

## **Media and the public opinion within the current political-economic context**

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### **Abstract**

Within the last 25 years, the influence of the media has increased exponentially along with technological developments, at first via radio broadcasts, newspaper and magazine dissemination, then via television, and, today, over the Internet. We live in a society that relays on information and communication, since they decidedly influence each of our daily activities. Hence, it has come to such situations that noteworthy lobby companies in the United States would not confirm the President's attendance at an event, if the press were not present at that event. Based on the Theory of Democracy, the media desideratum is to propagate social, economic or political information, to correctly and timely inform the individuals, who, in their turn, shall influence, by vote, any decision-making process. It is this very important role that the media plays in today's society, for it came to influence key segments of the economic, political and even legal sectors.

**Keywords:** media, public, opinion, political-economic context, Internet

**JEL:** Z10, Y80

## **1. Preliminary considerations**

Starting from the idea that every life event can be perceived directly (if witnessing it) or, indirectly, through words symbolism (news, reviews, interviews), we can very much state - without any exaggeration - that the media (more than family, school, professional membership, social status or political affiliation) exerts its supremacy over the public opinion via the symbolic force of the message (Bourdieu, 1996; Breton, 1997; Noel, 1998). It is already a truism that every word (except for proper names) is the symbol of life aspect, a life event or a situation, a mental development starting from the reality itself, though it might not be its faithful reflection, but a subjective representation. Thus, people may not necessarily rely on (in case they did not witness an event that occurred) the real-reality, but the media-conveyed reality, without being aware of the distinction (as postulated by Walter Lippmann) between the “environment” (the reality itself) and the “pseudo-environment” (the media-conveyed reality). Hence, “something” is interposed between the real fact and the opinion, without which there would be no opinion: the mass media message (Lippmann, 1925, p. 13).

To materialize this idea, let us assume that the printed or the audio-visual press releases some information on a threatening fire in a supermarket, the message also communicating about special forces’ intervention to handle the situation. Well, even if the news is accompanied by photographs (in press) or live images (on TV) or both, via the Internet, the individual does not perceive the real event as a direct mental representation (customer’s condition, officials’ declarations, products’ state, fraud attempts, the state of the construction, etc.), but the media-conveyed reality that will ultimately shape the opinion of the audience (the construction in flames, firefighters’ action, the construction state, i.e. post-event elements). Moreover, the audience will not develop a common opinion, but various perspectives (the condition of victims, damages, the culprits), which will be subsequently unified by means of media messages as well. Such messages will eventually lead the public opinion towards the final version of the reality. Still, this unification is achieved also via symbols (statements, debates), thus key elements in decoding and interpreting the event (Osgood, 1978; Noelle-Neumann, 1993; Bougnoux, 1993; Negrea, 2015).

Under the circumstance, individuals do not operate with the facts, but symbols that reflect a media-conveyed reality and on which public opinion is completed. Likewise, this pseudo-reality emerges in several degrees of subjectivity, even though, in the end, it is sanctioned as objective. It is, first

of all, the reporter's bias on the event, for (s)he records this incident after it had really occurred, relying on others' accounts, subjective in their turn as well (customers, employees, employers, local authorities). Additionally, we have to consider the subjectivity of workers in the newsroom, as they conclude the message, and, last but not least, the subjectivity on the form, the meaning and communication space. Thus, media representative prove that they hold the strategy of the symbolic power to shape public opinion on certain aspect of reality, even though it does not entirely belong to the proper reality.

## **2. Media and the symbolic power**

Within the context the contemporary society, the media changes the boundaries between the real- reality and symbolic one, while the means of communication stand as a dissemination process of the symbolic events. It has come to this situation, because nowadays information has acquired a strong symbolic content, and, for this very reason, symbols have to transfer a common understanding in order to trigger attitude and behaviour changes. Any media message bearing a symbolic imprint must address the public interest, as transmission-reception form of a symbolic stream that needs first to be decoded to enable the receiver perceive the concise, nuanced and sometimes even only inferred information. Such a technique is the "brilliant generalisation" technique, consisting in the combination of words to render a special emotional and suggestive load (champions food, the king sport, dreamlike holiday) or the "transfer" technique that links the prestige of a cherished person with another person, aiming at generating a favourable, accepting attitude (politician X = the new Titulescu or the local Napoleon). According to the "instrumentalist" concept, the word symbol is not mandatory, though it conveys an imperative suggestion (the best, vote for it!). Thus, it can establish a relationship between the primary reality dimension and media-conveyed reality, leading to the idea that the media-conveyed message is the central reality knowledge instrument that generates at the same time a "mirrored" reality, while the only remaining problem is the ability of the means of communication to ensure the mirroring authenticity. This concept implies the transmitter's ability to subtly deploy the receiver from the authentic reality via the symbol-word, thus encouraging her/him to form opinions in relation to a parallel reality, though preserving the illusion that her/his behaviour is in compliance with the primary reality (Smarandache & Vlăduțescu, 2014; Vlăduțescu, Negrea & Voinea, 2015).

This view is opposed to the syncretic perspective that demands the media to achieve, through information and communications related to an event, a perfect concordance between the reality, the language and the individual; an almost impossible interdependence, for as the word is only the symbol of an event (it cannot be a substitute), and the message cannot take the place of reality. Thus a new reality emerges, since the language is not the mirror of the reality but of a subjective transmitter.

It is self-evident that the main purpose of communication is how the message is perceived by the receiver. “Mass communicators expect their audiences to notice their messages, to identify the contents of the messages, to properly change their attitudes or beliefs or to behave in accordance with the pre-established responses” (Severin & Tankard, 2000), despite the fact that the selective perception is influenced by a number of factors such as desires, needs, attitudes, assumptions, cultural influences, moods, education, social status, family, so that different subjects will receive the same message differently. For this reason, the proficiency of those performing mass communication is based on achieving coherence between individuals’ perception and their cognitive information processing. And this, because perception is a complex process, for as the audience does not only select and interpret a message, also, it receives various influences, both external (as previously mentioned) and internal, related to its selective exposure (the audience only accepts messages consistent with its views and avoid those that differ), its selective attention (individuals are attracted only to information that agree or disagree their interests) or selective memory (recollection of information or rumours that are somehow related to the new story).

Undoubtedly, in order to meet all these requirements, to find a common denominator in shaping the public opinion, a special effort is required on behalf of the media, forced to implement various information-processing models so as to influence public awareness and response.

Aware that the message symbolism may be interpreted differently, the media sometimes resorts to the theory scheme. The scheme is a structure composed of organised information, formulated in a simplified model, though bearing symbolic imprint and which needs to be decoded (Stovall, 1996; Bourdon, 1997; Popa, 2002; Stigler, 2006). For example, Ron-Euro ratio schemes are presented in printed publications and on television as well, indicating on the horizontal the months of the year and on the vertical the reference rates. However, such message is an incomplete symbolic message, in as much as the audience is forced not only to decode the meaning, but to individually or

collectively calculate: loans interest percentage, the inflation rate, advantages or disadvantages vs. currency exchange, thus leading to the idea that the scheme is only an auxiliary aid of the message, not an effective means of communication, exhibiting a reduced possibility of application.

This method was enhanced in mass communication with the “subliminal perception” technique, a technique that manifests “beyond the awareness threshold, i.e. that the individuals can be influenced by stimuli that they are not even aware of” (Severin & Tankard, 2010). Thus, commercial is suddenly interrupted the funeral arrangements and the display projects the image of a punctured lung, shrouded by smoke from a cigarette. Then, commercial continues, and after an interval, the music and the image repeat without any comment. It is a symbolic message, which suggests giving up smoking.

Much more effective in the attempt to identify the media-conveyed reality with the proper one and highly applied in television is the message-image combining method. It is well-known known that images are not only transparent representations of the reality, but also emotional or affective apples’ transmitters, and thus combined with information thy can turn into complex argument for the audience to build a decisive opinion on a fact the overlaps reality. In accordance with this method, the media needs to display reliable expertise in combining verbal information processing with visual images processing. Accordingly, a message on the new “Dacia” model (engine capacity, consumption, driving performance and other technical data) is complemented by the vehicle image a driving test; the two components (verbal and visual) increase the receiver’s trust, that (s)he is an authentic witness of the reality, thus highlighting the force of the communication giving strong endorsement dimension via media.

Being aware that text-image combination draws the audience interest, recently, it was added the “simulated image”, which, supplemented by sound, accompanies the message and the image itself, in order to bring the receiver closer to the real-reality of the created event. Thus, the message about a traffic accident, accompanied by images of the crushed vehicles, is technically explained by a simulation design of the road, where one of the vehicles runs on the opposite lane and crushed the other vehicle. The simulation is accompanied by a specific vehicle-collision noise, image and text to enable the audience shape a much accurate vision. Aiming at clarifying the media - symbolic power relationship, special attention was paid to message-coding-and-encoding techniques applied to media-conveyed messages and perceived by the audience. We all know that language is static

(a limited number of words), and the reality is dynamic, constantly changing, i.e. the limited verbal models need to adapt to the countless social events (Voinea, 2015; Voinea, Buşu, Opran & Vlăduţescu, 2015). Besides, language is abstract, selecting some details and omitting others (admiring a vehicle we may notice external details, but not its functional structure), thus the word suggests an overall representation of a reality fact, while individuals people create different meanings for it. Consequently, the symbolic language used in media influences the message and, indirectly, the audience manner of thinking and interpretation. For that reason, the means of communication should avoid conceptualizing and thus blocking the message at a level that creates distortion, as is structures like: “law and order”, “justice”, etc., which do not acquire a concrete meaning if no further details are provided: “observance of law and order for all citizens”, “judicial independence”. At the same time, it should be avoided an exaggerated identification of individuals that would prevent any distinction among the members of a certain social class and another, thus leading to over-equalising (X leader of the Z party is corrupt, so the whole party corrupt). Media avoids excessive identification that may lead to categorisation by means of language and, hence, the inability to inform the public on the differences between individuals or life situations. Also, media messages should avoid two- option assessments (of or-or type), as they induce a limited thinking between two possibilities, since any life fact displays a multitude of variants. Last but not least, of the three types of statements, it is recommended that the media messages use either the story-telling (statements that can be verified) or the sustained judgment (following an approval or disapproval) rather than the inference (a statement over an unknown a fact or a future situation), because in order to overcome the subjectivity and the hazard (which will lead to a lack of credibility) a summary of the verifiable information is being recommended. The entire approach endorsed the idea that the means of mass communication form and influence the public opinion, but sometimes – due to unprofessional encoding or inaccurate decoding – they may lead to differences between the audience perception and the expected effects. Such situations may occur, in as much as, by means of the symbolic power, the media intends to convey a set of symbolic goods to strengthen beliefs and legitimate actions. Via the message, the symbolic form becomes the audience symbolic good, to be interpreted and put it into circulation, thus turning into the opinion.

### 3. Conclusion

Although everyone argues over manipulation (intentional or unintentional) as a phenomenon of the reality, this manifestation of the influence is negated (strategically), both by those who use it, and by those who do not want to admit that they are manipulation victims. It has come to this, just because manipulation - not a forced, but an inferred action, leading a person or a group to act in compliance with the interests of the originator - is subtly exerted, "by means of counterfeit arguments or of partial truths, arranged in false sequences appealing to human emotional, non-rational consciousness dimensions" (Herjeu, 2000, p. 18). The subtle manifestation of this action is performed overwhelmingly via persuasion, which is a common way of communication, aimed to change the attitude of a group, through information ascertained primary by one source, with intent to manipulate the social behaviour. Persuasion is part of our lives and, whether we want it or not, we have to admit that we use it, or, we are exposed to it anytime: goods purchasing, medicines administration, visiting a preparatory or a doctor, voting for a party or a person, watching a show, attending a demonstration, etc. To put in a nut shell, we can say that - despite the fact that the media seems independent, acting as a shield against propaganda – all the means of communication are manipulated by political propaganda or other sources, generating in their turn, consciously or not, an intense process of persuasion on the audience, generally carried out on following stages: performance (persuasive message), attention (audience), cognitive process, cognitive response (accept / deny), manifest-like behaviour (maintained / changed attitude).

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