

A GEOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE UPON THE ROMANIAN AUDIOVISUAL LANDSCAPE

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L'article décrit le paysage audiovisuel dans l'espace roumain. Dans l'étude sont présentés les moments de l'apparition de la télévision en Roumanie par rapport à l'année d'apparition dans le monde, ainsi que l'impact de son introduction et l'expérimentation dans notre pays comme principal moyen de communication. L'analyse continue avec une description des principales chaînes de télévision au niveau national et les dimensions publiques et commerciales du système dans le contexte européen. L'analyse de la couverture du territoire de l'audiovisuel occupe une place importante dans l'étude. L'analyse présentée fait partie d'une étude géodémographique plus détaillée qui se présente à la fin comme une contribution à l'enrichissement de la future recherche sur les facteurs socio-culturels non-spécifiques (ex. la télévision) dans le domaine de la géographie culturelle.

Introduction

The first appearance of television broadcasting in Romania was very close to its beginning at the global level (and it could be dated in the 20s). Even though the period between the two world wars was not utterly favorable to scientific development, in 1928 the broadcast at distance of the first images was experimented, the laboratory tests being tried out under the supervision of the researcher George D. Cristescu. Almost a decade afterwards, in October 1937, a group of professors and students from the Faculty of Science of the University of Bucharest managed the setting of the first television broadcast in our country, the images being projected, one month later, during a live show hosted by the Romanian Athenaeum. Two years later, new experiments carried out in front of the audience took place, this time the host being Dalles room. The research in the field was then interrupted, more than ten years, because of the war.

During the post-war period, the first important moment occurred in 1953, when the first television transmitter manufactured at Bucharest was tested and which covered, technically, the entire city and its surroundings. In August 1955, this was used for the setting of the first experimental television station. The

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moment coincided with the beginnings of the broadcasting of the first regular shows. In the next year, the station became the support of the Romanian Television which was inaugurated in the evening of 31 December 1956. This is, in fact, the day that marked the moment of television institution emergence in our country. The programs predominantly comprised newscasts, artistic movies and documentaries and cartoons. The television had, by its programs, the extremely important task to be at the public service, having the duty to inform and, mainly, to educate people.

During the first years of television (1955-1957), the number of TV sets existent in people's households was very small, only a few hundred. These were of German origin (brought from GDR) or of soviet one (Leningrad, Rubin, Temp brands), being designed for the personalities of that time. Therefore, for the general audience, many view rooms in different places of the capital were set, among them there were some well-known places such as the Electrotehnica shop and the Radio Progress Cooperative, both on Magheru Boulevard, the Technometal shop on Victoriei Avenue, the Music shop on Academiei Street, the Technical Museum in Carol Park, the tennis grounds in the National Park, as well as in the Herăstrău Park.

In a broader context, the *fig. 1* comparatively displays the years of global occurrence, respectively, of introducing or experimenting in our country of the main methods of communication (telegraphy, telephone, radio, television and internet). Between the two rows of data, relatively slight differences in years could be observed, they being emphasized below (Drăgănescu, 2003).

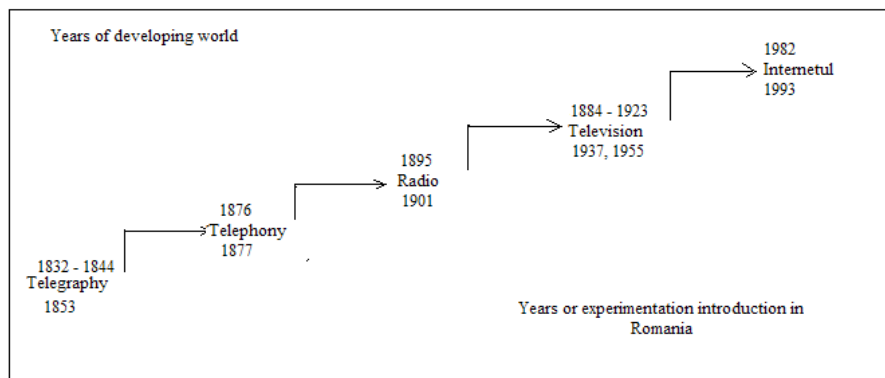


Fig. 1. Years of developing telecommunications

At present, in our country, the National Council of Audiovisual (NCA) allotted 148 audiovisual licenses by satellite, out of which 137 are operating, the broadcast being made by cable networks and by the "direct to home" system (DTH) or only by the DTH system. The other 11 channels are to be under

commissioning. Besides these licenses, NCA allotted a number of 240 local (terrestrial) television licenses for 89 big and medium towns. Most of them were allotted in the county capitals, among which 10 to Braşov, Cluj-Napoca and Iaşi 9 to each, Bucureşti 8, Constanţa, Târgu Mureş, Piatra Neamţ and Târgovişte 7 to each, Alba-Iulia and Sibiu 6 to each, Timişoara, Craiova, Bacău, Ploieşti, Baia Mare, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Suceava, Miercurea Ciuc and Petroşani 5 to each, Buzău, Bistriţa, Deva and Făgăraş, 4 to each, Galaţi, Oradea, Piteşti, Arad, Reşita, Târgu Jiu, Vaslui, Hunedoara, Zalău and Sinaia 3 to each.

The big number of licenses places our country, by far, on the top of the richness and diversity of the audiovisual landscape among the former communist countries.

The main criteria of classification of TV stations are the statute and the affiliation, the thematic profile, the transmission of the signal in the territory and the means of its distribution, from the technical point of view.

The State-Owned Television

The inauguration of the television in Romania took place, therefore, on 31 December 1956, at the same time with the first broadcastings from the provisory studios set up in a place located in Floreasca area of Bucharest (No. 2 Moliere Street). The onset moment marked, in fact, the end of an early stage in the history of the Romanian television (the experimental one), and the beginning of a new one (the professional television), respectively. For more than three decades, till the abolition of the communist regime, it would be the only state-owned television from our country. During this period, with a few exceptions, the state-owned television did not manage to surpass the condition of a “spokesman” of the politic regime of the time, its programs being rigorously controlled. The messages of the institution were in a total conformity with the politics and the ideology of the state authorities. Consequently, the RTV history limits to that of a unique and monolithic institution (Hennebelle, 1995).

The interests of the political power were publicly expressed by the wish to enlighten and educate people, television being considered the most efficient mean of communication in influencing public opinion and ideological indoctrination (Stanciu and Varlam, 2001). To the state interests, people’s curiosity and attention for the new discovery brought in their homes, were added in time. Therefore, it was a further reason for the television development to take place, especially during the first years, at a fast pace. Thus, in the mid 60s, the number of broadcasting hours exceeded 1600 per year, the reception of the state-owned TV programs being possible in the households of more than 500,000 inhabitants, spread almost all over the country. Subsequently, the ongoing circumstances led to an important decision of the state head of the time,

that of setting up, in the capital city, the one of the most modern and equipped television centers, of medium capacity, which existed at that time in Europe. The new construction was built at the current address of the Public Television (191 Dorobantilor Avenue), between 1966 and 1968.

The new technologies and equipments gave the possibility of broadcasting, starting even since 1968, the year of the assets completion, of the second channel of the Romanian Television. The interest manifested by population was a huge one, the statistics indicating, in 1970, a number of 1.5 million subscribers. The number of broadcasting hours noticeably increased, so that, in the second half of the eighth decade, the programs summed up 100 hours per week out of which 65 were on the first channel and the 35 hours on the second channel.

Approximately in the same period, the first experiments regarding the color television were made. The first TV car was purchased in 1975, but the programs continued to be broadcast in black and white. It was only on 23 August 1983, after long tests and postponements, when the first official color broadcast took place, from Piata Aviatorilor, being completed with other color images set up in studios.

In the following period, similar to other state institutions, the television had its share of dark perspectives, being private owned for a while, but in the same time it was used as a propaganda tool for the communist regime. Therefore, until this moment, as much as it was the television for the masses, the public interest quickly disappeared and an officious type of television took its place, as the most absurd and ridiculous version of a television station, from all the nearby countries. As if it wasn't enough, on the basis of policy that was called "saving energy", the number of running hours for TV programs was drastically cut, by the 20th of January 1985 to only 2 hours a day, between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m.. At the same time, Channel 2 was also shut down. Starting with 1st of November 1988, an extra hour was added to the original 2 hours. Now the TV was airing between 7 p.m. and 10 p.m.

Broadly, this is how the TV programs looked like, in the second half of the 9th decade. This was the period in which thousands of citizens that were living close to the borders of Romania, no matter if they were belonging to a minority or not, built homemade devices, like different types of outdoor aerials (antenna), in order to receive TV programs broadcasted in the neighboring countries, such as Bulgaria, Hungary and Former Republic of Yugoslavia.

According to the five year development plan between 1985 and 1989, they were trying to replace, gradually, the equipment required for black and white broadcasting/transmissions, which was fully cleared off, with equipment for color TV.

Even though the investments were uncompleted, they managed to continue them for the following years, despite the fact that the Romanian Television (RTV) succeeded in worldwide broadcasting, live, a revolution. The revolution was an event in which the active role of the National Television was

obvious. Technically speaking, the television was able to broadcast due to the prior investments. From another point of view, as an icon for the institution, the December 1989 events came as a first step in rebranding the name from TVR (Romanian Television) to TVRL (Romanian Free Television). As a result of the events, in the winter of 1989, the broadcasting time was enlarged and in February 1990, Channel 2 was able to broadcast again.

Another important stage in the National Television development after the communist era, a stage that emphasizes the national character of the institution, was the gradual setting up of the regional studios, in Cluj-Napoca (1990), Iași (1991), Timișoara (1994), Craiova (1998), Bucharest (2007) and Târgu Mureș in 2008. This stage was possible with the help of the core specialists that were trained for many years, during the period when the regional radio studios were equipped with reporting cars, with which they were able to do live broadcasts from these specific areas.

Public Television

TV stations from all over the world turned up and were able to maintain their statute, because of the public investments, firstly in experimental researches, and then followed by investments for developing and broadening the phenomena. On the main land, especially in the Western countries, the above mentioned reasons dominated the audio-visual landscape until the 70s and the 80s. After this, the piercing of audiovisual by private capital balanced the domain and then turned the situation in favor of private owned TV stations (in the United States and Canada, for example this phenomenon started to manifest with a decade and half earlier, unlike in Europe).

In the former communist countries like Romania the public televisions appeared only after the totalitarian regime was abolished. These TV stations emerged from the state owned televisions, embedding the whole patrimony and personnel from the former state owned TVs.

In our country, right in the middle of the events in December 1989, the state owned television was among the first institutions that pioneered its rebranding, from TVR into TVRL (Romanian Free Television). Shortly after, the things took an unexpected turn, and the big changes that occurred led to losses and delays. Even though the makeover from an official television to an autonomous public interest service was set forth at a constitutional level since 1991 in a regulatory framework, this was accomplished only four years after the regime was changed. This happened when the Parliament passed the bill no. 41/1994 regarding the organization and functioning of The Romanian Television Company.

According to the statute and the law regarding the organization and functioning of the Romanian TV Company, the editorial independence is assured by freely expressing, the opinions and the ideas, in the content of TV programs without any political interference or external interference by any other nature.

The theoretical concept of a public television must highlight the direct contact/relation with the audience. Following the definition, the public TV must satisfy the broad and exacting preferences of the audience, approaching to all public segments.

Through its programs the national TV is asked to promote the values of national culture, providing a certain percentage of national art, in the abyss of foreign offers. It is also called to sustain the cultivation of human dignity and of certain selected attitudes and behaviors.

The European Parliament itself supports a special worthy status of all public televisions in their own societies, that being the subject of many documents. In this context, starting from Romania's status as a member of European Union, it is always in our attention to harmonize as fast as possible our country's well functional legislation regarding public televisions with the legislation adopted on European level.

At present moment it is shown that the Romanian Television Company is the owner of 12 satellite based audiovisual licenses for the following channels: TVR1, TVR 2, TVR3, TVR Info, TVR Cultural, TVR International, TVR Cluj-Napoca, TVR Iași, TVR Timișoara, TVR Craiova, TVR București, TVR Târgu-Mureș and TVR HD. The last one, with HD content, (*High Definition Television*) started to broadcast in June 2008, just at experimental level, and on a regular basis since December 2009. On the other hand, TVR International began to air on the 1st of December, the programs being destined to Romanians from across the borders. They were very well received in all European, northern African and Middle Eastern countries.

The Coverage in Country of Public Television Stations

From a technical standpoint, the main channel of the Romanian Television Company, TVR 1 has a maximum coverage throughout the country, being the only channel that can be received 100% by all the inhabitants who have access to television. Their number amounted to 20,170,000, representing 94.12% of the total population of 21.43 million inhabitants (up to 1st of July 2010, according to the National Institute of Statistics). The difference between technical potential and coverage of population (of 5.88% respectively 1.26 million inhabitants) is explained by the large number of people, especially in rural areas, who are presently working abroad (officially registered), plus the large number of households without television or electricity (a few tens of thousands)

or because of religious reasons (few thousands more). Therefore, TVR 1 is better received in urban areas: 11.50 million people, representing 97.4% of the total urban population out of 11.80 million people). In rural areas, the number of people who receive it rise up to 8.66 million (representing 90.0% of a total of 9.63 million inhabitants). The other most important channel, TVR 2, has an almost as big national coverage. It was reopened in February 1990 and today it is being watched by nearly 20,060,000 people, representing 99.0% of the population with access to television which is 93.6% of the total population, respectively.

In cities and towns, TVR2 can be watched by 11.48 million inhabitants, representing 97.3% of the total urban population and it also has a significant weight in rural areas, 8.57 million inhabitants, i.e. 89.0% of the total. Recently established TVR Cultural (2002), and TVR 3 (2008) enter the homes of over 18 million Romanians, which means about 90% of the stable population, i.e. nearly 85%. Stable population access to public TV channels is facilitated largely by the National Radiocommunications Company, which transports and distributes audio and video waves in the whole country, on all levels of terrain, from the sea level to altitudes of 1200-1400 meters, in the Apuseni Mountains. On the other hand, cable operators in Romania are obliged by the broadcasting legislation to include in the packages offered to subscribers TV stations belonging to the Romanian Television Society. The adjacent charts present data on access of the Romania's population to public channels of the Romanian Television (*fig. 2 and fig. 3*).

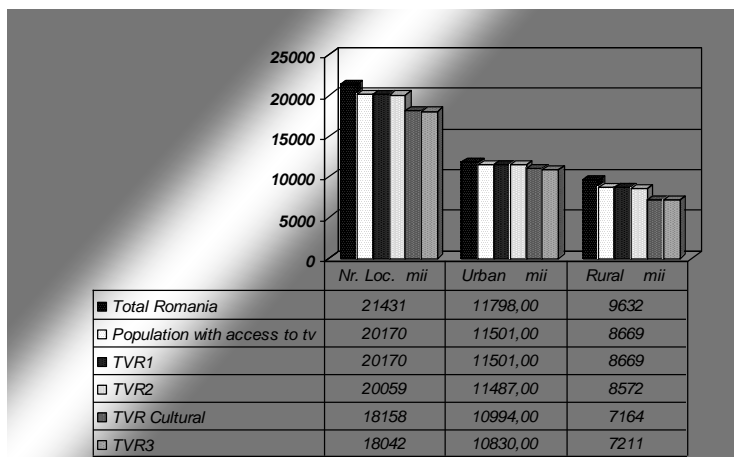


Fig. 2. Public access to public TV channels of the Romanian Society of Television (absolute figures)

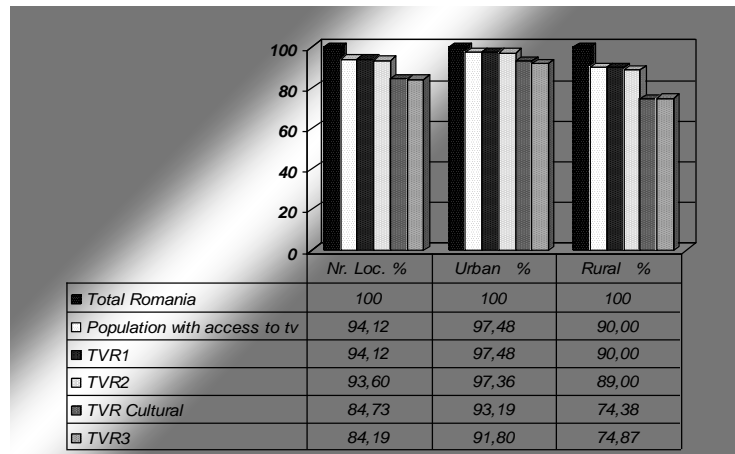


Fig. 3. Public access to public TV channels of the Romanian Society of Television (relative figures)

The Commercial Television

Emerging and evolving differently in various parts of the world (for example, a decade and a half earlier in North America than in Europe), private television stations have now become dominant worldwide. In Romania, the first private television stations have begun airing three to four years after removing the totalitarian regime, amid pluralism in broadcasting regulation (Law 48/21 May 1992). The emergence of commercial television in the Romanian audiovisual landscape has led to widening the choice of programs that can be accessed by population. The result was a major competition between televisions, which is perceived as still elusive in many situations, intending to increase the quality and attractiveness of the programs.

Within the large number of commercial television broadcasting in our country, those which currently perform are, in order of their appearance: Antena 1 (founded in 1993), Pro TV (1995), Prima TV (1997), Acasă TV (1998), B1 TV (2001) Realitatea TV (2001), National TV (2003), Antena 3 (2005), Kanal D (2007) (fig. 4).

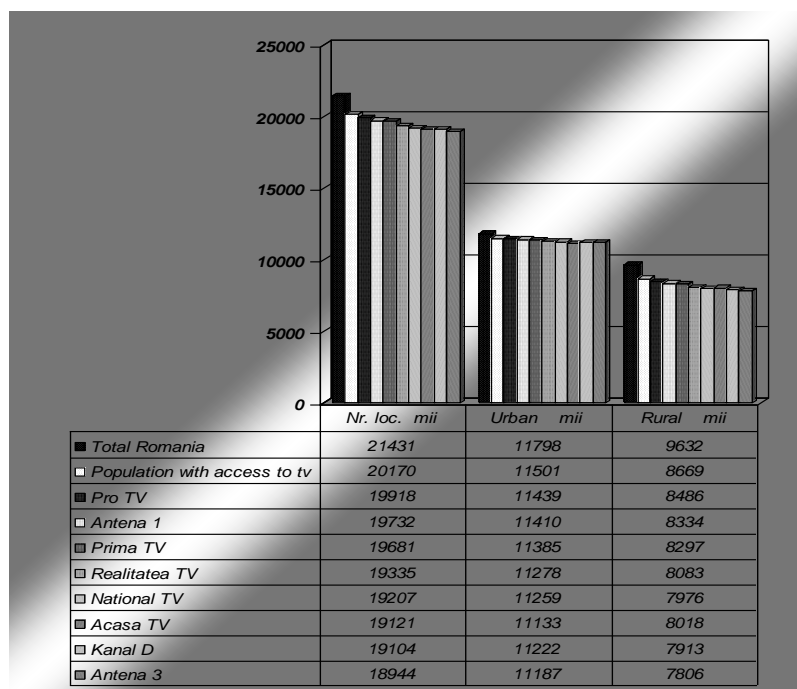


Fig. 4. Public access to commercial TV channels in Romania (absolute figures)

Taking into account all types of receptors (network cable, satellite dish or terrestrial antenna) the hierarchy of commercial TV channels by coverage area is led by ProTV, followed by Antena 1, Prima TV, Realitatea TV, National TV, Kanal D, Acasă TV, Antena 3 and B1TV. These programs can be viewed by 20.17 million people. This is so far the number of people who have access to television in our country. They represent, as we mentioned in the previous section, 94.12% of the total population of 21.43 million on the 1st of July 2010, according to the National Institute of Statistics. Still a large number of people, about 1.26 million, do not watch TV because of leaving home for long periods of time (leaving the country to work abroad), or because of living conditions (households without electricity or without electronic equipment and appliances). The situation is more evident in rural areas.

Major commercial TV stations are very well represented in all the regions of the country, particularly in those characterized by an overwhelming percentage of Romanian population, Oltenia, Muntenia, Moldova and even Dobrogea. Their presence in the territory concentrates between 95 and 100% of the total resident population with access to television.

Although it is an undeniable reality the fact that in our country there is no

“vacuum Romanian ethnic”, in some areas, however, the level of coverage for commercial televisions is influenced by the concentration of the population belonging to ethnic minorities. This aspect is best revealed in Transylvania. In the settlements with predominant Hungarian population, located in the upper basins of the Mureş and Olt rivers, in the Eastern Carpathians on the eastern valleys of Transylvania (region overlapping administratively, in part, the counties of Harghita and Covasna) the interest in the Romanian language programs is much lower. The propensity for programs in Hungarian is clearly predominant. As we know from the latest census (1992), the population of Hungarian origins counts over 40 thousand people in the region. If other localities in the counties of Mureş and Cluj are added, totaling over 220.000, respectively, 120.000 ethnic Hungarians it could be found a main reason for the reduction in the coverage of commercial television channels for the counties of Transylvania. This is about 2% (for ProTV), 10% (for National TV and Acasă TV) and even of 15% (for Antena3). The decrease is more obvious in rural areas, registering a value of 15% for Acasă TV station, 20% for NationalTV and nearly 25% for Antena 3.

Similar situations are also found in border counties in western, northwestern and northern Romania, where a strongly ethnically mixed population lives. According to the same census, in Bihor, Crişana and Maramureş there are numerous communities of Hungarians (about 155.000 in Bihor, over 125.000 in Satu Mare, about 50.000 in each of the counties: Arad, Sălaj, Maramureş). The Ukrainian ethnic group totals over 30.000 inhabitants in Maramureş County. The ethnic minorities located in the border towns are concerned to preserve certain cultural elements so as to ensure their relative cultural, linguistic, and folkloric autonomy. This is a reason for which they prefer the television programs in their native language, broadcasted on the territory of the neighboring countries, e.g. Hungary and Ukraine. Therefore, the index of Romanian televisions coverage is significantly reduced in these regions, too: ProTV (96%), Antena 1 (93%), National TV and Realitatea TV (91%), Prima TV, Acasă TV, Antena 3, Kanal D (each with 88%), B1 (81%). In terms of residential area, the coverage is much higher in favor of urban settlements (all the stations mentioned above cover over 90% of the population in the area) as opposed to rural areas, where only two television stations, Antena 1 and ProTV are over, respectively, reach the threshold of 90%.

In Banat (Timiş and Caraş Severin counties), part of the population belonging to Hungarian ethnic group (approximately 50.000 people) and to Serbian and Croatian groups (other 25.000), have access to native language programs, broadcasted in Hungary and Serbia. Here, differentiation trends regarding the favorite TV channel appear also in Swabians communities, which count about 20 000 people. Therefore, there are enough reasons to lead to a slight decrease in the interest of a part of the population for some Romanian TV

channels. As a result, the index of coverage is reduced by several percent, from 1-2% (ProTV and Antena 1), up to 3-4% for all the others.

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