Audience History as a History of Ideas: Towards a Transnational History of Ideas about Audiences

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Abstract

One of the possible ways of approaching audience history is by focusing on the history of ideas about audiences. This article examines the benefits and shortcomings of such an approach and develops a set of methodological propositions, drawing on the principles and methods of the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts). To demonstrate the usefulness of these propositions, the article briefly examines the ideas about audiences in socialist Yugoslavia, focusing on the surge of ideas about politically engaged audiences in the late 1960s. The concluding part of the article situates this historical episode in the wider geographical context and outlines possible avenues for a broader, transnational investigation of the history of ideas about audiences.

Keywords: audience research, history, television, broadcasting, Yugoslavia

This article considers the option of conducting historical audience research by focusing on the history of ideas about audiences. Approaching audience history in this way means starting from a simple premise – namely that the audience is, among other things, an idea. It is an idea shared by journalists, editors, screenwriters and other individuals and groups who are in the process of developing a cultural product that will eventually find its way to particular receivers. It is also an idea used by researchers seeking to make sense of these products, and an idea invoked by policy makers and cultural commentators. Finally, individuals and groups who constitute audiences also have their own ideas about what it might mean to be an audience.

As with any other idea, the meanings and uses of the audience are changing across time and space, in response to the changing economic, political, cultural and technological environment. As Richard Butch (2000) shows in his history of American audiences, twentieth century concerns surrounding audience 'passivity' and the harmful effects of the media on their audiences were a product of their time, provoked by the advent of mass mediated communication and the retreat of audiences into private spaces. In contrast, nineteenth century audiences were unmistakably active, yet contemporary commentators saw this activity – the rowdy behaviour of theatre audiences, for instance – as problematic. Recent transformations associated with the rise of digital media offer another telling example. The growing range of opportunities for active engagement and the proliferation of user-generated content seem to be making even the concept of the audience itself obsolete, prompting a shift in academic discourse to notions of media use and participation (e.g. Carpentier 2011, Livingstone 2013). Within media industries, related changes are taking place. Established ways of conceiving and measuring audiences, centred on quantitative measurements, are being challenged by alternative approaches, which seek to understand audience engagement beyond the initial exposure to media content (Napoli 2010).

A history of ideas about audiences has several benefits. The first and most immediate benefit comes from its ability to make the familiar look strange, and thereby prompt us to question established ways of thinking. By contrasting the past with the present, we may, for instance, realize that the debates about audience passivity and activity are historically situated, and make little sense when transferred to a different era. Likewise, a history of

ideas may also lead us to acknowledge that the current emphasis on participation and interactivity does not automatically provide us with a somehow more 'accurate' understanding of audiences. Rather, these are simply the most recent, socially situated ideas about audiences. As such, they themselves constitute objects that demand explanation. Which political, technological, or economic changes have led us to embrace engagement and participation as key concepts in audience study? Which aspects of the social reality do our current ideas about audiences help reveal or, as it may be, conceal? This also means that a history of ideas about audiences is, in a sense, a precondition for any other form of audience history. Without it, research can all too easily impose the taken for granted meanings of the here and now onto a historical reality that bears little relationship to it.

A history of ideas about audiences can also – if done in the manner advocated here – help us avoid the danger of overemphasizing the malleability of ideas about audiences, or reducing the audience to a mere 'object of knowledge' that exists only in texts (Hartley 1988: 234) or to an 'imaginary entity' and 'abstraction' that has no existence outside of representations (Ang 1991: 2). Through engaging with concrete historical documents, produced by specific institutions and individuals, a historian of ideas becomes aware of the context-bound nature of different notions of the audience, and is compelled to think about how these notions relate to the broader context in which they were produced. To put it differently, an investigation into ideas about audiences should prompt questions about causality – Why did these institutions and individuals think about audiences in this particular way? How were their ideas shaped by the political, economic and cultural context in which they operated? How were they influenced by the social reality of audiences, and, conversely, how did they themselves shape that reality?

The above reflections are based on a set of assumptions about how best to go about doing a history of ideas. These are addressed more directly in the following section, which draws on the principles and methods developed in the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts). To demonstrate some of these general points, the rest of the article briefly examines some of the ideas about audiences in socialist Yugoslavia, focusing on the late 1960s. There are two key reasons for choosing this particular historical and geographical focus. First, the vast majority of existing debate on audiences is derived from the liberal democracies of the West, and even where the empirical focus lies elsewhere, the theoretical frameworks adopted take little notice of local ways of thinking about audiences (for an exception see Butsch and Livingstone 2013). We therefore know rather little about how the concepts familiar from the West relate to ideas of audiences elsewhere and indeed whether or not it is justified to frame these ideas in terms of Western concerns. As shown later on, the twentieth century debate about active and passive audiences took on a peculiar turn in the Yugoslav context. Rather than being regarded as helpless victims of media influence, Yugoslav audiences were often seen as distinctly active. Driven by the revolutionary trust of the communist ideology, political elites encouraged media professionals to use communication technologies as a tool of social mobilization for the communist cause, using innovative formats premised on audience participation. These ideas about audiences were closely intertwined with contemporary political, economic and cultural developments in the country. The 1960s were a tumultuous period, marked by economic reforms, major political events, and growing popular discontent. Television and the modern mass media more generally were at the centre of these changes, acting as a key conduit that encouraged popular engagement with public concerns (Mihelj 2013). Ideas about audiences reflected these trends.

The concluding part of the article charts the surge of similar ideas about politically engaged audiences in a range of other socialist countries, and points to cognate developments in the

liberal democracies of the West. It also briefly outlines the differences and similarities between the (Yugoslav) socialist ideas of audience participation and the notions of the active audience familiar from Western literature and identifies possible avenues or a broader investigation of the history of ideas about audiences.

What kind of history of ideas? Whose ideas? Which methods and sources?

History of ideas has often been criticised – by proponents of other types of history – for being 'written as a saga in which all the great deeds are done by entities which could not, in principle, do anything' (Dunn 1968: 85). This is not the kind of history of ideas that is advocated here. Instead, the approach adopted in this article involves the analysis of ideas within the broader social context that has shaped, and has, in turn, been shaped by, these ideas. This includes the specific contexts of media policies, communication technologies, ways of measuring the audience, the habits and preferences of audiences, as well as the broader economic, political and cultural shifts.

To put it differently, while the analysis presented here focuses on ideas about audiences, it is not satisfied with mere 'textualism' that Bourdon criticises in his contribution to this themed issue. A rigid dichotomy of 'representations' and 'reality' does not have much mileage when seeking to understand historical audiences. What is more fruitful is an approach that looks at how particular ideas about audiences held by specific social groups shaped the work of media organizations and media output, but also at how these products, in turn, opened up (or closed down) particular opportunities for audiences. Ultimately, however, this knowledge can and should be used to move beyond representations and ideas and build a fuller picture of the reality of audiences, which comprises not only representations, but also material practices and habits as well as institutions. Ideas are of course not the same as the reality they seek to represent, but neither are they so removed from reality that they do not allow us to say anything about it. Rather, they are constitutive of that reality, and make some aspects of that reality more consequential than others. Furthermore, some representations of the audience are more powerful in shaping reality than others. An idea enshrined in a major media policy document adopted in an authoritarian state will be more consequential than, for instance, an idea published by a critical member of the intellectual elite in an underground publication, or an idea found in a private memoir. The role of the analyst is to make informed judgements about the relative standing of different ideas and sources, and use them to draw inferences about the reality they represent.

Those familiar with debates surrounding the different traditions and approaches within the broader field of history of ideas, intellectual history and cognate traditions will have recognized by now that the approach adopted here is closer to the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* than the American tradition of history of ideas as formulated by Arthur O. Lovejoy and embodied in the work published in the *Journal of the History of Ideas*. Unlike the history of ideas practiced by Lovejoy, the task of *Begriffsgeschichte* is not only to identify the changing semantic fields associated with key social and political concepts, but also to link them with changes in political, social and economic structures (Richter 1987), as done in the approach adopted here. Another similarity with *Begriffsgeschichte* lies in the emphasis on seeking explanations and identifying patterns of causality, which is alien to the history of ideas, but key to *Begriffsgeschichte*. Furthermore, the approach advocated here also draws on a similar array of sources, taking into account published sources such as newspapers and books as well as documents produced by governmental, administrative and legal bureaucracies. Other potentially useful sources not covered in this particular article include dictionaries and encyclopaedias, as well as correspondence and diaries. Finally, the

two key methods used in *Begriffsgeschichte* are applied here as well: identifying all meanings of a concept (in our case, the concept of the audience) and tracing all terms used to refer to a particular concept (in our case, terms such as 'viewers', 'listeners', 'direct producers', 'workers' etc.).

I should add that the full scope of the *Begriffsgeschichte* agenda extends well beyond what can be accommodated within this brief article. Even though the analysis that follows does provide an indication of how particular ideas about audiences relate to social groups such as political and media elites, this approach is far from the comprehensive mapping of the contested uses of a concept across a whole range of social groups and strata offered in the work produced in the *Begriffsgeschichte* tradition (Brunner et al. 1972-1997). Furthermore, due to the limited historical scope, this article cannot really address the question of what is specifically modern about the ideas of audience examined here, and how they differ from cognate concepts in pre-modern time – a matter of key concern for *Begriffsgeschichte*.

It is worth noting that methods cognate to those advocated here have been applied in other corners of media history, especially in the context of historical research of cinema-going and film reception. While not specifically aimed at reconstructing a history of ideas about audiences as done in this article, the approaches employed in this fast growing body of literature offer much to learn from. Janet Steiger's (1992) landmark study on the historical reception of American cinema and the many studies inspired by her 'historical materialist' approach are particularly valuable in this respect, and so are the studies seeking to reconstruct the social experiences of cinema-going (for a useful reflection on the methods employed in the field see Biltereyst et al. 2012).

In line with the above, the article draws on a range of archival and published sources acquired in the Yugoslav successor states: documents produced by Yugoslavia's governmental, administrative and legal bureaucracies; records and transcripts of meetings of key Yugoslav media institutions and political bodies involved in media regulation; internal publications and audience research reports from the four largest radio and broadcasting centres in the country (located in Belgrade, Zagreb, Ljubljana and Sarajevo); books and articles about the media and communication written by academics and influential intellectual figures; as well as popular newspaper articles aimed at the general audience. Taken together, these sources offer insights into ideas about audiences shared by, or at least known to, a range of different social groups, including cultural and political elites and media practitioners. Other sources that could potentially be used to expand the analysis include life story interviews (as explored in Irena Reifova's and Alexander Dhoest' contributions to this themed issue), memoirs, diaries, personal correspondence, audience letters, and historical media texts.

The 'Active Audience' of the Yugoslav Sixties

The Yugoslav media enjoyed significantly more freedom than their counterparts in other socialist countries. Political and economic reforms introduced gradually over the course of the 1950s and the 1960s reduced the control of communist elites over the media, brought greater editorial and organisational independence, and contributed to the professionalization of media management as well as journalistic practice (Robinson 1977: 44–45, Novak 2005: 606-9). At the same time, state funding decreased sharply, and the media, including the broadcasting sector, were becoming increasingly reliant on advertising revenues (Robinson 1977). Even though similar changes can be identified in other socialist media systems, including the Soviet one (Paulu 1974, Huxtable 2014), existing literature leaves little doubt

that Yugoslav reforms were considerably more far-reaching, and brought the country's media system closest to arrangements known from Western Europe. For instance, the reliance on advertising, both in the economy as a whole and in the media sector more specifically, was greater in Yugoslavia than elsewhere in the region (Hanson 1974). This peculiar position of the Yugoslav media arguably offers a particularly good venture point for a reflection on ideas of audiences beyond the West.

The Yugoslav 1960s were marked by an increasingly vibrant public culture and unusually frank debates about current economic and political developments in the country. Critical news commentaries and dedicated radio and television programmes discussing living standards, unemployment and social inequalities became more frequent and open.[1] These changes were in part fuelled by economic developments. The early 1960s brought a decline in labour productivity and per capita real wages as well as a slowing down of economic growth. The ensuing reassessment of existing economic models gave rise to reforms that reduced administrative control over several areas of economic life, including the banking system, prices and foreign trade, and fostered a shift from investment to consumption (Rusinow 1977: 172-79). Despite much hype surrounding the reforms, however, implementation was sluggish and benefits were slow to materialize. Rates of economic growth continued to decline, real wages were at best stagnant, and unemployment remained high (Woodward 1995: 193).

Yet, the explosion of public engagement in the 1960s cannot be reduced to economic reasons alone; it was also actively encouraged by the communist authorities and aided by political reforms that sought to reduce the role of the Party and the state and encourage popular participation in political affairs (Rusinow 1977: 148-52, 197-202). Central to these reforms was the notion of 'direct self-management', which envisaged a society in which all public affairs are run directly by workers and in which all property is 'socially owned'. Originally devised in the aftermath of the Tito-Stalin split in 1948, the ideal of self-management provided a key pillar of Yugoslav political identity and served as a sign of Yugoslav superiority vis-à-vis the Soviet Union as well as vis-à-vis the capitalist West. By means of self-management, went the argument, Yugoslavia would steer away from the dangers of excessive bureaucratization that allegedly plagued the Soviet Union, as well as from the corrupting effects of unbridled economic liberalism supposedly rife in the West, and thereby move towards a more advanced stage of socialism (ibid.: 47-58).

These political shifts had repercussions also in the realm of the media. As policy documents from the mid-1960s show, Yugoslav media were expected to function not only as a means of top-down transmission of information, but as a 'political forum' designed to encourage popular participation in public affairs. In a programmatic document debated by the highest ranking political bodies across the federation, the media were identified as one of the crucial instruments of 'direct socialist democracy', within which 'direct producers' – the Yugoslav working classes – were expected to have a privileged position:

> The current stage of our social development requires the working people to articulate their own views [...] as directly as possible, by means of public communication media. Of particular importance in the current conditions is the foregrounding of words and ideas by direct producers, by means of the press, radio and television. In these conditions, the press, radio and television are

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[1] For examples of such critical reporting see U.S. Information Agency, Living Conditions in Yugoslavia, R-82-64, 1964, 7–10, in National Archives and Records Administration, Record Group 306, USIA Series P142 Research Reports, 1960–99, box 20.

> becoming public fora which reflect real relations and interests, those of specific social environments as well as the general social interests and developmental tendencies. [2]

Political elites across the federation were keen to embrace the notion of the media as a conduit for bottom-up communication, and regularly criticized the existing state of affairs for not living up to the ideal. One commentator, for instance, noted that information was still too often flowing 'from the top down', with the media conveying the opinions and decisions of various official organizations, which 'is not compatible with the system of self-management' and 'is not enough for the active involvement of the citizens and their creativity'.[3] Likewise, members of the Slovenian branch of the League of Communists emphasized the role of the media as a 'forum for the popular masses', and even described them as 'weapons' in the hands of 'producers',[4] while a member of the Croatian branch insisted that the media should become 'a place where it is possible to influence politics from bottom up'.[5]

Yugoslav media professionals were quick to exploit the opportunities opened by these political principles, and emphasized the beneficial impact of the media on Yugoslav society. In a lecture delivered in 1964 to the Educational-Cultural Council of the Croatian Assembly, the director of Radio-television Zagreb argued that recent political reforms enabled radio and television to 'fully realize their potential' and 'allow the society to even more directly influence the work of self-managing organs'.[6] In a report prepared in 1964 by Yugoslav Radio-television, discussed by the highest political bodies at federal level, Yugoslav television was praised for contributing to the 'modernization of political work', for bringing the work of political bodies closer to millions of people, and for turning into a true 'political forum'.[7]

Also telling is the tone and approach adopted by internal editorial policy documents at the time, which reflected a keen awareness of audience preferences. For instance, a 1966 document discussing the editorial principles of Television Belgrade was explicitly described as an attempt 'to view the television programme, above all, from the point of view of the audience we are addressing and the duty we have to viewers'.[8] Although the report lamented the declining educational level of Yugoslav television audiences – linked to the proliferation of television sets among all social strata at the time – it found little sense in blatant paternalist approaches that sought to 'uplift' the cultural standards of the audience by force-feeding them live transmissions of classical music during prime time. Such an approach, argued the report, was likely to provoke a negative reaction among viewers.

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[2] Jugoslovenski institut za novinarstvo, 'Dokumentacija uz Teze o mestu, ulozi i zadacima štampe, radija i televizije o daljem razvoju društveno-ekonomskih odnosa,' 1965, pp. 1-2, in Archives of Yugoslavia (hereafter AY), f. 142, Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Jugoslavije, box 207.

[3] 'Razširjena skupina za masovna komunikacijska sredstva', 15 April 1965, p. 2, in AY, f. 142 – Socialist Alliance of the Working People of Yugoslavia (hereafter SAWPY), box 207.

[4] 'Osnovna problematika na području idejno-kulturnog djelovanja komunista', n.d., p. 1, in AY, f. 142, Socijalistički savez radnog naroda Jugoslavije, box 207.

[5] 'Stenografski zapisnik sastanka o tezama Saveznog odbora SSRN o 'Mjestu, ulozi i zadacima štampe, radija i televizije o daljem razvoju društveno-ekonomskih odnosa', održanog 16.VI 1965. u Zagrebu', p. 10, in AY, f. 142 – SAWPY, box 207.

[6] Ivo Bojanić, 'Radio i televizija u SRH: Danas i sutra', *Naš studio: List kolektiva Radiotelevizije*, No. 2, October 1964, 5, in Written Archives of Croatian Television.

[7] Jugoslovenska radio-televizija, 'Stanje i problemi razvitka televizije u Jugoslaviji', pp. 4-5, in ASY, f. 130 Federal Executive Council, Box 566-942.

[8] 'Programska politika TV u 1967. godini', 1966, p. 36, in Radio-television of Serbia, Center for Public Opinion, Program and Audience Research (hereafter RTS-CPOPAR), Report No. 161.

Changes in editorial policy and the political environment also opened doors for greater experimentation within media production, and stimulated the development of more interactive media formats. In 1965, TV Belgrade launched a series of talk shows entitled *Current Debates* (*Aktuelni razgovori*), aimed at addressing the most pressing social problems and involving contributors ranging from factory workers to some of the highest representatives in the Yugoslav economy and politics. The choice of issues discussed on the programme was to a large extent based on audience preferences, gauged based on audience letters and phone calls. In the already mentioned document discussing the editorial principles of Radiotelevision Belgrade, *Current Debates* were described as a 'new breakthrough and a qualitative novelty in the television programme', which 'opened the process of the transformation of television into a public forum that carries with it our social development'.[9]

Judging from contemporary audience research, these complimentary descriptions of *Current Debates* were not just empty phrases. Over the course of five years of its existence, the producers of the program processed 11,770 letters and more than 20,000 telephone calls posing questions for the program.[10] According to an audience survey conducted in 1968, well over 70% of those interviewed gave a positive assessment of the programme, with the highest rates reached among those segments of the population whose views it was meant to represent most directly, namely workers (JRT 1969: 275-6). Over 60% of those surveyed also agreed that the programme had 'direct benefits' for their public engagement and general awareness of current issues (ibid.). We should of course be wary of taking these results at face value – as Kristin Roth-Ey (2011: 268-9) points out in her discussion of Soviet audience research, leading questions, low response rates and lack of anonymity were a common feature of contemporary research at the time. However, Yugoslav media research was becoming rapidly professionalized at the time, and looked to the West for methodological guidance, which meant that leading questions were becoming less of a problem, samples more representative and interviewing procedures more rigorous. Even if we continue to doubt the validity of survey data, the sheer volume of suggestions for *Current Debates* received via post and telephone suggests that a significant segment of the audience did take the invitation to participate seriously.

New forms of audience participation were not limited solely to current affairs programming, but were taken up also in television fiction. The most well documented case of such an approach was the comic TV series *Sleep Peacefully* (1968), which comprised eight episodes, all addressing major 'social problems', including unemployment, income disparities, social solidarity, and corruption. Each of these issues was introduced through the personal experiences of a fictional character called 'Lucky Menace'. In the opening episode Lucky is caught stealing caviar from a local self-service market and ends up facing a trial at the 'court of self-managers'. The plot of the series is organized around the trial, which probes the rights and wrongs of Lucky's individual deeds as well as raises questions about collective responsibility. The central character is unmistakably critical of the current state of socialism and openly states that being jobless and hungry in socialism 'is a disgrace'. He also suggests that his theft was effectively a rebellious act prompted by social inequalities—caviar, he argues, is regularly eaten by those at the top of the socialist hierarchy, yet he has never been invited to take his share. At the end of each episode, viewers were asked to 'participate' in the trial by means of voting on whether or not Lucky was guilty, or whether the responsibility for his misery lay with the broader collective of 'self-managers'. As with

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[9] 'Programska politika', p. 26.
[10] 'Pet godina 'Aktuelnih razgovora'', p. 1, in RTS-CPOPAR, Report 371.

Current Debates, the series struck a sensitive chord with the audiences. Television Belgrade was inundated by thousands of letters and phone calls, the overwhelming majority of which congratulated the authors for articulating what everyone felt yet nobody allegedly dared to speak about.[11]

On the whole, there is little doubt that the 1960s ideas about audiences diverged from those prevalent in the immediate post-World War Two period, which were rooted in Leninist ideas about the press as a tool of propaganda and centred on notions of elite-led mobilization (cf. Lilly 2001). The cases of *Current Debates* and *Sleep Peacefully* also suggest that these ideas succeed in shaping audience behavior and stimulating greater public engagement. However, we should be weary of exaggerating the scope of the changes brought by the 1960s. The 1965 document discussed earlier, which emphasized the role of the media as a 'public forum', also made it clear that some views were more welcome than others. The media, it was argued, 'have a significant role in the synchronization of general social interests and particular interests', and they could perform this function 'only if they are an expression of the most progressive social conscience and action, which is developing in the process of self-management itself, in social-political organizations, and, above all, in the League of Communists of Yugoslavia'.[12] The views of Yugoslavia's life-long president Josip Broz Tito were underpinned by a similar understanding of the role of the media. In his letter to the Association of Journalists of Yugoslavia, published in 1965, he emphasized that the media 'are increasingly becoming a democratic forum for social-political organizations, working collectives and our people', yet also makes clear that journalists must always foreground 'the most progressive social tendencies and those social activities that are aimed at realizing our politics' – that is, the politics of socialist self-management (Broz 1980 [1965]). In short, popular participation was welcome, but only as long as it did not challenge the legitimacy of communist rule and as long as it accepted that real progress could only be achieved within the framework of self-management.

While these ideas are clearly different from the early Marxist-Leninist views of the press as a top-down instrument of mass propaganda, they remain firmly within the ideological parameters of communist politics. The participatory forms of mass communication envisaged by Yugoslav communist elites were genuinely designed with the intention of bringing power to the people. Yet at the same time, they were also meant to ensure that the people willingly and actively participated in executing the political vision defined by the elites, on behalf of the working masses. Retrospectively, these two goals seem incompatible, yet at the time, Yugoslav political and media elites genuinely believed that they were developing a system capable of accommodating both. This peculiar, seemingly incoherent political goal was not peculiar to Yugoslavia. A recent study of Chinese communist audiences (Hemelryk Donald 2013) reveals similar attempts to elicit active involvement while at the same time expecting obedience to Party goals, and aAs Stephen Lovell (2013: 94) points out in a recenthis investigation of Soviet radio broadcasting, 'the whole of the Soviet period may be seen as a balancing act between the need to impose authority and the need to elicit involvement'.,

Eventually, however, this precarious balance proved difficult to sustain. Ideas about an active socialist audience gave rise to political and cultural developments that went far beyond what the Yugoslav elites had intended. As the 1960s gave way to the 1970s, public

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[11] 'Analiza pisma gledalaca upućenih serijskoj emisiji "Spavaje mirno" + pisma gledalaca upućenih serijskoj emisiji "Spavaje mirno" – izvodi', Part I, 1969, p. 9, in RTS-CPOPAR, Report 354.
[12] 'Teze o mestu, ulozi i zadacima štampe, radija i televizije o daljem razvoju društveno-ekonomskih odnosa,' 1965, p. 2, in AY, f. 142 – SAWPY, box 207.

discontent and political contestation grew ever more fervent, and became increasingly rife with nationalist sentiments. Successive reforms appeared to have little effect on the standard of living, unemployment continued to rise, and growing numbers of Yugoslavs were compelled to leave the country in search of a better life in the West (Lampe 2000: 313). In the increasingly heated struggle for power, nationalism provided a convenient shorthand for interpreting Yugoslav problems, and for envisaging possible solutions (Rusinow 1977: 266-73). Outbursts of nationalist fervor became particularly acute in the republic of Croatia, culminating in a wave of mass protests across the republic in autumn 1971. This escalation prompted the aging Yugoslav president Tito to intervene and turn the course of Yugoslavia's political development back towards the core principles of Marxist-Leninism, and initiate a large-scale purge of political, media and cultural elites across the federation.

After the purge, the Yugoslav media became more stringently regulated. Each of the Yugoslav broadcasting centers was required to produce detailed yearly plans, which were scrutinized by several political bodies, while the day-to-day work in the media was overseen by groups of League of Communists members operating within each media organization. The tone of political pronouncements changed as well. In a letter issued in 1972, addressed to members of the League of Communists, Tito put it in no uncertain terms that any deviation from the prescribed course of political development would not be tolerated. He appealed to 'all communists in the press, radio and television and in all responsible political and social bodies' to 'adopt energetic measures to prevent destructive writing and remove from leading positions all those who do not accept the political direction of LCY, and to prevent writing which is opposing the politics of the League of Communists as well as fractional activity through the press' (Broz 1980[1972]: 195).

Towards a transnational history of ideas about audiences

One may be tempted to suggest that the particular patterns of ideas about audiences presented here are unique to Yugoslavia, due to its peculiar geopolitical position and its proclaimed goal of carving out a 'third way' between the extremes of Western market liberalism and Soviet state socialism. There is certainly much that sets the Yugoslav version of socialism apart from its siblings elsewhere in Eastern Europe and it is feasible to argue that the Yugoslav media and political reformers enjoyed a greater level of freedom than their counterparts in the Soviet Bloc. Nonetheless, there is enough evidence to suggest that these were differences of degree rather than of kind, and that similar patterns of change appeared elsewhere in the socialist East.

For the Soviet television professionals and analysts of the 1960s, the ideal TV viewer was an unmistakably active and publicly engaged individual, and this ideal guided much of the investment in participatory formats and live television at the time (Roth-Ey 2011: 223-280, Evans 2011). Boris Firsov, a pioneering Soviet media sociologist and head of Leningrad TV in the 1960s, explicitly sets this vision of the 'active audience' against the approaches purportedly promoted in Western or 'bourgeois' media literature (Firsov 1971). A Marxist approach, argues Firsov, rejects the notion of the audience as passive. Because socialism changes the relationship between the individual and the society, and overcomes the contradictions and conflicts between personal interests and social interests (which lead to alienation), a person in socialism is no longer an object, but a subject of history, and as such an active player that contributes to social transformation. The guidelines for television entertainment formulated in 1967 in East Germany were no different in tone. They demanded that producers avoid both 'trivialization' and 'intellectualism,' and advised them to steer away from 'aesthetic experiments in form' and 'content deemed too intellectually

demanding' in order to avoid offending the 'the authority and dignity of audiences' (Breitenborn 2004: 392).

Across socialist Eastern Europe, views such as these stimulated the introduction of interactive media genres, including political shows based on the talk show format such as TV Belgrade's *Current Debates*. Czechoslovak television offered its viewers televised confrontations between political prisoners of the Stalinist era and their prosecutors (Bren 2010: 20-29), while the Hungarian current affairs program *Forum* featured Party leaders and representatives of various ministries answering questions posed live over telephone (Paulu 1974, 374). In the Soviet Union, a local station in Kuibyshev produced a program in which the journalist confronted the members of the City Executive Committee with probing questions from the public, while a similar program broadcast in Soviet Estonia featured government ministers answering questions from viewers (ibid.: 128). A particularly striking socialist experiment involving audience participation was developed in Czechoslovakia, and involved a form of participatory cinema in which audiences could decide how the narrative would unfold by means of a technological mechanism involving armchairs with voting technology. Known as the *Kinoautomaton*, this project enjoyed full support from the Czechoslovak state, and was initially displayed at the World Exhibition in Montreal in 1967 as an attempt to showcase the creative capabilities and technological advances of the communist country to its Cold War allies and enemies (Carpentier 2011: 265-308).

Interestingly, similar developments can be found in the liberal democracies of the West. For instance, in the U.S., the introduction of public broadcasting was explicitly designed as a way of using the media as a means of cultivating active citizens, capable of resisting the lure of commercial television (Ouellette 1999: 64). These developments formed part of broader debates media and democracy at the time, and in this context the 'PBS put forward a model of 'enlightened democracy' that complemented commercial television's hegemonic orientation with a different, 'governmental' logic' (1999: 69). Comparisons with the socialist East played a role as well. The Federal Communications Commission Chairman Newton Minow pointed to Soviet and Chinese successes in using television as a means of mass education and propaganda, and suggested using nation-wide educational television to serve similar goals in the U.S., namely to bring 'to a mass audience the knowledge needed to keep our society growing, the cultural heritage to keep our society rich, and the information needed by our citizens to keep our society free' (Minow 1962: 9, quoted in Ouellette 1999: 70).

These similarities raise intriguing questions that demand a more thorough, transnational investigation of audience history. They suggest that political and media elites on both sides of the Iron Curtain were attracted by similar cultural and to an extent even political values, centred on active political engagement and grounded in traditional cultural hierarchies that privileged education and information over entertainment – a fact rarely acknowledged in existing historical reviews of media development, which either pay little attention to socialist media or present them as wholly different from their counterparts in the West. What were the broader political goals that can help explain this convergence in elite views? To what extent were these views taken up in media practice, and to what extent did they manage to shape the behaviour of audiences, both east and west? What was the role of the changing demographic composition of television audiences at the time, their leisure patterns, as well as the ebbs and flows of livings standards?

Another interesting question that a transnational history of ideas about audiences could help address concerns the relationship between the transnational infatuation with notions of the active audience in the 1960s and the later shift to 'active audiences' in Western academic

literature of the 1970s and the 1980s. Arguably, the political investment in popular participation in the 1960s and the general upheavals that marked the decade gave rise to intellectual interest in the possibility of different, more interactive forms of mass communication. The hopes generated by the political and cultural changes and the intellectual fervor of the 1960s spilled over into the 1970s in the form of intellectual projects that sought to do away with traditional modes of thinking, including – in the context of media and communication research – the established ways of understanding and researching media effects and audiences. The ideas of the active audience established in Western academic literature in the 1970s-1980s challenged the perception of audience passivity as such and pointed to the myriad ways in which audiences are almost inevitably actively engaging with the media. Or, to put it differently, if the audiences of the 1960s were essentially seen as passive and in need of active mobilization via innovative, participatory media formats, or via a public media system that defied the logic of commercial media, the audiences of the 1970s and the 1980s were seen as already active, regardless of what the media had to offer. The understanding of what exactly constitutes audience activity shifted as well – if, in the 1960s, audience activity referred primarily to political engagement, the 1970s-1980s saw this category broaden to include a whole set of meaning-making activities that eschewed the realm of politics as such.

Retrospectively, it is tempting to wonder how such ideas about audiences may have been shaped by the general political climate of the 1970s. Both east and west of the Iron Curtain, the mass politics of the 1960s gave way to the 'normalization', disengagement and (for some) frustration of the 1970s, which occasionally found expression in subcultural activities or expressly 'antipolitical' ideas (Suri 2003: 213-59). In such a context, audience activity could, indeed, take place primarily in the form of a predominantly private, cognitive engagement. One also wonders whether the emphasis on audiences as inherently active did not, in its own way, chime with the decline in public accountability at the time. If audiences are indeed already active and engaged, do those in rule have any responsibility at all to encourage popular participation? A full consideration of these issues would of course require a thorough examination of developments in the 1970s and beyond, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, but as this article has hopefully made clear, a history of ideas about audiences offers a promising starting point for such an investigation.

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