

The Public, the Media and the Library

Dr. Sultana Craia

E-mail: sultanabuluta@gmail.com

Dr. Sultana Craia is a specialist in communication sciences. She taught as a reader courses on communication theory, information and communication techniques, bibliology. She has a rich publishing activity. She published numerous books, studies and articles on the history of culture, communication, bibliology and information science, literary criticism and history.

Abstract

Media influences cultural priorities, tastes, social representations and even cultural consumption needs. The position of the library in the community, the public interest and the use of its services are strongly marked by the effects of consumption and the media-generated patterns. This article presents the results of a questionnaire survey administrated to 289 subjects aged between 8 and 80 years in Bucharest and other cities of Romania. The survey was focused on two directions. The first was aimed at the media consumption typologies and needs of the public, according to age categories and the second focused on the public and the library.

Keywords: media, library, public, survey, reading

In our contemporary society public opinion is shaped by the media, especially audio-visual media. It influences the cultural priorities, tastes, social representations and even cultural consumption needs. Not all public categories consume and are shaped in the same way by the media, each responding specifically to the messages received.

The position of the library in the community, public interest and the use of library services are strongly marked by the effects of consumption and of patterns generated by the media, and librarians must observe this phenomenon, analyse it and adapt to it, in order not to see themselves even more marginalized in the future.

In this article we present information obtained for this purpose based on a survey focused on two directions and conducted with the participation of students (in the 1st and 2nd year) from the Faculty of Journalism. The questionnaire based surveys were conducted in the spring of 2008.

The first direction was aimed at the media consumption types and needs of the public, according to age categories..

The study was conducted on a sample of 289 subjects aged between 10 and 80, in Bucharest and other cities of Romania, so the research is valid only for urban areas. Two questionnaires were used.

Questionnaire A focused on the cultural practices of the respondents (reading, going to the theatre, film consumption, preference for a certain musical genre, preferences for television shows).

One of the questions (question no. six) was formulated as follows: "You receive one hundred RON as a gift. What do you do with it?", aiming at highlighting the subject's predisposition to cultural or other type of expenses.

Questionnaire B was designed to help analysing the information needs and tools, the information practices, the time allotted to media group and family communication, and also the daily routine consumption of radio and television shows.

Here are the results on consumption, predilections and directions of interest, from early childhood to old age.

Consumption, needs and trends of the public between 10 and 14 years old

Electronic communication. This category of children devote most of their free available time to using the computer. Over 20% of the respondents state that they are familiar with this instrument since the age of four, about 30% since the age of 7, the rest later.

Children use computers for games, listening to music and watching movies and only in a very small measure for the information needs related to school assignments.

The time allotted daily to computer use is higher than that devoted to television. Some respondents spend up to 5 hours a day in front of the monitor and even more on holidays as compared to only one hour spent in front of the TV, according to their statements.

Audio-visual media. An interesting observation has been made: children do not watch TV shows dedicated to their age, but most frequently programmes intended for adult viewers. Only 2% rarely watch programmes on Discovery and Animal Planet channels, which could develop their knowledge and have information and educational value.

The type of TV movies preferred at this age is the "action" type, that is a violent and simplistic type, followed by comedies, parodies and SF movies.

Still the children's need for fairy tales remains since most subjects declare their preferences for *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Jurassic Park*.

Children listen to relatively few radio programmes and not at all to those dedicated to their age group. The time allotted to the radio is on average maximum 2 hours daily, most of them declaring that they listen to the radio for one hour (68%). They listen to Pro FM, Europa FM, Radio 21, Guerilla, Kiss FM, Campus. Public radio has not been mentioned by any respondents aged between 10 and 14.

The most popular music includes manele, followed by *Bug Mafia*, *La Familia*, *Metallica*, *Holograf*, *Paraziții*, *Iris*, *Talisman* and several foreign bands such as *Backstreet Boys*, *Blue*, *Destiny's Child*.

Reading. This segment of the public is under the pressure of school assignments, which makes them read the compulsory bibliography, especially for "Romanian literature". Consequently, the respondents read *Amintiri din copilărie* by Ion Creanga, Andersen's stories, *La Medeleni* (vol. I), *Moromeții*, *The Three Musketeers*, *The Legends of Olympus*. The only book they read, without being compelled to is *Harry Potter*, probably as a result of the fact that the movie is based on a best-seller and of its planetary scale coverage. Jules Verne was not mentioned, children and teenagers do not know or do not like the cape and sword novels, or even those in the StarTreck cycle, much appreciated a decade ago.

As far as magazines are concerned, there is a marked interest for publications in which the visual component predominates: boys read sport magazines, especially those focused on their favourite football teams and motoring, and girls read *Cool Girl*, *Popcorn* and *Bravo*. They do not read the *National Geographic* magazine (2 mentions) and they are not interested in daily newspapers.

Group and family communication. According to their own statements, children aged between 10 and 14 spend around 3 hours daily with groups of friends, schoolmates and neighbours, and 4–5 hours with their family, but this time is used for school assignments and the computer. They correspond only through the Internet, in the same group of friends.

Cultural expenses. If they had a hundred RON children would buy sweets, toys, girls would also buy clothes, but under no circumstances books and rarely CDs.

Cultural practices. Only 3% of the respondents went to the theatre and only once, with the school, which shows that their families do not take them to shows. None went to the Opera or a classical music concert.

Teenagers

The category between 15 and 18 years old is partly different from that of children, both by their orientation to other media offers, and by the age when they started to use a computer.

Electronic communication. The age when they started to use a personal computer is about 12 years, and the computer is now no longer used mainly for games, 70% of subjects searching for information, communication, using it for school projects and other activities, like participating in forums.

Audio-visual media. Watching television occupies about 2–3 hours daily and listening to the radio about an hour. It is interesting to note that there are television programmes preferred by this category too, as well as by children (*Cronica Cârcotașilor*, *Taxi Driver*), but teenagers are also interested in News; they mention watching the Divertis group, as well as shows such as *Din dragoste*, *Trădați în dragoste*.

As far as radio channels are concerned, there is some overlapping with the 10-14 category: Kiss FM, Radio 21, Pro FM, Campus, and in addition DEEA, South East etc.

Bands like *Paraziții*, *Voltaž*, *O-zone* and singers such as Eminem are popular, while manele are mentioned not on the first but on the last place, which shows that the negative effects of this phenomenon are relatively recent.

As far as the consumption of movies is concerned, teenagers watch a greater number of movies than children, stating that they watch at least a movie every day besides series.

Reading. The subjects in the 15–18 category have school assignments, too, but fewer compulsory books to read. Besides the bibliography required by teachers, teenagers read *Harry Potter*, *Shogun*, but they are not interested in the science fiction genre.

They read more periodicals, boys in particular read *Prosport*, *Gazeta Sporturilor*, *Pro Tv Magazin*, *PC Game*, and girls read women magazines, *Libertatea*, *Click*, etc.

Group and family communication. The respondents spend 2–3 hours a day with their friends or group and 4–5 hours with their family, more specifically in front of the computer. About 70% correspond with 6-8 people per month via the Internet.

Cultural expenses. None of the respondents, in 36 subjects would spend the one hundred RON received as a gift for a cultural product, but for clothing, cosmetics, computer components or for going out with friends.

Adult Public

The questionnaires reveal sex differences in the orientation towards media offers, in the money spending choices and the use of the computer.

Women

Electronic communication. Adult women say they use the computer in a much smaller proportion than young people and even less than children. The questionnaires show that more than 50% of the female subjects use the computer, this percentage being derived from subjects under 30 years and none over 45.

Audio-visual media. Adult women watch two to three movies a week besides series and they like movies such as *The Titanic*, indicated as a favorite. They are interested in entertainment television programmes: *Divertis*, *Profesioniștii*, *Tezaur folcloric* and they do not mention cultural genres. The interest in news bulletins and political talk shows is extremely low. On average they spend three hours daily watching TV and about one hour listening to the radio (*Europa FM*, *Campus*, *Antena satelor*). They prefer music bands like *Voltaaj*, *Roxette*, *Iris*, *Holograf*.

Reading. Unconstrained by school obligations, women read on average one to two books per month or not at all. The following books have been mentioned: *The Bible*, *Cel mai iubit dintre pământeni*, *A Hundred Years of Solitude*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *In Search of the Lost Time*. However, the percentage of book readers is small (32%) as compared to the percentage of women who read only newspapers and magazines. They read *Libertatea*, *Evenimentul zilei*, *Jurnalul național* and women magazines.

Group and family communication. Time allotted to friends is reduced to no more than two hours a day (not during week days but on weekends), and the time allotted to family is of 3 hours, correspondence taking place only occasionally, with relatives.

Cultural expenses. The one hundred RON would be used exclusively for clothing, cosmetics, household items or gifts, but under no circumstances for a cultural product.

Men

Electronic communication. 70% of the respondents (i.e. specifically young men) use the computer, starting with the age of 13. Initially the computer is used for games and later for information and other facilities.

Audio-visual media. The adult male audience watch news, sports programmes, some popularized science shows and talk shows on television. They spend about 3 hours daily watching TV and / or about two hours listening to the radio (*Radio Romania Actualități, Pro FM, Europa FM*).

They prefer programmes like *Observator, Cronica Cărcotașilor* and pure entertainment shows.

The respondents declare that they watch 3-7 movies a week, belonging to different genres, with action movies usually coming first in the top of their preferences.

Favorite music bands are *Metallica, Iris, Holograf, the Beatles* and the singer *Madonna*.

Reading. Those who read more than one book per month do not exceed 20% and a percentage of 80% declared that they never read books.

As far as newspapers and magazines are concerned, men buy / read about 2-5 newspapers a week (*Sportul, Adevărul, Evenimentul zilei, Libertatea, sports and local newspapers*).

Group and family communication. Most respondents state they spend 1-2 hours with their friends and about 2 hours with their family, randomly, mainly on weekends.

Cultural expenses. With the one hundred RON received as a gift a young man would buy alcohol, cigarettes, clothing, and an adult over 40 something useful for the household. 0% cultural expenses.

Elderly people

Electronic communication. At this age level, electronic communication is practiced only as an exception.

Audio-visual media. Elderly respondents allot on average 6-8 hours daily to the radio and about 6 hours to television. On TV they watch at least one soap opera, news, reality shows, entertainment shows.

They listen to *Radio Romania Actualități and Radio Romania Cultural*, unselectively, in order to occupy their time.

Reading. Elderly people rarely buy newspapers and they usually limit themselves to the information they receive from radio and television. Occasionally they read borrowed books, sometimes novels already read in their youth. When they can afford to buy them, they prefer daily newspapers (*Adevărul, România Liberă*) and magazines with herbal recipes or *Formula AS*.

Group and family communication. Most of the subjects have no longer families or friends and they just occasionally communicate with their neighbours.

Cultural expenses. If they had 100 RON they would buy products that are strictly necessary and possibly a book, too.

Conclusions

The study focusing on the first direction of research shows differences in the use of information sources and tools, as well as differences of tastes and patterns from one category of audience to another. A preference for computers instead of television is visible with the younger audience, along with variations of the periods of time spent in front of the TV as compared to the radio.

A shift of interest for different types of periodicals can be noticed, from magazines with a generous visual and entertainment component in the case of teenagers and young people to a preference for information media (with focus on "people") in the case of adults and a decrease in newspapers reading habits in the case of the elderly population (who prefer radio shows instead).

In terms of written communication, the interest in reading books is low and it targets mostly literature and not at all other genres. The respondents are not willing to spend money on books (except for a small number of elderly persons).

Cultural press is ignored, only 4 respondents mentioning literary or cultural magazines like *România literară*.

As far as cultural practices are concerned, only 11 of the 189 respondents went to the theatre, but they do not go more than once a year, which indicates the absence of a tradition of high quality leisure.

In terms of taste, there is a great receptivity for sub-products such as manele as the respondents' age decreases.

Different categories of public, but also a series of common dominant elements can be distinguished: lack of interest for an offer of quality media products, a generally passive, non-selective and conservative consumption in the case of adult generations and a tendency for sedentarism which limits the perspectives to what can be watched / listened to at home.

The resulting image is that of a media-dependent public with low requirements, a low level of curiosity and desire for variation, too lazy or too conservative to look for experiences they are not accustomed to, such as going to the theatre.

The second direction of study focused on *the Public and the Library*.

The same students interviewed the same sample of respondents and asked them to fill in a second questionnaire – C, on library use and interest, but also regarding the public's perception of the institution and its funding by the authorities.

The public was asked if they go to the library (using a reader's card). Another question focused on the interest in this institution and was formulated as follows: Is the public library a useful institution? The next question: Do you consider that the state / local authorities should provide generous funds for libraries? Another question was: "Are public libraries very well/, well/sufficiently/, insufficiently financed?". And finally: "Where do you go when you need cultural or utilitarian information?" The answers are presented below:

The segment of public between 10 and 14. 86% of the interviewed persons said they went to the library (56% to the public library, the rest to the school library). The percentage is normal, given the compulsory nature of school readings and assignments, although many reports are taken from the Internet. 92% said that in their opinion the library is useful, 8% answered that they do not know. As far as funding is concerned, the respondents in this age group said that libraries should receive money, but did not know from what source and could not assess whether the library to which they go was well or insufficiently financed. With reference to the source of information used, 78% of the answers indicated the Internet (although 70% of the participants in the first study had declared that), the rest indicating their family, teachers and friends as a source of information.

Teenagers. Only 58% go to the (public) library on account of their school obligations, 76% consider the library an useful institution (even those who do not attend it, as it can be seen), the rest answering that they do not know. 96% can not answer if libraries are well or insufficiently financed, but they think they should receive money (they do not know from what sources). As far as information resources are concerned, 72% said that they get information from the radio and television, followed by the Internet, while none mentioned the library. As it can be seen, the young public does not see the public library as a place where one can get information, despite the fact that they consider it useful.

The adult segment of the public. There are no significant differences between the opinions of women versus men. 98% consider the library useful although only 18% hold a library card (which, compared to the complete lack of theatre attendance, as indicated in the first study, appears as a positive aspect). 87% believe that libraries should be generously funded and 82% think their community libraries are under-funded. But they do not consider the library a place of information, since 86% get information from media sources and the rest from their acquaintances. The librarian is not perceived as a person whom the public can address for information.

The elderly segment of the public. Responses show in proportion of 98% the subjects' respect for the library, but only 8% of the respondents are registered readers who actually go to the library. 98% of the respondents

believe that the library is useful and should be funded by state, but only 14% can assess whether or not libraries have money and 6% believe that the library funds are insufficient. As for the source of information, 100% say they get informed from the media, which shows that not even this group sees the library as a source of information.

Conclusions

The two surveys showed that the members of the public prefer the media at the expense of other information sources. Traditionally, the public preserves a respect in principle for the institution of culture, but they use it little for their school and leisure needs, but not as a place of socialization, as an information space, as a second home, as a pleasant public place. Implicitly it means that the librarian is not seen as a mediator or as a source of information, hence as a partner of the citizens.

These results are not collected and processed through techniques specific to a sociological investigation, but through means characteristic of journalistic investigations, so that without generalizing we have presented the findings in order to propose a subject of reflection for librarians. This phenomenon is not specific only for Romania. Other information on this subject can be found in specialized foreign publications. European librarians do not indulge themselves in regrets, they analyse the situation and try to find new approaches in order to adapt their offer to a changing world.

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