

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

2008

**The Development
of Sustainable
Independent Media
in Europe and Eurasia**



MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX 2008

The Development of Sustainable Independent Media in Europe and Eurasia

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USAID

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The government has temporarily put off its plans to restrict satellite television and the Internet. The latter remained the least regulated of all, but the authorities have set their sights on correcting this, with elections due in 2008. Most media, especially broadcast, are state-owned, and only a dozen independent newspapers offer alternative viewpoints. Similarly, the government has kept an unwavering grip on the press distribution channels and telecom infrastructure.



BELARUS

B

Belarus remained largely unchanged this year, scoring a 0.74 versus last year's 0.71. The government sustained its tight control over the media and its institutions. But unlike in 2006, when journalists were physically assaulted and several newspapers were suspended in during the controversial presidential election, the general attitude was more of suppression rather than harassment.

The government put off, at least temporarily, its plans to restrict satellite television and the Internet. The latter remained the least regulated of all; however, the authorities have set their sights on correcting this, what with elections due in 2008. Most media, especially broadcast, are state-owned, and only a dozen independent newspapers offer alternative viewpoints. Similarly, the government has kept a firm grip on press distribution channels and telecom infrastructure.

Belarus's Soviet-style economy slowed somewhat, but growth remained strong at 8.1 percent. However, many expect a continuing decline after the deterioration of energy relations with Russia, Belarus's key ally and main gas supplier. Under an agreement reached in January 2007, the Russian gas monopoly Gazprom forced Belarus to pay double the costs in 2006. Also under that deal, prices will gradually rise to reach parity with those paid by EU states by 2011. Under another arrangement, the Belarus lost most of its windfall oil earnings, since 80 percent of the revenues from increased oil exports were to be transferred back to Russian oil companies.

Subsidized Russian energy has long buoyed President Alyaksandr Lukashenka—in office since 1994—via nearly full employment and state-mandated wage hikes. With this pillar of his rule threatened, he declared in early 2007 that he wanted closer relations with the West. The government, however, has done very little, if anything, to improve its poor record of political governance and human rights by giving at least some freedom to marginalized parties, NGOs, trade unions, and the media. The move was generally seen as playing for time in anticipation of Russia's presidential election in March 2008. Meanwhile, several regime critics remained jailed—most notably Alyaksandar Kazulin, who challenged President Lukashenka during the 2006 presidential election.

Belarus society has been more concerned with rising prices (84.2 percent of those polled aged 18 and above) and unemployment (38.3 percent) than with human-rights abuses (25.6 percent) and Belarus's being an exile country (14.5 percent), according to an independent opinion poll. In a positive breakthrough, 49.6 percent said they trusted independent media (up from 12 percent a year earlier), and 47.7 percent said they trusted state media (down from 58.2 percent in 2006).

The MSI panel, meanwhile, voiced little optimism for the year to come. Several participants reserved lower scores—usually zeroes—for the future, saying there is clear evidence that the situation will deteriorate.

BELARUS

BELARUS AT A GLANCE

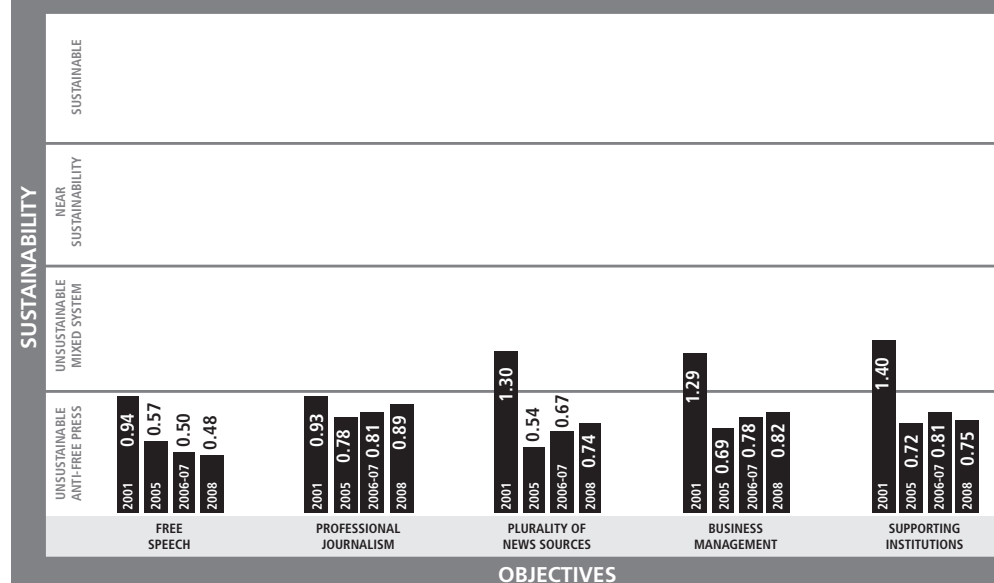
GENERAL

- > **Population:** 9,724,723 (July 2007 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Capital city:** Minsk
- > **Ethnic groups (% of population):** Belarusian 81.2%, Russian 11.4%, Polish 3.9%, Ukrainian 2.4%, other 1.1% (1999 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Religions (% of population):** Eastern Orthodox 80%, other (including Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim) 20% (1997 est., *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **Languages (% of population):** Belarusian, Russian, other
- > **GNI (2006-Atlas):** \$32.80 billion (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **GNI per capita (2006-PPP):** \$8,810 (World Bank Development Indicators, 2007)
- > **Literacy rate:** 99.6% (male 99.8%, female 99.4%) (1999 census, *CIA World Factbook*)
- > **President or top authority:** President Aleksandr Lukashenko (since July 20, 1994)

MEDIA-SPECIFIC

- > **Number of active print outlets, radio stations, television stations:** Print: 1,251 (704 newspapers (9 daily)), 508 magazines and journals, 35 bulletins, 3 catalogues and 1 almanac; Radio: 159 radio stations (2 nationwide); Television stations: 60 (6 nationwide) (Belarus Ministry of Information, November 2007)
- > **Newspaper circulation statistics:** top three: *Sovietskaya Byelorussia* (state-owned, 2,503,500 weekly circulation), *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Belorussii* (independent, 542,800 weekly circulation), *Respublika* (state-owned, 249,500 weekly circulation) (Belarus Ministry of Information, November 2007)
- > **Broadcast ratings:** Share of television audience: ONT (21.3%, state-owned) RTR (9.6%, Russian-owned), Channel One TV (9.4%, state-owned) (Institute for Sociology at the National Academy of Sciences, June 2007)
- > **News agencies:** BelTA (state-owned), BelaPAN (private), Interfax-Zapad (Russian-owned), Prime-TASS (Russian-owned), Ecopress (private), Agentstvo Grevtsova (private), Minsk-Novosti (state-owned), Registr Information and Legal Agency (private) (Belarus Ministry of Information, 2007)
- > **Annual advertising revenue in media sector:** \$87.1 million (\$53 million television, \$15.4 million press, \$3.7 million radio advertising, \$3 million Internet) (ZenithOptimedia advertising group, December 2007).
- > **Internet usage:** 5,478,000 (2006 est., *CIA World Factbook*)

MEDIA SUSTAINABILITY INDEX: BELARUS



Unsustainable, Anti-Free Press (0-1):

Country does not meet or only minimally meets objectives. Government and laws actively hinder free media development, professionalism is low, and media-industry activity is minimal.

Unsustainable Mixed System (1-2):

Country minimally meets objectives, with segments of the legal system and government opposed to a free media system. Evident progress in free-press advocacy, increased professionalism, and new media businesses may be too recent to judge sustainability.

Near Sustainability (2-3):

Country has progressed in meeting multiple objectives, with legal norms, professionalism, and the business environment supportive of independent media. Advances have survived changes in government and have been codified in law and practice. However, more time may be needed to ensure that change is enduring and that increased professionalism and the media business environment are sustainable.

Sustainable (3-4):

Country has media that are considered generally professional, free, and sustainable, or to be approaching these objectives. Systems supporting independent media have survived multiple governments, economic fluctuations, and changes in public opinion or social conventions.

Note: MSI panelists in Belarus agreed to participate only if they were not named publicly. Amendments to the criminal code were introduced in December 2005 to add a new article, "Discrediting the Republic of Belarus," that provides for criminal liability for submitting to international organizations "false information" on the situation in the country. Human-rights groups, both domestic and international, believe the article's vague wording makes it possible for the government to penalize anyone reporting negative information with detention of up to six months or imprisonment of up to two years.

OBJECTIVE 1: FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Belarus Objective Score 0.48

In 2007, scores for free speech remained virtually unchanged from the previous year, reflecting a stagnant situation that kept Belarus a country actively opposing free speech. The constitution guarantees freedom of speech, and there are laws that regulate the media and protect freedom of speech; however, those are only partially enforced, and other aspects of these laws also limit freedom of speech, panelists said. "Formally, there are some rights that protect freedom of speech; there is minimal enforcement, since independent media still exist. Yet you can't say this right is truly enforced both for the broader public and the media as well," one panelist noted.

Panelists scored most indicators close to the average. One exception received a notably higher score: Indicator 8, media access to international news sources. On the other side, Indicator 2, broadcast licensing, received a score just barely above 0.

Politicized courts offered little to no protection to independent media and journalists. "Theoretically, a practical result might be achieved, yet not always," a media lawyer added. They recalled a case when the Supreme Court ruled in favor of an independent journalist who was fined over working without an accreditation for a foreign radio station.

The already restrictive legal framework has not changed much in 2007. However, there have been some minor, albeit very negative, developments: under a new administrative code, fines were increased for the "misuse" of media. An energy shock in early 2007—when Russia doubled gas tariffs for Belarus and increased an export duty on oil products that the Belarus economy heavily relies on—was widely covered by independent media to the dislike of the government, which was criticized as slow to present a more positive picture. As a result, an instruction by Prime Minister Siarhiej

Sidorski on February 22 ordered tighter control of what state officials and managers of state-run companies could say to independent media reporting on the economy and the government—namely, those officials providing "incorrect" information might be fired.

Earlier the same month the cabinet tightened control over the work of Internet cafés, in particular, ordering them to keep the log files of all websites visited by their clients for at least 12 months and, if necessary, to provide those to law-enforcement officials.

The draft law on information passed the first reading in the Belarusian parliament in December 2007. Widely criticized both domestically and internationally as a tool to further curb civic liberties, it is, according to state telecom officials, meant to regulate access to public information, methods of protecting state information systems, and personal data and would have no control over media and copyright issues. Strangely enough, a representative of a local press-freedom watchdog, the Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), was invited to contribute to the bill. BAJ and other domestic and international experts came up with over 200 comments on the bill, yet the parliament adopted only minor ones. However, the bill is still to pass one more reading at the lower house of the parliament and then go through the upper house before being passed to the president. Prospects are gloomy, many agree, since the government has made clear its desire to regulate the Internet.

Thus, the deputy information minister, Alyksandr Slabadchuk, announced on August 20, 2007, that a working group was being set up to research the legal regulation of the Internet. He claimed that the new regulations would not restrict freedoms but went on to cite how the Internet is controlled in China. The announcement came two weeks after President Lukashenka threatened to put an end to "anarchy" online.

Some panelists felt that the society does not value free speech, at least compared with the early and mid-1990s, when the public protested against the closure of television and radio programs and attacks on the independent press. Nowadays, they are distracted by more serious concerns, such as survival. In an independent opinion poll in December 2007, 84.2 percent of adults said rising prices had been their biggest problem. Besides, Belarusians are not an information society because information is not needed to make a choice, one panelist said. Another participant of the discussion, a media lawyer, added that "...the society is just tired after 13 years [of the authoritarian rule of the incumbent president, Lukashenka]. Moreover, protesters may and do face sanctions."

Even opponents of the president sometimes attack independent media for being critical of the opposition. Luckily, a panelist noted, there is more solidarity in the independent media community itself, and violations of media freedoms are made public to the extent that the independent press reaches their audience.

The Internet, meanwhile, remained the least regulated compared with other sectors, despite likely legislation in 2008. On LiveJournal (LJ), a popular blogging system, over 20,000 blogs place Belarus in the Top 15. And bloggers are quite active, a panelist added, noting those were mostly the younger and more educated. Hence, he believed there were chances that Belarus would move closer to an information society in the near future. Voice-over Internet protocol, however, is restricted other than for personal/private use.

Broadcast licensing remained highly politicized, panelists agreed, with licenses granted by the information ministry. Three FM radio stations received licenses in 2007, the ministry of information reported. One was actually an extension of a license for an FM radio station in Vitebsk; two more stations are already on air in Minsk and decided to go regional. Elsewhere, SKIF TV, a privately owned regional television network in the northeast of the country was given a license for an FM music station, a panelist added.

Participants also mentioned that ONT, a state-controlled national television channel, launched Radio ONT in the capital, Minsk, in November 2007. "Yet I can't recall the word

'contest' if you speak of how Radio ONT got the frequency. It wasn't mentioned at all," a panelist said.

On the other hand, BelaPAN, an independent news agency, lost its radio broadcast license in September 2007 because it was unable to go on air with its radio station FM-Novosti (FM-News) within a year after the license was granted. One more contest for a radio frequency had to be announced by the information ministry, but it would not do so.

President Lukashenka told BelaPAN director, Ales Lipai, at a press conference that "...registration of a radio station would not be made easier... we are cautious as to creating private, unfriendly stations and letting investors in... should Paval Yakubovich [editor of Belarus's biggest daily, *Sovietskaya Byelorussia*, the mouthpiece of the Lukashenka administration] decide to launch a radio station as part of his newsroom, there would be no problem. As for those we are not sure of, we have to ponder on that and set certain conditions."

Market entry for media outlets was described as unfair and having many more restrictions than other industries, with licensing coming from information and telecommunications ministries. In addition, newsrooms need to register with local authorities where their premises are located. The procedure is nontransparent, and local officials use dubious or no grounds at all to deny registrations to independent media. Unlike other businesses, media outlets can be suspended without a court ruling, after receiving two warnings from the information ministry. Taxation and other conditions are no different for the media than for other industries. "You need to get more permits than for other businesses—it could be comparable to the arms trade," a panelist said.

Similarly to other years, crimes against journalists remained rare. However, participants mentioned that obstructing the work of a journalist was a criminal issue in Belarus and concentrated more on that aspect. Those working for foreign media without accreditations come under serious pressure from the government and sometimes quit their jobs, a panelist said. Panelists mentioned several cases when photojournalists were detained or even assaulted by the police. On September 10, 2007, Reuters photo correspondent Vasili Fiadosenka and his Agence France-Presse colleague Viktor Drachou were briefly detained by the police outside the city court in Baranavichy while shooting a picket in support of a young opposition activist who was on trial for being a member of an unregistered organization.

On December 12, two more photo correspondents were assaulted by the riot police who were dispersing a rally in downtown Minsk. "Journalists generally feel a bit more secure than demonstrators," a panelist said, "...and if

LEGAL AND SOCIAL NORMS PROTECT AND PROMOTE FREE SPEECH AND ACCESS TO PUBLIC INFORMATION.

FREE-SPEECH INDICATORS:

- > Legal and social protections of free speech exist and are enforced.
- > Licensing of broadcast media is fair, competitive, and apolitical.
- > Market entry and tax structure for media are fair and comparable to other industries.
- > Crimes against journalists or media outlets are prosecuted vigorously, but occurrences of such crimes are rare.
- > State or public media do not receive preferential legal treatment, and law guarantees editorial independence.
- > Libel is a civil law issue; public officials are held to higher standards, and offended parties must prove falsity and malice.
- > Public information is easily accessible; right of access to information is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Media outlets have unrestricted access to information; this is equally enforced for all media and journalists.
- > Entry into the journalism profession is free, and government imposes no licensing, restrictions, or special rights for journalists.

detained, they are released soon, yet only after they couldn't do their job of covering the event."

"You do not just feel insecure. On the contrary, you are perfectly aware that if something happens, this system will neither work for you, nor neutrally. It will work against you; that's how it's oriented," said one panel participant, an online editor. Crimes against journalists do receive certain coverage in the media, yet few surviving independent media might provide only limited publicity.

There are no public media in the western sense, panelists said. Media laws favor neither state-funded nor independent media, yet in a broader sense state media are given preferences via orders and regulations of local authorities and state institutions, especially as far as access to information is concerned. Every year the budget law provides extra funding to state-owned media in addition to their subsidized salaries, rent, printing, and distribution.

State media are far from being editorially independent, since their editors—whose contracts are usually renewed every year—are directly appointed by the ministry of information. "Editors of major state-owned media are appointed by politicians, or to be exact, by Belarus's only politician [President Lukashenka]," a panelist commented.

Under Belarusian legislation, libel is a criminal law issue. However, more common are "honor and dignity" cases falling under civil law, where the prosecution does not have to prove malice, or even falsity. It is enough that the article in question caused "emotional distress" to the one being described. "There are a bunch of such articles in the criminal code, and under the civil code the burden of proof is much heavier than in other European countries," said one panelist, a media lawyer.

Two cases were mentioned during the discussion. On October 1, 2007, a district court in Minsk ruled in favor of Aleh Praliaskouski, head of the ideology department in the Lukashenka administration, in a defamation lawsuit against the independent weekly *Narodnaya Volya*. The newspaper and its journalist Maryna Koktysh, who wrote the story, were ordered to pay 25 million Belarusian rubles (\$11,600) and 2 million Belarusian rubles (\$930), respectively, over a report on the arrest of Praliaskouski's deputy on bribery charges. The ideology boss told the court that the story caused him to experience anxiety, which led to health problems for which he had to take medicine. "The court has ordered us to retract three sentences [Praliaskouski disliked], including the phrase 'but Praliaskouski currently walks free,'" said Koktysh in an interview. An appeal with a higher court later that year was unsuccessful.

Separately, another district court in Minsk upheld on December 20, 2007, a lawsuit from senior government official Mikalai Charhinec against the independent weekly *Novy Chas* and journalist Alyaksandr Tamkovich. The newspaper was ordered to pay 50 million rubles (\$23,300) and Tamkovich 1 million rubles (\$470), respectively. Charhinec, chairman of the standing committee on international affairs and national security in the Council of the Republic, the upper house of the Belarusian parliament, filed a suit over his critical profile the newspaper published on September 24, 2007. The profile, titled "General-Senator Mikalai Charhinec," criticized his literary credentials (Charhinec is a writer of detective stories and chair of Belarus's official writers' union) and his record of Soviet police service (including alleged participation in an unsuccessful investigation of serial killings in the early 1980s); it also exaggerated his military service in Afghanistan in the mid-1980s during the Soviet invasion of the country.

Charhinec claimed the story damaged his "honor, dignity, and business reputation as a writer, politician, and general-senator," a report said. In an unprecedented claim—in the country where the average salary is \$352, officially—he demanded 500 million rubles (\$233,600) from the newspaper and 100 million rubles (\$46,700) from journalist Tamkovich and seizure of the property and financial assets of both the paper and the journalist to secure the coverage of damages.

"In both Praliaskouski's and Charhinec's cases, the defense raised the issue of to what degree a public figure may be criticized. The courts reacted just the opposite," a panelist added.

Public information is not easily available, the panelists agreed. Although the law guarantees equal access to information, state-owned media have better access, or rather access for independent journalists is restricted first of all via accreditations issued by state bodies and local governments. Those working for online media or foreign media without an accreditation with the foreign affairs ministry do not have journalist status and hence face even more problems. In the regions, said one panelist, independent journalists are often denied accreditations on grounds that a) a state-owned media have already been accredited; b) all the information can be obtained from the state media where it will officially be published. Sometimes regulations are issued banning state officials from communicating with journalists rather than via press services.

One panelist mentioned that in 2007 the press center of the National Assembly, the lower house of the Belarusian parliament, failed to provide even the accredited journalists with copies of the 2008 budget. "The draft was introduced just a day before it was supposed to be voted through the

parliament. Luckily, MPs got it. The only thing journalists were given was a verbal statement of what's in the budget. Nothing of the kind has ever happened since 1991 [when Belarus gained independence]. Perhaps they thought that was unnecessary," the panelist said

It is therefore not surprising that investigative reporting is almost extinct in Belarus—apart from, to some degree, what is being done by e-paper *Ezhednevnik*. Investigations are expensive and time-consuming, and restricted access to information makes them something most independent media cannot afford.

Under the law, any state body shall respond to a request for information from the media within 10 days. However, this norm is not enforced. Some journalists are fighting the restricted access to information, mostly with the help of BAJ. "Naturally, people are getting used to living in a shrinking environment. Yet so far these walls being pushed from outside meet some resistance from the inside," a participant commented. Looking onward, panelists were unanimous that further restrictions may follow given the provisions of the law on information adopted in the first reading in December 2007.

There are no formal restrictions on access to international news and news sources. With modern technologies like satellite television and radio and, first of all, the Internet becoming more available and affordable, the main issue here is willingness to take extra efforts to access them. However, revenues of independent media outlets by and large remained the same, so they still have to put a curb on Internet use, a panelist said. Other participants quoted the language barrier as another big reason why most media in Belarus are using Russian websites as the main source of international news, which, in view of their dubious objectivity, gives a somewhat distorted or at least one-sided picture of the world.

Subscriptions to international news services are restrictively expensive for most Belarusian media, and thus—unless subsidized by foreign donors—absolutely unaffordable. Some foreign news companies, like Reuters, are offering Russian-language news subscriptions. These are useful, a panelist said, since they provide a more balanced view and some information for comparison. Yet media absolutely would not spend money on that.

Entry into journalism is relatively unrestricted, panelists said. However, to be considered a journalist, one should be employed by a registered media outlet. Under the law, there are no freelancers or independent journalists; they are not given any rights other journalists enjoy. An increasing number of events require accreditation, and independent media outlets are often denied.

Until recently, the government has hardly controlled admission to journalism schools. However, there are plans to amend admission rules for specialties "of particular import for the state," including those for would-be journalists. This means applicants should be providing recommendations from local governments, reports said in November 2007. There is a common belief that this provision would be used to debar the politically unreliable from journalism schools. However, the panelist mentioned one exception: Franak Viacorka, son of the top opposition leader Vincuk Viacorka and head of the Commission for Culture of the nationalistic party Belarusian Popular Front, is currently a third-year student of the journalism school at the Belarusian State University in Minsk. At the same time, panelists doubted that anyone with a similar profile would ever join the journalism school.

OBJECTIVE 2: PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM

Belarus Objective Score 0.89

Scores for professional journalism edged up somewhat, to 0.89 against 0.81 a year earlier, due to higher ratings given to objectivity, ethics, coverage of key events, and balance between entertainment and information content. However, no indicator scored significantly higher or lower than the average.

Similarly to previous years, participants found it difficult to assess Belarusian media in general, since what most state-owned and some non-state media are offering is anything but journalism, according to the panelists. Some of the panelists remarked that they would speak only about independent media, not state or opposition propaganda. No wonder opinions differed to some extent on whether Belarus journalism was getting more professional. Surprisingly, the scores given by the opponents were not much at odds with each other.

Independent reporters try to verify and fact-check the information to the extent that it is possible, considering the restricted access to information. They do consult a wide variety of sources—sometimes so wide that these sources are absolutely unreliable, said one participant, an online editor. The lack of background research is due not so much to a lack of professionalism as to a lack of time, since most newsrooms are understaffed. "Instead of three or four journalists, we have only half of a journalist working, who, nonetheless, has to come up with three or four stories instead of one, albeit a big one," said one panelist.

Experts are another sore point. "There are just a handful of them, and the same names are everywhere." Furthermore, another panelist added, as a rule an expert should first

be briefed by a journalist on what has happened and on how things might develop further. Independent think-tanks are almost extinct, and even economics has not been properly analyzed: forecasts rarely come true, and analyses are sometimes outspokenly unprofessional even for non-economists. State officials and experts are unwilling to give comments to independent media, or they offer propaganda at best. Exceptions here are the finance minister and the chair of the central bank. In an alarming development, according to a panelist, some experts complained that journalists wrote comments themselves trying to guess what experts might say rather than actually talking to them.

Many journalists are not using the Internet to double-check information, find the original source, or follow the trends, a panelist said: "Every two or three years they come for a seminar in Internet-assisted reporting, and you see that skills they have gained at a previous session are just gone because they have not been using them."

Press conferences are becoming more popular as sources of information, with journalists just reporting what officials have said and rarely questioning or fact-checking their statements. Previously, that used to be just one of the opinions, a panelist said. Interviews are also a sore point, with more journalists acting like a "microphone stand"—a radio journalism slang nickname for an unprofessional reporter—and being led by an interviewee rather than interviewing him or her.

Both the BAJ, the group that brings together independent journalists, and the Belarusian Union of Journalists, the "official" journalists' association, have their ethical codes of conduct. The former are more likely to adhere to

JOURNALISM MEETS PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS OF QUALITY.

PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM INDICATORS:

- > Reporting is fair, objective, and well sourced.
- > Journalists follow recognized and accepted ethical standards.
- > Journalists and editors do not practice self-censorship.
- > Journalists cover key events and issues.
- > Pay levels for journalists and other media professionals are sufficiently high to discourage corruption.
- > Entertainment programming does not eclipse news and information programming.
- > Technical facilities and equipment for gathering, producing, and distributing news are modern and efficient.
- > Quality niche reporting and programming exists (investigative, economics/business, local, political).

those standards, panelists noted. However, "in light of the confrontation initiated and fueled by the authorities, when barricades have been set up, many are becoming less choosy. There is a fight going on," a panelist said. "Even the regional media are becoming more and more polarized, and it's getting increasingly harder to stay calm," added one participant, an independent editor.

Most journalists do not accept gifts for favorable coverage, possibly because they are not offered, a panelist commented. His colleague recalled a presentation by Russia's VTB Bank, when journalists received souvenirs (a bottle of expensive wine and a pen) that cost more than most of them earn during a month. Nobody refused. Separately, in another example, Belarus's biggest portal, TUT.by, was given laptops as presents.

Stories or positive coverage are sold in the form of hidden advertisements and endorsements. Sometimes this is done to sidestep the requirement that limits advertising to 30 percent of a newspaper's content or to optimize taxes. Even news agencies are (unofficially) selling press mentions. Interfax-Zapad, a Russian-owned, pro-government news agency, was said by some to charge politicians \$300 a month and then contact them for comments. Both journalists and editors are selling the stories, a panelist added.

"...There is a common belief that self-censorship is widespread among independent media as well. Yet when you ask a colleague, the answer is: 'No, we do not practice that, while the others...'. Realistically speaking, there is a problem. Any media outlet faces it, if they want to make money. In short, the more business there is in the project, the more cautious you are. Everyone is balancing their own way, yet this is one of the most serious professional problems. And sometimes we do not understand how far that has gone," said one participant, an independent editor.

Among the most dangerous topics most media shun away from are the Lukashenka family and business interests of his closest allies. Even the new media practice self-censorship to some extent, often to give more protection to their heroes and sources. However, most key events and issues are covered, especially by independent media, panelists agreed. State-owned television channels and newspapers often either ignore negative news or reporting or comment on them three or four days after the event, most likely because they are awaiting instructions from the [Lukashenka] administration. Politics is being covered more or less fully, with the economy and culture less so, especially in the regions.

Independent journalists remained poorly paid. The gap between state-owned and independent media outlets widened even more: "Even state propagandists stopped

lambasting their independent counterparts for their salaries, since they are very well-paid themselves, and this money is not well-earned.” Salaries even at leading independent newspapers are three times lower than at state-owned ones for the similar work, a panelist said. Many independent media can’t afford salaries of over \$150–200. Even the leading online media are offering \$300 a month at best. News anchors at Channel 1, Belarus’s biggest television channel, are paid \$1,500–2,000 a month; they also receive other benefits, like apartments, subsidized loans, etc., according to a panelist.

News and information programming are not transcended by entertainment content, panelists said. In fact, with the society being somewhat split and concentrated more on survival, politics and related topics are given more attention than they would be in a more democratic and prosperous country. And panelists noted that the quality of both news and entertainment content is low.

Newsrooms differ a great deal as far as their technical capacities are concerned, yet some minimal level is more or less sustained. Panelists, however, say this minimal level is “stone age” compared with the world’s leading media. Many are using old PCs and lack professional digital cameras and recorders. Even with broadband Internet, there are connection width and traffic caps. Software is 100 percent pirated, added another participant.

Luckily, as technology advances, both equipment and the Internet are becoming more affordable. Increasingly, independent newsrooms are being upgraded by journalists themselves, since some of them, especially younger ones, find it easier to buy voice recorders and laptops themselves, rather than wait until newsrooms pay for them. Similarly, some journalists—even those based in the regions—have faster Internet connections at home.

Panelists failed to generalize about where exactly the aid should be channeled, since needs are not always similar. Moreover, the aid is not always used efficiently. For example, BELSAT, a donor-funded independent satellite television channel with an annual budget of €4m (\$5.8m) that started test broadcasting from Poland in December 2007, received old equipment. Its parent company, Telewizja Polska SA (TVP), equipped it with analog Betacam SP studio decks, which used to be the industry standard until the late 1990s. Surprisingly, its reporters working in Belarus are using DV (digital video) camcorders, and at some point in December 2007 they had compatibility and editing problems.

However, in most cases the blame is to be laid with media outlets themselves, since they are reluctant to keep up with the latest standards, including technical ones. And when asked what kind of help they would need, they don’t know

what to ask for or save money for, a panelist added. This equally applies to both independent and state-owned media.

Meanwhile, in 2007 the government spent \$63 million on the state media, of which \$47 million was spent on television and \$7.5 million on the press.

“There is a problem with quality reporting as such, to say nothing of quality niche reporting,” a panelist commented, saying affordability is the main constraint. In understaffed newsrooms, one journalist has to report on three to four topics, and he or she is just scratching the surface. Besides, the development of specialized quality reporting is hampered by low demand. That is not likely to change until the political situation changes. Currently media are fighting for survival, and there are a handful of journalists—fueled mostly by their enthusiasm—who offer high-quality niche reporting.

Panelists spoke highly of the news agency BelaPAN and business weekly *Belorusy i Rynok*, which offer quality political and economic reporting, and the sports weekly *PressBall*. Even state-owned news agency BelTA was said to be doing some good specialized journalism—if not political reporting, which is blatant propaganda, according to the panelists.

OBJECTIVE 3: PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES

Belarus Objective Score 0.74

This objective increased slightly from the previous year. One of the reasons may be the independent news agency BelaPAN, which has not only continued to offer high-quality reporting, but has also come out with new information services. Separately, more news sources became available, mostly on the Internet (blogs, online radios, etc.). Indicator 3, state broadcasting reflects the political spectrum, held the average down with a score nearly half a point lower than the average.

Overall, the media landscape has not changed considerably: some plurality of news sources still exists, but not all of them are easily available. State-owned television channels remained the primary source of news. In a December 2007 independent opinion poll, 67.4 percent said they were watching Belarusian state television channels every day or at least several times a week. In comparison, 26.8 percent said they were reading local newspapers (unspecified whether state-owned or independent), 21.2 percent said they were reading *Sovietskaya Byelorussia* (the country’s biggest daily, published by the Lukashenka administration), and 16.7 percent said they were reading *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii* (a popular Russian-owned tabloid with a Belarusian insert). “Easily available news sources are absolutely monopolized by

the government, and you can't say they are giving a full and objective picture to the public," a panelist commented.

Not surprisingly, those living in bigger cities and people with higher incomes have better access to alternative news sources, like cable television, the Internet, and satellite television and radio. In rural areas, people usually have access to state television (commonly two channels), state radio (via a cable radio network reaching 3 million households), and one or two state-owned newspapers.

According to the same opinion poll, 30 percent of those aged 18 and older said they were watching cable television every day, and 12.8 percent said they were watching it several times a week. For satellite television, figures are 9.8 percent and 5.6 percent, respectively. Newspapers are affordable to many—only 8.9 percent said they were not reading them—yet these are being purchased mostly for television listings. Since independent press is by and large banned from state distribution networks, fewer people are willing to make the extra effort to buy them from a street seller or subscribe to them. The latter alternative is even more complicated and time-consuming, as a contract needs to be made, then paid in a bank with the receipt sent to the publisher, etc. Moreover, some are afraid to subscribe to the independent press—labeled “opposition”—for fear of reprisals.

One panelist spoke of the digital gap between urban and rural areas. Although state-owned telecom monopoly Beltelecom is offering broadband even in smaller towns, fees remained high and there was hardly any demand.

MULTIPLE NEWS SOURCES PROVIDE CITIZENS WITH RELIABLE AND OBJECTIVE NEWS.

PLURALITY OF NEWS SOURCES INDICATORS:

- > A plurality of affordable public and private news sources (e.g., print, broadcast, Internet) exists.
- > Citizens' access to domestic or international media is not restricted.
- > State or public media reflect the views of the entire political spectrum, are nonpartisan, and serve the public interest.
- > Independent news agencies gather and distribute news for print and broadcast media.
- > Independent broadcast media produce their own news programs.
- > Transparency of media ownership allows consumers to judge objectivity of news; media ownership is not concentrated in a few conglomerates.
- > A broad spectrum of social interests are reflected and represented in the media, including minority-language information sources.

According to another nationwide survey, 48 percent of Internet users still use dial-up. Fast broadband is still a luxury: one megabit ADSL without a traffic cap was offered for around \$1,000 a month and by Beltelecom only, since it owns most of the country's telecom infrastructure and controls international Internet traffic. With other Internet service providers (ISPs) forced to purchase traffic from Beltelecom, they cannot compete on price. According to a survey, only 7.0 percent of those aged 18 and older use the Internet daily, with 8.7 percent more using it several times a week. Only 2.6 percent said they were reading news online daily, with 3.9 percent doing so several times a week. Moreover, high fees are hampering online and civic journalism, for which a 24-7 Internet connection is a must, a panelist added.

To be distributed or broadcast in Belarus, foreign print and electronic media need express permission from the ministry of information. Most western and also Polish and Ukrainian channels were banned from cable networks several years ago. However, they are available via satellites. The foreign press is hardly affordable. However, one could subscribe to them directly, and the state postal service, Belposhta, would deliver them, a panelist said. Russian titles are widely available by subscription but are getting exorbitantly unaffordable. And very few will pay for such subscriptions, since these newspapers cannot be read on the Internet. Still, in November 2007, Belposhta delisted three Russian newspapers—*Kommersant*, *Moskovskii Komsomolets*, and *Novaya Gazeta*—from its subscription catalogues because of their critical reporting about Belarus.

Attempts to restrict the use of satellite television by dismantling dishes outlined in the previous report have not gone any further than several cases after *Sovietskaya Byelorussia*, the mouthpiece of the Lukashenka administration, blamed the attempts on “overly enthusiastic” local governments. Meanwhile, a panelist noted that the percentage of pirated satellite subscriptions remained very high.

The Internet remained largely unrestricted compared with other media. Domestic news sources and sometimes blogs, or even entire blogging platforms like LiveJournal.com, are “pinpointedly” blocked only during opposition rallies or similar events.

Belarus has no “public” media, while state media all speak in a single voice and report mostly on the government and first of all on President Lukashenka. “To some extent, they do reflect the political life, since it has really turned into a one-man show,” a panelist commented. Not surprisingly, they do not offer alternative viewpoints. “However, you can post a critical comment on the website of *Sovietskaya Byelorussia*, and they will not delete it,” argued one participant.

Panelists complimented BelaPAN, an independent news agency, on its objective and quality reporting, which has contributed to the overall growth of Objective 3. In 2007, in addition to its traditional text services, BelaPAN offered photos, infographics, audio, and video. "BelaPAN is everywhere. You can't imagine the Belarusian media landscape without it. References are everywhere, and those who are just not citing them as a source are too many to count," a panelist commented.

Alternatively, media outlets, depending on their orientation, are also using BelTA (a state-controlled agency) and two Russian-owned services, Interfax-Zapad and Prime-TASS. Five other companies registered as news agencies are offering mostly economic news and legislative updates. There is no discrimination on the side of the agencies, panelists said. On the contrary, independent media are very welcome to subscribe to BelTA, which is actively pushing propaganda. Several years ago, state-owned media and private radio stations were banned from using BelaPAN.

Unless subsidized, subscriptions are not always affordable for independent media. BelaPAN charges \$150–300 a month for its news subscriptions, depending on the package and how much a media outlet can actually pay. Interfax-Zapad's subscription costs around \$300, according to a panelist. Apart from BelaPAN, only BelTA has been offering photos (for many years, unlike BelaPAN) and some infographics.

Domestic broadcast media tend to rely more on purchased programming. Non-state broadcasters, including regional ones, produce their own news, yet they are made "as toothless as possible," a panelist said.

Broadcasters based outside Belarus—like European Radio for Belarus, BELSAT, Radio Liberty, Radio Racyja, and Deutsche Welle—provided little relief. They target the same audience as domestic broadcast media, which is good because they have to compete and thus do supplement each other. "There is an impression, maybe wrong, that more people read news on their websites than actually listen to them," a panelist said. In November 2007, TUT.by, Belarus's biggest Internet portal, launched its online radio station, Radio TUT, which offers mostly music but also some news, including those provided by BelaPAN.

The law orders media outlets, but not publishers or broadcasters, to disclose information about their founders. Hence, in some cases ownership may not be transparent, yet consumers can easily distinguish between state-owned and independent media. Government is the only media mogul, and foreign presence is insignificant. Russian oligarchs own several newspapers, including the popular daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda v Byelorussii* and analytical weekly

BelGazeta. Popular weeklies *Argumenty i Fakty* and *Trud* publish Belarusian local editions.

Russian Renova-Media owns Cosmos TV, a big cable television operator and ISP, based in Minsk. The Swedish media conglomerate Modern Times Group (MTG) was said to be finalizing an agreement with Belarus's ministry of telecommunications to build a production studio and a teleport on the condition that it will broadcast Belarusian state television channels via its Sirius 2/3 satellite. MTG is the largest Free-to-Air-TV and Pay-TV operator in Scandinavia and the Baltics and the largest shareholder in Russia's largest independent television network, CTC Media, Inc. Its channels are distributed on the Viasat platform and in third-party networks in 24 Nordic, Baltic, and Eastern European countries and reach 100 million people.

Minority issues largely remained marginalized. "As a rule, interests of a narrow social group are not presented in mainstream media. At the same time, there are few media who represent narrow social interests," a panelist said. Ethnic minorities have their own media outlets, mostly small-circulation newspapers or bulletins. Most notable are Polish (including undercover ones, opposing the government), Ukrainian, and Hebrew.

There is a big language minority, i.e., those speaking Belarusian, a panelist said. Among domestic broadcasters, only two state-owned radio stations, Radio 1 and Radio 2, are offering news in Belarusian. Television-wise, LAD and STV have kept only several cultural programs in Belarusian; Channel 1 and ONT each have only a couple of journalists—mostly regional ones—reporting in Belarusian.

OBJECTIVE 4: BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Belarus Objective Score 0.82

The business environment remained hostile, with printing and distribution channels almost 100 percent owned by the government, a key barrier to the development of independent media and also a major threat to their very survival. Separately, the state has also been very repressive to small and media businesses, the mainstay for independent media, thus affecting their advertising revenues. The objective remained relatively unchanged from the previous year, scoring a 0.82. Indicator 5, regarding government subsidies for private media, scored more than twice the average. All other indicators scored below the average, with Indicator 1, media outlets operate as profit-generating businesses, the poorest of the lot.

Belarus was ranked 151 out of 157 in the 2008 Index of Economic Freedom, administered by *The Wall Street Journal* and The Heritage Foundation: “[Belarus’s] financial freedom, investment freedom, property rights, and freedom from corruption are 20–40 points below the world average. The government dominates the financial system and either owns or controls all but one of the 31 banks. Foreign investment in all sectors faces hurdles, from outright restrictions to bureaucratic incompetence. Weak rule of law allows for significant corruption and insecure property rights.”

Both state (given their subsidized status) and independent (economically repressed by the government) media are not operating as efficient businesses, panelists agreed, arguing that media could be a profit-making venture under current conditions.

“The few remaining private printing houses are periodically raided by some unknown officials. I don’t know what they are looking for, yet the client will feel discomfort at a minimum,” a panelist said. Almost 20 independent newspapers were banned from the state postal service, Belposhta, and press distribution network Belsajuzdruk several years ago and have had to rely on their own street sellers or house-to-house delivery systems ever since. Two more regional newspapers, *Vitebskii Kurjer* in the northeastern city of Viciebsk, and *Miascovy Chas*, based in Pinsk in the southwest of the country, suspended publishing altogether, since they found it impossible to make ends meet. Several independent newspapers, most notably *Narodnaya Volya* and *Tovarishch*, still publish outside Belarus, in Smolensk (western Russia). Meanwhile, the government is investing millions of dollars to update printing presses under a program that would allow all local state-owned newspapers to go full-color in 2008.

INDEPENDENT MEDIA ARE WELL-MANAGED BUSINESSES, ALLOWING EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE.

BUSINESS MANAGEMENT INDICATORS:

- > Media outlets and supporting firms operate as efficient, professional, and profit-generating businesses.
- > Media receive revenue from a multitude of sources.
- > Advertising agencies and related industries support an advertising market.
- > Advertising revenue as a percentage of total revenue is in line with accepted standards at commercial outlets.
- > Independent media do not receive government subsidies.
- > Market research is used to formulate strategic plans, enhance advertising revenue, and tailor products to the needs and interests of audiences.
- > Broadcast ratings and circulation figures are reliably and independently produced.

Revenues come from different sources, with independent media using the widest variety (advertising, sales of print copies, sometimes donor funding), yet to a different extent. This, however, has not contributed to their sustainability, given the overall anti-business and anti-free-press environment. State media relied mostly on government funding and subsidized fees and to some extent on subsidized advertising. Private broadcasters, such as FM radio stations, were making profits on advertising only, while regional television stations also relied heavily on personal messages, such as birthday greetings.

Although the market for Internet advertising almost doubled in 2007—up to \$2.8–3.0 million, according to some reports—little of that, if any, reached online media, who had to rely on donor funding.

In 2007, according to the advertising group ZenithOptimedia, the Belarus advertising market totaled \$87.1 million annually, with \$53 million spent on television ads, \$15.4 million on press, and \$3.7 million on radio advertising. Television became the biggest gainer quantitatively, since big multinational companies that offer fast-moving consumer goods and advertising agencies had traditionally stuck to national television channels that reached wider audiences. Big international agencies continued to dominate the market.

Under a new advertising law, advertising should not take more than 20 percent of total daily broadcast time and 30 percent of primetime (18.00 to 22.00).

Independent media do not receive government subsidies. However, some outlets nominally not owned by the state yet controlled by it sometimes choose to join state media holdings to avoid bankruptcy. In April 2007, the team at *Vechernii Minsk*, a daily based in the capital, sold a 68 percent stake of the newspaper to MTIS, one of Belarus’s biggest cable television and Internet providers. MTIS, in turn, is owned by the Minsk City government.

Some market research is being done, both in-house and by commissioned companies. However, their services are hardly affordable to all but a few bigger media outlets, mostly state-owned. According to a panelist, privately owned newspapers *Intex-press*, *Vechernii Brest*, and *Vechernii Grodno* were using their own in-house research efforts, including questionnaires and phone polls, and accordingly tailoring their reporting and advertising behavior. State-owned media, like the daily *Sovietskaya Byelorussia* and television channels ONT and Channel 1 were also said to be using external research and adjusting their products.

One panelist raised the issue of applicability, since media are very restricted in their marketing efforts: “If you tell

Narodnaya Volya [the newspaper is banned from subscription] that their readers would rather subscribe to it, there is very little they can do.”

Several companies offer broadcast ratings: NOVAK is selling subscriptions to its diary panel and does quarterly face-to-face interviews on media consumption. The Institute for Sociology at the National Academy of Sciences uses people-meters to produce television ratings. The Independent Institute of Socio-Economic and Political Studies (IIEPS) administers mostly political polls, yet sometimes offers television, radio, and newspaper ratings; SATIO and MASMI periodically research Internet audiences. Of all pollsters and research companies, only IIEPS offers its reports for free. Sometimes figures on the use of the Internet are made public.

Sometimes the ratings lack credibility, the panelists believed, or give little practical information to both media and advertisers. The same applies to circulation figures, since there is no independent audit authority. Under the law, every issue of the newspaper should carry the print run, yet actual sales figures remain suspect.

OBJECTIVE 5: SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS

Belarus Objective Score 0.75

Media-support institutions remained at a low ebb, finding it next to impossible to sustain an independent and professional press. Overall scores for this objective declined slightly from 0.81 a year earlier. Indicator scores did vary quite a bit; Indicator 2, professional associations, was the clear leader at more than twice the average, while Indicators 1, 6, and 7—trade associations, printing facilities and access to newsprint, and apolitical channels of distribution, respectively—all scored much lower.

The panelists failed to name any trade associations supportive of media outlets’ interests. Television Broadcasting Network (TBN), an organization of local television broadcasters, closed down altogether in 2007. Independent regional publishers that used to have their own association until 2005 are now trying to reunite in the form of a more loose partnership.

There are two professional associations working in Belarus, and like other associations in the country, they are ideologically juxtaposed against each other. The Belarusian Union of Journalists is an “official” organization of journalists. Although it brings together around 2,000 media professionals working for state-controlled media, panelists failed to recall what it had been doing apart from giving out prizes. Not until 2007 did it launch a training program for journalists, something its independent counterpart, the

Belarusian Association of Journalists (BAJ), has been doing for years. The BAJ unites around 1,200 independent journalists and works to protect their rights via legal advice and defense, professional development, and public advocacy. Panelists paid tribute to what the BAJ was doing to protect both journalists and the freedom of speech in the country. However, one panelist regretted that it had been working somewhat traditionally, “like a usual association in a usual country.” Although very supportive for the media, it should be more pioneering and also active in keeping Belarusian journalists at the cutting edge of the most up-to-date innovations in the media sector, according to this panelist.

In a positive development, the BAJ’s membership was growing—up from around 1,000 media professionals a year earlier. A group of young journalists, mainly working for the new media, joined the BAJ in 2007. Since most of them lack professional training in journalism, the association is helping to improve the quality of their reporting. The influx of fresh blood is likely to make the BAJ more pioneering and efficient, a panelist said. Besides, the BAJ publishes a professional journal, *Abajour*, which also contributes to the development of media.

Nongovernmental organizations are an endangered species in Belarus. Being harassed by the government, they have to concentrate more on their own survival than on helping the media. Some of them work in stealth mode and do provide some assistance to the media, like offering trainings or legal advice. There is more of such cooperation in the regions, since the BAJ does not always reach remote regions, a panelist said.

Several domestic universities offer journalism degrees, most notably the journalism school at the Belarusian State University in Minsk, and other state schools in Homiel, Hrodna, and

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS FUNCTION IN THE PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS OF INDEPENDENT MEDIA.

SUPPORTING INSTITUTIONS INDICATORS:

- > Trade associations represent the interests of private media owners and provide member services.
- > Professional associations work to protect journalists’ rights.
- > NGOs support free speech and independent media.
- > Quality journalism degree programs that provide substantial practical experience exist.
- > Short-term training and in-service training programs allow journalists to upgrade skills or acquire new skills.
- > Sources of newsprint and printing facilities are in private hands, apolitical, and unrestricted.
- > Channels of media distribution (kiosks, transmitters, Internet) are private, apolitical, and unrestricted.

Viciebsk. There are two privately owned institutions, both based in Minsk, that train journalists. Academically, domestic programs are “archaic,” a panelist commented, and offer no practice-oriented training at all. Media managers at both independent and state outlets were said to be dissatisfied with the knowledge (“very basic”) and skills (“if any at all”) that would-be journalists get. Besides, the programs do not teach niche reporting, including economics and business, media management, and online journalism.

External alternatives include the European Humanities University, once a Belarusian university now in exile in Vilnius (Lithuania). There are also scholarship programs in Ukraine and Poland, funded by their governments and foreign donors. Elsewhere, the US government offers masters’ scholarships in journalism and mass communications at US universities under the Muskie program. Other minor opportunities might be scholarships by the British Council (at the United Kingdom) and the Open Society Institute (Central European University in Budapest, Hungary). Similarly to previous years, panelists doubted that graduates would find it easy to apply locally the knowledge and experience they had gained abroad.

Short-term training opportunities, offered mostly for free by both local and international organizations, are available and quite popular since they are often the only opportunity to bridge the skills gap. By and large, the professional needs of all departments and all levels are addressed—or, at least, pertinent courses are available. More trainings should be organized domestically, the panelists said, since most newsrooms find it problematic to send their key staff abroad. Trainers from Belarus and neighboring countries, like Ukraine and Russia, are a better choice compared with the western ones, one participant argued, since the former have better knowledge of the audience and better understand the broader context the media work in.

As noted above, the government monopolizes printing facilities; hence, they are politicized and price-discriminative against the independent press. “The [remaining] 1.5 private printers are so scared to make the government angry that they themselves censor the newspapers they print,” a panelist commented. Under the law, a director of the printing house is responsible for the contents of the printed materials his company produces. Sources of newsprint are not yet controlled by the government. However, it has built a newsprint factory in Lukashenka’s hometown of Shklou and was reportedly ordering state-owned newspapers to purchase newsprint from it starting in January 2008. At the same time, it was planning to impose discriminatory customs tariffs on imported newsprint, a panelist said. However, the production did not start as planned in December 2007 due to technological problems.

Media distribution channels have remained under tight governmental control. Newspaper kiosks are owned by the state. There are some sales of mostly non-political press via newsstands in shops and supermarkets. Some independent regional papers operate their own, very small distribution incentives.

All broadcast transmitters are owned by the state, as is most of the telecom infrastructure. There are private, last-mile ISPs, yet the government controls international traffic and fees remain unaffordable for the vast majority of the population. As a result, some of the Internet providers openly admitted they were earning more money by charging their users for access to their multimedia libraries—with almost 100 percent of pirated content—than by selling Internet access.

Web-hosting is more or less unrestricted; however, most online media prefer to be hosted outside of the country both for affordability and security reasons. “...There is an illusion of freedom. At least as far as Web hosting and Internet access are concerned, a newsroom can circumvent the state [restrictions],” according to a panelist.

As noted above, the MSI panelists for Belarus agreed to participate only if they were not named publicly in order to avoid criminal prosecution.