INVISIBLE AUDIENCES: STRUCTURE AND AGENCY IN POST-SOCIALIST MEDIA STUDIES

Irena Reifová*, Tereza Pavlíčková
Charles University in Prague

The study of media audiences was not assigned an especially prominent place in Central and East European (CEE) academia after 'the big bang' in 1989. Even now, almost 25 years later, the audience research is not performed in a consistent manner and pronounced in a firm voice in this region. We could say that media audiences – people who receive, co-create, interpret, understand and appropriate media messages – were rendered almost invisible in the post-socialist study of media.[1] This state of affairs may seem like a coincidence of idiosyncratic factors but it is in fact a repercussion of larger socio-political logics which established themselves as unquestioned mainstream discourses underlying the period of post-socialist transformation. The trifling, petty problem of media audiences (from the societal perspective, not for us) thus becomes an access point which enables us not only to understand the reasons for its suppression but also to gain a deeper insight into the character of the post-socialist times in general.

In the first half of the 1990s, shortly after the collapse of communism, the Czechs discovered a new way of teasing each other. When they intended to address somebody's supposed or real affiliation with the former regime, they would use the phrase 'stará struktura' ('old structure'). Nobody knows any more where the catchphrase originated or

---

*   Corresponding author: Irena Reifová, Charles University in Prague
    email: reifova@seznam.cz

1   This essay distinguishes between the academic study of audiences and the research on audiences as markets. The CEE media systems were, on the whole, adjusted to the main principles which are usual in media systems in Western Europe and introduced public and private media ownership/logics. It also severely impacted on the ways of defining and understanding audiences and introduced the divide between academic research focused on audiences' qualities and the rating analysis facilitating the private media which are – as Ien Ang famously put it – "desperately seeking the audience" (Ang 1991). Our point of departure is the observation that the academic study of audiences as social actors is absent in CEE countries. This assumption does not cover developments in market research on the audiences as consumers which, on the contrary, has been flourishing in the majority of CEE countries after 1989. However it has very little in common with understanding the audiences as autonomous actors endowed with agency. Interestingly enough, the situation in the last decades of the communist regimes was similar. The party-directed media organizations in the communist countries followed ratings – at least to the extent allowed by the methodological developments determined by the period and isolation behind the iron curtain. E.g. in communist Czechoslovakia, the state television and radio organizations had their research departments and used ratings as the evidence that communist media programming was successful in meeting people's needs. Czechoslovak Television commenced occasional (questionnaire-based) rating surveys in the mid-1960s and switched to continual daily (diaries-based) research in 1972 (see DigiZone). However, Czechoslovak Television had only one channel, CT1, from 1953 to 1970 and two channels in the subsequent period until the beginning of the 1990s. It was not exceptional for an average television show to reach ratings of around 80 or 90 percent under these circumstances. With one or two television channels, there was no market with multiple broadcasters' shares and the surveys thus measured mainly decisions about watching or not watching television in general, rather than about watching a particular show or broadcaster. The history of measuring audiences in the Czechoslovak Radio is even longer and dates back to the interbellum years (Hankusová 2006).

who used it first, but it was impossible to stop people merrily and ironically calling each other "you old structure" on every possible occasion. We can only assume that it was born in the media as a part of the lustration discourse. In the context of this introduction, the usage of the phrase is not as important as the vocabulary. We will try to show that talking about "structures" (even in the quotidian situations like joking about one's friends) was not merely a slip of the tongue but an indicator of what was the main thing at stake, what was in the core of the post-socialist "structure of feeling" (Williams 2001 [orig. 1961]).

Obviously, this introduction is not about inspecting post-socialist colloquial language but about specifying the place of audience studies in Central and East European media scholarship in the post-socialist times. Still, there is a significant proximity between the two – calling others "you old structure", and the slackening of the study of media audiences (or ordinary people and their cultures in general). In the rest of the article we will argue that these seemingly distant cases are actually symptoms of the very same logic and evidence of the same prevailing paradigm.

Old socialist and new neo-capitalist determinations converge in the post-socialist condition and therefore it makes sense to search for the reasons for overlooking media audiences in the past as well as in the present.

1. Fascination with the new structures
The "transformation frenzy", as we can describe the first decade after the fall of communism in CEE, had far-reaching consequences. The process in which the whole societal skeletons were erected anew in front of one's eyes brought about a serious fascination with structures – the old dissipating ones as well as the new ones that has just started to settle down.

In media studies it resulted in narrowing the focus onto various dimensions of *media systems*. Approaching media as media systems prevailed in CEE media studies in the 1990s and early noughties. In this perspective, media was viewed as one of the social subsystems which facilitate/undermine functioning of the general social system. Post-socialist media studies simply emerged in CEE as a study of transformation of media systems on the way from authoritarian socialism to the market-based economy. The strongest focus was on the processes of privatization, both legal and informal regulation of media performance, commercialization and media management in new commercial market conditions or on the profile and protection of the public service media.

The pioneers of media studies in CEE (Splichal 1994; Sparks 1998; Gross 2002; Jakubowicz 2006; Jakubowicz and Sukosd 2008; Jirák and Köpplová 2008; Klimkiewicz 2008) typically targeted exactly the macromedia structures within the fields of legislation or economics. After 2005 the post-socialist structuralism in media studies got a new spin as a result of the work of Daniel Hallin and Paolo Mancini (2004).[2] The Hallin-and-Mancinian vibe legitimated and boosted the already existing preoccupation with the parameters of media systems in CEE and simultaneously posed a new question about the autonomy

---

2   This approach – which was at first perhaps more intuitive than connected to the trends of the international media studies scene – got further galvanized when Hallin and Mancini published their work *Comparing media systems* (2004) and when it was translated into the Czech (2008). Hallin and Mancini mention the three media systems, but they designed them for the world in which the post-Soviet bloc is "hic sun leones" type of territory. In other words, they do not cover this region with their typology. It opened up the gap that had to be filled and brought about a further reinforcement of the structuralist focus on media system (Dobek-Ostrowska and Glowacki 2008; Dobek-Ostrowska, Glowacki, Jakubowicz and Sukosd 2009).

of CEE as a distinctive media system (not recognized as such by the forefathers of this theory themselves).

2. ...as well as the old structures

Another source of structuralism in post-socialist media studies was grounded in uncovering the media's role during the state socialist past. The former state socialism was, again, made identical with and reduced to its structures. This kind of enquiry in media history demonstrated itself as the study of totalitarian media laws, regulations, regimentations, and documented enactments of power and hierarchies (Goban-Klas 1994; Končelík, Večeřa and Orság 2010). Looking back at the communist regime was nothing other than dismantling its structures. In fact, the state socialism was made identical with its structures. Ideology and politics (curiously, economics less so) were taken to be the core structures of the state socialism that must be thoroughly studied if we wanted to learn about the past. The contemporary history, political science, sociology (as well as media studies) looked at formal, institutionalized aspects of the structures of the vanishing world. Very rarely academics paid attention to the people that inhabited the structures, those that made them last or (less likely) change. The struggle of oral history for its legitimate existence and research on the life stories, witnesses and memories of the so called normalization period in Czechoslovakia can be seen as an example of the stubbornness from the side of structuralism.

It was not only academics who took the social structures as the only relevant social element to look at. Popular fantasy also lacked potential and experience to think beyond social structures. Any spontaneous democratic action coming from the people themselves was unthinkable within the official political discourse orchestrated by the communist party. The concept of "citizenship" was recognized by the socialist constitutions; it was, however, mutilated into the definition of "socialist citizenship" under which civil rights were limited and political rights entirely eliminated. The concepts of participation, democratic action or popular engagement were largely unknown to the newly post-socialist mentality. Social structures were given such importance in the past as well as in the new present so that people saw their own agency as irrelevant.

3. Tyranny of structuralism

To summarize, this introduction diagnoses the chronic ignorance of media audiences and their cultures in post-socialist media studies in CEE and connects it to the regionally specific "tyranny" of structuralism. The question why structuralist analysis was not complemented by a more culturalist view of media audiences in the outbreak of CEE media studies will always be speculation. Nevertheless, the prevalence of structuralism can be interpreted as akin to neoliberal hegemony. Audiences as carriers of their specific agency did not fit into the CEE triumphant transformational narratives which sought to legitimize the neocapitalist orientation and required bold and clearly manifested changes (typically substitution of old structures by new ones). Cultural renditions of media audiences, on the contrary, see media cultures as sites of human agency – reservoirs of semiotic and/or civic energy which reluctantly accumulate in off-centre provinces; minute, fragile and volatile practices (Reifová, Hladík and Gillárová 2012; Reifová 2010). Enquiry into media cultures leaves out transformations of societal frameworks and takes care of transformations

of meanings and identities. This kind of knowledge seemed to be incompatible with, or irrelevant to hegemonic requirements related to the constitution of neocapitalism in CEE.

4. ...and how to complement it

Here, in this special issue, we bring together six studies of media audiences that are focused on Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe and the particularities of this region. The presented collection of articles is varied, in terms of the research questions, methodologies used and research methods, but they are brought together by their interest in media audiences in the region of post-socialist Europe. They show that the label "post-socialist state" can be experienced differently in each state. Despite having shared a common political ideology to a certain degree in the past, the everyday of media use differs for audiences in each post-socialist state because of each country's distinct experience of socialism, as well as their subsequent pathway in relation to political change and transition, which are in many cases inseparable from nation-building processes as well. Hence, putting together this collection of research allows us to see the emerging field of audience research in post-socialist Europe and to identify similarities, particularly among the questions that most concern researchers in these societies, the answers to which reveal similarities as well as differences.

The two first articles are concerned with media use within a broader political context, dealing with the question of how political regimes and influence are interwoven with the way media are used. The aspect of political transformation is indeed important for the European post-socialist countries. The same society and public sphere is shared by citizens and media audiences that formed their opinions within two different political systems – either through personal lived experience, or by growing up in a new system in transition that is however formed by those brought up in the old systems.

We open the issue with an article by Zrinjka Peruško, Dina Vozab and Antonija Čuvalo that bridges the strong focus of media research within Central and Eastern Europe on media systems and the less prominent interest in media audiences. Rather than focusing on the analysis of media structures at the macro level, they suggest an alternative model of categorising European media systems based on audiences' behaviour and audiences' agency at the micro level. Building on the typology of media systems and the structural variables described in Hallin and Mancini's (2004) model, this innovative approach compares data from European countries to show that when differences in audiences' practices are taken into account, especially in the use of digital media, the countries are clustered differently than suggested by the Hallin and Mancini (2004) model and they "cluster along the North/South divide of wealth and development, and not along the East/West divide of old and new democracy."

Alina Dobreva's article focuses on aspects of socialisation and the transition to democracy, and their influence on people's perception of information and their ability to employ it in the everyday evaluation of political regimes. She uses quasi-experimental research methods to gather data not only from people with different political orientations (left/right) but also with different experiences of political socialisation (in the old/new regime). This creates an interesting matrix of respondents that allow her to further explore their perception and evaluation of political information. Focusing on the case of Bulgaria, her research shows that the supporters of the left socialised under the new democratic regime show a

higher degree of political sophistication due to the bigger societal pressure and need to justify their political views and opinion. Importantly, the presented data also indicates that although there is the support for the democratic regime in principle across all the groups of respondents, there is also a "potential threat of erosion of this support because of the intensive dissatisfaction with the regime's performance amongst all groups."

The following two articles remind us that audiences in post-socialist countries did not only have to deal with political transformation, but often this was accompanied by a need to build a new national identity, as many new states were born. Jānis Juzefovičs in his article studies the television news preferences of the Russian-speaking minority in Latvia, while Lucia Vesnić-Alujević and Nataša Simeunović Bajić in their article look into patterns of media consumption in the former Yugoslav states. Although asking different research questions, those two articles show how audience research in post-socialist countries allows us to better understand cultural meanings and the role of media in particular contexts that was previously only assumed. When ethnic groups that once formed part of the same country find themselves as minorities when national boundaries are redrawn, their understandings of the shared cultural context of the past and the new structures and practices of the present become contested. Jānis Juzefovičs importantly shows in his research that the "immersion of the Russian-speaking viewers in transnational television from Russia is not evidence of their lack of interest in the national life of Latvia, nor absence of their national allegiance to Latvia."

The last two articles included in this special issue draw on approaches much more aligned with cultural studies to offer yet another angle on how to conceptualise the role of media in the audiences' everyday. Firstly, Laura Visan offers an interesting insight into the historic media use of Romanian children during the Ceauşescu era and shows how they "appropriated and renegotiated the propaganda messages that the Romanian Communist Party communicated through media artefacts targeting children". Her focus on the everyday practices of media use and employment of de Certeau's (1988) theory of tactics of use, and echoing Hall's seminal work on encoding and decoding, reveals how propagandistic messages targeted to children are still polysemic texts that offer ground for de Certeau's tactics of interpretation.

Last, but not least, Zuzana Skřepská brings a study of the contemporary audiences, employing yet another analytical method – a discursive analysis. Her study is concerned with the reception of a specialized commercial television programme screened in the waiting rooms of gynaecology clinics. Here, she deals with a very specific audience – the patients and visitors in the waiting rooms of the gynaecological clinics and how they receive and interpret those programmes. Despite being concerned with reception of a very specific media programme, and also a very specific context of media consumption, her study also points to important topics that are part of the post-socialist audience research's mix of questions and interests, namely, audiences' ability, literacy, to understand media content and its change in its broader societal, economic, political and ideological context. The last study allows us to see that this is not only a question of mainstream media, but also of those that are very specific and seemingly marginal.

This special issue is far from being a complete insight or an overview of what audience research in the European post-socialist region has to offer and is interested in; rather, this special issue aspires to initiate a debate not only among the researchers within the

region, but also open it to others. There are times when the imaginary East/West barrier is still in place, in "our" mind, as "we" feel "we" are different, "we" have different historical experiences, and it is possible "they" feel the same. However, this particular context of historic experience and consciousness should be explored and reflected not only in the research of media structures and systems, but also, if not more importantly, in the re-search of media audiences, everyday media practices, and the role and use of media for establishing national, as well as, individual identities. Audience research can also help us to acknowledge the role of context in research, and thus to ask about the role of ideology in media use, but also in media research. Let this special issue be one that raises more questions than it will answer and contribute to the establishment of a profound debate on media audiences within the Central and Eastern European context. We want to thank all those who helped us with this issue to happen – the authors, but also the reviewers. We wish you an inspiring read.

Irena Reifová is the editor of this special issue and an assistant professor and a researcher at the Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Media Studies. She works as a research coordinator and teaches courses on critical media theories, cultural studies and media audiences. Her major scholarly interests are in television popular culture, and she fo-cuses especially on Czechoslovak and Czech serial television fiction. She is a vice-chair of ECREA CEE Network and a member of the editorial board of the Communication Management Quarterly (Serbia).

Tereza Pavlíčková is the editor of this special issue. She is a PhD student at the Charles University in Prague, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Media Studies, writing her thesis on audien-ces' understanding of the author and its role in the process of interpretation. Her primer interest is in audience and reception research, exploring audiences' interpretation of media content in the current media environment.

References

Ang, Ien. 1991. *Desperately Seeking the Audience.* London: Routledge.
DigiZone. *Jak se z diváka dělá koláč.* http://www.digizone.cz/clanky/jak-se-z-divaka-dela-kolac/ (28.10. 2013)
de Certeau, Michel. 1988. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
Dobek-Ostrowska, Boguslawa – Glowacki, Michal – Jakubowicz, Karol – Sukosd, Miklos (eds.). 2009. *Comparative Media Systems: European and Global Perspectives.* Budapest: CEU Press.

Dobek-Ostrowska, Boguslawa – Glowacki, Michal (eds.). 2008. *Comparing Media Systems in Central Europe.* Wydawnictvo Uniwersytetu Wroclawskiego.

Goban-Klas, Tomasz. 1994. *The Orchestration of the Media: The Politics of Mass Communications in Communist Poland and the Aftermath.* Boulder: Westview Press.

Gross, Peter. 2002. *Entangled Evolutions.* Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press.

Hallin, Daniel – Mancini, Paolo. 2004. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hallin, Daniel – Mancini, Paolo. 2008. *Systémy médií v postmoderním světě.* Praha: Portál.

Hall, Stuart. 2001 [1973] "Encoding/decoding". Pp. 166–176 in *Media and Cultural Studies Keyworks*, ed. by Meenakshi Gigi Durham – Douglas M. Kellner. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Hankusová, Veronika. 2006. *Vývoj výzkumu rozhlasových posluchačů v Československu a v České republice.* Praha: Karolinum.

Jakubowicz, Karol – Sukosd, Miklos (eds.) 2008. *Finding the Right Place on the Map.* Bristol: Intellect.

Jakubowicz, Karol. 2006. *Rude Awakening: Social and Media Change in Central and Eastern Europe.* Cresskill: Hampton Press.

Jirák, Jan – Köpplová, Barbara. 2008. "Slovníkové heslo: Czech republic: Media System." Pp. 1162–1164 in *International Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. by Wolfgang Donsbach. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

Klimkiewicz, Beata. 2008. "Media Pluralism and Enlargement: the Limits and Potential for Media Policy Change." Pp. 81–104 in *The European Union and the Culture Industries: Regulation and the Public Interest*, ed. by David Ward. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.

Končelík, Jakub – Večeřa, Pavel – Orság, Petr. 2010. *Dějiny českých médií: od počátků do současnosti.* Praha: Portál.

Reifová, Irena. 2010. "Rerunning and 'Rewatching' Socialist TV Drama Serials: Post-socialist Czech Television Audiences Between Commodification and Reclaiming the Past." *Critical Studies of Television*, 4(2): 53–71.

Reifová, Irena – Hladík, Radim – Gillárová, Kateřina. 2012. "The Way We Appauded: How Popular Culture Stimulates Collective Memory of the Socialist Past – the Case of the Television Serial Vyprávěj and Its Viewers." Pp. 199–221 in *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, ed. by Timothy Havens – Anikó Imre – Katalin Lustyik. London: Routledge.

Sparks, Colin. 1998. *Communism, Capitalism and the Mass Media.* London: Sage.

Splichal, Slavko. 1994. *Media Beyond Socialism: Theory and Practice in East-central Europe.* Jackson: Westview press.

Williams, Raymond. 2001. *The Long Revolution.* Peterborough, Letchworth: Broadview Press.