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„Fostering capacity building for civic resilience and participation: Dialogic communication ethics and accountability“

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ESTONIA



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Summary

This report, focusing on Estonia is one of eight country-specific studies presenting the results of focus group discussions conducted as part of Work Package 3 (WP3) of the Horizon Europe project *DIACOMET – Fostering Capacity Building for Civic Resilience and Participation: Dialogic Communication Ethics and Accountability*.

The Estonian report is based on the analysis of interviews conducted with 11 focus groups. Primary codes were compiled on the basis of the theoretical overview of the DIACOMET project (D. 1.1) and supplemented during the analysis. The coding was carried out by four people, which allowed us to validate the thematic analysis and subsequent discourse analysis. This report provides an overview of the main factors that support and inhibit dialogue in public communication, as well as the communication values and principles that are important to the interview participants.

The 200 text examples allowed for a detailed analysis of how the interviewees perceive one-way and two-way communication in society. For example, interviewees with information power talked about how they worry about when, how, and to whom to share information. Those interviewees who were in the role of "information recipients," however, spoke about how officials seemed to try to listen to them, but how this listening was unsuccessful. The discourse on listening culture highlighted people's expectations of dialogue, good and bad communication practices, and an analysis of whether and to what extent social acceleration and the pace and nature of social media inhibit both listening and the general culture of communication.

A theoretical assumption that dialogue works in the absence of power relations in communication was confirmed. People feel bad when communication is conducted from a position of power and that they are not substantively involved in discussions or decision-making processes.

Problems that were not addressed in theory but emerged during the discourse analysis of the focus groups were: "hijackers and loudmouths of the public communication space" – i.e., people who irresponsibly interfere with meaningful dialogue; the complexity of vulnerability in real communication situations and the problem of people not daring to express their (critical) opinions publicly, especially in organisational communication; the real possibilities for establishing human autonomy in relation to the rapid development of technology. In theory, one of the universal fundamental values of communication is truthfulness. The importance of this value was also confirmed: based on their different experiences, the

interviewees expressed the view that half-truths and concealing the truth undermine trust. The discourse on truth-telling was closely linked to the theme of the quality of information and communication, in a negative sense meaning information overload and false information, as well as the amplification of irrelevant information. The interviewees were not critical of professional journalism. As an exception, examples of unethical behaviour by individual journalists were cited, acknowledging that, as in any field, there are professionals in journalism who behave in a highly ethical manner and those who do not.

During the discourse analysis, researchers from Tartu University and Praxis coded the "actors." Total of 302 text references made it possible to analyse how the interviewees see themselves and other participants in communication based on both public attention and their position of power. The analysis of the results of the first four focus groups already revealed that the attention economy theory does not work in Estonian society. This is probably because it is relatively easy to get public attention in a very small society. However, as already mentioned, from the perspective of the ethics of dialogic communication, people considered the use of information power and the responsibility of representatives of social and political power in communication to be important. In regard to the quality of communication, the participants regarded listening and politeness as mandatory in communication in all cases, even if the other party does not follow these standards.

Theoretical Background

The theoretical framework of in the Estonian report is based on a synthesis of the attention economy, the ethics of dialogic communication (D. 1.1), and the theoretical starting points of discourse analysis. The categories created on the basis of attention economy theory were not applied to the analysis. Although the position of different individuals in a communication situation is very important from the perspective of the ethics of dialogic communication, the following categories are more important from an ethical point of view: power, moral sensitivity; awareness of one's own responsibility; awareness of communication quality standards and reflection on one's abilities to listen and respond, as well as attitudes towards differences of opinion and the limits of freedom of speech. All the above categories are present in normative concepts of journalism and media (e.g., the concepts of freedom of expression and informational self-determination and autonomy, the concepts of hate speech and cancellation, the listening index, etc.).

Theory extensively explains the importance of power in communication ethics (e.g. Bächtiger *et al.* 2018). Power is a central thread in communication ethics scholarship that reveals the extent to which politics and ethics are deeply interconnected. Power is here understood to describe the capacity to impose, maintain, repair, and transform particular modes of social structuring that explicitly and implicitly condition our ideas about the good" (Lipari 2017). In

order to balance power, the principles should support equality and provide guidance how to balance the power relations between people. Safe communication usually means respectful communication where people should not be afraid of attacks. This is therefore related to the human dignity as a value.

Generally, the dialogic approach values others as equals in discussions, listening and empathising with their concerns. It is two-way communication, wherein central values are *openness* (learning from others), learning from differences, and respecting the partner in dialogue partner. Freire (1968^[1]) suggests dialogue requires love, humility, and faith. The strength of dialogic ethics lies in the idea of constant negotiation and interchange between various actors.

Also, accountability mechanisms depend on reciprocal exchange of ideas and opinions, as the participants in the communication process have many often-conflicting motives and interests. The concept of dialogic communication is closely related to the theory of deliberative communication. Vital values for a successful deliberative communication are human dignity, truth, and freedom of expression (including both the right for receiving information and the freedom of speaking out) that back up rational, unrestricted, and facts-based communication.

Truth and truthful information are related its quality and reliability. In the context of the principles of dialogical communication ethics, it is important to formulate who has a duty to tell the truth, whether the requirement to tell the truth is always valid or whether it is expedient to guide people to think about the questions of whether and to what extent they can judge the truth of the information

The list of categories presented in the appendix to this report largely reflects the list of theoretical concepts used. The theoretical basis for this Estonian report is also the theoretical approach to dialogical communication ethics (D 1.1), which has been further developed during 2025.

The present analysis aims to contribute to understanding the power positions and vulnerability of communication participants and agency in public communication. For example, Arnett and his colleagues who have developed the theory of the dialogic communication ethics point out the importance of agency in dialogic ethics:

Dialogue is understood as the communicative exchange of embedded agents standing their own ground while being open to the other's standpoint, conceptualising meaning that emerges in discourse situated between persons while engaging a common text in their communicative event. (Arnett et al., 2006, 164)

Recognising and involving power relations are interrelated discourses. Involvement is ensured by listening. To conceptualise listening in a way that allows us to analyse what kind of listening people value, we have used the 'listening index' (Scudder 2022). Scudder points out that meaningful and inclusive listening primarily involves responsiveness. The scale proposed by Scudder has six levels and includes the following options:

0. No listening: The listener reports not listening to the speaker.
1. Listener reports listening to the speaker: The listener reports listening to the speaker, but interrupts the speaker to the point of silencing.
2. Listener does not silence the speaker: The listener does not interrupt to the point of silencing the speaker. The listener allows the speaker to speak.
3. Listener recalls speaker's contributions: The listener can recall what the speaker said.
4. Listener responds to the speaker: The listener responds to the speaker. The response can be verbal or nonverbal (nodding, shaking head).
5. Listener gives a substantive response to the speaker: The listener responds to the speaker in a substantive and relevant way.
6. Speaker reports feeling heard by the listener: The speaker reports being satisfied with the sincerity of the listener's listening. (Scudder, 2022: 180).

For the purposes of the focus group analysis, we emphasise distinctions between level 4 and levels 5 and 6. In other words, from the perspective of dialogic communication, it is important for people not just to be heard (although this is also important in some cases), but to be listened to in such a way that they feel involved in the decision-making process, which requires that the response be genuine and that the listener feels that what they have said has had an impact.

The brief overview above shows the broader theoretical framework for creating categories for discourse analysis. As mentioned, we also used many normative concepts to refine the categories.

Whilst the theoretical framework in the Estonian report differs from those applied in the other country reports, they all followed the same methodological strategies. Thus, the analysis of the focus group discussions followed a qualitative research tradition, emphasising participants' lived experiences and subjective perspectives. They were conducted using the dialogue method developed by the *Timeout Foundation*, either in person or online. Timeout is a non-profit organization established by the *Finnish Innovation Fund (Sitra)*, with the aim of fostering constructive public dialogue. The method promotes respectful and inclusive conversation by encouraging listening, reflection, and experience-sharing rather than argument or debate (Heikka 2018).

The analysis adopted an inductive approach and was carried out using thematic analysis, a widely used and flexible method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of

meaning in qualitative data. Thematic analysis is well suited for examining how participants perceive their environment, articulate their experiences and construct social meaning – making it an appropriate tool for addressing the open-ended and ethically nuanced questions such as those addressed in WP3. The process of meaning-making typically unfolded organically from *bottom-up*, with participants contributing to the development of analytical categories. In sociological terms, this represents *emic* approach (Alasuutari 2010), in contrast to *etic* approaches, in which analytical categories are predetermined and applied *top-down* to the data.

The questions addressed to the participants in the focus group meetings reflect the project's interest in the ethical concerns, tensions, and contradictions encountered by non-professional actors in today's communication environment. They aim to shed light on what the participants in the focus groups say about communication ethics and how they understand the contexts of their arguments, concerns, and experiences. Some of the questions addressed in this Work Package, and the DIACOMET project on the whole, go beyond the themes analysed in the country reports. For instance, these reports do not include comparative analysis across countries.

All national reports follow a shared structure. The Introduction section provides a brief overview of the national context. This is followed by a description of how the research team recruited participants, conducted focus group discussions and analysed the data produced in the discussions. The empirical findings are presented in three main sections: the first explores participants' views on *media environment*; the second focuses on their reflections of *public communication*, and the third examines their perspectives to *ethical issues*, values and responsibilities. The conclusion summarises key ethical tensions and challenges identified in each national context. An annex at the end of the report provides information about the composition of the focus groups.

1. Introduction to the country report on ESTONIA

Estonia is a small, low-lying country in Northern Europe, bordered by the Baltic Sea, Latvia to the south, and Russia to the east. It also has maritime borders with Finland across the Gulf of Finland. Estonia regained its independence after the collapse of the Soviet regime in 1991 and started a political, economic and social-cultural transition towards democratic political order and market economy. Estonia joined both the European Union (EU) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) in 2004. The ten countries that joined the European Union during the first decade of the 21st century have been regarded as successful in their economic, political and societal transition. (Lauk *et al.* 2022.) In this context, Estonia has been regarded as a transition prodigy of democratic reforms, succeeding relatively well in societal democratisation and economic transformation. Estonia has a population of around 1.3

million people, making it one of the least populous countries in European Union (Statistics Estonia 2024).

The population is highly urbanised, with the capital city Tallinn being the largest urban centre. The largest minority group are ethnic Russians, comprising roughly 25%. Other bigger minority groups include Ukrainians, Belarusians and Finns (Statistics Estonia 2025). The official language is Estonian, a Finno-Ugric language closely related to Finnish. Russian is spoken among the minority, especially in northeastern regions. English proficiency is high, particularly among younger generations and in the business or urban environments.

After regaining independence in 1992, the flourishing number of media channels provided an unprecedented diversity of content. In 1995 media companies launched their online news platforms and the biggest news provider started to offer a lot of news free of charge due strong competition for the attention of the audience. The period of 2014-2017 marked a strong leap in the digitalisation of the media sphere (Lauk *et al.* 2022). Estonian media market is relatively small and characterised by oligopolistic structures (Harro-Loit and Loit 2023). By the end of the 2020s, two large media corporations, which own media outlets also in other Latvia and Lithuania, control most of the media market in Estonia. The small scale of the media sector in favours oligopolistic market conditions, media convergence and developing cross-media ownership, which have effects on the job market for journalists and the level of professionalism in journalism (Harro-Loit and Loit 2023).

Although no official statistics exist on the number of journalists in Estonia, researchers participating in the Worlds of Journalism study estimate the figure to be between 800 and 1,000. Estonian journalistic culture is underpinned by a tradition of academically supported journalism education and is increasingly aligning with Nordic standards (Berglez *et al.* 2024). The level of political parallelism in Estonia is considered low in comparison to other Central and Eastern European countries (Rožukalne *et al.* 2024). Estonian media outlets are not aligned with to political parties albeit some outlets have been slightly biased towards one or another political ideology. Given the small size of the media market the media economy cannot afford strong political polarisation without significant losses in terms of audience reach and income. Still, transparency of editorial policies (e.g. employment of editor-in chief) is low (Harro-Loit and Loit, 2023). Estonia does not have political accountability and public accountability instruments. The self-regulation system in the country is regarded as outdated. The code of ethics for journalists was ratified in 1997 and has not been updated since.

In what follows this study addresses the challenges in fostering ethical awareness and helps to reveal how people perceive ethical standards in media and public communication. It highlights real-world communication ethical dilemmas the participants have experienced. More specific interpretations related to the media environment and public communication will be provided in the findings.

2. Research Setting: Applying the Framework

In Estonia, the research setting was founded on the case-based approach. The initial stage of planning involved determining relevant subjects or cases that would form the basis for the focus group discussions. The cases that had gained attention in journalism and/or social media and that had relevance in connection with communication ethics in Estonia were identified and selected. The selection was informed of the aim to find out how the participants had experienced the cases, how they coped with ethically complex situations, and how would they define and makes sense of their values regarding communication ethics. The cases selected in the study were the following.:

- Expansion of Nursipalu military training field (focus groups 1 and 2)
- Closing of rural schools (3 to 5)
- Establishing an opportunity to marriage for same-sex couples (6)
- Workplace bullying and internal criticism within organisations (7)
- Communication ethics in social media and ethical aspects of AI technology (8 and 9)
- Disability rights (10)
- Communication ethics in relation to youth engagement (11)

Altogether, all four actor categories listed in the framework of the Work Package 3 were covered across groups: Attention Magnets, Attentions Workers, Attention Hackers, and Attention-Deprived. In most discussions, two or more actor categories were represented in each focus group discussion. Two discussions were held with representatives from one category only (for details, see Annex 1). All discussions were designed for avoiding explicit polarisation to prevent situations where participants would feel that they cannot express their opinions freely. This was regarded important, as some of the discussions referred to controversial topics where the participants might have faced harassment. Due to this discussions on the expansion of Nursipalu military training field and closing of rural schools) were organised separately for the Attention-deprived and Attention Magnets respectively.

The Recruitment Process

The recruitment of participants took place between March and December 2024. During the recruitment process attention was paid to the principles of representativeness and diversity. The diversity of focus groups was pursued by inviting selecting different types of cases and contacting participants from distinct actor categories. In addition, participants from different genders, age groups, socio-economic status, and regions were approached. Also, diversity of worldviews and political opinions was encouraged in the recruitment process. The aim was to have at least ten focus group discussions with each group comprising 4-8 participants.

The snowball strategy was used by asking contacted persons for recommendations about other potential participants. People were invited by e-mail, phone, or social media. The main challenge was that while people generally welcomed the invitation and looked forward to attending the focus group discussion, remarkably many declined to participate. Approximately 30 people were contacted for each focus group to reach a minimum of four participants. There were occasions when confirmed participants without any notice did not show up in the focus group or informed of their withdrawal only a few minutes before the discussion. Moreover, scheduling meetings with several mid- or high-level professionals was particularly complex. Actors from smaller organisations, despite their interest, often said they lacked time or available people to participate. Many people felt that the topic was too delicate, and they were not sure if other participants would keep the discussion confidential. Many potential participants called and asked for clarifications about data processing and pseudonymisation. There were some fears that opponents were participating in the focus group or that their employers would disapprove of their participation. One participant called and asked if the invitation could be sent to their private email address, as they did not want his/her employer to know about it.

Conducting the Focus Group Discussions

In total, 11 focus group discussions were conducted with total of 54 participants. The composition of 4-6 participants enabled us to create a good dynamic atmosphere ensuring an open and in-depth conversation. There were 28 males and 26 females participating. According to the agreement with the ethics committee, educational level or data on the age of the participants was not gathered.

All 11 focus group discussions were conducted online on Microsoft Teams. Despite minor technical problems with microphones, communications were fluent, open, and dialogic. Given the delicate and ethical nature of the topics, some discussions required careful moderation to keep debates constructive and prevent overly emotional or polarised exchanges. The atmosphere in the discussions was rather amicable and not conflictual. In some cases, at the participants' request, off-topic comments were removed from the transcript. In some cases, participants tended to discuss the topic itself rather than its communication aspects, requiring some reminders to steer the conversation accordingly.

Q-sorting method was applied in ten focus groups. It was decided after the pilot focus group that the Q-sorting exercise follows the group discussion. Participants were informed in advance that there is a need to use a computer with a mouse. The moderator introduced the task and answered questions during the q-sorting exercise.

Empirical Analysis

For analysing the material collected from the focus group, a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis was used. From WP1 D1.1 several themes were identified to be

looked for in the transcriptions (e.g., freedom of speech, privacy, power relations in communication, dialogism, agency, etc.). In addition, when coding the material, we looked at relevant information in relation to communication ethics in public communication (e.g. acceleration, social media, young people, etc.) The coding tree for Estonian focus groups can be found in Annex 2.

3. Experiencing the Media Environment

The focus groups included both journalists and people with different experiences of journalism and the (social) media (like state or local government officials, civil society activists etc). In the Estonian focus group discussions, the professional news media (journalism) as an institution was considered balanced and neutral both by journalists and by people outside the professional media.

"The mainstream media or traditional media somehow keeps things in balance, but there's no point in expecting any balance on social media, because it's just a shooting gallery. That's also true for the future. I know that there are always journalists who are loudmouths, where there shouldn't be."

V4, Nursipalu, focus group 2 policy makers

However, it was acknowledged that, as in any other field, there are responsible as well as careless journalists:

"Yes, you have these young reporters who come in, you can't even finish a sentence, and the story is already up on Delfi. They had the story already written in their heads. They don't even write what you said in that one sentence."

V1, focus group 4, policy makers

This criticism of professional journalists pertains to inexperienced and poorly trained journalists who reportedly lack functional listening skills. However, one journalist participating in the focus groups analysed the reasons for the trustworthiness of professional journalists, pointing out that because the professional community as a whole has strong professional ethics, the mistakes of individual journalists are noticeable.

"All of us who have undergone the same journalistic training, all of us who have been initiated into the guild, get to taste the sweetness of responsibility, so to speak. If you make a mistake as a journalist, your main fear is not that someone will take you to court, but that you would lose the

respect of your colleagues. Those are few and far between in Estonia and they'll keep a close eye on each other.

V2, focus group 1, Nursipalu

The broader context of the criticism concerns the quality and accuracy of messages. As pointed out by a participant quoted above, journalists violate the norms of good communication when they approach interviewees with preconceived notions.

The expectations towards the media emphasised responsibility towards society, such as providing platform for the opinions of all parties, truth telling, truth seeking and capability to see behind. However, according to the participants the media sometimes amplifies certain aspects of the story. In the discussions this was treated as an indispensable working principle of the professional as well as social media that may also hinder the trustworthiness of the media. Among professional news media (journalism), the local journalists and newspapers were considered more reliable.

"For over 10 years, we've had Facebook and that's been really cool. Politicians and government officials all use it and share information. There's also the other side of social media, that can also hit you really hard. Maybe we could trust journalists more sometimes. I mean local ones. Maybe talk to local journalists and explain it to them so that they could be involved in some way. I don't mean that they would want to be biased or lean towards one side or the other. But they would know that they shouldn't write just what they hear. A good journalist writes what they know, not what they hear."

V4, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

The journalist also explained the restraints of their work. People outside the media may not perceive how the limited time resources can affect the quality of the journalism:

"Journalists have so little time to plan their activities: for who I'm going to talk to, how I'm going to structure the story. Then it doesn't all come down to some press release from the ministry and racing over who gets there first. The only argument informing the news work is speed, and that's never the best argument."

V1, focus group 3, Metsküla

To contrast the previous excerpt about the realities of news work, the participant shared a personal experience when and how journalists would be allowed to do their job better.

When it came to setting up the defence line, the journalists were gathered two days in advance and told that we were going to start building bunkers, and I had the whole next day to go around [removed to ensure confidentiality] and talk to people. To get the local perspective

and find out what people thought. Then the journalist has time to present the first thing in a reasonable way."

V1, focus group 3, Metsküla

The other limiting aspect of journalists' everyday work was the strive towards the sensationalism through catchy headlines with the aim to attract as many readers as possible:

"Who can come up with the most sensational headline? That headline goes on Facebook, and then the algorithm looks to see whose headline is the most sensational. It's a very cruel world."

V4, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

The participants explained their views on the role of professional journalists in reporting conflict situations. Two people from two separate focus groups expressed the opinion that in some cases, the only way to make your voice heard is with the help of journalists, as professional journalism disciplines those in power and gives citizens the opportunity to be listened and heard. The media and journalism was perceived as an institution with greater authority in influencing public decisions:

'It's just that the situation is hopeless anyway, that the only way out is through public exposure. If journalists don't save us, then there's no hope.'

V1, focus group 3, Metsküla

'From the media's point of view, if a bad decision has been taken, then we bring it out and show that to people. Maybe it will discipline decision makers just a little.'

V2, focus group 1, Nursipalu

At the same time, state and local government representatives expressed a contrasting view that people should not 'go to the media' and argued that a motive to initiate public discussion is to trigger a scandal and that creates problems to public policies. The thoughts of one participant above reflect an assumption that it is possible to talk about problem in institutions so that people will listen. From the point of view of dialogic communication, this is a strong assumption because, as we will mention below, listening is not just hearing:

"Good communication starts with the fact that, if at all possible, issues should be resolved without public scandals, without going to the media. It starts with people communicating openly with each other. If you have a problem you don't go calling a journalist first, but you try to communicate with that person or institution yourself first."

V1, focus group 3, Metsküla

The quote above mentions “openness”. An open and unbiased attitude in interpersonal communication is a recurring theme that focus group participants highlight as a prerequisite for a good communication culture.

Journalists who participated in the focus groups pointed out that journalists need to understand ‘the other side and that asking critical questions is the function of journalism.

“When I ask something as journalist I am doing my job. No one should start attacking me personally, even my question would be critical questions, because it is my duty to ask critical questions.”

V4, focus group 3, Metsküla

The focus group participants shared both positive and negative experiences with journalists. While pointing out that the spokesperson himself is largely responsible for what he says to the journalist, the journalist has its part when enabling the informant to review the text, The following quote is particularly telling from the perspective of dialogic communication, showing how journalists and people who provide information can work together to achieve a higher-quality message.

“I really like it when journalist sends me back the text of our conversation so that I can check how it has been written. In many cases I have been able review the text. formulate the sentences, and to edit the entire text myself in a way that I like. I'm ultimately satisfied with that. Of course, I have been reading something written for a magazine or newspaper that was perhaps written in the heat of the moment.”

V3, focus group 3, Metsküla

The focus group participants also provided examples on that there is practically no independent local press in Estonia anymore and that municipal newspapers are mostly dependent on the municipal government. It was perceived that local media does not represent others' interests but those of the local government officials and that it does not promote dialogue between parties.

“When it was announced in our local newspaper and municipal website that a school is being closed but that this decision was contested or that parents disagreed with it, there was not a word published about it. It's a bit of a shame because there would be a lot of things to discuss. It would have good just to mention that the matter is still open and we are in court, and we'll see what happens.”

V5, focus group 5, small schools

It was also pointed out that professional journalism ethics has been developed over a long period of time, while for new platforms in social media there are no clear ethical standards.

The tension between responsible professional or traditional media and “wild-wild-west” on social media were discussed in several focus groups:

“I think it's safe to say that it took a hundred years or more to develop ethical standards for journalism. Perhaps we cannot expect that we would be able to develop same understanding of norms and values in social media in such a short time. In regard to social media, we are still in our infancy as society compared to traditional media.

V1, focus group 8, communication on social media

Different techniques of communication and their effectiveness were also discussed in the focus group on social media. After reflecting upon whether and to what extent a punishment could have an ethical effect a participant concluded that it could not. The participants also highlighted that many of those who could (and should) shape good communication space and intervene in case of malpractice choose to remain passive observers:

“Let's be honest, shaming or cancelling people doesn't really work. Show me someone in Estonia who has been shamed or cancelled and who hasn't just moved on living a normal life, right? Cancelling is not a very strong social norm, and maybe it shouldn't be. Instead of the stick, we should use the carrot? Those who have been silent and shaking their heads understand that now it's the time to roll up their sleeves and that no one else is going to save the Estonian-language communication space.”

V4, focus group 8, communication on social media

Given that Estonia is a small media market, the role of public service broadcasting in the country is important. The Estonian public service broadcaster ERR hosts a function for the ombudsman who monitors the quality and neutrality of public service broadcasting. One participant pointed out the different work ethics of private and public media. As private media was considered more prone to selective coverage of topics and promoting its corporate (business) interests, the public media was perceived more impartial and independent:

“Private media can choose their positions, and thanks to their good communication, they may take a slightly different approach to how they deal with public issues. In the case of the ERR, it is precisely impartiality, independence and balance that are laid down as good practice. This is also reflected in the National Broadcasting Ac. In the sense that the rules are quite well established.

V4, focus group 6, marriage equality

"The national broadcaster has a very clear framework that if there is an issue that provokes very different opinions in society [...] then we must always remember to return to these principles every time."

(V4, focus group 6, marriage equality)

The quotes above illustrates that the task of public service media is maintain neutrality as its core criterion for the quality of information. This public service media is tasked to facilitate the most important prerequisites for dialogic communication: establishing a standard for the quality of reliable information.

With regard to social media, the participants saw that content production in those platforms is difficult to regulate normatively. One participant pointed out that posts on social media are reactive and 'made on the basis of emotion'. Although this statement cannot be generalised, the participant reflected upon difference in expectations between professional and social media: Professional media has resources for analytical and in-depth coverage, while social media provides platform for rather spontaneous reactions.

"In the traditional media they get paid to go in depth. Contents in social media, is often emotional reactions created on a fraction of a second of emotion."

V4, focus group 8, communication on social media

When talking about social media, the focus group participants highlighted anonymity and rude and abusive communication often prompted by anonymity. This argument stemmed from a context where the participants reflected upon why users behave differently online from their everyday life.

"In digital communication, we don't perceive that empathetic boundary which we tend to recognise offline. With posts, we don't see faces or the body language of others. We don't see how that person is there. So, we can't relate to them, Even now in this focus group discussion we're having, the conversation would be different, if we didn't see each other on the screen."

V1, focus group 8, communication on social media

Another topic that came up in the focus group on social media was the imposed and repetitive marketing messages. The participants said that the creators of marketing messages seem to not understand (or do not want to understand) that repetitive messages are annoying, inappropriate, and overly pushy. One participant proposed that the marketing adds should be more personal and fit to the group to whom it is posted.

"Two or three posts per day from the same company, with the same content day after day, week after week. I wouldn't call that good behaviour."

V1, focus group 8, social media communication

"It's bombarding, spamming different groups without any connection to the group. Often it's vegetable sellers, saying they're bringing vegetables from Tartu or somewhere. It's all well and good, but, please, make the post personal! Say when are you bringing them to this part of town and on which days."

V2, focus group 8, communication on social media

When identifying problems on social media, the participants reflected upon why diversity, which used to be an important value in communication just a few decades ago, is now becoming a rather negative or confusing. A plausible explanation maybe found in the logic of attention economy, which results in information overload.

"As long as we live in a capitalist attention economy, the media organisations try to show to advertisers how good they are at keeping the attention of a large number of people and then selling that audience to advertisers."

V4, focus group 8, communication on social media

Information overload may be one of the reasons why public dialogue is not always perceived positively by people. At some point, it also becomes burdensome. The abundance of opinions, which used to be taken as positive indicator for democracy, is no longer conducive to dialogue, but rather a problem causing communication fatigue.

"Maybe our brains are simply not ready to absorb so many different opinions. Hearing all my neighbours' opinions on temporary traffic arrangements in my local community social media account, there's just too much of it."

V4, focus group 8, communication on social media

One of the dominant discourses concerning the expectations of professional and social media was related to the quality of the message and communication distributed via media. Specifically, 38 segments were coded where the quality of the message was explicitly pointed out. The following quote illustrates a discourse in which the quality of a message is linked to transparency and reliability. This quote also illustrates that sometimes the accuracy of data is not enough. Therefore, the quality of a message is a complex value, where the main role and responsibility lies with the data processor, whose attitudes determine how the data is presented.

"Our discussions about communication often deal with data. There are so many dimensions to that topic, as data can be produced and presented in many different ways. This is why transparency is important

in itself. It's for knowing where the data comes from, who obtained it, for what purposes. Those are the questions where I feel that the standards in Estonia are currently quite poor, quite low."

V4, focus group 6, marriage equality

4. Engaging with Public Communication

According to conceptual approaches to the ethics of dialogic communication (WP 1, D 1.1.), dialogue functions ideally when there are no asymmetrical power relations in the communication situation, or when those relations are well balanced and equal. We therefore investigated how people perceive power relations in different communication situations, including whether and to what extent power relations are balanced in communication and who could be deemed responsible for this.

Power relations in communication are best balanced when all participants in the communication can have a say in the issues that concern them on an equal footing. Some people in society inevitably have more power (to make decisions that affect other people) than others. In communication ethics, the question of who has information and the power to decide prompts another question how an inevitably disproportionate power relationship could be balanced so that persons with less power or less information would feel themselves equal in the communication situation. This stipulates that the communication is sincere, and that questions and needs of each parties are understood. The following quote illustrates how such ethical principles were articulated in the focus group discussions:

"I would like communication to be more sincere and honest, so that people would feel that the person they are talking to understands their difficulties."

V5, focus group 10, people with special needs

The previous example illustrates that dialogue can only function in a situation where listening involves a response. The "listening index" mentioned in theory (Scudder 2022) is helpful here. One can imagine that the interviewee describes a fifth and sixth level of listening: "5: The listener responds to the speaker in a substantive and relevant way, and 6. the speaker reports being satisfied with the sincerity of the listener's listening. (ibid. 180).

There is a clear distinction between state power and local power holders. The following quote reflects participants' perception of a minister who does not find the time and does not focus on issues to stakeholders and instead chooses to engage in small talk.

"There was less than five minutes to go when the minister arrived. He greeted a pair of people standing nearby. He talked about his trip telling

that a goat had run in front of him several times. Then he looked at his watch and said he had to run off to a meeting and left. He didn't even say hello. He could have at least done that much. And if that's not arrogance, then I don't know what is."

V3, focus group 1, Nursipalu

In the case of actors in positions of power, the focus group participants also raised the issue of communication skills. One participant referred to a lack of competence as a lack of management skills, but the description corresponds to a lack of assertiveness. In this case, the context was workplace bullying, which in Estonian focus groups was also linked to critical dissent.

"I have seen cases where workplace bullying, or such rude behaviour occurs because managers don't dare to assert themselves or that they lack sufficient management skills. Then, lower down, middle managers or ordinary employees behave very rudely towards each other, and this leads to conflicts. Managers can be very strong specialists, but they don't know how to run a medium-sized company. And that is why problems arise there."

V5, focus group 7, whistleblowing

Power relations in communication are related to trust. This became clear, especially in the focus group that analysed two conflicting topics, that people do not particularly trust the messages of those in power. The participants noted that "not listening" is sometimes inevitable. One possible reason for this is that people have a 'pre-prepared script' for communication that is not spontaneous and does not take into account the other party's real fears or opinions. The following text excerpt illustrates a situation where local government representatives introduced four scenarios for the organisation of local schools (including possibilities of school closures) to parents and the school staff. In their discourse local authorities assumed that their proposals had already been listened to but misinterpreted.

"We prepared possible scenarios. But by the time we went to the community with these scenarios, the whole thing had already been turned against us. So, when we presented the four versions, all we heard was that the school would be closed. That was all we heard, even if we had no plans to close the school."

V4, focus group 4, policy makers

The preceding text excerpt illustrates a discourse that emerged in several focus groups in which public authorities expressed sincere regret that they were unable to engage in dialogue with the people concerned due to being misinterpreted and prejudiced. At the same

time, the excerpt reveals that local authorities did not perceive that they were initiating one-sided communication rather than a dialogue.

As mentioned above, when balancing power relations, it is important that people feel that representatives of state power treat them as stakeholders and equal partners in two-way communication about the planning processes in land use (Nursipalu focus group) and in the restructuring of the school system.

In the discourse of public officials were primarily concerned about whether their information reached the people concerned correctly and efficiently. A major concern for government representatives was that information needed to be complete and validated before being distributed. Sharing information too early seemed wrong, as it might have been inaccurate. Sharing it too late, on the other hand, would have meant that people had already formed preconceptions based on inaccurate information. For government representatives, the timing of information sharing was therefore a prerequisite for dialogue.

The following excerpt illustrates the government's reasoning regarding the risks posed by premature disclosure, and why it is more transparent to inform people sooner rather than later.

"If we come out with incomplete information just for the sake of keeping citizens informed, we will be faced with an avalanche of questions that we cannot answer. We always promise that more information will be provided, as things become clearer. Please, keep an eye on the latest news." The local mayor agrees with us. He is also in favor of providing as much information as possible to avoid speculation and intrigue."

V4, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

Discussants in the focus group also pointed out that there are decision-making areas where the involvement of local people in policy processes is limited due to the nature of the decision. In the following quote this observation connects to a military defense issue and the construction of the Nursipalu training ground.

"We know that not everyone can decide whether we should buy armored vehicles, how our soldiers should be trained and how we should respond to our possible enemies. Some things are not for citizens to decide."

V4, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

From the ethical perspective of balancing power, it is also noteworthy that the representative of the state (in this case, in a position of greater power in terms of both information and decision-making) pointed out that dialogue requires bilateralism. Nevertheless, in this case, the discourse on the balance and proportionality of power is missing. Those who have greater power should have a proportionally greater obligation to listen in the establishment of dialogue. The following quote indirectly shows how the

person in power seem to give up on dialogue, saying that the other side (the people of the Võru County) was not open enough to listen to the government.

"Every practice of good communication is two-sided. If the other side has no desire to communicate with you but pursues other goals from seeking a solution, then these conflicts are written into them.

V4, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

Communication participants: agency and responsibility

The discourse that emerged as a problem in the Estonian focus groups can be coined 'loud voices'. It refers to people who are not involved in the problem and do not represent the views of the (local) people involved – but who tend to hijack the dialogue without knowing the details:

"Some people hijack meetings and say and do whatever comes into their heads."

V3, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

In the following quote, the interviewee also explains that local residents tend to disapprove of vocal 'troublemakers' from outside the community because they take away the opportunity from locals to engage in the dialogue. In so doing, they are instrumental in creating biases that ultimately inform the decisions:

"I feel that people of Võru County don't need those who come with their hands in the air, shouting, filling the meetings. The saddest thing is that decisions and assessments are essentially based on four or five people who attend these meetings as guest speakers. And I can see how cornered these officials are in the end, because whatever they try to explain or say calmly, they don't even get the chance. Communication is killed off right at the start, there and then."

V5, focus group 1, Nursipalu

As mentioned above, the problem is that the position and motivation of the person(s) who speak in public events are not always known to journalists. The interviewee does not blame the journalist, but rather the people who gave the event its tone, even though they were not actually involved:

"We looked at who wrote what and where. We also looked at their profiles to see who these people actually were. The conclusion is that there were no landowners in these groups. When landowners did speak up, it was only one or two people a week. And when we looked at whether these people were local or not, there were actually quite a lot of people

who were not from the area. There were a lot of people from Harju County and Tallinn who represented the so-called anti-government forces. There were also local people who spoke up, but the extreme arguments did not come from the locals.

V2, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

"The most vocal community is the one that is most inclined to turn to the media, and then their arguments become the centre of the discussion and the focus of public attention. At the same time, other schools, which are more passive, remain silent, are quietly pushed aside. But it is very difficult to map this reality, this actual situation."

V3, focus group 4, policymakers

Those who speak louder were considered one of the biggest problems in dialogue-based communication, especially when people feel that they would rather have a opportunity to ask questions, listen, and be heard. In the social media focus group, on the contrary, it was said that important voices are missing from public communication.

"Good communication is not so much a question of whether you are polite or well-behaved, but rather that we admit that a large number of people who should be heard in the public sphere do not speak up at all."

V4, focus group 8, communication in social media

In summary of the discourse on 'vocal loudmouths' and 'missing voices', people whose motivation for speaking out is unclear do not face any real barriers to communication. These people attract public attention by speaking out in (social) media and at local meetings, thus preventing those who wish to engage in substantive dialogue from holding peaceful discussions.

Several representatives of focus groups on small schools considered inappropriate or uninformed communication to be a problem. In the following quote, the speaker highlights the problem that ideological rather than professional opinions are becoming widespread. Dialogue requires well-argued and accurate information. Based on this premise, the speaker highlights a problem wherein initially incompetent opinions end up being interpreted as reliable.

Responsibility and anonymity

The discourse of responsibility was prevalent in the Estonian focus groups. It was related to the concept of privacy and the recognition of true information as well as the question of who should be responsible for ensuring that dialogue works. Taking responsibility was also linked to personal autonomy and responsibility for their communication choices. At the same time,

we cannot conclude from the focus groups that people were aware of the various choices available to them and their responsibilities. It should be noted that the discussants spoke about situations that, for various reasons, they had reflected on more than usual or where moral choices were more clearly defined. The following quote refers to the participant's relationship with social media illustrating a mindset where responsibility for consuming unethical and "toxic" media lies with the individual. This, in turn, raises the question of how such a pragmatic attitude toward communication culture could support a general culture of dialogue in public communication.

"You can choose whether you are in social media or not. And if that is too toxic environment for you and doesn't fit your values, then you don't visit it. You can create an alternative environment where there are people who share your values. The environment should allow for self-determination in terms of how you communicate."

V3, focus group 8, communication on social media

In the excerpt above, self-determination of the media usage was set as value for individuals. In the following quote another participant doubts that people would be capable of living up with that ideal in this era of rapid technological development.

"We spend so much of our day in a constant hybrid between digital and analogue platforms. I mean, while being in a meeting in real life, we're looking at our phones at the same time. All that content flows and spills out. It's becoming more and more normal."

V4, focus group 8, communication on social media

The participants emphasised the responsibilities of platform administrators to ensure that it functions as a good communication channel. The question arose as to what degree should such duty for care extend.

"Where does the duty of care lie? On the part of the algorithm, is it the Meta platform itself? What about a specific group, moderator or owner? These can play out very differently. I cannot morally or legally argue that you have no responsibility. You have gathered these people together, so you are responsible. The question is simply, which one is more responsible: Meta as a large platform that provides the service, or you as the source of the output? It will be very interesting to see how this plays out."

V4, focus group 8, communication on social media

In the following quote, the speaker expresses the need to spend time and attention to ensure that messages communicated in the public space are reviewed by several people so that the tone of the message would not accidentally be too harsh.

"When we post stuff on Facebook we let several people review the messages first and point us out questionable parts. What do you think, is this sentence okay, or is it too harsh, or should it be changed somehow? Well, actually, we've all looked over those kinds of things together most of the time."

V3, focus group 3, Metsküla

While willing to take responsibility, members of the social media focus group also discussed the scale of control and responsibility, and resource it requires. Given that there are so much communication it is impossible for a person to control their quality. A solution for the moderation problem is alleviated by pooling resources with follows.

"It's very difficult to control, if you have a Facebook group with 40 000 followers. I definitely can't read all the posts, let alone the comments. I know maybe a hundred people but not all of them. When someone says something, immediately there are a couple of dozen people who read that comment to say whether it was appropriate or not. In case there was hate speech or someone swore at someone, the comment on the post will be reported."

V2, focus group 8, communication on social media

"I have to go through the list once a week. I go through the comments that were reported and look into whether it was offensive or not, whether it insulted someone or not. I don't go around checking every day to see if someone has said something. Users report it themselves nowadays."

V2, focus group 8, social media communication

The participants were sceptical about handing out the good communication control to artificial intelligence, AI. They pointed out that algorithms can still create content that is inappropriate, and that only a human expert in the field can control this. At the same time, the discussant reflected upon the point at which responsibility becomes control and the criteria for determining the boundaries of good communication practice. In the focus groups there was no consensus on this issue. Given the vagueness of opinions, it seems to be too early to expect programmes to teach the boundaries of good practice. From the perspective of dialogic communication ethics, such a discussion will be indeed important.

A separate issue regarding responsibility arose in connection with anonymity. The focus groups clearly expressed a disapproval of anonymous communication. They argued that if you have something to say, you should say it under your own name. The speaker did not mention courage, but the need for courage in communication comes across strongly in the following quote.

"I don't tolerate anonymous comments or letters. If a person has something to say, they should say it under their own name. I say who I

am and what I think. I expect the same from others. Why would you need to post anonymous comments in a newspaper?"

V3, focus group 1, Nursipalu

The dominant discourse related to anonymity tended to emphasise that recognition of identities leads to responsibility and adherence to good practice.

"I was at a cyber violence conference and the Italians there pointed out that there is less violent content when actors in the environment identify themselves. In that sort of environment, anyone can access my data and hold me responsible for my content, if they want to."

V1, focus group 8, communication on social media

In the case of social media, focus group participants highlighted fake accounts as a risk, where anonymity removes responsibility. A speaker pointed out that people can create as many fake accounts as they want, as it is impossible to identify someone on social media.

"The bolder the comments are in social media, the more absurd the names are. People create these fake accounts, so that they don't have to be who they are in real life. On Delfi [new website in Estonia], they called the comments section a toilet wall. That was about ten to fifteen years ago. Now the toilet wall is on social media, where people live out their lives under pseudonyms carrying out some sort of agenda. I don't know what they're doing. What are the reasons that they can create so many fake accounts?"

V3, focus group 8, communication on social media

5. Reflecting on Communication Ethics

The need for honest and open communication is emphasised in the focus groups by both representatives of authority and citizens in various roles. At the same time, the discourse on also reveals its complexity. In the following quote, the speaker argues that honesty and openness are important because people can see through lies. However, as we will show later, the focus group participants were also critical of people's ability to distinguish between truth and lies.

"For me, the main lesson in communication is that it must be honest, because people quickly see through deception and obfuscation."

V6, focus group 5, small schools

In the following quote, however, the speaker points out that you cannot be honest with everyone but at some moments must choose with whom you can speak completely honestly. That reflects rather instrumental and strategic viewpoint on honesty.

"When it comes to communication, I am in favour of openness. Openness and honesty, speaking up, but not with everyone. You still have to filter out those who are, let's say, influencers, pioneers from the community. You have to get to the same boat with these school leaders for being speak inside the school. V4, focus group 4, policy makers

In the following quote, a government official attending the focus group points out that adherence to the principle of honesty is important both at the social and organisational level, but emphasises that the importance of the media and other institutions as watchdogs:

"Honesty is a thing I really wanted to bring up. For the state and the agency, it's one of our fundamental principles we adhere to. In addition, the media monitors us, and the public monitors us We cannot get away with all that when providing any other kind of information."
V5, focus group 2, Nursipalu policy makers

At the normative level, focus group participants emphasised the importance of honesty, but interpreting its value became complicated in the longer term, as honesty is linked to trust, or more precisely, to the lack thereof. A local government representative added that honesty means no concealment.:

"I am the kind of person who wants to tell my target group such as residents of the municipality. It mean I tell them a little more than they asked for to signal that we have nothing to hide, while preventing additional questions at the same time. For me, this is a good way of communicating, so that I wouldn't give the impression that I've left something unsaid."
V1, focus group 2, Nursipalu policymakers

Participants in the Nursipalu focus group specifically mentioned hypocrisy as an ethical problem. The following quote characterises a mindset in which the speaker perceives a contradiction between values and the ideology constantly repeated in public communication regarding environmental sustainability, which in this case contrasts with defence and security.

"What has bothered me is the hypocrisy. On the one hand, we are incredibly concerned with nature conservation, forest management, bird species and so on. Looking at Nursipalu, we can see logging taking place

there without a permit in the middle of the spawning and nesting seasons"

V1, focus group 1, Nursipalu

The topic of Nursipalu brings up another truth-twisting and concern about manipulation that the focus group participants highlighted as a negative phenomenon. It was manifested in the form of taking issues out of context and deliberately distracting the focus in public media and communication.

"And one example of this is that the national media is talking about the four municipalities in Võru County receiving ten million. That sum allocated for four municipalities [removed] is like a drop in the ocean."

V4, focus group 1, Nursipalu

Focus group participants linked the discourse of truth and trust to political struggle. The following example illustrates that Estonian people do not trust the consistency of political rhetoric and resent the fact that lying is reportedly widespread and common in political community during elections. In addition local politicians prefer to say what they think voters want to hear:

"In the election campaign the alliance that won the ballot promised to keep all small schools open. Then, they immediately started closing them down. The fundamental conflict that followed resulted from that they lied to the voters."

V1, focus group 3, Metsküla

"A new reality in Estonia is that campaign promises do not have to be kept either in local or national level. It's not right but you can't blame just local politicians for that. We have a general crisis of trust."

V2, focus group 3, Metsküla

Participants in different focus groups linked the problem of lying to a lack of real accountability. The following quote illustrates that a lack of accountability affects people emotionally, especially when people perceive it at both the central government and municipal levels. The phrase "you can say whatever you want, whatever comes out of your mouth" shows that that lying is perceived unacceptable. As there were many similar statements on the truth and falsehood scale in the focus groups, responsibility for abstaining from lying and spilling half-truths is one of the most important challenges for a dialogue-based ethical discourse and accountability system.

Speaking of truthfulness, the speakers in the small schools focus group were also critical in terms of how information is presented. Those in power tend to present their opinions as facts, and others would be compelled to prove their point wrong with evidence. The following

excerpt demonstrates how the credibility of actors in public communication is linked to status, which in turn precludes the prerequisites for dialogic communication:

"There is a kind of tacit understanding that what a local government official or the mayor say, or everything what is written by them is a fact, and not open for dispute. When I, as a parent, want to object to something, I have to jump through the hoops, stand on my head, gather information, organise things."

V6, focus group 5, small schools

Human dignity and extreme speech

The discourse in relation to human dignity and politeness that emerged in the focus group) was characterised by emotional statements. Politeness was considered a prerequisite for diversity of opinion.

"Often discussions turn into debates and sometimes even disputes. As far as I am concerned, everyone can express their opinion as long as they do so politely and within limits that do not involve insulting anyone or restricting anyone's rights. "

V2, focus group 8, communication on social media

The following quote summarises the opinion expressed in several focus groups that good dialogue would require rational and thoughtful public communication, but that social media allows for emotional and impulsive expression, which can lead to conflicts.

"I would say that politeness is the basis of everything. And it is precisely kind of polite communication that is not driven by emotions. We see that a lot of problems start when people are not clear-headed but driven by emotions. When they start attacking each other, the conversation becomes ugly and nasty. In those moments, you should take a step back, think, let your emotions subside before acting."

V1, focus group 8, communication on social media

The following quote reflects the emotions people feel when they are not involved as equal partners solving a problem. In public interaction no one explicitly calls other with names, but the participants were able to read that between the lines, as those in power came to them with ready-made plans

In the analysis, we coded 23 speech acts where the participants directly or indirectly described their viewpoints on extreme speech. While some focus groups provided personal examples of experiencing extreme and hate speech, more frequently the discussions took place on a more general level reflecting upon the trends associated with extreme speech and the reasons behind those trends. The participant quoted below

pointed out that as a result of polarisation, society is becoming accustomed to extreme forms of expression.

"Political polarisation is widespread, not only in Estonia, but across Europe, the Western world. The temperature in the room has risen. Aggressive language and threats, things like that, are being treated as normal.

V4, focus group 6, marriage equality

Freedom of speech, critical dissent, whistleblowing

One prerequisite for dialogue-based communication is freedom of speech. It is both a value and a concept. As concept, freedom of speech describes its limitations (both in a legal and ethical sense. In doing so, it defines freedom of speech negatively, as "freedom from". Freedom of speech is declared in the constitutions of democratic societies, and this holds true to Estonia as well. In practice, though, there are quite a few restrictive aspects for freedom of speech. This is especially true with situations where people have strong differences of opinion. In the following excerpt the participant argues that freedom of speech has changed over time and is gradually becoming more restricted.

"No one dares to say anything anymore. It's as if the Soviet regime or some kind of totalitarian society were back. It started with the coronavirus crisis, or maybe even earlier, around 2014, 2015. Back then, the opinions of writers, opinion leader or intellectuals no longer mattered at all. Letters written about the senselessness of Rail Baltic, nothing happened. 10,500 people said in public that Nursipalu wasn't a very good idea."

V3, focus group 1, Nursipalu

The practical and everyday use of freedom of speech can also be hindered if nothing changes as a result of what is said out loud. In these circumstances there is no need for censorship, as ignoring something has the same silencing effect. The following quote expresses the speaker's awareness of situations that are very complex in terms of dialogue-based communication, as citizens' opinions can contradict each other and that their value choices are often irreconcilable.

"I think we are in a somewhat critical moment, where some people use freedom of expression as a pretext to restrict the freedom of expression of others. As a result of this you cannot be sure of what you can talk about."

V3, focus group 11, young people

As discourse, freedom of expression appeared to be complex for the focus group participants. Thus, its abuses do not have clear boundaries. They perceived restrictions on freedom of speech particularly in communication within organisations. An early evidence of this was drawn in the recruitment process for this study, as one participant asked that information about the research project would be sent to their personal email address because they were afraid of what their employer would think about their participation. Organisations tend to value loyalty over critical opinions, including constructive criticism. This may have cultural effects, as in Estonia, there are no publicly known whistleblowing cases with a happy ending. A "happy ending" would mean that the whistleblowers get to keep their job, would not be harassed or punished, and the organisation would publicly admit the mistakes that were made.

Whistleblowing may be treated as an indicator of whether and to what extent critical dissent ensuing public dialogue would be possible in society. When reflecting about this, a discussant pointed out that whistleblowing leaves a 'stigma' and it may take long time before that could change in Estonia:

"All precedent cases show that whistleblowing as such is culturally condemned. People are afraid of getting that mark, so to speak. It's a very complex issue, and I think we will be dealing with it for a long time to come."

V1, focus group 7, whistleblowing

When evaluating the possibility of whistleblowing in organisations the participants pointed out to an important aspect of dialogic communication: people's courage or, conversely, their fear of speaking up. They also reflected upon the distinction between false accusations and dissenting or critical comments. From the perspective of dialogue-based communication, it is important to refer to competence, because in the case of a widespread problem, it is important to ask whether solving the problem may be related to solving a competence problem.

"The question how to offer employees protection, depends on what is the interest of the organisation to ensure that protection to those who come forward to disclose critical information. Perhaps one reason for why people don't do it because many people tend to complain without reason or make false complaints. Therefore, the organisations can take this attitude."

V5, focus group 7, whistleblowing

The recent whistleblowing scandal at the Tallinn Technical University (TalTech) in 2019 suggests that public universities, where the discourse on academic freedom should particularly protect critical dissent, the criticism within and about the organisation is often suppressed. In two focus groups the participants described silencing of criticism as a

structural problem. The following quote describes the understanding gained through experience of why organisations tend to close ranks and suppress critical opinions.

"When a scandal or problem arises at universities – and this applies to many of them - the ABCs of human psychology come into play. We start protecting our own, we create a quick circle of protection, we diminish the culprit's perspective. When the problem should be solved, all applying rules are forgotten. This also applies to big companies with large communications departments, which are supposed conduct equal treatment and organise training against all the time."

V3, focus group 7, whistleblowing

In the excerpt above, the participant describes how rules disappear in the moment of real conflict situations because loyalty to the organisation and 'looking after one's own' prevail. The speaker softened the statement saying that 'the rules have been forgotten', but from the perspective of dialogic communication, the following quote expresses concern that tolerance of criticism and dissent within organisations is a cultural challenge, where applied practices determines whether a critical mass of managers is prepared to deal with the problems such workplace bullying in a constructive and dialogic way.

An important prerequisite for dialogic communication is that people can speak up, including expressing dissenting opinions without fear. The following description of the situation shows how incidents cause people to fear speaking freely:

"University employees have told me that they are afraid to express their opinions. This is caused by fear. Last year, my colleague suggested organising a public discussion and inviting the management to talk about decision-making at the university. After the discussion had taken place, my colleague was blocked from the mailing list. The university accused him, among other things, of rudeness for which he received a warning from the university, the same punishment that the university management had imposed in the summer on a person who had abused his power and sexually harassed his subordinate over a long period of time. I wouldn't say that this colleague was a whistleblower, he just wanted to have a discussion, but the university management punished him anyway."

V4, focus group 7, whistleblowing

In the following quote, the speaker highlights the characteristics of a 'silent organisation' culture. In features "corridor conversations" where people cautiously express thoughts that they do not dare to express in official and public communication.

"Fear, silence, and passivity are widespread in the internal university culture. I would even say that they are inherent to the system. While

working there, I observed the corridor talk, where many people complained. People are bold in the corridors, but few are willing to speak openly or communicate critical views to the university management. This is largely because the hierarchical system of the university is not designed to allow different voices to be heard."

V4, focus group 7, whistleblowing

The quote lists techniques that organisations can use to restrict freedom of speech and the expression of dissenting opinions, instilling fear of consequences in people. As mentioned above, academic universities could serve as indicators for one aspect of dialogic communication: freedom of speech and the safety of expressing dissenting opinions. If there is a climate of fear at universities (as confirmed by two participants in different focus groups and also confirmed by the authors of this analysis), then what the management or communications department says is essentially meaningless.

Labelling or dismissing the people who express a different opinion or raise a problem as stupid, "misunderstanding the issue" or "incompetent" is a tactic that was also described by participants in two focus groups dealing with conflictual issues. Thus, silencing critical dissent and blaming the victim in communication is one of the most serious obstacles to dialogue-based communication in Estonia.

Values: privacy

The AI focus group revealed that major problems with privacy are related to concepts that are missing in everyday communication in Estonia. For example, human autonomy and the degree of interference, and passive privacy protection technologies:

"A lot of privacy protection technologies are rather passive. So, I give away my data first and then the company uses privacy protection technologies to protect my data. As an individual, I can't really do anything. You can step ahead and say to a phone sales person 'I don't want this anymore. Please delete all my data from your database'. Pseudonymisation is technologically easy, because it can be done in such a way that the person doesn't do anything, they're somewhere else."

V4, focus group 9, technology and AI

One of the topics discussed in the focus groups was the increase in people's awareness of informational self-determination, especially with regard to social media platforms. It is acknowledged that social media provides information that can be misused against people. In the following quote, the speaker also mentions their encounter with the concept of 'the right to be forgotten' vs. 'the integrity of archives'. It is true that the use of outdated and irrelevant information is more a matter of moral choice on the part of the user, but this realisation is of little help to those who suffer:

"I have started to share less information about myself and removed information from Facebook, LinkedIn and various other places. I even called the editorial office of a newspaper and asked them to take down an article where erroneous information about me was published."

V1, focus group 7, whistleblowing

At the same time, the AI focus group also expressed the opinion that there are not many people who are concerned about their privacy. The problem was not so much a general concern about privacy, but rather a lack of understanding of the meaning and content of "informed consent". A focus group participant also raised the point that the privacy of individuals may be outweighed by the benefits to society (and thus indirectly to the individuals whose data is used) arising from data processing.

"I personally feel that whatever they do with my data, the value I get back is much greater than any harm caused. Probably many people think the same way, and it's just a matter of making people aware of the risks so that they can decide for themselves what they want to share with the system and what not." V2, focus group 9, technology and AI

The experts who participated in the Estonian focus groups did not agree on whether and to what extent ordinary people should be concerned about the security of their data. In fact, there were two separate arguments: one where we do not need to worry too much about data leaks, as the use of data does not significantly affect the privacy of ordinary citizens. The other view was that the data of individuals as a whole poses a security risk to society because control over the information is outside the democratic system, in the hands of large corporations whose interests are not aligned with those of the actual owners of their own data:

"We've been living with the internet for 25 years now. And how big of a problem is privacy really? I'm afraid that people often see this problem as too big. No one really cares about what hasn't been leaked so far, it's not a problem. It's the same problem as when you're given a knife in a restaurant, someone might kill someone else with it, right? It's not a problem. People don't usually kill each other."

V1, focus group 9, technology and AI

"You may not care, if your data is leaked, but maybe someone else close to you cares. And if your data is leaked, does it mean that you would leak someone else's data too."

V4, focus group 9, and AI

Setting privacy boundaries for oneself was not always clear for the participants. The speaker below points out the blurred line between information that people are willing to share with friends but not with the public, in the sense that they no longer know who would have access

to the information about them. The following discussion expresses uncertainty about whether and to what extent people can control their own privacy boundaries today. In other words, autonomy in a situation where 'some website says it has a legitimate interest in a person's data'. And from there, privacy and data become commodities that have value for organisations, which people no longer imagine or control themselves.

"And I totally understand that I wouldn't want my private conversations to be out there. And I also feel that at the moment, when I think about it, it's probably okay to share this ChatGPT log, but I'm not sure if it should be that way, because as a matter of principle, I don't want it to be out there, it's my business what I'm researching there. There's quite a lot of information about my interests there, you can find out quite a lot about me, my social media is mainly professional, I don't usually share personal things on social media. And if you read the ChatGPT log, you can find out quite a lot about my hobbies. My friends all know about them, even my colleagues know, but it's not something that everyone in the world needs to know about me. I understand that the thing is, well, I'm just a more private person. But yes, I completely agree with them about browser cookies, because the problem with them is that when you actually start reading what they want, some website says that it has a legitimate interest in my data. The question is, what legitimate interest do you have in me coming to this page, what are you offering me in return? And well, in Europe I've seen pages where there is a "reject all" button and you can click it, but generally elsewhere it's "accept all" in blue and the other button is transparent. And then I've seen repeatedly how people just... Well, 'Oh, it popped up, accept all, next', they don't even think about it."

V4, focus group 9, technology and AI

"I'm just saying that it's not like there's one company doing something that you can pin down, but every damn teenager with a gaming computer can do it today. And today it requires a little technical savvy, surprisingly little, by the way. But tomorrow, it won't even require that. The world, the problems that are coming, it's not okay, but in a sense, they are insurmountable. There's going to be a lot of this mess with artificial intelligence."

V1, focus group 9, technology and AI

Competencies

Issues related to public communication ethics require certain communication skills, which can be divided into different levels. The focus groups revealed that certain communication skills need to be taught at a fairly early age, as children are already active in the public

communication field. Although children learn what is acceptable in terms of communication ethics mainly in the family and school environment, access to the internet has enabled them to participate in the public sphere. Therefore, attention should be paid to internet-related aspects at an early stage:

"It should definitely be made clear to children in the fifth or sixth grade that, you don't post pictures that are not related to you on Facebook or social media. You don't post pictures or comments that disparage others, because there can be consequences. Another thing is that someone could later use a picture you posted in a bad way, even though you thought you posted a nice picture of yourself joking around in the schoolyard or something, and then someone else could easily copy that picture, edit it and use it to make you look bad. Children should understand early on that absolutely everything they post on the internet stays there forever. No one, not even the police, can take it down, because someone has downloaded it somewhere and can change it and repost it at any time. It is very important for young people to think about what they post."

V2, focus group 8, communication on social media

On the other hand, it was pointed out that adults may also need support in understanding what is important to know in terms of communication ethics. In order to avoid escalating situations, it is necessary to start with relatively basic aspects, such as the fact that people should communicate directly with each other when they have concerns. Direct and immediate communication with the persons concerned prevents people from feeling excluded, which is one form of bullying. The following quote highlights how situations can escalate if this is not done.

The discussion also raised the question of what skills need to be taught and where. At the same time, it was pointed out that, for example, young people's communication on the internet and in real life varies greatly. The focus group strongly raised the question of how to teach the relevant skills for functioning in both real life and the public space of the internet:

"Internet ethics could be included in the school curriculum, since everyone uses the internet. I also see this with my own children, who are nine and ten years old. They don't communicate in real life the same way they communicate with other children in games and on the internet. Because they feel that if you can't see the other person with your own eyes, you are more cruel and use language that they know they shouldn't use in real life."

V3, focus group 8, communication on social media

The same focus group also pointed out that there are already approaches and techniques for teaching young people about internet safety, as well as how to communicate politely

online and what to keep in mind in terms of communication ethics. However, there is a lack of approaches specifically aimed at adults, for whom the internet and its possibilities are developing faster than people can keep up with.

"In the last two years, we have introduced digital safety [removed] children and [removed], none of whom are interested in Facebook, by the way. We still talk about how not to get Roboxes on Roblox. How to tell if someone you're talking with on Discord is actually an adult? Where do you draw the line when someone starts crossing boundaries on Snapchat, and so on. Things are going very well with the children, they learn quickly, and even kindergarten children can learn about password security and viruses by running around outside. What is problematic is that parents feel that it is not age-appropriate. The same parents who buy their children a smart device by the age of three at the latest, 75% of children have daily access to a personal or accessible smart device. And that is age-appropriate for them."

V4, focus group 8, communication on social media

6. Conclusion

The analysis of the focus group interviews revealed that most of the topics are covered in normative theories of communication ethics, but what was unique was how the participants described their everyday practices and the cause-and-effect relationships between bad practices. We have attempted to highlight these connections in the previous analysis. Another unique aspect of the analysis is how people perceive changes in agency related to technological developments. A distinctive feature in Estonia is the issue of freedom of expression and the security of its use, as well as the gradual decline in freedom of expression, particularly in relation to discourse on dissenting opinions.

Through discourse analysis of focus group interviews, it became clear that communication ethics cannot be regulated in the traditional way; rather, it is a matter of developing competence and sensitivity.

It also became quite clear that people may want to engage in dialogue, but sometimes they lack the imagination or skills to listen in a way that makes their partner feel not only heard but also understood. The habit of coming up with your message and expecting the other person to listen and then start a dialogue is quite common. However, to start a dialogue, you need to begin with a question: what is it that I don't know (about the situation being discussed by your partner or by you)?



The general conclusion is that the more differences of opinion, messages of varying quality and speakers with different motivations there are around people, the more complicated and tiring everyday communication becomes. However, all focus group participants expressed a desire for dialogue-based communication.

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Annex 1. Overview of Focus Group Discussions

	Involved actor categories	Description of the case/ discussion	Participants (n)/ Gender (M/F/X)	Session date
1.	Attention deprived and attention hackers	The Nursipalu training area is one of six military training fields used by the Estonian Defence Forces, covering approximately 3,300 hectares. Following the start of war in Ukraine, a decision was made to expand the area, as the Ministry of Defense confirmed new boundaries. Landowners and local activists shared their experiences regarding the communication of the process.	5 1-4-0	Apr 3, 2024
2.	Attention magnets and attention workers	As part of the expansion of the Nursipalu training area, politicians and citizen journalists reflected on the communication challenges related to this process.	6 3-3-0	May 7, 2024
3.	Attention deprived and attention workers	In Lääneranna Municipality in Estonia, the decision to close Metsküla school has sparked resistance from parents and local activists, who have taken the local government to court. Teachers, parents and activists shared their perspectives on the communication related to the process.	4 1-3-0	May 29, 2024
4.	Attention magnets	Several municipalities in Estonia have decided to close small rural schools, triggering pushback from parents and local activists advocating to keep them open. Politicians and representatives of the Ministry of Education	5 4-1-0	Jun 12, 2024

		discussed communication related to the topic.		
5.	Attention deprived, attention hackers and attention workers	Similar to other cases of rural school closures in Estonia, local parents, activists and citizen journalist discussed the communication strategies and challenges of this issue.	6 1-5-0	June 17, 2024
6.	Attention deprived and attention hackers	Debate on legalizing the marriage for the same-sex couples in Estonia has generated intense discussions. Activists and the chair of the Ethics Council shared their experiences related to communication on the topic.	4 2-2-0	Sep 26, 2024
7.	Attention hackers and attention magnets	Workplace bullying and internal criticism within organizations is growing concern, often suppressed or overlooked. Activists, a conciliation officer, and a representative from the Estonian Human Rights Center discussed how these challenges are addressed in organization communication.	5 2-3-0	Oct 28, 2024
8.	Attention magnets and attention workers	A discussion on communication ethics in social media offered insights from a Web policeman, a blogger, a Facebook group moderator and a media literacy researcher.	4 3-1-0	Nov 29, 2024
9.	Attention magnets and attention workers	A discussion on the ethical and autonomous aspects of AI technology, featuring the country's AI program manager, leading developers and a senior researcher.	4 3-1-0	Dec 4, 2024
10.	Attention deprived	People with disabilities are often marginalized in public discourse, forcing them to advocate for their equal opportunities. Representatives of various disability organizations,	6 4-2-0	Jan 28, 2025

		including a representative of autistic people , discussed ethical concerns in public communication.		
11.	Attention deprived and attention magnets	Experts working with young people, including teachers, coaches, youth workers and a psychologist , discussed communication ethics in relation to youth engagement and development.	5 1-4-0	Jan 28, 2025

Annex 2. Coding Tree

Code System	Memo	Frequency
Code System		1754
Media environment		0
Expectations to media	Includes all discourses where journalism or journalists are criticized or praised, and how journalists justify their roles, activities, or expectations.	82
Social media	An inductive code marking mentions of social media in focus groups.	80
Acceleration, changes in time	Inductive code to capture the expressions over the acceleration process in society.	12
Message quality and content	This category emerged inductively, with focus group members discussing what a message should and should not be like (e.g., messages should be clear and unambiguous).	38
Public communication		0
Power relations in communication	A theoretical code encompassing all power-related themes in transcripts, including decision-making authority, control over information sharing, and references to officials like ministers and local government leaders.	91
Safety	Discourse is related to freedom of speech and fear associated with expressing dissenting opinions, critical thoughts and/or public statements both within organisations and in the media.	32
Equality in communication	Equality in communication is related to the absence of power relations or, conversely, to exclusion, disregard and non-involvement resulting from power relations.	18
Dialogism and one-way communication	Dialogism and one-way communication – both positive thoughts about the existence of dialogue and people's complaints about its absence; one-way communication is expressed in specific expressions such as 'conveying information', 'giving information', 'receiving information', etc. Dialogism also includes all discussions related to listening and not listening.	200
Manipulation and communication strategies		38

Actors and agency	A macro-discourse encompassing multiple sub-discourses, capturing all text segments that focus on the question of WHO—who holds information, who produces it, who shares it, and who receives it. This helps explain power relations and identify active agents in communication ethics versus passive, vulnerable figures.	302
Responsibility	Concerns who takes responsibility and to whom it is assigned. Related to agency and power relations, significant for defining principles in communication.	81
Anonymity	A normatively important category.	8
Extreme speech	Includes hate speech, extreme opinions, and biased views meant to defend a particular interest.	23
Inclusion and Informational Self-Determination	Emerging from normative frameworks, it covers the presence or absence of inclusion and its importance for dialogism.	97
Value conflicts and communication values	A broad discourse marking places where participants articulate values, either abstractly or in specific situations. Sub-discourses such as care, discretion, etc., can be added later	142
AI and technology	The discourse is related to the risks and opportunities related to the use of AI	43
Values education and capability	The category includes talks about values education, individuals' capabilities to understand communication ethics and individual awareness of the possible outcome of their communicative acts. The category may be also closely related to privacy.	19
Ethics and responsibility		0
Truthfulness and lying	Truthfulness is a normatively important value. The focus is on how people discuss it and its relation to agency.	68
Misinformation and amplification	Covers all instances of misinformation, disinformation, and rumours. Misinformation is linked to the value of "truth-telling" and is analyzed as a barrier to dialogue. Amplification relates to both social media and journalism but also includes word-of-mouth rumors.	36
Human Dignity and Courtesy	Universal values in communication.	37
Freedom of speech	A normative category connected to whistleblowing and critical opinion, including speech restrictions.	50

Dissent	Normative category capturing how people define dissent, their attitudes toward it, and the extent to which the reasons for disagreements are discussed.	53
Critical opinion	A normative category related to freedom of speech and whistleblowing, sometimes overlapping with dissent but distinct in its critical nature.	11
Cancellation and exclusion	Related to emotional experiences where individuals feel ignored or their opinions are diminished despite formal inclusion. This does not cover exclusion outright but situations where individuals are made to feel insignificant in discussions	9
Privacy	A major normative category encompassing all aspects related to private life, sometimes overlapping with informational self-determination. Further subcategories may be developed.	17
Competences	The category describes any skill, knowledge or traits as well as the educational system that enables to increase the competence on communication ethics, dialogic communication, and/or media	24
Openness vs prejudice	A normative value related to openness and inclusion	24
Deliberation	Any discourse where people talk about how and what values are deliberated.	8
Children	Covers ethical considerations and choices related to children's communication.	30
Young people		29
Transparency and concealment	A normative category referring to transparency as a value in dialogue, including all expressions related to it.	30
Trust	A codable value at the word level, significant for analyzing who trusts whom or what. Descriptions of broken trust may include unfulfilled promises.	22