

IN SEARCH OF THE ‘THICK DESCRIPTION’ OF THE ROMANIAN RURAL AUDIENCES¹

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Introduction

Within the subject topic of the circulation of myths between cultures, the delimitation and description of the specific sub-groups of receptors is of importance. In the larger theoretical paradigm of media reception studies, I will focus my interest on the specificity of various audiences. In order to make sense of the decoding activities of the individuals, their characteristics are to be properly grasped. The issue that I wish to raise in this paper is whether, in order to be analyzed, Romanian rural audiences are different or require a different type of analysis than Romanian urban audiences. From the socio-demographic point of view, the major differentiation line is the characteristic of living in the countryside. In this paper I attempt at problematising the specificity of the rural audiences, other than the simple fact of residing in non-urban dwellings.

In this respect, I advance some aspects than could have an explanatory power on the issue of contemporary Romanian rural audiences. On the one hand, I argue that the fact that the public television has been a constant presence in the most remote areas of the country represent one point of additional differentiation, besides the demographic aspect. Equally important is the fact that the rural populations are not a target for the commercial producers that feed the private channels with advertisements represent an interesting subject for understanding the characteristics and the relation that rural audiences could develop towards media formats. Moreover, the international migration phenomenon is an additional element towards the understanding of the means via which ideas related to media and media consumption make their way in the rural areas. Last but not least, technological aspects add to the potential specificity of rural audiences. Thus, there are two aspects that could be analyzed: to what extent rural areas

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are deprived of technical means and symbolical values attached to technology. Sometimes cable or satellite technologies reach Romanian rural areas faster than current water.

My paper is an exploratory attempt at understanding some of the main characteristics of Romanian rural audiences in the context of the transformations brought by post-communism. I believe that the rural area has experienced profound transformations that have not been reflected in-depth by the media formats, mostly focused on the urban young and affluent audiences. In this respect, I believe that two issues are of special importance. On the one hand, there is the ‘thick description’ of the rural audiences, and on the other hand, the substantive characteristics of the population in the non-urban areas and the development of their relation to media and media formats.

Conceptual and methodological aspects

The theoretical resource of this paper is represented by current conceptualizations regarding the media public, mainly in the tradition opened and developed within Cultural Studies (Ang 1991, Fiske 1989, Gray 1999, Hall 1980, Morley 1988). I state thus, from the beginning, that I do not conceive of the audience in its marketing understanding, derived from behaviorist traditions and instrumentalized mainly to understand the specificities of various media market segments for advertisers. The understanding of audience in this paper is that of individuals or groups that are exposed to media messages and that behave and interact in specific and various ways. I will refer to people that integrate media consumption in their daily life, that make use of it in particular ways and that are able to transform and to decode differently the messages that they receive, different from the intentions of the media producers. The main premise of accounting for this specific subject of research is that once the media product was released, it no longer belongs or is controlled by the producers, but enters the symbolic and individual repertoire of the media users. This idea is derived from the Frankfurt School critical tradition and is to be considered one of the backbones for engaging with the rural audience as subject of research. Thus, the question does not stress neither the intention, the meaning provided by the media producers, nor the media message content. Furthermore, it is not of interest to understand the cultural competences of the rural audience, for this would only mean a reiteration of the understanding of culture provided by the powerful (Bourdieu 1984). The cultural capital is not flat phenomenon; it is not evenly distributed and not evenly controlled. Thus, I argue for disengaging from the common understanding of culture in its understanding of high-culture as another must for reaching a “thick description” of the Romanian rural audiences.

The media market approach has become very popular in accounting for audiences in Romania in the last two decades, nevertheless, it is not the only one that can provide useful information on the formation, existence and specificities of media publics. It is indeed the case that media audiences as they are conceived of in the Cultural Studies are explored mainly by means of qualitative research, in participant observation or unstructured interviews. The main limitation of this approach is that the results of the inquiry cannot be generalized. On the other hand, though, the quantitative market research does account for certain preferences of media consumption and the results can indeed be generalized, yet, one does not have an in-depth picture of the reasons and circumstances, as well as on the uses, abuses or avoidance processes that the audience develops. Moreover, quantitative research cannot account for the change in itself and for itself, can only detect it. Last but not least, the interpretive repertoire of the receivers of media content is left unexplored and unproblematised.

I do not argue against quantitative methods per se, yet, I believe that, at least in the specific Romanian case after the fall of communism, a worrying hypothesis can be advanced: standard imported quantitative measurements of media markets have, to a certain extent, produced these markets in Romania. What I mean is that it might be that the measurements and the fragmented imagination of markets according to demographic and psychographic characteristics pre-existed the actual separation into specific market shares in the Romanian market. I thus argue that it might be that marketers, by means of importing advertisements and market research tools ‘invented’ various markets that would fit product characteristics. I consider that marketing might have arrived first, to be followed by specific social groupings, inspired by the very marketing strategies. To provide with few examples, the “middle-class”, the “urban youth” might have provided with symbolic resources for the actual emergence of social groups with external symbolic characteristics depicted in the advertisements for these segments. My statements might seem daring, indeed. This reversed possibility makes me cautious though as to the usefulness of quantitative research on the issue of real audiences in Romania at the moment.

At the same time, I intend to provoke the audience to provide some characteristics of the “rural population”. It might be that our imagination is rather empty at this point, or that it is populated with images of derision, an opposition to the urban segments. A second media resource for conceiving of rural population might be the agro-cultural programs; that are nevertheless very scarce and provided only on a few channels; like for example the public station. One possible answer for the difficulty of providing with clear attributes the rural segments might be the fact that these are not social groups with good potential for advertising. They are not potential buyers; therefore

there are no real efforts of creating a symbolic repertoire that would depict them with flattering connotations and specific positive attributes.

One unfortunate outcome of this situation might be that our imagination of the rural population to be very schematic and very far from the actual existence of this large social stratum. Moreover, one could be trapped in the discourse carried by others than the rural audiences themselves; that are by the way quite absent in the public space and do not have a proper voice of their own. One of the recurrent ideas in the mainstream discourse is that Romania has a far too large rural population that should somehow be diminished so that we can be finally considered civilized. This approach is visible and happily carried on in the media, but without many representatives of the spoken group as part of the discussion. Another disturbing hypothesis might be that the rural population might feel socially alienated of the rest of the population, not finding its voice and its real priorities in the media. Yes, this is only a hypothesis that requires further careful testing. I admit that too many hypotheses raise further questions rather than answering any, yet, I admitted from the beginning that this would be an exploratory and problematising endeavor.

Another issue that can be raised considering the scarce and often schematized apparitions of the rural populations in the media is that the mere research of media texts is of no real use for understanding the social reality of the subject of research, rural audiences. This is more the case as the production of media messages is not carried by representatives of this segment of population themselves, but by specialized communicators or advertisers, and their own imagination of what rural audiences would look like or behave. At this point I argue that too few media messages are carried out for rural audiences, and that many of the ones that do have rural actors, depict them in rather schematized roles and positions. The “peasant” has simply vanished as a media object in itself and for itself in the last two decades. Then the natural question is: where to find the rural audience. The only valid answer, to my knowledge, is: in the countryside, where it resides, in its natural space with its real social configuration and specificities.

Another issue that needs to be realized before proceeding to the “thick description” is the process of denaturalization, of disengaging with the common-sense images and repertoire regarding the rural audiences. It is what the sociologists, starting with Durkheim, have reclaimed; leaving aside the personal prejudices, and engaging with the social fact in itself and for itself. This might be more difficult than many imagine, giving the fact that we are social beings, raised into certain values and ideas about ourselves, about society, and about the others. The real interaction in a given social setting, especially in one that is quite far from the everyday setting might be more disturbing than anticipated. It might simply be that nothing is the way it was imagined at the beginning, for the imagination on this subject had

previously been fed by media images and stereotyped presentations. The process of feeding availability for the 'difference' and for the 'alterity' is to be taken into consideration before proceeding to the real encounter.

Exploratory empirical accounts

In the second part of the paper I will bring to the fore some illustrations of the reactions of residents in the countryside or of people that visited the countryside as to media. The main point of illustration will be the perception on the availability of media and especially on the prominent position of the public service television in these areas. There are no conclusions that could possibly be considered from scattered impressions of disparate people, at the same time I argue that some common sense ideas can be derived. I believe that it is possible to detect what is considered as normal or abnormal when it comes to media, what is considered as backward and how media offer is conceived of by some residents and visitors of the countryside. The common demographic denominator is age, the subjects that performed the observations being students in their early twenties.

The accounts have been gathered during the Christmas break by third year students in Journalism in Constanța as part of a larger examination project. From the fifty accounts gathered, I only selected for illustration the observations that had taken place in the countryside. In this situation, there are two types of accounts; on the one hand there are the students that are residents of rural areas, on the other hand there are the ones that visited relatives or grandparents in the countryside during their vacation.

The number of the observations that occur in the countryside is fairly limited, only six. At the same time, in a larger reading, in the context of all the accounts, the topic of the moment of introduction of cable appears as distinct as compared to the urban accounts; "it was only when there were other stations as well that it became worthier to buy a color television station. Before, there was not much to be seen on TVR." It is considered as a moment of moving on, of escaping the dependency on the public television or the improvisations that would bring alternatives to it. The second topic that is interesting to mention, even if only remotely connected to the main topic of this account, is that in many of the accounts the first television set of the family made its way as a wedding gift for the newly wed.

Mention should be made of one of the accounts, in which the public television is still the only provider, but the large family gathered at the grandparents use the switched on television mainly "to lighten the room" (Roxana P, 21 years old) at night. From discussions to students that have family in the countryside, it turned out that public television is not used for its cultural or educational offer, but for its prime-time entertainment show, at

a moment when the inhabitants of the countryside return from a long day of work, that had started very early in the morning.

The connotations attached to the public provider are not positive and a recurring idea is that the existence and usage of this station is quite a sign of backwardness, while the emergence of cable represents progress. The availability of commercial and entertainment channels reading as a sign of progress leaves the issue of the education, cultural and diversity mission of the public television unexplored and unasked. Moreover, the times of the compulsory relation to the public television is bitterly recollected: “but things changed when we moved to a small village in Ialomita County. These have been dark days for me. I lived around four years only with the national channel, that was immensely boring and then with Antena 1 as well. But the private channel was asking its tribute: the Russian electronic plates. I mean the only way to get rid of Tezaur Folcloric and the Hungarian language afternoon show.” (Emanuel C., 20 years old) I believe that one of the possible explanations is the difficulty of this television provider to reinvent itself from a state channel to a public channel, thus carrying into the new order the connotations of the old regime.

The public service television appears in the discussions with young students as a remote and dusty provider, suited for the rural backward areas. Some students are even more radical and demand for the removal of the public television tax and for the freedom to use only the commercial channels. (like Ziadin R., 20 years old). PRO TV is a commercial television station that features as popular among the ones that performed the observations. This is revealed both in the urban as well as in the rural accounts. Another element that places it in a prominent position is the place it occupies in the order of the programs on the television selection.

It is worth as well mentioning that in all the settings that have been observed, both urban and rural, and with no clear differentiations between them, that media consumption mainly means television consumption and that in almost all the homes under observation there are television sets in almost all the rooms. Radio is listened to mainly by the mothers while they cook in the kitchen while the printed media is almost absent from the accounts. The computers are used mainly as entertainment devices, for chat, gaming or downloading, and mainly by the young representatives of the households. From the accounts available to me, it might be concluded that there are no significant differences between the rural and the urban, at least when it comes to the media preferred and to the technological aspects, number of television sets or the availability of cable. At the same time, this observation cannot be generalized.

Conclusions

In order to open to further exploration into the universe of rural audiences, it might be useful to ask what functions media perform and whether there are significant utilizations in the urban, versus the rural areas. In order to account for the specificity of the rural media audiences, I argue that two issues are to be considered: first the necessity to perform long term observations into the rural areas, and second of all to compare population with similar socio-demographic characteristics, that differ though when it comes to the place of residence. To use the words of one of the subjects in the research “to a certain extent, television is the contact that they have with the world, just as we feel when we have the computer turned on (...) There was a time when it was broken (...) We had the feeling that we were under the ground.” (Teodora B, 21 years old, Mihail Kogalniceanu). I believe that while some of the technological aspects have become obsolete as terms of differentiation, symbolic ones can still account for major differences.

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