

Development of Media Research in Estonia

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Regular empirical media research began in Estonia in 1965. The mid-1960s was the period of the birth of empirical social sciences in general in Estonia. Although some successful and influential attempts of empirical social research were made in the late 1920s and 1930s, the tradition of regular research was not established before World War II.

Until the late 1950s, empirical social sciences did not exist in the Soviet Union. Instead of research, society was described by using ideological constructions of the Communist Party history. These were much more closed to religion than to science. Krushchev's thaw brought some democratic changes into political life and ideology but did not change the suspicious and hostile attitude towards empirical social research as an "alien bourgeois activity." The years 1958-1964 has been called the embryonic period of Soviet sociology (Shlapentokh 1987: 13-32) – in 1958 the Soviet Sociological Association was established and in 1961-1964 the first sociological research units were established in Moscow, Leningrad and Novosibirsk. Young people who had contacts with Western sociologists and who had had opportunities for scholarship in the West often headed the units. It was one of the reasons why sociology was by that time viewed by officials with suspicion.

Attitudes towards sociology started to change in the middle of the 1960s. Empirical sociological research expanded into many areas of study and began to spread across the country. Sociology deserved official recognition and was very popular in society; sociologists enjoyed both official and popular prestige. It happened in connection with Premier Kosygin's plans for economic reforms in the USSR. Attempts at reforming the USSR's economy

could not be based only on ideological mythology but presumed a more or less objective picture of economic and social reality based on actual data. The forceful introduction of empirical sociology in 1965-1966 was closely connected with these reform plans (which were never fully implemented). Fruitful development continued for several years, even in the beginning of political and ideological stagnation after the crackdown on democratic developments in Czechoslovakia. The years 1965-1972 have been called the golden age of Soviet sociology (Shlapentokh 1987: 33-56).

The possibilities for empirical sociological research were actively put to use in Estonia. Due to close contacts with democratic-minded young sociologists in Leningrad and Moscow, and easier access to Western literature (especially through Finnish contacts), students of Tartu University showed great interest towards the introduction of empirical social studies. One of the first areas of the newborn empirical social studies was media research. A pioneer in the field of media studies was Ülo Vooglaide, on whose initiative the first comprehensive professional audience survey by the Tartu local newspaper *Edasi* was conducted in 1965. This was one of the first representative surveys of a media audience in the Soviet Union. During 1966-1969, *Edasi* also carried out a large program of additional empirical research, which involved polls, experiments, and observations (Vooglaide 1972).

In 1967 Ülo Vooglaide established the Laboratory of Sociology at Tartu University, which developed within a short period into an influential centre for regular media research across all the Soviet Union. Another centre was established in Tallinn, where in 1965-1966, research groups at Estonian Radio and Estonian Television started studying the structure and interests of radio and television audiences.

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