The Struggle for Survival of Independent Newspapers and the Role of New Media during the 2006 Belarus Presidential Elections.

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ABSTRACT

ANDREI KHRAPAVITSKI: The Struggle for Survival of Independent Newspapers and the Role of New Media during the 2006 Belarus Presidential Elections.

(Under the direction of Lucila Vargas)

The 2006 Presidential race was a watershed for the Belarusian independent press because the government embarked on cleansing the independent print journalism that had emerged in 1991, when the country became independent from the Soviet Union. The election was also marked by the transition of some independent newspapers from print to online and the vibrant development of citizen journalism in the Belarusian cyberspace. Based on a case study approach, this Master’s thesis explores the demise of the traditional press and the emergence of new alternative sources of information that tried to substitute for the silenced traditional media in Belarus during the period of the 2006 Presidential Election campaign, from October 2005 to March 25, 2006.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The 2006 Presidential race was a pivotal point in the political life of Belarus, a small post-Soviet country where Alaksandr Lukashenka, after being president for 12 years, was for the first time seriously challenged by the opposition, the international community, and the media (Bulhakau, 2006; Chavusau, 2006). The race was also a watershed for the Belarusian independent press because the Lukashenka regime embarked on cleansing the independent print journalism that had emerged in 1991, when the country became independent from the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the presidential race was marked by the transition of some independent newspapers from print to online and the vibrant development of citizen journalism in the Belarusian cyberspace. The purpose of this case study is to examine the Belarusian independent newspapers’ struggle for survival during the 2006 presidential race and the emergence of alternative (mostly online) sources of information that attempted to, at least partially, substitute for the newspapers.

A few years earlier, authoritarian regimes in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan ended with a wave of peaceful civil protests commonly referred to as “color revolutions,” such as the Revolution of Roses in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. In Belarus, the opposition prepared for a similar scenario, having chosen its own revolution color – denim to symbolize freedom and resistance to conformity. Most analysts agree that among the most basic requirements for such non-violent revolutions are the
following: one, a weak and unpopular state authority; two, a credible opposition able to attract mass support; three, an active civil society, especially independent media to inform and mobilize that support; and, four, passive or divided security forces (Anable, 2005).

The Belarusian authorities, however, succeeded in preempting the revolution by conducting unprecedented arrests of civil and political leaders, closing independent newspapers, and creating an atmosphere of fear to minimize civil unrest after the elections (Silitski, 2006). If we examine Belarusian media in terms of their potential audience (i.e., circulation of periodicals or number of listeners and viewers of radio and television) in the first years of Lukashenka’s rule, 95 percent of broadcasting and 90 percent of print media belonged to the state. However, if we examine these media in Belarus in terms of the numbers of their outlets, only one quarter of broadcast and two thirds of print media belonged to the state (Manaev, 1995). Over the 12 years of Lukashenko’s presidency, the regime gradually cut off the sources of alternative information, thus depriving the opposition of the necessary levers to interact with the public (Dynko, 2006). But after the wave of successful color revolutions in the neighboring countries, and with growing pressure from the West, the regime took preemptive measures to limit even further the influence and outreach of the independent press. The state-owned newspaper distribution company, Belpoštta, no longer allowed subscriptions to or the distribution of privately owned, independent newspapers (Khrapavitski, 2006). The reasoning behind the refusals was straightforward. The monopoly referred to Article 391 of the Civil Law holding that citizens and juridical entities were free to sign or annul any contract and it was not allowed to oblige someone to conclude an unwanted agreement. This is how Belpoštta explained its actions to an independent newspaper Tovarishch: “Since the law does not require an
edition’s inclusion into a subscription catalog, Belposhta upholds its right to select publications for inclusion and consequent distribution by subscription” (Bastunets, 2006). Another state monopoly, Belsayuzdruk, refused to have any of these publications sold at the kiosks it controlled (Khrapavitski, 2006). Its reasoning was similar to that of Belposhta. The editors of independent newspapers protested, wrote petitions to the highest authorities, but their appeals and demands were turned down (Klaskouski, 2006).

By the end of the election year, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (thereinafter, BAJ) counted around 30 private newspapers with political news and a circulation of more than 999 copies (BAJ, 2007). From 2004 to 2007, the number of independent newspapers dwindled by more than half (Bastunets, 2007). BAJ explained this phenomenon as being the result of economic and legal discrimination of the nongovernmental press. Of the 30 licensed newspapers, 13 publications were not available via subscription due to Belposhta’s policies, and 16 were not sold in the kiosks of Belsayuzdruk (BAJ, 2007).

This case study will contribute to understanding the role of citizen journalism and new media in democratic transformations. Based on a case study approach (Stake, 1995), this Master’s thesis explores the demise of the traditional press and the emergence of new alternative sources of information that tried to substitute for the silenced traditional media in Belarus during the period of the 2006 Presidential Election campaign, from October 2005 to March 25, 2006.

The broad research questions of the study are as follows. How did the Belarusian traditional media struggle for survival during the 2006 Belarusian Presidential campaign?
Which alternative sources of information emerged during this period? How did those alternative information sources try to replace the silenced traditional media?

I organize the thesis in the following way. In chapter 2, I provide political background information about Belarus, including an overview of the state of the Belarusian media. The literature review follows in chapter 3, where I explicate the concepts of independent press and citizen journalism. In chapter 4, I explain the methodological foundations of the study, present personal background information, and enumerate limitations of the chosen method.

In chapter 5, The Government’s Attack on the Independent Press, I address how the Belarusian traditional media struggled for survival during the 2006 Belarusian Presidential campaign. In the chapter, I examine the closure of some independent newspapers, the distribution ban imposed on others, and the newspapers’ struggle to reach their audiences under these extreme conditions. The chapter features statistical data provided by the Belarusian Association of Journalists, Reporters Without Borders, Freedom House, and narratives of the editors of the repressed Belarusian newspapers. In addition, the chapter discusses the role of independent media in transitional societies, compares the Belarusian situation to the transformations in Ukraine and Georgia, where the undertakings of the opposition forces were successful owing to a greater outreach and availability of the independent media.

In chapter 6, Emergence and Growth of Alternative Media, I explore the appearance of new alternative media mostly initiated by ordinary citizens who attempted to disseminate information about the events in the country during the electoral period. The chapter discusses the role of the Internet as a new communication platform, the
phenomenal popularity of *Livejournal* blogs in Belarus, and the government’s efforts to impede the proliferation of uncensored Internet content.

Finally, in chapter 7, Conclusion and Implications for the Future, I discuss the potential of the Internet and new information technologies to contribute to the democratic transformation in Belarus. The bigger question addressed in the chapter is whether Belarusian society (or any other) is prepared to transition from print to online media. The chapter argues that the new technologies may not necessarily lead to preservation of the values of newspaper journalism, especially its public journalism qualities. There is a prolific discussion among the American communication scholars and professionals whether Internet could save traditional media from the gradual demise. The Belarusian case, however, shows how dangerous and problematic an untimely transition to online communication can be.
CHAPTER II

POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Belarus has recently gone from being the European “terra incognito” to being one of the top issues of the European Union’s foreign policy (Lobjakas, 2005). Researchers from within and without Belarus have been exploring what the phenomenon of Lukashenka was, and who or what could put the country of ten million inhabitants back on the democratic track. Unlike Ukraine, Belarus’ government has overtly renounced any efforts to integrate into the European community. The Belarusian president, well-known for his controversial rhetoric, once said that he would not lead Belarus after the civilized world, presumably meaning the West. And he proved his position many times by closing down offices of U.S. and European foundations, and by throwing journalists, NGO activists, and oppositional politicians in jail. As an alternative to the dominant pro-European sentiment in the region, President Lukashenka has offered Belarusians a union with Russia. But the integration process between the two nations has been going on for at least 10 years, and still the union is incomplete and even feeble. Some scholars argue that Lukashenka is not going to yield his powers to any supranational formation (Bulhakau, 2003; Dynko, 2004), and thus this entire long-running pro-Russian agenda is his way of bargaining for economic benefits – cheap gas, oil, and other products, and financial support
for his political campaigns. As Andrei Tsygankov, professor of international relations at San Francisco State University, remarked:

Since 1996, Russia and Belarus have been engaged in an elaborate political dance concerning integration in some form. While initially Lukashenko may have believed that a “union” of the two states could provide him with a vehicle for holding onto power, he came to realize that this was unlikely to occur (it is better to be the ruler of a small country than a minor figure in a large one) (Lavelle, 2005).

Moreover, in an authoritarian country, policies and ideologies of the government do not necessarily reflect opinions of the entire population. Data from independent sociological institutions reflect a radical polarization of Belarusian society over such crucial questions as whether Belarus should integrate with Russia or rather with Europe.

The state of media in Belarus was much different from that of Ukraine or Georgia. The Belarusian internal electronic media were entirely controlled by the state, and newspapers were subjected to the heaviest onslaught in the post-Soviet history of the country. Newspaper editors often had to choose either to break a repressive regulation or stand by a human right to distribute information. For example, in the run-up to the presidential vote, Belarus’ Central Election Commission ruled that publishing candidates’ political platforms in independent newspapers would be regarded as direct assistance to them, which is against the electoral code. However, state-owned newspapers, on false pretenses, refused to publish the program of the main Lukashenka’s rival, Alaxandr Milinkevich. So editors had to make a choice either violate the ruling or let their readers know the platform of the opposition leader. Choosing between informing and keeping silent sometimes is the hardest challenge for newspaper owners in an authoritarian state. Even a minor violation of the Belarusian media laws may be regarded as a serious felony, resulting in a publication’s closure or imprisonment of a reporter or an editor.
For example, the Belarus’s Ministry of Information closed down the Zhoda newspaper for publishing a cartoon of Prophet Muhammad. The caricature, which infuriated Muslims around the world, went practically unnoticed by Belarusians. There were no protests or even harsh remarks against the cartoon in Zhoda in Belarus’ Islamic circles. But the government acted fast. The prosecutor-general and later the president himself reprimanded Zhoda for inflaming religious turmoil. But was that the real reason for harsh punishment of the newspaper?

An alternative explanation can be found not in the religious realm, but rather in politics and the presidential race in particular. One of the candidates running for office was Alexander Kazulin, an outspoken Social-Democratic leader who made a surprise knockout television address, harshly attacking the incumbent. During his speech, he accused the state media of pro-Lukashenka propaganda, tore the official state-owned newspaper Sovetskaya Belorussia, called Lukashenka a liar, and appealed to the Bible, comparing the president to the devil. After this appearance his poll ratings surged and awoke the sleepy society out of its fear, apathy, and disbelief in the opposition’s strength (Volchek et al., 2006).

Apparently, Lukashenka wanted to silence Kazulin. The best way he could do it was by closing down a newspaper that was backing the oppositional candidate. Aleksei Karol, Zhoda’s editor, was Kazulin’s campaign aide, so by hushing the only registered social-democratic publication in the country, the regime seriously limited Kazulin’s abilities to get out his message.

According to Oleg Panfilov, head of the Moscow-based Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations (CJES), Lukashenka and his government have created a situation where campaign coverage in the Belarusian mass media benefits only the incumbent. Such
an atmosphere has been systematically built during Lukashenka’s rule, with radio stations, newspapers, and Internet sites gradually being destroyed (IFEX, 2006). Lukashenka successfully pushed a constitutional amendment through parliament in October 2004, which enabled him to seek a third term as president. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) characterized that process as undemocratic. It said Lukashenka and senior administration officials received more than 90 percent of the pre-election television coverage (IFEX, 2006). In such conditions when, on the one hand, the incumbent gets all the attention of the state-run media, while on the other, all alternative sources of information are silenced, the independent press virtually becomes the enemy of the state, and with this label, it cannot keep out of the political agenda, and journalists cannot remain detached.

The records of the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) show that even newspapers with little political news fail to avoid the repressive mechanism. They pose danger to the regime just by being financially independent. This alone is a reason to crack down on them. Belarusian journalists often choose to fight back. Of course, there is a danger of overplaying here – journalism may become political public relations. Direct advocacy for a certain political force is very widespread in Belarus, and this may be a large step toward partisan journalism.

And yet, Belarusian independent newspapers, according to BAJ, strived to give a wide picture of the election process and wrote about all presidential nominees. For example, Belarussy i Rynok weekly dedicated 2.8 percent of materials to S. Gajdukievich, 20.1 percent to A. Kazulin, 33.4 percent to A. Lukashenka, and to 33.6 percent to A. Milinkieivich. Komsomolskaja Pravda v Belarusi gave 4.6 percent to S. Gajdukievich, 25.6
percent, to A. Kazulin, 19.2 percent to A. Lukashenka, and 14.5 percent to A. Milinkievich (BAJ, 2006). The coverage of candidates was mostly neutral. At the same time all these newspapers, except Komsomolskaja Pravda v Belarusi, were critical of Lukashenka. The BAJ monitoring, however, did not reveal any case of journalists’ ethics violation in the independent press (BAJ, 2006).

A different picture was observed in the state-owned press. Zviazda newspaper wrote nothing about S. Gajdukievich. A. Milinkievich, A. Kazulin and A. Lukashenka, who took up 0.03 percent, 0.03 percent and 30.86 percent of its space respectively. At the same period another daily Sovetskaya Belorussiya dedicated 0.4 percent of its space in the materials covering the activities of all monitored subjects to S. Gajdukievich, 1.1 percent to A. Kazulin and 1.1 percent to A. Milinkievich. A. Lukashenka took up 63.1 percent (BAJ, 2006).

The literature demonstrates that the process of transition to democracy is a challenge. East European countries had approximately the same starting point. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Belarus’ economy was not worse than that of Poland. But the two countries moved in different directions, and as a result, researchers suggest, the gap between the two countries has been increasing very quickly.

However, the transition to democracy was not easy in the other post-Soviet countries. Many are still ruled by quasi-dictators. Russia, itself, during the presidency of Putin, has survived an onslaught against the independent electronic media. As history shows, free media can play an important role in the process of democratization. Recently, Ukraine and Georgia saw a revolutionary change. In both countries, media played a crucial
role in the victory of democratic forces over the authoritarian regimes of Kuchma and Shivarnadze.

The situation with freedom of expression in Belarus is currently worse than in Ukraine, Georgia, or even Russia. And in 2006, when presidential elections were held, it became a time of ordeal for both democratic forces and independent media. Proceeding to a qualitative study of the role of independent media in Belarus’s recent presidential elections is a challenging, interesting, and difficult undertaking. “Difficult” is the word used by many researchers of media in Eastern Europe. Most of the published works explore previously written literature and do not offer empirical research of their own. However, they provide a good grounding for further studies.
3.1 Independent Press

The majority of post-communist states are not devoid of media denoted in this thesis as independent. Sometimes they are termed as “free media.” Some authors use more circumspect wording describing the media in the region – post-Soviet, post-Communist, non-governmental, private, or transition media. Grankina (2004) termed them quality press as opposed to mass press. Maisenya (1997) suggested calling non-state newspapers “opposition press.” In Belarus, another widely used term is “democratic press” or “pro-democratic press.”

Fred S. Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm pinpointed the six duties appointed to the media in light of the view of the press as the “Fourth Estate:”

(1) Serving the political system by providing information, discussion, and debate on public affairs;
(2) Enlightening the public so as to make it capable of self-government;
(3) Safeguarding the rights of the individual by serving as a watchdog against government;
(4) Servicing the economic system, primarily by bringing together the buyers and sellers of goods and services through the medium of advertising;
(5) Providing entertainment;

(6) Maintaining its own financial self-sufficiency so as to be free from the pressures of special interests (p. 74).

The theories of Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm, although considered outdated (Merrill & Nerone, 2002), delineate the duties of an independent newspaper, which recur in more recent definitions of the term. Wang (1994, p. 217) defined an independent newspaper as a news organization not controlled financially and editorially by the government or any organization or individual that makes its own editorial policy in accordance with professional standards. Yet he argued that no newspaper is ever completely independent from outside control. Even in democratic countries where freedom of the press is guaranteed by a constitution and protected by the courts, newspapers are subjected to various kinds of control, such as legal constraints concerning libel and government secrecy; and government news management through press conferences, press releases, and leaks. In addition, newspapers may also be subjected to economic pressure from advertisers and interest groups, to internal pressure such as deadlines, and to the implicit control of news conventions such as, in the West, an emphasis upon the negative and the unexpected (Wang, 1994). Martin, in his study of the role of mass media in Africa, further refined the definition of independent press by adding two roles it should play in an authoritarian society: to speak out freely and fearlessly about concrete conditions in their own and other states; and at the same time to be an instrument for informing and mobilizing people about their rights and obligations (Martin, 1992).
Analyzing the First Amendment, Emerson (1963) argued that freedom of expression in a society was essential to citizens’ participation in government decision making. Ferguson (1998) wrote:

Not only does the extent to which citizens and the media are allowed freedom of expression predict whether outlets are available to challenge organizations, but the degree of expression permitted impacts many aspects of a society’s culture. Organizations in societies where the broadcast media are state-controlled, such as in India, rarely face threats from radio and television. These media are government propaganda tools, advancing educational and developmental goals.

Coverage of politics and public issues leaves little attention for consideration of organizational actions and the question of their social responsibility (Ferguson, 1998; Sriramesh, 1992). The degree of freedom of expression allowed in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has been a significant factor in the speed of these nations' transitions to democratic systems, while at the same time it has been largely dependent upon their culture and the history of Soviet media (Ferguson, 1998).

There is very little in academic works on how the concept of an independent press can be operationalized, taking into consideration a scholarly disagreement about the levels of freedom the press enjoys in the former Soviet states and a plentiful discourse on what constitutes an independent press. The annual reports produced by Freedom House and Reporters Without Borders offer general analyses of different countries’ media systems. But neither of them reveals a clear and employable strategy for evaluating the level of independence of a certain medium. And yet, these sources are most widely cited by scholars studying independent press from a global perspective (Esser, & Pfetsch, 2004; Martin & Hiebert, 1990).

Also unclear is how to generalize about the diverse media in Eastern European countries where traditional concepts and theories come into juxtaposition with one another.
So Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm’s division of the world into four distinct groups of theories – authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist (Stevenson, 1994) – are considered to be outdated after the collapse of the Soviet empire and even more so after the wave of “color revolutions” in Ukraine, Georgia, Serbia, and political changes in Kyrgyzstan and Moldova (for example, see criticism in Merrill & Nerone, 2002).

Hatchen’s (1992) division of the world media into five concepts – western, development, revolutionary, authoritarian, and communism – are similarly questioned. For example, it is unclear whether the independent media in Belarus should be categorized as revolutionary, since they are funded from abroad and support policy change, or they should fall under the authoritarian concept, which describes the traditional autocratic media system but fails to conceptualize the presence of the independent press in it; or they might be considered part of the development concept, e.g., this assertion is implied by Silitski (2006) who argued that the division between some former Soviet states and the Third World was lost. Other scholars (Dynko, 2006; Bulhakau, 2006) concurred when Belarus had joined the Un-aligned Nations Union.

3.2. Public (Civic) Journalism vs. Citizen Journalism

The significance of the survival of independent newspapers and newspaper journalism in general has ardently been argued by Merritt, (1997) the father of public journalism, or civic journalism as it is sometimes referred to. The concept of public journalism as opposed to citizen journalism is instrumental to this research, so these terms need to be clearly defined. The former has grown into a movement attempting to address
issues of “media degradation” in the United States and falling interest in public life (McGregor et al, 2000). According to “The Roots of Civic Journalism” by David K. Perry, the practitioners of civic journalism – who saw the movement's most dramatic growth in the early 1990’s – have always adhered to the following basic tenets: (a) attempting to situate newspapers and journalists as active participants in community life, rather than as detached spectators; (b) making a newspaper a forum for discussion of community issues; (c) favoring the issues, events, and problems important to ordinary people; (d) considering public opinion through the process of discussion and debate among members of a community; and (e) attempting to use journalism to enhance social capital (Perry, 2003).

Likewise, independent newspapers in authoritarian countries, e.g., Belarus, serve as community and public heralds, not avoiding hot issues but rather attempting to encourage public participation in political life and civil society.

As noted at the Web site of the Pew Center for Civic Journalism, public journalism is both a philosophy and a set of values supported by some evolving techniques to reflect both of those in journalism. At its heart is a belief that journalism has an obligation to public life – an obligation that goes beyond just telling the news or reporting facts. The way journalism operates affects the way public life goes. Journalism can help empower a community or it can help disable it (Pew, 2006).

The civic journalism movement has risen as an attempt to abandon the notion that journalists and their audiences are spectators in political and social processes. The civic journalism movement seeks to treat readers and community members as participants. Maybe, that is why civic journalism is sometimes confused with citizen journalism. The
key difference is that the former is practiced by professional journalists, whereas the latter is a prerogative of ordinary citizens.

Citizen journalism, also known as “participatory journalism,” is the act of citizens “playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information” according to the seminal report “We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information” by Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis. They say, “The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires” (Bowman & Willis, 2003). Indeed, the “blogosphere” (all blogs as a community or social network) is now a major influence on the political culture, as pretty much everyone who has a computer and Internet access can publish his or her views (Cox, 2006). Citizen or participatory journalism generally falls into these broad categories: (a) audience participation at mainstream news outlets; (b) independent news and information Web sites; (c) full-fledged participatory news sites; (d) collaborative and contributory media sites; (e) other kinds of "thin media;" and (f) personal broadcasting sites. Other examples of citizen journalism emerge all the time. And some of the categories listed above overlap with one another (Lasica, 2003).

In Belarus, the upsurge of citizen journalism occurred in 2006 when blogs partially undertook the functions of professional news Web sites and print media. Belarus, a country with the population of about 10 million, has 17,521 blogs on Livejournal.com¹ alone and ranks as the 13th nation with the most Livejournal users (Livejournal, 2007). Meanwhile, in spite of the new possibilities opened up by online tools and technologies and the growing

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¹ Livejournal (often abbreviated LJ) is a virtual community where Internet users can keep a blog, journal, or diary.
competition from bloggers, Belarusian online media seem to have based their strategies on traditional journalism techniques. A survey of Belarusian media online conducted by e-belarus.ORG in 2006 revealed that the number and quality of Belarusian media online initiatives showed them to be in the period of infancy. The overwhelming majority of them fell within the category of the news sites with very limited editorial news and some form of participatory communication (E-Belarus.ORG, 2007).

1.3. The Role of Media in “Color” Revolutions

There has been growing scholarly attention to the transformations in Eurasian countries that occurred in recent years and were commonly denoted as “color” revolutions. The majority of the available literature, however, explores these phenomena from the perspective of political science, sociology, and economics; significantly less research has been done in the area of mass communication. Koplatadze (2004) and Sulkhanishvili (2004) at the Manship School of Mass Communication at Louisiana State University, defended their theses on topics related to Georgia’s Revolution of Roses and the way it was framed by the media. Baysha & Hallahan (2004) conducted a similar study on media framing of the Ukrainian political crisis at the turn of the new millennium, which resulted in the Orange revolution. A much richer scholarship is available on the framing of the downfall of Milosevic in Serbia and NATO’s military campaign in the region (Auerbach & Bloch-Elkon, 2005; Berinsky & Kinder, 2006; Cooper, 2002; Woodward, 1995).

The literature on the revolutionary changes in Georgia, Ukraine, and Serbia and the role of media in these processes provide a substantial comparative grounding for research on the failed Belarusian revolution. Some parallels can also be drawn from the works on
failing media system in Russia and the pre-Yushchenko period in Ukraine. Znatkevich, a graduate of the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, explored the transformations of Russian media after communism. The author conducted a historical analysis of the media from the years of perestroika to the mid 1990s. In the final chapter of his work, Znatkevich looked at the most recent developments and outlined the challenges, perspectives, and dangers of Russian media. The author noted that mass media had become much freer in Russia after the collapse of "the empire of evil," but he predicted that there would be a set-back (Znatkevich, 1999).

Elisabeth Wächter expressed similar concerns in her Master’s thesis, “Truth and Politics – the Mass Media in Independent Ukraine 1991 – 2001,” showing parallels with the current Belarusian situation. While generally historical in methodology, this paper nonetheless included events as recent as March 2001 (Wächter, 2001). The author remarked that the research problem did not lend itself well to original research in the form of, for instance, questionnaires, focus groups or content analysis. However, this approach seems justified for two reasons: firstly, there is to date no authoritative work on the mass media in independent Ukraine available in any language. It therefore seems that the first task must be to collect the available (published) data and structure them in a meaningful theoretical concept (Wächter, 2001).

However, works on the Belarusian media system and, especially, the most recent event – the failed “denim” revolution – are much less numerous. Karp (2006) sketched out Lukashenka’s policy toward the media: (1) the complete subordination of the official media, (2) a restrictive policy toward independent media, (3) television - Lukashenka's instrument, and (4) Lukashenka's struggle against the Russian media. The more the state controls information, the narrower range of information people can access. They are
presented mostly with news and opinions reflecting specific interests. Censorship strives to block any signs of criticism or critical thinking (Vutsans, 1998).

Framing theory has animated Prekiavicius’ study of the way Sovetskaya Belorussia, the main official newspaper in Belarus, framed various political issues for the benefit of the government. Methodologically, Prekiavicius used textual narrative analysis categorizing media frames in “the voice of the regime” (Prekiavicius, 2005). More recently, Usau (2006) conducted a similar analysis exploring manipulative propaganda methods employed by the governmental journal Planeta. The qualitative study offered a schematic representation of the frames used by the journal to cover international events, especially foreign pressures on the Belarusian regime. The findings suggested that the Belarusian opposition was presented as (a) being directly financed by the United States and serving American interests; (b) a satellite of Polish enemies; and (c) directly connected with international and Chechen terrorism (Usau, 2006).

Recently, the Polish Center for Eastern Studies conducted a qualitative study of Belarus’ political, social, and economic situation. A group of Polish scholars from the Center, Rafał Sadowski, Agata Wierzbowska-Miazga, and Iwona Wiśniewska (2005), made a series of trips across Belarus to conduct in-depth interviews with representatives of Belarusian non-profit organizations, independent media, Polish minority groups, and priests of Catholic congregations. The researchers used nonprobability purposive samples, including the snowball technique. In regional centers, Polish scholars contacted directors of local pro-democratic nonprofits and resource centers and asked whom they would recommend for an interview. The content of Belarus’ state-owned and independent media was monitored, newspaper staffers were interviewed, and scholarly literature published by
Belarusian think tanks was examined. The results constituted a detailed case study of the Belarusian modern situation.

The authors devoted several sections to Belarus’ media sector and presented a descriptive overview of the problems Belarusian independent newspapers faced with reporters’ and editors’ insights on the quasi-legal state of the unregistered underground press. One of the contributors, Steven Eke, wrote that President Lukashenka was unambiguous in his characterizations of the non-state media. He has referred to them as “fascist,” while calling on the state media “to reveal the real goals” of the political opposition (in Lewis, 2002, pp. 89-101).
CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

4.1. Case Study Method

Using a case study approach (Stake, 1995), this Master’s thesis explores the demise of the traditional press and the emergence of new alternative sources of information that tried to substitute for the silenced traditional media in Belarus during the period of the 2006 Presidential election campaign. This period started in October 2005, at the Congress of Democratic Forces, when the opposition chose Alaksandr Milinkevich to challenge the incumbent, and ended on March 25, 2006, when post-electoral protests were violently dispersed by riot police and another opposition candidate, Aleksander Kozulin, was arrested and consequently sentenced to five and a half years in prison (Chavusau, 2006; Dynko, 2006; Silitski, 2006).

Case studies are bound by time and activity, and researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over a sustained period of time (Stake, 1995; see also Creswell, 2003). Seeger wrote (1994, p.10) that a case study was “a story of a problem” (see also Hoag, Brickley & Cawley, 2001). A key strength of the case study method involves using multiple sources and techniques in the data-gathering process. The researcher determines in advance what evidence to gather and what analysis techniques to use with the data to answer the research questions. Data gathered is normally
largely qualitative, but it may also be quantitative. Tools to collect data can include surveys, interviews, documentation review, observation, and even the collection of physical artifacts (Soy, 2006, see also Eisenhardt, 1989; Hamel, 1993; Stake, 1995).

This Master’s thesis is based primarily on archival media available online or recorded by me during the events. The analyzed materials included review of secondary literature, primary documents, video and audio recordings, as well as periodical publications and reports by related organizations, e.g., the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Pontis Foundation, Reporters Without Borders, and the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies.

Primary Sources

Initially, I searched for primary sources by studying the entries in the media sections of the two biggest Belarusian web catalogs. The search revealed that, during the electoral period, the oldest Belarusian web catalog, Akavita, contained links to 150 newspaper sites, 69 news Internet media, 19 radio stations, and 19 television channels. The biggest selection of media links was available at the Tut.by portal: 267 print media outlets, 159 electronic media, 59 television sites, 199 analytical sites, 89 publishing houses, and 46 radio-related sites. Most of these Web sites have turned out to be irrelevant for the analysis, as they contained no news about media developments in the country. However, the initial stage of the examination has allowed me to make a list of both traditional Belarusian media available online and purely Web projects. The Tut.by and Akavita Web catalogs also enabled me to do keyword searches within the categories I was interested in. The sites of television channels, radio stations, and publishing houses were eliminated from the analysis. I focused on the print media and analytical Web sites. I also had to
narrow the print media list because not all the sites were appropriate for analysis, as many of them did not cover general political events, only entertainment news. Many economically independent news sources refrained from covering current events or, if they did, never allowed themselves any criticism of the current government. For my research, it was necessary to draw a line between what was independent and what was not. For purposes of this research independent media are defined as the information outlets that offer political news, many-sided commentaries, and opinions and are economically and politically nonaffiliated with the state.

The unofficial Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ) keeps track of the information environment of Belarus, so I used its count of independent news sources in the country. According to a BAJ report, there were 20 independent registered newspapers in Belarus in 2004. Of this list, I studied six major national newspapers. Independent newspapers *Nasha Niva* and *Delovaya Gazeta* have their PDF versions on their websites. All PDF materials were downloaded for further analysis. Small, independent online regional media that do not offer national news were disregarded. The selected publications were searched for media-related content via a ByMedia database and also by keyword searches on their Web sites.

Unlike the independent media, Belarusian state-owned media are much more diverse and numerous. Many newspapers have a regional scope and are not represented online. Some ignore political topics and concentrate on some professional themes, e.g. *Nastaunickaja Hazeta* focuses on educational problems and *Glavniy Buchgalter* on bookkeeping. For convenience, I analyzed the Web content of the three major official newspapers available online – *Sovetskaya Belarusia* (the biggest Belarusian newspaper),
Respublika, and Zvyazda. The Belarus’ state-owned electronic media were not analyzed. However, I followed and downloaded for further analysis the following analytical programs of the Belarusian Television Channel One: “In Focus” and “Hard Talk,” which summarized the official viewpoint and had the biggest ratings among Belarusian viewers.

Regarding foreign media, I scrutinized only those news sources that targeted Belarusian audiences. Relevant programming of the following radio stations with Belarusian services was routinely analyzed: Radio Liberty, Radio Polonia, Radio Sweden, European Radio for Belarus, and DeutcheWelle. Some of them offered analytical programming and panel discussions with prominent Belarusian journalists and political analysts. Some of the discourse presented in these panels is relevant to the topic of the thesis and is cited here.

The Internet played a major role in 2006 elections, and Web logs, especially Livejournal diaries, competed with Web sites of traditional media in numbers of visitors, live updates from street rallies, speed, and sometimes even quality of information. In some cases, bloggers “scooped” big traditional news sources in covering the elections. For this study, I daily checked and archived for further referencing all major – according to Akavita\(^2\) statistical data – Belarusian political and general-agenda blogs during the electoral period. I have compiled a comprehensive Livejournal blogroll, e.i., the list of daily visited and archived blogs, and followed their activities during the entire electoral period.

**Secondary Sources**

I also used the reports by research institutions and non-profit organizations exploring Belarusian socio-economic and political situation from within or without the

\(^2\) Akavita – Belarusian Internet statistics service and online catalog.
country. A significant array of scholarship came from the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Pontis Foundation, Reporters Without Borders, the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, the Belarusian Helsinki Committee, the Belarusian Assembly of Pro-Democratic Organizations, and others. I also used datasets of Belarus’ electoral observation organization “Partnership,” which organized the poll watch; the Belarusian Journalists’ Association, especially relating to the choice of media sources for my study; and Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies, which conducted quantitative research during the campaign period. The scope of literature on media developments in the country, however, is much more limited than that on the political implications of the elections.

4.2. Limitations

Because I consider this Master’s thesis first and foremost an analytical chronicle, one of my primary goals has been to present a coherent and readable narrative that tells the story of the media transformations in Belarus during the 2006 election campaign. While, as discussed in the literature review, a great deal of the documentation allows me to piece together the story of the Belarusian failed “Denim” revolution and the role of media in it, there is still much that remains a mystery and likely will not become known by the public until after the downfall of Lukashenka. Belarus remains an underresearched country in Europe primarily due to its isolationistic policies. Independent research institutions are faced with many serious problems in Belarus. Several years back, the International Research & Exchanges Board, the Soros Foundation, and the Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies were forced by the Belarusian government to close
their offices in Belarus, but some of them continue to function either from abroad or covertly within the country, providing some insight into the Belarusian conundrum.

4.3. What I Bring to the Study

Qualitative researchers traditionally find the worldview and experiences of the researcher to be of particular importance in evaluating the validity of a study’s results (Bischa, 2001). In this section, I disclose some of my life experiences that might color my interpretations of data on freedom of expression in contemporary Belarus and also helped me ground the study in my own familiarity with the Belarusian culture and the contemporary political scene.

In addition to being a citizen of Belarus, I have been part of Belarus’ independent media and third sector\(^3\) for the past ten years. As a high school student, I joined the staff of an independent weekly, Volnaje Hlybokaje (Free Hlybokaje), and worked there in multiple positions. Having entered Polatsk State University, I started a newspaper of my own, Conspect, the mission of which was to freely and independently cover the students’ life in Navapolatsk and the country. I was also elected chairman of the university’s branch of Zadzinocannie Bielaruskich Studentau (the Belarusian Student Association), the oldest pro-democratic youth nonprofit in Belarus. After graduation, I continued my work in Volnaje Hlybokaje in the position of a deputy editor and cooperated with other national media outlets, such as Nasha Niva and ARCHE. As for nonprofit affiliation, I worked in the resource centers “Sumiezza” and “Barmica,” and was an elected representative to the Workgroup of the Assembly of Belarusian Nongovernmental Organizations in Minsk. I

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\(^3\) Non-profit organizations.
was also a cofounder of a network of active youth, New Stream, and the head of the Partnership’s independent electoral observation mission in northwest Belarus.

I spent a lot of time engaged in international projects and traveled to Sweden, Germany, Poland, Latvia, Ukraine, and other countries. One of my recent strong impressions was “the Orange Revolution” in Ukraine. There I was a part of an ENEMO electoral observation mission. This experience has contributed to my better understanding of the political landscape in the region and its electoral laws and media systems.

The cultural aspect of the study and my understanding of the current situation is very important. I had to deal with texts in Belarusian and Russian, and my fluency in both languages was essential in this research. Qualitative research is often based on the study of language and meaning that resides in the dialectical process between the text and the reader, which takes place in a particular social and historical context (Curtin, 1995; Hil, 1979). My background in Belarusian independent journalism, and my experience in election monitoring and civil society initiatives may color this study with my opinions and insights. However, my cognizance of the situation and familiarity with journalists and civil activists in Belarus provides information that may be hidden to outside researchers.
CHAPTER V

THE GOVERNMENT’S ATTACK ON THE INDEPENDENT PRESS

5.1. The State vs. the Press

The Belarusian Constitution proclaims the freedom of the press. In practice, criticism of the president as the supreme authority of the nation often is a prelude to a crack-down. This applies to all media – both printed and electronic. The opposition claims that since the top management of the Belarusian Television and Radio Company is appointed by the president, it is totally subordinated to him. Political opposition therefore is denied any access to the government-owned media (Maximenkov, 2007). This chapter addresses how the Belarusian traditional media struggled for survival during the 2006 Belarusian Presidential campaign and examines the closure of some independent newspapers, the distribution ban imposed on others, and the newspapers’ struggle to reach their audiences in these extreme conditions.

The history of the ongoing battle between the Belarusian regime and the independent media can be traced back to the beginning of Lukashenka’s presidency. Some authors note that tensions between the government and the press existed during the earliest years of Belarusian independence (Feduta, 2005; Karp, 2007). The state-controlled media adhered to the official line of the governing elite, and the first independent publications and radio stations that began to appear in Belarus at the beginning of the 1990s met with
repressive measures by the government of Prime Minister Vyacheslau Kebich (Karp, 2007). The main reason for this is that, unlike in Lithuania or Poland, a change in the Belarusian ruling elites did not occur with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The pro-democratic Belarusian Popular Front failed to come to power, while the former Communists controlling the parliament were reluctant to rise to the challenges of democracy and to abandon the privileges they enjoyed (Lindner, 2002). In this situation, the early independent newspapers – Svaboda, Nasha Niva, Pahonia, and others – adamantly criticized the government and the Supreme Council (the Parliament) and became the agents of change (Jakubowicz, 1995), but the state-owned press of the pre-Lukashenka period also allowed itself to openly challenge the government’s fallacies and policy failures (Manaev, 1995).

During the first presidential elections in 1994, the Belarus media faced increased censorship from Prime Minister Kebich’s administration which, in an attempt to silence critical voices during the campaign, had taken radio programs off the air and prevented independent newspapers from printing. Kebich was the main presidential hopeful of the ruling elite, and pollsters did not project Lukashenka would make it into the run-off. Some editors hoped that should anti-corruptionist Lukashenka come to power, government attacks on the media would be consigned to the past (Human Rights Watch, 1997).

When Lukashenka won the 1994 Election, his first days in office were quite peaceful. Lukashenka said at his first press conference, “From now on the press would be able to feel free” (Klaskouski, 2006). Both the opposition and most of the press offered a grace period to the newly elected first president of the country. However, the first major scandal ended in one instant the illusion of peaceful coexistence of the press and the new
government. In December 1994, Syarhey Antonchyk, an oppositional parliamentarian, delivered an anticorruption report to the Supreme Council that implicated President Lukashenka and members of his government. At that time, state-run newspapers would regularly publish the important documents issued by Supreme Council, but the president’s office was so worried about the public’s perception of Antonchyk’s report that Alexander Feduta, the presidential press secretary, gathered the editors of major publications and asked them directly not to publish the report. Peculiarly enough, most of the editors decided to disobey the request, and the infamous report had to appear in print the next morning. The authorities, however, could not allow this to happen, and a phone-call order was given to the state-owned publishing house not to publish Antonchyk’s report. The next morning all major newspapers appeared with blank spots and empty pages where the article was supposed to be. Soon afterwards, Feduta, discontent with the government’s actions against the press, resigned, took the blame for this incident, and covered for the president. The recalcitrant editors of state-owned print media who allowed themselves to challenge the president were dismissed and replaced with more subservient employees (Feduta, 2005; Hawkes, 1999). This was the turning point when many Belarusians and international observers understood that the age of partial freedom of the press in Belarus was over and nothing promising should be expected from the Lukashenka’s government.

From 1994 onwards, the independent Belarusian media have faced unrelenting pressure to comply with the official version of events and to abstain from critical reporting. As the political climate became increasingly authoritarian, many of the new media laws enacted during the presidency of Lukashenka were unfavorable to mass media. The required registration of mass media enables the government to prevent the establishment of
undesirable sources of alternative information. In order to legally publish a newspaper, an editorial board must have a legally registered office. It can be acquired by signing the order of agreement with the local administration. However, over the past few years, unexplained refusals have been given to every request to launch a newspaper. In 2004, local government authorities refused to provide legal addresses to the editorial board of such newspapers as Afisha (Billboard), Novaya Gazeta Smorgoni (New Newspaper of Smarhon), Sobstvennyi Kommentariy (Own Commentary), and Volny Horad (Free Town) (Viasna, 2004).

In April 1998, a memorandum entitled “On Strengthening Countermeasures [Against] Articles in the Opposition Press,” marked “for official use” and signed by B.N. Bolozhinski, an officer from the president’s office, was leaked to the press in Minsk. The memorandum outlined three main points of action to counter antigovernment media coverage: banning the passing of official documents by the government and state organs to non-state media; banning commentary by state officials on official documents to the “opposition mass-media;” and forbidding state enterprises from placing advertisements in “opposition newspapers,” which denies these newspapers important revenue (Hawkes, 1999).

The state also refined the legislative ways to close an unwanted media outlet. In 2003, the Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus amended the national Press Law, making it possible to lawfully close a media organization if it received three warnings from the ministry in one year. A warning could be issued on such a minor matter as, for example, a failure to inform the ministry about changes in circulation or number of issues per week. This is exactly what happened to western Belarus-based independent
Mestnaja Gazeta (Local Newspaper) in the spring of 2004. However, in another similar situation, when a state-supported newspaper of the same region, Nash Chas (Our Time), failed to report changes in its publishing schedule and left its datelines unaltered, the ministry refrained from issuing any warning and Nash Chas remained clear of any wrongdoing (Ivashin, 2005).

Due to these and other measures, the work of independent reporters was substantially complicated. A minor violation of the repressive laws could result in an official warning from the State Press Committee, which acted as the government's censor (CPJ, 1999). An example of such measures against an independent newspaper Svaboda is presented in the following section.

5.2. Svaboda Case: The First Closed Newspaper

Svaboda, the oldest Belarusian independent newspaper and the most relentless critic of the government, was one of the few publications criticizing the president from his first days in office. It was also the most popular independent newspaper in the country. In November 1997, it became the first newspaper to be closed for political reasons. The Supreme Economic Court declared that two of Svaboda's articles threatened “to incite discord both in society and between the citizens and the government” (Bykowski, 1998). Kozyr (1998) clarified:

The November 19 warnings relate to two articles published in Svaboda earlier in November. One article, entitled “Impeachment - The Second Attempt,” drew parallels between Belarus today and 1937; the other, entitled “Belarus - Remembrance Day,” accused the president of incompetence and criminal activity. In accordance with the Law on the Press, publications that receive “multiple” warnings are in danger of closure. In this instance, the Higher Economic Court ruled Svaboda to be in breach of Article 5 of the law and annulled its registration,
thereby closing the newspaper. The two articles, and the three articles which previously drew warnings, were within the internationally accepted boundaries of free speech. Further, the closure of Svaboda for the expression of such opinions constitutes a clear violation of domestic and international instruments, such as Articles 33 (3) and 34 (1) of the Constitution of Belarus, Article 3 of the Law on the Press and other Mass Media, Article 8 of the Russia-Belarus Union Charter, and Article 19 of the ICCPR.

*Svaboda* was shut down as a warning to other independent newspapers that every publication can be closed this way (Bykowski, 1998). In February 1997, somebody shot in the window of the house of Ihar Germeyanchuk, editor-in-chief of *Svaboda*. The case was not solved by the police (Dubina, 1998). But neither intimidation nor direct pressure from the authorities stopped him and the newspaper’s staff. The decision was made to continue publishing and soon the newspaper returned to newsstands under a new name, *Naviny*. But the problems did not stop after the name change, because the editors chose not to mitigate their criticism of the government.

*Naviny* received a warning from the State Committee on the Press on January 23, 1998, for reprinting the *Svaboda* logo on the front page (Kozyr, 1998). And in the night of November 1, 1998, the newspaper’s office was robbed. The most interesting fact in this robbery is that thieves took away just hard disk drives, leaving expensive monitors. The damage was estimated at $3,000, but the worst of it was the loss of a data base that had been created throughout the eight-year existence of the newspaper (Dubina, 1998).

On May 26, 1998, *Naviny* received a second warning for a satirical article on the Belarusian militia. The final straw came when *Naviny* published an article describing how State Security Secretary Viktar Sheyman had built a luxury house for his parents. Unfortunately for *Naviny*, the picture accompanying the article was of the wrong house. A libel suit followed, and a court ordered the newspaper to 15 billion Belarusian rubles
($52,000) in damages. *Naviny* could not pay, and the paper has closed down once again. Occasional issues of *Naviny* have appeared since, samizdat-style, and yet another incarnation of the paper, *Nasha Svaboda*, was registered and appeared early in 2000 (Jarvis, 1999). In August 2002, the independent newspaper was convicted of libeling the chairman of the State Control Committee and fined 100 million Belarusian rubles ($55,000). Unable to pay, the publication was forced to close (CPJ, 2002).

In 2005, the first editor-in-chief of *Svaboda*, Siarhiej Dubaviec, attempted to resurrect the publication in a bulletin-size format. The effort was short-lived. *Svaboda*, however, now exists online, as a Web project. Its newest Web reincarnation is based on WordPress, a content management system used as a software solution for bloggers. *Svaboda’s* case is not unique. Similar strategies have been used against other independent publications, such as *Svobodnyje Novosti*, which, after closure, was forced to change its name to *Svobodnyje Novosti Plus*.

5.3. Toward the Denim Revolution

Various international and domestic institutions have noted that press freedom situation was gradually worsening in Belarus over the years of Lukashenka’s rule (including the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the U.S. State Department, the Pontis Foundation, The East European Democratic Center, and others). Belarus’s ranking in the press freedom indices of both Reporters Without Borders and Freedom House has dropped continuously. In the Freedom House index, Belarus fell from the 66th position it occupied

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4 Samizdat (Russian: самиздат, Polish: Bibuła or drugi obieg) was the clandestine copying and distribution of government-suppressed literature or other media in Soviet-bloc countries.
in 1994, when Lukashenka came to power, to 86th place in 2005, when the regime’s fear of a “color revolution” was paramount.

The victory of the pro-democracy forces in Ukraine, similar events in Georgia, and later peaceful changes of governments in Kyrgyzstan and Moldova have been commonly referred to as the wave of “color revolutions” (Guillory, 2006). In Belarus, the state-run media practically ignored these events or framed them in a negative light, whereas the independent media provided extensive coverage of the victorious protests in the neighboring countries. Some Belarusian independent news Web sites (for instance, Charter97.org and Sumiezza.org) introduced orange elements to their design to support the revolution in Ukraine.

The successful peaceful transitions to democracy in Ukraine and Georgia impressed opposition members, journalists, and observers from Belarus who followed the events in these former Soviet countries with great interest (Guillory, 2006). Hundreds of my compatriots, including myself, visited Kiev during the 2004 Presidential Election. Watching hundreds of thousands on Maidan (Kiev’s central square) was one of the most unforgettable experiences in my life. The Chair of Ukrainian Studies at the University of Ottawa, Dominique Arel (2005), called the Orange Revolution the most momentous political event in Eastern Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Ukraine’s Orange Revolution unearthed a vibrant civil society that few scholars and analysts believed had existed. Massive popular demonstrations in Kyiv were sparked when authorities proclaimed Prime Minister Viktor Yanukovych the winner of the November 2004 presidential runoff, despite exit-poll reports of a clear lead for opposition candidate Viktor Yushchenko (Kuzio, 2005).
Belarusian opposition leaders, unlike skeptical analysts, were optimistic sparked with optimism thinking that the wave of change would reach Belarus (Guillory, 2006). In January 2004, the civic initiative Five Plus was created. It was a coalition of six pro-democratic parties (Belarusian Green Party, Belarusian Labour Party, Belarusian Social-Democratic Gromada, United Civil Party, Belarusian National Front, and Party of Communists of Belarus), leading non-governmental organizations, and independent labor unions. A common strategy for the coming parliamentary elections was adopted, as well as a common list of candidates and a common program (Five Steps to a Better Life) (SILBA, 2005). In December, Five Plus agreed with another oppositional group, European Coalition, to join forces during the pivotal 2006 presidential campaign.

In April and May 2005, the united democratic forces held conferences in Minsk and the regions. The representatives of the democratic forces defined names of four challengers for the role of a single candidate. In June-August 2005, delegates for the Congress of the Democratic Forces of Belarus were elected at regional and city meetings of democratic organizations. It was decided that participation in the Congress also would be open to democratic members of the last two convocations of the Supreme Soviet of Belarus, candidates of the parliamentary elections to the House of Representatives in 2004 from Five plus and the European Coalition, representatives of the pro-democratic NGOs, democratic members of local councils, editors-in-chief of independent media, and some other influential Belarusian politicians and public opinion leaders (SILBA, 2005).

On October 3, 2005, a regional leader with a strong background in the nonprofit sector and the academe, Alaxandr Milinkevich, was chosen to run for president as a sole contender from the Belarusian pro-democratic forces. He won 399 votes, beating by eight
votes his main challenger, Anatol Lyabedzka, who collected 391 votes. The participants of the Congress represented the majority of oppositional parties and public associations of Belarus. They signed an agreement that all forces represented at the Congress would support the chosen candidate (BHTimes, 2005).

Milinkevich, however, was not the only one who was to challenge the incumbent. Alexander Kozulin, the former Rector of the Belarusian State University, on April 10, 2005, was elected as the chairman of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party Hramada. The same year, Kozulin became a founder and coordinator of a nation-wide social movement, the People's Will. According to many analysts, his fierce campaigning invigorated the presidential race (Boratyński et al, 2006). An agreement between Milinkevich and Kozulin was discussed but not reached, and the electorate had to choose between the two oppositional contenders. The latter attracted the media’s attention for his fierce campaigning strategy.

5.4. The Distribution Ban and the Struggle for Survival in the Pre-electoral Period

The campaign was covered extensively by the independent media. However, due to the regime’s counter-measures, Belarusian society remained largely uninformed about the political alternative to Lukashenka. In April, 2005, Zhanna Litvina, chairwoman of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, predicted that the Belarusian authorities were seeking “a total cleansing of the information sector” in the country. Yelena Raubetskaya, chairwoman of the Fund for the Development of Regional Press, was even bleaker in her prognosis. She said that libel suits against independent media would be followed by the removal of major nonstate publications from state-run print shops and state-controlled
press-distribution networks. "I am absolutely sure that by 2006, the nongovernmental press that writes about politics will no longer exist," Raubetskaya added (Maksymiuk, 2005).

By 2005, the authorities had practically cleansed Belarus of independent newspapers. In a single year, the Ministry of Information issued 160 written warnings and suspended 25 publications. The press had never before faced such an enormous pressure. In August and September 2005, some independent newspapers had to reregister under new names because in May President Lukashenka issued a decree limiting the use of the words “national” and “Belarusian” in the names of organizations positing that only state institutions had a right to use them. Private media outlets were not allowed to use any of these words in their names (Maksymiuk, 2005).

The presidential decree compelled many newspapers to reregister: Belorusskaya Delovaya Gazeta (Belarusian Business Newspaper) as BDG Delovaya Gazeta, Natsionalnaya Ekonomicheskaya Gazeta (National Economic Newspaper) as Ekonomicheskaya Gazeta, Belorusskii Rynok (Belarusian Market) as Belorussy i Rynok (Belarusians and the Market), and Belorusskaya Gazeta as Belgazeta. Many Belarusian commentators said that the reregistration was primarily intended to confuse and disorient the readers of independent periodicals and make it difficult for them to find their preferred publications on newsstands or in subscription catalogs (Maksymiuk, 2005).

According to the counts of the Belarusian Association of Journalists, by 2005, around 20 officially registered independent publications were left in the country. Most of them were regional. The newspapers Narodnaya Volya, Nasha Niva, Zhoda, Salidarnasc, BDG, and several regional publications were excluded from the state-owned distribution
system, they were also forbidden to be sold by the state-owned monopoly of kiosks (Volchek et al., 2006).

The editor of Nasha Niva, Andrei Dynko, found out about the subscription ban from his readers. According to his words, this is a sign that the country is now devoid of fair elections. Thus, I think this will enfeeble the regime itself. What concerns the ban of subscription for Nasha Niva and the regional newspapers, this is also a crime against our culture. The newspapers published in the Belarusian language, comprise just 10 percent of all the newspapers in the country, but they comprise 70 percent of all the banned publications. This is an extermination of the Belarusian culture (Charter97, 2005).

The editors of independent newspapers were faced with the question of how to respond to the onslaught on their publications. Independent periodicals chose different methods to deal with the ban. Some, like BDG and Salidarnasc, transitioned to online news outlets, others decided to fight to the end. Nasha Niva had to change its format from A3 to a letter-size A4, a standard printer-friendly format for easy multiplication (Khrapavitski, 2006) but increased the number of pages to 48 to compensate for the smaller format, and mailed every issue to its subscribers via ordinary mail (NN, 2007). The subscription fee was collected directly by the editorial staff, and more people had to be hired to do the mass mailing. The newspaper I had worked for back in Belarus, Volnaye Hlybokaje, was removed from the subscription catalog, as well, and chose a similar method of distribution. The newspaper targeted the North-Western part of the country, and in Hlybokaje, it was sold on the central market by the newspaper’s own salesman.

Other newspapers also faced the print ban imposed on them in Belarus. Narodnaya Volya, for example, was forced to be printed at a publishing house in Smolensk, Russia.

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5 Using the metric system, the base format is a sheet of paper measuring 1 m² in area (A0 paper size). Successive paper sizes in the series A1, A2, A3, etc., are defined by halving the preceding paper size parallel to its shorter side. The most frequently used paper size is A4 (210 × 297 mm).
Transportation of the print run was not always successful. The authorities occasionally seized the entire print runs of certain issues of the independent newspapers. For example, on March 4, 2006, the police arrested 250,000 copies of *Narodnaya Volya*. The two automobiles transporting the newspaper from the publishing house were stopped by the police and escorted to Vitebsk. There the print run was confiscated for alleged violation of the electoral code (Volchek et al., 2006).

On March 17, 2006, the police confiscated 200,000 copies of *Tovarishch*. The seized issue contained coverage of the presidential campaign of opposition leader Alaksandr Milinkevich. Like *Narodnaya Volya*, *Tovarishch* was printed in Smolensk, Russia, because printing houses in Belarus refused to take on the politically sensitive job. Like many other opposition newspapers, *Tovarishch* relied on volunteers to distribute directly to readers since December 2, 2005, when the postal service Belpochta excluded the newspaper from its 2006 subscription catalog, effectively barring the newspaper from being mailed. (CPJ, 2006).

5.5. The Peak of Confrontation

Human rights abuses and political abuses ran rampant as the elections were approached. Lukashenko criminalized criticism of his regime and banned demonstrations. Secret police targeted opposition groups, and hundreds suffered arrests and prosecution as a result. While Minsk had officially invited the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) election monitors, each monitor had to have an invitation from the pro-Lukashenka Central Electoral Commission (CEC). This commission had publicly stated that the expected number of observers (700 to 800) was excessive and that no monitors...
from Georgia, Latvia, or Lithuania would be invited. U.S. envoy to Belarus George Krol described the odds of these elections being free and fair as “dismal” (Cohen, 2006).

The clampdown on the press, as seen from the prior chapters, had begun long before the actual election, but the tension between the state and the independent media reached its peak during the election week and the mass protests that followed the election. In the week preceding the vote, four independent newspapers were forced to halt publication. On 10 March, the Higher Economic Court temporarily suspended the independent newspaper Zhoda following a complaint filed by the Information Ministry. Three days later, on March 13, a printing house in Smolensk, Russia, informed the BDG (Delovaya Gazeta) and Tovarishch newspapers that their printing contracts had been terminated for “economic and political reasons.” Police confiscated the print run of the Narodnaya Volya newspaper on March 14, after the newspaper was able to find another printing house in Smolensk (IPI, 2006). The newspaper also lost its printing contract after the incident. “When a week before the election someone refuses to print three papers, it is clear there are political reasons,” Narodnaya Volya quoted Managing Editor Svetlana Kalinkina as saying. "The authorities [in Minsk] must have done a deal with Russian authorities who found a way to pressure the printing house” (IFEX, 2006).

Both opposition leaders, Milinkevich and Kazulin, had no trust in the fairness of these elections and urged their supporters to come to Minsk’s central Kastrychnitskaya Square in order to demand a fair revote from the government and the CEC. The official results gave the incumbent Lukashenka a convincing 82 percent victory. This result had been widely predicted and provoked the international community’s hostile response – in the weeks leading up to the election the main observer mission, the Organization for
Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), prejudged both the conduct and result of the poll, deeming it to be neither free nor fair before a vote was cast (BHHRG, 2006).

On the election night, on March 19, 2006, 10,000 to 30,000 people (estimates vary) gathered to rally in Minsk to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the election result. In doing so, they defied the authorities' repeated threats to classify protesters as "terrorists" (an offence punishable by eight years of prison or even the death penalty) and their resort to sending text-messages to reiterate the warning. In the face of dozens of buses filled with riot police beside the square, people continued to gather for five days after the vote; hundreds stayed overnight in freezing temperatures, and thousands turned up again to a demonstration on March 25 (Letain, 2006). Young people set up a tent camp on Kastrychnitskaya Square, preparing for a long standoff. Similar tactics had been employed by the Ukrainian opposition during the Orange Revolution in 2004 (Aslund & McFaul, 2006). The Belarusian police, however, blockaded the square, arresting anyone who attempted to bring tents, warm clothes, or even food to the protesters (McFaul et al, 2006). Among the protesters was the editor-in-chief of Nasha Niva, Andrej Dynko, who was arrested on March 22 when be attempted to bring food to the youth rallying days and nights on the Kastrychnitskaya Square. Dynko was accused of "hooliganism" for allegedly using “vulgar language” (Andrukhovich, 2006; Charter97, 2006). During his time in prison, the journalist kept a diary. Dynko (2006) wrote:

I am writing these lines on Monday at 11 pm. With luck, these notes will reach the office of Nasha Niva just in time to be printed. The lights are out, but the prison is not sleeping. It is as loud as a jungle in the night. Voices and even laughter can be heard from the cells. The sounds of the prison remind me of a summer camp for children. During the day the prisoners play chess (with figures sculpted from bread), "mafia", battleship, and solve crossword puzzles. When the night comes, it is time for verbal games. Prisoners recall the riot police and guards they have met, and tell spicy jokes about the dictator and his camarilla, state radio hosts, and
sergeants who were gathered from all corners of the Belarusian capital to Akrestsina prison in Minsk. "Calm down, motherf*****!" – the guards remind the prisoners about their existence, but the buzz doesn't get any more quiet. There is a lit bulb in a small window above the door. It gives me enough light to write.

Despite the blockade, the tent camp in Minsk held on until early March 24 when the special forces stormed the square, arresting all the participants. That night hundreds of people – including my best friends – were arrested. But the protests did not stop with the dispersal of the protests on Kastrychnitskaya Square. On March 25, 20,000 to 30,000 people gathered in Janka Kupala park to continue to promote the cause of the Denim Revolution. The protesters decided to march to the jail on Akrescina to demand freedom for the hundreds of political prisoners who were arrested mostly during the storming of the tent camp and awaited trials in that jail. On the way to the jail, police suddenly blocked the demonstrators (an estimated number is 3,000 to 10,000) and started beating them up and throwing smoke and gas grenades into the crowd. The presidential hopeful was badly beaten up and arrested. Some people were seriously injured (Katkouski, 2006). That was the violent ending of the Denim Revolution.

But not just ordinary protesters and politicians were detained and beaten. According to information gathered by the Belarus Association of Journalists (BAJ), approximately 40 journalists, about a score of them foreign, were arrested by the authorities in Belarus from March 14 to 27. They were accused of taking part in opposition rallies. Six of have been released since then after serving sentences of up to five days in prison. Several others were released after a brief detention and at least three others were sentenced to pay a fine (RWB, 2006).
5.6. The Attacked Press Keeps on Struggling

Even after the journalists and protesters had been freed, it was obvious to every independent journalist in Belarus that the press was still facing an ordeal. Just before its 100th anniversary, the independent Belarusian newspaper *Nasha Niva* was threatened with closure. The Executive Committee of the City of Minsk ruled that the arrest of editor-in-chief Andrej Dynko on March 22 disqualified *Nasha Niva* from operating as a company in Minsk. Since January 1, 2006, the periodical had run up against a series of bureaucratic brick walls intended to force it out of circulation. State-run distributor Bielsajuzdruk had found various pretexts for refusing to deliver *Nasha Niva*; the official subscription service also refused to handle the paper. Then, on April 10, 2006, the Belarusian Ministry of Information notified the editors of *Nasha Niva* that its application for a license to distribute via independent subscription had been refused (Eurozine, 2006; see also NN, 2006). The newspaper is still struggling; its distribution is carried out via a mass mailing system they succeeded to set up. The independent newspapers’ owners also attempted to address the government to stop the confrontation. The editors of five non-state periodicals – *Narodnaya Volya, Tovarisch, BDG. Delovaya Gazeta, Borisovskie Novosti,* and *Vitebsky Kuryer* – wrote an open letter to Lukashenka. They were prompted by the inability since 2005 for non-state periodicals to print in Belarus. They questioned the distribution ban through state-monopolist distribution companies, Belsayuzdruk and Belposhta (Rutkovsky, 2006).

On May 23, addressing the Belarusian House of Representatives, the head of state said he intended to study the situation and resolve the problem. After Lukashenka’s pledge, the editors appealed to the Ministry of Information to ameliorate the situation. However,
the Ministry’s response was that distribution and printing of newspapers was a matter strictly between companies and did not involve the Ministry (Rutkovsky, 2006).

Some publications also urged their readers to write official appeals to the Ministry of Information and other administrative institutions and to demand the return of the independent newspapers to subscription catalogs and newsstands. After the subscription ban was imposed on Brestsky Kurier, one of the largest regional newspapers in the country, its readers, members of nonprofits, and trade unions appealed to Belposhta to renew the subscription. Due to the public’s demands, subscription for Brestsky Kurier was renewed on December 15, 2006. Yet, the number of subscribers significantly dropped, and this resulted in revenue losses for the publication (Guseynova, 2007).

5.7. What the Future Holds for Print Journalism

In an authoritarian state, when political parties are weak and civic societies are still nascent, journalists often become heralds of an alternative vision for political development. They also become tribunes pushing the society towards a better geopolitical choice. The current state of Belarusian journalism resembles the times of Polish Solidarity, when leaflets and bulletins were distributed and accurate, unbiased reporting was rare. An assertion can be made that part of Belarus’ independent press ranks among Hachten’s “revolutionaries,” grounded on the fact that practically all of it is funded by foreign donors. Indeed, without financial support, Belarus would hardly have a single independent newspaper. The regime has put them in unbearable, unfair economic conditions. Whereas a state-run newspaper can publish a television guide for free, an independent one is obliged to pay around $1,000 per month. All publishing houses where newspapers can be printed
by an offset method are state-owned. So an independent newspaper has to pay two, or even three times, as much as a state-run publication. After the recent developments, the former have lost their right to be printed in Belarus at all.

With a strong regime in power, which cracks down on any source of alternative information, the underground newspapers are the only mouthpiece the opposition can use to spread their viewpoints throughout the country. In Belarusian independent newspapers, one would not be able to find many positives about Lukashenka’s policies, rather just as many negative commentaries of his policies as in the state-run media on the opposition’s. This is especially true about the biggest independent newspapers – Narodnaya Vola and Nasha Niva.

But the difference is – and here real journalism comes into play – factual, i.e. independent newspapers cannot afford to lie, or they will be closed for libel even on the most far-fetched pretences imaginable. To the contrary, the state-run media, in a dictatorial state, are not limited by any legal rules. Throughout the Lukashenka period of Belarusian history, there have been very few cases, in which ordinary citizens or oppositional politicians succeeded in winning libel cases brought against the official media. The regime-owned political media are above the law, as their societal purposes are propaganda, agitation, and control. These three functions were implemented in the totalitarian Soviet Union. Lenin put them forward, as the purposes of the media in a communist country. And some leaders of ex-USSR republics – for example Turkmenistan, Russia, and Belarus – certainly learned their history well.

So in Belarus’s case, the Belarusian independent press is largely partisan, biased, and politically motivated, but the reason for it to be that way is that the state-owned press
ignores views dissident to the ruling regime. But the Belarusian independent newspapers still do their job, sustaining the journalistic profession in the country, no matter how hard it may be. Meanwhile, the state-run media have lost their journalistic spark. I would rather characterize them by Leninist notions – agitators, propagandists, and controllers. In Belarus’ journalistic circles, even a special term was invented to differentiate them. Independent newspapers are referred to as the sources of mass information; the state-run press is often called “sources of mass propaganda.”

As the dictatorship was taking form after what some call the harshest and the most fraudulent electoral campaign in Belarusian post-Soviet history, the newspapers reached smaller and smaller audiences. Thus, the following questions arise. How to preserve quality journalism within Belarus? How to keep the high level of political debate and the variety of opinions, that were present on pages of the independent newspapers? How to make the news as affordable as possible? How to reach the widest audiences? These questions have been raised by institutions supporting the free press in Eastern Europe. And answers are needed urgently, as the regime has practically extinguished the independent print media from the Belarusian soil.
CHAPTER VI

EMERGENCE AND GROWTH OF ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

6.1. Satellite Television and the Internet

This chapter explores the appearance of new alternative media mostly initiated by ordinary citizens who attempted to disseminate information about the events in the country during the electoral period. The chapter discusses the role of the Internet as a new communication platform, the phenomenal popularity of Livejournal blogs in Belarus, and the government’s efforts to impede the proliferation of uncensored Internet content.

During the period studied here, the information blockade in Belarus had a few important loopholes, through which alternative information could ooze in. One was satellite television. Unlike China or Uzbekistan, the Belarus government did not limit ownership of satellite receivers, and the number of people who were able to watch foreign channels was gradually increasing. However, satellite broadcasting was very expensive. The European Union was able to fund a 30-minute program, “Window to Europe,” on Russian independent satellite channel RTVI. It had been available to subscribers of Minsk cable network Cosmos TV, but just before the elections, the channel was blocked “for technical reasons.” The Belarusian authorities did not impose any restrictions on purchase of satellite dishes, but Belarusians did not have an independent satellite channel, nor did the majority of the population own satellite dishes. In fact, residents of smaller towns,
where there were no cable operators, tended to buy a dish sooner than residents of the cities where cable television was widespread. But some 20 to 40 channels included in a package were filtered by controllers from the Ministry of Information. The downside of relying on satellite television was its high cost for customers. RTVI was an encrypted channel, and unless one subscribed to it and paid, one would not be able to watch it. During the researched period, there were discussions that a new free-to-air satellite channel should be launched, but still a potential viewer would have to buy the equipment (the minimum cost is $100).

The most important unfiltered medium in Belarus was the Internet. Unlike satellite television, it had already become a significant source of free information for Belarusians. Internet use was growing rapidly in the country. According to statistics compiled by the International Telecommunications Union, in 2004 there were 1,409,780 Internet users, i.e. about 14 percent of the country's total population. A recent survey conducted by the Belarusian Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Research indicated that people aged 20-24 were the most active Internet users, and 50 percent of users were university graduates. Some 40 percent of Internet users were government officials. The majority of users (45.6 percent) lived in regional centers, and 22.9 percent were inhabitants of the capital of the country (Sokolova & Doroshkevich, 2006).

One day before the elections, an anonymous user posted a comment on the most popular Web-site in the country, Tut.by. He wrote that Belarus would be remembered in history as a country where the Internet played a crucial role in the upheaval of the nation against the dictatorship. He even called the recent post-election protests the “Internet Revolution” (Anonymous, 2006).
Indeed, most traditional media in Belarus were also available online. After newspapers had been banned from the state-run distribution system, their Web sites became practically the only means for journalists to reach the audiences. In fact, many newspapers, like some of their western counterparts, had much more content online than in their print versions. So *Nasha Niva, BDG, and KP-Belarus* worked in a nonstop regime on election day, offering online coverage from Minsk’s downtown where thousands of people came to protest the electoral fraud.

6.2. The Case of Forced Transition from Print to Online

Belarus is a country where the transition of some independent newspapers from print to online has been taking place for the past few years, fueled by the repressive state crackdown on censorship-free sources of information. This section illustrates how some Belarusian newspapers had to seek new ways to reach their readers. According to Belarusian media law, the court could ban a newspaper after two official warnings (*Zakon RB o SMI*, 1995). Later the law increased the number of warnings from two to three but made the closure proceedings easier for the state authorities (Ivashin, 2005). The government used this law to close, among others publications, *Pahonia*, a major regional newspaper from Hrodna that overtly criticized the regime. After closure, *Pahonia* transformed itself into an online edition, maintaining its mission of providing censorship-free news. After its transition to online, however, the problems of *Pahonia* did not stop. Its editors, Mikola Markevich and Paval Mazhejka, were sentenced to a year and a half of “corrective labor” on charges of libeling Lukashenka in an online article. Despite imprisonment of its journalists, *Pahonia* survived in an online format. Similar to *Pahonia,*
the first closed Belarusian independent newspaper, *Svaboda*, whose story is described in detail in the previous chapter, transformed into a purely online project in 2005.

International attention was drawn to Belarus on May 12, 2005, when the newly elected leadership of the Union of Poles in Belarus was declared illegitimate by the Belarusian Ministry of Justice. A series of attacks on the Polish minority also affected an independent newspaper of the Belarusian Poles. A state-owned printing plant, under instructions from the government, refused to print the Polish weekly *Glos znad Niemna*. In addition to this, fake issues of the newspaper were printed under the umbrella of the Belarusian government. Repressions against its journalists followed. On August 1, 2005, Belarusian police arrested Andrzej Pisalnik, editor-in-chief of *Glos znad Niemna* and a contributor to the Polish newspaper *Rzeczpospolita* in Schuchin. On July 6, 2005, Pisalnik and several of his colleagues from *Glos znad Niemna*, as well as Andrzej Poczobut, editor-in-chief of *Magazyn Polski*, and Ivan Roman, a reporter for the *Solidarnasc* newspaper, were arrested by police in Grodno, while they were protesting in the city center against the harassment of their newspapers. The printing of *Glos znad Niemna* in Belarus was no longer possible; however, the newspaper is now published in Poland and transported to Belarus. The fastest way to access news of *Glos znad Niemna*, however, is via the periodical’s web site (www.glos-wschod.org) (Human Rights House, 2005).

In September 2005, *Solidarnasc*, a newspaper published by the Independent Trade Union, was forced by authorities to suspend its print version, but in February 2006, the periodical launched a regularly updated Web site and positioned itself as an Internet newspaper. In March 2006, after a distribution ban, another major independent newspaper, *BDG*, discontinued its print version and began to publish online. Editor-in-chief Piotar
Martsau promised all journalists would keep working for its Web site (BelaPAN, 2006). *BDG* had been the most respected business publication in the country, its Web site took over as one of the most popular news resources of the Belarusian web.

*Nasha Niva*, a major intellectual publication, has been struggling to preserve its print version, although it had to switch from a broadsheet A3 standard to a bulletin-like A4. Key motivation for that change was ease of multiplication – now any owner of a computer and a printer can download a PDF-version of *Nasha Niva*, print it out, and distribute it around his or her apartment complex. But even this forced measure did not seem to be sufficient to secure the newspaper’s existence. Authorities have continuously been trying to ban the newspaper by closing its office in Minsk and depriving *Nasha Niva* of its juridical address. This means that the newspaper could lose legal right to be published within Belarus and would most probably be available online only.

Some newspapers, like *Nasha Niva*, have managed to preserve their print versions, but closure or a distribution ban are constant threats. The biggest independent periodical in the country, *Narodnaya Volya*, launched its new web site in 2006. Earlier, it had not been active online and instead focused on the quality of its print version. Regional independent newspapers, *Vitebsky Kurier* and *Volnaje Hlybokaje*, allowed third-party Web sites to repost their articles online. Many well-respected news sources – *RFE/RL, Charter97.org, Nasha Niva*, etc. – provided RSS-feeds\(^6\) to Web logs on election day, trying to secure that readers would still be informed if their Web sites were blocked or hacked.

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\(^6\) RSS is a family of Web feed formats used to publish frequently updated digital content, such as blogs, news feeds, or podcasts. Users of RSS content use programs called feed "readers" or "aggregators": the user subscribes to a feed by supplying to his or her reader a link to the feed; the reader can then check the user's subscribed feeds to see if any of those feeds have new content since the last time it checked, and if so, retrieve that content and present it to the user (Wikipedia, 2007).
The problems of the print media did not stop after the elections. In September, 2006, *ARCHE*, an intellectual journal, was suspended for three months for alleged violations of the Belarusian media law. During the suspension period, the journal, however, kept on reaching its audiences via its web site (Salidarnasc, 2006).

After printing was no longer possible, some media chose innovative ways to reach their audiences. *Studunckaja Dumka* (Student Thought), a popular independent youth magazine, discontinued its print version after confiscation of the print run of one of the issues and threats of criminal persecution of the editor-in-chief (Kennicott, 2005). The magazine not only ported its content online but also began to publish a compact disk edition, *CD-Mag*. The magazine’s staff started spreading the electronic content of the magazine through the local area networks connecting home computers in some parts of Minsk and other Belarusian cities. *CD-Mag*’s issues could also be downloaded via person-to-person sharing systems. The new digital format allowed the magazine to use not just static contents but also video, sound, and animation (I. Vidanava, personal communication, August 12, 2006).

A satirical newspaper, *Navinki*, was suspended in 2002 for allegedly libeling the president. After closure of *Navinki*’s print edition, the editorial board refocused its activities on film-making and turned its Web site into a video blog with tidbits of its latest productions.

**6.4. Internet “Guerilla” Journalism**

Belarusian journalists have increasingly turned to the Web in addition to their regular jobs. Online journalism has become a more efficient method to reach young
Internet users who tend to read news online and not in the newspapers. Internet is also much less controlled and subject to censorship. It is possible to post news anonymously and thus to avoid prosecution. Due to the severity of the Belarusian media laws, some undercover journalists and political insiders post news to web projects rather than to newspapers, which could lose their licenses after a ruling from the Ministry of Information.

Covert online reporting is similar to guerilla fighting. This metaphor inspired creation of “Beloruski partizan” (Belarusian Guerilla). In November 2005, journalists from within and outside Belarus launched an Internet project with this flamboyant title, balancing on the line between professional and citizen journalism. The geography of the Web site’s contributors was impressive: Belarus, Russia, Poland, Germany, and Czech Republic. The site’s initiator, Pavel Sheremet, once was a prime time newscast host on Belarusian Television. But soon after Lukashenka rose to power, Sheremet turned into a personal enemy of the Belarusian president. Having being fired from the Belarusian state television, Sheremet became a Minsk bureau chief of ORT, Russia's public television station. During a press conference with President Lukashenka in 1996, Pavel Sheremet reportedly asked him, “So, who is going to be [arrested] next?” The President replied, “It could be you” (Amnesty International, 1997).

And indeed, in July 24, 1997, Sheremet, then a correspondent of ORT (Russian Public Television) and his crew (Ovchinnikov and Zavadsky) were arrested for allegedly crossing the border illegally. Under international pressure, the Belarusian authorities released him three months later. Sheremet had to emigrate to Russia where he became an ORT primetime news anchor and wrote a book about Lukashenka, An Accidental
President. In 1998, he received a CPJ International Press Freedom Award. In his acceptance speech, Sheremet (1998) said:

A year ago while in jail, I often had a feeling that I’d never get out. The investigation against me and my colleagues on the pretext impossible anywhere in the civilized world was just an example of how the government treats the mass media in Belarus. My personal experience is proof that this pressure is hard to withstand and dangerous. Had it not been for the support of journalists in Belarus, Russia, and other countries, the outcome would have been hard to predict.

Another prominent journalist behind the **Belarusian Guerilla** project is Svetlana Kalinkina, the editor-in-chief of *Narodnaya Volya*, the biggest independent newspaper in Belarus, and earlier the editor of *BDG*. Kalinkina, an experienced newspaper journalist, criticized Belarusian Internet media for being unable to use the greatest advantage of the Web over the print media – speed. Kalinkina believed that the biggest demand online was for breaking news reports and that Web sites offering such contents would be most popular (Drakhahrust, 2006).

Some authors of the **Belarusian Guerilla** preferred to remain anonymous and hid under soubriquets. Most of them were Guerilla insiders providing exclusive information leaked from the power structures. It comes as no surprise that such materials attracted the most interest from the Web site’s audience and from the Belarusian secret services.

Apart from news coverage and political analyses, the **Belarusian Guerilla** published an online version of the book disclosing the horrific facts about the Belarusian special services and alleged assassinations of Lukashenka’s political opponents. A special section of the Web site was dedicated to Flash animation cartoons about the Belarusian president. The **Belarusian Guerilla** creators also encouraged ordinary citizens to post news on their Web site, making this project a convergence of traditional and citizen journalism.
6.5. Livejournal Phenomenon and Rise of Blogging in Belarus

In Belarus, blogging has become increasingly popular with the general public. The role of citizen journalism especially grew during the 2006 campaign, as the traditional media, hampered by the pressure from the state, faced strong competition from bloggers who kept their visitors informed about the post-electoral rallies on Minsk October Square even at night. The most successful blogs were able to attract thousands of clicks a day, competed with Web resources of traditional media, and were often able to win the battle for audiences (Akavita, 2006).

The most popular blogging tool in the post-Soviet states is Livejournal. Livejournal (often abbreviated LJ) is a virtual community where Internet users can keep a blog, journal, or diary. Livejournal differs from other blogging sites in that it is a self-contained community and has some social networking features similar to Friendster and MySpace. Livejournal was started in 1999 by Brad Fitzpatrick as a way of keeping his high school friends updated on his activities (Livejournal, 2007). The success of Livejournal in the former Soviet Union is amazing. In Belarus alone, it has 17,521 blogs (Livejournal, 2007). That number is equal to the population of a mid-sized regional town. And this number is growing fast. From February to March 2007, more than a thousand of new Belarusian blogs were registered on Livejournal.com (Pankaviec, 2007).

The growing popularity of blogs was noted by the Belarusian independent print media. Belgazeta, Salidarnasc, BDG (Belorussskaya Delovaya Gazeta) ran articles describing blogs as the new alternative information source, as a major trend in mass media, or as vulnerable to disinformation. Sovetskaya Belorusiya (a paper directly controlled by the Belarusian President himself) and 7 Dney (operated by the Ministry of Information)
also ran feature articles on blogs, both playing with the idea of blogs as “princess diaries”,
a new game for teenagers and artistic people who wanted to have the world’s attention
(Populi, 2006).

In 2003, Belgazeta was the first to provide a definition of blogging for the “offline”
people:

A blog is not primarily a stream of colorless, dry information. It is the whole world
where one can find priests preaching, journalists presenting information before it is
published in official media. There are celebrities, some of them are actually the
catalyzers who brought the Russian-speaking online community into the blog
world: Anton Nossik, Norvezhsky Lesnoy, Dima Verner and many others. There
are quite a few Belarusian designers, journalists, and “builders” of Belarusian
Internet there (Dudina, 2003).

Three years later, Viktar Martinovich, another Belgazeta observer, identified
bloggers as one of the key forces in the current information wars in Belarus: there is a
whole new class of people in Belarus who access news not in newspapers, and definitely
not on TV, but from the posts of “friends” in their Livejournal.com accounts (Martinovich,
2006).

Another Belarusian independent newspaper Salidarnasc reprinted Andrey
Ilarionov’s interview from Esquire magazine, where the author described blogs this way:

Blogs are the “kitchen talk” of our times (allusion to the Soviet dissident tradition
of discussing the ongoing affairs in the kitchen). The matter is not that anyone is
forbidden to have a say – anyone can have a say, in fact. Anyone who does it,
however, has to mind the price which he’d have to pay for this freedom. Self-
censorship is more prevalent than censorship (Populi, 2006).

Livejournal was unrivaled by other similar platforms in Belarus. The efforts of
Belarusian companies to offer a domestic blogging solution yielded no fruit. The first
Belarusian blogging service was begun with the mark of censorship already on it. The rules
of this Belarus-based hosting service allowed not only eliminating blogs critical of the
government, but even editing or deleting individual posts. So a diary containing libelous claims against Alyaksandr Lukashenka (according to the judgment of the first Belarusian blogging service) was deleted from the server without warnings or additional checks (naviny.by, 2006).

With no good alternatives available, thousands of Belarusians – including many journalists – chose Livejournal as a means to communicate with others. Lukashenka’s former press secretary and now a renowned publicist, Alexander Feduta, has launched a blog to keep in touch with a new generation of potential readers (personal communication, 2007). Blogging has become a hobby for Andrej Chyk of Nasha Niva and Web editor of RFE/RL Belarusian Service, and Uladzimir Katkouski, who set up the most visited English-language blog about Belarus. Siarhiej Dubaviec, the former editor of Nasha Niva, has also registered on Livejournal to keep in touch with his audience. Belarusian Wikipedia (2007) has a special page listing the Belarusian celebrity bloggers on Livejournal. Many of them are well-known politicians, musicians, academicians, writers, and journalists.

However, just like everywhere else, blogging is a realm where, with few exceptions, there is very little real journalism. Bloggers covering the elections published a lot of unchecked data. It often happened that one author would report some “breaking” news, and in a few minutes it would be disproved by another source.

A higher, more professional level of blogging was encouraged by some established informational Web sites. Transitions Online, a journal specializing in transformations in Eastern Europe, initiated in 2006 a project TOL Belarus Blog focusing on transformations in Belarus. The new blogging community united analysts from within and without Belarus.
TOL Blogs had sections in both Belarusian and English to reach not only domestic but also international audiences. *Nasha Niva* was one of the first Belarusian newspapers to incorporate the journalists’ blogs into its own Web site. Nnmby.com is an intellectual blogging community where a group of Belarusian analysts are mainly engaged in discussions of Belarusian politics. Worvik.com is another blog run by philosopher Uladzimir Mackievic and other Belarusian analysts. He also has an account at *Livejournal*, unable to ignore the power of the most popular blogging service in Belarus.

By 2006, the Internet had become the only source of fast and objective information for thousands of Belarusians deprived of independent traditional media. Some of few remaining independent newspapers, e.g., *Narodnaya Volya* and *Glos znad Niemna*, had to use services of printing plants abroad as Belarusian publishing houses refused to print them. Others still are published in Belarus but face a constant danger of contract annulment and liquidation. Online journalism and blogging became a mass practice in 2006. Some western donors that traditionally supported print media reconsidered their priorities and began to support Internet projects in Belarus.

The growing role of the Internet, however, poses some serious questions to both researchers and practitioners. Was Belarusian society prepared for the transition from print to online media? How can Belarusian Internet users resist the Internet censorship? Will online journalism be able to maintain the principles and standards of the journalistic profession? These issues are addressed in the following chapter.
CHAPTER VII

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE AND CONCLUSION

With the Internet becoming the dominant communication platform for Belarusian independent media, the following aspects of this shift are worrisome. First, it is doubtful that the Belarusian society is prepared for the Internet age due to high Internet costs, slow pace of Internetization in rural areas, and growing concerns about Internet censorship. Second, the downfall of traditional media has turned many journalists away from the profession. And third, because online journalism is, in most cases, less responsible than newspaper journalism, the forced shift may endanger the standards of the profession. These issues are addressed in this chapter.

7.1. Internet Censorship

The popularity of blogging was noted by the state-run newspaper Sovetskaya Belorussia, which ran a piece on the phenomenon of Livejournal. Reporter Popova (2007) wrote:

Virtual communication has become a routine experience for millions of users worldwide, and a cult-status service Livejournal (LJ) in the period of last couple of years has become a popular medium. Millions of people – LJ users – turn on their computers with intention to write a post to LJ, read commentaries, find out news of the Internet community. Livejournal is all about online communication with virtual
and real friends, this is an epidemic, contagion, virus, whatever you call it, but you cannot stop LJ.

The regime’s fear of the emerging alternative media, free of governmental control, was so great that, on election day, Beltelecom, the Belarus’ state Internet provider, reportedly blocked access to Livejournal.com and to other online information outlets (ONI, 2006). Yet, this extreme measure was used just for a very short time. Other more acute methods have been employed not to stop LJ but to get the most out of it for the regime’s benefit.

In 2007, a Livejournal blogger, Der_oper, who had been a member of oppositional nonprofits and wrote on LJ about politics, publicly confessed that he was an agent of Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti (KGB), the Belarusian intelligence agency (Bykowski, 2007). Der_oper’s confession attracted great media attention and prompted discussions among Belarusian LJ users fearing that KGB agents might have infiltrated many closed, friends-only blogging communities, as it was harder to spot an online mole than an offline one.

A great concern for bloggers and ordinary Internet users during the electoral period was the menace of Internet censorship in Belarus. Tut.by, the most popular Web site in the country, and several other popular Web sites censored individual posts on their political forums. The case that triggered concern about the Internet censorship in Belarus took place during the second presidential election on September 9, 2001, when access of Belarusian users to independent and opposition news resources and “mirrors”7 of these sites was blocked. Later it was explained by technical problems of the national provider, but blocking of sites’ “mirrors” did not match the explanation. Amidst fears that the

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7 A mirror in computing is a direct copy of a data set. On the Internet, a mirror site is an exact copy of another Internet site.
authoritarian regime of President Lukashenka was going to close down Belarus’ political cyberspace during the 2006 elections, Open Net Institute’s (ONI) monitored instances of Internet censorship in Belarus. The final report posited (ONI, 2006) that testing found little evidence of systematic and comprehensive filtering, despite earlier ONI investigations that established the regime’s capability to do so. ONI monitoring during the elections showed that, on average, opposition and independent media websites remained accessible throughout the monitoring period. ONI testing revealed a number of serious irregularities that disrupted access to certain opposition and independent media websites at strategic moments during and after the vote.

In particular, election day was a day of online struggle between Web administrators and hackers (Murdoch, 2006). The former tried to keep up their sites, while the latter were attacking them, trying to stop truthful coverage of the vote. So the site of Milinkevich, an opposition leader, was hacked, and Charter97.org was down as a result of a flood of DoS attacks. Different sources reported that the most visited oppositional and news sites were inaccessible on election day within Belarus, whereas they could be accessed from abroad or through proxy servers (McFaul et al., 2006; ONI, 2006).

When the electoral battles were over, direct attacks on Internet resources stopped. Independent Web sites continued their activities, but the moribund independent press could not revive, and the remaining few newspapers considered porting to online as their only way to survive.

However, since 2006 there have been growing concerns that the Belarusian government would begin to install an Internet filtering system similar to that in China or Uzbekistan. Belarus has a state monopoly on the gateway to worldwide Internet access and fixed communication telephone services. Also, by the legislation secondary (mostly private) Internet service providers are not allowed to use satellite channels to provide
telecommunication services. Both outgoing and incoming traffic must pass through the nodes of Beltelecom, the primary government-owned service provider. Other providers are prohibited from providing IP telephony services; the right to perform these activities belongs to the primary state provider. Private businesses have to resort to illegal resources to avoid these restrictions. Therefore in 2002 and 2003, the Belarusian court sentenced several businessmen to prison with expropriation of all their private property for ‘illegal’ providing of IP telephony services to the population (Valoshyn, 2006).

In Belarus, government investigations into Internet usage were easier than in other countries because the servers that provided Internet access were controlled by state firms that willingly provided personal information to police. In 2005, Belarusian authorities launched investigations into the Internet activities of a youth organization called The Third Way after it posted political cartoons on its Web site ridiculing President Lukashenka. Third Way member Paval Marozau had to seek political asylum in Estonia after being threatened by the KGB (Synovitz, 2005).

Resorting to online journalism did not guarantee security from the regime’s persecution of journalists either. In addition to the aforementioned Pahonia problems, there were other similar cases. Journalist and human rights activist Natalya Kaliada was fined 160 euros on February 2, 2004, for posting material on the Web site of the Charter 97 (www.charter97.org), which is not recognized by the authorities (RWB, 2006). When working in Belarus, I was warned by the prosecutor for posting to an unregistered news Web site (www.sumiezza.org). Such instances compelled reporters to use sobriquets and fake names. Most informational Web sites are hosted outside of country for security reasons.
Organizations that assisted journalists and ordinary citizens with information technologies faced problems, too. For example, the foreign ministry refused to renew the accreditation of the Minsk office of the U.S. International Research & Exchange Board (IREX-Promedia), which had organized training seminars for journalists, provided free access to the Internet, hosted the Web sites of about 30 independent newspapers, and made extensive online photo and print archives available to the media (Minikes, 2003). Another example is the closure of the Hrodna city NGO resource center Ratusha, which provided free satellite Internet access to nonprofit organizations in the city (HRW, 2006).

For the last few years, Reporters Without Borders has included Belarus in its list of top 15 enemies of the Internet. According to the organization’s report, the Belarusian regime uses its monopoly of the communications system to block access to oppositional Web sites when it chooses, especially at election time (RWB, 2005).

7.2. The Pace of Internetization

Although during the period studied, Internet penetration in Belarus remained amongst the lowest in Europe, the user-base was on the rise. Estimates suggested that the number of Internet users doubled between 2002 and 2005 and reached close to 2 million or 20 percent of the population. However, only some 5 percent were thought to be “permanent” users due to the high cost of access (Doroshkevich, 2005). In this respect, the majority of Lukashenka’s core constituency – the rural workers, the middle-aged, and the elderly – were not yet active Internet users. A 2003 survey on the political attitudes of Internet users and non-users found that users were more likely to be skeptical of the Lukashenka regime’s policies and propaganda, trusted independent news sources more
than state-run organs, and were more inclined to actively support the opposition (ONI, 2006).

The gap between the capital city and the regions was especially notable in the spread of broadband Internet. Private providers that offered Internet connections in Minsk had not yet come to smaller towns. Most Belarusians had slow dial-up connections, and fast DSL connections were very expensive (for economic, but, as some analysts suspect, also for political reasons). Young IT-savvy Internet users figured out that they could buy one expensive DSL link and then create a local area network with their neighbors, thus sharing the bandwidth and the costs (Katkouski, 2006). Despite multiple efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Information and Beltelecom to outlaw such networks, their number was growing in all major cities of the country. People in regional towns and villages, however, mostly resorted to using slower and cheaper dial-up connections. The majority of Belarusians could not afford an expensive DSL connection, and broadband home networks with shared Internet costs were not available in rural areas.

The question of accessibility of news is crucial even for such a computerized country as the United States. Various scholars questioned the preparedness of American society for a transition of the press to online delivery of news. Unlike authoritarian Belarus, the United States is a democracy with a 210,080,067 Internet users as of November 6, 2006; that is a 69.6 percent penetration (Internet World Stats, 2007). There is a danger that some part of the nation will be left out, uninvolved, unwired. In Belarus, Internet is still a buzz word for the young and educated elite, not an information source for everyone.
Valery Karbalevich, an analyst with the Minsk-based Strategy Political Analysis Center, argued that

it was mainly opposition supporters and people who lived in urban areas who usually visited Belarusian independent Internet sites. The Internet was used mainly by democratically orientated people, people who [already] supported the opposition’s values. It was natural that these people were visiting the sites of the candidates. They were looking for their programs and so on and so forth. But to tell the truth these people did not need to be converted [to the opposition's cause] (Mite, 2006).

Polls indicated that the majority of those who supported Lukashenka were pensioners and people who lived in villages or small towns – a group often far removed from modern technologies. According to a 2001 Internet user survey, the vast majority of Internet users at the time were based in Minsk, were under the age of 30, and had slow connections (Mite, 2006).

The gap between Minsk and the provinces might explain why most national media stepped forward into the digital age, while the editors of regional publications feared to lose their readership if they discontinued their print versions. According to the information provided by the Ministry of Information, in 2006 there were 8 press agencies, 1,148 print media (748 newspapers [136 regional], 400 magazines), 54 television stations, and 154 radio stations registered in Belarus (Ministerstvo Informacii RB, 2006). An E-belarus.org survey (2006) revealed that only 6 percent of all these media had their online avatars: six news agencies (64 percent), 58 print media outlets (5 percent) (11 percent national and 12 percent regional), and 23 television and radio stations (11 percent). The front page of Tut.by was the most popular news site with approximately 60,000 daily visitors. The next five top sites were date.by, naviny.by, charter97.org, bdg.by, svaboda.org. Only 4 percent of Belarusian media were purely online projects.
The Internet age had been coming more slowly to Belarus than to other countries in the region. The demand for free information, however, was higher because of the scarcity of traditional independent media. The dearth of unbiased information turned thousands of Belarusians to the worldwide Web. The history of newspaper journalism in Belarus is very short. The country has become independent in 1991, and Lukashenka came to power in 1994. Mackievich (2007) observed that when the Internet comes to Belarus, there will not be morning and evening papers – there is no necessity for them. Such things are either upheld by the tradition, or are momentarily taken over by more modern media. Thus, I assert that Belarusians, in terms of informatization and internetization, should outrun other European countries. Not that Belarus is richer, but its population’s demands are more aptly satisfied by the Internet than by the traditional media. Hence I understand that a senior citizen who wants to read *Narodnaya Volya* would go online sooner than the one who reads *Sovetskaya Belorussia*, because the latter can get it in print anyway.

Instead of the mostly unidirectional information flows offered by print journalism, The Internet allows for multiple streams of communication running through multiple parties, allowing for multiple types of messages (Singh, 2003). The rise of Belarusian online journalism diversified the information field, allowing more interaction between journalists and citizens and urging political debate and critical evaluation of state policies.

4.3. Conclusion. Implications of Online Journalism

Belarusian online journalism and blogging became a widespread practice in 2006, and this trend has continued in 2007. Let us consider the worst case scenario – even if all independent newspapers close, there will be underground printouts, RISO\(^8\)-quality bulletins, and Web sites that will deliver the uncensored news to Belarusians. But will they

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\(^8\) The Risograph is a high-speed digital printing system manufactured by the Riso Kagaku Corporation and designed mainly for high-volume photocopying. Increasingly, it is more commonly referred to as a RISO Printer-Duplicator, due to its common usage as a network printer as well as a stand-alone duplicator.
be able to substitute for the traditional print media? Merritt delineated the following characteristics of the independent press: depth, professional objectivity, accountability, layered process of fact-checking and editing, community coherence, and multiple sourcing. Newspapers are not a particularist voice, and the best of newspaper journalism has a brand – readers know what to expect. He argued that newspapers developed these qualities through years of experience, high standards, and journalistic ethics and norms (Merritt, 2006). Online journalism, and especially blogging, can scarcely boast most of these advantages. The Center for Citizen Media (2007) proclaimed the following principles of citizen journalism: (a) accuracy; (b) thoroughness; (c) fairness; and (d) independence. It can be questioned whether the Belarusian traditional press was able to meet these standards, but, similarly, there are concerns that many Belarusian online sources are even less able to do so. The decline of standards is a very serious issue when transition from print to online takes place. Some news Web sites in Belarus – and this is an international trend – have narrowed the boundaries between their own content and users’ blogs, and have added elements of citizen journalism to their Web sites. For instance, one of the most respected and trusted news sources in the Belarusian language, the Belarusian service of RFE\RL, urged its Internet audience to submit reports, photos, and text messages during the political protests in Minsk. In 2006, it also launched an evening program “Abloga” that cites the most interesting posts in the Belarusian blogosphere and regularly offers interviews with prominent bloggers.

There are, however, serious concerns that the Belarusian government will attempt to install Internet filtering equipment and to limit access to oppositional Web sites. On February 10, 2007, a new law obliged owners of cybercafés and Internet clubs to report
Internet users looking at illegal web sites (IFEX, 2007). According to the new law, Internet café owners or their authorized agents must keep an electronic registry of the domain names of the sites accessed by users. The electronic log should contain at least at 12-month history of all connections. State Security agents, police, and state control inspectors are authorized to review the logs in cases as listed by legislation. When violations are suspected, Internet café managers should inform law enforcement about the cases (Doroshkevich, 2007). Commercial public Internet centers had been the only places where Internet activity could not be properly monitored by the authorities – mainly because of anonymity of users in such places. Meanwhile, all the users of home Internet connections can be easily monitored without notice because providers can directly map IP and home phone numbers. It is generally easier for users of Internet at work and in home local area networks to conceal themselves because there is a large number of people behind one common IP-address (BM, 2007).

On the other hand, instances of Internet censorship are counterbalanced by the development of information technologies, spread of broadband and satellite Internet, and gradual decrease of Internet access costs. Wireless and mobile technologies are also rapidly developing. As of January 1, 2006, 4.09 million people subscribed to the Belarusian cellular services. That is 1.7 times higher than in January 2005. The level of mobile market penetration was 42 percent, compared to 25 percent in the beginning of 2005 (PointTopic, 2007).

Whereas traditional journalism is endangered, blogging has become a hobby for thousands of Belarusians. In Belarus, editors often choose not to rely solely upon staff members but to urge ordinary citizens to cooperate with their news organization. Many
journalists, unable to feed their families, have resigned from reporting positions at independent newspapers, emigrated, or changed careers. Personal security concerns, low salaries, limited opportunities for professional growth have turned many talented journalists away from the profession. Some newspapers, especially regional ones, are unable to provide good working conditions to reporters; most of their staff works as freelancers.

Online journalism, mostly unpaid, offers, at least, a safe haven to hide under a sobriquet and, in majority of cases, to avoid prosecution. It is also much less challenging in terms of ethical norms and standards. Paradoxically, there are also some benefits of this – online journalists do not resort to self-censorship and often publish hard-kicking articles that would be redlined by newspaper editors. The Internet is also much faster, especially when many independent newspapers are printed abroad and transported into the country – and this takes a lot of time. Online journalists can easily post their news from any computer connected to the Internet and even from cellular phones. With no domestic independent electronic media available within Belarus, the Internet has become the most up-to-date source of information for many Belarusians. The Web site of the Belarusian service of Radio Liberty is reportedly more popular than its over-the-air broadcasts. This is explained by growing Internet usage and decline in sales of shortwave radio receivers. In 2007, Andrej Dynko resigned from his post as the editor-in-chief of Nasha Niva and took the job of the editor of the newspaper’s Web site. This position is not less important, as the readership of the Web site is higher than that of the print version of the newspaper.

The slow pace of Internetization and fears of Internet censorship in Belarus pose a critical question: was the Internet revolution really happening in Belarus, or was the
Internet had become a merely temporary way for Belarusian independent journalists to survive during times of oppression? The role of the new alternative media was huge during the elections. However, it was not big enough to eliminate the information blockade.

The failure or success of a democratic transition unequivocally relates to the absence or presence of a free press. Freedom House rated Belarus 185th in its press freedom ranking. This is almost the bottom of the list, just above Sudan, Equator Guinea, Zimbabwe, Eritrea, Libya, Burma, Cuba, Turkmenistan, and North Korea (Freedom House, 2006).

When I started collecting data for my thesis in 2005, I did not imagine I would be ending it amidst the near ruins of Belarusian print journalism. The case of a forced transition from print to online is unusual and analysis of its short and long-term outcomes may enhance our understanding the dangers of losing traditional, independent media as an accessible source of information. The free press played a crucial role in the democratic transitions of Ukraine and Georgia, it and remains a key element of the watch dog mechanism needed to supervise governmental actions.

In this thesis, I point out that newspaper journalism plays a major role in sustaining democratic discourse, assuring political accountability, and fostering nation building and the formation of civil society. To a large extent, the failure of democratic revolution in Belarus was brought about by the deep cleansing of the information field undertaken by the regime. But the response of the civil society was also feeble and disproportionate. Readers failed to intercede for their newspapers, although journalists expected that. And the Internet was not widespread enough to substitute for the print media. The case of
Belarus is a forewarning of a premature transition to online for editors around the world.

The society must be ready for the shift.
REFERENCES

PRIMARY SOURCES


SECONDARY SOURCES


