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Civic expression on the Net:
Different faces of public engagement

INTRODUCTION

The continuously increasing use of interactive media, global publishing and user-generated content has generated much discussion on the future of journalism and roles of citizens in a contemporary society filled with new digital innovations (see Gillmor 2004; Bowman & Willis 2003; Lievrouw & Livingstone 2006). By equipping citizens with a chance to easily bring topics to public discussion without intervening mediators like journalists, the ICTs challenge traditional practices of knowledge and information production in mass media (Gillmor 2004; see also Inroduction; Jordan, Lappalainen and Baringhorst in this volume). Blogs, wikis and other diverse user-generated content on the Net witness the invasion of citizens even in global news production (e.g. McNair 2006). Recently, media houses have started to adapt this participative turn by inviting citizens to create media content with newsrooms.

The rapid changes within communication practices will also set many challenges and create potential for 'citizen-oriented media'. We can ask; what kind of role it may have in the media environment where convergence, ever growing competition and commercialisation are gaining ground? How issues in citizens' media are represented when compared to mainstream media? Or how the old question of the communicative and informative task of media is now considered? On the one hand citizen-oriented media is often produced on a small-scale

and with a low-budget and based on voluntariness. On the other hand, big news corporations have more resources to cover various themes, make more in-depth stories and attain larger audience than alternative media. But does this make journalism in big media houses more multidimensional?

In this article I approach the question of the role of citizen-oriented media by analysing civic action and its potential impacts on social learning by taking a look at a local case of grass-roots level action. The initiative of a web portal called *Manse Square[1]* serves as an example of citizens' media or citizen journalism. This local case of an alternative media was created and produced by the University of Tampere with local citizens and citizen groups in the city of Tampere[2] in Finland. In this article I discuss the civic action from two viewpoints: 1) collective civic action as social participation which might lack direct affiliation to political aims, and 2) collective action as political participation that was initiated in the Manse Square environment more rarely than communally oriented forms of participation. The article leans on research material that consists of theme interviews (taken in 2004), a web survey (in 2003–2004) and data gathered by participatory action research methods,[3] as I closely participated in the Manse Square project during 2001–2006. The interviews were conducted with and the survey implemented among the active participants of this online initiative.

The survey called forth different vantage points of the use and the role of Manse Square as a part of the local public sphere. The survey was sent to 153 citizens and 73 responded (response rate 48 %). The sample of 153 respondents was gathered by approaching people who had at that time been involved in Manse Square or participated in its actions. The number of responses is representative of the number

1. The prefix "Manse" stems from a phrase that the city of Tampere is the Manchester of Finland and it is a common nickname for Tampere. Some combining features can be found between these two towns as they both were previously industrial, working class cities. The suffix "tori" means square in English.
2. The city of Tampere with over 200 000 inhabitants is one of the biggest cities in Finland. This largest inland city in the Nordic countries has its roots in the cotton and paper mill industry which is still reflected in the cityscape, as former industrial buildings and factories appear now as examples of the regeneration process in the city centre.
3. For information concerning action research, see Stringer 1999.

of active individuals at Manse Square because this group is relatively small. The survey data was analysed with SPSS software. The small sample imposed restrictions on the analysis so mainly frequencies, a few cross tabulations, correlations and chi-square tests could be used to analyse the data.

To discuss some topics of the survey more thoroughly I did theme interviews with active citizens because I wanted to get more in-depth information about their participation experiences. I interviewed seven people who had participated in Manse Square's activities for at least one year and had lived in their current neighbourhood for some time. The interviews helped to locate the social context that exists in collective action (cf. Jankowski et al. 2001, 107).

Next I introduce the case of the Manse Square project and its background. Then I briefly discuss the relations between citizens and the media and proceed to analyse the civic action of the case and the aspects of social and political action attached to it.

THE CASE OF MANSE SQUARE
– ORDINARY PEOPLE CREATING A PUBLIC SPACE

The Manse Square project was initiated in 1998 in Tampere to enhance local civic discussion and to develop new participatory tools. Manse Square (http://www.mansetori.fi, Mansetori in Finnish) has acted as both a virtual and a real life meeting place for local citizens, citizen groups and decision-makers. It has aimed at offering a free forum for alternative views on current issues, problems and interesting topics of discussion.

Currently Manse Square's portal consists of two independent websites; *Manse Communities* and *Manse Media* (see picture 1). At the *Manse Communities* section local neighbourhood communities and a cultural community of the Roma[4] maintain their community sites. As

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4. The Roma are an ethnic minority group with their own specific culture and language. According to estimates there are 10 000 Roma people living currently in Finland and about 10–15 million living in Europe. Despite the long history of the Roma in Finland they still face many societal problems and prejudice. One aim of co-operation with the Roma participating in Manse Square was to develop digital communication competence and to support the empowerment process of this minority group (see Sirkkunen & Kotilainen 2004).

of May 2008 some 35 districts of Tampere have their neighbourhood sites at Manse Square.[5]

Picture 1.
The front page of Manse Square in November 2007.

Manse Media is a section for local news that relies on user generated content. Manse Media functions as a citizens' web magazine providing an alternative voice with stories produced by local "neighbourhood correspondents" as citizen reporters (see picture 2). These volunteer reporters are local people who are interested in reporting publicly about activities in their neighbourhoods.

Picture 2.
The Front page of the *Manse Media* section in September 2006 introducing a story of "the Olympics of Children".

5.   There are approximately 80 districts in Tampere.

The Journalism research and development centre in the University of Tampere created the portal of Manse Square in research projects[6]. The aims of the projects focused on creating and maintaining a space for civic publicness, developing social innovations and communications technology and studying the processes of the emerged public action (Sirkkunen & Kotilainen 2004).

In 1998 when the project started, the information society was not as diffused as nowadays.[7] The price of computers, software and digital cameras set limitations on civic action on a totally different scale than nowadays when digital cameras, open source technology and broadband connections are part of everyday life in many households. The novelty of the new media occurred at the beginning in several ways; for instance people did not have Internet connections at home and they had neither software nor technical skills for photo editing or web publishing.

At the beginning the project organisation borrowed digital cameras and offered office space at the university where citizens could use computers to write and publish their stories: to learn *digital competences*. They tried to overcome digital divides by educating active citizens in web publishing and encouraging people to publish stories by teaching them (see Heinonen et al. 2001). The university also provided free server space for communities' use. First the university had to encourage and invite local communities to utilise the Internet as the idea of improving communication in neighbourhoods with

6.   The projects were funded primarily by the Finnish Funding Agency for Technology and Innovation. The projects collaborated among others with MIT Media Lab Europe. The first project around Manse Square "Locality in the global net" was implemented in 1998–2001. The second project "Evolution of e-communities" continued the work in 2002–2004.

7.   The use of ICTs has developed in Tampere since the turn of the millennium when Manse Square was initiated. For instance 80 % of the inhabitants of Tampere had an Internet connection in 2005 (Infocity research 2005). This shows an increase from 74 % in 2003 and from 65 % in 2000. In 2000 53 % of the inhabitants used the internet daily or almost daily and in 2005 this number had increased to 74 %. According to a survey that was implemented among users of Manse Square in 2004 47 % of the respondents had an ADSL connection and 19 % had a modem (Seutuverkkojen käyttäjätutkimus 2004).

ICTs was not commonly recognised earlier. This project required a lot of effort and commitment from residents but also from researchers who educated residents in using computers and methods of web publishing (ibid.).

At first there were only a few neighbourhoods that started to publish their own neighbourhood web sites at Manse Square. Step by step the portal became more popular and the number of sites increased. At the beginning Manse Square consisted of two sections; one was a neighbourhood web site - *Manse Communities* and the other was *Manse Forum*, which acted as an open arena for public debate on current and locally controversial issues. Manse Forum was divided into thematic sections that dealt with various themes such as housing, sustainable development, urban planning and general welfare. Furthermore, Manse Forum distinguished itself as an initiator of public discussion by organising encounters between citizens, civil servants and elected officials (see Hokka et al. 2004). Manse Forum was an essential part of Manse Square until 2006 when it was closed down during the transfer of maintenance and co-ordination of Manse Square from the university to the city.

The university co-ordinated Manse Square until November 2006 when the portal was transferred to the city of Tampere. The purpose of this transfer was that the Journalism research and development centre considered the city to provide better resources to secure the continuity of Manse Square.[8] By approving this task the city of Tampere wanted to emphasise the importance of the civic action originated at Manse Square. This transfer turned out to be a turning point in the portal's history.

During the university's first project the emphasis was on teaching ICT skills to citizens and inviting them to act publicly on the Net. When the second project started, the basic infrastructure of Manse Square was functioning and the researchers could focus more on developing new tools of web participation. For instance, during the second project the Manse Media section was added to the portal and the development of an open source publishing system was initiated.

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8. The Journalism research and development centre functions on private funding. When Manse Square was no longer maintained as a research project of the centre after 2004, the realistic solution was to hand over the responsibility of co-ordinating Manse Square to the city of Tampere.

The years 1998–2004 were the most active period at Manse Square. During this time there were several people participating in organising meetings, seminars and encounters with local communities, civic groups, elected officials, civil servants and other interest groups. The research projects at Manse Square ended in 2004 which inevitably meant a decline in resources. During 2004–2006 there were only one part-time co-ordinator and one part-time technical administrator at Manse Square to support citizens in their activities and questions. In this period the action slowly started to decrease, partly because the research project ended and the active input from researchers ceased.

TRANSFER TO THE CITY IN 2006 BROUGHT CHANGES

During 1998–2004 regular face-to-face meetings with active citizens were held. Different sections had their own monthly group meetings and a meeting group for the whole of Manse Square assembled a few times per year. After 2004 the various detached groups were united into one meeting group of Manse Square. This group continued regular monthly meetings until Manse Square was transferred to the city of Tampere in the end of 2006. After the transfer the action has been co-ordinated by one civil servant. The density of social encounters has reduced as the city now organises meetings with Mansetori's activists only few times a year.

The change after the transfer to the city is visible not only in the diminishing number of face-to-face meetings with residents but also when viewing the use of the portal. According to user statistics only a short period after the transfer in January 2007 there were 47 312 visits to Manse Square and in December 2006 the number was 36 709. An average of 9200 users visited Manse Square monthly in 2003, compared to approximately 12 800 in 2004 (Kokkonen 2004). These figures show a positive increase. Partly the increase in user visits can be explained by the fact that the number of neighbourhood sites has increased during Manse Square's existence. Naturally this widens the scope of its users and audience.[9] However, when taking a look at

9. The present situation in April 2008 according to the user statistics shows there were 39 687 visits to Manse Square.

the number of published stories at the website, the activities show a decrease. For instance, after the transfer citizen reporters published 10 new stories at Manse Media during 12 months[10]. The current situation in May 2008 shows similar features as reporters have published only three stories this year in Manse Media. Before the transfer, for instance in August 2006 there were 11 stories written in a period of only one month. These figures show a clear decrease in the content production on Manse Square's Manse Media section.

A rough estimate of the amount of active people during the active period of Manse Square was about 70–80 persons but this group started to reduce after Manse Forum was closed and Manse Square was transferred to the city, when some of the citizen reporters continued their civic expression elsewhere. However, even if Manse Square has become more well-known, the activity of citizens shows some implications of decline.

Above I have given a brief overview of this local case of citizen media. The case of Manse Square reflects a period when ICTs were rapidly expanding in Finland and administration simultaneously had started to diversify practices of citizen participation. This progression appears clearly in the endeavours of Manse Square which were influenced by the objectives of the university's research projects. However, the core of the action was local people who created and shaped the platform to portray their view of citizen media.

To touch more upon the typical features of citizen-oriented media I briefly discuss the mutual relations between citizens and the mainstream media and the challenges ICTs have presented to the media environment. Then I continue to discuss the practices of civic action at Manse Square, mainly during the period when it was co-ordinated by the university and analyse the civic action from communal and political points of view.

RELATIONS BETWEEN CITIZENS AND THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA

The participatory development of media in which citizens are no longer just passive receivers or consumers but independent producers

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10. The number of stories counted on 25th of October 2007.

who publish and share content online (Gillmor 2004) is often referred to by the terms "web 2.0" or "social media" (see Introduction in this volume). A typical example of social media are weblogs which are online postings functioning as an open space for publishing views outside mainstream media. Wikis such as Wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia on the Net, are an example of online social content production that is available for everyone to edit. On the background of this development is the global trend of utilising easy-to-use web publishing tools for information and content sharing; citizens becoming active participants in the creation and dissemination of news and information (Bowman & Willis 2003).

This tendency of citizens gaining ground in media production originates partly from the aim of creating more multivoiced media which is not a new phenomenon. Various alternative media have previously tried to challenge the dominance of mainstream media and its ways of depicting citizens (e.g. Rodriguez 2001; Downing 2003). The pressures of the mass media to situate itself closer to its audience have in part derived from this activity of alternative media and the international trend of fragmenting audiences (Deuze 2006, 264). Moreover, the rapid development of communication technology has acted as an incentive for mass media to reformulate its practices. People who independently publish content on the Internet do not fit the traditional definitions of the audience or users of mass media.

Notably, the idea of public or civic journalism has emphasised relations between journalism and its audience (e.g. Rosen 2000). This reform movement has aimed at media having a role in activating people to take part in society and to produce informative journalism that could act as the basis for decisions. Placing the discussion of democratic practices and concern over the role of media in democracy (Haas & Steiner 2006; Sirianni & Friedland 2001, 231) as a starting point, civic journalism calls forth the importance of citizens' experiences when making news and stories.

Despite civic journalism's concern for the intensity of citizens' voice in mainstream media it nonetheless places people in a certain frame that journalists create. In addition, in civic journalism journalists still hold on to decisions over the form and content of published articles as well as the way people are represented in texts.

The topics and approaches of citizen produced stories differ from the texts written by journalists. It seems that the idea of what is news is not the same for citizens and journalists (e.g. Heikkilä & Lehtonen 2003). For instance in citizen produced content the threshold for published stories does not ascend to the same level as in mainstream media where elite sources such as specialists and decision-makers often get a voice. Also, in professional journalism the view on citizens is different; when citizens are considered more as readers and subscribers of newspapers, i.e. consumers. However, the situation is now changing with the participatory turn, especially in online versions of mainstream media.

The practices of mainstream media have been guided by the demands of news production and economic pressures; the most profitable stories for news rooms in an economical sense are often themes that include conflicts or scandals that sell papers instead of, for example, small and pleasant events from neighbourhoods that are important topics in the stories published by citizens in the case of this article. Furthermore, mainstream news rooms are more bound to strategies, standards and policies of media companies that set the frames; strategies to survive in the competitive world of gaining enough readers by satisfying them – producing the kind of stories readers want to read – and maintaining a certain, previously defined level of quality. I do not argue that the quality of alternative or citizens' media would be poorer than that of the mainstream media but to address the issue that citizens' media is not usually fixed by any previously determined guidelines that would affect how and for whom texts are written. On the contrary, I consider alternative media to have more freedom of action to provide multiple strains of voices and ways of expression than mainstream media.

EXPRESSIONS OF COMMUNAL ACTION AS SOCIAL LEARNING

The consumption of media is connected to public participation and civic engagement in democratic practice. Nick Couldry, Sonia Livingstone and Tim Markham (2006) call the public engagement with a notion *public connection*. With this they refer to the basic orientation towards a public world:

[…] most citizens share a basic orientation towards a public world where matters of common concern are, or should be, played out. We call that basic orientation 'public connection'. Orientation is not the same as continuous attention – everyone's attention rises and falls – but orientation underlies the possibility of attention, and without that basic orientation, there is no point improving the quality of public, including political, communication, because people will already be turned to face the other way.

People's capabilities of acting as citizens in the information society play an important part in the process of public or civic engagement. These capabilities can be called *civic competences* that are regarded as supporting the "making of good citizens" (see Dahlgren 2008). Apart from being able to understand and interpret media texts, citizens are expected to adopt, filter and communicate masses of information coming from various sources. This often long-term process, can be understood as a social learning process. Learning emerges in two-way interaction and according to Pieter Glasbergen (1997), social learning can happen when actors learn about each other during responsive communication. Learning takes place when actors are engaged in social practices and reflections in which they are able to evaluate, understand and negotiate opinions, views and shared meanings (see, Wenger 1998, 10).

I consider civic learning as social practice in a similar way to that in which Colin Lankshear and Michele Knobel (2007, 4) describe new literacies: "*Literacies call us to generate and communicate meanings and to invite others to make meaning from our texts in turn*." I understand their view on new literacy as one component of social learning. By practicing digital literacies citizens can develop their civic competences (see Dahlgren 2008; Buckingham 2003) which may enhance social learning. The case of Manse Square indicates some examples of social learning through communal action.

The starting point for analysing civic action at Manse Square builds strongly on everyday life (e.g. Sirkkunen & Kotilainen 2004). According to the theme interviews I conducted, it seems that the benefits of the kind of *everyday politics* in the development of citizenship (i.e. in the process of enhancing public connection) emerge on

ordinary occasions and during current events. With everyday politics I refer to decisions, conduct and networks that act as guidelines of daily practices. It has been recognised in the studies of social capital that daily social contacts increase and support the development of horizontal civic trust and reciprocity (Putnam 1993, see also Dahlgren 2008). Daily social relations have also provided an asset in community building in the publishing neighbourhoods; the interviewees described, for instance, the importance of local associations and civic groups when organising activities.

At Manse Square the aims and starting points of participative communities have influenced the employed means of civic action. Drawing on the various research material, civic action in publishing neighbourhoods and communities has rested mainly on 1) improving the *image* of neighbourhoods and increasing their attraction, and 2) developing *internal communication*. The new technology is adopted by people to suit their specific needs and practices. At Manse Square the active citizens do not necessarily have the urge to develop civic participation practices in administration, but the emphasis is moreover on gathering positive public attention for local neighbourhoods (Sirkkunen & Kotilainen 2004, see also Hollander et al. 2002, 23). In the survey that I implemented among Manse Square activists 86 % of the respondents said they had participated in Manse Square to attempt to gain publicity for neighbourhoods.

Although Manse Square has provided general information, for instance, concerning the use of ICT in participation and offered online connections to city officials, citizens valued their own neighbourhood sites (Manse Communities) to be the most important part of the portal. 87 % of the respondents of the survey used their own neighbourhoods' sites. According to the research data local people feel neighbourhood websites and discussion boards are arenas for discussing "minor" matters like selling things on an electronic flea market, offering help to neighbours for example, in gardening, in childcare, in renovation, or trying to get a cash machine to one's neighbourhood etc. Neighbourhood discussion boards in the Manse Communities section were, therefore, much livelier than the rational and serious topics raised at the Manse Forum discussion board. See the following citizen interview extract which illustrates that the content of Manse Square was based strongly on the ideas and interests of participants:

...[I] think that it always resembles the people who are active there and it depends on the moment when it is done, and how active people are, and what issues become topics […] For instance people who have their own houses, they are interested in issues concerning renovation and all those kinds of things.

Within civic action at Manse Square, there can be seen to be social effects, both on the development of local communities, and individuals. For instance, Manse Square has succeeded in widening social networks and interactions among residents in communities, which can be considered as one signal of the improvement in neighbourhood communication. According to the survey respondents 90 % have established new social relations when participating in Manse Square. For instance 52 % of the respondents stated that they had become acquainted with 1–5 new persons during this action and 20 % of the respondents with 6–10 new social contacts. 60 % of these new acquaintances live in the same neighbourhood as the respondent. Some signals of the development of individuals' civic competences can be reported, such as better ICT skills and improved interaction skills (especially when contacting administration). Participation and co-operation with the administration have taught them about the practices of bureaucratic institutions. When decision-making processes and administrative practices have become more well-known and opened slightly, people have acquired relevant knowledge for their institutional expertise.

Although the citizens who participate and maintain web sites at Manse Square have been active before, expanded activeness can be reported. People have previously been more interested in issues concerning their living environment. According to the citizen interviewees they now follow more issues happening in the whole city. One cannot argue that this has happened only due to the participation at Manse Square, but probably the active participation has encouraged and strengthened individuals' public orientation:

...[I] believe that I follow now more actively than before everything connected to housing and living. I think that I have become much more active.

It has increased my activity a little, although I have always been active. It is an extra tool. When you notice something, you can write a story about it. Sometimes I have written similar stories for Manse Square and for some other places such as to our neighbourhood associations' paper.

People's motives and interests in using Manse Square as an alternative media engage on individual and communal bases. Manse Square is a place where local people can learn skills for web publishing, writing stories, conducting interviews, image processing, and photographing and designing websites. Communal interests include acting on behalf of one's neighbourhood, for instance reporting on current questions, paying attention to issues that need to be developed or repaired or drawing positive attention to the neighbourhood to attract new residents. This shows in the next quote of one citizen interview:

...[I] have sometimes thought that when I have borrowed a camera and then when I have had the camera with me, I have thought that something could happen now so I could be right there and make a story of it.

During participation processes people have also indicated some signs of adopting a media critical perspective. Citizens have noticed the frames in which journalists often place them in interviews. See the following extract where an interviewee talks of his experiences when been interviewed by journalist:

...[E]ven if they [journalists] try to do a newspaper story truthfully, still it often changes a bit and ordinary people do not see that there is this kind of change or distortion.

In the interviews it occurred that the media's way of presenting citizens and city-authorities in opposite, often conflict-related positions has elicited the feeling of contradictory and difficult co-operation. This negative way of presenting the relations of city authorities and residents affects both the preconceptions that people create of decision-making and citizens' role and the possibilities of having an influence on local matters; e.g. their eagerness to participate.

Although the community context of an alternative (citizen) media is important (Jankowski & Prehn 2002), citizen-oriented media publicness is also firmly connected to an individual perspective. In the citizens' media of this article, Manse Square, individual and community views emerge in published stories. Story subjects range from the birth of kittens to the renovations of houses. The stories are based on personal experiences and this might give an impression of this website acting only as a means of individuals' self-expression. However, several stories have had a broader connection to issues and events of local neighbourhoods or the whole city.

Civic action at Manse Square could in some parts be classified as social participation with little emphasis on political action. This is partly true, but according to research data there is evidence that functioning social networks enable the formation of political civic action. The findings suggest that functioning social networks can be a prerequisite for political participation (cf. Putnam 1993; Mosca, Gillan and Vromen in this volume). The significance of trust and support from one's community may be an essential factor for developing courage for public action and justification for one's participation in public discussion. This might have even bigger emphasis in Tampere where participation in decision making processes has been considered complex and difficult (see Laine & Peltonen 2005).

I understand political civic action broadly as choices and interpretations that citizens make in their everyday lives and in processes they participate in. Political action does not necessarily relate only to party politics but can appear as choices or definitions that are made for instance in an urban planning process (see Introduction in this volume). I consider political action as a process where participants negotiate and re-negotiate decisions or definitions of questions and actively try to raise issues to the level of public discussion. The development of citizenship is partly a political process; when people participate they face different interests and values and are required to understand relations and aims that are derived from different backgrounds. In this sense the participation process can embody features of social learning. The internet has been recognised as a means for new political action and its

potential may rest in individuals' experiences; considering the Internet as a public space for experience (Lappalainen in this volume).

The expressions of political civic action at Manse Square have intertwined most clearly in topics of urban planning. One example of this was a dispute concerning a city's plan in which a vehicle bridge was planned to cross culturally-historically important scenery in the centre of Tampere. I refer to this debate as "Koskenniska bridge"[11]. Other examples of more political topics were a struggle concerning conservation of an old dye-house "Värjäämö" near the centre of Tampere and discussion over whether vast football grounds should be built on a popular recreation area. Also various smaller events connected to issues at a neighbourhood level, such as routes of bus services were ventilated.

In the case of the Koskenniska bridge active citizens clearly indicated features of political action: 1) they created web sites for the case at Manse Square's Manse Forum section, 2) they actively encouraged public discussion on the Net at discussion boards, 3) they implemented enquiries to civil servants and elected officials and published the results online and 4) they created visual illustrations of what the environment would look like after the bridge and published this material on the Net (Bamberg 2005). In this case the Internet offered a new dimension for political discussion and negotiations and challenged the traditional ways of participation.

In the Värjäämö case, Manse Square mainly served as a place for information. The sites dedicated to this old dye-house offered alternative views on planning the specific area. The sites presented alternative options and architectural drawings of the area that would preserve the dye-house as a counterpoint to the city whose plans would demolish the majority of the dye-house.

The more political topics at Manse Square have attached to issues concerning the whole city; such as culturally-historically important places around the Koskenniska bridge or the old dye-house. These have emerged as vast questions whereas smaller disputes in neighbourhoods have not succeeded in entering public discussion at the same level as the cases which included a more common interest.

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11.   See more Ridell 2001; 2005, and Bamberg 2005.

In the case of the Koskenniska bridge Manse Square also served as a place to illustrate spatial information in a historical perspective. It constructed a public *civic memory* by recording different stages of processes and making this information publicly available. For example, opinions of civil servants and city officials were recorded and published on the web site and then these statements were updated as the process developed (Ridell 2001; Bamberg 2005). However, creating civic memory does not necessarily require political perspective but it can also develop continuously through *everyday politics* when local neighbourhoods build and maintain their websites.

Previous examples have illustrated that political action was connected clearly to urban disputes, but Manse Square also tried to contribute to public discussion with "non-conflict" methods, by organising encounters, seminars, and discussion series and online surveys (see Hokka et al. 2004). Manse Square was for instance, one participant in organising an event on the theme of globalisation. The aim was to bring this concept to the level of everyday life; what does globalisation mean in daily practice and how can citizens approach it. By means of this event, organisers also wanted to offer an alternative view on globalisation which in mainstream media was often discussed from a very general viewpoint (ibid., 218.). Moreover, Manse Square organised, in co-operation with a local citizen group called Tampere-Forum,[12] a discussion series called "City maintained through co-operation". The goals of this debate series were 1) to test different forms of public discussion, 2) to combine different media to achieve public attention and 3) to enhance activity and co-operation at Manse Square portal (Hokka et al. 2004, 219). The topics of the series concentrated on various means of civic participation and problems experienced within participation practices as well as provided improvement suggestions.

Manse Square has acted both as 1) means and 2) a space for public discussion and political action. It has served as an arena for different topics but it has also enabled political civic participation by networking various civic actors. In these co-operative projects different actors

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12. Tampere Forum is a loose citizen group that encouraged public discussion in Tampere for several years. The group consisted mainly of individual citizens but included also representatives from the city administration and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tampere. The group acted in close co-operation with Manse Square but lately it has not been active.

have encountered and shared interests and aims. In this respect one can argue that Manse Square has succeeded in encouraging political action through social and communal participation.

I think we should not set the frames of civic action too strictly. We should understand that civic activity develops through learning in different ways that not always need to be serious or rational. The stories in the Manse Media section show that public action can happen in multiple ways; for instance with cheerful and lighter means such as tales, poems, photos and pictures etc. Still, citizens do recognise the opportunity to use the media publicness of the Internet to try to have an effect on issues when necessary. This clearly indicates social learning. For instance discussions on the Manse Square website have increased when there have been disputes over urban planning in the city. Although the important role of the Tampere Forum group and the project researchers should not be forgotten; the more political endeavours required much effort from these groups who helped to arrange facilities such as meeting rooms and other necessary equipment and participated in planning the various encounters.

However, a different question is whether Manse Square has succeeded in having an effect on attitudes towards the efficiency of civic participation. The orientation of people towards citizen participation in decision making processes appears to be rather pessimistic. The citizen interviewees have often adhered to prevailing settings; the juxtaposition between residents and the city administration. The interviewees often felt that civil servants view active citizens as a burden and that it is almost impossible to have an effect on issues unless one has powerful enough resources to support one's cause:

...[W]ell, this is one of the eternal questions, of course they consider [your opinion] if you go and take massive enough "guns" with you and make them consider it.

...I think the word "have to" is pretty essential in this. (one interviewee talking about why the city organises participation; because the law obliges)

...If you are persistent enough, then I think you can [have an effect on issues] but usually it is pretty difficult. The best way to have an effect is to do stuff yourself, do something small and also do it the way you would like others to do it.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

At Manse Square people act as fellow-residents who follow and take care of the current errands of their neighbourhoods. They can be seen as local "messengers" and the neighbourhood websites as arenas to communicate important and topical questions to residents in the area as well as to residents of the whole city. Besides this civic interest that is connected to a really local level – to the neighbourhood – other overlapping and intertwining interests can be seen which emphasise the use of alternative media in order to focus public attention on issues that get no foothold in the mainstream media (see Gillmor 2004). In this sense people regard it as their duty to use their own channels to bring important subjects to the public arena:

> ...[I] consider it valuable that there exists at least one forum [talks about Manse Square] where alternative views on the cultural scene are registered even if they do not achieve publicness but at least they are written down somewhere.

> [When an issue is published at Manse Square] It gives more official status to this action when it is noticed somewhere, because the news media are not interested in this kind of action. It has been a tool where you have control over the issues that get publicity.

This feature of an active citizen who follows media and local happenings is also connected to the position of citizen reporter in general. Citizen reporters have some features that resemble local journalists but of course on a different scale; they do not regard Manse Square as "serious" journalism but as a lighter way of talking about the everyday life of the city compared to the mainstream media. A distinction from professional journalism is the very strong spatial connection of citizen

reporters; stories are located in their living surroundings. Stories may include historical information, tell about local tales and events such as art exhibitions, outdoor flee-markets or introduce inhabitants. Some topics have been covered both at Manse Square and in the local news media. Even then, some citizen reporters have tried to bring in a different angle to the story than the mass media. These features show the endeavours of the citizen reporters in trying to create distinguishable publicness.

Although the various civic actors at Manse Square all connect strongly to their own neighbourhoods, they share a common interest towards spatial interaction. The citizen interviewees often emphasised the importance of face to face meetings with other activists at Manse Square as a motivating factor:

> …[o]f course it is also important that you meet people. When you do things on the web it feels somehow abstract. So it feels, it is important that you belong to a group and you meet people and exchange opinions, not necessarily regarding the stories but any subjects at all.

> ...[O]f course it always motivates you when you have people around you that are active, it makes you also feel like"yes, I'm gonna finish the story now".

Due to the community driven civic action at Manse Square the gap between story producers and "audience" is not very broad. Naturally, this derives from the fact that Manse Square is a place for neighbourhood communication, but probably also the earthiness of the published stories has narrowed the distance. However, close connections between audience and producers have not been self-evident generally within alternative media (Downing 2003).

Individual engagement on civic action depends on personal motives and capabilities that citizens develop during their participation experiences; for instance capacities for critical literacy. When talking about critical literacy in the context of media education, David Buckingham addresses the fact that the aim is not purely to learn user skills or technical skills but to promote a more in-depth understanding of how media operate as well as to support more reflective ways of using

media (Buckingham 2003, 181). Although Buckingham deals with the media education of children and young people, the same principle can be used when employing research on adult learning.

CONCLUSIONS

As stated before, I consider participation and civic action as a learning or development process that can strengthen the capabilities of citizens to actively take part in society and improve their level of public orientation (see Kotilainen 2004; Heikkilä & Lehtonen 2003; Dahlgren 2008; Buckingham 2003). The case of Manse Square shows some evidence of participants practicing civic competences and digital literacies which encourages the process of social learning. However, the Internet still rarely remains as the main channel for public argument or debate for active people. Manse Square web sites act more as channels for communicating and delivering information to neighbourhood residents and to people interested in local issues. The potential of community communication and civic engagement lies in local grassroots networks. Despite growing individual interest, people may utilise their personal networks and skills in favour of a certain cause, as happened for instance in the dispute over the Koskenniska bridge in Tampere. But Manse Square has not performed generally as a place for political messages or campaigning for something.

At Manse Square the sense of belonging or the sense of spatial identity has increased among the persons and groups who have managed neighbourhood websites. Unfortunately, enabling larger spatial identity in neighbourhoods has remained unreachable. According to the citizen interviews the sense of communality has grown more because of the concrete actions taken by local actors and groups such as neighbourhood associations. Activities regarding the maintenance of websites still remain distant for the majority of residents in neighbourhoods. People are still more likely to participate in local events such as concerts, outdoor markets or other various neighbourhood events.

Like any human action citizen participation is also filled with different motives, agendas and values which have also affected the civic action at Manse Square. In mainstream media the interests of news

corporations can sometimes be rather visible, which has been argued to prevent mainstream journalism creating multi-voiced publicness (see Ridell 2005, 32). In the case of Manse Square the interests have not focused on the general principle of Manse Square in a sense that they would have set action frames for the whole of Manse Square but emerged in specific cases of civic action. Thus, certain interests were shown for example in the dispute over the Koskenniska bridge and other agendas in the discussion of changes in bus services.

In this changing media environment citizens are continuously put in the position of being citizens, consumers, customers or audiences (Livingstone 2005). As the consumer position is considered to be strengthening, citizenship can be regarded as a private affair instead of public orientation. Mojca Pajnik (2005, 355) writes about the development of citizenship in a more consumer emphasised direction so that "*it is not as much a matter of community as of the individual*". However, people can practise their citizenship in different positions. For instance people who critically observe media can be regarded as a critical audience which approaches the position of consumers. These positions of audiences or consumers are usually distinguished from the characteristics of citizens, although critical viewing can be an active and rational act. Furthermore, when people actively produce content on the Net they act as citizen producers which I believe is more generally accepted as an act of citizens because when producing new content they trigger topics for debate and in that sense participate in public discussion.

Topical issues related to free content production are questions regarding the trustworthiness and reliability of knowledge. For instance, Wikis have proved that user control over online content and its reliability can succeed even if a user community is worldwide. In Wikipedia the users' community maintains sites, traces false information and edits it. Still, recent development shows that citizens need more capabilities and means of digital literacy to evaluate media content. I wonder if mainstream media experiences a bigger responsibility in producing truthful and reliable information than citizens' media, which can be regarded as more experimental. One of the strengths of citizens' "do-it-yourself"-media is the originality of the content and layout, and the visual originality. Also, the organisational structure of citizens' media

often differs from mass media which might influence the employed means and practices. For example the case of Manse Square builds on horizontal relations that Putnam (1993, 87–91) considers typical for citizen communities in which people help, honour and trust each other. These non-hierarchical features may indicate respect for diverse and equal civic expression

One could state that when initiated in 1998 the experiment of Manse Square was a bit ahead of its time. The current period would probably be more favourable for implementing this kind of project especially in the light of technical development and diffused access to the Net. This case has depicted civic action and the use of ICTs during a certain time period and naturally the results have to be interpreted based on these circumstances. Hopefully, not only has it been a development process for citizens but for representatives of the city administration and other partners as well. Learning should not be constrained by only paying attention to changes in individual competences, but also by approaching learning from the angle that recognises the conditions, resources and social practices affecting the whole process of co-operative action.

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