

POST-COMMUNIST PATTERNS OF MEDIA USE AND MEDIA-RELATED COMMUNICATION AT HOUSEHOLD LEVEL: ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDIES IN ROMANIA

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The general socio-political changes that took place in Romania after the downfall of communism (1989) included the emergence of a new social actor: the mass media. The monocentric media system, centrally controlled by the political power, was gradually replaced by a demonopolized system. The printed press was fast and almost completely demonopolized, reaching a peak of 1800 titles in 1994. The number of audiovisual stations increased dramatically in 1997 to 189 private local stations, 119 local television stations and 1053 cable operators, which competed for audience shares with the public broadcasting stations.

A legitimate question is whether the media's rapid expansion after 1989 was externally induced or reflected changes in the audience.

According to the finding of the CURS panel study (conducted in 1994-1997),¹ the general audience of the public radio and TV services decreased from 88,5% (TVR1—channel 1 of the national public television) and 65% (Radio Romania Actualitati—national public news station), respectively, in 1990 to 54,5% (TVR1) and 54% (Radio Romania Actualitati) seven years later. The same study reported a rise in the number of viewers and listeners of private broadcasting stations (the average value for both radio and television was 29%). But the CURS study considered the numeric aspect of media consumption and did not address the role played by the mass media in directing human actions and the effects of mediated messages on the receivers' opinions, attitudes and judgments. We can call this a mechanistic approach to media consumption, which, paired with the magic bullet view of media effects, accounts for the primitive design of political communication during the first decade of free elections in Central-Eastern Europe.

The fact that mass media had an important influence on human action was taken for granted. In Romania, a country with a short history of democratic processes, this perspective involved the danger of an authoritarian relation between the media and the rest of society, including politics. Citizens were treated like passive receivers of messages directed to them

¹ ***CURS. *Sondaj National de Opinie*, 9-15 October 1997.
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through the media by institutional social (e.g., political parties, the parliament, the President).

One of the main objectives in the former totalitarian societies after 1989 was to build “new” social relations among various social strata. The media in the Central-Eastern European countries was best positioned to link various groups in society, and all groups with the new power structures. But the mass mediated communication required dynamism from all actors involved. In a diversified media environment, the diversified and “fragmented” audience could and had to exercise choice.

The Purpose of the Study and the Research Questions

The goal of the present study is to identify the roles of the media in structuring the daily routines of ordinary people in the post-communist environment. My approach to the relationship between media and society will emphasize the receivers’ perspective.

The following research questions will be addressed:

1. Are Romanians active or passive consumers of the media?
2. What are the roles mass communication has for the daily life of Romanians?
3. How do the media influence the behavior of the Romanian population, at the individual or group level?
4. What is the relationship between the mass mediated and direct interpersonal communication?

Theoretical Framework

This project assumed a dynamic relation between media and society. The research was conducted from a functionalist perspective within the uses-and-gratifications framework. McQuail’s² critique of the uses-and-gratifications paradigm model was embraced, which stressed that mass mediated communication is a cultural phenomenon occurring in a social setting.

Working Hypotheses

The following suppositions were considered as working hypothesis of the empirical project:

1. The type and degree of influence that mass communication has on individuals who have the same social role within the household depends on the shapes of interpersonal relations within the household.
2. The differences among the social roles within the household members lead to various uses of the means of mass communication.

² D. McQuail, *With the benefit of hindsight: Reflections on uses and gratifications approach*, in M. Gurevitch and M. R. Levy (eds.), *Mass Communication Review Yearbook*, vol. 5., 1985, pp. 125-141.

3. The major function of mass communication in the household is to facilitate interpersonal discussions.
4. There is a direct link between the pattern of media consumption at the individual level and the shapes of social interactions in the household.
5. The influence exercised through mass communication on households is a functional one. The media have a role in directing some activities inside the household. People react in different ways to different mass communication sources.

Research Methodology

The ethnographic research method was adopted to analyze communication as a cultural phenomenon, highly dependent on historical time and geographic space. The method involved the following assumptions: (1) alternative decodings of a mass mediated message are developed within the household, which is considered as an interpretative community; (2) the various decodings of the same message cause the psychosocial relations associated to the uses of mass communication channels; (3) individuals act differently on those decodings in different structural contexts.

Based on the existing literature, the relational uses of the media were expected to be the following: facilitator of interpersonal communication, means to avoid direct communication and contact, instrument for social learning, and instrument for cooperation or dominance.

For validity reasons, two methods of data collection were used: participant observation and personal interviews.

Research Design

The study was launched in 1998 and its goal was to identify media consumption models at the small group (household) level in a country under transition from communism toward capitalism.

The study was conducted from a twofold perspective: the individual point of view, as expressed by family members, and the symbolic perspective in which the household was considered as a type of human environment.

Sample

The sample included 21 families (70 individuals) located in various cities of Romania. The study began with a criterion sample maintained constant throughout the project. From

this, a snowball sample was developed by adding individuals located in the same cities but having different demographic characteristics (e.g., age, education level, occupation). The final result was a sample composed of geographic clusters.

Data Collection

For the members of the families included in the criterion sample the principal sociological method used in the empirical research was participant observation. The observations were made by a member of the family using four sets of indicators³:

1. Type of primary group (family)
2. Main descriptive indicators:
 - 2.1. Technical means of mass communication
 - 2.2. Geographic location of the family
 - 2.3. Family income
 - 2.4. Social biographies of each family's member
 - 2.5. Roles, communication links and networks within the family
3. Analytic indicators:
 - 3.1. Types of interpersonal relations among family members (cooperation, conflict, competition)
 - 3.2. Type of social integration within the family (assimilation, dominance, subordination)
 - 3.3. Role perceptions and the manifest behaviours related to them
 - 3.4. The kind of normativity that existed in the family
 - 3.5. Media consumption patterns at individual and group levels
4. Secondary descriptive indicators:
 - 4.1. Schedules of activities associated with media consumption
 - 4.2. Social hierarchies related to the uses of mass communication means within the family
 - 4.3. Functional uses of various media in the family (utilitarian, social control, facilitating the social interaction)
 - 4.4. Interpersonal communication networks related to media uses
 - 4.5. Personal reasons and gratifications associated with the uses of mass media.

The instrument made available to the family members who recorded the data included: observational notes, social biographies of all family member, household's maps indicating the

³ K. Land, *Théories, modèles et indicateurs de changement social*, in ****Revue internationale des sciences sociales*, vol. XXVII, nr. 1/1975.

location of the sets, and schedules of housework and media consumption.

The interval of time allowed for the recording of this information was one week. At the end of this period, the researcher conducted two open interviews with the main members of each family (i.e., husband and wife, in most cases).

For the snowball sample, the semi-structured interview was the only research technique used.

All the interviews were tape-recorded.

Table 1 provides a summary of the data collection procedure.

Table 1- Data collection procedure

Data recording technique	Number of cases	Geographic location
Participant observations	21 families	Bucharest (capital); Turda (Cluj district); Moreni (Dâmbovita district); Ploiesti (Prahova district); Sibiu (Sibiu district); Baia-Mare (Maramures district).
Non-structured interviews	35 subjects	Bucharest (capital); Ploiesti (Prahova district); Turda (Cluj district); Moreni (Dâmbovita district); Sibiu (Sibiu district); Baia-Mare (Maramures district).
Semi-structured interviews	70 subjects	Bucharest (capital); Oradea (Bihor district); Sibiu (Sibiu district).

Findings and Discussion

The findings selected to be presented in this paper refer to (1) the roles and functions of mass communication within the daily routines of Romanians in the first decade after the downfall of communism; (2) the patterns of media-related interpersonal communication in different families.

The roles and functions of mass communication

The cases below present selectively findings from case studies. Cases 1 and 2 show that in small group relations the media play different roles for each person. Both case studies as well as Examples C, D, E, and F from the snowball sample display a variety of roles performed by the media for various individuals. The primary role appears to be informative.

Case 1: Family P⁴ (Bucharest)

Nuclear, biparental family, with 6 members.

Fixed monthly family income (sum of family members' salaries).

The cultural expenses in the period under investigation represented 1/10 of the family budget (medium level).

Media equipment: 2 TV sets and 2 radio sets.

The participative observation showed different media consumption patterns of older and younger members of the family. The spatial and temporal co-presence of all six members of the family related to media did not occur during the observation period. This state of facts was recognised by the wife in the non-structured interview: "Generally, we watch together prime-time movies in the evening. But it is difficult to be all at the same time at home, because the two older sons have schedules that are completely different from ours." (Interview with N.P., wife)

According to the husband, the media have two main functions in the household:

1. To facilitate the relation of the family's members with the rest of the society: "Mass media try to present us the news and the ways in which social problems are solved in general. ... The journalists' role is to inform the people about what is going on in society." (Interview with D.P., husband)

To create a favourable household's environment: "The other members of the family watch TV, listen to the radio and read the newspapers in order to relax, because they are curious." (Interview with D.P., husband).

Case 2: Family B (Moreni, Dambovită district)

Nuclear family with 4 members, all high-school graduates.

Media equipment: phone, 3 TV sets, 1 radio, 1 video recorder.

The communication expenses do not reach the level of 10 percent from the total monthly income of the family.

The "ritual" of news watching in the evening was an established group practice, leading to interpersonal communication (e.g., expressing opinions, feelings, and attitudes toward media messages).

⁴ The families and individual participants in the research project will be designated by capital letters.

Example A

Location : Dining room.

L. B. (husband) watched news on the ProTV channel. Sitting on the bed in front of the TV set. D. B. (wife) is in the kitchen where she prepares dinner.

L. B. watched news quietly, reacting only to flood news. He told his wife a flood story from his childhood.

The joint watching of TV news was acknowledged by both husband and wife:

"I watch TV movies and news together with my wife and children." (Interview with L. B.)

"We watch together TV news, sport events, and sometimes movies. Generally speaking, this happens in the evening." (Interview with D. B.)

The two partners have different images of each other in relation to media's messages:

Example B

Interviewer: "Your wife told me that you have some conflicts on political issues. What is your opinion?"

L: "Yes, that is true. I am a nationalist, she has more liberal ideas." (Non-structured interview with B.L.)

Interviewer: "Do you have arguments with your husband related to media messages?"

D: "I argue with my husband especially on political issues. He is more conservative than I am in political matters." (Open interview with B.D.)

The perceived roles of the media in everyday life differed. The husband did not feel any personal dependence on mass communication. ("I do not give up my usual activities ... for a TV program" (Open interview with L. B.) But his wife admitted she watched TV to escape from reality: "I like to spend my free time watching TV movies or entertainment programs. In that way I escape for a while from reality." (Open interview with D. B.)

In the case of Family B, the media have several functions:

1. To inform
2. To relax
3. To facilitate interpersonal communication
4. To relate the household to society

Example C: Participant O.M. (Oradea)

Professor, university graduate, age 57.

Interviewer : "What is the main reason for which you watch TV, listen to the radio, and read the printed press?"

O.M.: "I listen to the radio and read the newspaper for information. TV news are both informative and entertaining."

Media uses:

1. Information
2. Entertainment

Example D: Participant C. A. (Oradea)

Retiree, high-school graduate, age 61.

Personal reason for media consumption: "information and entertainment."

Reason of family members: "To learn about current events."

Media uses:

3. Information
4. Entertainment

Example E: Participant A. N. (Bucharest)

Retiree, high-school graduate, age 65.

Personal reason for media consumption: "I read newspapers and magazines only for information. I don't have time to watch TV or listen to the radio too often."

Reason of family members: "They watch movies on TV because they are interested in the story, they like the artists."

Media uses:

5. Information
6. Entertainment

Example F: Participant P. I. (Bucharest)

Student, age 22.

Personal reason for media consumption: "Usually I do that to fill my free time, because I like to read newspapers, watch TV, and listen to the radio."

Media use:

Pass time

A gender difference in media usage patterns was observed among subjects. The

women motivated their higher level of media consumption by the need to relax, to relieve the daily stress, to escape from reality. The men eventually fit the media within their schedule, whereas women frequently adjust their schedule to the media. As one of the interviewed women said, "The time when the soap operas are scheduled is the time to relax. After that I start doing things around the house." (Interview with N. R.)

Patterns of Media-Related Interpersonal Communication

The family as a primary group is considered in ethnographic audience studies as a system with internal structure⁵ determined by (1) external factors (e.g., material resources⁶, occupations of the family members); (2) subjective factors (e.g., social biographies of the family members, cultural traditions, communicative abilities); and (3) the time-space complex (e.g. life cycle). In this research tradition, space has two meanings⁷: In the physical sense, it defines a place with its external boundaries. Its symbolic meaning confers space an individual dimension.

The relationships within families depend not only on the available material (economic) resources but also on the space-time dynamics. The household members have common activities, which they schedule. The way in which they interact is shaped by this space-time structure.

Cases 3, 4, and 5 presented in the following boxes were chosen to illustrate the variety of media-related communication patterns in Romanian families in the first decade of post-communist social transformations.

Case 3: Family A (Bucharest)

Nuclear family, with 3 members: 2 retired adults (both with university degrees) and their son (university student).

The son recorded the information.

All 3 members of the family have flexible schedules and a considerable amount of leisure time. Nevertheless, the temporal structure of day-to-day activities is a very precise, steady one, especially for the parents.

The family owns two one-bedroom apartments, one for the parents, and another one for their son. The space allows for different media-related behaviors. The existence of two flats results

⁵ J. Uwe Rogge, K. Jensen, *Everyday Life and Television in West Germany: An Emphatic Interpretive Perspective on the Family as a System*, in J. Lull (ed.), *World Families Watch Television*, Sage, 1988, p. 86.

⁶ See examples of Family Communication Expenses in the Appendix.

⁷ R. Silverstone, *Time, Information and Communication Technologies in the Household*, in ****Time and Society*, vol. 2(3)/1993, p. 295.

in a fragmented communicative network among family members.

Each family member uses different mass communication channels: The husband uses television and the printed press; the wife uses the radio and magazines. The communicative link between husband and wife is the printed press, but reading is an individual activity. Discussion between husband and wife about the information they independently gather from the media is limited. They talk about cultural issues covered by the media but avoid the social and political issues. The media's informative role has different meanings for each of them.

Example G

Location: Dining room.

M. A. is sitting in an armchair, reading the newspaper.

R. A. comes from her room: "How wonderful are the programs on the Radio Romania Cultural! "

M. A.: "What programs?"

R. A.: "About a new way to communicate... using images, the senses... They say people read too much..."

M. A. (trying to impose an opposite view): "Images, like those cave drawings, have been used since ancient times."

Case 4: Family M₁ (Bucharest)

Nuclear family with 5 members: husband and wife (both have university degrees), two children who are students, and one child in high school.

The family lives in a two-bedroom apartment.

Media equipment: 2 TV sets, 1 personal computer, and 1 radio set.

The family spend little time together. Usually, the members of the family are engaged in daytime activities outside the house. The scarcity of physical space and the location of the media devices in the dinning room result in constant reshaping of the small group dynamics.

Example H

Location: Dining room.

Time: Evening.

The members of the family are watching a movie on the ProTV channel.

R. M. (eldest daughter) is reading while sitting in the armchair in front of the TV set.

M. M. (son) is working on the PC and occasionally watching TV.

R. I. M. (husband) is sitting on the sofa, watching TV.

F. M. (wife) is ironing; the table she uses for ironing is near the TV set, so that she can watch the movie at the same time.

Example J

Location: Dining room.

Time: Evening.

F. M. (wife) is sitting on the sofa, watching TV.

R. I. M. (husband) is using the PC.

R. M. (eldest daughter) enters the room and asks for permission to change the TV channel. She does not receive an answer, so she goes to another room where she starts listening to the radio.

The family conversation in the family room reveals the power structure in the household.

Example K

Location: Dining room.

Time: Evening.

There are three persons in the room: the wife (F.M.), the son (R. M.), the eldest daughter (R. M.). They are watching a TV movie and making comments:

F.M.: "Is this another movie or the same? It seems to be the same."

R. M. (eldest daughter): "No, it's another one."

F. M. (insisting): "It must be a new episode. That one was about the mob."

R.M. (eldest daughter, getting impatient): "No, can't you see, it's the same actress, look at her! She has the right face for this kind of movies."

F. M.: "I don't understand what is going on in this movie!"

At this moment M. M. (son) arrives. He switches to another TV channel. There are some protests from others and F. M goes to another room.

Due to the limited space and the dense communicative network of the family, some unspoken rules operate. The choice of a channel belongs to the same member of the family who turned on the TV set. A longer period of watching gives a family member control of the TV set and priority in choosing the channel.

The husband admits the existence of conflicting views about media's messages:

Example L

R. I. M. (husband): "In a family with five members...there is a higher incidence of

any sort of discussions. Talking with one another is quite important. The most frequent topic is conflicting preferences: Someone wants to watch a program, another one wants to watch other program at the same time. This triggers an argument about who gets the priority in watching TV.” (Interview with R. I. M.)

Conflicting preferences are usually resolved based on the traditional family power structure in Romanian families: Husband > Wife > Elder Son > Younger > Elder daughter > Younger daughter.

Case 5: Family M₂ (Bucharest)

Nuclear family with 5 members (husband, wife, and 3 daughters).

The education level of the parents is inferior to that of the children: the parents are both high-school graduates and two of their daughters are university students.

The monthly income of the family is rather low. The amount of money spent on communication is small (Compare the communication budgets of Families M₂ and A in the Appendix). The media equipment in the household is minimal: 1 TV set and 2 radio sets.

The distribution of household roles is traditional: The father/husband contributes most to the family income and makes all family decisions. The mother/wife administers the household budget and facilitates the daily routine activities for all family members. The daughters can only make decisions on their individual activities.

The media-related communication is rather limited. The very small family space restricts interaction among family members.

Example M

Location: Dining room.

The TV is on and the family is watching a cartoon series on the Antena 1 channel.

A. M. (wife), M. M. (daughter 1), M. E. (daughter 2) and M. D. (daughter 3) are sitting at the table and D. M. (husband) is lying on the bed.

D. M. (husband): “Another cartoon?”

A. M. (wife): “Today’s cartoons are different. Some years ago even children could understand them.” She tells the story of a cartoon that was broadcast some years ago.

She sees that nobody listens to her and stops.

The ultimate control on media use is exercised by the father. He schedules family activities, including media consumption at the individual level.

Example N

Location: Dining room.

D. M. (husband) is alone in the room, eating, and switching from channel to channel.

E. M. (daughter 2) comes in and they start talking. The father interrupts her to listen to something interesting on TV. The daughter goes to the kitchen to talk with her mother. The father remains alone to watch TV.

Discussion

The findings selected to be presented in this paper show that media consumption at home by family members tends to be a casual and an individual experience. The study revealed complex patterns of media-related practices that are highly dependent on general family circumstances and momentary circumstances.

The media-related discussions usually revolve around the information provided by the medium in use or resolve preference conflicts.

The families observed and interviewed in this study used media for various purposes. The major purposes appeared to be information about the real social world and entertainment. The media were occasionally used as a background for domestic activities (e.g. women in their kitchens listening to the radio).

Some families use coviewing of television for bondage purposes, as a convenient way of spending time together (e.g. in Family A, the printed press provided a basis for conversation for the spouses). When one family member happens to be alone at home, he/she may use the media for surrogate companionship.

Often times the control over media use and choices expresses the power structure in the family (e.g., in Families M₁ and M₂).

In the new free market environment, the status differentiation has dramatically increased. Some families benefit from newly acquired wealth to purchase and use media as status indicators. For example, in Family M₃ from Sibiu (two adults, no children), the husband listens to the radio only when he drives his new car (Interview with G. M.)

The location of media outlets in the home shapes the “geography” of the family. Generally, a new PC or color TV set is located in the main family room and the old-fashioned one is located in another room. The main family room often serves as an “intermediate space,” both private and public, where friends, relatives, and neighbors are received. This makes the main family room an appropriate place for the display of media equipment as status indicators.

In communist times, families used mass media to escape unpleasant realities, as a

means of evasion from the highly politicized social environment. The household was a refuge and provided emotional support for individual family members. In post-communist years, the external environment became more challenging, people have increased opportunities to develop their personalities and pursue their interests. They tend to spend less time at home, and family life is less tightly knit. The family space tends to be used more and more to express personal identity through the exercise of choices, including media choices. This tendency is proportional to the socio-economic status of the family.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Communication Expenses for Family M₂

Type of expense		Amount of money (in lei)
1. Culture	1.1. Theatre 1.2. Movies 1.3. Concerts 1.4. Exhibitions	
2. Personal computer	2.1. Materials 2.2. Personal computer and printers 2.3. Software 2.4. Lectures and courses 2.5. Internet	
3. Disks and cassettes		
4. Video recordings	4.1. Video-cassettes 4.2. Video-camera	
5. Books		
6. Audiovisual	6.1. TV subscription 6.2. Radio subscription 6.3. Cable-TV subscription 6.4. Pay-TV subscription	18.000 lei 12.400 lei
7. Printed press	7.1. Newspapers 7.2. Magazines	6.000 lei
8. Telcommunications	8.1. Phone 8.2. Pager	75.000 lei
9. Mail	9.1. Letters 9.2. parcels 9.3. Other	
Total		111.400 lei

Table 2

Communication Expenses for Family A

Type of expense	Object of expense	Amount of money (in lei)
1. Culture	1.1. Theatre 1.2. Movies 1.3. Concerts 1.4. Exhibitions	
2. Personal computer	2.1. Materials 2.2. Personal computer and printers 2.3. Software 2.4. Lectures and courses 2.5. Internet	
3. Disks and cassettes		6.000 lei
4. Video recordings	4.1. Video-cassettes 4.2. Video-camera	
5. Books		100.000 lei
6. Audiovisual	6.1. TV subscription 6.2. Radio subscription 6.3. Cable-TV subscription 6.4. Pay-TV subscription	10.000 lei 12.000 lei
7. Printed press	7.1. Newspapers 7.2. Magazines	82.800 lei
8. Telcommunications	8.1. Phone 8.2. Pager	142.000 lei 140.000 lei
9. Mail	9.1. Letters 9.2. Parcels 9.3. Other	30.500 lei 36.000 lei
Total		559.300 lei