

Agency, awakening, and the audiovisual: Developments in late-Soviet Latvian Broadcasting



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ABSTRACT: This study explores developments in Latvian broadcast media during the period known as the “awakening” that led up to the re-establishment of independence. It pays particular attention to the celebrated television program *Labvakar* (Good Evening). It argues that pre-existing patterns of political communication persisted through the period showing that while media practices and content were the product of social agency emanating from an elite group of intelligentsia and politicians, broadcasting was less successful at generating social agency at the grassroots, a precondition for and ideal of effective civic and public service communication.

KEYWORDS: public service broadcasting, social agency, glasnost, perestroika, Latvia



INTRODUCTION

Analysts have characterized the mobilization of Latvians in pursuit of the restoration of independence as a national “awakening” and a grassroots uprising with mass media playing a key role. However, this interpretation fails to fully account for social agency and attendant results, or lack thereof, in public service broadcasting. This study provides an explanation through broadcasting practice of how political and intelligentsia elites (often the same people) maintained an existing pattern of communication while engaging in a contest for power, the effects of which have been felt in the post-Soviet era. The key focus is on the television news program *Labvakar* (Good Evening), the creation of which has been described as “the most important event in the development of television” in the period, but has never been the focus of direct scholarly inquiry (Brikše, Dūze & Šulmane, 1993, p. 236).

Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch (1995), using the United Kingdom and the United States as their primary referents, argued that by the mid-1990s public communication was in crisis. Recent changes had created a situation in which journal-

ists in important ways switched from “reporting *on and about* politics, ‘from the outside’ as it were, to that of being an active participant in... the political process” (p. 3). Further, they argued that political communication was an institution “in its own right... interweaving political and media forces,” thus modifying an ideological approach that more simply saw media as a stooge to dominant political institutions (p. 2). This study is broadly supportive of such assertions. However, East Central Europe and the former Soviet Union have their own history of such processes. Obviously, politics and media were integrated earlier and more explicitly than in the US or Britain thus it is easier to see continuity over change in some key respects.

AGENCY AND AWAKENERS

Broadcast journalists often remember their role in Latvia’s drive for independence as highly significant. “Without radio and television, the awakening would have not been possible,” according to one (Berķis, 2003). “Media’s role was huge because all of the awakening was started by journalists. There were so many journalists in the Popular Front... every tenth was a television journalist... everything was broadcast live,” said another (Mirļins, 2004). Indeed, *Labvakar* journalists became widely admired (Streips, 2004; Brikše *et al.*, 2002, p. 70). In a letter to the Central Committee, 177 workers wrote that the television program was “extremely significant to the democratic process in Latvia.”¹ Broadcast media were considered so integral to the movement for independence that when Romualds Ražuks of the Latvian Popular Front, addressed hundreds of thousands of people on the banks of the Daugava River in Lithuania in January 1991, he asked “Are you ready to defend our radio and television?” to thunderous applause.

Radio and television were important in late-Soviet Latvia and its independence movement at various levels. Changing content served as a sign of changing political realities and possibilities as well as historical and cultural understandings. As such it is sometimes remembered as providing a kind of “collective therapy” (Ēlerte, 2004; Beļskis *et al.*, 2005, p. 177). Broadcast media also figured into the strategy and tactics of the movement in specific ways. For instance, the founding congress of the Latvian Popular Front, the leading organization of the national movement, was broadcast live without critique. The founding congress of its opposing Interfront was broadcast live with “real time” rebuttals. The Latvian Popular Front went over the air for on-the-ground organizing in key mass events such as the million-plus-person Baltic Way demonstration of August 1989 or the coordination of barricades in January 1991.

Thus, broadcast media appears as a significant part of the quest for political change, but the nature of change within broadcasting deserves further inquiry. This

¹ This and many other such letters are collected in Latvian State Archive (LVA), f. 101, ap. 63, l. 62.

article contextualizes historical changes in Latvian broadcasting that enabled it to become an instrument of the independence movement. We argue that what was once national in form and socialist in content became socialist in form and national in content, at least in structural if not ideological terms. Broadcast journalism remained linked to politics in a similar way. “We put ourselves in the Popular Front’s hands... We were servants, not leaders,” was how Aivars Berķis of Latvian Radio felt.

Therefore, broadcast journalists became rebels and servants simultaneously. This also helps explain how broadcast media – traditionally the most tightly controlled of Soviet media – ultimately became almost completely in service to an anti-Soviet opposition. Broadcast continued to fulfill the function of an organ, but for a new political movement. Changes in broadcast in this period were gradual and can be traced by the shifting political terrain in the republic. Therefore, as Inta Brikše put it, media ironically fulfilled Lenin’s vision of “agitator, propagandist, and organizer” (Brikše, 1998). If, in this regard, broadcast media did not change so much, then such continuity may help explain some of the difficulties that broadcast faced in the post-Soviet period as regards journalistic independence and public service. In short, broadcasting that engages in public service and responsible journalism require bottom-up influence and debate as well as top-down dissemination of information. Therefore, the question of agency at the moment of political transformation is of paramount importance.

Commentators have frequently offered a romantic and ethno-deterministic understanding of Latvia’s “awakening” (*atmoda* in Latvian) in the late 1980s. There are two variants to the interpretation: one in which agency is ascribed to the masses and another in which it is attributed to elites. In the first conception, the Latvian people/nation (*tauta* in Latvian) are grassroots agents of change. In a speech, President Vaira Vīķe-Freiberga said, “Fifteen years ago Latvia, along with neighboring Estonia and Lithuania, regained its independence after 50 years of Soviet occupation. The Baltic Singing Revolution achieved this by nonviolent means, by the sheer courage and determination of the peoples of these countries” (2006). Prior to that, in a national address, the speaker of the parliament Anatolijs Gorbunovs said, “It was a kind of outburst of social activity. Society’s mood was exponentially reflected in organizations and movements and pulsed in them. This in turn strongly affected and created social opinion” (1995). Scholars have aided such interpretation by, for example, suggesting that revived memories of the interwar republic triggered the formation of grassroots activity (Karklins, 1994). The movement began with the people “from below” in this narrative and with demonstrations in 1987 “like a sunbeam... people cracked the foundations of the wall of evil” (Zile, 1994a, p. 31).

In the second conception, the intelligentsia is the awakener and the watershed event was a meeting of Latvia’s creative unions in June 1988. The plenum “rang as an alarm clock” waking up society (Stradiņš, 1992, p. 94). “It was like a sublime thunderclap. It touched everybody” (Zile, 1994b, p. 50). The intelligentsia breathed

“fresh air” at the plenum and brought the truth about history to people still living in an “impure atmosphere” (Peters, 1988). Consequently, “hundreds and thousands were waking up in Latvia” (Zīle, 1994c). This sensation survives in individual memories as well. When Mavriks Vulfsons spoke of Latvia’s “violent occupation” by the Soviet Union at the meeting, his interpreter was momentarily at a loss and left the Russian-speaking members of the Central Committee thinking they had been hit by technical problems. “I was completely stunned. For a moment I couldn’t translate because it was such a shock... and I simply watched as these gentlemen started to pull at their earpieces in agitation,” she remembered. Then, “suddenly it seemed like another world... it was easier to breath. The days of the congress remain lodged in my mind” (Azovska, 2004).

This second narrative suggests an answer to the question of who did the “awakening,” but who revived the intelligentsia from its slumber? Thus far, the answer has been rooted – expressed in each narrative – to a large degree in a romantic notion of awakening itself. History is understood as a history of ethnicity and its latent social power rather than of events produced and experienced by human beings. “Nationalism alone can awaken cynical and disillusioned peoples to a spirit of sacrifice and common purpose,” writes Anatol Lieven (1993, p. xxiv). Thus agency is given to the “ism” and national identity (an identity that presumably existed before and after mobilization) rather than concrete actors and institutions. This study therefore offers an explanation of actors and outcomes *via* an examination of broadcasting practice including oral history interviews, archival sources, and content analysis. Public communication was clearly important to the “Singing Revolution,” but it is not necessary to see this as strictly by or for “the people” at the grassroots. The crucial function of broadcast media may be seen in its role in the contest for power between conservatives and reformers at a tier above the grassroots level with the people serving as the source of legitimacy accorded to political factions.

A romantic interpretation of “people power” would suggest profound changes in public service broadcasting and media culture that did not occur in the post-Soviet period. As Brikše *et al.* note, the quantity of information exploded in the post-Soviet period, but without accompanying public debates or public service initiatives (2002, pp. 100–101). Content analyses by Kruks and Juzefovičs (2007) and Kruks *et al.* (2007) of Latvian television showed that while political news dominated it tended toward protocol journalism and rote reporting of announcements, decisions, and meetings without much analysis. Journalists rarely problematized the decisions they reported or presented citizens as shapers of politics. The voice of the people was minimal as source material.

While these problems are not unique to Latvia, they are in part traceable to and provide an important retrospective view on the events of 1988–1991 as regards political change and broadcast journalism. It appears that a pattern of top-down communication was in a significant way unaltered at the time.

MEDIA AND LATVIAN POLITICS 1985–1991

Broadcasting was linked to politics in Latvia during the inter-war period of independence, but served new political and ideological masters under the Soviet regime (Kruks, 2001; Kruks, 2005). However, Soviet politics began to change in important ways with Mikhail Gorbachev's ascension to power in 1985. The first political changes preceded and enabled changes in broadcast media at the all-Union level and the republic level. In Latvia, *perestroika* (restructuring) elevated a new generation of Latvian intelligentsia in the bureaucracy of Party, government, and administration. As the head of the Writers' Union, Jānis Peters, who joined the Central Committee, recalled, this provided a kind of "armor" that protected them (Peters, 2005, p. 88). They were reformists acting within the system and were accorded accompanying ranks and titles. In 1988, they developed an ambitious political agenda for reform as well as the re-Latvianization of society. The key events for this political project were the meeting of creative unions on June 1–2 and the founding congress of the Latvian Popular Front on October 8–9. The armor of elite leadership was understood as of prime importance in June. "For we were not about to have some bush gathering with little known people," Peters explained (p. 91). "I knew the machinery of the partocracy very well and decided to coexist with it in a smart fashion: so that it would carry us on its own, but under our guidance and in the direction we want," he continued.

Naturally, the reformers were not alone in power and significant apparatus of the state, significantly in law enforcement and security lay out of their hands to the end. Their rise was incremental as were their demands and crucial to political change was popular support. The creation of a Popular Front enabled a mass movement to provide further "armor." Media were intrinsic to this strategy. "In reality, when I started to lead the Popular Front, our real weapon, the tool with which we worked, was mass media," said Dainis Īvāns, the group's first chairman (Īvāns, 2004). Among the first demands at the Front's founding congress in October 1988 were media access and their own newspaper (Vāverniece, 1989, pp. 224–225). Broadcast, with its limited channels, already was beginning to mirror the Popular Front platform and the show *Labvakar* in particular was a key promoter of views established by the leading intelligentsia. Elita Veidemane, editor of the Popular Front newspaper *Atmoda* (Awakening), recalled that later there was strong cooperation with *Labvakar* (Veidemane, 2004). The Central Committee attacked the show for resisting Gorbachev's proposed constitutional changes and putting Īvāns on air calling for protest (*Sovetskaya Latvija*, 1988).

In 1989, the Popular Front won local elections and in 1990 it won a majority of seats in the Latvian Supreme Soviet. One of these went to Edvīns Inkēns of *Labvakar*. The reformist and ultimately pro-independence content of media reflected concurrent changes in the political balance of power, much to the chagrin of conservative communists. Media, especially broadcast, increasingly supported the pro-independence camp – so much so that in December 1990, communist leader Alfrēds

Rubiks attacked the Latvian Supreme Soviet for subjecting the mass media to “moral terror.”² Media were seen by each side as weapons in the political conflict. Broadcast journalists understood they had a place in the contest as well. “We were for [the Popular Front] fully a megaphone. This was viewed as our main task,” recalled radio’s Aivars Berķis (2003). Inkēns recalled general support for the Popular Front in television (2004). Inkēns’ partner Ojārs Rubenis recalled wanting to work for reform and wondering “In what way can you do it? Only through television, that is the mass media is simply the way to do it” (2002). *Labvakar* occupied a prominent position in this project and as Inkēns saw it, the show was a place to “consolidate political ideas.”

As such, broadcast media took a special place in the movement and one predicated on political goals. This was continuous with past media traditions in Latvia, but in service of new politics. Why did broadcast appear in this role since it was traditionally the most tightly controlled of Soviet media? First, changes already initiated in Russian broadcasting signaled new opportunities in Latvia. Second, broadcasters were careful to not surpass changes reflected in elite opinion. In this respect they could share in the protection of the intelligentsia’s armor. While much of the content produced by *Labvakar* or other broadcast media were new and stunning to audiences, they worked within the system. Third, television and radio were under the government control rather than the Party’s Central Committee. As such, it was less ideologically burdened and more prone to the influence of political reformers. Latvian broadcast journalists engaged sincerely in the movement, but their practice was still that of intermediary between social groups, principally in courting popular support. As such they performed a role of transmission in the communication formula of Latvian politics.

LATVIA, THE “AWAKENING,” AND BROADCAST MEDIA

The key symbol of *perestroika*, the weekly (originally conceived of as daily) late night show *Vzglyad* (View), began airing on October 2, 1987. Its visual packaging had a stunning effect: Relaxed young anchormen, casually dressed, discussed the most acute problems of the state live with invited guests. The panel show even included international pop music. A counterpart to *Vzglyad* appeared in Latvia three months after the Russian program began. This was *Labvakar*, the most celebrated television show of the period. People commonly claim that the streets and theaters of Riga were empty every time it aired with families huddled around their TV sets. It was created by Inkēns and Rubenis, who recognized that Latvia lagged behind Russia regarding changes in broadcasting, especially concerning discussions of history, politics and economics and the development of new entertaining formats (Inkēns, 2004). *Labvakar* cameramen and director Mārtiņš Jurjāns also recalled that

² LVA, f. 101, ap. 65, l. 44.

the decision to allow the program came “from the top for a controlled letting off of steam” (Griškeviča, 2008).

The program began airing on January 31, 1988; it was broadcast every second Sunday (later weekly) with simultaneous translation in Russian on the second radio channel. The length of the program varied from one hour to three hours. The format was close to *Vzglyad*, but Latvian journalists took less of a personal leadership initiative or analytical role. Instead, they frequently relied on interviews with elite reformers and argued with statements by conservatives found in the press or in anonymous letters. They also highlighted Lithuanian and Estonian leaders along with Latvians conflating activities in the three countries as a Baltic movement.

Below we analyze four of the six broadcasts that aired from July 24 to October 16, 1988. The choice was dictated by availability of recordings (a complete set of broadcasts or transcripts does not exist), however, this was a highly significant period of the awakening that set precedent for further broadcasting patterns. This timeframe bridged two crucial events. In June, a plenary meeting of creative unions “created confusion” in heretofore “controlled *perestroika*” (Bleiere *et al.*, 2005, p. 421) by putting the new reformer intellectual elites on center stage. In October, at its founding, the Latvian Popular Front counted 110,000 supporters and the summer “confusion” was crowned at its first congress with unprecedented mass rally in Riga. The content of *Labvakar*’s broadcasts at that time, however, do not suggest that a mass mobilization of civil society and a public elaboration of the Popular Front program were taking place or that the broadcast itself was the flagship of the “Singing Revolution.” At this point, the content of *Labvakar* was far from calling for “revolution” and, owing to sometimes unmelodious, quarrelsome, and sensationalist style, not beautifully “singing.”

As reformers in Moscow looked to *Vzglyad* or *Ogonek* to be supporters rather than directors of a political agenda, so it was in Latvia with *Labvakar*. However, *Labvakar* had a local context and operated in the currents of Latvian politics. In a sense, it became an organ of the Popular Front, whose political power steadily increased from 1988 on.

In addition to partisan politics, *Labvakar* included light entertainment such as pirated foreign video clips and soft news about Western popular culture. For entertainment purposes, a third anchorman – the showman Jānis Šipkēvičs – was invited to the crew. The technical quality of the show was low: the usage of non-professional VHS tapes was common, anchormen were sometimes not well prepared for interviews and live shows, video stories lacked professional editing, and thus the program was long and lacked tight focus. Stories covering emerging private business activities mixed ideological criticism of the regime with overt lobbying for particular business interests that included hidden advertising of products and services. Controversial topics were covered in single-source stories, sometimes based on a person with doubtful credentials and expertise. By framing the stories in “us” and “them,” the journalists aimed at discrediting the regime: any bad news was to be interpreted as a logical consequence of an unjust regime. For example, an invited

journalist relayed an alarming story about doping in Soviet sports. He described how two people were struck blind, another incurred a brain injury, and “feeble children were born.” Thus while, *Labvakar* is remembered as political it was also the precursor of tabloid sensationalism on Latvian television.

THE CONTENT OF *LABVAKAR*: WHO SPOKE AND WHAT ABOUT?

An analysis of *Labvakar*'s story subjects and sources reveal several things about the birth of a mass movement as well as mass media at the time, including the issues of the day and their framing, but two significant patterns are prominent. First, the stories that aired showed support for the developing political agenda of reform movement leaders. They did not extend beyond that and advocate independence, just as the Popular Front did not advocate independence until 1989. They do indicate partisan media connected to a developing political faction. Second, the sources used indicate a continuing top-down flow of information favoring political elites connected to the reformist faction. These sources were thus granted privileged media access. The stories fall into the following categories.

Relay of speeches and decisions by the leaders of the reform movement. In this category, local elites are given direct access and television serves as a tool for promoting their views. The journalists did not elaborate and give details and explanations. For example, on October 16 the anchorman announced that Lithuanians were discussing a new constitutional project. The story featured general phrases by the leader of Sajūdis (a Lithuanian popular front organization), Vytautas Landsbergis – “We are happy... This is the beginning, not the end” – but did not include any explanatory reporting.

Technical organization of mass events. Here information is distributed about upcoming manifestations and forums and appeals are made to people to write supportive letters and make donations. No details are given about the substance of events and the political significance of resolutions to be adopted. In this category, the program serves as an organizational tool.

Exposure of Latvia's ethnic problems. Here some Russians are discredited for their ignorance of local history and culture, but simultaneously others are presented positively for sharing the concerns of the indigenous populations in Soviet republics. The anchormen read an aggressive anonymous letter written in Russian saying “Latvians will answer for their anti-Russian politics.” He then immediately normalized the conflict saying “this is a provocation therefore we do not associate the letter with Russians” (August 21). On September 18 a journalist interviewed the head of a Riga cell of the Communist Party, Vasily Terekhov, who gave standard evasive answers on ethnic relations, arguing that a few extremist statements cannot be taken seriously. Subsequently the anchorman read an article by the local Russian conservative communist daily, *Sovetskaya Latvija*, arguing that it was *Labvakar* that sowed discord among nationalities. The anchorman mocked the article, saying that

the author should have learned the Latvian language better in order to understand the content of *Labvakar*. Opinions published in the conservative local Russian-language press are typically ridiculed and single-source testimony of ordinary Russians was used to exhibit opposition to Interfront, the conservative opponent of the Popular Front. This was important because Latvia was only 52 percent Latvian.

Broadcasting was also seen as a tool to reach Russian audiences and in this period Russian-language programming increased. Movement leaders had limited access to Russian print media. So they created their own. At the June 1988 meeting of creative unions Inkēns already argued what he thought should be the case: “By perestroika’s flag and grasped handle, one word is sung in various melodies” (Inkēns, 1988, p. 20). Since access to Russian language print media was weak, he argued that Latvian broadcast media could be used to reach Russians. *Labvakar* also sought to manage xenophobia, as did the Popular Front, by condemning Russification, but not Russians *per se*. However, the usage of general non-specific designators like “many,” “some few,” and “several” created implicit connotations of the Russo-skeptic tenor of the discourse. For example, on September 18, a leader of the Estonian Popular Front said: “Now many Russians are indifferent to Estonia. Let us help them to find their place in their motherland.” These were the final words uttered in this broadcast followed by a choir performance – a direct allusion to an “us” and “them” confrontation in the Singing Revolution.

Ecological hazards. This reporting included sensationalism and discrediting of authorities. There were attacks on a proposed nuclear power station in Liepāja and reconstruction of industrial enterprises which later evolved in demands to stop workforce migration that threatened Latvian minoritization in the republic. Challenging the regime on environmental matters dated back to the Popular Front chairman’s article against a hydroelectric dam on the Daugava River in 1986, but the practice originated before that in Russia.

Use of the Latvian language. The program’s reporting demanded the separation of mixed Latvian and Russian language schools. It promoted the use and status of the Latvian language, which was a key issue for reformers. On October 6, two days prior to the start of the Popular Front’s first congress, the Latvian Supreme Soviet passed a motion on granting Latvian status as the state language.

Historical symbolism. Revival of the interwar republic’s symbols was another key issue for reformers and *Labvakar* promoted this. On September 29, the Latvian Supreme Soviet legalized the pre-war Latvian flag and other symbols. *Labvakar* then highlighted an upcoming anniversary commemoration of sculptor Kārlis Zāle, the author of one of Latvia’s most important national symbols – the Freedom Monument in Riga. The seven-minute story was critical of the Riga municipal government which was led by the opponents of the national movement and encumbered the celebration.

Symbolical re-integration of Diaspora Latvians into the Latvian nation. Such reporting ridiculed everyday Soviet life and showed foreign support. For instance,

a violinist from the US told of how her music was confiscated by Soviet customs officials (August 21). Diaspora Latvians appeared ready to invest in social life, but one observed “despite the fall of political barriers that obstructed collaboration with Soviet Latvians the locals still do not trust each other” (September 18). The “trust” mentioned by western Latvians is an important factor in social agency. However, the journalists did not develop the Diaspora’s fresh look on the local society.

Reminders that the West is closely watching what happens in the USSR. “They pay attention to us,” summarized the anchorman retelling a story aired by the German ARD (July 24). *Labvakar’s* reporting on this issue reflected how reformers looked to the West for support in the contest for power.

Discussion of everyday problems. These were topics formerly excluded from Soviet media like crime and interethnic conflicts including those with Vietnamese immigrants. An episode that aired on September 18 reported the unjust activities of the militia, which generally supported the hard line communists. It described the brutal arrest of a young man conducted without evident reason, but did not investigate the veracity of the story even though one of the interviewed witnesses said “this guy is to blame too.” The result was a portrayal of political opponents as “bad guys” without in-depth investigation of the conflict.

The treatment of independence in these stories was cautious. On October 16 anchorman Inkēns said that “nationalism is the form, while the essence is economy.” The reduction of Slavic immigration to Latvia was at the heart of the ideological and political contest and this discourse too was put into the framework of the economy. Immigration was discussed in terms of bad economic strategy that envisaged building huge, unnecessary, immigrant-inducing industries in the Baltic area. Asked about the eventual secession from the USSR, the leader of the Lithuanian opposition group Sajūdis, Landsbergis, avoided a direct answer: “I believe in good sense.” Jānis Peters explained, on September 18, that a planned mass rally was to support “humanism and democratization.” This was a tactical decision also by the Popular Front who advocated an incremental approach to the movement they sometimes called the “parliamentary way.” Broadcast media followed suit. Inkēns later said, “We lied to them [the authorities] without a doubt,” but that such deceit was necessary given the political and communication possibilities of the time (2004). However, he added, a claim on independence was the logical result of all the earlier demands for pre-Soviet state symbols, economic independence and the like. Indeed, he later got the distinction of voting for independence as a member of the Supreme Soviet on May 4, 1990, albeit again cautiously with a period of transition built in.

PEOPLE REPRESENTED IN *LABVAKAR*

The “Singing Revolution” was accomplished by human beings, not by “broadcasting.” Who were those individual and collective actors that transformed the political structure? How did they engage themselves in this social action after almost 50 years of

“sleeping,” i.e. before the “awakening” started? Given the special role ascribed to *Labvakar* and broadcast media by those cited in this paper, we could expect that such programming promoted collective social action and this action was reflected in the stories. We might expect public service broadcasting that featured an engaged citizenry.

The four broadcasts of *Labvakar* featured 45 voices in 55 stories. Elites (intelligentsia and government reformers) and Diaspora Latvians account for 68 percent of the people presented by *Labvakar*. Ordinary civilians accounted for 29 percent, however, they are featured primarily in human interest and crime stories. The only featured non-elite Latvian active in a movement-related project was a volunteer participating in reburial of Latvian army officers killed by the Soviets in 1941. Ordinary people of non-Latvian ethnic origin are shown rebutting xenophobia by arguing that the conservative communists used ethnic conflicts to provoke tension in the Union. Political voices remained the province of government and intellectuals, while the grassroots society was mostly a mute actor in a literal sense. On September 18, 1988 a voiceover described a plenum of Estonian communists while the images showed masses of people, flags, choir singing and some faces in close-up. Thus the people were seen, but not heard. Elite *versus* popular initiatives were imbalanced in the coverage. A two-minute story devoted to an initiative in a regional town, Talsi, protesting against the enlargement of a factory stands as a lonely example of an engaged citizenry. Images showed a crowd waving flags during a mass manifestation (September 18), but interviews with participants were not included.

The tie between elites and *Labvakar* was not accidental, but neither was it insidious. Inkēns saw his show as a “political force” and “opposition’s flag” (2004). Media workers were linked to the political arm of the movement and operated accordingly and without regret. Politics and journalism mixed freely in this period and the line between working for the burgeoning elite-led movement and independent journalism blurred. This was even evident occupationally. The journalist Īvāns became the chairman of the Popular Front. Aleksandrs Mirļins moved from television to publicity for the Latvian Supreme Soviet. Sarmīte Ēlerte moved from publicity to the newspaper *Diena* (Day). The editor of *Padomju Jaunatne* (Soviet Youth) went to the Congress of People’s Deputies. Besides Inkēns, five other journalists were elected to the Latvian parliament in 1990. Journalists held positions in media, movement, and governance. These links ensured a continuation of top-down forms of communication, with broadcast media acting as a conveyor belt of information meant for mobilization and organization. This in turn gave the people a more of a walk-on role in the drama. The grassroots needed watering and the garden canister was held above. There is nothing cynical in this observation. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how it might be otherwise. As Mirļins notes, “Everyone today says that they were opponents of the Soviet regime from birth, but then the question, ‘What held together the regime?’” (2004). The answer is in part the relationship between elites and the grassroots, the actions taken between them, with broadcast media in the middle.

CONCLUSION

How can we interpret broadcasting as part of Latvia's national movement? Early accounts of the Singing Revolution (Karklins, Zīle) outlined in a romantic way an "awoken" ethno-cultural sentiment as a source of the quick self-organization of civil society. Our content analysis of *Labvakar* did not produce tangible evidence of such self-organization or promotion of citizen-based initiative without elite-led direction. Looking at broadcast media through the prism of a key program at a crucial moment, it appears that communication for rivaling elites is a more precise way to describe broadcasting at the time rather than "civic communication" or other terminology that evokes a broadly participatory model.

The Latvian broadcast communication formula of the past did not significantly change during the "awakening," despite its turn toward different political goals and support of a new political faction. This has been recognized by participants themselves. "From the view of today's journalism, it was not genius," said Inkēns modestly (2004). "If today we cut up *Labvakar* or *Atmoda* or many other things with a professional and ruthless scalpel, then they would not hold up under these criteria. But at that time another quality was necessary that was more important," said Ēlerte (Beļskis *et al.*, 2005, p. 179). That other quality that was more important left the complicated challenges of adapting broadcasting and its public service mission to the post-Soviet period. Recently, the television journalist Kārlis Streips, a Latvian American who moved to Latvia during the "awakening" period and advocated the adoption of Western-style reporting, bemoaned: "To a certain degree there is still a residue of Soviet times in the media today. We need journalism, not propaganda" (Beļskis *et al.*, 2005, p. 181).

Looking at broadcast in Latvia in this period, it appears that media are the product of social agency (here emanating primarily from the elite reformers and intelligentsia), but do not necessarily create social agency; in this case, agency at the grassroots to make demands and take action as an engaged citizenry without mediated direction. Further research, including in non-mediated communication and social networks, will help to better understand this phenomenon which has relevance for the practice and character of public service broadcasting and its effectiveness in civic life. Blumler and Gurevitch fear "our civic arteries are hardening" (1995, p. 203). In order to understand this process we also need to understand how freely the blood flowed in the first place.

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