

THE REGIONAL DIMENSION OF RUSSIAN BROADCASTING

РЕГИОНАЛЬНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ РОССИЙСКОГО ТЕЛЕВЕЩАНИЯ

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The author examines the role of television in the construction areas and other imagined communities, new typological approaches to the television channels definitions. The article analyzes the existing and possible classification of media coverage areas. This material may be of interest to journalists, researchers of the federal, regional and local television stations.

Key words: *broadcasting; territory; broadcaster; region; typology.*

Автор рассматривает роль телевидения в конструировании регионов и иных воображаемых сообществ, предлагает новые типологические подходы к определению телеканалов. Статья анализирует существующие и возможные классификации медиа по охвату территории. Материал может быть интересен журналистам; исследователям федерального, регионального и местного телевидения.

Ключевые слова: *телевидение; территория; вещатель; регион; типология.*

The analysis of the Russian modern TV is complicated by the lack of clear and reasonable criteria of local and regional television. It is considered a priori that television which is not national (federal) is regional (local). The Law “On Amendments to Clauses 14, 33, 36 of the Federal Law “On Advertising” gives the definition of federal channel: it is “an organization which realizes on-air broadcasting on the territory of more than five subjects of the Russian Federation”. Current Russian laws, however, do not give such clear definitions of local or regional television. At the same time, conceptions of regional and local TV are often used as synonymous ones without concretization. This mixture of different types of broadcasting is caused by historical reasons, non-transparency of Russian business and anachronistic administrative division of the country. It is important to examine what principles were fundamental for the Soviet period of television technology distribution and what principles of dimensional organization of broadcasting are used nowadays. This article is devoted to the territorial dimensions of television coverage and to analysis of the role of open-air broadcasting in the construction of regions.

Economic geography of television. The background

When examining the differences between Soviet and post-Soviet television it is typical to point out the abolition of the censorship and the appearance of the commercial channels with TV series and advertising. These differences may not be the most essential. The principles of location and the regulation of broadcasting have changed dramatically. Instead of the primitive dichotomy “Central Television – local studio” with duplication of the functions, formats and style of the Central Television in local programs, today there is a great variety of broadcasters.

This variety is created by international (transboundary) television companies and world services (*Euronews* and *Russia Today*), by almost twenty federal channels, by national broadcasting companies (*Tatarstan* –

Noviy Vek, Moya Udmurtia, Sakha), by nation-wide channels (*Perviy Kanal* and *Rossiya*), and also by regional channels (provincial, krai and okrug-wide) like *Yuzhniy Region Don, Yenisei-Region* and others. But the most significant change of the dimensional characteristics of television is connected with the penetration of modern TV in small audience groups at the level of municipal unit, city area and even a block.

In the Soviet period an oblast (krai) had a minimal or last status of television center. And even not all the administrative oblast centers had a broadcasting committee. As a rule, cities with population less than a million were not supposed to have a TV studio as well as evening paper, metro, opera house and some other creature comforts. In those small towns where TV center was built, the authorities could be punished for spontaneous activity, given that the Soviet view of television presupposed millions of viewers. Only processes of regionalization in 1990s spread TV to the compact audience groups. Corporative, university and school broadcasting centers appeared. There are no enormous differences in picture quality between home video and professional report any more. Technological innovations (continuous miniaturization and reduction in price of television equipment) brought down the coverage for local broadcasters to the level of village (aul or ulus).

However, only Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan called television world a “global village”. In Russia TV is, and always has been, a city media, which is weakly presented at the countryside. “According to the government statistics near 1,5 million of people who live in about 10 thousand settlements are not covered with broadcasting at all, and 3,7 million have access to only one television program” (*Televidenie v Rossii. Sostoyanie, tendencii i perspektivy razvitiya. Otrasleyvoi doklad*, 2010). Broadcasting covers the country’s territory not with a solid wave but as well as road network and circulation system with capillaries of television transmitters concentrated in the big cities. That is why geographical features, the character of settlements, communicative connectivity of territories exert a great influence on media landscape.

In the scientific literature devoted to television a question of appropriateness and reasonability of spreading of television technologies in one or another region depending on their human capital has not still been raised. Oddly enough, the question of economic reasonability of broadcasting in remote areas has not been put by public authorities as well. However, the installation of digital exciters and digital receiving systems by the Russian TV and radio networks (RTRS) in the outlying districts allows this statement of a question. Every new technological breakthrough sharpens the question of the price of penetration and pay-back. Should multiplexes be installed in those regions where even analog television does not differ in variety and quality of content?

Historical prerequisites of the placement of the first regional TV studios

Spread of broadcasting in regions began only in the first half of 1950s. At the beginning, the enthusiasm of radio (and other electronic technologies) fans played a crucial role. The amateur TV studios appeared spontaneously in different cities. They mostly appeared in radio clubs, universities and institutes of technology. The authorities did not interfere with their work but were of little help either. In 1951 the broadcasting station constructed by amateurs appeared in Kharkov. While the television center was in process of construction local community was making home-made TV sets. Delegations from Odessa and Riga, Omsk and Vladivostok came to Kharkov in order to get to know technological devices and adopt the experience from the first broadcasters. In 1951 on initiative of the professor A. A. Vorobiyov, the director of Tomsk polytechnic institute who had familiarized himself with equipment of Kharkov's experimental television center, the decision to build an amateur TV-center in the polytechnic institute was made. At that time it was clear from the executive orders that the government was not going to build a television center in Tomsk in next five years. In half a year Tomsk polytechnics have created

transmitting television equipment (*Televidenie v Sibiri: monographiya*, 2011).

Television as well as other electronic communications is a technology which is not created by a single genius but absorbs discoveries of many engineers, research teams and design departments. Territories which have created the best conditions for a new communication technology achieve performance by way of growth of human capital. Like the Internet and mobile telephony now make users think fast, television, half a century ago, made audience clever. Television brings people closer to the cultural achievements of civilization and opens new perspectives in education and self-cultivation. At least it did so at the dawn of television's presence in social life.

On September 15, 1955, The Council of Ministers of the USSR accepted a resolution № 1689 "On Measures for Further Development of Broadcasting in the USSR". The phase of rapid development and spread of technical facilities of television broadcasting in regions had started. The resolution obliged Government of the RSFSR and Councils of Ministers of the union republics to build television centers and relay stations, to make and assemble microwave-link equipment for relay stations in 1956–1958. At the same time, the government did not state the principles of television centers location. It put into operation those centers which were built at the expense of executive committee and enterprise forming a company towns budget. And then the government would suddenly remember to amend the site location plan of television centers. In 1965 the Resolution of CPSU "On State and Measures of Improvement of Local TV Studios in the RSFSR", which provided requirements only for strengthening of material and technical basis and ideological orientation of broadcasting, was adopted. Leadership of a party declared putting into operation dozens of satellite communication receiving stations "Orbita" in Siberian regions, the Far East, Central Asia and the Far North. It was expensive equipment which would never be installed at the expense of local budget. However, the Communist party stopped closing its eyes to the unauthorized activity which local television studios had

been showing since 1950s. The party wanted television to demonstrate the advantages of the Soviet way of life. Otherwise there was no need to construct all the satellite system.

Struggling with “amateur activities” of local TV studios, leaders of Central Television even promoted closure of some autonomous broadcast centers. For example, of all television studios which appeared in Altayskiy Kray at the end of 1950s only one in Barnaul was still operating by 1970. The same thing happened in Tyumenskaya Oblast – only the regional television center was left there. Closure of the TV studios in Biysk, Rubtsovsk, Nizhnevartovsk, Khanty-Mansiysk and other Siberian cities ought to be authorized somehow. As an excuse an economical version was suggested which stated unprofitability of small studios and difficulty of their regular technical modernization. Researcher of the TV E. Bagirov writes about this version: “General enthusiasm for television in the early 1960s provoked spontaneous construction of television centers on the initiative of local community without regard to the state resources for their regular modernization” (Bagirov, 1985).

However, there was another reason which was not named explicitly but local television journalists understood it correctly. A number of local TV studios still missing their role of the Central Television as information and journalistic branch were keeping on making all-embracing reports, thus bringing themselves to the useless competition with the all-Union programs. On principles of political monocentric Central Television was formed and it became the main supplier of information for the Soviet people. And local TV studios, on the complementary principle, were to make “News from the Fields” on a regional scale. As Central Television’s power was rising, local studios were brought down to the level of the correspondent’s offices. It may be said that in the geographical location of television centers Soviet government was seeking for simplification of situation, as “plurality should not be posited without necessity”. It can explain, for example, the fact that Vilnius had a republic committee on television, while neither Riga nor Tallinn had one.

New principles of geographical location of television companies

After the August Putsch of 1991 the “parade of sovereignties” began, and instead of general television system, which had been being created for decades, fifteen independent state television and radio complexes appeared in half a year. It took a lot of time and strength to create uniform information space which was destroyed almost in a blink. At the beginning of 1990s idea of independent private television was maturing among many of journalists and businessmen. This period was the most favourable for creation of media business due to many reasons. State television was extremely depressed, it was splitting into separate production units. Professional personnel of state television companies were seeking for more creative and well-paid work.

State authority was unconcerned with television. The licensing system for broadcasting was working on default. There was no such term as “pirate movie” in public conscience. There had not been rivalry on the market because there had not been a market itself yet. In this very period the principles of geographical location of broadcasters changed dramatically. If in 1950s government solved the problem of TV tower’s construction from the state considerations, then at the beginning of commercialization of the regional television area only ambitions of the local founders and initial capital initiated the start of new telecasting station broadcasting.

It became clear very soon that it is easy to start broadcasting in one or another human settlement but it is not so easy to keep an audience and to compete with other broadcasters. To understand the logic of state and private broadcasters’ formation in the provinces it is necessary to examine the triad of key concepts “Center – Regions – Outlying districts”. Between the center and regions the same relations of subordination are being formed as between a region and its outskirts.

Metropolis takes tax payments, competitive production and best specialists from regions and gives in return budgetary subsidies, foreign goods and culture samples (including television programs of central

channels). As a matter of fact, this is colonial policy but today it disguises itself in economic and cultural forms. The further from capital the less possibilities of TV programs reception, variety of channels and quality of television production remain. Oblast and krai centers act towards raions and oblast towns in the same manner as the capital acts toward the provinces.

There are more than 12 thousand of municipal units in Russia today. Our analysis of the registry licenses for broadcasting, kept by Roskomnadzor²⁷ gave us 3753 licensees in television. Not all of them produce something for broadcast and go on air because of economic reasons. According to A. V. Malinin, the Deputy Minister of Communications and Mass Media, “the number of cities where federal channels have interest from the economic point of view in spreading their programmes with all-Russian and local advertising is not more than 120”²⁸. In consideration of the fact that Russia has only 11 megalopolises with population of more than a million inhabitants, it is clear that among 120 “cities profitable for TV” not all are equally profitable. It is obvious from the national sampling of TNS Gallup Media: there are 29 big Russian cities which are the most interesting from the point of development of local television and advertising market.

Does it mean that television is being located in the area of regions-markets and obeys the market laws of profit? The answer is both yes and no. Spread of programs at the territory of oblasts’ raions has little interest for local commercial television companies because they have to pay operators of RTRS (Russian Television and Broadcasting Network) for signal propagation. The coverage of outlying regions does not promise the same advertising revenues as those which can be made from broadcast of TV programs in the administrative center of the oblast. The question of costs and profit is not prior for the Oblast Administration while the issue of political influence among the electorate is quite pressing. That is why

²⁷ The Federal Service for Supervision of Communications and Mass Communications. URL: <http://rsoc.ru/mass-communications/reestr/>

²⁸ National Association of Broadcasters. URL: <http://www.nat.ru/>

oblast television channels (telenets) mostly have state legal status. Thus, non-state broadcasters which make business from TV are concentrated in the provincial centers. State broadcasters which make a political and social project from television try to cover all the territory of the federal subject.

There is its own specifics in the commercial way of broadcasters' location which is connected with the fact that the principal business of our country is associated with hydrocarbon raw materials. Let us suppose that Khanty-Mansiysk has a population of 75 thousand people. According to this number this city is not supposed to have seven institutes of higher education, two theatres, two state museums, two newspapers and a television company which NAT (National Association of Broadcasters) praised as the best of the year for three times. As far back as 2007 television channel *Yugra* started broadcasting in the digital standard DVB-T in MPEG4. *Yugra* is the only regional television radio company which produces live-action films and TV series based on their own studio *Yugra-film*.

It reminds, by the way, of Manaus, Brazilian town, where the world's largest opera house was built in 1896, in the days of the rubber boom and world-famous tenors were being invited there. *Yugra* is the only television company which covers the administrative center of the oblast with broadcasting, although it does not have high ratings in Tyumen. *Yugra* shows how television can work without paying attention to the administrative boundaries. The very fact of the existence of such a unique television company maintains understanding of the region as a corporation. But still the situation of one television company going beyond the boundaries of the autonomous district is unique and even ridiculous in some way. Usually city television companies are closed on their city audience from which they collect advertising contacts for financing of broadcasting.

System approach to the location of local broadcasters as a side-effect of government regional policy

Government bodies have their own logic of broadcasters' location which coincides neither with market logic nor with corporate. And this logic is not easy for understanding. Why, for example, Kudymkar, the administrative center of Perm Krai, has GTRK "Komi-Permyatskaya", though population of this town is only 31 thousand people? And why does not the big industrial Siberian city like Novokuznetsk with the population of 563 thousand have any state television radio company? Neither has Tolyatti which population is 703 thousand people. And Tura (an urban-type settlement in Evenkiysky District of Krasnoyarsk Krai) with 5 thousand of inhabitants has GTRK "Heglen". Only high social tasks can explain such audience imbalance in state broadcasting.

However, regional authorities think only on a local scale and do not want to take extra responsibility for interregional projects. "Thinking within limits and borders obstructs project activity at the macro-regional level for the simple reason that any idea of cooperation between regions or between their parts is usually being rejected due to "natural" escape from excessive complications" (Glazychev, Schedrovitsky, 2004). Some attempts have been made to build horizontal relations at the level of "Siberian Accord" but governors of 15 krajs and oblasts went no further than making declarations. Position "it is better to have little and not much of a good but yours" impedes the creation of interregional programs (TV channels). Siberia had an experience of co-production and information exchange within the framework of programs *Gubernskie Novosti* (GTRK "Novosibirsk", GTRK "Tomsk", GTRK "Altai") and "News of Siberia" (a regional network NTSC), but it was short-lived.

The basic problem of digital divide, which is connected with disproportions in the location of television forces, consists in the lack of regional policy. There is Ministry of Regional Development, there are many policy documents and declarations but there is no policy itself, no policy as a state participation in affairs of regions. "Russia has no distinct

regional policy. Today the course on income equality of the Federation units is set. This course leads (sooner or later) to the reduction of donor regions and this is happening now. I think that another strategy should be adopted – the rate based on the regions of growth, around which outpacing economic growth is starting, and which will draw neighboring territories into their own orbit of development” (Khloponin, 2004).

It is exactly the absence of the distinct and coherent regional policy that has led to the situation when municipal TV companies, which only began to appear as a type of broadcaster, have to scale down their operation here and there. Let us say, in Krasnoyarsk region five municipal TV stations were asking for entering into the television holding “Yenisei-Region”, because they were not able to live on advertising revenues. The new edition of the Law “On Principles of Local Self-Government” and the relevant amendments to the Budget Code have frozen the partial municipalization process of territorial administration. Now, not only grants and subsidies from the regional funds, but also federal subsidies for exercising on state powers can enter the municipality not directly but only through the subject of the federation. We do not get a lesson from history although it had been already stated in the XIX century that “The bigger territory tending to one center, the more desert is all other area culturally and spiritually. The only salvation for the border regions from the devastating action of centralization is to establish regional councils and to hand over disposal of local finances to them” (Potanin, 1995).

Management failures in the attempt to link the communicative space regions by district TV

It would not be fair to refer all the failures in creating of new regional broadcasters only to the rigid chain of command and self-interested “regional barons”. The failure in establishing district television is due to a more complicated set of managerial, professional, and financial reasons. When establishing the seven federal districts by the Presidential Decree № 849 in

2000, the most adventurous media managers decided that they had received *carte blanche* to create inter-regional broadcasters. The motto of these projects was “the formation of the uniform information space in the regions”.

In 2001, with the support of the Minister of Press Michael Lesin and RTR chairman Oleg Dobrodeev Siberian entrepreneur Jacob London created television station “TV-Siberia” with the financial support of tycoon Oleg Deripaska. However, TV company went on air with the news programs only in the fall of 2002, and six months later difficulties with licensing and financing of the project began. In the summer of 2003 most employees, who had been enticed by high salaries from Kuzbass and Altai television companies, were withdrawn from the staff without service benefits.

Despite the fact that Ural has a similar television company – “Yermak” – which exists for seven years already, the experiment in creating inter-regional television in the federal districts cannot be called successful. Firstly, the founders of “Yermak” and “Siberia” have not solved the problem of signal delivery over large areas (Siberian Federal District occupies 5114,8 sq. km., Ural Federal District – 1788,9 sq. km.). To such coverage a huge transmitter-receiver system, the broadcast license and costs (for which no one, as it turned out, was ready) would be required. Programs of “TV-Siberia” could be seen only in Novosibirsk.

Secondly, such a huge territory, divided into several time zones, has different climatic and, what is more important, different economic conditions. Evenk reindeer-breeder in Taimyr, a worker of the agricultural holding in the south of Omsk Region and, say, a teacher from Irkutsk actually have little in common. They are not interested in the news of distant areas which live different lives. None of them considers Novosibirsk a capital of the region and newsreel reports from this city are unlikely to have a national news status which would justify their distribution.

Jacob London’s project could have been successful only if the professional team of television journalists, assembled from all Siberia, had started to make high-quality programs for regional TV stations in the mode-production studio. In 1950–1960s local studios used to exchange their best programs regularly, but then this practice faded. From 1992 to 1996, the ANO

“Internews” was releasing a program *Local Time*, the purpose of which was to share news items of various genres (primarily without information occasion) among dozens of local TV companies – program participants.

If “TV-Siberia” had become a ground for the creative experiments and exchange of journalistic experience, if it had formed the horizontal relations between regional broadcasters, the project would have succeeded. But the first Jacob London’s problem was, apparently, to draw 10 million dollars allocated by O. Deripaska for formation of district TV. Another reason for the regional TV project’s failure was non-transparency of the issues of property and funding sources. And in a year and a half of the project Oleg Deripaska failed to understand when and in what form he would receive dividends from the investment in the district television. Naturally, the businessman lost interest in such kind of investment soon.

TV development trends in regions during the digital television transition

It is obvious that a full digital transition guarantees drastic changes to regional television and it has already started to make an impact. “There is an actual risk that in the “Digital Age” local companies could become marginal. Today all strategically minded managers are already pondering how to save these companies, and what they could produce in future. It is important to realize that this issue concerns not only the TV business. In fact, regional media develops civil society and, in Russia, is an essential part of it. Therefore, keeping and development of the media is of common cause” (Shvydkoy, 2010).

As a matter of fact, the conception of the TV broadcasting development in Russia for 2008–2015, which was already approved in 2007, includes the digital transition, however, it does not consider regional channels at all. Alexey Malinin, Deputy Minister of Communications and Mass Media of the Russian Federation, admitted only at the end of 2010 that the Ministry was “yet to carry out a large amount of work in

terms of analysis of the regional market”. But we are talking only about the third multiplex, which will include those who did not get into the first and the second set of programs. It may be assumed that there are several methods regional broadcasters can use to “minimize the damage from the digital transition”. First of all, a regional channel which managed to enter a multiplex could share its space in the broadcasting schedule with those companies which would otherwise not be present in an obligatory TV package. These companies, however, have to be reclassified as production companies (that is production-studios) rather than television broadcasters in order to use this broadcasting space.

Since all local companies are in a severe competition to get a sponsor, it will be psychologically difficult to enter the broadcasting space as “junior partners”. There is another way for the whole television community to enter a multiplex. A new company has to be created by the integration of current broadcasters. If an appropriate legislation were developed, local companies would be able to create a public broadcasting system. Besides, a big company, even of a commercial kind, with its own programming and 15 hour air-time could provide competition to the federal channels and network television companies at least in terms of information broadcasting. The possibility of creating a merger of broadcasters should involve ambitions of media managers who are not eager, as well as regional governors, to merge with anyone at all.

If the integration of broadcasting systems does not succeed either on the base of the most powerful local company or on the basis of a new TV company being an association of all existing provincial broadcasters and production companies, then regional TV companies will have only one choice: to move to non-air space – cable networks and the Internet. In fact, even now, some companies, tired of “fighting with the windmills”, agreed with cable TV providers on including their production in a paid TV package. There is no doubt that non-air space has its own growing competition, but the level of tension there could be hardly compared to the cruelty prevailing in the regional air divided between television networks and federal channels.

Nowadays, therefore, since the Soviet times, the country inherited inefficient spatial organization of public broadcasting in the regions, linked to the outdated administrative-territorial division of the republics, regions and districts. VGTRK (RTR) has to maintain redundant structure of broadcasting in sparsely populated districts, even though this broadcasting takes up the airtime only for two to three hours per day. This outmoded system opposes to the emergence of horizontal relations between producers and distributors of programs and to establishing of regional networks and channels.

The emergence of private broadcasters in the 1990s and the transition to the commercial broadcasting economy have not eliminated disparities in regional development. They just prepared the ground for aggressive Moscow capital. Federal channels together with television networks squeezed local broadcasters out of the airtime and turned them into “VCR”. Lack of regional content in the TV even in the form of local “windows-spots” contributes to the loss of the regional identity for residents of the province.

National Television Syndicate (NTS) plays an important role in supporting the broadcasters, who refused the networking and switched to their own programming. But NTS started providing TV packages to local television stations only in 2005, when television networks had already been firmly entrenched in the regional space, therefore, nowadays it is difficult to recover lost ground in the air.

Russian regions need cross-border television, which would support the communication connection between currently decaying and degrading peripheral territories. TV should be viewed as a public service and human capital investments. The reformative problem of education and young potential development should be posed for regional broadcasters. We need a federal program to support municipal television stations. These companies, in association with the local cable networks, may become this very “e-government”, which for a long time has been discussed by the officials in the government and in the President’s administration.

The reconfiguration of TV functions is also a problem for the scientific community of faculties and departments of journalism. We must create a

typology of television broadcasters to include spatial measurements of coverage and bind different TV legal forms to some areas. Following the new classifications we should develop broadcasting concepts and strategic development scenarios of those new companies that have not yet found a place in the regional information space. As man said in the past, to help mass media find their own face. Therefore we have to join in the real media-economy with the research and influence the media landscape of the regions.

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Typology of local and regional broadcasting²⁹ by organizational-legal form and reach

ORGANIZATIONAL-LEGAL FORM AND OWNERSHIP STRUCTURE TV COMPANIES			
Coverage of the territory / administrative-territorial units	State-owned companies* (federal, state, district, regional)	Non-state (private)** companies (Inc., Ltd., etc.)	Public-private partnership – Mixed forms of company-branches, subsidiary companies
The federal districts (8)	Ural district broadcaster “Yermak”	—	—
Republics (21)	GTRK “Bashkortostan” and another 20 similar TV-companies	Small business “Ethir” (Kazan), Ltd “TV 12 Region” (the Republic of Mari El)	Ltd “AIST” (Irkutsk and Transbaikal region)
Territories and regions (55)	Regional state TV channel “Yenisei-Region”, state unitary enterprise Regional Television Network (OTS) in Novosibirsk	OTV-3 (Omsk), TV “Yuzhny Region Don”, JSC “Oblastnoe TV” Ekaterinburg, TV-21 of Murmansk and other channels	STS-Kuzbass (Kemerovo), Samara GubernskoeTV, etc.
Autonomous regions / districts (5)	GTRK Jewish Autonomous Region “Bira” (Birobidzhan), Aga Buryat GTRK (village Aginskoye), etc.	Ltd. Salekhard Video Channel, Inc. TRC SurgutInterNovosti, etc.	Autonomous facility of the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous District “District broadcasting company “Yugra”, etc.
Municipal formations / cities, towns (12000)	“New TV” (Novokuznetsk), TRC STV (Strezhevoy), TRC Nazarovo, etc.	JSC “TV-2” (Tomsk), Ltd “TV Channel Four” Ekaterinburg, etc.	ANO “Novgorod regional TV” ANO “Volga television broadcasting company”, etc.

²⁹ The total number of TV companies, having a valid license, is estimated at 3753

* The total number of public television stations in the Russian regions is estimated at 512 (13,6%)

** The total number of non-state TV stations in the Russian regions is estimated to be 3114 (83%)