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Media, migration experience and adolescence

The role of television and internet for 6- to 18-year-olds of Russian descent in Germany and Israel

TV and Internet are used by children and teenagers of Russian descent and their families to cope with the task of integration in Germany and Israel; they offer a safe arena to strengthen family ties and constitute a means of linguistic and cultural orientation in the new country.

A growing body of research is dedicated today to the role of media in the lives of immigrant children and youths, who are faced with unique personal and social challenges stemming from relocation and coming of age, as well as inter-generational tensions (cf. e.g. de Block/Rydin, 2006; de Block/Buckingham, 2007; d'Haenens, 2003; Durham, 2004; Mayer, 2003). Similarly, our ongoing research agenda on Russian-speaking immigrant youths in Israel and Germany (cf. e.g. Elias/Lemish, 2008, a, b; 2009) aims to identify the roles fulfilled by the various media in 2 main challenges facing immigrant youngsters and their parents:

- integration oriented “inwards” (i.e. the preservation of the common cultural denominator between immigrant children and their parents and strengthening family consolidation)
- integration oriented “outwards” (i.e. immigrant children’s incor-

poration into the host culture, in general, and into the local peer group, in particular).

In this article we wish to report on 2 complementary studies. The first study explored these issues with more established young immigrants from the Former Soviet Union to both Israel and Germany in the context of their families. The second study focused on the role of media, particularly the Internet, for the relatively new immigrant youths from the Former Soviet Union to Israel. Indeed, these two countries, Israel and Germany, have received large waves of immigrants from the Former Soviet Union (FSU) over the last 2 decades: Israel has accepted 1 million immigrants of Jewish origin, while Germany has received 2 million immigrants of German descent and 200,000 Jewish immigrants. In both countries these immigrants have established an extensive network of print and electronic media in Russian (cf. Elias, 2008). We assumed, therefore, that FSU immigrant children and their parents found themselves in a rich media environment that consists of media products in the host language (Hebrew and German), in their mother tongue (Russian), and the global media (mostly in English). Accordingly, we sought to determine if and how these media are involved in their settling down within 3 cultural worlds

– the host culture, the Russian culture, and the global youth culture.

A parallel examination of Russian-speaking immigrants in Israel and Germany might contribute to a better understanding of media roles in the lives of immigrant children and their parents within 2 specific and very different social contexts. These findings might be applied to many other nations that are dealing with the challenges of receiving large waves of immigrants and their incorporation into the host society.

1. The role of media in immigrant families

The main research methodology applied in this study was semi-structured in-depth interviews with Russian-speaking immigrant children and their parents. The study was conducted in 2004. The sample in Israel included 19 girls and 19 boys, 6 to 18 years of age; 9 of them were born in Israel, while the remaining 29 were born in the FSU and had lived in the host country for 1 to 14 years. The sample in Germany included 18 girls and 17 boys; 3 of them were born in Germany, while the remaining 32 were born in the FSU and had lived in the host country for 1 to 12 years. Altogether we interviewed 73 children. The interviews investigated their lei-

sure culture, media uses, social integration, attitudes towards immigration and the like. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed as customary in this form of research. The findings presented here are organized along the lines of the 2 main challenges facing immigrant youths: integration “inwards” versus “outwards”. In doing so, we focus on media roles in the totality of the immigrant family, thus taking into consideration parental roles in shaping immigrant children’s media preferences and family conflicts involving media uses.

Integration “inwards”

Cultural continuity

The mass media can provide the immigrant family with a wide array of inexpensive cultural resources and tools that can be accessed in order to maintain their shared cultural heritage and a common language. Accordingly, we found that many parents in both countries were concerned about the loss of the Russian language by their children. Thus, they used the media in Russian to impart to their children a greater command of the Russian language. In regard to the question of whether it is important to teach 8-year-old Andrei (who arrived in Israel when he was 2 years old) the Russian language, his father answered:

“Sure. That’s why we force him to watch television in Russian.

And not only cartoons, but also regular programs [...]. We also force him to read in Russian. Sometimes we watch something [on TV] and there are subtitles in Russian at the bottom, and he asks ‘What is it?’ And we tell him, ‘Read, so you can understand’. [...] We try very hard to teach him Russian.”

In addition, Russian-language media were perceived by some of the parents not only as an easy tool for impart-

ing linguistic skills but also as a resource that makes it possible for them to transmit to their children a little bit of their cultural heritage.

16-year-old Kiril and his father, living in Israel for 11 years, explained the following:

Kiril: “Sometimes I forget the words [in Russian]. If I am watching a film and there are words that I don’t know, then I ask my father right away.”

Father: “Not only do I translate it for him, I tell him all the history of the word, so that he will never forget it.”

Yet, unlike the case of Kiril, who seemed to enjoy these interactions, in most of the cases children resisted their parents’ pressure to use the mass media in order to maintain their cultural heritage. 15-year-old Viktor, who had lived in Germany for 13 years, described such a situation:

“In the past, I had a lot of conflicts with my father, because he forced me to watch Russian documentary films about World War II. But I wasn’t interested at all and we had a lot of debates about this issue. I always tried to find some excuse in order not to watch these films. Now he gave in; he doesn’t force me to watch them any more.”

Hence, in a majority of the families parents tended to abandon rather than to advance their attempts to transmit “Russian” cultural knowledge to their children. They limited themselves to imparting the Russian language. Accordingly, most of the parents made use of the media contents that were the most efficient means for achieving this goal, such as American films and computer games that had been

translated into Russian. This meant that they relinquished contents that included cultural knowledge necessary for creating a shared cultural heritage, such as fine literature, classic Russian films, and historical television programs.

Family consolidation

Alongside being a tool for inter-generational cultural transmission, the findings in both countries reveal that the Russian-language media were used to maintain family ties. Even though a majority of the children did not want to watch television in Russian, they occasionally joined their parents and grandparents in order not to lose contact with them, especially as integration of older family members into the local culture was usually slower.

Furthermore, in families where the cultural gaps between parents and children were the greatest and where the children refused to watch Russian television programs, the joint viewing usually took place when the contents were of a “global” nature, such as Hollywood films, American series and reality shows, and international sports competitions. For example, 15-year-old Jenia (in Germany for 12 years), who had resisted anything he identified as being of “Russian influence”, enjoyed watching Hollywood films and an American reality show (*Judge Judy*) with his parents. Similarly, 10-year-old Sasha, who was born in Israel and who was perceived by his par-

ents to be a “genuine Israeli” and so in many ways foreign to them culturally, found a shared language with his father in viewing international football matches. These viewing preferences served to circumvent the tension involved in choosing between 2 possibilities – “assimilation” or “cultural preservation” – by means of finding shelter in what both generations perceived to be the “global” culture.

Integration “outwards”

Cultural adaptation

Immigrant children and their parents assigned many roles to the host-language media as facilitators of their cultural, psychological, as well as instrumental adjustment to life in their new country. More specifically, many interviewees pointed to the local television channels as direct and efficient resources for learning the host language. The mother of 12-year-old Ksusha, who had lived in Germany for a year and a half, explained:

“I don’t read newspapers and don’t watch television in Russian, because I don’t want to confuse myself. I just can’t allow myself to do it right now, because I have to learn German well. I can’t give in to any temptation. Hence, to watch [German] television is not just for pleasure. It is of great importance to me in order to learn the language.”

Her mother’s strong motivation seemed to have had a strong influence on Ksusha, as she recalled her first months in Germany: “I didn’t go out anywhere, until I learned German well enough.” When asked about the role of German television, she continued:

“I couldn’t sit in front of the TV for more than half an hour, because I didn’t understand anything. But I did it every day like it was homework. At the beginning I couldn’t watch films, because I didn’t understand anything and it was boring. I watched only cartoons because they were the easiest to understand. Then I started watching series. Today I can understand any film in German. This ability didn’t come from nowhere, but rather step by step.”

Ksusha’s concentrated efforts to learn German were worthwhile, as after only a very short period of time in Germany she was already speaking German fluently; reading books and

magazines in German; and most of her television time was dedicated to watching films and series on German television channels.

Yet, it is important to point out that in several cases the children’s intense efforts to acquire the host language often came at the expense of losing Russian-language skills, as the mother of 12-year-old Artjem (living in Germany for 4 years) related:

“He doesn’t watch films in Russian. I tried once, but he couldn’t stand it. He hardly understood anything. At the beginning, when we had just arrived, we demanded of him to speak German at home. But then we found out that he has no problem with German, but rather that he is forgetting Russian, and we stopped pushing him. Now I realize that such pressure was unnecessary, because today he doesn’t speak Russian well.”

The transition their children make to the host culture and to the host-language media is perceived by many parents with a deep sense of loss and as a major tragic consequence of the immigration process. Hence, in many families, the children’s cultural assimilation was accompanied by an increase in the inter-generational gap, so that after a few years in the host country, parents and children lived in separate media worlds and spoke different cultural languages.

Fitting in

The well-established social functions that media serve for youth culture were especially important for the immigrant children who perceived media to be central tools for fitting in, e.g. into the peer group. It is not surprising, therefore, that the interviewees’ television viewing generally reflected patterns similar to their native-born counterparts. Moreover, watching the same television programs on local channels in order to discuss them with friends was especially important for children of the 9 to 12 age group. Thus, for example, the mother of 12-year-old Artjem, who had resided in Germany for 4 years, said:

“He doesn’t need anything, but cartoons. Even if I punish him and forbid him to watch television, he still asks me to allow him to watch 2 particular cartoons, because tomorrow at school everybody will talk about it and he will not know what to say.”

Similarly, most of the pre-adolescent girls in the Israeli sample were fascinated with South American telenovelas, such as *Chiquititas* and *Rebelde Way*, which were very popular among native-born girls of their age group. As a result, knowing some Spanish had become very prestigious among many children in Israel and the girls in this study, too, were highly motivated to learn it through their television viewing. This is of particular interest given the finding that none of the children in either of the samples made the conscious effort to learn Russian through their media consumption, and usually they were satisfied with whatever level of command of Russian they acquired at home.

Finally, in the case of several children who felt particularly lonely and isolated, television served as a replacement for interaction with the native-

born peers. For example, 8 year-old Andrei, who had resided in Israel for 6 years, described himself as existing on the “border zone”: at home he was not “Russian” enough for his parents, who pressured him to improve his Russian-language skills, while outside he was not enough of an “Israeli” and therefore felt rejected by native-born children. Hence, the local television children’s channels offered him the social space where he felt most comfortable, and he preferred watching them instead of socializing with real peers.

For other children, mainly those who immigrated at an older age, the computer and the Internet filled the role of a “surrogate friend” by filling the void of face-to-face communication, especially during the first years in the host country. The case of 16-year-old Nikita, who had lived in Germany for 4 years, is very interesting in this regard. After only a short period of time in Germany, Nikita experienced a deep psychological crisis and found it very difficult to fit in. He did not create friendships but rather equipped his room with expensive computer technologies and electronic media, thus turning it into a shelter from the outside world. He spent most of his time on the Internet looking for new software, downloading movies and chatting with youngsters in the FSU.

2. Adolescent “newcomers” and the Internet

In the second study we set out to learn about the media in the lives of newcomers. This study was based on questionnaires as well as in-depth interviews conducted in 2005 with 93 immigrant youths aged 12 to 18 from the FSU living in Israel for 6 months to 5 years. The sample consisted of 37 boys and 56 girls who were interviewed by 2 Russian speaking interviewers.

What was most striking in the findings of this study was that immigrant

youths actively used the media in empowering ways. Most specifically, we found that the Internet was the most central medium in their lives. First and foremost, the Internet was the most accessible and credible source of information about various aspects of life in the new country (e.g. popular resorts, religious traditions, prestigious neighborhoods, fashion, climate etc.).

Surfing it in Russian allowed the youths to overcome the most difficult cultural barrier of all – the mastery of a new language. We found that most interviewees surf simultaneously Hebrew and Russian language websites originating in Israel, in order to fill their knowledge gaps. Such actions seem reasonable given the new immigrants’ need to learn almost everything from scratch. 16-year-old Jenia, who had been in Israel for 1 year only, said:

“There is a site that translates things from Russian to Hebrew. That’s important. There are news sites about the political and economic situation in Israel. They explain the world we live in today. And besides this, I enter a chat, choose a topic, and correspond. I ask all kinds of questions and receive all kinds of answers; for example, about life in a different city, let’s say, Herzelia [town in the center of Israel]. Is it good or bad there? What’s interesting there? How is the weather? We don’t plan to live in Beer-Sheva [city in the peripheral south] forever. Later we will decide where we wish to live.”

A second central role the Internet played for immigrating youths was a safe arena for experimenting with social interactions with local peers as well as social networking with their co-ethnics. A majority of the interviewees admitted that their social network was comprised mostly of young immigrants, like themselves, whereas interaction with local peers was mostly superficial and largely negative.

In addition, many interviewees expressed feelings of embarrassment and disorientation in face-to-face

interaction with local teens due to language and cultural barriers. Given these circumstances, web-based communication was a useful surrogate for direct interpersonal communication since it provided anonymity, reduced the importance of physical appearance, and provided physical distance. Thus, it was extremely helpful in practicing communicative skills in the new language and even for establishing contacts of romantic nature that were nearly impossible in off-line reality. The following statement by Dima, a 16-year-old boy who had lived in Israel for 4 years, exemplifies these points:

“It is difficult in real life. If I meet a pretty [Israeli] girl, I feel too embarrassed to start talking to her. There [on the Internet] it doesn’t matter if I am alone or not if she does not answer back. But, if this happened when I am with my friends, then I would feel ashamed. In the chat rooms it’s much easier. There everyone is nice. There are many things that I can’t tell a girl face to face ... Maybe it will sound strange because of my accent. And, maybe she will laugh. But when I meet a girl through the ICQ, it is different.”

The Internet also played a major role in the immigrant youths’ identity construction, mostly in exploring the newly acquired Israeli-Jewish identity as well as gendered ones. A typical question asked by many female adolescents – “Am I attractive?” – was transformed into a more confusing one: “Am I perceived as attractive in my new country?” Such questions suggest that female teenagers felt a need to reconstruct their feminine self-image. This task turned out to be especially difficult given the immigrants’ lack of social experience with local residents and their lack of experience in interpreting properly their responses and codes of behavior. Due to this sense of ambiguity, which often was combined with fear of direct contact with local men, some interviewees were looking for answers or advice in the Internet, as can be seen in the quote by 17-year-

old Olga, who had lived in Israel for a year and a half:

"Israeli men embarrass me. I don't understand how they react to me. Sometimes they look like they are interested, but then it turns out that they didn't really mean it. [...] I surf the Internet once a week at friends' house. I like to enter [Israeli] websites to meet someone. There are pictures of women who want to meet men... who want to get married... I look there and compare – am I pretty enough?"

Our findings demonstrate that most of our interviewees shared a deep sense of loss and expressed intense feelings of longing for Russia. It seems that the Internet allows them to find and to re-invent their own Russia: they can preserve those parts of their homeland that they miss most, while being in full control of the frequency and intensity of their relationships with its virtual forms (e.g. youth portals, institutional websites, photography collections). Similarly, the Internet offers accessible opportunities for interpersonal interactions with peers who are going through the same problems of adjustment to a new culture. As a result, the Internet not only helps battle the loneliness typical of the first period of time following immigration. It also contributes to the development of virtual support networks of immigrant youngsters assisting them to confront the 2 major transitions in their lives that pose difficult challenges: adolescence and immigration.

Conclusion

Media have important and varied roles for children, youths and their families as they go through the difficult time of immigration. In a context of scarce resources – financial, social, cultural, and linguistic – media are particularly valued for taking over many of the roles fulfilled in normal times by more traditional socializing agents – family (immediate and extended), school, community organizations and the like. Moreover, it seems

that "safety" is a key concept in the analysis of immigrant youths' Internet uses, as it colors all the functions that this medium serves for newly arrived adolescents. It offers safe and trustworthy information so crucial for cultural integration; a safe means to interact with both local peers as well as with co-ethnics thus providing a network of social support; and a safe arena for practicing the newly acquired identities. In contrast to popular discourse, suggesting that the Internet serves adolescents mainly as a "play-ground" for adventures, pleasurable experimentations and risk taking (see e.g. critical discussion by Livingstone, 2007), it seems that the Internet serves as a "safe-ground" for immigrating youth.

In our study we also unveiled many unexpected themes which the space here does not allow us to detail, including the therapeutic role of reading literature (Elias/Khvorostianov, in press); the role of fashion (Lemish/Elias, 2008), and the role played by the popular music as a means to express anger and frustration of integration difficulties and as a measure of their social and cultural adaptation (Elias/Lemish/Khvorostianov, in press). ■

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