PARTICIPATION OR NEW MEDIA USE FIRST? RECONSIDERING THE ROLE OF NEW MEDIA IN CIVIC PRACTICES IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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ABSTRACT *The article discusses qualitative research on the mundane civic practices of some Czechs, with a specific focus on the role of new media. It works with a context-oriented approach in order to avoid media-centrism. Our research is focussed on the ways in which civic practices are structured by immediate and wider social and political contexts and how they are experienced by post-socialist citizens from villages and large cities. The role of new media and the place of civic practices in everyday life is analysed with respect to these contexts. The research based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 22 politically and publicly active citizens indicates that Czechs experience a similar crisis in relation to institutional politics as their counterparts in long established democracies and it reveals tell-tale differences between the social spaces of villages and cities both in participatory practices and in civic uses of new media. However, the study does not indicate a radical, new media-driven transformation of citizenship, rather it suggests subtle shifts in practices and a pragmatic mixing of face-to-face communication and traditional media (print, public address systems, noticeboards) with new communication technologies.*

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INTRODUCTION

The "new" Czech democracy has in the 25 years of its development effectively caught up with Western democracies in terms of discontent with politics, distrust of political institutions and media and a continual decline in political participation (Linek, 2013). In general, these developments can be framed as a crisis of legitimacy of institutionalized politics and since the 1990s it has been expected that new – digital and networked – media will play a role in resolving this crisis (see Dahlberg, 2011; Macek, 2013a).

It is apparent that such a general impact of new media is illusory and that the logic of a straightforward and readily available "technical fix" is, as Kevin Robins and Frank Webster (1989) argued already over two decades ago, just an offspring of the seductive modern meta-narration of universal and instrumentally rational progress. Existing – mostly quantitative[1] – research on the topic has become more nuanced (compared particularly to the 1990s when the influence of new media on politics was understood in a more straightforward manner) and addressed questions such as: What role do new media play in political participation? Do they broaden the repertoire of participatory practices? What are the differences and relationship between online and traditional participation? (see Tang and Lee, 2013; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2010; Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010) However, answers to these questions are hardly satisfying yet. Why?

Firstly, the field is inconsistent in conceptualizations of basic terminology. Lincoln Dahlberg's remark that democracy or e-democracy is "often talked about as though there was a general consensus about what it is" (Dahlberg, 2011: 855) is plausible even in relation to participation. Nico Carpentier (2011) and Peter Dahlgren (2011) note that the term participation is usually treated in an open, vague way, while Maria Bakardjieva stresses that political participation is dominantly researched and theorized in relation to institutionalized politics although civic practices should actually be studied also in the context of mundane everyday life and the private sphere (Bakardjieva, 2009). Secondly, as we have already argued elsewhere, existing research on the phenomena related to new media tends to be media-centric, understanding new media as a central, specific focus (cf. Macek, 2013a: 67–94, 95–106). However, this understandable reduction could be misleading. When holding a hammer, everything seems to be a nail; when focusing on new media, everything seems to be related to new media. Therefore, civic practices – the particular agencies of citizens related to public and political issues[2] – should be the main character in the story. And related uses of new media should be analysed with respect to immediate and broader contexts surrounding and structuring civic practices (Bakardjieva, 2009; Bentivegna, 2006; Dahlgren, 2011, 2013; Macek, 2013a; Macková and Macek, 2014).

[1] There are, of course, also some qualitative studies on new media and politics, see Huang et al., 2014; Nilsson and Carlsson, 2014; Warren et al., 2014; Bakardjieva, 2009.

[2] Public issues are here understood as issues located beyond the private sphere, as issues related to events and relations in the public space. The practices then, as we show below, vary from seemingly non-political collective (public) activities such as organizing concerts for local children or attending a beekeepers' club to (explicitly political) activities such as participating in local municipal politics or in elections.

Dahlgren (2011, 2013), Carpentier (2011) and Bakardjieva (2009) address the problem within a theoretical frame and a context-oriented approach underlines the necessity of an ongoing and careful reconsideration of actual participatory agency. We take up this challenge and confront our theoretically informed understanding with the lived and contextualized experiences of 22 politically or publicly active Czech citizens: we decided to ask them in qualitative interviews about (1) how they relate to politics and to the public sphere in general, (2) what they actually do or do not do in relation to public and political issues and how they conceive their activities and (3) how and why they use media in this regard. Moreover, our previous research on city-based online activism suggested that uses of new media for political participation in cities are probably influenced by the specific characteristics of urban social relationships (Macková and Macek, 2014). Therefore we decided to take a closer look at (4) whether and how the activities and related uses of media differ in rural and urban environments and what they have in common. The first two questions explore the role of the broader contexts of national politics and of links between how citizens see and experience the political and public spheres and how they experience and understand their own particular civic practices. The third question then takes into account communication technologies and the fourth one the role of rural and urban social contexts.

BEYOND A MEDIA-CENTRIC LOGIC, TOWARDS GREATER COMPLEXITY

Although our ambition is to understand how our interviewees engage in actual civic practices and hence we build on their understanding of what constitutes these practices and on the local and national contexts, it is necessary to clarify our conceptual apparatus. When talking about new media and participatory agency, Carpentier makes a conceptual distinction among access (to technologies), interaction (about public and political topics) and participation (see Carpentier, 2011: 28–30). For our purposes and also in line with the findings of our previous research (Macková and Macek, 2014) we have modified this typology. We decided to distinguish between access (as a contextual condition for uses of media) and agency. And since access was one of the sampling criteria, we focus only on agency here.

Furthermore, in relation to agency we have made a distinction between communicative practices of reception and interaction and conative practices of engagement and participation. The reception of mediated contents and information (produced both by individual actors and professional media) and interaction with others (including both mediated and face-to-face communication) are essential conditions for engagement (as an expression of interest, as taking part in events, community, associations, clubs etc.) and participation (Carpentier, 2011) definition practices aiming at co-deciding, participation in decision-making processes). These four (Weberian ideal-typical) forms of politically and publicly oriented practices – we refer to them by the umbrella term civic practices – enable us to work even with interviewees' subtle understandings of their engagement with public and political issues. The distinctive focus on the communicative

practices of reception and interaction enables us to concentrate on reception and interaction as practices conditioning engagement and participation and linking civic practices in general to media uses. In addition, the distinction between engagement and participation helps us to tell apart participation in events and decision making on these (or at least aiming to do so).

When approaching new media and civic practices we knowingly avoid the simplistic media-centric logic with new media conceived as a more or less central or even primary source of current social and political change. As Scott Wright suggests: "The revolutionary potential [of technology] lies [...] in how technologies are designed, exploited and adopted (or not) by humans in particular social and political contexts." (2011: 246) Therefore we focus on immediate, everyday contexts directly surrounding and structuring civic practices (including the private sphere, work, social ties) as well as on the broader political, social and economic contexts of the locality and of the nation state.

With the former we specifically focus on forms of locality and forms of local relationships, as research question 4 indicates. We are, in other words, interested in how community–based local contexts typical of villages (though possibly existing in cities as well) differ from urban contexts in shaping civic practices and uses of new media. In this regard, we understand "the village" and "the city" as ideal-typical constructs (see below).

Last but not least, it is worth stressing that our approach does not neglect technology as a formative material and symbolic force structuring agency or shaping larger contexts. On the contrary, it does explicitly explore the role of media (as technologies and texts) in relation to civic practices and to broader contexts. This approach appears to be useful specifically in a situation when changes in the studied phenomena are in many aspects subtle, contradictory and more colourful and difficult to track than originally expected – as with political practices (Dahlgren, 2013; Bakardjieva, 2009) – and when understanding media as a central problem could jeopardize more nuanced interpretations of the transformation of the political (Wright, 2011). Therefore, we take into account that the political sphere is constantly changing both in terms of institutionalized politics but also in its perceptions by citizens. Also, we are aware that civic practices keep transforming and that the term covers a wide range of specific practices (cf. Ester and Vinken, 2003; Lievrouw, 2011) and finally that the affordances of new media play a role in these changes as they meet particular needs and structure particular practices and can set up new contexts for interaction and power relations.

METHODS

We have focused on broadly conceived expressions of civic practices in cities, on the one hand, and small towns and villages on the other and the role that various media play in these practices. We expected that these practices could differ according to constraints and opportunities that particular social spaces (e.g. social ties and involved collective identities) offer.

We worked with a qualitative research design based on broadly conceived semi-structured interviews with 22 interviewees, aged 15–60 years (mean age for villages and small towns was 32, for cities 25)[3]. The interviews were collected in April 2014 in 22 distinct places across the country; eleven interviewees live in bigger Czech cities (over 100 thousand inhabitants)[4], one in a mid-size town with 37 thousand people, two in small towns (15 and 6 thousand inhabitants), one in a bigger village with 3 thousand people and seven in small villages with fewer than a thousand inhabitants. The sample was homogenous in terms of interviewees' social status and media skills – all of them could be characterized as middle class, routine users of traditional and new media. Our choice of the sample was intentionally limited to people who proclaimed some kind of political or public engagement, participation in local politics, local cultural and community events or associations, volunteering, etc. Our interviewees include university and secondary school students engaged in volunteering (working with homeless people, active at school assembly, doing theatre etc.), teachers, two mayors of small villages (209 and 586 inhabitants), a former teacher and a current deputy mayor in a town with 37 thousand people, a former journalist, a businesswoman restoring a chapel in a small village, a woman working at a youth centre, a citizen journalist from a big city, a communal politician and sacristan from a small town and a designer, a freelancer and a MA student working for NGOs.

The analytical process actually began already during the work on the research design and the interview guide (see Arksey and Knight, 1999) while reflecting on our previous empirical and theoretical work on the topic. The main part of the analysis then started with a systematic reading of the interviews and with an initial comparison of a few selected interviews conducted in large cities and smaller settlements when we established categories that appeared to be identical or symmetrical for cities as well as towns and villages. We understood differences in categories or in actual interview contents as an analytical opportunity to understand the differences between the two types of settlements and interviewees living in them. Finally, before writing this article, we identified the categories central for the analysis while the remaining categories were treated as contextual.

Our research is inevitably limited due to sampling and the constraints of qualitative research design. The article addresses a very specific segment of the Czech population due to our intention to interview politically and publicly active individuals of middle-class origin. Moreover, the division of the sample into inhabitants of "the village" and "the city" creates a strong dichotomy revealing the specifics of opposite types of social spaces. However, despite the inclusion of three interviewees from smaller towns, the study does not address more complicated situations in towns where the social characteristics of villages and cities overlap. In line with the logic of qualitative research, we note that our findings should be interpreted as evidence-based theoretical suggestions, not as authoritative generalizations. Hence, data collection and analysis were – as parts of a

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[3] The interviews were – under the authors' supervision – conducted by MA students at Masaryk University specifically trained for this purpose. The duration of the interviews varied between 60 and 120 minutes.
[4] Namely in Prague (the country's capital city), Brno (a regional administrative centre) and Zlín (a regional administrative centre).

broader research project – intended as a pilot study preceding a quantitative survey of the Czech population conducted in December 2014 (Macková and Macek, 2015; Macek et al., 2015).

SMELL THE CRISIS: DISENCHANTED CITIZENS AND PARTICIPATION AS DUTY

When talking about the political and public spheres in general, our interviewees are disenchanted, dissatisfied with the way national institutionalized politics developed following the Velvet Revolution of 1989. They express an increasing distrust and decreasing interest in democratic institutions, they consider politics cynical, unable to deal with problems. In other words, our interviewees have experienced a similar crisis of trust in the political as documented in other democratic countries (Dahlgren, 2013).

We have identified four dimensions of this crisis in our interviews. Firstly, our interviewees are sceptical about the possibility of a fully functioning democracy. They characterize the external efficacy (responsiveness) of the political system as very low and they are not convinced about the meaningfulness and efficiency of standard democratic tools. At the same time, they perceive national politics as alienated, evil, corrupt and difficult to influence. Hence participation (as co-deciding) is experienced as distant and pointless. Secondly, in relation to the reception of political news, interviewees talk about the failure of traditional media. The nature of national politics and politicians' media-discursive (rhetorical) strategies discourage our interviewees from actively watching and reading media coverage of national politics. Moreover, our interviewees are critical of media as such: they think that national media have lost their independence, have become politicized and corrupted, and therefore they often talk about finding information "on their own" (in face-to-face interactions, on social networking sites – SNSs).

Thirdly, our interviewees perceive others' apathy and lack of concern as well as politicians' obscurantism. They believe that apathy leads to corruption and polarization of society. And politicians' obscurantism is seen as preventing citizens from knowing what really is going on in national politics and how it affects them. The perceived apathy is not limited to national politics. Our interviewees see apathy as permeating the whole public sphere. A student talks about her secondary school student council as being not "a seedbed of democracy" but "a seedbed of indifference" (Student, female, 17). Where does this apathy come from? Some interviewees linked it to political elites' obscurantism, some to the communist past when people "were passive". The second reason is particularly interesting as it can be understood as a distinct feature of the Czech post-socialist political culture – interviewees see the communist past as a historical burden, a source of passivity. "And I think it's still connected to the past because everyone's just waiting that something's going to happen," suggested a 31-year-old designer living in a large city. "That someone instead of them... that someone's going to give them something." (Designer, male, 31) Importantly, our interviewees repeatedly stress that the problem is not just historical or systemic, in particular those from small places think that in the

local context "it's more about people". However, the implicit link to the communist past is ubiquitous. Fourthly, despite discontent with institutionalized politics, our interviewees considered participation as a norm and a duty: it is right and necessary to participate, even in national politics, and apathy is a sign of others' irresponsibility, in the words of an interviewee "it's maybe sad when someone politically active says he hates politics totally. On the other hand, it [politics] is a necessity. It bothers me that people are so indifferent about politics. [...] It's about Czech people's lack of responsibility." (Sales representative, male, 24) The sense of an obligation to contribute to the system, is – as a crucial motivation for democratic agency (Amnå, 2010; Dahlgren, 2011) – specifically manifested in relation to elections. Most of our interviewees vote regularly (at least in national elections), considering it their "civic duty", as some put it. Fulfilling this duty is at the same time understood as a legitimization of ensuing discontent: "When I need to complain about something later, I have the right to do so." (Volunteering student, female, 22)

In these four dimensions we can see an interesting tension between the negation of institutionalized politics as flawed and the normative sense of duty that suggests a denial of apathy. In some cases the negation of current politics results in a careful labelling of one's engagement and participation as "non-political" or as "accidental". In other cases, it results in a conviction that politics should and could be changed – from below.

I believe in a revolution, in that bottom-up change, [...] when people change, when they start to think differently, politics will fit to that somehow. So it doesn't make sense to change politics... and hope that people start to think differently afterwards. (Working student, male, 24)

And, importantly, this sense of duty seems to get stronger and the sense of disconnection weaker as we move from the national to local contexts, this can be explained by the more binding loyalty to particular people and relationships in the local context, in other words, the duty to the imagined community of the nation is weaker than that to actually lived local communities.

RENAISSANCE OF THE LOCAL? BETWEEN "CITY" AND "VILLAGE"

The findings discussed so far show that distrust in national politics is more obvious when compared to interviewees' attitudes to local issues (in urban and rural settings). The low external efficacy related to disappointment with national politics is accompanied by higher external as well as internal efficacy in local politics. The interviewees characterize local politics as closer and within reach in terms of their own influence and also in terms of the responsiveness of the political. Any "change for the better" is more meaningful and likely at the local level because politicians and active citizens are able to know and meet each other.

Nevertheless, here we encounter the notorious and at the same time ideal typical distinction between the village and urban spaces. To put it simply, the interviewees met our expectations based on the classical Tönniesian duality of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft – "community" and "civil society" (Tönnies, 2001). The city as Gesellschaft is

characterized by its physically and socially dispersed space – a space fragmented into a number of particular places that overlap with points of social encounters and networks of social ties. As such the city could be seen as a matrix of diverse civic practices. Diversity could be productive but it can also come at a price. The networked social topology and the missing "centre of gravity" of the single core community easily make urban civic practices as dispersed and fragmented as the social space itself. Moreover, the distance between citizens and their local representatives is inevitably greater in a city than in community-based towns and villages. Hence engagement and participation could be experienced as less efficient in cities. In contrast, the everyday social space of our interviewees living in villages is centred on Gemeinschaft, around local communities firmly situated in a relatively delineated physical and relational space. The communities are based on the personal knowledge of others and on various interpersonal ties. When talking about their civic practices, our interviewees inevitably talk about their relatives, friends and neighbours. They are directly grounded in local politics and public issues and things are perceived as done by certain people for certain people, not by distant elite for an imagined community (cf. Anderson, 1991).

It is not surprising that our interviewees' differences in civic practices and related uses of media copy the differences between these two types of spaces. Opportunities and limitations offered by social spaces evidently call for different engagement and participation as well as reception and interaction practices. Typically, interviewees from villages and small towns found practices related to the maintenance and reproduction of the local community and its collective self crucial, these involved engagement or participation in organizing cultural events that are usually closely and personally connected to local municipalities and public institutions (libraries, schools, youth centres etc.). Furthermore, we can reasonably argue that both spaces call for distinct theoretical approaches, "the village" – as reconstructed in or interviews – corresponds to a communitarian view of citizenship where "community holds ontological primacy over the individual" (Bakardjieva, 2009: 92). In contrast to that, "the city" – with its fragmented social space, where NGOs play a crucial role and where a wider range of topics and issues is addressed – corresponds to a republican view of citizenship which "does not discount individual interests and group or community belonging, but places the public as a political community at a higher level of significance" (*ibid.*: 93).

CASUALLY ACTIVE: THREE TYPES OF (SUB)ACTIVISM

It is worth stating that our interviewees' practices share some general characteristics that question the simple distinction of village versus city and that show that despite structural differences both spaces have a lot in common. We have arrived at an open-ended typology of our interviewees' engagement and participation that takes distinct motivations for these practices into account along with the broader context of the crisis of the political as well as the role of a sense duty to participate in public and political issues. The typology helps us answer the initial question about actual civic practices in our interviewees' lived, contextualized experience.

In general, we do not merely mean "regular" – i.e. organized, institutionalized and explicit – activism here. Indeed, some of our interviewees were involved in NGOs or local institutions, however, we also took into account "implicit" forms of engagement and participation. In this respect the interviewees' publicly and politically oriented practices should be seen (1) as responses to the needs or expectations of a community or immediate social peers, (2) as responses to the experience of a dysfunctional system, i.e. institutionalized politics, (3) as deeply intertwined with interviewees' everyday private lives and last but not least (4) as contingent and occasional, disconnected from an explicit ambition to "change the world", often experienced in contrast with "regular" activism or politics. The first two points suggest that conclusions formulated in relation to other national contexts also apply in the Czech case. Dahlgren repeatedly argues that people dissatisfied with national politics look for alternative political paths, such as alternative politics or activism, or tend to focus on topics or politics they can actually change (Dahlgren, 2005, 2013, Lievrouw, 2011). Points 3 and 4 prompted us to employ Bakardjieva's concept of subactivism as "a kind of politics that unfolds at the level of subjective experience and is submerged in the flow of everyday life" (Bakardjieva, 2009: 92). This concept – based on Ulrich Beck's (1996) notion of subpolitics – enables us to identify one of the sources of political agency in mundane practices and relationships in the private sphere.

Some practices described by our interviewees suggest a blurry line between subactivism and "regular" activism: the contexts of private life and public sphere get inseparably mixed (cf. Papacharissi, 2010). Therefore, in the following we use (sub)activism to highlight that we find both subactivism and activism (i.e. subpolitical and political phenomena) in our interviews and these often merge. As we have identified three distinct sources of motivations for civic practices – sources related to individual skills, social peers and the construction of individual biographies – we talk about (sub)activism on demand, biographic (sub)activism and peer-motivated (sub)activism.

In our sample (sub)activism on demand tended to be more typical of the urban context – it is practiced by actors offering their specific expert skills (in computer graphics, cultural production, PR and marketing, accountancy, video editing etc.) to "regular" activists, NGOs or other civic organizations. (Sub)activism on demand differs from "regular" activism in its topical randomness – it is driven by the interviewee's sense of duty to do the "right things" and by her or his willingness to apply particular skills but is not guided by an intentional and systematic focus on a specific topic. Moreover, (sub)activism on demand mostly merges with interviewees' everyday work routines – particular tasks or contracts are simply conceived as part of their job agendas.

Interviewees practicing biographic (sub)activism become engaged or eventually begin participating based on life trajectory choices. Engagement and participation are consequent to such choices as they result from interviewees' individual tactical struggles – in line with Michel De Certeau's (1984) distinction between tactics and strategies – with formative contextual conditions. Becoming a teacher or a local clerk could thus signify an "inevitable" engagement in local public events or a participatory struggle with conditions of a school or an office, on the one hand, and the state, on the other.

Peer-motivated (sub)activism emerges – both in urban and rural spaces – as a response to a friend's or a relative's suggestion. It is typically conceived of as more accidental and less intentionally activist or political than other types of (sub)activism since interviewees understand it as a favour. For example in this case of cooperation with the Green Party: "I was shooting a video for the Green Party by chance. [...] I did it 'cause my friend asked me. And he just like [...] I did it simply for him. Rather than for the party." (Working student, male, 24) Although social ties and others' expectations are an important source of motivation for engagement and participation in general (Dahlgren, 2011; Macek, 2013b) play a central role in this type of (sub)activism. Furthermore, peer-motivated (sub)activism illustrates Bakardjieva's (2009: 97) argument that ties with family members, friends and neighbours involved in politics or activism could mobilize and at the same time they blur the private / public distinction.

Communication technologies play a role in all three types of (sub)activism – as routine interaction and production tools used in line with interviewees' other work and life routines, as specific tools employed for more complex online practices and – last but not least – as environments structuring their experiences of time and space.

NEW MEDIA AND "DIFFUSED PARTICIPATION"

Along with contingency, we emphasize another important feature of (sub)activism: its specific position in the temporal and situational structures of our interviewees' everyday lives. For them it is often impossible to separate public and political practices from private aspects of their lives, work / studies, leisure and hobbies. In other words, theirs is "diffused participation" building on Nicholas Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst's (1998) notion of a "diffused audience" – being a (sub)activist is a permanent experience and therefore it should be treated as one of the formative axes of our interviewees' everyday lives. As an undergraduate student helping in an NGO with PR and marketing puts it: "Leisure time... mostly in the evenings... I had it, but hmm... hard to specify." (Volunteering student, female, 22) Similarly illustrative are words of a middle-aged citizen journalist: "And work is merging with leisure time too because it's about stuff I'm interested in and I'd like to write and shoot about it." (Journalist, male, 38)

New media affordances play a significant role here – mobile and networked communication technologies enable actors to blur or even break down explicit physical boundaries between recently separated situations as well as between private and public spatiotemporalities. According to Shanyang Zhao's (2006) phenomenological explanation, new media set up a new spatiotemporal zone of "there and now" broadening the spatially settled "world within reach" of "here and now". New media make it possible to be constantly available to others and therefore to merge contexts of previously discrete social encounters. They create, in Sherry Turkle's (2011) words, a "life mix" in which actors – balancing on the edge between physically experienced situations and interaction interfaces of their smartphones, laptops and other objects – perform multiple roles all the time.

Our interviewees experience this – when talking about their (sub)activist practices – mainly in relation to the use of mobile phones and social media. Interviewees from cities use social media broadly for receiving and redistributing contents, for interaction with friends and colleagues, to express political opinions and for work-related tasks – and thus they mix all these particular practices. They obviously take an instrumental advantage of this mix – the mediated permanent contact with others bridges the physical fragmentation of the social space. However, some tend to reflect on media use critically and see it as a source of disintegration of time, potential precarization (permanent availability could mean permanent availability for work, cf. Standing, 2011: 108), information overload and colonization of privacy by other contexts: "So I got there [on the smartphone] emails, as many people do, right? So we're complete idiots, right? That we let work penetrate into our pockets." (Designer, male, 31) "It's a terrible mix 'cause my Facebook is split in a stupid way when it's half personal stuff [...] and it's half about work [...]." (Working student, male, 24)

Nevertheless, it would be probably misleading to blame new media for having an exclusive and destructive impact on the division between private and public. Rather, they amplify the tendency to mix private and public that is implicit in (sub)activism itself. Some interviewees from villages – who do not use social media in their engagement and participation at all or as actively as interviewees from cities – resist the perceived "threats" of social media passively: "I'm there [on Facebook], not using it," as one of the interviewees noted (Working student, male, 24). Nevertheless, due to the contingencies of the village community space (sub)activism remains diffused and permanent even in these cases. People in the local "here and now" community are "within reach" as much as are their urban counterparts reconstituting the sense of "us" through interactions in the online "there and now" zone. In other words, (sub)activism itself challenges the boundaries of private and public contexts.

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND PUBLIC NOTICEBOARDS

And what about other roles that media play in civic agency? We have uncovered a wide range of reception and interaction practices employing both new and traditional media within the three types of (sub)activism discussed. The practices are mostly based on the creation and recirculation of contents that are perceived as political, activist or simply publicly relevant. At the same time the practices range from clearly subpolitical, non-systematic individual acts to systematic and even collectively organized tactics – from forwarding an email from one's favourite NGO, recommending an article or sharing a petition or an event on Facebook, ad-hoc spreading of information about an upcoming demonstration to the systematic distribution of information about a project among friends, creating and administering a local blog on culture and politics in the village or running a satirical website mocking local representatives online. Indeed, face-to-face interactions along with media – old and new – play a crucial role here. It is particularly in cities that SNSs (and dominantly Facebook) became tools of and arenas for these practices. However, as one of our interviewees who works as a citizen journalist suggests, using

Facebook, blogging or publishing online can be seen as substitutes for or extensions of older "material" practices:

When something intrigued me, I was underlining and cutting it out [from newspapers] and showing it to other people thinking it was good for them to read it. [...] But I often talk with political scientists and other experts [...] and then I mediate the information to other people. Recently, I was talking about it to people around the pub table, now I mediate it to readers, so there is no... I don't see any substantial change. (Journalist, male, 38)

The role and importance of SNSs as tools of engagement and participation in cities and villages differ clearly. All our interviewees followed a wide range of particular paths to reception and interaction, gathering knowledge and information, persuading others about organizations, projects and planned events. However, we can argue that SNSs play a dominant (even though not exclusive) role in the (sub)activism of our interviewees who live in cities.

Although our study has limits due to the use of a qualitative method and sample size, we can formulate yet another generalization that could serve as a hypothesis: While in the "republican" cities included in our sample we have encountered a more colourful range of topics, in the "communitarian" villages we saw a more diverse and selective use of specific communication channels: interviewees from villages quite reflexively stratified their choices of channels by particular topics or according to recipients' personal knowledge. In "communitarian" villages the interaction component of political and public agency seems to be more balanced between face-to-face interaction, email, SNSs and information websites, phone and "physical" media. Yet "physical" media – namely local and municipal print publications, public announcement systems and public notice boards – play a crucial role in spreading information within rural communities covered in our study. While some of the interviewees from villages consider Facebook useful in relation to local youth and children, older community members are commonly addressed via print media (municipal papers, leaflets) distributed around the place or pinned to local noticeboards serving as a "Facebook wall for the elderly": "Well, we use Facebook a lot [...]. When we put it on our [Facebook] wall, you can see more children when we put it just on the municipal noticeboard on the square. [Laughing.] Obviously, children stick to Facebook, so we have to too." (Worker at a youth centre, female, 36) Nevertheless, face-to-face communication remains central for interviewees from villages as it emphasizes the communitarian character of the "personal and conservative" village that makes their home distinct from the "impersonal and modern" city.

It was somehow nice how these people communicated with each other in the past. When people isolate themselves in their homes, living anonymously, not knowing each other, then it's like in a city and I don't like it. [...] It's definitely better [here] than in a city. People communicate with each other and they prefer personal communication, not mediated one or something similarly modern. We even planned to send news as text messages but people didn't want it. They said: print it, announce it as a public announcement, but no text messages. (Mayor of a small village, female, 45)

CONCLUSIONS

Employing a context-oriented perspective results in a rich and at the same time realistic image of the role of new media in civic practices. Our research indicates that even in cases when new media are routinely used as tools of reception and interaction, they are not necessarily central to citizens' political and public practices – nevertheless, an understanding of citizens' practices can uncover much about the role of new media as well as of more traditional communication channels and practices in civic engagement and participation.

Our analysis suggests that active Czech post-socialist citizens do not principally differ from their counterparts living in other national contexts (Bakardjieva, 2009, Dahlgren, 2013). Engagement and participation are structured both by the way interviewees perceive the political and public in general and by their immediate social contexts. Our interviewees' relation to the political is characterized by a tension between a normative sense of duty and the experience of national politics as dysfunctional. At the same time, politically and publicly oriented activities, described above as (sub)activism, are predominantly aimed at local issues, deeply ingrained in interviewees' everyday lives and oriented towards their peers and the broader local collectivity. Actual civic practices can be seen as a result of a combination of a duty-motivated reaction to national politics and the immediate contexts of our interviewees' everyday lives. We suggest that these immediate contexts – in particular peer pressure, individual biographic trajectory and structural differences between the communitarian space of "the village" and the socially dispersed space of "the city" – can amplify or silence the proactive potential of the individual sense of civic duty.

New media are not irrelevant to this story. Firstly, in the urban space they help to substitute for the lack of direct social interaction typical of physical communities. Secondly, they disperse (sub)activism into everyday routines as they enable to be "always on" and thus blur the spatial and temporal structures of everyday routines. And thirdly, they are pragmatically used as routine tools of reception and interaction, i.e. of practices conditioning engagement and participation as collective phenomena. Nevertheless, new media practices are not isolated from traditional communication practices such as face-to-face interaction, traditional media and local physical media and particularly in the rural, communitarian context, new media do not seem to be the driving force of engagement and participation.

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ŠTO JE NA PRVOM MJESTU – KORIŠTENJE NOVIH MEDIJA ILI GRAĐANSKA PARTICIPACIJA KROZ NOVE MEDIJE? PREISPITIVANJE ULOGE NOVIH MEDIJA U GRAĐANSKIM PRAKSAMA U ČEŠKOJ

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SAŽETAK *U članku predstavljamo kvalitativno istraživanje svakodnevne građanske prakse dijela Čeha, s posebnim naglaskom na ulogu novih medija. Temi smo pristupili tako da smo se orijentirali na sadržaj, a ne na medije. U fokusu našeg istraživanja jesu načini na koje su građanske prakse strukturirane u užem i širem društvenom i političkom kontekstu te kako te kontekste doživljavaju postsocijalistički građani iz sela i velikih gradova. Uzimajući u obzir navedene kontekste, analizirali smo ulogu novih medija i građanske prakse u svakodnevnom životu. Istraživanje se temelji na polustrukturiranim dubinskim intervjuima s 22 politički i javno aktivna građanina, a pokazalo je da se Česi suočavaju sa sličnom krizom u institucionalnoj politici kao što je to slučaj i u starijim demokracijama. Istraživanje je također otkrilo razlike u načinu informiranja između sela i gradova, kako u participacijskim praksama tako i u načinima kako građani koriste nove medije. Međutim, istraživanje nije dokazalo da su novi mediji radikalno transformirali građanstvo, već je pokazalo da je došlo do suptilnih pomaka u praksi i do pragmatičnog miješanja komunikacije licem u lice i tradicionalnih medija (tiskani mediji, sustavi razglasa, oglasne ploče) s novim komunikacijskim tehnologijama.*

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