

The Culturally Situated Young Romanian Viewer and the New Television

Abstract: Our aim in this paper is to identify the ways in which the new Romanian television has removed itself from its former (communist) status and orientation, and has tuned in to the global media, in turn undergoing changes prompted, on the one hand, by new communication technologies and, on the other hand, by geopolitical changes per se occurring worldwide. We intend to show how the new types of media, particularly television, having interconnected consumers everywhere into a global village, and having facilitated the segmentation of audiences and the targeting of audiences with narrowly focused messages, have impacted young Romania television viewers. We will also try to track the ways in which global media symbols interact with local specificities and are socially mediated with the direct intervention of culturally situated local young audiences. In addition, we hope to prove that young Romanian television viewers are adept managers of the multivalent television messages, which they successfully decode in ways that serve their subcultural interests and needs.

AUTHOR:
Lecturer, ESP Department, Faculty of Letters, Babes Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania. E-mail: dianeira2002@yahoo.com

Introduction

Today's wired global village, created by the advanced technologies in communication and the resultant interconnectivity, has allowed mass media messages and symbols to become more mobile and less fixed in space and time. Television is the medium *par excellence* that can diffuse worldwide dominant messages, and has therefore been considered by media and cultural theorists an imperialist[1] vehicle. That is, it is viewed as a vehicle for injecting a particular ideology into the hearts and minds of viewers everywhere. However, later theorists in the field have decided that some credit should be given to audiences, who are active decoders rather than passive receivers of media messages, and that the effects of the media are in reality limited. This angle, too, has had its faults, for it over-credited audiences with the power of using the media wholly in their own interests

KEY WORDS:

culturally situated viewer, segmented and fragmented audiences, imported ideology, crosscultural and transcultural media symbols, encoding and decoding, localization

and to their own gratification. The new individual viewer seems to belong to a model of society[2] constituted by a range of subcultures whose members form shifting alliances and become different viewing subjects at different times. Under these circumstances, an analysis presuming the individual viewer's or collective viewers' tastes and interests to be invariable would build on a false foundation. Nevertheless, with some allowances for the concept of the viewer as indeterminate, we intend to focus on an ethnographic generational group, the young Romania television viewer, and to utilize some of the investigative focus provided therein.

In the following we intend to make a cursory overview of the new type of television found in Romania (since 1989), of the proliferation of television channels, domestic or imported, and how they have 'prompted' the emergence of niche audiences in general and one niche audience in particular: young television viewers, grouped into a community of taste and subcultural interests. Our intention is to gain some insight into how they react to global symbols as mediated by television. We will, hopefully, prove that young people in Romania, even if circumscribed culturally by the media, can and do appropriate the media messages in ways that show them to be literate television consumers and selective decoders of its multicultural messages.

The dexterity of these viewers emerges when confronted with the eclectic content of the television messages, with the bombarding flux of symbols that can create confusion and disorientation in the viewer who, until not long ago could consume a very limited amount of television (2 hours per day, nearing 1989) with highly censored content, purged of any and all western cultural values.

Post-Communist Romanian Television And Young Audiences

Romanian television registered a complete turnabout after the fall of communism. At least two important directions can be mentioned in what regards its radical change. On the one hand, it rapidly adjusted to current global transformations in terms of technology and marketing policy, dramatically increasing the number of channels as well as the diversity of programs. This eventually led to the narrow circumscription of Romanian audiences by personal and cultural preferences.[3] Such new channels as ACASA Channel, which targets an almost exclusively female audience, Sports Television, which targets a primarily male audience, MTV Romania, which targets young viewers, have gone beyond simply segmenting the formerly mass Romanian audience, polarize viewers into distinct factions. The interactive quality of the new media also contributed to the division of the overall audiences into niches. On the other hand, the Romanian television has reformulated its dominant messages and multiplied its content, while the newer options with multicultural values have also contributed to dividing the audience into ever-narrower viewing segments.

In keeping with worldwide media trends, this diverse content is relayed through specialty channels that respond to the particular preferences of their audiences and provide content that satisfies these diverse interests. Moreover, a transnationalisation of symbolic forms has occurred: programs, genres, styles, and stars circulate literally to reach local audiences of culturally situated viewers. This in-depth re-shaping of television naturally had an impact on Romanian audiences, young people included. The untrained public eye was flooded with imported imagery, and the viewers engaged in a simulacrum (Baudrillard) of socio-cultural reality relayed by the new television.[4] For a time, the exported meanings were consumed, overall, indiscriminately and unselectively and the new dominant social and cultural values were readily accepted.

The packaged western ideology for young people came in the form of new imported genres: docudramas, talk- and chat-shows, reality shows, imported channel formats, either adapted or received directly via satellite: Music Television, VH1, the Discovery Channel, and National Geographic, or shows which mediated the western multicultural experience: The Osbournes, Punk'd, MTV Music awards, Star Trek, etc, some of which explicitly featured minority groups and subculture interests: women, homosexuals, racial and ethnic minorities, etc.

These developments have made it possible for cultural crossings to occur, uniting people through media imagery.[5] Consequently, young Romanian locals have been enabled to participate in interpretative communities (e.g. become Star Trek fans) as part of an audience defined by cultural rather than geographic proximity.

On the other hand, young people, like other categories of television consumers, view TV more and more privately and independently in this world of expanded cultural offerings. They occupy niches related to their various cultural orientations, lifestyles, languages, genders, ethnicities, sexual orientations, and technological literacies.[6] Therefore we must always make amends for individuality and idiosyncrasy, even if it is much more convenient to treat young viewers as a homogenous group, a facilitative yet false presumption.

Imported Imagery And Crosscultural Media Symbols

Young Romanian television viewers have in recent years (since 1989) been heavily and abruptly exposed to new media content, which explicitly or implicitly has adopted a agenda of conveying multicultural messages. For example, one of the Discovery Channel's logos is 'celebrating diversity,' accompanied by short stints of ethnic specifics presented by young nationals speaking their native languages (with subtitles). This new orientation of media content has been prompted by geopolitical developments (integrative tendencies, i.e. the European Union, massive immigration, professional mobility), on the one hand, and on the other hand by new communication technologies, which have practically abolished spatial separation and have connected

people worldwide into a single audience.[7] This connection to the flux of global media messages has affected young Romanian viewers and has exposed them to cross-cultural television symbols.

Perhaps the most straightforward examples are those of Valentine's Day and Halloween, American holidays that as dominant Western values have been assimilated into the local experience. This ready acceptance of imported cultural symbols might be misconstrued as a mainstreaming effect of the media. Some representatives[8] of the functionalist tradition of sociology in their proposal of a taxonomy of the social functions of television have identified one that they explicitly label dysfunction: heavy exposure of large masses of the population renders them politically apathetic and inert. However, the decoding of these symbols has been negotiated rather than uncritically accepted.

In the light of the above, it could be said that access to global culture and the programmatic multicultural policy of the new television have made it possible for young Romanian television viewers to participate in a shared discursive space. The new media offer them the status of transnational viewers, which status they employ to localize the media message and make their own uses of it. Media theorists emphasized the active character of audiences who decode the media messages in a way that will meet their interests and needs[9]. In the process the distance between 'the local' and 'the global' contracts, and not simply due to the broadcast technology, which diffuses the media messages across the world to be received by young audiences everywhere, but also because of the local young audiences. Media exposure to the cultural symbol of Valentine's Day can account for a number of reactions in young people. For example, it has now become commonplace for Romanian teenagers to celebrate Valentine's day at school by sending each other romantic notes delivered by a specially assigned person who is exempted from other scholastic duties for the day. SMS messages are sent. Valentine's Day parties are organized. Also, clubs organize special theme parties: for example, local clubs announced under a common heading various parties for sweethearts, other parties, and pop or rock concerts.

In this way television's representations are recognized, interpreted, and used in the young Romanian viewer's social construction of daily life. This is called social mediation.[10] Through repetition, these new icons have penetrated the individual and collective consciousness and have affected social behavior. The case of Valentine's Day is an instance of a cultural form having literally moved through space to interact with local cultural forms and settings and to change them. While traditionally this would have been prompted by the physical movement of people across geography, it is now facilitated by the new media technology.

From another angle, it could be said that young Romanian viewers are empowered by having offered to them for consumption forms of foreign popular culture currency with almost worldwide circulation. This empowerment combines with our subject's newly acquired television literacy. From here, the young local viewer can move on to develop new cultural competencies,

which enable him/her to manage the torrents of information and to be selective with the assorted cultural values in the dominant message of the media. The young viewer is a technologically sophisticated bricoleur,[11] who can negotiate meanings from eclectic television content and messages. So, where the new texts, imported and exotic, might incur some sort of confusion or disorientation, they have been made manageable by the television-literate young viewer. The strategies employed to re-articulate and appropriate television material are debated as features of postmodern culture.[12]

Negotiating Media Meaning By The Young Viewers

It has been noted that audiences in general, and viewers in particular, seek the pleasure of recognizing their own culture in their program choices. This has been called cultural proximity.[13] Recent television marketing has oriented towards targeting ever narrower audiences, young people included.

However, viewing the audience, even a niche audience, as homogeneous is a misconception that was discarded early on. The focus has shifted onto the individual, who occupies different positions in the social formation having at his/her disposal different codes and subcultures and repertoires. Moreover, any one individual member of the audience can at different times be different viewing subjects as constituted by his/her determinants. The individual media consumer is a poacher, in Certeau's terms.[14] The individual young Romanian viewer makes no exception and appropriates the material produced by the media and assigns to it meanings that are in line with his/her subordinate or subcultural interests[15] as defined by local circumstances.

On the other hand, audiences can be viewed as groups of people who have in common some media related behavior. For young people television viewing is one of the focal activities and articulates most of the music based subcultures, which depend, albeit not exclusively, on music broadcast by television. It can be said that young Romanian viewers, as do their peers elsewhere, share a cultural orientation towards decoding messages.

Perhaps the dynamism of the young viewer vis-à-vis television is most visible in the interactive formats: chat-shows where hosts and guests interact with call-in viewers, the organization of the screen with space allotted to SMS messages (MTV Romania, Atomic TV), or TV programs for viewer use (B1TV TV chat). Some cultural and media theorists call the use that young viewer make of this framework proposed by television programming 'the counterhegemonic act of evading containment.' While the television subject-positions the young viewer by offering him/her particular mediated symbols, and also empowers him/her by distributing popular culture products, the viewer can counteract the intentions of programmers by decoding symbols in radical ways. Thus, it has been noted that SMS messaging by young Romanian viewers displayed at the bottom of the screen is conducted in a code that overtly opposes

the standard linguistic norms or in a lexical cloaking that is esoteric or obscure to the mainstream viewer.

The counterhegemonic appropriation of the dominant message is explicable in part by the possible asymmetry in the encoding-decoding process.[16] It can be explained as a conscious act of refusal on the part of the young viewer to be framed by the dominant message, but also as a signal of the lack of fit between the codes of broadcasters and receivers. The disjunction[17] between the television code and the end product of decoding by the young viewers arises, on the whole, from the resistance of the young viewer to mainstreaming. Yet, the decoding is not collectively oppositional, but rather complex and diversified within this opposing stance, for young people inhabit a variety of different subcultural sections of the young audience. Basically, like other subcultures (feminists, environmental groups, gays), youth use media to endorse counterhegemonic values and lifestyles.

Glocalization

Cultural values travel easily over space and in time in today's wired global village. Valentine's Day is a case of transculturation by which a media product literally moves through space and time to interact with local cultural forms and settings. Nevertheless, the process does not conclude with the arrival of the foreign icon on new territory. The message is indigenized,[18] the foreign is domesticated, and usually a hybrid form emerges. In Romania, Valentine's Day is not so much about sending cards as it is about partying and dating. Romanians have skipped the stage of writing Valentines by hand– we have no Valentine's day card industry per se – but rather send SMS messages, while the Internet savvy turn to the Yahoo greeting service.

On the other hand, early media theories suggest that the ready acceptance and swift social mediation of such foreign cultural symbols relayed by the media (celebrating Halloween or Valentine's Day in a local setting and specificity) could be written off as an international hypodermic media effect: ideology and values are injected directly into the minds of the media consumers. By circulating geographically generic American icons, and thus legitimizing them, the media frame reality and inconspicuously influence the local Romanian audience. From this angle, television could be said to have a hypodermic effect.[19] However, Romanian young viewers localize the content and make their own use of it. Besides diversion and entertainment, they use it to meet a specific aspirational need of their own: identifying with Western lifestyles. The celebration of Valentine's Day on Romanian television, repeated every year and given greater amplitude by some Romanian channels to the detriment of local festivals of love (*Mãrþi°or* on the 1st of March or *Mother's Day* on the 8th) works similarly to the objective correlation of ads.

A third point we could make is that the active reception of such media symbols and messages prompts a renegotiation of the local identity vis-à-vis the dominant foreign culture.[20] This is all the more so as globalization

is now considered a cliché.[2121] Ien Ang in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p. 179.

The reality of the geopolitical realignments, which also affect Romania, compounded by the crisscrossing of media vectors, evades the possibility of globalizing television viewers into a homogenous audience.

Conclusions

The young Romanian television viewer has been exposed in the past decade or so to in-depth changes of the dominant media messages conveying a radically different ideology. He/she has been equally bombarded by a multitude of cultural values and symbols through a medium that has itself been revolutionized by the progress in the broadcasting technologies. He/she has been offered an eclectic content that might at first be confusing to a local viewer with limited television experience and literacy (under the communist regime).

The proliferation of channels with their plurality of programs has made it possible for young audiences to be framed and targeted as a loyal niche audience. Whether as an individual viewer or as partaking in a collective audience coalesced into a community of needs and taste, the young Romanian is the new viewer subject, a sophisticated bricoleur who can manage the television message and discourse and integrate it with other media in his/her focal activities.

Furthermore, he/she has mastered the skills necessary to decode foreign television messages in ways that combine the counter-hegemonic tendency featured by young people as a marginal and subordinate group with his/her newly acquired television literacy. Thus, the imported ideology relayed by media representations is socially mediated and, moreover, adapted to local features. The cultural values circulated by television are appropriated and cloaked into the subcultural garb that fit their interests. In this way they are granted access to a community of viewers that transcends geographic proximity or national delimitation.

Notes

[1] Antonio Gramsci, early 20th century Italian intellectual, used the term hegemony to stress how mass media are used by ruling elites to perpetuate their power, wealth, and status.

[2] John Fiske, Moments of Television: Neither the Text nor the Audience, in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, *Media Studies. A Reader*, p. 537.

[3] Lull, James, *Media, Communication, Culture*, 2000, p. 159.

[4] Umberto Eco distinguishes between what he calls paleo and neo television. Neo television talks less about the external world and more and more about itself, resulting in crossreferencing, interterxtuality, and selfreflexivity.

[5] Lull, James, op.cit., p. 242.

[6] ibidem, p. 216.

[7] Marris, Paul In Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p.7.

[8] Robert Merton and Paul Lazarsfeld 1948.

[9] Uses and gratification theory.

[10] Lull, James, op. cit., p.26.

[11] Jim Collins in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p. 372. Bricolage is the term used by anthropologists for the ways

in which primitive tribespeople piece together a meaningful cosmogony out of random elements they encounter in their daily lives.

[12] Umberto Eco quoted in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit. p. 372. He proposes a new concept of the viewing subject

– a postmodern viewer that is multiple and contradictory.

[13] Joe Straubhaar in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p.179.

[14] According to De Certeau (1948), "poaching" is a strategy for appropriating materials produced by the dominant culture industry and reworking them in terms that better serve subordinate or subcultural interests. In Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p. 551.

[15] John Fiske in Fiske, John and John Hartley, *Reading Television*, p. 121.

[16] Stuart Hall in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p.22.

[17] David Morley, Cultural Transformations . The Politics of Resistance in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p.474. Morley remarks on the fact that there is a wide range of decoding strategies and competencies in the audience.

[18] Arjun Appadurai 1990 in Lull, James, op. cit., p. 237.

[19] The cultural imperialism thesis suggests a hypodermic needle model of international effects, whereby American values are injected into television viewers elsewhere in the world.

[20] Sreberny in Curran, James and Gurevitch Micahel (eds.), Mass Media and Society, 1991, p.133.

[21]Ien Ang in Marris, Paul and Sue Thornham, op. cit., p. 179.

References

Curran, James and Gurevitch, Michael (eds.). 1994. *Mass Media and Society*. Edward Arnold: London

Fiske, John and Hartley, John. 1992. *Reading Television*. Routledge: London and New York

Hall, Stuart and Tony Jefferson (eds). 1976. *Resistance through Rituals. Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*. Routledge, London

Hebdige, Dick. 1987. *Subculture. The Meaning of Style*. Routledge. London and New York

Lull, James. 2000. *Media, Communication, Culture*. Polity Press

Marris, Paul and Thornham, Sue. (eds.) 1988. *Media Studies. A Reader*. Edinburgh University Press