

## The Concept of Cultural Journalism: What the Editors in Latvia Think They Do When Doing Cultural Journalism

**Ilva Skulte**

*Riga Stradins University, Faculty of Communication  
E-mail: iskulte@gmail.com*

**Abstract:** *Cultural journalism is a matter of current discussions in journalism theory and practical research. As a relatively small and specific area of journalistic practice, it operates in the intersection between media, culture in general, and arts and creative industries. The complexity, heterogeneity and variability of the field is determined by the major changes transforming all three intersecting areas – the new media, diversity of genres and the audience practices that characterize contemporary communication; liquidity and hybridity is a mark of the global postindustrial society, whereas art is more and more framed by the rise and convertibility of the concepts of creative class, production, and capital. The self-reflection, conceptualisation of their work and the object of report and reference – culture – by the editors and producers from the Latvian cultural media outlets and departments is the topic of this paper. The main conclusions are that their concepts of culture, cultural quality, and journalistic production, as well as the goals and principles of their work largely differ depending on the type and format of their medium. However, what unifies most of the respondents is the lack of more abstract conceptualisation of the complexity of the field and its social contexts with all the potential consequences for their work and the field of culture in general.*

**Key words:** *cultural journalism, arts journalism, culture, self-reflection, autonomy.*

## Introduction

The Latvian society has undergone major changes during the last 25 years. The democratization of the political system and re-introduction of the free-market economy took place in the context of globalization and technological innovation in connection with the digitalization and the rise of the Internet. The transformations in culture were the most significant because the national identity was broadly conceptualised as cultural differing (culture was exclusively valuable) and because cultural production was highly vulnerable to the intrusion of the new market conditions, global challenges and the new digital codification. Here an active part was played by media as a tool of self-reflection and observation, discussion, cultivation and formulation of new types of knowledge. Threats and risks for the culture in the new situation are in part connected with the vagueness of the concept of culture (ranging from everything created by people to lists of phenomena belonging to cultural systems, including values, norms, traditions, symbols, languages, etc.), as it is applied all over the humanities and social sciences, and theorized as currently changing in very various contexts, for example, globalizing (Janssen, Kuipers, Verboord, 2008), hybrid (Burke, 2009) or liquid (Baumann, 2011)

In this article, culture is understood as a system of values, norms, forms, rituals, and symbols, emerging from the everyday practices in societies and groups and elaborated to have distinctly perceivable qualities in traditions, arts, and philosophical reflection. This shows the essential place of media work in and for culture, emphasizing the role of a cultural journalist in finding, highlighting and maintaining this distinct quality, and mediating culture as something having (certain mark of) a distinct quality – aesthetical (beauty), ethical (good), theoretical (knowledge), inherent to an outstanding, valued form or structure in arts as well as in everyday practices of the social life, allowing decoding and meaning-making. Cultural journalism is called to do so in order to preserve tradition (as a stock of collectively valuable things, forms,

norms, practices), understand the cultural legitimacy (Janssen, Kuipers, Verboord, 2008: 721) and enhance the creativity (as a source for development).

However, in the context of contemporary society, cultural journalism is increasingly described all over the world in the academic discourses, as well as in professional discussions, as being in „decline“, losing its quality and achieving a secondary position in the everyday routines in media organisations (Jaakkola, 2015a: 385). The theoretical discussion of cultural journalism includes two levels – that of the media organisation and that of the culture as a system (Jaakkola, 2015a; Porombka, 2007; Lüddemann, 2015) and two directions of its development in the contemporary media world – that of specialization and that of expansion (Lüddemann, 2015: 74). Interplay and overlapping features appear in this process – cultural journalism regarded as a specific „soft“ journalism could in the same time be treated as a branch in literature, philosophy, anthropology, etc. (Jaakkola, 2015b; Prombka, 2007; Lüddemann, 2015). That is, it could be included in the other sub-fields of the culture.

The main goal of the article is to explore how the editors and producers, working in the Latvian cultural journalism field, conceptualize culture as the object field of their journalistic practice. To reach this goal and the answer, the main three research questions are investigated: 1) what concept(s) of culture are currently used and how they are operationalized in the field of cultural journalism in Latvia? 2) how the organisation and everyday routines of media structurally influence this operationalization? 3) what is the perception of their mission and goals, e.g. the value system and quality standards used in the work? 4) what are the specifics of cultural journalism in Latvia determined by the historical, social and political context? The conclusions are made based on the data collected in 12 in-depth interviews with representatives from a wide variety of media – from the Internet news portals to the specific cultural periodical publications and public service television.

## Theoretical framing of the field of cultural journalism

Cultural journalism is usually perceived as covering products of cultural or creative industries: literature, theatre, visual arts, cinema, music or architecture. The question of borders (of the culture to cover) is rising when discussing the inclusion of some other areas of the human creative production, such as, for example, television, popular music, fashion, lifestyles or traditional cuisine and – from quite a different side – cultural politics. However, this account only covers some parts of the cultural life. To include all aspects, areas and complexity, one must look at everything that is done and produced by human beings with some sense and having some meaning that must be accepted (Porombka, Schütz, 2008:13). Culture – the object of cultural journalism – has an implicit meaning and a perceivable form. It certainly works through a structure or program providing a potential of stability (in terms of values, norms, notions of good and beautiful), but is always changing, becoming a practical experience, a variation, which must be noticed and stated again and again. This is a permanent process of distinguishing, interpretation, and meaning-making, where media, and, in particular, the cultural media, had a crucial and ambivalent role in the last two and more centuries:

*„Cultural journalism (..) is working with cultural facts in the aspect of their relative importance. But doing so, it not only takes part in the dissemination and definition of this importance. Cultural journalism does it while being a cultural fact itself whose independent importance is not stated once and forever, but must be declared again and again in the process of culture (where it participates). It also means, however, that what was said here can refer to both the observation of cultural phenomena as well as the observation of phenomena in the perspective of culture.”* (Porombka, Schütz, 2008:13).

Thus, starting with products of arts already marked for selection as culture, cultural journalists proceed into other areas of human life to find and select different phenomena, including the meaningful forms

for cultural interpretation. And by observing and recording them, cultural journalists are those (journalists) who tend to understand – to ask not only about the reasons, causes, goals and place of the phenomenon in the social life, but also about something so variable as meaning and level of social importance. This meaning presented in the phenomena is observed as a certain kind of quality, connected with the material and life on one end, and with the category as a form in the human mind on another.

The search for a distinct quality that distinguishes cultural journalism is often understood and critically analyzed as connected to the conceptual positioning and cultural journalists' self-perception as being the guardians of the high culture, taste and spirit, ideologically positioned against the mass civilization (Mulhern, 2000: 20-21). However, it is not obviously a search for pureness and high quality that can conceptually cover all the content and practices connected to the contemporary cultural journalism. To understand the concept of culture more broadly, as an achievement of bringing the human creativity to the encoded system of values, norms, symbols and rituals, let's also include other forms of culture, such as, traditional or folkloristic culture, subcultures, everyday culture (and lifestyles), popular culture, etc., that have the ability to bear and produce this system of value norms, symbols and ritual acts as a distinct quality, in the field of observation of cultural journalism. Some theorists consider this inclusion as blurred borders of cultural journalism (Lüddemann, 2015: 74). In this article, the different approach is used in the belief that the distinction between cultural and not cultural (the base of opposition is this quality of cultured), as a kind of permanent metacultural practice, is exercised constantly and permanently in everyday work of cultural journalists. It is basically their essential work – forming metacultural discourse every day, observing it in all possible realities (including primarily arts and products of the creative industries, but more broadly – everything enacted and produced by humans), something distinguished with this quality that is labelled as „culture” – in certain way this procedure performed by cultural journa-

lism can also be seen as “marking culture (as culture)” or even “making of culture” or crystallizing it from the outside position of an expert or object observer. Cultural journalists, but in broader sense journalists, in general, are involved in the cultural field as co-makers, they play crucial role in the life of every separate unit of this complex field of observation – from political rituals (political culture) to popular artists’ carriers just to name some examples: „*In the periodical review of artistic and cultural topics, as well as in the visibility of new trends, journalism supports and builds symbolic memory, confirming its condition as a narrative praxis marked by its professional culture and the context it is in*” (Golin, Cardoso, 2009: 81).

This ambiguity created a difficulty in defining the field – or subfield from the point of view of a journalistic theory – relations to its object in cultural journalism that is observed by most of the theoreticians of the cultural journalism. “*Cultural journalism is culture itself, more precisely; it produces culture (...) Cultural journalism is alive only if the notions of culture are constantly differing – not in the interests of new hierarchies, but in the interests of a sharp perception and discussion*” (Lüddemann, 2015: 55-56). Bourdieu’s social theorizing of the field of cultural production might be helpful here to understand the interaction between culture, journalism and cultural journalism as a dynamic tension between autonomous and dominating heterogeneous tendency of conceptualisation of cultural journalism as an agent in the legitimization of artefacts as culture (Jaakkola, 2015a; Golin, Cardoso, 2009; Janssen, Kuipers, Verboord, 2008).

The main difficulty in describing cultural media and cultural journalism is based on the fact that media themselves play a kind of an ambiguous role – sociologically defined they belong to the field of culture, in the same time having this field as its object for mediation – and interpretation – they may be defined as a self-surveillance and self-regulation agent unit of cultural field – metadiscourse of culture. The cultural determination is characterizing many areas and aspects of media work – the organisation and principles (ethics), content making and professionals (having creative production skills).

It changes the journalistic profile of cultural journalism's main principles of what can be described as deviant/deformed into the direction of symbolic engagement, closeness to sources, pedagogical interventions, authoritative opinion, as well as predictiveness, universalism instead of immediacy and actuality (Jaakkola, 2015a: 99; Golin, Cardoso, 2009: 77-83). The engagement and closeness creates a problem of self-identification of cultural journalists – they often see themselves as “writers” or “reviewers”, not self-identifying with journalism (Harries, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 624) but rather seeing themselves as involved with the art scene and elites (Golin, Cardoso, 2009: 82). This is relevant for all the interpretations of the word “culture” – respecting culture in the economic contexts as the creative industries (media and advertisement are also included there in their manifold interconnections) and arts whose products are *evaluated* (i.e., defining the basic market value of the product) *mediated*, *interpreted*, *archived* and *disseminated* by/in media or more anthropologically – as a system of values, norms, traditions, myths and symbols acting as mental protocol of behaviour for all the members of society, including definition of arts as a sphere of the sublime standing over all. The last version emphasizes preserving of cultural heritage that is also an unforgettable mission of the cultural journalism along with the encouraging of creativity – both sides mentioned in Raymond Williams' reflections on society and culture (Williams, 1993 (1958)) that allows concluding of the *educational role* of the cultural journalism.

Besides of the high culture's standards for cultural journalism, contemporary (post-modernist) discourse on culture doesn't make it easy to find out (it rather differs from person to person, from one media outlet to another) what culture is there to be perceived and observed, how it could be grasped (events, processes and milestones, industry, policy, creativity, sublime, lifestyles, traditions, symbols, great products and their authors–celebrities, etc.) and how (previewed/reviewed) it could be represented (forming through meaning-making). The different elements are linked in complicit networks of human and non-human agents (Latour, 1999) and described as a dynamic model of a social

system around journalism work and it takes into account all the genre specifics of all the different genres in the different journalism cultures in a globalized world. Indeed, the situation is even more complex when observed from the perspective of a permanent structural change and variability – liquidity – as Zygmunt Baumann puts it: “(..) *the culture of liquid modernity has no ‘populace’ to enlighten and ennoble (..) The function of culture is not to satisfy existing needs but to create new ones – while simultaneously maintaining needs already entrenched or permanently unfulfilled. Its chief concern is to prevent a feeling of satisfaction in its former subjects and charges, now turned into clients, and in particular to counteract their perfect, complete and definitive gratification (..)*” (Baumann, 2011: 17).

The media help to create needs. The concept of (cultural) needs is connected with the understanding of what is valuable. In the contemporary social theory, the notion of ritual is productive to understand how the quality (of culture) as a form is processed to the open-ended structure of „floating” values. Nick Couldry (2012) shows how, first of all, it is the culture that appears as a distinct form or quality through media rituals, involving audience into practices that establish meanings. But it also shows how it ends in the celebrity cults replacing the structure of religious or political power centers and so, the essential structure on which the high-culture cultural journalism is oriented on is transformed into a celebrity culture. The liquid culture consolidates to come up with relatively solid forms – categories – qualities in the rituals performed by media professionals, but it only works if the audience really participates in the rituals and takes them seriously – multifold forms of attention raising and maintaining the attention using the Internet and multimedia available. For those who take culture seriously, modern social media offer the space for expression and exchange. From fanzines and comments to stylish and intellectual blogs, as well as celebrities’ tweets – media covering culture and making its meaning are diverse and liquid as the culture itself. This is, probably, exactly where the problem for sustainable cultural journalism lies today. On one hand, it is connected to the floating value system (Couldry, 2012: 67) (including the

aesthetic values) and the criteria system of the contemporary liquid world in order to become decisive and clear if holding the (journalistic) principles of objectivity, diversity of opinions and neutrality. On the other, it is permanently faced with audience criticism, alternative criticisms and the criticism of criticism – over the last decades, all voices alarming of the crisis of criticism belong to it. For example, that of James Elkins: *„So in brief, this is the situation of art criticism: it is practiced more widely than ever before, and almost completely ignored (..) Art criticism is diaphanous: it’s like a veil, floating in the breeze of cultural conversations and never quite settling anywhere”* (Elkins, 2003: 5).

In order to create cultural needs, media industry starts expanding adaptation of journalistic standards that – in the context of multimedia and multiculturalism – are in its own way undergoing several changes (Deuze, 2005) in some aspects parallel to those accented in the border area, like cultural journalism. But it involves a risk of not actually raising any “appetite” at all. The dynamic process can be described by the tension between culture and journalism, but also in terms of the economic vs. cultural capital (Jaakola, 2015a: 126) where perceptions of culture as the high culture (aesthetical discourse) or people’s / everyday culture (anthropological discourse) or enlightenment (educational/philosophical discourse) interact. Cultural journalism has traditionally been working with narrow, carefully cultivated audiences of specialists or like-minded (in part involved in the cultural production in some role) people, or – as a result of expansion, becoming narrow-minded and rough – too simple for the elite readers, expecting specialist authorship, and too complicated for the popular reader, who needs generalized discourse (Jaakkola, 2015a: 125-126). As a result *„... traditional high cultural canon had been complemented with a popular cultural canon and that the concept of culture had become more inclusive. The average length of articles became shorter, and the share of reviews went down; of all the journalistic genres, reviews were cut in length the most. The production of reviews was increasingly outsourced while culture departments took on the responsibility of producing news. Culture departments became closer to other news-oriented departments and lost their specialist autonomy”* (Jaakola, 2015a: 6). This

global trend is also represented in the professional discourse on quality in Latvia.

The new tendencies in mass communications and media (e.g. commercialization, globalization, speed and the amount of instant information flows, development of social media and, in particular, blogging as a place for critical reflection and review of cultural events and products etc.) are making the work, professional principles and self-identification of cultural journalists even more complex. It is especially prominent in the descriptions of crisis of criticism mentioned above (Berger, 1998; Elkins 2003), or in the intensive role of public relations (PR) from one side and the new initiatives, like citizen or “do it yourself” cultural journalism (Forde, 2001; Strahan, 2011), but is summed up and framed by Maarit Jaakola as the five directions of change – elitization, popularization, commercialization, journalistification and disengagement (Jaakola, 2014:9).

Those tendencies show that the processes that are completely changing the field of occupation of cultural journalism have already started and the parallel process of this change is a process of reconceptualisation of the field. The questions like “what is cultural journalism?” should be asked. What position does it take in the unclearly differentiated bunch of terms and notions describing this area, such as art journalism, literary journalism, ethnographic journalism (Cramer, McDevitt, 2004), feuilleton, critiques (Wonder, 2011)? What are its object(s), goals, tasks, forms and methods of work, criteria, standards and norms, genres, styles and discourses, and what the audience – heterogeneous, segmented and „liquid” as it is – is expecting from cultural journalism? There are at least three answers to this question looking at it from different points of view.

First, if we look at cultural journalism from the point of view of producers of cultural goods – artists or creative industries – cultural journalism is to some extent involved in maintaining quality standards and social judgment of taste and development of arts. It must cover their operations properly, deeply and appropriately understanding their system(s) and ongoing processes inside the artist scenes, theory/con-

cepts and industries when providing information and expertise needed for the operation of industry in the economic sense because only due to media representation, artist's work obtains social accept and recognition – a kind of social capital for starting its operations on the market. In this sense, cultural journalists are gatekeepers, letting or not letting an artist into the art world. In this world, a journalist is an insider, connected with invisible and visible ties with other members of the community. He/she participates in the social life of cultural scene, makes friends, knows everyone, is part of the cultural elite whose life he is covering (Golin, Cardoso, 2009), even if it tends to become „yellow”. His/her mission ranges from guarding of the high cultural standards, taste and promoting of the fine products of arts according to those standards (if the concept of culture doesn't cut off entertaining or popular products of the so-called cultural industries), providing information and reflection of the artefacts, events and topics that are in some way framing the contemporary understanding of culture and directly putting itself into service (information and a kind of navigation support in the cultural landscape) of consuming audience (Porombka, 2007: 274).

Unfortunately, recent analysis of cultural journalism (Hellman, Jaakola, 2012) shows that the interest in organisational effectivization of the production process in cultural media and departments predicts shortening of freelance staff working for review and the critical part of cultural journalism, where this task is taken over by journalists covering art scene – that means that the critics receive the place that is secondary to art coverage in general. The result is wavering between two paradigms of cultural journalism that is perceived as crisis both by professionals and the audience of cultural journalism. The two paradigms have been described as aesthetic and journalistic by Finish scholars M. Jaakola and H. Hellman who draw differences along such dimensions as professional identity (reviewer, critic versus journalist, reporter), aim of work (encouraging artistic quality / stimulating of democracy), role of the audience (educated, segmented / citizen, client, universal); base of reflection (emotions and experience / common sense); system of reference (aesthetics / politics); position of author (expert / objective

observer); position of sources (covered / opened); attitude (monolithic, determined, disciplined / pluralistic, open, problem-oriented), concept of time (retrospective / proactive) (Hellman, Jaakola, 2012).

The second model – a paradigm where the current development in the industry seems to bring cultural journalism – strongly contradicts the good practices of a rather elitist art critic described above because in this model closeness and openness to the field of the first model is perceived as a weakness in terms of objectivity. This can be described as a deviance from the general normative model of journalism, including, besides of objectivity and neutrality, the principles to ensure the appropriate way, understandability, fairness and variety, and balance in opinions and a content representing different elements and sub-fields of culture. This also includes a strong emphasis of the news element in cultural journalism with all the following criteria and consequences for planning and organizing of media production work. It is also important to note that while the previous model mostly includes education, in particular, fields of art as the most necessary element in a journalist's competences, this second model draws mostly on the competences that are included into journalist training curricula. In fact, this also involves the question of style/discourse in cultural journalism (besides of genre-determined style differences) that could be appealing to narrower (specialist) or broader (mass) audience and is closer or looser related to academic and scientific discourses on the same topics, i.e., if the more journalistic approach predicts the usage of popular, mainstream language style and easy structures of texts, the more art-specified discourse doesn't exclude academics as authors and some influence of the methods and discourse of particular disciplines.

The third approach of cultural journalism bears its traditions from the continental (mostly German and French) publicists of the late Enlightenment (Lüddemann, 2015: 74) with its passion for insight and education in critical reflection of contemporary society, interpretation of its events, processes, rituals, products, its roots and consequences. The base for this approach connects cultural journalism to intellectual reflection and practice as such (philosophy, essayistic, blogging) that

is not so much started by the need to give a complete and objective overview on the art and cultural life and not the in-depth study and evaluations of the artefacts appearing in the field, but the kind of creative independent activity that included reaction on events and products along with the cultural processes but takes them as a starting point for broader reflection, philosophical analysis and creative interpretation. This kind of cultural journalism is maybe closer to different other fields of social life as literature, philosophy or essayistic (Lüddemann, 2015: 74; Porombka, Schütz, 2008; Porombka, 2007: 274) and addresses topics and realities usually not related to the cultural field, but as it is operating in the same field (and participating in the same market) as other media – media field and media market – it is still useful to see this journalism as a special, different kind of journalism (some have referred to it as literary, contextual or ethnographic journalism).

### **Research outlines and methodological considerations**

The main goal of the research is to find out how the editors and producers from the Latvian cultural media outlets and departments conceptualise their field of work – to explore their professional self-reflection, especially, in three aspects: 1) conceptualisation of the culture and the cultural (arts as belonging to the cultural) as their field of coverage; 2) organizational experience – routines, professional competences and education as well as prospects for the organisational development of their units and 3) perception of their mission and goals, e.g. quality standards, values and principles for their own work. The methodology chosen for this purpose is qualitative methodology – 12 in-depth interviews with professionals who are currently working or were working in different media were carried out, each lasting 30 to 90 minutes. The interview is a method that gives a wide range of context-rich data that, however, are simplified and narrowed during the process of categorisation and classification. It is especially important to state, because the diversity of media, formats, styles and genres (covering contemporary cultural landscape from the Latvian perspective – for a relatively small

audience) was taken as the basic principle of choice of respondents and it might have an influence on conclusions of the research in form of simplification or generalisation. Some of the industry workers that were chosen for the research don't directly recognize themselves as cultural journalists (similar as in Harries, Wahl-Jorgensen, 2007: 624). All interviewees include the following participants (grouped after the approximate types of media represented) (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Types of media and positions of interviewees of the research.

<b>Critical philosophical essay style of journalism</b>	<b>Periodical overview of cultural life with anthropological deepening of topics</b>	<b>Mainstream cultural news and analysis</b>	<b>Art magazines and adequate on-line media</b>
1. Ex-editor-in-chief of the oldest Latvian monthly magazine for cultural reflection / literary journalism. 2. Editor of the internet portal for cultural reflection 3. Producer of the cultural program for public service radio	4. Ex-editor-in-chief of the cultural weekly newspaper 5. Editor-in-chief of the cultural (lifestyle) magazine	6. Producer of cultural programs in the public service television 7. Editor for culture in the news portal 8. Editor of the cultural department and supplement in a daily paper 9. Editor of the cultural department and supplement in a daily paper	10. Editor-in-chief of the Internet portal for literature and philosophy 11. Editor-in-chief of the internet portal for arts and culture 12. Editor-in-chief of the arts magazine

## Results of the research: concepts of culture through the lense of a media organisation and norms in journalism

The concept of culture and cultural largely depends on the type of medium included into the research and is connected with the aims and goals of media organisations through how they are interpreted by editors and producers. Even if the scope to reality developed by all media – focus on events and products appearing in the Latvian art scene with sometimes broadened context, including global scene, history, philosophical reflection and deepening of the topic – is very similar, three groups of media have a clearly different approach to culture, cultural field to cover and cultural phenomena to represent. They include, first, the cultural news media and cultural departments in media concerned mainly with production of news (it doesn't exclude, but rather naturally involves, also working on products in other journalistic genres and adapting other attitudes and broader focus), second, the art media that are mainly focused on one particular scene of a branch of arts (in cultural context when the editorial concept includes it), third, the media of cultural reflection or cultural criticism that are either concerned with interpretation of the products, processes, events, institutions, strategies, rituals, identities etc. in what is considered culture from the sociological, anthropological or philosophical point of view or devoted to the phenomenological reflection of diverse phenomena in human and social life, including diverse social groups and subcultures. The discourse and genres developed according to media strategies are also different as is their understanding of the concept of culture. Anna, editor-in-chief of the internet portal for arts says: *"I have an intuitive definition. The culture is something that a nation or a social group in a given moment understands as valuable, acceptable and, yes, true. [...] Journalists understand it – broadly or narrow, according to the branch they work in. It is in the real work where one finds out how to concretize it."*

It seems obvious that the most different here is the approach of the second group – art media, because their main concern is about a particular art scene, and questions about culture in the editorial reflection

are only secondary, and arise in the background when framing and understanding a particular art scene: *„In the beginning we wanted just to be a source of materials about literature and culture. No idea to give panoramic view writing about culture”*, says Artis, editor of the portal for philosophy and literature. However, media dedicated to a particular art scene mostly have a strategy to develop research-based (deepened insight) and practical work; they discover the need for contextual representation of art works, artists or topics because contemporary art itself is oriented on a broader social and cultural field and consciously explores the shifting of the borders of art. Inga, editor of the magazine devoted to visual arts admits: *„We are writing about artworks and events, but always in the context of the contemporary situation in arts and theoretical reflection – thoughts of philosophers and theoreticians about particular problems.”*

In that respect, art media are similar to the third group concerned mainly with a critical or phenomenological reflection of the human life. Inese, former editor-in-chief of one of those magazines states: *„Thematically we were not centered on culture, one can write about anything that is not included into the notion of (high) culture, not even into the field of humanities, a normal human being will never call it culture. What is important is the point of view as well as a reason why to write about it, this is concretized every time. So it is not predicted by genre but based on personal engagement. If there is someone with attitude and knowledge to look at the particular thing in a certain way – this is providing him/her an opportunity to look at the thing as belonging to a particular field – doesn't matter what we call it.”*

The cultural reflection media use the broadest and most flexible definition of culture as something in the process of becoming were media themselves play an important role: *„Culture is not something already happening, but what becomes it in applying a distant gaze. When a composer is writing music, it is not culture before someone is writing about it. Cultural journalism is a mechanism that predicts why some objects of art, products of the creative process are preserved, but others are lost. [...] This is ambivalent – a medium that both mediates and makes the reality. However, the role or meaning of the cultural journalism is not to constitute cultural fact or event, but [...] to create a place where this is happening –*

where culture becomes culture”, states editor-in-chief of the oldest cultural portal in Latvia, Ilmars. „Language style, attitude, selection”, lists Zane, editor-in-chief of the culture magazine working in style she characterises as gonzo journalism: „We are writing about living culture – special personalities and events – everything that is not yet noticed but is definitely worth noticing,” Zane is describing their practice of letting culture become culture.

A quite different position then is held by the editors of media accenting news in their work. Although their everyday practice, besides of news work, usually also includes reviews and their conceptualisations of work specifics significantly differ (depending mostly on the media strategies, but also on the personalities of editors/producers themselves – their journalistic style, professional affiliation and education and competences involving media type) ranging from almost automatic and routines-based reaction on the products and events of art and creative industries, according to the agendas of cultural institutions with the main aim to entertain audiences, to a more careful analysis of cultural life, processes, tendencies, personalities and topics in the background. For example, Kristīne, cultural editor of the news portal, tries to bring audience into the cultural part of content with a diversification of genres (more entertaining), and she doesn't see any problem in having close contacts and diverse collaboration forms with art and cultural life organisers or contacts with critics they provide, in the same time stressing objectivity as professional pride. In contrast, Ieva, producer of cultural programmes in the public service television admits: “It must be noted that cultural journalism is usually quite complimentary in Latvia, not critical enough. [...] We have a very narrow environment that determines this permanent friendship between artists and journalists who cover art in media”. To change this situation one must act very carefully for not to break the rules of discourse (with risks of losing audience and creating negative emotions in the art scene) and, for her, a new genre is a solution but with different goals, “... being aware of it, we developed a new genre – TV discussion – to try to find solutions for problem issues. It turned out to be very difficult.”

The lack of discussion in the society outside and in the discourse and genres of cultural journalism (or the quality of existing discussion), in particular, were mentioned in several interviews. Developing this discourse and opening the narrow and hierarchically structured field of national culture to the diversity of opinions, experiences and contexts is seen as an important task. The current situation is described as looking for an all-inclusive picture of cultural life framed by organisers of this life (even if the direct influence through marketing is not allowed) and dominated by a small number of well-known elite artists is the legitimate practice that creates and imagination that there is only one big Truth that cultural journalists should help to find, establish and refer to. It created a professional “illness” of a (false) exclusive responsibility – that of being the last instance of the only true decision for inclusion into culture (cultural code). The consequence is hyperbolized in the image of journalists as the “Saviors of the Nation”, as one of the interviewees, Inga, ex-editor of the cultural weekly, ironically described. She also stressed the importance of the qualitative discussion in everyday practice where goal- and object-oriented, in-depth and abstract reflection is delivered in the form of a dialogue between many truth forms. This is needed because cultural journalism strongly participates in deep cultivation processes framing culture itself and through this – the society in general.

However, asked to deliver their understanding of culture and cultural, almost all respondents opened up the concept as they have it in everyday operations to include a philosophical or sociological account. The ways of expanding the concept are surprisingly similar, even when talking from different ideological positions where different realities come into scope: *„Culture is something we do to our children. And that stays after we pass away through our children. Something that is preserved to read, for example, and think. From another side, there is something in our culture that we want to save our children from – it is so with the subcultures. Think about David Bowie or Lou Reed [...] - sometimes it turns out that something we are worried about is much more important to our children as something that we want to teach. This exactly shows the role of the culture.”*

(Ilmars, cultural portal); *“It is important to say yourself what do you want to include in your message. To show how things belong together. To analyze cultural politics, cultural processes is our aim. But our priority always was to speak about it in the broader context – going away from what happens in Riga. Pillars of our scope? The singing festival, preservation of immaterial culture...”* (Anita, editor of the cultural department and supplement in one of the biggest dailies). In particular, she emphasized the need for diversity in cultural coverage in terms of representation and gratification of diverse regional and social groups in the same time stressing the importance and ideal of national (perspective, idea, tradition) according to the strong ideological positioning of the paper and (the cultural supplement of this paper received direct support from the Ministry of Culture since 2013) the cultural politics maintained by the government (and framed strongly by the right wing conservative and nationalistic party led MC). *“Cultural Alliance<sup>1</sup> is helping us to create content. It was so from the beginning and, in fact, still is so”*, says the editor of the cultural department of one of the dailies and she sees no problem and no influence in the situation.

The other concept involved in the investigation for this article was that of journalism. Questions were asked about the understanding of journalistic principles and maintaining them in the everyday work as well as about self-identification as a (cultural) journalist. Here, the education of the editor or producer was also an important factor – only one of twelve interviewees has a university degree in journalism (one has unfinished studies and some others have taken additional courses in journalism or media management). This is why most of the respondents were rather careful with self-identification as journalists (and their work as journalism) with some clearly denying journalism as a shallow occupation for the cultural field: *„One of the terrible aspects [in journalism – IS] is its connectedness with concrete moment and actuality. Good*

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<sup>1</sup> Organisation with a scandalous history from creative unions' common platform for actions to an organisation representing particular interests [more info: <http://www.makslinieki.lv/aktualit%C4%81tes/Kas-ir-Kult%C5%ABras-Alianse/>].

*article [in cultural journalism- IS] can be informative, but the point of view should be literary based and go beyond the framework of the actual. The style of journalism that involves shallowness, narrow layer of education or funny personalization must be avoided,”* Inese judges the usual examples of journalism when explaining why she and her colleagues „are not journalists.”

However, professional self-identification and self-consciousness is connected with knowing of principles that are usually learned in the process of studies. The lack of journalistic education in the cultural media editorial offices is, in part, explainable by the wish to guaranty depth and professionalism of insight in arts, nevertheless, the lack of understanding of media functioning in a social field does not make it easy for cultural editors to develop for themselves a solid un-contradictional system of principles for work. Especially, for inexperienced editors, this aspect is crucial when understanding how their everyday editorial choices are made and what could be the effects of their choices.

It seems that the amount of information available from networks described above is making the decision difficult. The gatekeeping function of editorial offices is performed in different quality depending on the character and strategy of the medium, genre, but it also strongly depends on the education level and permanent critical self-reflection (journalistic, but also non-journalistic) of the editors. It's typical that for those media that are mainly working with news (a lot of possible news messages, required immediacy, punctuality, clearness etc.), the influence of agents of the cultural field is admitted without serious critical reflection. It includes both – quick and unpretentious elaboration of PR material for their news (especially, in the news portals, but generally true for all types of media where editors do not see problems with structuring their materials around the PR-proposed agenda) and close collaboration with diverse agents of the cultural field interested in framing views and selection of news. This is openly considered as legitimate in the field when combined with rationality and basic ethical concern. The independence of own view is strongly emphasized in the intellectual reflection part of cultural journalism, however, collabora-

tion and good partnership is highly valued in terms of empathy that is helping to better understand the cultural phenomena – especially, for those journalists who work in the genre of literary reflection that must be strongly separated from criticism as a very specific, in part, academic occupation of criticism (according to Inese, ex-editor of the magazine who is also a well-known poet herself). But in the real practice criticism tends to be replaced by the more audience-attracting and time and money-spending practice of literary reflection.

The media people don't like to speak about the influence of their gatekeeping routines by PR of the cultural industry. Some of them don't see any problem in publishing press releases directly or accepting sponsored articles, or inviting PR experts as authors. Zane, the editor of the magazine, explains it: *„we are hardly working with press release material and have sponsors for some materials. In the real life, there is nothing completely clean. We don't have illusions that in such a small country one can separate interests, works, and information. We must find the information if readers have interests. But we are very skeptical about sponsored articles,“* and she goes on to explain how they use social media as a source of information and ideas and a source of information on their audiences that in part are converted to become authors.

The audience is one of the biggest concerns in the editorial offices of cultural media in Latvia. Although carefully studied, especially, in start-up media, and involved in interactions where social networking is a very helpful tool, the audience is not perceived in terms of clear patterns of attitude. The tension between the two missions of audience gratification and audience education is noticeable with answers ranging from careful descriptions of the work with the audience to rather radical answers that state the belief that qualitative journalism is per definition possible only when writing for a selective – “my audience”. The question of how to expand the small and valued primary audience and not lose it in the race for bigger masses (where the classic model is to strategically move into the neighboring field of entertainment) is formulated for everyday concern in several editorial offices. But, traditionally, the focus on the work with audiences is very different. For example, two visual art spe-

cific media have had quite different strategies: if one of them – a printed magazine – (sustained mainly from the funds of SCCF) had no interest for years in who and why are reading them (according to the opinion of the new editor of the magazine), another – an internet portal (as a privately sponsored start-up) was created exactly around the area to work with a global audience (through translations into English and Russian).

As this example shows, the strategy of working with the audience is also connected to the models of financing that are different. In general, there are four models that came up in the interview material – 1) direct or indirect support by the state (Ministry of Culture), municipalities or other public sector agents (State Cultural Capital Foundation (SCCF); public service media); 2) local and international private media companies; 3) private sector non-profit media organisations built upon the support of foundations or private sponsors, 4) self-sustained private cultural media – by sales, advertisement and other business operations. Most of the private companies compete for additional (governmental) support and combine it with other financing sources because the initial support (especially in bigger dailies) for cultural coverage is shrinking or because the private sponsoring is only planned as start-up capital. Furthermore, the last group – self-sustained media – after a longer period of financial independence, applied for official support during and after the time of economic crisis.

Questions arise here about the editorial independence and autonomy connected to all those models of financing. All interviewees deny suggestions of this kind of influence, however, in the market situation their vulnerability is clearly visible and then it is up to the ethical strictness of the editorial board how to ensure autonomy in everyday work virtual agreements. This is, probably, why the cultural reflection media (providing critical insight in the cultural life of society) mostly tend to be based on a self-sustained model, risking it with hard work invested into negotiations with occasional sponsors, advertisers and even parallel business activities supporting publishing but escaping the permanent influence. Even if not admitted when talking about personal experience, editors interviewed characterise the Latvian media culture

in general with consensus on practices where private owners having influence on the work of cultural media and departments by shortening their budget and the staff, but also allowing themselves the privilege to get involved into the editorial competences and sometimes directly influence content based on personal views (taste) or business interests (for example, by including sponsored sites). Culture as „soft” journalism is not considered as an area of primary interest, so the financing is smaller and always wavering and – as not put under strong public surveillance – influencing is easier and deeper here having long-term effects., It is especially so when the cultural part of media is seen as a scene for ideological struggle. The public sector financing is in part created to include more independence from owners of the business. Yet it is not free from political interests in the field (as seen in the long debates and struggles in the last years’ discourse on public service media) and – when talking about art journalism – aesthetic preferences in part connected to social-political commitment – connected with taste, ideas and audience – that are not based on any clear and transparent evaluation criteria when a medium is chosen for support as one of the editors, working for a period of time in the commission of SCCF, admitted (the interconnectedness of the experts of SCCF to both cultural branches and the journalism is another concern). The whole structure of this support is unclear, sporadic and often changing (*„how can You work if You have to wait for response on support every 3rd month”*) as is the strategy of support because of lacking policy in the field of (cultural) media – many critical moments arise because there is no independently and separately conceptualised element or place of cultural media in the cultural policy. As acknowledged by several editors, being financed as a non-profit organisation with some additional support from the state is the best practical model to guaranty both security of operation in the market contexts and independence of the editorial board.

Yet, another part of the editorial activity is important to treat here – that of the editorial work with authors. The number and sometimes the choice of authors is sometimes restricted by owner strategies. For example, renowned experts in the field have an additional attraction in

the eyes of the audience, adding in that sense of additional (social or symbolical) capital, but they are also a factor of losing independence as a result of being mostly active in different agent sides of the cultural field. Practically, all the editors referred to difficulties of finding young and perspective journalists, they complained about the lack of cultural experience and education – especially, criticism, of all branches of art, is lacking the skillful training with broader contextual view and development of non-academical style (several art media editors pointed out philosophy studies as a solution instead of literature, art or theatre theory or musicology). But only some of the editors spoke about their careful work with students and young people as their own investment in the future. The following is a longer fragment from an interview with one of the respondents, Zane that shows a very good theoretical and practical balance in the approach to choosing and working with the authors in the editorial every day:

*“Our authors can be divided into two bigger groups – the network of the like-minded, they are specialists coming from different areas, seldom – educated journalists. We must work with those people to teach them some journalistic methods.(..) It is serious work – performed individually with every author. Technically, work is performed in several steps: topics, ideas and wishes, raw material, comments. Most authors appreciate it. But we must take into account that, in their respective fields, the authors are more experienced and have better knowledge as editors.”*

This interactive work with freelance authors is parallel to work with audiences (where the freelance authors are considered to come from) and can only be based on a clear and structured vision on quality in cultural journalism.

The reflections on quality by the Latvian cultural editors and producers are mainly connected with the routines of their work and institutional set-up including the educational and cultural environment and media system. For example, the traditional excuse for the lack of quality or problems in quality management is connected with the financial situation, models of financing and support for the cultural media that are not able to survive in the market with additional means.

In the theoretical part of this article, I discuss the notion of quality as a mark, sign, and a structure allowing the analysis of something as culture in the long-term processes of the human life. The perception of quality in some aspects reflect the tradition of thinking about culture as an area of the sublime, pushing forward into the sphere of cultural journalism ideas of distinction, taste and quality. The normative discourse of editors / producers of the cultural media in Latvia also includes the rhetoric of self-regulation and moral restrictions connected with what is referred to as the high-quality standards and understood as an aesthetical, ethical and cognitive quality of texts and broadcast programs in terms of having a capacity of sublime. This especially shows the acknowledged embeddedness of the practice of cultural journalism in the field of culture.

This is why part of the requirements to authors and articles include the same principles that could be asked from the products of arts, such as originality, novelty, creativity and structural clearness including both idea and form of the message: *“It is not important what You are writing and what about, but how You treat it and if You really think about it, if reading of the review really makes the reader think. The best criterion is the quality of the text – it is about how much we need to improve. If you cannot write correctly, it says something about you as a personality.”* (Ilmārs, the editor of the portal for culture). Working for television, journalists are required to have manifold skills and talents. As Ieva, producer of programs puts, he must understand not only the field he is covering but also how the TV message is constructed (including script, text, sound and image editing). Furthermore, the Internet journalism today, with the expanding multimedia diversity, asks for at least the basic multimedia competencies from the journalist: “I learned editing of audio files,” asked about the professional development in practical experience Anna, editor of the art portal, admits.

Problems of the writers of reviews, who are able or competent enough to create interesting, innovative product in a good language style, without clichés and according to the general style guide of the medium (that also includes restrictions on too academic texts or texts where the basic

journalist skills are taken under a question mark), were mentioned in almost all the reflections on quality. There are different ways editorial offices are dealing with this problem, however, working hard with the own young authors (as discussed in the previous chapter), evaluating success and failures was mentioned as the most adapted practice. Especially, the free usage of language, being stylish, original, but also feeling the restrictions on fairness, punctuality and genre are the characteristics of good-quality texts. As Zane from the alternative culture magazine noted, texts should be neither stupid nor cynical. Overall, they should have a deeper sense of developing a new angle of interpretation and it is good to have a broader context for a topic, for example, through the network of aspects developed around the topic of the magazine. The journalistic part of the quality standards of texts, in Zane's view, is connected to the clear line of description and argumentation, but also to the feeling of language as their instrument. However, the growing attention in the cultural media editorial offices is consciously or intuitively turned to the integration of multimedia approaches into the expression of a message – video interviews, visualisations, visual design, interactivity, post-digital style (for example, the paper editions as supplements to online communications typically include longer in-depth articles and interviews). The purposeful usage of the mix of accessible technologies and competencies is seen as an important part of the qualitative work. As an ethos of cultural journalists, the editors see form – both logical and aesthetic – of their performances that must be developed, innovative, original, tasteful, balanced and appealing, an artistic form, indeed.

However, it was also mentioned that the genre often predicts quite clear profile differences in quality requirements. A more difficult situation with the distinction of good or bad work is in the review part of the cultural journalism, especially, in the specialized art media. No clear quality indications are known, set or guarded, the quality of the critical review as well as the quality of the work that is reviewed stays as a blurred, subjectively and intuitively treated concept. For example, Artis from the literature and philosophy portal directly says: “*I don't know!*” – he is judging subjectively, and finds that there are different types of good

articles, the only important principle is giving a broader context using a broader frame of reference (this why it is difficult to expect a good article from an inexperienced although interested and engaged student) and – probably not selecting the clearly bad and uninteresting works for review – this very disputable principle is held in many editors' work. Inga from the art magazine thinks that experience and education allow the right reference frame for the art criticism as well as balancing the negativism - if the work in question isn't good, she adds an important element: *"today we don't speak about the technical issues [in art criticism]. An artist can leave his/her work open. A good critic must see the intention that moves the artist"*.

*"The opinions of the critics should not be too theoretical and they should not be unfair. The opinions expressed in the review are, of course, always subjective but they must be clear enough to take the reader somewhere. As cultural journalists, they are too much 'in', but they must not have clear ties there,"* says Anita from the cultural department of one of the biggest dailies.

Putting genre differences in the center of the conceptualisation of quality (however, perceptions of the genre borders and discourses appropriate in cultural journalism are not always matching in the answers of respondents) allows to see that for a (sub)field, in general, some core journalistic genres are lacking. For example, at least one-third of the interviewees mentioned that investigative journalism is needed in order to reflect on the field of culture not less than on any other fields of social life. Given the problems with autonomy, financing and journalist staff, it is, of course, a very big and serious problem of the field.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The concepts of culture in the editorial offices of the Latvian media covering culture are developed in direct influence by definitions or frames of reference given in the documents and activities of different social agents. Journalists see themselves as involved inside the culture with diverse links. The model of the network (including different kinds

of agents) seems to bring better insight into the understanding of culture in the practical work of editors and producers of cultural media. The network of culture as observed by the cultural media includes different kinds of realities – the art works and documents, symbolical elements, traditions and norms, institutions, personalities, other media (including social media), social groups, government, elites and other entities interacting with each other as agents of the cultural field. It is typical for each media organisation to develop their own attitude by selecting and emphasizing some of the agents as “points of entrance” into the network and in that modelling and enacting the network – culture – in their own scope. This process of modelling concepts of culture in a practical, routine-based approach to observation of the cultural field is mostly unconscious, but sometimes also connected with the ideological or methodological statement of the medium or what is conceived as expectations of the audience.

The particular models are different to each editorial office, but, taken together from all the interviews, they enact a list of agents, most obvious or popular of which are listed here:

1. Cultural (art) “life” (mostly as pre-planned agenda (oriented on big cities) where culture is defined as artefacts and events by governmental and non-governmental organisations, artist associations, private agents – publishers, galleries, movie theatres and distributors, elites as agents, but also events and artworks, manifests and materials themselves).
2. Cultural politics (the network includes agents like Ministry of Culture and other governmental institutions, documents on strategies and funding received by artists developing projects that then attract people for cultural consumption and national commitment).
3. Cultural processes (personalities, artist organisations, other media and their content, symbols, research organisations and documents).
4. Cultural traditions (artworks, archives, research, GO and NGOs, institutions with their documents and agenda, educational insti-

tutions, ordinary people as keepers of traditions that include the audience itself).

5. Creativity, innovation (personalities, NGOs, government, educational institutions and initiatives, policy documents, events, products).
6. Cultural production and consumption, cultural and symbolic capital (private and non-governmental organisations, art market, audiences – social groups, elites, documents, including research organisations and publications).
7. Cultural phenomena (acts and documents of meta-reflection of social groups, personalities, other media and their content, artworks, objects, situations, abstract structures).
8. Value and normative approach (artworks, lifestyles, schools and educators).

The diversity of elements enacted in the models of networks shows the optional diversity in the treatment of the concept of culture. The conceptualisation of culture and cultural is structured around strategies and tactical choices of editors when approaching culture in their practical work. This shows how the differences in the conceptualisation of the culture are in part connected with routines, rituals and organisational models of work in the editorial departments and newsrooms.

The field of cultural journalism in Latvia generally is a narrow field where media and the surrounding cultural field is interconnected with a number of different close ties, mostly personal – journalists are working as teachers, PR workers and starting their own creative projects; writers and musicians are writing critical reviews and often become cultural bureaucrats; and cultural media are applying for financial support to the same branch of grant commissions, providing foundations of artists they are going to describe, analyze and provide critical reviews about, whereas commissioners are working both as art critics and artists, just to name a few curious examples. This closeness (intersection) with other fields is connected with limited specialist competencies available in Latvia (with its criticized educational system), but also the lack of means and time to develop competencies needed within an organisation itself, as well as (especially, in some covered areas) with explicate

hierarchical structure of the cultural field (the importance of symbolic capital held by some master professionals and use of this symbolic capital by media organization as one element of their operational assets). Fragmented, insecure and with a small financial base, the cultural media has established rather problematic strategies of surviving within the traditional media system in Latvia – some of the organisations tend to save money by employing a small number of workers (freelancers or just enthusiasts) – sacrificing quality, broader scope and audience (who turns to media with star writers, professionals with good style or at least, investments in marketing) as well as occasionally their journalistic autonomy. However, no editors admit direct or regular influence on their views or agenda by some outside interested party – government, political associations, artists, artist organisations, marketers or sponsors in the field. Some indicators in the interviews show that at least the framing if not the agenda (in terms of hidden advertisement), including the framing of the concept of culture, is connected or directly based on the understanding by other players in the field. It is, symptomatically, what drives media editors and producers into contradictions and rhetorical questions when talking about their work. Their professional qualification in journalism, but also other fields of humanities allows them to better understand the importance of the ethical norms of the field and through this individual intelligence, mostly, but not always, helps to hold on to journalistic / intellectual autonomy.

The field of cultural journalism in conceptualisations of editors and producers of media is almost divided between two poles – the journalistic and the aesthetical, according to the framework by Jaakola and Hellman (2012) – and is tended towards the more journalistic pole in times of crisis, whereas support by government is small and going to the mostly non-journalistic part of the field, developing this gap even more (as those who are not able to think “journalistically” ended their operations during crisis). The professional depth of the field is impossible without journalistic consciousness, but it also involves independence, insight, empathy and specific expertise. This is why some experienced editors of the field refuse to have their work considered as journalism,

conceptually looking for their way of intellectual, critical and artistic expression and freedom from the restrictions of genres, the profession as well as from financiers, bureaucrats or power elites of the country.

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