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REPRESENTATION OF THE SNOWDEN SCANDAL IN THE ESTONIAN MEDIA: THE CONSTRUCTION OF THREATS AND FEAR

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explicate how the leakages concerning details of the top-secret mass surveillance program PRISM launched by the United States government were contextualized in the Estonian public information space. The Snowden scandal received strong public feedback because this topic addressed even people who had normally kept their distance from politics. It touched the cornerstone of contemporary identities – the right for free Internet. The Internet is frequently associated with the freedom of expression, horizontal relations between citizens and state authorities, transparent governing, etc., and those characteristics are often interpreted as signs of the progressive and democratic nature of the medium. This study tries to explain how such positive connotations start to resonate with cultural fears of unregulated surveillance and non-transparent control.

Keywords: conspiracy theory, e-Estonia, identity creation, PRISM, semiotics of fear, technological determinism

INTRODUCTION

This article maps how different explanations of the Snowden scandal[1] were constructed in the Estonian media. I explain what kind of key signifiers and strategies of association were relied on in the case of interpreting the socio-cultural impacts of PRISM[2]. For theoretical purposes, I have mainly relied on cultural semiotics, which defines culture as the sphere of organization of information) in human society as opposed to disorganization (entropy) (Ivanov et al. 1998: 33). The goal is to explain how different sign-systems model reality and how they co-function. It is important to note that cultural semiotics is not interested in reality in its entire diversity but rather in its sign-based models, and in most cases those models tend to be simplifying (Lotman 2001: 16–17). Therefore,

my study concentrates on how the meanings of PRISM were articulated in the Estonian online media rather than the specific aspects concerning the mass surveillance program itself. Despite the fact that the analyzed representations were usually addressed to the so-called ordinary readers who do not have any special knowledge about contemporary information politics and Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (and actually a vast majority of the authors also do not have that kind of expertise), it is relevant to study this material, because the sphere of meanings constructed around Snowden's leakages allows for exploring the common understandings and values that are connected with contemporary technologies and with the visions of information society in general.

A contemporary analysis of culture should not treat the Internet as a merely technological layer that affects our lives or as a place where social interaction occurs; it needs to explain how collective understandings, local and global identities are attached to it (Kelty 2010: 13). In order to explain why PRISM received such vast public feedback in Estonia, I have to place the Snowden scandal in a wider context of meanings of the new ICT. Many studies have outlined that a commonsense way of thinking about the developments of contemporary ICT is technological determinism (Ballinger 2011; Bell 2001; Hirst 2012; Morozov 2011; Mosco 1996, 2004; Sandywell 2006). To put it very briefly, technological determinism is a tendency to understand the relation between machines (technology) and people in a predominantly linear way: it is implied that technological developments directly influence social processes, and in some interpretations technology is even seen as the main cause thereof (Bell 2001: 65). According to Barry Sandywell (2006: 41), there is a bipolarized field of understandings behind contemporary ICT: "on the one side we have supportive responses by those who viewed the new technologies as instruments of liberation and progress (technologies of freedom) that 'change life'; on the other side we find discourses predicated upon fear and distrust (the new technologies undermine traditional institutions, reinforce existing inequalities, and so on)". Several authors state that the frameworks of technological determinism are deeply rooted in the Western cultural memory and the Internet, as social networking sites and smartphones are addressed in strikingly similar rhetorical frames that were used, for instance, for telegraph, electricity, radio, television, etc. (Hirst 2012; Mosco 2004). One common feature that characterizes the discourses of the impacts of technological innovation is the idea that new technology is leading to novel or even unprecedented social situations. New technologies have often been paired with hyperbolic phrases, such as 'the Information Age', 'the Electronic Era', and 'the Telecommunication Revolution', which indicate the constitution of a new era (Sandywell 2006: 41). A similar interpretational scheme is also prevalent in the context of the vision of new technological generations (e.g.

generation C, smartphone generation, etc.) that are believed to be dominated by new values and habits.

In the following, I will be focusing on the main values and both optimistic and pessimistic future scenarios that are associated with the contemporary ICT in Estonia. Firstly, the techno-utopian identity discourse, i.e., e-patriotism, will be introduced. E-patriotism highlights national IT-infrastructures and general IT-savviness of Estonians as important characteristics, which make us a progressive role model of active citizenship and participatory democracy for the rest of the world.

TECHNO-UTOPIANISM: THE DISCOURSE OF CYBER DEMOCRACY AND E-ESTONIA

Several authors have studied techno-utopian visions of the digital era and they have also critically explained the development of those ideas in different socio-cultural contexts (see Holmes 2005; Jordan 1999; Morozov 2011; Mosco 2004; Turner 2006; Söderberg 2013; etc.). The utopian visions of the Internet, and especially of social media, are usually built on an idea that new communicational resources are paving the way for the emancipation of passive media consumers. It is also believed that the online environment promotes inherently anti-authoritarian participatory communication (Kreiss & Finn & Turner 2011: 247; Morozov 2011: xiii-xiv; Mosco 2004: 113). The main distributers of the vision that the Internet is supporting democracy are IT enthusiasts, civic activists, and technology journalists.[3] Some academics have also contributed to the elaboration of those techno-utopian understandings (see Gilder 1994; Negroponte 1995; Tapscott 1998). There are certainly also vernacular versions of the discourse of cyber democracy that relate it with local events, communal memory, and personal experiences.

After regaining independence, the cyber-optimistic discourse became an important dominant of the Estonian future-oriented identity. Public self-descriptions started to emphasize the importance of national IT solutions that facilitate the development of deliberative democracy and the emancipation of citizens. The rapid development of the e-state was understood as a key to success: as something that makes Estonia to stand out against the background of other post-Soviet countries and brings us closer to the Western values. Aro Velmet (2015) has pointed out that the articulation of the success story of e-Estonia started at the beginning of the 1990s and it was predominantly related to the actuation of the Internet-based system of the state institutions. One important milestone of the progressive and innovative e-state was achieved in 2000, when

the meetings of the Estonian Parliament became paper-free. The other center of e-Estonia was an idea that contemporary ICT can help to reduce social and regional inequalities and increase participation in the discussions on public topics. This kind of rhetoric arose with the popularization of the Tiger's Leap project, which started in 1996. The Tiger's Leap was a state-run project, the main goal of which was to develop Estonian digital infrastructure and which put a special emphasis on providing computers for educational institutions. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, the success narrative of e-Estonia was supplemented with the topics of civic education and participatory democracy (Velmet 2015: 140).

The example of e-Estonia has been highlighted as one of the most outstanding projects of national branding. The meaning package of e-Estonia is anchored to the idea that clever IT-solutions, used on many levels of the state, make Estonia a modern, innovative, and easily approachable target for tourists and foreign investors (see Jansen 2012: 85–88; Kulcsár & Yum 2012: 198; Mosco 2004: 172). The cyber-attacks on Estonia (2007)[4] enriched the success story of e-Estonia with a heroic nuance; they demonstrated that the Estonian paperless governing system cannot be fatally destroyed, and, what is more – after this violation, the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence was established in Tallinn (Jansen 2012: 88). As indicated above, those cyber-utopian visions also have an important role in Estonian inwardly oriented identity discourse (at the official but also vernacular level). It is even possible to observe a certain Estonian e-patriotism.[5] One of the central tropes of that kind of self-description is pointedly summarized by Aro Velmet (2015: 139), who claims that Estonian e-patriotism is built on Jakob-Hurt's[6] famous national-romantic idea that Estonians cannot be a great nation in population but they can be a great nation in spirit. A contemporary version of this formulation is articulated around the topic of e-residency: in 2025, small Estonia will have 10 million e-residents[7] (ibid.). A similar frame of self-description also applies to the idea of spreading Estonian successful public IT solutions (ID-card system; e-elections, e-school, system of digital prescriptions, etc.) around the world. Other important signifiers of the discourse of Estonian e-success[8] are: Skype, paperless bureaucracy, e-healthcare system, wide Wi-Fi coverage, generation of the Tiger's Leap (and general IT-savviness of Estonians); Toomas Hendrik Ilves as the President of Twitter,[9] the world record in start-ups per person.[10] This listing could be continued with a number of aspects but I believe that it already demonstrates that basically everything connected with the Internet and innovative digital solutions carries strong positive connotations in Estonia – it is understood as something progressive and liberating.

It is important to note that techno-utopian explanations often follow cybernetic-informational epistemology, i.e., people tend to identify themselves and the new IT-driven society by relying on the features that are used for describing hypermedia; for example, a nonhierarchical or decentralized nature, interactivity, etc. (Boyer 2010: 79–80; see Madisson & Ventsel 2015: 9). Those characteristics are rounded with a strong axiological charge; they are seen as a guarantee of civil liberties and progress. It is assumed that the interaction opportunities, provided by the Internet, revolutionarily grow the potentiality of deliberative democracy and facilitate *two-way* or *bottom-up communication* between active citizens and state authorities (Holmes 2005: 9, 84). Also, it is believed that thanks to the experience in online-participation and content creation, a new generation of citizens is developing who will end the era of social hierarchies that are characteristic of rigid military systems and bureaucracy, and replace them with horizontal power relations based on shared interests and voluntariness (Mosco 2004: 89; Turner 2006: 38). Utopian visions see the Internet as an alternative public sphere or forum, which is relatively unspoiled by censoring authorities or commercial interests; thus different interest groups can spread their voices there, and individuals navigating the Internet can be part of enriching dialogues between various viewpoints (that are sometimes even contrary to their own worldview) (Atton & Hamilton 2008: 81; McQuail 2003: 111; Ballinger 2011: 175–177). Great expectations have been placed on e-governance that should make legislative processes more transparent, allow cooperation with different grassroots organizations, and widen the possibilities of communication between citizens and representatives in the political system (Mosco 2004: 113; Söderberg 2013: 1282).

In Estonia, the discourse of e-democracy, especially the topic of inclusive or horizontal politics, reached one of its peaks just a few months before Snowden's leakages. At the beginning of 2012, there took place a huge social resentment and resistance to the Estonian government's plan to ratify the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA)[11], which was compromising the popular idea of the free Internet. The wave of public protests – which were extraordinarily active and crowded for Estonia – showed that the topic really resonated with contemporary Estonian identity. In the second half of 2012, the public debates about the transparency and inclusiveness of Estonian governance intensified. As a result of this discussion, 17 citizens-activists and academicians made a public statement, called *Harta 12* (Charter 12), which demanded that serious steps be made in order to have a healthy democracy and civil society in Estonia. As a result of this public statement, President Ilves assembled a meeting of the activists of civil society, political parties, opinion leaders, and political scientists; the meeting was organized in the Ice Cellar building in Kadriorg on November 21,

2012.[12] In that meeting, it was decided that proposals for improving Estonian democracy and governing system would be developed through the combined efforts of the general public and then submitted to the Riigikogu (the Parliament of Estonia). The submitting process was organized via a *crowd-sourcing* platform Rahvakogu (People's Assembly)[13] and everybody who had an Estonian ID was welcomed to attend.

E-democracy and other components of the success story of the e-state have a significant role in contemporary identity discourse of Estonia but it would be unbalanced to say that there only exist optimistic understandings about the social outcomes of the contemporary ICT. The following sub-chapter introduces the dystopian visions of the computer era and demonstrates that the worries that arose in the reception of PRISM were not created from scratch.

DYSTOPIAN VISIONS OF THE COMPUTER ERA

It seems that dystopian understandings of an ICT-driven society are rather peripheral in public discussions. Those visions are often mentioned in the context of subcultures that share left-wing, in some cases extreme left, views (e.g. radical environmentalists, anti-globalization movement, anarcho-primitivism, etc.). This may also be the reason why there is not much academic research concentrating on that topic (see Fisher & Wright 2001; Fuchs 2013; Sandywell 2006). Usually, the dystopian visions of society seem to re-articulate the gloomy scenarios presented in William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer* (1984). Namely, they describe a future world where the triumph of computers has increased the inequality between big corporations / IT-experts and ordinary people, where private information has become an oxymoron, and where people have been alienated from basic human values and from face-to-face communication (Bell 2001: 22; Dodge & Kitchin 2001: 230; Fisher & Wright 2001; Sandywell 2006: 42). The techno-dystopian discourse also relies on tropes of surveillance society; for example, the idea of global authoritarian control (NWO[14]), Big Brother (see Sandywell 2006: 48), and of masses of brainwashed citizens.

From time to time, we can observe in the Estonian media the articulation that sees the Internet and all kinds of smart technology as the main cause of social problems. For example, there is an understanding that heavy social media usage is turning adolescents uneasy and uncommunicative in offline interactions; or that the generation that is used to *liking*, *sharing*, and other phatic activities is no longer able to think analytically and see the big picture.[15] Also, it is believed that the elderly people are more marginalized and discarded from social life because of the overall massive usage of computers.[16] Sometimes the system of e-elections is questioned, especially the aspect of reliability and

security.[17] Also, the projects of e-participation (e.g. Rahvakogu) are discredited for their relatively opaque and populist agendas.[18] But in comparison to e-success stories or cyber-democracy, the dystopian discourse is much narrower in Estonia. It is related to concrete age-groups, or specific issues, while the techno-utopian visions are articulating proportionally more essential and comprehensive social changes.

The analysis of the reception of PRISM allows for shedding some light on the expansion of dystopian explanations (that usually originate in the socio-cultural periphery) into the dominant explanations of PRISM. The Estonian example offers rich and concentrated material for analyzing how cultural fears resonate with techno-utopian visions, because e-discourse has a focal role in the future-oriented Estonian identity.

THE RECEPTION OF PRISM IN THE ESTONIAN MEDIA

To grasp representations from professional and alternative media,[19] I analyzed opinion articles of the main newspapers and popular blog postings as well as the comments that followed both. I studied 35 opinion articles and 140 comments that were explicitly discussing leakages by Edward Snowden, from the mass electronic surveillance data mining program PRISM or the NSA. From the mainstream media, I analyzed articles and comments from *Postimees* (The Courier, as the biggest Estonian daily newspaper), *Eesti Ekspress* (Estonian Express, as the biggest Estonian weekly newspaper), and *Delfi* (as the biggest Estonian Internet-based news portal, which has the most popular forum for reader comments). I also analyzed postings of two blogs – *Memokraat* and *Persona in fieri* – as representative examples of the alternative media. I decided to focus on those particular blogs because they concentrated on the topic of PRISM most explicitly, and also because they are popular among the readers who are interested in contemporary information politics. The major focuses of analysis were: the dominant topic of the representation and key-signifiers; the attribution of agency; and the usage of tropes. In order to explain the general socio-cultural mechanisms that were framing the reception of PRISM, I synthesized the semiotics of fear, media sociology, and cultural studies.

ARTICULATION OF THREATS AND FEAR

PRISM-like surveillance technologies are rounded with a feeling of opacity and absence of control, and that kind of feeling of disorganization is organically connected with the articulation of collective threats and fears. It seems that

already at first sight, the text corpus that surrounds PRISM is dominated by the explicit indication of the feelings of anxiety and fear. Hereby, I would like to outline just a couple of opening sentences of an opinion article:

> *Snowden's revelations documentarily confirmed to us what we have always been afraid of. Namely, that large countries are very comprehensively watching the so-called free Internet and by doing that, they do not hesitate to violate the most basic human rights*. (Põder 2013)

> *Yesterday Glenn Greenwald published another article in* The Guardian *about the leakages of 29-year-old Edward Snowden. This time the story was terrifying. Very terrifying, and it transcended the former leakage many times*. (Turk 2013)

Yuri Lotman (2007: 108–110) has claimed that ambiguous or poorly explained social situations are normally accompanied by a rapid increase in the mythology of threats. Almost all texts present PRISM and its social impacts as something alarming and at least potentially dangerous. Different authors articulate various fears connected with mass surveillance technologies. The general rule that I detected is that authors publishing in the mainstream media talk about possible threats and their future scenarios are sketched in quite an abstract manner. The alternative media reflects threats of surveillance much more explicitly; dangers are often seen as something that is already significantly affecting the current developments and sometimes they are also connected with (unpleasant) social events from the past. Fears take much more drastic and clearer shape in the representations of the alternative media; they find their reference in the sense of specific enemies, settings, and victims. In the following, I will outline the most prevalent ways in which different articles and comments articulate fears connected with PRISM.

Phobophobia: The Fear of Fear

In some interpretations, Snowden's leakages and their socio-cultural impacts are rounded with a certain meta-fear, i.e. phobophobia – a concern about the devastating impacts of the collective feeling of fear and vulnerability. Phobophobia is built upon an understanding that society lacks the competence to solve an acute problem and the present situation can only deteriorate because it is assumed that the general atmosphere of anxiety and disorder will make people behave irrationally and there is a danger that they become easily manipulated. Several authors are convinced that there is a lack of experts who are able and/or willing to adequately explain the social implications that contemporary surveillance

technologies have for ordinary people. Neeme Korv has noted that, in order to maintain and protect democratic values, it is highly essential to orientate in the informational chaos that is surrounding the topic of PRISM. He also mentions that there are not many people who explain this topic in a clear manner: "We have no other choice than to rely on those who are skilled and capable of explaining the ongoing events as simply as possible" (Korv 2013). Urve Eslas (2013) points out that even the world's leading technical journalists are incompetent at explaining the social impacts of PRISM. People also express concern that the general lack of knowledge about the topic can lead to superficial and destructive discussions which may facilitate the way to biased spokesmen and populist rhetoric. Some authors point out that an uncontrollable creation of black and white interpretations and conspiracy theories is taking place and producing ironic and distrustful attitudes towards the establishment and free information society in general (see Tuisk 2013). Authors are worried that the emerged 'headlessness' may paralyze the perception of more important topics; for example, as people are panicking about Big Data, they may not notice the threats posed by Meta Data, which may have more serious consequences (see Filippov 2013).

Generally, the discourse of phobophobia places the possibilities of overcoming this informational chaos in the hands of hypothetical experts. Those experts have to be IT-geniuses who also possess knowledge about international relations, military systems, and lobby organizations. And, what is more, they should not be motivated by self-profit and they should be extremely skilled in communicating those intricate aspects in a way that is understandable to the so-called ordinary people. At the same time, there is a tendency to stress a certain responsibility that Estonians (as an IT-savvy nation) have in the context of refuting the destructive attitudes towards the ICT. It is pointed out that our IT-experts should contribute to creating more transparent IT-solutions and also to profound analyses of the ongoing situation. For instance, Silver Meikar (2013) notes: "As a leading country in the Freedom House's annual index of Internet freedom, Estonia has to take the role of an example and show that transparent and honest governing is possible".

Some interpreters see that the atmosphere that connects contemporary ICT with the atmosphere of anxiety and clutter is created by a spiteful secret cabal. It is claimed that the panic that followed Snowden's leakages was consciously cultivated by media institutions and the main goal thereof was to incite the fear of terrorism, which would make it possible to legalize even more exhaustive surveillance actions. For example, one blogger writes:

> *The media is producing objects of popular hatred used as building stones for the Republic of Hatred, which is based on the fear of an individual to fit into the category of the hate object. It forces citizens to be infinitely loyal to*

> *the existing regime and to embrace the banal truths that the mainstream media offers.* (Persona in fieri 2013)[20]

That kind of understanding about the connections of the media and the malicious elite will be more thoroughly explained in a sub-chapter that talks about the NWO conspiracies.

The fear of jeopardizing global democracy and/or human rights of individual citizens

The idea that the opaque surveillance politics is making some countries drastically more privileged in the world arena is massively articulated. Authors are also worried that the power of some interest groups and/or countries has grown exponentially and is undermining the trust in democracy and international law. In most cases it is understood that the USA (CIA, NSA, Pentagon), some lobby organizations, and IT corporations are now strongly dominating the world's information politics. For example, Siim Tuisk (2013) has noted:

> *One must have permission to intercept the citizens of the allied states, and there must be some control over the issuance of those permits; but the present system relies on secret court and secret decisions and on senators who should exercise surveillance. We are not given a full picture of who and when is allowed to intercept*.

It is believed that the surveillance departments have become uncontrollable in the sense of collecting and archiving information and the international law is unable to regulate their actions because they are moving in juridical no man's land. The question posed by one author promptly concludes one of the general directions in the public discussions in the Estonian media: "If we have to choose between the benevolence of the almighty judge and the power of the law then we must choose the latter, mustn't we?" (Lobjakas 2013) In many cases, the agency behind PRISM is referred to, based on the metaphor of Big Brother. Also, many other keywords from the popular discourse of dystopia have become activated, for example, *thought police*, *mind control*, *panopticon-shaped society*, *secret eye*, etc. One important layer of this discourse is drawing parallels with the memories of Soviet intelligence and propaganda services; for instance, people talk about gumshoe men[21], spies[22], and the KGB archives of the new era. One of the authors sketches vivid associations with deportation:

> *On the level of information technology, the compilation of the list of deportation may be reduced to keyword search, separation of the suspicious*

> *group, and to the logistical question of how many containers are needed*. (Irve 2013)

Similar threats are also reflected when different authors try to map the influence that surveillance technologies have on ordinary citizens. As one may expect, on this level, the authors are identifying with possible victims and they outline their fears more expressively. The most common issue is that the privacy of the individual (as one key value of democracy) is seen as undermined. Lobjakas (2013), for example, mentions: "PRISM guided us to the era of post-privacy". Another author worries that all procedures that were previously protected with confidentiality, for instance, personal files and letters, financial transactions, communication between doctor and patient or between lawyer and client, are now disclosed (Turk 2013). In the most pessimistic views, surveillance technologies are understood as something potentially life-threatening. One internet commenter cynically writes:

> *If we accept that drones may use data from our computers for deciding upon the execution of random people whose guilt has not been proven in court, then we are accepting a world where men in black masks organize raids and people disappear forever only because they said something bad about the establishment*.[23]

The linkage between drones and the surveillance program turned out to be quite popular; namely, associations were drawn with the counter-terrorist operations in the Middle East and North Africa, where drone attacks were used. In the context of PRISM, drones are associated with the gathering of secret information but also with the execution of dangerous individuals and with the intimidation of people. Drones may fulfill a function similar to that of mystical black helicopters in conspiracy beliefs, which were especially popular in the 1990s. Alasdair Spark has pointed out that the image of a black helicopter represented the agents of malignant state power, acting covertly. Black helicopter theories made it possible to express the fears about the capabilities of powerful military technologies (Spark 2003a: 125–126). Drones resonate with similar anxieties but as they are consumer goods that are potentially available for a vast segment of people, the relations between drones and evil state authorities are articulated more vaguely.

In both cases authors share an opinion that the essence of the surveillance problem is located outside *us as Estonians, as people of a small country, as Europeans*. It is understood that we are the ones who are harmed and manipulated by the external forces. As already implied, central agency is ascribed to the USA (the state and big corporations) and to IT-geniuses who comprehend the surveillance technology. Only a few interpreters see a slight chance that Estonia or the so-called ordinary people can improve the present situation.

The fear that PRISM is a sign of New World Order's conspiracy

An important center for the reception of PRISM, especially in the alternative media but also in some newspaper articles, is a fear of conspiracy. In the broadest sense, conspiracy can be defined as malicious actions of a covert group, which influence the development of an important social event or series of events.[24] The topic of PRISM almost 'naturally' generates interpretations that refer to conspiracy, because after Snowden's leakages, it became widely known that a covert surveillance system exists that affects a large number of people. But in order to call an interpretation a conspiracy theory, one more feature must be present: it is an understanding that a secretly acting group has *consciously evil* intentions (Madisson 2014: 287). Usually conspirators are presented as morally corrupt, motivated by the wish of establishing absolute power; the desire for limitless self-profit is also highlighted as one of the main motivators of the secret cabal (see Ballinger 2011: 268; Fenster 2008: 101; Knight 2008: 176).

In the reception that connects PRISM with conspiracy, I detected two tendencies: 1) some authors refer to a possible conspiracy; 2) others are convinced that a vast and long-term conspiracy exists and is already determining important social events. Authors publishing in the mainstream media are afraid that the USA has created a mass surveillance system which is used for lucrative interests and for gaining disproportionately large power. This kind of interpretation sees malicious intentions of the USA in a quite narrow network of connections, and it is usually associated only with a secret self-profitable surveillance system, which has been achieved via making covert deals with big IT-companies. We can also observe that kind of indication to a possible conspiracy in some of the representations analyzed in the previous sub-chapter. The harmful effect of conspiracy is usually (as a threat to democracy or to human rights) seen on the level of possibility and it is projected into an indefinite future. Normally those interpretations do not explicate that the USA has already significantly harmed other countries. It is important that sometimes the indication of conspiracy is done in a knowingly humorous or exaggerative manner; for instance, one author points out: "Today we do not have a clear answer for which purpose Yankees are gathering and storing data. Conspiracy theorists are having days full of inspiration" (Luts 2013). Another author notes:

> *In the world struggle for power is intensifying; on one side of the front line are those who write the code, on the other side are those who write the laws, i.e., global web-giants versus countries. But what if this struggle is illusory and the opponents are making agreements with one another? We will hear about the secret protocol later or our children will. I hope it is all a conspiracy theory*. (Korv 2013)

Some other interpretations see PRISM as a direct result of an extensive conspiracy, and those interpretations prevail in the alternative media but also in some newspaper articles. PRISM is understood as part of a malignant New World Order (NWO) conspiracy that has intentionally catalyzed public problems and catastrophes.[25] In short, the NWO conspiracy implies that a malignant grouping has systematically acted for a long time and it has been absorbed into a global economic and political elite and also into the mainstream media, education, and military systems. The goal of this conspiracy is to create a global centralized regime – a totalitarian One World Government – and to gain an absolute control over the movements and even over the thoughts of ordinary citizens (Ballinger 2011: 64; Madisson & Ventsel 2015: 18; Spark 2003b: 537). Some sources of the alternative media interpret PRISM as part of a secret plot, started centuries ago; they connect it, for example, with the systemic actions of the Illuminati.[26] Also, it is quite a widespread tendency to connect the surveillance system with the Bilderberg Group.[27] PRISM is quite often referred to as having direct relations with the September 11 attacks and/or Boston Marathon bombing. It is believed that the terrorist attacks were an inside job of Western conspirators and it was needed for legitimating some further actions, namely, the Iraq War and the legalization of PRISM. This tendency of interpretation is illustrated by the following posting:

> *They want to keep power in their safe hands and that is why PRISM is needed: it makes it easier to maintain the power. Terrorism is a good excuse for developing the system and justifying the expenses. As the Boston bombing shows, some capital injection for developing PRISM is still needed*.[28]

Another commenter writes that "9/11 was not the thing that they present to us, it was 100% fake-terror, an inside job".[29] Sometimes it is indicated that the cyber-attacks that took place in 2007 were a similar inside job as well. It is believed that the covert aim of organizing the attacks was to create NATO's Cyber Defence Centre which allows for a more sophisticated surveillance over the Estonian population. As one of the commenters has put it:

> *After the cyber "attacks" of 2007, Estonia has had a chance to enjoy the status of a star of cyber defense, and also NATO's Cyber Defence Centre was brought here. In the Western information security circles rumors have been encircling for a long time that NATO's Cyber Defence Centre has had a big role in creating the Stuxnet. What can we actually be proud of?*[30]

A tendency to use quotation marks while talking about terrorist assaults, the danger of terrorism or cyber-attacks is very common in the discourse of the NWO, as it is used for ridiculing the official explanations.

It is important to note that the mainstream media is seen as the key-supporter of establishing a dystopian surveillance society. Among other things, the media is accused of covering up the actual facts about 9/11; of causing the general atmosphere of fear and anxiety (see the chapter on phobophobia) that allowed for justifying the creation of PRISM; of inadequate and misleading media coverage of the activities of the NSA; and of demonizing Snowden.[31] Although in the reception that sees PRISM as part of the NWO, the main agency is ascribed to the decadent elite, the authors perceive themselves in a remarkably higher position than the ignorant masses of so-called ordinary citizens. They feel that they have not been influenced by the systemic brainwash and have a privilege to think independently, and see, at least partly, through the manipulations of conspirators. Conspiracy theorists hope that soon the secret manipulations can be revealed because the present situation abounds in the signs of a significant breakthrough. Namely, some authors stress that thanks to Snowden's leakages and various channels of the alternative media (which introduce the idea of the NWO), people are becoming aware of the secret manipulations of mainstream structures and getting more skeptical. For example, one of the comments reads: "People are becoming more and more awake and today you cannot pass with the mainstream-shit as you did at the time of 9/11 and in the past, and I am only glad about it".[32] Similarly, another commenter points out: "Luckily people are increasingly awakening, reading the news of the alternative media and making up their own minds about what to believe and what not".[33]

PRISM AND THE SEMIOTIC MECHANISMS OF FEAR GENERATION

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the reflection of Snowden's leakages is dominated by the discourse of fear, which connects PRISM to instant threats but also to some abstract dangers. In the following section, I will try to explain what the main types of meaning-making are that those interpretations relied on and what kind of socio-cultural causes led to the creation of that kind of discourse of fear. According to Yuri Lotman, the things that are new and placed outside tradition have increased symbolism. The semiotization of things creates the mythology of things (Lotman 2007: 87). People start to see more in the ICT than just technology: technology is contextualized as a sign of prosperity or disaster. Vincent Mosco (2004: 32) has pointed out that contemporary ICT embodies a sense of liminality, as people tend to perceive that they are living in an era of changing paradigms or ruptures. They feel that the innovation has not actually achieved its complete effect but the present situation is full of all

kinds of signs of that new era. The constant articulation of technology-driven social changes or even ruptures does not allow for concentrating on the other aspects of social reality, which would add some historical and socio-cultural dimensions to those visions (ibid.: 49). Mosco's observation has been developed further by Martin Hirst in the context of the discourse of *Twitter/Facebook revolution* or *Revolution 2.0.*[34] He claims that the perception of the very strong social significance of ICT-innovations allows people to get stuck in their bias of convenience and leads to ignoring the complexities, controversies, and contingent aspects of the issue (Hirst 2012: 7). Albrecht Hofheinz (2011: 1423) has conceptualized that kind of continuous search for political utopia through the next generation of technology as a NEXTOPIA. People's interpretational horizon gets limited by a preoccupation with the new, and we tend to hail the progressive nature of the ICT without placing it in the context of historical developments and human agency.

The discourse of e-Estonia was also characterized by the NEXTOPIA-tendency: the ICT was understood as a revolutionary means for facilitating democracy, civil society, transparent governing, etc. In many cases, PRISM's reception demonstrated the reversal of those utopian visions and the replacement with dystopian understandings. It is important to note that the perception of the significance of the social impacts of technologies remained relatively constant in both cases; the positive charge of meaning was just replaced with a negative one. For example, the important keywords of the e-success story (e.g. the NATO Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre, e-healthcare system, paperless bureaucracy) started to signify a hidden danger – a wolf in sheep's clothing. The constituent topics of the discourse of e-democracy, such as horizontal power-relations, freedom of expression, and transparent governing were, in many cases, replaced with the images that are familiar from the description of totalitarian societies. People started spreading the vision that the ICT was rather undermining democratic freedoms (e.g. the privacy of the citizen) and contemporary information politics (on a national and also international level) is anything but clear and unbiased.

It is noteworthy that the socio-cultural meanings of PRISM were often created by expressing modern versions of the fear discourse about the Soviet state surveillance. Eda Kalmre has pointed out that the image of the KGB, which is skillfully and malignantly using the newest achievements of technology, has not lost its topicality in contemporary Estonia. The old fears are often interwoven with the documentary material about the Soviet security agencies and emotional memories of the more or less personal contacts with the KGB (Kalmre 2013: 50). One important center of the vernacular discourse about the Soviet panopticon is the understanding that via the surveillance technology the state is omnipres-

ent in the private activities of the citizens (Astapova 2015: 55). These kinds of associations about blurring the private and public spheres were frequently activated in the reception of PRISM. Many interpreters were drawing parallels between contemporary ICT and interception technologies (especially phone tapping) and violent practices of the KGB. Some authors also relied on the fictional dystopias, for example, Huxley's *Brave New World* or Orwell's *1984*. These kinds of interpretations often assumed that the contemporary surveillance regime is reaching so far that it can actually control and even direct the thoughts of the individuals, and expressed the idea of an emerging post-private age. In addition, it is important to stress that often the explanations that extensively articulate various worries and fears are occasionally interlaced with ironic and jocose stories that ridicule the surveillance anxieties (Astapova 2015: 55). Also, in the (public) PRISM reception some authors were articulating a connection with dystopian regimes in a hypothetical and exaggerating manner, but some others seriously recognized the alarming signs of the creation of a totalitarian surveillance society.

Lotman has pointed out that one reason why substantial technological innovations are causing distress and skepticism is that they increase the unpredictability of social developments. Another significant factor is the unprincipled nature of new technologies, i.e., they can serve anyone's interests (Lotman 2007: 76). In the context of mapping the social impacts of PRISM, one important tendency was the expression of the lack of knowledge. Sometimes it took the shape of phobophobia – people expressed worries about the atmosphere of fear itself. It was believed that contemporary ICT and its covert unpleasant 'extras' were not entirely understandable for so-called ordinary citizens, and also for the IT-experts and technology journalists. In addition, it was indicated that this topic is also out of the reach and control of international law. Leonidas Donskis has elaborated a concept of *technocratic demonology* to describe such tendencies of interpretation. The understandings dominated by technocratic demonology tend to see intricate technological/biological manipulations (that are principally unintelligible for normal people) behind unpleasant social phenomena. It is felt that the people who are affected by those manipulations do not have any possibility to resist them (Donskis 2002: 115). As PRISM's reception has demonstrated, the contemporary surveillance technologies were often mapped by using the image of Big Brother or a faceless Power which embodies the imperceptible power and control. As this power does not have an easily localizable center of reference, the image of Big Brother is causing feelings of incapacity, weakness, and fear of a totalitarian future among its interpreters (see Sandywell 2006: 47–48).

Donskis (2002: 115) has outlined that it is believed that the evil technocratic forces can be beaten only by relying on the guidance of experts who are aware of the supreme forms of technological knowledge. The indication of such hypothetical experts was also present in the context of the reception of PRISM. People sensed that they could not be sure of the benevolent intentions of the IT-geniuses and they identified with the position of a helpless victim (ibid.: 116). However, not all the authors were taking a passive position – some of them stated that they (and IT-savvy Estonians in general) were responsible for a detailed ascertainment of the social impacts of PRISM; for example, in the context of performing and mediating expert analyses, contributing to an international discussion about legal aspects, etc. On the other hand, there was a considerable proportion of authors who decided not to devote their attention to the aforementioned nuances (as evil code-writers have designed it in a way that is not graspable to ordinary people). They rather focused on opening up various aspects of a malicious secret society that was seen as responsible for creating the mass surveillance system.

Conspiracy theory is quite a universal framework that makes it possible to explain the main causes of an unpleasant social event, to map how it is connected with more distant and closer historical developments, and who the leading charters behind it are (see Madisson 2014). The hallmark of the conspiracy theory is that everything is perceived to be connected, meaningful, and motivated by the evil intentions of the conspirators (Melley 2002: 69). One of the essential cultural functions of the conspiracy theories is to extenuate the frustration that is caused by sensing the complex, uncontrollable, and unpredictable nature of the ongoing social processes. In the context of PRISM, I observed the creation of the NWO conspiracy theories that talked about the creation of the global totalitarian regime. Those interpretations placed the surveillance program in a causal chain with the September 11 attacks, the Boston Marathon bombing, and the systemic spreading of fear and anxiety in the mainstream media.

CONCLUSION

This article showed that the articulation of the social impacts of the surveillance program was significantly affected by technologically determinist self-descriptions prevailing in Estonian culture. E-discourse was (and actually still is) one of the most important cornerstones of Estonian identity. A belief that new technologies had mainly positive and innovative impacts (e.g. e-democracy, free movement of information, freedom of speech) was highly questioned in the light of Snowden's leakages. PRISM's reception demonstrated that in many

aspects the techno-utopian sphere of meaning was inverted and replaced with a dystopian one. The contemporary surveillance technology was interpreted by drawing parallels with keywords from the descriptions of totalitarian societies. People started generating associations with Soviet memories (e.g. activities of the KGB and censoring), fictional dystopias, and contemporary NWO conspiracy theories.

At the time of writing the article, two and a half years had passed since Snowden's leakages, and now it is possible to see that the aforementioned dystopian visions have fallen back into the periphery of public discussions. The articulation of the e-success story still has a significant role in Estonian national branding and in self-descriptions of various groups and enterprises, but it is not dominated by the topics of e-democracy and the emancipation of active citizens. It rather talks about e-Estonia as an economic Nirvana and the key components of that discourse are e-consumption, quick bureaucratic processes, and cost-effectiveness (Velmet 2015: 141).

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NOTES

[1] Edward Joseph Snowden is an American computer professional, who worked for the United States National Security Agency (NSA). He became world-famous in May 2013, when he leaked information about the top-secret mass surveillance system PRISM to journalists of *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian*. His revelations caused an international scandal and led to heated public discussions about covert mass surveillance, government secrecy, and information privacy (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Snowden, last accessed on May 15, 2017).

[2] PRISM is a clandestine surveillance program, under which the NSA collects internet communications from the major US internet companies (e.g. Microsoft, Yahoo!, Google, Facebook, YouTube, Skype, Apple). PRISM was launched in 2007 under Bush administration and it was connected with the Protect America Act (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/PRISM_(surveillance_program, last accessed on May 15, 2017).

[3] Several studies have outlined that technology journalists (e.g. from the *Wired* magazine) are eminently the most prevalent creators of techno-utopian interpretation (see Boyer 2010; Hirst 2012; Hofheinz 2011).

[4] The cyber-attacks that began on April 27, 2007, in the context of the disagreement between Estonia and Russia about the relocation of the Bronze Soldier (Soviet World War II war memorial) and paralyzed many important websites of public institutions and private companies, including the Estonian Parliament, ministries, newspapers, broadcasters, and banks.

[5] See Velmet 2015; Hinsberg 2015.

[6] Jakob Hurt (1839–1907) was a prominent Estonian folklorist, theologian, and linguist, who played a significant role in Estonian national awakening.

[7] E-residency of Estonia is a status by which non-residents can gain a secure digital identity issued by Estonia, (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/E-residency_of_Estonia, last accessed on May 15, 2017). The main authors of that vision (Taavi Kotka, Ruth Annus, and Siim Sikkut) hope that in ten years Estonia, a small country with 1.3 million population, will have ten million e-residents (see http://uudised.err.ee/v/eesti/4455dc8a-824c-434a-92c3-27af94202806, last accessed on May 15, 2017).

[8] The following articles offer quite concentrated examples of the success story of e-Estonia (see http://www.bbc.com/news/business-22317297; http://www.economist.com/blogs/schumpeter/2013/07/estonias-technology-cluster, both last accessed on May 15, 2017).

[9] In 2013, American media-edition *BuzzFeed* nominated Estonian President Ilves the President of Twitter (see https://www.buzzfeed.com/maxseddon/the-president-of-twitter?utm_term=.gdpJnbBYpX#.hgJYEaBAGW, last accessed on May 15, 2017); this event received quite lively feedback in Estonian media and it fortified the image of Ilves as a leading figure of e-Estonia. Ilves has played a significant part in articulating the success story of e-Estonia from its very beginning. He was one of the main initiators of the Tiger's Leap program when he was Estonian ambassador in the USA in the 1990s. As president (Ilves was Estonian president in 2006–2016), he actively participated in discussing various cyber-issues and thus was called the spokesman of cyber-security.

[10] See http://www.economist.com/blogs/schumpeter/2013/07/estonias-technology-cluster, last accessed on May 15, 2017.

[11] The Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA) is a multinational treaty for the purpose of establishing international standards for the enforcement of intellectual property rights. ACTA aims to establish an international legal framework for targeting counterfeit goods, generic medicines, and copyright infringement on the Internet, and would create a new governing body outside existing forums, such as the World Trade Organization, the World Intellectual Property Organization, and the United Nations (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anti-Counterfeiting_Trade_Agreement, last accessed on May 1, 2017). ACTA's ratification discussions were accompanied by heated debates in Estonia and they led to crowded public demonstrations in the winter of 2012 (see more about ACTA's reception in Estonia in Madisson & Ventsel 2015).

[12] See https://www.president.ee/en/president/institutions/147-estonian-cooperation-assembly/8313-ice-cellar-initiative/layout-institution.html, last accessed on July 3, 2017.

[13] See https://www.rahvakogu.ee/, last accessed on May 15, 2017.

[14] NWO is an abbreviation of New World Order. It is used for referring to a systemic global conspiracy that aims to create a global centralized regime: Totalitarian One World Government.

[15] See, e.g., http://www.diplomaatia.ee/artikkel/kuidas-internet-meid-rumalaks-muudab/, last accessed on May 15, 2017.

[16] See, e.g., http://tarbija24.postimees.ee/548092/kihnu-kummekond-eakat-tegid-arvutiga-lahemat-tutvust, last accessed on May 15, 2017.

[17] See, e.g., http://www.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/eesti/savisaar-paremparteid-voitsid-valimised-e-valimiste-tulemusi-voltsides?id=66073466, last accessed on May 15, 2017.

[18] See, e.g., http://arvamus.postimees.ee/1180468/andrei-korobeinik-rahvakogu-2-0, last accessed on May 15, 2017.

[19] This article relies on the definition of the alternative media that is elaborated by Chris Atton and James Hamilton, who stress that the alternative media proceeds "from dissatisfaction not only with the mainstream coverage of certain issues and topics, but also [...] emphasizes alternatives to, inter alia, conventions of news sources and representations; the inverted pyramid of news texts; the hierarchical and capitalized economy of commercial journalism; the professional, elite basis of journalism as a practice; the professional norm of objectivity; and the subordinate role of audience as receiver. Alternative media, at least its ideal form, is produced outside mainstream media institutions and networks" (Atton & Hamilton 2008).

[20] See also http://ekspress.delfi.ee/arvamus/hans-h-luik-juba-selgus-et-usa-vilepuhuja-snowden-on-nohik-ja-friik?id=66279302, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[21] An equivalent to the Estonian word *nuhk*. Gumshoe man is "an old slang term for a detective or investigator (police-affiliated or private). Shoes in the late 1800s were made of gum rubber – the soft-soled precursors of the modern sneaker. The phrase 'to gumshoe' meant to sneak around quietly as if wearing gumshoes" (see http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=gumshoe, last accessed on May 16, 2017).

[22] In Estonian in this context the term *koputaja* (knocker) is used. It refers to a citizen who is secretly gathering information about the people around him or her (e.g. at work or at school) and passing it on to the KGB.

[23] See http://ekspress.delfi.ee/news/paevauudised/andrei-hvostov-vilepuhujad-ja-tapjad roonid.d?id=66587085&com=1&no=0&s=1, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[24] I agree with the scholars of conspiracy theories who claim that sometimes conspiracies happen and thus it is possible that some conspiracy theories prove correct (see, e.g., Birchall 2006: 34). But I also underline that the aim of my research is not to decide upon the truth-value of conspiracy theories but rather to analyze how those explanations are constructed.

[25] I have to emphasize here that the reception that mapped PRISM as a part of conspiracy is not coherent, authors stress different and sometimes even controversial aspects, and views also differ in their degree of radicalism.

[26] See, e.g., a comment from July 5, 2013 (15:29) to the article at http://ekspress.delfi.ee/kuum/hans-h-luik-usa-luure-voimsam-presidendist-voimsam-kohtust?id=66389498&reg=0, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[27] The Bilderberg Group, established in 1954, involves European and North American political elite, experts from industry, finance, academia, and the media. See, e.g., http://personainfieri.wordpress.com/2013/06/22/liberalismi-hauakaevajad/, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[28] See a comment from June 13, 2013 (12:36) to the article at http://ekspress.delfi.ee/arvamus/janek-luts-george-orwell-ma-ju-hoiatasin?id=66280568, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[29] A comment from August 15, 2013 (11:52) to the article at http://ekspress.delfi.ee/kuum/andrei-hvostov-vilepuhujad-ja-tapjadroonid?id=66587085, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[30] A comment from August 23, 2013 (15:12) to the article at http://ekspress.delfi.ee/kuum/andrei-hvostov-vilepuhujad-ja-tapjadroonid?id=66587085, last accessed on May 16, 2017. Stuxnet is a malicious worm-type computer virus, identified in 2010. It is believed that Stuxnet was designed to attack the computer systems of Iran.

[31] See, e.g., http://ekspress.delfi.ee/arvamus/hans-h-luik-juba-selgus-et-usa-vilepuhuja-snowden-on-nohik-ja-friik?id=66279302; http://personainfieri.wordpress.com/2013/06/22/liberalismi-hauakaevajad/, both last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[32] Comment on June 12, 2013 (20:00) to the article at http://ekspress.delfi.ee/arvamus/hans-h-luik-juba-selgus-et-usa-vilepuhuja-snowden-on-nohik-ja-friik?id=66279302, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[33] Comment on June 12, 2013 (19:54) to the article at http://ekspress.delfi.ee/arvamus/hans-h-luik-juba-selgus-et-usa-vilepuhuja-snowden-on-nohik-ja-friik?id=66279302, last accessed on May 16, 2017.

[34] The term *Twitter/Facebook revolution* or *Revolution 2.0* is used to refer to uprisings in Iran, Tunisia, and Egypt in 2009–2011. It is often believed that the driving force of those events was social networking sites.

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