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22 March 2019

FINAL REPORT

Big Data in the Cold War:

The Case of Radio Free Europe's Audience Research

Visegrad Scholarship at the OSA, 14 January – 14 March 2019

My research on Radio Free Europe's audience and opinion research conducted at the Open Society Archives serves as the basis for one chapter of my PhD thesis which deals with the history of the Czechoslovak service of RFE. In my thesis I am analyzing RFE as a media institution operating in various environments and interacting with them. Besides the US-American and the general Cold War context, these are mainly the fragmented anticommunist exile in Western Europe and in the US, the audience in Czechoslovakia, the Communist-controlled Czechoslovak media as RFE's foremost adversary, and the West German context taking into account that RFE headquarters were located in Munich. Focusing on such interplays my work aims at presenting a more complex picture of the history of RFE and its Czechoslovak service.

In these interplays knowledge plays a central role: RFE can be considered one of the biggest producers of knowledge of socialist countries and societies during the Cold War. Its gathering of information and the knowledge which resulted from this was the basis for RFE's communication towards East Central Europe, it shaped its broadcast policy and the broadcast content. But RFE's knowledge was also very influential in the West as RFE made its research results available to Western politicians, diplomats, journalists, and academics. This is reason enough to have a closer look at this stock of knowledge and its production – which was my aim at OSA.

During my research stay at OSA I have extended my focus: I am not only focusing on RFE's audience and opinion research but also on general knowledge of East Central European countries and societies which RFE generated. Questions which guided my research at OSA were: How did RFE gather information? What methods did it use? How did it select and proceed information? How did it store information? How was information interpreted and used? What concrete influence did it have on the

radio broadcasts? The approach I have chosen is not to ask whether a particular information that RFE gathered or published corresponded to historical facts or not. I am more interested in the question how this whole "stock of knowledge" can be characterized.

Also, I deal with knowledge production at RFE as a case of big data – arguing that big data did exist before the age of the internet and of today's powerful computers. Following other big data history projects I do not define big data in terms of the absolute quantity of data but rather in relation to the current capacity to deal with large datasets, i.e. to aggregate, to search, and to cross-reference data. I understand big data not only as a material phenomenon but also as a concept in itself: It is connected with the belief that large datasets offer highly objective knowledge. Not only today but also back then – for example at RFE – this made big data a part of the strategies and practices in the production of "truths".

A question that emerges here – and which also guided my research at OSA – is the one about political or ideological framing of big data. Taking into account the political interests of the USA in the Cold War, without which the history of RFE cannot be explained, my presumption was that this would be somehow reflected in RFE's knowledge production (and its results) as well. During my research stay at OSA I found many examples which show that this presumption was correct.

At OSA I worked mainly with the records of Radio Free Europe's research department (HU OSA 300; see also the detailed list of documents which I consulted at the end of this report). Most valuable for me were HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion research, HU OSA 300-30-13 Information Items, HU OSA 300-30-1 Card Index to the Subject Files, and HU OSA 300-30-30 Miscellaneous Records of the Czechoslovak Unit. Highly important were also documents I could access at OSA although they were still being processed by the archivists or have not been processed at all yet. This concerned mainly additional documents of RFE's audience research (which complement the existing collection HU OSA 300-6-2), a collection of RFE/RL photographs, and documents from RFE's Engineering Department. I am very grateful for the possibility to access these materials.

On the whole the documents I consulted confirmed my presumptions. Especially during the early years of RFE's existence (the 1950s and 1960s), at the various stages of RFE's knowledge production the archival documents show clearly that RFE was designed as and functioned as a propaganda institution and not as an institution that aimed at presenting the events of the day in the most objective way.

Also, the documents revealed to me how RFE's knowledge production was influenced by typical thought patterns predominant during the Cold War, i.e. thought patterns which were characterized by a strong dichotomy, by the belief that the Communists tell "lies" whereas the "free" West tells the "truth". This, I argue for example, explains why we do hardly find positive news about East Central Europe in RFE's stock of knowledge. Such thought patterns also played a role in RFE's ongoing efforts to optimize and develop further its research methods in order to gain more accurate results, as OSA archival documents revealed. Both the influence of the described thought patterns on RFE's knowledge production and the development of RFE's research methods will be main topics of my chapter.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank the Visegrad Fund as well as the staff at OSA for having given me the opportunity to conduct profound research at the OSA, for every assistance which I received for my research, and also for the opportunity to spend two month in such an inspiring environment. The scholarship allowed me to collect very valuable archival material for my work and on that basis to formulate a concrete argumentation for my chapter, and to start writing a draft. I am looking forward to staying in touch with OSA and hopefully coming back to Budapest in the future.

Detailed list of consulted archival material

HU OSA 300 Records of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Research Institute
HU OSA 300-1 General Records:
    HU OSA 300-1-1 Rome Bureau: Box 6
HU OSA 300-6 Media and Opinion Research Department:
    HU OSA 300-6-1 Administrative Files: Boxes 9, 12, 13
    HU OSA 300-6-2 East Europe Area and Opinion Research: Boxes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5
HU OSA 300-8 Publications Department:
    HU OSA 300-8-14 East Europe News: Box 1
HU OSA 300-30 Czechoslovak Unit:
    HU OSA 300-30-1 Card Index to the Subject Files: Box 1
    HU OSA 300-30-8 Old Code Subject Card Files: Box 8
    HU OSA 300-30-13 Information Items: Boxes 1, 2

HU OSA 300-30-14 Collection of Documents on 1968: Boxes 1, 2

HU OSA 300-30-30 Miscellaneous Records of the Czechoslovak Unit: Boxes 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

Collections from the OSA Digital Repository:
- Free Europe Committee Encrypted Telex Communication
- RFE Information Items
- RFE/RL Background Reports
- RFE/RL Situation Reports

Documents consulted which are being processed/not yet processed:
- Documents of RFE's audience and opinion research department: ca. 15 boxes
- RFE/RL photographs: Boxes 1, 2, 3, 4
- RFE Engineering Department: Reel 90
- Several individual RFE/RL documents which the archivists made available to me.

Literature at OSA Library and CEU Library