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RESEARCH OF THE MEDIA AUDIENCES IN BULGARIA: CONCISE OVERVIEW

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Researchers into the media environment in the countries of Central and Southeast Europe invariably link the processes of transformation to the collapse of political and economic system in these countries. The last decade of the 20th century, however, will remain emblematic not only with the fulfillment of the idea for a new, united Europe, but also with the emergence of many new information sources and speedup of communications. Thus, besides with the toppling of the Berlin Wall, 1989 is important with the adoption of the first pan-European documents for regulation of the rapidly developing radio and TV environment. These are the *European Convention on Transfrontier Television* issued by the Council of Europe and the *Television without Frontiers Directive* of the European Community. These documents have been amended in line with the development of globalization processes, Internet, digitalization, and broad-band technologies.

The major trends in the development of contemporary communication processes have stood out for more than two decades now: technological convergence; media and communication transnationalization; obscuring of demarcation lines between the commercial and public territories; commodity approaches leading to manipulation of audiences; fragmentation and specialization of the media content users; genre hybridization, etc. Media transformation is catalyzed now by the opportunities presented by the blogosphere and social networks; by the mobile information and communication technologies, with all this leading to basic changes in the media paradigm – from means for mass information to means for individual media services. Thus in the age of hyper modernity and multiplication of information sources, the public discourse is medialized and leads to significant structural transformations in the public sphere. The media and their audiences are subject to broad diversification under the growing importance of the public opinion and of the development of consumer culture.

Prior to the political changes in 1989, the Bulgarian mass media system was centralized, state-owned and subordinated to the priorities of the Party-State system. Of all institutions in the country, the mass media helped transformation of democracy in the fastest and most profound way. It turned out that the media were fulfilling the dual function of transmitters of protest and accelerators of political change.

Data provided by the National Statistical Institute vividly show the trends in the development of the printed media within two decades of the transition period. Thus 301 newspapers (17 dailies) with annual circulation of 895 265 000 were issued in 1989, as compared to 436 newspapers (64 dailies) with an annual circulation of 355 600 000 twenty years later, in

2009. The corresponding figures for magazines and bulletins were 827, with annual circulation of 57 849 000 in 1989 vs. 745 with annual circulation of 11 401 000 in 2009 (NSI, 2009a). There was a notable trend for preserving and even increasing diversification of supply and, along with this, for considerably reducing circulation.

In contrast to the turbulent, wrenching transformations in the printed media, the changes in the electronic media were slower, incomplete and generally inconsistent. After several unsuccessful attempts, the first law on radio and television in Bulgaria saw light only in 1998. For twenty years now a highly oversupplied radio and TV landscape has formed in the country. Bulgarian radio and television stations now operate on two economic levels: Government-funded and private. Presently, a total of 465 program services (317 radio and 148 TV) are disseminated terrestrially, via cable or satellite on the territory of the country (CEM, 2010). Of all institutions, the public service broadcasters took lead in public confidence. The *Bulgarian National Television* boasts approval of 69.5 percent of the population and the *Bulgarian National Radio* of 64.9 percent (NCSPO, 2009).

Since the end of the 1990s, users have been able to choose between a variety of off-line and online news services of diverse quality and content. Close to forty percent of the population are regular Internet users (NSI, 2009b).

Although the public is offered a highly varied media menu, expectations that the media would aid the processes of democratization in a purposeful and effective manner have proved unrealistically high. Change of property and departure from a single-party control were insufficient to render them professional. Strengthening of the market outlined the start of their consolidation. The processes of media concentration in Bulgaria were characteristic with the inflow of foreign capital and players, especially after the country's accession to the European Union in 2007. The leading media now are owned by foreign holders.

Public interest was replaced by what was interesting to the public. Although the Guild has adopted its ethical code in 2004 (National Council, 2004), the journalists failed to create mechanisms for sustaining it and in many cases still show inadequate reaction to some important and publicly significant issues, as well as to a number of professional problems.

The transformation processes in the media sphere in Bulgaria after 1989 are remarkable for their transition from ideologized to individualized consciousness and stratification of audiences. In the last twenty years research interest has been fragmented in the country. Researches into the media environment are assigned by sundry entities: economic subjects, political parties, non-governmental organizations, regulatory authorities, academic institutions. A wide range of quantitative and qualitative methods have been used in these researches for registration and processing of empirical information and its analysis: standard interview, diary observation, people metrics, experiments and testing, in-depth interview, focus-group discussion, content analysis, discourse analysis, case-study.

Researches into the media audiences are focused along several lines: structure, acceptance habits, interests, attitudes, preferences, confidence. The effect of the electronic and printed media and the mechanisms of media impact are also studied.

Researches into the audiences of the printed media take under consideration their type (dailies, weeklies, monthly magazines, life-style magazines); of the radio audiences – the concrete radio format (public-commercial; monothematic-polythematic; specificity of thematic purpose; national-regional-local); of the TV audiences – the type of the TV media (public-commercial; aerial, cable, satellite distribution; specificity of thematic purpose; national-regional-local); and of the on-line media – the linear-nonlinear service, interactivity, social networks, blogosphere.

In Bulgaria, two people metric agencies carry out the daily surveys of the media, and of the TV audience in particular: TNS/TV Plan <http://www.tns-tvplan.bg/> and GARB (GfK Audience Research Bulgaria) <http://www.garb.bg>.

Academic researchers are united into the Bulgarian Sociological Association <http://www.bsa-bg.org/>.

Established by decision of the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria immediately after of the political changes in 1989, the National Centre for the Study of Public Opinion (NCSPPO) is the Bulgarian Government authority in charge of national and regional representative surveys for political, social, and economic and media researches. NCSPPO activities are aimed at Bulgarian decision-makers, both in the legislative and in the Government management sphere, as well as at entrepreneurs and economically active groups in Bulgarian society in general.

Many sociological agencies are engaged in intermittent media research. Twelve of these agencies are members of ESOMAR (European Society for Opinion and Market Research): <http://directory.esomar.org/results.php?countries=31>:

- [Alpha Research Ltd](http://www.aresearch.org/en.html) (Agency for market and social research): <http://www.aresearch.org/en.html>;
- [Estat Ltd.](http://www.estatbg.com/) (Agency for collection, processing and analysis of research data and consultancy services in the field of marketing): <http://www.estatbg.com/>;
- [GfK Bulgaria EOOD](http://www.gfk.bg/index.en.html) (Market Research Institute): <http://www.gfk.bg/index.en.html>;
- [MAP Marketing Research Ltd.](http://www.map-mr.com/) (Market Research Outsourcing and Online Panel-Supply Services): <http://www.map-mr.com/>
- [Market LINKS](http://www.mmlinks.net) (a full-service market research company): <http://www.mmlinks.net>
- [Market Test \(r\) Ltd.](http://www.mtest.bg/) (Marketing Research Company): <http://www.mtest.bg/>
- [MBMD Consulting](http://www.mbmd.net/) (Market and Social Research Institute): <http://www.mbmd.net/>
- [SEERC \(South East Europe Research Corp.\)](http://www.seerc.bg/en/about/7a4640) (Market research provider in Southeast Europe based in Sofia, Bulgaria): <http://www.seerc.bg/en/about/7a4640>
- [Synovate](http://www.synovate.com/contact/europe/bulgaria.html) (Sociological & marketing research & analysis): <http://www.synovate.com/contact/europe/bulgaria.html>
- [Taylor Nelson Sofres/BBSS Plc.](http://directory.esomar.org/Bulgaria/r708_Taylor-Nelson-Sofres-BBSS-Plc.php) (http://directory.esomar.org/Bulgaria/r708_Taylor-Nelson-Sofres-BBSS-Plc.php)
- [The Nielsen Company](http://en-bg.nielsen.com/): <http://en-bg.nielsen.com/>
- [Vitosha Research](http://www.vitosharesearch.com/#) (market, social, political, advertising and media research): <http://www.vitosharesearch.com/#>

Professional associations and non-government organizations also engage in the research of audiences, content-analysis and media monitoring on topical issues. All researches are made public by conference presentations, scientific papers and media publications.

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