

# Knowledge production regarding public opinion at RFE

Final report of the OSA Visegrad Scholarship at the Open Society Archives by Vojtěch Ripka

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Audience research at Radio Free Europe has long been a line of inquiry that I have seen as fruitful and potentially rewarding not just for me, but also for the research communities on the CEE state socialist societies and perhaps also for historians of social science. My research stay at the OSA Archivum has offered me a welcomed opportunity to revisit my previous attempt to make use of this material<sup>1</sup> and to add to my mosaic of sources on popular opinion in state socialist Czechoslovakia. As I have moved on with my career since I have paid serious attention to the audience research reports in 2011-2012, the context of my research and its potential implications are naturally different: less focused on welfare policies and moving towards the social history of state socialist Czechoslovakia, the history of social science and the educational applications thereof. This final report does not stand for a research paper or a definite treatment of the topic itself. I am rather attempting a narrative reflection upon the developments of my research endeavour at OSA. Still, some basic findings shall be revealed. Having had an opportunity to study some of the research reports in 2011 and 2012 at OSA, being familiar with some of the domestic sociological surveying in state socialist Czechoslovakia and being partially familiar with the relevant research literature, I developed a research question before arriving to OSA, which stayed unchanged throughout the research fellowship:

What is the reliability and validity of the research of “public opinion” in state socialist Czechoslovakia by Audience research by RFE (1960-1989)?

The research question has not only led to the archival probes within the OSA, but also to broadening and updating the literature review in the relevant fields and gathering other relevant primary and secondary documents. As the search for relevant documents and writing the literature review shed new light on the archival research itself, I have found this strategy rewarding and most of the turns and paradoxes described below have occurred thanks to this iterative strategy.

The work on audience research at Radio Free Europe developed over the time and took different forms. The department in which it happened changed its name (Audience Research Department - Audience and Popular Opinion Research Department - East European Audience Opinion Research) and its exact place within the corporate structure of RFE and later RFE/RL, but it has been viewed (and has seen itself) as one of the key and stable components of the corporation. As its department brief from 1960 states, “No radio station can operate at all without being in close touch with its listeners: therefore, the primary concern of the Audience Research Department is to study the reaction of the target area audiences to RFE broadcasts and to determine the prevailing popular attitudes (climate of opinion) in the five target countries in general and toward RFE specifically.”<sup>2</sup> However, scepticism towards the usefulness of such

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<sup>1</sup> Ripka, ‘Controlled by Social Policy? Housing Policy in Real-Existing Socialism Revisited’.

<sup>2</sup> Radio Free Europe, ‘Audience Research Department “Brief”’.

research has so far prevailed. One source of the scepticism came from RFE itself, as a quote from an interview with W.W. Marsh reveals: "I didn't put great stock in the material produced by Audience Research. ... The survey information was not to be relied upon 100%. . . . I thought we had to have it, but I didn't use that as a barometer of our effectiveness."<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that despite the fact that the collection of the "HU OSA 300-6 Media and Opinion Research Department" fund is rich, it is far from complete vis-a-vis the Hoover Archives collection. That is why for instance the aforementioned department brief, a complete list of research reports produced by the audience research at the RFE and other pieces of primary and secondary evidence has been taken from that "master" archive. Thanks to my brief visit in 2016, I have gathered some documents from the Hoover Archives in person, and I have used both their finding tools<sup>4</sup> as well as some of the few digitized online documents. My literature review has revisited the existing literature on the audience research within RFE itself and at related broadcasters,<sup>5</sup> though the limits of this research are obvious -- being mostly done by former employees of the RFE, questioning of the methods is rather limited. The need to deepen the literature review ended in a limited review of the history of the RFE,<sup>6</sup> current approaches to Cold War social science,<sup>7</sup> and contemporary sociological research on state socialist countries in the CEE region both from within and from the West.<sup>8</sup>

The batch of audience research reports from 1954 to 1989 amounts to 794, with about 180 directly dealing with data and findings from Czechoslovakia. My primary concern has been systematic surveying, which started in the early 1960s. This systematic nature of surveying travelers to the West became an unparalleled operation with results that cannot be matched in terms of either vastness and rigorousness of the method to any other attempt at understanding the state socialist societies. Moreover, as Ottersbach concludes, RFE was

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<sup>3</sup> Haas, 'Communities of Journalists and Journalism Practice at Radio Free Europe during the Cold War (1950-1995)'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Register of the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Corporate Records'.

<sup>5</sup> Parta, 'Audience Research in Extremis'; Parta; Parta, *New Directions in International Broadcasting Research*; Gillespie, Mackay, and Webb, 'Designs & Devices: Towards a Genealogy of Audience Research Methods at the BBC World Service, 1932-2011'; Mytton, 'Audience Research at the BBC External Services during the Cold War'; Bashkirova, 'The Foreign Radio Audience in the USSR during the Cold War: An Internal Perspective'.

<sup>6</sup> Tomek, 'The Response to RFE Broadcasting in Czechoslovakia: An Attempt at Evaluation'; Tomek, 'Československá Redakce Radio Free Europe: Historie a Vliv Na Československé Dějiny'; Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: A Collection of Studies and Documents*; /; Feinberg, *Curtain of Lies*; Kind-Kovács, 'Voices, Letters, and Literature through the Iron Curtain'; Kind-Kovács, 'Talking to Listeners'; Bischof and Jürgens, *Voices of Freedom - Western Interference?*

<sup>7</sup> Engerman, 'Social Science in the Cold War'; Engerman, *Know Your Enemy*; Dayé, *Experts, Social Scientists, and Techniques of Prognosis in Cold War America*; Gieseke, 'Opinion Polling behind and across the Iron Curtain'; Gieseke, 'East German Popular Opinion. Problems of Reconstruction'; Ottersbach, 'Cold War Social Sciences beyond Academia?'; Macrea-Toma, 'The Intricacies of a (Cold) War of Ideas: Radio Free Europe from Above and from Below'; Vowinckel, Payk, and Lindenberger, *Cold War Cultures*.

<sup>8</sup> Gieseke, 'Opinion Polling behind and across the Iron Curtain'; Gieseke, 'East German Popular Opinion. Problems of Reconstruction'; Connor and Gitelman, *Public Opinion in European Socialist Systems*; Corner, *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes*; Gieseke, 'Opinion Polling behind and across the Iron Curtain'; McDermott, 'A "Polyphony of Voices"?'; Fitzpatrick, 'Popular Opinion Under Communist Regimes'.

never fully subordinated to propagandistic purposes.<sup>9</sup> Still, the level to which its methods were rigorous and substantiated remained a key to their validity and reliability.

The paradoxes and turning points in my research endeavour could be rephrased as fortuitous discoveries, as Michael Hill calls them in his insightful analysis of the situation archival researcher<sup>10</sup>.

The first paradox came relatively early on. Since the long-term head of the department, Henry O. Hart, remains a rather opaque figure himself and there are only a handful of traces regarding the evolution of the method within the administrative files, I have tried to search for other sources that could shed more light on the method. An interview conducted by Eugene Parta with Helmut Aigner, which is available online at the Hoover archive,<sup>11</sup> turned out to be extremely valuable leverage. Analyzing the role of Helmut Aigner, who ran by far the biggest surveying operation for RFE, with tens of thousands of respondents in Austria, it becomes relatively clear that Henry O. Hart cannot be seen as an indisputable mastermind, since Helmut Aigner contributed a lot to the evolution of the method and techniques of discovering and interviewing travelers. This interview has revealed more about the method, its evolution and context than the administrative files or relevant pieces of research reports of the audience research unit at OSA.

The second paradox is also associated with the limited answers one can find in the OSA Archivum regarding the methods of audience research. One particular operational research question related to validity and reliability is its reputation in its time. A good departure point might be to probe into the distribution lists of the department's publication, mostly the research reports. Having not been able to find any particular information about that in the archive and searching for propaganda pieces against the RFE and its audience research in the Czechoslovak press in particular, one text from 1975 took me by surprise. The "Scam", a three page long article in *Mladý svět* [Youth World], a popular Czechoslovak weekly,<sup>12</sup> was produced as part of a discrediting campaign orchestrated by the KGB with Mieczyslaw Lach in the key role. After leaving Poland in 1968, Mieczyslaw Lach worked at the Audience and Public Opinion Research Department of RFE, being an agent within the organisation. He returned to Poland in 1974 with dozens of documents, photos and audiotapes, which were used in unmasking the so-called information net of the radio.<sup>13</sup> The plot of the USSR and Poland's political police and its propaganda campaign included the distribution lists of the publication of audience research, and thus became, in a hyperbolic sense, more valuable than the OSA archival holdings.

Finally, the third turning point also came as a surprise. Having been advised by Zsuzsa Zádori about the existence and potential value of the so-called Whelan report,<sup>14</sup> which was commissioned from the Library of Congress by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee as part of its investigation into Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty.<sup>15</sup> Though the Whelan report covers Radio Liberty exclusively, its thoroughness led me to discovering the report by James R. Price,<sup>16</sup> a parallel report also commissioned by the same committee, but this time on the

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<sup>9</sup> Ottersbach, 'Cold War Social Sciences beyond Academia?'

<sup>10</sup> Hill, *Archival Strategies and Techniques*.

<sup>11</sup> Aigner, R. *Eugene Parta Interviews Helmut Aigner on 25 October 2005*.

<sup>12</sup> Redakční klektiv MS, 'Podvod'.

<sup>13</sup> Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe: A Collection of Studies and Documents* /, 191.

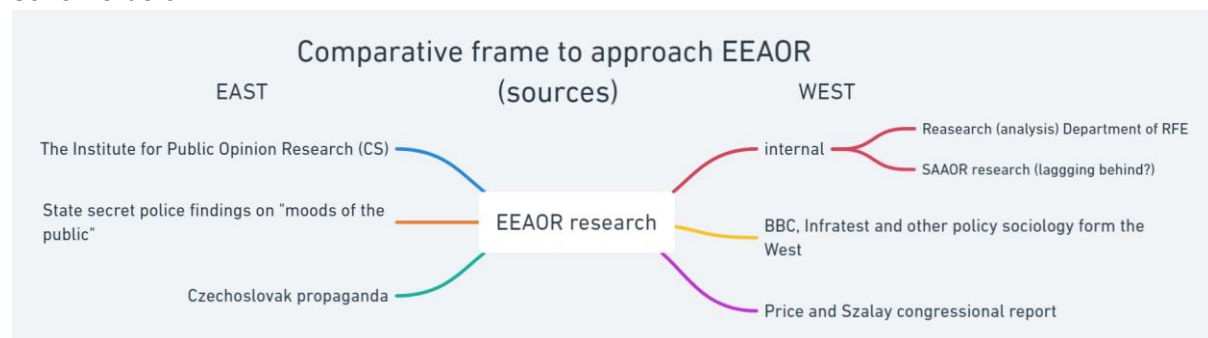
<sup>14</sup> Whelan, 'Radio Liberty. A Study of Its Origins, Structure, Policy, Programming and Effectiveness'.

<sup>15</sup> cf. Sosin, *Sparks of Liberty*, 131–43.

<sup>16</sup> Price, *Radio Free Europe - a Survey and Analysis: March 22, 1972* /.

RFE. Despite the circumstances, both the report itself, and especially its large appendices on audience research prepared by the then well established expert on intercultural communication Lorand B. Szalay turned out to be by far more valuable compared to the scholarship of the last 30 years. Paradoxically, this product of an investigation held by the OSA, but largely unused so far by academic discourse, has turned out to be a goldmine in helping to assess the validity and reliability of the audience research. Lorand B. Szalay generally finds the method of interviewing travelers reliable, while he reports that the most substantial problem with triple bias on travelers not being taken as an unbiased sample of the population only needs to be weighted for demographics, education and labour. Secondly, this first problem is even more accentuated given the return rate, especially in the case of Czechoslovakia in the 1970s. Finally, the bias led to limited insight into the way that concepts traveled (occupation, especially when it comes to “workers”; “capitalism” and other general, politically loaded terms).

These and other findings have given me a strong foundation for an interpretative frame on research reports based on surveys by the audience research group at Radio Free Europe, since the primary data from the surveys is largely missing. Its sources are illustrated by a scheme below:



The stay at OSA Archivum has been marked by a wonderful opportunity to share my findings with fellow researchers in the larger field of Cold War Archival studies at the “ Methodologies of Working in Cold War Archives. Facts, Values and Archival Ecologies” conference. This event, organised by the OSA itself in October 2021, where I have presented my early findings, helped me to improve my focus for the rest of the research stay and to get welcome feedback on the approach I have chosen. I look forward to synthesizing my findings in an upcoming publication based on this conference. Moreover, the Czech Social Science Data Archive, which holds the collections of domestic, Czechoslovak sociological surveys done during the state socialist period, became interested both in my research and in potential cooperation with the OSA Archive. Feedback from the other OSA fellows, my supervisor Andras Mink and other colleagues was completed by the final presentation on November 11, 2021.

I have also made use of the research stay to hold a seminar on the pedagogical use of primary sources in digital online tools for the OSA staff, using some of the photographs and documents from my inquiries as examples. These initial experiments with audience research-related documents should become online activities for secondary or college students in 2022, most probably within the Historiana<sup>17</sup> learning environment.

I would like to express my gratitude to a number of colleagues at the OSA Archive for their help and the insights that they shared with me, namely Robert Parnica, Judith Hegedüs, Iona

<sup>17</sup> Euroclio, ‘Historiana’.

Macrea-Toma, Zsuzsa Zádori, Katalin Dobó, Fanni Andristyák and Anastasia Felcher. I look forward to future cooperation with OSA Archive, its archivist and researchers.

## OSA

HU OSA 300-1-8 Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty Public Affairs Photographic Files

HU OSA 300-6 Media and Opinion Research Department (HU OSA 300-6-1 Administrative Files + HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion Research + HU OSA 300-6-3 Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research)

HU OSA 300 - RFE/RL collection (especially Price, James Robert. Radio Free Europe - a Survey and Analysis : March 22, 1972. Washington, D. C.: The Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service) and the "Whelan report" (Radio Liberty. A Study of Its Origins, Structure, Policy, Programming and Effectiveness. By Joseph G. Whelan

Radio Free Europe/Free Europe Committee - Encrypted Telex Communication, <https://fec.osaarchivum.org/>

Columbia University Research Project Hungary 1956 Hungarian Refugee Interviews at OSA Archivum, Budapest OSA 1956 Digital Archive

## Other archives

National Digital Library, Czech National Library (domestic media covering the audience research of the RFE 1956-1990)

Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) corporate records, Hoover Institution Library & Archives

"Ústav pro výzkum veřejného mínění při Federálním statistickém úřadu [The Institute for the study of public opinion, Federal Statistical Office]", Czech Social Science Data Archive

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