

# Latvia - Media Landscape

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## Overview

Latvia is at the high end of the World Press Freedom Index being in 24<sup>th</sup> place among 180 countries in 2016. This is a remarkable achievement for a country that only 25 years ago was in the grip of totalitarian rule. Latvia is a post-Soviet state

having regained independence in 1991. Since then, there have been fundamental changes of political, economic and social nature that have turned a former Soviet colony into a democratic country with a market economy.

Taking into account the size of the market, Latvia's media can be considered well-developed. At the same time, the immense competition created by the small and fragmented local media market, coupled with pressure from Russia, which is increased by the lack of language barriers, can sometimes have a negative impact on the quality of content.

The challenges of a small market and outer pressure have been especially marked in recent years, taking into account the technological advances and media globalisation tendencies. Domestic media have not only to compete with each other for audiences but also with global market players. A small market cannot ensure such conditions whereby the Latvian media can operate fully and develop without support mechanisms. At the same time, this is not only a Latvian or Baltic phenomenon, as most European states also have various kinds of support mechanisms for the media.

On 8 November 2016 the government adopted Latvia's Media Policy Guidelines for 2016–2020 and the accompanying action plan. These are the first media policy planning documents in Latvia. The five core directions are aimed at strengthening media diversity, media quality and responsibility, professionalism, media literacy and the resilience of the media environment.

During the drafting of the media guidelines, the experts involved identified the need to support the domestic media, both the media themselves and the journalists so that they could maintain high editorial standards and produce interesting content of high quality. In order to strengthen the regional media, in 2016 the State Culture Capital Foundation in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture implemented a targeted programme for the media in Latgale. Nine quality journalism development projects on various media platforms are supported through a tendering process. More financial support for the production of high quality content of public importance is envisaged for 2017 and future years.

Changes in media consumption patterns have led to larger audiences for Internet media but consumption of the printed press has fallen, which is also reflected in their advertising revenues. Possible reasons are the small market, low purchasing power, competition with Internet media and the shrinking population, especially in the regions. The continued existence of the printed press as a source of diversity of opinion and bedrock of the Latvian language and culture is under threat. Nevertheless, the press is still regarded as an important source of information, especially on local and regional events. During the subscription campaign for the year 2017, 398,722 periodical subscriptions were made, 76 percent of them in the countryside, as disclosed by Latvia's postal service Latvijas Pasts. The percentage of homes with Internet access should also be taken into account. In the capital Riga 76 percent of households have Internet access but in the Latgale region this is less – 65 percent.

The audience has become fragmented and diffuse in terms of various interests. Consumption of non-linear media content is increasing. This is fuelled by interactive television archives, the online availability of television broadcasting and other facilities. Social media have widened the traditional sphere of journalistic activities and added new formats to the media environment such as blogging and citizen journalism. In this way the traditional media are competing not only with the websites of other traditional media but also with new forms – social media and information search engines. Journalists have partly lost their once-exclusive function as transmitters of information.

In recent years the mass media have experienced a rapid loss of consumer trust. One possible reason may be the growth in media literacy, which has resulted in information being evaluated and analysed more critically. A survey conducted by SKDS in December 2016 found that over half of the respondents had trust in radio and television but less than half trusted the press and Internet portals. Still, a 40 percent level of trust is something that Latvian government institutions and political parties can only dream about.

Latvia was struck by a serious economic crisis in 2008, which not only led to dramatic national budget cuts for education,

healthcare and social needs but also dealt a serious blow to the media. Year 2009 was a terribly difficult one for the media. As advertising revenues and the purchasing power of local residents both diminished, the media had to cut costs. Journalists were laid off, wages were trimmed, some publications disappeared but others merged. There were ownership changes and the quality of journalism also suffered because of the sudden and unaccustomed changes. The government subsidy for the public media was cut substantially. The volume of the advertising market and the ability of the Latvian media to do business fell sharply. The advertising market has still not reached pre-crisis levels (€94m in 2007, €49m in 2012, €76m in 2014 and €77m in 2015). The greatest decrease was felt by the printed press. For example their advertising market fell from €37m in 2007 to €10m in 2013 and stood at €11m in 2015. Nevertheless, the advertising market, albeit by only a few percentage points, is showing signs of recovery.

# Media

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## Print

The print media in Latvia have always been held in high regard. The first newspaper, *Rigische Montags* (later *Donnerstags*) *Ordinari Post-Zeitung* (later *Rigische Novellen*) appeared in 1680, only to be closed down by the Great Northern War soon thereafter. The paper re-emerged only in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, newspapers played an important role in shaping public opinion, ensuring national and social emancipation, promoting social and political changes, and in establishing the new Republic of Latvia. A particularly impressive phenomenon in the 20<sup>th</sup> century history of the Latvian media was the newspaper *Jaun?k?s Zi?as* (1911-1940), which was hugely popular and influential. In the late 1930s, it had a circulation of 250,000, or approximately one copy per eight residents of the country.

After the occupation of Latvia in 1940, many people working in journalism were killed or repressed. While Latvia was in the Soviet Union, it was fully subject to the Soviet press system. The most important newspapers were those of the Communist Party and the Komsomol (Communist youth movement), published both in Latvian and in Russian. During the era of perestroika and the independence drive (*Atmoda*), which led to the restoration of independent statehood, newspapers and magazines had an enormous audience and enjoyed a great deal of trust. In the early 1990s, the press system was restructured, and there were changes in the audience. The media quickly had to learn how to exist under a democratic system and in a market economy.

In Latvia the state supports the publication and availability of the press in various ways. The Postal Law envisages delivery of subscribed press publications as a universal service until the end of 2019. It also envisages compensation in those cases where delivery costs result in net losses. For example, in 2013, the delivery of the subscribed press in countryside regions created losses for €4.29m but in the first half of 2014, the losses amounted to €1.8m. Latvia's postal service *Latvijas Pasts* was compensated by the government for these losses from the state budget. This ensures the delivery of the subscribed print media also to Latvia's remote and sparsely populated locations.

It should be noted that, since 2011, *Latvijas Pasts* has gone over to a five-day working week for press publications and no longer delivers on Saturdays. As a result publishers ceased publishing newspapers on Saturdays, which led to changes in the regularity of newspaper publishing for many editorial offices as well as in the routine of journalism.

Another form of support for the print media is the lower VAT rate. Until 2008 the rate was 5 percent but from 1 January 2009 it was raised to 10 percent and since 2011 it is 12 percent. However, this support is not sufficient to ensure the sustainability

of the print media. In some member States of the EU the rate is lower still and even 0 percent in some cases.

From 2007 till 2013 the annual circulation of newspapers fell by 60 percent and for newspapers in the Latvian language it fell by almost one half (47 percent). During this period the circulation of periodicals in the Latvian language fell by one fifth. The fall in consumption of daily newspapers is explained mainly by the free 24/7 availability of news on the Internet, including on smart phones. Other factors are a falling population and changes in media consumption patterns. The consumption of newspapers is also falling among the senior population. This may also be influenced by the cost of an annual subscription, around €100. Although there have been suggestions for newspapers to be reoriented basically towards analytical journalism or to be published every other day, up to now no radical and effective steps have been taken to retain readers.

Three national dailies are published in the Latvian language – *Diena* (published by Dienas Mediji), *Latvijas Avīze* (Lauku Avīze) and *Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze* (Mediju Nams). In terms of ownership and editorial management they experienced changes in 2015 and 2016 but these have not affected the editorial line in a major way, at least for now. Further changes might possibly be observed with the approach of local government elections in June 2017 and parliamentary elections in October 2018.

Currently *Vesti Segodnya* (Media Nams Vesti) is the only daily newspaper published in the Russian language. In 2013 its staff announced that it may no longer be published because they hadn't been paid for several months. It continues to survive although circulation is relatively low (14,000 in 2014). The newspaper says it sets out to inform about what is important in Latvia and the world, to help solve everyday living problems, like saving money etc. However, media experts point out that the newspaper is partly responsible for social divisiveness because its content, especially in previous years, tended to be biased, pitting the Russian speaking population against Latvians.

In 2014 the print version of the Russian language business newspaper *Bizness&Baltija* ceased publication (it continues to operate as a news portal). Media expert and researcher Anda Rožukalne points out that journalists who have been working in the media in the Russian language until recently, are experiencing first shrinks in the labour market before their very eyes. After the concentration of the Russian language press in 2012 (when the three largest newspapers *Vesti Segodnya*, *Chas*, *Telegraf* came into the hands of a single owner), *Vesti Segodnya* is the only one that remains with its supplements. In terms of audience, it is surpassed by *MK – Latvija*, published by Baltic Media Alliance. Russian language journalism can still be found in some magazines, for example, the women's magazine *Lyublyu!*, radio stations and website of the MixMedia Group, public service media, some news portals and in the regional media.

In 2015, 252 newspaper titles were published (204 in Latvian, 41 in Russian). Important to note is that 123 of them were informative publications of local government. Data by market research company Kantar TNS shows that in 2016 there have been changes in the top five newspapers according to average audience per one edition. The first three places remained the same – the weekly *MK Latvija* (Russian), the TV guides *Televizor/MK Latvija* (Russian) and *Latviiskaya TV-Programma* (Russian) but there was a change in the fourth place which was taken by the daily *Latvijas Avīze*. The Russian language weekly *Latviiskije Vesti* came fifth.

In the winter of 2016 an average of 90 percent of the Latvian population aged 15 – 74 had read or skimmed through at least one of the last six issues of a press publication. Daily newspapers are not among the most widely read types of media. In 2016 Latvia's inhabitants mostly read or skimmed through weekly publications (52 percent of the population), monthlies (46 percent) and the regional press (33 percent). The figure for daily newspapers is only 12 percent. Compared with the early months of 2010, one survey found that 31 percent of respondents had read or skimmed a daily newspaper in the preceding week. Regional newspapers were read or skimmed more often, by 46 percent of respondents in the survey.

For approximately half a century, the regional press has been quite popular in Latvia. The daily press has lost subscribers

since the turn of the century but, in most cases, the regional newspapers have not. Around 2008–2010, the situation with regional newspapers changed with the reforms of administrative boundaries that replaced 482 parishes and 26 districts with 109 administrative districts (novads). Nevertheless, newspapers retained the communities of readers of regional newspapers. For example, the one-time Balvi region newspaper *Vaduguns* now positions itself as a newspaper of Northern Latgale. The situation is also influenced by an aging population and emigration, which is leading to a fall in the population, particularly in rural territories.

The private regional newspaper *Novadnieks* ceased publication in 2016 because of economic hardship. Two regional newspapers *Zemgales Ziņas* and *Kursas Laiks* reduced their periodicity and became weeklies. The owners plan to strengthen the digital platforms of these media where readers will be able to keep abreast of current affairs but the newspapers will become more and more analytical.

In 2016 there was a heated debate on whether local government informative publications (financed from public resources) should be allowed to carry commercial advertising, thus reducing possible advertising revenues of private regional media. In order to ensure diversity of opinion it is important that in Latvia's provinces and towns journalistic content should not only be available via the local government informative publications but also via newspapers independent of the municipality. At the same time, however, it should be emphasised that the content and quality of the private local press needs to be improved. Because representatives of journalism and local government understand the notion of commercial advertising, public relations with local governments, the necessary work, and the amount and methods of informing the public, discussions among the sector should continue with the aim of improving the legal regime, by defining the relevant terms and areas of competence more precisely.

In 2005 a new and initially successful element of the media world appeared in Latvia – free newspapers. The leading one was established in 2005, and it was called *5min*. The newspaper was published by Dienas Mediji in both Latvian and Russian and was distributed on the street and on public transport. Although in 2005 experts predicted that the readership and volume of advertising for the free newspapers *5min* and *Rītdiena* would increase, because of their dependence entirely on advertising and of the economic crisis, both papers folded a few years later.

Magazines have a larger readership than newspapers. During the period of economic growth between 2001 and 2007, the number of titles and overall circulation expanded very rapidly. Magazines became part of the consumer culture that flourished and was enjoyed in post-Soviet society. Since the economic crisis began, the number of magazine titles has dropped by 14 percent, while circulation figures have fallen by 23 percent. In 2015 there were 322 magazines (254 in Latvian, 20 in English and 33 in Russian). Compared with the years before the crisis, the number of magazine titles has fallen (2008 – 431 titles, 2009 – 370), but in recent years their number has remained relatively stable.

A Kantar TNS study shows that Latvia's inhabitants mostly consume weekly publications. On average, 52 percent of Latvia's inhabitants aged between 15 and 74 have read or skimmed a weekly publication at least once a week. Monthlies are in second place (45 percent). However, magazine readership has also fallen. For example, a survey conducted in the spring of 2010 found that 68 percent of respondents had read or skimmed a weekly magazine, while 45 percent had done so with a monthly magazine.

In Latvia there are many similar publications intended for a wide audience (including men's and women's magazines too). Magazines about the lives of celebrities are popular and there are many titles on practical advice. Magazines dealing with psychology, astrology, literature, theatre, money, business and other themes have also found their niche. Even individual narrowly specialised publications have managed to become very successful and in high demand. A study by the research centre SKDS, in 2016, found that magazines dedicated to hobbies, advice and health are growing in popularity among

readers. One quarter of the population admit that in the last five years, they have most often bought this type of magazine. Science and history magazines have also become more popular. 80 percent of respondents thought that magazines are a convenient way to find out what is new regarding cultural events, household goods and electronics as well as beauty and perfumery. Moreover, readers willingly examine attractive advertising on the pages of magazines. This study confirmed that magazines are read mostly by women between the ages of 35 to 64 who live in rural areas. Magazines are read both by people with secondary and higher education.

Readers have distinctly favourable attitudes toward magazines which, particularly in terms of consumer magazines, are seen as friends, allies, supporters and advisors in all life situations, particularly problematic ones. Kantar TNS data show that in 2016, the top five of most-read magazines has not changed for the fourth year in a row. The five most read magazines by average audience for one issue are the weekly women's magazine *Ieva*, the weekly gossip and celebrity magazines *Privē? Dzēve* and *Kas Jauns*, the fortnightly *Ievas Stēsti* and the monthly food magazine *Ievas Virtuve*. Four of them are published by Santa. The leading magazine publishers in Latvia are Santa, Rigas Viēi, Lilita, Dienas Žurnēli and Cits Medijs. The latter also publishes the magazine *Ir*, which came out in 2010 after several journalists left the newspaper *Diena* to create a new media platform following a change of ownership in 2009. The first issue had to be reprinted in order to satisfy the large demand. The owners of *Ir* are the staff and several business people. Key content is politics, economics, culture, investigation and analysis, success stories and outstanding personalities.

Since the economic crisis began, the press is currently not a profitable business. Under tough economic conditions, advertising revenues have plummeted. Publishers have had to absorb losses and stop investments. The dependency of the press on other income and owners has been on the rise. Several magazines ceased publication in 2016 – the healthy lifestyle magazine *Shape*, men's magazine *FHM* and *National Geographic*. The long-running children's magazines *Ezis* (since 1991) and *Zēlēte* (since 1958) also saw their last issues. The teenage magazine *Sērups* with its 15 year history was closed in 2016. These processes confirm the transition of media consumption by younger audiences to other formats as well as the general decline in the children's and teenage demographic.

A couple of years ago Latvia's *Playboy* ceased publication. Its licence had expired and the Latvian publishers Dienas Žurnēli decided not to continue with it as the printing costs were much greater than the revenues. Other press publications have also been terminated. However, media experts do not see this as a crisis in the Latvian magazine market as it is still highly saturated. Newcomers to the magazine market in Latvia are bookazines or illustrated magazine books, which have become popular since their entry in 2014. They are published irregularly and dedicated to individual themes (handbooks). They are characterised by good design and compilations of information about a particular subject. On occasion they have had to be reprinted. There have been various themes from style and fashion, bathroom or kitchen design to recipes by famous chefs. There are also regularly published bookazines such as the biannual *Benji Newman*, whose slogan is "a life that you can read". It has been published by Agnese Kleina since 2014.

## Radio

Experimental radio broadcasts began in Latvia in the early 1920s, but *Latvijas Radio* (Radio Latvia) was established only in 1925. It was the 19<sup>th</sup> radio station in Europe to start broadcasting and initially it had 331 subscribers. During its first six months, Radio Latvia transmitted only for two hours a day, in the evenings. Gradually it increased its airtime while also expanding the range of genres. Original news reports appeared and Radio Latvia also had an educational function. The content was cosmopolitan, because musical recordings were widely available and the radio station was seen as a window to the world – a station which did not have to popularise domestic culture. On 1 May 1940, the radio station had 156,568 subscribers. During the Nazi and Soviet occupations and annexation, Radio Latvia became a propaganda tool.

The “golden era” for Radio Latvia, as far as many people are concerned, was the drive for Latvia’s independence (Atmoda) in the late 1980s and early 1990s. During the days of January 1991, when people erected barricades to protect key government buildings, the radio played a seminal role in helping to organise and manage non-violent resistance. People were glued to their radio sets for several days in a row.

Once the independence of Latvia was restored, private radio channels began to emerge. *Radio Sigulda* was the first private music radio station, first broadcasting in May 1991. Larger audiences were found in 1993 when *Radio SWH* was established.

In 2014 there were 69 radio stations in Latvia 2014. There are seven major players in the radio market: public service radio Radio Latvia and the private undertakings *Mediju Grupa Super FM*, *Radio SWH*, *Radio Skonto*, *Star FM*, *MIX Media Group* and the *Silver Group*.

The top three radio stations in autumn 2016 were *Radio Latvia 2* (20.7 percent share), *Radio Skonto* (12.3 percent) and *Radio Latvia 1* (7.9 percent) followed by *Radio SWH*, Eiropas Hitu Radio (EHR), *Star FM* and the rest. There are popular radio stations in Latvia’s regions, including *Radio TEV*, *Ef-Ei*, *Alise+*. On the whole and especially in Riga, the Latvian radio station market is highly fragmented and saturated. Characteristic too is the overlap of radio station audiences – people tend to switch from one station to another. The format chosen by radio stations is fairly homogeneous – mixed-type programming focused on entertainment, popular music, news reports and brief discussions. This is probably because of the need to attract as broad an audience as possible in order to maximise advertising revenue.

Radio’s share of the Latvian media advertising market in 2015 was 12 percent. Compared with 2014, this represented a fall of 5 percent because there were no Latvian or European parliamentary election campaigns attracting more listeners.

Towards the end of 2014 amendments to the Law on Electronic Media (LEM) were adopted that obliged radio stations whose licenses envisaged at least 50 percent of transmission time in the Latvian language to go over to 100 percent transmission in Latvian from 1 January 2016. This became a hot topic in 2015. After a major conflict within the radio industry and in order to prevent threats to the security of the information space and not subject the Russian language radio market to unpredictable fluctuations, parliament decided to allow radio stations whose licences envisaged 50/50 airtime in Latvian and foreign languages to choose the language of transmission from 2016. Other amendments to the LEM came into force on 1 January 2016 including the obligation of radio stations to fill at least 90 percent of weekly airtime with their own content. The aim was to promote domestically produced content and to restrict surreptitious retransmission that has the potential of disseminating propaganda.

During the 1990s there were changes in terms of people’s radio consumption patterns. In 1994 the average listener spent three hours with the radio on, while in 2016, the duration was up to 4.5 hours. Listening to the radio happens mostly at home, in the car or at work. People began to use the radio for background music. Back in the mid-1990s, the largest audiences were attracted at noon and during the afternoon. Nowadays people listen more to the radio during the working week than at weekends, especially during weekdays from 08.00 till 13.00. According to Kantar TNS, in autumn 2016, 81 percent of the Latvian population had listened to the radio at least once a week but 62 percent had listened at least once a day, just as many as in 2009.

There are several Internet sites which list national, regional and Internet-based radio stations among them *Eradio.lv* and *Visiradio.lv*. These services, like the websites of individual stations, are also used by Latvians who are living and working abroad to listen to live broadcasts.

Public service broadcasts on six stations: *LR1* broadcasts general content and positions itself as the information leader. *LR2*

plays Latvian popular music 24 hours a day while *LR3* is a classical music station and *LR4* is aimed at national minority audiences and broadcasts mainly in Russian. Radio *Pieci.lv* is a youth orientated multimedia platform whereas *LR6 (Radio Naba)* offers listeners alternative music and other content.

In 2014 a three-person board was elected to run Radio Latvia instead of the usual single director general. In an open letter, the staff of Latvijas Radio expressed their opinion that the best chairman had not been chosen in competition. Although at the time the board had expressed its support for a unified public service media (a merger of Radio Latvia and Latvia's Television), at the political level this idea has been put on hold for now.

In the media sector the arrival of radio *Pieci.lv* and its operation is still controversial. In 2013 the Saeima (parliament) allocated almost €1.9m to the new radio station *Pieci.lv* for the period 2014-2017. The station's development concept envisaged a target audience of young people between the ages of 15 and 30 and planned to achieve a reach of at least 100,000 listeners. Other media actors regularly point out that the newly established station has not reached its objective and call for an evaluation of the usefulness of the subsidy. For example, at the end of 2016, an initiative had reached Saeima committees to withdraw the €130,000 subsidy to radio *Pieci.lv* from the 2017 budget and award it to other stations. In the end, financing for the formation of a commercial radio platform for popular Latvian music was awarded from contingency resources.

For three years now, before Christmas radio *Pieci.lv* organises the charity marathon "Dod pieci!" (Give me five!) where the station plays songs requested by listeners in return for a donation of at least €5. Every year a particular social problem is targeted – the welfare of lonely senior citizens, rehabilitation of cancer sufferers and so on. This charity event has become very popular and attracts large public participation. For example, in 2016 listeners donated the sum of €190,910.45.

Radio in general is becoming more and more multimedia in character; There are free mobile applications allowing one to listen to the radio without a radio receiver.

In light of the current geopolitical situation and the Russian annexation of Crimea, in recent years reception of the public service media in the eastern border areas has been improved. In 2016 Radio Latvia opened its Latgale multimedia studio in Rēzekne. Its task is to provide a flow of regional information to all the Radio Latvia stations and to create content for the public service media portal *LSM.lv*. Saeima allocated 155 000 euros for the operations of the Rēzekne studio. The justification for the studio was that neighbouring country TV channels are freely available in Latgale and the inhabitants are subject to biased information and interpretations of national, international, social and other processes. That is why it is necessary to provide inhabitants living in the border regions with reliable and trustworthy information about current events in Latvia and the world at large. How effective the studio operations have been will be known after a year.

There has been a convergence in media outlets in terms of radio and TV formats. *Latvijas Radio* and *Radio SWH* offer a webcam view of one of its broadcasting studios. A radio station in the Latgale region that broadcast in the Latgalian language or dialect found itself in financial difficulties a few years ago. It introduced some religious programming into its format, and it has actually been able to stay on air only because of the new shareholder which owns 99 percent of its shares – the Rēzekne and Aglona diocese of the Roman Catholic Church. One of the most important events in the radio environment in 2010 was the opening of a new radio station, *Open Radio 101*, which was established by former employees of *Radio SWH* and also offered an Internet-based webcam view of its studio. In 2013 some of the staff left the station to become the core of Latvian Radio's *Radio 5*. *Open Radio 101* continued to broadcast for a time with other radio personalities but eventually closed. Its financial problems began after the crash of its creditors Latvijas Krājbanka.

On 15 December 2016, the Latvian State Radio and Television Centre (LSRTC) and Radio Latvia officially began testing



digital radio broadcasting in Riga. In summer 2017 LSRTC plans to provide the initial calculations of the costs of introducing digital audio broadcasting (DAB+) and transmission throughout the territory of Latvia.

## Television

“This evening we are beginning an experimental broadcast on Riga Television. Today you will see the movie *M?jup ar uzvaru* (Homeward with Victory).” Those were the words that launched the first television broadcast in Latvia on 6 November 1954. Latvia was the first of the three Soviet Baltic republics to have its own television station. Before that, television broadcasts in the USSR had been available only in Moscow, Leningrad and Kyiv. Colour broadcasting on Riga TV began in 1974.

The first private television stations appeared in Latvia shortly after the restoration of the country's independence in 1991. In 2010, Latvia switched from analogue to digital terrestrial TV broadcasting. Analogue broadcasting was switched off in all of Latvia on 1 June, and people needed a decoder or a TV set with an installed MPEG4 format decoder to see television programmes made in Latvia. It is still possible to watch Russian and Belarusian TV programmes without a decoder in some eastern border regions .

A substantial re-division of the television audience occurred in the early 1990s, when imported satellite dishes (bringing foreign television channels) first became available.

In 2015 95.6 percent of households in Latvia had a television set and on average, 19.1 percent of them used digital terrestrial broadcasting but 4.2 percent watched only the free-to-air channels. There are five free-to-air channels – the public service channels LTV1 and LTV7 and the private channels Re:TV, Riga TV24 and Sportacentrs.com.

In 2016 the average television viewer spent 4 hours and 48 minutes in front of the screen each day – 22 minutes less than in 2015. The most watched linear TV service in 2016 was TV3 with an 11 percent share. It is followed by LTV1 (9.5 percent), PBK (9.3 percent), NTV Mir Baltic (7.7 percent), LNT (7.4 percent), Rossiya RTR, (3.5 percent), REN TV Baltic (3.1 percent) and 3+ (2.9 percent). The channels LTV7 and TV6 each had a 2.6 percent share of total viewing time.

The most popular TV programme in 2016 was the final of the *61<sup>st</sup> International Eurovision Song Contest*, which was watched by almost 12 percent of the population. Special media events attract a large viewership and 32 of the top 40 programmes were aired only once. Kantar TNS has found that the most popular regularly aired broadcasts are dominated by the shows *Es m?lu tevi*, *Latvija!* and *Izklausies redz?ts*, Latvian serials *Ugunsgrieks* and *Sapl?st? kr?ze*, and the programmes *Nek? Person?ga* and *Bez Tabu*.

TV3 has been the most popular channel for the last six years. It is owned by MTG TV Latvia that also has the TV channels LNT, TV6 and *Kan?ls 2*, the radio station *Star FM*, the largest video portal in Latvia *TVPlay* as well as the news and entertainment portal *Skaties.lv*. Rossiya RTR experienced the biggest drop in viewing time due to a six-months ban on its retransmission in Latvia.

Among the leading cable television operators in Latvia are Baltkom and Latttelecom, while Viasat is the leading provider of satellite services.

Incumbent telecoms operator Latttelecom has also entered the television services market alongside its Internet services. In 2014 it was the first in Europe to set up a pop-up TV channel *Positivus TV* dedicated to the Positivus music festival. In one and a half months it was watched by 130,000 households. After several of these pop-up channel ventures, in 2015 Latttelecom started offering its own permanent channels *360TV* and *STV Pirm?*, which is intended for a female audience.

Mobile telephone operator LMT has created the LMT Straume application for smart devices offering live streaming from

sports, cultural and arts events, conferences etc. The full LMT Straume service is available only to LMT clients on the LMT network.

In 2016 mobile telephone operator Tele2 began its new television and video service – *Open Television*. Users can choose packages and applications with access to a broad range of TV shows and films. With a streaming device the content of any application can be easily transferred from a phone to a television or any other large screen. LMT also began to offer its clients smart television in 2016.

The popularity of Internet based catch-up TV services such as *TVPlay.lv* and *Replay.lv* is also growing. That 4.4 percent of the population have no TV set at home is not only because of financial hardship but also a conscious decision. Fewer and fewer people arrange their lives around the TV schedule, preferring to watch recordings on the Internet or taking advantage of the service provider's TV archive function. In recent years, advances in technology have brought an increasing development of non-linear consumption of television programmes. Kantar TNS figures show that in 2016 5.5 percent of the population has watched television on a time-shifted basis.

Latvia's inhabitants like to use several types of media in parallel. In 2012, one third surfed the web while watching TV and discussed what they'd seen on social networks. Taking into account that in August 2015, 698,000 users had had used the Internet on their mobile phones, the number of people consuming various media simultaneously could be higher.

Information gathered by the Latvian security services and strategic communications researchers shows that for many years now, the Latvian media environment is being used to disseminate tendentious information about Latvia that has been either created in or initiated by Russia. These actions are intended to influence public opinion, and undermine national pride and identity thus presenting a threat to Latvia's statehood. The leading Russian television channels are one of the most effective instruments to reach wide audiences across borders. For Russian speakers in Latvia, television is the main source of information about events in Latvia (77.4 percent), elsewhere in the world (76 percent), in Russia (78.1 percent). The most watched TV channels by Latvia's Russian-speaking audience are *Pirmais Baltijas Kanāls (PBK)*, *NTV Mir Baltic* and *Rossiya RTR*, which belong wholly or partly to Russian owners.

In 2014-2015 there was an idea to create a Latvian (or even pan-Baltic) TV channel for the Russian-speaking population with trustworthy content and quality journalism. Unlike Estonia, that founded the *ETV+* channel, in Latvia the idea did not take off – the powers in place were not convinced that the considerable financial investment required would reach the objective of the channel to be able to compete with the offer of Russian channels and attract the Russian-speaking audience. This issue was raised again in March 2016 when, because of financial considerations, *MTG TV Latvia* closed its Russian language channel *TV5*, which, incidentally, also had its own news service. Although public service channel *LTV7* has a Russian-language news service producing news and analytical programmes, the closure of *TV5*, which had reasonably good ratings, was a relatively serious blow for the Latvian media environment. Its audience share was around 4 percent and most likely these viewers have now gone over to consuming content produced in third countries.

There were 25 television operators in Latvia at the end of 2009, the largest number in recent years. In 2013 the number of regional and national TV channels had fallen to 18.

Latvian Television, which is Latvia's public broadcaster, offers two channels: *LTV1* has an emphasis on informative broadcasts and analytical, children's and cultural programmes, *LTV7*, on the other hand, is more focused on sports, youth programming and entertainment, and programmes in Russian language. *LTV7* is criticised for not being clearly positioned and thus its audience share is relatively low (2.6 percent). Its share increases in those months when it broadcasts important events. For example, in 2014 *LTV7* had a 5 percent share because it transmitted the Sochi Winter Olympics and the Football World Cup finals.

Latvian Television is a state-owned limited liability company. Approximately 60 percent of its financing comes from the state budget. The company earns the rest of its income autonomously through advertising. In 2015 there was a debate over whether public service media should leave the advertising market but this idea was put on hold because of uncertainty about the possibility of the state to ensure compensation. In order to cover the loss in revenue from advertising, the amount of subsidy required in compensation from the state budget would be around €8m.

Television stations are owned by several groups of companies, one being the Modern Times Group whose affiliate MTG TV Latvia owns *TV3*, *TV6*, *TV2* and *LNT*. In 2012 the Competition Council decided to allow MTG Broadcasting AB to acquire *AS Latvijas Neatkarīgā Televīzija*, which then owned the *LNT* and *TV5* channels. Because the acquisition would lead to a serious increase in concentration, the Competition Council imposed binding conditions to prevent harm to competition, protect advertisers, TV content distributors and protect the interests of the end consumers – the viewers.

In 2015 television had 43 percent of the advertising market (just as in 2014). Although the Internet share is growing (19 percent), television remained the market leader in terms of advertising share.

## Digital Media

The Internet media environment in Latvia began to undergo intensive expansion in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first news portal, *Delfi.lv*, appeared in November 1999. Over the course of the next year, the *Tvnet.lv* and *Apollo.lv* portals were opened, all privately owned. Initially the portals did not specialise, but the most important innovation in Latvia's media arena was the possibility to leave anonymous comments under published articles and to engage in debate. The aforementioned portals remain leaders in terms of hits. In 2010, *Delfi.lv* was visited by just under 670,000 users (450,000 for *Tvnet.lv* and 424,000 for *Apollo.lv*). By contrast, Latvia's most popular Internet site, *Inbox.lv*, was visited 800,000 times in May 2010.

The statistics for 2016 show that the number of Internet portal visitors has grown and the popularity of the sites has changed. The top ten were *Delfi.lv* (921,974), then came the e-mail service provider *Inbox.lv* (889,277), *Tvnet.lv/Apollo.lv* (885,796) followed by the Latvian social media *Draugiem.lv*, entertainment site *Skaties.lv*, celebrity and rumour site *Kasjauns.lv*, e-shopping comparison site *Salīdzini.lv*, public service media portal *Lsm.lv*, the portal of newspaper *Latvijas Avīze* and lastly the information site *1188.lv*.

In 2015 the number of users accessing the Internet on their mobile phones grew by 46 percent and on tablet PCs by 39 percent. According to Gemius Audience figures, the average monthly time spent on the Internet was 16 hours from computers, 4 hours from mobile phones and 1.5 hours from tablet PCs. The first Internet versions of Latvia's press publications began to appear in the early 2000s with newspapers initially fully or partially presenting their print content. Later they started to offer updated news and additional sections (video, photos, user's content, blogs, etc). Still, most of the content on newspaper portals continues to involve republishing of print materials or annotations.

Internet portal visitor numbers show that news portals with their independent editorial teams (the so-called pure players) are frequented more than the websites of other media (television, radio or press). Online media as a whole have become more

professional and there has been a transition from the first stage of copying and pasting information from news agencies and other media to the next phase of creating original content according to journalistic standards and values. The largest news portals have editorial offices that can compete with the news desks of traditional media. The largest internet portals *Delfi.lv* and *Tvnet.lv* have more than 15 years of experience.

It is true that there is still a whole series of websites whose operations are an imitation of media activities; their content cannot be trusted or it is deliberately distorted. The latest study by not-for-profit investigative journalism centre Re:Baltica "How to make money with fake news" (7/12/2016) looks at pseudo-news portals that publish fake news not in the interests of some political party or ideology, but for business purposes. With scandalous and false information such as, for example, parliamentarians who want to reduce pensions, websites created by young people on social media that amass clicks and accordingly build up revenue from advertising. The content of the news or its veracity is irrelevant, what is important is to ensure a high desire for Internet users to read it.

The public service media portal *LSM.lv* is a joint Latvian Television and Latvian Radio news portal, which began operating at the beginning of 2013 in the Latvian language. Russian- (*Rus.lsm.lv*) and English-language (*Eng.lsm.lv*) versions were added later. The portal reflects informative and analytical content from both public service media organisations as well as creating its own publications.

The owners of *Ir* magazine Cits Medijs also have their own portal *Irir.lv* that combines journalism with community communication. It is based on news, journalistic comments and user-generated content such as general views, and communication with the authors of the articles, other like-minded users and visitors of the site.

There are several digital magazines in Latvia for example, *LILLÁ*, which appeared in 2013 and is intended mainly for a female audience. Publishers Mediju Nams produced the mobile application *Sofa* in May 2016. This is a free digital magazine with personalised content (one can choose favourite themes from 18 categories). The content changes almost every time it is opened, as if a new issue had been printed.

The Internet had 19 percent of the advertising market in 2015 not including overseas registered media, social networks and Google. This represents an increase of 38 percent compared to 2014. The Latvian Advertising Association points out that the increase in 2015 can be explained by both the development of new digital products and the ability to digitalise traditional products. However, advertising revenue continues to flow out to Internet resources based overseas.

## Social Networks

Social networks are visited by almost 60 percent of Latvia's Internet users and most of the audience are women, according to Gemius.

For many years the online social network *Draugiem.lv* that was formed in 2004 enjoyed huge popularity. After only three years in spring 2007, it had already attracted one million users, over half of them based in Latvia. *Draugiem.lv* is available in Latvian, Russian and English on PCs and mobile devices. Comparing summer indicators for 2012 and 2015, the average time spent per month by a user on the portal from a PC fell from 19 to 12 hours. In spring 2016 among the top websites in Latvia (for average daily visitors) there was Facebook in fourth place but *Draugiem.lv* in sixth, which is also a high rating. In addition, it should be pointed out that *Draugiem.lv* is a suitable place for children and seniors to learn about the essence of social media as well as for others who have only begun to use the Internet. Over half of Latvia's population (55 percent) uses smart phones, which is more than 8 percentage points more than in spring 2015. In turn, 22 percent of the population uses tablet PCs, which is 3 percentage points more than in spring 2015.

## Opinion Makers

The top audience of blogs in autumn 2016 was 193,500 users. Of the top 20 blog users 60 percent were women. The most visited blog was Kristaps Skutelis' technology blog *Kursors.lv* (31,600 users in November 2016). Second was Inga and ?riks Dalibs' folk wisdom blog *Innu.lv* and third was Ance Šternberga's healthy lifestyle and treatment blog *Topivesels.lv*.

J?nis Polis's blog *Ardomu.lv* caused a great stir in December 2016 when it published a study on Internet propaganda in Latvia – what was hidden behind Facebook pages and websites popular in Latvia.

In 2013 and 2014 actor Artuss Kaimi?š' programme *Su?u B?da* (Doghouse) on the Internet radio station *Boom FM* drew a huge audience. Various well known personalities were interviewed in the studio. The merciless and at times course interviewing technique, although controversial, was, at the same time, key to the show's popularity. The most popular broadcast recordings on YouTube have had over 170,000 views. Artuss Kaimi?š was elected to parliament in 2014 from the Latvian Association of Regions party. He continues to film goings-on in the Saeima and publishes them on his video blog *Sunubuda.tv*.

Undoubtedly his popularity was aided by the programme he led. Media researcher and expert Anda Rožukalne points out that already as a candidate deputy, Kaimi?š continued to agitate and host his programme. Because *Boom FM* is not registered with the Media Register and does not use a Latvian frequency (it is only available online), according to the strict application of the Law on the Press and other Mass Media, it is not regarded as a medium. A working committee within the Ministry of Culture is currently drafting a new media regulation project, which should be finished by the end of 2018. Some of the problematic issues that will have to be resolved are tied to the notion of media and the definition of a journalist.

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## Organisations

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### Trade Unions

The first associations of press-related professionals appeared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first Congress of Baltic Journalists was held in Riga in 1909. The Latvian Association of Writers and Journalists was established in 1917. From the 1920s until the early 1940s, Latvian writers and journalists had a union which handled professional issues such as tariffs, working hours and copyright and protected the rights of its members. After the Soviet occupation, in 1959, the Soviet Latvian Journalists' Union was established. In 1990, while Latvia was still formally a part of the USSR, the organisation dropped the word 'Soviet' from its title and became the Latvian Journalists' Union.

The Union organises the 'Journalism Hope' awards for young professionals but public statements made about the organisation by media workers, experts and academics indicate that the organisation has no significant effect or influence. It cannot bring representatives of the profession together or defend their rights. The organisation has a code of ethics which concerns: the role of the media in society, the duties of journalists, the responsibilities of editors and editorial boards, relationships with authors, rules on publication and links between journalists and their audience. The document dates back to 1992, however, and has never been updated. This means that it is certainly out of date and carries little authority in the profession.

## **Journalist Associations**

Another journalists' organisation was founded by 56 members in November 2014, the Latvian Journalists' Association. Its main objectives are: to improve the journalists' professional environment, to defend freedom of expression and freedom of the press, to promote discussion of professional and ethical issues, to protect the professional, economic and social rights of journalists, to improve and develop media legislation, to promote and care for the professional training and growth of its members including lifelong education. The Association has more than 100 members from various types of media and academia. It plays an active role in the drafting of legislation and planning documents as well reacting to restrictions and attempts to restrict freedom of expression in Latvia and elsewhere in the world. For example, the Association supported the Hungarian media that protested against laws restricting freedom of expression in this EU Member State and it supported Estonian colleagues who protested against legal provisions restricting media freedom.

The Association also has its code of ethics and Ethics Commission that is elected by the General Assembly.

The Latvian Association of Press Publishers (LAPP), which adopted the name in April 1993, actually dates back to the period of upheaval just before the restoration of Latvia's independence. In 1991, the Soviet regime confiscated the building where all of Latvia's newspapers and magazines were housed and printed. Publishers came together to divide up available publishing resources, find offices for colleagues, share available amounts of paper and printing materials, etc. In February 1992, the organisation launched a 'Week Without the Press' to focus public and political attention on the fact that principles such as freedom of the press and freedom of speech were not being observed properly and that the economic chaos which existed in the country meant that many publications were going bankrupt.

The organisation continues to be actively involved in press-related policy issues. It is active in the media policy planning document drafting process as well as in the current discussions about the inclusion of commercial advertising in informative publications of local governments. The LAPP especially advocates the need for financial support to ensure the long-term sustainability of the written press (at least €2m annually). The idea is that institutional support would be given to newspaper operations and to ensure quality journalism as a whole on condition that the newspaper fulfils certain criteria, for example, number of full-time staff, regularity of publication, amount of original content (as in not related to other projects) etc.

The Latvian Association of Broadcasting Organisations was established in 2006. It brings together several privately owned television and radio organisations, as well as associated members. Like the publishers' association, the Association of



Broadcasting Organisations reacts actively to changes in policy and takes part in the drafting of media policy planning documents. In the last two years it has been especially active in supporting the need for the public service media to leave the commercial advertising market.

In Latvia there is also the Association of Regional Television, however, its presence in the public space and policy-making process is not so visible.

## **News Agencies**

In summer 2015, the investment holding company UP Invest OÜ, which then owned the news agency group Baltic News Service (BNS), acquired Latvia's largest news agency LETA. The Competition Council decided to allow MM Grupp OÜ through the holding company UP Invest OÜ to acquire a decisive influence over SIA LETA because it had concluded no harm to competition would result from the transaction. That is, MM Grupp OÜ sold BNS in order to remove any barriers from acquiring LETA. On 31 August 2015 the companies SIA, BNS-Latvija and SIA Mediju Monitorings were sold to a different Estonian company AMP Investeeringud OÜ and thus the merger parties are no longer competitors in the news agency market.

Similarly, the Competition Council concluded that the Internet pay\_news portal owned by SIA LETA does not create significant competition pressure on free Internet news portals *Tvnet.lv*, *Apollo.lv*, *Financenet.lv*, *Sejas.lv* and *Spoki.lv*, which are owned by MM Grupp OÜ. Although formally each agency has a different owner, the media sector is worried that this is only a temporary phase and that after some time there will be only one news agency operating in Latvia's small market. In the year during which the transaction took place, the BNS editorial office was reduced by half. Although the reduction in the number of news agencies could potentially influence the diversity of content, the most important role in preserving diversity will still be played by the media themselves. At the beginning of 2017 both brands – BNS and LETA – exist in Latvia.

The LETA information agency was founded in 1992 although it dates back to the first period of Latvian independence. The Latopress company was established in 1919 and later became LETA. During the Soviet era, the agency operated under the names LTA and then Latform. In 1990, it regained its historical name of LETA. LETA also has an archive dating back to 1993 and runs the *Nozare.lv* business portal. The business magazine *Kapitāls* is also linked to the agency.

The regional BNS news agency has an archive dating back to 1992 and is the largest pan-Baltic news agency, with offices in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. BNS offers original reporting about events not just in Latvia, but also in the Baltic region. BNS used to organise the annual Mass Media Games. As many as 2000 representatives of Latvian media outlets and media agencies and members of their families have come together to relax and engage in sports. The last known information is about the 18<sup>th</sup> Mass Media Games, which took place in 2012.

## **Audience measurement organisations**

The market, social and media research company Kantar TNS and the international Internet research and consultancy company Gemius publish regular and publicly available data on the media in Latvia. Kantar TNS regularly publishes its latest findings on press readership, radio and television ratings and Internet use. Gemius, on the other hand, provides figures on the top Internet portals, blogs and e-commerce sites. Statistics on household access to the Internet are gathered by the Central Statistical Bureau. Companies are often commissioned to conduct private studies the results of which become partly known if they are published on the commissioning party's website, in press releases or press conferences. Results of studies with relevance to the media are sometimes presented by academic representatives of the media environment or government institutions. The public opinion research centre SKDS, the market and social research company GfK and other companies

also conduct surveys in Latvia.

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Audience measurement organisations

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## Policies

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### Media legislation

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the media in Latvia operated under strict conditions of censorship. Freedom of the press was observed in between 1918 and 1934 and since the Latvian independence drive (*Atmoda*) in the late 1980s. In 1924, a liberal press law took effect in Latvia, ensuring freedom of the press until 1934, when an authoritarian regime governed the country after a coup.

There are currently several laws and secondary legislation that regulate the media in Latvia, many of these dating back to the 1990s. Freedom of speech is constitutionally guaranteed in Latvia. The Constitution was adopted in 1922 and reinstated in 1991. Article 100 states that “each person shall have the right to freedom of speech, which includes the right to freely acquire, possess and distribute information and to express his or her opinions. Censorship is prohibited.”

The Law on the Press and other Mass Media took effect in 1991. It also enshrines freedom of the press and bans censorship and monopolisation of the press and other mass media. The law prescribes how the mass media are registered, operate and end their operations. It addresses the types of information that must not be published, retraction of false news, protects the confidentiality of sources, the rights and obligations of journalists, etc.

The Freedom of Information Law adopted in 1998 ensures people have access to information that is at the disposal of government institutions or which must be disclosed. The law sets out a unified procedure whereby private individuals can

obtain and use such information.

Electronic Mass Media Law regulates operational arrangements and rules of electronic mass media existing under the jurisdiction of Latvia. It also includes sections on public service media and public service remit.

Other laws which pertain to the media include the Law on Advertising, the Personal Data protection Law, Copyright Law, the Law on the State Language and the Law on Information Society Services. English translations of some laws can be found on the *Likumi.lv* portal (website giving free and systemised access to legislative acts).

In spring 2010, the police conducted a search of the apartment of a Latvian television journalist with the aim of identifying her sources of information. More than 120 journalists signed an open letter demanding amendments to the law to protect journalists and their sources and to strengthen the principle of freedom of speech. The case eventually went to the European Court of Human Rights, which found that there had been a violation of the journalist's right to freedom of expression (see *Nagla v. Latvia*).

In the spring of 2015 a new Media Policy Division was established at the Ministry of Culture. In the media field the ministry elaborates and coordinates media policy while promoting freedom of expression. The overarching objective of Latvian media policy is a strong, pluralistic, professional, transparent, sustainable and stable media environment in which:

- quality content in the interest of Latvian society and the common good is produced at the national, regional and local level. This content should promote the reflection of the fundamental values expressed in the constitution and its preamble in the national media space with priority being given to the Latvian language;
- the interests of the various players in the sector are balanced;
- the public has access to independent and trustworthy information and the knowledge to use it.

The action plan of the Media Policy Guidelines approved by the Cabinet on 8 November 2016 envisages concrete tasks and activities to improve the media environment. The Guidelines set out five core principles and fields for action:

- Media diversity;
- Media quality and responsibility;
- Professionalism of the media environment;
- Media literacy;
- Resilience of the media environment.

The action plan foresees the drafting of new media legislation by the middle of 2018 that would replace the Law on the Press and other Mass Media and the Electronic Mass Media Law. The aim is to improve the resilience of the normative base regulating the media and its fitness for purpose. For example, the current Press Law was adopted 25 years ago and is seriously outdated. Although the Electronic Mass Media Law was adopted in 2010 and amended several times, it still needs to be improved, especially in light of the revision of the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive.

## **Accountability systems**

In Latvia there is no single code of ethics binding on the entire media sector. In 2017 the action plan of the Latvian Media Policy Guidelines for 2016–2020 (the Guidelines) envisages the drafting of proposals to promote a sectoral agreement (or at least involving a majority of the sector) on common ethical standards thus making the theme topical in the media environment and raising professional ethical standards.

As noted earlier, a code of ethics was approved by the Latvian Journalists' Union in 1992, but it is both excessively general

and out of date. The Latvian Journalists' Association also has its code of ethics. The issue of journalistic ethics has been widely discussed in mission statements, visions and goals voiced by individual media outlets. One of the first to publish its own code of ethics was the newspaper *Diena*. Media codes of ethics tend to differ and they are not always publicly available, for example being published on the websites of the media.

The rights and obligations of journalists are also enshrined in general terms in the Law on the Press and other Mass Media (the Press Law). Among other things, the law says that "the editor shall be responsible for the content of materials published in his or her mass medium."

The action plan of the Guidelines foresees support for the media sector to organise itself in the establishment of a media ombudsman in 2018. This would be a mechanism for handling individual complaints about journalists' compliance with professional and ethical standards. This would promote media accountability and strengthen society's critical thinking regarding media content. A common media ombudsman for the sector would permit the resolution of conflicts whereby people portrayed in the media consider there has been a breach of ethical or professional standards. If the alleged infringement has taken place in the electronic media, it can be investigated by the National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) but at present there is no institution to which people can turn to with complaints about content in the written press. (Not all journalists are members of an association with a binding code of ethics.)

In 2016 the Ministry of Culture proposed a draft law on the public service media and its management which included the idea for a separate public service media ombudsman.

## **Regulatory authorities**

The Ministry of Culture is responsible for media policy as a whole. It does not supervise the activities of the media or investigate possible infringements in media content. As the regulatory authority, the National Electronic Mass Media Council is responsible for the supervision of the audio (radio) and audiovisual (television) media. As in other democratic states, responsibility for the evaluation of the activities of other media lies with the sector's associations. In cases of serious violations (hate speech, protection of minors and so on), competence lies with the law enforcement agencies. Every person has the right, according to the procedures set out in law, to demand retraction of news or an apology, and in cases of conflict, to apply to the court.

Electronic communications, postal services are under the purview of the Ministry of Transport. The Press Law obliges the disclosure of media ownership through the provision of information on the beneficial owners from the Register of Enterprises where this is recorded in the media register (in 2015 there were 1531 registered media). However, public access to this register is restricted and this does not promote transparency of the media environment. Moreover, the current rules permit the registration as media of various types of channels of communication that in actual fact do not fulfil the functions of independent and professional media organisations. At the same time, the Press Law permits Internet news portals to operate unregistered as mass media. Over the last ten years the ownership structure of the Latvian media has changed and become less transparent. Although current legislation permits the identification of the formal owners of media organisations, the true beneficial owners remain unknown. This is not just a threat to the freedoms guaranteed by the Satversme (constitution) but also increases the risk of Latvian media becoming channels of influence by other states. The Ministry of Culture and the Register of Enterprises plan to resolve this issue, including the drafting of new legislation.

The National Electronic Mass Media Council (NEPLP) issues broadcasting or retransmission permits, as well as special permits for cable television and radio operations.

The NEPLP is an independent institution that ensures the electronic mass media observe the constitution, the Law on

Electronic Mass Media and other laws in their operations. It also controls the situation with freedom of speech and information in the electronic media.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> quarter of 2016, the NEPLP monitoring centre monitored 2,848 hours of radio and television programming, producing 148 investigation and monitoring reports. During this period it found 16 violations of various kinds (administrative, advertising etc.). Administrative sanctions were applied for surreptitious advertising, breaches of the rules on the amount of advertising, infringements of generally accepted journalistic and ethical principles in the presentation of the news, lack of translation of films into the official language and other violations. In November 2016 the NEPLP also monitored the cable operators and found discrepancies between the channels being retransmitted and those listed in the retransmission permit.

On 7 April 2016 the NEPLP decided to prohibit the retransmission of the *Rossiya RTR* television channel in the territory of Latvia for a period of six months. The Council had found repeated serious violations, including incitement to hatred, in the programmes broadcast by *Rossiya RTR* in breach of Latvia's Law on Electronic Mass Media and the EU Audiovisual Media Services Directive.

The situation in Latvia has evolved whereby the NEPLP performs the functions of a regulator with responsibility for the overall development of the electronic media sector as well as that of the supervisor and shareholder of the Latvian public service media. It follows that, as the regulator of all the electronic media, the NEPLP supervises itself. Moreover, it is unusual for a media regulator to be a media shareholder.

The issue of the governance of the electronic media has been on the table for several years yet it remains unsolved. For example, in 2010 the opinion of the Presidential Commission of Constitutional Law on the law regulating the public service media in a democratic state was that the conflict of interests should be prevented whereby one regulatory authority supervises all the electronic media, including those over which it realises the mandate of the state as owner. Separation of the functions of the media regulator from the governance of the public service media is one of the topical issues in the electronic media environment.

The term of office of four of the five members of the NEPLP ends at the beginning of February 2017 and parliament is currently evaluating 10 candidacies for the four positions. In December 2016 the Saeima supported amendments to the Electronic Mass Media Law that would require candidates to the NEPLP to have the right of access to state secrets.

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## Education

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### Universities and schools

Latvia does not have a long history of professional education for journalists. During the first half of the 20th century, journalists working for newspapers and the radio learned their skills on the job. A rather large percentage of these people began their careers as schoolteachers. An Institute of Journalism was to be established in Riga in autumn 1940 but the Soviet occupation interrupted those plans. During the Soviet period, journalists were trained by the Latvia State University (beginning in 1945) and by the Communist Party schools. Journalists in the Soviet Union were supposed to serve ideological purposes, too.

Education for journalists changed after the restoration of Latvia's independence. The five-year higher education model for Soviet universities was transformed into a three-year bachelor's programme and a two-year master's programme. New courses were developed. The experience of universities in the United States and Western Europe was studied intensively. Faculty members were replaced and time spent at western universities became very important. The first doctoral programme in communications studies was established in 2006.

Education in media and journalism is offered at seven institutions of higher education, four of them in Riga and three in the regional towns of Valmiera, Rēzekne and Liepāja. Regardless of the fact that, with the beginning of the economic crisis in 2009, Latvian media were forced to reduce both their staff numbers and wages. Media and communication studies have been one of the study programmes in greatest demand for more than ten years. The content at bachelor and master's level is relatively similar but the colleges also try to offer something more specific. For example, since autumn 2016, the Rēzekne Academy of Technology has Regional Media and Communication as a master's programme.

Heads of media and editors are often critical of graduates' readiness to work in media organisations while at the same time these mass media lack the resources to work with trainees and to encourage their growth. The Media Policy Guidelines contain several initiatives for the improvement of education for media professionals including the promotion of a more active dialogue between media professionals and academic organisations.

In 2009 the Stockholm School of Economics in Riga established the Centre for Media Studies to support education and research in the Baltic media. The centre provides further education for journalists in the fields of investigative reporting, business reporting and journalistic ethics.

Another step in the direction of training media professionals came in November 2015 with the founding of the Baltic Centre for Media Excellence. Its activities are aimed at: training and improving the knowledge and skills of journalists and other media specialists and organisations in the Baltic states and Eastern Partnership countries, the exchange of professional ideas between journalists on raising media-related issues, gathering and disseminating information on the media, training possibilities in the Baltic states etc.

## **Professional development**

Latvia does not have statistics on how many of the people who have earned a degree in journalism and media, continue to exercise a profession. Some move to work in other sectors related to communications, for example, in public relations, advertising agencies, marketing etc. Although in Latvia switching from journalism to public relations is considered as a kind of devaluation of journalistic ideals, there are several publicly well-known journalists, which have made this maneuver and returned to journalism successfully.

## **Sources**

Media and Journalism studies

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- [Studies in Communication and Media, Vidzeme University of Applied Sciences](#)
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- [Studies in Journalism and media, Turība](#)
- [Studies in New Media Art, University of Liepāja](#)
- [Studies in Regional Media and Communication, Rēzekne Academy of Technologies](#)

Life-long learning in Journalism

- [Baltic Centre for Media Excellence](#)
- [The Centre for Media Studies at Stockholm School of Economics in Riga](#)

## Conclusions

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### Conclusion

The media landscape in Latvia expanded considerably in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. There were changes in the content and use of the media, as well as in audience attitudes. New traditional publications were created, but the media system also expanded into the areas of Internet services and digital media.

Although several media have closed in recent years, there are still several stable private players apart from the public service media. *Latvijas Avīze* and *Diena*, two important daily newspapers, in Latvia's media history and still significant players today, have celebrated their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary together with the women's magazine *Santa*. The Internet portals *Tvnet.lv* and *Delfi.lv* and commercial television channel *TV3* have been active for more than 15 years whereas *Radio Skonto* and *Radio SWH* as well as the commercial TV channel *LNT* have a history of over 20 years. Other media have also celebrated important anniversaries. Although the media market as a whole can be said to be saturated, there are still possibilities for new entrants but the decisive factor is having a feel for the audience and its expectations as well as finding a way to reach it.

It is possible to say that competition for audience attention will increase between the local media and global market players. A portion of the advertising revenues is already abroad and even beyond the EU. Audiences can be attracted by original content but this demands greater financial investment. The costs of so-called first copies is high and sometimes it is often less expensive to acquire foreign products although this reduces diversity and the audience's ties to locally produced content.

In 2017 there will be local government elections and in 2018 the Latvian Saeima (parliament) elections. These may bring extra advertising revenue but at the same time they will be a test of media independence and trustworthiness at all media levels, both regional and national. The greatest challenges at the media policy level in the near future will be the reform of the regulatory authority (NEPLP) and separating its supervisory function over all the electronic media from the governance of the public service media and the approval of the public service remit. No doubt, the debate will continue over the need for the public service media to leave the commercial advertising market as is the case in many European states, including Estonia and Lithuania.

In the next two years active discussions are expected on the drafting of new media legislation. Bearing in mind the

sometimes conflicting interests of those involved, these discussions may become heated especially on those aspects that so far have not been covered by any laws, for example on the regulation of the new media and its necessity.

Although the most popular programmes on television have been media events such as the Eurovision Song Contest or TV shows and infotainment, there is also a demand for analytical and investigative content, which have wide public resonance. For example, the public service channel LTV1's programme *Aizliegtais Pa??miens* (Forbidden Method) carried out an experiment by establishing a real fast food outlet "Frics" with the aim of discovering and showing what it is like to be a small enterprise in Latvia.

In the next few years there are plans to pay greater attention to the issues of media accountability and ethics. After two years Latvia may have its media ombudsman. Journalists will be encouraged to have a discussion on the ethics of journalism and as a result the number of media having their own code of ethics and applying it in practice may increase.

Fake news and sensationalism as infectious expressions in the media cannot be completely eradicated but the public understanding of the standards of reliable media and their role may increase. At the same time it should be said that, to a large extent, this depends on the promotion of society's critical thinking in general. Although more and more will be spoken about the importance of media literacy in the state and non-governmental sector, the rift may widen between that part of society that consumes media content wisely and those who continue to be blindly led by their favourite media content and choose to live in an information bubble. The critical factor in this case will not be digital skills but precisely the ability to evaluate media content. Youngsters, the middle and older generations are subject to this risk of uncritical media consumption and will so be in the future.

It can be predicted that with the increasing use of mobile devices, the media will find ever more creative digital solutions for consumption of content. Traditional media activities could continue to expand and become more interactive in the digital environment. Already the website of the youth oriented public service radio channel *Pieci.lv* offers the possibility to listen to live broadcasts but also to several different music streams for example, music by new Latvian bands, international hits etc. The audience has always been and always will be the master that the media will want to serve in order to retain its attention. Fragmentation of Latvia's media landscape will continue, and technological modernisation and marketing will become more important in the battle over audience shares.

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