

Changing Media in a Changing Society

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Changes in Estonian society have been very fast and radical, compared to other post-Communist countries. The political climate of the 1990s in Estonia was formed by expectations of success. Even the growing disappointment and dissatisfaction with the outcomes of some reforms among many social groups could not deflate the general atmosphere of optimism (Rose 2000).

Changes in society soon influenced changes in the media. Along with the rapid shift towards an open-market economy, Estonia's media was overwhelmed by far-reaching liberalization that started in the early 1990s. But what was the role of media in societal changes?

This article examines the development of the Estonian media during the last fifteen years from within the context of societal changes. We can assume that the role of the media during historical ruptures, deep changes in the whole social order, had to be different compared to the media in "normal," stable societies. On the other hand, changes in Eastern Europe in 1989 and after could not have been the same without direct involvement of the media. The present article observes changes in the media during four stages of Estonia's post-Communist development: 1. political breakthrough (1987–91); 2. radical political and economic reforms (1991–94); 3. stabilization (1995–99); and 4. social crisis and search for a new consensus (2000–02) (a detailed analysis of these periods appears in Lauristin and Vihalemm 1997 and 2002).

The First Stage: Media as a Tool for Mass Mobilization

At the start of Gorbachev's reform policy, Estonian society as a whole and the media in particular were comparatively slow in beginning change. For example, media coverage of the first mass protest meeting against the Soviet regime in Tallinn in August 1987, on the anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, was consistent with the style of Soviet propaganda. The media declared that the Estonian people did not support the meeting; it was labeled as a provocation inspired by the Voice of America and Western secret services. The speed of changes during

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the following years was striking, in contrast to the slow start. Two years later on the same occasion, the Baltic popular fronts organized a six-hundred-kilometer human chain from Tallinn to Vilnius. This event not only was broadcasted directly by all radio and TV channels in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, but it also was managed with the assistance of the media.

During the first period of transition, the Estonian media played an important, even decisive, role in the formation and performance of the national mass movements. The media was the most important social mechanism used for the political breakthrough. Ironically, the Leninist concept of the media as a "collective propagandist and organizer of masses" was implemented in full against the regime created by the Communist Party. During the period of *glasnost*, when a multi-party system did not yet exist and the underground centers were weak, the media was the main mechanism of social legitimization and mass mobilization (Lauristin and Vihalemm 1993; Paasilinna 1995; Lauristin 1998; Tapinas 1998). The structures of the public sphere that emerged in connection with the massive popular movements in 1988 and 1989 in the Baltic countries were created with the help of the media and functioned through the media. This was facilitated by journalists who felt themselves involved in revolutionary changes. National media became a network supporting the growing political activity of people. In a two-or three-month period from April to June 1988, rapidly emerging liberation movements used the media for coverage of meetings, publication of manifestos and declarations, and disclosure of the atrocities committed by the Communist regime. The changed nature of the media encouraged people to openly express their views and aspirations, overcoming the "double-thinking." Although the institution of censorship was not formally abolished until September 1990, the policy of *glasnost* prevented direct interference with the media's activities.

Surveys from these years show an astonishing level of media exposure. According to a survey conducted by the Department of Journalism at Tartu University, an average Estonian in 1990 read twelve newspapers and magazines regularly. The 1989–90 period was the peak of press exposure for Estonians. Three national dailies with circulations of 150,000–200,000 each, a cultural weekly with a circulation of 90,000, a women's magazine with a circulation of 225,000, and so on were published for a market of less than one million Estonians (Hoyer, Lauk, and Vihalemm 1993: 343–347). In the years 1988–1990, the total number of periodicals increased by 3.7 times and their total circulation doubled. Most of the new periodicals were irregular, however—small publications published by different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local communities.

The "movements' press" replaced the old Soviet model of the "Party press," but both presumed the active involvement of journalists as advocates of politically dominating forces. At the beginning of 1990, the political plurality of the media grew remarkably. On the Estonian political scene, the Estonian Citizens committees, the second most powerful nationalist movement at the time, emerged on the Estonian political scene. It competed with the Popular Front for popular support. The Estonian media was no longer influenced and controlled by a single oppositional political force, the Popular Front, as it was during the Singing

Revolution in 1988–89. Competition between the two models of liberation movements created a space for political distinctions not only between “the red” and “the white” or for and against the Soviets. People acquired an opportunity for more rational choices between more radical and more moderate political options. The availability of choice between equally popular and legitimate alternatives also gave more freedom to the media. This was the main reason why the emancipation of journalists from direct political partisanship in Estonia succeeded earlier than in many other post-Communist countries. To avoid direct political engagement by the competing movements, the major newspapers declared their political autonomy in 1990.

The Second Stage: Political Emancipation and Commercialization of the Media

The main trends of media development in 1991 through 1994 can be described as the emancipation of Estonian mass media from the state and political forces and adaptation to open market conditions.

When, after the restoration of independence, the Estonian media deliberately distanced themselves from active participation in politics, did journalists still play an active role in supporting reforms?

Political Autonomy of the Estonian Media

As several scholars repeatedly have pointed out (Jakubowicz 1994, 1995; Downing 1996; O’Neil 1997; Aumente et. al. 1999; Coman 2000), in many post-Communist countries the media has become pluralistic, but not politically independent. It is often characterized as an “Italianization of the media,” as described by Slavko Splichal (1994), or as partisan and state-controlled media interwoven with politics.

This “Italianization” effect has not been the case in Estonia. Journalism in Estonia has been relatively successful separating itself from state structures and obtaining political autonomy. The political emancipation of the Estonian media, to a large extent, was the result of the rapid generational replacement among journalists. The attachment of the young generation of journalists to the liberal model of journalism changed the previously cooperative relationships between the political elite and the media, which had been based on memories about common participation in national liberation movements.

The failure to apply direct pressure on the media does not mean that the Estonian media was not influenced by politicians or that there were no attempts at indirect pressure from state authorities. Instead of the direct interference, political influence was exercised through public relations. Politicians were used as unilateral sources, or they were invited by leading newspapers to write columns, thus becoming part of the journalistic interpretation of political events in the media. In many occasions, journalists wrote (and are continuously writing) articles based only on official information (press conferences, press releases, police or court records, etc.), and often have neither the possibility nor desire to check the facts or use different sources. Public agenda is often set not by journalists, but by politi-

cians who are leaking information and launching biased interpretations that are too easily and uncritically published. Too often journalists are mentally dependent on political stereotypes and prejudices; they are unable or unwilling to carry out independent analysis. The lack of critical assessment of information provided by influential sources and poor self-reflection are presumably common issues concerning professional journalistic culture in all post-Communist countries.

Although the media played an important role during the struggle for independence, the media's role in the development of a new democratic public sphere and a "voice" for all new forces in society was not so simple. Most groups actively using the new opportunities created by free speech consisted of young and entrepreneurial urban youth, the new political elite, and Soviet-era managers, rapidly grasping new business opportunities. A majority of the people were confused and had difficulty adjusting to the new media environment. Social differentiation created by "shock therapy" with a series of fundamental changes in rapid succession divided the Estonian population into "winners" and "losers." The "losers" included people who actively participated in the restoration of an independent Estonia: intellectuals, the older generation, survivors of Stalinist repressions, and people in the villages and small towns far from the rapidly prospering capital city. People expected that the media would accept a socially protective role, defend the interests of ordinary citizens, or at least help them to understand what was going on in society. These expectations were not fulfilled. The media, driven by market forces, clearly took the side of the "winners." In this stage, the slow development and weakness of the new civic society also prevented implementation of democratic principles in the media's performance.

The news criteria changed rapidly after 1991: politics lost its appeal, and journalists tried to uncover any political scandal and corruption to catch the audience's attention. Commercialization of the media fed high interest in scandals. In the autumn of 1994, the media helped the opposition bring down successful reformer Mart Laar from the prime minister's office, using information about a secret deal of selling the leftover Russian rubles after the currency reform in 1992 to Chechen rebels. The fate of his political opponents was not different; the media severely attacked the leader of the opposition, Edgar Savisaar, for the illegal secret recording of other politicians' conversations, pushing him out of the interior minister's position in October 1995. The media also accused Prime Minister Tiit Vähi of corruption, which caused his resignation in February 1997. When, in 1998 and subsequent years, Estonia was listed among the least corrupt post-Communist countries, this achievement was connected with the effects of the watchdog media. In a way, sensationalism of the commercialized media helped to keep political balance in the media.

In general, the Estonian media helped to create a climate of opinion, backing radical changes in society. The media promoted pluralism and open competition in politics and economy and supported the whole politics of shock therapy launched by the first reformist government. Estonian journalists overtly expressed their sympathies toward liberalization and took sides with radical reforms (at least until 2000) not because they were controlled or manipulated by right-wing politi-

cians (as some think), but because this liberal policy corresponded to their own interests and convictions. One of the main reasons why liberal views dominated Estonian media almost throughout the 1990s was the rapid generational replacement that occurred in the journalistic staff. Similar to the quiet disappearance of the Estonian Communist Party from the political scene in 1991, the Soviet-era generation of journalists mostly retired or left to work in other areas after the privatization of their industry. Soon after, the majority of journalists' jobs were filled with young people representing the generation of winners (Lauk 1996).

Because of the domination of pro-reform liberal views, the picture in the media during the initial period of radical reforms did not appear very balanced.

From the viewpoint of participatory democracy, many big groups of society were not represented fairly in the public debate. The losers were not given much of a voice. In fact, they were marginalized as people unable to manage their own lives or who, for personal reasons, opposed rapid changes.

As Russian troops still remained on Estonian territory, it

was quite easy to label the views of people opposing shock therapy as dangerous for independence and to stigmatize left-wing politicians as supporters of the pro-Moscow policies. The majority of Estonians, according to the surveys conducted in the early 1990s, accepted radical reform as the only safe way to escape Russia's economic influence and achieve economic sustainability (Rose and Maley 1994; Rose 1995).

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Marketization of Estonian Media

Rapid privatization of the media created a situation where regulation of the industry shifted almost completely from the political and cultural fields toward the economic field (Vihalemm, Lauk, and Lauristin 1997; Lauk 1999). With this transition, the attraction of a solvent audience became the main criteria of a successful market-driven media.

Instead of the standardized media hierarchy of the Soviet period, a colorful media landscape emerged, one characterized by diversification of the media system—including the launching of new magazines, new private radio and TV channels, a new type of semi-commercial publication, specialized supplements, and so forth. Instead of a few large media outlets that the majority of people followed, there was an increased number of outlets followed by specific (but smaller) audiences. In general, the importance of print media—especially publications focused on political and cultural issues, decreased—and the role of electronic media increased.

The first years after independence were characterized by deep changes in the patterns of media consumption. Increasing living costs, including the rise in

prices of newspapers and magazines in 1991–96 at a rate of about three times more than the prices of other goods and services led to the dramatic decrease in circulation of the Estonian press. Between 1990 and 1995 circulation of the national dailies fell more than 3.5 times, local press 2.5 times, weeklies two times, magazines three times, cultural publications nineteen times. Reading newspapers became a more elite habit as many people were unable to subscribe to even one newspaper. The shrinking circulation, however, did not mean a decrease in reading; reading newspapers in public libraries or at work, borrowing them from neighbors or friends, and reading newspapers on the Internet became more common. The main outcome of the growing cost of the press, however, was the rapid increase in television viewing. The average television viewing time was two hours per day in 1985, three hours in January 1994, four hours in January 1997, and five hours in December 2002.

As advertising became the main source of income for most media outlets, content was adapted to market principles rather than to reflect professional journalistic standards. Journalistic production was more often evaluated from the viewpoint of sales profits, than from social or cultural values. Competition for audience attention also changed the content and functions of the media. Information and entertainment have intertwined, superseding analysis, enlightenment, and social integration. Due to the diversification of outlets and the rising cost of media consumption, the media lost its culturally and socially unifying role and increasingly became a source for entertainment.

These trends imply that the Estonian media lost part of its traditional authority and sincerity. But the media still had an important role to play, adapting audiences to the new political and economic environment. The uncontrolled diversity of opinions represented in the media and the new formats, styles, and language used by the media were very powerful tools for social learning that reached the entire population. Through the media people gained access to different symbolic environments, new role models, and the commercialized Western civilization. Via the media, people become rapidly acquainted with everyday reforms and the new faces on the local public scene. The media taught people the new discourses of a new society.

Third Stage: Expansion of the New Media

From 1995 to 1999, the process of diversification and expansion of the media system continued. Instead of two programs on state radio in 1990, twenty-seven radio programs were aired in 1999 (four public and twenty-three private); instead of one state TV station, there were four nationwide TV stations broadcasting (one public and three commercial).

Increased competition in the advertising market resulted in a concentration of the Estonian media. The second half of the 1990s was characterized by mergers of national newspapers and inflow of foreign capital (Finnish, Swedish, Norwegian, and American) into the Estonian media market. Leading print media were divided between two big media corporations, one dominated by Norwegian capital (Shibsted), the other by Swedish capital (Bonnier). Instead of six national dailies in Estonian, four remained—two political national dailies, one business paper, and one

TABLE 1. Relationships between Reform Policies and Changes in the Media

Period	Impact of Reforms on the Media	Contribution of the Media to Changes in Society
Political breakthrough, 1987–91	Abolition of censorship and ideological control from the Communist Party Involvement of journalists in mass movements Peak of media exposure	Creation of a new political public space Mobilization of democratic forces against totalitarian Soviet regime Legitimization of the radicalization of demands from sovereignty to complete independence.
Radical political and economic reforms, 1991–94	Unlimited freedom of speech Privatization of the press Establishment of private broadcasting Expansion of new magazines and other periodicals Generational replacement of journalistic staff Decrease and segmentation of audiences	Support to radical economic reforms Support to the policy of generational replacement in public offices New generation of journalists sympathized with “winners” of the liberal reforms and contributed to marginalization of “losers” Domination of liberal ideology and marginalization of voices criticizing “shock therapy” Spiral of silence around social problems of transition.
Stabilization, 1995–99	Growth of the advertising market Commercialization of media production Foreign capital flow to Estonian media market, concentration and monopolization of the media mergers of national dailies Expansion of the public relations business	“Watchdog” role of media and focus on political scandals support delegitimization of government Sensationalism of commercialized media contributed to growing alienation of audiences from political life and growing anomie National dailies and main weeklies construct division between “winners”

(table continues)

TABLE 1. Continued

Period	Impact of Reforms on the Media	Contribution of the Media to Changes in Society
Stabilization, 1995–99	<p>Growing TV consumption and entertainment usage</p> <p>Successful national computerization program and expansion of the new media</p> <p>Growing tension between public and private broadcasting</p>	<p>and “losers,” legitimizing social cleavages</p> <p>Media reproduce ethnic separation and political alienation between Estonian and Russian-speaking populations</p> <p>“Americanization” of mediated campaign during 1999 elections</p> <p>Emancipation of the journalistic coverage of elections from the direct campaigning.</p>
Social crisis and search for the new consensus, 2000–02	<p>Growth of infotainment</p> <p>Diversification of channels</p> <p>Fragmentation of audiences</p> <p>Continuing expansion of the new media</p> <p>Rise of self-criticism in the media</p> <p>Division of functions between private and public broadcasting</p>	<p>Continuing de-legitimization of political institutions; critical attitudes of the media toward the privatization policies of the government</p> <p>Media start to set new social agenda of public debate: gender equality, poverty, drug problems, HIV, human rights, new social consensus about common goals and values</p> <p>More balanced picture of reality and growing attention to the social problems and life of the “average citizen”</p> <p>Growing tolerance in minority issues</p> <p>Political scandals—“watchdog media” continue to prosecute cases of corrupt and greedy behavior of public officials and politicians</p> <p>Media actively support development of the civil society</p>

“yellow” newspaper. Concentration also decreased the autonomy of local newspapers; a majority of them now belonged to chains related to one or another of the big companies. In these circumstances, the government continued to subsidize publication of a cultural press, which had low market competitiveness, and to cofinance public broadcasting to support original TV and radio productions.

The Estonian advertising market grew to USD 51 million in 1998. Still, it was too small for such a large number of competing outlets. In order to diminish the number of competitors and redistribute advertising revenues, private media tried to push public broadcasting out of the advertising market. In 1998–99, the first attempt was made to exclude advertisements from public television broadcasts (Shein 2002). However, as the

public funds for the public broadcasting company were not increased, advertising was soon brought back to public TV screens. One alternative—implementing viewers’ license fees—was denied, because in addition to public TV and local commercial channels, a large portion of Estonian audiences already had access to a number

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of satellite channels, connected with the expanding cable networks. (In Estonia via satellites, viewers had access not only to major global networks such as CNN, RTL, and BBC, but also to a large number of Russian TV channels.)

The end of the 1990s brought a new feature to the Estonian communication field: the rapid expansion of the Internet. According to different estimates, Estonia is the country in Central or Eastern Europe with the greatest number of citizens online. In fall 2002, the share of Internet users among the Estonian population reached 43 percent, which is more than in many EU member states. The availability of banking services through the Internet and the development of e-commerce soon involved hundreds of thousands of customers.

More evidence of the media’s penetration into all spheres of Estonian life was seen during the 1999 election campaigns. This was the first time an election became a media-show, involving a number of professional media agencies, public relations firms, and advertising companies. Political debate between the parties was designed according to principles of political marketing. The logic of political marketing pushed the parties to hunt for popular names affiliated with their political leanings, but from outside the political field, like athletes, TV stars, or millionaires. As a result of that “mediated” politics, the public became more alienated from and cynical toward politics. Politics as represented by the media appeared to be a game of the elites pursuing their profits.

Increased use of new media technologies contributed to the further fragmentation of the audience, but it also stimulated political debate. Online comments concerning political news, online EU debate, and online polls on hot topics

brought young people who were not eager to participate in elections into the political field. This new media environment inspired politicians to supply active information about the parties and government institutions via Web sites. The Law on Public Information in 2000 made a significant contribution to the development of an electronic public sphere. According to this law, all public institutions were obliged to publicize all relevant information about forthcoming legislative acts and other decisions, information about the usage of public funds, and so forth on their Web sites.

Growing commercialization increased tensions between the media and politicians, stimulating the media to draw grim pictures of politics in general. A spiral of cynicism (Cappella and Jamieson 1997) created fruitful soil for general disillusionment. Complaints in the media about alienation between politicians and ordinary people helped to create a vicious circle of public mistrust. At the end of the day, the media, which actively had diminished trust in politics and politicians, became trapped by the growing cynicism of the public. Public opinion polls indicated that trust in the media had fallen sharply (see table 2).

Fourth Stage: New Challenges

In Estonian society the beginning of the new millennium was characterized by intense preparations for EU accession and integration with NATO. In the summer and fall 2000 these developments were fused with a sharp decline in public support of political institutions.

The newly elected center-right coalition government launched reforms in several areas: administration, health care, pension system, and higher education. The last and biggest privatization projects, involving energy plants and railways, also were planned to take place during the same period. These projects were met with outrage and public criticism. Given the growing income inequality and remarkable unemployment, the majority of ordinary people expected the government not to speed up new reforms, but to find measures that could increase everyday security and stability.

On the other side, Estonian business circles were also dissatisfied with the way the government acted. In particular, influential domestic entrepreneurs, including owners of the media companies, did not support any more privatization through international open bids, which had been one engine of rapid marketization in the 1990s. The new economic elite of Estonia now felt strong enough to compete for leading positions in the domestic economic scene and started a public campaign against selling out the country's strategic resources to foreigners. One indicator of the growing economic potential of the Estonian elite can be seen in the change in media ownership in fall 2001. Estonian media mogul Hans H. Luik became the sole owner of one of the two dominating media companies, Ekspress Grupp, buying out all shares that were held by the Swedish Bonnier Group.

The confidence crisis was at its worst in spring 2001 and continued until the governmental coalition changed in the beginning of 2002. The Estonian media was actively involved in the crisis. In March and April 2001, the situation in the print media started to resemble the days of mass movements, when journalists were

**TABLE 2. Trust in Public Institutions 1995-2002
Complete and general trust, % of population aged 15-74**

	1995 Nov	1996 Nov	1997 Dec	1998 Sept	1999 May	2000 May-Nov	2001 Apr-Sept	2002 May-Nov
President	69	67	65	74	73	71	62	77
Parliament	46	47	42	45	50	44	31	39
Government	47	52	48	49	53	49	28	49
Prime Minister	47	58	52	46	47	47	22	43
Central bank	55	56	64	43	48	na	51	65
Mass media	63	58	56	53	49	na	52	44
Police	33	48	44	44	43	na	46	47
Estonian military	46	46	50	58	56	na	na	63

Source: Saar Poll.

directly involved in politics and used as active agents of civic protest. This time the new economic elite, not political forces, tried to manipulate the fourth estate to put government decisions under their control. Along with investigative stories that disclosed links between groups behind different privatization projects, newspapers published critical open letters and columns with appeals to change the government.

Various groups demanded a re-estimating of political decisions, one that considered human and social development rather than just stressing Estonia's economic success. This re-assessment was made unexpectedly and ironically during the presidential elections of September 2001. After a severe campaign between five candidates, Arnold Rüütel, the former ranking Communist Party official and ex-chairman of the Supreme Soviet, who represented the Rural Union, became president. The election of a former Communist as president initially was viewed by many as a serious blow to the further successful development of Estonia. Quickly enough, however, the post-electoral debate in the media acquired more relaxed tones. The new president was called to become a peacemaker between the winners and losers, the urban and rural, and the advanced and lagging parts of Estonian society. Soon after they lost the presidential elections, the coalition of the three pro-reform parties was dissolved, and the new center-right government was formed.

After this political reshuffling that brought to power the Center Party, which earlier was criticized almost unanimously in the media as anti-democratic, the media seemed to be a bit confused with the results of their own activities and softened their watchdog rage.

After almost a decade of support for reforms, the critical position of the media, inspired and supported by new elites, indicated that the transition model of the 1990s, based on neo-liberalism, monetarism, and open-market policy, had exhausted its legitimacy. A positive outcome of the confidence crisis was that the media had been challenged to prove that freedom of the press does not only mean commercialization of the media, but also an outlet for serious debate about social and economic problems, public interests, strategic goals of development, and common values for all society.

The confidence crisis of 2000–01 appears to be a sign that the post-Communist transition in Estonia is coming to the end. The breakthrough from the old (Communist) political and economic order to the new (capitalist) one, which was the main content of the reforms of the 1990s, will be completed with Estonia's accession to NATO and the EU in 2004. Estonia is becoming a normal democratic society, capable of self-improvement and self-regulation.

In this new stage, Estonia's media must learn how to act effectively, not only as a barking watchdog, but as a democratic institution in a stable open society. Both the role of the media in the promotion of social dialogue and public participation in decision making should be more consistent and conscious. As a precondition, this means that media owners and managers not only must take into account their economic interests, but also must acknowledge their social responsibility. Increasing social responsibility means journalists must present more crit-

ical analysis, more balanced reporting, more work with different sources, and more reflexivity about the social effects of the media. But sometimes it demands simply a more relaxed, positive attitude toward the people and life itself.

Growing pressure from global media networks, and the openness and vulnerability of a small culture add to the democratic mission of the Estonian media as a strong cultural dimension. In 2002, parliament initiated an important step in this direction. By amending the Broadcasting Law, it excluded advertising from public TV while obliging government to compensate for the loss of advertising income and to finance public broadcasting according to the strategic development plan for the public TV and radio. This plan should be adopted by parliament every three years. In the first development plan, adopted in 2002, the cultural role of Estonian TV had been emphasized along with its democratic mission. Compared to the commercial TV channels, which broadcast mainly imported films and shows, at least half of public TV programming should contain originally produced material. The first year without advertising has proved that freedom from market pressures increases the journalistic and artistic quality of original programs.

The Estonian media has experienced dramatic changes and has played an active, albeit sometimes controversial, role in these changes. It is time for maturity and long-term evolutions instead of revolutionary break-ups. The main challenges, facing the development of Estonian society and media in the foreseeable future, will be quite different from the economic and political turmoil of the 1990s. On one side, the speed of both technological innovation and integration with global information and communication will be decisive for the future of Estonia and the Estonian media. On the other side, the Estonian media will play a decisive role in sustainable development of Estonian society and culture, so far as they can retain and strengthen their roots in the new Europe.

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