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Today, those who were at school 12 years ago, when our schools started the tiger leap into information society, have all finished school. Today, these people are active grown-up members of the society, and have a considerable impact on our everyday life. As concerns the ICT (information and communication technology) infrastructure, Estonia is a brave European average, we have some idea of the level of our technical skills. But how much could the consequences of the onslaught of the information society be foreseen? Especially the negative ones that have become a daily topic, from anonymous hate to violent Internet games.

It is impossible to give a forecast. All we knew was that computers would give a competitive advantage to other countries and their children. We were determined not to lag behind. Where we were headed, what the development would be like – that was not just Estonia's problem, but common to all Western world. In fact, computers are just a by-product of a developed society.

To give a negative example – not even the top-of-the-world experts hired by the US government, whose task it is to foresee all possibilities, were unable to predict how efficiently the resources of ICT could be used by a society that propagates a return to the 7th century AD, including the legislation and theocratic public administration of those times.

**The new media has innumerable possibilities to enter the private sphere of each citizen. Yet considering the possibly specific nature of our society, do we need to worry about whether someone is trying to spread some ideology among our citizens, or is there rather reason to believe that nous will prevail even in the world of Internet?**

Diversity of information is a much better option for a democratic society, especially a society in

transition, than a controlled flow of information. Let us imagine that things could have been different in 1992 – so that now, we would have media transmitting mostly government information (temptations to influence the media, for instance broadcasting, have of course been present now and then) and that private media offering alternative information would not exist or be extremely scarce. Then we would have reason to worry, much more than we have now.

When I read a news item on the Internet and doubt its correctness, I can check it promptly. This is also what journalists do, and that is why news that have proved incorrect often do not make it into the paper issue of a newspaper. Information competition, the possibility always to check against other sources, can only make an open society more wholesome.

Ever since the Enlightenment, the possibility that information offered to people should be limited or qualified in some way has not been present in our notions of civilisation. Things are different in other parts of the world. In our civilisation, it is neither for the church nor for the state to tell the citizen what the truth is. Instead, we let the citizen decide. This is a great advantage that the West has had of other societies, for 250 years already.

**In Estonia the state, the public authority with all its institutions and local governments, is probably the greatest provider of information on the Internet. The information may sometimes have a complicated wording, but it is still the most trustworthy text on the offer.**

This is required by law. We have created an open society where public services have no option but to keep their doings public. This is a great advantage compared to a situation where state authorities can function covertly.

A small example. About my visit to Georgia, the most comprehensive and precise story was published by Vladimir Socor, who was not present in Georgia himself. For his outline article, he used the homepages of both the Estonian and the Georgian President. The Estonian journalists who were on the spot wrote very different things – they were caught in details, described the wines, etc. while failing to address what was really important about the visit. In November, for instance, there were 30,000 visitors to the Estonian President's homepage, and 400,000

downloads.

**It is a paradox that while the public authority is offering the most verified, the most trustworthy information, this has not increased the trust towards the public authority or its institutions. It is at about the same level as the trust for media, even though the quality, correctness and exactness of the information is like day and night when compared to private providers.**

I would not blame this situation on the public authority. It is easy enough to lay the blame, to stick labels on people. The media's attitude to public authority is born of the conviction that accusations will make them more popular. The same is true about some politician's attitude to honest public servants – the latter are always found guilty of something.

**And yet, should we not make an overall effort in this society to make all encyclopaedic information public and available to everyone? We do indeed have a structure that has been gathering and editing encyclopaedic information for decades now, but the fruits of their work are not available on the Internet. We do not have a trustworthy, verified source of information.**

The Wikipedia in Estonian does indeed provide information, but anyone can write articles there and they need not always be correct. An encyclopaedia should certainly be much more easily available.

Yet information and its availability are not the whole world. *Enkyklios paideia*, the original form of the Greek word

*encyclopaedia*

, has two parts. The first part means encircling or grasping something, the second part, *paideia*

, denotes the ideal of classical education – the knowledge of mathematics, philosophy, and the arts. These things cannot be found in an encyclopaedia. You can look up  $\pi$  and as many of its numbers as you like, but to understand it, you need to know mathematics. You can look up sonnet – right, fourteen lines, rime scheme abba, bccb, and so further, 8+6 or some variation of it – but no encyclopaedia can give you the ability to enjoy or understand a sonnet. For that, you need education.

I do not want to over-emphasise the role of information – although it is certainly paramount to all newsaddicts, including myself – for the reason that it has a way of distracting and diverting us from the genuine, which is seldom encountered in the virtual world. The genuine can in my mind be found in books, and we should read books.

For a person like me, the problem with web information is not that it might be biased or wrong, but that I will be compelled to read things that are in fact insignificant, and that is such a big waste of time. When you sit down at the computer and start reading something important, you can see a multitude of links guiding you further – you click, the page is interesting, the next one even more so ... From another source, you could have acquired spiritually much more in the same time. An essay, a novel, a philosophical text or a research always yields more than just the number of words used in composing it.

Distracting or diverting attention, the inability to differentiate between the important and the unimportant, is the problem of the information society. Everything looks the same, and a better designed website could make all the difference.

One of my favourites is <http://www.bartleby.com/>, where you can find many classical texts whose copyright has expired. It is not much to look at, but the texts, the classical texts, are there! And you always do have a choice – whether to look at a well-designed page or to do something more reasonable.

This is my problem with the Internet – too much attention goes to the superficial and insignificant, less is left over for deep analysis or the beauty that would not remain “behind the screen”.

**High culture has not been a success on the web. It is never on the foreground, but somewhere behind the corner, in a small niche, as if confirming the opinion of „popular tastes” that claims it quite unnecessary. Those who are interested and look for libraries, theatres and concert halls, can find the essential information (of which there is an abundance on the Internet) even there. The problem is that every new medium that has emerged, although never taking the place of the older and more sophisticated ones, has always created a new, lower stratum. This does not help high culture in any way; there is just yet another competitor, yet another layer of stifling noise.**

Drowning would perhaps not be the right word to describe existence in a flood of information, but when you look at the news that directs you to another and yet another news item, you have finally wasted an enormous amount of time. Just on foreign politics, I get so much information from so many sources, that if I had not got a morsel of self-discipline, I could fill my days with reading it.

**Self-restraint and discipline are of paramount importance in contact with the virtual world, but it is difficult to guide people to these characteristics, with freedom as a value to be made use of standing at the top of the societal hierarchy.**

As a consolation, let me tell you that 25 years ago, all over the developed world, people were worried about everyone spending too much time watching television. Internet is better, because it is still interactive. You are not just a passive watcher, but an active communicator. Already in the 1970s, Americans were watching TV for an average five hours a day. I have never been much of a TV person, but in the computer age, I do feel like a victim of information flood to some extent.

**We have bound our identity very strongly with language. Language has been one of the main issues of Estonian politics, it has been the mainstay of our identity, a value in itself.**

**The incessant accrual of lower strata has accelerated the changes in language too. To be more precise, linguistic standards are, just like any standards, subject to constant invalidation. Is this not a threat to our general understanding of what is right and wrong in language?**

First, the deterioration of language usage has been noted in all cultures encountering the Internet. The reason for this is the democratisation of printed, visual language and its usage.

Before the electronic media emerged, language was a medium of oral communication for masses. Written communication was, before made public, always examined by a literate editor with a good feeling for language. A completely illiterate, grammatically incorrect piece full of slang could be sent to the editor's office, yet it was always "tidied up" before publication.

Barring teachers who read the writings of schoolchildren, people seldom encountered bad syntax or incorrect spelling or vulgar language in written form. Today, with every news item that a language editor has checked, you get a lot of unedited comments. Seeing such language in written form makes it acceptable. When an edited article mocking incorrect usage of language is full of mistakes, its criticism will be nipped in the bud.

**This may lead to situation when teaching the Estonian language and literature at schools will remind us of the religious studies in *Kevade* by Oskar Luts: the teacher must teach a subject by orders from above, but he does in fact not consider it necessary. Orthography and beauty of expression come in useful once or twice in a lifetime, when taking the state examination in the Estonian language. Young people know that on these occasions, they must follow a certain pattern and meet certain requirements in their writing. Yet they are wondering why they should bother when everywhere else anything is permitted language-wise.**

This problem is not unique to Estonia either. Last week, there was a long article in *International Herald Tribune*, criticising the US politicians for their inability to form coherent sentences. The author blames this on the fact that after George Bush Senior, there has been no President or President

Candidate in the US who has had Latin as part of his school curriculum; he considers knowledge of Latin the basis of lucid thought and expression. Indeed, comparing the language usage of the past and the present with respect to the use of simple or more intricate sentence structures, we can see that the latter is diminishing. There have always been conservative minds who sing praise to the past – and in this respect, educational system and school curricula are no exception.

As one of the basic curriculum subjects, Greek disappeared even before Latin. In the Anglo-Saxon world, a hundred years ago every secondary school graduate knew his Latin and Greek, at least to some extent, but in the 1930s, Greek disappeared and Latin became rarer and rarer, until it also disappeared a generation later.

When I was a university student, knowledge of two foreign languages was required to for doctoral studies, although one of them could be replaced with statistics or mathematics. Today, there is no such requirement except in the specific fields. And no research is made in German or French, for no one would read it. Also Germans and Frenchmen write in English, and the level of research English is deteriorating rapidly. We can see the same phenomenon in the European Union paperwork, where English has become horrible – the sentences of the bureaucrats are plain, devoid of beauty.

**Ever since Plato, Europe has still achieved considerable success in the course of its two and a half millennia of downfall. What is the next great effort we need to do to adjust to changing circumstances?**

Exasperated as I am by the deterioration of language, it seems that several other problems – for instance the political decisions of our neighbour, or climate, are much more urgent in the near future. If there were no climate change ...

**...with global warming, the word snow could disappear from the Estonian language ...**

But perhaps, besides *saar* (island) and *laid* (islet) there will be many more words to denote the insularity of a landscape. It just seems to me that if, among all information, we must choose two important things – the foreign policy steps of our neighbour, and our climate – then I will not check whether the news are written in good or bad Estonian. This has no impact on the message. The reply to the demands presented to Estonia in 1939 could have been written in high style or in market-place lingo, neologisms could have been used or avoided, the verb placed at the end of the sentence as is common in German, or not – still, it would have made no difference.

As to language usage, I am quite conservative; I prefer neologisms derived from our own language, instead of the use of foreign words, or simply borrowing. We can joke here about „hängima” and „tšillima” (Anglicisms popular with Estonian youngsters). These words are unnecessary and have emerged without the help of language planning. Still, we should better admit that most of the Estonian vocabulary has been acquired in the same way, although hundreds of years ago.

**The 20th century is quite exceptional for the Estonian language, as language planners were ahead of the people throughout that century. In late 20th century there were some limitations, but even then the language planners did not lose control – at least not over the vocabulary. Now all this belongs to the past.**

Ferdinand de Saussure has said that „language is usage”. Myself, I prefer prescriptive, standardised language development. That would help us to understand texts not only from the 21st but also from the 18th century. The modern reader of English can understand Shakespeare just as well as he understands modern English literature. But it is very difficult to read those few Estonian texts that have come down to us from the 16th-17th centuries. I wish that it would be possible to read today’s *Eesti Päevaleht* or *Postimees*, or let’s say *Ivan Orav’s Memoirs*

also in 300 years’ time. Of course, it would be hard to understand the cultural context, but it would be good if, in 2307, people still did not have to wonder about the meaning of words in Orav’s text.

Reading English texts that are 300–400 years old, we often find jokes there, or irony that we completely fail to grasp. But we do understand the words. I fear that if there is too much „hängimine” and „šillimine” in our language, this will make the texts harder to understand in the future. Those words are bound to disappear from the language quite soon.

General education is much more important. Above, I mentioned **paideia**, which forms a basis for much of our European culture. For instance, in Tammsaare’s texts, there are many allusions to the Bible, the biblical texts. After the occupation period, when universal confirmation classes and Bible-reading, as well as religious education at schools were abolished, few people understand those allusions. People do not read the Bible voluntarily, to pass the time. Neither do they read Homer or Virgil.

This problem is common to all civilisations. I read of it recently, in the context of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was part of the curriculum in American schools once, but not any more. And many Shakespearean expressions are no longer understood. The most conventional phrase of the pop culture – „falling in love” – was coined by Shakespeare, from whom it found its way to common usage. The example may be trivial, but the phrase is still deeply woven into the English language.

The same goes for Estonian literature. All the classical literature that is written even in the Soviet time, up to the 1960s, is still written by people who had received religious education in one way or another, and written on this background. It is not my intention to advocate religious education, but to emphasise that the less you know old things, the harder it is to understand the past, to understand literature. The readers of Shakespeare in modern England will understand less of later literature that alludes to Shakespeare – for example, the heading of Faulkner’s novel „The Sound and the Fury” – than the reader 30 years ago. And it is difficult to understand Faulkner deeply without knowing the Bible. Or let us take „For Whom the Bell Tolls” by Ernest Hemingway – the title is inspired by John Donne’s meditation concluding with the words „Ask not for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee”.

This sad passage on mortality was well known to readers twenty-five or thirty years ago. Even today, people read Hemingway, but they are no longer aware of the origins of the title. This takes us back to what I said about the Internet world. If you know everything about Britney and Paris by heart, but nothing else, your personal layer of civilisation is going to be quite thin.

**This is not just a long-term problem, even today authors of highly sophisticated texts sometimes experience – although those who propagate „popular” literature say that they are not read because their works are so „far from real life” – that their texts are not read because their vocabulary and syntax are no longer understood. The reader who daily encounters a different style of writing, and sees characters and signs hitherto unknown to the Estonian alphabet, no longer recognises the Estonian language in its so-called classical form. It is difficult to read, because it is so out of ordinary. If the linguistic stratification deepens, it is the sophisticated minority that is threatened, as the author who produces something „useless” may fall victim to the blind rage of the linguistic third estate and be deprived of his daily bread.**

Even this threat has existed ever since the days of Plato or Aristotle. A common Athenian did not understand their texts, although at least Plato wrote by telling nice stories, dialogues. But Aristotle could have been considered quite useless by many of his contemporaries. The graffiti of Pompeii are no different from the ones found in our own public conveniences. I do not think that people who scribbled those obscenities on the walls spent their evenings reading the texts of Marcus Aurelius or Catullus. Those different layers of language have always stood far apart.

Language is a tool. In some grammatical forms, it has been used for ten or twenty thousand years. Written language became more widespread in the 19th century. A bit earlier in Protestant countries, and later in the rest. Before that, people lived happily without literacy or the need to write. Language will exist also in the future, there is no cause to worry.

We are wondering whether people will be able to use this very sophisticated and very new phenomenon – written language – as a language. For thousands of years, we managed very well without reading Uku Masing’s „Song of the Retreating Soldiers”. And this – I dare say – is something that some few well-educated people can understand in all profundity. It is nothing simple or self-evident. And never will be. Even if we are lucky, and there are one to five million Estonians (five million could be maximum) in a hundred years’ time, the number of people who will be able to read the poetry of Uku Masing, to understand and enjoy it, will still be very-very small.