

SECTION ONE

Measuring the Audience to Western Broadcasters in the USSR

Survey data on Radio Liberty's audience during the coup crisis in August 1991 was available within days of the event. It showed widespread listening to the station. This was not the case during most of the station's history, when the Soviet Union was off limits to Western survey researchers. Western radio broadcasting was considered "ideological diversion" and any attempt at researching the audience for the benefit of a Western broadcaster would have been considered little short of espionage, especially in the case of Radio Liberty.

Given that it was impossible to carry out classic audience research within the USSR itself, second-best methods had to be employed. The fallback was to interview systematically travelers from the Soviet Union who were temporarily outside their country.¹ Beginning in the early 1970s, emigrants from the USSR, primarily Jewish, but also some ethnic Germans, were also interviewed. These research efforts were directed by the Soviet Area Audience and Opinion Research (SAAOR) unit of RFE/RL, located in Paris.² The actual interviewing was carried out by

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independent research institutes in a neutral manner that did not prejudice results in favor of a single broadcaster. The data were relied upon by all the major Western broadcasters to the USSR for their basic estimates of audience size and listening behavior.

During the 1950s and 1960s, interviewing travelers produced primarily *ad hoc* anecdotal evidence of listening, which provided useful insights but permitted few general inferences. By the early 1970s, data collection had been systematized to the point that preliminary generalized estimates could begin to be made about audience size and composition. During the period 1972–1990, over 50,000 interviews with Soviet travelers were conducted and analyzed using a sophisticated mass media communications computer simulation model developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT).³ Since that part of the Soviet population which was allowed to travel to the West was demographically and ideologically skewed, highly robust methods were required to counteract those biases. Travelers tended to be more male, more urban, more educated, more middle-aged and more likely to be members of the communist party than the population at large. While the MIT simulation program could correct for the demographic skew, there was no real way to correct for the fact that travelers had been carefully screened for loyalty to the Soviet state. This might have had an impact on their willingness to admit to listening to certain Western radio stations (such as Radio Liberty) that were considered ideologically antagonistic. While the focus of this paper is not on methodology *per se*, the complicated methodological issues involved in surveying a non-representative traveling population are briefly discussed in Appendix A. The underlying principles of the MIT mass media simulation program are dealt with in Appendix B. Methodological issues will be examined in more depth in a subsequent publication.

Throughout this paper, for reasons of convenience, the term “sample” will be used to refer to the Soviet traveler data. This does not mean to imply that the sample of travelers is a random, scientific sample in the usual sense of the term. It should rather be taken to mean a survey group reconstructed by the MIT simulation program in such a way as to be representative of the adult population of the USSR.

In addition to the traveler survey, an entirely separate project, also managed by SAAOR, surveyed over 25,000 legal emigrants

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from the USSR on their media habits before emigration. This research could be conducted with the straightforward administration of a detailed questionnaire. Emigrant data were not used for estimating audience size in the Soviet Union, but provided much useful detailed information on listening behavior and permitted cross-checks to validate the internal consistency of the traveler data. Another source of useful information for the radios, although it couldn't be used to estimate audience size, was listener mail. Thousands of letters were received over the years, and their many first-hand accounts of listening behavior, along with their positive or critical comments, were of inestimable value to the broadcast services. However, listener mail is beyond the scope of this study and awaits a separate analysis.

No claim is made that the research approach used by SAAOR during the Cold War produced results that would have been as accurate as surveys freely conducted within the USSR using state-of-the-art methodology. *All research findings in this study have to be understood within the limits of that caveat.* There are always limits to accuracy and when direct impediments are placed in the way of the research process those limits can be severe. The data, however, do provide a rather remarkable body of internally consistent findings with high face validity, and we feel confident that they offer valuable insights into the role played by Western radio during the Cold War period. Along with the data on media use, a considerable amount of attitudinal data was gathered. As the size and quality of the database increased in the 1980s, and analytical methods became more refined, our understanding of the listeners gained in depth and richness. Through the careful analysis of this extensive database, it became possible to provide broadcast management with crucial information allowing them to adapt programming in order to better meet listeners' needs and desires.

When the Cold War ended and research could be conducted within the USSR, and later in the successor states to the Soviet Union, it became clear that our earlier measurements and understanding of audience behavior were firmly grounded and no major reassessments were required. Subsequent surveys conducted inside Russia after the fall of the USSR bore out the finding of widespread listening to foreign radio stations during the Cold War period and their importance to the Soviet peoples.

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This paper is based on the extensive data gathered from SAAOR traveler surveys and addresses the important questions of audience size and listening trends over time, the position Western radio occupied in the Soviet media environment, listeners' demographic traits and attitudinal tendencies, the evolution of the image of different Western broadcasters, and listeners' programming preferences. The role of Western radio in various crisis situations will be examined through a number of case studies. An additional section examines issues of data validation, drawing on comparisons with internal Soviet studies, both official and unofficial. Finally, some tentative observations will be made on the important question of the impact of Western radio and Radio Liberty *from the listeners' perspective*. Impact can be an elusive issue to quantify and it is imprudent, if not impossible, to isolate a single factor in any causal process. These difficulties notwithstanding, it is important to attempt to better understand what Radio Liberty and Western radio actually meant to their listeners, and how their influence may have inspired or reinforced other tendencies at work in the USSR in its fitful movement toward a freer society.