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Researching Media Audience in Croatia: an Uncharted Territory, or just Under-theorized?

Keywords: empirical audience research, trust in the media, children and media, implied audience, Croatia

Audience as market and commodity

Audience research in Croatia in the past two decades can best be described (with few exceptions) as preoccupied with the size and demographics of the audiences of particular media or media programs. Ratings and circulation figures of audience exposure collected by market research agencies (among the largest are GfK, AGB Nielsen, Puls Media) are hard to come by on a regular basis, as they are not published or otherwise put in the public domain. Only television audiences are continuously monitored with a consistent methodology (the Nielsen's people-meter started in 2003). Continuous monitoring exists for the popularity of Internet sites and these data are publicly available (Čuvalo in print). In the advertising perspective, the "audience as commodity" is the principal frame. For the Croatian audiences, television is the choice media for political information, followed by the printed press and Internet (GfK 2008). Internet is used by 53% of the population over 15; among Internet users, the same number would drop television as Internet if they had to choose, showing the growing importance of the Internet (GfK 2010).

Audience research in socialist Croatia pre-1990 (when she was part of the former SFR Yugoslavia) was mainly performed by media companies Audience research units (Vjesnik, the largest print media production company, and Television Zagreb, today Croatian Radio and Television HRT, had the largest outfits), aiming to better understand the likes, dislikes, and needs of their audiences. Even though it failed to develop culturally specific media studies or media theory, the research between 1960 and the end of the 1980's included the analysis of popular culture and its audiences (teen magazines, romance novels, etc.) (Senjković 2008). Senjković further reminds us, while marvelously resurrecting the debates and research about popular culture and mass media in the socialist period, that, contrary to popular belief (at least at the international level) the print media in socialist Croatia and Yugoslavia functioned according to market constraints, competed for mass audiences, and were closed down if they failed to produce the expected profit. The "dumbing down" of content of popular magazines was already in the 1960s quoted as the unfortunate result of commercialization and the competition for the attention of audiences (advertising came later).

Media use as dependent variable (the incidental audience)

Academic research has predominantly been of the social scientific character, and has investigated the media audience in terms of public opinion surveys, thus constructing the "audience" from a sample of individual citizens, and not in terms of audience as a culturally defined collective (Livingstone 1989). The main questions were related to trends of media use, in relation to different variables of personal characteristics and social or political attitudes. One such research project at the end of the 1990s (the audience was surveyed as

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part of the European Value Survey for transition countries, and the data fed into the Norris & Inglehart 2009 analysis of cosmopolitanism) aimed at showing the influence of social status and political attitudes on trust in media and media use, and showed that older men use the media for information purposes more often than women or young people (Mataušić and Rimac 2000). The relationship of the trust in the media and the frequency of media use shows that the heaviest media users (every day) have less trust in the media than those who use it only "several times a week", while the trust in the Parliament is (while very low) still a bit higher for the regular media user, as is approval of democracy as the best political system. This seems to support the "virtuous circle" theory of Norris and Inglehart (2009) on the positive impact of media use on social trust. Several findings in this study point to the conservative character of the Croatian heavy information media user in the 1990s: he is more likely than the light user to regularly participate in church, have negative attitudes to homosexuals and youth sex, and more support for "the way the country is governed" than the light information media users. No theoretical framework is offered by the authors for the interpretation of the empirical research, while brief mention exists of the S-R theory and uses and gratifications (the second, the authors think, would be a more likely explanation, but they don't say what of (Mataušić and Rimac 2000). We might add, however, that it would be interesting to expand the approach of Norris & Inglehart (2009) in authoritarian and other non-democratic regimes to see if the non-media use in a media environment with heavy political/government control (until 2000 the Tuđman government was distinctly anti-liberal with authoritarian tendencies also in the mediascape)¹ is a regular way of a social practice of dissonance (and that it is indeed the social trust that defines the media use, and not vice versa).

Lazma Posavec & Rihtar (2003) report on a panel study performed in 1998 and 2002 where the readers of leading political dailies and weeklies were compared, in a national representative probabilistic sample, according to their demographic characteristics and in relation to political attitudes. The audience behavior is framed by the uses and gratifications approach (without operationalization), and the data were collected as part of the large election related research – the media audience was not the primary research goal. The findings describe the Croatian reader of political dailies and weeklies as a younger male, with above average education, social and economic status, and with urban residence, employed or student. The study found that the readers mainly defined themselves as irregular, showing that audience loyalties to specific titles were no longer in place. Some 70 % of these readers also regularly use the public service television HRT for news and political information. The study showed a marked political division between the readers of political weeklies (*Globus*, *Nacional*, *Feral*) and one daily (*Jutarnji list*), who showed higher political participation (election) and "left" - social democrat to liberal progressive - political attitudes, from the readers with more conservative political attitudes, lower education, and rural backgrounds (*Večernji list*). The most recent study of citizens' trust in the media (performed again on a national representative sample by Media Metar for the Faculty of political science, University of Zagreb, 2009) confirms the main media choices and audience characteristics found by Lamza Posavec and Rihtar (2003). The overall audience trusts most in the radio, then TV, and then the printed press (Čuvalo 2010)

The issue of trust and opinions about the desired and acquired openness of the Croatian media system was analyzed in 2005 and 2006 within the "Index of openness of Society, where the expert survey on the state of the democratic development of the media system was complemented with a public opinion survey (Peruško 2005, Peruško 2006). The results show that about 30% of the population still do not accept democratic debate and freedom

of the media as the norm, and would support the closure of some media. The interpretation questions the possible influence of the low quality of the media (this was not tested in the population survey, but the expert survey declared a decline in the objectivity and reliability of the information media (Peruško 2006). Younger respondents however differ and in a much higher per cent accept the democratic media framework.

Special/sub-cultural audiences: children and media

How children use the media was examined in several studies over the years. Only one study used a sample which enables generalization to the whole children population - quota national sample of school children (Ilišin et al 2001, Ilišin 2003). The framework for analysis included media use in leisure time (Mikić & Rukavina 2006) in the context of the socialization effects of the media (Ilišin 2003,), reading habits (Jelušić 2005). Children (10 – 14) spend on average around 3 hours a day watching television, mainly films and series and quiz and game shows (only 7,5 % watch the educational program); choice of media is gender related (boys prefer television and computers, girls radio and magazines); content choice is predominantly entertainment, both in traditional and new media. Ilišin (2003) also examined the role of media content in communication with friends and parents, and found that media content is the largest conversation topic with friends, but much less so with parents. The frequency of peer communication about media content topics increases with school success, as does the conversation about the same topic with the father; in case of the mother, the self perceived competence of the child is not a factor, as is age (Ilišin et al. 2001, Ilišin 2003). Media treatment of children has been recognized as a sore point in the Croatian media practice, as the Ombudsman for Children showed in a recent conference presentation (Jelavić 2010). In relation to children audiences the issue of media literacy has also been highlighted (Zgrabljic Rotar 2005), but no empirical research has been published so far, to my knowledge.

The implied audience

Media policy and political economy of the media are research approaches that often imply the audience (either as the "beneficiary", or victim), but without seriously considering it (Livingstone 1998). Recent investigation of the public interest concept in Croatian television policy and its translation into diversity and pluralism in programming and socially useful programming, and audience use or benefit (in terms of the new communication policy paradigm of public liking over the public interest) attempts to transcend this omission (Peruško 2009). The results show, on the basis of interfacing the broadcast genres/program categories and their audience ratings, that the audiences lack information programs, are given too much fiction, and that the public interest is not fulfilled by commercial televisions. Similar approach was used in testing TV news for bias in the parliamentary election campaign, when the parties' "audience ratings" i.e. share of actual votes received in election were compared to the share they received in the news coverage (Peruško 2008b).

The audience is also theorized in terms of the civil society theory, where the audience/public as the active participant shares in the creation of the civil society, defined by communication practice in terms of deliberative democracy (Peruško 2008a).

In terms of Alausuutaris' depiction of three generations of media audience research in cultural studies – reception/coding-decoding, audience ethnography, and audience as a construction "entailing a broader frame within which one conceives of the media and media use" (1999:6), Croatia is a virgin territory (of course, ethnography is a common method in ethnological research, but the media has only recently been noticed as their field of potential interest, Senjković 2008).

The main common characteristic of the empirical research on media audiences undertaken in Croatia is its lack of theoretical development, especially in terms of media studies/mass communication theory. Clearly future audience research should attempt to correct this by posing theoretical questions for empirical research. For instance: how does the two-step flow of media influence work in the digital media environment?

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¹ For the development of the Croatian media system and policy in the 90's see Peruško Čulek, Zrinjka (1999) *Demokracija i mediji*, Barbat: Zagreb, and Peruško, Z. 2003. "Croatia: The first ten years. In Paletz & Jakubowitz, eds., *Business as Usual*, Hampton Press, p. 111-145. For a detailed account of the television policy and sector in contemporary Croatia see Peruško, Z. 2005. "Croatia". In *Television Across Europe: Regulation, policy and independence*. EUMAP & NMP: Budapest, and in relation to market developments in CEE see Peruško, Z., Popović, H. «Media Concentration Trends in Central and Eastern Europe». *Finding the Right Place on the Map: Central and Eastern European Media Change in Global Perspective*, Edited by Karol Jakubowicz and Miklos Sukosd, ECREA Book Series, Intellect Books, 2009.