

media IQ MONITORING
Quarterly
report:
May—
August 2019

Minsk, 2019



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The report has been produced within the MEDIA IQ medialiteracy project implemented by Press Club Belarus in cooperation with Detector Media, a media watchdog from Ukraine, and Pact, a non-commercial international organisation, with the support of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).

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Executive summary

This report is a result of the MEDIA IQ¹ monitoring — a monitoring of Belarusian TV and online media's compliance with journalistic standards when reporting public-political news and a tool to decipher propaganda, disinformation and manipulative techniques. It is held by Press Club Belarus² in cooperation with Detector Media³ (Ukraine), with the support of USAID/Pact⁴ (USA). This is the second quarterly report, which covers four months from May 2019 to August 2019⁵. The report is based on the monitoring of 15 online media outlets and 4 Belarusian TV channels, in both Russian and Belarusian languages and monthly reports issued by the monitoring team and available in Russian only. The monitoring and analysis were held in compliance with the MEDIA IQ monitoring methodology⁶ elaborated between September — December 2018 and updated⁷ in March 2019.

The analysis showed that most of the reviewed media to some extent violated the journalistic principles, including a failure to provide facts and sources, lacking balance and accuracy. However, the overall picture was not that grim and the compliance with journalistic standards was rather 'good', not requiring significant changes in the editorial policy. Most violations related to the non-compliance with the principles of fairness, separation of opinions from facts and balance of opinions when covering the conflicting parties. In the reporting period the media monitoring has revealed a clear difference between national state-controlled and non-state-controlled media in terms of frequency of use of propaganda, manipulations and disinformation with former resorting to propaganda on average in 17.6% of their publications.

Major recommendations for focus media to enhance their credibility included a more careful attitude towards reference to information sources, ensuring a clear separation between facts and opinions, avoiding value judgements, reference to anonymous sources and providing a good range of opinions, enabling the audience to draw conclusions independently. There was identified a need to improve the quality of reporting on various issues, such as trials, pre-trial detentions, etc.

The May — August 2019 MEDIA IQ monitoring report was presented and discussed with a number of reviewed media in a public event⁸. During the event the monitoring team substantiated the violations and showed examples of trend-errors and provided general recommendations. PCB has been in contact with some media for individual feedback and recommendations. Notably, chief editors and staff generally positively assessed the findings of the reporting period.

Introduction

The MEDIA IQ monitoring methodology was elaborated by Press Club Belarus in close cooperation with Detector Media (Ukraine). Its purpose was to address contemporary challenges faced by the Belarusian media through raising the profile of media literacy and strengthening Belarus' information security.

The monitoring goals were to

- 1) reveal cases of violation of journalistic standards, misinformation, propaganda and manipulative techniques;
- 2) enhance Belarusian media and journalists' capacity in creating quality and objective materials in compliance with journalistic standards;
- 3) inform the public about such cases of violations to help to prevent them in the future.

Media, which were selected as the object of monitoring had to comply with the following criteria: private or public/state ownership; HQ located in Russia or the EU but having field offices in Belarus; regional or national wide circulation; produce own news content. MEDIA IQ was monitoring the compliance with the following standards based on BBC guidelines: accuracy, fairness, separating facts from opinions, balance of opinions, completeness of information, relevance (timeliness) of information and revealed cases of propaganda, disinformation and manipulative techniques.

Each month, MEDIA IQ monitoring team issued a report, which, among other things, ranked the media subjected to the monitoring and pointed to the most common violations. Overall, during the reporting period monitoring team has monitored 14,558 public-political pieces of news (12,828 during the first

reporting period). For six months in a row BelaPAN independent news agency top-ranked the MEDIA IQ rating (maximum 5.94 points of 6 possible), while CTV TV channel closed the list for two months in a row (minimum 4.22 points of 6 possible), ONT TV channel scored record low in July — 3.82 points and Belsat TV hit the bottom of the list in August at 4.17 points.

In May-August 2019, the monitoring revealed 617 cases of propaganda. There were consistent leaders in propaganda — CTV, SB. Belarus Today and ONT, while BelaPAN and Mogilevskiye Vedomosti were completely free from propaganda in the reporting period. In two state-controlled media (CTV and ONT) articles containing propaganda constituted more than 30% of reviewed publications.

That said, the overall picture could be assessed as rather “good” with average points scored by all reviewed media ranging between 5.29 in July and 5.43 in May. This means, the average quality of reporting was stable.

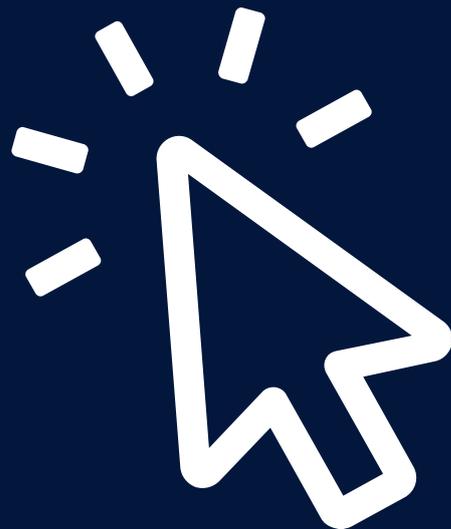
The analysis of compliance with journalistic standards has revealed that all media subject to the monitoring violated journalistic standards, however, most of such violations were not malicious or serious and could be addressed and resolved without alterations in the editorial policy. The analysis has found that most frequent and common violations related to the non-compliance with the principles of fairness, separating facts from opinions, and balance of opinions. For example, this was evident from the publications on sensitive issues, such as covering trials, performance by law enforcement, the 2nd European Games held in Belarus in June, the launch of the parliamentary campaign in July, domestic political events, the president and the constitution, and others. In some cases, this led an identification of a manipulation of public opinion. Cases of propaganda

and manipulations were more common as compared with the previous reporting period and primarily practiced by the CTV channel, ONT TV Channel and SB. Belarus Today newspaper of the Presidential Administration. Propaganda and manipulations have been identified in one third of CTV channel reports and in 17% of news reports by Belarus 1. Most frequently, state affiliated media was used in the interest of domestic political leaders and policies. Specific violations and non-compliances with journalistic standards are elaborated in detail below.

MEDIA IQ statistical infographics

Ratings of news outlets (May-August)

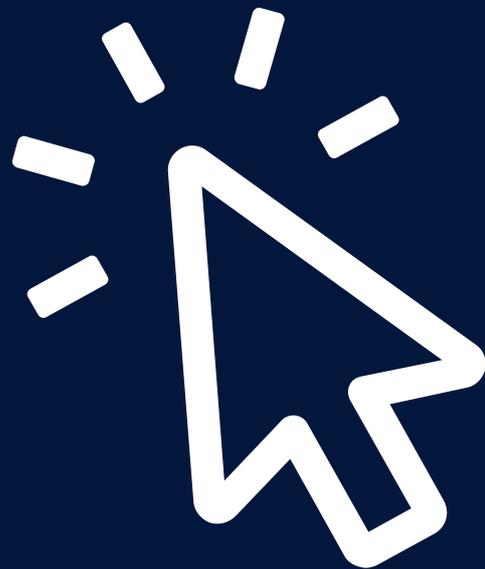
*Interactive
infographic*



<https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/846634/>

Violations of journalistic standards by media

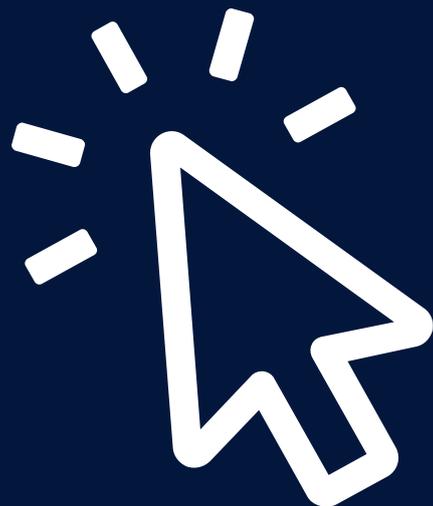
*Interactive
infographic*



<https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/865251/>

Signs of propaganda and manipulations revealed in 672 news items in May—August

*Interactive
infographic*



<https://public.flourish.studio/visualisation/846876/>

Most common violations of journalistic standards by standard

FAIRNESS

A reference to the source of information is the primary marker of compliance with the fairness standard. In the reporting period, TV channels continued to lead in the number of violations — they lacked the reference to the source in half of their reports on average. CTV TV Chanel was the ultimate ‘leader’ in providing reports without referring to sources (in July 2019, only 16.3% publications did not violate the standard), while Belsat TV was the fairest among TV Channels on average. Online media outlets were generally more compliant with the fairness indicator ranging from 100% compliance by Intex-press in July 2019 to 53.8% by Silnyje Novosti in May 2019, which was also a sharp reduction in fairness for this media outlet. In addition, the Village Belarus and Nash Gomieli showed a stable downward trend in compliance with this standard in the reporting period, as compared with the previous one.

Most common cases of non-compliance with this principle included the lack of reference to any source or references to ‘generalised pseudo sources’ or references to anonymous sources. When analysing the compliance with this journalistic standard, the monitoring team often registered related violations of other standards, such as accuracy, or separating facts from opinions.

Case 1. An ONT TV channel piece, dated August 21st⁹, entitled “Shortcomings in Belarusian law enforcement: expert comments”, is an example of the violation of the fairness principle. Instead of experts announced in the headline, the off-screen voice makes assumptions referring to a generalized pseudo-source, “*Some Internet resources were quick to connect the disclosed flaws in security officials’ work with the upcoming elections. Others, on the contrary, stated that the disclosed deficiencies of people wearing a uniform have stolen electoral points from the current government*”. Such generalization would have been justified if further in the report “some” and “others” would have eventually voiced their positions. But they did not. Furthermore, neither of the two experts (professor from the Interior Ministry Academy Alexander Ivanovsky and associate professor of the political science department of the Belarusian State Economic University Alexei Belyaev) had said nothing on the subject matter, i.e. issues discussed at the president’s briefing with law enforcers and specific shortcomings. This function was performed by a voice from the studio, which referred to assessments by the Belarusian president. That said, the voice primarily told what president had said, not making it clear where was what the president had said and where was his opinion. “*In general, Alexander Lukashenko said the security situation in the country was stable and exemplary for many states in the region. In Belarus, the oligarchy and rampant crime are not allowed. But some glaring facts in security forces operations cast a shadow over law enforcement. The President spoke about cases when the police provoked drug offenses to improve statistics*”. The author referred to the president speaking “about cases,” that is, about certain facts, however, without the reference to such facts. What if these were no such facts, but only

the president's opinion? In addition to violating the fairness principle, this case is also a demonstration of bad separation of opinions from facts, presenting journalist's opinion as a fact.

ACCURACY

Almost all focus media have high accuracy indicators — ranging between 90-100 %, except Nash Gomieli (77.1%-88.9%), The Village Belarus (79.8 — 88.3%), Belsat (80% — 93.3%) and CTV TV channels (79.1 — 90.5%).

Case 2. On May 31st, 2019, CTV TV channel published a piece¹⁰ entitled “Alexander Lukashenko: in the future either a new Constitution will appear in Belarus, or will be amended”. Specifically, the author says: “*Today, only the lazy one does not say that the modernisation of the constitution has matured in Belarus.*” A newspaper cliché “only the lazy one” — hides an abstract majority, which actually does not exist. In any case, it is not a confirmed fact. The CTV piece leads to the conclusion that President Lukashenko is in favour of amending the constitution. Meanwhile, Petr Miklashevich, chairman of the Constitutional Court, only states: “*The head of state has already outlined a certain vision of the changes*”. Miklashevich does not express his position. None of the speakers in the piece say that “*the modernization of the constitution has matured*” — these are the words of the journalist. Hence, in addition to violating the accuracy principle, the journalist with his phrase has violated the standard “separating facts from opinions” in his piece.

SEPARATING FACTS FROM OPINIONS

As in the case with the compliance with the fairness standard, TV channels further were the most ‘malicious’ violators failing to separate facts from opinions in more than half of their reports. During this reporting period, ONT bypassed CTV in the number of violations of this standard with only 7.9 % of news complying with this standard in July and some 15% on average in the reporting period. BelaPAN showed the best compliance, followed by BelTA, TUT.BY, Euroradio and Intex-press. That said, the media monitoring team in no way wanted to compromise the journalist’s right to expressing his/her own opinion, however, this was not appropriate in the news format, which was the subject of the monitoring.

Case 3. In a piece¹¹ by Belsat TV channel on July 30th, 2019, entitled “First year students do not know. What students of Belarusian universities are being forced to?” the author, without a reference to the source, says, that “50,000 young men and ladies will find their names this summer in first year enrolment lists” and further refers to unreliable source, an anonymous Telegram Channel “expelled”: “The Belarusian State Economic University threatens to put students on a travel ban list if they do not find two volunteers from each group for the national census”. The author does not attempt a fact-checking. Both cases make a violation of the accuracy standard. Further, the author presents his opinion as a fact: “First year students, who only aspire to receive knowledge, will learn in September that they will be given many other tasks unrelated to the education process”. And “Telegram channels regularly report about cases of coercion. The latter has already become a part of the Belarusian academic culture”, “active student life in Belarus

often envisages a passive civic stance”. Not only the author has not separated facts from opinions, it has also used a manipulative technique, which should convince the audience of a sad fate of Belarusian students. Finally, the author quotes famous French sociologist Durkheim: “*As father of sociology Emile Durkheim said, the attitude of universities and schools to students is a replica of authorities’ attitude towards the population*”, thereby putting pressure on readers with Durkheim’s authority, who has nothing to do with specific facts.

BALANCE OF OPINIONS

According to the MEDIA IQ methodology, if the standard is not applicable to a publication of a specific genre, it is considered that there has been no violation. Therefore, due to formal criteria, reports by “protocol journalists” from meetings with the president do not violate the balance standard. Having this in mind, almost all media showed 100% compliance with the standard. Except Belsat TV (82.2% in August to 90.3% in May 2019) and The Village Belarus in May — 82.71%.

Case 4. BelTA in a piece¹² dated August 29th, 2019, entitled “The Foreign Ministry: Belarus did not receive an invitation to the reburial ceremony of the remains of Kalinovsky in Vilnius”, has presented the answer given by the Foreign Ministry Press Secretary, Anatoly Glaz, and nothing more. Meanwhile, at the MFA briefing, BelaPAN asked whether Belarus had received an official invitation from the Lithuanian government to the ceremony of reburial of the remains. Glaz replied, “To date, no invitations have been received through diplomatic channels”. It would have been

fine, if the spokesperson did not say before that *“I believe that, like you, we have read in the media the statements by some high-ranking representatives of Lithuania about inviting our government delegation to this ceremony”*. With this statement the spokesperson has introduced the audience into existing conflict, which has two sides. However, neither BelTA, nor many other outlets, have quoted any Lithuanian officials and only reported the second part of what Glaz had said. Hence, readers have not learned about whether there was invitation or not.

COMPLETENESS OF INFORMATION

In the reporting period there was a downward trend in terms of compliance with this standard by the reviewed media. On average, compliance among focus media has reduced to some 75%-80% as compared with 90% in the previous reporting period. There has been a sharp increase in non-compliance with this standard in July-August 2019 by SB. Belarus Today (circa 50%) newspaper and ONT and CTV TV channels (circa one-third of all pieces). Euroradio and KP Belarus were the ultimate leaders in complying with this standard, as well as BelaPAN in May, Onliner and Vecherniy Brest in July.

Case 5. SB. Belarus Today in a piece¹³ dated June 28th, 2019, entitled “Compensation for losses due to the supply of contaminated oil may be decided by courts”, fails to make any reference to the facts of the subject matter in question and only from a quote by Deputy Prime Minister Igor Lyashenko, at the end of the piece, one may guess that Russia was involved in the case. No further explanations are provided. “The question of compensation for losses due to

the supply of contaminated oil may be decided by the court. Deputy Prime Minister Igor Lyashenko announced this in Parliament. He noted that as of June 26th, more than 705,000 tons of contaminated oil had been squeezed out of Belarus. A roadmap has been developed and agreed to replace low-quality oil in Belarus. The measures taken should ensure there is no low-quality oil by August 15 due to its displacement to Russia. “As regards lost profits, it is obvious that the issue, if agreements are not reached, will be decided with the Russian side through the court,” said Igor Lyashenko”.

TIMELINESS

With a few exceptions, all media complied with this standard by 100%. There were only a couple of cases when this standard was violated.

Case 6. Numerous publications about strawberries have appeared in the Belarusian media after the publication on June 11th, 2019 by Media-Polesie¹⁴ about residents of Luninets District throwing away strawberries due to the lack of buyers. On June 17th, the story was picked up by Belarus 1 TV channel in a piece¹⁵ entitled “The President orders MART and the Belcoopsoyuz to deal with the strawberry situation”. The viewer receives information about the oversupply of strawberries, about the presidents’ order to deal with the situation and how his order was implemented. Text is accompanied with a video from Luninets (dated June 3rd) and a report by public officials about resolving the issue (dated June 17th). It remains unclear when the president ordered to resolve the issue. If that was June 11th, when the news

appeared then a week of silence was too long, covering up an important problem. Moreover, the opinion of local strawberry producers in Luninets, whether their problem was resolved, was not presented. Instead, the piece showed public officials reports and the strawberry situation in Drogichin district and in Minsk. At the end, the author emphasises: *“Today, all issues regarding the purchase and harvesting of berries, including by private entities, have been removed”*. Given the fact that strawberries are seasonal, the issue was indeed resolved. However, from the viewpoint of journalistic standards, it would have been better to let Luninetsky district residents to speak about the matter.

Manipulations, propaganda and disinformation

The MEDIA IQ monitoring recorded an increase in the number of propaganda and manipulations in the news pieces by the focus Belarusian media in July and August – some 200 cases on average in these months as compared with 106 in May and 153 in June. By August 2019, only BelaPAN news agency and Mogilevskiye Vedomosti (state-controlled) were completely free from direct propaganda. Most cases of propaganda were registered in news reports by state-controlled media, the ultimate leaders being SB, Belarus Today, CTV, ONT and Belarus 1 TV Channels. They were also the leaders in terms of the share of propaganda in their reports (ranging between 2% to 38%. Among non-state media, Belsat TV, Sputnik Belarus and Nash Gomieli had most registered cases of propaganda (4%-14% of the monitored pieces).

Case 7. In a piece¹⁶ by ONT TV channel dated July 30th, 2019, entitled, “Lukashenka approved the dates proposed by Yarmoshyna for holding elections in Belarus”, the media monitoring team recorded several violations, however, in this section the focus will be on manipulations. “The appearance of Lydia Yarmoshyna on TV has long become not even an omen, but a sign of the forthcoming elections. Although a conscientious housewife has all the gears of the electoral machine lubricated and ready for work, the elections may conceal many potholes which should be taken into account”. This paragraph creates an image of the CEC head as the master of elections, their primary chef. Such a metaphor drives the audience away from treating Yarmoshyna as an official who was hired to help voters to exercise their political right.

“Election observers may often be compared with jury in gymnastics or freestyle competitions, when grand stands uniformly shout that everything is in compliance, but biased jury members will always find something to downgrade for. Fortunately, the elections in Belarus are measured not by the opinions of others, but by the voters’ votes. And the fight for them has begun”, this paragraph uses manipulating metaphors and aphorisms, and paves the way for explanations of why international observers may not be happy with the elections in Belarus. Instead of specific facts and figures, emotional speech constructions are used, which prompt the viewer to make pre-programmed conclusions. At the 2015 presidential election, Chair of OSCE PA ad hoc Working Group on Belarus Kent Härstedt said: *“We could not see the vote count”* and emphasized that it was unacceptable to keep observers away from the place of ballot counting or to close their review: *“When you stand there and you don’t see the count, you begin to wonder: ‘What am I doing here?’ ”* Since then, Belarusian election legislation did not change. Observers, when counting the results of elections by election commissions, are unable to see what exactly is being marked on the ballot tables. Therefore, they are unlikely to verify the accuracy of the vote count and confirm it. However, they have already been named *“the biased jury”*, which *“will always find something to downgrade for”*.

Further, the author continues to lead the viewer to the “necessary” conclusions: *“Fortunately, elections in Belarus are measured not by the opinions of others, but by the voters’ votes”*. The statement appears logical, the election organizers only take note of observers’ reports. However, if the counting of votes is arranged so that several commission members count the ballots simultaneously in silence and do not

show the subject of the count, then neither observers, nor even other members of the election commission know how much the result corresponds to the actual will of the voters. Accordingly, a reference to the election assessment not by observers, but by “voters’ votes” is inaccurate, since voters do not count themselves.

Conclusions and recommendations

Monthly reports on the results of the MEDIA IQ monitoring are published online and disseminated to PCB subscribers (circa 3300 e-mails). As a rule, some focus media addressed PCB for feedback requesting additional information or recommendations. The results of the monitoring in May - August 2019 were presented and discussed at an open public event, including with some media subject to monitoring (those willing to communicate). The monitoring team explained in detail how exactly different media non-complied with journalistic standards, sited case studies and recommended how to develop the editorial policies to improve compliance with journalistic standards. Present chief editors and creative staff of media in general showed understanding and solidarity the MEDIA IQ monitoring team, they asked many questions, provided meaningful feedback and requested further details on how to improve the professionalism of their reporting to receive better scores for their reporting and climb up the MEDIA IQ rating. That said, in the month, following such consultations, media in question usually improved their overall ratings and compliance with specific journalistic standards.

The report has revealed that, generally, media have most difficulty complying with journalistic standards of fairness, balance and separating facts from opinions, including when reporting on sensitive issues in Belarus. For example, this was evident from the publications on such issues, as trials, pre-trial detentions, harvesting campaign, Belarus' international cooperation, domestic political events, the president and the constitution, the ongoing parliamentary elections.

The MEDIA IQ monitoring has revealed a need to hold regular discussions of the legislation, ethics, the context of media reporting, and to clarify the terminology.

The media monitoring team has issued general recommendations which would help all focus media to improve the quality of their news reporting.

FAIRNESS AND ACCURACY

- Reference to an information source is a must. Without such reference, the audience cannot judge the credibility of the news report. Editorial offices, especially TV editorial offices, should require that their journalists made explicit references to information sources (for example, “according to Belstat”, “according to the Finance Ministry”).
- Reference to generalized sources constitutes a ‘bad practice’. People usually do not speak in chorus, so by the standards of news journalism references to ‘collective’ sources are unacceptable.
- Reporting from a courtroom should be explicitly indicated so. Such reports require not only a reference to the source of information and its procedural status, but also to the circumstances when the quoted statement was made, e.g. before the start of the trial, during the process, during a break, after the trial, etc. The place and time of a conversation with the source can be an important detail when reporting about trials. If it is a closed trial, a journalist must explain how he or she knows about what is going on there.

- Reference to anonymous sources must be justified and explained. Passing off opinions as a reference to an anonymous source is unacceptable.

SEPARATING FACTS FROM OPINIONS

- TV channels editors should bear in mind that when adapting a TV report for posting a text version on the website, some fragments of visual reporting may disappear and facts in the subsequent text may appear as a journalist's opinion.
- Journalists must avoid clichés, especially clichés containing value judgments.
- In reporting, unlike in the hardcore news items, the effect of the presence is an important element. A journalist usually tells what he or she sees and feels, what impressions he/she has. However, a journalist should not tell the audience how he or she evaluates this news item.

BALANCE OF OPINIONS

- Justifying the lack of balance with the fact that one side is 'bad' or 'guilty', and so on is unacceptable.
- Balance standard is not always applicable in reporting. When reporting breaking news, a media outlet may use a news flash without the reference to all parties in a conflict. However, in such cases, the breaking news report should contain

a reference that the report will be updated. Furthermore, when updating such reports with commentaries by parties involved, a journalist should indicate that there is a different opinion and that he/she intends to obtain it.

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