THE POINT OF NO RETURN: BELARUSIAN AUDIENCE REFUSAL TO USE WESTERN BROADCAST MEDIA AFTER EXPOSURE TO THEIR CONTENT

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ABSTRACT: Audiences in Belarus, an authoritarian country, are facing the situation of limited media choices when it comes to socio-economic and political information, which can slow down the process of democratic transformation. With electronic media (radio and television) in the country controlled by the state and independent print media facing numerous impediments from the state, Western media broadcasting in Russian and Belarusian languages (the native languages for the most of the country’s population) can potentially become a valuable source of socio-economic and political news. However, these media do not enjoy high popularity. The purpose of this research is to explore the nature of relationships between Western broadcast media and Belarusian audiences. Using the method of long interview, the study looks at reasons for Belarusian audiences not to return to using Western media once exposed to their news content. Although the participants were mostly talking about their criteria for news content, they also mentioned the associations they had with the outlets themselves. That and the context of Belarusian media market made it possible to infer that issues with the Western media go far beyond their news content.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, Western media, long interview, selective exposure
INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH QUESTION

When present on a media market in an authoritarian regime where domestic outlets are controlled by the state, foreign media may enjoy high popularity as a source of alternative news to that provided by controlled media. These outlets can even serve as an engine for political transformations (Kern, 2011). Audiences in Belarus, an authoritarian country, face the situation of limited media choices when it comes to socio-economic and political information, which can slow down the process of democratic transformation. Audiences for foreign broadcast media in Belarus are limited (Manaev, 2009). Despite the fact that the media market inside the country is strictly controlled (Manayeva, Aniskevich and Dinerstein, 2011) and alternative media broadcasting in Belarusian and Russian languages are present in the market, their audiences seem unreasonably small (Yuran and Manayeva, 2012). It is important to understand the underlying processes that drive audiences’ media preferences in a situation of limited choices. By exploring the reasons for Belarusian audiences not to return to the use of foreign broadcast media after being exposed to it, this study is set to start understanding such processes.

In a given country, various factors (e.g., cultural characteristics of the audience) can affect interactions of the foreign media and effectiveness of such interactions with a specific audiences (Leonard, Van Scotter and Pakdil, 2009). Manaev (2009) has attempted to describe the audience for Western media in Belarus, including their values, attitudes, and beliefs, based on data from public opinion polls in the country. He demonstrated that Western and Russian media in the country promoted different values while consolidating and expressing opinions and ideas of their audiences, who differed in their attitudes toward democracy as well as their position on the country’s geopolitical course. Yuran and Manayeva (2012) set out to further develop the topic by looking at public opinion data on media use and news content of the Belarusian Service of Radio Liberty. Content analysis of the news published on the radio station’s website and analysis of public opinion data (news consumption, political views) revealed a discrepancy in content provided and the views of audiences. While the analysed news content seemed mostly imbalanced and skewed toward supporting opposition, the audience of the Western broadcast media did not appear to differ significantly from the rest of
population in terms of their views of the regime. These findings did not support the idea of Western media consolidating and expressing opinions of their audience. Both studies did not provide enough evidence to link sociological characteristics of Belarusian audiences directly to media use. Even though some research tried to explain the role and influence of foreign media in post-Soviet countries, and Belarus in particular, no attempts were made to approach the topic from the audience's perspective. Literature is lacking explanation of audiences’ reasoning for foreign media use (or refusal to use such media). This research is set to start filling this gap by shedding light on the issue of users’ refusal to continue using foreign broadcast media in Belarus once exposed to their content.

**BELARUS BACKGROUND AND MEDIA LANDSCAPE**

The Republic of Belarus attained independence in 1991. Elected as the country’s first president in 1994, Alexander Lukashenko, self-perpetuating ruler of the young state, has turned it into “an example of a ‘façade regime’ in which democratic ‘scaffolding’ conceals a dictatorial style of polity building” (Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh, 2003: 5). According to Freedom House’s report *Nations in Transit 2010*, “He restored Soviet-era symbols, reduced the Parliament and judiciary to rubber-stamp bodies, abandoned term limits for the presidency, and took control over local administrations and security forces. President Lukashenko also curbed media freedom, suppressed political opposition, and reasserted state control over the economy” (Freedom House, 2011). Freedom House (2011b), Reporters Without Borders (2011), IREX (2011), and other organizations characterize the media system in Belarus as unstable and not free. Both non-profit organizations and scholars (Korosteleva, Lawson and Marsh, 2003) speak of a retreat to authoritarianism in the country that could be observed in the example of the Belarusian media system.

Despite a significant number of formally independent media outlets in Belarus (according to official data, as of December 2011, out of 1,394 print media registered in the country, 988 were not owned by the state, out of 243 electronic media, 73 were privately owned (Ministry of Information of the Republic of Belarus, 2011)) “there aren’t more than 30 registered non-state socio-political media in Belarus nowadays” (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2011: 4). Those
few independent print media outlets that cover socio-political issues could not successfully compete with state-run newspapers for audiences due to various tactics (control over infrastructure, state subsidies to state-run media, constantly changing media law, and other ways to victimize independent media, to name a few) (Manayeva, Aniskevich and Dinerstaein, 2011) used by the state to control freedom of the press. As an illustration, Sovetskaya Belorussia (Soviet Belarus), the largest state-run newspaper, has a weekly circulation of approximately 2,000,000 (Manaev, Manayeva and Yuran, 2009), while Narodnaya Volya (People’s Will), the most popular independent newspaper, circulates 23,000 copies a week (Kirchick, 2011).

As the Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press 2010 report stated, state-run media maintain a virtual monopoly on the national market. With the majority of officially registered electronic media in the Republic of Belarus belonging to the state (170 out of 243), and independent (or not owned by the state) TV and radio channels being “fully controlled by the local and national governmental authorities, due to the existing system of broadcast licensing in Belarus” (Belarusian Association of Journalists, 2011, p. 4), and print media being constantly silenced, harassed, and oppressed, access to alternative information on socio-political and economic issues looks grim.

In this situation, the availability of Western media outlets offering alternative information seems crucial for the public. As Kirchick (2011) stated, while the state-controlled media remain a tool of political propaganda, and the independent voices inside the country are silenced, part of the Belarusian public is turning to foreign broadcasting outlets (such as Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty’s Belarusian Service or the Polish-sponsored Belsat television) as the alternative sources of information. The question remains, however, as to why these foreign media are not really a viable alternative source of information. Why are these media not as popular as they could be in a situation of limited choice? How do their potential audiences perceive these media, and why do these perceptions prevent the foreign media from becoming a viable alternative source of information used on a regular basis? All these questions could not be answered in a single study. However, this research can lay a foundation for further exploration of the topic; it can provide a first insight on the users’ view of the issue but looking into reasons why media consumers
choose not to continue to use foreign broadcast media in Belarus once exposed to their content.

METHOD

To explore the abovementioned area, the research utilized the method of long qualitative interviews. The method allows for direct inquiry into the ways respondents see and experience the world (McCracken, 1988). Such an approach provides for a better understanding of media consumers’ reasoning in their choice of news sources.

Participants for the research were selected using the snowball sampling technique, “a technique for finding research subjects. One subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on” (Vogt, 1999: 268). Such an approach made it possible to identify potential participants overseas without being actually present there. Screening interviews with the recommended interviewees were then conducted via Voice over IP services (Skype and Google Talk). Conversations with participants who had experience with Western media broadcasting for Belarus and with an online presence in Russian and Belarusian languages, but did not choose to use these outlets on a regular basis were conducted via Skype and recorded in mp3 format using the “Skype recorder” software. Files were saved on a password-protected portable drive, which was stored in the researcher’s office when not in use. Later, interviews were fully transcribed and analysed.

Four participants, whose identities are not to be revealed in this paper, provided information for the analysis: three male participants and a female participant, all living in the Republic of Belarus, all with at least a bachelor’s degree, and all employed when the interviews were conducted. As public opinion data in Belarus demonstrated, audiences of the Russian- and Belarusian-language Western news outlets (radio stations, in particular) were more educated than people who did not consume such media products (Yuran and Manayeva, 2012). These participants are likely audiences of the Western media and thus their reasoning for not using the media on regular basis could be of special interest.

Participant A, one of the two participants the snowball started with, is a male in his mid-20s, a native Belarusian, and fluent in 4 lan-
languages with basic knowledge of two more. He has a bachelor’s and a master’s degree in social sciences and is interested in politics. Participant B, the other “snowball starter” has a bachelor’s degree in the hard sciences and works as an IT specialist in the banking industry. Participant C, a male in his early to mid-20s, has a bachelor’s degree in the hard sciences and works as a programmer for an IT company. Participant D, a female in her mid-50s, has a master’s degree in the social sciences; she is working on her PhD while teaching at a university, doing consulting, being involved in social work, and rearing children.

Interviews were conducted in Russian, the participants’ native language. None of the interviews used for the analysis were conducted in Belarusian (the other official language of the country) or other languages. Conversations were transcribed in Russian. Most of the transcriptions were not fully translated into English, but rather quotes selected for illustrations. The interview guide (see Appendix A) prepared for the research was not strictly followed but used as a general guideline. Interviews started with general questions about participants’ daily routines and time management in order to assess the background. These inquiries were followed by broad media use questions that lead to the topic of the study, for example “How big of a place does media take in your life?” From general questions about participants’ background to their media consumption habits, to their experiences with foreign (and Western, in particular) media, to detailed discussions of reasons not to use Western media on regular basis, the funnel design (Hesse-Biber and Leavy, 2008) was adopted for the interview guide in order to broaden the scope of conversations and detect potentially valuable points for discussion. Participants lead conversations; following questions were mostly based on previous responses, recouping facts mentioned and employing the language used by the participants.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Before getting to the research question, it makes sense to discuss some findings that contribute to the understanding of the broader context in which participants refuse to consume Western socio-political and economic news product on a regular basis. The analysis revealed several commonalities as well as differences in the ways par-
participants consume news product.

All four participants followed the news, all four had their media outlet preferences, and those preferences were similar for all of them. This phenomenon might be rooted in the sampling technique used in this study – early participants were suggesting their acquaintances as potential interviewees. The suggested acquaintances were likely to share some views and habits with the original participants who recommended them (Lazer et al., 2010). However, some other mechanisms may be at play in this situation. That is potentially a subject for another study. Crucial for the topic of this research was the homogeneity in technology and source preferences among the participants.

For example, Participant D, when asked, how much time in her busy schedule she devoted to media, replied:

(...) I don't read newspapers; don't watch the TV for, perhaps, five years or so. Rarely, I would listen to the radio in my car, but only music though. I look at news on the Internet – using news websites or following my friends’ recommendations – the links they share. I also receive a newsletter from [the] embassy, which aggregates references to the Republic of Belarus in media. If a title interests me I ask them to send me the full article. Well, that's about it.

Respondent C said, that the Internet was the main source of information for him as well. Respondent A had the same idea: “As a matter of principle, I do not watch television, don't listen to radio – I get everything primarily via Internet”.

Similarly, Respondent B used Internet resources exclusively to get his daily news: “I don't read newspapers, don't watch the TV, don't listen to the radio. Everything is quite simple”. However, when it comes to the “simplicity” part of it, reasons for the respondents to use the Internet as the main news source are not entirely identical. Motivations to use Internet could be categorized as following: convenience of access/fitting busy schedules, choices of sources offered by the medium, and control over content/personalization of news. The first two were present in all four responses, whereas the last theme was unique for Respondent’s B views:
Let’s say, on TV or on the radio, information is presented in such a way that you can’t speed nor can you slow it down in order to get to understand it better. In other words, it is delivered in real time, but it is not what I really want to say. In general, there is flowing sound or picture that you can’t control. When you read the news online, however, you can do it at your own pace. You can, for example, re-read some information; you can just glance over an article, realize that it doesn’t really interest you, and just close the page. In other words, the freedom of perception is different.

All four participants noted convenience of web resources. Respondent A says about it: “Mainly I use Internet [for news], of course. It is convenient for me, because I always go there [online] at work. My job is basically working on a computer all the time. (...) I do many things online and, at the same time, I can glance over some news portals, or simply search for some interesting information”. For him, it was “obvious,” that the Internet was the main source of news, as it was for Respondent B: “I am quite an active Internet user. It doesn’t even come to my mind - to read newspapers (...) I read news mainly at work. Say, my work day starts, and before I start working, I look through news”. In their busy schedules participants of this study try to make time for news. It is convenient to go over main events at work before attending to job related activities. As Participant C noted: “I read news in office, usually; about half an hour or so before work”. In a situation of limited media choices, Internet provides virtually limitless potential as a communication channel. Western media do have a presence on the Web and are easily accessible. In this situation, the fact that users refuse to come back after accessing the sources could not be explained by the efforts on the regime’s side to control the channel. Participants are active Internet users for whom gaining access to Western media is not a problematic task. As it becomes more obvious later in the analysis, media/audience relationships in this case do not directly involve the regime.

Besides being at hand and fitting busy schedules, the Web offers a variety of news channels: news portals, social networks, email and chat (to share links to news), blogs and subscriptions. All four participants actively use most of the opportunities to get information; they don’t limit themselves to a few sources. In all that variety, however,
they do have their favourite news channels. They all named TUT.by, a Belarusian Internet-portal, as their first choice.

Participant A (when describing news sources he uses regularly): “Periodically, I visit TUT.by, sometimes I’d look over western [foreign language] media”.

Participant B: “News sources? Usually, first of all, I look over TUT.by”.

Participant D: “(...) TUT.by and open.by I load up every day in any case”.

When describing their motivation for using TUT.by as their main news source, among other things, interviewees mentioned objectivity of its content:

Participant D: “(...) well, it [TUT.by] is the most extensive resource. And there was a period when it was the most unbiased one. They’d just provide the news instead of comments, they wouldn’t impose comments (...)”.

Participant A: “(...) [presence of] in-depth [information] is important as well. But, as a bare minimum, it [news article] has to be balanced and diversified in order to interest me in any way (...)”.

Participant C: “I like neutral [news] materials, with no embellishment, so that I can come to my own conclusions. I don’t like when someone concludes for me, when someone tries to force some conclusions on me”.

Unbiased delivery and objectivity were described as the main criteria for news selection in relation to the content of TUT.by and as general standards for quality news. However, a good portion of the news materials published by the portal is not written by their staff and comes from various sources, including the Western media under scope of this study. In this situation, it seems peculiar that in the participants’ view, objectivity was seen as something TUT.by provided, but seen as lacking in the Western media broadcasting for Belarus in Russian and Belarusian. When talking about news content, participants concentrated mainly on surveillance motives, while those were not neces-
sarily the main factor in their choices of media. Research within the uses and gratification approach demonstrated that “one and the same set of media materials is capable of serving a multiplicity of needs and audience function” (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1974: 517). While often exposed to the very same content, even via the same channel (Internet), participants preferred one medium over another. How much do the concerns of the respondents have to do with the source's content and how much of it has to do with the source's image and associations? This potentially is a topic for another study, but further analysis may shed some light on the question. Throughout the interviews it seemed the participants were talking more about what quality media and media product should be, in their opinion, and less about the actual news product they consumed.

A larger theme emerged from the analysis of interviews with regard to negative qualities of Western news product in Russian and Belarusian – “delivery of opinions rather than information”:

Participant B: “I can say to it [a general questions about use of Western media broadcasting in Russian and Belarusian] right away, that they are biased”.

Participant D: ”They are all biased. I don’t really want to waste my time searching for a grain of sense in a flow of biased information”.

Participant C: “Their news has an embellished character. For example, Syria (..) – very much one-sided”.

Several more specific subthemes frame the bias theme in participants' responses. The first concern, expressed by all four participants, had to deal with Western media imposing their point of view. And this point of view was not necessarily similar to that of the participants of this study. In Participant A, such behaviour of these media evoked a rather emotional response:

They always talk about some sanctions; they say that the regime is bad, that there is no freedom, and that everything here should be changed. Do they ask what Belarusian citizens themselves would want? Do they ask “how to help YOU”? “Is it going to work for you if we change things this
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way? Maybe you have some needs?” No, they don’t study Belarusians. They try to bring here what they need and not what we need.

Participant D has also brought up his characteristic of the Western media in a quite direct form. She showed it as the main reason not to consume news product of these media on a regular basis:

Well, they impose their point of view. The point that our way of life is wrong (…); that we are all busy with wrong things, we tolerate things that we shouldn’t be tolerating; that things here should be done in this particular way. Well, I agree that things should be done this way. And if I know their position already, why would I read more? (…) They only transmit one position that serves their interests but not the interests of my people and my own.

She also expressed another concern, another structural element of the “bias” theme: “They manipulate the facts and fill them up with negative emotional contents. Why would I need that?” Thus, yet another characteristics of the “one-sidedness” of Western media is their bias towards negativity. Participant B had an almost identical view of the issue: “[I don’t like their content] because, well, everything seems so bad and terrible. You would often see distortions [in articles]”. Another element of the “bias” theme emerged from the conversation with Participant A:

Let’s take BBC, a very good example. So, they have both Russian and English versions. And all the events are presented a little differently, the news are different for different languages. (…) I often don’t understand, why is there is one thing written here and another thing written there.

Thus, the issue with the outlets that have special services in the country’s native languages is that the news content in those sections is special as well. Usual media practice – to adapt their product for the audiences – becomes an issue for participant A. There could be more to it than just the content that participants criticized so extensively. They all admitted that their exposure to this content was not lengthy, however, a brief acquaintance with it was enough for them to form an opinion of the Western media. It could be that they have had a
predisposed view of the outlets before exposing themselves to their content and that had a significant impact on their attitudes toward the news product of these outlets.

Besides the issues with the news content of the Western media, analysis revealed problems that participants had with news outlets as a whole. The theme of negative image of the Western media broadcasting for Belarus in Russian and Belarusian consists of several elements. Participant A had voiced the first concern:

I don’t even know what I mean when saying “them” [about people presented as expert by the Western media]. In general, there were mostly near-oppositional activists, so to speak. (…) Participants of those shows were only talking about how bad everything was, and that everything had to be changed. Here is all their approach”.

Participant A, as well as the rest, saw a clear association of the Western media with inactive, non-constructive, and in his view, oppositional forces. Participant B described this association as a major factor that made him lose interest in Western news product: “They often transmit only one point of view – a radically oppositional one. Accordingly, it is just a radical point of view, and often things like that are not interesting for me”.

Mechanisms described by selective exposure scholars come into play here. Back in 1960, Klapper noted that “the tendency of people to expose themselves to mass communications in accord with their existing opinions and interests and to avoid unsympathetic material, has been widely demonstrated” (Klapper, 1960: 19–20). Later research in the area showed that people’s political beliefs are related to their exposure to media (Stroud, 2008). However, political beliefs alone could not entirely explain people’s choice of media. It is obvious that other factors are at play here. In the case of the participants of this study, we can see an interrelationship of at least three elements. On one side we have the audience’s views and beliefs (political in this case); on another side is media content that has to relate to these beliefs and views in order to attract their attention; however, but not the least, element is the image of the media itself in the eyes of the audience. “Appearance” of the messenger plays a very important role in how the message is perceived; it could have a very significant impact
on a person’s choice to expose or not to expose oneself to the content at all. All three elements need to be studied to draw a fuller picture of the relationships between Belarusian audiences and Western media. Other players (opinion leaders, political forces inside and outside the country, competing media, etc.) could be reviled in the process of research, and their impact will have to be studied as well. At this point, it is obvious that it was not simply incompatibility of the Western media content with the participants’ criteria that drove them away.

Another theme, the theme of insignificance of the Western media, could be better described in Participant’s B words:

> For me they are just like Belarusian Television [state-run] but with an opposite sign, plus or minus - it does not matter. Because, just like there, “everything is bad, everything is terrible”; you see a lot of distortions in their content. And only one point of view is presented, a very radical point of view. And that is very uninteresting for me.

That illustrates that Participant B did not really see the Western media as an alternative source of news information. It was all the same for him. Both Participant B and Participant A explained the fact that they often did not remember sources of “oppositional news” or did not come back for news to the Western media on a regular basis because of insignificance of their content and ideas. Here is how Participant A talked about it, when asked if he came across “decent” (in his words) information in the Western media:

> I don’t even remember any more. If I don’t remember, than there probably was nothing interesting there, because usually I remember things that are interesting for me. I absolutely can’t remember what they talked about. (…) I can’t even remember topics of their runners and stories. I am not sure what it tells [you]. It either was uninteresting, or unimportant, or insignificant for me. Again, there were reasons for not to make account of it, right?

These last quotes bring us one step closer to understanding the underlying meaning of users’ refusal to use Western media that broadcast in Russian and Belarusian languages on a regular basis. While talking extensively about the issues they had with the content of the
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media, none of the participants had prolonged exposure to the content. By the end of each conversation, accents shifted toward associations around the outlets from the content and its quality. Positions and attitudes of the participants, combined with collective image of the media “on the other side,” may have formed the perceptions of the media content. Criteria could have been formulated later to justify the choices.

DISCUSSION

Even though specific reasons not to return to the use of Western media that broadcast for Belarus (and have presence online) in Russian and Belarusian slightly differed for the four participants, all the interviewed people stressed issues with the content of these media and their obvious association with opposition political forces in the country. Approving (or not) of ideas and actions of opposition, interviewees did not accept one-sided delivery of news. Those were not practical reasons (i.e., accessibility or format preferences) but the issues with the media and their content that drove the respondents away. In participants’ words, content and its delivery did not fit their criteria of quality news. However, it was not clear from the interviews if the criteria were formulated by the participants to justify their choice of media or if their choices were actually based on the criteria they mentioned. Research shows (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng, 2009) that people who have greater interest in politics are more likely to expose themselves to information that may contradict their beliefs. Loss of interest in politics (expressed by the participants), along with pre-existing beliefs, preconceived images of the media may all lessen the importance of the news content itself in selection of media.

This research was not designed to answer definitively why in a situation of limited media choice Western media in Belarus do not enjoy high popularity. Its value is in questions raised and new areas for research pointed out. While demonstrating that the regime’s control over the media landscape is not the sole reason (it was not mentioned by participants at all) for the unpopularity of the outlets under study (which in a situation of limited choices could have enjoyed larger following), and questioning the dependence of the unpopularity of these outlets on quality of their content, this research should be considered a first step in exploration of the nature of relationships of
Belarusian audiences and Western media that broadcast and publish news in Russian and Belarusian in the country. Analysis of the news content is necessary to evaluate and explore participants’ claims about it. It is crucial to include other groups in the study (i.e. people who consume Western media product on a regular basis, people who never used it and may or may not still have an opinion about it). Both qualitative inquiries into deeper meanings of users’ motivations in their media choices and social scientific analysis of media content and public opinion will advance the understanding of the issue.

Multiple limitations of this study may have influenced the results. Computer-mediated communication can involve certain issues, such as distraction caused by technical difficulties, availability of distracting materials; limitation by the web-camera visibility and eye contact can make abstractions look less impolite; sound quality, limitation by hardware, and speed of Internet connection could have served as an aggravating factor thus affecting quality of responses. A seven-hour-time difference and the need to be in front of a computer for the entire time of interview (which took over an hour and a half in one case and over an hour in another) could have worked as additional inconveniencing agents.

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Knobloch-Westerwick, S., and Meng, J. (2009). Looking the Other Way: Selective Exposure to Attitude-Consistent and Counterattitu-
APPENDIX A. Interview guide

- What is going on in your life at this moment of time?
  - What do you do, how do you use your time?
  - How big of a place do media take in your life?
- Tell me about media that you usually use?
  - What drives your choice of news and media?
  - Why is that you chose these criteria (name the criteria, ask about each, see if they can explain in detail)?
  - You think people you know (family, friends, co-workers, etc.) may have different criteria in mind? Why is that those don't work for you?
- Tell me about your experience with foreign broadcast media in Belarus (give examples, see which they used and for how long, during which period [political activities in the country or abroad, or special events in their lives]).
  - Do you remember when and how you decided to use the foreign media?
  - Can you tell about the first time you used the media?
  - Tell me about your experiences with these (this) media (medium)?
  - Why did you decide they were appealing to you back then?
  - Tell me about specific instances of use of these media?
  - Tell about the last time you used the media?
- Why don't the foreign media don't fit (do fit) the criteria we discussed earlier?
  - If they do fit your criteria, why then don't you use these media anymore?
- What else might you be able to tell me that would help me better understand your media consumption habits and reasons for you not to use foreign broadcast media on a regular basis?