

Between reality and illusion: re-examining the diversity of media and online professional journalism in the Baltic States

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Abstract

This article addresses the relationship between the size of media markets and content diversity online. In the Baltic countries, the Internet offers new channels with greater diversity of information; at the same time, the increasing presence of hybrid discourses (PR based news, promotional writing) on online media channels is creating an illusory impression of news diversity: same sources and same story frames are dominating online. The authors argue that new concepts (quality of information processing, media literacy) are needed to be taken into account to adequately assess online journalism professionalisation (changing identities and functions of journalists) in a small country.

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1. Introduction: Internet offerings in small countries

Online publishing has definitely expanded individuals' access to news media, opening new channels and offering more choices. As a result, different kinds of online content are produced, ranging from the purely journalistic to public connectivity-based websites, i.e. from online media where professional journalists and editors hold the monopoly of storytelling to a 'networked journalism' where news making process is a constant communication and interaction with information, and where professional journalists and amateurs work together (Hujanen and Pietikäinen 2004; Scott 2005; Beckett and Mansell 2008). Indeed, the Internet media actors create a rich media environment where different players – conventional news media, specialized news portals, bloggers offering user-generated content, and so on – compete with one another. The interactive logic of Internet media has indeed made a dramatic impact on both – professional identities of journalists and

journalistic discourse online (Martikainen 2000; Deuze 2003). With technological advances and with emerging popularity of online platforms with participatory, connective storytelling and dialogical communication, a new demand for professional journalism is emerging: instead of being only gate-keepers online professional journalists must become sense-makers; instead of being agenda-setters they must become interpreters of whatever is both credible and valuable (Singer 2006). In other words, professional journalists working online are now being asked to acquire new professional competences and, in addition to being good reporters and communicators, they must become critics and evaluators, and watchdogs of political and economic power.

Within any debate on changes in journalism discourse and content diversity online, the issues of market size and the availability of resources to produce quality journalism have re-emerged, requiring new solutions. Is the size of the advertising market sufficient to support innovative media development online? Do Internet media companies have enough expertise and resources to produce professional journalism and quality content? What kind of discourses dominate online and what content production strategies are applied to online publishing?

While it may seem obvious that larger and wealthier markets, with greater resources available for the provision of media, can afford a greater diversity of content output than smaller markets, the significant point is that the total resource available for media provision in a small market may be less than those available for even a minority group in a larger market (Doyle 2002). A particular concern, therefore, for smaller markets is the availability of resources to support domestic content, as opposed to less expensive but imported content. A media policy dilemma arises in this instance: Whether or not to support diversity amongst suppliers by liberalizing market entrance conditions for new actors or diversity of content by, for example, providing subsidies to the media and promoting media education and media literacy programs in schools.

One further aspect is observed in small national media markets. The synergistic logics of media conglomerates transforms the nature of news into a variety of informational content, which can be re-packaged and re-used to fit different formats and channels thus becoming usable by different divisions of the same company (Croteau and Hoynes 2001). Conventional media in many small countries have, as a result of fierce competition, gradually become content-production companies instead of news media. These media groups publish newspapers, books, online news portals, catalogues, produce television shows and also organize conferences. In other words, they simply re-pack available information into different forms, formats and channels.

As practice reveals, the media (by seeking to remain competitive in a small national market) have only a limited number of choices. The two most popular approaches in the Baltic countries are either to produce hybrid content (i.e. cheap journalism) by overlooking the difference between paid and independently produced information, or to make a serious structural transformation. On the face of it neither of these strategies seems to be justifiable. Original news production is an expensive process which ensures that many small and local news media, as a corollary of limited budgets, are forced to produce hybrid journalism by mixing news, promotional writing and advertising (Baerug 2005; Harro-Loit and Saks 2006). The issue of the widespread proliferation of hybrid news discourses, as well as the indirect legitimization of this practice is a sensitive matter, which to date has been overlooked by media policy makers. Structural transformation inevitably requires both a new management style and the application of new strategies of media convergence such as cross promotion, cloning or content sharing. Structural transformation and media concentration is a very

complex and costly matter, especially for small national media. Consequently only large and wealthy media firms are capable of increasing both the quantity and use of innovative media products, alongside better editorial content and more journalistic autonomy. The problem, as Doyle (2002) succinctly argued is that highly concentrated media ownership and business logic, based on economic management of news production and distribution, poses a threat to pluralism by concentrating more power into the hands of just a few suppliers.

2. News and journalism online: cheap and repetitive or rich and varied?

The income from online advertising in the Baltic remains at a low level despite the rapid growth in Internet audiences. Online editors and journalists are, therefore, often using other kinds of publicly available information such as PR news, promotional writing, translations from other online information sources, etc. rather than investing in the development of original journalism online (Lund 2002; Harro-Loit 2005b). The colonization of online news discourse by PR offerings is part of a wider social practice (Underwood 1993; Erjavec 2005; Harro-Loit and Saks 2006), but in the context of expanding online publishing possibilities it is important to estimate how much real journalistic input is provided by media organizations.

Online news portals seem to provide access to news and information from multiple sources as well as offering extensive discussion and publishing facilities for users. Recent research however indicates that the multiplicity of media sources does not necessarily result in a great deal of news diversity. Online content offerings are largely drawn from a few authoritative sources and as Dahlberg (2005, p. 165) observes, news is framed along the same editorial lines. The discernible aspect now is that most mainstream online journalism simply offers new ways of consuming journalism of the same content that is typically and topically grouped with toolbars that allow quick linking. The majority of online news sites are essentially portals offering rapid, easily used, access to digital news archives through direct hyperlinks or search engines (Scott 2005, pp. 93-94).

It appears that the production of high quality journalism online is almost as expensive as it was in “the brick and mortar world” (Scott 2005, p. 96). Non-linear story-telling, for instance, requires a high level of labor and resources to provide the links to contextual content, related stories, multi-media additions and dynamic updates and thus quality content. ‘Contextualized’ journalism, therefore, often appears only in mainstream journalism when that additional content is already produced and available free of charge from corporate agencies (Scott 2005, p. 120).

Indeed, online news diversity depends upon just a few issues: the number of different online news providers (Internet media actors) and different production strategies, which are essentially whether the market and its regulation supports sufficient diversity of actors and whether media organizations invest in staff recruitment to produce professional original online content. In such context, two content production strategies are emerging online that are also shaping the roles and functions of journalists: the ‘journalist as an interpreter’ and the ‘journalist as a translator’. The mode of interpreting requires journalists to analyze, re-think and re-visit issues obtained from source information. This mode requires journalists to give adequate meaning to the content produced. Online journalists working as interpreters are changing journalistic discourse: they are checking and double checking the information, finding missing angles in the story, conducting additional interviews, etc. The translating mode of online information production, in contrast, deals with the process of adaptation of journalistic text from one medium to fit the requirements of the other (online) medium. Translating does not require changing the discourse but the structure of the text through the

addition of hypertext links, finding and indicating sub-topics in the text, adding multi-media elements and other kinds of online functionality.

Indeed, as regards changing journalistic discourse online, a central theme is whether online journalism leads to a more diverse picture of social reality (through the production of diverse topics, opinions and story angles about the same event). Media diversity notion is an ambiguous concept and can refer to the extent in which media content reflects and serves various interests and opinions of the public (to put it more precise, it deals with media ability to inform people about relevant issues within the surrounding reality); or it can refer to general diffusion of media power in society on the level of ownership, economic structures and political influence (Jönsson 2005; Karppinen 2007). Diversity is also related to media's ability to acknowledge and express existing social differences through maximization of choices offered to audiences who are in turn able to take advantage of such provision. Indeed, liberal media policy approaches and ongoing developments in the media field (market-led reforms, increasing marketization and commercialization of content) combined with the technological innovations are set to guarantee consumer choice. But, as Freedman (2005, p. 17) poses, at the same time, contemporary liberalizing policy initiatives are based on the conception of diversity that focuses on maximizing the number of outlets, thus it emphasizes the quantity rather than quality of the range of choices that audience have in everyday media consumption. Following Freedman's (2005) argument, it is problematic to see media diversity and consumer choice as desirable ends in themselves.

After said all this, an important concern is emerging in relation to content development online – will online production models support the visions of Internet media development by, for example, offering diverse ways to reach and contact audiences, to provide breaking news, and in integrating audiences into news production; or simply reproduce an illusionary diversity of content by re-using same news published in other sources.

3. Comparing media markets in Lithuania and Estonia: similarities and divergences across small countries

Internet media has gradually become the fourth branch of the media system in both Lithuania and Estonia. The clear identification of the characteristics of the online news environment requires an examination of the function of conventional journalism.

The Lithuanian and Estonian media markets are among the smallest in Europe with potential audiences of 3.38 million and 1.34 million, respectively. While the size of the news market is fairly similar at the national level and the media regulation climate is comparable in both countries, there are some significant differences that influence the development of online journalism. In Estonia, newspaper organizations are the dominant national news agenda setters and have the biggest advertising revenues, with 44% of the media advertising market, while in Lithuania television is the most popular information channel with 43%, the largest share, of advertising. The broad availability of numerous regional television channels, many with local news programs, is another important characteristic of the Lithuanian news environment.

Estonia is a small and can be called a country which openly promotes an online lifestyle; it has an Internet penetration rate of 57.8%, while Lithuania is a less Internet-oriented country with an Internet penetration rate of 34.2% (Internetworldstats, 2007). Nevertheless, traditional newspapers in Estonia, as in the Scandinavian countries, are the strongest online news providers. Besides *Delfi*, the country's only Internet-specific news provider, the three

portals of the national dailies (*Postimees*, *Päevaleht* and *SL Õhtuleht*) are among the five most visited web sites in Estonia. Lithuania, in contrast to Estonia, possesses just one mainstream daily with a strong Internet presence (*Lietuvos rytas* with the news portal *Lrytas.lt*); but also a broader spectrum of Internet news and general interest sites. The online news demand in Lithuania is filled by a wide spectrum of general interest sites such as *Delfi.lt*, *Alfa.lt*, *Balsas.lt* and *Atn.lt* as well as the Internet specific news provider *Bernardinai.lt*.

Traditional news agencies have found survival difficult in the small markets of the Baltic countries. The Estonian Telegraph Agency closed in 2003 leaving the largely Internet based Baltic News Service (*BNS*) to dominate the national media market. Something similar is happening now in Lithuania: the role of the Lithuanian office of *BNS* is increasing at the expense of *Lietuvos Telegramų Agentūra*'s former dominant position. The ability of Internet based media agencies to provide a continuous 24/7 flow of news will inevitably undermine the survival of their 'traditional communication' based competitors.

By comparison, radio in both countries is strongly commercialized and oriented towards different music formats and entertainment. In Lithuania there is a 24 hour news radio station (*Žinių radijas*) while in Estonia music channels dominate.

The popular preference for free news and infotainment is a tendency observed worldwide. The advent of the 'free daily' concept is a fairly recent occurrence in the Baltic countries, which has challenged the identities of both the print newspapers (especially in Lithuania) and the online news services in that all the information is cost free to the consumer and the model of production is that of an Internet news portal (mixing breaking news, magazine type journalism and different services). Despite the novelty of 'free dailies', they are among the five most read newspapers in both Lithuania and Estonia.

The Lithuanian Internet advertising market, by virtue of being bigger than Estonia's, is able to offer more possibilities to expand and invest in innovative developments, as well as seeking better qualified staff. Furthermore, public funding as an alternative form of online content funding is beginning to emerge in Lithuania.

4. e-society and e-media: new challenges for journalism

4.1. The pros and cons of rapid Internetization

The rapid increase of Internet usage in Estonia is linked to several factors, such as government initiatives, liberalization of the telecommunications market (foreign investments, increasing competition and decreasing prices) and the development of e-banking. All government institutions were pooled into one e-government services portal by 1998 and in 2004 the e-citizen project was implemented. The objective of the '*Tiigrihüpe*' (Tiger's Leap) governmental and NGO initiative was the nationwide accessibility of the Internet for all those sectors of society that are of little interest to commercial vendors; specifically schools and rural areas. The Tiger's Leap program has provided computers and software for schools and helped to connect all Estonia's schools to the Internet (Kerem 2003). Since 2001, competition in the Estonian telecommunications market increased and Internet access prices for consumers started to drop. At present the average price for ADSL connection is 10-40€ per month (the average monthly salary in Estonia in 2007 was about 705€). Internet banking started in 1996, providing frequent Internet users in Estonia with various advantages. Internet communication, especially among young people, is multifunctional and being used for interpersonal communication, information searches and to purchase a multitude of services.

The well-orchestrated government initiatives and private sector investments have had far reaching results. The number of frequent Internet users in Estonia (using the Internet each day or a few times each week) has doubled in just a few years. A survey conducted in the Fall of 2005 by the Department of Journalism and Communication of Tartu University and the market research company Factum demonstrated that 19% of population read newspapers via the Internet each day and 16% do so a few times each week.

The speed of Internet penetration in Lithuania was aided by an initiative undertaken by a combination of government, NGOs and private sector business interests, in 2002. The '*Langas į ateitį*' (Window to the Future) initiative led to the establishment of 175 public Internet access points throughout Lithuania. The telecommunications market was liberalized only in 2003 which further aided to the speed of Internet penetration. Despite different marketing strategies by Internet access providers, Lithuanian Internet access costs have remained comparatively high. An important step for the institutionalization of online media was the acceptance in 2003 of the Regulation Regarding Distribution of Information of Restricted Content via Publicly Accessed Computer Networks. This means that online media should now adhere to the principle of self-regulation and observe journalistic norms online. The proportion of active Internet users (going online on a weekly basis), in spite of all the activity regarding the Internet remains quite low, 25% in Lithuania and 34% in Estonia. While Internet penetration is gradually increasing, the development of the mobile communications market has surpassed all expectations. Lithuania has three equally competitive mobile services providers which have ensured that, consequent to some of the cheapest European Union wide prices for mobile telephony, Lithuania has one of the highest penetration rates of mobile telephones at around 130%. Mobile access to news appears to be a high priority for users in both Estonia and Lithuania.

4.2. Professional news organizations and the Baltic Internet

Although in both countries the traditional media (i.e. newspapers) were the first to move online (Estonian dailies started with online versions in 1995; in Lithuania, the business daily *Verslo žinios* moved online in 2000 and the mainstream *Lietuvos rytas* in 1997), today the Internet-specific news media (e.g. *Delfi*) are the most popular online news providers. Lithuania's online audience is still growing, while in Estonia the number of online news portal readers may have peaked following a recent decline in interest.

Delfi (established in 2000 by the Estonian company Microlink and now owned by the Norwegian company Findexa) has remained the most visited Internet-specific news portal in the Baltic States. Each national version of *Delfi* has its own national newsroom, internet telecommunications, and marketing departments. *Delfi.lt* has the largest professional staff. Since 2007, *Delfi* in Lithuania, as in Estonia, has opened a news portal in the Russian language. The content of *Delfi* is poly-functional combining online news, entertainment, magazine type journalism, e-shopping and e-dating possibilities. *Delfi* also invests heavily in multi-media and cross-media reporting. The Lithuanian *Delfi* has around 800,000 daily visitors whereas the Estonian *Delfi* has about 460,000. There are several specialist Internet-specific news portals in Estonia, such as sports news on *Kalev.ee* but only the one professional Internet-specific news producer in *Delfi.ee*. Lithuania, by contrast has at least three of these Internet-specific news portals in *Delfi.lt*, *Alfa.lt*, and *Balsas.lt*. Although most of the news items published by *Delfi* belong to the category of second-hand news (these are the edited versions of news stories from other conventional and online media channels) the news departments in each Baltic country also employ reporters and produce original news

pieces. The *Delfi.lt* newsroom currently has a staff of 36 (11 reporters, 12 news editors, 7 video journalists, and 6 managers, illustrators and translators), while *Delfi.ee* has 10 (2 reporters, 6 editors and 2 managers). *Delfi.lt* has ambitions to become an even stronger player in the news market by investing in staff development and planning to compete with *BNS*.

There are two major online journalism development trends observed in Lithuania. First, all the news media is moving towards free news provision, a move already made by the business daily *Verslo žinios*, which has a free online version offering both breaking online news and the newspaper's own content. Today, in the same way as in the mid-1990s, the Internet re-creates the idea of 'informational welfare' – online news free and available to practically everyone. Second, the newspaper's function to bring relevant news to the audience is being recreated on the Internet by the online news media that produce both 'audience driven' and 'news driven' journalism. The first variety of journalism aims at fulfilling the audience demand, e.g. *Delfi.lt* does so by seeking to provide relevant news and entertainment to readers. The production of the 'news driven' variety of journalism rests on the initiative of an individual journalist, or an external commentator (an expert, for example, in politics, economics or culture), to bring diverse ideas into the public news agenda. There are also minor trends signaling that online journalism in Lithuania is constantly searching for innovative forms of presentation; every news portal produces video news, offers user generated content (blogs) and invests in different kinds of interactive forms, formats and transactions.

The three national Estonian dailies are the most influential Internet media actors. The Internet products of the three dailies *Postimees (PM)*, *Päevaleht (EPL)* and *SL Õhtuleht* have been quite popular, each generating more than 100,000 visits per day. Until 2006, the two competing mid-market dailies *PM* and *EPL* had different concepts concerning their Internet versions: *PM* had an online news department with eight staff members while *EPL* had only three. Online journalists in *PM* wrote reviews on the basis of news published by other media channels, edited PR news and produced original local news by adding information or comments to news that was already evaluated by other media. However, in the last few years all Estonian daily newspapers have started to invest in online editions. Today, for example, *EPL*'s online journalists have increased to 12 and *PM*'s staff has increased to 13 online journalists. The tabloid *SL Õhtuleht* has also created an online department. All three dailies have improved the layout of their online versions and include video reporting.

4.3. News production strategies online: towards news diversification

Comparative research of print and online newspapers in 16 European countries confirmed a considerable overlap in articles published in print and online editions of the same newspaper in the fall of 2003 (see, for example, van der Wurff 2005, p. 35). Similar results have been reported in studies made on three national dailies in Lithuania and Estonia (Balčytienė and Marcinkevičienė 2005; Harro-Loit 2005a), and since these two studies, the Lithuanian dailies *Lietuvos rytas* and *Verslo žinios* have clearly begun a new phase of development by radically transforming their online editions into news portals where numerous discourses occur. Changes in other media sectors also confirm that online journalism has influenced news production models and the functions of traditional journalistic channels. For example radio, once the most operative (news) medium seems to be losing that function in Estonia. In Estonia and Lithuania, news agencies are losing their market niche as many media (newspapers and broadcast stations) produce currently updated online news by themselves.

In spite of many changes in Baltic online journalism the overlaps between conventional and online journalism remain a regular practice. The recent comparison between Estonia related news published in traditional and online versions of *EPL* and *PM* gave the following results: the paper version of *EPL* (16th of August 2007) published 18 news items of which 7 were published the day before on *EPL*'s online version, which equates to a 39% overlap. The overlapping news of *PM* was 7 of 13 articles or 54% (Rebane 2007, pp. 40-44). Another observation is that although online versions of newspapers provide twice as many headlines as their print counterparts, growth of content diversity online is still questionable. *EPL* (15th of August 2007) provided 31 headlines online (in the 'Estonian news' section) of which only 9 were original (not picked from other newspapers or otherwise reprinted from the previous day's paper edition); the statistics for *PM* in the same section were marginally better, 15 original news stories out 34 headlines (Rebane 2007, pp. 40-44).

In order to diversify online content, the online media in Lithuania (the Internet-specific news portals as well as *Lrytas.lt*) actively use reviews prepared by external commentators. The openness of online media to external input may explain the decreasing tolerance, which the Lithuanian traditional press has for external opinions (news and reviews produced by non-staff members). Content analysis of two national dailies *Lietuvos rytas* and *Respublika* conducted in the period of 1988-2000 has demonstrated that the number of outside actors in both newspapers has undoubtedly decreased (Nevinskaitė 2006). Estonian online journalism in contrast to Lithuanian online practices is news oriented and does not use external authors. One more observation is that the original sources of online news stories are frequently not transparent to the reader.

The overall impression of online content diversity is mixed. On the one hand, the diversity of actors and voices has increased. There are more diverse media actors online offering both mainstream as well as specialized news content. On the other hand, Internet logic sets new requirements (for professionalism of online reporting) and demands (for filling the gaps created by the constant demand for news). Frequently these demands are met with ready made, otherwise available and cost free news (PR and news agency material). On the other hand, the number of voices has increased online through readers commenting and blogging, and through other content production means such as cross promotion, content sharing and the different types of partnerships found in the Internet media business.

4.4. The impact of the Internet on journalism professionalization

The broad popularity of the Internet and the applicability of modern interactive information technologies, has stimulated debate about journalism quality and media professionalism in several ways. According to the proponents of the democratizing view of the Internet, the various forms of online media may create a new electronic public space that allows citizens to connect directly to journalists, writers and with each other. The popular adage explains it this way: if television journalists must be ready to be recognized in public, online journalists must be ready to be criticized in public. The issue of whether interactive online commenting (a popular aspect of news portals) and online debates create new conditions for media to become more accountable remains to be assessed through practical studies.

Interactivity and audience participation has been, and still is, one of the most important phenomena of the Baltic news environment online. Readers in both countries have been actively commenting in the news media online since these possibilities were designed in the mid-1990s.

Indeed, in the Baltic countries, commenting online has become a habit. Despite criticism towards a wide application of this practice (especially related to unfavorable outcomes such as libel resulting from defamation online), *Delfi* as well as many online newspapers and news portals have refused to limit these possibilities. Rather, other quality control strategies are proposed. Newsrooms, for example, have implemented online keyword filtering technologies, and employed editors to observe reader performance online (readers can indicate inappropriate commenting by directly marking such comments online). Many online news media have developed their own policies where online commenting rules are defined. In Estonia, *EPL* invests into interactivity and takes more responsibility for reader comments. *PM* has not taken any responsibility concerning reader comments; it only provides the users with the possibility of informing the editor about 'unsuitable comments'. As practice shows, some news stories accumulate over a thousand reader commentaries. A significant point worthy of note is that the life-cycle of a front page online news story can be as long as readers are willing to respond; this practice often creates a 'snow-ball effect' in which editors can take the initiative to produce more news stories but with a different focus on a widely debated issue.

Until recently, restrictions related to Internet commenting and the communication culture online were minimal. Public debates about Internet defamation and legal regulation started in both countries, but there is neither political nor public consensus about the matter. In Lithuania, there were attempts to organize an association of online news providers to draft an online ethics code but so far no concrete actions have been made. But some results were nevertheless achieved. There are a number of initiatives from online journalists aimed at implementing a watchdog role on Internet media and especially on the content of interactive reader comments. For example, over a dozen online portals have joined the '*Neburnok!*' (Don't Swear!) project, which aims to promote free speech, constructive critical dialogue, professional discourse and online communication culture. Other projects include those where media comment on media: '*Projektas Ž*' (Project J– the "J" is for journalism) and '*Atvirai ir garbingai apie žiniasklaidą*' (Openly and fairly about the media). The increasing popularity of the Internet means that a raft of new issues must be addressed in media policy debates concerning the professional requirements for an online journalist; defining the providers of reliable online content; the funding of online projects, and the establishment of mutual trust and many others.

5. Discussion and outlook

The news media have achieved a prominent success in placing their journalistic portals among the five most visited portals in the Baltic countries. In Lithuania, besides the online news portals maintained by the conventional media, an abundance of Internet-specific news portals are taking full advantage of the existing opportunities to conquer online audiences by providing breaking news, video news, news analysis, interviews and press reviews, with the added value services of interactive games, e-shopping and e-dating.

Regarding the questions posed in the introductory section of this article, the clear impression is that smooth online journalistic development is possible only if the three factors are well balanced against each other: public accessibility to online content (affordable Internet access prices); the resources necessary to develop journalism online (online advertising revenues, investments by the media into staff development and applicability of Internet affordances); and the diversity of online news (investments in human resources, adherence to the social and cultural needs of the audience). In Lithuania, where Internet penetration is still modest in

comparison to Estonia, the media invests pro-actively in staff development, format and design changes of online news portals, and offers more added value content and services such as news accessibility via multiple and mobile platforms, (e.g. WAP); although the Window to the Future has not mirrored the success of Estonia's 'Tiger's Leap' in encouraging use of the Internet. In Estonia, where the number of news readers via the Internet is increasing anyway, there seems to be no reason to invest either too much or too quickly.

As the number of news and voices has increased, as a consequence of developments in the Internet media sphere (increase in Internet actors, increase in advertising), the question of content diversity (different voices) and of having access to alternative actors online, is no longer a crucial issue in the Baltic States. As demonstrated, Lithuanians and Estonians are accustomed to accessing news via different channels, both online and mobile. But regular online and interactive use of news might mean that people are also getting used to consuming short news (headlines, summaries, very short video news) which, in the long run, may have dramatic and detrimental effects on both news production and consumption. Traditional media is also changing its behavior patterns: one recently observed trend is that the demands for two strands of a generic variety are being met: hard news and magazine-style journalism. Investigative journalism, being expensive to produce, is vanishing – it is rarely found online, and nowadays seldom found in the conventional media.

In small countries online journalism plays a different role from that played in bigger markets where the media is stronger and wealthier (has more resources) and audiences are bigger, which allows the media to receive profits even from niche products. A small market also sets certain requirements for quality online management. As competition for the interest and attention-span of different sectors of the audience increases, the Internet media must clearly increase their investments to cover the important issues of offering more choices and experimenting with news production models. Also, online journalism challenges the concept of news diversity. In favoring Internet affordances (interactivity and the breaking character of news production, highly flexible information structures and multi-media reporting) attention needs to be paid to the fact that a bigger online diversity without either a clear structure or guidance by communication professionals (competent journalists) might work against democracy in providing only an illusionary impression of pluralism and public representation. Our assumption is that the development of professional online journalism requires a new type of literacy. In other words, development of online journalism sets exceptional requirements on news production and representation as well as on news consumption. From the point of view of news production, the Internet has changed the roles and functions of journalists – different models of online news production are found (journalists as interpreters and translators). From the point of view of news consumption, interactive media sets demands on better informed choices by the readers. Also, the role and function of active commenting in a small market differs from developments online in a bigger market.

In conclusion, while the Internet media in small countries may indeed have a democratizing function (by offering diverse online media channels, by increasing interactivity and by allowing users to publish content online), there are a number of high level costs related to content quality, media literacy requirements, the development by news organizations of certain policies to deal with flaws in online commenting, etc. Consequently, the online media performance debate must include the additional concepts of quality of news production, quality of information processing, trust and journalistic independence, as well as others.

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