



Belarusian mass media online

A survey conducted in 2006, January, 6 -February, 6

1. Introduction

The aim of the review was 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. The analysis of the structure of online media has been based on the selection of Belarusian websites derived from the two catalogues, and from www.akavita.by and www.all.by/rating/ rating systems. As substantial number of Belarusian web sites are not indicated by [akavita](http://www.akavita.by) and [all.by](http://www.all.by), three other catalogues were analyzed www.br.by; www.zubr.com; catalog.tut.by .

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.

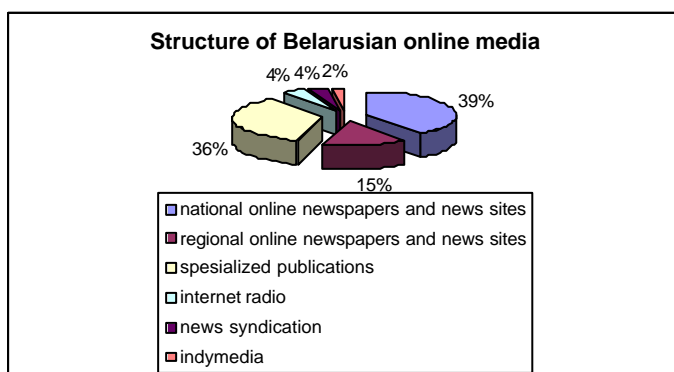
To understand users' perceptions and evaluations of online media, focus group discussions were organized. The group consisted of 10 participants, representing the core of Internet audience: individuals with a university degree, aged from 20 to 35, living in Minsk or in a regional center with a monthly income of more than USD 100.

Internet penetration is developing rapidly in Belarus, and Internet audience makes a significant fraction of population (23-24%). The majority of Internet users prefer Russian search engines, while Belarusian search tools are used for finding information on jobs, entertainment and etc. Kiril Poznyak, the editor in chief of "Belaruskye 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 Belarus (http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/02/94d60147-0a69-4f28-86c3-728_a651fb0d0.html). However, 47% of Belarusian portals visitors are searching for news, 18% of general population and 43% of young people consider internet as an important source of information.

2. Major findings

According to the information provided by the Ministry of information, there are 8 press agencies, 1148 print media (748 newspapers (136 regional), 400 magazines), 54 TV programmes and 154 radio programmes registered in Belarus [www.mininform.gov.by/main/massmedia/publishing].

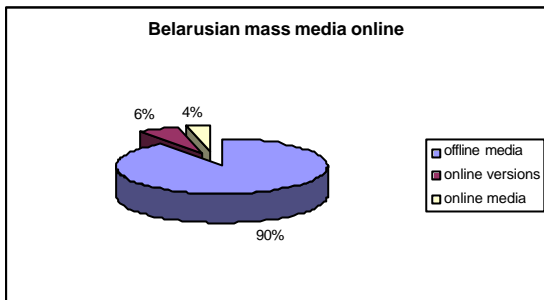
Only 6% of them have their online avatars: 6 agencies (64%), 58 print media (5%) (11% national and 12% regional) and 23 TV and radio radio programmes (11%). 4% of the total number of media are purely online projects.



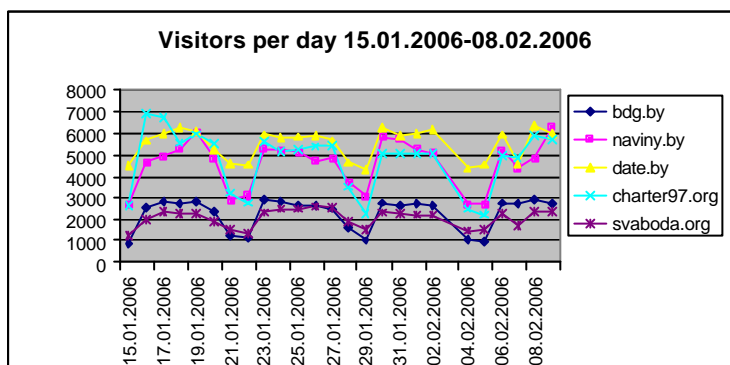
Two major Belarusian catalogues have registered 52 online projects providing news, including 21 national sites and portals, 8 regional, 19 specialized resources, 2 internet radio projects and 2 news syndication



sites. Belarusian indymedia project <http://belarus.indymedia.org/> launched in 2005 should be added to the list.



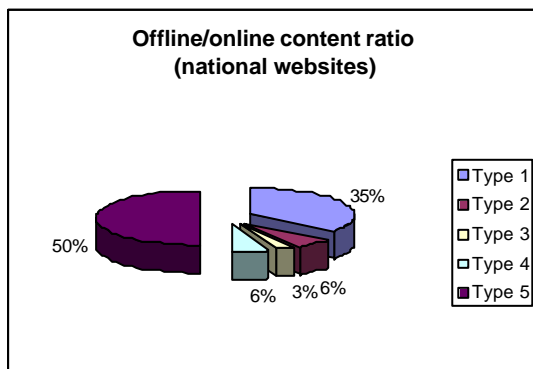
Tut.by front page is the most popular news site with approximately 60 000 daily visitors. The other five top sites are date.by, naviny.by, charter97.org, bdg.by, svaboda.org.



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

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

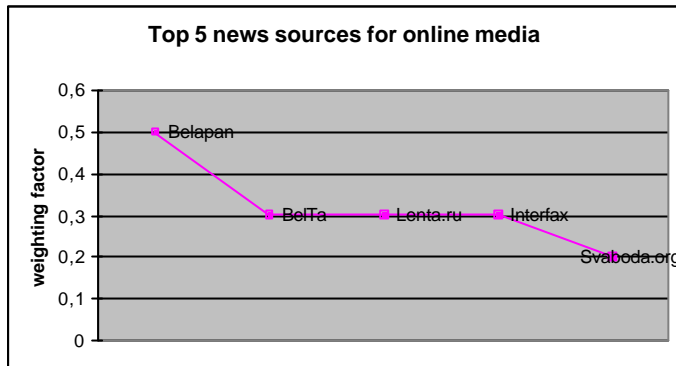
The structure of 34 national news websites, based on the suggested typology, is presented in the diagram



The analysis of 10 online *news resources* (tut.by; naviny.by; charter_97; euramost.org; bdg.online; open.by; kraina.by; date.by; Belaruski_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 Belarus, when no references to press-services of these bodies are given. National press agencies provide 34% 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.



The major sources for Belarusian online media are national press agencies Belapan and Belta, Russian lenta.ru, Interfax and Belarusian service of Radio Free Europe website.



Users' evaluation of the quality of news provided by Belarusian online resources. tut.by and telegraph.by were characterized as sources providing "adequate" Belarusian news. svaboda.org, according to the respondents, provides balanced and objective information, while Charter97.org is considered "rather trustworthy." naviny.by, bdg.online and nn.by are valued for their Belarus 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." svaboda.org was named as one of the best sites providing news about Belarus.

The majority of respondents consider that events in Belarus 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 Belarus. Lack of editorial content was indicated as one of the drawbacks of Belarusian 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.

In order to evaluate the *value added quality of online news sources*, an operational typology based on Deuze's approaches¹ 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 Belarusian 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). Brief 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 Belarusian 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."

¹ Deuze, M. (2001.) Online Journalism: Modelling the First Generation of News Media on the World Wide Web. *First Monday*, 6 (10). URL: http://firstmonday.org/issues/issue6_10/deuze/index.html



Conclusion

In spite of the new possibilities opened up by online tools and technologies, Belarusian online media seem to have based their strategies on traditional journalism techniques. The number and quality of Belarusian 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 any r sources) as well as on users evaluations.