LITUANUS

THE LITHUANIAN QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF ARTS AND SCIENCES
VOLUME 58:2, Summer 2012

Gintaras Karosas's sculpture LNK INFOTREE at Europos parkas. Photograph by Gintaras Karosas.

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The research for the linguistic articles in this issue was completed as part of the project "*Lietuvių kalba: idealai, ideologijos ir tapatybės lūžiai, 2010-2013* (Lithuanian language: ideals, ideologies and identity shifts)," carried out by the Lithuanian Language Institute and funded by a grant from the Resarch Council of Lithuania, No. VAT-14/2010.

On the Public Sphere and its Participants

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Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication.

Marshall McLuhan, 1964

This article presents some observations on the public sphere and its participants in Lithuania in the Soviet period, during the transitional period and after independence. The public sphere itself is an important factor in the history of the restoration of independence. The whole breakthrough might be regarded as a public sphere revolution, since the changes first took place in the media and at mass meetings. On the other hand, an analysis of these changes in Lithuania might provide valuable results for research, since it would demonstrate several different forms and stages of the development of the public sphere with various factors of influence. The current analysis is focused on the participants, which, along with the arenas (spaces for discussion) and the public (audience) is one of its main elements and can reveal a great deal about the nature of the public sphere.

This article is based on data from a language research project that created a corpus of audiovisual media texts from 1961 to 2011. Although it was created for the purpose of studying language change, one of the by-products of the corpus is a list of the participants who speak in the programs. Therefore, it provides a valuable source to study more general changes, which, because of the cost of working with audiovisual data, would be less accessible otherwise. The article continues and complements previous research on the development of the public sphere during the transition to independence and after. Particularly relevant in this respect is a study of the participants in the newspapers during the transitional and commercial periods (1988–2000) that was previously completed by the author.[1] This article also refers to some other, more general, studies on the Soviet public sphere and its later transformation.

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Theoretical background

The public sphere, as conceptualized by its most famous theoretician, Jürgen Habermas, is "a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed."[2] It is not a part of the state, but is, on the contrary, "a sphere in which the activities of the state could be confronted and subjected to criticism."[3]

In his main work on the subject, Habermas traces its development and formulates a vision of an ideal public sphere.[4] According to him, this ideal was inherited from Greek Antiquity, but did not exist until the eighteenth century. In the Middle Ages, the authority of the rulers was merely "represented," or displayed, in front of the people; there was no political discussion, because there was no representation and no public in the modern sense. Therefore, Habermas calls this type of public sphere "representative publicness." In his analysis of its transformation, Habermas highlights several characteristics of the new bourgeois public sphere: universal accessibility, rational-critical discussions, and a concentration on common matters.[5]

Habermas later describes what he calls the "decline" of the public sphere, when it was losing these characteristics, especially the rational-critical discussions. They were replaced

1 Nevinskaitė, *Viešosios erdvės transformacija*.
2 Habermas et al., *The Public Sphere*, 49.
3 Thompson, *The Theory of the Public Sphere*, 176.
4 Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*.
5 Ibid., 27–43.

by cultural consumption, discussions performed for the public. Concentration on common matters was weakened by the invasion of private interests. According to him, the decline of the public sphere was caused by the narrowing gap between state and civil society, and most importantly in this context, the commercialization of the media.

Despite many doubts from his critics, if the bourgeois public sphere idealized by Habermas did really exist with the characteristics described by him, the ideal characteristics postulated in his account remain as normative criteria that are used to assess the qualities and functioning of the public sphere. While acknowledging that this is only one of various possible models representing one approach, it will be used in this article as the background needed to assess changes.

Changes in participant types in broadcasting are also closely connected to general changes of television (and radio) models in Europe, which were obviously affecting the Lithuanian audiovisual landscape as well. The history of television in Europe clearly splits into two different periods – the monopoly of public service broadcasting vs. competition, or the commercial model. These models are characterized by different genres (classic vs. mixed), a different relationship with the audience (monologue vs. dialogue), differing audience roles (passive vs. active, citizen vs. consumer), and intentions (educator vs. friend)[6] and, without a doubt, these changes influence the types and appearance of participants.

However, while these trends explain the changes of participant types, they can be regarded as a part of the same trend toward the commercialization of the media. Indeed, one aspect of media commercialization is the domination of commercial broadcasting over public service broadcasting, whose institutional structure and mission corresponds, or at least seeks to correspond, to the ideals of the public sphere.[7] Therefore, the analysis of the participants in audiovisual media has to take into account the general transformation of broadcasting, but it is only one of the trends in the transformation of the public sphere.

Thus, the article presents ideas on the characteristics of the public sphere and uses data and observations from the above-mentioned project to highlight those ideas and illustrate their embodiment in the typical participants in audiovisual media during different periods of change.

The data

The sampling for the corpus of audiovisual media (radio and television) was based on two criteria: 1) periods of media change, 2) genres.

Regarding the periods of media change, the sample was constructed on the classification of the whole period into three periods of audiovisual media change: the Soviet period (1961-1987), the transitional period (1988–1992), and the commercial period (1993–2011). The first time line (about 1960, but the first program in the corpus is from 1961) was selected rather arbitrarily, as a date connected with the wider spread of television in Lithuania (it was first introduced in 1957). The year 1988 as a time line of the transitional period was selected because in that year the first program of the "new generation of TV programs" was launched.[8] The start of the commercial period (1993) is marked by the launch of the first commercial television channel (TELE-3).

Regarding the genre, the sample was based on three talk-based genre groups, presumably ensuring a roughly equal distribution of the features of discourse relevant for the tasks of the overall project: spontaneous vs. nonspontaneous speech, monologue vs. dialogue/polylogue, and professional vs. non-professional speakers. Thus, the genre groups were: talk programs (talk shows, debates, etc.); features, documentaries and "journal" programs;[9] and news programs. The corpus did not

6 Pečiulis, *Iki ir po televizijos*, 132-137.

7 Garnham, *Capitalism and Communication,* 104-114.

8 Pečiulis,"Televizijos programų plėtra," 233.

9 The title "journal" program is an approximation for this type of program: it consists of several feature stories, connected by the same presenter, who is often also an author of one or more of the feature stories.

include fictional programs, programs for children, specialized programs or any other types.

The sample was influenced by the scarce availability of recorded programs, especially from the Soviet period, and especially of those programs that were broadcast live. In total, the sample included sixty recorded hours. Within the sample, 995 speakers were found and classified. The distribution of programs and number of speakers within each genre is presented in the following table.

Distribution of audiovisual material in the sample
(hours of recording time)

Genre/Period	Soviet (1960–1987)	Transitional (1988–1992)	Commercial (1993–2010)	Total Hours
Total number of recorded hours	20.5	13	26.5	60
Talk programs	3	5	15	23
Features, documentaries, and 'journal' programs	12	6	8	26
News programs	5.5	2	3.5	11
Number of speakers	379	267	349	995

Although problems of availability result in a sample that is not truly representative of the period analyzed, within the genres it was constructed randomly, without any preset criteria that could skew the sample. Therefore, it can be regarded as a sufficient sample to form an overall image about what participants were populating the "spoken public sphere" during the period. Also, it is a good sample for studying those who took part because it contains general political-social programs and excludes fictional and specialized programs.

Types of speakers

Since the corpus includes only audiovisual materials, participants in the public sphere are speakers in the programs.

Only those participants that actually speak during the programs (not those who are quoted or otherwise mentioned) are included.

Speakers were classified into categories based on their roles in the programs:

Show host: the person who leads the conversation in talk programs, e.g., talk shows, debates and similar dialogues.

Presenter/newsreader/voice-over: the person who reads the text in other types of programs, e.g., news reports, documentaries, "journal" programs.

Celebrity: a person who is known to the general public and has a strong chance of appearing in the media more than once; therefore, not only "celebrities" in the narrow sense of the word are included, but also sportsmen, writers, etc.

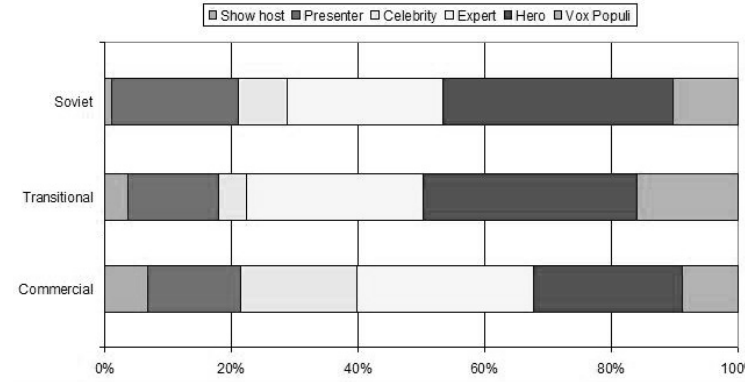
Expert: a person who comments on matters in his or her field of expertise, e.g., historian, political scientist, economist, etc.; politicians are also included in this category.

Hero: usually an "ordinary" person whose life or deeds are presented in the media, e.g., teacher, kolkhoz worker, old person, crime victim, etc.

Vox populi: an ordinary person on the street, in the studio or elsewhere, whose opinion on some matter is presented.

The results of the quantitative analysis – the distribution of speaker roles within the sample – are presented below.

Distribution of speaker roles (in percentages)



Although the categories of participants in the public sphere as they were constructed for the purposes of the analysis of language change do not include all the possible distinctions needed to fully describe the changing nature of the public sphere, they nevertheless can help to shed light on some characteristics of the public sphere during the period of analysis. The tendencies of the distribution of different types of participants in different periods are analyzed further in connection with the characteristics of the public sphere.

Staged vs. spontaneous public sphere

Media in the Soviet Union were an integral part of the system of ideology, serving the goals of mobilization, legitimatization, and propaganda. The ideological and propaganda goals of the media were to create an ideologically symbolic environment, which would serve to indoctrinate the audience with Communist ideas and values and thus to create a loyal Soviet citizen. Other tasks set for the Soviet media were to provide proof of the effectiveness of the Communist system and to confirm its superiority as opposed to Capitalism. Media were also used to mobilize support for various government plans and projects.[10]

Accordingly, it is obvious that the Soviet Union did not need a proper public sphere as a space between citizens and the authorities – rather the opposite. The function of the staged public sphere was to demonstrate support for government decisions, not to discuss them, and to prop up their legitimacy in this way. In Habermas's terms, some commentators call the Soviet public sphere a representative public sphere, where political leaders and other public figures "performed as Santa Clauses or Father Christmases" for the people instead of discussing issues with them.[11] Something closer to a public sphere in the Soviet Union was taking place in alternative spheres only, like the cultural sphere, which included some "between the lines" oppositional elements, the openly oppositional sphere of the samizdat press, elements of the public sphere in some discussion clubs, private communication networks, and foreign media information that reached the country.

The types of speakers that may illustrate the differences between the Soviet and a "proper" public sphere is the difference between show hosts, who lead a conversation, and presenters, who read a prepared text. However, they are directly connected to the talk genres as opposed to all other genres. One of the difficulties we faced when constructing the sample of the corpus was the lack of talk programs during the Soviet (and continuing through the transitional) period, which nowadays constitute a large share of everyday radio and TV programming. The problem was not only the existence of recordings, but of the programs themselves. The history of Soviet television was dominated by monologue and, within the range of general political-social topics, included only a couple of programs that might have resembled a talk format. Some livelier formats were available in more specialized topics, like education, living, medicine, and others.[12] Therefore, the sample also included considerably fewer talk programs from the Soviet and transitional period, and the results of the quantitative analysis of these speaker types is very much predictable and self-explanatory.

Although dialogue cannot be equated with spontaneity (a dialogue may be scripted beforehand), they do correlate, and the increasing proportion of show host roles and talk shows in general may be interpreted as a sign of a freer and less staged public sphere. A preliminary look at the content of the talk programs of the Soviet period also indicates that the programs, or fragments of them, labeled as "talk," actually contain long segments of text prepared beforehand, which is very different from this type of program today.

Indeed, one of the biggest innovations of the transitional period was a "proper" talk-based program, like "Veidrodis," which was not only the most popular and politically critical

[10] Jakubowicz,"Media as Agents of Change," 23.
[11] Høyer et al., *Towards a Civic Society*, 223.
[12] Štikelis, "Ekrano šviesa."

program of the time, but was also broadcast live, not yet a matter of course at that time. Later, other similar programs followed, like a single broadcast of "TV forumas," which for the first time provided a stage on TV for the leaders of Sąjūdis, the discussion program "Dialogai," "Už ir prieš," and the Sąjūdis-connected program "Atgimimo banga."[13]

Thus the presenter and the show host are typical personalities of both the Soviet and later periods, embodying the differences between a staged and a more spontaneous and dialogue-based public sphere. Indeed, the most prominent media personality of the Soviet era in Lithuania was the newsreader (*diktorius*), a prestigious position. The main requirement for a newsreader was the fluent presentation of a prepared news text, and one of the most important criteria of evaluation was the quality of his or her voice.[14]

Nowadays newsreaders are replaced by news anchors, who also work as news editors, and the requirements for their appearance and voice are different (in the words of critics, much "lower"). But the news anchors of today, although still visible and known, do not enjoy the level of stardom of the newsreaders of the Soviet era. For example, in the poll on the most influential journalists in 2011, none of the news anchors got into the top ten – not on the list based on the opinion of media experts, nor on a list based on a survey of the general public, although the latter included a few hosts of some popular nonpolitical talk shows, which would not be influential in the political sense. It is worth noting that the general public's list included only TV personalities with their "personal" programs.[15] Thus a show host could be regarded as a figure symbolizing present day television (or even the whole media).

The difference between the staged and spontaneous public sphere is also demonstrated by the distribution of roles of other participants, described further.

[13] Pečiulis, "Televizijos programų plėtra," 233–234.
[14] Paulauskas,"Diktoriaus žodis," 185.
[15] Įtakingiausių žurnalistų TOP 10, 2011.

Soviet realism vs. commercialism

The ideal public sphere, as conceptualized by Habermas, should be separate from both the state and commercial interests. As discussed earlier, the public sphere in the Soviet Union actually served the interests of the state. On the other hand, Habermas regards commercialization of the media as probably the most important cause of the decline of the public sphere he observes occurring in Western countries. Among other factors in the commercialization of the public sphere, he pointed to the trends of cultural consumption, instead of critical discussion, and the commercialization of culture.

The roles of the speakers that can help shed light on these aspects of the public sphere are the "hero" (a person whose life or deeds are presented in the media) and the "celebrity" (a person who is known to the general public and, in contrast to the hero, is likely to appear in the media more than once).

The data show some decrease in the hero role during the commercial period as compared to the Soviet and transitional periods. A more detailed look into who the heroes were in the media of these different periods reveals the different functions of the hero and the meaning of this decrease. In the Soviet period, a typical hero was a hero in the very sense of the word, like a participant in the war, a worker of some kind ("work hero"), either in a factory or a kolkhoz, or a similar speaker. The function of this role was to support Soviet ideology, in other words, to confirm the "glorious" Soviet reality. Interestingly, the Soviet media could also present imperfect heroes or heroes with a negative sign, e.g., a worker with a drinking problem. However, this was clearly done with the intention of highlighting model behavior or to demonstrate the concern of the state for each of its citizens.

In the commercial period, the role of a hero does not perform this function anymore. A new and quite frequent kind of hero, especially in talk shows, is a victim of violence and crime (both outside and within their families) or people with some kind of personal problem, whose stories in most cases merely serve to increase the audience's curiosity and thus the

commercial interests of the media. There are far fewer heroes of the type that were typical in the Soviet period.

The data also show a huge increase in the celebrity role, which clearly speaks to the trend for commercialization of culture and media. It is also a symptom of the increase of the topics outside the "common interest," as mentioned by Habermas in his definition of the public sphere. In addition, the nature of people who were celebrities both then and now are different: in the sample, the celebrities from both the Soviet and transitional periods are mostly representatives of such "serious" branches of culture as literature, classical music, and theater, while in the commercial period, the role of celebrity is dominated by representatives of popular culture, such as pop singers and dancers.

Access to the public sphere

According to Habermas, in the ideal public sphere, everyone would be able to voice their opinion in public. Although in contemporary society, where the public sphere is mediated by the mass media, universal representation of everyone's opinion is not possible (the mass media are defined by their professional nature and the few-to-many communication model), but it remains a principle that is strived for.

This principle is realized in several forms in radio and television, which in the coding scheme used here, fall under the roles of vox populi (an "ordinary person" who voices his or her opinion on some matter) and expert (a professional who voices a reasoned opinion on the matter of his or her field of expertise).

The distribution of the roles of experts and vox populi in the sample is about the same, and there is a substantial proportion of expert roles in all periods. Thus the Soviet media were effectively simulating discussion in the sense of presenting the opinions of various participants (the proposition about simulation is a hypothesis that, most probably, would be confirmed by a closer look at the content of the speech).

The data also show an increase in the role of the vox populi during the transitional period and its subsequent decrease. It is worth noting that the study of newspapers of that period and beyond has confirmed the same pattern in the print media, which were much more open to outside nonprofessional participants, including ordinary citizens, than in the periods before and afterward.[16] A more frequent vox populi role in the transitional period might be interpreted as a sign of the rise of the public sphere, influenced by trends in society. During years of rapid political and societal change, society needs to discuss the situation and negotiate future developments; therefore, the trend in the radio and television media might indeed not be accidental.

In the commercial period, the role of vox populi became less frequent, reflecting some "decline" in the public sphere. Although the proportion of vox populi roles in the Soviet period and commercial period is about the same, a closer analysis of the content and delivery of their speech would be needed to determine if they can be equated. A preliminary look at this speech leads to a very probable assumption that most citizen "opinion" in the Soviet media was prepared beforehand and sometimes even read rather than spoken spontaneously.

Final notes

Data on the speaker roles in Lithuanian radio and television programs between 1961 and 2011 demonstrate and confirm some of the theorized features of the public sphere in the Soviet period, during the transitional period, and after independence. The data support the difference between a staged and a spontaneous public sphere; a shift from a public sphere subsumed under the interests of state ideology towards one dominated by commercial interests; and wider access to the public sphere, especially during the transitional period. The pattern supports and illustrates the thesis of the transformation of the public sphere: the development of a "proper" public sphere and its rise during the transitional breakthrough period

[16] Nevinskaitė, *Viešosios erdvės transformacija*, 128-131.

and its subsequent weakening (judging by the normative Habermasian ideal) by commercialization.

The change of the speaker roles also illustrates the changing nature of broadcasting from that of educator to entertainer, particularly in the commercial period through the weakening importance and influence of the newsreaders, its dialogical nature, and a more intimate relationship with the audience. It is important though, that the trends seen in the data (such as the increase in discussions, increased participation during the transitional period, and later changes connected to commercialization) confirm the trends found in the studies of other media, such as newspapers.[17] Therefore, the changes in broadcasting must be interpreted as a current in a wider trend of the transformation of the public sphere and its institutions, of which broadcasting is but one. These changes are a part of the trend toward the commercialization of the media and the public sphere in general. The democratization of the country opened up the door for commercial television channels and the innovations developed elsewhere that they brought with them.

Edited by Chad Damon Stewart

[17] Ibid.

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