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Internet news about Ukraine and the “audience agenda”: topics, sources and the audience aggressiveness

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Abstract. *Euromaidan in Kiev, the annexation of Crimea and the war in Eastern Ukraine had become the most important international events that impacted media content in 2013 and 2014. This paper provides research that intends to analyse the interrelation between news content of the three largest news sites in Latvia (Delfi.lv, Apollo.lv, Tvnet.lv) and the Latvian and Russian-speaking audience reaction to the news about the events in Ukraine in 2014. By using a unique tool for audience behaviour analysis “The Index of Internet Aggressiveness” in this research, the level of audience aggressiveness that appears within audience comments has been analysed with the aim to find out how and if the professional approach of the news producers influences the aggressiveness of the news site’s audience.*

The three different groups of data from the Index of Internet Aggressiveness are used to measure audience behaviour: the quantity of aggressive keywords used in the comments by audience members that create a significant rise in the Index of Internet Aggressiveness next to the news on Ukraine; content analysis of the most aggressively commented news articles about the events in Ukraine; the semi-structured qualitative interviews with editors of news sites that explain professional routines.

The most significant conclusions of the research show the domination of the official Russian media outlets among the news sources about Ukraine. By republishing ready-made and easily accessible news stories, independent

news sites of Latvia have become distributors and multipliers of messages favourable to the Russian version of the events in Ukraine.

Keywords: *representation of Ukraine events, verbal aggressiveness, user comments, quality of online journalism, Internet audience participation.*

1. Introduction

During more than 15 years of the development of Internet journalism, experience with online news reports has undergone several different periods of time, but right now, editors try to strike a balance between the speed, uninterrupted flow of news, and the need to ensure higher-quality content (Ngyen, 2010). The work of Internet news portal editors is influenced not only by various data from the Web metric tools but also by the opportunities for the audience to participate in the process.

User comments are one of the most popular forms of audience participation. Their distribution, content, and interactivity opportunities have developed studies that evaluate the influence of Internet media user activities on the development of the public sphere (Habermas, 1984, 1989), as well as the quality of discussions and the involvement of the public at large in discussing important issues. Data from these studies have shown that an opportunity to take part in a debate does not mean an increase in the diversity of views because the opportunities to post comments anonymously has also created an all-encompassing process of intolerant communications (Weber, 2014). This is often manifested as verbal aggression.

The age during which researchers were amazed about the democratic opportunities on the Internet is over because the participation of users has been manifested as anonymous attacks, humiliation of individuals, racist pronouncements and intolerance (McCluskey, Hmielowski, 2011; Hughey, Daniels, 2013).

The Department of Communications Studies at the Riga Stradins University (RSU) set up a team of researchers to design a tool for the analysis of aggressive comments “The Index of Internet Aggressiveness”

(IIA). The researchers used all user comments on the three largest Latvia's Internet news portals in terms of audience numbers. According to *gemiusAudience* data, the portals reach between 43% and 57% of all Internet users in Latvia (*gemiusAudience*, 2015). According to data IIA, during the 2013 and 2014, the news related to Ukraine events created a significant rise in aggressiveness, which means that the Internet users commented on that news more aggressively than other topics. That was the reason to research Ukraine news content in the context of audience behaviour.

The interpretation of research data is based on theoretical findings that include the gate-keeping approach, online news management, and the specific nature of online news narratives.

2. Literature review

The development of the Internet media has occurred in a controversial period during which normative ideas about the duties of the media (Siebert et al., 1956; Altschull, 1990; Watson, 1998; DeFleur and DeFleur, 2005) interact with the functions of journalism (Rudin, Ibbotson, 2002; Harcup, 2008), as well as with the fact that the Internet media are in a complicated business environment that forces them to follow market model requirements (Croteau, Hoynes, 2002). Internet journalism has proposed debates about a new wave of market-driven journalism and the quality of journalism (Vobic, Milojevic, 2014).

2.1. The quality of Internet content: conflicts between professional and audience demands

The content analysis of the Internet media can be based on classical theoretical approaches that analyse the gate-keeping process (Shoemaker, 2002), sociology of news (Shudson, 1989), as well as the normative theory about the media (Windhal et.al. 2009), and concepts about the duties and quality of journalism (McQuail, 2002, 2010). Modern Internet media practices, however, offer a broader understanding of gate-keeping prospects, recognising the role of the audience and calling it audience gate-keeping (Shoemaker, Vos, 2011).

The development of the Internet media changed journalism, making it possible to enrich content with additional information, increase the speed at which news are delivered, and involve the audience in the process. However, economic factors related to the Internet media particularly focus on user clicks and the hunt for visitors, thus facilitating not only the increase in the number of sensational and exaggerated headlines but also transforming news and other journalism-related genres. When it comes to the news-making culture of journalism, researchers have emphasised the diversity of forms, and the influence of sources on the production of news (Papacharissi, 2009; Singer et al., 2011).

Competition, speed, and the uninterrupted production of news on a 24/7 basis have all influenced the nature of journalism. As a result, fragmentary presentation of news has developed, news reports with just a single source are being presented, and the diversity of opinions and contexts is being reduced. The goal of the news producers is to attract the attention of readers, and this has led to an increase in the presentation of viewpoints from various sources while also reducing the importance of fact-based journalism. These aspects have led to harsh criticism of the Internet content, with authors claiming that the development of the Internet content has nothing to do with journalism as such (Deuze, Paulussen, 2002; Vobic, Milojevic, 2014).

The research focused on the quality of Internet journalism mostly discussed the difference between the normative and professional principles of journalism, as opposed to actual online journalism practices (Robinson, 2011). In discussing the quality of Internet journalism, scholars also emphasise the differences between the works of Internet journalists from those of “true” journalists, because the content of their media is usually based on already published information, with copy/paste practices being of importance in the presentation of Internet news reports. Quandt (2006) has described this as second-hand journalism. Internet journalists establish their own unique professional values, practices and ideals, and in this they differ from the journalism of the press and the broadcast media (Deuze, 2007). Critiques of the quality of Internet journalism speak to the main shortcomings in present-day journalism – the alienation of journalists from sources of

information, and the fact that this profession is turning into office work (Davis, 2009).

In Latvia, the Internet media developed during the economic crisis of journalism (2009-2013), when the labour market and wages of journalists shrank (Rožukalne, 2013) and the intensity of the work of journalists increased (Salovaara, Juzefovics, 2012).

In analysing the relationship between the quality of journalism and the audience, Meijer (2013) argues that there are contradictions between professional views that describe the independence of the quality of journalism on the one hand and neutrality and accountability vis-à-vis audience perspectives in a manner that is characterised by commercialisation and the sacrificing of professional values on the other hand.

In the context of the main issues of this study, of importance is the issue of how the audience of the Internet media influences the decision-making process of the editors. Although journalists still try to preserve autonomy, they can very quickly and easily obtain data about decisions that relate to the process of audience media usage. The interaction between the audience and the media has become ever more active, and by nature, it is both automatic and natural. Web metric systems that are related to audience behaviour offer audience analysis, but there is a shortage of research to analyse the influence of such data on editorial decisions. Gate-keeping is a job for journalists, but the use of web metric data can change this role by allowing the audience to influence those decisions (Vu, 2014), or by creating a professional conflict between the analysts of technical data and journalists (Agarwal, Barthel, 2013). The audience perception of news has also changed, now being more focused on the other audience members.

2.2. Audience comments: interactivity, engagement and hostility

User comments are one of the most controversial aspects of the work of online media. Commenting can indicate that the public is involved in the democratisation of debate, but the analysis of comments also shows that the offered content and competence of the discussion is of essential importance. The content of comments causes doubts as

to whether a free environment for comments can ensure public debates as an ethical and rational process that is meant to be an instrument for social transformation (Habermas, 1989).

Scholars have had different views about the importance of interactivity in the process of news consumption. It has been called a unique engagement feature for readers (Deuze, Paulussen, 2002), but there have been questions about the engagement of news value status (MacGregor, 2007). When looking at the behaviour of Internet media commentators, researchers emphasise fundamental aspects – the market-driven desire of the media to facilitate the involvement of the audience to attract advertisers, as well as the role of commentators in shaping the public opinion and facilitating democracy (Ksiazek et al., 2014). Interactivity in the Internet media has been reviewed at last at two levels – as a responsive reaction to the content, as well as conversations among users. Engagement and interactivity can be perceived as a psychological and behavioural experience (Ksiazek et al., 2014). Researchers have questioned whether user comments can be seen as high-level interactive engagement (Ksiazek et al., 2014) or the extent to which commentators affect other users depends on their own views about news topics (Lee, Yang, 2010).

The fact that the Internet allows the audience to take part in the creation of content has been one of the driving forces behind changes in journalism. Journalists are sceptical about comments. They are prepared to offer a platform for discussions, but they do not accept the imprecision, attacks or limited competence of commentators (Nielsen, 2014). The number of comments is influenced by the cited persons and locations, as well as by the use of the names of well-known people (Weber, 2014), with the audience reacting to what it believes to be news that are important and related to specific groups in the audience.

3. About the research on verbal aggressiveness of the Internet news sites commentators

This study is part of a larger research project, “The Index of Internet Aggressiveness” (IIA) (RSU, 2011–2015). The aim is to analyse verbal

aggression on the Internet, trying to understand the complex aspects of the interaction between media usage and the actual behaviour of societies. A unique research instrument was created for the “Index of Internet Aggressiveness” study – software to analyse online Internet comments, making use of pre-selected keywords to engage in daily analysis of all comments on Delfi.lv, Tvnet.lv and Apollo.lv.

During the study, the data cohort was made up of approximately 13.93 million comments, some 305.79 million words, and some 439,620 articles. The research method was developed in several phases. In order to design the instrument, 3,500 “aggressive” word forms were selected from the 65,000 words that were used in the comments, establishing 900 basic word stocks in all forms and spellings. Text normalisation (Garkaje et al., 2014) was conducted so as to prevent transliteration mistakes and to obtain more precise data.

Keywords in the study were grouped into 11 categories – discriminatory words, swear words, injustice, calls of violence, aggressive activities, a symbolic individual associated with aggression, associations with aggressiveness, military terms related to aggression, denunciation, aggressiveness-related emotions, and treason. Each category was assigned a specific weight depending on the level of aggressiveness – highly aggressive words, moderately aggressive words, and aggressive words.

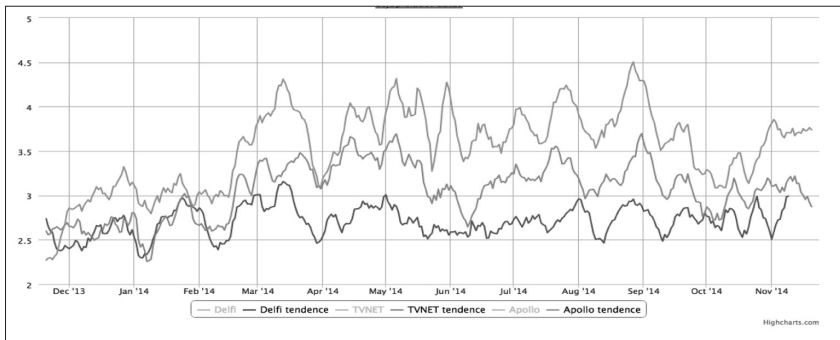
Next, the researchers devised a computerised formula that helped to calculate the level of verbal aggressiveness on each news portal and during any period of time. The IIA formula is created in the following way: the number of aggressive words is multiplied by the weights of words and the resulting sum is divided by the total number of words used in readers’ comments during a specific day.

The second phase of the research involved the analysis of 10,000 comments. A machine-based learning programme that recognises aggressive comments when analysing the entire content and body thereof have been created. The machine-based learning tool indicated trends that correlated with the data extracted from the analysis of aggressive keywords only. This confirmed the hypothesis that the use of aggressive words in a comment can mean that the entire comment is aggressive.

4. Findings

Improvements to the work of the analytical tool “The Index of Internet Aggressiveness” made it possible to identify the top ten news reports which attracted comments that made it to the peak of the IIA, determining the most aggressive comments. The news on Ukraine for this research has been selected by using two types of data: the aggressiveness level of commentators and the list of the most aggressively commented articles.

The research involved three methods – the IIA data, with 42 peaks between August 2013 and October 2014 (392 news reports); content analysis of the news reports, and qualitative interviews with the editors of the portals (see Picture 1).



Picture 1. The “peaks” of the Index of the Internet Aggressiveness at different news sites

Source: the Index of the Internet Aggressiveness

The audience reaction was the basis to choose Ukraine news for more detailed research. The readers of news sites commented on Ukraine events very aggressively. Among the news on Latvian politics, celebrity, social and crime news selected from 42 peaks of the Latvian language portals, 130 or 33% was the news on Ukraine events. In order to broaden the research about Ukraine news, 25 peaks of the Index of Internet Aggressiveness on the Russian versions of the mentioned

news sites have been chosen and 148 news pieces in the Russian version of the portals have been selected in the period between November of 2013 and April of 2015.

These were the main research questions in the study: What are the regularities between the aggressiveness level of the audience and the content of news about Ukraine; what are the correlations between the level of verbal aggression and the professional approach of offering news reports e.g. number and quality of news sources?

The news sites Delfi.lv, Apollo.lv and Tvnet.lv are the largest and most influential Internet media in Latvia. All three mentioned news portals are run by Estonian media outlets: Delfi.lv belongs to *Ekspress Grupp*, but Tvnet.lv and Apollo are the part of *Eesti Media*. These Internet news sites provide content in Latvian and Russian languages.

The content analysis of the news on Ukraine in the Latvian language news sites shows that the aggressive comments written by readers were related to the following topics (see Chart 1): events in Ukraine (24%), the news that express the views of the Ukrainian government officials (22%), international reaction to the events in Ukraine (21%), reaction of the Latvian politicians and authorities (18%), and news on Russia's activities in the context of Ukraine (15%).

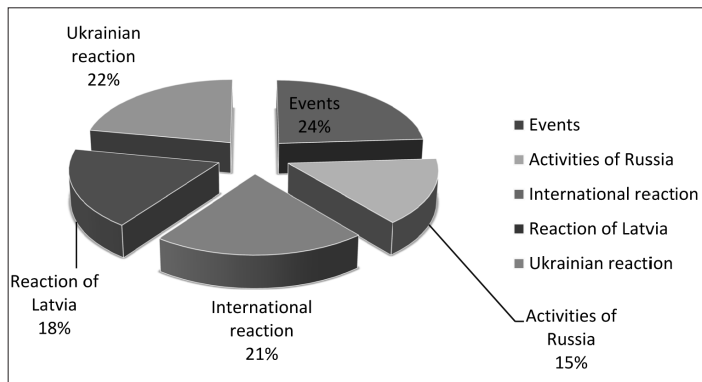


Chart 1. Topics of Ukraine news in Latvian version of Delfi.lv, Apollo.lv and Tvnet.lv

Source: authors' calculation based on data of content analysis

The structure of the topics on Ukraine in the Russian language news is rather similar, however, editors of the Russian portals published more news on the international reaction (35%), events in Ukraine (25%), opinions of the Ukraine officials (18%), opinions of the Russian officials (10%), opinions of the Latvian officials (10%), but far less news show Russia’s activities in Ukraine (2%) (see Chart 2).



Chart 2. Topics of Ukraine news in Russian version of rus.Delfi.lv and rus.Tvnet.lv (Apollo.lv and Tvnet.lv have common Russian version of news site)

Source: authors’ calculation based on data of content analysis

One of the most important qualities in evaluating the professional quality of journalism is the number of sources of information because this helps to judge the thoroughness and objectivity of news reports. The analysis of the number of sources in reports that attract aggressive comments (Chart 3) shows that the largest part of news reports (78%) have just one source, 15% have two sources, and only 1-3% of examined reports have more than two sources.

Only Tvnet.lv news site regularly supplements reports from news agencies with additional news. The study shows that Tvnet.lv has the most reports with two or more sources. The editor of Delfi.lv Ingus Bērziņš, in turn, does not feel that it is necessary to balance out the number of sources in news reports: “We very seldom supplement news reports. Good practice involves expanding and continuing to be inte-

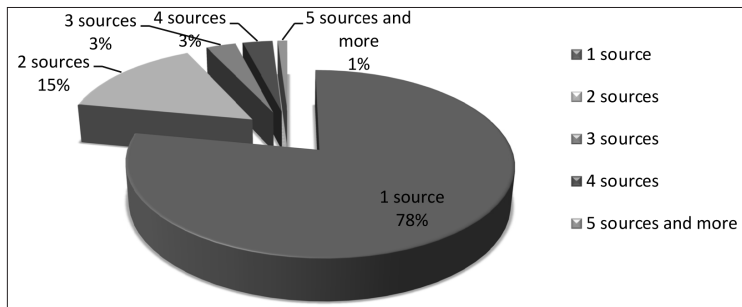


Chart 3. Number of the news sources of Ukraine news Latvian version of Delfi.lv, Apollo.lv and Tvnet.lv

Source: authors' calculation based on data of content analysis

rested in other contexts and viewpoints. We place those in a different report, and we can have a chain of reports related to one viewpoint.”

Data shows the domination of one-sided reports in Russian language, too: 62% of the news consists of the information from one source, 18% – two sources, only 5% – 9% reports have more than two sources (mostly in the articles that provide overviews of larger events in Ukraine) (see Chart 4).

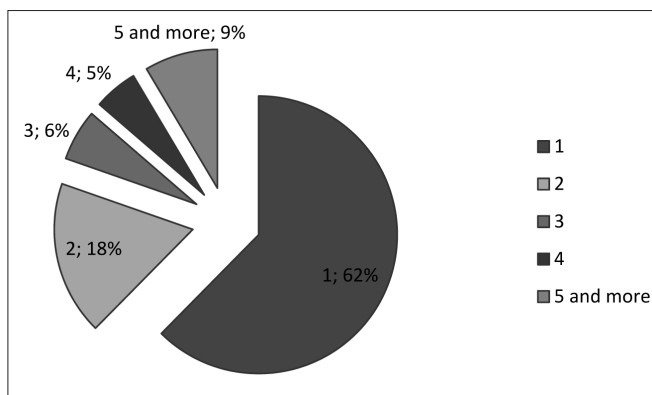


Chart 4. Number of the news sources (by spokespersons) in Russian version of rus.Delfi.lv and rus.Tvnet.lv

Source: authors' calculation based on data of content analysis

The analysis of the news sources in Latvian language news about Ukraine shows that news sites mostly use easily accessible sources that regularly express their viewpoints through press releases, press conferences or other means of public communication.

The analysis of the sources for publications on Internet portals in Latvian also shows that of great importance are several groups of sources (Chart 5), with 35% of sources being government officials and 12% being politicians. Public relations representatives of the officials speak on behalf of the officials in 5% of the analysed reports, experts are sources in 10% of the reports, journalists are sources in 8% of the cases, and other sources are not of essential importance. The practice pattern of republishing and copy-paste news-creating is demonstrated by data that show that 16% of information sources are other media outlets.

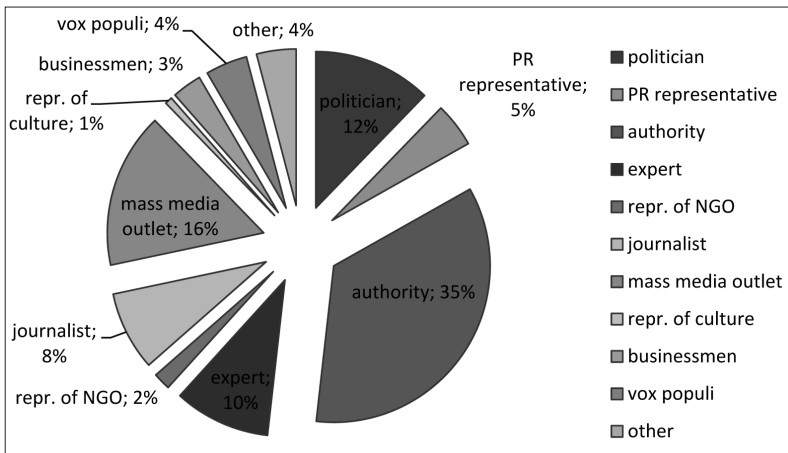


Chart 5. News sources of Ukraine news in Latvian language news sites: Delfi.lv, Apollo.lv and Tvnet.lv (by spokesperson)

Source: authors' calculation based on data of content analysis

The information about the Ukraine conflict in Russian language is given mostly by the authorities (36%), politicians (24%) and mass media outlets (27%) (see Chart 6).

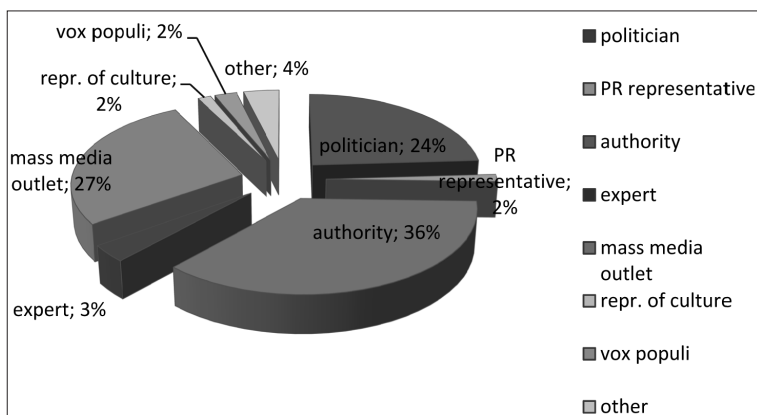


Chart 6. News sources of Ukraine news in Russian version of rus.Delfi.lv and rus.Tvnet.lv (by spokesperson)

Source: authors' calculation based on data of content analysis

Editors of the news portals understand that there is a problem related to the need to deliver news speedily on the one hand and to ensure the quality of content on the other hand. For that reason, portals have established special sections to collect all related news reports. Tvnet.lv editor Zita Lunde: “We are not an analytical medium, ours is a news portal. We do have and will continue to have unilateral views. If I cannot reach a person to offer another viewpoint, the report will be out of date the next day, and so I publish it as it is. If the report remains important the next day, then we supplement it with other views.”

The lack of resources and time pressure are the main reasons why news sites use other media as information sources. At the same time, readers regularly complain in the comments sections that Latvian news sites mostly republish news that comes from the official Russian media. The lack of diverse information about the Ukraine events creates the rise of the Index of Internet Aggressiveness. In order to identify the most important media outlets that have been used for news compilation about Ukraine in the Russian language portals, the information sources of all news were researched.

The data shows that the Russian language content of the news portals is based on information that comes from different Russian media outlets – 45% of all news, Ukrainian media – 26%, international media – 17, Latvian media – 12% (see Chart 7).

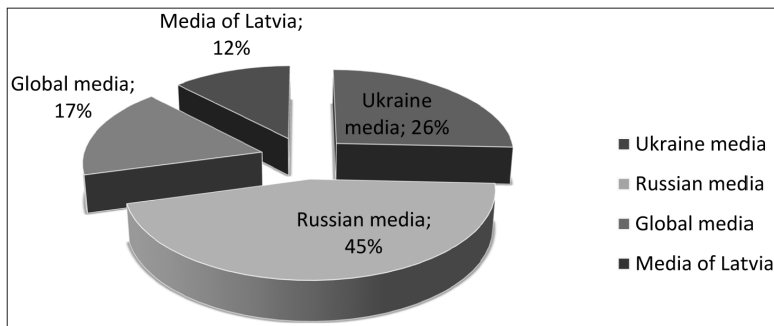


Chart 7. News sources of Ukraine news in Russian (by media)
Source: authors' calculation based on data of content analysis

By studying the titles of media outlets used as news sources for Ukraine news on the news portals, the domination of the official Russian news agencies ITAR-TASS and RIA Novosti, as well as the official television channel RT, Inopressa.ru, Lenta.ru and others that provide news that usually rely on one source has been observed. In addition, the Russian propaganda messages expressed by Russian authorities or institutions have been noticed. The news that explain the situation in Ukraine in the international media, e.g. Deuche Welle, The Wall Street Journal, Der Spiegel, have been published in the Russian-language news sites in Latvia. The most popular sources of the Ukrainian media are Unian.ua, Unn.ua, Espressotv.ua, Ukrainskaja pravda, Informacionoje soprotivlenije.

A deeper analysis of the news that have been used in Latvian portals but originally appeared in different Ukraine media outlets identified that the largest part of that news also use official Russian news agencies as the main sources. There are roughly about two or three levels of news sources in each news piece published on Latvian portals, for

instance, the news on Ukraine is republished from a Ukrainian media outlet, but the content of that particular news comes from a Russian TV channel that has used the official news agency information. This means that the Internet news about Ukraine addressed to the Latvian audience are mostly based on the official Russian media information. Therefore, the professional routines of the largest Latvian news sites have to be discussed. Publishing of opinions of the Russian authorities seems natural from the Ukrainian media point of view because Ukrainian media editors continuously try to inform their readers about the Russian position. But the use of the official Russian media as the most important source in the news of the Latvian internet portals means that the editors have not evaluated all the news sources critically enough and fulfilled the news pages with ready-made and cheap information (that does not need translation and is regularly supplied) from the official Russian agencies. This situation raises even more doubts about the quality of information provided by the largest news sites in Latvia.

5. Conclusions

The nature of producing news and goals related to the market achievements on the Internet mean that there are different interpretations of professional approaches – the diversity and balance of opinions are sacrificed on the altar of speed and immediacy. Because editors of the news portals regularly receive information that is prepared outside of their own offices, pluralism in the practice of portals often means follow-up news reports that are added to the original reports, with editors understanding that each report offers only one fact or one viewpoint. The establishment of blocs or serials of news helps editors to ensure an uninterrupted flow of news, as well as the diversity of opinion that reduces the influence of “one-viewpoint” or “he said/she said” in news reports. However, the evaluation of the news sources shows that Ukraine news very often demonstrates the second-hand (Quandt, 2006) or even third-hand form of journalism; therefore, this practice raises doubts about the quality of news.

The analysis of verbal aggressiveness over the long term indicates a stable habit of hostile commenting, with a stable number of commentators who post their comments on the basis of news topics, people in the news, and other commentators. A comparison of topics that lead to aggressive comments and of aggressive keywords used in such comments shows that over the long term, one and the same topic leads to the same words in the comments sections of the Latvian and Russian versions of the news sites. Aggressiveness can thus bring the exchange of ideas to a dead end because aggressive words in comments are repeated automatically and endlessly.

The content analysis of the news reports that were selected for the research project presents a contradictory image. First of all, it is possible to identify a typical group of news reports that are devoted to specific topics (e.g. armed conflicts, injustice, intolerant expressions of authorities) that in most cases lead to verbal aggressiveness in readers' comments. Second, the level of user aggressiveness can be linked to the way in which news reports are presented, as well as to the professional journalistic criteria that are defined by each portal. The flow of news is uninterrupted, and from the perspective of editors, the speed at which reports are delivered is of great importance. This speed, as well as the external influence of news releases and announcements from government officials, institutions and politicians, reduces the diversity of opinion, thus making the content of the news and the flow of the news as such more unbalanced.

Data from the content analysis and interviews with editors show that of importance for online content are new quality criteria that relate to audience behaviours. Speed, the popularity of each report, the number of clicks and the number of comments can influence not just the placement of reports on the front page of the news portal, but also the evaluation and self-evaluation of the editor's work. Decisions that are taken by editors show the secular nature of professional discourse (Kunelius, 2009), with the need to satisfy the desires of the audience becoming of even greater importance in editorial work. On the other hand, from

the analysis of the users' comments the superficial and one-sided news content can be seen as one of the reasons of readers' aggressiveness.

Editors of the news portals also understand that harsh competition and limited resources in terms of attracting an audience relates to the quality of news and the diversity of covered topics. For that reason, editors try to combine professional principles and the need to use various techniques to encourage audience interest on the same news page and the same media format.

Web metric data that help to analyse audience attention in the processes of media use have changed approaches to the preparation of headlines and news texts, as well as the way in which topics are selected. On the other hand, news portals are beginning to change their fragmented approach to news, understanding that crumbs of events cannot attract an audience.

The results of the Ukraine news analysis can be seen within the context of professional routines of news preparation of the largest news sites in Latvia. The information about the events in Ukraine is relatively sparse on online news sites, with slightly more being available for the Russian speakers. From between 42 to 56 news stories posted daily on Delfi.lv, 2 to 4 are dedicated to Ukraine. Almost the same, 3 to 5 articles, are posted daily on rus.Delfi.lv.

On the Latvian version of Tvnet.lv, out of 50 to 72 daily articles, again, three or four are about Ukraine, with rus.Tvnet.lv having the most information – at least 7 Ukraine news every day (out of 90-100 daily articles published).

The articles offered to Latvian readers are created by a few Russian and Ukrainian media and news agencies. All news sites republish news from the same sources – Lenta.ru, Gazeta.ru, Unian.ua, the Russian government agency ITAR-TASS and RIA Novosti news.

The selection of the articles of news sites is not neutral. In each language, a difference in persons, themes, messages, opinions and the selection of sources can be seen. As online news are often biased, because many news stories consist of a single quote or a statement about

an event from one of the involved parties, problems with the opinion diversity, depending on the language of the article, become even more noticeable.

The analysis of the online news site content suggests that Russian statesmen – Putin, Lavrov, Medvedev – are the most important characters in the Russian language news about the events in Ukraine on the Latvian news sites. The Russian sites in Latvia are dominated by quotes from influential Russians offered by RIA Novosti. While the Latvian language news more often consists of information that comes from international media (BBC, Deuche Welle) and the international news agencies.

The information selection and professional publishing routines of the independent Latvian news sites indicate that the sites align to Russia and the daily agenda of its official media. Therefore, the influence of the official Russian propaganda can be increased through media that is not connected to Russian interests, therefore, those media outlets become distributors of messages favourable to Russia. This practice creates a double wave of audience aggressiveness where readers firstly react to the news content or the topic, and secondly, express anger by criticising the professional quality of news.

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