

DESIGN DEVELOPMENT TRENDS OF LATGALE REGION NEWSPAPERS (1998 – 2017)

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Abstract. *The aim of the paper is to find out how the design of regional newspapers has changed and what cultural and social factors have affected it. The paper analyses the design of Latgale region newspapers “Latgales Laiks”, “Rēzeknes Vēstis”, “Vaduguns” in three periods from 1998 to 2017. A comparative analysis is made, analysing the processes that have affected the visual communication of cover pages and the content. Content analysis is used as a research method to achieve the aim. In the study, a total of 270 regional newspapers were analysed. During the period from 1998 to 2008, there were changes in the design of the newspapers that took place under the influence of cultural and social factors: higher-quality photographs, colourful content, original design solutions, and official websites of newspapers etc. The changes were found in all three of design disciplines, while the detected newspaper design changes in the period from 2008 to 2017 had not affected the overall visual image of the newspapers.*

Keywords: *culture, design, media space, newspapers, regional media, social space, visual communication.*

JEL code: Z1, Z19

Introduction

There is a tendency in the 21st century in Latvia and in the world that the number of newspaper readers and subscribers is rapidly diminishing, so what is the relevance of the debate in society about whether printed newspapers can be saved and what is their future? Technology development has hit the regional newspapers that often have limited financial resources, and it makes it difficult to adapt to the current trends, yet the newspaper designers do not pay enough attention to design considering it as a decoration, rather than a message carrier. The media pay great attention to visual communication and design and only then adjust the content, which has changed the way the media culture and the media are presented in general, while the regional media pay less attention to the development of design.

Thus the research hypothesis is: the social and cultural changes can affect and develop design of newspapers. The aim of the paper is to find out how the design of regional newspapers has changed and what cultural and social factors have affected it. The paper analyses the design of Latgale region newspapers “Latgales Laiks”, “Rēzeknes Vēstis”, “Vaduguns” in three periods from 1998 to 2017.

The tasks of the paper are following:

- describe theoretical issues on visual communication and newspaper design;
- identify the role of the regional newspapers in the region;
- explore and analyse the cover pages of the newspapers “Rēzeknes Vēstis”, “Vaduguns”, and “Latgales Laiks”;
- examine how social and cultural processes have affected the changes of the newspaper design.

To achieve the aim, the quantitative and qualitative content analysis was performed and categories to analyse newspaper design were developed.

Print media is almost entirely composed of visual information that is effective for the transfer of information. Graphically, depicted content is capable of passing a large amount of information at high speed, with less space, if compared with other methods of transmission of information (Tufte, 1990).

“Visual images become more and more common, and, as a result, information and knowledge about the surrounding world are increasingly being formulated visually, and people interacting increasingly use fully constructed visual experiences” (Rimšāne, 2003). In Bo Bergstrom’s book “Visual Communication,” it is stated that visual communication is almost never used without a specific purpose for aesthetic purposes: “No, text and images require more. A message must be given – no matter how banal or vital it is”. This applies to all the media, including the printed press, where visual communication in the narrower sense translates into the presentation of the publication, the images and the visual structure of the text (Jameson, 2007). Harry J. Jameson's work “Visual Communication: More than Meets the Eye” is based on the fact that visual communication has several dimensions, such as social or semiotic. Perception or social communication determines that “modes of vision” are influenced by social factors, from which it can be concluded that the processes in society influence the way in which visual communication takes place. Interpretation that comes from visual experience is a combination of several factors: biological, psychological and socio-cultural. Both the image creator and the receiver are on the opposite side of the communication process, but they are in the same fundamental perception system. The main difference is that the creator reproduces or creates cultural forms, provides a “way to see the world”, thus affecting the way the recipient can “see the world”. The basis of this system is the potential of human marking (Kukkonen, Stocchetti, 2011). The ability to capture large amounts of visual information also explains why a person so much trusts visually received information (Tufte, 1997). Visual information is perceived by the eye but processed by the brain. There are three ways in which the human brain processes visual messages: mentally, directly, and through

mediation. The handling of mental imagery refers to experiences in the mind such as thoughts, dreams, and fantasies. Direct visual information is what a person sees without intermediary intervention, while mediation relates mostly to visual information provided through the media: television, the press, the computer, and other platforms (Lester, 2006).

The media is a channel that is located between the sender and the recipient, and depending on their ability and visual code reading skills, it plays an important role in reaching the recipient. "A message may be a technical editor of a newspaper or television channel, the creative director of an advertising agency, or an artist responsible for creating visual design at the customer's request" (Lester, 2006). The book also states that most messengers do not have free and independent roles, as they are service providers, intermediaries between the employer and the purpose of the message. All the elements involved – the sender, channel and addressee – looks at visual communication from three different perspectives. The sender works in accordance with the intent perspective, where the main points are analysis, purpose and a message, the channel forms a proximity perspective that includes text, images, and context, or interplay between words and visual images, while the recipient responds from a perceptual perspective, which includes perception, sensation, and interpretation (Lester, 2006). This paper looks on press as a communication tool to reach an audience.

Regional newspapers' role in sociocultural space

The printed press vary according to the structure, content, and journalistic tendencies, as well as geographical categories – local, regional, national, international. This is a category of mass media, which, however, despite the diverse range of mass communication tools and technologies nowadays, forms the local informative space and is able to address and interest the audience. Researcher James de Vries suggests to look on newspaper design as a process of cultural change that goes beyond the usual methods of designing a newspaper (De Vries, 2008). The authors' conclusion is highlighted as a main hypothesis – based on it, the analysis of a newspaper design is structured. The newspaper design is described as a part of culture and social processes.

Newspapers, like many social processes, have inherently spread themselves into the media space. The media space can be interpreted as a specific reality that cannot be fully visualized, but it organizes agent practices and representations that produce and consume media through the media, which in turn creates an objective and physical basis for the media space. According to Nichlas Luhmann, a media researcher, the concept of media includes all public institutions that use technical means to disseminate

reports. First of all, the author refers to books, magazines, newspapers produced using printers, electronic means etc., the mass production of which is created for mass communication, not for a specific recipient. Secondly, radio and television are also considered within this concept, unless the report is public rather than used for individual telephone communication (Luhmann 2000). A specific medium is related to the location, which is first expressed geographically. Therefore, mass communication processes are described in terms of space, for example, by referring to specific media markets, sales, marketing, audience, etc. Therefore, the media and space are inseparable elements that include the inclusion of different approaches (both humanitarian and social) in media research. There is a continuous interaction between the media and the public: there is no simple causal one-way relationship between the media as a technology or cultural content and the public; the results of this relationship are varied, unpredictable, dependent on different circumstances. Thus, the media space is at the same time a cultural and social system.

The media social theory (Thompson, 1995) states that the media have a significant impact on the social space. "The use of the media creates new forms and contacts of the social world, new forms of social relations with oneself and others. By means of communication technologies, communication is changed, they provide the opportunity to communicate and act without physical presence" (Thompson, 1995). Therefore, their most significant feature is the spatial and temporal transformation of social life, which is represented by a variety of media use and opportunities because "mass communication is regarded as a social and cultural phenomenon" (McQuail, 2010). This means that the media in the social sphere combine not only the function of reflection of reality but also become part of publicly important structures, for example, the technological infrastructure is connected with economic development possibilities. However, common ideas, images and information have an impact on the cultural-social space. They both form and themselves are part of the culture. The cultural system plays an important role in mass communication, as it promotes the development of the social system. Cultural artefacts become a potential source of modification of the social system. Therefore, the information provided through the mass media, however unexpected it would not be, reflects the processes in the highest social space. The media space becomes the mainstay of the ruling elite. This means that the media space is simultaneously characterized by cultural and social factors. In this respect, local media as creators of regional communication is an important element of interpreting the local cultural environment. Taking into account German communication scientist and psychologist Gerhard Maletzke's message on the importance of a wider social and cultural environment in communication

research (Fawkes, 2007), it is also essential in the practice of local media to consider them as a specific addresser, for example, as part of the cultural industry or as representatives of ruling power ideas that reveal the interaction and the relationship between capital, technology, culture, and everyday life, in which media development takes place in the local area.

The local newspapers as a part of mass-market product do not look for an answer to the question who I am, they rather offer ready-made prototypes, images and objects that make readers to identify themselves. Local newspapers allow an individual to learn about the area and the state, learn social norms and culture, thus becoming members of a particular environment and territory. The media researchers Inta Brikše and Vita Zelče emphasize that the local newspapers are a component of cultural identity. “The idea of our small newspaper describes the community in question” (Brikše, Zelče, 2006). The locals who are often not involved in the daily routine of one or another are in the same communicative space to share events, problems, victories, entertainment, discussions, etc. They are much more involved in the community life, thus also consuming more local media.

Methodology

In order to obtain the most accurate data for the period from 1998 to 2017, the newspapers “Rēzeknes Vēstis”, “Vaduguns”, and “Latgales Laiks” were studied in the context of three periods of time: 1998, 2008, and 2017. The selection of each period is justified by important cultural and social processes in the society.

During the study, the content analysis of the elements of the newspaper and its front page was carried out according to the quantitative and qualitative categories. The categories of analysis were developed based on the interaction of newspapers' visual communication and design with content.

The technical design was examined in the context of the entire newspaper in the following categories:

- the number of pages – allows you to set, depending on the period of time, how the thickness of a newspaper has changed;
- the number of coloured pages – allows you to determine when coloured print is used more often and what kind of content is being placed on it.

The editorial and system design, elements of visual communication are considered in the context of the front page in the following categories:

- the number of pictures – it lists the number of pictures on the front page, excluding the pictures used for supplementing articles (for example, “On this edition”);

- the number of news – it lists the number of news, including weather reports, as well as explores the elements of visual communication with which news are separated and highlighted;
- the number of the main news – it lists the main news and explores which elements of visual communication highlight them on the background of other news;
- the position of logos – the logo placement on the front page is recorded;
- the number of advertisements – it lists the number of advertisements on the front page, including self-promotion and explores the elements of visual communication that highlight and separate advertisements;
- the number of congratulations and columns – it lists the number of congratulations and special columns and explores the elements of visual communication that highlight and separate congratulations and columns;
- the number of notifications – it lists short notifications about important topicalities and explores the elements of visual communication that highlight and separate notifications;
- eye-catching elements, regular columns – it lists and records specially created eye-catching elements and columns specific to a particular newspaper, as well as explores the elements of visual communication that highlight and separate the information.

The influence of cultural and social factors on the design of newspapers “Latgales Laiks”, “Vaduguns” and “Rēzeknes Vēstis”

In 1998, the 7th Saeima elections were held, so political news and paid advertisements played a major role in all the afore mentioned media. In general, advertising focused on private entrepreneurship. The 1990s was a time when new vehicles that were produced abroad came to Latvia, as a result of which the car repair business also flourished, and advertisements for tire change and other services appeared in newspapers. Similarly, new types of business and services, such as the installation of PVC windows, came in, and money was spent in order to attract the attention of society and display advertisements on the first pages.

In the 1990s, especially at the end of the decade, both the typography developed and new technological solutions in the field of photography emerged that required the media to adapt. The television's offer was getting wider – the news format became freer, entertaining and informative broadcasts with colourful and high-quality image appeared. Radio also

became more accessible; the flow of information accelerated. Due to these changes, new solutions had to be sought for newspapers. The national newspapers such as “Diena”, “Neatkarīgā Rīta Avīze” and others increasingly use colourful content, information provided by foreign news agencies and photographs. It makes the regional media review their design and content.

The content of informative character occupies the most part of a front page of all of the studied regional media: news, notifications, brief information, etc. In the field of design, all newspapers focus on editorial design techniques that promote the ability to understand the content of the publications, successfully applying them to the development of design. The newspapers “Latgales Laiks” and “Vaduguns” highlight the main news in almost every issue, which are supplemented with one or several photos, while the approach of “Rēzeknes Vēstis” is different – they put as much text as possible on the front page, trying to distribute it with frames and different backgrounds. A common feature of editorial design for all the newspapers is the use of backgrounds, headlines and frames to separate news one from another. Each newspaper has special columns that appear on the front page. The front page of “Latgales Laiks” and “Vaduguns” displays one of the main topics, thus attracting the reader's attention, while the front page of “Rēzeknes Vēstis” in 1998 covers mostly brief news, notifications and columns “Hallo! RV listens!”, Church news, and posters.

In 1998, coloured pages began to appear on all the studied newspapers. It can be attributed to the development of technical design. Colourful printing was expensive in 1998, so advertisements were the ones more often printed in colours, which made them also more expensive; not only regional but also national events such as the celebration of the anniversary of the proclamation of the Independence of the Republic of Latvia, approaching of the New Year, and other events were highlighted.

1998 was the election year, the 21st century was coming, which was projected to be the time of the rapid development of technology, and Latvia was still on the verge of development after the restoration of independence, therefore it was self-evident that regional newspapers placed emphasis on national and regional information that also became apparent in design. The main news covered the topicalities of the region or the state and included pictures of inhabitants, politicians and famous people.

In 2008, the news portals have already stabilized in the information space and social networks were developing. Regional newspapers also set up their official portals, adapting to the rapid flow of information, and the links to Internet portals appeared in the contents of all regional newspapers. From 2007 to 2010, a global crisis triggered the economic recession in most of the world's countries (Delfi, 2013) that led to the financial and governance crisis in Latvia. Until the financial crisis, Latvia experienced so-called “Fat-Cat

Cycle” from 2006 to 2008, which marked the rapid economic growth of the country. During this period, new companies were actively founded that tried to attract customers actively; it can also be found in the regional newspapers. The companies of different fields were willing to pay large-format coloured advertisements on the front page, thus providing additional revenue for the regional media. 2008 was the first year of crisis, and ways to keep and attract the new customers were sought. Therefore, the interaction between entrepreneurs and the newspapers was an important source of profit and attraction of clients both for newspaper publishers and businesses.

In 2008, Latvia was a member of the European Union, and many of the topicalities of the national importance were also addressed in a global context, linking to the events in the world and in Europe. Television channels from all over the world were available, both radio and television were beginning to integrate their content on the Internet, Internet news portals began to use different audiovisual solutions for the content creation, as well as technologies that allowed visually capturing and transmitting information at a very high speed, which was why newspapers had to search for the new solutions again. As a result of the technological advancement in the world, the print media in Latvia increasingly used image processing and graphic pictures that allowed the message to be transmitted visually without text. It was increasingly difficult for the regional newspapers to hold readers, but they still held an important area in the region's informational space.

If the emphasis was on the editorial design in 1998, then efforts were made to adapt the technical design to the 21st century in 2008. All newspapers included coloured pages in their design on the regular basis, and usually there were several of them: the first and the last, or the first, last and centre spread. In 2008, the content of colourful pages less often focused on a special event; it was dedicated to the paid information: advertisements, announcements, and congratulations. This was an opportunity to get more profit, as the information placed on colourful pages was more expensive. The newspapers also used the opportunity to display the most important information on colourful pages, thus attracting the readers' attention to the content. Frames or titles were used less frequently in visual communication; colour elements were applied instead.

The newspapers “Latgales Laiks” and “Vaduguns” have not changed the way of editorial and system design in 2008, while “Rēzeknes Vēstis” has more adapted to the traditional style of the national and regional press, when the main picture is highlighted and photographs are used on the first page to complement the content and draw the reader's attention to a specific topic. Frames are used rarely, and all special columns are not so often placed on the front page. These changes are both editorial design techniques and systems because the way of organizing work and communicating with society is

reviewed. The newspaper published a new logo in 2008, thus it can be concluded that the publishers of “Rēzeknes Vēstis” were considering design changes, but they were not ready to abandon the principle that the text occupied most of the front page. In general, between 1998 and 2008, the regional newspapers have paid more attention to design than during the rest of the periods, and new ways for addressing a reader and sending a message visually were sought.

In 2017, the media have evolved beyond the usual platforms: Internet TV, Internet radio, video blogs, etc. Most municipalities used the opportunity to set up their free informative publications that were similar to the newspapers. There was a risk that people, who were not fundamentally concerned with a particular regional newspaper, chose to receive a newspaper for free without going deep into the political behind-the-scenes. The newspapers were increasingly losing influence, which also resulted in lower revenue and decreasing tendency to place advertisements in them.

In 2017, as in 2008, the biggest changes in the newspapers were found in technical design, but this time this was due to financial possibilities, rather than the desire to adapt to current media trends. The number of pages has decreased significantly in all the reviewed newspapers, with the exception of “Rēzeknes Vēstis”, and there were issues with colourful content less often. At a time when the society's information obtaining habits have changed and attention was paid to visual communication, design and its interaction with the content, newspapers were forced to come out to a lesser extent and in black and white, which reduced their ability to compete with national media, social networks and regional Internet resources. There is a debate all over the world about whether there is a future for the print press; the largest and most influential newspapers in the world (Greenslade, 2017) are provided as examples. Unusual solutions in the newspaper design are mentioned as one of the solutions. The newspapers abandon the printed format, focusing on the Internet platforms, but the design of regional newspapers has not undergone significant changes since 1998, preserving the principle that the text covers most of the front page, despite the fact that there is a trend to reduce the amount of text by replacing it with images on the front page between 1998 and 2008. The trend continues until 2017, but it is not so visible for the changes to be seen in the overall image of newspapers. The creators of newspapers stuck to the loyalty and recognition of the readership of the past, but it is not enough to increase or even maintain the number of readers at the current level in the 21st century.

Latvia celebrates a centenary of the state's existence in 2018, hence the topics of statehood are increasingly highlighted in the newspapers' design, and a special column is created in the newspaper “Vaduguns”. On the front page, each issue has a graphic design with a count-down to the centenary's

celebration. Although this technique does not provide substantive information, it visually complements the design of the newspaper and, if necessary, helps to separate the text blocks. Comparing the reviewed newspapers, only “Vaduguns” has used graphic images created by designers, not photos on the front page since 1998. This is the original way of explaining or visually dividing information.

One common trend that is characteristic to other media is the reduction of content on the front page. “Rēzeknes Vēstis” has significantly reduced the number of columns and brief news in 2017, but original design solutions and ways how to draw the readers' attention that return the desire to buy a newspaper and publish an advertisement in it still are not searched for.

The regional newspapers still perceive the design as a decorative supplement to the content and do not recognize the fundamental role of design, where everything that is visual – paper, font, use of images, etc. – contains meaning and message. It is a particularly difficult task to convince newspapers because it means the change of the usual culture, where the words play the most important role.

Conclusions and suggestions

During the period from 1998 to 2008, there were changes in the design of the newspapers that took place under the influence of cultural and social factors: higher-quality photographs, colourful content, original design solutions, official websites of newspapers, etc. The changes are found in all three of design disciplines, while the detected newspaper design changes in the period from 2008 to 2017 have not affected the overall visual image of the newspapers, and it can be concluded that the regional newspapers lag behind social and cultural processes taking place in the community.

One of the major problems is the insufficient or non-systematic use of the key elements of visual communication to separate information blocks, creating a transparent and easy-to-understand design. The designers of local newspapers do not use technological and graphical solutions to make information visually more binding.

In 1998, editorial discipline for design was used the most, searching for solutions how to make the content more transparent by applying various elements of visual communication. In 2008, the emphasis was placed on the technical discipline because the volume of newspapers and the number of colourful pages had increased. The design changes that was found in 2017 had not changed the overall image of newspapers.

At the end of the 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, regional newspapers were among the most important sources of information; however, the technological progress and the newspapers of local municipalities created competition resulting in decrease in the number

of readers. An important role in creating the media today is design, which should be easily visible, laconic, and technologically advanced, yet in discussions about future and the viability of regional newspapers of Latvia, the aspect of visual communication and design is rarely mentioned, while leading media in the world and in Latvia as well, as one of the solutions to the problem, mention changes in the design, abandoning the principles upon which newspapers have been created up to now.

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