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EXPLORING THE ROLE OF ROMANIAN TELEVISION IN
PUBLIC SPHERE (1957-1989)

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Abstract

The research regarding the history of public television in Eastern European states has focused on the issue of continuity between television in authoritarian regimes and its transformation into a public institution after 1990, since the onset of democracy. Nonetheless, there are other issues related to the construction of the public sphere and of the nation-state within the public broadcasting system which are important in order to understand the Eastern European media during the last 60 years.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the relationship between television and public sphere in 1957-1989, in Romania. Our discussion will incorporate examples from the history of the Romanian Public Television.

In Romania, the Public Television had a monopoly position spanning four decades, which saw the overlap between the ideal of ‘social unity’ and the process of nation-building. The link between culture and national culture was expressed in various broadcasting programs, essentially functioning as ‘social cement’. The public service was attributed cultural, moral and educative roles and its mission was to improve the general knowledge on issue related to society and science, but it also had a clearly stated political function. The political function was to support communism and its ideal, defined as the creation of a ‘popular democracy’. Though, the public broadcasting failed to fulfill its constitutive role in the public sphere during these four decades.

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1. Introduction

In October 2016, in the context of a stormy discussion regarding the law that was seeking to eliminate the license fee for public broadcasting in Romania, the former presidents of Public Television (SRTV) and of Public Radio Broadcaster (SRR) signed an open letter arguing why the license fee should be maintained. They stated that “the radio and television license fee is the contractual proof that the stakeholders of public television and radio are the citizens, the warranty of values that represent us a nation” (***, 2016).

This statement – evoking a Habermasian influence – underlined the connection between public broadcasting, public sphere, and nation, reasserting the importance of having media institutions that are financed directly through the contribution of every household.

As a matter of fact, in Romania as in other European countries, the license fee for radio and television has been existed since the very beginning of broadcasting on the national territory. The license fee has always been a symbolic one and has been collected through the electricity bill. The first radiocasts was made in Romania on November 1, 1928, well before the communist regime. The first television broadcast took place on the occasion of New Year’s Eve, in 1957, during the communist regime. Still, no matter the political regime, the license fee was preserved by state authorities to fund the national broadcasting system. The ceasing of this practice would be a disruptive moment in the history of Romanian public broadcasting. It may pose numerous problems in terms of guaranteeing the editorial independence of the Romanian public service of television and radio, which had an essential role in nation-building and in the construction of the public sphere. A further investigation on the history of the relation between public television and the public sphere is necessary, and this exploration is the topic of the present paper.

2. Problem Statement

In the classical perspective on the public sphere, the public communication is valid only in the presence of truth and public authority (Arendt, 1958), as it is attached to the public exercise of Reason. For Habermas (1997), the public sphere is essential in the process of democratization, constituting an empowerment source for citizens. It also refers to that part of the social life which allows citizens to debate and exchange ideas on crucial issues, pertaining to the general welfare, and having as result the active making of public opinion.

In the communist regime, the debate, as expression of social communication, was transformed by the propaganda system into a new form of indoctrination. The debates in the authoritarian system have always had an ideological content, and were developed around predictable topics. In that period, the civil society was absent, its place being taken by a series of organizations (youth organizations, women organizations, unions) that mimicked debate and dialogue. Moreover, the initiator and organizer of debate is the system itself, a complex propaganda machine, with a well-structured hierarchy (Roșca, 2012).

The extensive process of simulation of participatory democracy had as result the implementation in communist mass media of numerous mechanisms of insertion of a so-called ‘public sphere’ in the editorial strategies. Therefore, in the communist print and audiovisual media there were present, on a daily basis, the opinions of the “representatives” of the People: prominent scientists, teachers, workers,

who stood for the “voice” of nation. This discursive mechanism had the role of underlining the solidarity of people, united under the umbrella of official Marxist-Leninist ideology (Roșca, 2010). It also emphasized the need for involvement from the part of citizens in the process of building of the new Socialist society, in a powerful and independent nation.

The ideological discourse of media disseminated a simulated democratic participation and made possible the communication strategies that legitimized the status quo, and encouraged the personality cult and the presence of national themes, that were transformed into ideological vectors of the Romanian national-communism in the 1980s (Gabanyi, 2003).

The preparation of the setting and the writing of the scenario for opinion exchange were used as discursive strategies to simulate the social communication based on negotiation and debate. From the sociological and philosophical perspective, social communication is totally absent, in authoritarian systems. The symbolic construction of a public and democratic life – with decisions taken by citizens, as a result of public dialogue – was one of the ideological strategies used by the official propaganda. The short and long term effects were the spread of disinformation among citizens, in the public space, and their alienation, in private space. When the public sphere is mystified, then the private sphere is affected by alienation. To illustrate this phenomenon, we previously used for analysis (Roșca, 2010) the published diaries of Romanian intellectuals who shared their living experiences in communism: on professional evolution (Gabanyi, 2003), censorship (Tănase, 2002), private sphere (Mălăncioiu, 2003), surveillance of private sphere (Șerbănescu, 2002). The following argument builds upon the above-mentioned analysis and also adds empirical data from another type of written sources: the public television’s lists of programs (from 1963 to 1989).

The analysis of the Romanian public sphere from the communist period shows that this was monopolized by the official discourse, and there was no alternative to public sphere (as the Roman Catholic Church in other Eastern European states), and also no opposition sphere, as the *Solidarność* (Solidarity) in Poland (Jakubowicz, 1991). There was still an exterior form of the public sphere of opposition in Romania, shaped by the editorial team of Radio Free Europe and Voice of America, by diaspora, and by the Romanian dissidents whose messages were broadcasted to Romanians by the above mentioned radio institutions (see, also, Badenoch, Fickers & Heinrich-Franke, 2013). Within the country, the numerous institutions of Secret Police (Securitate) made impossible any coagulation of a vocal opposition with democratic visibility and social function (Roșca, 2012).

Research on the history of public television from former communist states focused on the issue of continuity between what television was in the authoritarian regime, and what it became with the advent of democracy, after 1990. Additionally, it made prominent the difficulty of accessing television archives (Bignell & Fickers, 2008; Havens, Imre & Lustyic, 2012; Mustață, 2012; Matei, 2015).

The relation between the construction of public sphere and nation within the public broadcasting system is also of importance for understanding the media of the last 60 years. We argue that studying the relationship between television and public sphere in communist Romania is important for a comprehensive overview on the challenges of Eastern Europe public television today.

3. Research Questions

What is the relationship between television as an institution and the public sphere between 1957 and 1989, in Romania?

In what way the public television participated - or not - to the construction of the public sphere in Romania, in 1957-1989?

What roles fulfilled the television in an authoritarian society?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present paper will approach the situation of the television between 1960 and 1980, in Romania, seeking to present a coherent illustration of the relationship between television and public sphere in Eastern European countries during this period of time.

5. Research Methods

This paper is based upon a review of the functions of public television. For analysis and illustration we used two types of sources: (1) the published diaries of five Romanian intellectuals (Gabanyi, 2003; Mălăncioiu, 2003; Rădulescu 2013; Tănase, 2002; Șerbănescu, 2002) offering insights into their experiences during communism, and (2) the television's lists of programs, from: 1963, 1968, 1973, 1978, 1983, and 1988, available at the online database: <https://tvarheolog.wordpress.com/>.

6. Findings

The definition of public television is based, in Europe, on the British Broadcasting Company's (BBC) experience. The BBC started as a radio company back in the early 1920s, and the concept of public service was originally "a set of ad hoc, practical arrangements" (Scannel, 1990, p. 12). According to Scannel (1990), starting with 1923, all the successive British broadcasting committees made efforts to formulate the general functions of public broadcast.

The public broadcast was seen as a "valuable form of public property" and as a "potential power over public opinion and the life of the nation [that] ought to remain with the state" (Sykes 1923, quoted in Scannell, 1990, p. 12). Therefore, as Scannel (1990, p. 13) summarizes:

The definition of broadcasting as a public utility, and the mandate to develop it as a national service in the public interest, came from the state.

The functions of the public broadcast were attached to the idea of maintaining high standards of production (with an emphasis on information, not on entertainment) and on the preservation of high standards of morality (with an emphasis on forming the public taste):

Broadcasting had a responsibility to bring into the greatest possible number of homes in the fullest degree all that was best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour, and achievement (Scannel, 1990, p. 13).

Last, but not least, as Scannell argues, the public broadcast had a social and political function:

By providing a common access for all to a wide range of public events and ceremonies – a royal wedding, the FA Cup Final, the last night of the Proms, for example – broadcasting would act as a kind of social cement binding people together in the shared idioms of a public, corporate, national life.

But, more than this, broadcasting had an immense potential for helping in the creation of an informed and enlightened democracy. It enabled men and women to take an interest in many things from which they had previously been excluded (Scannel, 1990, p. 14).

Besides the social cohesion function above mentioned, the public television was seen as the main element for the “formation of an informed and reasoned public opinion as an essential part of the political process in a mass democratic society” (Scannel, 1990, p. 14).

To summarize, the ideal public broadcast should have three main functions when it comes to production: to inform the general public, to educate it, and to provide high quality entertainment; there are three more functions in terms of social organization: to promote morality, to be the social cement of the nation and to contribute to the development of the public sphere. These functions conceived for radio broadcasts were transferred to public television, and were in place until the late 1970s when the monopoly of public television started to fade out in Western Europe. The BBC model also influenced the configuration of public television in the Eastern European countries. It is the case of Romania, where the BBC model can be traced in the content of TV productions of the 1960s and also, in the organization of the TV production itself (Mustață, 2012, p. 134; Nicolau, 2009, p. 23).

The idea of a public television as “social and political tool” is still present in the contemporary discourse on public television’s functions (Iosifidis, 2012, p. 6). Other functions, besides those of social cohesion and enhancing democratic process, were clarified or added:

preservation and promotion of national culture and heritage, editorial independence and accountability, and serving the needs of an increasingly multi-cultural society (Iosifidis, 2012, p. 8).

The Public Television had a monopoly position from 1957 to 1989 in Romania, and, in the given period, the ideal of “social unity” was joined to the idea of “national construction”.

The Romanian Public Television was an important tool in simulating social communication and debate during the socialist times. The television fascinated many people at its beginnings in Romania, including opinion leaders and intellectuals (Pârvulescu, 2003; Sebastian, 1935, p. 3). The TV set as object was used in Romania starting with 1956, December 31, when the first broadcast took place from a studio located in a residential district. As Mustață (2013, p. 107) explains, the television service “was placed under the supervision of Radio and Television Committee of the Council of Ministers, which served as an intermediary body between the broadcasting institution and the state”.

We choose to analyze the functions of public television in relation with the historical periods of communism in Romania. Therefore, for the analysis of discourses publicized by the television we distinguish three periods: the beginnings (1957-1963), the period between 1960-1970s, and the 1980s.

The beginnings coincide with the process of de-Stalinization of Romanian society, after the death of the Soviet leader. This period was characterized by continuous technological development, innovative formats and new televisual discourses. Nowadays, in “TVR 60”, a public broadcasting series celebrating the anniversary of 60 years of television in Romania, it is referred as the “romantic” period of Romanian

Television. In this period, the entertainment wins the viewers by its novelty in the daily life, as well as by the approached subjects. It also materializes the function of social cohesion: the reduced number of the TV sets encouraged people to gather for watching the national television broadcasts. The personal experience of L. Rosca, one of the coauthors of the present paper was that of a person that lived in the 1960s, in Bucharest, on Floreasca district, in a block of flats where, there was only one family that owned a TV set. The inhabitants of the block of flats gathered at that family flat to watch television. The places were limited, so the room was overcrowded most of the time. In front of the TV set, the neighbors had many interesting conversations about television programs.

The ideological TV programmes took turns with the cultural and sportive ones. For example, the first televised theater representation taking place at the National Theater of Bucharest (1957), the first outside broadcasting made with a mobile unit at the concert of the French singer Yves Montand (1957) were followed by an event with great ideological significance: the broadcasting of the launching of Sputnik I, the first artificial satellite of the Earth (Păsăilă, 2004, pp. 255-256).

The increasing number of live broadcasts from stadiums, schools, or auditoriums brought a growing number of Romanian people in front of TV sets, multiplied the entertainment options, and brought color (read “black and white screens”) to the dull existences of people, fundamentally transforming their daily lives (Strinu, 2011).

At the end of the 1960s, watching television became a habit, influencing the Romanians’ lifestyle and their way of understanding reality. We agree with Mustață (2013) that this was the “golden age” of public television. The amount of hours of live coverage grew along with the number of subscribers. Between 1957 and 1971 the television subscriptions went from 2,897 to 1.7 million (Păsăilă, 2004, p. 256). The 1970s, overlapping with the so-called ideological “thaw” of the Eastern Bloc, constituted a flourishing decade for the Romanian Television. The ideological “thaw” was co-extensive with more generous time slots allocated to entertainment, cultural and educational programs (Strinu, 2011). College graduates with excellent results were hired as reporters and TV producers.

However, what the public saw on the screen was just a symbolic image projected by the ideologues of that time. Ileana Mălăncioiu, a Romanian writer, recalled how she started to work at the National Television, in 1968, after she had graduated in Philosophy:

The Russians have entered in Czechoslovakia and the building (of the television) was surrounded by the army. This situation augmented my emotion... Although we were in a period of relative freedom, the censorship was harder than in other newsrooms, and it wasn't easy for me to work there, but until I had finished my three years stint I had no other solution (Mălăncioiu, 2003, p. 44).

The information provided by Mălăncioiu indicates how since the beginning of the Romanian National Television, including during the so-called period of “thaw”, the ideologues were aware of the force that the television exerted on the masses and they operationalized the ideological function in various ways: by concealing facts, by staging great events of patriotism and nationalism and through the convenient paralleling of reality. In the midst of the ideological script, the public was enjoying entertainment programs, Sunday shows, sports, scientific and educational broadcasts without being aware of the enormous efforts that the television professionals were making to avoid censorship. Of course, by comparison to the hard period of Stalinism, it seemed like a dream come true for the majority of

Romanians, as they had access to pop-music, including to international performers, to soft news stories and TV programs on the subject of contemporary literature. Also, it should be noted that the Romanian Television was the only Eastern European broadcaster to offer live coverage for the descent on the Moon of Neil Armstrong on the 20th of July, 1969 (Aldea, 2011).

The extraordinary attachment to the National Television originates in that period as the nostalgia for its live transmissions, pertaining to the older generations of viewers. It is a timespan in which the regime makes available a soft content alternative to the strong ideologically marked public sphere, precisely by emphasizing the educational, cultural, entertainment and informative functions of television. A few examples: the programmes for musical education of Iosif Sava, the educational documentaries of Leonard Bernstein, the scientific shows of Andrei Bacalu and the film reviews of Ecaterina Oproiu, who introduced the *Telecinemateca* every Wednesday. Last but not least, we should remind the productions of Tudor Vornicu, who was an exceptional TV producer, a legend of the Romanian television (Badulescu, 2014).

Since 1971, July 6, when the Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu delivered the speech know as *July Theses* (Romanian: *Tezele din iulie*), until 1977, when the National Council of Romanian Broadcasting was created, the television professionals were able to maintain to some degree the functions that define mass-media, despite the strengthened ideological supervision. This is to say that they managed to keep the public sphere open to – given the circumstances - modest forms of alternative communication. After 1977, these attempts were suppressed and, from 1985 later on, the Romanian National Television broadcasted only for two hours per day.

In the 1980s, public communication was completely obstructed, becoming opaque, and television broadcasts mostly had the ideological function. This is the period when the national-communist doctrine and the personality cult of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu reached the highest levels (Gabanyi, 2003). The programmes of the National Television were overflowed with celebrations of the presidential couple. Other programmes were occasioned by national festivities and dedicated to national heroes, and punctuated by the discourses of Nicolae Ceaușescu. The two hours were rigorously allocated: the *Telejurnal/Newscast* - lasting no more than 20 minutes, followed by political reports, specializing amongst others in the visits of the presidential couple, the show *Cântarea României/Praising Romania* (Petrescu, 2011) and, sometimes, a scientific broadcast. The domination of propaganda, the informational scarcity and the everyday bleakness generated the citizens' attitudes of rejection towards television.

The sociologist Sorin M. Rădulescu observed in his diary published in 2003:

Thursday, 29th of September, 1988 – the streets are empty, in the dark hours of 10 p.m. people are cautious to talk; they only say jokes. Instead, when it comes to the national official channels, you can hear merely words, words. At television you can't see anything but factories, plants, building sites, workers who declare their adhesion or cite the official catechism; in radiocasts, in meetings, in the newspapers' pages you keep finding the same things (Rădulescu, 2013, pp. 21-22).

Further: "It is impossible to watch television" (Rădulescu, 2013, p. 30). Consequently, the television's function of social cohesion is drastically reduced even though there are ample live coverages from national festivities or from the sports events (football competitions or the Olympic games). The absence of current affairs programs and entertainment shows, the absence of social criticism (one of the

few programs that focused on social investigation, *Reflector/Spotlight*, was removed from the television's list of programs at the end of the 70s, Mustață, 2012, p. 136), and the two hours/day broadcast weakened the social cohesion, emphasizing the feeling of alienation and the accumulation of frustration at social level.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to discuss the relationship between television and public sphere between 1957-1989, in Romania. The discussion was illustrated with examples taken from the history of the Romanian Public Television.

The Public Television had a monopoly position for more than 40 years in Romania, and, in the given period, the ideal of "social unity" was joined to the idea of "national construction". The linking between television and nation was given expression in various broadcasting programs, considered to be the appropriate material for the "social cement" role. The public service was seen as a cultural, moral and educational force for the improvement of general knowledge on society and science, but it also had a clearly stated political function (related to the ideal of communism defined as "popular democracy").

Nevertheless, during communist times, the public broadcasting failed to fulfil its role of part of the public sphere. The analysis of the Romanian public sphere from the communist period shows that it was monopolized by the official discourse, to which there was no alternative. The extensive process of simulation of participatory democracy had as result the implementation in public television's editorial strategies of numerous mechanisms of creation of a so-called "public sphere". The ideological discourse of television made possible the communication strategies that legitimized the status quo, and eventually encouraged the personality cult and the over-growing presence of national themes in public broadcast. This simulation of democratic participation differentiates the public television from Eastern Europe from its Western counterpart.

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