

Listening to “the Human Without a Soul” – Outline for an Audience-Centred History of Broadcasting in Communist Albania

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Abstract

The paper proposes a study of broadcasting in one of the most tightly isolated regimes of the communist Eastern Bloc, beyond the paradigms of radio as a pure propaganda medium and of radio history as pure institutional history. Instead of a macro-history from above, this contribution proposes an ethnographically grounded micro-perspective alongside the lines of “audience studies”, informed by “oral history” methods. It proposes to focus on the social effects of radio listening and, in a broader perspective, on how radio broadcasting was embedded into larger modernization agendas of the regime of Enver Hoxha.

Keywords

Radio, Albania, anthropology of development, audience studies

“The medium is the message” – if we take into account this famous quote by the Canadian media theoretician Marshall McLuhan (1964: 7), we must acknowledge that media, and particularly radio in Albania produced multi-layered and often ambiguous messages in the second half of the 20th century. This ambiguity concerns both the material aspect of the radio receiver, the broadcasting content, and the diverse contexts of broadcasting reception.

Broadcasting, and Radio Tirana in particular, was beside the communist party’s daily newspaper *Zëri i Popullit* (*The Voice of the People*)² without doubt the key medium of the communist regime for the “privatisation of politics” (Mihelj 2013). It was through broadcasting that party propaganda penetrated domestic space through the backdoor and in an immaterial way. Radio Tirana had in addition an international relevance as a Marxist-Leninist propaganda medium with foreign language programs, particularly in the 1960s

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² It is telling in this respect that several directors of Radio Tirana had previously worked as editors in chief of the party newspaper *Voice of the people*. Todi Lubonja, general director of RTSH from 1970–1972 for example, was chief director of *Voice of the people* (1963–1970) before he entered radio.

and 1970s, being at the same time Anti-West and Anti-Soviet - an aspect we cannot develop further in the frame of this paper, which concentrates on the role of broadcasting within communist Albania.

To consider radio as “the voice of the party”, i.e. an ideological tool towards the myth of the creation of an ideal socialist society with ideal socialist citizens, would fall short of a much more complex reality. Already in terms of quantity, we have to rethink for Albania the role of the radio in domestic settings. According to guidelines by the Central Party Committee, Radio Tirana should ideally broadcast 70 % of music and 30 % of spoken word during its daily programs (Çobani 2010: 82). Even if we take into consideration that music and its aesthetic orientation, as well as the musical subjects often responded to ideological guidelines, we would misinterpret radio reality if we reduced Radio Tirana to its propagandistic function.³

For the rural population of Albania, radio in particular and media in general opened a new register of experience, significantly expanding the horizon of their small local world. Particularly for Albanians as people in a tightly isolated country, the radio dial as a mediating interface was a virtual window to the outside world (Fickers 2012). Internally radio was a key medium for bringing Albanians in touch with broader ideological agendas of change subsumed under the Albanian term “zhvillim” (development). These agendas focused on the constructed “need for modernization”, the fight against “zakonet prapanike” (backward customs) and the struggle for education. Broadcasts such as “Teatri në mikrofon” (Theatre at the microphone) or “Fjala artistike në mikrofon” (Artistic speech at the microphone) are representative of this idea of bringing culture into the living room, especially in those places which did not have access to the expanding network of cultural houses (vatrat e kulturës, shtëpitë e kulturës). Radio as well as other media may be considered in this sense as effective tools for a “mythology of modernization” (Ferguson 1999), constructing a fictitious image of what the “new socialist man”, as well as a utopian socialist society, should look like. Representative for this stance is this statement from a North Albanian villager, who directly links “radiofication” to the events of electrification and modernization:

“The people here lived for more than 400 years in the light of a pine-wood spill, candlelight or kerosene lamps. Already electric lightning was something extraordinary, which made people enthusiastic. Light brought knowledge, which brought change, culture and modernization. There was neither radio nor TV. Through electrification the whole village culture modernized itself. This was the ground for all sorts of change to come” (Vatnikaj 2015).

RTSH, the Albanian State Radio and Television, was a tightly controlled and regimented institutional body. Its directors and employees had to conform ideologically to the “party line”. Whoever aroused suspicion, like those radio

³ A similar position has been taken by Lovell in relation to radio in the USSR: “Soviet radio cannot be reduced to the themes of totalitarian ideology and political control...” (Lovell 2015: 3)

journalists who were suspected to have participated in the “meeting of 1956” and were accused of having planned conspiratorial acts against the state and the party, were removed from their post, sent to prison or to forced labour camps. Even the leading positions were no exception from this rule: Todi Lubonja, who was for several years a trustee of Albania’s dictator Enver Hoxha, was appointed general director of RTSH in 1970; two years later he was dismissed for the fact that he was one of the principal organizers of the XI. Festival of Light Music “Festivali i Këngës” in which “muzikë me influencë të huaj” (foreign-influenced music) was presented, which was beyond the socialist realist paradigm. Lubonja was sentenced to 15 years imprisonment; afterwards he was degraded to a forced labourer in the waterworks of Shkodra (see Bazzocchi 2004).

This tight regimentation and censorship applied to media was one of the reasons for the inner erosion of the system, particularly in the 1980s; people (re)invented their own trustworthy mediascape in innovative ways, employing “kanaçe” (self-made TV receivers made of used tins) for catching foreign “imperialist” TV channels and switching to foreign radio stations, particularly Italian RAI, Radio Skopje, Voice of America and Deutsche Welle. For the first time this allowed them to look and listen beyond the official propaganda discourse of the regime. Eventually this involved strategies of the local population for “speaking back” and of appropriating media for their own agendas. This is how a local inhabitant from the region of Lunxhëria, in close distance to the Greek-Albanian border, describes his personal inventive ways of escaping communist media regimentation:

“There was collective listening with the radios and later collective watching with the TV. When we had electricity, there was only one TV set for the entire village. And this set was set up in the house of culture, where all gathered. When there was Football World Cup, we had to switch to the Greek station. 10–15 boys gathered and went to someone - those in charge would not allow us to watch or listen. We did not understand a single word on the Greek channel, we just watched. The same for the Italian channels. We used these small tin boxes, which were called *kanaçe* with some diodes and resistors. This was like an amplifier. If you recorded something – do you know how marvellous the quality was? But the state would not let you... When they caught you, they sent you directly to prison. Or if someone spied on you and reported that Piro had listened to an Italian broadcast....even on the radio, better not listen to foreign stations.” (Rebi 2015).

Also the role of domestic media has to be taken into account in this context. This concerns particularly self-recorded tapes, and VHS which constituted a different part of reality than the official one. Such highly personalized media often encompassed different experiences of time and sociality, often non-compatible with official readings of reality and politics. Radio listening and watching TV⁴ and particularly the recording and mixing of foreign mu-

⁴ First experiments with television in Albania date back to April 1965 (Çobani 2010: 190), however real transmission started in the 1970s to those who had an “authorization” for possessing a TV set and who were lucky enough to have received one of the scarce TV sets sold in local shops.

sic, as well as the circulation of foreign (pop) music tapes, became a way to express controversial aesthetics and ideas, of escaping an oppressive reality. Broadcasting itself had a double-sided nature: it was the voice of those in power, it possessed ideological authority, but on the other hand the medium suited the mobilizing, participatory culture in Albania as well, shaped after the Soviet socialist model. Radio had in this context not only the function to transmit the voice of authority but also that 'of the people', to make people part of the mobilizing mission of the communist party.

Considering this multi-semantic character of radio broadcasting in Albania we propose seeing the introduction of radio, its everyday use and relevance, not as an imposed state-directed process, but as a contradictory process of negotiation between state-actors and the local population, as a tension field between state policy and local expectations, constraints and counterstrategies. This view takes into account the agency of an "active media audience", its local choices for the implementation and adaption of technology, as well as the imaginaries, expectations and disillusion which media practice has brought forth. What can be stated without any doubt is that media were not only objects of propaganda and consumption but also principal actors of socio-cultural change throughout the 20th century. Apart from processes of urbanisation and migration, media were of outstanding importance for shaping individual live histories, for the questioning and reformulation of values and traditional practices.

The Establishment of a New Medium

When Radio Tirana was inaugurated on 28 November 1938 in celebration of the 26th anniversary of Albanian independence, this was a national event which required the presence of King Zog and his wife Queen Geraldine. The speeches made during a short fifteen-minute ceremony in the morning of that day emphasize the importance of radio as a new medium which was considered to be a gift of the monarch to his people, as well as a sign of prosperity, national pride and modernity. The General Director of the Ministry for Postal Services and Telegraphy, Ndoc Naraçi expressed this idea in the following way:

"This gesture of His Majesty the King shows clearly his untiring efforts with which he cares continuously for the progress of our country in the realm of science and culture. This modern work, realized by the voluntarism of His Majesty the King shows effectively that the Albanian state under his glorious regime has reached a higher level of development in terms of technology as well as in culture, taking the best which results from the fabulous invention of the radio. This station of 3 kw with short wave frequency, built by the world-renown Marconi company, is the final word in contemporary technology and will be apart from this our strongest weapon for a national propaganda" (...) (Dizdari 2008).

This argument was further deepened by the King himself declaring that:

“in inaugurating the radiophonic station of Tirana, I would like to stress the importance which it has for the cultural development and the creation of brotherhood within the Albanian race. At this occasion I would like to utter a wish as your highest potentate: ‘Wherever you are, reach out your hand brotherly to the other, and dedicate [yourself] with endurance to the work of progress, as the independence of our homeland is not enough, but we have to engage for the creation of a brotherhood for all Albanians, and for the consolidation of the crown of freedom’” (Ibid.).

Literature on the development of radio in Albania has unfortunately unconditionally followed such ideological statements of nationalist and later communist leaders, seeing radio and TV as media serving the nation, considering media history primarily as the history of media institutions. One striking example in this respect is Skifter Këlliçi’s “History of Albanian Radio-television (RTSH)” published in 2003. A much more personal view, but again from the perspective of media producers, is the book by Agron Çobani in which he recalls his experience as radio moderator and as an ex-director of RTSH (Çobani 2010). The traditionalist point of view – considering media as the preferred propaganda tool of the party – prevails also in outside press coverage about the Albanian media system and in writings of Albanian Diaspora journalists. As a matter in case we might cite here a statement of Anton Logareci (1910–1990), who since 1940 reported as head of the BBC Overseas Service to his country of origin:

“Like literature and the arts, the press, radio and television operated under the strict control of the communist party and served as its principal instruments of political indoctrination and mass education” (Logareci 1978: 177).

An official propaganda leaflet shows this idea of a double indoctrination exemplarily. A shabbily dressed villager or worker sits in his chair reading the Party’s newspaper *Zëri i Popullit* (*Voice of the People*) while listening to the program of Radio Tirana at the same time. The image suggests that radio and newspaper function complementarily as sources for information. The *Voice of the people* represented through the newspaper and the *Zëri i partisë* (*Voice of the Party*) of Radio Tirana are intrinsically connected since – in the mythology of totalitarianism – the collective body exists only in dependence to its head, the personified party and its leader. The image shows the radio receiver on an elevated table, and, on top of it at eye level with the worker, is put an alarm clock. The clock in this context represents the working discipline and the balance between working time and “leisure time” (including media consumption). Additionally, beside the radio can be seen a lamp with a turned on electric bulb – this object as well as the caption of this image brings media in direct relation with the electrification of the country effected in 1967–1970. The caption, instead of describing the actual scene, contains a short poem:

“Do të fryjnë erërat e maleve
 nëpër telat-artere te malësisë,
 e si me një lahutë vigane
 lavdinë do t’i këndojnë partisë.”

“The mountain winds will blow
 through the cable-arteries of the North Albanian mountains,
 and like with a century-old *lahutë*
 we will sing to honour the party”

(PPSH circa 1971).

This leaflet, distributed to common villagers to make known the achievements of the communist party, is of interest as it tries to negotiate between the official party propaganda and the “mythology of modernization” and the expectations and mental world of the villagers still attached to traditional practices and values. In bringing into the foreground such documents, as well as oral history methods, an evaluation of the practical impact media had in Albanians’ everyday lives seems to be possible. This ideological discourse has shaped the way in which people think of radio as a medium up to the present day. A villager from the region of Lunxhëria in South Albania remembers the early radio history of his village, whose inhabitants were particularly well off due to a long migration history to the United States:

“There were a few radios with kerosine, and gramophones existed as well. The radios were hung from the ceiling, I think they were Russian one’s. We listened – but to what we could listen to: there was just one thing – ‘the voice of the party’” (Rebi 2015).

Detaching from such a politicized view of media practice, and from the common tendency to separate media technologies and media texts from their social contexts of production and reception, this road will eventually lead us to an “anthropology of media” (Askew and Wilk 2002) “forefronting the people taking pictures, listening to the radio, working behind and posing before the video camera” and examining “how they manipulate these technologies to their own cultural, economic and ideological ends” (Ibid: 1). This would mean in the sense of Morley’s “audience studies approach” (1992) that we acknowledge the active agency of the audience and the impact media has on mindmaps and imagination. In the end it is the listener who decides, where, when and what he likes to listen to. Investigating broadcasting practice in Albania from this perspective would mean exploring how radio has influenced private lives, and the consciousness about oneself and the world (in the sense of Falkenberg 2005). Such a perspective would allow us to gain insights into how the rhetoric of propaganda reached the individual level, how this propaganda was received and appropriated and how cultural and social change was accelerated by media texts and contexts on a practical level. We argue that media had a constitutive role in establishing socialist norms, morals and standards of behaviour. Media negotiated between the private and the public, the formal ideology and the

informal understanding of it – Real socialism in practice. Media charged the rather abstract ideas of revolution and change with affectivity and comprehensibility. They played therefore an active role for the social mobilization of ideas. But how much agency can be accredited to audiences under a regime with a tight media control is a matter of argument. Unlike the USA, where in the formative years of broadcasting audiences “were critical components in the making of radio, the establishment of its genres and social operations” (Razlogova 2011: 3) assuming a participative role through writing letters, telegrams or calling the radio editors, the possibilities of influencing or shaping radio programming in communist Albania were very restricted. However it was not a utopian relationship, which existed between radio as an institution and its local audiences. Media innovation requires reciprocity and so also the programming of RTSH received a wide range of responses from radio listeners all over the country.

Broadcasting as an Event and the “Animated” Radio Object

Another aspect of radio is that it contributes actively to history-making, to a popular understanding of what is happening in the world. Radio amplified and at times manipulated reality in the ether, constructing in the terms of Dayan and Katz (1992) proper “media events”. The media theoretician Viehoff expressed it that way: media make events perceptible – as media events. Through constructing media events out of real events, media provide the precondition that events leave social traces (see Falkenberg 2005: 18).

The radio therefore leaves its proper acoustic traces in society – it can have a community building and opinion-making function. A representative example for this powerful potential of the radio is the orchestrated media coverage of the burial of Albania’s dictator Enver Hoxha in April 1985. The regime mobilized all available audiovisual media to create a proper “media event” which amplified the death of the country’s leader as a shared collective tragedy, and eventually as “dynjaja”, as the end of the world.

Looking back to the perception of the radio in the Albanian village in the 1950s and 1960s we can see that not only was the radio creating events but listening to the radio itself was an unusual event as well. We might speak even of the quasi-mythical status of the radio as a material object (Morley 1995). Possessing a radio meant having acquired a certain social status. Family albums are a valuable source in this respect; they often show teenagers posing with their first radio in the surroundings of the village. Family photos show the presence of the radio as the newest acquisition of the family, held like a new-born child in the hands of the mother. These photos provide accounts of the radio as a personalized object, whose arrival was frenetically celebrated. A local text, written in the dialect of Gjirokastra, South Albania illustrates this approach depicting the arrival of the first radio receivers at the very end of World War II:

Radio in the village.

“The night came over us in Stër nec, a village seven hours by foot from the town of Berat. (...) Near an old linden tree we put the radio, one of us brought the wire for the antenna and another turned the generator with a chain so that the battery was charged. The villagers, men and women, gathered around us and took notice of the wheel which rotated to supply the battery with energy, while they waited impatiently to listen to the ‘human without a soul’. After a while London knocked at our door: ‘tak-tak-tak’ and the speaker started his broadcast: ‘Here is Radio London!’ The villagers folded their hands as if frozen, they closed their eyes and moved their lips as if they would pray. (...) The Radio continued: ‘Brussels, the capital of Belgium has fallen into the hands of the Allied forces, and the red army is on advance everywhere else.’ – ‘Cheers my friends and death to fascism!’ – wished a man with a black moustache and with a tiny *raki* bottle at his mouth (...)” (Mikrokozmos 1945).⁵

Of interest here is the formulation „njeriu pa shpirt“ (human without a soul), a formulation that shows that the social appropriation of technology was reflected also in verbal expression. Indeed this idea of a media object as a friend or family member had an affective dimension as can be evidenced in this quote from a handbook for the domestic use of television:

“When the television enters your house for the first time, the family creates a festive atmosphere, everyone is enthusiastic as a ‘good friend’ has entered their house, an important tool of education and entertainment, with which one can spend some hours of one’s free time. At the same time they [the family members], take care that the television is brought into the home and that it is put in the most adequate place, that it is installed properly with the intention that the TV program on the screen can be seen as clear and as well as possible” (Maçko 1979).

The interconnection between the material, social and symbolic aspects of media, and radio in particular, were significant if we take into account the listener’s perspective. In the metaphoric language of the regime, media were a “human without a soul”, they were as well the voice of the “trupit kolektiv” (collective body) as it was “the voice of the party”. This ideological language of the personified media accounts for the idea of the inseparability of people and their leader in an “iron unity” (unitet i çeliktë). The idea of a media object as “shok”, as a new friend, on the contrary, has a much more intimate meaning. However all these bynames give an account of the profoundly social role which was attributed locally to media and of an understanding of media as “animated socially active objects”.

Radio had a constitutive role in creating domesticity as well as a domestic belonging. Radio was part of everyday lives and it contributed to the

⁵ Translated from Albanian.

fundamental reshaping of these lives during communism. Broadcasts which referred to the everyday needs and problems of the people were a way to stimulate interactivity and to enter everyday lives. Regular broadcasts like “ora e fshatarit” (the hour of the villager), “emisioni i bujqësisë” (agronomic broadcast), which had existed since the early days of Albanian radio back in 1938, were common reference points of listening, proving that radio was a relevant source of information, apart from its propagandist and entertaining function. Radio also redefined local concepts of time, particularly visible in the temporal organization of the day. For the first time, radio and television opened up a new temporal window – one which was associated with the concept of leisure time.

Media Access and Exposure

However the penetration of everyday lives through media was not felt similarly everywhere. Urban places, particularly Tirana with the concentration of the political and intellectual elite of the country, were advantaged in terms of media access. A high ranking engineer from Gjirokastra remembers the media development of his town which had already been electrified in 1932:

“Radio existed even before the electric power came. But not with electricity, with *vajguri* (kerosene). When the electricity came in 1932, all who were well-off bought an electricity-run radio. You had to be from a family from a higher economic strata. You had to have Lek otherwise you could not afford it. Television came much later, no urban citizen had a television, there were just two: one for the chief of the executive committee of the Communist Party, who worked for the Albanian Embassy in the Soviet Union, and one for a state officer, who was well employed by the Albanian Embassy in Moscow till 1961. In the 1970s when we did not have TV access we gathered around these two TV sets in the house of Bajo Topulli, and we tried to catch the TV transmissions by the Greek television. The quality was pretty bad, however what we saw seemed to us like a miracle. Some of us spoke Greek, some just watched sport. We have seen the 1970 World Cup: we, a very small group of close friends, who knew each other and who were friends with the Party Committee. It was something exclusive as the room was small and not everyone could just enter...” (Kalo 2015).

Media consumption was also restricted in reality through the tight programming schedules both of radio and TV, although the broadcasting schedules were extended gradually during the communist period. Listening to the radio was possible only from 6 a.m. to 12 noon and in the afternoon and evening from 4 p.m. to 11 p.m.

The accessibility of media was crucial for the Albanian context as well: this concerns not only gender and social class issues but also party affinity and distance. Access to media was dependant both on the economic potential of a household and on the issue of *autorizimi* (authorization), particularly

in the case of television. Local village teacher Pren Toçi from a mountain village in Central Albania remembers exemplarily the difficulties of gaining such an authorization. Although he was a reliable village teacher and later head of the youth pioneer organization he did not accept party membership – a step which caused several problems for him in getting *autorizimi* for his own private TV set:

“In 1978 my name was on the list to get a TV set. As there were not too many requests by my fellow villagers in that year, it was approved, but in that year my father died and according to local customs we had to be in black for one entire year. For this reason my request was refused all of a sudden. In 1979 I applied again, but this time there were 4 requests and a commission of ‘the people’ should decide. Me, another teacher, and two common villagers were the candidates. So I told my neighbours and friends to vote for me so that I got 16 more votes than the others. I went to the chief of the commission and asked for the authorization. ‘I cannot give it to you’ he said. ‘But I’ve got the vote of the people, you have to give it to me!’ I replied. ‘I will go up to Tirana if you will act against the will of the masses.’ After two hours I got it. Next early morning I presented myself to the mayor of the municipality. I got the seal from him. But in the meantime villagers lobbied against me and accused my family of having a ‘bad biography’ and of not having fought with the partisans. After two days the mayor changed his mind and said ‘Deliver the authorization, it is not valid anymore.’ I refused to deliver and asked the Party secretary for help. After 1–2 months I finally took the TV set from the village shop” (Toçi 2013).

Possessing a radio or TV set was a question of social contacts and political privileges. It depended on a ‘good’ or a ‘bad biography’ and it ultimately influenced social prestige within the community. Such an authorization was officially not required for radio receivers, but radios in village stores were rare goods and shop keepers kept lists with “porositë” (demands). The local interest in radio receivers was huge so that production could not cope with the number of requests. This scarcity was the second major problem and is recalled by Ndue Vatnikaj, who in the 1960’s was the seller in the only local village shop in his home village of Curraj i Epërm:

“The day the village was electrified, on 29.11.1969 the first 8 radios entered Curraj i Epërm. I took the radios from the shop and distributed them to the families. My grandfather was 89 years old; when I turned the radio on he was fascinated. He had never heard of anything like this before. It was a Chinese radio called ‘25 December’; this was the National Liberation Day whose 45th anniversary we celebrated back in 1969. They were produced in China on orders by the Albanian State. This was a symbolic act; a gift of the party to distribute a radio to those who were electrified on the occasion of the National Liberation Day. But I had a problem: I only had 8 radios for 200 families. Only after 5–6 months could I have a

new supply for the shop. Although the people were poor, they were saving money to buy a radio receiver. To listen to songs, news and music, they just wanted to listen...” (Vatnikaj 2015).

It was a general policy of the regime to provide party secretaries and ideologically compliant office-holders firstly with radios as a reward for their loyalty.

Media possessed a particular aura and a symbolic significance as it represented one’s family’s access to progress and modernity. Progress was often equalized with the directives of the Party and State leadership. This ideology – as represented in numerous documentary films, poetry and works of art – did not propagate a ruthless policy of fundamental change of the Albanian cultural landscape but rather favoured the idea of a smooth transition from the traditional world of the Albanian village towards a “socialist village”. This transitional process aimed at reconciliation with the values and morals of the traditional Albanian village and its social structures centred around the term “zëvendësim” (replacement). Images such as those of a shepherd with his sheep on the pasture, in his hand a battery driven transistor radio “Illiria”, were common to illustrate this peaceful coexistence of traditional worlds and modernity, which eventually aimed at blurring the boundaries between rural and urban life worlds.

Photographer Roland Tasho recalls that in the 1970s newly married couples from the villages went to the capital Tirana to spend their honeymoon there. Often these young couples promenaded through the streets with their battery-run “Illiria” as a “suitcase” or they displayed it prominently under their arms. This symbolic performance of a newly gained socio-economic status remained incomprehensible to the city dwellers and they often mocked these villagers who all-of-a-sudden had turned into “civilized people”. Roland Tasho, being from an established Tirana family was listening at that time to a radio receiver from the GDR in his living room. After the fall of the communist regime he bought an old “Illiria” radio at the tourist bazaar of Kruja: “as a relic and as a souvenir to remember the old times” he says.

The End of Media Authority and Media Nostalgia

Towards the end of the communist regime, particularly after 1985, the mythical construction of the unity of a “collective body” and the personalized party was dissolving rapidly. The reception of foreign radio and TV Channels was in constant augmentation. When RAI started its evening program, curtains were closed. Media no longer served the mythical purpose of binding together the leader, the party and its people. Media on the contrary contributed to deepen the shift between the party officials and the common population. Media became a virtual place of emancipation, a refuge which offered the possibility to escape the omnipresence of the party and prescribed collectivity. In this context the change in listeners’ attitudes can also be seen. While at the beginning of the media era, whole families had gathered in Albanian villages around the radio receiver practising “community reception”, “individual reception” was

prevailing since the 1980s. This fact gives account of a growing diversification of public media tastes according to gender, age and educational background.

A village teacher of Central Albania, who received his first “Orienton” radio back in 1968 for 11,000 Lek, which was then the price of a photo camera, recalls how radio and TV consumption related to social status and education:

“We were one of the most wealthy families in the village, we listened to refined popular music like Parashqevi Simaku because we had all finished school; those without school listened to songs with iso [polyphonic songs] or in the morning from 5 a.m. to 6 a.m., before going to work, to songs with clarinet or with çifteli [a plucked lute from North Albania] on Radio Tirana. On TV we watched RAI Uno a lot; we liked to hear light songs from San Remo, [and] we usually watched Italian channels after 10 p.m. with closed curtains. The Yugoslav channels were unreachable for us, as we had the mountains between their radio waves and us” (Toçi 2013).

As Lovell (2015) has argued for the case of Soviet Russia, radio history is difficult to write, as it relies on fragmented and unbalanced sources, and radio is an “inherently fleeting medium, extraordinary difficult to remember accurately and describe historically” (Lovell 2015: 6). If we try to refocus on Albania’s radio history through their audiences this means being confronted with “selective memory” processes. Albanians remember particular listening experiences, broadcasts, speakers, music titles, and at times forget about the ideological implications of these listening experiences. Older Albanians regularly cite radio’s role in providing positive models for emulation and setting high linguistic and cultural standards. As in the case of Soviet Russia studied by Lovell, they compare the communist period of broadcasting more often than not “favourably with the fragmented and undisciplined media system that replaced it” (Lovell 2015: 4). In some regions the idea of radio and TV as authoritative state controlled and non-pluralist medium survived up to the post-communist era. A couple from the Central Albanian mountain region of Shpati answered my question of their media consumption:

“We put on radio or TV only in the evening. Just news, nothing else, as we receive only ‘Tirana’ here. My husband says to me: Why do you turn it on – it is senseless. There is nothing to listen or to watch to. We only have the State Television and Radio, that’s it.” (Toçi 2015).

A discussion of the post-communist use of radio in Albania would be beyond the scope of this article; however it is worth mentioning here that broadcasting production, as well as the contexts of reception have been subjects of a further diversification linked to the privatization of the media sector. At the same time a nostalgia for radio use and radio objects from communist times is widespread. We might call this phenomenon, which inscribes into a wider communist nostalgia, as a “sentimentalization of media”. It is telling that for this radio nostalgia that many Albanians have kept

old radio or TV receivers, which are practically out of function, in cellars, gardens or lofts. This fact illustrates how the symbolic value of such media receivers has outlived their material value over time. The emotional bonds between the Albanians and their human technology, their “friends” and their “humans without a soul”, seems to be a lasting story, surviving even the change of political systems. Identification with them is at the same time part of a very personal love story and of an implicit transfiguration of the ancient regime. Looking at the materiality of “their” radio makes them recall the efforts undertaken, the sacrifices accepted, in order to become part of a prescribed vision of modernity, as Sokol, a retired electrician from Elbasan recalls:

“I started working in 1962, in 1964 I worked on the electrical installation in several newly built blocks in Librazhd, I was 15 years old. I worked more than was my duty and earned some extra money. From that money I bought a Polish Radio, which cost 5000 Lek, a monthly wage at that time. It was difficult: radios and bicycles needed to be registered, so that you could be controlled. The first thing I did when entering my own apartment was to put on the radio. You needed to make a sacrifice to have a radio” (Lolli 2013).

This nostalgic approach has now even entered public space: in Tirana a “Radio Bar” has recently opened exhibiting radio receivers from different times and contexts; a “Propaganda Hostel” welcomes its guests not only with the portraits of the dictators Mussolini, Hitler, Mao-Tse Tung and Enver Hoxha but also with a collection of nostalgic radio objects including the previously mentioned “25 December” model.

In summing up we can assert that the symbolic meaning of radio and television in Albania has shifted from communist times to post-communism significantly. One might even say that its meaning has reversed: while media in the 1950s and 1960s were predominantly considered as progressive symbolic tools of progress, social change and a party-led modernization, post-communism has turned radio and television into nostalgic objects, and material artefacts, recalling the times of Communism. A critical semiotic approach as well as a media historical inquiry taking into account the role of media archives as well as the traces broadcasting has left in collective cultural memory as proposed by Huhtamo and Parikka (2011), would probably assist us in disentangling the historical reasons for this current media nostalgia.

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СЛУШАТИ „ЧОВЕКА БЕЗ ДУШЕ” – ОКВИР ЗА ИСТОРИЈУ
РАДИОДИФУЗИЈЕ У КОМУНИСТИЧКОЈ АЛБАНИЈИ СА
УСМЕРЕЊЕМ НА ПУБЛИКУ

(Резиме)

Намера рада јесте да развије нови приступ проучавања радиодифузије у комунизму изван двеју парадигми: радија као чистог пропагандног медија, и историје радија као институционалне историје. Уместо макро-историје „одозго“, овај прилог предлаже етнографски засновану микро-перспективу у правцима „студија слушашаштва” (Morley 1992), уз методе „усмене историје” и историјске „археологије медија” (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011). Испитују се вишеструке друштвене улоге које је радио имао за руралне заједнице у једном од најизолованијих комунистичких режима Источног блока – како у материјалном и симболичном смислу, тако и у погледу идеолошког садржаја његовог програма. Предложено је фокусирање на услове у којима је слушање радија било могуће, као и на ритуалност која је често пратила искуство слушања. У широј перспективи, радиодифузија и, генерално, употреба медија, биће разматране у светлости критичке антропологије развоја (Ferguson 1999), узимајући у обзир радиодифузију као есенцијалну особину уграђену у шире модернизацијске програме режима Енвера Хоџе.

Submitted August 20, 2016

Accepted for publication September 7, 2016

Original scientific paper