered and stable world. However, by for example arranging the food pleasingly, control can be gained over it and a sense of being in charge reconquered. Visual mastery becomes particularly crucial in connection to mediated food, as the consumption of 'imagised food' out of necessity is non-material. Thereby visual food consumption becomes dependent on an attractive surface, which needs to hide any 'messy materiality' (Lavis 2015: 1ff.).

Finally, the last step is eating. Often there are extreme close-ups on the finished dish when the vlogger is about to eat, once more leaning on the visual language of cooking shows. Followers' comments become a good indication whether the vlogger has managed to create a visually appetising representation of a dish, the highest accolade being when the food looks so tasty, that in order to get the whole experience a follower re-cooks it and thereby converts virtual into material food:

'Really, I saw your afternoon smoothie, I thought 'hell I want one of those too'. I went to the store, made my smoothie and continued watching the video!' (Therese Lindgren 2016a; follower comment)

Some vloggers do not eat their meal in front of the camera or just take a first bite, especially when eating with other people (while those who do eat, eat very carefully). This indicates that the act of eating may be too intimate for some to show in its full extent on their front stage, or that it would destroy the picture they perform of tidy, aesthetic surfaces, once more conjuring resemblance to cooking shows.

During the visual performance, there's an overall, reoccurring pattern of a scale balancing aesthetics and authenticity. Everyday authenticity and being 'like everybody else', connects the vloggers with their followers, who even come to see them as 'friends' (Therese Lindgren 2016b; follower comment). But at the same time the vloggers need to show that they have style and know about taste by aestheticising their everyday lives, making everything from kitchen, clothes, body shapes, food preparation and serving the dishes, to eating manners fit together in order to become someone to follow in the first place. However, if this is taken too far and becomes too TV-like, the vlog might be rejected: 'Looks like a tv program, I don't like that' (Therese Lindgren 2016b; follower comment). Or the followers may challenge the authenticity of what the vlogger is showing: 'Well, don't believe that people who do these videos and eat 'healthy' […] eat like that all the time' (2GETHER 2017; follower comment). Thus, in general, while the vloggers need to present an aestheticised and stylised front stage on which they perform their

lifestyle-diets, they also, true to the reality TV genre, need to show at least some parts of their backstages, which the next section will deal with.

Backstage

As the word in itself indicates, a 'performance' is a staged activity. Still, where there is a front stage there is a backstage too, where individuals hide what is not shown during a performance. Through such impression management people want to ensure they come across in the best possible way (Goffman 1956: 27, 69f.). However, according to Hill (2014: 70) a distinction can also be made between the actual backstage [in the case of the vloggers the off-camera realm] and a 'middle region', which is positioned between the actual backstage and the front stage. In the middle region a person chooses to reveal certain things in order give insight into the 'real' self. This is a common strategy in reality TV, as it creates a sense of authenticity, shining through the acted performance. A vlog too, works in that way. It invites people to watch other people in the intimate[71] surroundings of their homes, experiencing the ordinariness of the everyday while expressing their thoughts (Wesch 2009: 21). The 'What I eat in a day' vlogs moreover create this intimacy through food. As Higman (2011: 149) points out, the ultimate show of inclusion is to offer others something to eat in a private space. The vloggers, of course, do not physically offer food to their followers, but form a new way of visually 'eating together'. Yet, as seen in the previous chapters, all vloggers narrate their days carefully and try to perform themselves, their lives and food in visually aesthetic ways. Consequently, even the most intimate-seeming scenes are *staged backstages*.

Looking at the staged backstage through the process of filming

As people are aware of each other's' impression management, everyone tries to spot inconsistencies which allow glimpses into the 'true' self of somebody (Goffmann 1990: 18ff.). However, as the vloggers can check for these inconsistencies themselves, not only during the performance, but also in post-production, they leave very little opportunity for their communities to discover their 'real' backstages. Simultaneously, or maybe to make up for this, the vloggers do not aim at hiding the fact that the scenes are staged, which, paradoxically, gives

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[71] In Western societies the clear separation of the private home from the public sphere has been the rule (Thompson 2001: 152).

the impression of backstage access. For instance, vlogger Adam Larson (2016; 0:20) exemplifies this, when he comes into the kitchen with bed-messy hair, saying:

> 'Well it's bloody obvious with YouTubers, well like when I do things like this, then one knows that they have […] actually put on the cameras before they come in, sort of'

While Adam Larson seems confused by the practice of staging, such make-belief is necessary for any narration to work, even if both storyteller and audience know that what is shown is not reality. As Bignell (2002: 132) points out there are expectations of how a depicted, fictional world needs to work in order to create plausible and authentic realism, so called 'generic verisimilitude'. This in turn determines whether people will perceive a performance as the 'real' world they know from their everyday lives (Gledhill & Ball 2013: 356). So even if Adam Larson could be seen to destroy the realism of his story by talking about the filming process, in another sense exactly that creates realism – the followers expect the vlogger to use a camera in order to narrate everyday experiences.

The performance of 'being a vlogger' also becomes evident when filming equipment is detectable or when the filming process itself becomes visible, for instance if the camera, held in the hand, gets in the way: 'It's hard doing this [frying minced meat] single handed I can tell you' (Wilma & Emil 2016; 04:21). Such glimpses into the backstage of filming also strengthen the feeling for vloggers and followers of sharing a mutual space. Mediated social interaction is of course not superimposable with an actual physical place (Thompson 2001: 108). And for the vlogger the presence of the followers is time-delayed. Not until the ready vlog has been uploaded to YouTube, interaction becomes a possibility. Therefore, as Wesch (2009: 24f.) states, during the filming process the vlogger's spoken words come to resemble an inner monologue, recorded in the safety of the home, encouraging intimate revelations. At the same time, not knowing who the audience[72] will be can create a feeling of awkwardness. Vlogger Sara Nygren (2017; 13:45) for instance shows some feelings of both awkwardness and intimacy:

> 'I'll continue doing videos in vlog format, because I feel more comfortable with that, than just sitting down and tarting myself up. And like you see, I really look

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[72] Although it has to be noted here, that some vloggers, especially those with faithful followers or an established community, probably have some sense of who they are addressing.

a mess, but it feels like less pressure and a little more relatable, well one doesn't get so far away from those watching'

Approaches towards boundaries

While a diary is usually a space in which people confide their most inner secrets, a vlog, as a public kind of diary, intended to be shared, only gets entrusted with certain intimate matters. This aspect of the vlog furthermore picks up on the 'confessional culture' which has emerged from reality TV (Berryman & Kavka 2017: 311). Confessions or revelations made by a vlogger are one way of giving insight into (chosen) parts of the 'true' self. For example, vlogger Estonian Sisters (2018; 03:40) confesses: 'After breakfast […] I don't know why, but I always take something sweet'. Nevertheless, talking to a camera, with the knowledge that the finished vlog can potentially be seen by the whole world, makes a person self-reflective as to who one is and which image one wants to convey (Wesch 2009: 21). Estonian Sisters could have chosen to not show and tell her habit of eating sweets after breakfast, but by doing so, she stages her confession and conveys to her followers that she is a 'normal' person without inhuman self-constraint.

Yet, even if staged, the confessions do also give unintended glimpses into the 'real' backstage, as they hint at values and rules the vlogger is (unconsciously) attached to. As Seale (2002: 169) puts it, confessions become a way of defining what is morally acceptable. And eating choices, for instance, are confirming people's beliefs regarding food (Tellström 2015: 57). Thereby, confessions partake in staking out boundaries of what is to be regarded as 'good' food within different lifestyle-diets. For example, by confessing what she perceives as unhealthy snacking behaviour, vlogger Therese Lindgren (2016a; 08:00) reveals what is acceptable within her diet:

> 'There's someone here in my block who makes french fries […] and I like, oh my God, I just need to have french fries […] And do you know what I'll do? I'll make some of these [french fry squares from her freezer] and sit here and eat. […] Not a particularly healthy snack, but I'm so tempted. Honestly, damn neighbours.'

Therese Lindgren here uses her neighbours as pretext for breaking her own rules, which shows her need to excuse herself, which in turn indicates a codex of rules she feels bound to. Where the lines of edible and nonedible are drawn, however, is varying widely. While sugar and fries are categorised as bad by Therese Lindgren

(2016b; 02:50), vlogger Rawveganse (2016; 04:05) classifies raw vegetables with a persimmon-purée as: 'really, this is such damn junk food'.

Moreover, even if one disagrees with certain, omnipresent unwritten eating rules, one needs to take a stand on them. For example, vlogger 2GETHER (2017; 04:50, 10:40) expresses her annoyance with people who exclusively eat healthy food and thereby miss living a 'good life'. At the same time, she feels a need to convey that she, too, is healthy sometimes and thereby still does obey predominant eating rules: 'Then some days, I might just eat a salad […] Well it totally depends'. This indicates that, while individual interpretations and rule-systems are theoretically possible, cultural negotiations, based on a shared language of how to 'read' the world, are a strong force as they connect the individual to the community (Jansson 2001:91ff.).

Part of confessing, is of course also, that someone listens and judges the revealed (Foucault 1990:61). Here the vlogs go a step further than confessions in reality TV, insofar as the vlogs allow the followers to comment. By judging eating practices shown in the vlogs, followers partake in staking out the borders of what to eat, especially when different diets clash. When followers themselves confess own, bad eating habits, they furthermore acknowledge the vloggers interpretation of what to eat and in a way contribute to fixate those rules: 'And here am I, making coco-balls …fun 😄 <3' (Therese Lindgren 2017; follower comment).

Thus, the followers' comments, judgments and own confessions partake in approving or disapproving vloggers' food choices and contribute to turn the vlog into an intimate, yet interactive public-diary-space, in which boundaries of 'right' food choices get negotiated. Moreover, simply by being acknowledged, the rules are to some extent legitimised. Through what is *not* said underlying rule-systems, which will be looked at as regimes in the next chapter, can be glanced.

Underlying food regimes

Regime 1: Style and status

By presenting a lifestyle package which visually present an aesthetic self, home and food vloggers implicitly provide moral pointers towards what they perceive as the 'right' style and taste. One such underlying moral guideline is that visual appearance is of uttermost importance for keeping up an image of perfect taste, even more so, ironically, than actual, sensual taste. For instance, vlogger Therese

Lindgren (2016b; 02:50) puts in time and effort to make an aesthetically mouthwatering dish of watermelon and blueberries, both regarding the arrangement, colours and filming, finishing off the preparation with a tempting close-up. However, then she says: 'The watermelon tasted shit, but I forced down that half anyway'. This very clearly illustrates how the tangible taste comes secondary as Therese Lindgren (just like her followers) was left with a visual treat only. The underlying moral obligation to ensure visual tastefulness is always present, even when it is disobeyed, like vlogger Rawveganse (2018; 10:15) illustrates when stating that her buckwheat porridge 'is not exactly the prettiest food, but it's so incredibly delicious'.

In the field of food vlogs the underlying values everyone agrees on, accordingly is that it matters greatly not only what a person eats, but also how visually aesthetic a diet is. And while the concept of foodies encourages and theoretically makes it acceptable for everyone to express their food opinions, some of the tastes enjoy higher status (Johnston & Baumann 2010: xvff.). Which criteria decide whether food looks aesthetic, however, have at some point been socially constructed (Johnston & Baumann 2010: 207). Accordingly, people may want to be advised by experts or cultural intermediaries presenting what is currently regarded as good taste (Bourdieu 2010: 323). Vloggers can be such cultural intermediaries, who detect (for example through media) or create new lifestyle-diets, appropriate them into their own everyday and then, in turn, pass them on, in a personalised and therefore trustworthy version.

However, being able to have 'good' taste is not seldom influenced heavily by life-circumstances, such as having the means and the time to live out food interests (Johnston & Baumann 2010: xvff.). For instance, meals made from scratch have become a status symbol in a time of easily available manufactured meals, as it requires money as well as time. Yet, additionally the meal needs to be home cooked because the cook chose to do so, not because circumstances made it necessary (Willén 2012: 106ff.). The same dish, accordingly, can position a vlogger differently on the field, depending on motivation, combined with the aesthetic outcome. Vloggers Herbivore Stories and Estonian Sisters both cook a one-pot-pasta from scratch.

Figure 3:
Herbivore Stories (2016a; 01:20 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsQSAXkM_0M

Figure 4:
Estonian Sisters (2018; 11:31) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-bvad0Z_Cak

But while Herbivore Stories motivation for choosing this dish is based on being a 'lazy vegan' (Herbivore Stories 2016a; video description), indicating the cooking is everything but a burden, vlogger Estonian Sisters (2018; 00:50) explains that the budget is a bit tight after Christmas. This makes the latter dish ambivalent, as it simultaneously claims to be part of the foodie discourse as a 'What I eat in a day' performance, yet was cooked out of necessity. Moreover, while both vloggers

choose to present their pots in the making, the visual outcome looks very dissimilar. The first pasta communicates taste, style and skill, while the second indicates a lack thereof and almost comes to feel like a mimicry of a 'What I eat in a day' vlog. This typically happens when people with lower positions on the field, imitate those higher up and therefore become too self-aware in their role as cultural intermediaries (Bourdieu 2010: 324, 339).

Other vloggers feel much more at ease in their role, indicating a high position on the field. For example, vlogger Ida Warg (2016; 01:30) talks about how she simply needs to 'listen' to her body in order to know what she ought to eat, illustrating how her field position has provided her with the confidence of 'knowing' about food and taste. Self-evidently, each performance of a practice still takes place as a singular incident. But the execution itself is performed by people having come to 'know' what is appropriate, without having to think (Warde 2016: 57ff., 76ff.).

Moreover, through the struggle for high positions on the field a strict, yet unspoken hierarchy of interdependent positions takes form with similar positions forming groups (Bourdieu 1992: 129; 2005: 37). For example, the confident, more professional cultural intermediaries form their own group, within which they legitimise each other's status as food-lifestyle experts:

> 'Vlogger Anna Maja Astrid: You rock! I […] have consumed all your [Ida Warg's] food diaries in one go! Thanks for the inspiration […]
>
> Vlogger Ida Warg: Thanks darling and happy you dropped by :) <3' (Ida Warg 2017; comment section)

Also, by offering guidelines to follow, those highly positioned in a field, show off their position and right to be taste-makers. Yet, simultaneously, they indicate anyone could rise in the field and become like them by adapting the 'right' – namely their – interpretation of lifestyle (Lewis 2008: 9f.; Bourdieu 2010: 324, 370). For instance, vloggers Herbivore Stories (2016b; 00:00-01:00) suggest that it is possible for everyone to imitate their lifestyle when they say:

> 'Viktor: Many think in order to be vegan one needs to be privileged, […] because who has the money for all these expensive products? But in that case one comes from a faulty train of thoughts which is to [… replace] animal products with the identical vegetarian version […]
>
> Lisa: It becomes cheap if one cooks what one eats from scratch […]'

However, Herbivore Stories here, even by downplaying it, show off their high position. Firstly, they do so by assuming everyone has the time and skill to replace any ready-made with home-cooked food and secondly, by taking for granted that their followers will want their advice. As follows, the vloggers positions also depend on how their followers receive them. Because, as Bourdieu (2010: 4f., 11f.) points out, groups on a field compete against each other in order to make their own world-view the predominant one. If there were no followers, the vloggers as cultural intermediaries would have no one to convey any cultural opinions to. Nevertheless, the vloggers constantly need to defend and update their positions and food vlogs in order to keep their followers. Because newcomers to a field may try to push through their views and change the field and its hierarchies (Bourdieu 1992: 127, 214). For instance, vlogger 2GETHER (2017) states in her comment section: 'I find that others, who do such videos, show a pretty skewed picture of what one 'ought' to eat and I feel that it's important that people such as me can do these kinds of videos, too'.

Nevertheless, just demanding to want to be taken serious, does not result in a high position on a field. Rather, authority, like a good nose for taste or some kind of famousness are necessary (Lewis 2008:9). Accordingly, it is advantageous if a vlogger is a *micro-celebrity*, who actively creates and maintains a mediated version of the self, with which to attract and keep an audience [followers], by providing them with continuous content and interaction (Marwick & Boyd 2010: 121f., Marwick 2015: 333). Additionally, to occupying varying degrees of micro-celebrity-ness the 'What I eat in a day' vloggers are also *ordinary experts* as their authority is rooted in everyday experiences. This combination leads to a new kind of cultural intermediaries.

One aspect which makes this mixture possible are the reality-TV elements, discussed earlier, which produce an emotional bond and a sense of authenticity (Hill 2014: 159f.). Additionally, these feelings are enhanced by the immediacy of moving pictures, letting followers experience vloggers' everyday life as if they were actually present (Berryman & Kavka 2017: 310, 316). Such an (imaginary) virtual closeness can further be reinforced by combining personal content with commenting functions (Rousseau 2012: 9). However, if the strategy to attract an audience gets to obvious or dominant, a micro-celebrity might be experienced as inauthentic (Marwick & Boyd 2010: 128). One follower's comment exemplifies just that: 'The kitschiest food video in the world lol' (Therese Lindgren 2017).

Therefore, in order to ensure authenticity a micro-celebrity needs to interact with the followers for real, not just pretend to do so (Marwick 2015: 345). In the 'What I eat in a day' videos the interaction is ensured through various strategies, like

direct address, answering questions, 'taking' the followers along through the day or being active in the comment section of the vlog. This interactivity moreover contributes to create a 'participatory culture' in which the audience is actively partaking in shaping any emerging community (Jenkins, Ford & Green 2013, Olsson & Svensson 2012). Hence, through closeness, immediacy, interactivity and community-building the followers get bound more tightly to their vloggers, which in turn legitimises the vloggers positions as trustworthy and entitled cultural intermediaries, thereby also adding weight to the moral imperatives the vloggers are attached to and convey. That the vloggers are accepted as tone-setters is confirmed by innumerable, admiring comments from followers.

Consequently, by simultaneously being an ordinary expert and micro-celebrity the vloggers can gain a high position within their field and become cultural intermediaries with the right to define what ought to be seen as tasteful lifestyle-diets. In an ambivalent way, as Lewis puts it, lifestyle experts thereby show they are distinct and at the same time stress that there is no distinction (Lewis 2008: 9f.). On the one hand, the vloggers want to create a sense of intimacy and authenticity, stressing their normalness and closeness to the followers, while on the other hand their belonging to a distinct group of lifestyle- and taste-setters gives them status and may make their ways of life seem unattainable. In other words, it takes uniqueness to 'become someone', because if everyone were exactly alike, there would be no distinctions.

Regime 2: Ideologies and belief-systems

Besides implicitly conveying moral imperatives regarding aesthetic taste and position through the performance of 'What I eat in a day' videos, the vlogs are also expressions of the vloggers' more explicit moral belief systems of what 'good' food or diets are supposed to be.

The definition of 'good' food always includes moral considerations, some of which may be of political kind. In the foodie discourse the political issues mostly taken into consideration are animal welfare, sustainability and eating locally produced food. However, these issues are not automatically connected to being a responsible citizen, but are often based on a consumer ideology and personal win-win situation[73]: for example, while ecological food is environmental-friendly it may

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[73] According to Johnston and Baumann (2010: 161) this may also explain why hardly ever social injustices are touched upon by foodies – as it becomes harder to construct a win-win situation. This illustrates that being a citizen is not the main aim, even when political issues are advocated.

also taste better and be seen as healthier (Johnston & Baumann 2010: 139-152, 206). That most food-vloggers motivation is not mainly political, does however not mean there are no deep-rooted beliefs beneath their diets. Especially so, as food and eating have become a form of secular religion to many people in contemporary Western societies (Tellström 2015: 57). Having a belief provides a structure of guidelines regarding how to live life, replacing unpleasant feelings of uncertainty, and for that reason humans always strive to find a belief system to stick to (Peirce 1877: 4f.). Two food-related belief-systems, to see the world through and adjust life after, are 'veganism' and 'healthism'.

Veganism

Being vegan does not only mean following an animal-products-free diet, but carries with it moral implications of how to approach life, based on the belief that human animals have no right to use other animals in any way (Francione & Charlton 2015: 3). The 'What I eat in a day' vlogs provide a space for vegan vloggers to define and exemplify how they enact a vegan world-view. For example, vegan vloggers Herbivore Stories combine their food preparation with giving information on why everyone should become vegan. But even if Herbivore Stories emphasise the political aspects of their diet, they still exemplify the win-win thinking:

> 'To be vegan sounds more complicated than it is. It doesn't need to be more complicated than any other diet. Eat plants. For the sake of the animals, your health, the planet and future generations.' (Herbivore Stories 2016a; 4:20)

As Johnston and Bauman (2010: 134ff., 154f.) put it, foodies may care about the welfare of animals, advocate ecological food as better for earth and present themselves as knowledgeable on these matters, yet still combine such a view with a focus on health and tastiness. In other cases, however, the vegan belief-system is not understood at all, or disregarded, and the win-win situation tips completely over towards the individual's well-being and for instance becomes a superficial diet-trend (Jessica Pamlin 2017a; 00:22).

However, what is morally acceptable as a vegan, is not only defined by the vloggers themselves, but also by their followers. Through comments it becomes possible to see whether a vlogger's personal take on a moral imperative is embraced and thus working, disputed or outright rejected. Affirmative comments partake in fixating the regime a vlogger is advocating and, what is more, may even partake in a

potential spreading. As Warde (2016: 145f.) suggests, a person does not become vegetarian [or vegan] in an isolated environment, but a like-minded, supporting community makes a diet change more probable. For example, one follower becomes inspired by vloggers Herbivore Stories to 'eat less animal products' (2016a), while another follower asks them for direct advice on how to turn vegan (2016b).

Moreover, within a strong community a belief may even become fixed to the point that it seems to be the universal truth (Peirce 1877: 7). Being enlightened by the 'truth' can cause life changes:

> 'You have totally changed my way of thinking. […] I've now been vegan for some weeks and I have never before felt so good in my body […] that change is even something people in my surrounding have commented on. I find you talk about veganism in such an incredibly inviting […] way and it's really rare you meet people who make you become a better version of yourself. And for that I want to thank you so very, very much!' (Herbivore Stories 2016a; follower comment)

But while following a belief may be comfortable as it gives peace of mind, humans' social drive means interacting with other people, who may have other convictions and thereby un-fix beliefs (Peirce 1877: 6f.). Humans interacting, thus, becomes part of negotiating moral imperatives. For instance, one commentator accuses all vegans of double morality, pointing to the win-win situation incorporated in the kind of veganism advocated on the 'What I eat in a day' vlogs:

> 'They [vegans] don't make any difference because the fruits and so on are shipped anyway. And even if they are grown organically they are still fertilised artificially and destroy the soil. If you [vlogger Therese Lindgren] want to make a difference, stop living like a consumer whore!' (Therese Lindgren 2017; follower comment)

Other disputers are less concerned with the details of vegan, moral imperatives as they do not agree veganism should be a regime in the first place: '[I] at least don't have to care about the animals. Animals are so bloody tasty' (Therese Lindgren 2016b; follower comment). Accordingly, what a vegan lifestyle ought to be does not only get defined within a community, but also by the clashing of different lifestyle-diet beliefs. As Higman (2011: 149) points out, the refusal of the 'others' food' draws borders between groups. Diets become one such way of indicating who is part of a community and who is not (Johnston & Baumann 2010:33).

Healthism

The more scientific approach towards food in the early 20th century, not only introduced food as built of nutrition, but also presented the idea, still in use, of measuring food as calories (Tellström 2015: 147ff.). Hence, one moral imperative suggests that in order to be healthy, different nutrition needs to be carefully balanced for the most effective diet:

> 'Well this is sort of a smoothie which is pretty easy to make, easy to ingest and one gets a lot of proteins and carbohydrates [Emil pours in protein powder]. With this you get yourself a substantial breakfast which is quick to eat and … pretty tasty' (Wilma & Emil 2016; 1:50)

Taste, here, becomes no more than a nice side-effect. Instead, the main focus in the healthism-ideology[74] is to avoid any unhealthy choices which might risk bodily (becoming obese) and moral (losing control) integrity (King & Watson 2005: 229; Lupton 2012: 41f.). As Leichter (1997: 366f.) points out, control and power over the own body shape and health condition gives a sense of security in a world which offers no such thing. On a personal level that consequently also means that the individual is responsible for evaluating which food is impure, damaging to the body and thereby potentially visual 'proof' of living un-righteous (Douglas 1972: 76f.). Vlogger Rawveganse (2018; 08:08), for instance, classifies all 'soy-things' as inedible:

> 'Such stuff – miso, tempe, tofu – I'm totally unscared of [... but] all these things which are artificial, soystuff, these processed things […] they are just a big No-No.'

This is characteristic for contemporary Western societies, which value natural – that is ecological, seasonal, local, unprocessed – food items as authentic, therefore healthy and desirable (Tellström 2015: 19, 52f.; Rundgren 2016: 117, Johnston & Baumann 2010: 23). Furthermore, the time invested in home cooking, besides the satisfaction of being creative (and being admired for that), also gives more control over the ingredients.

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[74] The ideology of healthism requires that the individual should act responsible in all lifestyle choices and constantly work on being healthy. The reward is supposedly a fulfilling life, while failure would lead to self-inflicted illness (Crawford 1980: 368, 375ff.).

'Above all I love to get inspiration for as 'clean' food as possible. I try to only eat semi-manufactured food once a day […] because it's not especially good for the health.' (Therese Lindgren 2017; video description)

Vlogger Therese Lindgren certainly tries to live up to the moral imperative stating that non-industrial, home-cooked food is the best, and thus *clean*.[75] As Douglas (1997: 10, 54) states categories of clean and unclean are highly symbolic, as there is no universal 'truth' behind them, but they rather signify a desire to maintain order. The moral imperative of eating clean hence makes it desirable to keep the own body (functions) in order, by avoiding all *unclean* substances, which for one vlogger may be 'fatty food, […] processed stuff, white sugar, white flour and […] dairy products [… which] make us sort of clog ourselves' (Rawveganese 2018; 12:52) and for another 'no gluten, no lactose, nothing which is tough for my stomach to digest' (Therese Lindgren 2016b; 1:00).

This individualism in deciding on what is healthy leads to very different definitions of the healthism-regime. Hence, it is not surprising that a lot of negotiation is taking place between vloggers and followers regarding what morally healthy food ought to be. In most cases the high moral standards the vloggers are keeping make the followers feel inferior and deficient: 'Sat here eating popcorn while watching your video and you were so healthy and I felt so unhealthy so I went and fetched a real big glass of water ☺' (Therese Lindgren 2017; follower comment). Here the follower even feels the need for 'cleansing' through water after interrupting the unhealthy eating. Moreover, the statement, action as well as the laughing-crying smiley express the pressure the underlying moral health imperative is putting on people, once again acknowledging the existence of the regime.

Coming to a close

Recapping the findings

Overall the 'What I eat in a day' videos (re)present performances of lifestyle-diets. On the one hand these performances, through narration and aestheticisation, create a food- and lifestyle language and on the other hand, by giving controlled

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[75] "Clean eating" is a lifestyle-diet in which one eats food that is considered to improve health, like whole, not processed food items, while avoiding, for instance, dairy products, refined sugar or certain carbohydrates which are classed as unclean (McCartney 2016 :1).

insight into staged backstage areas allow a glimpse into how underlying food rules are approached.

The narration is centred on the meals of an ordinary day, showing how individual food intake, menus and food occasions become routinised practices connected to wider, collective culinary customs and societal structures, like meal times or dish formats. Such customs legitimise individual eating practices and make them ritually (e.g. meal-times), culturally (e.g. cooking meat) and symbolically (e.g. communicating romance at dinner) meaningful. People's curiosity, however, means that new experiences are sought beyond established food-structures, which leads to a balance between keeping conventions for social cohesion and recognisable eating practices, and guiding new habits and foods through limbo. This shows how eating practices are not something stable, but always made to change.

Vloggers are especially open to various new food influences and spread their own takes on these through their performances of aestheticised lifestyle packages (stylised home, personal appearance, beautified food), which moreover legitimise them as experts of 'good taste'. While such aesthetics, leaning heavily on how lifestyle media and particularly cooking shows represent food, bestow the vloggers with an air of food authority, they also need to provide some insight into their 'real' selves if they wish to appear authentic and thereby trustworthy. The diary format of the vlog, which picks up the concept of everyday banality and confessions from reality TV narration, creates such a sense of closeness and realness. Through the exclusion of more sensational or excessive reality TV elements, the vloggers furthermore ensure they are not reduced to a mere spectacle, but keep their appearance as authorities of taste. Additionally, the vloggers themselves are in control of the production and aware of the vlogs publicity. Thus, they will control which revelations and confessions they make and edit their performances, whereby the 'real' backstage is kept hidden. Even staged confessions, however, give an unintended glimpse into this 'real' backstage, as they hint at underlying value- and rule systems the vlogger is attached to. Despite their unconsciousness, such moral guidelines are still 'felt' and evoke guilt if violated against, which makes it possible to adumbrate them. Departure from or rejection of a particular lifestyle-diet, consequently, still implies recognition and awareness of the basic value system, or regime, underlying the diet. This also illustrates how eating choices are never truly individual, but embedded in socio-cultural food structures, which determine the choices available in the first place. A vlogger's individual eating performance becomes one interpretation, one belief system with certain moral imperatives derived from the underlying regime.

Depending on the performance, the vloggers reach different positions within the hierarchy of the food vlog field. These positions, accordingly, determine how much weight a vlogger will have as a cultural intermediary and consequently how much right to define what ought to be seen as a morally 'right' lifestyle-diet.

Possessing the 'right' taste, however, is not sufficient to ensure that a vlogger will attain a high position in the hierarchy of the field. Instead, a position is to a large degree legitimised by followers as well. Through their comments, opinions and judgements followers become co-producers of the vlog as a text. Without the right kind of followers (like 'high-positioned' vloggers in combination with a high number of 'regular' followers) a vlogger's advocated interpretation of a lifestyle-diet, would not have the qualification or impact to spread. Thus, it is absolutely necessary to consider the followers in the production of the videos. This consideration reinforces the necessity to balance a demonstration of superior taste and style, with intimacy, authenticity and emotional bonding. Besides glimpses into the backstage area, that also implies interaction between vloggers and followers. If done skillfully, the vlogger becomes a cultural intermediary who simultaneously is an ordinary expert and a micro-celebrity.

As such, the vloggers acquire the right to (re)define the moral imperatives which constitute lifestyle-diets and (re)create belief-systems. While there may be political considerations involved, such as sustainability, animal welfare or environmental concerns, the vloggers, as foodies, put taste over everything else. Even more important than the actual pleasure of eating, however, is the call for the 'right' food choices, which will mirror a person's taste and status. This paradoxically puts tangible taste secondary, but makes the vlogger appear tasteful and prestigious and hence morally immaculate. What is seen as morally 'correct' is not explicitly stated, but hinted at by the vloggers behaviours and practices. Thus, each vlog implicitly conveys different moral imperatives, which, through followers' reactions (such as expressing feelings of deficiency) are negotiated and appropriated. This demonstrates how moral imperatives are defined by what is *not* explicitly said and that they actually work.

In this study, the moral imperatives emanate from two main regimes. Those moral imperatives which originate in the regime of 'style and status' advocate appearance-based taste (visual expressions of stylised and aestheticised food and eating practices) as morally desirable, while the moral imperatives stemming from the regime of 'ideologies and belief-systems', aim at giving guidance regarding how to become a (morally) better version of oneself. For instance, veganism stands for a particular position within the field of food vlogs, presupposing certain aesthetic expectations (like sumptuous salads with beautiful toppings) and certain

ideological expectations (stating that no animal products should be used). The two regimes are, hence, highly interconnected, making it impossible to determine which regime originated first. Individual reasons (for instance personal health) for following the regimes' recommendations in turn form personalised moral imperatives. Importantly, this illustrates how moral imperatives never come out of nowhere, but are influenced by and influence existing structures (like the regimes) and habits. Therefore, individual beliefs, resulting in practices, are not as individual as they may sometimes seem to be. Also, while personal diet-beliefs contribute to the formation of a lifestyle, that lifestyle is simultaneously embedded in social structures. These structures, in turn, influence which individual beliefs can arise. This illustrates how agency and structures are interdependent in a loop of mutual influence. A social setting, for example, which values individual interest in food, will consequently facilitate an environment in which personal takes on any particular lifestyle is encouraged.

Mechanisms of cultural reproduction and renewal

As an in-depth study of one specific case, the cultural phenomenon of 'What I eat in a day' vlogs gives insights into the dynamics of how eating practices function as subtle moral imperatives. Moreover, the case illustrates how everyday food-vlogging is not only about reproduction and representation, but partakes in the shaping of new practices around food. Thereby, this study has provided a glimpse into the inner workings of a specific cultural field (the field of food vlogs): for example, into mechanisms of unspoken hierarchies, internal struggles for positions and the mediation, negotiation and appropriation of moral imperatives. Furthermore, it has become clearer how, as cultural intermediaries, vloggers acquire the potential power of introducing changes to eating practices, for instance, by intertwining offline with online eating practices.

This evolvement of offline to mediated eating practices entails changes at various levels. On a visual plane the food, as well as the kitchen are aestheticised and stylised. On a technical level, having to handle a camera while cooking and eating, changes how tasks can be executed. Finally, on an attitudinal level, the awareness that the performance will become public, potentially watched and judged affects the vloggers' conduct while, for instance, using their kitchens or eating. These largely unnoticed workings, consequently, partake in changing and shaping practices. As Warde (2016: 40) states, each individual performance carries the 'practice forward, expressing, affirming, reproducing and transforming it'. However, as shown, these changes do not only take place at an individual level,

but are negotiated and spread within a field. Additionally, no field is an isolated occurrence, but, in its turn, is defined by its relations to other societal structures, such as the bigger field of cultural production (Schultz 2008: 10).

Therefore, the workings of one specific example of food culture in a society characterised by mediation processes can provide insight, more generally, into cultural reproduction and renewal regarding food. Furthermore, on a even more abstract level, these insights can also help understand cultural mechanisms and how reality gets constructed and becomes taken for granted. For instance, one conclusion which can be drawn from the case of 'What I eat in a day' vlogs, is that mediated bottom-up, everyday expertise, in combination with the authority and self-assuredness of a micro-celebrity, can grant the position of a cultural intermediary. Such an intermediary has the potential power to, in cooperation with an online community, define, change and spread everyday practices, online as well as offline. This also confirms how, even if media per se does not mold a practice, it provides the language needed for a practice to be expressed, thereby come into being and spread (Storey and McDonald 2014: 221ff.). In other words, this close study of one case's concrete underlying mechanisms helps to shed light on *how* culture changes in connection to web 2.0. Even if culture has always been changing, current society, characterised by mediation processes, has allowed for potentially anyone to mediate culture, which gives contemporary cultural intermediaries a new kind of more pervasive power.

To understand that new power and the mechanisms of cultural reproduction and renewal even better, further studies need to be conducted. Other new, mediated, everyday practices (like mediating grocery shopping or a pregnancy) can be investigated to complement the picture of intertwined online and offline expressions of everyday life. Moving outside the texts themselves may also yield valuable insights into how mediated practices become produced, received, expressed and used in offline environments beyond the publicly available interface of the text. This is particularly true, as the meaning of a media text is not bound to the text itself, but moves and changes through time and space (Silverstone 1999: 13ff.).

The practice of combining physical offline cooking and eating with recording, uploading and online showcasing is still rather new. But as Couldry and Hepp (2016: 197f., 222f.) point out, any new media practice can eventually get habitual and feel natural. It may be the case that, some years from now, the aesthetics of a dish might be prioritised over actual taste, that handling a camera becomes a taken for granted part of cooking or that we will join each other at virtual tables as a broadly-accepted means of sharing food. The important point, however, is that

by becoming aware of contemporary online eating practices in a (Swedish) society characterised by mediation processes, as well as by understanding the underlying mechanisms, we can become more aware of new hierarchies, logics and markers of status, which no longer solely derive from economy or traditional cultural competences, like education. With such insights in mind, it becomes possible to be more conscious about underlying structures and to some degree partake in deciding which direction we want eating practices, but also society and culture at large, to take.

Finally, while human culture is in constant change, there are aspects of food culture which will probably always remain the same. Even in a society characterised by mediation processes, with virtual eating habits and tables, we still need actual meals in order to survive, just like all our fellow humans before us. As long as we eat, to return to the introductory quote, it's just as true in 2018 as it was in 1825, that we'll use our food to tell each other who we are.

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The particular politics of the home

Domestication and parental practices of digital games in everyday life

Magnus Johansson

Introduction

Media technology and content are intimately interwoven into the mundane routines of our daily lives, leaving the everyday a site deeply influenced by, and experienced through, media (Couldry & Hepp 2017:54). The social world has ultimately become a world signified by media use (Hepp 2010:40). Digital games[76] have emerged as such a technologically dependent activity, whether it be playing games on mobile phones on the living room couch or on the commute to work, or engaging in massive virtual worlds on gaming computers. This activity does not remain unproblematic, with, for example, debates on correlations between violent behaviour and video games being long standing (see for example Statens Medieråd 2011). Concerns have also been raised around commercial data collection and surveillance, both on a commercial level and in digital games themselves (Taylor & Rooney 2017). However the debate on excessive gaming and video game addiction are now often considered the main source of media panic regarding the medium (Thorhauge, Gregersen & Enevold 2018:9).

This raises questions on how we actually cope with these technologies and content on a daily basis, considering many individuals deeply involved in the activity. What remains at stake is risking the home becoming 'an increasingly regulated and surveilled space' (Flynn 2001). Nonetheless, it cannot be presupposed that playing digital games is harmful, being sources of addiction or violent behavior. By looking at how *digital games are regulated* within the four walls of the home, for example by rules or restrictions, and have their *moral values negotiated* in the

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[76] The term 'digital games' (sometimes 'video games' or/and 'computer games') will be used in this text as a collective definition of the spectrum of games played either on classic consoles which connect to a TV, computers or any mobile device.

everyday of families, this study investigates the values and meanings of digital games *in relation to the moral project of the family.*

As of 2018, the World Health Organization considers video and computer game addiction a mental health disorder (Scutti 2017). Children and young adults are singled out as the primary group at risk, a group that usually believed to be extraordinarily susceptible to a wide range of harms (Lupton 2013:155). In a debate article on SVT Opinion[77], Patrick Wincent, owner of the video and computer game addiction facility Dataspelsakuten, warns about 'asocial mobile phone zombies'[78] (Wincent 2014), metaphorically blaming technological over-use to have paralyzing effects. This constitutes a telling example of how public discourse around the fear of new technology has a strong social character. In the addiction and excessiveness debate, harms of video and computer games are presented not as entirely psychological, but more often than not presented as social afflictions as well. In light of this, Thorhauge, Gregersen and Enevold (2018) propose a conceptual replacement for the term video game addiction, especially in research within the social sciences, as excessive gaming often becomes synonymous with an actual psychological affliction. Instead, the authors propose addressing excessiveness as 'problem gaming' (2018:9), which becomes a more relatable concept for this project as well. The term problem gaming is itself not entirely unproblematic, as question arise to whom gaming is actually a problem (Brus 2018:51).

A non-media centric approach to media studies places the central questioning on practices and agency in the everyday (Krajina, Moores & Morley 2014). It is a closer look at what Roger Silverstone (2007) calls 'the particular politics of individual households' (2007:169), posing the question of what role digital games play in the morals of everyday life. The ways in which we use, reflect on and evaluate media, where our role as consumers is in constant transformation and question, is actually 'boundless', 'incorporated, both consciously and unconsciously, into the cultures of the everyday' (Ibid. 2007:20). We are also here confronted with the experiences, definitions and constructions of threats, harms and afflictions of media use. These are moral questions posed with the entrance of every new media technology into the home, a prime example being the television, in many ways echoing similar types of concerns (Livingstone 2009:152; Williams 2001).

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[77] A website from Swedish public service for debate articles and responses.

[78] This is the author's translation from Swedish, full article in original is cited in the reference list.

This thesis aims to contribute to a discussion of digital games grounded in examinations of the moral negotiations and forming of regulations in the home, while not neglecting its relation to public discourses surrounding digital games. The everyday constitutes of 'spaces of agency' which are built on specific practices, politics and moral responsibilities (Sandvik, Thorhauge & Valtysson 2016:11). How we perceive digital games rely on definitions in public discourse, positionings of power, enabling 'possibilities and opportunities' but also 'disruption and suffering' (Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999:4). So, there is a manifestation of digital games at two levels, the social construction and the domestication of digital games, centered everyday practices and reception of digital games. The home is, thus, never fully separated from the outside world. The home, as an imagined place, exists in the area of tension between definition and practice, in the form of negotiation*s*, including moral evaluations, formulations and the enforcing of regulations on digital games in the family.

A total of 9 semi-structured interviews with parents will provide the empirical foundation, paying special attention to the ways in which parents regulate digital games in their daily lives, uncovering the theoretically complex practices of the mundane. Two examples of public discourse will also be investigated, taken from the webpages of Dataspelsakuten (2017) and Logopeditjänst (2016), where video game addiction is discussed and defined. Providing a broad view on the parents perceived (potential) threat of excessive gaming of or violent content in digital games, this study's focus is digital games both in their social construction through public discourse and in the domestic setting. Following this framing of the subject, this study aims to answer the questions below:

- In what ways do parents negotiate the moral values of digital games in relation to public discourse?

- How can this negotiation work be understood in relation to the tactics parents deploy in regulating digital games in everyday life?

- What part do these tactics play as part of the moral project of the home?

Moral panics and moral economies

Adapting new technologies into everyday practices both shape and are shaped by the technology and the way we use it (Sandvik, Thorhauge & Valtysson 2016:11), bringing along any problematic issues faced in this process. The domestication of new technologies often seems to be associated with a sense of threat, a disturbance

in the everyday in need of management. Whether this be the VCR and video violence, mobile phones and communication practices or video games and addiction, they all share a similar relation between domestication practices and the discursive mechanisms of moral panics, though not always as well researched. Studies on video games and their audiences have evolved from being almost exclusively comprised of effect studies[79], to now being an interest to a wide variety of fields, among them psychology, computer research and of course media and communications (Märyä 2008:5). Digital games themselves have also developed in such a diverging way, that talking about video or computer games can encompass an entire ecosystem of digital entertainment (Ivory 2016:1).

Explicit studies on the subject of excessive or problem gaming have become increasingly more examined, a prime reason being the entry of MMORPGs[80] into the market, among those *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) (Griffiths 2016:75). In the DSM-5[81], Internet Gaming Disorder encompasses video game addiction and it is described as an affliction for further study, and not recognized as an actual disorder, since there is no conclusive diagnosis for the affliction (Ibid. 2016:83). The majority of the studies on video game addiction have also historically been quantitative in nature (Griffiths 2016). Video game addiction almost always carries with it a strong resemblance to discourses surrounding substance abuse, as it is presented as 'unknown, dangerous, unsafe or menacing' (Cover 2004:111). In terms of moral discourses, both digital addiction and real life addiction (like that of drugs), often share a discursive framework. But video game addiction is not something that simply occurs randomly (Clark and Scott 2009:8), meaning that there is no single or general explanation (nor is there an all-encompassing solution) to why the specific addiction permeates a person's life.

The connection between moral panics and video games has primarily been focused on violence, relating playing video games with violent acts, such as school shootings in the US (Ferguson 2008). As the research on video games and moral panics tend to lean towards violence, there are few studies that actually tackle the issues of problem gaming, in relation to moral, or media, panics.

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[79] Once again, to see a somewhat recent critique of this, see Statens Medieråd (2011).

[80] MMORPG stands for Massively multi-player online role playing game and is played online in a world inhabited by a large amount of other player characters.

[81] The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, published by the American Psychiatric Association.

Complex media uses - domestication as theory

Although the television as media technology has a long history of being conceptualized as part of family life (Livingstone 2009), Silverstone and Hirsch (1992) argue for a paradigmatic shift in studies on families and media technology by placing family life and the consumption and integration of media technology at the very centre. This shift in focus diverges from studies of television as technologically and culturally significant (Williams 2001) to the individual and collective practices and meaning making in the everyday. Media itself becomes a placeholder for researching everyday media use and the mundane, potentially thought of as *non-media centric media studies* (Krajina, Moores & Morley 2014). As Morley (2006) states, 'our senses of 'belonging' to either national or transnational communities' (2006:22) have transformed practices and routines of everyday life since the Internet provides almost unlimited range of social access points. The home does not run parallel to this evolution, but is very much part of it. With the evolution of media technologies such as modern computer and video games, comes a distinct form of consumption which is dependent on interaction, which in many ways differs from the practice of, for example, watching television (Flynn 2001).

Domestication theory's prime interest area is how these domestication processes of ICTs[82] into our daily life routines actually looks. It is at the same time studying agency (how we use technology and what we do with it) as well as adaptation (how we fit those uses into our daily routines) (Haddon 2016:20). Everyday life, as a field in which research 'have tended to deal with those parts of life outside the formal worlds of work and education' (Haddon 2004:1), has become a central arena for these technological changes. As such, domestication theory deals with the 'so-called moral economy of the household[83]' (Helles 2016:33), and the integration of ICTs into that very specific economy. It is the de-centering of 'the particularities of media, their distinctive characteristics and affordances' (Krajina, Moores & Morley 2014) that signifies the non-media centric approach. It offers a contextualization which, instead of research being focused on one specific technology, includes the broader ensembles of media use (Hepp 2010:42). In other words, social practice, not media itself, is the point of departure following this approach.

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[82] Information and communications technologies.

[83] The concept of the moral economy will be explained further under the header Domestic frameworks.

The specifics of the domestication of media

Giddens' (1991) concept of *ontological security* is the continuative regularity of everyday practices and conventions that solidifies the individuals experience of the world as a dependable constant, and as such, these continuities create a sense of safety (1991:48). In modern or late modern (primarily western) societies, much focus has been placed on the self-reflexivity of societal collectives, as well as that of the individual (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991). These practices are attempts to establish a sense of stability that is desperately missing in modern life. Ontological security is a 'continuous work of reproduction' since 'the household engages in a process of value creation in its various daily practices' (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:19). Family life, through the stability of the everyday and the construction of the household, reproduces the feeling of security and sense-making, but can also be the source of its lack. Giddens (1991) argues that *trust*, built up within the home, becomes a fundamental defence against the anxiety of modern life, the fragmented perception of reality. The home is seen as a creator of 'a spatially and temporally bounded sense of security and trust' (Ibid. 20).

The primary assumption of domestication theory is that media technology, as objects, are not mere material constructions, but are also meaningful artefacts (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:15), which are part of the project of the household, and are conceptualized as the 'moral economy' (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:16). This economy is not autonomous in relation to the public, objective economy, but it is still considered a system of its own, largely metaphorical in nature. Within the practices of everyday life, the moral economy is the on-going negotiations of value between the public to the private, as well as within the private sphere of the home. The concepts of the moral economy and ontological security manifest two sides of living with technology and media within the family, as processes of creating the home as an entity. Stability of the private sphere is essential to uphold the household as an economic, moral and social institution. It is these processes, 'which turn space into place' (Ibid. 1992:19), that make households heterogeneous homes.

Silverstone, Hirsch and Morley (1992) propose four elements of the domestication process: *appropriation*, *objectification*, *incorporation* and *conversion* (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:21). The appropriation element lies in the transactional process of an object being brought from 'the world of the commodity' (Ibid.) into the household. As such, the technology is in this process crossing the line of being a commodity in the objective public economy into being owned by the family and brought into the moral economy. An object is also

considered to have a biography, a story that encompasses the technology's production, marketing and other aspects of its life (Ibid. 1992:17-18) which 'contribute to shape their identities and to carry particular representations of their roles in our society and everyday life' (Natale 2016:432).

Following the objects entrance into the home, the object is objectified. This is 'expressed in usage [...] but also in the physical dispositions of objects in the spatial environment of the home' (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:22). In placing the object in the home, its spatial placing conveys specific meaning, and could be understood in, for example, aesthetic values. The uses of technologies is the main consideration of the incorporation dimension, which 'focuses on the temporalities' (Ibid. 1992:24), how the functions of media technology and content bring with them questions on the usage of the objects, who in the household uses them and in what way. These questions bring with them the specifics on usage of media, which in modern societies is a complex matter. The last element, conversion, is where the media technology becomes part of the transaction between the home and world outside of it (Ibid. 1992:25). Here it is once again boundary crossing that is at the fore front, in that the technology has been incorporated into the moral economy of the home, its meaning and functions can be expressed outward. As Haddon (2016) argues, this classic approach, although it has been expanded upon, remains useful as domestication theory includes a general sensitivity in terms of social context (Haddon 2016:22).

Media imaginaries, everyday tactics and the moral economy

Digital games are highly diverse in both technology and content. Tracing the biography of any given technology or text demands the necessity to research a single game console, specific game or mobile unit. Instead, adopting a perspective that encapsulates this wide variety of forms, is essential. Deborah Chambers (2016) uses Roland Barthes' (1973) notion of the myth to construct the concept of *media imaginaries*, which encompass 'popular discourses and public meanings associated with media technology' (2016:13) where its 'potential are debated, contested and agreed upon' (Ibid.).

While the concept of the imaginary is satisfactory for understanding public discourse around digital games, it remains abstract, not encompassing the practices within the home. Michel de Certeau (1984) distinguishes between strategies and tactics. Strategies can be seen as the over-arching macro structures, the broad strokes of power relations, not defining but inspiring modes of operation. They are dependent on the creation of place, where tactics, on the other

hand, are reliant on the '*utilization of time*[84]' (de Certeau 1984: 39), a reaction to the dominant strategy. In other words, a strategy is in many ways included in the media imaginary, as it is a creation of a certain 'place', a dominant narrative, looming over everyday practices and regulations. Tactics, on the other hand, symbolize the operational modes of the private sphere, where social practice can be investigated. Tactics play the part of 'time', the individual agency in contextually rich situations, flexible and often unpredictable. It is the way in which the common individual re-evaluates products (like media technology and content) to suit their own needs, adapting an individualized tactic in its usage (Ibid. 1984:32). Strategies and tactics are never independent of each other, as tactics, being the varying practices of households, are the reaction to the theoretically charged strategy. The 'ordinariness' of families is what de Certeau (1984) calls the 'everyman' (1984:2), the ordinary hero of the everyday. Families are highly complex constellations of similarly complex individuals, and their social life is an intricate web of practices and experiences. They are, as we shall experience later in this text, not ordinary at all.

Using de Certeau's (1984) distinction between strategies and tactics, we can elaborate on the discursive and understand the modes of operation that exist within households regarding digital games. Households consume these products, but it is a productive consumption (Silverstone 1989:79). Strategies are the grand *ideas*, while tactics are the productive practices. Consumption is not passive, but requires the ability to (re)formulate, to articulate and appropriate, any media that is so intricately interwoven into the fabric of everyday life. This consumption constitutes part of the moral economy of the household.

Methodology and methods

The marking of a starting point for understanding how moral evaluations of media technologies both shape and are shaped by everyday practices, is an attempt to 'encapsulate the nuances of consumption and the way that users inscribe artefacts with meaning' (Berker et al. 2006:6). Domestication theory demands a methodological outlook grounded in perspectives understanding the everyday as a space of giving meaning to experiences (Ibid. 2006:7). Even though it is the *idea* of a phenomenon that is dissected (Hacking 1999:26), it is available to us empirically in social interaction. This approach sees the social as constructed

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[84] Emphasis in original.

through operations in the everyday (Couldry & Hepp 2017:21). This is also embedded in the idea of a non-media centric approach, where the mundane and ordinary is often placed at the heart of the social inquiry (Krajina, Moores & Morley 2014). The influence of the discursive, the ideas that exist in society and the manifestations of them, also shape the practices of the everyday. 'Ideas do not exist in a vacuum', Hacking (1999) states, '[t]hey inhabit a social setting' (1999:10). This demands the analysis of both practices and ideas.

Empirical approaches

The empirical material in this study consists of 9 semi-structured interviews, all approximately an hour in length, focusing on parents who have children interested in video games. Interviews were done exclusively in the home environment of the families. These interviews entailed questions on how parents view their children's gaming, how their regulation around games look, but also why they retain policies and rules around digital gaming, if at all. The central focal point remained on individual 'attitudes and values' (Byrne 2012:209). It is important to recognize that interviews are never fully a subjective telling of the interviewee's viewpoint, as the researcher is considered a co-producer of the data (Rapley 2007:16). Rather than being a process of collecting data, it is in many ways instead a generation of data (Byrne 2012:208).

In investigating the issue of public discourse, a closer look is applied to material from the websites of *Logopeditjänst* (2016) and *Dataspelsakuten* (2017), two private companies who offer information and care for problem gaming and addiction. This material will not only provide insight into the construction of public discourse on excessiveness as problem gaming, but will potentially reveal more general views on the need for regulation of digital games. While the debate on violence and games is almost exclusively centred on content, the texts surrounding addiction partly remain on the psychological damage, but also on damage to the social and the socialization processes of primarily young people.

Based in the notion that the social world is a world of discourse (Schröder 2012:112), this material then becomes an entry point to the construction of the harms of digital games in a social context. Deciphering the language used on these webpages will provide the thesis with a contextual understanding of problem gaming, providing a discursive overview of sorts. An analysis of discourses exposes power relations through deconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions and language use (Jörgensen & Phillips 2000:70). I build on Norman Faircloughs' (1992; Chouliaraki & Fairclough 1999) critical discourse analysis (CDA) but also

conduct a more general textual analysis, where additional emphasis is placed on language and discourses.

Digital games and the moral project of the home

Constructing social deviance

Discourses surrounding the social harms of digital games all make claims, and in uncovering what these claims are, as well as who they are directed to, broadens the view on how these types of discourses are constructed. This basic understanding of public discourses around the social implications of problem gaming provides a basis of further examination of their appearance as discourses in the negotiations between the private and the public. The excessive playing of digital games is a phenomenon constructed and defined as a social problem in which children and young adults are considered engulfed in fabricated worlds which threaten their social, psychological and physical well-being. Social groups, be it parents or organizations, who engage in '*claims-making* activities[85]' (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 2009:152) in relation to a particular social problem, add to the construction of meanings and definitions of this very problem.

Public discourses on problem gaming

The media imaginary of digital games contains the seeds of moral panics. Logopeditjänst (2016), depicts digital games as an affliction that needs to be treated, equalling the addiction to digital games to that of any other type of addiction[86]. But maybe more importantly, the discursive structure of the text is one of desire, of games being so attractive that they inherently possess the potential to destroy young lives. It is constructed as a desire which lures in young people who have no notion of the consequences of excessive gaming and this desire is kept through practicing games. The game itself is created as an object of desire, a successful one, and it is an object that needs to be controlled. The text explicitly addresses the need for more education to youths of the dangers of too much digital gaming[87], but describes them in third person as 'youths' or 'persons', using

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[85] Emphasis in original.

[86] "The player often loses their perception of time and reacts with the same symptoms as with other types of addiction, for example aggressiveness and abstinence, when they are not allowed to play." (Logopeditjänst 2016)

[87] "lack of knowledge of computer game addiction" (Logopeditjänst 2016)

pronouns in conjunctions with describing them, using 'their' and 'they'. In calling for more education around games and gaming, the text puts responsibility on parents, schools and government[88].

Under the headline 'What is computer game addiction?', Dataspelsakuten (2017) once again define video game addiction as an issue particularly effecting young people. Here, there is emphasis on balance in the lives of young people[89]. Gaming is not a problem area unless this balance somehow becomes skewed, like in cases of excessive playing. The balance contains a dichotomy of the normal and the fantastical, where participating in digital games allow young people to act differently than they would in real life situation, where '[a] shy child can suddenly become sociable, a passive child can become aggressive'. This dichotomy is further elaborated on, as this is presented as the main issue of creating the excessive behaviour. It is a division between the digital and real world, where the consequence-less freedom of the digital world is portrayed as a desirable one[90]. Digital worlds represent escapism, where there is no 'demand to meet people for real' (Dataspelsakuten 2017). As in the text from Logopeditjänst, Dataspelsakuten use pronouns like 'they', showing that the text is not directly referencing dialogue with these young people, but instead calls for action and taking responsibility.

Mythologizing deviance

The above examples are of course only part of the discursive construction of digital games, which also includes the debate on violent media content. However, this debate is extensively covered elsewhere[91]. The *myth* of addiction to digital games does not exclude any real-life implications of the activity, as physical, social or psychological issues can arise from excessive consumption, as I have stated throughout this text. But through mechanisms commonly found in moral panics, these discursive practices construct excessive gaming specifically as a threat to the

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[88] "As there is great cluelessness in society regarding young people playing there are attempts made to increase awareness through information to youths, their parents, school personnel and other groups where young people are active." (Logopeditjänst 2016)

[89] "Gaming become an addiction when it starts to interfere with the person's relationships or his/her strive towards goals like good grades or progress in other activities, such as sports." (Dataspelsakuten 2017)

[90] "Young people, that feel powerless in their daily lives, suddenly get the ability to take the command of armies, drive and crash cars and deliver chaos in a virtual world without there being any real consequences. This is of course enticing." (Dataspelsakuten 2017)

[91] Once again, I can refer the reader to Statens Medieråd (2011).

social. Digital games are indeed seen as potentially creating social deviance[92] in children and young adults, having destructive effects on their psychological and physical well-being. The perceived responsibility, 'the degree of felt concern' (Goode & Ben-Yehuda 2009:152), to manage this deviance does not only lie at the level of public institutions, such as medical or educational, but also in the moral institution of the family, the home.

Moral deviance is attributed, not to young people themselves, but to the controlling properties of the very technology and content itself. The object becomes the active subject, while the individual, in a state of lost control, is at the mercy of the ('ingeniously crafted') technology and content. When this transfer of control has reached a certain point, when the player is no longer consuming the object, but being consumed by it, different modes of intervention need to be enforced. These interventions come in the form of institutional practices (education, medical treatment, school system) and the (in the best of worlds) supportive structures of the family.

The problem area is constructed as a largely grey one; the lines between addiction, excessive behaviour and high engagement are never clear cut. The grey area encompasses the struggle of the social implications of digital games, containing power relations, both between discourses and in terms of active control. Video game addiction is caused by desire, loss of control, and the question remains how this control should be regained and sustained. Responsibly is not thought to lie with the game developer, neither is it in the hands of the afflicted individual. Rather, responsibility lies with the stability of society, of functioning institutional resources, whether they be public or private. The media imaginary of digital games contains all these struggles for meaning as these technologies and content are brought into family life.

The tactics of ordinary families

When asked why she and her husband ended up playing the Scrabble-Like digital app game Wordfeud on separate phones while laying right next to each other in bed, Maria, a resident of Ronneby, Sweden, and mother of two girls, offers this response:

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[92] I am aware that 'deviance' contains its own definitions, especially within criminology. The way I am using it here is as a description of the individual succumbing to a social problem, becoming socially deviant, which in turn trigger a response, often in the form of regulatory actions.

Maria: Easily accessible. I think that's what it is. I don't know why really, but those damn phones are experts at drawing people in. It's an addiction that you've created for yourself, which is terrible. As soon as you don't have anything to do, you sit with your phone. Instead of reading and talking with each other, or play games or something. It's scary actually.

Although often conceived as a private sphere, the four walls of the home have become increasingly transparent with advancements in media technology. The transgression between the public and the private is through the transparent and porous walls of the home, ideas are as appropriated as the objects that are brought into the home as commodities. The private sphere is often felt as an isolated refuge, but it is a specific place for 'technological change' (Chambers 2016:44), not as easily separated from the discursive practices of the public. Maria lays blame to the object itself, but at the same time recognizes individual responsibility. Within ordinary families these negotiations both differ wildly and seem all too similar (see Silverstone 2007:108), as do their practical and operational implementations.

De Certeau (1984) uses the notion of 'ways of operating' to illuminate the complicated variations of everyday practices (1984:30). As Maria tells us, it's the interplay between the construction of the product and its uses that informs the modes of operation. With that construction comes the myth of its harms.

Maria: And we check all the time which ones are there. We try to keep track but yeah, sometimes we look at the iPad and the phone and go all right, what's this game? But most of the time she keeps to the types of games we feel are okay. So it's like, we try at least, but it's hard, it's really hard.

The symbolisms of objects entering the home become part of a regulatory process, one that is described by Maria as a 'really hard' one. So, in negotiations with the perception of what games are acceptable, Maria adopts a forceful tactic of surveillance, by checking her children's phones. This, albeit very simple, example shows how regulations are reinforced within the negotiations with the media imaginary. In de Certeau's (1984) words; '[t]he imposed knowledge and symbolisms become objects manipulated by practitioners who have not produced them' (1984:32), the forceful nature of objects entering the home become part of a manipulation which is tied to the moral structure of the home. Digital games need to be morally evaluated and regulated.

> Maria: But as a parent you have to also be… I mean, just like I think that a parent who buys these games for an 11-year old when there's an 18-year old restriction is completely stupid, I have to take responsibility to look through the children phones to see what kind of games they have. Our children would never be allowed to play such a game for example. If we don't think it's kid friendly enough, they won't be allowed to have them and we'll erase them.

It is not only up to the parents to regulate through everyday tactics, but also to interpret the media imaginary, to decipher it and act accordingly. By doing this interpretation work, Maria, together with her husband, is also deploying a tactic of sorts, an evaluation of object and meaning. Grand Theft Auto (GTA), a violent and adult video game, becomes part of the media imaginary of the harms of digital games, manifested as imagined threats on Maria's horizon. Silverstone (1989) means that 'the everyday life world is a world on the defensive, a world of common sense, of common feelings, defining and defending a territory against the threats of the unknown and the oppressive' (1989:84-85). The object of desire that needs defending against does not need to enter the home physically, but can enter it discursively. The commodity that is consumed within the home is never only object, but also meaning, context and myth. The media imaginary includes the production of power. According to Maria, her children have never come into contact with the game, and as such, it is never appropriated. It is not allowed to 'become part of the family' (Berker et al. 2006:2), but it retains in its symbolism a potential threat, to what is still to be explored.

> Maria: But the thing with buying stuff and that, it's… We try to keep it so that it's kid-friendly. We also set, they aren't allowed to buy something for example, we have the codes for that. Anja [the eldest child] has an iPhone but she has my Apple-ID there so she can't buy anything without my… Or download anything without me going in and writing in my code and approve it. So I feel you have to be a bit harder there.

It is in the *trust* between parent and child that her home can be protected from harmful content. However, trust can become forceful, visible in the parents' tactics in seeking out, restricting or eliminating harmful content. Giddens (1991) metaphorically calls the bond of trust between children and their caretakers an '*emotional inoculation*'[93] against existential anxieties - a protection against future threats and dangers which allows the individual to sustain hope and courage in

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[93] Emphasis in original.

the face of whatever debilitating circumstances she or he might later confront' (1991:39). Maria calls this trust the 'ultimate responsibility'. The child is expected to put trust in the parents' ability to negotiate the media imaginary and supply the most (in their eyes) effective tactics. The bond of trust is the bond that morally ties the family together, it becomes the moral beacon which to follow.

The playing of games is then both discursive and practical, both metaphysical and physical. In the media imaginary, the myth of digital games pertains all these meanings. The imaginary needs not a materiality to spin its narrative around, it can, in its discursive form, be a formidable exercise of power.

Keeping deviance at bay - everyday tactics of incorporation

Maria's story is not without its nostalgic moments, as she sees similarities with her experience of digital games during her own childhood:

> Maria: I don't see it as any worse than when we were playing video games, how long didn't we sit and play Zelda and Link or Super Mario or Ice Climber when they were out on 8-bit. Or computer games when they came, I see it as an evolution. But of course, it's much more accessible when they have their phones with them all the time. But I don't see it as any worse than us playing video games, I really don't. I mean, how many times didn't our parents tell us to go out and play in the sun instead of sitting stuck inside?

Once again, Maria mentions accessibility as a potential threat, one that is a product of technical evolution. For her, video games seem to have the ability to get you 'stuck', it has the potential to be a harbinger of excessiveness, defined by the parents as caretakers and policy-makers. Maria is describing an object in its dimension of incorporation, where it's functions are negotiated and placed within the moral economy of the household (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:24-25). Within the dimensions of appropriation and incorporation, the regulatory operations of digital games in the household are often most clearly visible. The functions of its uses, the harms and the meanings are negotiated and regulated, ultimately being either shut out or, often with a lot of hesitation, invited in. It is here that Giddens' (1991) metaphorical vaccine is created and applied.

In this incorporation dimension, parents constantly evaluate the plurality of meanings concerning digital games. In their practical enforcement, parents assess values and meanings around the discourses and objects.

> Agnes: I've tried to limit it a little bit like that they can put the clock on one hour and then they have to do something else. So, sometimes it happens that I'm bad at reinforcing it, kind of. To be able to remember that, oh right, that's the rule I have. So, there is a rule, but I'm diffuse with it.

Often, straight-forward rules are not perceived the most effective modes of operation by the parents. These tactics are seen as morally questionable. Their implementation seems to require a further element, a foundation of trust between caretaker and child. This building of trust resides, regarding a lot of the interviewed parents, in dialogue with their children. In a simple 'why' that can establish the forceful limiting of games as acceptable.

> Karin: And what kind of individual it is, what kind of human one is. They accept it for now and I tell them why I think they should turn off and not only because I think so. But because there is a reason. Maybe not with how long time but I decide it with my gut feeling.

> Ester: And we've let her do that somewhat, that she can sit with her phone and computer, but at the same time we… I mean, she can't sit for as long as she wants but… We don't have any set times of so, we've talked about it when it's not working and we feel we have to nag too much for her to stop, then we've said we might need set times, kind of.

These modes of operation, these tactics, come up against moral implications in their pragmatic form. For Karin, this is a question of explaining her decision, but at the same time it is based on her intuition, her gut feeling. Ester, on the other hand, feels reinforcing moral standards on family members are dependent on a routine, a vision of values and morals that are based in the family members' equality within the household.

Transactions within the moral economy are not limited to forceful modes of operation, such as restricting the children's use of digital games. The regulatory practices are more complex than that. They are operational modes, 'multiform and fragmented' (de Certeau 1986:xv). Leading into the intricacies and further theorization of digital games as part of the moral economy in the subsequent sub-chapters, there is emphasis on, on the one hand, the continuous work that is the moral project, and digital games as *active* or *non-active* elements in this process. On the other hand, there is also the question of what properties of digital games as part of the home are perceived as in need of regulatory processes. Here, focus

is put on a property of *distancing* that digital games create between individuals in the home, which opens up discussions on responsibility.

The value of continuous activity

Karin and Mattias, parents of two boys, are in many ways similar to the other parents interviewed for this study. They both describe themselves as uninterested in new technology, but still admit to having a plethora of media devices in their home. When asked about their daily habits, they comment on digital games:

> Mattias: It's a little bit of video gaming, but not all the time. Big brother ends up there a bit.

> Karin: It's not like… When you talk to people, there are ones who have it much worse. They aren't totally hooked on these things even though they are exiting and interesting but it's not the only thing that matters. Like you hear about kids who play around the clock. They're not that old either.

From the beginning of the interview, Karin shows how she is involved in negotiations with other parents, referencing and measuring her own family's practices with others. The negotiations of digital games are evident in both the appropriation and incorporation, but here Karin shows how it's also part of the conversion dimension, where the values of digital games are evaluated in terms of *other* families. Digital games become lesser threats when the morals of the family is measured against families 'who have it much worse'. As Karin and Mattias continue to articulate their experiences with digital games, it becomes evident that the moral valuing of video games is based within the moral economy of this specific household:

> Karin: They often sit and watch and they play a lot of FIFA up here. I don't know much about it but maybe you know it. It's actual players from the real world and you can name them and it feels very real then, sort of. I have no problems with them playing it. They have a lot of fun with it and it feels okay.

In Karin and Mattias family's case, there is value placed in the activation of family members, where football becomes the catalyst of the activation. Playing digital games which contains this interest do not pose a threat. They are not seen as harmful as the value placed in football as an activity is present in the game. Mattias continues the discussion:

> Mattias: We try to put the brakes on [digital gaming] somewhat, by trying to get them to think it's fun to be active. They are easily sold. They love balls and they think team sport is fun. Then you've got the social as well, you get a lot of pieces.

Football as a physical activity functions as a transactional element, influencing both the meaning of digital games, and the tactics associated with them. It enters the moral economy as value, not as an object, content or technology. Playing FIFA poses no threat to the moral fabric of the household, as football is seen as a positive activity. The parents see interest in the game as an extension of the children's football interest. It becomes part of the family's identity as a 'social and cultural unit' (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:19). It is important to note that this moral transaction works both ways. Being compliant, from the children's perspective, completes the transaction as their compliance helps establish the households' moral boundaries. Mattias and Karin have presented the children with the option of, what they consider, a sound activity which can be extended to digital games. Becoming a regulatory process in its own right, integrated into the moral economy, this tactic remains dependent on the continuous moral agreement between parent and child regarding physical activity. The regulation is visible as a *continuity*[94], as long as the parents keep a moral stability within the household, digital games do not pose a threat. However, this stability is subject to change.

> Mattias: As a parent of small children you have to live here and now. We might have answered totally different in five years' time. They might have given up football completely and are sitting in a chair, drinking four liters of Coca-cola and crisps every day.
>
> Karin: It doesn't feel like we're heading there, but you never know.
>
> Mattias: It's exiting. For us it's always been very uncomplicated.
>
> Karin: I can feel it's like a drug. There is so much.

The drug analogy becomes the ultimate signifier of the threat. At the same time, the parents are not worried, it's been 'very uncomplicated' for them. This complex

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[94] The term 'continuity' is here borrowed from Giddens explanations of ontological security, and is to be considered a continuity of morals. This does not mean it is constant or inflexible, but it's seen as a continuity within the family that is valuable to protect, for example from the harms of digital games.

ambiguity demands 'boundary maintenance' (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:20), the family needs their own set of regulations to establish a sense of continuity in the everyday. The family establishes that there are families who are worse off, essentially valuing the moral continuity as successful. Nevertheless, the myth of the harms of digital games is still spotted at the horizon of family life.

> Mattias: No, it's characterized by their hobby if you compare to their peers who play other things. I think I would have had a harder time if they played, these games whatever they're called. Games that are characterized by violence. Then I might have thought they played too much, I don't feel that so far.

This line of thinking is also visible in Anna's, a mother of a boy and a girl, aged 12 and 15, discussion of activity:

> Anna: Linus is very active as luck would have it, like in the summer when he's out playing ball in the yard and out and about. He's not locked in playing games. If he would have been doing that, we might have had to deal with it even more, but he's naturally one of those who wants to run around, but you can see how fast you engulfed in this like, the kick you get when you play. He gets totally into it.

Mattias replicates the discourses surrounding both violence and excessive behaviour, as they are presented almost as cause and effect. Games containing violence would seemingly result in excessiveness. Anna does not mention violent games. Instead, she means that the 'naturally' inherent behaviour of her son is a form of reassurance of self-regulating properties of physical activity. The potential threat here is the 'kick'. It is the high that Giddens (1992) refers to as the initial sign of addiction, the instigator to harmful excessiveness (1992:72). This kind of negotiation around the plurality of meanings of the harms of digital games solidifies how the myth of digital games is not always easily defined within the household. In the continuity of activity, where football or physical activity is morally beneficial, violent content or excessive behaviour would disrupt the moral fabric of the family. Such a disruption would call for a shift in everyday tactics. This shows the strong presence of digital games as being potential threats without even being considered an issue. Games have been incorporated into the domestic sphere by negotiations pertaining to physical activity.

The activeness of digital games in the moral economy

This evaluation and meaning-making is specific to the family, but the mechanisms of the moral continuities are visible in other ways as well, at the very least showcasing the complexities of 'ordinary families'. Agnes, a single mother of two girls living in Kalmar, makes note of the distinction between activity and non-activity concerning digital games:

> Agnes: I still think my children are small enough so they should take the opportunity to play and not just sit and take something in. I really want them to kind of do something. Sure, you can do that in a game, but I know the types of things they choose are not that developing or that they produce something. I would really have wanted to get them to use the iPad for something else. Like that it's okay that they record a movie, then I'd let them use the iPad whenever really. Or if they wanted to write or something. I just felt I really have a stone age vision of games!

What Agnes calls a 'stone age vision of games' is the notion of games not being activating, at least not the games her children play. Agnes' articulation of activity can at first glance seem very different from the interview discussed in the previous chapter. However, they are both articulated as activities in the sense that they are believed to fall within the morals of the household, games should be active in establishing the moral fabric of the home. A game in the form of a non-active[95] element is seen as a disruptor to the moral continuity of the household. The practice of gaming is solidified as part of the transactions of the moral economy. Regulatory modes of operation rest on different values in different families, but they are part of the same kind of meaning-making process in being incorporated into everyday life. The tactics are 'activities which are heterogeneous to the dominant' (Silverstone 1989:82). In a sense, these tactics do not simply conform to dominant narratives, but are negotiated in the heterogeneous household and its diverse everyday practices.

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[95] Using the term non-active, instead of for example passive, is deliberate, as its non-activeness pertains to the symbolic contribution to the family as a moral project. It is still an activity, but its symbol is closer to non-activity in terms of the moral economy. The term passive signals a parallel process to the moral economy, while non-activeness can be part of the moral project, for example in the form of disruptions.

Agnes: Sure, they are really interested in having the iPad, it's kind of the most important, but they rather watch stuff than actually play themselves. And I can find that a bit frustrating because I know that it's like girls watch while boys do. So it's almost like I want to say, come on, play a bit, do something! That's when I feel it's more developing than just watching a program. And there the thought that it's needs to be developing slipped in as well. […] Like I know that Minecraft is good like, because it's maths and they can build and stuff. And that they are allowed to choose, that you don't allow the ones where you just dress Barbie in different clothes, but there being a bit more thought in the game.

Agnes understands the dichotomy between active and non-active moral activities as a gendered process. Articulated as an activity, playing games can easily be transformed into non-activity through ideas of stereotypical gendering. The separation of activity and non-activity only becomes clear in the moral continuity of Agnes' line of thinking. In its gendered process, the meaning of digital games and technology need to be subjected to an evaluation of 'developing' qualities. Agnes sees the process as non-activity if the games and their practices promote stereotypical representations of gender. In defining digital games as a non-activity, a non-contributor to the moral economy of the home, digital games and their practices are perceived as potential threats. Ester, resident of Malmö and mother of two children, comments on her and her husband's decisions when purchasing games for their children:

Ester: We rarely buy games but I usually think that I don't want there to be violence, unnecessary. I don't think that's needed. Gladly that it's something activating, that it's building or something. Like this one [points at the TV where a game is being played by their son] which I think it was great that you bought because it's a little bit puzzly. It's calm, beautiful and not that bustling. I think about that when it comes to movies and that stuff as well, that it doesn't need to be violent or so.

Ester conveys the activating aspect of games as informing regulations in the adaptation of digital games into her family's domestic space. She points to the relevance of a continuity, that this line of thinking, in the form of regulatory processes or tactics, not only pertains to digital games, but to other media as well. An activating or developing game can be more easily adapted into the moral place, the household. This activity can be found in the mundane routines of the everyday, where tactics focused on establishing continuity are reliant on patterns.

Björn: But when you at last have decided on these rules, that's okay, there is no iPad or video game until we've eaten, or say, half past five. So when you just have gotten them to understand that, you're free of all the nagging because they know that that's just the way it is. A part of the routine. Then the key becomes to stand firm, and not become lazy yourself in a way.

Björn sees it as a difficult task to regulate games so that the activating properties find a space in the home. The regulatory processes involved in these restrictions do require an activeness in themselves, which require certain assets or resources (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:19). These resources are not always readily available to the families.

Agnes: I mean, before my divorce, I used to be great at keeping track of what the kids did because I saw them all the time. And then now, when I don't see them all the time, it's like 'ah, but we got a new game' or 'we were allowed to download this when we were at dads'. So then I'm a bit bad at checking what kind of game it is, I'm more just okay.

Activeness in the production and transaction of values is dependent on the specific constellation of the household and its internal complex relationships. The potential non-activeness of digital games need active regulations. This either to bring them into the realm of activeness, or build a project in an attempt to exclude them from the moral economy of the household. Tactics are reliant on resources in, as in Agnes case, the structure of the family. Establishing moral guidelines is not enough. It is also crucial to have the possibility to enforce the tactics, to establish continuity, within the heterogeneous family constellation. Returning to Karin and Mattias, they seem to represent the other end of the spectrum:

Karin: We're home a lot now. We have a lot of time with them. It also makes it easier to control it all, I have to say. If you'd been gone all day and get home at six. When I'm home we can always go out and do something. I can control that it doesn't get too much. […] It's important that you don't lose control. I think it's easy to do, but it's easier to control the more you're home.

The formation of the family plays an important part in the activeness of regulations. This formation potentially influences the ability of the family to create the 'bounded environment' (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:19) which is the household. Time, as a control mechanism, once again showcases how tactics are everyday processes, put in place for controlling excessive behaviour. Disruptions in the continuities of the home, like divorce or work that takes time

away from home life, have the potential to destabilize the moral economy of the household. This connection between the harms of digital games (as the media imaginary), regulatory processes (the tactics of everyday life) and the moral economy are intertwined to form complex and interrelated relationships, only a few can be investigated here. These relationships are unique to specific families and their unique constellations. It takes all members of the home being active in the construction of moral processes for the tactics to be effective against the potential non-activeness of digital games.

Regulating the distancing properties of digital games

The home is a collection of individuals that strive towards a vision of unity. This is the project of the home, the intricate processes which 'turns space into place' (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley 1992:19). However, playing games often seems to be experienced as a solo activity:

> Anna: No, I guess it's not as common to sit all four of us. It's not. It happens, but often not that long. It might be that we watch an occasional movie together maybe. But otherwise they rather sit and watch their own. She wants to see hers and Linus maybe wants to play games instead of watching TV.

Digital games, and screen time more generally, is often seen as embodying properties of distance. These qualities seem to distance the family members from each other. This is often perceived as counter-active to the creation of trust and moral continuity in the home.

> Agnes: Concerning time, I think a lot about this is isolation, that one starts living a double life, that one is more into the game and that's more important for you, to play, than what it is to have your friends or to meet up sometimes and do something, like. I think it's really important with relationships between people.

Digital games are seen as having isolating properties. They can potentially create double lives, introvert parallel existences that are centred solely on the game itself. It is a *distancing* from relationships, from the activity that is necessary for establishing links between people. It is in Agnes' call for people to 'do something' that this becomes most apparent. This 'doing' is a real life activity, where playing games is considered a non-active doing. In this creation, it is relationships between people that suffer. Digital games become road blocks in the creation of the moral and the social. Part of the media imaginary of digital games, excessive playing is

presented as harming relationships. Playing digital games is not only a distancing from the social, but perceived as a distancing from the active building of the social as well.

> Ingrid: And even if that activity had been to create art, draw, I mean some kind of activity one likes, if it had been sowing, it doesn't need to be physical either. Men just so you don't get stuck in that interactive world kind of and just want to be in it all the time. But that you are actually around people and learn how to behave, I mean the social game in the world where you have to meet people. If you don't socialize with people then you don't really know how to behave for god's sake, in a group.

Both Ingrid and Agnes point to games as having distancing properties, but also raise the question of who is in control. Digital games seem to be accused of drawing in and getting people stuck in their world. But in the parents' description lies the notion of activity, of games actually requiring agency and interactivity, they need to be *played*. The tactic for adverting the imminent isolation is activity perceived as morally sound, that of drawing or sowing. They are mirrors of de Certeau's (1986) mundane practices in their attributes as potentially re-appropriating the space as non-threatening.

What can also be extracted from Ingrid and Agnes' way of describing this distancing activity, is the realization that it is not that simple. Responsibility exists in the socialization process, in the building of relationships, but it seems hard to grasp.

> Ingrid: But it's like these games, I don't know what their names are, but there was rape in them, or is, I mean I think that's outrageous that it even exists. That 13-year old children, or however old they are, sit there and play. There is an age limit but the parents have allowed them to play and that's a responsibility that the parents then let go off in that 'my child can do this, but then I don't really know what the game contains'. But that the fact that these kinds of games exist is sick, regardless if they are for adults or children.

Industry regulations include age restrictions, but the very notion that this type of game even exists is alien to Ingrid. The actual gaming individual is seen as being non-active in this responsibility work. Responsibility is transferred to the parents specifically; it is in its tactical shape that this type of content should be regulated. This type of tactical agency around media use within the home 'implies some kind of responsibility' (Silverstone 2007:108). The fact that parents are not fully aware

of the contents of the games their children play places emphasis on the distance created between this responsibility and the moral project. To the moral project in the home, this distancing property, whether it is excessive gaming or unwanted content, is in need of regulation, again pertaining the myth of digital games.

Being understood here as a distance between activity and a perceived non-activity, this property of digital games is also articulated as a distance of 'worlds'.

> Ingrid: I think it's important [knowing what children do with technology] and we parents have a large responsibility, I don't think everyone deals with that part. Some get into everything new, and I think that's the hard part, to learn how to keep up with all this stuff that is, and how they fit together. […] The hard part for us, adults, is to keep up in this world. And I can imagine if you have kids that are very much in games, it's just as hard to keep up there with what you can and can't. I mean, that you, you have to sit there a bit for yourself and learn what it is they do.

> Ester: You try to be as much in their world as possible, but without believing that you can be a part of it, like, but be there in a curious way. You can't intrude into their world, you just can't, it didn't work when we were small either, I think. There wasn't much available then, you didn't even have a cell phone but… You were in the telephone booth calling 'Heta linjen' and that kind of stuff.

Responsibility for being part of the children's mediated world falls, not surprisingly, on the parents. Non-intrusive insight into this world functions as a tactic of shortening and controlling the distancing. Ester points out that the world of children is also an individual one which may not be a threat to the composition of the home. It is the realization of not being able to fully reconcile the different worlds of the home, some which are constituted through media use. A moral project does not translate into a unified moral understanding of every question or issue raised within the home, it is also dependent on trust and understanding the individual space. This form of understanding can also be related to disruptions, as the idea of parental responsibility and the creation of the distance is not always easy to reconcile.

> Fredrik: It would be fun to just socialize with the family, and play ordinary games, I mean regular games, board games, it that the name? The small one, he likes that but David, he ah… It's like he drops that kind of thinking and puts his time into other things instead.

Interviewer: Why do you think that is?

Fredrik: No, I believe that it has a lot to do with us being too loose maybe, it's been too easy I think to buy this kind of stuff. And limit maybe. I think that saying like to forbid, that they can't use the computer or the phone, that won't work as it is today. It's a new generation and everything, but maybe one should limit it better.

Inhibiting technology is itself a tactical resource strapped by limitation. In the everyday permeated by media use, the project of total restriction seems near impossible. Available is only the compromise of limitation. To promote the social family, technology, and its uses, needs some form of limiting tactic. Fredrik still displays *understanding* for the practice of playing games, as he admits the impossible task of restricting it, at the same time arguing for the responsibility of parents to at least try to limit it. Understanding the children gaming interest shows, more than anything else, the interpretational practices that the family utilizes.

Inclusion as regulation

Understanding the world of children, with or without the necessity of having to be an intrusive part of it, is presented as key in regulating the distancing property of digital games. This particular kind of knowledge of children's media usage is not autonomous from the media imaginary, as it is informed by the potential harms. Even though there is an acceptance for these worlds to co-exist, it does not mean that a unification tactic isn't visible in the parents' regulatory process of this distancing:

Maria: We do have Wii, we do, but unfortunately we play it far too seldom. At least that's social. We have liked playing Wii, both me and Christoffer, and Sara. Especially these sports games where you go bowling and stuff. Then it's not as much since Petra was born, because she's too small to be in on it. And then she becomes annoyed because she can't manage it, then it's ruined so it hasn't become much more after that.

The distancing property and the regulatory process of trying to unify and include the value of digital games into the morals of the household does not solely extend to the process of playing games together within the family. It can also be more tightly connected to the discussion on responsibility which has been covered above. Vera, who lives just outside of Karlskrona with her husband and their 11-

year-old son, regards the distancing property of games as being part of the non-inclusiveness of digital games into family life:

> Vera: I think that parents generally have been engaged too little in that part [the playing of digital games]. It's something you do parallel to family life. And then I think it's easy to have rules around it. But you're not interested in taking part in it. There's so much positive stuff to derive from that world and then there's a lot of crap as well. You have to help your kids navigate around. I think it can become a situation where you let the children go at it and then it goes out of control and then you set up rules. That's the experience I have.

Being resistant to forced rules around digital games, Vera does not believe in rules, or even regulations. She sees the very exclusion of playing games from the home's social project as a threat of the excessiveness of gaming becoming uncontrollable. By not including the practice of play into the moral economy of the home, but trying to shut it out or forcefully control it (and the content), it per definition becomes non-active in this project. Rather, it is in Vera's thought of 'navigation' that we can spot the regulatory process. Responsibility for the moral project cannot solely be up to the policy-makers of the household. It needs to be incorporated into the practices of all the participants of the building of the home. Thought of as a tool for navigation, Vera also uses the metaphor of a filter for this building of responsibility.

> Vera: He's been allowed to play games that have another age restriction than what he is. We haven't been manic about that. We are very active in what he plays and what he does however. We think it's important that our children have a filter between their ears. They'll come across these things at friend's or somewhere else anyway. We want him to think. Is this good? Is one allowed to do this? It gives rise to pretty good discussions even if one comes across games that are war games of something else. We don't think it needs to be a disadvantage that it's the same thing you go out and do in real life. It's up to us adults to control.

The acceptance of digital games as an activity, as something unavoidable, seems to present a very to the inclusion of this practice and content into the moral economy, an act that requires a transaction of responsibility. The incorporation of media becomes a democratic project and responsibility remains at the forefront. These specific regulations are dependent on the transfer of responsibility, trust and knowledge between the individuals of the household. Parents are still seen as the policy-makers, but their project is no longer tactical exclusion of digital games

or their imaginary. The formulation of playing games is seen as active in the constitution of the home.

The views of Vera and her husband offer a counterpoint, a juxtaposition to the pattern of regulatory processes that seem grounded in a vision of digital games as non-active in the moral project. Even violent games, games that are restricted by age, are not excluded in the project of inclusion in Vera's family. This tactic becomes a resistance to games formulated as harbingers of harm in the media imaginary. It does constitute a quite clear example of 'the ways in which the public and private spheres are interconnected and how they are manifested and expressed' (Chambers 2016:48), concerning media technology and content. If this technology and its content is doubly articulated as object and meaning in the negotiation between the public and the private, between discourse and practice, this negotiation is also in many ways seen as transferrable, establishing both meaning and context within the home as a building of trust and responsibility.

> Ester: But I also think that, of course you can keep on and set restrictions, you can put on filters and have full control all the time, check her computer, what she does and such. But I still believe more in having this open dialogue and talk to each other, be curious and ask: 'Alright so what are you watching and such, tell me about this, why is it that way'. So I'm thinking that if she sees something that's scary she can tell us and we can process it together, like.

Both Ester and Vera note, that it is possible to have a stable home. As Giddens (1992) notes, '[a] sense of the shared reality of people and things is simultaneously sturdy and fragile' (1992:37), which has implications on our sense of ontological security. The media then becomes part of the establishing of the contextual of the home, as a way of processing the in-betweenness of the public and the private. This contextual work is paramount in reducing the distancing property of digital games, and it comes in its simplest, and at the same time most complex interactional form, as dialogue.

The value of the mundane

The over-arching narrative of the families met in this thesis is that of the challenges of everyday life, with the imagined potential to be colonized by media technology and it's accompanying content. Games, then, can be seen as active or non-active in the continuative process of establishing a moral fabric in the home, with properties, like distancing, as challenges to overcome. Both the issues of moral

activeness and the distancing properties range from questions of generational understanding, the value of physical activity and regulatory practices informed by perceptions of gender. It is in these complexities and heterogeneous attributes that the household becomes a distinct home. In the non-media centric approach, these complexities can be investigated without much restriction in regard to the media technology itself. As digital games, as an ensemble, are primarily framed as leisurely and mundane activities, they present a particular form of challenge to these heterogeneous homes. They are often seen as non-contributors to the moral activeness of the household, and in mapping out these families and their tactics, hopefully the project of the home can become a bit clearer.

The metaphor of the moral economy developed by the initial domestic theorists still stands as a functional one. However, in its execution as analytical framework, it runs the risk of being taken either too literal or too metaphorical. It contains transactional elements of meaning, but also of materiality and contexts, as part of a larger domestication challenge of media technology and content. As such, the families I have followed in this study exemplify the ever-changing everyday, a site of *moral production.* The evaluative work of digital games is tactically maneuvered in trying to include them in or exclude them from the idea of the home. I have mostly focused on the moral economy as a site of negotiation work, which it certainly is. However, these negotiations and moral transactions have been based in terms of threats and harm. This is of course only a singular perspective. Nevertheless, the tactics of seemingly ordinary families, as regulations or restrictions, have provided not only a vision of the challenging work of negotiations, but also a potential way forward.

What I propose to add to the rather impressive body of research that utilizes domestication theory, is how modern families are caught defending the home not only from objects, but moral values, contexts and imaginary distances based in public discourse. This within a domestication process that includes a seemingly endless supply of media content. Digital games are both alien and well known. They are shape shifters in their appearance as media technology and content, sometimes acceptable, other times not. I do not believe that a critique of the social construction of the harms of digital games is enough. The worries experienced in the home are real, they are felt and dealt with, they cannot be discarded. But the exclusion of digital games from the moral project cannot be the solution. There needs to be a shorter distance between digital games and the morals of the home as gaming is an activity that is, and will with all certainty remain, a large part of young people's lives. The answer cannot solely consist of rules and restrictions. The domestication process is not just a way to tame 'wild technologies' (Berker et

al. 2006:2), but a way of finding *acceptance* for the wilderness in them. Media technology as such can never be completely domesticated. Embracing this will not only make regulatory processes potentially less forceful, but hopefully create a familial understanding for the 'wild' attributes of digital games. There is no family in this study that is unaware of the discourses around digital games. Neither is there one that fully believes there to be simple explanation of correlation between, for example, high engagement and addiction, or content and violence. Still, the formulation of their everyday tactics are often too closely informed by the myth of digital games, leaving them in danger of becoming a vicious circle of reproduction of the perceived harms.

By focusing on regulations, I am myself in danger of moving too close to banal reproductions of the potential harms, threats and worries that are included with the media imaginary of digital games. I hope it is clearly illustrated that this thesis is an attempt to move away from this perspective. Instead, this is an effort to examine how digital games, through media imaginaries, enter the home as discourses and objects already ripe with meaning. This is illuminated by investigating the challenges that families face in the social world of increasingly integrated media use. The potential activeness or non-activeness of digital games can be both contributor and disruptor to the metaphorical moral economy of the household. In light of this, a spotlight needs to be directed at issues of context, *as well as* the practices of the home. Non-media centric studies allow for this broad approach.

It quickly becomes clear that digital games, in whatever way they are experienced, are not as easily distinguishable from what is commonly addressed as 'screen time'. Social media, YouTube, streaming services, and of course games, can all be accessed via these types of media technology, including phones, computers, iPads and televisions. Modern (primarily western) societies are likewise states of technological convergence (Jenkins 2008)[96]. Although not part of this thesis, it further consolidates the complexity of both the activities and the challenges these activities bring. They all pose individual and collective ideas of harms, becoming part of a greater fantasy or imaginary of what technology represents in the household. This is certainly an area that could be further explored, as the empirical material in this thesis show how the parents worries are not singling out digital games, but include games in a larger discourse of screen time. Here, domestication

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96 However dated this term may be, is up for discussion, but it nevertheless signals modern life as exceedingly integrated with media use.

theory has done a lot of valuable work, and will, with all certainty, continue to do so.

The complexities of the home

But let us return to the research at hand. In the process of understanding the moral project of the everyday, the analysis also shows how responsibility and trust become imperative in negotiating the values of digital games. This thesis has seen trust explained as the parents' ability to make the ultimate decisions, to know what is good and what is not. It also pinpoints the transference of responsibility, to act accordingly to a moral framework. These two dimensions of family life operate as space and time. Trust, in its tactical form of regulations, is a thing of space, a defensive reaction to threats of harm which sustains the territory. Responsibility is the on-going, the time, the gradual building of the moral economy of the home. In its transactional metaphor, this is the parental transference of values and meaning, which then itself is negotiated and valued with the child. The parents of this study see this, explained as 'navigation', 'filter' or simply 'dialogue', as a way of bringing the family closer to shared moral grounds, not meaning it needs to be uncontested or unified. It is a process of letting digital games closer to the moral frames of the home. Responsibility becomes the bearer of trust, trust put in the child to make their own decisions and evaluations, while being able to rest on the base of the moral project. These become tactics in themselves, while the base morality of the family acting more like a strategy. It is the isolated power of parents, as guidelines and ideas, where children become the ones who tactically maneuver.

Partly a theoretical understanding of the worries of parents regarding digital games, in many ways, this thesis attempts to offer more. In diving into an investigation of the moral economy, we are able to uncover processes and procedures that are very specific to particular families. These values and practices emerge as detailed and rich. Seeing how digital games are attempting to be integrated into the moral economy and the everyday, this reveals the moral challenges that parents face in the light of these new, highly complex toys. As noted before, these challenges come with practically any inclusion of new media technology into the home environment (Livingstone 2009). And while there are reproductions of similar types of worries surrounding the emergence of essentially every new media and technology, the processes and practices surrounding these worries differ, solidifying the importance of research into these areas.

It is in their inclusiveness, then, as active or non-active in the moral economy that the role of this special media becomes visible. The forceful tactics of restrictions or the morally constitutive regulations are both integrated parts of the household, a project that needs upkeep. This is in itself not without its challenges. Changes to family life as an imagined stable unit, for example divorce often contains disruptive qualities, further shaping these processes. The processes are as complex as family life itself, in the individuals that are included and the relationships that are built. Social life does not start or stop, it does not arrive at a finish line, making research into these issues as on-going and procedural as the moral project itself. At best, the domestic approaches offer a slice of life, a puzzle piece seemingly suspended in time and space as a defined case, but with transgressional properties in its value of understanding the household as a heterogeneous site of moral production.

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Christine Sandal grew up in Oslo, Dublin and Munich and decided then to do both her Media and Communication BA and MSc in Lund. Currently she's writing a bachelor thesis in Media History (the minor in her BA degree) and is working at Lund's University as SI (supplemental instruction) leader and coordinator, while pursuing a Ph.D. position.

Stephen Rading-Stanford holds a BA in Journalism from the University of the West of England and a MSc in Media and Communications from Lund University. Between degrees he worked as a freelance journalist, and continued to so while studying at Lund. Since graduating he has continued to work as a journalist and a communications specialist.

Axel Vikström holds a BA in Journalism and a MSc in Media and Communication from Lund University. As a journalist he has specialized on long-read writing with an emphasis on gender and sports. He is currently working with communications at Lund University while pursuing a PhD position that would allow him to continue studying the mediation of economic inequality.

Excellent MSc Dissertations 2018

This edited volume, *Excellent MSc Dissertations 2018*, is the third in the series that brings a selection of eight postgraduate dissertations, written by the students who undertook the MSc degree in Media and Communication at Lund University, in Sweden and graduated in June 2018. During the Masters Programme in Lund, students develop their curiosity for global issues that concern us all and are trained theoretically and methodologically for two years to ask critical questions and explore the place, the role and the use of media in people's lives. The thesis is the opportunity for the students to discover their passion for research, to be creative and original in their research design and to seek answers for the burning question that they are curious to find out.

The studies in this volume draw our attention to the multi-faceted media use and production in people's everyday life that impacts political, social, economic and cultural structures. The authors in this volume stand out by their critical approach to media production and audience engagement. The chapters talk to each other within two underlying threads. The first one exa-mines issues concerning politics, power and inequality through investigating both traditional and new media practices. The second thread delves into the place of media practices in social and cultural processes, exploring the nexus between identity, the self, the family as well as the wider society we live in.