

Report

on the research conducted from 01.06.2012 to 31.07.2012 on the topic
“Public opinion and media research in Hungary, 1969-1991”
supported by the International Visegrad Fund

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I. Research antecedents

The Mass Media Research Centre (Hungarian abbreviation: TK), as of 1985 Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research (MKI), was founded in 1969 as the first and until the systems change practically the only domestic workshop for communication/media and public opinion research. The maintainers and client groups of the institution changed several times over the years, but it has always conducted research primarily for Hungarian Radio and Television and for the Party Centre of the Hungarian Socialist Workers' Party (MSZMP). Part of the researches was ordered by the latter institutions, and another part was submitted to them for approval on the initiative of the management or staff of the institute. TK's researcher staff of hardly 20 grew to 100 persons by the mid-eighties, and in addition to the research departments – Department for Public Opinion Polls, Panel Department, Mass Media Department, Methodological Team, – it had its own network of full-time interviewers acting also as instructors for the survey staff networks operating in Budapest and in the countryside, checking their work and the genuine completion of the questionnaires personally. The data processing unit was responsible for data entry and computerised processing, and the Publishing Department edited and published the review of the institute and its publication series of analyses based on researches conducted at the Institute, and of the edited Hungarian-language versions of leading international researches on communication theory and methodology. None of TK's publications was commercially distributed to the public; there was a predefined itemised list of persons receiving each. There were some “confidential” researches, the numbered copies of which were delivered only to a few political top executives “for confidential treatment”, but even the institute review *Szemle/Jel-Kép*, published in the highest number of copies, made its way to no more than a few hundreds of readers.

The documents of the researches of TK/MKI are invaluable: they project a comprehensive picture of the key features of public thinking, public mentality, the operation of limited publicity and of the media in the Kádár era and, moreover, TK was the only research institute at that time not only in Hungary, but in the entire Soviet block examining the structure of social communication and public opinion and the tendencies of their change systematically, at an advanced methodological level. Whereas in the advanced world communication

and public opinion research had gained ground and became perhaps the most dynamically developing social sciences discipline, in Eastern Europe this Hungarian site was the only workshop conducting institutionalised, regular, scientific surveys to monitor the operation of the media and the changes in public thinking.

The relative weight of media research and public opinion research, the two central areas of TK/MKI research, has kept changing within the research activity of the institution. In the initial periods, the emphasis was on communication and media research, with a significant role attributed to the regular examination of the viewer numbers of TV programmes, but from the eighties on, parallel with the change of the political situation, public opinion researches have gained ground, and by the time of the systems change, media researches had been pushed into the background.

From 1969 to 1991, a total of more than 400 nationally representative or stratum-specific data surveys were made, which collected and analysed opinions not only on media usage, but also on the key phenomena/events of social/economic and political life. Besides the government measures, primarily of economic and social policy relevance – price increase, wage settlements, licensing of small businesses, launch or curbing of the reforms, changes in social policy allowances, decisions pertaining to the inflation rate etc. -, special attention was paid to the investigation of the deeper strata and long-term changes of public thinking. From 1976 on, regular quarterly surveys were made to monitor the changes of economy-related general sentiment. The resulting public opinion barometer demonstrated the cracking of the legitimacy basis of the system, the gradual erosion of the belief in the steady growth of prosperity and of the sense of security and economic perspectives of the population. There were research projects on historical consciousness; on the assessment of the various periods and key actors of history; the level of the historical, economic and political knowledge of the population; the business strategies of households and their adjustment to the changing circumstances; the stereotypes, prejudices prevailing/active in society; on national consciousness; the attitudes to ethnic Hungarians outside the borders and to the neighbouring countries; on knowledge styles and, from the eighties on, on networks and networking. Within communication research in the broader sense, the foreign language skills of the adult population were subjected to regular research; several projects focused on the specifics of scaremongering, the culture of communication in the mother tongue and on functional illiteracy, respectively. Sometimes extraordinary events provoking lively public opinion reactions, but subject to systematic misinformation in the media such as the football rig scandals or the Chernobil nuclear disaster were also put in the focus of research

As can be guessed from the above, the extensive knowledge base accumulated at TK/MKI provides a unique impression of the Kádár regime in every respect. It provides a comprehensive image of the phenomena and deeper

layers of social communication and public thinking; of the structure and transformation of social publicity.

The systems change triggered the mushrooming development of profit-oriented public opinion and market research companies, and the tender announced for the assessment of viewer numbers/audience ratings of TV programmes was won by multinational AGB. The Hungarian Institute for Public Opinion Research was terminated, its place was taken by a research panel of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (MTA-ELTE Research Group for Communication Theory), responsible among other things for archiving the research materials of MKI. In the first half of the nineties, the research documentation of the materials concerned was classified and the databases stored on magnetic tape were transferred to floppies partly by copying, and partly by repeated data entry. Part of the research material, the publications and the documents concerning the operation and contact network of the institute is now available in the form of document copies in OSA's collection. Although not complete, this material can be regarded as an authentic cross-section of the more-than-two-decade-long operation of TK/MKI.

II. Research objective

The ultimate goal of my research is to sort out/classify and make suitable for research the TK/MKI materials located at OSA. The materials concerned will significantly enrich our knowledge of the operation of publicity under the Kádár regime, and of the value hierarchy and public thinking of the era. Its processing and analysis is likely to give us a comprehensive picture of a so far very little known segment of socialist dictatorship. The collected and classified material will be an important source for the researchers of that period and for university students interested in this topic, but also for those who presume that the roots of today's public thinking and public mentality go back to the Kádár era. Several issues studied in the seventies and eighties may well be relevant also today, and it will hopefully be possible to use TK's questions and data to outline the long-term trends of public thinking.

I set myself the objective of doing the preliminary review, categorisation and classification of this material during the term of the grant awarded to me by the Visegrad Fund; these tasks must be accomplished by all means to make the material now at OSA available and researchable to the broad professional public in the longer term.

My objectives included, moreover, the detailed mapping of every document in the most valuable part of the material, vis. public opinion and media research, as well as familiarisation with the contents of the researches and establishment of whether they are complete or incomplete. For, to reconstruct

the database of the researches, beside the data files, the questionnaires, code instructions, sample descriptions and code conversion guides are also absolutely needed.

III. Research results

Based on the examination of the material and as a result of consultations with the OSA staff, I suggest the following structure for the description and proper archival processing of the entire TK/MKI material (Fig. 1.)

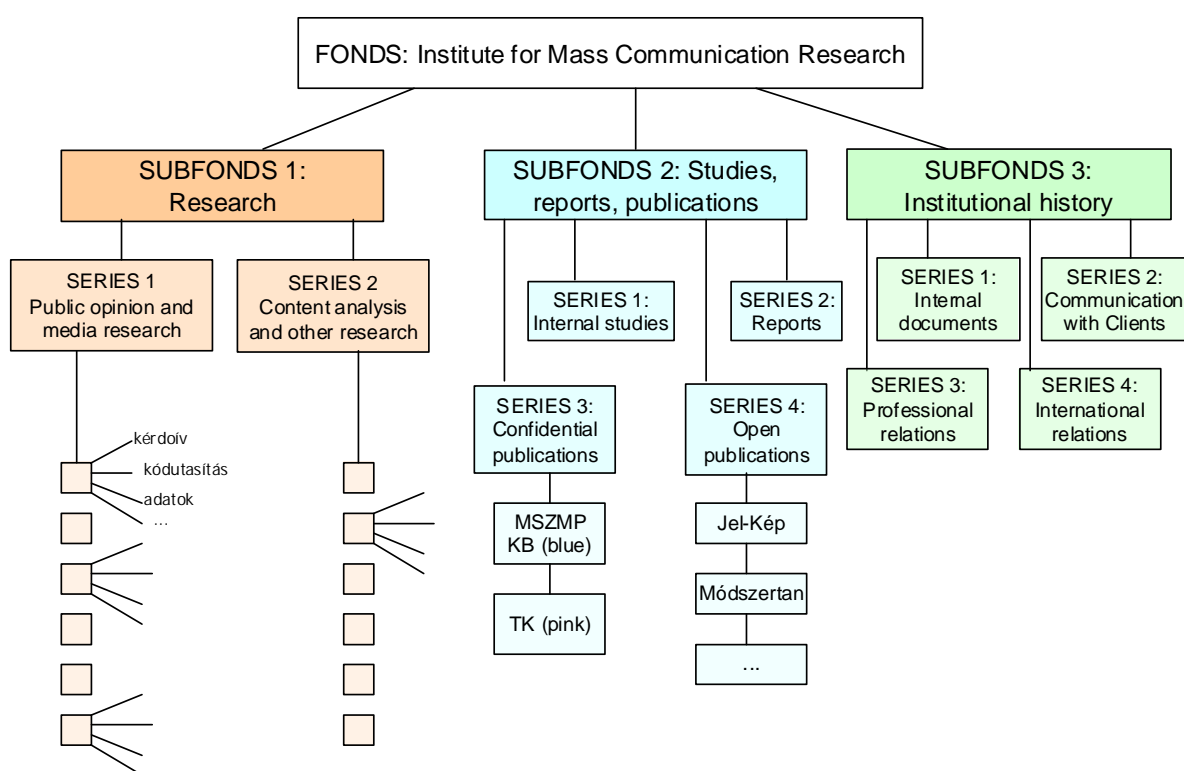


Figure 1. Suggested structure of the TK/MKI documents

According to my research carried out in the past months, to our current knowledge, the OSA stock comprises the documents of 438 researches, of which around 60% can be regarded as complete in the sense that each includes the corresponding questionnaire, sample description, code instructions and code conversion description and sometimes even the basic distributions. The identification of the related data files is the task of the period to come. 80% of researches is public opinion or media research conducted on nationally representative or stratum-specific samples, but neither is the proportion of

researches based on other methods, i.e. press content analysis, in-depth interviews, observation etc. negligible. The research materials consist of public opinion and media research (ratio: 60:40), but in a significant part of the cases the two major topics – media and public opinion – figure in the questionnaires concurrently. Data collection for the public opinion and media researches was carried out in more than two thirds of the cases through personal questionnaire-based interviews with members of the nationally representative sample of 1000 persons, and telephone-based interviews gained ground in the second half of the eighties.

In the past two months, I compiled a detailed list of the topics treated by each research based on the questionnaires, since a single questionnaire survey often gathered data on as many as 8-10 topics. I took stock also of the range of documents associated with each research project, indicating any missing items.

The other group of documents transferred to OSA's collection consists of the *publications* of the institution, which can be assigned – according to my experiences – basically to one of two major groups. The secret or confidential publications available in a few copies only were received exclusively by the top executives of the MSZMP – similarly to the so-called confidential reports of MTI, the Hungarian News Agency –, and access to them was also defined by the party leaders. These numbered analyses marked “confidential” had two versions (one “pink”, the other “blue”) disseminated to a narrower and a broader public, respectively. The reports concerned were not publicly available even for the institution staff; their content was known only to their authors and the leaders of the institution. According to the estimates, some 80 such reports were made during the history of the institution, of which OSA's collection contains 52 according to the preliminary survey.

The publications available at OSA suggest that TK/MKI carried out intensive publication activity from the start to document and analyse its research results and to introduce foreign technical literature to the Hungarian professional public. The analyses and methodological publications based on the research results and the translations of foreign works were published in series which, however, were not distributed commercially, but made their way exclusively to the internal public of the institution, and to the top executives of the MSZMP, of Hungarian Radio and Television and the printed press, respectively, and to the leaders of the partner research institutes. Neither was the quarterly professional review edited by staff members of the institution and some leading media personalities, launched under the name of *RTV Szemle* and re-named *Jel-Kép* later on, sold at news vendors. Our preliminary surveys suggest that the most of the outcome of TK/MKI's publication activity can be found in OSA; in the longer term, the research aims at linking the publications to the data files representing the basis of the respective analyses to pave the way for secondary and longitudinal analyses.

A third type of documents at OSA is that of manuscripts, printed materials mapping the *history of the institution*, its internal operations and external contact system. My explorations so far suggest that these materials are related not to the research activities, but primarily to documents generated within the institution (executive meetings, director's instructions, professional discussions etc.) and to contacts with various clients and with the TK/MKI partner research institutes and international professional organisations, institutions, researchers. Their classification and detailed processing may serve as a basis for researches of institution history that could give us an insight into the operation, in the context of state socialism, of an institution occupying a very special position and doing very special tasks.

IV. Conclusion, further research directions

As mentioned already, the research materials, publications and institutional historical documents of TK/MKI are historical documents of unique relevance not only of the Hungarian state socialist dictatorship, but also of the entire Central and Eastern European region. The way of thinking, the value hierarchy, mentality and customs of the "men in the street" of the Kádár era offer many points of reference for understanding the period from 1969 to 1991, and also the social developments of our days: the mentalities, attitudes, individual life strategies which had evolved under the Kádár regime are still present in Hungary society to a decisive extent. Whichever key social issue you address, whether it is about justice, property, interest assertion, poverty, attitude to public issues or politics, the Roma question or anti-Semitism, you are bound to be confronted with the fact that the relevant public thinking is rooted in the Kádár era.

The first steps to make the research materials, publications and institutional historical materials of TK/MKI available to the professional public and researchable shall be followed in the periods to come by the following:

- drafting of the typology of the archived researches;
- cataloguing of the researches according to pre-defined criteria (name, date, topics, documentation of the research);
- converting of digitised data files to the SPSS files in use to date ;
- linking of digitised data files and research documents;
- cataloguing of the topics of the publications, based on the established typology;
- linking of publications and researches;

- classifying of the documents on institutional history, their categorising/archiving by specific criteria;
- documenting, archiving, connecting into the database the researches conducted by the MTA-ELTE Research Group for Communication Theory of, the legal successor of TK/MKI, from 1991 to 2010.