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Groupuscular identification in informational network of Estonian far right[i]

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Abstract. Our presentation focuses on processes of identification in hypermedia – the informational space that is paying more and more significant role in articulating individual and collective identities. We would like to explicate the strategies of self-description that prevail on the websites of the activists of Estonian far right. Roger Griffin has elaborated a concept of *groupuscule* in order to explain diffuse far right movements of cyber-culture.

Our main critique is connected with the technological determinism that is characteristic to Griffin´s explanations but also to other scholars. It is quite widespread that the technological qualities of hypermedia (non-hierarchical, decentralized organization; potential for user created content, horizontal communication, grass-root activism; easy accessibility etc) are attributed, in more or less one-to-one manner, to groupuscular signification processes and meaning creation itself. Our main contribution would be the complementation of the concept of *groupuscule* with the ideas of Tartu-Moscow school of cultural semiotics. By the essential theoretical frameworks of cultural semiotics – autocommunication and core/periphery – we would like to demonstrate the communication of different units of groupucsular network and the formation of temporary inter- and intra-groupuscular hierarchies.

Our case-study is based on extraordinarily forceful public feedback that followed when Estonian government was discussing the ratification-project of ACTA (Anti Counterfeiting Trade Agreement).

Keywords: semiotics of culture, Griffin's theory of groupuscule, far right, hypermedia, autocommunication.

Introduction

Roger Griffin has elaborated a concept of *groupuscule* in order to explain diffuse far right movements of cyber-culture. To put it very brief we can characterize gropuscular filed by: 1) general discontent with contemporary world order, 2) the plurality and marginality of different groupuscular units, 3) rhizomic structure of intra-groupuscular communication. Although the concept of *groupuscule* is already a fruitful tool for understanding contemporary far right there are several aspects that need more academic developing. Also, Griffin himself has stressed that the concept has mainly heuristic value.

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Our case-study is based on extraordinarily forceful public feedback that followed when Estonian government was discussing the ratification-project of ACTA (AntiCounterfeiting Trade Agreement). It led to numerous public demonstrations and also the formation of *Rahvakogu* (The Panel of the People). The topic of the freedom of information became an ambiguous core-signifier: it played important part of the discussions of parliament but also in the self-descriptions of Estonian radical nationalists. For illustrating these tendencies we are analyzing the nodal points of Estonian groupuscular network: blog *Rahvuslane*[ii] (Nationalist) and blog NS[iii]. The method of our inquiry is non-participatory observation.

In order to analyze far right movements and the main patterns of their practices of communication and identity construction, we first have to map the conceptual field by which we can specify the meaning creation in hypermedia and the extreme/far rightism.

1. Text creation in hypermedia

In following we are outlining three intertwined key aspects: 1) hypertextuality, 2) the fluid and temporary nature of textual elements, 3) interactivity; that are specific of text creation processes (including verbal, visual and audiovisual texts) in hypermedia environment.

Hypertextuality The main specificity of texts that are created on internet environment is using hyperlinks. Hyperlinks give a possibility to connect very various kinds of text fragments[iv]. The fundamental characteristic of hypertextual system is its nonhierarchical structure which means that various text fragments (that have different lengths, modes etc.) are equal, that **no** element is dominating over the others (Botler 1995, 110). For navigating in hypertextual system every particular interpreter is activating different reading paths that organize text fragments in a unique manner. (Kress 2005, 4).

The fluid and temporary nature of textual elements. Texts that are constructed in hypermedia consist of various fragments that constantly are moving between different textual systems. When the textual whole is once established, it may exist in a finished manner only for a short period, because its elements are opened to constant modifications. This is possible because the means of hypermedia have made the operations of adaptation: citing, paraphrasing and mixing smaller or bigger text chunks very easy and available for all users. Many researchers (Laas 2011; Landow 2006, 232; Soukup 2008, 14) have stressed that hypermedia is facilitating a tendency of interpreters becoming bricoleur-authors who create their texts upon the fragments of already existing material. The novel textual whole that is evoked by these bricoleurs is always maintaining some relations with its previous organizations.

Interactivity. Hypermedia is also characterized by interactivity – hypermedia texts are equipped with technical affordances that provide instant explicit feedback. Interactivity differs significantly form reaction or implicit feedback because interactivity implies the intentional and active answer to some given text. (Ryan 2004, 338). Many researchers stress that hallmarks of network culture are built on interactivity: *participatory culture* (Erstad and Wertsch 2008), *citizen* or *grass-root journalism* (Atton 2009)*, mass self-communication* (Castells 2009) etc.

It is quite common that the technological affordances of hypermedia are straightforwardly connected with higher socio-cultural meanings e.g.: ideas of information freedom and democracy. The decentralized nature of hypermedia, the great potential of interactivity and relative anonymity of internet users (considering race, religion, social class, sex, location etc) are often interpreted as a sign of democratic essence of that medium. According to Mosco this kind of discourse of cyber-democracy is usually articulated by accessibility and interactivity as the two mythical core-signifiers. In this context accessibility indicates that thanks to new Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) active citizens can cross the constraints set by time, money, energy and geographic location and it allows them to participate in public discussion about the social problems. Interactivity implies that the affordances of hypermedia are facilitating the organization of people with similar interests who could not meet before because of the above mentioned constraints. (Mosco 2004, 30-31). The discourse of cyber-democracy understands internet often as an alternative public sphere.

2. Far rightism in hypermedia

According to Paul Hainsworth (2008, 67) the ideology of extreme right is articulated by the mission that includes saving the endangered nation and people from cosmopolitan, decadent, alien and anti-national influences. Xenophobia, polarization with socio-cultural establishment and the ideal of pluralism; and neglecting the principle of equal rights between the people – are also outlined as the main characteristics that have to be present for calling something far right (Rydgren 2004, 4). Far right movements are using rhetoric that is built on exclusion, they usually depict their sublime nation as an organic whole that is characterized by homogeneity and continuity. (Halikiopoulou and Vasilopoulou 2010, 584; Mikenberg 2002, 337).) Thus in their representations the nation is understood as a *real* or an *authentic* collective self.

Similar understanding is also shared by our establishment: Estonian Security Police [v] (institution that is *inter alia* preventing right radicalism) that defines the corner stones of far right ideology as following:

„public and unambiguous racism; promotion of ideas of white supremacy; hate against sexual minorities, understanding that the main causes of social problems stem from a particular ideology or world-view or some ethnic or racial conspiracy."

As the most of the forms of human communication have adapted with hypermedia environment, also the communication of far right is flourishing in the internet. According to Les Back (2002a, 632) the discourse of "cyber racism" is characterized by following features:

"a rhetoric of racial and/ or national uniqueness and common destiny, ideas of racial supremacy, superiority and separation a repertoire of conceptions of racial Otherness, a utopian revolutionary world-view that aims to overthrow the existing order."

As we can see, this definition overlaps with general notions of right radicalism. But the means of hypermedia have also provided new forms of far right practices. Theory of groupuscule elaborated by Roger Griffin focuses on those new aspects in most explicit manner.

Griffin´s theory of groupuscule

According to Griffin (2003, 30)

"in the context of extreme right-wing politics in the contemporary age groupuscule are intrinsically small political (frequently meta-political, but never primarily party-political) entities formed to pursue palingenetic (i.e. revolutionary) ideological, organizational or activist ends with an ultimate goal of overcoming the decadence of the existing liberal democratic system."

Griffin (2002, 6) outlines that far rightists

"can be seduced into feeling that without leaving their room they are active members of a global virtual community formed of the small minority of the initiated in possession of the correct diagnosis and remedy for the current political situation".

Internet can be used for feeding the perennial fascist feeling of being engaged in a Manichaean struggle against dark forces. (Griffin 2002, 6) One way for presenting this kind of virtual belonging is adding numerous links to other groupuscular web pages inside one´s postings. Goupuscule share the understanding that the contemporary decision-making is ruled by corrupted and greedy elite (usually perceived implicitly *Evil*) whose purpose is to subordinate the whole world under its authoritarian regime that is against everything sacred and sound, nations states included.

Groupuscular structure of communication

Griffin (2003, 33) states that groupuscule have a rhizomic structure, they form a cellular, centreless and leaderless network with ill-defined boundaries and no formal hierarchy or internal organizational structure to give it a unified intelligence.

Intragroupuscular communication is not strictly organized. Particular groupuscule establish a thematic niche in general groupuscular field (e.g. some groupuscule focus on articulating ideological statements, the others more specific social problems) but they all share a common bearing – opposing the establishment.

Thanks to the affordances of hypermedia it is very easy to copy modify large fragments of information. Groupuscule have greatly adapted with this and a culture of sharing far right representations has arisen. One widespread tactic is copying far right representations of foreign web pages and translating or summarizing them in order to circulate the ideas. This tendency increases intersection of groupuscular ideas. Griffin (1999, 44) stresses that groupuscule generally have direct connections (and always indirect connections) to other anti(liberal)democratic organizations, local, national and international and like-minded groups may well contact and collaborate with each other.

Many researchers of cyber culture have claimed that specificity of ICT of hypermedia is often greatly used in self-descriptions of online communities. According to Dominic Boyer the authors of online content are frequently relying on cybernetic-informatic epistemology that attributes the main characteristics of hypermedia (non-hierarchical, dynamic, decentralized and interactive nature) to their own declared identity. Those characteristics are carrying high axiological value, normally they are used for emphasizing progressive and novel manner of presented ideas and also the presenters themselves.

(Boyer 2010, 79-80) This cybernetic-informatic aspect of self-descriptions has an important role of groupuscular representations. We have to remark that Griffin himself is also creating this kind of equivalence between technological qualities of hypermedia and particular groupuscular signification practices: e.g. when he claims that groupuscular movements have essentially nonhierarchical and decentralized structure.

Presenting hypermedia as an alternative public sphere with great democratic potential is useful for legitimizing the exchange of ideas of groupuscular field. It is important for they self-legitimization but also for naturalization of their practices for mainstream level. For describing this kind of tendency Les Backi has elaborated a conception of *liquid ideologies* by this he explicates modalities that extreme rightists use for transforming elements of dominant or 'normalized' discourses into racist media practices. For example they exploit the language of multiculturalist discourse through its adoption of terms such as "equality", "fairness" and "rights". Liquid ideologies are capable of assimilating elements that on the face of it seem incompatible'. (Back, 2002b, see Atton 2006: 574-576)

In the level of declared identifications groupuscule are presenting themselves as alternative counter-cultural public sphere that is accomplishing (made possible by the informational freedom that is provided by the means of hypermedia) a revolutions which main aim is to undermine the establishment´s canons of objectivity and of liberal democracy in general. From a posting of one Estonaian goupuscular nodal blog we can read:

> "We have to agree that intellectual property is important in society and it needs protection but we shouldn´t consider it higher than other personal rights and freedoms for example right to privacy and freedom of thought and conscience etc. [S]o we think that ACTA has been negotiated in a way that isn´t proper for democratic society. ACTA just does not match with our legal order and thus we ask to vote against ACTA, together we can change Estonian country by saying our word."[vi].

> "People who are against ACTA are not mentally ill. They are not even upholders of piracy and forgery. They are educated and intellectual people who are pointing out that the bottleneck of that project that may cause the violation of human rights.[vii]

Despite the fact that groupuscule are stressing it on the level of self-description we cannot treat them in the level meta-language/analysis as a variant of grass-root or citizen journalism because far right informational networks are not opened to essential heterogeneity of view points (see Atton 2006, 585-586). Groupuscule are operating in homogenous field of ideas that is not characterized by aspiration of dialogue of synthesis of different perspectives but cultivation and polarization already existing understandings.

Groupuscular network as a semiosphere.

We think that the main shortcoming of Griffins conception of groupuscule is the under-theorization of the aspects of intra- and inter-groupuscular communication that we referred to in previous chapter. Giffin´s theory is not focusing on: 1) the main mechanisms of meaning creation that organize navigation on groupuscular network. Griffin explicates primarily general technological specificities that are characteristic to any kind of web communication (rhizomic, nonhierarchical organization; relative indistinguishability of center and periphery etc). 2) It does not sufficiently explain specific signification logic of groupuscule (prevailing modes of modeling: dominant frames of connection, values etc). We believe that the apparatus of cultural semiotics (conceptions of semiosphere and autocommunication) can help to improve the theory of groupuscule. Handling groupuscular communication in a framework of semiosphere allows us to explicate the context of relations of goupuscule. The conceptions of code-text and autocommunication help to understand a paradoxical question why in groupuscular internet communication that is potentially opened to all possible horizons (because via internet it is possible to reach for very wide spectrum of view points) are prevailing very homogenous communicational patterns and styles of modeling. This kind of synthesis between contemporary theories of far right and cultural semiotics is also fruitful because it provides a framework by which particular analyses can be conducted.

According to Juri Lotman the semiosphere is a semiotic space, outside of which semiosis itself cannot exist. The most substantial quality of semiosphere is semiotic delimitation that lies in the notion of border. The semiotic border is represented by the sum of bilingual translatable "filters", passing through which the text is translated into another language (or languages), situated outside the given sub-sphere of semiosphere. At the level of the semiosphere (as a sub-sphere) the border

represents the division of self from other, the filtration of external communications and the translation thereof into its own language, as well as the transformation of external non-communication into communications, i.e. the semiotization of incoming materials and the transformation of the latter into information. (Lotman 1999: 15). At the meta-level of self-description of semiosphere (as a whole) the border differentiates distinct spheres. At The level of self-description the specificity of self is acknowledged and also self is opposed to so-called external spheres. Structures that are able for meaning-creation operations can be understood as semiotic monads that are functioning in all levels of semiosphere. At a moment when two semiotic monads are starting to interact, they swich from the state of mutual neutrality to the state of structural antonymity. (Lotman 1999: 44-45). From this moment monads are starting to cultivate their own specificity and contrasts with other semiotic unities.[viii] (Lotman 1999: 45). If we draw a parallel with online communities then some researchers of cyber-culture have stated that hypermedia connects people with same interests from all over the global spectrum, a widespread tendency is to establish international niche-communities that are sometimes accompanied with radical and polarized identifications. (See Castells 1997, 2009; Sunstein 2001, 2009).

If we view it from the higher structural level, then the same semiotic monad can belong to wider monads (i.e. semiospheres). A semiotic monad can maintain its wholeness while being a part of higher semiotic monads (Lotman 1999: 46). When particular groupuscule is establishing relations with other entities of groupuscular fields (e.g. by sharing links) then it has to express the meaning of this relation. It is primarily done by specific self-description. Autonomous groupuscular cells (in sense of ideology but also of activeness) can vary so remarkably that they can offer something for all kinds of far right taste. For example there is content for people that are fond of philosophy of Julius Evola but at the same time there is also something for the fans of White Noise of the admirers of Third Reich ideas (see Virchow 2004, 69). In Estonian groupuscule we can see the juxtaposition of following topics: *Plato and national-socialism*; *Runes – a true alphabet*; *Our true religion – paganism*; *The myth of slave*; *Music and videos* etc[ix]. As well as: *Myths of Russia*; *True Islam*; *Weekday of Empire of Evil*; *Freedom* etc.[x]

Although the content of groupucsule may greatly vary, they still carry important common denominators that facilitate the integration in some level, e.g.: all nodes of groupuscular network share the ideas of white supremacy and opposing to multiculturalism (see Virchow 2004, 70). In this context it is important to explicate the relations of core and periphery that has constitutive role in the level of particular groupuscular unit as well in the groupuscular field in general. According to Lotman core-structures are strictly organized and because they are dominant they work in the level of self-description. In core they develop central system of meta-description that is used for describing the core itself but also the periphery. (Lotman 1999, 18).

We can see that kind of core structures also in the context of groupuscular field. One indicator of core-periphery relations is that some topics are functioning as so-called inter-groupuscular umbrella themes. For example in the context of postings that concern ratification of ACTA the main topic that is present in majority of postings is the corruption of different administratival levels of European Union and also the general idea of NWO conspiracy and decadence of liberalism[xi]. Those umbrella topics become so widespread because it is very common to cite/refer other texts in groupusclar filed. Referring to the ideas of other far right thinkers also helps to confirm and fortify one´s claims. It is important to note that inside the groupuscular network there have developed some opinion leaders whose postings are most often visited and cited.[xii] For becoming this kind of authority includes plenty of aspects: e.g. active and constant posting; preservation of far right ideals, attractiveness of postings (reliability of references, having a likable style, proportions of verbal and visual text, proportions of entertainment etc).

It seems the by referring the lack of center and periphery in groupuscular network Griffin: 1) relies mainly on technical features that organize web; 2) does not take into account the relative nature of center-periphery opposition; 3) does not take into account the internal hierarchies of signification processes themselves. We think groupuscular self-descricptions can be explicated in the spectrum of center-periphery by Lotman´s concept of code-text.

Code-text as auto-modeling structure of groupuscule

According to the thesis of cultural semiotics (1998: 62) the culture (as organized informational space) is dignifying auto-modeling texts and the conception of itself. One central self-model of groupucule is a code-text that articulates the decadence of prevalent liberal democratic system and the existential danger that it constitutes for (nation) states. (Griffin 2003, 38). According to Juri Lotman a code-text is a textual system that originates from a cultural memory of particular collective. A code-text is a certain kind of interlink that, instead of being an abstract collection of rules for constructing a text, is a textual

system with a rigid syntactic order. The different signs of a code-text can be divided into various sub-structures, but despite this the code-text remains unambiguous "for itself": "on its own level, the code-text is a unitary phenomenon in both content and expression". A code-text unites into a unitary text elements which, for a so-called outsider perspective, would remain unconnected. (Lotman 2006, 245-246)

Particular articulations of code-text that is shared by groupuscular network may of course vary, but in general the code-text forms a typical framework of explanation that is common for all elements of goupuscular field. Michael Barkun has reached to similar conclusion by saying that New World Order conspiracy theory (NWO) is functioning as an ideological glue that helps to connect elements that are seemingly incompatible. So the representations of far rightists may combine elements of mainstream politics, pseudo-science, fragments of spirituality etc. NWO conspiracy theory constitutes a frame-narrative that is including almost all ideas that are present in countercultural field of knowledge of fringe politics. (Barkun 2003, 182-184). For illustrating the code-text of Estonian groupuscule we can analyze a following posting:

"[…] ACTA would change too many important principles that our society is based on:
a) The definition of Historical Truth. Holocaust denial and disputing of Nuremberg will be criminalized.
    […]
c) Thought crimes will be criminalized (see Orwell, 1984) — taboos will be constructed, public discussion will lead to punishment.
d) the definition of criminal organization will be changed – self-interests will not be an argument anymore, idea-exchange will be sufficient for that.
e) Instead of punishing for particular actions there will be punishing for having a public opinion in a matter of Truth-questions. Expressing an opinion that you don´t like someone/something can be enough…
    […]
g) It will not matter anymore if the group that is being criticized is exists or not. Freemasons don´t have to prove anymore that they don´t exist.
h) New juridical terms will be imposed systematically — public peace (compare with lack of public interest); other public space (Internet, of course!)
i) Some more juridical terms; *hatred*, *hate speech*, they even do not have proper equivalents in Estonian."[xiii]

Here is another example that illustrates the code-textual mechanism that is used for constructing causal chain (ibid):

"There has arisen a significant resistance of forcing gay-marriages in our society. Finally — the foreign prompters have been given empty promises in the context of gay-marriages "hate-speech" and other questions. Some genius understood that if to wrap all this mess in a Gordian knot then wider auditorium will start to blame rather somebody like Yana (Yana Toom is member of Estonia Riigikogu (Parlament), wellknown as speaker of Russian diaspora – M-L. M & A.V). So the protest against gay-marriages will fall silent and we can fulfill all then stupid promises that we have given to the West. /..../ The little tactical advantage that is given to the minorities will not outweigh *the destruction of Estonian history and self-understanding* (our emphasis – M-L.M & A.V) that this ratification will lead to."

For or a bystander a code-text may appear as a diffuse aggregate, but for those for whom the code-text functions as a text of collective memory, it becomes an essential landmark for interpreting various different events. (Lotman 2006, 245-246).

3.   Groupuscular   meaning-creation   that   is   based   on autocommunication

Code-text is a fruitful concept for understanding processes of groupuscular self-description, but it does not open the wider basis of this kind of signification processes. Signification processes of groupuscular field are characterized by its orientation towards autocommunication. Lotman differs two types of communicative systems that usually co-exist by in the level of analysis we can talk about the system that is dominant in particular situation. In the system of "I-I" the carrier of the information remains the

same but the message itself is reformulated and it gains a new meaning. It can happen because of the new code is added.

If the communicational system of "I-(h)she" allows to transmit the information in constant extent then in "I-I" communication there takes place the qualitative transformation of information that leads to the reformulation of I itself (Lotman 2010, 129). In that case the message is being reformulated in different categories, not the new messages but the new codes are coming in, the sender and receiver are melting together in the same individual. (Lotman 2010, 140).

In groupuscular communication dominates the "I-I" communicational type. A constant process of meaning-generation is taking place but its repertory of signification is limited to a small number of a stereotypic patterns, thus the information cannot qualitatively change. The selection of information, organized by a code-text, implies that the system is opened only for connections that are already well-known – i.e. that they fit in the code-text that talks about decadence of liberal-democratic world. Information that does not support the code-text is not considered worth for any kind engrossment. Lotman emphasizes that a system oriented towards auto-communication has a tendency to turn texts into standards one and to identify what is "elevated", "good" and "true" with what is "stable", "eternal", i.e. with the set standard. (Lotman 2010, 144). This tendency of equation is prevalent in rhetoric of radical right. For example we may view how the concept of nation is presented in far rightist discourse. Nation stands for something "real", "authentic", something that carries "high" values and is opposed to establishment that represents liberal world-view. It is important to note that "nation" and "people" are presented as synonyms. Nation is understood as "real-authentic" collective self that is hidden inside the other "superficial-artificial" selves. Nation is understood as unifier of people with common history and ancestry and it is thought that nation helps to cultivate cultural belonging that lies under superficial differences.

Cultures oriented towards autocommunication are capable of great activity that "makes one see manifestations of the One phenomenon in the various phenomena of the real world, and observe the One Object behind the diversity of objects of the same type" (Lotman 2004, 571). In case of far right this One Object is a decadence of liberal democracy. Autocommunication oriented systems are often much less dynamic than human society requires (Lotman 2010, 146).

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[ii] http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com

[iii] http://staap02.wordpress.com/.

[v] http://www.kapo.ee/%C3%A4%C3%A4rmuslus,%20%C3%A4%C3%A4rmuslased,%20parem%C3%A4%C3%A4rmuslus,%20vasak%C3%A4%C3%A4rmuslus,%20ekstremism

[vi] 10.01. 2012, kl. 10.34. http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/,

[vii] 12.02.2012, kl 10.00. http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/,

[viii] It is important to note that Lotman (1999: 40-42) understands semiosphere, particular semiotic monads, individuals, culture and every (complex) text as isomorphic entities of meaning creation

[ix] http://staap02.wordpress.com/

[x] http://bhr.balanss.ee/

[xi] According to *Postimees* (the biggest newspaper in Estonia) in Tallinn there were carried slogans: «I love my country, but fear my government», «No ACTA, no new world order», «1984 - Orwell was only off a decade or two», «ACTA – global censorship». 12. 02. 2012, kl 10.23, http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/

[xii] The contextual nature of core and periphery is shown by the relations of groupuscular right and institutions of alternative media. In the context of alternative media groupuscule themselves are belong in periphery and at the same time far rightists consider the opinion leaders of alternative media, such as Wikileaks or Anonymous as authorities, see 31. 01. 2012, kl 12.35, http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/.

[xiii] 31.10. 2012, kl 13.44**,** http://rahvuslane.blogspot.com/.

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<u>Major publications</u> (with dates):   1) Madisson, Mari-Liis. 2010. Hirmu verbaliseerimine (tänapäevases legendis) [The verbalizing of fear (in contemporary legend)], *Acta semiotica Estica* 7. 221–236.

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