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The information environment: theoretical approaches and explanations

Armand Mattelart has written that an understanding of the development of contemporary society in terms of changes in information processes represents an apologetic discourse between two diametrically opposed axioms – the way in which we are entering a new era of mediation and how we exist in the present era.¹ The theoretical approach taken by Frank Webster with respect to this issue also divides societies into two groups – those who understand that a new (post-industrial, information, knowledge-based, or network) society is emerging from the old one, and those who feel that the process of change is uninterrupted and sequential (the approaches of neo-Marxism, reflective modernisation, the public sector, etc.).²

In Latvia, these contradictions and lack of understanding appear from time to time, but there has never been an analytical or critical discussion of these matters. Instead, they are avoided or ignored, possibly because of their complexity, but also perhaps because of a lack of information and knowledge. Change “is both capitalist and informational, while presenting considerable historical variation in different countries, according to their history, culture, institutions and their specific relationship to global capitalism and information technologies,”³ which requires interdisciplinary, interactive, and co-operative research, because “interdisciplinarity still accepts boundaries between disciplines. It is interthematicity, to use French philosophical jargon.”⁴

The positioning of information is something like a living form, and “information itself then constitutes the world itself and is no longer simply representation.”⁵ For this reason, the information environment in the lives of modern-day societies and individuals is becoming a new and important social phenomenon which involves actors, the communications (information) infrastructure, and the

content of communications, as defined by the information and communications needs of society – ones in which individual or collective consciousness based on local and global phenomena produce the dimension of space and time.⁶

The information environment, which is often associated with the issue of information ecology,⁷ represents a set of factors, resources, and processes, which demonstrate the knowledge that has been accumulated and used by a specific society, community or individual, looking also at ideas and assumptions. There is also the issue of how this knowledge can be obtained, created, expanded, and used. This means that the information environment is a requirement for the survival of individuals and societies and for progress in the development of individuals and societies. That is because information provides an opportunity for necessary exchanges between and among us.⁸

If we consider an organisation from a holistic approach, we can define four different attributes of the information ecology: (1) integration of diverse types of information; (2) recognition of revolutionary changes; (3) emphasis on observation and description; and (4) focus on people and information behaviour.⁹

Analysis of an information environment is one way of recording and evaluating changes in societies, because various forms of communications do not replace each other or exclude former ones. Instead, they tend to co-exist and supplement one another.¹⁰ This occurs in accordance with the communicative needs of society and the overall aspects of the information environment. For instance, the first and, for a long time, only publication that a Latvian farmer received was an almanac, and it has not disappeared. In the 1960s, many people predicted that television would mean the death of magazines and the cinema, but this has not happened – those industries continue to be very strong. Some thought that the Internet would threaten television, but television continues to attract a vast audience.

When one describes factors, resources, and processes, one finds similarities or even equalities among various periods of time and levels of technological development – interactivity, which is seen by many people as an innovation, as well as computer-mediated communications – these usually are manifested as acts of communications among individuals or small groups. On the Internet, this is an innovation only with respect to characterisations of mass communications. Similarly, media convergence was manifested in newspapers and magazines that presented illustration, in sound movies, etc. This happened long before the appearance of the Internet.

This means that an analysis of an information environment can be one way to (a) recognise the phenomena which mark out new and significant changes in a society's development; (b) identify the types and nature of changes, comparing these to previous experience (for instance, many causes of computer addiction could be understood if one studied research about television addiction; the phenomenon of how interesting the Internet is can also be explained through theories about the use and effects of the press, the radio and television); and (c) allow people to understand an area which is important for their existence – the development of which is a key prerequisite for the sustainability of individuals and societies in the modern world.

The information environment: the concept and a theoretical approach

The concept of an environment in describing and explaining the phenomena and processes of information and communications is quite diverse when it comes to scholarly texts:

*“Correspondingly, the rise of interactional formats within broadcasting has reshaped the landscape of political communication once again. The new environment places a premium on the ability to speak without a script”;*¹¹

*“Any real public debate with citizens participating on equal terms is really impossible in a commercialised and centralised media environment”;*¹²

*“... important changes took place in the media environment as a whole that affected the public”;*¹³

*“But we face our environment in our interface with technological systems”;*¹⁴

*“... the relation between traditional media and new information technologies in a pluralistic environment”;*¹⁵

*“... the daily newspaper sectors tended to be more concentrated, while magazine publishing operated in a more competitive environment.”*¹⁶

When the concept of the “environment” is used, this usually has to do with analogies and/or experience. Analogies are sought and found through physical, chemical, or biological systems and sets of factors in which living organisms or communities with external factors exist – ones which affect the life, development, and survival abilities of living beings.

The approach of experience has to do with the social practices and experiences of the individual, and the information environment is essentially compared to

the “surrounding environment” and the “living space,” this referring to the set of available resources and opportunities, as well as their quality and the relationships which people, communities or the society can consider and which are of greater or lesser importance in everyday life, because they influence, promote, etc., other processes and phenomena (the media environment, the information environment, the communications environment).

In describing and characterising the media, the terms “press system,” “media system,” and “mass communications system” are quite often used. This is based on the approach of the system theory and on a classical study of communications theory – “Four Theories of the Press.”¹⁷ One of the reasons for the long-lasting and common use of system theory is “the idea that the world’s media systems can be classified using a small number of simple, discrete models.”¹⁸ These models can serve as typical examples in terms of determining how to organise the discussion of the media systems:

“If it is the government to take control of press values and practices, how should it be done: by law, through licensing of publications and journalists, through censorship? But even if all of these actions are based on an indisputable motive to maintain unity and order in the country, they do not just endanger the media system”;¹⁹

“The Communist media regime in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland was replaced by a market-led pluralistic media system”;²⁰

“In the national media system, television, radio, print and Internet media make available as a matter of course information on the parties and their political programmes”;²¹

“... function and malfunction if the (observer’s) goal is clearly defined. Thus, economic functions of the media were ‘refunctioned’ into malfunctions by some observers, because they saw them as incongruent with the general goals assigned to the media systems in democratic societies”;²²

“... do entertainment programmes belong to the system of art or to the media system?”²³

The way in which media systems are constructed and developed is not homogeneous from the perspective of territory or time. Even in a single country, the media do not shape a unified system with a unified goal, even though many processes and phenomena are interdependent and affect each other. For instance, the type and amount of advertising can have a significant influence on the type and number of media outlets. Major media conglomerates which are focused on the effects of synergy change the relationship about the media in what Joseph Turow calls a media system of society.²⁴

When a nation state loses its significance in terms of determining and maintaining the environment of culture and information, and when information and communications technologies mess up traditional ideas about the relationship between the media and their audience, links among global, national, and local media outlets change. For instance, the hierarchical links which are reflected in the “umbrella” model – ones in which the national media play a greater role and cover a larger share of the audience – tend to disappear.²⁵ In Latvia, national newspapers are read more by urban residents, but in comparison to global publications, these must be seen as local newspapers in terms of the information that they cover.

In the information environment, “the ‘local’ is defined by reference not to a specific geography or community, but, rather, to a “shared sense of place that is, itself, part of the global picture,” because ‘locality’ is “produced as our sense of difference from the global – it is not a spontaneous expression of given, hard-held local traditions.”²⁶ This is seen quite clearly in the interaction among art schools and directions of art, etc.

In Latvia, from the perspective of the audience, we cannot speak of a media system, because that concept refers to the coverage of the entire society of a country and the satisfaction of its interests and needs. Latvia does not have a homogeneous society – various senses of belonging and identity are shaped by ethnicity, the experience of the Soviet era, values, orientations toward the past or the future, people’s socio-material status at this time, etc.²⁷

The diversity of media development in terms of time and territorial aspects can be seen very well in the Baltic States – a small region in which countries have a similar level of development and where medial transformation processes were very similar in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but quite different in many aspects afterward. This can be attributed to two different factors. First of all, the processes of democratisation in each of the Baltic States were different in terms of the cultural and political context that prevailed. The body politic in each country consisted of different communities, interest groups, and individuals (local factors). Second, phenomena of global communications entered the everyday information environment of individuals at a different speed and in different ways (global factors). Thus, we can say that the phenomena of globalisation are of key importance in the establishment and development of the national, community-based, and individual information environment of any country.

A systemic approach is of key importance in determining the functioning of the media, as social institutions, in the context of other systems – political, economic,

legislative, communications, and other systems. There are not direct “one-on-one” relationships in this area, however, “because of the complexity of the real political system and because political variables interact with a number of other influences on media systems.”²⁸ In any society, governments play an important role in establishing media systems, because they not only issue regulations as to media operations and the entire information environment, but they can also directly influence the development of specific areas with basic investments (government-financed television and radio operations, libraries) or with supplementary investments (government-financed funds and investment programmes).²⁹

The systemic approach has thus far been used only in specific areas (information and communications technologies and the mass media), but not in terms of analysing and studying the information environment as a set of factors, resources, and processes.

The concept of space is also often used in the context of information environments:

“Information of all kinds of quality and importance to the democratic process has proliferated. Its abundance and decentralised nature fragment the information space.”³⁰

The use of space in the sense of the environment, however, can create misunderstandings, because whether the concept stands alone or is used together with the concept of time or place, it is essentially used to describe the information environment as such:

“There is a strong potential in ICT to increase the speed of politics, and to split the traditional communicative space of the national mass media into fragmented, specialised spheres of publics.”³¹

Another concept that is close to the information environment is that of the “public sphere” (and the “private sphere”). This may create the greatest criticism with respect to the need to identify the “information environment” as an independent social phenomenon. An analogous situation exists between the concepts of “media” and the “public sphere.” In understanding these concepts, it is of key importance to accept the fact that the “public sphere” is a greater phenomenon than the “media,” while the media obviously perform a central role in the public sphere.³²

The public sphere can be described as a “metaphor that we use to think about the way that information and ideas circulate in large societies.”³³ The information sphere is a phenomenon that is shaped by existing institutions of information and

communications, the content which they produce, the information and knowledge resources that are maintained, the available information and communications technologies and channels, and the participants in the information environment (the individual creators and consumers of information). The information environment is regulated nationally (laws) and by society (codes of ethics), and it involves co-operation among individuals, businesses, and government institutions. The information environment of a society depends on the philosophy and policies which prevail in the state with respect to information and communications. The public sphere is split off from the state.³⁴ The information environment – its accessibility, diversity, circulation, quality, etc. – is, for its part, a key prerequisite for the survival of the public sphere as a vital component of a democratic society.

When the historical development of an information environment is analysed, it is important to look at the way in which processes of information distribution and exchange have developed. Marshall McLuhan has defined the mechanical age and the electric age in terms of communication development, arguing that as the world has been narrowed by electronics, it is nothing more than a village in which the electric speed brings together all social and political functions in a sudden explosion.³⁵

In analysing the development of the information society, Sandra Braman defines three periods – electrification of communications in the mid-19th century, convergence of technologies and an understanding of the central role that information plays in society during the mid-20th century, and harmonisation of information systems in the 1990s, which evened out or eliminated technological differences among various systems. Information resources were consolidated with financial services, etc. The capacity, speed, and coverage of systems all expanded.³⁶

In the 1990s, the Japanese futurologist Yoneji Masuda defined four levels of development in the process of computerisation, thus predicting when the information society might become a reality: (1) major, science-based computerisation (1945–1970), when the processes related to major projects of a national scope (outer space, defence); (2) management-based computerisation (1955–1980), which involved computerisation of business and governance, focusing on increases in GDP; (3) society-based computerisation (1970–1990) – introduction of information technologies for a wide range of social needs, the aim being an enhancement in national welfare; and (4) individually based computerisation (1975–2000), when, according to Masuda, “each person will be able to use computer information obtained from man–machine systems ... to resolve problems and pursue the new possibilities of the future.”³⁷

In the 1990s, Manuel Castells proposed the assumption that information and communications technologies have created a new kind of society – the network society.³⁸ In this society, networks of electronic mediation promote the development and spread of knowledge and information. The relevant development process began with physical resources, and it has been focused more and more on the mobilisation and co-ordination of knowledge and information.³⁹

Jan van Dijk describes the infrastructure of the network society as a set of social, technical, and media networks. Social networks emerge with the support of technical and media networks, and they can be divided up among four levels: (1) individual relationships, which cover the private relationships of individuals with friends, neighbours, relatives, and colleagues; (2) group and organisation relations, which are manifested through virtual teams and projects, for instance; (3) social relations, which shape the political, economic, civic, and institutional networks of societies; and (4) global relations, which bring together countries and international organisations at the global level.⁴⁰

Theoretical explanations and characterisations of the information society speak to two fundamentally important trends. First of all, there has been a definition of a series of causes, conditions, and consequences which reflect a systemic set of characterisations that can be identified as the information and communications environment, which is necessary if the industrial society is to transform into the information society. Technological factors were recognised to a greater extent at first, but eventually various social and economic conditions emerged as well – for instance, Masuda's prediction of the individually based computerisation which, around the year 2000, would create "the high mass knowledge creation society" – one that would be equivalent to the most highly developed level of the industrial society.⁴¹ These conditions cause a serious audit of the economic and social rules which create the "digital divide" between the world's more highly developed regions and those which lag behind, also affecting various groups in society. Second, if the information society is interpreted as a network society, this applies not so much to the new manifestations of the information society, but rather on the description of the information society, which particularly accents the environment as a holistic system.

In a democratic society, of course, the information environment is an open system. At the same time, however, there can be limitations on the environment and obstacles against its development – a low level of information capacity, social apathy, the "digital divide," as well as other factors which narrow or diminish the importance of the information environment.

The information environment is a set of fundamentally important factors, resources, and processes which, as was mentioned before, created changes in the industrial society and create reason to talk about the shift toward the information society, not just a certain number of post-industrial transformations of the industrial society. Increased knowledge is a qualitative phenomenon, not just a quantitative one, because the old media transmitted standardised messages to a unified mass audience, while new communications media allow not just broadcasting, but also “narrowcasting.” Information can be prepared, selected, and obtained in line with the most specialised and individualised needs. That is why knowledge is not just based on an unprecedented level of technological innovations and economic development, but also becomes a cornerstone for a national economy and a key prerequisite for changes in employment structures.⁴²

Many researchers of these processes explain the aforementioned changes not just as a new form of production, but also as a new lifestyle.⁴³ Alvin Toffler has called these changes the “third wave,” arguing that the first two “waves” or revolutions were the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution. Masuda has proposed not only that the industrial society will be transformed into the information society, but that the species *Homo sapiens* will be transformed into *Homo intelligens*.⁴⁴ Changes are described as an “information element,” a “new era,” and as a set of dramatised, poeticized, and mystified phenomena. This idea is usually based on the assumption that technologies are the decisive factor in changes in society and that the description of these changes will spread to all other areas. The fact is, however, that technologies develop under specific social conditions and reveal the social relationships of their age.⁴⁵ Christopher May says that his views on the matter are sceptical and concludes that, if it is assumed that new information and communications technologies have an effect on society, then “there is no need to assume as well that these developments are recent in origin.”⁴⁶

In other words, the development of the information environment is a successive process starting when someone begins a systemic collection and storage of knowledge, which can then be transferred to others. These processes are implemented by actors (individuals, groups, institutions) who use the technologies of their age, as well as other conditions that have been created in other social environments (systems). The basic elements in the information environment include content, actors, and the relevant infrastructure. These elements have been present in all times and in all societies, and differences relate to the conditions created by societies, communities, or individuals. Also of importance are the resources that are available

(e.g., censorship and secret materials in Soviet libraries). Changes in the fundamental understanding of the information environment and the true manifestations of these changes today are related to changes in time and space which are “fundamental, material dimensions of human life,”⁴⁷ as well as to perceptions of place.

Place, time, and space

Modern human beings have a need for “space” and “time of one’s own” – concepts that have emerged and taken root over the course of history.⁴⁸ At the same time, “space and time are being transformed under the combined effect of the information technology paradigm.”⁴⁹ Time-space intersections are essentially involved in all social existence,⁵⁰ but Anthony Giddens stresses that in social analysis, one must recognise not only this double difference, because there are three differences which intersect in social action – the temporal difference, the paradigmatic difference (invoking a structure which is present only at the moment), and the spatial difference.⁵¹

Most people in contemporary society operate not just in the environment which can, to a certain extent, be called the “visible” environment, but also in the “invisible information environment,”⁵² where the “visible” environment is based on the individual’s personal experience, while the “invisible” environment is based on mediated knowledge and information.

The concept of the “visible” and “invisible” environment, of course, is both abstract and highly conditional, but when it comes to root culture and the transmission of history, it is a “locale whose form, function and meaning from the point of view of social actors” depends on the views of the social actors.⁵³

The “visible” and the “invisible” environment depend on the ability of the individual to receive information, as well as on individual and collective interests and needs. Also important are information resources and their availability. The “invisible” environment can turn into the “visible” environment as a result of information that is obtained. This was clearly visible in Soviet-era mass communications, when the phenomenon served as an instrument for the mobilisation and legitimisation of society, as well as for propaganda purposes. Those who were in power had absolute abilities to reach the public at large.⁵⁴ In public communications, a symbolic environment was created – one which was in line with the ideology of those who were in power. The presentation of events, processes,

etc., had to “prove” the achievements of the system in pursuit of its goals. The media, thus, created an alternative reality, and the images which it presented were burned into the minds of the audience. This served to replace or to supplement and improve the reflection of reality which people gained through direct observations and experience. The processes of awakening led to a democratisation of the communications space, and that which was at one time “invisible,” albeit known, partly known or at least sensed, became “visible.”

The history of human communications and of the understanding of place, space, and time has changed and continues to change. As soon as a message can be preserved and used outside of the time and space where it has been created (this was first true of written texts and mobile carriers of information), the ideas of people about reality change and become more diverse. Reality “is only how we as consumers of reality actually perceive it. We construct our own universes in our own minds and through our own individual experiences.”⁵⁵

In the information environment, the direct links between time and place, on the one hand, and the individual as the creator and user of content, on the other hand, have long since disappeared, because only a traditional society is based “on direct interaction between people living close to each other. Modern societies stretch further and further across time and space. Barriers of time are broken by the spread of customs or traditions. Barriers of space are broken by the increasing reach of communication and transportation.”⁵⁶

This means that the fact that distance and time are losing their relevance in terms of the development of societies is no longer an innovation. Various societies, communities and individuals, however, perceive this loss of links differently, both in terms of the depth and scope of the changes, and in terms of the way in which they influence everyday life. Daniel Bell argues that the poorest societies are those with most time in their hands, so there is little need for punctuality or the measuring of time,⁵⁷ but that applies not only to societies, but also to various strata and groups of residents whose lifestyles are related to different understandings of time and space. In accordance, this also influences individual needs and interests in terms of establishing one’s information environment.

Information technologies and a higher level of professionalism in the gathering, preparation, and transmission of information – these have liberated individuals from participation and the need to have permanent connections with sources. The media deliver information, and information resources with various content are available on a permanent basis. This easily overcomes distance, but

space and place continue to be the predominant space of experience, of everyday life, and of social and political control.⁵⁸ When interpreting Marshall McLuhan's idea of the "global village," Castells argues that "we are moving towards mass production of customised cottages."⁵⁹ Anthony Giddens defines globalisation as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant *localities* (emphasis added) in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa."⁶⁰ One way in which individuals can find their place in this world and join it is identification of place.

Places that are mentioned publicly in news reports and the like are public places that provide a resource for readers, which closes down the distance between "the place over there" and "the reader over here." These are universal locations which can be found in any major city, ones which are symbols of power. The level of generalisation in terms of these places is reminiscent of a traveller's guidebook, one which helps the traveller to make his or her way through a new place and helps to satisfy interest and curiosity about new places.⁶¹

In contemporary society, understanding of place relates not only to the physical place of social activities which is marked out geographically. In pre-modern societies, space and place largely coincide, since the spatial dimensions of social life are, for most of the population and in most respects, dominated by "presence" – localised activities. The advent of modernity increasingly tears space away from place by fostering relations between "absent" others, distant in terms of location from any given situation of face-to-face interaction.⁶²

People are closely linked to their place, and in the information environment, "there was no dialogue between the news and its readers, but the relationship was based on an implicit contract that readers knew of the difference between their own location and the location of news."⁶³ People shape their understanding of place, however, not just by categorising a territorial place, but also by associating it with certain symbols, events, etc.

For that reason, the concept of place is of importance in the information environment, on the one hand (on the basis of this, for instance, a new word has been created in Latvian – *vietne*, a derivative of the word *vieta* (place) which denotes an information site on the Internet). On the other hand, the relationship between information and place is becoming increasingly unclear and unimportant. This, however, does not reduce the fundamental importance of the concept of place in media and communications studies, because many new phenomena can be explained specifically with the help of traditional understandings.

One of the classical elements in news-writing tradition is the question of “where.” This emphasises the place where an event took place and information was obtained. In studies of news flow, more interest has usually been devoted to the way in which news are presented in various countries in terms of their size, their population numbers, etc. Sadly, “the news flow studies tended to ignore the significance of places and the role of news in constructing them. Only the debate about the diminishing power of nation-states in globalisation has brought the importance of place into the research agenda.”⁶⁴

That is why geographic place has lost its earlier importance in the six questions that are posed by news-writers – *What? When? Where? How? Whom? and Why?* That is because in information about new things, activities, actors, interrelationships, etc., are becoming more important, since human activity is increasingly becoming multi-territorial. Information and knowledge are created in one place and used in another (here, for instance, we can refer to transnational corporations which have “brain centres” in the Western hemisphere, while manufacturing processes occur in the Eastern hemisphere). The identities of place as an information environment, however, “do not disappear, but their logic and their meaning becomes absorbed in the networks.”⁶⁵ That is why the place where information is located has less and less of an influence on the ability of individuals to receive information (inter-library loans, electronic full-text databases, etc.).

Similar changes in the production, dissemination, and consumption of information also affect the dimension of time, because production, distribution, and consumption activities arise from the ability of information technologies to “overcome” the constraints of time and distance.⁶⁶

Speed as a symbol of time, moreover, is losing importance. It used to afford greater value to information as a product, but now the meaning of the immediacy of information has lost its criteria. The distance among events in the information flow is becoming more and more narrow, and the split between new and even newer information is becoming harder for people to recognise. The speed of the news flow completes with the speed of life itself.⁶⁷ Journalists no longer have time to create texts, and readers, listeners, and viewers no longer have time to digest them.⁶⁸ Time, “which in one sense creates distance and proximity,”⁶⁹ no longer exists.

Time is losing its traditional values and importance in terms of limitations (work hours), speed, accessibility (the speed of information accessibility), etc. Manuel Castells calls this “timeless time.”⁷⁰ He argues that it stands against the

biological time of human existence and the clock time of the industrial age, instead, reflecting the dominant logic of the network society.⁷¹

Human understanding of time is also changed by boundaries and relationships between work and free time.⁷² These are becoming far less stable thanks to information and communications technologies which make it far easier to switch from work to private life or entertainment (e.g., the *www.draugiem.lv* portal, access to which is sometimes blocked at places of employment and education). It is also true that people are increasingly doing their work outside of traditional workplaces.

Generally speaking, these are phenomena which also change human thinking about the value of information and information carriers. The value of a book as a volume of text, which dictated relevant usage norms, is receding, because publication of books is not a rare phenomenon. Moreover, the content and format of books are increasingly meant for “one-time use” (best-selling pocket books). The simplicity and speed of copying text encourages plagiarism, which many people do not even see as intellectual theft. The “cut and paste” approach quickly increases the amount of information, but it does not increase its content. Precision and responsibility in public texts are disappearing, since information is perceived as a short-term message that will soon be replaced by another one, etc.

The condensation of time has also reduced the traditional value of many information and communications products. Morning newspapers are one such product – their value in the market is calculated in about three hours. Time no longer offers added value to a newspaper, and the medium is forced to change the priorities of its content – no longer presenting facts, but instead interpreting them through narratives and expert analysis of narratives of events and processes.

Changes in the meaning of place and time have to do with new qualities in the understanding of space. Manuel Castells has proposed the concept of “space of flows” in order to understand and explain these processes.⁷³ The flow of information from databases, information services, various institutions, etc., becomes independent of the geographic place and time, as is the case with other flows – “space of place continues to be the predominant space of experience,”⁷⁴ also considering “material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows.”⁷⁵

For many people and even large groups in society, however, place continues to be the most important determinant in the information environment – everyday life defines interests and needs related to information, as well as the need to expand on one’s knowledge.

This means that there are at least two spaces, and if they are isolated and without interaction, then those in the space of places remain outside the shaping of knowledge taking place in the space of information flows.⁷⁶ The consequences are seen in the phenomenon of the “digital divide.”

Fragmentation of the audience and, one might add, the splitting up of society into different communities based on place of residence, interests, education, etc. – this is by no means a new phenomenon, and it has not been created – as is often argued – by the development of information and communications technologies (in communications theory, this was described and researched as a knowledge gap hypothesis back in the 1970s).⁷⁷ The gap created by technologies is usually merged with lack of a tradition of intercommunication and public discussion, as well as the lack of a culture of openness and the skill to obtain personal information from the public sphere.⁷⁸

We should instead talk about the dialectic development of the information environment – since the 19th century, media and the news which they transmit have been building bridges between separate spaces of place, creating the atmosphere of “here and now” while also understanding that “it is the great benefit of electronic news, a fact too often ignored, that it brings the world to its readers, thus acting as one of the earliest vehicles of globalisation.”⁷⁹

At the same time, however, we have to accept the fact that the unity of space was quite illusory. It has been created by the new technologies which allow broad audiences to receive one and the same information simultaneously. In other words, the idea of unity in space was created by mass communications, in which communications channels and content are managed by media organisations. Thus, “the media also work to enable groups of people to live together as a community (if not actually, then at least in their imagination),” and this also “allows one to feel connected to a polity.”⁸⁰

Mass communications have always ensured comfort in the space of place, even though information changes every day, creating various effects and impressions. Nevertheless, “news performs the same ritual function day after day because the media package it into the same form.”⁸¹

Interactive technologies reduce the power of the mass media in governing the information environment, i.e., in determining the information environment for individuals and communities. Individual freedom is increasing in the creation, dissemination, and consumption of content, but at the same time, there is a decline in the comfort which the choices made by media editors once ensured.

Manuel Castells has called space an “expression of society,”⁸² defining it as “material support of time-sharing social practices” and “crystallised time.”⁸³ At the same time, however, he also admits that “most people and most spaces live in different temporality,”⁸⁴ where the space of flows is characterised by “timeless time,” and the space of place is characterised by discipline of time, biological time, socially determined sequences, etc.

Understanding and comprehending changes in place, time, and space – this is a challenge for individuals, communities, and societies. In Latvia, this is made more difficult by the fact that 20th-century developments were chaotic and dictated by external forces, and Latvia was excluded from global processes of change and their theoretical understanding. Society moved very quickly and in a very short period of time from typical space of place to space of flows. Not all communities, groups, and individuals, however, have been able to deal with this fact as a result of limited economic, educational, and technological resources. That is why many local residents have not been able to find their place in the information environment. Comfort (relying on the media to deliver information) has disappeared because of the contradictory nature and the lack of availability of media outlets. New information flows are so diverse, contradictory, etc. that people feel confused and insecure. This is even more true because of a lack of opportunities to use original sources of information and analysis. There is a lack of rational criticism in the public sphere.

Actors in the information environment

Jan van Dijk says that the difference between his understanding of the network society and that of Manuel Castells is due to the fact that Castells sees networks as a basic structure of organisation, while van Dijk himself believes that “the basic units are still individuals, groups and organisations, albeit increasingly linked by networks.”⁸⁵ In other words, he refers to actors who create, disseminate, ensure, maintain, etc., a wide variety of information resources and ensure the relevant communications processes.

One of the key changes related to information and communications technology is that the spectrum of these “units” – communicators as actors taking part in public communications and the true freedom of communications has increased. One of the basic criteria in judging the quality of the information environment is the extent to which these “units” are or are not involved in networks.

The actors in the information environment can be divided up into several groups on the basis of their interests and activities. First, there are **individuals** for whom new technologies provide unprecedented opportunities to become directly involved in public communications. Second, there are **the media**, which use traditional and new channels for mass communications. Third, there are **government institutions and private companies** which collect and maintain information, offering or selling access to it or underpinning the communications environment. Fourth, there are **state and local government institutions** with Internet sites. Fifth, there are businesses which use communications channels for marketing, to maintain links with their clients, etc. Sixth, there are various **interest groups** (including political parties, public organisations and associations), which promote their level of recognition, communicate with their participants and supporters, provide information resources, etc.

Individuals. The traditional strength of the individual in relations with the press, radio, television, books, the cinema, etc., has to do with the ability of the individual to be selective about the media and media content which he or she chooses. This selectivity is influenced by social categories – the structuring of societies into specific groups on the basis of the assumption that individuals recognise their belonging to a group, as well as that people in one group are different from people in others. There are *social relations* – the social contacts and interpersonal relationships of the individual, as well as *individual differences* – descriptions which are unique for the individual despite his or her belonging to a concrete social group.⁸⁶

The freedom of the individual in this context is explained through “market freedom” – the ideas which appear in the media are the ones which are sufficiently useful and valuable for others to pay for them. The freedom of speech, though declared for all individuals, must be viewed critically in the context of media commercialisation, however, because there are increasing numbers of groups and individuals in society who are excluded from the discourses of public communications. It is not always the case that these are processes of marginalisation, but, undoubtedly, this *exclusion* denudes the information environment, because it does not present the true diversity of views and information presented by communities, groups, and individuals. These phenomena are clearly seen in discourses related to sensitive issues of politics and/or culture – discourses that are different in the press, on television and radio, and on Internet portals (examples include Latvia’s participation in the war in Iraq, the Gay Pride event in Rīga, etc.).

Although it can be agreed that the minor part of the society have an opportunity to communicate via the Internet, that does not mitigate the situation that has been observed – the traditional media do not allow individuals and groups to express their views in a sufficiently public way.

The traditional practice of public communications in societies has always been and still is “giving the floor” to others. This is dictated by cultural traditions, norms of behaviour, and the power to govern (economic, political, legal) channels of communications. The public at large, therefore, can enjoy the freedom of selecting communications content and channels, but it often has no opportunity at all to take the floor in these communications channels. This, moreover, is explained and justified through the argument that the broader audience is not interested in the subject or problem that is being addressed.

As new communications technologies expand choice, there emerge two distinct communications phenomena– individualisation and interactivity, both of which essentially relate to individuals as communications actors.

Individualisation means “disintegration of previously existing social forms – for example, the increasing fragility of such categories as class and social status, gender roles, family, neighbourhood, etc.”⁸⁷ For that reason, the priority factor in individual media choice is individual difference, not an orientation toward the relevant social category.

Individual differences are also the cornerstone for determining and developing one’s identity. According to Manuel Castells, identity is “the process by which a social actor recognises himself and constructs meanings primarily on the basis of given cultural attributes, to exclude a broader reference to other social structures.”⁸⁸

Under the influence of these phenomena, there has been a change in the traditional theoretical split in the communications process between the “sender” and the “receiver” – something which usually appears in those cases when communications are analysed as interaction which creates meaning. Analysis of the Internet shows that users not only create, change, and supplement content, but they also create new technologies – “the vast majority of the communications software technology that constituted the Internet was developed by users, often young people.”⁸⁹

The way in which individualisation affects the information environment is manifested through demassification of the audience, as expressed through the ability of individuals to come up with their own media and content selection.

This differs from the traditional situation with mass communications, in which the media group their audiences on the basis of social categories and relationships.

Interactivity, like individualisation, is usually related to individuals as communications actors, because it is a typical manifestation of direct personal communications, one that can be defined as “the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many-to-many), both synchronously and asynchronously, and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency).”⁹⁰

The opportunities afforded by technologies were initially related only to the overcoming of the boundaries of time and space (e-mail is faster than snail mail), but gradually the understanding of interactivity has expanded. It represents not just an immediate reciprocal link, but also a series of factors which underpin the process of communications – the possibility for choice, the responsiveness of users, the efforts necessary for communications, monitoring of the dissemination and use of information, possibilities to edit and supplement text, the development of personal communications, a characterisation of the directions of communications, flexibility in time in communications, etc.⁹¹ The more extensive description of interactivity shows that changes in communications are not dependent only on technologies, but instead on the way in which users perceive the communications process, as well as on the interests, needs and expectations of users.

The increased role of the individual as an actor in the information environment is rife with meaning – a phenomenon in which each manifestation can be accompanied by an excuse concerning requirements and consequences, e.g. – the opportunities and freedoms of individuals increase as long as people have adequate knowledge and skill in using these opportunities and freedoms; by participating, individuals expand and diversify the content of the information environment, but at the same time, this means an increase in the volume of poor-quality and irrelevant information; the minority has a real opportunity to publicise its views extensively so that these views might be received by other groups in society.

These phenomena are neither new, nor are they created by the Internet, but information and communications technologies have made them more visible, thanks to the fact that the public nature of the lives and relationships of societies, communities and individuals has expanded.

The **media** are defined as “social institutions that play an essential part in social, economic, and cultural life and in consequence are variously respected, feared, controlled, valued and criticised.”⁹² They play the primary role in establishing the content of the information environment and in the dissemination of that information, even though the role of individuals, groups, and communities has expanded thanks to individualisation in public communications. This is because the media are professional organised communicators, ones with their own communications policies aimed at ensuring sustainability. The media, furthermore, have always been focused on the audience as a means for establishing networks. The only differences have rested in understanding about the media themselves as an actor, and about the functions of the media in these networks. This can be seen in a fairly broad spectrum, with three major directions:

First, the media as public enlighteners. In this context, the function of the media is to direct the public, to provide information about correct/incorrect behaviours, to explain, to convince, to instruct, etc. This means that the media must be “smarter” than their consumers, they must undertake the role of foster parents by demonstrating the correct choices, etc. An example of such a publication was the first periodical in the Latvian language, *Latviešu Ārste*, and the same can be said of the entire Soviet media system.

Second, the media as messengers. The main function of the media is to offer information (facts and opinions), and the quality of this process is characterised by the diversity of information. The task for the media is to offer a neutral reflection of society in its diverse, albeit possibly contradictory manifestations, allowing users themselves to make critical judgments as to what is important, what position one might take, etc. This is how the news media usually position themselves.

Third, the media as an arena for public debate and for the provision of opportunities in the public sector. Here the functions relate to the provision of a diversity of information, to analysis and critique of that information, and to the creation of frameworks for public debate. This direction includes elements from the two previous ones and is the most rational option for contemporary society. The media, for their part, argue that their role is to manage information (collecting, selecting, arranging, transmitting or ensuring availability to information in accordance with the needs and interests of potential users, promoting the use of information, etc.). The public, for its part, sees that the media pursue this role in different ways, depending on their goals (what kinds of potential users to seek out and preserve, which expectations to satisfy and promote, etc.).

It is on the basis of these approaches that there is diversity in understanding when it comes to the principles of media responsibility and the relevant mechanisms in the information environment: (1) political accountability, which refers to formal regulations that stipulate how broadcasting companies and newspapers are structured and how they function; (2) market accountability, or the system of supply and demand in which the free choices of the public are given free reign; (3) public accountability, which relates to the job of the media of maintaining more direct relationships with citizens, in addition to their relationship with the market and the state; and (4) professional accountability, which relates to codes of ethics and performance standards within the media, which should help to counterbalance any excessive dependency on politics and the market.⁹³

The responsibility of the media for establishing the public information environment presently is expanding, not diminishing. The information environment of the individual is becoming larger and larger in terms of the number and types of actors and information resources. This expands choice, but also limits safety and trustworthiness. For that reason, the media which have undertaken the functions of public communicators, have made public declarations about this, and have more or less clearly positioned their orientations in culture and politics, must serve as a space for correlation among the existing and expected values of societies, communities and also individuals.

The Internet has caused fundamental changes in the existence and development of the media, but experience shows that this, all in all, "has not destroyed traditional media industries, regular use of the Internet has not replaced the consumption of other media forms."⁹⁴

The Internet has led to radical changes in the perception of the media. If a newspaper was traditionally seen by the reader as a "map," then now it represents "indexes" and systems therein. The media are losing their ability to express place (for instance, by placing the most important information on the front page, as in a shop window). Instead, they are obtaining new and unlimited opportunities for expression in terms of time (uninterrupted news flows, updating of information, etc.) and space (virtually unlimited opportunities for the publication of information in terms of volume, depth and diversity, along with the ability for media texts to be "packaged" simultaneously for various audiences).

These innovations remain all but unused by Latvian press, radio, and television outlets. They have mostly made use of the opportunities which the Internet affords in terms of interactivity and uninterrupted content, and it has only been

recently that newspapers have, for instance, started to offer blogs. That is why Internet portals and information agencies which, thanks to the Internet, have become public channels for transmission, are beginning to become risky competitors for the traditional media in Latvia – newspapers in particular.

The press, radio and television in Latvia reacted slowly to new information and communications technologies, and it can be said that they missed the boat at the point where people began to make mass use of those technologies. This means that information and communications technologies began to have an effect on the use of information resources, as well as the expectations of the audience. The voice of the newspaper has disappeared almost entirely into the endless array of options which are presented to the reader.⁹⁵

Radio Latvia has been most successful so far in using the Internet as an additional channel. Its Internet site indicates that Radio Latvia is a public medium, because it ensures the availability of extensive and in-depth information.

The media have been affected significantly by the extended opportunities of individual freedom in the information environment, and this has to do with the aforementioned manifestations of individualisation and interaction. Media owners and editors usually identify these phenomena at the level of results – there is fragmentation and/or segmentation of the audience. In Latvia, where the potential national market audience is comparatively small and is also divided up by language use, this process must be seen as risky for the mass media business. It is also true that the people of Latvia access media from Russia and other countries, mostly through satellite and cable television.

The phenomenon of fragmentation has to do with media use: on the one hand, the media seek out interest niches in the audience and seek to draw as close as possible to the needs and interests of the potential audience. On the other hand, individuals seek media outlets which satisfy their individual expectations to the greatest degree. The fairly rapid development of these phenomena is a distinct result of the process of individualisation. Readers, viewers, and listeners expect the media to address them personally, not as representatives of an anonymous mass audience. The belief that the function of the mass media is to transmit identical content in one or another way is strong and alive. In Latvia, this idea may be strengthened by the long-lasting influence of the ideology of the Soviet media. This means that the phenomena of individualisation pose a challenge to the media, because it becomes more difficult for them to forecast the behaviour of the potential audience. It is also more risky to preserve the audience. The

situation is exacerbated even more by the fact that the Internet makes it easy to switch from one resource and medium to another.

The essence of segmentation, which is often seen as an analogous phenomenon to fragmentation, is actually different – with their content and marketing efforts, the media seek to group the audience as much as possible in accordance with social categories and relations, as well as – more directly or indirectly – with the interests of the potential market of advertisers.

If from the perspective of media business we can speak of the fairly successful work of the media industry (which is evidenced by stable increases in advertising income), then from the perspective of individual interests, the role of the media in the shaping of the information environment must be viewed more critically, because (a) Latvia has a small number of media outlets which are oriented on the provision of high-quality information (this refers to the usefulness of content in analysing economic, political, cultural, and social phenomena and in predicting their development, as well as to the depth of information, the security of sources, the quality of journalism, the objectivity of content, etc.), and (b) as media try to draw as close as possible to the consumerist expectations of the audience, their content has become far more commercialised.

In this context, the functions and roles of the new and public media, which are also informational media, are quite important.

Today, “the news media have a dual nature. On the one hand, they represent a societal institution that is ascribed a vital role in relation to such core political values as freedom of expression and democracy. On the other hand, they are businesses that produce commodities – information and entertainment – for a market.”⁹⁶ The news media, however, differ from others in an important way, despite their business-related nature and the commercialisation which has occurred – by nature and thanks to their influence in society, the news lead the relevant media outlets to be compared more to social institutions than to business enterprises. From this perspective, specific norms of the new genre must be applied to the media. This refers both to sources and to public expectations – these require appropriately trained personnel, and companies and their employees must do specific work so as to satisfy certain public and political needs.⁹⁷

The public media, for their part, are at least partly protected against market pressure, and they can be more independent in terms of their responsibilities vis-à-vis the public, as well as professional quality, by pursuing the best practice of journalistic culture. In the Latvian information environment, these responsi-

bilities are handled only by Radio Latvia. Latvian Television, by contrast, faces ongoing political pressure (frequent and poor-quality changes in management, several attempts in 2006 to restructure the News Department without any real justification and without any clear forecasts about the future, etc.).

Thus, as the information environment changes, one of the key existential issues with respect to the purpose of the media is still the extent to which the modern media meet the citizen and how the accountability and answerability of the media vis-à-vis citizens can be strengthened.⁹⁸

Opportunities afforded to individuals as the technological capacities of the Internet develop, are expanded more and more by other **government institutions and private companies** which collect, process, maintain, and offer public access to information and data and/or ensure the communications environment.

Libraries are important institutions in shaping and influencing the information environment. In the spectrum of their roles in the Latvian information environment, there are two roles which are of key importance, even if they are fairly contradictory.

One of these roles is to promote the equal ability of all residents to use information resources. Of importance here is the library network – more than 2,000 libraries in Latvia, which are visited by 39% of the population to read books and periodicals, to access the Internet, to use copying facilities, and to take part in events organised by the library.⁹⁹ Libraries also offer access to global full-text databases. Since 2004, the national agency which is called Cultural Information Systems has been working with the international eIFL.net Fund to conclude agreements on the use of the EBSCO, Cambridge Journals Online, Emerald, RUBRICON, Integrum Techno, OVID CAB Abstracts, ProQuest, and other databases at academic, scientific, medical, and public libraries. Local databases are also available through Latvia's libraries – the Latvian Normative Acts Information System (NAIS), as well as the databases of the LETA news agency. Of key importance in terms of surveying the information environment and seeking out information are the unified electronic catalogue of eight major libraries, the database of the national bibliography, etc.

The other function – digitalisation of information resources so as to establish the so-called digital libraries – is a key step in ensuring that the users in the information environment are independent of the factors of space and time. The focus in Latvia when it comes to digital libraries has been on the preservation of the country's cultural heritage, but not on the preservation in digital form of

new texts. Digital libraries represent a significant investment in overcoming the localised nature of the Latvian information environment. The Latvian National Digital Library "Lettonica", which had some 450,000 digitalised pages of information at the beginning of 2006 (newspapers, maps, posters, postcards, notes, portraits, photographs, drawings, etc.), also had an archive of digital publications. These can be accessed from the European Library portal, which means that Latvia's information resources are becoming integrated into the overall European information environment.

Other key changes in the information environment are ensured by other cultural, religious, and educational institutions, because these provide information in accordance with the expectations of communities and groups, also helping to promote horizontal communications processes.

Rapidly developing digital resources are still hard to find in Latvia's information environment, because they are not conveniently and easily accessible from well-known and highly recognised portals and vortals. Users must rely on their own experience, or on Google, which promises to make global (including Latvian) information available to everyone. On the long-awaited Latvian state portal *www.latvia.lv*, for instance, a search for the word "bibliotēka" (library) two months after the portal was on-line yielded only eight responses, and these did not include the Latvian National Library or the Latvian Academic Library.¹⁰⁰

An important role in the Latvian information environment when it comes to the maintenance of information resources and the development of information systems is performed by SIA Lursoft, which maintains more than 60 information systems, including some which are state information systems. In 2004, Lursoft had more than 70,000 registered users and more than 300,000 users who have access to Lursoft services via the Internet banking system Hanzanet (*www.hanzanet.lv*).¹⁰¹ By actively forming partnerships with other private companies, government institutions and their registers, Lursoft has become a monopoly. Its role and influence, thanks to the networked information resources which it governs via databases – a role and influence which must be seen as passive right now – may, in future, become very influential in society if the company begins to make more active use thereof.

As the Internet develops, new and far broader importance in the information environment is being gained by news agencies for which, unlike other media outlets, the Internet offered far more of an opportunity as a threat.¹⁰² That is because "established players are best positioned to take advantage of the Internet. They

already have the news-gathering infrastructure of journalists and networks with primary sources, the know-how of writing, editing, illustrating and packaging, and the hard-earned credibility that can attract the customers who want to read what is provided."¹⁰³

The Latvian news agencies LETA and BNS, however, have not become independent media that are focused on a widespread audience, which offer a diversity of analytical and entertaining materials, texts supplemented with visual materials, etc. News agencies have continued to see corporate clients as their goal, but these are clients for whom the availability of information and communications services is becoming more and more extensive.

The media and the news agencies use their products on mutually advantageous terms. For the media, news agencies are historical and traditional suppliers of news. Besides the provision of a chronological and extent review of events, they also serve as supervisors of the environment in which things occur. News agencies, on their part, offer media monitoring, clipping services, analysis of publicity, etc., to their clients. News agencies are also an important channel for the dissemination of public relations texts.

Information from news agencies is the basic element of the news segments of Internet portals. Editors largely select news and prepare a news agenda that is related to the relevant portal's thinking. This phenomenon has proven to be a factor of influence in terms of the importance of newspapers, as well as radio and television, in the emergence of individuals' information environment.

Thus, the news agencies, together with Internet portals, have created a powerful and all-encompassing network for the dissemination of news. On the one hand, this reduces the phenomenon of fragmentation in the information environment, but on the other hand, it makes that environment more homogeneous and simple, because this stratum of information is largely related to the stating of phenomena and noticing of changes therein, without much of analysis.

Over the last few years, there has been a particularly rapid development of portals which could be defined as spaces for virtual communications. For instance, *www.draugiem.lv*, which was established in 2004, defines itself as a portal for various activities and mutual communications, one that is meant for a wide segment of society.¹⁰⁴ According to TNS Latvija, the portal received an average of 226,000 hits each day in the spring of 2006 – an increase of 2.3 times over since the spring of 2005. Other similar portals include *www.inbox.lv* (253,000 daily hits) and *www.one.lv* (163,000).¹⁰⁵

These portals offer vivid manifestation of the processes of individualisation and interaction, and there has been insufficient research and evaluation of their importance in terms of changes in Latvia's information environment. The point is that they have had a significant effect in changing the communications capacities of individuals and groups. They are also becoming an important source of information. Journalists, for instance, often use *www.draugiem.lv* to find subjects and heroes for their materials. These portals establish intensive and extensive personal communications network, which means that of greater importance in the individual's information environment are private information sources. There are more intensive horizontal communications and relations in society.

State and local government institutions have been using their own Internet sites more and more actively, and these processes should facilitate better provision, receipt, and exchange of information.¹⁰⁶ These sites are used as information resources by 28.4% of Latvia's residents, and young people in particular consider them to be effective.¹⁰⁷

Ministries, state secretariats, and government institutions which offer services to individuals and legal entities are obliged to establish Internet resources by law.¹⁰⁸ There are no such regulations and, importantly, very few resources of this kind among local governments. Normative acts which regulate general elements of content and offer formal characterisations – these indicate that in national governance, Internet sites are interpreted as an opportunity for unidirectional communications, providing information to local residents when governance structures are interested in disseminating it. This means that in future, as e-governance develops, the asymmetrical nature of relations between state and municipal governance, on the one hand, and local residents, on the other hand, can expand, because practice shows that there are several risks in this area. First of all, the Internet sites of government institutions and local governments are used quite actively to promote a positive self-image and to reflect the things that their leaders are doing. Second, the sites have little to do with residents as active individuals who wish to and are able to take part in processes of government. Third, residents have virtually no ability to monitor whether state and local government institutions are ensuring the availability of all information resources.

If the operations of the media can be monitored by residents thanks to their public nature and to criticisms among the media themselves, then government institutions and local governments as public communicators have remained outside the focus of attention of the media and the public. To be sure, the Internet

sites of government institutions and local governments are a comparatively new phenomenon, but they are too important in terms of the overall information environment to leave their development entirely in the hands of political and administrative structures.

Among **businesses**, those which are most active in influencing the information environment directly and indirectly are those which use the Internet – information services, Internet banks, Internet shops, information and communications technology companies, Internet service providers, etc. This is also true of those which publish public relations or corporate magazines. These marketing channels are used to offer clients information about the latest events in various sectors, as well as entertainment. In this sense, businesses have a similar function in the information environment as media companies do, and the boundaries between journalistic and marketing media are becoming blurry. This is facilitated further by the commercialisation of journalism media outlets.

Interest groups play an insignificant role in the Latvian information environment at this time, and their information resources and communications channels are mostly used to enhance the level of recognition of the groups. One can speak of an active virtual community only with respect to *www.draugiem.lv*, although an exception to the rule is also *www.gay.lv*, which is a portal for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered individuals. Several of Latvia's political parties also have Internet sites which seek to become virtual communities, but because most parties have few members, this can be seen as more of a simulation of communications networks, one which is aimed at presenting parties as democratic, active and large interest groups.

The content of the information environment

The main role in shaping the content of Latvia's information environment is still performed by television, radio, newspaper and magazine journalists. The traditional media cause a confluence in the content of the information environment by quoting one another, by maintaining and continuing narratives, events, "heroes," etc., jointly, and by being separated in terms of orientation toward the languages of readers, watchers and listeners – Latvian and Russian. The content of the information environment in Latvia has a clear lack of narrative and originality – "texts, particularly brief news, are reprocessed messages from

other media texts and information agencies, and sometimes one can even speak of plagiarism."¹⁰⁹ In the information environment, "events, people, processes, etc., which people perceive as more or less mutually oriented or emerging from one another in a specific order (ritualistic or structural),"¹¹⁰ appear only as fragments, and that hinders the emergence of an overall view of the matter.

The quality of media content in Latvia has been discussed quite harshly, but these are incidental debates – only some materials lead to audience dissatisfaction, contradictory attitudes, or increased competition among the media.

The strongest pillars for the traditional media include the culture of journalism, which is manifested through codes of ethics and standards. This allows the media to operate as a "social map" which displays directions and hierarchies and can, therefore, be perceived by the audience as an "authoritative representation of the social world."¹¹¹ This is a conventional aspect of audiences and the media which is based on a long-standing tradition. The media undertake the responsibility for the utility, security, and adequacy of information, while the audience trusts and relies on the professional activities of the media. As the media become more commercial, the social functions of journalism change – "as the journalist's main objective is no longer to disseminate ideas and create social consensus around them, but to produce entertainment and information that can be sold to individual consumers. And it clearly contributes to homogenisation, undercutting the plurality of media systems."¹¹²

A critical approach to the media is also enhanced by their nature as "gatekeepers" and setters of agenda. On the one hand, the audience expects the media to produce a "social map," but on the other hand, it criticises the media for obviously failing to reflect the full spectrum of views and facts (this is limited by the media space and time, if not by anything else). Sometimes audiences perceive the media even as representing the interests only of specific groups.

Latvia's journalism and the mass media have not established a common understanding as to their responsibilities vis-à-vis society, and this has been true ever since the restoration of Latvia's independence at the beginning of the 1990s.

Media commercialisation and harsh competition in the market have pushed media criticism out of the arena of public debate in the broad sense of the concept – discussions about the role of the media in Latvian society so as to promote an agreement between the media and the public when it comes to the roles, responsibilities and obligations of the media. At best, there are discussions of individual incidents, and journalists typically do not analyse their own professional

environment, choosing instead to take positions of corporate solidarity vis-à-vis individuals, the state and other institutions. People outside the media space often express dissatisfaction with the professionalism of journalists and the policies of editors, but these viewpoints are presented in the media very seldom.

One of the greatest contradictions between individual expectations which promote new opportunities for the media and the traditional media is that these media have content which is focused on an abstract audience as characterised by the demographic, economic, and social indicators that are of interest to advertisers, but not the individuals.

Expectations of individualisation in the information environment are distinctly enhanced by advertising, which addresses people directly and engages in the discourse of proximity. This represents a dissonance in comparison to the abstract and non-specific message of the media. This is seen most clearly in social advertising, which offers very personal and specifically addressed texts.

The problem of individualising content in the traditional media, as is seen in their texts, has been recognised, and new approaches are being sought out. One is the attempt to personalise the news, but that often leads to a situation in which true news reports in newspapers are replaced with trivial blabbering and a description of various insignificant details so as to conjure up the effect of presence for the reader.

The content of Latvia's information environment reflects a general phenomenon which is seen in other societies, as well – "traditional media emerged within the ethos of mid-modernity and its focus on the nation-state and national identity. ... Alternatively, new media emerged in late modernity with an emphasis on individualisation and choice within a culture of freedom which resists strong institutional structures in order to encourage communication initiatives at the local, national and supranational levels."¹¹³

The infrastructure of the information environment

Changes in communications, as linked primarily to the new opportunities which technologies provide to communications actors, can be reviewed from various perspectives, but there are four approaches which are most visible – the technocratic approach, the social structure approach, the information structure and exclusion approach, and the modernisation and capitalism approach.¹¹⁴

The technocratic approach focuses on the Internet, which changes everyday life, ensures greater work opportunities, facilitates education and strengthens communities. The most important factors in ensuring these opportunities include accessibility, content, and the competence of users. In Latvia, this approach is often most visible, and it is strongly supported if there are economic interests in facilitating the market for information and communications technology market, in ensuring and dividing up government procurement for information and communications technologies, etc.

Despite the fairly visible superiority of this approach, however, there are indicators to suggest that a digital divide has emerged – computers and the Internet are used more extensively in urban than in rural areas. In the region of Latgale, which is less economically developed, the indicators are at the lowest level. Computer and Internet use are affected by income, age, etc.

This means that the availability of the digital information environment is very different for various residents of Latvia – in other words, there are no equal opportunities. In overcoming these problems, of key importance in recent years have been achievements in the computerisation of Latvia's regional libraries – 86% of them are computerised, and 77% have an Internet connection. Here, too, however, we see a significant gap among Latvia's various regions. The highest percentage of computerised libraries is found in the Rīga District (96%), while the lowest percentage, again, is in Latgale (78%). The greatest percentage of libraries with Internet connections is found in the Kurzeme region (92%), while the lowest percentage is found in Latgale (76%). Public Internet access facilities also offer a series of other modern technologies – recording and playing of CD/DVD content, printing and scanning opportunities, etc.

In the social structure approach, the focus is on Internet dialogue and search functions which enhance opportunities for civic participation and for influencing decisions. This approach has not attracted much attention in Latvia, and in those cases where there has been attention, it has pretty much been a formality. This is indicated by the long time that it took to draft a conceptual document on the information society, by delays in the introduction of E-governance, by the low level of interactivity on state and local government Internet sites, etc. Governance in Latvia is not oriented toward an active exchange of information with local residents.

In the information structure and exclusion approach, the key problems are seen in the unequal opportunities and relations between the centre and the periphery.

In any description of Latvia's information environment, one can see very visible differences between Rīga and other cities, to say nothing of rural regions. The traditional media are concentrated in Rīga, and that means that the capital city and life therein are reflected far more than are other areas. Rīga is also the place where library resources and cultural and education institutions are concentrated, and this has the automatic side-effect of meaning that schoolchildren and students there have better Internet access, etc.

The modernisation and capitalism approach seeks out causes for the increasing influence of information technologies. Castells has described this as "information capitalism," wherein education and the ability of individuals to enhance their education are of key importance.¹¹⁵ In this respect, desires are more in place in Latvia than realities in terms of issues such as the number of university study slots in which tuition is covered by the state.

Various studies have shown that young people have better computer and Internet usage skills. One reason for this was the Latvian Educational System Informatisation (LISS) project, which took the complex approach of providing computers and software to educational institutions, training teachers, ensuring Internet connections, and designing and using electronic educational materials. The project was launched in 1997 with 0.3 million lats in government financing, and that increased to LVL 3.43 million in 2002. In 2003/2004, however, it declined back to the 1997 level.

The level of information skills remains low in Latvia, and this problem is starting to resemble a closed cycle. In small companies (fewer than ten employees), computer use is two to three times lower than in larger companies. The proportion among these companies in Rīga is 1.8, while in Latgale it is 3.03. Computers are used least often in companies related to agriculture, hunting, and forestry (30%), retailing and renovations (21%), as well as in households (11%). The main reasons for this are a lack of resources (38%), a shortage of qualified specialists (31%), and the belief of company directors that these technologies are not necessary in their work (28%).¹¹⁶ In some territories of Latvia, an average of 70% of employees have non-existent or insufficient computer skills. 60% of employers, meanwhile, think that this is something which employees themselves must organise.¹¹⁷

One way of overcoming this is the National Unified Library Information System (NULIS) project, which is aimed at the following: (1) information searches, using not just traditional, but also electronic search systems; (2) ordering of information, which offers alternative means for document delivery at a price which

can be afforded by everyone; (3) information delivery, not only through the use of traditional printed information sources, but also in electronic form – something for which the interlibrary loan system must be effectively utilised; (4) information services; (5) creation of resources – the local information resources of the national cultural heritage (e.g., databases of local history and culture) in electronic reform; (6) training of librarians; (7) user instruction – increasing the preparation of users so that they can operate independently and locate and use information services on their own.¹¹⁸

The fact is, however, that Latvia's information and communications infrastructure, taken as a whole, still does not ensure individuals with a convenient and stable accessibility of the information environment at a socially acceptable price in any populated area in Latvia. This reduces both motivation abilities to learn the necessary skills. The lack of skills, in turn, keeps people from using the Internet and its resources.

* * *

This collection is the result of a research project, "Latvia's information environment: the early 21st century," which began in 2005 in an attempt to implement the idea of Manuel Castells – that research concerning new phenomena and manifestations of communications must be interdisciplinary, interactive and co-operative.¹¹⁹ The collection was put together by 24 scholarly researchers, doctoral students, master's degree students and professionals from information sectors. Approaches to how best to understand the phenomena of the information environment were sought out through philosophy, advertising, law, journalism, communications studies, theatrical criticism, public relations, art, political science, and information technologies.

Analysis of the information environment is focused on four particular areas in this collection:

- the theoretical framework of the phenomenon of the information environment;
- actors in the information environment;
- the content of the information environment;
- the infrastructure of the information environment.

These areas of study appear in papers in various ways and various contexts, because the conceptual approach to this collection involved **no setting of limits** in terms of research methods, the phenomena that were studied, or the manifesta-

tions of the information environment. The reason for this is that editor wished to encounter various types of knowledge and interpretation. In the information environment, we exist not just thanks to household objects such as radios, television sets, and computers, but also thanks to our presence on the street, on buses, at church or at the theatre, at the parish house, at political party campaign rallies, in the sauna, at a museum, etc. This collection, in a sense, embodies the public space in which the observations and conclusions of its authors have come together.

The information environment in this collection also involves on boundaries. It was a challenge for the authors to conduct new research and for readers to seek out their own explanations for the information environment and their understanding thereof. It is, after all, important to know where each of us lives.

In article, **“Time and space: new aspects of the changing information environment,”** philosophy professor **Māra Rubene** proposes the idea that time and space are the initial parameters of changes in the information environment. Virtual reality (virtualisation) is a way of eliminating distance, mediation, and boundaries. The more complex the forms of space and time, the more independent individuals become with respect to the direct environment and the energy sources of the human body. The all-encompassing nature of the changes has had an effect on the former simplicity of ideas, leading people to think about their aporetic properties.

New media are one of the most important factors in understanding the present day. They have entered the lives of modern individuals, opening up a completely new presence of space and time – one in which there are shifting borders between the visible and the invisible, between the natural and the artificial. A stable society is one which can strike a balance between media which are oriented toward space, and media which are oriented toward time.

The co-existence of these media in society force a review not just of traditional ideas about proximity, distance, presence, and mobility by taking a closer look at different experiences with spatial and time-related aspects, but also of the issue of how these different rhythms have an effect on existing public institutions and how their goals and missions should be reformulated. Culture is of key importance in these processes, if it is seen as the ability of an individual to evaluate problems through the terminology of space and time.

In **“The problem of the fifth foot or issues related to the information society between the UN Summits in Geneva and Tunis,”** the computer science specialist Dr. **Juris Borzovs** finds that Latvia has achieved several of the goals that were

defined with respect to the information society at the global UN summit which was held in Geneva in 2003 – goals which were to be achieved by 2015. In most cases, these are achievements of a technological nature. They are accompanied by a series of new public phenomena: (a) electronic communications cause communities to become weaker and networks to become stronger; (b) other people can intervene (or are able to intervene) in almost any social context – something which has become common and, in some cases, even welcome; (c) there are electronic votes on many important issues; and (d) technologies have developed to the point where they can effect sexuality and love in the 21st century.

As is the case elsewhere in the world, people in Latvia must know and understand the key phenomena which affect nearly every individual, as well as the public at large. Information technologies have opened up the whole world for us, but the question is whether we open ourselves adequately to the world and to the way in which electronic forms of communications affect humanity – will they consolidate humanity or isolate people from one another?

Philosophy professor **Skaidrīte Lasmane** is the author of **“Information ethics in Latvia,”** addressing issues which have to do with the role of the quality of the information environment not only in creating views, but also in creating new desires and yearnings, as well as in ensuring public safety and other needs. Information ethics are one way to regulate the information environment so that its influence on private life and the public sector might be as valuable as possible. The author analyses several contradictory trends in terms of information ethics in Latvia – the contradiction between increasing information freedom and responsibility for its quality; the complications which opportunities to copy materials have created in the sphere of intellectual property; the lack of compatibility between the availability of information in databases and appropriate respect toward confidentiality and privacy; and the consequences of the demand for the speed and volume of information if this is not accompanied by honesty and precision in the representation of events and/or situations.

In **“Constitutional rights to information: is the state obliged to provide information to the media?”**, the attorneys **Lauris Liepa** and **Andris Kaņeps** analyse media regulations in Latvia and find that media rights are described thoroughly and in detail therein. In the widespread contacts between the government and the media, however, there is a fundamental problem – the right of the media to receive information and the obligation of the state to provide it. Information availability is regulated in the Latvian Constitution, the law on information open-

ness, and the law on the press and other mass media, but the application of these requirements is not always clear or acceptable to all participants in the information environment. Society does not always feel that a priority is the understanding that the right to information is of a constitutional nature, limited only when the limitation is specified by law and on the basis of a legitimate and commensurate goal. Each limitation on information availability which does not satisfy one of the aforementioned criteria must be seen as unconstitutional.

Nelliņa Ločmele, who is editor-in-chief of SIA "Reģionālā prese Diena," offers the paper "**The quality of journalism: views of editors and content of newspapers.**" She presents the results of a study of the views of editors with respect to the quality of journalism and the effect of this on the national daily press. The main conclusion is that media editors have views about the basic elements of the quality of journalism, which largely coincide irrespective of differences in the language of newspapers, territorial coverage, education, membership in the Latvian Association of Journalists, etc. Objectiveness is firmly defined as the most important factor, followed by precision, the skills and specialisation of journalists, the individualism of the newspaper, the use of research, and the style of language. Other important criteria defined by editors include the total volume of editorial content in newspapers, the proportion of articles written by staff journalists, the editorial proportion vis-à-vis advertising, the proportion of reports that explain things, as opposed to reports which simply offer information from the location of an event, and the high proportion of news versus features. Most editors have a positive evaluation of explanatory journalism and the work of commentators, but they do not attach much importance to the presentation of free time and physical and spiritual activities in the news. The quality of journalism is seen as an obligation which, at the end of the day, is not always appropriate for the strategy of earning business profits.

Vita Zelče, an associate professor in communications theory, has written the paper "**The local press – shaper of the community's information service.**" She concludes that in Latvia's local space, local newspapers are of particular importance, because on the one hand, they take part in the structuring and mapping of cultural identity, and on the other hand, are a part thereof. The number of publications issued in Latvian continues to increase, although overall print runs are not increasing. The number of local newspapers published in Russian and their print run have not changed, but the dissemination and reading of local newspapers, as well as their influence in various Latvian regions differs.

Newspapers mostly call themselves district publications, but their priority is not consolidating the district as a community. Specific cultural events take place in the cultural buildings of towns or parishes, schools, libraries, kindergartens, etc. Politics are handled by specific local governments. Economic achievements are gained through manufacturing and provision of services and entertainment, and all of these have their own specific place. The people who are described in newspapers talk about and describe their place – the city, parish, home, place of employment, birthplace, etc.

Ksenija Zagorovska, editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Chas*, and **Pāvels Šudņevs**, marketing director for the Petits advertising group, are the authors of the paper **“The phenomenon of the Russian Press in Latvia,”** in which they review the Russian press in Latvia and conclude that it shapes a developed and stable system in which the regional press, too, is quite well developed. Publications in Russian have pushed publications from Russia out of the market, and this is particularly true of socio-political newspapers – audiences want to learn about the latest local news in Russian. A distinct tradition for the Russian language press is to focus on so-called “little people,” focusing on the problems of individuals, helping people and specific schools, etc. The authors point out that the Russian language press is often accused of being oppositionist in nature, but they explain that this is because it is the tradition for the press to represent the interests of its readers. Since the restoration of Latvia’s independence, the Russian community has encountered many national problems such as the large number of non-citizens in the country and the reforms which are being implemented in schools. The authors also oppose the commonly held view that the Russian language press is financed by Russia. They say that the situation of the Russian language press is similar to that of the Latvian language press when it comes to the profits earned by publishers, the sources that are used, and the potential audience for the newspapers.

Rolands Tjarve, who holds an MA in the social sciences, is the author of the paper **“Radio and television: the aspect of mediation.”** He has discovered several important factors in the development of television and radio – ones which have an effect on the information environment.

The number of television stations in Latvia has not changed significantly since 1997, but the boundaries between commercial and public television are becoming more and more vague, even as the audience focuses more on the commercial media. In recent years, there has been increased audience interest in the

programmes which television stations produce for themselves. This helps people to mediate their own lives, and this is of particular importance, because society, as a community, is shaped by imagined relations and links, and television helps in this process.

In comparison to television, the traditional leader in the radio sector is Radio Latvia. It offers four different channels, and Radio Latvia 2, which broadcasts Latvian music, has become the most listened-to channel in recent years. The Russian speaking audience also listens to greater numbers of programmes produced in Latvia than it watches television channels offered here.

Digital television can create serious changes in the Latvian information environment, because it will make it possible to quadruple the number of national television channels in Latvia.

In **“Television news in Latvia: before challenges of the present and the future,”** the Europe correspondent for the Latvian Television, **Gundars Rēders**, evaluates TV news as a key information resource for the development of other broadcasts, in establishing long-lasting messages, and in promoting public debate on issues that are of importance to the public. Even though the number of Internet users doubled between 2001 and 2005, that did not have any major effect on the habit of people to watch television news. What is more, the overall audience for the news has had a tendency to increase.

Jānis Ikstens, an associate professor in comparative politics, is the author of the paper **“The individual and the Internet: opportunities for use and participation,”** and he concludes that there is a fairly classical digital gap in Latvia – computers and the Internet are more easily available to and are more often used by richer and better-educated people. The people of Latvia are not very active in making use of the administrative and commercial opportunities which the Internet affords, and the active users are those who use computers and the Internet at work. They are people for whom information and communications technologies have become an everyday matter. For others (the majority of society, in fact), it remains to watch both private and public initiatives aimed at improving the E-environment in Latvia without becoming actively involved in the definition of needs or priorities, or in making use of the innovations which are offered.

In **“The information environment in Latvia’s Internet,”** the senior editor of the Delfi Internet portal, **Ingus Bērziņš**, finds that entertainment and “time-killing” products are becoming stronger and stronger in their positions – search engines, virtual communities, Internet banks, the homepages of telecommunications

operators, pages of advertisements, etc. Audience interest in on-line media increases significantly at such times as there are timely, global or catastrophic events, but the need and habit of media consumption are changed by hypertextuality. The audience's understanding of the opportunities which are afforded by the information space is significantly influenced by the multimedia nature of the on-line media.

Lolita Stašāne, Deputy Editor-in-Chief of *Una Magazine*, is the author of the paper **"In search of niches in public relations communications."** She concludes that there are several trends in the Latvian public relations sector which are mostly the result of a polarised understanding thereof. A positive thing is that there is greater understanding of long-term investments in brand development and public relations as components of integrated marketing communications, but it is also true that people still expect public relations to provide a quick fix without any serious investments, seeing PR as a panacea for any situation. There are no precise data, but data from the Latvian Association of Public Relations Companies suggest that market dynamics are rapid, and client numbers are increasing. Companies expect more from public relations agencies than just media relations or publicity. The media, for their part, no longer perceive information from public relations companies as nothing more than the desire of profit-based companies to attract attention. Information about activities which have to do with positive messages in the information environment are no longer perceived with clear suspicion.

Public relations cannot be isolated from the overall information environment. The relevant quality standards can be regulated by associations, companies or society as such.

Ineta Tunne, an associate professor in social psychology, and **Marita Zitmane**, a Marie Currie doctoral fellow, use the paper **"Advertising and its messages: changes in functions and roles"** to review advertising in the information environment from two perspectives – as a representation of social reality and as a documentation of society and its values. Study and analysis of advertising, they argue, has not been adequate in terms of these processes, because "advertising criticism," like cinema criticism, art criticism, etc., is virtually non-existent in Latvia.

Advertising in Latvia's information environment presents a fairly homogeneous message – the dominant products and services are telecommunications services, hygienic products, department stores, television channels, and elec-

tronics. Products of immediate need are offered together with entertainment products. Advertising messages are focused on the present of society, not on the future – the nuclear family, age as a situation which can be escaped or has led to peculiar situations, etc. Social advertisements usually present worried people or people from socially deviant groups. This means that advertising can enhance mistrust of individuals in themselves, as well as pessimism in the public at large, because the images and texts which are offered in advertisements in the public information environment are dissonant from reality, people's emotions, actual events, and values. This phenomenon can be enhanced by the fact that advertisements present "others" or "strangers" who are more successful, wealthier, more satisfied, happier, etc., than "we" or "the locals" are.

Anda Rožukalne, who holds an MA in the social sciences, wrote the paper "**Is a 'magazine society' emerging in Latvia?**", reviewing the development of magazines in Latvia over the last five years, which contrasts with the seeming stability in the Latvian media environment. She points to trends that were typical in other countries in the world in the 1990s – fragmentation of the audience as a result of technological expansion, and the development of niche magazines and business publications. Each year, some 15 new publications appear in Latvia, and readers can subscribe to nearly 200. The process of internationalisation began in 2002 and 2003, when publications from other countries began to appear in Latvia's magazine market.

Professor **Silvija Radzobe**, who is a theatre critic, analyses post-modernism in Latvia's theatres as a new phenomenon in Latvia's information environment in "**Post-modernism in Latvian theatre.**" Young directors have performed a historical role over the last ten years or so – they have developed a theatrical language which can adequately express the most fundamental manifestations of the spiritual life of Latvia, as a society which belongs to the Western cultural space. The searches of young artists have had a positive influence on the development of theatre in Latvia as such. Processes in contemporary theatrical direction have occurred in parallel to events not just in the other Baltic States, but in the entire post-Soviet territory of Eastern Europe. Thus one can conclude that the language of the theatre which is typical of post-modernism has ensured that the Latvian theatre can compete in the international cultural space.

Art scientist **Inga Bunkše**, in "**Does the Latvian love art? Interaction between art and society,**" evaluates the role of art in the shaping of the information environment. Latvia has been a typical country in terms of serving as a

“gatekeeper,” but members of the post-industrial society want to consume, and they do so actively. The aim of cultural policy is to attract attention to culture in this regard. Naïve reliance on power structures and use of the narratives of victims and sufferers in the communications space of society serve to shut down the self-referential statement that “the Latvian loves art.” Instead there are narratives which, in semantic terms, are full of self-pity: “I don’t understand art, it is not meant for ordinary individuals.” These factors have an influence on information about art, particularly in those media outlets which have not specialised in the study and analysis of cultural processes and which are widely read. Journalists have little knowledge about the development of the world of art, so they rely on emotions, not knowledge. Sometimes they express clear demagoguery in shaping mythology about individuals or groups. In this situation, the resources of the self-referential statement that “the Latvian loves art” are not renewed. The statement disappears, circulates at the previous level of knowledge, or represents the conservative self-perception which has typified society over the last decade.

In “**Region and religious communities in Latvia’s information environment**,” the Rev. **Juris Cālītis** analyses Christian religion, where the spiritual is always held together with the material and the bodily, because God created both. The author looks at relevant challenges in the new information environment – the “virtual church,” links through portals, E-mail, the Internet and homepages. This creates a completely new context for congregations and friendships. It has not, however, yet been recognised that the environment changes its user, and the church, congregations and religious organisations which present themselves on the Internet have not yet started to think about how this information environment affects its participants. As has been the case in the past when technologies have changed (from the spoken word to the written word, from the written word to book publishing, and now from the printed text to the electronic environment), these latest changes in the information environment will shape and demand new explanations of technologies and faith.

The director of the Latvian National Library, **Andris Vilks**, is the author of “**Libraries – new identities**,” in which he analyses the activities and development of Latvia’s libraries in the context of the national policies of states. The natural monopoly of libraries in the shaping and maintenance of information resources has diminished, there are changes in the structure of libraries and their infrastructure of information and communications. Key changes in Latvia’s

information environment have been created by the Latvian National Digital Library "Lettonica," which involves the digitalisation and processing of the most valuable, threatened, and demanded materials, the establishment of a unified management system for digital objects, and assurance of long-term access to the "Lettonica" resources. Latvia's libraries, however, do not engage in the provision and shaping of information resources in a way which would correspond to the state's research and development needs, because priorities have not been clearly defined in Latvia with respect to national development, libraries cannot reach agreement amongst themselves on a unified profile, different libraries have different financing principles, existing financial and information resources do not enable a sufficient diversity in response to demand, etc.

"State and local government institutions on the internet" was written by **Inga Koleča** and **Sanda Rieksta**, holders of MA degrees in the communication science. They analyse the Internet sites of local government institutions and conclude that these are mostly informative, not communicative, offering local residents little opportunity to take part in public governance and decision making. That is because the information that is offered to local residents is complicated, it is not "translated" from documents, there is a lack of objective information, diversity of viewpoints and materials which would allow local residents to analyse situations, phenomena, and processes in a critical way. The availability of information is also different from one region of Latvia to the next one.

The portals and homepages of national government institutions have a greater wealth of information, more links, a better structure, and a visual appearance which creates a fairly homogeneous impression of the central institutions of national governance. This can be attributed to greater administrative and financial resources, as well as normative acts which present specific demands as to the framework of content on the homepages. Local government homepages and portals demonstrate a fairly distinct trend – the Internet sites of cities are richer in content, more attractive in appearance, and more useful for local residents than are those of smaller local governments.

PhD fellow in political science **Visvaldis Valtenbergs** concludes in **"The homes or signs of Latvian parties: analysis of political party homepages in advance of the 2005 local government election"** that for the time being, parties in Latvia are not yet prepared to use the World Wide Web as an instrument to involve people in debates about policy alternatives or to strengthen the loyalty of supporters. The Internet sites of parties are weakly structured and short-term, and only a narrow

segment of the audience is aware of them. Party sites are little more than a sign for the organisation, even though the pages also do present the latest news, as well as party press releases. Because campaigns are becoming more expensive even as ceilings have been set on campaign spending, virtual campaigns are promising. The number of Internet users is increasing quickly, and existing party financing laws mean that parties will have to count on limitations in time and finances insofar as media advertising is concerned. There are also active regulations related to campaigning, and there is monitoring of hidden advertising, too.

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