

## **The September 11 Attacks on the US in the New Interactive Media Space in Estonia**

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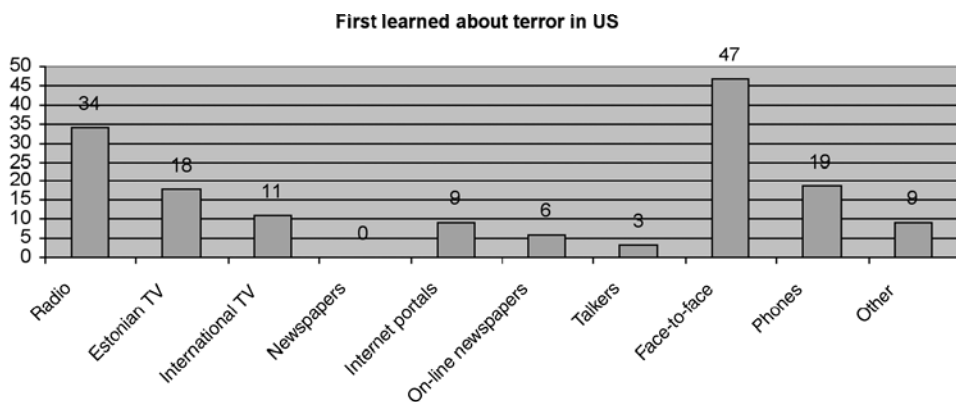
**ABSTRACT** *This paper examines how Estonians dealt with the news concerning the September 11 attacks in the new electronic communication space of the Internet. This work will summarize people's discussions on the Internet relating to the September 11 attacks by outlining the different narratives that carried people's attitudes and knowledge. The paper aims to show that the Internet was used, not only as a medium for obtaining more information about the attacks, but also as a medium for discussion and crisis support. This research is based on: (1) a survey amongst Tartu University students and follow-up semi-structured interviews; (2) an analysis of the comment pages on Estonian electronic newspapers; and (3) an analysis of three chat logs from Estonian talkers.*

**Keywords:** Internet, September 11 terrorist attacks, interpretative communities.

### **Introduction: The Internet in Estonia**

Estonians have always been very proud of their Internet usage. Estonia is in fifteenth place out of 95 countries in Europe and the surrounding area in an Internet connected hosts list.<sup>1</sup> This is the highest place among post-communist countries. Information and communication technologies (ICT) have been a rapidly developing field in Estonia. It is often thought in post-communist Estonia that high development in ICT will guarantee the nation's success in the Western world. Lauristin and Vihalemm summarized it well: 'The rapid introduction of e-society in Estonia has given a chance for a small post-communist country to make a "shortcut" to the advanced postindustrial society and to make use of the new opportunities for economic and social development'.<sup>2</sup>

The strong development of ICT in Estonia springs from several highly important and interrelated factors: a small territory and a society that is homogenous in terms of population; a supportive political, economic and cultural environment; and an openness to new trends in technology. In 2001, Estonia had a population of 1.4 million people of whom 32% (448,000) claimed to use the Internet on a monthly basis and 17% (238,000) claimed daily use. This



**Figure 1.** Where Tartu University students learned about the September 11 terror in the US.

compares with a 1997 monthly usage rate of 6% and a 1997 daily usage rate of 3.5%.<sup>3</sup>

### Overview of the Paper

This paper reports on studies of what people in Estonia talked about following the September 11 attacks. The goal is to outline different narratives and describe the attitudes and knowledge expressed therein. Both institutionalized and non-institutionalized narratives were studied. Newspaper narratives, Internet chat sites, questionnaires, and interviews were employed in this multifaceted study. The paper will show that the Internet was not only a medium for information gathering but was also a medium for discussion and support in crisis situations.

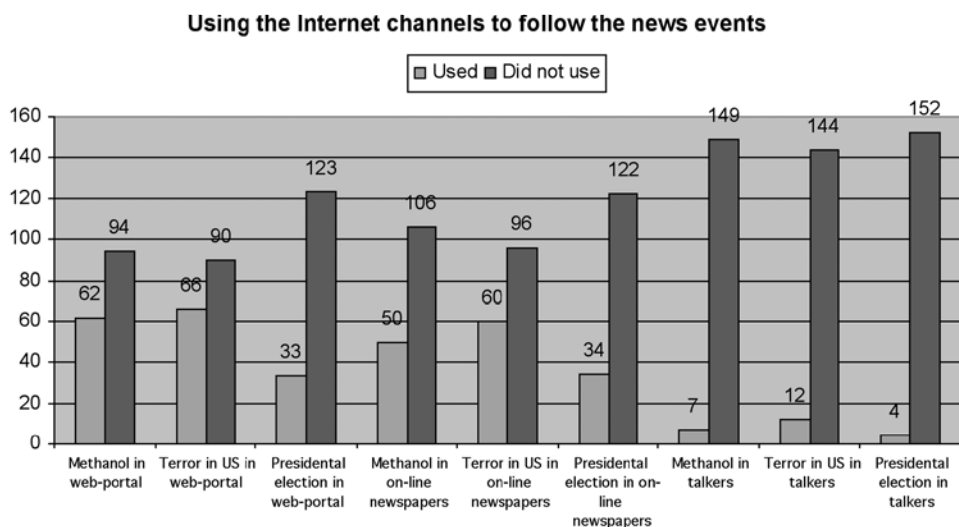
Institutionalized opinion was determined by analyzing articles published up to one week after the terrorist attacks on the United States in the two largest daily newspapers in Estonia: *Postimees* and *Eesti Päevaleht*. Both papers have news sites that are updated throughout the day.

Non-institutionalized opinion was determined by evaluating the comment pages from the same two newspapers, the log files from two Estonian Internet chat rooms, and log files from two IRC (Internet Relay Chat) chat channels. In those chat rooms and IRC channels altogether around 200 different people are represented.

A questionnaire was conducted of 156 Tartu University students who study medicine, philology, journalism and communication, and informatics. In addition, semi-structured dyadic interviews were conducted with seven students who had answered the questionnaires, that they used the Internet during the September 11 events.

### News Gathering

The questionnaire among Tartu University students indicated that the primary source for US terror attack news was person-to-person contact (Figure 1). This can be explained by the traditional crisis news diffusion patterns as this kind of news places high on the everyday communication agenda.<sup>4</sup>



**Figure 2.** Using the Internet channels to follow the news events.

Questionnaires conducted among Tartu University students followed three main events that took place in September. On September 9, the first victims of poisonous methanol drinking died in Pärnu. Altogether 68 people died and around 200 were hospitalized because of drinking methanol that they mistook for illegal alcohol. (As some comments pointed out: in percentages 68 people from 1.4 million is a larger percentage than the victims in the US.) September 11 saw the terrorist attacks on NYC, and on September 21 there were presidential elections that were won by one of the least expected candidates which caused great turmoil among the younger generation.

The Internet, however, proved to be a very important source for follow-up news. The international crisis not only caused people to search for news on the Internet (Figure 2) but also saw people turn to the Internet to discuss and comment on the news. As can be seen from the data, the use of chat rooms was also higher in the crisis situation. The same phenomena showed also from the interviews. The news of the US terrorist attacks was the most commented upon news items in the on-line editions of the newspapers *Eesti Päevaleht* and *Postimees*.

As a medium, the Internet provides an interesting opportunity for the development of an engaged and active polity. Whereas news sources for the English speaking Internet user and newspaper editors are the same and crisis situations such as the terrorist attacks require constantly updated information, Internet users can follow the news in the international media and on this basis form a discussion forum.

In contrast, the Estonian newspaper editors have to take time to translate the news. Given the continuous demand for speedy information in crisis situations, there is a noted lack of critical analysis and only space for more and more standardized news text from all kinds of sources. Active Internet users who frequently use either the comment option with newspapers or portals or participate in online chat rooms have an opportunity to develop critical and analytic approaches to news stories. They do not have to take the time to translate the news—all the news items referred to are in English but it is discussed in the

Estonian language and in the Estonian cultural space. In this case the Internet gave people the possibility of expressing themselves and to receive adequate and quick feedback to their expressions.

### **Institutionalized View on the September 11 Attack**

Online versions of Estonian newspapers are used as the reflectors of institutionalized opinions. Four general topical themes are discerned; 'National Tragedy', 'Who is to Blame?', 'New War', and 'Estonia Is Ready to Go and Help America'. Although many other topics were under discussion, these four were the most significant. Each topic is discussed below.

#### *National Tragedy*

There were a great deal of official and often propagandistic materials from the USA. Within the confines of this topic nothing serious and nothing critical is discussed, rather this topic outlines the overall reaction to the tragic events—sadness, compassion, and constant update of the events. Some headlines, for example, are:

**World mourns for the people lost in the terrorist attack in US**—people have brought flowers and candles to the highly secured embassies to mourn for the unknown number of people lost in the terrorist attack yesterday (*Postimees*, September 12, 2001).

**The Symbols of US crumbled in the dust** (*Eesti Päevaleht*, September 12, 2001).

**Since today, the world will not be the same!** . . . I think that since today, the world will not be the same—everything is changed (*Eesti Päevaleht*, September 12, 2001).

#### *Who is to Blame?*

Different approaches abound under this subheading: from quick official headlines, saying that we will hunt the guilty in some newspapers, to the extent that some newspapers even publish Nostradamus interpretations.

**Bin Laden is suspected**—The person behind the air terror attacks is thought to be one of the most feared terrorists, Osama bin Laden who lives in Afghanistan at the moment (*Postimees*, September 12, 2001).

**Internet is to blame: let's bomb the Internet Service Providers!**—Today's British newspaper *Daily Telegraph* blames the Internet in supporting terrorist attacks suggesting the bombing of Internet service providers who do not agree on banning encrypted e-mails (*Eesti Päevaleht*, September 17, 2001).

**Nostradamus's predictions: does third anti-Christ rise its head?** (*Eesti Päevaleht*, September 12, 2001).

*New War*

Within this topic many Estonian experts discuss the attack from the perspective that it could lead to a third world war. The possible WW3 is not about just killing people or a nation protecting/gaining territory, it is war against the unknown. It is a war against terrorists, who have different values and different understandings; they have different ways of fighting that are unbelievable for Western thinking. For instance, the first headline in *Eesti Päevaleht* was 'World War III'. The newspaper editor, instead of reacting as a professional, behaved as a human being and spread the panic. But the ideas of 'new war' also lead to offshoot opinions, such as those from psychologists discussing the attacks as prompting a possible inner war for human beings.

**Modern war era has begun**—Modern war is not just war for nation's survival. The following days will show if the US will start the war not only against the terrorist camps but also against the state order in pariah states (*Postimees*, September 13, 2001).

**War in us**—There is a saying, party in us. Now we have depression. We have a war spirit in us—we would like to bomb, to revenge! Party is in the past, at least for normal people (*Postimees*, September 21, 2001).

*Estonia is Ready to Go and Help America*

This topic consists of several statements by politicians and officials who say that, in general, Estonia is ready to help the US in its need should help be requested. But it also shows the importance and great impact that the terrorist attacks had on Estonians and as the officials saw this a possibility for themselves to promote Estonia and its activities by stating everywhere how very much they support anything the US undertakes.

**Government decided to hoist national flags as flags for mourning** (*Postimees*, September 12, 2001).

**If needed Estonia is ready to help America**—Estonian Rescue Board is ready to send a rescue team consisting from up to 40 members to United States, should major power ask for it (*Postimees*, September 12, 2001).

**Internet Narratives**

To compare and demonstrate differences between the institutionalized and non-institutionalized reactions to the September 11 incidents, the same four categories are used to gather narratives regarding what people discussed on the Internet. An attempt is made to demonstrate not only how opinions in the talking culture differed from official statements but also to show how the discussion topics are centered around more than mere news gathering and dividing; they also include discussion, support, emotions, and sharing.

Institutional news uses different news sources without comment and critique in that everything is taken for granted. The Internet gives non-news professionals the opportunity to follow the same news channels on-line concurrently with the news

media. As media institutions then need to translate, and sometimes edit, the news, people who use IRC or chat rooms make these more effective news channels. They refer to the news item and use the possibility to express themselves on the topic. This creates for a short while a very large-scale communication and discussion space where people use computer-mediated communication.

### *National Tragedy*

The main keywords here would be emotional compassion. This narrative also includes the idea of show business; the whole event is referred to as a movie that has no positive end. As the chat room logs were recorded without asking permission, the citations are without names.

September 11, 2001, 17:34: 'Methanol, Pentagon, WTC . . . Life as in moving pictures:—only that there is no Bruce Willis coming' (IRC channel).

September 12, 2001, 19:13: 'Now a regular American can see that America can not be saved by three men, one black, one president, one dork as they have it in the movies' (IRC channel).

September 11, 2001, 17:14: 'World end countdown has started' (Chat room).

### *Who is to Blame?*

There were many different opinions here. At some point people began discussing the idea that maybe the US deserved the attack, that it was an attack against the Western culture and ideology that the US supposedly stands for. Other blame targets range from a worldwide Jewish conspiracy to cosmic turmoil. Although these blame targets can at some point be taken seriously most of these speculations seemed to be sarcastic mocking of the headhunt the US was organizing.

September 11, 2001, 13:02: 'or Japanese kamikaze who got inspired by Pearl Harbor' (Chat room).

September 11, 2001, 16:43: 'Actually, it is just panic caused by evil hackers' (IRC channel).

### *New War*

Questions posed in this narrative include how to fight a new war and how to prepare for a new war. Many parallels are drawn with previous wars. People express their fears regarding the possible war.

September 12, 2001, 01:05: 'By the way, when the first news came, that first houses exploded in Kabul, then it made me feel a little bit creepy, that Christianity versus Islam has begun' (Chat room).

September 11, 2001, 14:56: 'Palestine will be crushed, there will only be China in front of Jews' (Chat room).

September 11, 2001, 13:27: 'Damn, if it will be found out who organized this bang then there will probably be WW3' (Chat room).

*Estonia is Ready to Go and Help America*

This is considered to be ridiculous and pandering to the US. This is one point on which the commentators appear to be unanimous. It is quite clear that the commentators do not believe that Estonia has any kind of help to offer to America.

September 12, 2001, 16:15: 'I don't know how to put it, things that happened in US were astonishing. And they shadow everything that happened in Estonia. But still, there should be national mourning for things happening in Estonia. Actually, it makes me wonder, why this has not already been done' (*Postimees* on-line comment).

September 12, 2001, 19:21: 'Where do we mourn people who died in Pärnu Aren't they people? For the government some Americans are holier than the local people, it can clearly be seen, whose interests are being served' (*Postimees* on-line comment).

September 26, 2001, 20:10: 'Everyone wants to be friends with Americans, Lithuania offered America their air space, but that seems to be almost everything there' (IRC channel).

## **Discussion**

Communication researcher Denis McQuail notes that 'in practice, the interactive potential of new technology is as likely to strengthen the position of the media "sender" as to serve the "empowerment" of receivers. The greater potential for interactivity of new electronic media is actually a force for consolidation of the traditional audience since it opens up new possibilities for active relations between senders and receivers'.<sup>5</sup>

We can see, that in the case of September 11 news, the concept of the traditional 'sender' has clearly changed due to the implementation of new technology. People have more chances to look up the news and relate to it quicker in the Internet context. As the interviews reported in this paper indicated, in a crisis situation all kind of channels are opened up to obtain more information: TV, radio, Internet, newspapers—all are equally opened for more and more information. The Internet chat rooms and comment pages at newspapers and portals often prove to be more than just information sources. They tend to be gathering points for different news sources and opinions. Participants of the chat rooms and comment pages turn into their own news gatekeepers, gathering and spreading the news among their own group. This phenomenon can be very well seen in the chat rooms where news is referred to with Web addresses and then is commented and discussed upon. The Internet is at every stage what McQuail refers to as an interpretative community. 'Media use is typically situation specific and oriented to social tasks that evolve out of participation on "interpretative communities"'.<sup>6</sup>

Here the community interpretations go further than just interpreting concrete news pieces, as the terrorist attack is referred and interpreted in the local context.

As Internet researcher Robert Arpo says: 'Texts are always produced and interpreted using norms, values, and world views that draw their respective meanings from specific communities'.<sup>7</sup> Also the Internet audiences as interpretative communities have greater opportunities as they use the common interaction space to bring these interpretation factors together.

In crisis situations where information is rare and not so reliable, larger inner cultural norms and values are used to interpret the information. That is why WW3 is suspected as soon as a major power is attacked. As a small country that is battered by wars, Estonians are extra sensitive and fearful on war issues. The cultural context also explains why the idea of Estonia helping the US is so ridiculous—for in the everyday context Estonians at some point even debated on the need for a military at all. New media gave excellent space in informational vacuum situations to support people through the common stereotypes, norms and values, and the increased possibility of sharing their ideas and emotions.

### Notes and References

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