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## Public Schools' Websites in Estonia: Required Communication Channel but no Shared Knowledge

Mari-Liis Tikerperi\*

### Abstract

In this paper, I will explore how Estonian public schools are sharing information with their target groups on their websites. Nowadays we cannot ignore the importance of online channels in communication. Estonian public schools are using different limited-access online platforms and mailing lists to manage their communication. According to the fact that schools are public institutions, they need to be visible in public and schools' websites have become an integral part of school public communication. In the Estonian context, schools' websites are also required by the law.

The main purpose of this study is to map how public schools in Estonia address the information to their stakeholders and through that, represent themselves on their websites. The data is focused on the announcements of the first school day in Estonian basic schools, upper secondary schools, and gymnasiums (N=374). Results show that schools are using different ways to manage and present information on their web pages even though their target groups and stakeholders are similar to the broad picture.

**Key words:** schools' communication management, public relations, information management, websites, school traditions.

### Introduction

Communication and its management, or public relations<sup>1</sup>, should be generally important for all organizations and seen as an integral part of strategic management (Grunig, 2006). Strategic communication management enables organizations to reach their target groups and brings to the fore its essence, objectives, activities, achievements and future endeavours. It is essential for an organization to be visible, because that contains the thing which people can use to decide over the nature and activities of the organization (Smith, 2009). According to Gilpin (2010), the image constructing, self-presentation and reputation management are integral parts of organizations' public relations.

Despite the general importance of communication management in all organizations, there is still a societal attitude like public relations are business world's or policy issue (Drucker, 2003) and particularly meant to manipulate with the information (Moore, 2009). It is not known how much that societal attitude affects schools' interest to manage their communication more professionally, even though they need to manage information and communicate with their stakeholders and target groups. Also, schools and education generally are societal issues, and public schools are public institutions under great public interest. That is the main reason why schools need to be visible in public. Even though recently there is more attention paid to schools' communication management in Estonia and there are some studies carried on in Europe, there are still many unknown aspects and needs of further studies.

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1 Dozier, Grunig and Grunig (2013), in their book, justify the alternating use of terms public relations and communication management, as wish to prioritize management of communication between an organization and its public. Thus, I base on the same meaning of public relations and communication management. Parallel use of the terms public relations and communication management helps, in my opinion, to understand the context of the work in the field and links, and to facilitate subsequent potential searches due to diversity of keywords.

Öhman et al. (2015) have explored news management in Swedish schools. Studies (conducted in 24 countries) show that schools' public relations or communication management were only shortly mentioned in connection with Latvia, Austria, South Africa, Denmark, Sweden and fewer in Iceland studies, but more concerning internal communication (Årlestig, Day, & Johansson, 2016). Dealing with communication as public relations does not go in depth in these studies but is mentioned as a part of school managers' activities.

There is specifically more attention paid to schools' public relations in the United States. It was believed already in the early 20th century, that schools also need to communicate with their target groups and to develop their communication work (Kowalski, 2011). According to Lunblad and Stewart (2005), the schools' public relations has been considered important in the USA since 1950 and since then, to support communication work in schools, many associations have been created, and a variety of books of that field have been published. Former NSPRA (National School Public Relations Association – USA) associate director Moore (2009) has also skilfully tied schools' planned communication work with students' success: school's actions taken in this field and school's reputation development should be fully in the interest of students' progress.

Speaking about Estonia, there are some signs that the topic is more and more important. In the year 2016, I explored how Estonian state gymnasiums<sup>2</sup> (N=9) leaders understand public relations and communication management in schools and how they describe practical activities in this field in their schools (Tikerperi, 2016). On the lead of Foundation Innove<sup>3</sup> (Haridusasutuse juhi kompetentsimudel, 2016) the importance of communication is mentioned (as "telling your success story") in a new model of educational leaders' competence which was created in 2016 but not widely applied to practice yet.

In this paper, I focused on how Estonian public schools are sharing information and representing themselves through that. As there is a lack of specific previous studies and theories, the study and the basis of the study are interdisciplinary by nature. The easiest and unlimited way to get publicly accessible information about schools was visiting their websites. Websites are described as inevitable communication channels, and despite wide usage, it is reasonable to explore how websites are implemented in real life (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). Conducting the data from websites enables to get information as it is generated and published by schools.

To gain an understanding of how schools are publicly managing and presenting information which is important to their stakeholders, I decided to analyse announcements about the first school day in Estonian schools. There were four main reasons for this decision: (1) Timing. In Estonia, the school year starts on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September (there are some reasonable differences in date, caused by school's specialty or when the September 1<sup>st</sup> is on weekend) and it follows to 3-months-long summer vacation when all students have been quite separately. (2) The importance of the event and the information about it. At least, all students (and parents) need information about the first school day. (3) Traditions. The first school day is by nature very traditional and similarly celebrated which provides an opportunity to analyse the announcements on the same basis. (4) New members in common target groups who may not have the access to closed information channels yet (like having an account in the e-School needs school administrators' approval).

Public schools are public institutions, and they (like any other organization) should pay attention to their communication management. Nowadays we can not underestimate the role of websites to share information and be visible in public. According to the lack of previous studies and knowledge about schools' communicational practices, I considered it essential to find out: (RQ1) How are Estonian public schools formalizing information about the first school day on their websites? (RQ2) How are Estonian public schools constructing their audience<sup>4</sup>?

<sup>2</sup> Estonian state gymnasiums can be looked as a quite new phenomena of educational policy in Estonia. On that moment there were nine working state gymnasiums (sample 100%) in Estonia and they were chosen for study at the request of the Ministry of Education and Science.

<sup>3</sup> Estonian non-governmental organization. The main purpose is to promote lifelong education.

<sup>4</sup> In this study the audience contains target groups, stakeholders and wider public. Target groups are seen as groups to whom the information is targeted and stakeholders (also part of the target groups) have more personal relations with schools.

## Websites in communication management

Studies show that nowadays the definition of public relations concept has expanded because of the changed media environment – is particularly referred to the internet (Waters, Tindall, & Morton, 2010; Watson, 2012). The strategic communication planning cannot be overlooked because of today's electronic media (Smith, 2013; Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2015).

Many theorists recognize that the accessible media has simplified the exchange of information from one side, but the communication area has morphed more complicated because it is more difficult to make an impact and be visible (Koschmann, 2012). Also, in spite of a wider area of communication knowledge and technical possibilities, it cannot be considered that presently people understand each other better (Vaarik, 2014). Even more critical is the goodwill of organizations to professionally and effectively manage their communication and promote good relationships with important target groups and stakeholders (Saksakulm Tampere, 2005) who, especially nowadays, need the information quickly and adequately (Kurtcu, 2012). Websites give them the opportunity to get easily accessible information when it is needed or when they have time to get it.

Many theorists point out that websites are seen as communication channels (Kurtcu, 2012) and also as tools for managing communication (Esrock and Leichty, 2000), but the full potential of websites is often unused (McMillan, 2000). Moore (2009) says that good design helps to find the most important information and increase understanding. In addition, websites offer many opportunities to improve the way how to communicate with stakeholders: by using design elements and pictures, but also videos (Moore, 2009). On the other hand, despite the aesthetics and design which are increasing understanding and creating users' emotions, thoughtless illustrative elements can rather be disturbing and confusing (Tuch et al., 2012).

In the schools' context, there are limited studies about school websites and how they are used in communication. Schools' websites are often seen as platforms for teaching and learning (Reychav & Wu, 2015; Taddeo & Barnes, 2016), but also as administrative tool (Taddeo & Barnes, 2016) or opportunity to support parents' engagement (Piper, 2012) which both are clearly defined as parts of communication management.

Taddeo and Barnes (2016) investigated schools' websites as an environment of teaching and learning, administrative tool and communication platform in South-Australia. In their study, Reychav and Wu (2015) were focused on effective and user-centred design and showed how it affects users (teachers and students) satisfaction. About the importance of the visual approach, Wilkins (2011) explored how school brochures and websites introduce the nature of the school and affect parents' choice.

Therefore, websites are essential communication channels and all organizations, included schools, should think how to reach to their target groups and stakeholders. Equally important are to improve the design of websites and publish information that the users need.

## Target groups and stakeholders in communication

It is crucial for every organization in all different social sectors to define their target groups, to work with them towards establishing relations and to organize interaction on high-level (Moss & DeSanto, 2011). As in every company, it is important for a school to define its stakeholders and target groups and pay attention to them (Salumaa et al., 2007; Vadi, 2004). Moore (2009) recommends schools to think of their stakeholders' needs and brings out that one point of managing communication is to "keep parents happy".

Target group concern basis is essential in public relations strategy, not institutional concern basis, and the development of strategy starts with finding out the interest of target groups (Moss & DeSanto, 2011) and organization related stakeholders (Smith, 2009). Best school management

practices include shared management and involvement of the target groups (Kukemelk & Ginter, 2016).

Different theorists (Moore, 2009; Wilkins, 2011; Piper, 2012; Reychav & Wu, 2015; Taddeo & Barnes, 2016) while talking about schools' websites, mention the importance of engagement with parents and also communication inside the school and in the wider public.

The public perception of the organization or organization's reputation develops with the help of words and acts in social activity (Past, 2007) and that in both planned and unplanned messages that the organization sends out (Smith, 2009). Thus, the reputation and its design are directly related to communication. It is important for every organization because the organization's reputation defines how people value the information they get from it (Smith, 2009). Shaping the image is closely related to peoples (target groups, stakeholders and the general public) expectations about the organization: met expectations improve and maintain the reputation, but unfulfilled expectation violate reputation (Vaarik, 2014).

## Estonian context

According to school leaders of Estonian state gymnasiums (Tikerperi, 2016), schools' official websites and social media are the most important communication channels for schools. As one of the most important target groups, namely the young people, is reached mainly through online channels, these are vital communication opportunities (Tikerperi, 2016). On a large scale, the educational communication has three target groups in Estonia's point of view: teachers, students and parents, and also, a wider public, because education is a societal issue (Aab, 2015). Estonian Basic Schools and Upper Secondary Schools Act (2010) declares:

*§ 55. Notification of students and parents  
(2) Schools disclose the conditions of and procedure for admission and the contact details of the institutions exercising state supervision over the school on their website.*

*§ 69. Disclosure of school documents  
(1) Schools disclose their curriculum, statutes, development plan, internal rules and the internal rules of the boarding school facilities on their website and create the possibilities of accessing the same on paper in the school.*

According to the law, it is possible to presume that having a website is required. The law brings out mandatory information on the website, but every school is free to choose additional contents and the design of their websites. There are no general rules or common understanding of how to build a website and schools have different capabilities to find resources for that. It is known that Estonia's capital city Tallinn has some additional rules for schools' websites<sup>5</sup> but no signs of regulations in other local communities in Estonia. The website gives a good chance to show school's unique and specialities to get a better position in concurrence between schools.

Under the leadership of Information Technology Foundation for Education (HITSA) in Estonia, there has been completed a business analysis about Estonian schools' websites, but it is limited with schools managed by state (basic schools – mostly for kids with special needs, gymnasiums, vocational schools and applied higher educational schools). The main goal of this analysis is to build a basis for a common web platform which could be used by different schools. At the beginning of the year 2018, the common platform is in the phase of development and testing, to be available (but not for free) for all public schools in Estonia. There is also published a stylebook to give advice how to design or generate the content of a website. Right now, it is not possible to say how relevant and useful is the stylebook scientifically and in practice but it is important to bring out because it is the only handbook-like material for schools to improve the communication

<sup>5</sup> Tallinn's rules prescribe more mandatory documents or information on the website; the design and additional contents are not mentioned

on their websites. The limitations of the analysis and handbook are that (1) they involve only schools managed by the state and (2) they are looking at very different types of schools (schools for kids with special needs; vocational schools; state gymnasiums and professional higher education institutions) in the same context and trying to find a common platform and recommendations for all of them. It is questionable how could one platform fit all special needs. Most of the Estonian public schools are managed by communities which means that all of them are still working by the same laws and curriculum, but management practices, economic capabilities, school worker's competencies and particular requirements to school leaders, vary widely.

Talking about Estonian context, I cannot ignore other channels they are using to share information and stay contacted with their target groups and stakeholders. One actively used environment is e-School or Studium (different platforms, but the same goals): web platforms to manage the communication between school and home. As told above, social media has become essential in communication management, and there are different mailing lists to share information. All those channels are with limited access and presume to have an account on the platform and sometimes connections with certain groups (like the school's group on Facebook).

### *Traditions on the first school day. Historical background.*

According to Estonian folklore and national holidays calendar, our traditions for celebrating the first school day began in the middle of the last century. Estonian history is known that school year started after agricultural works in September or in October. Common date – the 1<sup>st</sup> of September – was confirmed about 1945 (1935 in Russia; Estonia was a part of USSR since 1944). Since the year 1984, the day was celebrated over the former USSR as Day of Knowledge (Указ Президиума ВС СССР). The agenda of the event is quite similar and includes speeches, singing and reading poems. Students from the highest grade (9<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> – depends on the type of school) are guiding first-grade students to the festive room, and the school leader gives a spelling book to every beginner. There are some differences in traditions by every school, and I cannot be sure that there are no schools with a completely original approach, but generally, is the 1<sup>st</sup> September understood on the described way.

The whole first school day is especially festive for the first-grade students. Their parents (often grandparents and/or closer relatives) are welcome to attend the festive meeting. Despite older students' parents are not involved in the meeting (they may be welcome in smaller communities), they must ensure that their kids have all school supplies, are correctly dressed and are in school at the right time. The definition of proper clothing seems to be changed in time, but the most classical version is seen as black or dark blue trousers/skirt and white blouse.

According to those needs and parents' role, the necessity to be informed is clearly seen. However, the information is important to the wider public as well. Considering that in these festive meetings friends and relatives are often (especially in smaller communities and schools) welcome to participate or there are other stakeholders (politicians, company representatives, former teachers, etc.) to say greetings and congratulate the school.

### **Sample**

According to Estonian educational system and laws, the main interest is focused on public schools. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 2017 there were 530 public schools in Estonia (2017-2018 õppeaasta arvudes), among them, primary schools (grades 1 to 6), basic schools (grades 1 to 9), upper secondary schools that also teach basic school curricula (grades 1 to 12), gymnasiums (grades 10 to 12) and adults' gymnasiums.

The list of schools was taken from Estonian public information website [www.eesti.ee](http://www.eesti.ee). During collecting the data some types of schools were excluded:

- Primary schools under the same leadership with a kindergarten.
- Adults' gymnasiums

The main reasons for excluding those schools were (1) the difference in target groups (wider variability of students' age), and (2) the difference in leadership.

**Table 1:** Public schools in Estonia and the sample of the study

School's type	On the 1 <sup>st</sup> September 2017	In the study
Primary + basic schools in Estonia	351	234
Upper secondary schools (incl. basic)	143	123
Gymnasium	21	17
Adults' gymnasiums	15	0

Source: 2017/2018. õppeaasta arvudes [School year 2017/2018 in Numbers]

The final sample was 403 schools but 29 of them had problems with websites (not working, not opening) or did not have the information about the first school day on their websites. So it was possible to analyse announcements from 374 schools' website.

## Method

To analyse the data, the combined content analysis was chosen as a proper method to systemize written and visual (pictures, illustrative elements) data. Content analysis is widely used to analyse media texts (McMillan, 2000; Neuendorf, 2017) and the changed media environment has given new challenges in the use of the method. Weare and Lin (2000) consider that content analysis offers good opportunities to analyse websites, even though it is a challenge to create general descriptive categories because various visual elements are frequently mixed. There are some limitations connected with the part of the quantitative content analysis: it needs quite strictly limited categories, but according to big differences in the written information on websites, the data can be analysed superficially. To reduce this risk, I wrote notes about more significant exceptions and brought out some of them to demonstrate the variability in communication practices.

The data was gathered in the last week of August in the year 2017. It was obvious to presume that the information about starting the school year is available at least one week before the 1<sup>st</sup> September. In this study, the data was saved as screenshots of the announcements because McMillan (2000) warns that according to the rapidly changing character of the internet, it is required to collect the data quickly, and coders have to be sure they are coding the same data (it could be more critical than traditional reliability measurements). In conducting and saving the data, it was important to get screenshots of the maximum area to keep the information about announcements' location.

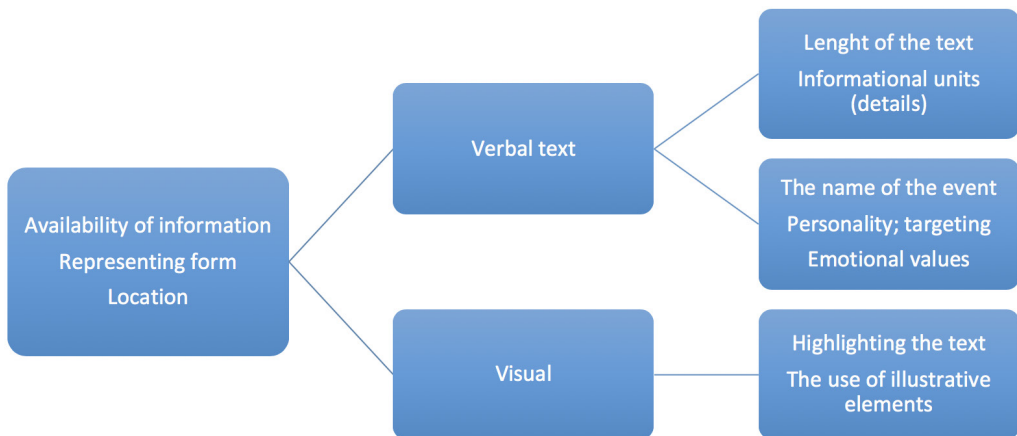
Two coders coded the data at full capacity. The coders learned together and developed a preliminary coding schema to achieve as accurate categories as possible. The main goal of the analysis was to get to the frequency of characteristics in four main categories. The analysis was carried out in MS Excel.

As I told above, 374 schools' websites were analysed and in the course of it, schools' backgrounds were seen in three categories: the type of school: basic (234); basic + upper secondary (123);



gymnasium (17); location: countryside (225) or town (149); and work language: Estonian (343) or Russian (31)<sup>6</sup>.

The general analysis of the announcements included the fact about the availability of the announcements on the website (the last unit to form the final sample), the way of presenting information and the location of information. The following logic of the analysis was divided into two main categories (Figure 1). The verbal (written) text was analysed in two ways: (1) by the length of the text and informational units (detailed information); (2) by contextual aspects like the name of the event, personality and expressed emotional values. Visual parameters included highlighting the text of announcements and using illustrative elements. The purpose was not to analyse every visual element individually, but it allows to systemize them by types of images or describe their characteristics in a general way.



**Figure 1:** The logic of categories

Source: authors' compilation

In addition to keeping the strict schema, I wrote notes to mark significant exceptions and details which were illustrating statistical results and giving a deeper understanding of the topic. It was not possible to measure the construction of the potential audience on the quantitative way, and those results were generated through the contextual meanings of named categories, their analysis, and conclusions.

## Findings

In this section, formal and contextual findings are presented using only the most important or more talkative background information at a time, because while using all of them at the same time it can affect the anonymity of schools.

### The form of the announcements.

The main purpose of this category was to map generally, on which way schools are publishing the information. 53.2% of all schools had chosen to publish only the text. Two schools of them had an extra file to download. 68 schools (18.2%) were using a picture with the text, and 28.6% (107) of all schools had a designed poster.

<sup>6</sup> While naming Estonian and Russian schools in text, I mean the work language; schools in Estonia in general context, are named as 'Estonian public schools'



By the school type, it seems that gymnasiums rather prefer only text (82.4%) than other combinations. Only one gymnasium had a designed poster, and two of them had added a picture to illustrate the text. Designing a poster was a bit more common among basic schools than in upper secondary schools: suitably 32.9% of all basic schools and 23.6% of all upper secondary schools. A remarkable fact was that basic schools and also upper secondary schools from countryside were using more designed posters than schools from towns. At the same time, schools from towns were adding pictures next to the text more frequently than the same type of schools from countryside.

**Table 2:** The form of the announcements

	Schools by location		% of all	Text		Text+Picture		Designed poster	
Basic school	234	100.0%	62.6%	114	48.7%	43	18.4%	77	32.9%
Country side	176	75.2%	47.1%	79	44.9%	31	17.6%	66	37.5%
Town	58	24.8%	15.5%	35	60.3%	12	20.7%	11	19.0%
Upper Secondary	123	100.0%	32.9%	71	57.7%	23	18.7%	29	23.6%
Country side	47	38.2%	12.6%	23	48.9%	6	12.8%	18	38.3%
Town	76	61.8%	20.3%	48	63.2%	17	22.4%	11	14.5%
Gymnasium*	17	100.0%	4.5%	14	82.4%	2	11.8%	1	5.9%
	374		100.0%	199	53.2%	68	18.2%	107	28.6%

Note: \* Gymnasiums cannot be separated by location because of keeping their anonymity

Source: author's calculations, based on the data

#### Location

According to the variability of websites' structure and design, I was interested in the location of the announcements and how easy it is to differentiate them from other texts on a website. The location was categorized by the section where I could find the complete information. When the information was findable in more than one section (for example on the front page and in the news section), the section with easier access was marked.

The location was explored in four subcategories: front page main section; front page's side; news section; and other sections (it was hard to name the section where the full information was located; opened in a pop-up window; calendar; other unusual section of a website).

55.9% (209) of schools presented the announcement on the front page's main section, 26 schools (7%) used the side of the front page, and 91 schools (24.3%) published the information in the news section. In 48 cases (12.8% of schools) the information was posted in different sections of websites, it opened as a pop-up window, and it was harder to find.

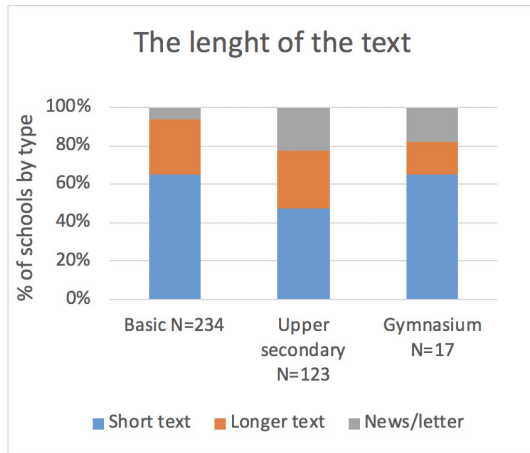
When looking at the distinction between texts, 267 schools (71.4% of all) can generally be outlined who have submitted announcements as text or combined text and image, because designed poster can already be viewed as differentiation. In this case, the highlighted title was not taken into account when all news headlines were similar. In total, 70.8% of those schools (N=267) did not differ from other texts in the same section of the website.

#### The length of the text

The length of announcements was analysed in three sections. Short information was seen as one to three sentences. The short news was four to eight sentences and extended news as an article or letter (more than eight sentences). It is important to mention that a sentence could be conditional when the text was placed as fragmented rows. Then 'one sentence' was measured as a textual part with complete meaning (for example [The festive meeting begins 9.00] [After that, taking photos]). The textual part was analysed in the same way except that the announcement was represented

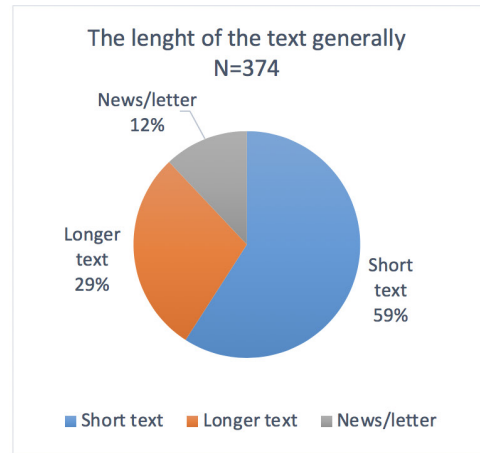
as text or as a designed poster because the purpose was to analyse the amount of information.

The results show that schools often – 59% (221) of them – use a short message to provide information, which contains definitely more basic information about the event (time, place). 108 schools (29%) gave more information, and only 12% (45) published longer (extended) news.



**Figure 2:** The length of the text by schools' type

Source: author's illustration, based on the data



**Figure 3:** The length of the text generally

Source: author's illustration, based on the data

In more cases, short information was given by basic schools and gymnasiums, but it is easily explained that upper secondary schools have more grades and often more students, and they have more than one festive meeting on the same day.

#### Detailed information

Detailed information in this study is seen as any other information but the date, time and event's name. Detailed information was mostly counted as a part of announcements (look: length of the text), except those cases when it was located separately. Although Estonian public schools were publishing the information shortly, 215 of them (57.5%) considered it necessary to give some additional information and there were marked 338 cases. The frequency of the topics is shown in Table 3.

**Table 3:** Detailed information. The frequency of the topics

Meeting with the class teacher – informative meeting	163	48.2%
School busses – organised transportation; mostly in country sides	85	25.1%
Taking pictures – group photos, usually taken by professional	36	10.7%
Dress code – school hat or uniform; classical or other rules/recommendations	32	9.5%
Punctual plan – the agenda of the day; including exact times	22	6.5%
ALL CASES	338	100.0%

Source: author's calculations, based on the data

The most frequent common information concerned the first lesson with the class teacher: 43.6% of all schools considered it as valuable information (Table 4). Surprisingly, it was less common among basic schools (37.6% of all basic schools). Generally, it was found that basic schools shared less detailed information. Entirely logical was the fact that schools from countryside have to give the information about school buses more frequently because their students are living on the

broader area and using organised transportation. The dress code was a bit more important for upper secondary school in towns (15.8% of them; N=76) but the exact plan of the day more in countryside (14.6%).

#### The name of the event

One contextual category explored the name of the event (Table 5). Among Estonian schools, the most popular name is 'school year's opening' (used by 141 schools). 58 Estonian schools (15.5%) named the meeting as 'The 1<sup>st</sup> September'. It has to be mentioned that the 1<sup>st</sup> September was named quite clearly in two ways: as a datum and as the name of the event. The analysis regarded only the name.

One of the most remarkable findings was the name 'Day of knowledge' which was particularly popular among Russian schools – 51.6% of all Russian schools used that name, but only 20 schools (5.8%) of all Estonian schools.

**Table 4:** Detailed information given by different types of schools

Schools		Additional information		Class teacher		School busses		Taking pictures		Clothing		Punctual plan		No additional**	
Basic school	234	127	54.3%	88	69.3%	65	51.2%	23	18.1%	14	11.0%	8	6.3%	107	45.7%
Country side	176	99	56.3%	63	63.6%	64	64.6%	22	22.2%	11	11.1%	5	5.1%	77	43.8%
Town	58	28	48.3%	25	89.3%	1	3.6%	1	3.6%	3	10.7%	3	10.7%	30	51.7%
Upper Secondary	123	76	61.8%	66	86.8%	19	25.0%	10	13.2%	16	21.1%	14	18.4%	47	38.2%
Country side	48	31	64.6%	26	83.9%	17	54.8%	4	12.9%	4	12.9%	7	22.6%	16	33.3%
Town	76	45	59.2%	40	88.9%	2	4.4%	6	13.3%	12	26.7%	7	15.6%	31	40.8%
Gymnasium*	17	12	70.6%	9	75.0%	1	8.3%	3	25.0%	2	16.7%	0	0.0%	5	29.4%
	374	215	57.5%	163	75.8%	85	39.5%	36	16.7%	32	14.9%	22	10.2%	159	42.5%

Note: \* Gymnasiums can not be separated by location because of keeping their anonymity

Source: author's calculations, based on the data

**Table 5:** The name of the event given by different types of schools and work languages

	All		Day of Knowledge		1 <sup>st</sup> September		1 <sup>st</sup> school day		School year's opening		Other	
Basic school	234	62.6%	23	9.8%	37	15.8%	8	3.4%	92	39.3%	74	31.6%
Estonian	222	47.1%	16	7.2%	34	15.3%	8	3.6%	91	41.0%	73	32.9%
Russian	12	15.5%	7	58.3%	3	25.0%	0	0.0%	1	8.3%	1	8.3%
Upper Secondary	123	33.2%	13	10.6%	23	18.7%	7	5.7%	43	35.0%	37	30.1%
Estonian	104	12.8%	4	3.8%	22	21.2%	7	6.7%	42	40.4%	29	27.9%
Russian	19	20.3%	9	47.4%	1	5.3%	0	0.0%	1	5.3%	8	42.1%
Gymnasium	17	4.3%	0	0.0%	2	11.8%	0	0.0%	8	47.1%	7	41.2%
Estonian	17	4.3%	0	0.0%	2	11.8%	0	0.0%	8	47.1%	7	41.2%
	374	100.0%	36	9.6%	62	16.6%	15	4.0%	143	38.2%	118	31.6%

Source: author's calculations, based on the data

The section 'other' contains various versions and wordings which did not give an unambiguous name for the event. For example, 'the school begins', 'we will meet on the 1<sup>st</sup> of September (as the datum)', just 'the festive meeting' or by one case 'the irony of destiny or back to the school'. Surprisingly some schools were using the form 'X school's opening meeting' which is not completely correct in the Estonian language. It is understandable, but it could have the meaning of an opening a new school.

#### Personality and emotional values of announcements

While find personal and emotional values, the data was analysed in three subcategories (the addressee; the sender; text's tone). Generally, it was not a common practice to address the announcements and schools preferred laconic text. According to the laconic texts, it was impossible to be sure how schools are constructing their audience.

Only 39 schools (10.4%) used the opportunity to turn to someone. In most cases, this was about turning to students, teachers, and parents, but it was also addressed to the public. The school directors were listed as the author of the news five times (as the senders of the letter). In seven cases, the announcements were signed by teachers or school workers as a group. As a significant example can be exposed one school leader who published on the school's website a personal letter to students and teachers and presented the agenda of the first school day. The letter contained warm wishes and emotions.

However, in cases of some schools, it was quite difficult to tell who was 'we' and who was 'you'. When the announcements turned to the *koolipere [school-family]*<sup>7</sup>, it appeared that some schools included all school-related people here, but it was not clear who was the sender of the message. At the same time, some schools seemed to use the *koolipere [school-family]* in the meaning of school's administration and teachers who turned to their students and with that, excluded students from school-family. These cases were exceptional but are illustrating differences in understandings and communication practices.

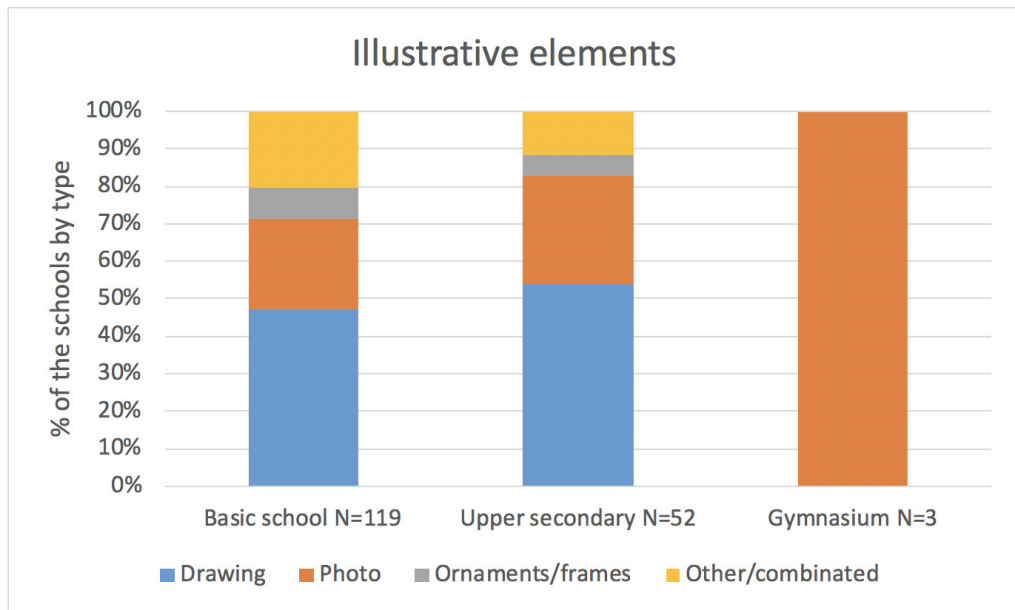
Talking about creating emotions, 16 schools (4.3%) were using poetry or lyrics of songs as textual illustrations. 61 schools (16.3%) were adding positive adjectives or/and wishes. Russian schools were using emotional expression a bit more often (29% of Russian schools) than Estonian schools (19.2% of Estonian schools).

#### Highlighting the text. Illustrations and design

The easiest way to highlight the textual announcements is to vary the font of the text. As 267 schools (71.4% of all) were using text or text+picture as the form of announcements, only 78 of them (29.2%) were using different fonts.

46.5% of all schools were using illustrative elements or designed posters to share the information. 48.3% of them were using drawings and 27% pictures. As there were quite similar proportions in using drawings or pictures between basic and upper secondary schools, then all three gymnasiums were using a photo. Only 28 schools used their logo as an illustrative element next to the text or on the poster but as many schools are using logos in the header of their websites, this aspect is comprehensible.

<sup>7</sup> used quite often in the meaning of students, teachers and other school workers altogether



**Figure 4:** The type of illustrative elements

Source: author's illustration, based on the data

The quality of used pictures and design were categorized in this study but it did not show significant results and some visual mismatches can not be analysed without analysing the quality and technical parameters of the entire website. Generally, it can be said that schools were mostly using technically proper elements with good quality. As an interesting exception, it was found that only one school cited correctly to the author of the photo they were using.

## Discussion

This study was conducted to discover how Estonian public schools are publishing information on their website and is it possible to understand how they are constructing their audience. The purpose of the analysis was to describe and certainly not to evaluate the form or content of announcements.

### *Publishing information. The form.*

Generally, most of the public schools in Estonia had at least a short announcement about starting the school year on their website. According to that result I can say that publishing information on their websites is common practice in Estonian public schools, and their websites are used as communication channels (Esrock & Leichty, 2000; Kurtcu, 2012) but as many other organizations, Estonian public schools do not use the full potential of websites (McMillan, 2000).

Although the most common way to publish information was a short textual note which did not differentiate from other texts, a number of schools were highlighting the information with illustrative elements. Proportionally basic schools and, more specifically, basic schools in country sides presented their information with different design elements and colours more often. Although theorists talk about the importance of good design (Moore, 2009; Wilkins, 2011, Tuch et al., 2012, Reyhav & Wu, 2015) and in this regard the users' satisfaction in general, the impression is that among Estonian public schools the illustrative elements were related rather to a younger age group

and expressing child-friendliness. This impression was confirmed by the fact that gymnasiums (students age 17-19) were using just text and few of them added photos.

According to the study, Estonian schools are publishing the information about the first school day in easily findable sections of the webpage. This practice is clearly in the interest of stakeholders because people nowadays prefer to get information quickly and properly (Kurtcu, 2012). At the same time, while looking at the frequency of short announcements (irrespective of presentation) the impression was that schools presumed that the rest of information was already known or the information is sent to all members of their target groups. However, it is not known how schools can be sure of that fact. On the wider picture, the tradition of the first school day has kept quite unchanged, but as the study showed, there are schools with special traditions, and unique practices.

It can be said that it is essential for schools to have the information on their website but it is not always clear what the planned effect of the announcement is. Further studies would be necessary to gain an understanding of how does short information meet the needs and expectations of main target groups, and if they need more information, how (or in which channels) could they get it. Kurtcu (2012) has pointed out that nowadays people need to find the complete information quickly. As the short announcements do not give much information, it would be useful to explore what is the purpose of partial information from schools' perspective and how are they providing the additional information if needed.

### *Constructing the audience;*

Estonian public schools have quite similar target groups (Aab, 2015). Especially students and parents should need similar information in every school, and an effective communication strategy should base on target groups' needs and less on institutions concerns (Moss & DeSanto, 2011). Nevertheless, the information published by schools is different by the quantitative indicators and contextually, emotionally as well.

In some cases, when the announcement turned to students, parents or public, it was easy to understand to whom the information was targeted. Also, some schools added the sender. This kind of personal approach and creating emotions are brought out by Moore (2009) who also states that people prefer to be in contact with persons, not with institutions.

According to the topics of additional information in the study and the general agenda of the first school day, I can conclude that the first school day includes different activities even though so many schools do not name them in the announcements. There was a tendency for additional information that upper secondary schools and even more gymnasiums added more details. That suggests to the possibility that schools presume that older students get more information on online channels. The same aspect was brought out by leaders or Estonian state gymnasiums (Tikerperi, 2016).

As most of the schools have laconic information, it was hard to understand clearly, to whom was the information targeted, who was expected to attend the event, or which were school's specialties in celebrating the first school day.

However, a website is open even for those interest groups which might not be defined by the school. It is not reasonable to underestimate the importance of websites because for schools it is the main public and easily accessible channel to show themselves. Building the public image of an organization is important because it defines how people value the information they get from it (Smith, 2009).

### *The public picture*

Education is an essential topic in every society, and the public interest in schools is broader than people and groups who are clearly connected with a school. Organizations generally should think about how they are seen by the public (Smith, 2009; Gilpin, 2010).

Theorists have noticed that technological opportunities seem to simplify communication, but actually, it is harder to bring out the most important and be visible (Koschmann, 2012). When looking at the announcements of the first school day, it is hard to understand schools' purposes to impress the public even though it is reachable with small changes. By giving information, all schools are creating a part of their face (Past, 2007; Smith, 2009) and communication generally helps to emphasize the unique nature of every school. For example, if there is an emotional letter written by the school leader, it tells the story about the school to the wider public, even if the information itself is not important.

While talking about the general picture I explored that Estonian schools have almost lost the tradition to name the first school day as the Day of Wisdom, which was the national holiday established in the Soviet Union (Указ Президиума ВС СССР). The study showed that it still occurs proportionally more in Russian schools, and was rather rare among Estonian schools. Definitely, I cannot say that '*the Day of Wisdom*' is not mentioned at all while celebrating, but on their websites schools used more other names for the day.

### *Limitations*

There were some limitations which provide a good basis for the next studies. Avoiding the evaluation of schools' skills and manners was important as well, as I cannot know which channels Estonian schools are using additionally to share important information with their target groups and stakeholders. Also, I cannot know who exactly is creating or editing those announcements.

It is important to mention that the study is also limited because of the narrow focus. According to the analysis of only one type of announcements, I can't generalize those results to schools' communication policy or management. In addition, many aspects did not differentiate enough to be sure that the announcements were not occasional this year.

### *Conclusion*

Estonian public schools are using their websites to publish information, but the study considers the image that schools are publishing the information differently. There are no common understandings and practices even though schools' stakeholders and target groups should be similar and there is wider public interest in their activities. The study doesn't give the clear picture of target groups and stakeholders constructed by the public schools.

All schools can choose their primary channels to share information, stay connected with their stakeholders and how to be visible in public. Definitely, I cannot declare that schools have to manage their communication in a certain way, but according to different studies and communication theories the importance of planned communication in every organization is clearly shown.

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