

Raluca Petre¹

Media Theory and Reception Specificities in Romania²

Abstract: In this paper I problematize the specificity of the dynamic between producers and receptors in a post-communist European country, Romania. In the first part of the paper I contextualize the institutional setting of media in Europe, and the CEE. I further attempt to explore the validity of the three „preferred reading” positions Stuart Hall identified in relation to media messages: the dominant hegemonic position, the negotiated code and the oppositional code. The main point of exploration is the contestation of the hegemonic and its meanings after the fall of communism. This paper attempts to reveal the institutionalization and naturalization of the commercial code in the years following the fall of communism and the underdevelopment of oppositional or negotiated readings of this emerging code, at least up to the moment.

Keywords: preferred reading, media policy, audience position, contested hegemony

Introduction

Since the development of the second wave of research on media effects and media reception (McQuail 2008: 393-419), it has become common knowledge that audiences are active participants in the process of media messages decoding. This stream of research has as well reached the conclusion that the media messages belong to the producers up to the moment that they are released via various media of communication. After they are broadcasted or printed, media messages enter in the universe of the receptors that actively decode them, in various symbolizing systems, according to their own cultural and social background. This is an optimistic view on the power of the audience, that came to reduce the worries that war propaganda and its power of mobilization had raised in the first years of research on media effects and power over the receptors.

In this paper I problematize the specificity of the dynamic between producers and receptors in the post-communist context, with a special focus on Romania. I attempt to explore the validity of the three „preferred reading” positions Stuart Hall identified in

¹ Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania

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relation to media messages: the dominant hegemonic position, the negotiated code and the oppositional code. The main point of exploration is the contestation of the hegemonic and its meanings after the fall of communism.

The European policy background of reception

Starting from the '80, the philosophy of media policy has started to change at the level of the European Union, from cultural and educational to free market and competition. According to media scholar Kevin Williams, "Politics has played a crucial role in the restructuring of Europe's media landscape. Since the late 1970's, the election of European governments, of both left and right, committed to a free market ideology has been of great significance in shaping the development of the European media. They have passed legislation which has resulted in the liberalization and deregulation of the media industries". (2005, p.10) The driving idea has been the liberalization of the market, in order to prepare the ground for diverse and accessible media products. The result, in the words of Denis McQuail, has been a 'large-scale, low cost and low taste' media production (in Williams, 2005: 17)

In the last three decades, the main European ethos of public broadcasting has started to be increasingly permeated by commercial and competition desiderata. This phenomenon occurred in the context of the growing competition from the American media industries, Europe losing ground in this domain. "The flow of US material has increased rapidly, accelerating with the arrival of satellite and cable television (...) threatening the industrial base of European media and cultural production." (Williams, 2005:14-5)

The grounds on which the trend towards the liberalization of the media market has occurred were the principles of the right for free movement of products and goods, cultural goods included. In this respect, a number of law suits have set the precedent for further opening the circulation and production of commercially viable media products in the space of the European Union in the early nineties (Jones, 2004:157-177) .

The way to legislate the new trends of liberalization has been via specific policy, the main result being the Directive *Television without frontiers*³. In this document, the cultural protection of the European space is undertaken by a compulsory percentage of European media products to be present in the public broadcaster's programs of the European Union Member States.

At the same time, this measure, considered by the supporters of the free market as protectionist, has come under the fierce attack of the United States; that has been repeatedly trying to impose the principle of free exchange of goods during the free trade agreement negotiations. Nevertheless, France has managed to obtain, after stubborn negotiations, the introduction of the 'cultural exception' that would thus prevent the overwhelming cheap imports from the USA, and increasingly Mexico and India. The 'cultural exception' principle would set a base for European media products, considered first of all cultural

³ http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/glossary/television_without_frontiers_en.htm

products, and only secondly products to be traded⁴. This situation is thus delimiting the media offer available at the European Union level. The principle of cultural exception thus excludes the cultural products, media products included, to be freely traded on the market, considering that they have both an economic as well as a symbolic dimension. The latter cannot have its price set in the very process of exchange, considering its intrinsic, untradeable characteristics, like aesthetic value, national identity values and the like.

The post-communist background of reception

It is useful to understand why Romania did not emulate the ‘cultural exception’ point in her own negotiations on trade, especially with the USA, and with what consequences in terms of the media offer on the Romanian market. Preliminary data show that by the middle of the nineties, more than eighty percent of the offer on the Romanian commercial media was from the USA (Munteanu 2006). It is moreover interesting to observe how media policy in Romania has followed the trend of liberalization already in place in Europe since the '80 after the fall of communism. I take into consideration in this respect the specific legacies of the region and the context of emerging out of a communist system and logic.

From my doctoral research (Petre, 2009) I have to say that Romania has been ready to embrace the free market ideas after the fall of communism. This approach was not set against cultural priorities, but in the name of a newly gained freedom; of expression, of circulation, and so on. The logic was that of “free expression of opinion through the organs of an independent press as a vital protection against the despotic usage of the power of the state.” (Thompson, 1996: 70)⁵

The commercial media dimension was not apparent in the early nineties, when the opening of the region took place. It was in the same period that trade agreements were signed, the ‘cultural exception’ not being a priority for many of the policy actors in the region. The commercial exchanges with the USA have been taking place on the basis of a bilateral commercial agreements signed in the early nineties. These agreements have allowed CEE countries to benefit from special custom facilities. On the other hand, since the integration in the European Union structures, these facilities are no longer valid (Abraham, 2006: 181). CEE countries did not raise the ‘cultural exception’.

This situation did have consequences once CEE started the negotiations on the 20th chapter on Culture and Broadcasting Policy with the European Union. One of the

⁴ for a comprehensive discussion on the specificity of symbolic goods in the era of industrialization see Walter Benjamin in *Illuminations*, cap. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

⁵ John B. Thompson, in note 44 of chapter 2 of the book *Media and Modernity*, suggests the following readings on this topic: James Mill, “Liberty of the Press” in *Essays on Government, Jurisprudence, Liberty of the Press and Law of Nations* (New York, Kelly, 1976); John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty” in *Utilitarianism, On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government*, HB.Acton (ed.) (London, Dent, 1972)

requirements of the EU was that CEE countries should change the trade agreement so that they could fit into the European 'quota philosophy'.

The countries in Central and Eastern Europe have been generally positive on the perspective of liberalization, they opened their markets and many media private investors occupied the newly emerged niche, in the context of the general liberalization in Europe. In the specific context of Eastern European countries "a legacy of censorship and tight media control during the Communist era led to a relatively broad political acceptance of deregulatory media policies after 1989. Privatization of press companies lay at the very center of the Government's response to the problem of the monopolistic and centralized media system" (Media Ownership Report, 2003: 372). These countries followed the commercial trend and there has been no public discussion on the issue of 'cultural exception'.

One of the advantages of the market driven institutional design is that it is simple. It envisages the basic structure for containing free and fair exchange, thus not involving complicated structures. From this point of view, few monitoring organizations are designed to keep the balance, but not to interfere. This design is as well easy to export and fairly uncomplicated to implement, as it does not involve the reshaping and costly interventions in the already existing structures and procedures, but the implementation of freshly new ones. Thus, the burden of legacy and bureaucracy is avoided, and the efficiency is potentially high with a minimum of resources involved. The market based institutional design was the one that replaced the already obsolete communist, state driven one after the fall of communism in all the realms of the society, media included.

State vs. public vs. commercial media systems

In the context of the transformations that occurred all over Europe since the eighties, several issues have become prominent. Thus, in Western Europe the main debate was about the utility of a public system versus the utility of the commercial system. In the context of the popularity of market driven economies, the arguments of accessibility that a commercial system would make possible, prevailed.

In CEE, after the fall of communism, the main line of transformation was that from a state system to a commercial one, in the name of freedom and the limitation of political interferences into the media system. In this case as well, the commercial media structures prevailed. It is thus visible that even if from different directions, one can witness a convergence between East and West in imagining the media and its functioning, even if for different reasons.

At the same time, what is to be briefly introduced here is the discussion that has not really occurred in CEE, namely the distinction between public and state media systems. The common element in the two cases is governmental spending and support. Nevertheless, while a public media system is built on a bottom up logic, with public accountability running high, a state media system is constructed on a top down logic, public scrutiny not being really considered. This is, in my opinion, the fundamental difference and misunderstanding in the process of media transformation. In CEE countries, the general

understanding that has become institutionalized is that of the *audience as consumer accountability*, rather than that of the *audience as citizen accountability*. We see thus, the emerging centrality of commercial media systems and its audience driven logic.

The position of the audience in Romania before 1989

During communism the ideological priorities were setting the media agenda in a centrally planned, top to down, institutionalized manner. The audience was an almost hidden part in the larger communicational circuit. Audience research was not largely and especially not commercially developed⁶. The audience was not an integral part in the media message production, but the abstract and dogmatic communist principles and ideology were setting the media messages direction. From this point of view, the structural premises for a divorce between the producers and the receptors did exist from the beginning.

Television was introduced in Romania in 1956 as a public service, being thus congruent with the other European countries. In the first years, the volume of television programs available to the Romanian public had been high, only to decrease to two hours of program in the late eighties. One of the specificities of the media programs, especially in the last decade of communism, was the low entertainment offer.

The realization that comedies were more popular than the news with Ceausescu, ultimately led to the reduction of the resources of the media research centre that had functioned within the public broadcaster by the end of the seventies. The system was not ready to face the fact that its ideological messages were not popular, thus acted upon the audience research, yet not fitting the messages to the audience demands.

Stuart Hall perceptively argues that “The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry – that is, the degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange – depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the ‘personifications’, encoder-producer and decoder-receiver (...) The lack of fit between the codes has a great deal to do with the structural differences or relation and position between broadcasters and audiences, but it also has something to do with the asymmetry between the codes of ‘source’ and ‘receiver’ at the moment of transformation into and out of the discursive form.” (1980: 54)

The lack of fit between the code of the producers and that of the receivers under communism would have as side effect the awareness of the receptors about the ideological priorities and hegemonic position of the encoders/producers. The code of the communist media producers was a triumphal one, about the continuous progress of socialism, the code of the receiver was set in the context of increasing economic privations of all sorts. The

⁶ see *Oamenii și teatrul (People and Theatre)* and *Oamenii și televiziunea (People and Television)* by Pavel Câmpeanu, as example of sociologically sound research from the seventies.

distance between the two ends, producer and receiver, would ultimately lead to a total rejection of the official communist messages in the last years of communism. People were aware of the loud ideological doings of the message producers and were thus silently rejecting them. The result was the creation of a second public space withdrawn into fantasy and illicit watching of American movies. The movies, available on videotapes, were smuggled in the country in various ways, mainly by people that could travel abroad, the sailors for example. They were watched in large groups of friends in various homes and their message was largely accepted, thus the dominant code of the producers being taken over enthusiastically⁷.

At the same time, in the official public space and at the level of the official media offer, hegemony was made visible and contested in non-political way, via consumption of foreign commercial media products, brought in via various informal networks.

The crisis of the social state and the fall of communism

The deregulation wave of the nineties has been accompanied by the crisis of the social state, after the fall of communism. In Romania, the communist social state had started, by the eighties, to be blamed for the difficult life of the regular citizens of the country. Thus, the social state acquired a bad name, while freedom, along with new free market ideas started to symbolically become a social desideratum, even if the real practice of freedom was not something known in Romania at the moment of the fall of communism.

The transformation has been visible in the media representations after the fall of communism as well. Thus, a research conducted by Antonio Momoc on the Romanian movies of the nineties (2006: 140) shows the changing definitions within a state that was passing in a fast pace from an all powerful one to one challenged on all fronts; the legitimacy of the state has been severely shaken after the fall of communism by the groups and individuals that had previously not have a voice in the public space. The author points out that in the early nineties the image of a social state brought along the stigma of neo-communism (Momoc, 2006: 140). The fury against communism and those associated with it was shared by the anti-communist elites and was translated, among others, in to unconditional support for the neoliberal policies that were enforced at that moment.

⁷ See Raluca Petre, *Média occidentaux et l'image de la prospérité et du succès. Prémisses symboliques pour « l'évasion » de la Roumanie après la chute du communisme*, paper presented at the 5th InASEA Conference, in Ankara, Turkey, May 2009; see as well Andreea Iacob *Receptarea filmelor americane în România socialistă; democrația în spatele ușilor închise* (The reception of American Movies in Socialist Romania; democracy behind the closed doors) BA Thesis Ovidius University, Faculty of Letters, Journalism Department, 2010

The position of the audience in Romania after communism

While in no market conditions, the audiences do not really have a say on the content of media products they receive, when the agenda is set by the producers, a the market situation, the situation is reversed. In this case, it is mainly the exchange value, the request for certain products from the part of the audience that becomes a filter of what it to exist and what is to disappear. The conditions of success are set by the consuming audiences in the market situation, while in the communist setting the conditions of success were dictated by the ideological line and priorities of the system. I believe that one cannot think of a more diametrically opposed version of envisaging media and its functioning.

Starting with the nineties, Romania has faced a rapid growth of media, in the context of deregulation and the withdrawal of the state. Recent researches on media consumption in Romania (in Balaban, 2007: 29) show a high preference for television and low printed media consumption. I believe it is important to stress that television is now an important aspect in the everyday life of the Romanians. In the afore-mentioned study, from the 10000 respondents of the representative sample, 50 percent said that watching TV is their preferred way of spending the spare time.

I believe that besides the fascination for television, the lack of resources for alternative time spending activities has explanatory power. Moreover, from the representative sample, 42 percent cannot imagine their life without television (Campaign in Balaban, 2007: 29). On average, Romanians watch television 3,75 hours every day, being thus above the European average of 3.42 hours (IMAS, 2004 quoted in Balaban, 2007: 29).

In the second part of the nineties, commercial television stations emerged with very attractive entertainment offers, as Delia Balaban points out (2007: 29-30). This shift in the focus of the television has been received well by the viewers, the time spent in front of the television stations bearing witness to this. Moreover, the most popular TV station in the urban areas is PRO TV, the first commercial station to emerge in the nineties. At the same time, the popularity of the former state media channels, presently public stations has steadily decreased, at the moment holding fifth place in terms of rating, even if it has still the greatest reach at the country level, given the terrestrial reception system it has inherited from the previous regime.

Commercial stations brought along advertising as a normal part of the media offer, and this part of the commercial offer has been embraced as well as part of the new and free media offer. The rise of the commercial occurred at the same time with the neoliberal optimism of the nineties and the strong faith in the virtues of the free market and deregulation. In my opinion, commercial media t the fertile ground of newly received freedom of expression after years of entertainment starvation.

The 'discovery of the audience' has occurred in the context of an emerging media market; "the consumption or reception of the television message is thus itself a 'moment' of the production process in its larger sense" (Hall: 52) as the audience started to matter. In the context of a free market, where the request and demand determine the very existence of the media circle, the audience becomes both "the 'source' and the 'receiver' of the television message" (Hall, 1980: 52).

These new developments emerged on the ground that had already been prepared by media practices from communism and in the name of a newly found freedom. The ideas driving the opening after the fall of communism were congruent with classical liberal positive connotations of a free press. The early history of mass communication associates the free market with the establishment of press freedom and the emergence of democracy (McQuail, Siune, 1998).

In the context of the wide acceptance of the new commercial ethos of media, I argue that the naturalization of the principle of commercial success has gained legitimacy, and the emerging generations already take it for granted:

Certain codes may, of course, be so widely distributed in a specific language community or culture, and be learned as so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed – the effect of an articulation between sign and referent – but to be ‘naturally’ given (...) However, this does not mean that no codes have intervened; rather, that the codes have been profoundly *naturalized* (...) They produce apparently ‘natural’ recognitions. This has the (ideological) effect of concealing the practices of coding which are present. (Hall, 1980: 55)

They become part of the *doxa*, as Pierre Bourdieu called it⁸, the common knowledge, with no scientific ground but socially shared and justified.

I also argue that advertising as persuasive communication has managed in Romania to be more efficient in concealing its hegemonic ethos, than its communist predecessor. One of the reasons for this phenomenon is provided by Ramona Eana and Cristina Munteanu. Thus, they argue that:

“just because the receptor is far from feeling *influenced or directed* and considers himself/herself free to choose, he/she becomes, ultimately, *obliged* to make the *right choice* (from the point of view of the message producer). Thus, most of the time, he/she makes the choice desired by the message producer”. (2007: 60)

This observation is consistent with my own, especially in my contact with young students that are much more ready to trust commercial brands than to trust school, or any other institution that seems to direct them.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that the communist hegemonic media code has been replaced in the nineteen nineties by a commercial-consumerist code. At the same time, the oppositional reading has not developed against the consumerist, but against the communist and its legacies. Stuart Hall concludes that “actually, what naturalized codes demonstrate is the degree of habituations produced when there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity – an achieved equivalence – between the encoding and decoding sides of an exchange of

⁸ in *Simțul practic (The Logic of Practice)*, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 2001

meanings.” (Hall, 1980: 55-56) This paper has attempted to show the institutionalization and naturalization of the commercial code in the years following the fall of communism and the underdevelopment of oppositional or negotiated readings of this emerging code, at least up to the moment. I believe that this dynamic has consequences at the social level that are worth exploring even further.

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