

MEDIA INSTITUTIONS AND AUDIENCES

The Latvian media in the new millennium: Trends in development, content and usage and the emergence of a community of media users

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This article reviews trends in the development, content and usage of the mass media in Latvia since the year 2000. It is based on data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia, the Bibliography Institute of the Latvian National Library, and the TNS Latvia research company, as well as on studies conducted by the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Latvia. The authors conclude that media development, as well as the relationship between the media and their audience, must be seen as flexible and fairly complicated. Economic growth and increasing prosperity among Latvia's residents have meant changes in lifestyle. There has been an intensive shift toward consumption, and therefore, the media have encroached upon the part of lives that are based on consumerism. In this new lifestyle, the media have a very important role to play – not so much in terms of constructing public or private values, but rather of offering entertainment opportunities and representing the new lifestyle.

Keywords: *Latvian media, press, TV, radio, Internet, audience, consumerism*

Individuals' need to understand and assess ongoing processes in society has traditionally been a key prerequisite for media usage. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as Latvia moved rapidly toward the restoration of its independent statehood, the single print-runs of a few national newspapers exceeded 300,000 copies, while the average print-run of local newspapers was around 15,000 (Vi-halemm, Lauk, Høyer, 1993, pp. 348-350). The intensity of media usage at that time

was in line with the high level of political action and participation in public processes that prevailed among Latvia's residents.

People linked positive political changes to positive material changes – improvements in welfare and standards of living. A large segment of the community became disillusioned, however, when most people experienced no tangible benefits from the changes that were occurring. In 2003, 62% of the people of Latvia claimed that their

family's material situation had been better 15 years earlier. Those in the 45-to-54 age group and people who had no jobs or a low level of income declared this more often than the average.¹

When a society is focused on economic and social problems, people become more inert vis-à-vis public and political processes, and socioeconomic circumstances cause changes in value systems. Collective interests became increasingly less important in the eyes of individuals. The independent nation state proved unable to provide automatic solutions to everyday problems, and it was not even particularly interested in any reciprocal links with the country's residents. The people of Latvia developed a low level of self-esteem in terms of their political competence (fully 66% said that most people were more informed about political and government issues than they were). Only about one-quarter believed that each individual should provide for his or her own welfare (Zepa, 1998, p. 15). Thus in 2002, when a period of rapid economic growth began in Latvia, most people were focused on their material needs and interests. People sought compensation for the difficulties that had occurred during the Soviet occupation and the subsequent years of economic crisis; they finally wanted to "live like proper human beings." This pronouncement included ideas about the quality of life and the consumer habits of Western Europeans and North Americans, but it did not speak to any experience with democracy and the relevant practices. There were already gaps between the public and the elite, politicians

and voters, citizens and non-citizens, Latvian and Russian news media, which had a substantial influence on public debate about issues that were of considerable importance to the entire community.

Between 1996 and 2001, GDP increased steadily (an average of 5.7% per year). Between 2002 and 2007, however, it shot upward. The same was true of average wages, albeit with slight shifts, and beginning in 2005, wage increases substantially exceeded price increases. In 2006, the difference between the average monthly net wage of working people and the consumer price index was 16.6% (see Table 1).² These processes affected on every resident of Latvia a greater or lesser degree. As purchasing power increased, consumption priorities and lifestyles also changed. For a long time, food and housing made up the majority of the average household budget, but between 2002 and 2006, the proportion of these expenditures shrank somewhat. The amount of money spent on entertainment and culture increased, as did spending on long-term-use objects such as mobile telephones, computers, television sets, video and audio equipment, and satellite dishes. Since 2005, increasing percentages of Latvia's residents claim they are satisfied with their lives – more than 60% in that year.³ Ideas about the "good life" were associated first

¹ The study was conducted by the SKDS public opinion research centre. See <http://www.skds.lv/doc/materialaisstavoklis_SKDS062003.doc> [Accessed 18.10.2008].

² See Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. (2008). *Latvijas statistikas gadagrāmata 2007 / Statistical Yearbook of Latvia 2007*. Rīga: Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia. P. 51 and 276.

³ Survey data show that in 2005, 61% of all residents were satisfied with their lives. See <http://www.tns.lv/?lang=lv&fullarticle=true&category=showuid&id=2208> [Accessed 18.10.2008]. In 2007, the percentage had risen to 63%. See <http://www.pro5.lv/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1752> [Accessed 12.10.2008].

Table 1. *Various indicators related to media use in Latvia*

Year	GDP vs. 2000	Real wage and salary index of employees	Annual circulation of magazines		Annual circulation of newspapers		Total programme length of TV channels		Total programme length of radio channels		Internet access in households	
			Millions	% vs. 2000	Millions	% vs. 2000	Hours	% vs. 2000	Hours	% vs. 2000	Total households	% vs. 2000
2000	100.0	100.0	24.7	100.0	181	100.0	45,264	100.0	245,776	100.0		
2001	108.0	103.5	27.4	110.9	186	102.8	45,709	101.0	267,033	108.6		
2002	115.0	106.0	27.4	110.9	192	106.1	60,347	133.3	295,794	120.4		
2003	123.3	107.8	28.8	116.6	181	100.0	55,669	123.0	304,268	123.8		
2004	134.0	102.4	32.1	130.0	201	111.0	48,346	106.8	315,211	128.3	14.7	100.0
2005	148.2	109.7	45.0	182.2	206	113.8	53,741	118.7	297,173	120.9	30.5	207.5
2006	165.9	115.6	51.7	209.3	224	123.8	71,105	157.1	310,577	126.4	42.2	287.1
2007	183.5	119.9	54	218.6	211	116.6	91,639	201.5	326,325	132.8	50.5	343.5

Data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

and foremost with high and stable levels of income, material satisfaction, and the life opportunities created thereby (Bela, 2006, pp. 50-51). By 2007, nearly one-half of the people of Latvia felt that they were materially secure (only 30% said the same in late 2003).⁴

The situation in Latvia during these years can be compared to what prevailed in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. Consumption increased as countries moved toward the welfare society. People gave little thought to the attractiveness of welfare – money, purchasing power, a cornucopia of goods and services, opportunities for entertainment, enjoyment and extravagance. In contemporary Latvian folklore, this period is described as “Kalvītis’ fat years,” because of the address the then prime minister of Latvia, Aigars Kalvītis, delivered on New Year’s Eve, December 31, 2005.

⁴ See [http://www.skds.lv/doc/Materiala%20no-drosinatiba%20\(12.2007\).pdf](http://www.skds.lv/doc/Materiala%20no-drosinatiba%20(12.2007).pdf) [Accessed 04.10.2008].

In it, he celebrated the country’s very rapid development and promised that seven good years could be expected in Latvia.⁵

This essentially launched the fulfilment of desires that had been accumulating in Latvia decade after decade. Since the last

⁵ The prime minister said: “This year will go down in history with many pieces of good news. Latvia has the most rapidly growing market economy in the world. We are world champions in terms of growth rates. Last year we had the most rapid increase in gross domestic product in Latvia’s history, the most successful collection of taxes, and the largest budget in the country’s history. Last year we saw the greatest increase in wages, and that will continue next year. One year ago, at this hour, I said that we needed another leap forward. It has begun, and we have created all necessary conditions to make sure that it does not subside for the next seven years. [...] Beloved compatriots, if nothing stupid is done, then we face seven years of plenty. Let us remember the story of Joseph and his seven lean years and seven fat years. We are already the world champion in terms of development tempos. Over the next 10 years, we have every opportunity to achieve that which we dreamed of when we went to the barricades – to be masters in our country, not guest workers somewhere else.” See <http://www.mk.gov.lv/lv/mp/runas-pazinojumi/Arhivs-Kalvitis/jaungada-uzruna-ltv> [Accessed 05.10.2008].

years of the Soviet system, many people in Latvia had been thinking about a return to the West. By this they meant the establishment of a welfare and consumer society, one in which every day is bright and brilliant (Plakans, 1995, p. 176; Lauristin, 1997, pp. 26-31; Stukuls Eglitis, 2002, pp. 15-19). Between 2005 and 2007, one could really feel that the dream was coming true, despite lingering resentments against the West because Latvia's legal accession to the European Union did not create any automatic benefits. Indeed, in some sectors of life, EU membership even caused losses (Giddens, 2007, p. 43).

This period in time can also be described as a maze of contradictions, which involved spending, a delay in fulfilling the dream of welfare, traditional habits versus new opportunities, as well as heavy and difficult work and satisfaction about its results. There was optimism about the future. History recalled major political, economic and social cataclysms. People enjoyed the "good life" and saw it as medicine for the traumas of poverty that they had experienced for many previous decades. The people of Latvia learned to live for the moment, and few made detailed plans for the distant future. The mood in society and among individuals was one that coincides with the concept of a leisure class. The classical sociologist Thorstein Veblen has written that "anyone who is required to change his habits of life and his habitual relations to his fellow men will feel the discrepancy between the method of life required of him by the newly arisen exigencies, and the traditional scheme of life to which he is accustomed" (Veblen, 1899, p. 129). Nearly everyone in Latvia found himself or herself in a situa-

tion in which it was necessary to respond robustly to this new order, and most were readily persuaded to accept new standards. Both objectively and subjectively, people's lives became more "Western," and the consumerist approach to life became part not just of everyday reality, but also – and more distinctly – of the discursive reflection of this dream and its fulfilment in the media and how the media were used.

Benefits and losses for the press

Economic growth, improved levels of welfare and changes in lifestyles all affected the media industry and media usage. With a few exceptions, overall there has been quantitative growth in terms of media outlets, particularly in those sectors that focus on economically active people and economically powerful regions. This particularly applies to Riga, which represents approximately 60% of the country's gross domestic product.

The media audience in Latvia is losing interest in the national daily newspapers, and the loss of loyalty and interest among readers can be seen in shrinking subscription rates. Another phenomenon is also at work: as those who can, to a certain extent, be defined as "old" readers are lost, new ones are not found.

The decline in subscription numbers has been more evident among Latvian language newspapers, even though they have tried to keep readers by offering various subscription options, such as just weekend papers; deliveries on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays; etc. The audiences for Latvian language dailies are also increasingly interested in weekly magazines, which have become fairly active competitors in this niche.

Table 2. Trends in Latvia's Press, Television and Radio Stations (2002-2006)

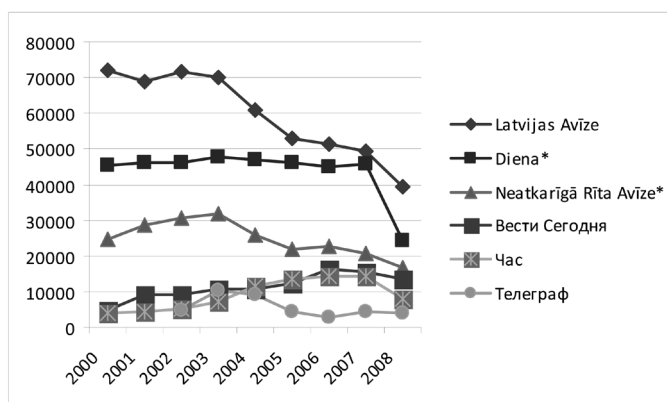
Year	Magazines		Newspapers		TV stations		Radio stations	
	Titles	% vs. 2000	Titles	% vs. 2000	Number	% vs. 2000	Number	% vs. 2000
2000	325	100.0	227	100.0	24	100.0	27	100.0
2001	355	109.2	222	97.8	27	112.5	28	103.7
2002	365	112.3	219	96.5	26	108.3	30	111.1
2003	340	104.6	250	110.1	25	104.2	29	107.4
2004	353	108.6	252	111.0	24	100.0	30	111.1
2005	366	112.6	261	115.0	22	91.7	28	103.7
2006	387	119.1	248	109.3	23	95.8	33	122.2

Data from the Central Statistical Bureau of Latvia

Table 3. Statistics related to Latvia's daily newspapers

Newspapers	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of titles	9	9	8	9	8	8	7	7
% vs. 2000	100.0	100.0	88.9	100.0	88.9	88.9	77.8	77.8
Single-issue circulation (,000)	196	212	183	239	239	226.2	217.5	194.9
% vs. 2000	100.0	108.2	93.4	121.9	121.9	115.4	111.0	99.4
Number of Latvian language newspapers	4	3	5	3	3	3	3	3
% vs. 2000	100.0	75.0	125.0	75.0	75.0	75.0	75.0	75.0
Single-issue circulation (,000)	128	99	101	147	157.1	147	141.2	133.4

Data from the Bibliography Institute of the Latvian National Library



* Consolidated subscription

Figure 1. Subscription numbers of national daily newspapers (Latvian and Russian), January 2000–2008

Supplements have been turned into weekly magazines sold separately from the basic newspaper, but are provided as bonuses to those who subscribe to the paper itself. Daily newspapers have lost their niche, and in 2005 only 30% of Latvia's residents said that they read one or more daily newspapers every day.⁶

The potential of media consumers in Latvia is very limited both because the country's population is small and because the audience is divided on the basis of the Latvian and Russian languages. Under such circumstances, newspapers are seeking to achieve maximum readership, which has promoted homogeneity and stereotypical approaches in media formats and content (Brik e, 2002, p. 92).

In 2005, the stock company *Diena*, which is owned in part by *Bonnier Media, Ltd.*, started to issue a free metro newspaper, *5min*, both in Latvian and in Russian. The newspaper is distributed in public transportation vehicles, on the street, etc. The newspaper stole both readers and advertisers from the competition. Late in 2007, *Diena* and *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze* almost simultaneously changed their formats from A2 and A3, thus losing their identity as traditional morning newspapers even further, and drawing closer to the format of the "soft" media. As the newspapers have lost opportunities and importance in the identification and construction of the country's political agenda, the influence of the media in terms of the public agenda also has been reduced.

⁶ See the Spring 2005 Eurobarometer report on public opinion in the European Union, Latvian national report. See http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb63/eb63_nat_lv.pdf [Accessed 20.10.2008].

Over the last 10 years, the Russian-language media in Latvia have developed a system in which there are daily newspapers, entertaining weekly publications, women's magazines, etc. This system takes up approximately one-fourth of the Latvian press market (Zagorovska and Šudņevs, 2006, pp. 169-175). This is an important and even fundamental tendency, because it facilitates the emergence of a multicultural society. Linguistic identity is the most important element in the ethnic consciousness of Latvia's Russian minority. The Russian language media also reassure the ethnic sensibilities of many non-Russians who consider Russian as their native language. (Volkovs, 2007, pp. 132-134). Thus, the media collectively are an actor that promotes the inclusion of local residents into social networks.

The Russian and Latvian press (more than other types of mass media) have different elements of journalistic culture. In Latvian newspapers, views and commentary are published separately from informational materials, and the position of the newspaper is demonstrated via topic choice. In Russian-language newspapers, by contrast, the position is presented directly in media texts and frameworks. Latvian newspapers tend to take a more global approach, while Russian-language newspapers are more regional, focusing on Russia and its interests in the territory of the former USSR. The Latvian press has comparatively more content related to life in the countryside and in Latvia's [provinces?].

The Russian-language press has basically pushed the publications from Russia itself out of the local market, first and foremost socio-political newspapers. That is because Russian speakers in Latvia need information

about the local events that the local Russian press provides (Zagorovska and Šudņevs, 2006, p. 173).

The local media play an important role in Latvia's various regions. They are major competitors for the national media, and are often sources of both local and national information. Local publications are increasingly printed with modern technologies, and they are appearing not just in district but also in small towns and parish centres. They cannot compete with national newspapers in terms of print-runs. The latter are published in the capital city, and their total circulation is nearly four times greater than the combined circulation of all of Latvia's regional and local newspapers. In comparison to the national newspapers, however, local newspapers tend to be stable. They have an ongoing and durable audience and set of advertisers indicating that local newspapers play a more important role in the everyday lives of readers. One can also think about the importance of rituals in maintaining audience loyalty.

The drop in subscription numbers cannot be attributed to the number of residents in any locality or to economic or other indicators applicable to that locality, because newspapers are published in various places in Latvia that differ in terms of their development. It is obvious that audience loyalty vis-à-vis newspapers is influenced both by the traditional role and functions of the local media in their community and by the quality of those newspapers.

The number of regional publications that are issued in Latvian has continued to increase, and overall circulation has followed suit, despite the 3.73% decline in the rural population of Latvia since 2000. Local newspapers published in Russian have remained stable in terms of the number of titles and level of circulation. That is because of the audience for such publications – Russian speakers in major regional cities such as Daugavpils, Liepāja and Rēzekne. Their numbers have not changed in any significant degree.

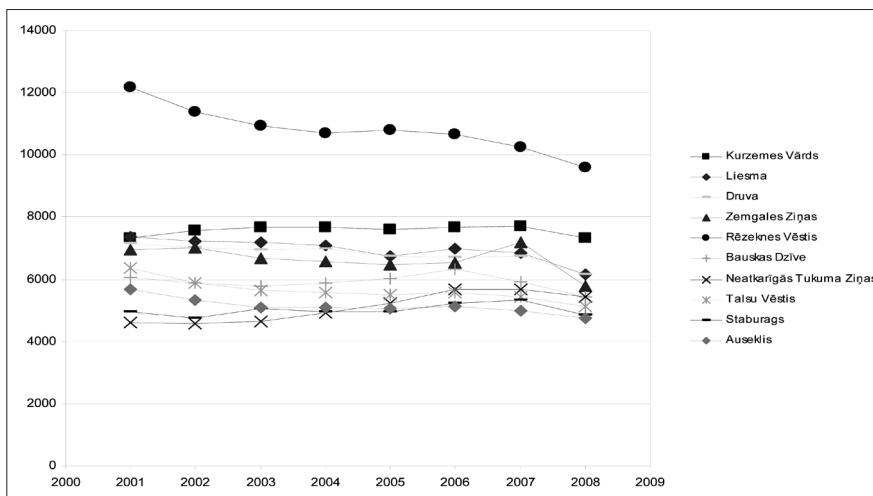


Figure 2. Subscription numbers for Latvia's 10 leading local newspapers, January 2000-2008

Table 4. *Statistics related to Latvia's local newspapers*

Newspapers	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of titles	95	101	103	134	139	140	140	152
% vs. 2000	100.0	106.3	108.4	141.1	146.3	147.4	147.4	160
Total circulation	44 835	43 014	43 773	41 547	43 357,7	43 227.7	47 959.4	49 065.1
% vs. 2000	100.0	95.9	97.6	92.7	96.7	96.5	107.0	109.4
Newspapers in Latvian	73	79	81	112	118	119	118	130
% vs. 2000	100.0	108.2	111.0	153.4	161.6	163.0	161.6	178.1
Total circulation	34 291	32 167	33 389	33 449	33 407.9	33 434.2	37 776.5	38 180.6
% vs. 2000	100.0	93.8	97.4	97.5	97.4	97.5	110.2	111.3

Data from the Bibliography Institute of the Latvian National Library

The proportion of Latvia's residents who read regional newspapers remains comparatively high. Data from *TNS Latvia* show that 49% of respondents in 2006 and 46% in 2007 and 2008 read, or at least surveyed, one or more regional newspapers. The readership of regional newspapers, indeed, has been proportionally higher than that of dailies, weeklies and monthly magazines. Only weekly newspapers have retained a slightly higher or similar percentage of readers (see Table 7).

In terms of Latvia's traditional cultural values, farmers and the countryside have been of long-lasting and major importance. The economic failures of the post-Soviet countryside and the vast social problems that exist in rural Latvia have reduced the value of the countryside as symbolic capital. At the same time, however, it remains true that the individual's place of residence and/or birth remains important in personal identity (Zelče, 2006a, pp. 258-296). A 2005 study showed that the relationship between individuals and locations in Latvia was most

powerfully felt with respect to the country, and then to a specific place of residence in a village, parish or city. This attitude is largely based on everyday needs – work, health care, shopping opportunities, availability of public transportation, the surrounding environment, natural landscapes – as well as emotional issues such as the roots of one's family, childhood memories, respect toward cultural history, etc. (Zobena, 2005, pp. 26-28, 43-45).

Local newspapers are both participants in the establishment of a collective cultural identity and a component of that identity. People talk about "our little newspaper," as part of the informative boundaries of administrative districts or regions. District newspapers emerged initially as part of the standardised media system of the Soviet Union, paralleling cultivated and official ideological values; they established collective local symbols, self-definitions and self-evaluations – an emotional environment, as well as attitudes toward other environments (Zelče, 2006b, pp. 150-151).

A 2005 quantitative study of the local media found that between 2002 and 2005, the greatest attention was devoted to cultural life, followed by information about the relevant community's everyday lives and politics. Comparatively little content related to the economy and business.⁷ What is more, districts were fragmented by the local press in most cases with the focus on events in specific locations and on people living in specific places. Local celebrities – businesspeople, teachers, local government leaders, librarians, etc. – were featured. The geographic mapping of the content of a regional newspaper shows that specific places are cited, and information about events and people resembles a picture puzzle. Local newspapers have largely become a specific social institution that deals with the everyday social, emotional and personal problems of readers.

As the staff of local newspapers attracts a readership, they engage them in direct communications, encouraging people to report on news, problems, offences, dishonesty among civil servants, etc. Readers are also encouraged to ask for advice during important life occurrences or crisis situations. The involvement of local newspapers in the everyday lives of their readers is of great importance in the establishment of a community of readers. People participate in resolving the problems of other members of the same readership community. Social solidarity with the local community's existence is a powerful instrument, which consolidates the community and allows it to have an effect on the quality of governance,

⁷ The unpublished study was produced under the auspices of Grant No. 05.1921 of the Latvian Science Council.

services and social security. At the same time, these processes also facilitate social integration in the community, thus creating a sense of local security and stability – one that is of importance as a component of identity, but also serves as a contrast or protective reaction against the changes in lifestyles occurring at this time (Brikše and Zelče, 2005, pp. 77-92; Zelče, 2006b, pp. 153-163).

The system of regional media in Latvia is quite stable at this time, but it is facing regional reforms of an administrative and territorial nature. This process has been dragging on for many years and has hindered media development, too. People who live in the countryside, particularly young people and those who work actively, live in two parallel media dimensions: the local dimension, in which the media are dominated by traditional values; and the dimension of media outlets based in the metropolis of Riga – ones that allow people in the countryside to take part in and observe the exciting life of the Latvian capital city and to reproduce its forms in their own environment.

A characteristic element in Latvia's media world in recent years has been a boom in magazine publishing, both in terms of titles and of circulation. In 2007 and 2008, 41-45% of residents read or skimmed weekly and monthly magazines. Since 2000, the advertising market has also turned toward magazines with the proportion of magazine advertising increasing by 9 to 17% a year (Rožukalne, 2006, p. 258).

Consumer magazines are in leading positions here – mass media monthlies and weeklies, which write about timely information, offer recommendations about

lifestyles, and help to deal with problematic situations. As is the case in other countries, such magazines make up approximately 80% of the total magazine market. In terms of circulation, too, consumer magazines are the leaders. Internationalisation of magazines began in 2002 and 2003. Publications launched in other countries entered the Latvian magazine market, albeit with a fairly heterogeneous approach to localisation. Positive examples include Latvian versions of *Illustrated Science* (2005) and *Illustrated World History* (2008), both of which are published by the stock company *Diena*, as well as of *GEO* (2008), which is published by *SIA Lilita*. These magazines represent a continuation in a trend that began in 2006 in the consumer-oriented magazine market in Latvia: growing audience demand for magazines that focus on news, special interests, popular areas of science, as well as hobbies (tourism, pets, home and interior design, automobiles, etc.).

In 2002 and 2003, weekly magazines substantially began to compete with newspapers and their supplements, and both types of media sought the same audience. The content of newspapers increasingly resembled the magazine niche, indicating that audience habits with respect to media usage were changing. In 2003, for instance, between 48 and 67% of respondents said that Latvian language dailies were a medium that offered a great deal of practical information.⁸

There were two years in which the number of magazine titles and magazine circulation both increased suddenly and in

a major way – in 2001 and 2006. In 2001, it was because of the increased purchase of weekly magazines. In 2006, it concerned the greater diversity in subject matter in magazines. New magazines that were similar to existing and popular magazines (duplicates or “younger sisters”) began to appear. This new wave of consumer magazines correlated with the overall wave of consumerism, teaching readers to enjoy consumerism, offering examples worthy of reproduction, and constructing “new stars” – people who are able to be consumers and are skilled at consumerism. These stars included TV divas, heroes from television programmes, “party girls,” athletes and their wives and girlfriends, etc. In 2006, according to *TNS Latvia*, each resident of Latvia, on average, read 1.3 monthly magazines and one weekly magazine.⁹

In 2004, the first biweekly magazines appeared in Latvia, and story-telling magazines were the key in this case. These magazines emphasised the value of human lives, supporting traditional values and lives not much affected by consumerism. Weekly magazines, such as *Ieva* and *Privātā Dzīve* (Private Life), were joined by biweeklies, such as *Ievas Stāsti* (Ieva’s Stories) and *Patiesā Dzīve* (True Life). These magazines were among the most widely read periodicals, even exceeding metro newspapers and publications devoted to radio and television programme schedules. In the spring and summer of 2008, according to *TNS Latvia*, *Ieva*, *Privātā Dzīve* and *Ievas Stāsti* held the top three spots in terms of the average readership of a single issue.

⁸ A report by the SKDS public opinion research centre on the image of the newspaper *Diena*, October 2003.

⁹ See <<http://www.tns.lv/?lang=lv&fullarticle=true&category=showuid&id=2502>> [Accessed 19.10.2008.].

Table 5. *Statistics related to magazines in Latvia*

Magazines	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Consumer magazines	168	191	201	183	195	240	210	272
% vs. 2000	100.0	113.7	119.6	108.9	116.1	142.9	125.0	161.9
Single-issue circulation (,000)	1,485	1,633	1,643	1,653	1,814.7	2,485.4	2,273.0	2,921.9
% vs. 2000	100.0	110.0	110.6	111.3	122.2	167.4	153.1	196.8
of which women's, men's, family, private life magazines	30	33	38	36	44	61	53	75
% vs. 2000	100.0	110.0	126.7	120.0	146.7	203.3	176.7	250.0
Single-issue circulation (,000)	538	555	550	604	740.7	1,187.6	1,096.3	1,428.5
% vs. 2000	100.0	103.2	102.2	112.3	137.7	220.7	203.8	265.5
Specialised magazines	157	164	164	157	158	147	156	140
% vs. 2000	100.0	104.5	104.5	100.0	100.6	93.6	99.4	89.2
Single-issue circulation (,000)	371	319	309	272	1,088.7	1,117.8	1,104.1	359.7
% vs. 2000	100.0	86.0	83.3	73.3	293.5	301.3	297.6	97.0

Data from the Bibliography Institute of the Latvian National Library

Magazine design has changed. Illustrations have become more expressive, and the quality of print has improved. Symbolically the image of the good life is attached to magazines. Consumerism-related magazines in Latvia fully demonstrate contemporary journalistic practices – emphasising to the requirements of femininity, youth, meditation, private life, consumer life and personal identity (Hartley, 1996, p. 16).

The Latvian magazine market also has specialised business magazines, intellectual and academic magazines, and PR and corporate magazines, which make up only about 20% of the market. Still, they have experienced growth over the last few years due to the high level of business activity, particularly in the real estate and financial sectors. The quality of the relevant publications improved accordingly. The

quantitative, qualitative and print quality of intellectual arts magazines improved thanks to the renewed market for objects d'art. Ownership of such objects became an indicator of consumerism and the good life.

Reader attitudes toward magazines are far more favourable than for other types of media. To quote a 48-year-old woman from the countryside: "Generally speaking, I don't trust the media. Sometimes they present false information. I trust magazines to a greater degree."¹⁰ Magazines, and particularly those for consumers, are perceived as friends, allies, comforters and advisers. Indeed, magazines offer vivid evidence of the "fat years" in Latvia.

¹⁰ Unpublished interviews from a research expedition in the Latvian village of Tirza, conducted by the Department of Communications Studies of the University of Latvia's Faculty of Social Sciences in July 2008.

Television and radio: The battlefield for competition over audience share

Television is a popular cultural medium. The economics that determine its production and distribution demand that TV products must reach a mass audience, one with many subcultures and sub-audiences who have different cultural experiences. The aim of television is to obtain a homogeneous audience so that one programme can reach many different audience segments (Fiske, 1987, p. 37). The limited number of potential viewers in Latvia led producers to create products that attract as large an audience share as possible. There is severe competition for viewers, particularly between the commercial channels *LNT* and *TV3*. Before *TV3* entered the market, *LNT* basically held a monopoly in the commercial market. At the end of 2007, however, *TV3* had a share of 29.7 (the percentage who watching that specific channel whenever they were watching TV), while *LNT* had a share of only 25.

The commercial media divide most of the audience, focusing on viewer needs and interests, drawing closer to the audience by producing shows about the everyday issues of life and producing most programmes in the genre of entertainment. TV channels of the *Baltic Media Alliance (BMA)* media holding company are also seen in Latvia – the *First Baltic Channel (PBK)*, which is a broad-based channel for families; *REN TV Baltic*, which is an entertainment channel for urban residents; and the *First Baltic Music Channel (IBM)*, which is an attractive youth channel that attained a stable level of ratings and audience affinity during the first six months of 2008 in the 15-34 age group.

The functions of television today include the creation of images that are appropriate for the age of consumerism. Programmes have been transformed and new genres have rapidly appeared. In turn, images were created that perpetuate illusions that were natural and believable to the audience. Entertainment began to take on an increasingly important and almost absolute role in the content of channels. In 2000, 42% of programming on Latvian State Television consisted of films and entertainment, while in 2004 that percentage rose to 51%. By comparison, the proportion has been very high on commercial stations from the very beginning – more than 70% (Tjarve, 2006, p. 177).

The first reality show appeared in Latvia in the spring of 2000, and many others followed. The first survivor-type shows were “The Robinsons,” “Barbarossa,” “Cuba” and “The Farm”. Big Brother-type shows included the most scandalous reality show in Latvia in 2002 – “Dream Island,” which emphasised the public display of human sexuality. The Star Academy format in Latvia produced “Talent Factory.” When the show “Sweethearts” ended on December 29, 2006, it was quickly followed by “Men’s Games,” in which participants had to spend two weeks in front of the cameras dressed as women. These are shows that encourage voyeurism, as viewers watch people competing with one another, undergoing difficult tasks, and being humiliated, rejected or victorious (O’Donnell, 2007, p. 128). The audiences of *TV3* and *TV5* were increased by talk shows in which private problems were debated in public – “Dāvids’ Show” and “Aina’s Talk Show”. The oldest intellectual game show, “Brain Bank,” is

in its 11th season in 2008. Game shows embody the values of competition, winning and materialism, as well as those of risk, happy coincidences and true brain skills. These are of particular importance in a society that is undergoing rapid development and change.

Over subsequent years, TV channels in Latvia competed with each other by offering ever newer formats of reality shows. Between 2006 and 2008, very popular shows have been ones in which celebrities compete – “Dancing With the Stars,” “Two Stars,” “Shower of Stars,” “Choir Wars,” etc. These bring the audience together on weekend evenings. In March 2007, “Dancing with the Stars” on *TV3* attracted an audience share of 20.4%, or 452,100 people. The second season attracted a share of 14.4%, or 315,400 people, in March 2008.¹¹ The formula here is watching the successes and failures of popular individuals, to judge them by voting, and thus to take part in the lives of stars and to join them in consuming the good life. Television today basically has a “cafeteria of genres – something for everyone to support the importance of television in our lives” (O’Donnell, 2007, p. 131). Whenever society changes, genres and conventions change, too, as television stations try to reach and even surpass audience expectations.

The soap operas and sitcoms produced by Latvia’s television channels have been important in recent years. During the 1990s and early 2000s, satirical shows about the problems of life were popular –

“Apartment”, “Flower of Darkness”, and “Beloved Monica” (the latter was a direct adaptation of the American programme “I Love Lucy”). There were also passionate programmes about the good old days (“The Taste of Sweet Poison”). Today, by comparison, shows present the good life both in the past and today.

In 2002, Latvian State Television first offered the dramatic series “Destiny’s Pioneers,” which was based on a novel by the popular author Vladimirs Kaijaks. The show covered the period from the 1920s to the mid-1990s, featuring hatred between two families, several love triangles, love, betrayal, mysticism, and a presentation of the complicated 20th-century history of Latvia. The show was particularly popular during its first season when the focus was on the good life of Latvians in the 1920s and 1930s, and on the opposition to the Soviet occupation in the 1940s. The audience for “Destiny’s Pioneers” was larger than for any other show except the evening news and such special individual events as the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, the national final for the Eurovision Song Contest, an anniversary concert for the popular composer Raimonds Pauls, and decisive games for the Latvian national ice hockey team. Between 2003 and 2006, according to *TNS Latvia*, “Destiny’s Pioneers” was one of the most widely watched shows among all of Latvia’s television channels. In February and March 2006, it had a share of 10.6%, or 235,300 viewers.¹² The reason for the success was that the realities of the lives of audience members were in line with the

¹¹ See <<http://www.tns.lv/?lang=lv&fullarticle=true&category=showuid&id=2613>> [Accessed 01.10.2008]. See also <<http://www.tns.lv/?lang=lv&fullarticle=true&category=showuid&id=2776>> [Accessed 12.10.2008].

¹² See <<http://www.tns.lv/?lang=lv&fullarticle=true&category=showuid&id=2380>> [Accessed 19.10.2008].

construction of reality that was presented in the show – “a series of conventions that aim to depict a recognisable and truthful picture of reality” (Hermes, 2005, p. 107). Fiske has argued that realism and television realism are two different things – television, he has written, “does not just reproduce reality, it makes sense of it – the essence of realism is that it reproduces reality in such a form as to make it easily understandable” (Fiske, 1987, pp. 24-25). “Destiny’s Pioneers” lost popularity in the season when it covered the Soviet occupation and the difficulties of the post-Soviet period; problems, Soviet repressions, poverty, and a decline in moral and ethical values did not satisfy the demands of an audience in the era of consumerism.

In 2006, Latvia’s leading television stations began to present soap operas about present-day lives – “Price of Foolishness” on *LTV* and “Strange Life” on *LNT*. The former show is still on the air in 2008, while *LNT* has turned to “Hope Street 21.” These are typical soap operas with added value based on the local context, the appearance of well-known personalities from Latvian theatre and popular culture, and the return to the screen of certain legends from Latvia’s cinematic history. These presentations of the good life are based on “emotional realism,” which makes it possible to ensure that the same things, people, relations and situations regarded as unrealistic at the denotative level and unlikely to happen at the connotative level, apparently did not appear at all as unreal, but in fact as ‘recognisable’ (Ang, 1999, pp. 81-90). The television series reflect the prosperity that has been achieved in Latvia over the last several years. It is believable, therefore, that the borders between reality created on television merge with

the true realities of life, because viewers get a sense of participating or living in the virtual reality of television, complete with the feeling of emotional presence.

Latvian State Television has lost comparatively few viewers in recent years if the audiences of both of its channels are counted together, and audience numbers seem to have remained stable. The position of Latvian Television in the media system, however, has changed. A monopoly in Soviet times and the distinct market leader in the first years after that system collapsed, *LTV* today has dropped to third place in the rankings, far behind two commercial competitors. The point is that the public media will lose in competition with commercial channels, and this, of course, will change the way events, values, and attitudes are portrayed in the media. The direction of change is toward extensive consumerism and entertainment.

The cable and satellite industries have expanded in a stable manner in Latvia, leading to another significant trend. Among Russian-speaking Latvians, the information environment is still very much influenced by Russian television stations; these media offer most of the audience’s information about what’s happening in Latvia and the rest of the world. Globalisation is another new trend, and new technologies have ensured that people are far more independent in media choice. They are no longer forced to watch what local, albeit national, television stations show, and they can choose more interesting channels that offer higher quality. Cable channels most in demand are ones that broadcast in Russian. All cable television systems in Latvia offer major channels from Russia – *RTR Planeta*, *REN*

TV Baltic, *NTV Mir*, *RVTI*, *NTV-Sport*, and *NTV Baltic*. In expanded packets of channels, other Russian channels are also popular, among them *Nashe Kino* (“Our Cinema”, which shows Soviet-era films in Russian), the Russian version of *Eurosport*, *Muz TV*. The rapidly growing audience for cable television outside of Riga shows that viewers throughout Latvia are looking for programmes that local stations cannot provide.

Viewing habits differ between Riga and the rest of the country. In Riga, the *PBK* and *TV3* lead the pack, but *LNT* and *LTV's* premier programmes top the list nationally. That is partly because reception of *LTV's* two channels and *LNT* are the only reliable ones throughout the territory of Latvia. Other television channels can only be seen in larger populated areas or on cable. The Riga audience has far more choices than elsewhere in Latvia – 81% of households in the capital city have access to cable television (Tjarve, 2006, pp. 181-183). Local TV and radio are of key importance in regional life. Local television stations in the towns of Rēzekne, Valmiera, Liepāja and Daugavpils have become important media outlets. There are 24 television stations and 15 radio stations in Latvia's regions at this time.¹³ They are closely linked with their audiences, because viewers and listeners are familiar with the people who are featured on broadcasts – often their neighbours.

Television stations use modern technologies in the competition for viewers, such as fee-based telephone calls – people can express their views about issues and take

an indirect part in programme scheduling by voting for their favourite song or film. Another common form of interactivity is mobile chat – during a broadcast, people send in SMS messages from their phones or the Internet. These messages appear on air, which offers them a chance to engage in a virtual discussion of subject matter that does not necessarily have much to do with the relevant programme. A similar process of interactivity is seen on the radio. People call in to morning programmes and to special programmes where they can announce things that they wish to buy or sell. Some radio stations ask audience members to report on traffic jams and lost or found objects. Listeners get a sense of belonging to the station as they speak on the air and make announcements.

Audience interests over the last few years have shifted in favour of news and of locally produced programmes. Although a cosmopolitan approach in local television stations is best seen in the adaptation of global TV formats, the interests of the audience also create processes that are typical throughout the world – even as the media are increasingly expanding the information environment of individuals in spite of time, distance or space boundaries. People are still just as interested in their own life environment as they ever were.

The traditional market leader in the radio industry is *Radio Latvia*, which has four channels. The most popular of these in recent years has been *Radio Latvia 2*, which broadcasts nothing but Latvian music. The popularity of this programme shows that people seek out things that are close and familiar to them on the electronic media, particularly the radio. In this case it is music

¹³ See <<http://www.nrtp.lv/lv/padome/raidorganizacija>>[Accessed 14.10.2008.].

that they have heard throughout their lives – at events, parties and celebrations.

Nearly all of Latvia's radio stations have a specific format, although most broadcast in the adult contemporary, oldies or hit radio style. Stations in Riga and those that cover most of Latvia observe format requirements quite strictly, while regional stations are more likely to play the music that the DJ of the moment likes. Language is a key issue in the radio market. Nationally, stations that broadcast in Latvian are the most popular, but the largest share of the audience in Riga listens to the radio in Russian. The Russian-speaking audience in Latvia definitely forms a large proportion of listeners to radio programmes produced in Latvia, whereas Russian speakers mostly consume TV shows produced in Russia as along with programmes produced abroad and then translated into Russian. The point here is that the radio does better than television in Latvia in satisfying the interests and needs of Russian speakers in the country, and thus the radio also has a more significant role in shaping the everyday agenda of society. This is true despite the fact that most people still say that the information from television most influences their views. The popularity of Russian-language radio stations in Riga shows that the radio shapes the information environment of the local community far more than is the case with television, where widely available satellite and cable television programmes allow Russian speakers to live in Russia's information environment.

Radio stations recently have started to talk to their listeners. On morning programmes, radio stations try to attract listeners by allowing them to talk to popular social figures. There are also special programmes

with audience involvement. The radio stations that broadcast in Latvian and those that broadcast in Russian have chosen similar formats. Radio stations outside of Riga largely act as local bulletin boards where people can post information about things that they wish to buy or sell.

Clearly, the electronic media market lacks diversity and conforms to the interests and needs of individuals. Perhaps this sense of shortcomings is created by the over-saturation of game shows, reality shows and soap operas – programmes that even take away the sense of illusory reality from the illusion of reality.

The Internet: The fastest growth in Europe

The Internet has developed at a breathtaking speed in Latvia – more rapidly than anywhere else in Europe. Between 2000 and 2007, the number of Internet users increased at least 713.3%.¹⁴

Earlier, more rapid entry of the Internet into everyday communications practice was hindered because the fixed telecommunications market in Latvia opened up only at the beginning of 2003. The former monopolist, *Lattelekom*, had tariffs that were so high compared to the income of individuals and that few people could afford to have the Internet at home. Market liberalisation changed the situation very quickly – in the first half of 2003 alone, the number of Internet users in Latvia increased by 45%.

A 2005 study showed that 25% of the people of Latvia had a computer at home (36% of households in Riga, 23% in the region of

¹⁴ See <<http://www.internetworldstats.com/eu/lv.htm>> [Accessed 16.10.2008].

Table 6. *The number of Internet users in Latvia (2000-2007)*

Year	User numbers	Population	% of population	% vs. 2000
2000	150,000	2,318,400	6.5	100.0
2003	310,000	2,290,100	13.5	206.7
2005	810,000	2,293,246	35.3	540
2006	1,030,000	2,279,366	45.2	686.7
2007	1,070,800	2,279,366	47.0	713.3

Data from *Internetworldstats.com*

Vidzeme, and 16% in the region of Latgale). Approximately one-half of respondents in the survey said the reason they did not use a computer was because they did not know how. Approximately 40% of respondents used the Internet. Those who did not said they had no access (63%), no need (58%), and/or no skills (28%).¹⁵

Both Latvian- and Russian-language newspapers in Latvia ignored the Internet for a long time and offered only one-sided information about it. From 2003 until 2005, the Internet was positioned as a market medium, and related opportunities were only commercial resources such as Internet banking, shopping online, differences in the technologies and prices of Internet connections, Internet telephony and Internet television in the Latvian market. The media also typically described the Internet as an entertainment medium, which did not help those people who did not have the Internet to learn about and understand the new medium.¹⁶

In 2008, according to *TNS Latvia*, 63% of people in Latvia use the Internet at least

once a week, and among them, 70% use it between five and seven days a week. The proportion of these “frequent users” has increased by 10% in comparison to the same period in 2007. The percentage of “infrequent users” has declined.¹⁷

The delayed development of the Internet may also have reduced the transformation of the traditional media into Internet formats, because there were not enough users to make that worthwhile. New Internet portals developed more rapidly and fearlessly, and when newspapers delayed development of Internet versions, they became less competitive in the race between the “new” and the “old” media. The daily *Diena* was the first to try to compete with ordinary Internet portals. Its advantages include a fine stable of journalists (not the case among any of the existing portals), a large archive of articles made available for free, a brand name that is associated by the audience with far more original, expansive and analytical content than any of the other portals, and, of course, the availability of the hard-copy version of the newspaper, too.

A particularly substantial increase in Internet use in 2008 was seen in the 40-49 age group – 50% in comparison to just 34%

¹⁵ See <http://www.lattelekom.lv/ltk/dov/IS_petijums.pdf>[Accessed 16.10.2008].

¹⁶ See Teleša, O. (2006). *Interneta tēls Latvijas drukātajos medijos* (The Image of the Internet in the Latvian Print Media), Bachelor’s thesis, Department of Communications Studies, University of Latvia.

¹⁷ See <<http://www.eps.gov.lv/index.php?&701>> [Accessed 15.10.2008].

in 2007. The most active group is the young age group 15-19, among whom 92% had used the Internet during the six months prior to the survey. An even larger percentage (96%) is found among schoolchildren and university students.

A second significant trend is that Internet use has evened out between rural and urban areas (particularly Riga), thus removing the long-standing risk of a digital gap. Internet access has also improved: now 44% of Latvia's residents have the Internet at home, 13% more than in the autumn of 2006.

The most popular portal in Latvia is *Google*, which 34% of respondents had used in the week prior to the survey. Next in line are *Inbox* (28%) and *Delfi* (26%).¹⁸ When people are asked about the characteristics of the Internet, they most often talk about timeliness – the availability of news online. The interest of the audience in the Internet is substantially increased when there are exciting events such as sports events, which has substantially changed media usage habits in Latvia (Bērziņš, 2006, pp. 218-244).

The Internet allows users to combine several communications channels and sources in a convenient way. As people actively search for information and shape its content, a cardinal change is occurring in one typical characteristic of mass communications: the communicator is losing control over communications channels, while users are gaining that control. This is an unprecedented challenge for the traditional media. The Internet also is increasingly an instrument for the consumption of other media. It offers the opportunity to take part interactively in television and radio broadcasts, for instance.

What is more, the Internet is now being used as an indicator of consumer comfort – online shopping in Latvia and abroad, payment of bills, use of banking services, etc.

The audience – individualisation and fragmentation

The relationship between the media and their audience during the described period in time was malleable and fairly complex. In comparison to the early 1990s, which was the last time that there had been an essential restructuring of the media system and the media usage habits of the audience, this was a time when there was a very intensive shift toward consumerism, and people's lifestyles as such were changing. In this new lifestyle, the media had a very important role in terms of entertainment and representation.

Because the media's focus was on finding as large an audience as possible and then holding on to it as long as possible, a new and expanding segment of messages began to appear in journalism – one in which individuals were perceived not as members of society, but as consumers. Magazines and newspapers began to produce feature materials about restaurants, recipes, wine; Websites focused on food and drink; TV shows offered cooking demonstrations, etc. Format choice was subordinated to this concept, and the content and the way in which audiences were addressed became very evident in the rapidly expanding magazine market.

The second issue is that many people in Latvia are comparatively disappointed with the media, because of their failure to justify expectations about the active involvement of media in public life (as was the case during

¹⁸ LETA news agency, 22 November 2007.

Table 7. Media Usage in Latvia, 2004-2008 (autumn of each year)

Type of media	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Printed press					
Regular or irregular reading of any press publication, %	97.5	98.2	96	96	96
Newspapers					
Dailies, %	48	43	47	44	41
Supplements, %	41.6	38	31	33	26
Weeklies, %	51.6	53	50	51	46
Advertising papers, %	28	26	19	16	14
Monthlies, %	9.5	9	9	8	8
Regional newspapers, %	48.5	49	49	46	46
Magazines					
Weeklies, %	47.8	53	43	45	45
Biweeklies, %	-	-	-	17	20
Monthlies, %	43	44	43	41	42
Quarterlies, %	5.6	9	22	10	12
Television					
Time spent watching TV by one watcher, hours per day	4:50	4:46	4:47	4:46	4:37
Radio					
Time spent listening to radio by one listener, hours per day	4:50	4:49	4:24	4:19	4:28
Listened at least once a week, %	86	85	81	78	76
Listened at least daily, %	67	66	63	60	57
Internet					
Use during last 6 months, %	24.7	32	44	50	51

Data from TNS Latvia

the period of the “Third Awakening”), the role of the in terms of unmasking violations in government and seeking punishment for such violations, the ability to demonstrate the correct and successful path for social development, etc.

Third, media choice has, for a long time, been affected by the low purchasing power of the Latvian population, and people have lacked the time to devote to media consumption, as opposed to the satisfaction of their basic needs. Under such circumstan-

ces, it is of key importance to make sure that satisfaction related to media usage is in line to a sufficient degree with the individual’s expectations. Also of key importance has been a change in the places where people access media. Ten years ago newspapers and magazines were largely purchased from press kiosks, post offices and bookstores, but today department stores have become an important part of the mix. The press is sold like other products at such shops – part of a multi-coloured mix on shelves that are

full of products, or else seemingly placed carelessly near the cash register, along with other small necessities. The media are meant to be bought. Usage, in many cases, becomes a secondary matter.

Statistical data and traditional sociological surveys that have focused on issues such as whether respondents have read at least one of the press publications that are part of the relevant study during the course of the past week do not note such changes. Instead, they have presented a fairly positive image of media usage. The overall print-runs of newspapers and magazines have risen, the number of titles has expanded, and 98.2-98% of respondents regularly or irregularly read one or more press publications (see Table 7). There have been essential changes in the format and structure of the media and their content, however.

A 2003 study on choices and usage of daily newspapers found that the Latvian audience, to a certain extent, can be divided into two groups.¹⁹ The first includes people who are more active economically and more highly educated. These people are more likely to live in Riga than in the countryside, and they are distinguished by the specific need to obtain useful information that will help them to learn about, understand, and perhaps also influence processes in society. This is a segment of the audience that is well aware of its needs, and these people work hard at fulfilling those needs. Other factors are of secondary importance. The education

and “cultural capital” of such individuals may permit them to take a more critical approach toward an evaluation of their experience in media usage, allowing them to find alternative ways of satisfying their informational and non-informational needs. For some, this is a matter of a morning ritual – people automatically collect newspapers and magazines from their mailbox as they leave for work. Others collect them even earlier and skim or read them during breakfast.

For the second group, the most important determinant is the need for information that helps people to understand what is going on – information that is of practical use. A far more important role is played by non-informational factors in this group – social needs, as well as ones related to the individual’s identity and relaxation. This model is more typical of people with a lower level of education and lower income, as well as those who live outside of Riga. Newspapers fulfil comparatively more functions in the lives of these individuals, and their role is greater. Such people are far more likely to hope that the newspaper will give them advice and be a guide in terms of how to live and to spend money during this era of consumerism. They also are more likely to appreciate the newspaper as a good way to fill their free time.

Consequently, at the end of the day, a paradox exists: People who feel a need for newspapers cannot always afford them, while those who can afford them feel less need for newspapers because material factors are not of decisive importance in their lives. Moreover, the latter group can satisfy their need for information and entertainment in other ways as well.

¹⁹ See Spurava, G. (2004). *Dienas laikrakstu izvēle un lietošana Latvijas sabiedrības un mediju vides kontekstā* (Selection and Usage of Daily Newspapers in the Context of Latvia’s Society and Media Environment). Master’s thesis. University of Latvia, Department of Communication Studies, 2004.

Overall economic growth and the flourishing of consumerism have had a key effect on the first group, because often enough people in the countryside – and particularly elderly people – feel that the good life relates to the ability to obtain newspapers and magazines (Bela, 2006, p. 55). During an interview in the summer of 2008, for instance, a rural resident (age 40) who was wealthy and well educated, had this to say about her ability to read the press: “Yes, we read it. I still can’t decide whether to subscribe to *Dārzā* (In the Garden) or to *Dārza Pasaule* (Garden World). I think I prefer *Dārzā*; I sometimes buy it. I give press subscriptions for Christmas – *Patiesā Dzīve* (True Life) to my mama, *Lilit* (a women’s magazine) to my sister, *Ilustrētā Zinātne* (Science Illustrated) to my husband, and *Ilustrētā Pasaules Vēsture* (World History Illustrated) to my friend. We subscribe to *Diena*, but only weekends, because our postal service is in poor shape. Our life rhythm is different, and we are here at home on Fridays. There’s no point in delivering newspapers to our mailbox every day. If Jānis is out driving around, he buys the newspaper. That’s more convenient for us.”²⁰

Another respondent (female, age 60), when asked why she reads newspapers, offered this explanation: “Information. Need. Waiting for the postal carrier. I could say that it’s a narcotic effect. Back when the postal carrier didn’t arrive for two or three days, I preferred to go and get my own newspaper. Now, when I get the papers on even days, I want to read them as quickly

as possible, because information gets old and uninteresting the next day. What’s the situation in the city? Newspapers at 8:00 AM! When we visit my aunt in Gulbene, the newspapers are there. If we bring our eyeglasses with us, we quickly read them. We come home after having already read the newspapers. That saves time. We listen to the radio, there’s one in the cattle shed, too.”²¹ The point here is that in the countryside, the media help people to compensate for the prosperity that they did not enjoy during the “fat years”.

Several qualitative audience studies conducted by the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Latvia show that there are many different reasons why individuals use the media – “the need to keep up with things,” the ability to “disconnect myself from the everyday”, the ability to relax or not to feel lonely, the ability to “find the key to success in life”, the role that the media play as a family member, etc.

Individuals typically declare that the important daily news items are those that are positioned high on the media agenda, but at the same time, they also deny that the media influence their views. Individuals are more likely to express their attitudes and views vis-à-vis the positions that the media take than they are to do the same with respect to events or processes that are reported in the media. Perhaps individuals perceive the reality that is shaped by the media as the only reality and, therefore, include it in their social practices.

A key dimension in the relationship between the audience and the media is the extent to which individuals trust the media. A

²⁰ Unpublished interviews from a research expedition in the Latvian village of Tirza, conducted by the Department of Communications Studies of the University of Latvia’s Faculty of Social Sciences in July 2008.

²¹ Ibid.

Eurobarometer study, which was conducted in the spring of 2008, offers a look at how people in Latvia trust the various kinds of media. Television enjoys the greatest trust – 66% of the population, with the greatest trust found among young people aged 15-24 (73%), university students (72%), and civil servants or specialists (70%). Radio was trusted by 61% of residents, again with the highest percentage recorded among young people aged 15-24 (67%) and university students (68%). The numbers for the press were 48% overall and 53% among civil servants and specialists – the group with the highest level of trust. Forty-two percent of respondents trust the Internet, including 66% of those aged 15-24, 53% of those aged 25-39, 71% of those who are students, 51% of those who are civil servants or specialists, and 52% of those who are senior-level employees. More credulity in the media exists in the countryside and in small towns, and far less in the capital city and other major cities (respectively from 60% and 57% for the press to 35% for television).²²

Interviews with media users show that many do not trust the press, TV and radio as institutions, although they do trust specific journalists and people who are seen on television or heard on radio. A 63-year-old pensioner said: “I can say that journalists have openness and dedication that did not exist in the past. On TV, I trust [Ilze] Jaunalksne, [Baiba] Strautmane, Aidis Tomsons, [Jānis] Krēvics. [Jānis] Domburs is so skilled that there is no need to look for anyone else like

him.”²³ This attitude, too, emphasises the personalisation that is so typical of consumerism. People create idols, and then use those emotional links to their idols as they try to get along.

The low level of trust in newspapers among urban residents may be because they are the leading consumers of daily and weekly newspapers (an average of 63% of Riga’s residents have read or skimmed at least one daily newspaper each day, and 62% have done so with at least one weekly newspaper). This segment of newspapers, however, is very diverse in terms of quality, and a new form of consumption has been noted – newspaper reading as a parallel activity while people are on public transportation or sitting in a café or elsewhere. That means that for many people, ideas about newspapers can be very episodic and fragmentary. In addition, many people may not choose a specific newspaper, leaving it up to chance – finding a metro newspaper while en route, reading newspapers subscribed to by their place of employment, or picking up ones that have been left at a restaurant or beauty salon they patronise. Access to and consumption of newspapers resembles the music that is played in public places: the audience devotes less and less attention to the quality of the channel of information. Instead they focus only on the ability to obtain concrete information, to fill their spare time, and to experience emotions. It can be assumed, therefore, that audience expectations vis-à-vis the quality of newspapers are higher than the gratification that is obtained

²² See the Eurobarometer’s 69th report, Spring 2008, p. 34-38. See <http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb/eb69/eb69_lv_nat.pdf>[Accessed 18.10.2008.].

²³ Unpublished interviews from a research expedition in the Latvian village of Tirza, conducted by the Department of Communication Studies of the University of Latvia’s Faculty of Social Sciences in July 2008.

from the accidental reading thereof. Dissatisfaction results in distrust.

People aged 40-74 are the most loyal readers of daily newspapers, and they spend nearly twice as much time reading newspapers than younger people do. A smaller proportion of daily newspaper readers are teenagers, who are more likely to get the news from the Internet. Daily newspapers are also read less often by people aged 30-39. Here again, they may read newspapers on the Internet, and among that segment of the population, it is the fourth most often cited reason for using the Web.²⁴ Perhaps this segment of the audience identifies the media based more on which channels they access than on the basic formats of the media, their publishers, etc.

Because of the mobility of people today, audiences are far more likely to adapt media use to their daily rhythm. In this sense they differ from the past, when many people arranged their day so that they could watch a specific television news programme. Older media-users still do so. The mobility of media use is a prerequisite for people spending a comparatively large amount of time on the media. Each person in Latvia devoted an average of seven hours and two minutes to media consumption on weekdays during the winter of 2007. On weekends, they spent an additional 48 minutes. On weekdays, this involved 43 minutes of newspaper reading and 29 minutes of magazine reading. On weekends, it was 47 minutes and 38 minutes, respectively.²⁵ It must be noted here that newspapers and magazines are

not background media, and they require concentration.

Conclusion

Such data show some significant changes in media use in Latvia. First of all, the potential audience is segmented by types and channels of media on the basis of demographics, which indirectly speaks to media usage experience and practice. Younger consumers, for whom communications technologies are a part of everyday life, focus on the Internet, radio and television (often using computers to access the latter two). They are often described as the “Net Generation,” and unquestionably real and massive changes are occurring in their use of media channels. A radical gap may be widening between various age groups. Those aged 15 to 29 devote comparatively more time to the Internet than other age groups.²⁶ This group contains the main consumers of the virtual environment, and their media needs may become inseparable from technology use (Bugeja, 2005, pp. 45-47).

Secondly, data about trust in the Internet reveal that older people have no views at all (39% among those aged 40-54, and 73% of those aged 50 and up). Since these age groups use the Internet less often, it indicates a deep information gap may be developing among various groups in society based on age. Indirectly it also reflects a gap in the availability of information technologies, as well as in the likelihood that differences about usage and trust in the media will need to be reconciled between urban and rural residents.

²⁴ See <http://www.tns.lv/newsletters/2007/13/default.asp?category=tns13&id=MP_mediju_paterins> [Accessed 18.10.2008].

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Third, individuals are increasingly unable to differentiate among specific media outlets or to recognise them. Research may need to focus less on the use of specific media outlets or channels and more on the informational environments of individuals.

The new millennium has brought significant changes in Latvia's media content, usage and the accompanying attitudes of the audience. The years from 2000 to 2007 can be described as a period during which the well-being of the media and their audiences increased along with consumerism. This led to greater diversity in what

was offered and what was consumed (to a certain extent, this also ensured trivialisation), as well as fragmentation based on the desire to satisfy all desires in the world of consumerism. More recently it has become evident that newspaper readers, television viewers, radio listeners, and Internet users are proving able to differentiate among various kinds of content so that they can assess and select what is most useful to them in informational and emotional terms. Higher demands are being placed on the media in terms of quality, and that tendency may continue in future.

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LATVIJOS ŽINIASKLAIDA NAUJAME TŪKSTANTMETYJE: RAIDOS, TURINIO IR VARTOJIMO TENDENCIJOS BEI ŽINIASKALDOS VARTOTOJŪ BENDRUOMENĒS ATSIKADIMAS

Inta Brikše, Vita Zelče

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