

CHANGING JOURNALISTIC DISCOURSES IN THE BALTIC STATES – HOW TO DEAL WITH CHEAP JOURNALISM

Auksė Balčytienė

Foreword

This article addresses post-transitional development of the Baltic media. It shows that new structural changes unfolding in political, economic, social and technological realms directly affect the media and their practices, with an increasing emphasis on commercialized, elitist and entertainment-oriented content. A process of commercialization and commodification of news implies homogenization, monopoly, as well as increasing control, threatening democratic processes and development of civil society.

In this article, our analysis of Baltic media development proceeds in three stages.

First, general conditions for media systems convergence are assessed in order to shed some light on challenges that journalism is now facing. Second, three factors which have a decisive impact on journalistic discourse are discussed and examples of change across the small news markets of the three Baltic countries are given. The three factors are liberal media policy, changes in political communication and the impact of new technologies.

Finally, and most importantly, we argue that in this vulnerable and rapidly changing news environment it remains crucial to preserve professional journalistic discourse. Autonomous journalism should preserve the democratic functions of the media – citizens must recognize professional (independent, informed and critical) journalism which, indeed, should help them to make knowledgeable decisions and participate in the political public sphere.

The article proposes that, on the one hand, *open public debate and media criticism* is one logical path towards the development of accountable, autonomous and professional journalism in the Baltic States. On the other hand, in the modern and varied information space, various *ways and means* (such as public funding) should be applied to support new civic initiatives and thereby support media that serves the citizens' needs and is free from commercial interests.

This article is written from a Lithuanian perspective with comparative data from two other

countries, namely Estonia and Latvia. The article aims at a systematic comparison between the three countries. It intends to identify and explain similarities between these countries' media with respect to the particular phenomena (e.g., media liberalism, changes in political communication culture and Internetization), being analysed. Hence, the emphasis here is on comparative theory building and testing, with the three countries themselves acting as cases.

1. General Introduction

A common understanding in contemporary media studies is that convergence of media systems and homogenization of journalism is becoming a worldwide trend. Authors advancing such views (Curran & Myung 2000; Hallin & Mancini 2004) have proposed that structural and organizational changes in the media systems (for example, ongoing media concentration, news commercialization, growth of infotainment and over-abundance of hybrid media) have taken place within the media of all countries, with more or less similar results.

The widely discussed commercialism of the media is, in fact, strongly related to social changes. One important argument for media commercialization is the idea that the centrality of organized social groups and importance of loyalty and solidarity to group interests is giving way to greater *individualism* (Hallin & Mancini 2003). As those scholars claim, the erstwhile mass audience is evolving into a new audience with personalized interests and the media are re-orienting towards producing news and information as a "saleable product".

Indeed, journalism is reported to be changing. Scholarly debates are now focusing on, and stressing, the process of homogenization of journalism, evident in practices of journalistic genre-mixing, shifting quality of news, more sensationalist and entertainment-oriented reporting, blurring boundaries between news, promotional writing and advertising (Erjavec 2005; Harroloit & Saks 2007). Mixed discourses (hybrid discourses of PR, advertising and journalistic texts) proliferate in magazines, broadcast media and online versions of newspapers. According to Scott (2006), new newsworthiness criteria seem to replace all others, meaning that journalism is no longer seen as just serving the public interest. Rather, the criterion guiding news selection is profitability.

The arrival of interactive technologies, too, contributes to the process of information "commodification": it provides means to personalized experience for information consumers.

At the same time, although the economic logic makes media similar to some extent, there still are certain differences due to history, traditions and culture of journalism which make media performance different in different national settings. In short, then, economics and technology are forces leading to the convergence of media systems, while specific political and cultural factors account for divergence. A historical perspective is very important, too: media institutions evolve over time; at each step of their evolution, past events and institutional patterns inherited from earlier periods influence the direction they take.

Thus, as we discuss post-transitional changes in the media of the Baltic countries, as well as professionalization of journalism, it becomes important to assess a number of issues. For instance, it becomes crucial to question whether economic liberalization, resulting from a *laissez-faire* media policy, has brought more pluralism and news diversity in the media of the Baltic States. Another concern is related to the changes in political communication cultures. While discussing the development of democratic media, it is important to ask whether professionalization of political communication amounts to a real shift in the communication of politics in both quantitative and qualitative terms, or is it simply related to the growth of specialized knowledge on political issue management? One more issue is related to the impact

of the Internet on journalism. Wide application of Internet media and development of online journalism has a clear ability to transform journalistic discourse and journalistic culture. So, it becomes important to ask whether or not technological innovations and online journalism have changed and radically enhanced the Baltic public sphere, thus, leading to a more diverse picture of social reality by offering space for different opinions, topics, events and voices.

2. Studying Preconditions for Journalism Change: Observations on Economic, Political and Technological Realms

2.1 *Laissez-Faire Policy as a Factor in Media Change, Development and Diversification*

Since the re-establishment of independence in the Baltic countries in 1991, media systems in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia have gone through a change of paradigm. The newly acquired political freedom brought along a libertarian media model, which promoted liberalism and very little regulation (see, e.g., Vihalemm 2002). A decade after the political breakthrough, a new wave of media re-structuring and orientation took taken place, with more diverse forms of ownership and cross-media concentration.¹

In very general terms, news markets in all three Baltic countries are small, media regulation is very liberal and media accountability is weak (Harro-Loit 2005).

In all three Baltic countries, the desire to limit state intervention into the mass media can be traced back to, and explained by, the communist past, when everything was under strict government control. Compared to other parts of the world, mass media regulation in the Baltics is very liberal. In Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia there is no law for the regulation of media concentration. There are also no restrictions for foreign capital investment into the media. So far, only concerns about restrictions on political advertising have appeared.²

In Lithuania as well as in other Baltic countries, state involvement in media matters is fairly limited (Balčytienė 2005). The level of state intervention is manifested in the public information policy in several ways, for instance, in the values which are promoted, in the types of subsidies (direct and indirect), in the regulation of media industry and power-sharing among various councils to regulate the broadcast sector. In Lithuania, the Law on Provision of Information to the Public (first accepted in 1996, new amendments as of July 2006) says that there is an institution authorized by the government to co-ordinate the implementation of national policy in the sphere of public information provision. Since 2001, this governmental institution has been the Ministry of Culture. The information policy seeks to increase openness and transparency of the media (as is indicated in Article 24 of the law), as well as to enable the widest range of views to be put forward in the media (diversity of the media), providing conditions under which they can have an equal chance of attracting public attention. Concerning transparency of the media, Article 24 of the law states that owners, producers and disseminators of public information are obliged to submit data to the ministry once a year, by 30 March, regarding the shareholders or co-owners of the enterprise.

In Latvia, by contrast, lack of transparency in the patterns of media ownership is a serious issue and the situation has not significantly improved since the period of the predominantly shadow economy of the early 1990s (see, for example, Nagla & Kehre 2004). Although partial information about owners can be obtained from the Company Register, lack of publicly available and updated information about real owners of different media companies is the main drawback on the Latvian media market.

In both Lithuania and Estonia the problematic issue concerns the lack of public discussion about the media, rather than lack of information on who actually owns what in the media.

The libertarian media model, with its principles of competition, pluralism and freedom of expression, confirms that all citizens have the right to express their opinions and receive information without any restrictions. While this may be true in theory, practice reveals something different.

On the one hand, the liberal news market opens new fields and forms for media development. On the other hand, liberal regulation and lack of state intervention into the media field create favourable conditions for the market-oriented logic to proliferate. The Lithuanian case shows that an information space governed by competition and market forces subordinates media operation to the profit motive. As media professionals themselves say,³ the freedom of the press eventually becomes freedom of press owners instead of citizens' freedom.

The more the media organization is interested in profit, the more its journalism acquires the features of "market journalism". This is dangerous for democracy because, ultimately, the free press may degenerate, i.e., become dependent on advertisers, PR companies, orders from an imagined audience or simply be guided solely by the media owners' interests. Ultimately, this commercial virus may infect the whole information space, and information producers may rapidly notice that they need to present more of the same, i.e., celebrity news, lotteries, games, documentary programmes stimulating the emotions of ordinary people, chat and reality shows of various types. The fight for audience share is noticeable in the increase in the number of popular television talk shows and quiz shows, weekly lotteries and games. For example, statistics confirms that there was a steady increase from 1992 to 2001 in the number of television games produced originally by Lithuanian producers or adapted from foreign programmes. In 2003 alone, the increase in all kinds of television games and reality television shows was three times higher than during the previous years (Jasinevičiūtė 2004). Attempts are being made to introduce different television voting possibilities through mobile telephones, the viewers are encouraged to send SMS messages and vote during live television shows etc. Apart from direct economic revenue from SMS, the media also get an indirect profit: SMS helps to sell brands of television and radio programmes.

These examples testify to a process of *secularization* which is defined as the decline of a political order based on collective political actors and identities and their replacement by a more fragmented and individualized society (Hallin & Mancini 2004). With increasing secularization, news reporting is clearly seeking a more immediate connection to the everyday life of individuals – news reported by journalists must be relevant and have tangible consequences for ordinary citizens. Journalists also tend to think of people in terms of lifestyles and consumption habits. Indeed, for the Baltic countries, the newly discovered commercial logic is based on openly market-driven media, accommodating to pressures of audience demand.

In this context, small news environments are facing dramatic challenges. For some, media survival in such markets (especially in Lithuania and Latvia, where regional media concentration process is still going on) requires one of two things – they must get closely integrated either into political or business field or into a larger chain of newspapers. By seeking to remain on the market, many local media are overlooking the difference between paid and independently produced information. Indeed, local news is the most expensive to produce; therefore, having limited budgets journalists are "forced" to produce hybrid media by mixing journalism, promotional writing and advertising. The question of widespread proliferation of hybrid media (and also the indirect "legitimation" of such practice) is a sensitive matter, which has not been given sufficient attention by media scholars and policy-makers so far.

One particular dilemma that needs to be addressed here deals with the question whether media concentration – an issue widely debated and criticized by media scholars – is indeed a threat. One can claim that few but large and wealthy media firms could provide more and more innovative media products, with better editorial content and with more journalistic autonomy than many highly competitive small local media suppliers with only limited resources. At the same time, however, highly concentrated media ownership and business logics based on economic management of news production and distribution pose a threat to pluralism by concentrating more power into the hands of just a few suppliers (Doyle 2002).

As practice reveals, there is no one, or an easy, answer to this question.

With growing ownership and media concentration by foreign capital in the three Baltic countries, it was hoped that media owners from Nordic countries would transfer high journalistic standards also to small neighbouring markets (Balčytienė & Lauk 2005). Small societies with limited media markets, dramatically changing journalistic standards and weak professional ideologies, are especially vulnerable when foreign companies are concerned only about profits and distance themselves from issues of social responsibility. There exists a general understanding in media studies that foreign owners usually do not influence content – they, rather, control the finances. But through the control of editorial budget media content is affected indirectly.

In the long run, cultivation of consumerism, the market, class inequality and individualism tend to be taken as natural and often benevolent, whereas political activity, civic values and anti-market activities tend to be marginalized. Therefore, in any genuine democracy the question of who controls the media economy is an important issue of public debate. However, the public of Lithuania, Latvia or Estonia knows little about the mechanisms of financial and organizational performance of the media. There are only a few organizations monitoring and watching over the media's performance (in Lithuania, this is the role and function of the institution of the Inspector of Journalist Ethics, but his/her reports and decisions made, however, only seldom reach wider audience). In addition, changes in the media field such as mergers and acquisitions are mainly reported by the media themselves only as economic matters (with facts and data on the media company itself) and as a matter with no socio-political ramifications – thus, not interesting to the average citizen.

2.2 The Pros and Cons of Political Communication Marketization

We should also note that with professionalization of communication, values that are promoted in media – increase in political-marketing and image-oriented reporting – as well as the quality of interaction between journalists and their sources have changed substantially (Plasser 2005).

It is important to acknowledge that there are scholars who do not demonize the “softification” of political reporting, namely of bringing more emotional and personal aspects in political journalism. It is common to say that “permanent campaigns” nowadays are necessary in political issue communication, i.e., that politicians permanently have to seek voters' support. Thus, political campaigns have become much more expensive: political parties commission their own opinion polls and invest heavily in advertising, replacing the press medium more and more with television. Campaigns are “increasingly geared to media's needs”, and political leaders are assessed in terms of their media appeal. In short, images dominate over ideas, and political coverage is increasingly personalized (Bielinis 2002; Donskis 2004).

Within an ongoing discussion of changes in political communication, the arguments of Murdock and Golding (1989) that identify three main kinds of relations between

communications and citizenship seem to be important. According to those scholars, first, people must have access to information, advice and analysis that will enable them to know what their rights are and allow them to pursue these rights effectively. Second, they must have access to the broadest possible range of information, interpretation and debate on areas that involve political choices, and they must be able to use communications facilities in order to register criticism, mobilize opposition and propose alternative courses of action. Third, they must be able to recognize themselves and their aspirations in the range of representations offered within the central communications sectors and to be able to contribute to developing their representations in the media.

This may lead us to conclude that commercialized political journalism may become an alternative public sphere if it scrutinizes the power elite and helps formulate and consolidate grass-roots views and expectations. To put it more precisely – popular talk shows, political satire, infotainment and even the Internet blogs could work as instruments for otherwise marginalized groups to make their voices heard and help to extend the domain of public discourse. In other words, if popular journalism is a way to question the power elite and if it creates possibilities for different, perhaps marginalized, groups to come forward, then popular journalism's potential to become an alternative public sphere is legitimated.

Another aspect of changes in political communication as affecting journalistic discourse is related to shifts in professional standards of journalism, among which truth and transparency (or public accountability) are the fundamental ones. Now the biggest challenge for political journalists is to get behind the scenes and behind the "closed doors", to find adequate political sources who speak off the record and to use unofficial channels to get information etc. At the same time, this leaves journalists who are using scoops, leaks and other unofficial information which comes from confidential sources with the dilemma of how to verify such information and retain their credibility. In short, while there still may be differences in how journalists' and sources' relationships are managed on national (Lithuanian, Estonian or Latvian) levels and what happens on a transnational scale (Balčytienė & Vinciūnienė 2006; Tammpuu & Pullerits 2006), the tendency is clear – with professionalization of political sources (with increasing application of spin doctors and political issue management techniques) – journalists are increasingly denied direct access to important information; they are confronted with PR material instead of being allowed to discover conflicts within the actual decision-making process.

On the other hand, political institutions – also feeling they should constantly provide information and maintain proactive relations with the electorate – face difficulties in this regard. As research data from a transnational study on European news production "AIM – Adequate Information Management in Europe" indicates,⁴ despite many direct and indirect efforts of political institutions (for example, the European Commission) to make more information available and apply sophisticated strategies of communication, the majority of people in Europe feel they are not sufficiently informed (AIM Research Consortium, 2007). Thus, in (European) political communication, one of the major problems faced by the media is certainly not one of availability of information but rather that of finding, selection and interpretation of relevant information. In other words, from the media's point of view, there is a lack of openness and transparency of the decision-making process at the political level (often resulting from the consensus-seeking approach and a "one-face" and "one-voice" policy of the European Commission). One of the policy proposals that the AIM project brings to political communication studies is that the contribution of journalism to enhancing transparency and openness of political reporting could receive a major boost if journalists would gain access to

better insight into the very mechanisms and procedures of decision-making at the institutional level. As the research project found, correspondents working in Brussels need an alternative to the overload of so-called pre-cooked stories that are distributed via all kinds of well-developed and official channels (Web pages, e-mail, press releases, Midday Briefings at the European Commission etc.). If they were given access to the decision-making process, journalists could easily be motivated to invest more into investigative stories and approaches – something still an exception in the daily affairs of the reporting of European news. Whether political institutions are ready to accept this call appears to be an open question – so far, it looks like European institutions have instrumentalized the notion of a public sphere as only a PR concept and are not willing to disclose procedural aspects as well as get involved in national debates.

To conclude what has been said, the critical element within ongoing changes in political communication process is that, on the one hand, the market – with increasing commercialization – affects the media's performance. By translating social and political issues into personal experience and organizing them around the emotional state of the individuals concerned, by trivializing political matters etc., it stratifies information provision and fails to provide all citizens with the same quality of political information and opinion. In this respect, the media can be seen not only as a cornerstone, but also as a force inimical to democracy, as they can easily manipulate individual needs, desires and choices. On the other hand, the media themselves are forced to change and adapt to new working conditions, such as establishing new kinds of relationships with political news sources.

Thus, there are old (media as watchdog) and new (media as dealing with structural and organizational changes in the political communication process) issues that professional political journalism needs to address.

2.3 The Impact of the Internet: Conditions Inhibiting and Fostering Professionalization of Online Journalism

In all three Baltic countries news media products are between the top five visited websites. The Internet media are the fastest growing, with young audiences increasingly using online media as their first news source.

Though Internet audiences are growing fast and Internet advertising revenues are increasing, Internet media income from online advertising still remains very small. As comparative studies show, online journalists and editors are often using other kinds of publicly available information such as PR news, promotional writing, translations from other online information sources, rather than invest in development of original online journalism (Balčytienė & Harro-Loit 2006). Part of the reason is cost. Another is increased impact from new communication technologies on journalistic output. One of the biggest technological impacts on journalistic content production is the acceleration of dynamics in news cycle. The accelerated news cycle – the so-called 24/7 reporting model – and the pressure to fill the news hole online, allows less time for more serious reporting and fact-checking for journalists. Fast-changing news cycles cause more superficial use of sources and citations which highlights the “breaking news” character of news reporting. As a result, Internet media are considered one of the major news aggregators, with mixed discourses proliferating there.

Despite many drawbacks, a quality element in this complex situation with Internet media development is that conditions may be established for something entirely new to be born. On the Lithuanian Internet, for example, there are several online-only projects (Delfi.lt, Balsas.lt, Bernardinai.lt) where journalists and other public intellectuals enrich the information space by

writing analytical articles or critical reviews. In this way, it is said, online-only media in Lithuania fulfil the role of many dailies which, in contrast to Internet media, are not open to external contributors (Balčytienė & Harro-Loit 2006). For example, content analysis of two national dailies, *Lietuvos rytas* and *Respublika*, conducted in the period of 1988 to 2000, shows that the number of outside actors in both newspapers has undoubtedly decreased (Nevinskaitė 2006). The analysis of actor's quotes in both dailies shows increasing domination of political figures, highly increased amount of commercial and industry organizations while, in the same period, opinions of individual and non-profit organizations occupy less space. On the Internet, on the other hand, public intellectuals are very often hired to write analytical online commentaries. Thus, online-only media become a serious alternative to newspapers where journalists seldom have time for long investigation and full-scale reporting. In addition, users of online news media (online versions of traditional newspapers and online-only media) often write online responses, actively participate in all kinds of public forums and communities. No doubt the Internet creates more opportunities for audiences in the Baltic countries to communicate and participate.⁵

Based on the foregoing, we can say that there exists a wide spectrum of Internet media, offering diversity of opinions (by journalists, public intellectuals, ordinary citizens) – in short, social connectedness, reader involvement, variety of opinions presented online etc. All this may have an important effect on the further professionalization of journalists in Lithuania (and also in other Baltic countries). As is often pointed out, while TV journalists have to be prepared to be recognized in public, online journalists must be ready to be criticized in public. Whether Internet media in general and original online journalism in particular do indeed create new conditions for the media to become more accountable remains to be assessed through practical studies.

3. Media Policy Proposals – How to Cultivate Good Journalism

In the context of changes unfolding in the Baltic media markets, our main concern, therefore, is this: Do economic restructuring, changing relationships with news sources, technological renovation as well as other factors, in fact, lead to democratization in the Baltic States?

As has been demonstrated, the fact that media organizations are driven primarily by market and financial considerations has a clear impact on the type of journalism that is produced in the Baltic countries. Market-oriented journalism has, indeed, found its way into public communication. With business interests dominating in the media organizations, the room for independent and free journalism is reduced.

Given that the cost of serious news-gathering and reporting is extremely high in small media markets, some media cannot and will not afford them. Journalists gradually learn a more market-oriented style of journalism, treated by the management as a commodity, and promoting the trend towards hybrid media production. Good journalism still exists, but against a growing background of a different style of journalism.

There are several mechanisms to keep the performance of media and journalism professionalization under scrutiny.

First, news organizations and journalists are subjected to the country's laws: if the media violate these laws, they are taken to court. Second, codes of professional conduct and self-regulation institutions for the media, e.g., commissions, councils and ombudsman institutions⁶ have been introduced in many countries. The principal idea of self-regulation is that media themselves must preserve professional conduct and, in this way, boost their own accountability and authority.

In addition to legal acts and self-regulation, a very powerful instrument to check on the media is public control, i.e., its genuine and civic concern with the media, as well as public reflection and academic analysis of processes unfolding in the media. Thus, the third aspect of media's accountability is *media criticism*, which by producing quality and independent analysis can become a mechanism to watch effectively over the performance of the media (Harro-Loit & Balčytienė 2005). In some countries (for example, in Scandinavia) there is a long tradition of media watching over the media (especially the public service broadcaster): important media development issues are discussed among journalists and the public.⁷ In addition, a special type of supervision takes place within the media through an in-house ombudsman. It is not customary for mass media companies in the Baltic States to have their own codes of ethics; however, some of them do have such codes (e.g., the daily *Diena* in Latvia).

In short, then, various means exist to encourage and support journalists' responsibility and reduce the pressure of market-driven journalism.

In the public sphere, the interests of at least three agents – state, media and public – intersect.

According to figure 1, the laws regulating the activities of the mass media reflect the interests of the state. For example, legislation regulates the amount of advertising on TV, media concentration, etc. The media, as market entities, have their own interests and seek more and more freedom to pursue their business interests. Self-regulation is directly attributed to the sector, and, as an external factor, public criticism on mass media influence the information quality. The different strata of society also have their own interests, e.g., to receive reliable information, which is the backbone of democracy.

If one of the three agents gains undue influence, it is impossible to find a consensus. It is tempting to indicate that lack of 'public control' (i.e. of informed public debate) is the weakest link in this system, but that would not be entirely true. The media themselves are also very vulnerable. Media accountability is very weak. Driven by commercial interests, unresponsive to the broader issues of public concern, overemphasizing sensational issues, the media set a public

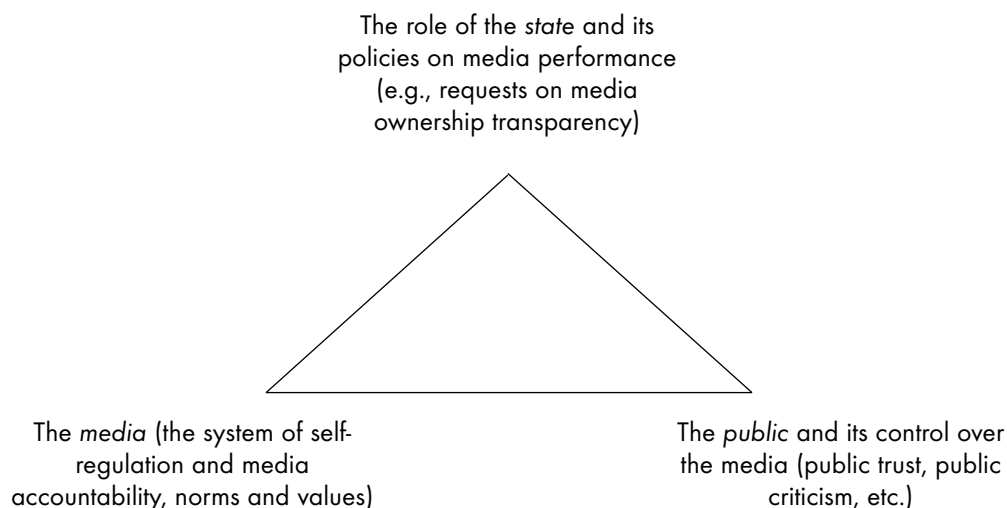


Figure 1: Main actors in the public sphere

agenda that is appropriate mainly for their own corporate interests. In addition, journalists themselves are reluctant to talk about the weaknesses of their profession. So it becomes obvious that the Nordic models of self-regulation⁸ cannot work without strong traditions of democratic journalism and adequate professional culture in society. The audience is not very critical of the media, either. Why, then, should the media care, if consumers are happy?

In this situation a crucial question remains what can be done, by whom and, if possible, how to improve the current situation and to preserve good journalism.

The following issues appear to be of crucial importance in the debate of media policy development.

First, it appears crucial to find the means to foster journalistic accountability. In this respect, analysis of media performance and journalism quality to increase *informed* public and academic debates about media performance is of major significance. By extending public as well as academic discourse on media matters and media performance, it would be possible to open up new themes, issues and involve new actors in the debate. Thus, the role of media literacy becomes crucial in increasing public awareness of critical concepts of journalism; an informed public also plays a role in helping journalists find a balance between autonomy and freedom on the one hand and accountability on the other.

In addition, the role of training and education of journalists seems to be of particular significance in promoting practical training of student journalists, while at the same time promoting analysis and reflection that is necessary for journalism professionals fully to understand the social repercussions of the way they practice their profession.

One more way to promote debate on media matters is by popularizing academic research results. In this respect, the situation seems to be the most auspicious in Estonia, with the highest number of journalism and communication academics. Until now the higher education reform in the Baltic countries and the system of ranking of academic publications did not motivate scholars to write in their national languages and, thus, to increase popular public discussion on media matters and to widen knowledge and understanding of critical media concepts. The adopted system of assessment of academic results should be shifted into a more democratic one which also accepts participation of academics in the public life, for example, by writing popular articles or participating in TV programmes or round-table discussions on matters of the media.

Public service broadcasters should also play a much bigger role in diversifying the information space. In their organization and media logic (to serve the public interest), public service broadcasters (PSB) have the potential to resist market pressures. PSB should become a standard-setter for other traditional and Internet media. In addition, with further diversification of the media usage forms and channels there emerges a need to discuss and to promote other forms of *public service media*.

Another possibility to correct “market failure” – when media fail adequately to serve their audiences by seeking to maximize their profits – seems to be the *public funding*. Public finance (by funding non-commercial media projects) has a particular potential in fostering and enhancing pluralism, diversity and quality in content provision. Since 2005, for example, any natural person in Lithuania may, under the Law on Income Tax of Individuals, transfer up to 2 per cent of the amount of the income tax paid to the state to any public or business organization. This has allowed public financing of some traditional media projects (such as monthlies and weeklies) as well as specialized news media online (such as Bernardinai.lt, as well as other online-only media projects).

Conclusion and Outlook

A number of important observations about the Baltic media's post-transitional change emerge from the above discussion.

In the past few years, the Baltic media have rapidly diversified along different commercial lines and interests. At the same time, and in spite of rapid changes, there has been very little public and academic discussion about structural changes in the media and about the new responsibilities of both media professionals and media owners. A more systematic approach to the assessment of Baltic journalism has taken place only recently (for example, in Lithuania) when media and journalism studies were discovered by other disciplines (political sciences, sociology and psychology) and included in their discourses as objects of their scholarly concern. However, despite the change of focus in journalism research, new questions are mainly addressed in research articles, project reports and graduate theses, while a more thorough analysis of journalism is still missing. The conventional media, too, have gradually learned to "commercialize" media-related news by focusing on media business matters (mergers and acquisitions).

We have argued here that there is a tendency towards media convergence and homogenization of journalism and that the Lithuanian media (as well as the media in Latvia and Estonia) are not excluded from this general trend. The media in the Baltics are continuously affected by media concentration and news commercialization. The new technologies strongly influence the development of journalism as well. Professional media practice reveals that journalists spend more time and effort on the management of news (i.e., selection and presentation of information) than on preparing interviews or planning news reports.

To look for the reasons for the deterioration of contemporary journalism, we have looked into the liberal media policy as determining the hyper-commercialization of news, as well as the shifting values towards more hybrid and more entertaining reporting, the changing news cycles of reporting and the "breaking news" character of reporting which affects journalism, and the ongoing changes in political professionalization of sources which again has an impact on changes in reporting style and political news quality.

After examining the three factors and in particular their impact on journalism, we conclude that hybrid media and cheap journalism (cheap in many ways – in terms of the costs involved and as more entertainment-oriented) are on the rise in the Baltic States. Conventional genres belonging to journalism are being extensively used for other (promotional or political) purposes. Although this trend may look as universal it brings special challenges in a small news market. More issues need to be taken under critical assessment: for example, the growing power of news sources as determining the news agenda-setting function of the media needs to be clarified.

There is no need to stop media commercialization. Rather, it is important to find adequate means to open up the media field to other actors (media professionals, public intellectuals as well as the general public) to critically assess its structural changes, changing news values, general development and professionalization. Another avenue is to develop popularized professional discourse on media performance, thus enabling informed public usage of critical concepts such as news diversity, media concentration, commercialization, homogenization, marketization etc. In a secularized society, media discussion may attract wider public attention if it is presented in a way that is interesting to ordinary people. This skill should be acquired in journalism schools. Media scholarship should be discussed not in a banal, but interesting, way, which is one more challenge for comparative media studies to take into account.

Notes

1. If compared to the situation of few years ago, today media in Lithuania and Estonia is already more controlled by foreign multimedia groups (Schibsted from Norway with investments in newspaper, magazines and free dailies publishing) and local industrialists (very often having political alliances).
2. In Lithuania, requirements for political advertising and the procedure for announcing and designating it in the media is laid down by the Law on Funding of Political Parties and Political Campaigns and Control over the Funding (law enacted in 2004).
3. For comparison, see interview with Dainius Radzevičius, the Chairman of Lithuanian Journalists' Union, in the book *The Impact of Media Concentration on Professional Journalism*, published by OSCE 2003 (Dohnanyi & Moller 2003).
4. The European Commission's 6th Framework Programme project, "AIM – Adequate Information Management in Europe" (2004–2007), deals with mainstream journalism (in general) and specific news production processes (European information selection, analysis, editing, presentation) resulting in EU coverage in mass media (in particular) of eleven countries in Europe. Project website is <http://www.aim-project.net>.
5. Research study conducted in four geographically different countries in Europe (Italy, Bulgaria, Ireland and Estonia) confirms that online readers in Estonia (also in other Baltic countries) are very active online responses writers, while elsewhere such practice is rather marginal (Fortunati et al. 2005). A hypothesis whether Lithuanians and Estonians are active participants in online news commenting because traditional mass media (e.g., newspapers) in those countries restricts outside authors needs to be tested in other practical studies.
6. The number of councils and the functions that are delegated to them differ from country to country. In Lithuania, for example, there is an institution of ombudsman (Inspector of Journalist Ethics) as well as the Ethics Commission. In Estonia, two councils currently watch over the media. Different from Estonia and Lithuania, Latvia, so far, has no press council or other structure carrying out the according tasks. The idea has not come further than to discussions among Latvian journalists about the need of having a structure that among other things would have to evaluate ethical issues related to the media (cf. Dimants 2004).
7. For instance, in several Scandinavian countries there are programmes on both TV and radio where journalists discuss about the developments and changes in the media sector such as media concentration, crime journalism, sponsorship of TV programmes etc. Such "media watch" programmes create public forums, increase public knowledge and open journalistic profession to critical reviews from outside.
8. Lithuanian self-regulation system, "imported" from Sweden and Estonian, is a mixture of Finnish and Norwegian traditions (for more information, see Rossland 2005).

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