Belarusian Media Online: What Is To Be Added?

A research review of Belarusian online news sources (January February 2006)

The structure of the review

1. Aims of the review

This research review is designed to examine the ways of producing and presenting news by Belarusian online media, as well as to understand perception of online news sources by Internet users, in order to find out the ways to improve the range and quality of online journalism in the country.

The review has the following aims:
- to offer a view of Belarusian internet audience;
- to identify a range of news sources in Bynet;
- to evaluate elarusian online media from the point of view of value added online journalism approach.

2. Limitations

elarusian online media is a rapidly developing phenomenon. It is especially true of the current pre-election period, when new online news projects evolve. Since the study is based on short-term surveys, it does not provide comprehensive and sophisticated analysis of elarusian online news sources. However, it presents major tendencies and observations based on the statistical data, online media monitoring and focus group discussions.

2. Methodology

The research is based on the understanding of online media as a value added journalism. Key characteristics of the latter are described by Mark Deuze in his *Online Journalism: Modeling the First Generation of News Media on the World Wide Web*: The online journalist has to make decisions on which media formats best tell a certain story (multimediality), has to allow room for options for the public to respond, interact or even customize certain stories (interactivity) and must consider ways to connect the story to other stories, archives, resources and so on through hyperlinks (hypertextuality).

The evaluation of online news media has been carried out within the framework of the typology derived from the approach mentioned above. Namely:

- *Mainstream news sites* generally offering a selection of editorial content (be it shoveled from a linked parent medium or produced originally for the Web) and a minimal, often moderated form of participatory communication. This type of news site cannot be said to differ - in its approach to journalistic storytelling, news values, relationships with audiences - fundamentally from journalism as it is practiced in print or broadcasting media.

- *Index and category sites* offering (deep-) links to existing news sites elsewhere on the World Wide Web, which links are sometimes categorized and even annotated by editorial teams. Such sites generally do not offer much editorial content of their own, but do at times offer areas for chat or exchanging news, tips and links by the general public - for instance maintaining some kind of bulletin board system (S).
- *Individual weblogs or blogs* - often highly personal daily diary by an individual, not in the least by a journalist, telling stories about experiences online and offering readers links with comments to content found while surfing the Web. These types of individual journalism (a.k.a. 'user-generated content sites') can be located somewhere between index- and comment sites, as they tend to offer limited participatory communication (more often it is just one person speaking his or her mind about certain issues), but provide plenty content - and comment on content.
- *Meta and comment sites* about news media and media issues in general; sometimes intended as media watchdogs (Mediachannel, Freedomforum, Poynter's Medianews, E&P's E-Media Tidbits), sometimes intended as an extended index & category site (European Journalism Center Medianews, Europemedia). Editorial content is often produced by a variety of journalists, and basically discusses other content found elsewhere on the Internet. Such content is discussed in terms of the underlying media production processes. This 'journalism about journalism' or meta-journalism particularly flourishes online. In this respect the Internet has contributed to the further professionalization of journalism in general, as the ability and willingness to publicly reflect on itself and be self-critical is generally seen as one of the defining characteristics of a profession
- *Group weblogs* - share and discussion sites based on more or less edited platforms for discussion of content elsewhere on the net   and offering personal accounts of more or less unlimited number of individuals.

Research techniques included some statistical methods, online media monitoring and focus group discussions.

The analysis of the structure of online media has been based on the selection of elarusian websites derived from the two catalogues, and from www.akavita.by and www.all.by/rating/ rating systems. oth systems have their advantages and drawbacks (see Table 1). As substantial number of elarusian web sites are not indicated by *akavita* and *all.by*, three other catalogues were analyzed www.br.by; www.zubr.com; catalog.tut.by .

Table 1
Comparison of major elarusian rating systems

Rating system	Total number of resources	Traffic	Advantages	Disadvantages
www.akavita.by	9321	262738	The biggest elarusian rating system	Complicated , not detailed statistics
www.all.by/rating/	117, but only first 150 are displayed	1366373	Strict criteria, leaders are easily distinguished	Closed system, small number of participants

Monitoring of 10 online news sources has been carried out during two weeks within the survey period. These 10 websites have been selected to represent various styles and approaches to online strategies, as well as different political attitudes. The major quantitative criterion was the average number of   visitors per day.
To understand users perceptions and evaluations of online media, focus group discussions were organized. The group consisted of 10 participants, representing the core of Internet audience: individuals with a university degree, aged from 20 to 35, living in Minsk or in a regional center with a monthly income of more than USD 100.
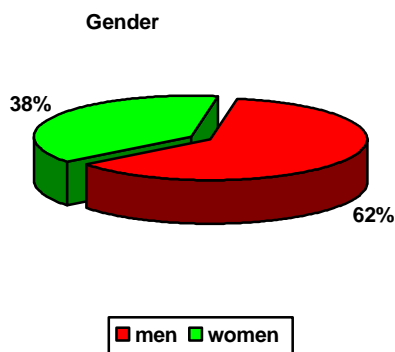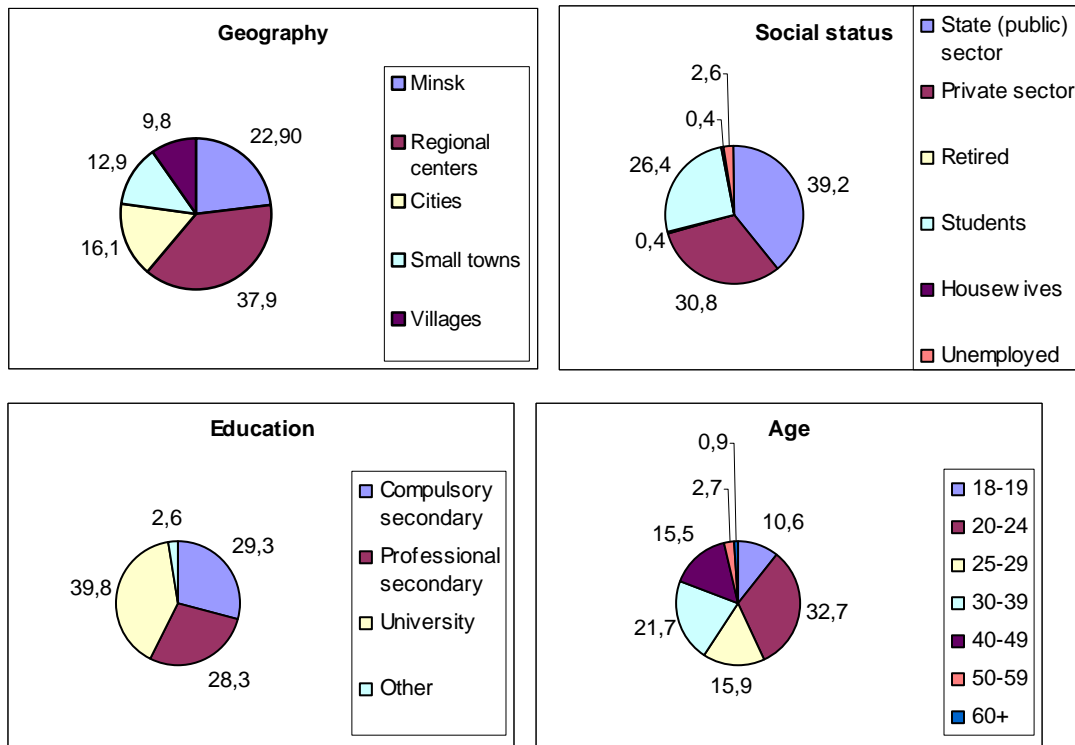
3. Internet users

3.1 Internet audience surveys
The latest comprehensive survey of elarusian Internet audience, conducted by the   elarusian Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political research in 2003, indicates that people aged 20 to 2 (one third of the respondents) are the most active Internet users, and 50 percent of all respondents are university

graduates. Remarkably, 0 percent of the Internet users are civil servants. The majority of users (5.6 percent) live in regional centres, and 22.9 percent are inhabitants of the capital of the country [elarusian Independent Institute, 200]. So, the average Internet user in elarus is a young civil servant in his or her early twenties, with a university degree, and living in a regional centre (see diagrams below).

Geography

- Minsk
- Regional centers
- Cities
- Small towns
- Villages

9,8
22,90
12,9
16,1
37,9

Social status

- State (public) sector
- Private sector
- Retired
- Students
- Housewives
- Unemployed

2,6
0,4
26,4
0,4
39,2
30,8

Education

- Compulsory secondary
- Professional secondary
- University
- Other

2,6
29,3
39,8
28,3

Age

- 18-19
- 20-24
- 25-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60+

0,9
2,7
15,5
10,6
21,7
32,7
15,9

Gender

38%
62%

men women

In spring 200 , MASMI- Y conducted surveys of 2000 city dwellers aged from 12 to 9 (Omnibus project) within the framework of Omnibus project. According to the results of the survey, 21% of respondents had Inyternet access at home or at work are Internet users, and 6% of them access Internet not less than five days a week. The age of most active internet users was 12-3 years old (http://baj.ru/200 /Jun/23060 smi .asp).

According to the latest data, there are 23-2 percent of Internet users in elarus. Half of them do it on a regular basis, and around 12 percent are regular users, accessing Internet several times a (http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/9 d601 7-0a69- f28-86c3-728a651fb0d0.html).

The summer 2005 IRI-Gallup altic indicates that 38 percent of the respondents aged from 18 to 29 years of old are Internet users [IRI, summer 2005]. A survey of Minsk students conducted by Minsk Social and Economic Research Institute the same year revealed that 86% of Minsk students use Internet, every fifth

student visits websites on daily basis. Among the non-university young people of the same age only 18,7% use Internet daily (http://naviny.by/ru/content/rubriki/0-ya_gruppa/novosti/kompyuter/31-01-06-21/).

In 200 , online polls of tut.by and open.by portals visitors were conducted. Tut.by survey of 30 000 respondents y revealed that portals typical user is a university student (23%) or university graduate (39%), of 17 - 22 years old (38%), living in Minsk (60%). The majority of respondents (50%) worked or studied at the state institutions (tut.by.com/service/advert/statistics/?print=1).

The average age of open.by portal users is 18-2 years old (3%). 70% of respondents live in cities with population more than 1 mln. (which actually means Minsk), and 23% - in the towns with population less than 100 000. Other 6% and 1% of respondents are from cities with population of 250 - 99 thousand and 500-999 thousand respectively. The majority of respondents are students (28%) and university graduates (3%)(http://open.by/200_061806.html).

The 2005 IRI-Gallup altic survey revealed that 18% of all respondents and 30% of democratically inclined fraction consider Internet as an important source of political information.   3% of young people aged from 18 to 29 use Internet as an important source of informarion. 67% of all respondents and 88% of young people aged from 18 to 29 would prefer to have more sources of information.

3.2. Surfers requests monitoring

In January 6- February 6, 2006, according for the data provided by all.by rating system the majority of the requests were about jobs, weather, contacts/dating and lotto. (See Table 2. All.by Top 20 requests January 30 February 6, 2006 and Table 2 All.by requests for January 6-February 6)

Table 2.
 All.by top 10 requests   for   January 30 February 6, 2006

	Type of content	Number of requests
1	lotto	362
2	job	355
3	weather	3 0
	Contacts/dating	261
5	chat	250
6	Students essays	220
7	lotto	213
8	services	190
9	Car business	168
10	Real estate	11

Source:http://all.by/statistics.html

Table 3
Structure of All.by requests for January 6- February 6

	Type of content	Number of requests
1	Weather	1189
2	jobs	1059
3	lotto	1036
	Contact/dating	1020
5	Students essays	381
6	Real estate	310
7	chat	279
8	Mobile phones	17
9	politics	167
10	news	165

11	services	123
12	economy	2

Source: http://all.by/statistics.html

At the same time, when asked what do you use internet for? (200 Online monitor project conducted by MASMI- Y in cooperation with   portals, including open.by and akavita.by) portals visitors answered in a different way:

- – information search 77%
- – e-mail 69%
- – instant messaging -38%
- – news- 7%
- – shopping 20% (http://open.by/200_061806.html).

The discrepancy of the data is explained by the fact that the majority of elarusian Internet users prefer Yandex as a search engine, which covers 95% of the elarusian search engines market. elarusian engines - **ALL. Y** (2 0000 daily visitors)**, TUT. Y (**160 000 daily visitors), **AKAVITA. Y** (2000 daily visitors), **TELEGRAF. Y** (500 daily visitors) - are used in cases when very specific in-country information is needed[1].

According to All.by statistics, the structure of 167 news requests (6 January - 6 February) looks like the following:
- news in general 105
- sports -12
- business -12 (real estate , customs, showbiz)
- elarus - 7 (elarusian news, news from elarus, interesting news from elarus)
- leasure -7 (culture, cinema, tourism)
- regional centers news (Grodno, Minsk, orisov) -6
- Tut.by news -2
- accidents -1
- news from future-1.
The top 10 requests about policy were structured in the following way:
- policy in general 89
- accounting and financial policy - 1
- social policy -10
- youth policy - 8
- industrial policy - 7
- manpower policy -
- fiscal policy -3
- internal and foreign policy of elarus - 2
- marketing policy - 2
- foreign policy - 2
(http://all.by/cgi-
bin/stat_all.cgi?mode=find&query=%E1%E5%E %EE%F0%F3%F1%F1%EA%E8%E5+%ED%EE%E2%EE%F
1%F2%E8&period=m).

Conclusion

Internet penetration is developing rapidly in elarus, and Internet audience makes a significant fraction of population (23-2 %). The average Internet user is 20-35 years old, has a university degree and leaves in Minsk or in a regional center.

The majority of Internet users prefer Russian search engines, while elarusian search tools are used for finding information on jobs, entertainment and etc. Kiril Poznyak, the editor in chief of " elaruskye novosti" (naviny,by) says that those who have Internet access often surf the web for reasons other than to find political information. He also points out that Russian websites are very popular in elarus

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[1] Average for November 2005

(http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/9_d601_7-0a69-_f28-86c3-728_a651fb0d0.html).
However, 7% of elarusian portals are searching for news, 18% of general population and 3% of young people consider internet as an important source of information.
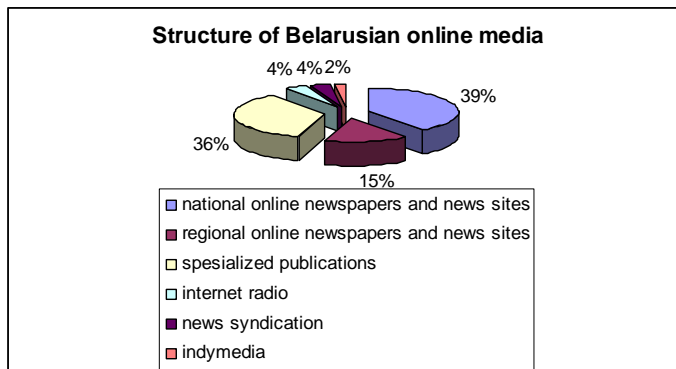
. An overview of elarusian mass media online

.1 Structure
According to the information provided by the Ministry of information, there are 8 press agencies, 11 8 print media (7 8 newspapers (136 regional), 00 magazines), 5 TV programmes and 15 radio programmes registered in elarus [www.mininform.gov.by/main/massmedia/publishing].

Only 6% of them have their online avatars: 6 agencies (6 %), 58 print media (5%) (11% national and 12% regional) and 23 TV and radio radio programmes (11%). % of the total number of media are purely online projects.

Belarusian mass media online

- offline media
- online versions
- online media

6% 4% 90%
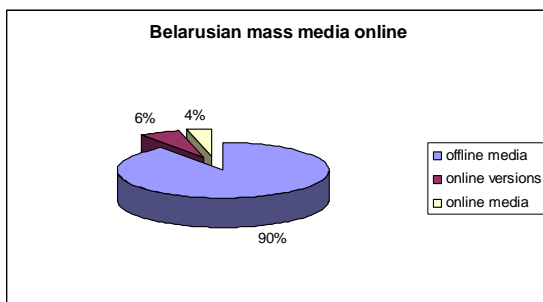
Two major elarusian catalogues have registered 52 online projects providing news, including
21 national sites and portals, 8 regional, 19 specialized resources, 2 internet radio projects and 2 news syndication sites. And elarusian indymedia project http://belarus.indymedia.org/ launched in 2005 should be added to the list.

Structure of Belarusian online media

4% 4% 2%
39%
36%
15%

- national online newspapers and news sites
- regional online newspapers and news sites
- spesialized publications
- internet radio
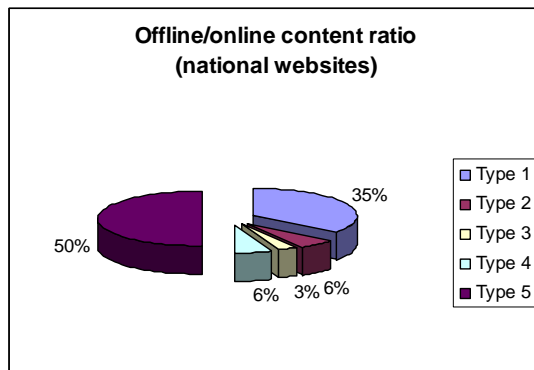- news syndication
- indymedia

Tut.by front page is the most popular news site with approximately 60 000 daily visitors. The other five top sites are date.by, naviny. by, charter97.org, bdg.by, svaboda.org.

Visitors per day 15.01.2006-08.02.2006

Legend:
- bdg.by
- naviny.by
- date.by
- charter97.org
- svaboda.org
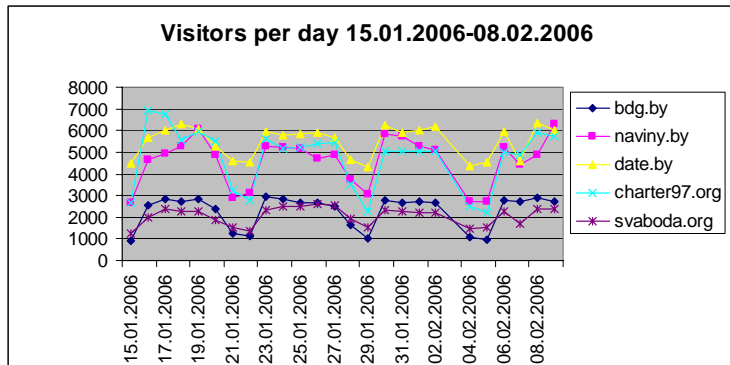
.2 Content

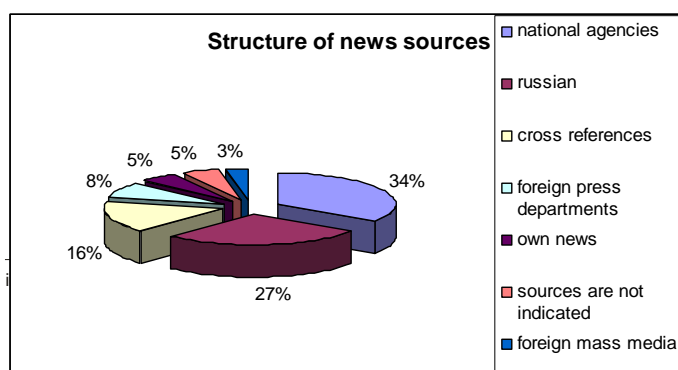The online/offline content correlation of elarusian online media may be presented in 5 types:

Type1. Website with about the same amount of content as the offline editions
Type 2. Website with very much more content than offline editions
Type 3. Website with entirely distinct content and differently configured content
Type . Online versions of periodicals banned by the government
Type 5. Purely online projects

Offline/online content ratio (national websites)

- Type 1 — 35%
- Type 2 — 6%
- Type 3 — 3%
- Type 4 — 6%
- Type 5 — 50%

The structure of 3 national news websites, based on the suggested typology, is presented in the diagram

Sources

The analysis of 10 online news resources (tut.by; naviny.by; charter 97; eauramost.org; bdg.online; open.by; kraina.by; date.by; elaruski partisan; telegraph.by) revealed that 58% of total number of news are taken form national online and offline resources, 37% from foreign sources. 5% of news are presented without mentioning their sources. This is especially characteristic for the information about PACE and OCSE activities in elarus, when no references to press-services of these bodies are given. National press agencies provide 3 % of news, 38% news are from foreign news sources (27% - from Russian, 8% from press departments of foreign media), 8% of news these sites borrow news from each other, while only 5% the total number of news are editorial.

Structure of news sources

- national agencies — 34%
- russian — 27%
- cross references — 16%
- foreign press departments — 8%
- own news — 5%
- sources are not indicated — 5%
- foreign mass media — 3%

The major sources for elarusian online media are national press agencies elapan and elta, Russian lenta.ru, Interfax and elarusian service of Radio Free Europe website.

Top 5 news sources for online media
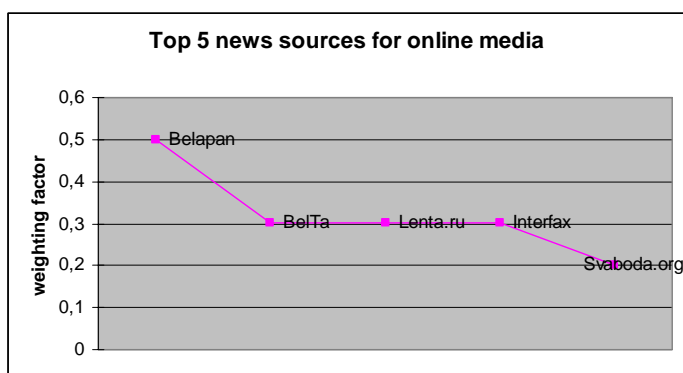
Users evaluation of the quality of news provided by elarusian online resources

Tut.by and **Telegraph.by** were characterized as sources providing adequate elarusian news. **Svoboda.org,** according to the respondents, provides balanced and objective information, while **Charter97.org** is considered rather trustworthy. **Naviny.by, bdg and nn.by** are valued for their elarus centered analytics. Almost all respondents read news at **tut.by,** as it is a news source with diverse and well structured information, close at hand. **Svoboda.org** was named as one of the best sites providing news about elarus.

The majority of respondents consider that events in elarus are not sufficiently covered by online news sources (the same holds true of offline media as well). There is evident lack of efficient and balanced information on social, economical, religious, cultural and scientific issues. The least covered topics are culture, religion and science in elarus. Lack of editorial content was indicated as one of the drawbacks of elarusian news websites.

According to the respondents, online media should be more efficient, targeted and customer oriented. They should provide more opportunities for discussions and feedback. Link density and diverse archives, as well as multimedia options were also mentioned.

Value added online journalism

In order to evaluate the value added quality of online news sources, an operational typology based on Deuzes approaches to online journalism has been developed:
- news sites with some editorial news and limited form of participatory communication;
- brief, scannable editorial news, closed participation;
- index and category websites with categorized deep links, annotated by editorial teams;
- news sites with hyper adaptive tools;

- news weblogs or group blogs share and discussion sites;
- sites about news media and media issues in general meta and comment sites.

The analysis showed that the overwhelming majority of elarusian online media falls within the category of the news sites with very limited number of editorial news and some form of participatory communication (polls, editorial board e-mail addresses, forums). rief and scannable editorial news are provided by press agencies websites. There are a few blogs and indymedia news resources. Index and category websites with categorized deep links, annotated by editorial teams, meta and comment sites and news web sites using hyper adaptive tools are not represented in elarusian Internet media structure.

Meanwhile, the latter three categories of value added online journalism were mentioned by the respondents of the focus group as model online news resources.

Conclusion

In spite of the new possibilities opened up by online tools and technologies, elarusian online media seem to have based their strategies on traditional journalism techniques. The number and quality of elarusian media online initiatives shows them to be in the period of infancy. The overwhelming majority of them falls within the category of the news sites with very limited editorial news and some form of participatory communication. The demand for value added online media remains unanswered. There are also concerns about accuracy and objectivity of news presented by online media based on statistics (5% of news is presented without mentioning their sources) as well as on users evaluations.

5. Concluding remarks

Internet penetration is developing rapidly in elarus, and Internet audience makes a significant fraction of population (23-2 %). The average Internet user is 20-35 years old, has a university degree and leaves in Minsk or in a regional center.

The majority of Internet users prefer Russian search engines, while elarusian search tools are used for finding information on jobs, entertainment and etc. Kiril Poznyak, the editor in chief of " elaruskye novosti" (naviny,by) says that those who have Internet access often surf the web for reasons other than to find political information. He also points out that Russian websites are very popular in elarus (http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/9_d601 7-0a69- f28-86c3-728 a651fb0d0.html). However, 7% of elarusian portals are searching for news, 18% of general population and 3% of young people consider internet as an important source of information.

Meanwhile, in spite of the new possibilities opened up by online tools and technologies, elarusian online media seem to have based their strategies on traditional journalism techniques. The number and quality of elarusian media online initiatives shows them to be in the period of infancy. The overwhelming majority of them falls within the category of the news sites with very limited editorial news and some form of participatory communication. The demand for value added online media remains unanswered. There are also concerns about accuracy and objectivity of news presented by online media based on statistics (5% of news are presented without mentioning their sources) as well as on users evaluations.

In this light, the following initiatives appear to be natural steps for promoting value added online media approach in elarus.

Firstly, new strategies are to be adopted in order to launch websites offering

-       brief, scannable editorial news;

-        categorized deep links, annotated by editorial teams;

-       with hyper adaptive tools;

-       effective techniques for news share and discussion .

Secondly, there is a need for building cyberjournalism practices through

- social networking websites for journalists (like Friendster.com, MySpace.com, Tribe.net, LinkedIn.com);

- sites about news media and media issues in general meta and comment sites with specific focuses on accuracy of information;

- promoting cyberjournalism techniques (e.g. Wiki,   logs, Annotative reporting, RSS for journalists , searching blogs for journalists and etc)

More specifically,

1)   in order to systematize and to put in order news and information, a website aggregating news should be launched (examples: topix.net, news.google.com). Such a website should cover everything written about elarus - domestic and foreign news and articles, presenting them in Russian/ elarusian and in other languages;

2)   participation in international content projects;

3)   to launch local yahoo.by , google.by, ebay.by websites;

)   periodical publication of paper annotated guide to   elarusian online media in order to increase general public awareness of opportunities provided by Internet

Finally, there is also should be a room for   elarusian online media monitoring and research initiatives.