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VIDZEME REGION INHABITANTS' MEDIA USAGE SPECIFICS

Ilze Krūmiņa[1], Inga Milēviča[2]

[1]Alberta College, Riga, Latvia, E-mail address: kruumina.ilze@gmail.com, ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-5595-8940

[2]Alberta College, Riga, Latvia, E-mail address: inga.milevica@gmail.com, ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-4948-8655

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Abstract

Research purpose. There is a growing trend of society believing more and more in public broadcasting and media because they can objectively explain and reflect on what is happening in the world and Latvia. As the pandemic escalates, people are increasingly listening to what professional journalists and experts are saying. The survey organised by the National Media Council (neplpadome.lv, 2021) also shows that trust in public media in Latvia has been growing. However, one important challenge now is handling misinformation and false news, mostly seen on the Internet and social media. To be able to trace and analyse misinformation and false news that might have a significant impact on the population, first, it is important to identify the traditional and digital media as well as other Internet sources that have been frequently used by the population. The purpose of this study is to identify media platforms, including regional media, that are in daily use by the Vidzeme region's population.

Design / Methodology / Approach. A quantitative research method was used in this study, specifically, a survey, which consisted of a questionnaire comprising 18 questions on media use. Overall, 333 respondents living in the Vidzeme region participated in the survey. The questionnaire was designed in collaboration with Alberta College communication students. It included questions on traditional (TV, radio, magazines, newspaper) and digital media (portals, social media) that the population uses to access daily and weekly news.

Findings. 1) The most frequently used media are social media (87.5%), while the Internet (85.5%) is considered the most reliable source of information. 2) Regional media continue to be an essential source of information for local communities.

Originality / Value / Practical implications. Communication specialists of regional municipalities can use the results of the study to strengthen communication with the population via municipality websites and newspapers, thus, contributing to regional, local, and fast-growing micro-media ecosystem understanding. One limitation of the study is the limited scope of research, which is why the authors are planning to expand the research into the study of other regions of Latvia.

Keywords: digital media; traditional media; communication; Latvia.

JEL codes: M30; D1.

Introduction

In public relations, the use of media is an integral part of work because it is included in the standards of the public relations profession. It is essential to properly navigate through media publications in order to properly present organisations' activities in the public eye (Standard of Public Relations Profession, 2019), which can help to sustain and expand the clientele circles as well as enter new markets or sub-markets. This will ultimately reinforce the organisation's position on the market and will increase revenues and profits, which form the foundation of business success.

The currently approved term for media in Latvian is "media," but this concept does not include important aspects of activities that are delivered by media. According to different semantic interpretations of the concept of media, it can refer to a platform that conveys news, such as a newspaper, radio, news portal, etc., to an organisation, as in the case of a media company, and to the technological platform or technical

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media (Beck, 2021). While all types of media structures are important to investigate, the one that directly impacts the population's views is a platform that publishes news. According to Diehl et al. (2016), in democratic nations, the formation of people's political views depends not only on the degree of people's susceptibility to persuasion but also on the information environment surrounding the population. Any information environment might be infiltrated by misinformation, which is incorrect or misleading information, and false news, in other words, fabricated news, which has become a global concern (Lazer et al., 2018). Fake news can be of different types, ranging from personal attacks to false information on political events, such as presidential elections or referenda, even in countries such as the USA and UK (Kanoh, 2018). Considering the increasing number of misinformation and false news that have been published on media platforms (Lazer et al., 2018), the public's views of reality might be distorted. The problem might be exacerbated by the increasing usage of social media platforms (Sterrett et al., 2019), which offer a platform for the delivery of information and engagement in conversations to anyone. However, it is not fully known how information fakes affect the views of the population (Lazer et al., 2018), though some research suggests that most Internet and social media users tend to agree that fake news creates problems (Kanoh, 2018). Some nations have established initiatives that can help the population to identify fake news. For example, various French news agencies, including Agence France-Press and Le Monde, have supported the development of "cross-check systems" for websites to identify fakes (Kanoh, 2018).

However, it is impossible to control the entire space of the Internet and social media, which is why people will continuously be exposed to fabricated information published on the web. Considering a wide range of online news platforms, social media sites as well as national user preferences, it might not always be obvious which of them are typically used by a specific group of the population. Therefore, the initial stage in the study of the impact of fake information on people's opinions is the identification of the media sites that are most frequently visited by a specific group of the population.

As it was mentioned earlier, the spread of fake information is a global issue, which is why Latvia, a small Baltic state, experiences it, too. In Latvia, in addition to national media and social media platforms, there are regional counterparts which form public opinion. The purpose of this study is to identify media platforms, including regional media, that are in daily use by the population of one region of Latvia – Vidzeme. The structure of the paper is as follows. The literature review section summarises the outcomes of studies on the impact of media on the population. The methodology section describes the research method used in the study. The results section outlines the key findings. The interpretation of the obtained results is available in the discussion section, while the conclusion section summarises the key outcomes of the study.

Literature review

Media play an important role in society because, by means of a message, they inform and connect individuals, organisations, and nations. The development of media (as an industry) significantly changed the initial concept of the role of media. Specifically, media turned from idealists' tribunes into business enterprises, which affect significantly wider areas and groups of the population than initially was thought was possible, and they transform the development of society (Veinberga, 2019). Such changes in the media role could be attributed to the evolving forms and ways of message delivery. Nowadays, media even co-shape people's daily activities because they constrain time and offer a specific set of news and other types of information (Beck, 2021).

The media range that is used in modern times is wide. It ranges from traditional forms of mass media communications, such as newspapers, magazines, radio and TV, and more recent digital formats, such as online news portals and social networks, which expose readers to different types of information, including news, whether readers actively seek it, or not (De Zuniga et al., 2017). Research on modern national, local, and hyperlocal media shows that new digital media formats do not fully replace more traditional media but rather change them (Coleman et al., 2016; Taipale et al., 2021). A summary of the usage of key media sources in the EU and Latvia is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Use of media sources in the EU and Latvian population (Source: Media & News Survey, 2022, on Eurobarometer, 2015)

Media source	EU, %	Latvia, %
Television	75	51
Online news portals	43	45
Social media and blogs	26	41
Radio	28	39

Considering the focus of this research on Latvia, the next table summarises the information on specific media used in Latvia (see Table 2).

Table 2. Use of traditional forms of media in Latvia (Source: created by the authors)

Specific media	Users, %	Information source
Television		TV Meters (2021)
LTV1	11,9	
TV3	9,4	
Other foreign channels	41,1	
Radio		Research of radio target group (2021)
Latvijas radio 2	19,1	
Radio Skonto	11,5	
Periodicals		National press audience study (2021)
MK Latvija	17,3	
Ieva	11,8	
Kas jauns	11	

The data provided in Table 2 suggests that the Latvian population uses digital media more frequently than other forms of media. According to the Eurobarometer data (2015), 44% of Latvians use social media every day, 12% - do it twice or three times a week, 5% - a few times a month or less, 33% have never used social media, 6% do not have access to these media. According to Gemius' research (2022), the overall traffic of all websites increased. For example, the number of visitors to the portal la.lv rose by 56,000 users, while the readership audiences of apollo.lv and tvnet.lv received additional 55,000 readers in January in comparison to December. The number of jauns.lv users increased by 53,000 people (706,000 readers) (Review of Internet usage trends, 2021), while the readership of santa.lv increased by 80,000 users in January 2022 in comparison to December 2021 (TOP 20 most visited sites in January 2022). Such an increase in the use of online sites is consistent with global data. Web browsing increased by 70% in the late stages of the pandemic, which was followed by (traditional) TV viewing by 63%, and social media consumption by 61% (Priedola, 2020). However, it should also be mentioned that some other research findings indicate that the time spent on television, radio, or print media in Latvia did not significantly increase since the beginning of the pandemic (Media Literacy of the Latvian Population, 2020).

A wide variety of available media channels ultimately leads to the fragmentation of the audience - the division into narrow user niches. Consequently, media are to compete to attract and maintain their clientele (Lasmane, 2018). Such competition possibly leads to the improved quality of news and other

types of information. Therefore, the credibility of the Latvian media in the perception of Latvian users of media is improving, as evidenced by a survey organised by the National Media Council (see Fig. 1).

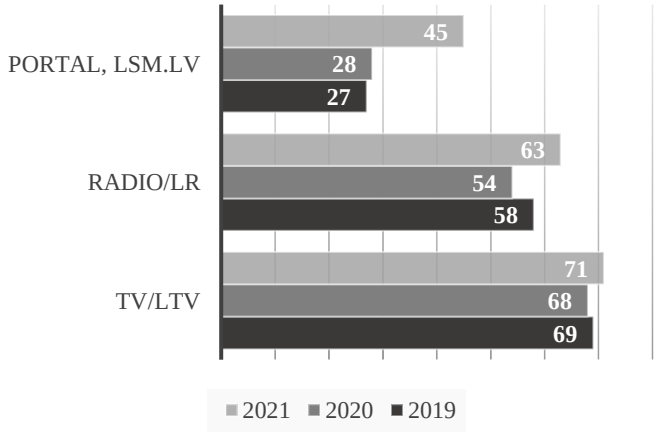


Fig. 1. Usage of Latvia State Media, the year 2019-2021 (Source: Media Literacy and Media Content Usage Habits of the Latvian Population, 2021)

Thus, the review of the national scope data of media use in Latvia points to the use of increasing use of digital sources of information. But the review of regional media suggests that not only digital but also traditional forms of media, including newspapers, are still popular. The concept of regional (local) media can be defined as follows: "geographically based, community-oriented, original-news-reporting organisations indigenous to the web and intended to fill perceived gaps in coverage of an issue of the region and to promote civic engagement" (Metzgar et al., 2011, p. 774). In 2006, 49% of the population read regional newspapers, including 35 morning and 17 weekly newspapers. In contrast to the national press, the regional press is much more popular (Veinberga, 2010). As for Vidzeme, the region selected for this research, public media remain highly popular, with 92% of the inhabitants still using them (Study of the Media Literacy and Media Content Usage Habits of the Latvian Population, 2021).

However, the media use trends in the population are not stable, which is why it is difficult to project them into the future. This happens because individuals, societies and the environment undergo transformations which are subject not only to macro-level but also micro-level changes (Rožukalne, 2009). Therefore, the media use by the Latvian population in 2022 might be significantly different from previous years. This provides one of the logical justifications of this research – to identify media use preferences in the population of the Vidzeme region in 2022.

A large number of media and media companies in Latvia create a fragmented media system, where several players operate in each segment of the media market, dividing a small audience into smaller readership groups. For example, in the city of Ventspils alone, there are three types of regional media – two printed issues, such as "Ventas balss" and "Ventspils," and one regional television channel, such as "Kurzeme Television." Overall, such high fragmentation of the media market in Latvian regions might be inefficient and constraining profits (Rožukalne, 2013). From this point of view, media use in each region of Latvia should be addressed in isolation and comparison to other regions and the overall national use, which is why this research focuses on the study of one Latvian region – Vidzeme.

Regional media are generally an interesting phenomenon because they contribute not only to the delivery of local (regional) news but also contribute to the various political processes, such as those of integration and disintegration (Lessa & Fontes, 2020), democratisation and elections (Stojarová, 2020). Their digital communications might even play a decisive role in campaigns both at the national and regional levels in Poland (Baranowski, 2022).

Overall, the review of both academic and professional sources on media use at the national and regional levels suggests that the study of regional media use is equally important to that of national media because they, too, form a public opinion that, in some cases, such as democratisation processes and elections, might be critical.

Research Methodology

A quantitative research method was used in this study, specifically a survey. To conduct the survey, a questionnaire of 18 questions was designed. The questionnaire was divided into two blocks – questions on demographic data and daily media use. The questions covered the daily and weekly use of traditional media, such as TV, radio, magazines and newspapers, and digital media, such as news portals and social media, and were structured as multiple-choice answers. These questions aimed at the identification of overall media platforms that are used for accessing news as well as identification of differences in the obtention of global, regional (local) news to determine if regional (local) media continue to be an important source of daily and weekly news. The questionnaire was designed in Google Forms. The questions were analysed by applying the descriptive statistics method.

The participants of the study included 341 students and academic staff of Alberta College in Riga, which is located in Vidzeme. The participants of the study lived not only in Riga but also in other parts of the Vidzeme region. The participants of this study were selected using a snowball sampling method.

Research results

Although the overall number of participants amounted to 341 students and members of the academic staff, the data from only 333 questionnaires were considered for analysis because other samples were incomplete. The respondent's gender ratio was almost equal - 58% women un 42% men.

All participants could be grouped into four age categories: 1) age 18-25, who constituted 24.3%, 2) age 26-34, who formed almost 26%, 3) age 35-44, who included 25,5%; and 4) age 45+ (24,2%). Therefore, it can be concluded that all adult age groups were relatively equally represented in the survey.

The key results related to media use are as follows. First, the most frequently used news platforms are Internet platforms and social media, which are, on average, used by more than 86% of the respondents, and the second most typically used source of information is television, used by more than 50% of respondents. Nevertheless, another source of information that was used by one-third of the respondents was radio. All other sources of news are used noticeably less frequently – on average by 10% of the respondents (see Fig. 2).

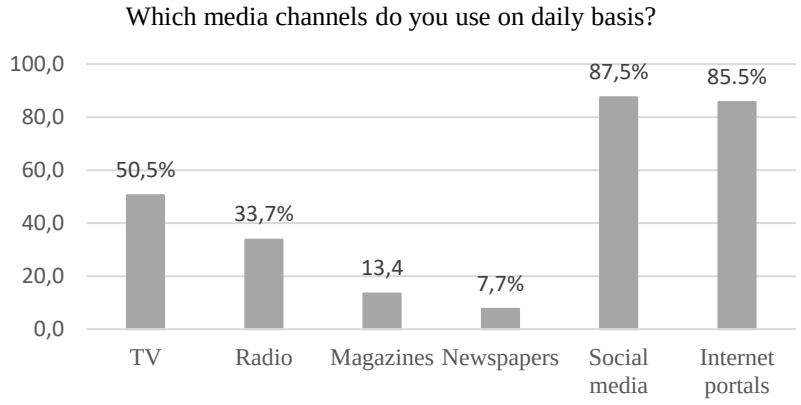


Fig. 2. Answers to the question "Which media channels do you use on a daily basis?" (Source: created by the authors)

The most frequently used media platform for obtaining news was social media (87,5%). The leader in this category was Facebook, which took 55% of the entire share of social media use, which was followed by Instagram with 21% of social media users. Other social media platforms were used significantly less often.

As for TV use (50,5%), a more detailed insight into the answers on TV use reveals that the frequency type of use was distributed almost evenly between the following types of use: daily, several times a week, rare and never. Interestingly, the age group of the youngest respondents (age 18-25) reported the rare or never use of TV. As for the TV channels watched, the leaders were the national TV stations - LTV1 and TV3, which were used by 41% and 27% of the respondents, respectively. Video streaming services were accessible to 63% of the respondents, while 38% did not use them.

The radio stations that were typically listened to include StarFM (19%), pieci.lv (19%), LR1 (15%), Radio SWH (11%), Radio Skonto (9%).

The answers to the question on the media sources that are typically used to obtain global news are provided in Figure 3, whereas answers to the same question pertaining to the regional (Vidzeme) scope are summarised in Figure 4.

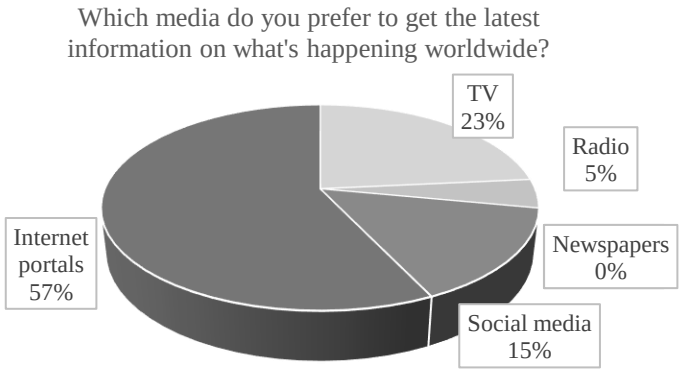


Fig.3. Answers to the question "Which media do you prefer to get the latest information on what is happening worldwide?" (Source: created by the authors)

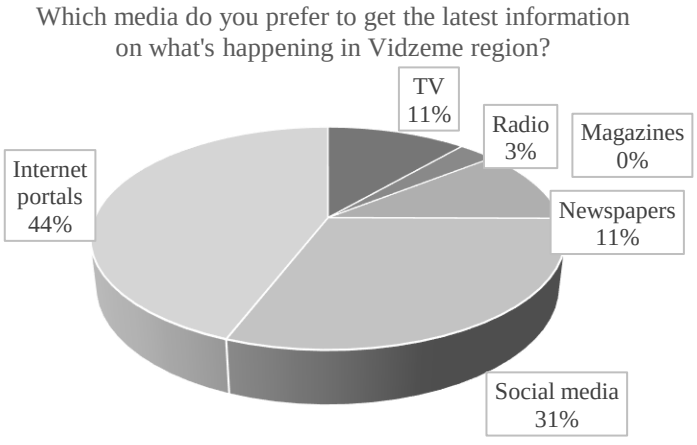


Fig.4. Answers to the question "Which media do you prefer to get the latest information on what is happening in the Vidzeme region?" (Source: created by the authors)

Both figures show that the vast majority of the respondents prefer to use the Internet for obtaining global and regional news, 57% and 44%, respectively. However, the frequency of use of other sources of information for obtaining global and regional news differs. The second most typically used channel for global news is TV (23%), while for regional news – social media (31%). In contrast, only 15% of the respondents use social media to gain access to global news. The percentage of use of other news sources might be considered insignificant for both cases, excluding magazines which are not used at all in both cases. This result is interesting because 56% of the respondents reported reading magazines but not for accessing news (see Fig. 5).

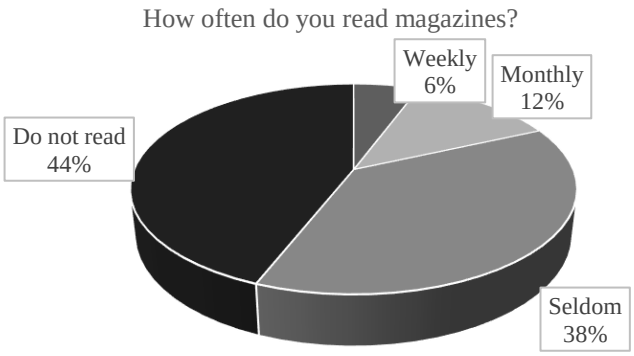


Fig. 5. Answers to the question "How often do you read magazines?" (Source: created by the authors)

The magazines that are typically read by the respondents range from the yellow press, such as Private Life (Privātā Dzīve) and What's New? (Kas Jauns?), to serious magazines, such as the Economist.

Overall, the results of the study indicate that the most typically used media platforms for obtaining news include various Internet media and social media. The second most typically used source of media for the same purposes is television. The preferred channel for obtaining both global and regional news is the Internet, and not social media, which takes the third and second positions, respectively. Considering the wide use of social media overall, it can be concluded that social media is used not only for the purposes of obtaining news. This conclusion is supported by the findings on magazines, which were reported by almost half of the respondents to be used, but not as a source of news.

The key results related to media use are as follows. First, the media platforms that are typically used for obtaining news are the Internet platforms and, to a lesser extent, social media. This finding is consistent with the current view that the use of the Internet and social media has increased in volume (Priedola, 2020). The increased interest in online content might be related to the technological advances of such platforms. Another contributing factor to the increased use of online content relates to the personalisation of online content, which is implemented by major web corporations (Reveilhac & Morselli, 2020). Such personalisation of the content leads to an abundance of online information, which in turn, leads to wide gaps in knowledge and negative effects on the creation of political knowledge (De Zuniga et al., 2017), which is a frequent target of fake news.

According to Eurobarometer data, social media platforms in Latvia are used more frequently than in the EU (Media & News Survey, 2022). However, the number of people who use social media for obtaining news is significantly below the overall level of social media use. It is difficult to interpret this finding because it might point to different reasons, such as the lack of overall interest in news, the decision to use news portals for news purposes, decision to use social media for other types of information. This topic needs to be addressed in future research.

Another finding of this research relates to the quite average use of TV as a news source and the fact that only two Latvian channels are in somewhat frequent use. It might be explained by the dominant online

platforms on which both the TV and other types of content could be accessed at any time. This finding, however, contradicts earlier research outcomes on the use of TV for political news in other countries. For example, in the USA, TV news continues to be an important source of political information for the population (Robinson et al., 2018). This difference between the current research findings and earlier research outcomes might be attributed to the earlier period in history as well as the Covid-19 pandemic, which gave an impetus to the overall digitalisation of all types of processes across the globe.

Conclusions

The key findings of this research are as follows. Overall, the population of the Vidzeme region mostly uses online platforms for obtaining both global and regional (local) news, especially online news portals and, to a lesser extent – social media platforms. This means that both national and regional governments should invest more resources into the development of both national and regional online news portals that will be verified for the reliability and accuracy of the provided information. Furthermore, the findings suggest that measures aiming at decreasing the negative impact of fake news should relate to the identification of fake information on online news portals as well as education of the public on the importance of the use of verified sources of information. Overall, this will reduce the impact of fake news on the formation of opinions of the inhabitants of this region.

The fact that social media are typically not used for obtaining global news suggests that the regional population of Vidzeme is not affected by the news content of social media produced in other countries. Therefore, it might be reasonable to invest in the education of the Vidzeme public on how and why to use reliable digital sources of news, such as BBC or CNN news portals. However, the fact that almost one-third of the regional population uses social media to obtain regional (local) news suggests that local political and educational institutions, as well as business organisations, should continue to develop their social media sites for news and monitor those of others.

Although half of the respondents acknowledged the use of television, a significantly smaller fraction used it for obtaining global and local news. Therefore, the impact of news produced by TV on the population of the Vidzeme region is quite limited, which stirs the need for discussion of the future of TV for the purposes of news delivery.

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