



Pulling a rabbit out of a hat: News agency's agenda-setting power in Latvia

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ABSTRACT

This research paper looks at how Latvian News Agency (LETA), the only national news agency in Latvia, affects the coverage of national news. The purpose of this study is to examine the phenomenon of 'churnalism' in the online news media, with a focus on one of the most significant state-level reforms, the administrative territorial reform, which came into force on July 1, 2021. Cosine similarity and the Levenshtein index were used as metrics in natural language processing to evaluate the degree to which online news media depend on the content of the news agency and to examine the level of originality in online news articles. The study reveals that the news agency serves as the catalyst for 47% of online news media articles. Moreover, 37% of news websites' content is almost verbatim produced by the news agency. In-depth interviews (n = 4) with editors-in-chief of leading media outlets and LETA confirm that, due to limited alternatives and resource constraints, reliance on the agency is not only habitual but structurally embedded. These patterns suggest a heavy dependency on a single source which poses risks to media diversity, editorial independence, and ultimately the democratic quality of the public sphere.

Keywords: intermedia agenda-setting, news agency, churnalism, natural language processing, Levenshtein, cosine similarity

INTRODUCTION

One of the key functions of democracies is to ensure the unrestrained dissemination of information and ideas, empowering people to make well-informed decisions. While journalists are entrusted with the civic duty to gather information from diverse sources, condense it into news, and spread news to the public, there are numerous challenges that have a significant effect on their daily work: widespread technological disruptions, financial setbacks, the relentless pace of the 24/7 news cycle, as well as concerns about the quality of journalism.

Boczkowski and De Santos (2007) highlight the fact that there does not seem to be a greater range of news sources, despite the greater diversity of news producers. The same news agencies, or wire services, are the source of a significant portion of news published by a variety of news publishers. Decisions of news agencies in the collection, filtering, and shaping of news messages influence the input of information from many news publishers (Boumans et al., 2018; Shoemaker & Vos, 2018; Welbers et al., 2018).

According to Welbers et al. (2018), news organisations provide other media platforms with a reasonably affordable, reliable, and quick stream of information. Main reasons for purposefully reuse news articles provided by news agencies are high levels of competition in the media markets, declining levels of readership, and falling advertising revenues (Lewis et al., 2008; Manning, 2008). Some authors emphasise that the reliance on news wire services could be explained by referring to cost reduction or the considerable amount of work of journalists (Boyer, 2011; Johnston & Forde, 2011). Although the availability and affordability of news can be seen as advantages, there is great concern that they also limit the variety of news available to the public, since

judgments about the most important issues of the day are made by one news organisation (Johnston & Forde, 2011).

While this research draws on global literature and examples, our focus is on 'churnalism' practices in the Latvian online media landscape. Harcup (2014) characterises 'churnalism' as:

"... a form of journalism that relies on recycling press releases and agency copy and which involves little or no independent reporting or attempt at verification" (p. 53).

Latvia saw tremendous political, economic, and social changes after regaining its independence in 1991. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvia implemented extensive political and economic reforms. Although its media landscape is considered well developed, there are obstacles due to fierce rivalry in the tiny and dispersed local market. The main challenges include limited diversity and undue commercial and ownership influence on editorial autonomy (Rožukalne & Skulte, 2024). An important issue is the influence of global platforms. In 2021, five global platforms (Google, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Spotify) accumulated around 400 million euros, while the Latvian media market managed to attract only one fifth of that amount, equivalent to 84 million euros (Drazdovska, 2023). The larger the incomes of global platforms, the lower the incomes of private media and their opportunities to create diverse content.

We chose the administrative territorial reform (ATR) as a case study because it represents one of the most far-reaching state-level reforms in Latvia in recent decades, entailing a major reduction in the number of local authorities and directly affecting local governance, municipal autonomy, and citizens' everyday lives. The reform provoked strong resistance from local politicians and residents, with 21 municipalities challenging it before the constitutional court. Its controversial nature and far-reaching consequences made it a highly salient political issue, sparking extensive media debate and providing an ideal context to examine how the news agency and online media outlets handle complex, contested policy reforms.

We employed computational text analysis techniques, drawing from the field of natural language processing. This approach enables us to assess the similarity of news content between different news organisations at the event level. Cosine similarity is a well-known metric for studying the resemblance between the two texts. A string metric called the Levenshtein distance is used to compare two sequences or the least amount of single-character changes needed to change one word or text into another. Despite the popularity of Levenshtein's distance as a plagiarism detection tool, it has rarely been used in the field of communication to study interactions between news organisations. The dynamics of relations between the news agency and online media outlets are explored through semistructured interviews with the editors-in-chief of leading news websites. These interviews offer valuable insight into whether and why these media organisations use the news wire services, shedding light on how they use the services of news agencies and how they manage the dynamics of this partnership.

NEWS AGENCY: THE CENTRAL HEART OF THE MEDIA LANDSCAPE

News agencies are media organisations that collect, verify and process information for the purpose of disseminating it further. News agencies provide highly accurate, fast, and factual information, including politics, sports, finance, and entertainment (Boyd-Barrett, 2010; Boyer, 2011; Paterson, 2015). They are "the central heart of the media industry," according to the editor of the British National Agency Press Association (Davies, 2008, p. 74). To fulfil this service, journalists write stories about events or issues themselves or use information provided by public relations specialists. Numerous news media organisations pay certain fees to access newswire services, which entitle them to use a vast array of news articles and images. The amount of news stories that the news agency publishes and other media organisations reuse depends on the resources that are currently accessible, such as their personnel, time, and money.

News agencies were developed in the 1830s and 1840s with the purpose of lowering the costs of news production and expanding the scope of foreign correspondence. Today's agencies function as 'wholesale news providers', providing maximally accurate and factual information as quickly as possible (Boyd-Barrett, 2010; Boyer, 2011; Paterson, 2015). News media outlets increasingly rely on news agencies to cope with 24/7 news cycles, as well as to reduce production costs (Forde & Johnston, 2013; Karlsson, 2011).

To describe the role of news agencies CEO Thomas Curley at Associated Press writes:

"You may not know us well, or perhaps haven't even heard us. We don't publish a newspaper or run a TV or radio station; what we do is provide the news to those who do for a world insatiable for information" (Reporters of the Associated Press, 2007).

This description of news organisations exposes their true purpose, which is to become a reliable partner for anyone looking to influence the media agenda. As more media outlets have increased the prominence of news agency material in their daily news cycle, researchers have cautioned that reliance on these agencies presents difficulties for news variety and free expression (Barker, 2009; Raward & Johnston, 2009).

Due to the agency's potential to reach audiences, they also provide an important validation function. A message gains importance when agencies report it (Boumans, 2018). Researchers discovered that reliance on news agencies is even stronger for online newspapers (Forde & Johnston, 2013; Welbers et al., 2018). The researchers argue that there could be two main explanations. Many users are not willing to pay for online content, and, therefore, online news sites often rely solely on advertising (Chyi, 2005; Herbert & Thurman, 2007). Second, the influence of news agencies on online news media is determined by the growing speed of the online news cycle. Because online news can be published around the clock, according to Klinenberg (2005), there is always breaking news to produce, consume, and, for reporters and their subjects, react against.

According to some studies, news agencies may not always follow journalistic guidelines for source verification and journalists may blindly trust the facts provided by them (Davies, 2008; Forde & Johnston, 2013). Other researchers, such as Boyd-Barret (2000), warn of the hegemonic role of international news agencies that dominate the flow of global news. Additionally, due to the cost-focused nature of all media organisations, there is increased pressure to provide more news at reduced costs. As a consequence, news agencies reduce staff and diversify their services in an effort to increase revenue (Wilding et al., 2018). Johnston (2009) and Paterson (2011) emphasise the impact of news agencies on news diversity.

This article focusses on the Latvian News Agency (LETA), which is the only news agency operating in the Latvian market. Before 2015, Latvia had two notable news agencies: the LETA and the Baltic News Service (BNS). However, with the acquisition of LETA by the Estonian company 'MM Grupp', after the sale of BNS and its subsequent liquidation in 2018, the landscape of Latvia's news agencies underwent a significant transformation. This consolidation has left the LETA as the only remaining news agency in Latvia. As a result, news producers in Latvia almost exclusively rely on the LETA for local news, seldom seeking alternatives except for international news and sports events, for which they occasionally use agencies like AFP and Reuters.

Given the scarcity of empirical data on the influence of the news agency on online news content, we propose the following research question (RQ), with our analysis based on a case study of national news.

RQ1: To what extent is the online news media agenda initiated by agency copy?

Intermedia Agenda-Setting

To explicate the relations between the news agency's agenda and the media agenda, we use an intermedia agenda-setting theoretical framework. By focussing on the relations between media outlets, researchers are looking for the answer to the question, "When the media sets the public agenda, who sets the media's agenda?" (Rogers et al., 1993). The main premise of intermedia agenda-setting is that the media not only influence public agendas, but also influence each other's agendas. As a result, when one media outlet publishes its articles, another media outlet will replicate its content.

According to Vliegenthart and Walgrave, intermedia agenda setting explores the ways in which one medium affects another and how themes and attributes are shared between them (Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 1993). Researchers estimated that intermedia agenda-setting occurs due to enhanced competition among media outlets, journalistic co-orientation, market pressures, and underfunded and understaffed newsrooms that rely on information subsidies such as PR material and news wires (Boczkowski, 2010; Brandenburg, 2002; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008; Vonbun et al., 2016).

Various studies have examined the reciprocal influence of the same type of media, while others have analysed different media types, for example, newspapers and television (Breen, 1997; Protess & McCombs,

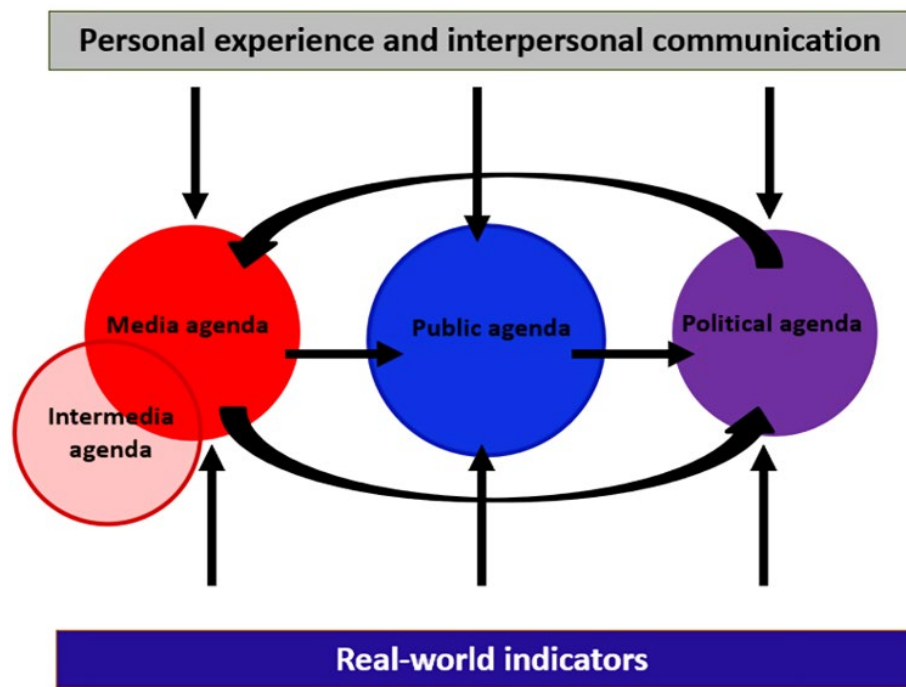


Figure 1. Adapted intermedia agenda-setting model [Source: Author's adaptation based on Rogers and Dearing (1988)]

1991; Vliegenthart & Walgrave, 2008). The rise of the Internet has facilitated the development of new media platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. As a result, more recent research has focused on exploring the influence of social networks on media content (Harder et al., 2017; Jang & Park, 2017; Šķestere & Dargis, 2022; van den Heijkant et al., 2019). Yet, research on the role of news agencies as agenda setters for news media remains scarce, despite evidence that agencies often serve as central hubs in national and global information flows (Boumans et al., 2018; Welbers et al., 2018).

Previous studies have shown that online news publishers prefer to rely on news agencies because it is difficult to produce news 24/7. Klinenberg (2005) uses the term 'news cycle' to describe the idea of disrupted temporal rhythms within journalism, depicting the change as the media transition into a 24/7 digital environment. As a result, many journalists work as information brokers, mainly recycling existing content.

Quantitative studies from different countries demonstrate the extent of reliance: 39% of French news articles were found to be non-original (Cagé et al., 2019), 40% of Greek articles relied on agency copy (Saridou et al., 2017), and nearly half of Dutch news content was based on ANP copy (Boumans, 2018; Welbers et al., 2018). These figures highlight the structural dependence of many media systems on agencies as content providers. Building on agenda-setting research, we conceptualize news agencies not merely as passive intermediaries, but as *initiators* of intermedia agenda-setting. Their content serves as an upstream input that online news publishers selectively adopt, thereby influencing both the salience and framing of issues in the broader media ecosystem. In this way, agencies occupy a structural position that precedes the traditional media-public-policy nexus outlined by Rogers and Dearing (1988). To capture this dynamic, **Figure 1** presents our adapted conceptual model, which integrates agency content into the agenda-setting process and illustrates how it flows into online outlets before shaping public and political debates.

To detect the presence of 'churnalism' in online news media in Latvia, we focus on the use of agency copy by the new websites. To estimate the number of news websites that recycle existing news agency content, the following question is raised:

RQ2: To what extent does the online news media agenda replicate agency releases?

Several researchers have underscored the importance of editor news selection, procession, and dissemination practices. Harcup and O'Neill (2017) emphasise that whether some information will become news depends on its 'newsworthiness' (characterised by its exclusivity, conflict, shareability, and several other factors), which is largely determined by news editors. Harcup and O'Neill (2017) acknowledge that other

factors that influence the selection and distribution of news are organisational cultures, social, educational, and cultural values of journalists (and editors), as well as resource availability and time constraints. To understand how editors-in-chief feel about their news recycling practices and whether they recognise their dependence on agency copy, the following RQ is proposed:

RQ3: Do editors-in-chief recognise their dependency on agency copy?

METHODS

The influence of a news agency is difficult to measure directly. Ideally, we could do this by analysing source references, such as hyperlinks or information about the author. Research by Lewis et al. (2008) shows that only 1% of news articles mention news agencies as a source; however, over 50% of the news content could be directly attributed to news agencies. We used a metric known as cosine similarity to assess how closely each online news article follows the content of news agency. This method has been used in previous input-output analyses (Boumans, 2018; Welbers et al., 2018). Cosine similarity is computed over a bag-of-words model with *tf-idf* weighting. This statistic measures the degree of word overlap by estimating the likelihood that two texts will discuss the same topic. The cosine score ranges from [0, 1], with a score of 0 signifying no shared terms and a value of 1 indicating terms that are the same in both papers.

We compare each news article published by the leading online news media outlets with articles published by LETA. The news agency article is believed to have likely affected the online news article if the similarity score is greater than a predetermined threshold. A systematic manual analysis with a subset of 60 randomly selected pairs of online news articles and LETA documents shows that texts with similarity scores above 0.5 consistently referred to the same event. Similarity scores below 0.3 indicate that both documents address different events, and thresholds above 0.6 show that both news articles are often partial copies of the agency's text. Similar cut-off points were established in other studies to examine whether there is a connection between news stories and agency copy. Welbers et al. (2018) found that similarity scores above 0.4 very frequently address the same event, while scores above 0.6 are frequently copies. Boumans et al. (2018) concluded that a similarity score 0.65 signifies that a content similarity is too high to be explained by chance. Thus, while our threshold choices are consistent with previous studies, they are also empirically supported by manual validation in our specific corpus.

To measure the content overlap between agency releases and media news articles, the Levenshtein distance is used. The Levenshtein distance is a commonly used metric in computer science and information theory. It is frequently utilised in tools designed to identify instances of plagiarism. The Levenshtein distance calculates the difference between two sequences. Levenshtein is commonly employed to compare individual words, but in this case, we switch from words to whole articles as our unit of analysis. This index ranges from 0 to 1, with higher values indicating greater overlap and thus a higher level of 'churnalism'. Through a methodical manual examination of a portion of the dataset, it becomes evident that when the Levenshtein index exceeds 0.65, the two texts exhibit a near-identical similarity. On the contrary, a score of 0 suggests that, while there may be certain similarities in terms of topic and word usage, the media text significantly diverges from the source text.

The conclusions of the last part of the research are based on qualitative in-depth interviews with four executives of the most popular news websites in Latvia and the news agency LETA. One-on-one interviews were conducted between September and December 2021. All interactions were online due to restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

RESULTS

Our primary aim is to grasp the interrelationships between the news agency and the online news media, with a particular emphasis on the analyses of the ATR in Latvia. Approximately four months after the parliamentary elections, on January 23, 2019, the Latvian Parliament approved the Government led by Arturs Krišjānis Kariņš. The newly formed cabinet of ministers made a significant decision to enact a major reform—the administrative territorial reform—a move regarded as one of the most substantial in recent years. Despite facing objections from several municipalities, the ATR officially took effect on July 1, 2021, with 43 municipal

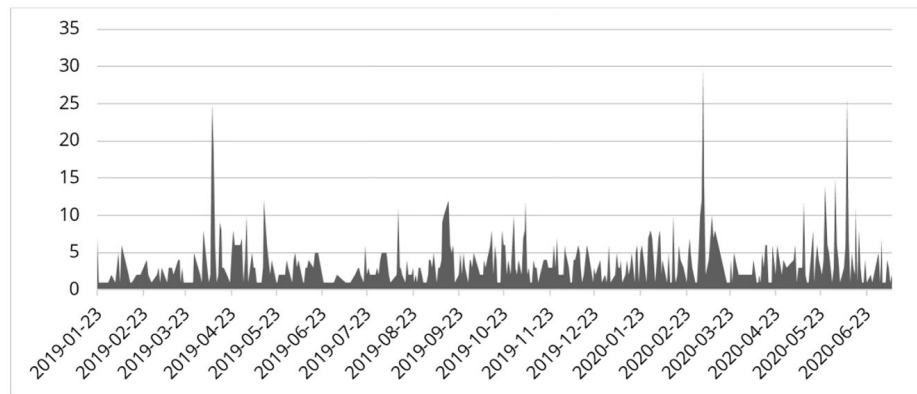


Figure 2. Time series of LETA news articles about ATR (Author's own data visualisation based on LETA news archive)

councils commencing their operations. We collected data from January 23, 2019, to July 10, 2020, to conduct a thorough analysis of intermedia agenda-setting and the presence of 'churnalism' in the landscape of online news media.

As can be seen from **Figure 2**, once the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Regional Development held its first presentation on ATR for municipalities on April 10, 2019, the number of articles increased significantly. The following peak occurred on 15 May 2019, when the Government authorised a report on information regarding the ATR model that was presented for public discussion. Instead of 119 municipalities, this model suggested 35 municipalities. On 7 August 2019, the first meeting was held with local governments, associations, NGOs, and members of society. Following public debate events, the Ministry expanded the number of municipalities. On 7 November 2019, the Latvian Parliament supported the proposed reform with a model of 39 municipalities, and the first protest was launched in front of the Parliament of Latvia. Despite several protests and demonstrations against ATR during the first few months of 2020, the Latvian Parliament enacted a measure for regional reform in second reading on March 13, 2020. 119 municipalities were expected to be reduced to 40 as a result. The Latvian Parliament's responsible committee approved a proposal on 12 May 2020 to establish 42 new municipalities, and on 10 June 2020, the Parliament of Latvia gave this proposal its final approval. Egils Levits, the former state president of Latvia, signed a significant set of local reforms into law on June 22, 2020. The number of municipalities was raised to 43 after the Constitutional Court determined on 28 May 2021, that the union of the Vārakļāni and Rēzekne regions is in conflict with the Constitution.

Measuring the Similarity of News Articles

The results of this research are presented in three parts. First, we analysed the extent to which online news media agendas are initiated by agency copy with the help of cosine similarity. Second, the influence of LETA on online news was investigated by calculating the Levenshtein distance. Third, to understand whether editors of the news website are aware of the influence of the news agency on the content of the news articles they publish, four semi-structured interviews were carried out.

From January 23, 2019 to July 10, 2020, the LETA produced 1434 news articles. The leading news websites published 1318 news articles on the ATR. The information from the LETA and online news sites was scraped by identifying the most common keywords for the ATR, such as ATR, county reform, etc. (full list of keywords available in **Appendix A**). The analysis includes a variety of online news websites, including eight of the most visited in Latvia in 2021 (Gemius, 2021). Among the online news websites analysed, *lsm.lv* (website of Latvijas Sabiedriskais medijs) stands out, representing the public broadcaster. The other news sites in the analysis, on the other hand, are platforms that are privately held. These include *tvnet.lv*, *diena.lv*, *apollo.lv*, *nra.lv*, *la.lv*, *jauns.lv*, and *delfi.lv*. These websites serve diverse audiences by offering information on news, current events, entertainment, culture, and lifestyle.

To determine whether an article is initiated by another news piece or a press release, we measured cosine similarity. As mentioned before, cosine similarity shows how similar two documents are in terms of their

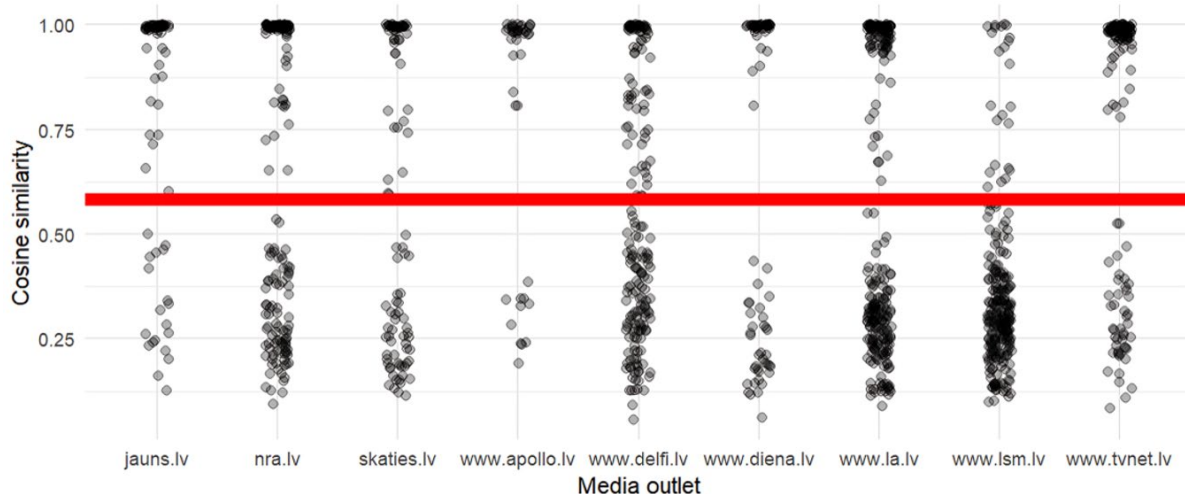


Figure 3. Number of news articles with a cosine similarity score of 0.5 or higher (Author's own computation based on press releases and online news media articles)

content. We chose a threshold of 0.5 or higher for this study in order to identify news items that were probably started by press releases or other media. Before applying similarity measures, all texts were preprocessed: they were lowercased, tokenized, and stripped of punctuation, numbers, and common Latvian stopwords. Words were then stemmed to their base form to reduce morphological variation.

The impact of press releases on news agency content was first investigated using a cosine similarity. In total, 352 LETA news releases had a similarity score 0.5 or higher. A similarity score of 0.5 or above was obtained for 352 LETA news releases in total. This suggests that PR content accounts for 24.7% of the news agency's published content. Literal copying of press materials occurs very rarely—only in 3.35% cases.

The next step was to compare the content of news portals with that of LETA news releases. To assess whether a news agency release triggered the publication of news article on major news websites, a cosine similarity was applied and it was concluded that nearly half of news content (or 47%) is based on agency copy. These high scores mean (M) that in the online news market, there is a high demand for news agency products. **Figure 3** presents the distribution of M values across all media outlets (M = 0.58).

A more thorough research is conducted in order to comprehend the effect of agency announcements on different media outlets. Apollo.lv had the highest score (M = 0.80, standard deviation [SD] = 0.30, N = 43), meaning that agency copy starts 75% of news pieces in the outlet. According to **Appendix A**, tvnet.lv (M = 0.78, SD = 0.31, N = 162) and jauns.lv (M = 0.78, SD = 0.30, N = 71) have the second-highest scores. According to analysis, agency announcements serve as the basis for 74.65% of the news stories on jauns.lv and 73.4% of the news articles on tvnet.lv. These results suggest that such outlets adopt an efficiency-driven editorial strategy in which producing original content plays a secondary role to the rapid circulation of agency news.

To assess differences between various media outlets, analysis of variance (ANOVA) is used. The ANOVA results show that the F statistics are significant ($p < .001$) and that the results between different news sites are statistically significantly different. A Games-Howell *post-hoc* test shows that the cosine score of lsm.lv (the website of Latvia's national public broadcaster) is significantly lower than that of private media companies (jauns.lv, tvnet.lv, and apollo.lv), indicating that the agency content has a less significant impact on the news published by the public broadcaster. These findings highlight that the public broadcaster follows a distinct editorial policy, prioritising original reporting and thereby ensuring a more independent news agenda. News sites like nra.lv vs diena.lv and la.lv, as well as skaties.lv vs nra.lv indicate very similar levels of content reuse (see **Appendix A**). Data indicates that, for many commercial outlets, the use of agency copy is not merely occasional but an embedded routine, which limits diversity of coverage across the wider media system.

Therefore, we can infer that agency copy serves as the basis for almost half (47%) of news articles. The high scores indicate a strong demand for the products of the news agency in the online news sector. Some media outlets (such as apollo.lv, jauns.lv, and tvnet.lv) are more frequently triggered by agency releases than

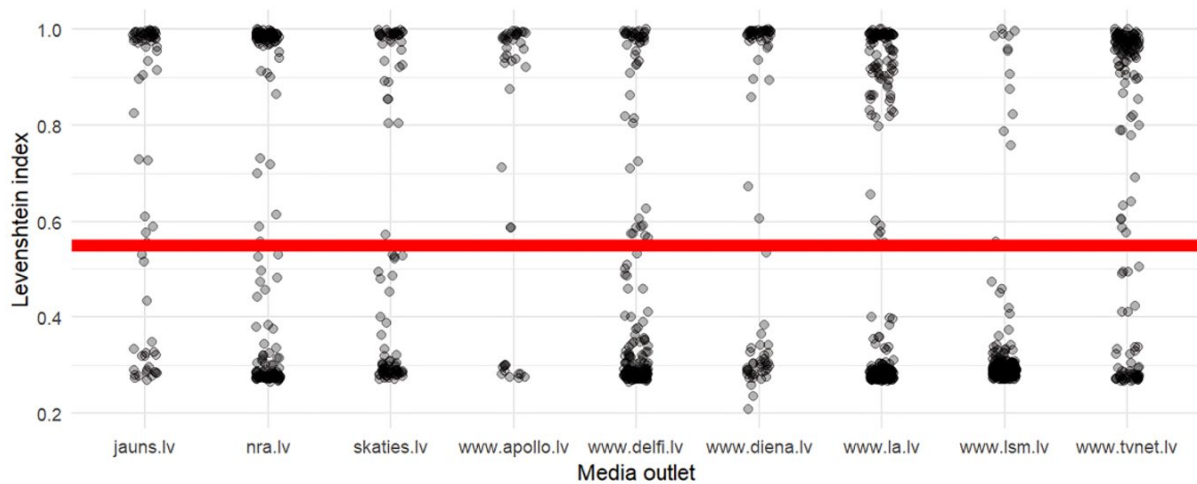


Figure 4. Number of articles with a Levenshtein distance score greater than 0.65 (Author's computation based on LETA news agency data and online news media articles)

others. This analysis shows that the news agency LETA has the least agenda-setting influence on the public broadcaster, as the majority of the content produced by the broadcaster originates from different sources. This finding suggests that the public broadcaster maintains a higher degree of editorial independence and autonomy when it comes to the choice of news sources and the utilisation of the content produced by the news agency, especially in the context of national news.

Measuring Content Overlap

RQ2 asks how much news websites actually replicate the news agency's content. Levenshtein distance scores of 0.65 or greater were found in 485 out of 1,317 news articles. This indicates that around 37% of all online news media material contained copy-paste. The distribution of Levenshtein distance scores across all media channels is shown in [Figure 4](#) ($M = 0.55$, $SD = 0.32$, $N = 1,318$). Importantly, all similarity analyses were conducted on preprocessed text, which involved lowercasing, stopword removal, and stemming to reduce the influence of stylistic variation and ensure that scores reflected substantive overlap rather than superficial differences in word form or syntax.

After then, the distinctions between different media sources are analysed to determine how much of an impact LETA has. Apollo.lv has the greatest Levenshtein distance score ($M = 0.77$, $SD = 0.30$, $N = 43$), suggesting that this outlet relies heavily on direct reproduction of agency content, with only minimal editorial intervention. The public broadcaster lsm.lv had the lowest score ($M = 0.33$, $SD = 0.14$, $N = 242$), indicating that it consistently produces original news stories and demonstrates the strongest editorial independence among all outlets. Delfi.lv also stands out ($M = 0.66$, $SD = 0.34$, $N = 187$) showing a more balanced approach: while it republishes agency material, it also engages in a relatively higher share of unique reporting. The second-highest scores were obtained for tvnet.lv ($M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.30$, $N = 162$) and jauns.lv ($M = 0.74$, $SD = 0.30$, $N = 71$) both of which display strong editorial dependence on LETA and a tendency to adopt an efficiency-driven model of news production. A full list of Ms is in [Appendix A](#).

There are statistically significant variations amongst news sites, according to an ANOVA ($F [8] = 39.25$, $p < 0.001$). A Levene's test was used to assess group variance and evaluate whether data dispersion was homogeneous. According to this test, news portals differ significantly from one another ($p < 0.001$). Games-Howell, a post hoc test that is useful when variances are uneven, was used to compare group Ms because the premise of equal variances was not met. In this case, Levenshtein distance scores were compared between different news portals. The statistical significance of the differences is demonstrated by the p-value table (refer to [Appendix A](#)).

A visualisation of the p-values from the Games-Howell test is presented in [Figure 5](#). Blue denotes a p-value near zero, indicating that news sites' reliance on LETA content varies significantly. No significant difference (equal levels of reliance on LETA material) is indicated by red (p-value near 1). Moderate similarity but still statistically significant differences are indicated by purple to pink. It is clear from [Figure 5](#) that the

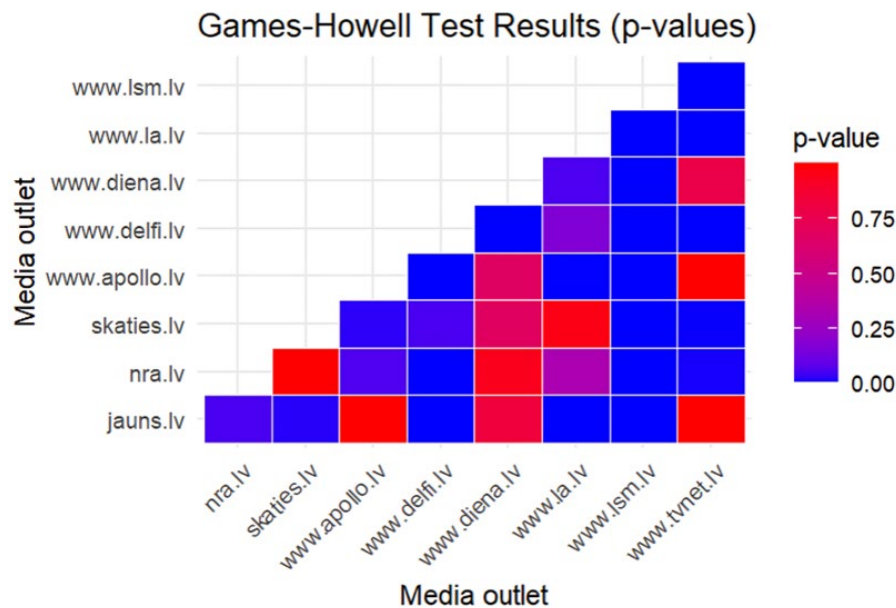


Figure 5. Games-Howell test results (p-values) (Source: Author's own computation)

content of public broadcaster (lsm.lv) is very different from the other portals. An M score of less than 0.33 indicates that the public broadcaster's website prioritises creating its own original content over republishing LETA news. There is minimal content overlap with other portals due to Delfi.lv's very high percentage of unique reporting. On the other hand, apollo.lv, tvnet.lv, and jauns.lv demonstrate high levels of similarity with the LETA's releases, indicating a strong dependence on republished material.

These results confirm that more than one-third of news content published by Latvian online news portals is based on the practice of republishing LETA material, with minimal or no modifications. High similarity scores reflect a strong demand for news agency content in the online news media sector. This evidence is in line with previous research led by Boumans (2018), in which researchers found that online news media material is highly dependent on news agency copy (more than print newspaper content). Some portals, such as apollo.lv, jauns.lv, and tvnet.lv, rely much more heavily on agency material than others. In contrast, the public service media outlet lsm.lv appears to avoid republishing LETA content.

Widespread Adoption of Subsidised Content in the News Media

To complement the computational analysis, we conducted four semi-structured interviews with editors-in-chief of leading online media outlets (delfi.lv, tvnet.lv, and lsm.lv) and the LETA news agency. Interviews were held via Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions and each lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. An interview guide was prepared in advance, focusing on the use of news agency copy, press releases, and editorial autonomy. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, open coding was applied to identify recurring concepts related to news production routines, reliance on news agency, and perceptions of editorial responsibility. Codes were then grouped into broader categories, such as PR influence, agenda-setting role of LETA, and editorial strategies. Themes were iteratively refined to ensure they captured both convergence and divergence in perspectives. To enhance validity, codes were compared across transcripts and reviewed twice to minimise researcher bias. The aim of interviews was to understand point of view of leading online news sites regarding the use of press releases and agency copy in the news production process.

Tvnet.lv is a media company that shows one of the highest usages of news agency content. The company's editor-in-chief acknowledges that press releases are important information material for news media outlets; however, the news agency LETA has the most significant influence. The editor recognises the temptation to rely on the LETA's news and press releases, which he believes is a challenge faced by all online news outlets. The editor-in-chief emphasises that only a public broadcaster has the capacity to produce news around the

clock. Although he acknowledges that relying heavily on the content of a news agency is not ideal, he understands that a news agency's main objective is to provide objective and accurate information.

"Frankly speaking, I don't see any solution. Without a news agency, it would be very hard for the commercial media to work," says editor-in-chief of *tvnet.lv*.

Regarding the influence of LETA news on the content of *tvnet.lv*, editor explains that most articles based on the articles of the news agency undergo editing if they are featured on the front page. However, for other less significant news articles, no text corrections are made. The editor recognises the strong agenda-setting impact of LETA on media content and highlights the responsibility of the LETA to provide objective information and warns that ignorance of this responsibility could lead to a loss of status.

Editor-in-chief of other media outlet *delfi.lv*, emphasises the importance of being the first to report the latest news. The editor explains that *delfi.lv* aims to set the agenda for others rather than simply republishing news reports from the news agency. As *delfi.lv* grows stronger, the influence of the agency diminishes, although he acknowledges the value of the agency's news and the need for it in certain situations when their own resources are limited.

"Often what the LETA writes sooner or later will be found elsewhere. This is the greatest strength of LETA", reaffirms editor-in-chief of *delfi.lv*.

"We are trying to create CONTENT ourselves, but we still need them. It depends, of course, on the subject in question and whether you have a person in the office who can cover the specific issue. If there is a news topic that has not been discussed before, we will have to rely on the information provided by the LETA," clarifies editor-in-chief of *delfi.lv*.

Editor-in-chief of the online platform of the Latvian public broadcast service, acknowledges the interest in using the LETA's news as rarely as possible but admits that it is not always feasible due to resource limitations. The editor confirms that stronger editorial teams require less reliance on the news agency, and the main alternative to the LETA's services are press releases created by PR professionals.

"There are areas and functions that they fulfil because we don't have enough resources. Our employees have holidays, vacations, and many other events. Sometimes we realise that we will not do something just because we can use news articles from the LETA. But in principle, the stronger the editorial team, the less need there is for the news agency copy," confirms editor-in-chief of *lsm.lv*.

Editor-in-chief of the LETA, agrees that there is a strong intermedia agenda-setting capacity of the news agency. The editor emphasises the importance of news agency journalists who possess a strong sense of justice and a commitment to fostering positive change. Regarding the spectrum of opinions, editor asserts that it is not within the LETA's purview to actively pursue diverse perspectives.

"We will not ask all parties for their opinion on some issue. We are going to publish the news stories one by one. And it is the responsibility of each media outlet not to publish them separately but to put the great picture together," says editor-in-chief of LETA.

The editor-in-chief describes LETA as an online platform where information can change rapidly:

"LETA functions as an online news fabric where information can change every five minutes. When a news article is ready, we will publish it. Afterwards, we can add some information, opinions, etc."

We can conclude that the editorial offices of major media view agency release as important news source. Editors agree that as their media outlets grow stronger, there is less need to rely on the LETA's services. The editor-in-chief of LETA underscores the responsibility of editorial offices to ensure the quality of news articles by selectively combining multiple sources rather than relying solely on the LETA's content. With little competition in this field, the LETA's news is likely to maintain dominance over other media outlets.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

At the beginning of this article, we acknowledged the challenging state of the current media environment. Journalism serves as a crucial element of democratic discourse, providing an arena for public debates. The absence of journalism would make our society more vulnerable to all kinds of deception, manipulation, and disruption. Our analysis demonstrates that the LETA news agency provides input for almost half of the content of the online news media. Furthermore, when comparing the content of new media on the Web with agency releases using the Levenshtein distance method, the findings are concerning: 37% of the web is based solely on the copy-paste principle, which does not offer additional information. The fact that online news media outlets rely so much on the news agency's content shows how much of an impact the news agency has on media agenda-setting.

It has become clear that news websites (with the exception of the public broadcaster) are not the authors of news stories, even though they occasionally make some minor edits to their news pieces. The editors of the leading news sites themselves do not dispute that the content of their websites is not unique. As if resources are scarce, the news agency's releases will be their obvious choice.

The purpose of this article is not to criticise the willingness of online news media outlets to reuse content created by the news agency LETA. However, we would like to encourage further debate on the possible consequences of the influence of news agencies on the plurality of viewpoints in the media environment. These findings show that the news agency serves as more than just an intermedia agenda-setter and a source of ideas for news stories. Republishing verbatim news agency releases contributes to the homogenisation of media agendas and eliminates space for differing viewpoints (please see other studies of Boumans et al., 2018; Doyle, 2015; Paterson, 2007). As a result, audiences are repeatedly exposed to similar framings of events and issues, which narrows the range of perspectives available in the public sphere and may erode citizens' trust in the media over time. This homogenisation not only affects media pluralism but also limits opportunities for democratic debate, where conflicting interpretations and competing viewpoints are essential.

The LETA national news agency is a media company whose shareholder is the Estonian-registered investment group Media Investments and Holdings. Similar to other media companies, agency operations can be impacted by the economic challenges of the media market. The LETA agency is not state-supported and depends on media clients and the interests of its investors. Like many other media organisations, LETA needs to find ways to diversify its sources of revenue and reduce employee turnover. The aforementioned raises concern about how long the news agency will be able to deliver high-quality news that adheres to the highest standards of journalism.

Through the application of advanced content analysis techniques such as cosine similarity and Levenshtein distance, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of how news agencies influence agenda-setting in online news media. These metrics enable researchers to analyse a large amount of data efficiently, allowing for systematic examination of relations between sources of information and media content. The findings highlight the importance of using document similarity scores as a tool to map the influence exerted by information subsidies on media content. In addition, the integration of both cosine similarity and Levenshtein distance metrics emerges as an effective approach to identify 'churnalism' and to determine the extent to which online news content is shaped by the sole news agency.

Although these findings certainly advance this field of study, they also have some drawbacks. The results derived from a single case (ATR) serve as the basis for this study. Increasing the scope of the study would presumably provide different outcomes. Additionally, editors-in-chief could be sensitive about their use of agency-copy, and thus minimise their dependence on information subsidiaries. Finally, as our results are limited to a Latvian media environment, it would be interesting to expand this study beyond the country's borders.

In conclusion, this research highlights the LETA's crucial role in the online media, functioning as key news source for a variety of media outlets. Although the reliance on agency-copy should decrease as alternative sources grow and develop, the prevalence of 'churnalism' practices persists. The widespread tendency to recycle stories from news agencies can result in a degradation of information quality. Publicly accessible

information is repurposed without thorough validation, raising concerns about the reliability and credibility of news media content. Such practices can potentially dilute the depth of new coverage, leading to a replication of viewpoints rather than a diverse array of perspectives. More importantly, the dominance of agency-sourced material risks undermining pluralism, weakening public trust in journalism, and reducing the quality of democratic discourse by limiting citizens' access to diverse interpretations of political and social issues. Addressing these challenges require both practical measures and broader political initiatives. Although it seems sense that media outlets would have to fight to survive in lean economic times, it is still their responsibility to be open and honest with their audiences by disclosing the information sources that inform their reporting. Professional associations and media regulators might keep an eye on trends in content copying and support actions that increase the diversity of opinions in the public domain. Furthermore, in order to combat homogenisation and maintain high journalistic standards, journalists and editors must get professional growth and training in verification, fact-checking, and original reporting. Confronting these challenges is therefore essential not only for safeguarding journalistic integrity but also for preserving media pluralism, strengthening public trust, and ensuring the vitality of democratic debate.

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Data availability: Data generated or analyzed during this study are available from the author on request.

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APPENDIX A

List of Keywords

“novadu reforma”, “pašvaldību reforma”, “administratīvi teritoriālā reforma”, “valstspilsētas”, “novadu pilsētas”, “Dienvidkurzemes novads”, “Augšdaugavas novads”.

Cosine Similarity Scores

Table A1. Cosine similarity scores (LETA-News sites)

| Characteristic | www.jauns.lv N = 71 | www.nra.lv N = 172 | www.skaties.lv N = 100 | www.apollo.lv N = 43 | www.delfi.lv N = 187 | www.diena.lv N = 81 | www.la.lv N = 259 | www.lsm.lv N = 242 | www.tvnet.lv N = 162 |
|-------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| | M (SD) | | | | | | | | |
| Cosine similarity | 0.78 (0.30) | 0.64 (0.35) | 0.59 (0.35) | 0.80 (0.30) | 0.54 (0.30) | 0.65 (0.38) | 0.55 (0.34) | 0.35 (0.20) | 0.78 (0.31) |

Games-Howell Tests for Cosine Similarity Score

| Domain_1 <chr> | Domain_2 <chr> | p_value <dbl> |
|-------------------|-------------------|------------------|
| 1 www.delfi.lv | jauns.lv | 0 |
| 2 www.la.lv | jauns.lv | 0 |
| 3 www.lsm.lv | jauns.lv | 0 |
| 4 www.lsm.lv | nra.lv | 0 |
| 5 www.lsm.lv | skaties.lv | 0 |
| 6 www.lsm.lv | www.apollo.lv | 0 |
| 7 www.lsm.lv | www.delfi.lv | 0 |
| 8 www.lsm.lv | www.diena.lv | 0 |
| 9 www.lsm.lv | www.la.lv | 0 |
| 10 www.tvnet.lv | www.delfi.lv | 0 |
| 11 www.tvnet.lv | www.la.lv | 0 |
| 12 www.tvnet.lv | www.lsm.lv | 0 |
| 13 www.delfi.lv | www.apollo.lv | 0.0002 |
| 14 www.la.lv | www.apollo.lv | 0.0002 |
| 15 www.tvnet.lv | skaties.lv | 0.0004 |
| 16 www.tvnet.lv | nra.lv | 0.0018 |
| 17 skaties.lv | jauns.lv | 0.0063 |
| 18 www.apollo.lv | skaties.lv | 0.015 |
| 19 nra.lv | jauns.lv | 0.0372 |
| 20 www.apollo.lv | nra.lv | 0.0733 |
| 21 www.tvnet.lv | www.diena.lv | 0.155 |
| 22 www.delfi.lv | nra.lv | 0.163 |
| 23 www.la.lv | nra.lv | 0.220 |
| 24 www.diena.lv | www.apollo.lv | 0.323 |
| 25 www.diena.lv | jauns.lv | 0.327 |
| 26 www.diena.lv | www.delfi.lv | 0.401 |
| 27 www.la.lv | www.diena.lv | 0.471 |
| 28 www.diena.lv | skaties.lv | 0.974 |
| 29 www.delfi.lv | skaties.lv | 0.975 |
| 30 skaties.lv | nra.lv | 0.980 |
| 31 www.la.lv | skaties.lv | 0.989 |
| 32 www.apollo.lv | jauns.lv | 1 |
| 33 www.diena.lv | nra.lv | 1 |
| 34 www.la.lv | www.delfi.lv | 1 |
| 35 www.tvnet.lv | jauns.lv | 1 |
| 36 www.tvnet.lv | www.apollo.lv | 1 |

Levenshtein Distance Scores

Table A2. Cosine similarity scores (LETA-News sites)

| Characteristic | www.jauns.lv N = 71 | www.nra.lv N = 172 | www.skaties.lv N = 100 | www.apollo.lv N = 43 | www.delfi.lv N = 187 | www.diena.lv N = 81 | www.la.lv N = 259 | www.lsm.lv N = 242 | www.tvnet.lv N = 162 |
|----------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|
| | M (SD) | | | | | | | | |
| Levenshtein distance | 0.74 (0.30) | 0.61 (0.34) | 0.57 (0.32) | 0.77 (0.30) | 0.46 (0.27) | 0.66 (0.34) | 0.53 (0.32) | 0.33 (0.14) | 0.74 (0.30) |

Games-Howell Tests for Levenshtein Distance

```
print(p_values_df, n = Inf)
# A tibble: 36 x 3
  Domain_1      Domain_2      p_value
  <chr>        <chr>        <dbl>
1 www.delfi.lv jauns.lv      0
2 www.delfi.lv www.apollo.lv 0
3 www.la.lv    jauns.lv      0
4 www.lsm.lv   jauns.lv      0
5 www.lsm.lv   nra.lv        0
6 www.lsm.lv   skaties.lv    0
7 www.lsm.lv   www.apollo.lv 0
8 www.lsm.lv   www.delfi.lv  0
9 www.lsm.lv   www.diena.lv  0
10 www.lsm.lv   www.la.lv     0
11 www.tvnet.lv www.delfi.lv  0
12 www.tvnet.lv www.la.lv     0
13 www.tvnet.lv www.lsm.lv    0
14 www.diena.lv www.delfi.lv  0.0001
15 www.delfi.lv nra.lv        0.0002
16 www.la.lv    www.apollo.lv 0.0004
17 www.tvnet.lv skaties.lv    0.0021
18 www.tvnet.lv nra.lv        0.0063
19 skaties.lv   jauns.lv      0.015
20 www.apollo.lv skaties.lv    0.0194
21 www.delfi.lv skaties.lv    0.0485
22 nra.lv       jauns.lv      0.0492
23 www.la.lv    www.diena.lv  0.0526
24 www.apollo.lv nra.lv        0.0569
25 www.la.lv    www.delfi.lv  0.167
26 www.la.lv    nra.lv        0.326
27 www.diena.lv www.apollo.lv 0.667
28 www.diena.lv skaties.lv    0.681
29 www.tvnet.lv www.diena.lv  0.775
30 www.diena.lv jauns.lv      0.822
31 www.diena.lv nra.lv        0.938
32 www.la.lv    skaties.lv    0.960
33 skaties.lv   nra.lv        0.998
34 www.tvnet.lv www.apollo.lv 0.999
35 www.apollo.lv jauns.lv      1.00
36 www.tvnet.lv jauns.lv      1
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