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Rationality of Noise: Acoustic Information Gathering during the Cold War

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During the Visegrad Scholarship at the Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, I analyzed archival collections which preserve data about jamming noise levels and clarity of radio signal broadcast by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE). My project explores the historical moment when noise was a political concern. RFE developed methods of studying noise that hindered clear radio signals behind the Iron Curtain. RFE faced constant uncertainty about sound clarity. Due to political constraints, its transmission facilities operated from West Germany and Portugal, technically unfavorable positions for reaching its intended listeners. Communist governments used jamming to combat “enemy propaganda,” while solar activity also affected the ionosphere and the quality of radio signals. Politics and nature, then, both distorted sound. For the RFE team, noise was not meaningless or irrational, but an object of research with its own

rules. Through its multidisciplinary research, RFE tried to demonstrate that broadcasting could overcome noise and that political messages were reaching potential dissidents.

The research is based on multidisciplinary sources which require analysis from the perspective of sound studies, history of technology, and politics during the Cold War. My study is an attempt to approach the Cold War history through the trajectory of unconventional and overlooked documents in which registering noise levels was not merely a technical task of engineers and daily activity of clerks at RFE, but one of the few available indicators of political changes behind the Iron Curtain.

Using the collection of recently digitized Encrypted Telex Communication at RFE,¹ I encountered numerous messages that mirror the daily process of evaluating jamming levels and sound quality. What was particularly useful is that this type of documentation about acoustic information gathering was linked to specific political events. For instance, on 22 September 1960, the RFE's New York office asked the so called technical monitors to evaluate the overall jamming situation in regard to RFE transmissions of the US president Dwight Eisenhower's speech delivered on the same date.² Following the encrypted correspondence, I was able to follow the response from monitors at Vienna and Berlin technical monitoring stations who evaluated the jamming intensity during the broadcast of this particular speech.³ I observed similar dynamics of evaluating political events through describing intensity of jamming noise levels while consulting the archival collection of Subject Files related to jamming in the Soviet

¹ Vera and Donald Blinken Open Society Archives, Radio Free Europe/Free Europe Committee - Encrypted Telex Communication. <http://fec.osaarchivum.org/>

² "NYC-90 September Crypto Message", 22 September 1960. HU OSA 298-1-2-35-0553c; Records of Free Europe Committee: President's Office: Encrypted Telex Communication between FEC New York and RFE Munich; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

³ "MUN-110 September Crypto Message", 23 September 1960. HU OSA 298-1-2-32-2458; Records of Free Europe Committee: President's Office: Encrypted Telex Communication between FEC New York and RFE Munich; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

Union. RFE analysts collected political reactions from the Western press about Soviet international politics in August 1968. Among the first topics discussed in the West (few hours after Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia) was that jamming of foreign radios started after five years without jamming.⁴

The research scholarship allowed me to identify possible primary sources for a comparative analysis which could shed some light on how jamming noise was defined in political rhetoric in the Soviet Union. Through Russian-language publications in the journals *Posev* and *Argumenty i Faktiy*, available at the OSA archive, I found out how people working at the jamming stations in the Soviet Union described in their own terms the task of evaluating broadcasting sound quality and how Soviet propaganda analysts defined jamming in positive terms - as a useful technology of ideological “defense.”

Technological descriptions of “jamming counter-measures” were particularly valuable for my research. Such documents include narratives of radio listeners who redefined Cold War broadcasting technology and gave unexpected meanings to radio listening in the context of a propaganda war.⁵

The Media and Opinion Research Department at RFE had the task to examine radio listening habits amid constant jamming noise. In the 1950s, the radio audience research team focused on the issue of radio reception as a crucial indicator of the radio’s effectiveness. During the first decade of its existence, audience researchers at RFE were interested in listeners’ reports about signal quality behind the Iron Curtain. Cold War historiography registered the fact that such audience research endeavors included unrepresentative samples of refugees and travelers to

⁴ HU OSA 300-80-1 Soviet Red Archives - Old Code Subject Files Box nr. 763

⁵ Suggestions on Counteracting Soviet Jamming. 2 March 1979, HU OSA 300-80-1 Soviet Red Archives - Old Code Subject Files Box nr. 763

the West. However, archival documentation that mirrors subjective perception of sound quality that was transformed into numerical codes is particularly valuable to understand how Cold War political constraints shaped knowledge production, technology, and social sciences. During my research, I encountered one of the earliest examples of gathering information about quality of radio reception – a report by the Media and Public Opinion Research Department on the Audience research survey during the Brussels Fair in 1958.⁶

Another valuable source for my research was the visual archive of the RFE Public Affairs department. This collection includes rare images of technical monitoring stations at RFE.⁷ Through images and captions, one could study technological objects used for evaluating sound quality and jamming noise levels.

To sum up, using the support of the Visegrad Scholarship at the OSA archives, I found and analyzed useful primary sources that could serve as a solid base for a research in the field of history of technology. The expected result from the scholarship is the completion of a dissertation chapter and a potential publication.

⁶ Analysis Report nr. 8 (1958) 14 November 1958. HU OSA 300-6-1 - Media and Opinion Research Department - Administrative Files, box 1

⁷ HU OSA 300-1-8, RFE/RL Public Affairs Photographic Files, rfe_workflow_014.

List of accessed materials

HU OSA 300-80-1 Soviet Red Archives - Old Code Subject Files Box 763 and 765 - Радио Глушение (Radio Jamming)

Encrypted Telex Communication between Free Europe Committee New York and Radio Free Europe Munich on the topic of radio jamming (Digital Collection)

Radio Free Europe Information Items on the topic of radio jamming (Digital Collection)

HU OSA 300-30-2-83 Old Code Subject Files, Czechoslovakia – information items on the topic of jamming (microfilm)

HU OSA 300 – 40 -4, box 8 and 9, Information items, Hungarian Unit – information items on jamming and jamming stations in Hungary

HU OSA 300-6-1 - Media and Opinion Research Department - Administrative Files, Boxes 1-9. Documents related to radio receivers in the Soviet Union and patterns of radio listening amid jamming noise

HU OSA 300-1-8, RFE/RL Public Affairs Photographic Files – Visual archival collections

Publications in periodicals

- Аргументы и факты : из выступлений советской печати по вопросам критики буржуазной идеологии и пропаганды (Argumenty i fakty : iz vystypleniï sovetskoi pečati po voprosam kritiki burzhuaznoi ideologii i propagandy). Moskva: Izdatel'stvo "Znanie".
- Посев : еженедельник общественно-политической мысли (Posev : ezhenedel'nik obshchestvenno-politicheskoi mysli). Frankfurt am Main, Germany : Izdatel'stvo Posev.