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MEDIA EFFECTS AND PUBLIC IMPACT

Abstract

No one is able to elude the media, ignore them, or, indeed, protect themselves from their impact. Should we accept McLuhan's assertion that, aside from mass media, we are all also influenced by games, numbers, clocks, films, etc; then it becomes apparent why the effects of the media, or the so called media reality, form the fulcrum of researchers' interest in communication studies. Effect of mass media and communications on the society and the degree of that influence, have been the subjects of great debate among communication scholars with decades.

The article elaborates different theorists who focus their debate on the modality through which it would be possible to empirically gauge the impact and effects of mass media on public opinion and on the beliefs and behaviour of media consumers. Its focus on the effects of the media on the citizens that cause a weakness in society and illnesses within the democratic process, such as political apathy, alienation, cynicism, destruction, confusion, illusions, and even fear. Using the secondary analysis, the article particularises some claim that the media and, first and foremost, television, privatize people and alienate them from each other and in this way, with the help of the media, a society is created in which people are frightened, disoriented, alienated, and isolated.

Keywords: media effects, public opinion, political communication, media reality

INTRODUCTION

Do not hope that television will present you the truth. Television is a damned amusement park. We will tell you that the good guys always win. We will tell you that nobody ever gets cancer. We will tell you any nonsense you want to hear.

Paraphrased lines by Howard Beale, a character in 1976 American motion picture Network, written by Paddy Chayefski

The questions on the effects that media have on people cannot be answered by generalized theoretical concepts. Questions being posed most frequently are the ones seeking to discover the influence of media on society and their impact on future developments, or, in other terms, whether the media are changing something, affecting, or reaffirming certain phenomena in society, but also how sizeable their effect is.

This article analyzes developments and parallels among theories of media effects. With secondary analysis, it discusses different media effect theories trying to identify commonalities for better approach on the question about the influence of the media and different media content and news on the society and on the people. Media cannot be investigated separately from the overall system of social understanding, which further entails that the entire cognitive process, the way in which stimuli and reactions to information received function, as well as the manner in which the conclusion-adopting process unravels must all be taken into account.

According to Denis McQuail, over the last fifty years, which is the period when the interest in the impact of media effects on the public and society has first appeared, media effects may be separated into three stages (Graber, 2007). In the **first stage**, placed at the beginning of the last century and stretching into the next thirty years, the media effects were associated with changes in people's habits, their opinions and beliefs, altering, as well, political developments. These claims, according to McQuail, were not based on scientific research, but rather on empirical observations of the behaviour of audiences towards the onset of radio, television, and cinema in that period. Assumptions about the effects that the media are able to produce can also be seen in political and military marketing material during World War I, campaigns carried out in totalitarian states, and the advent of military and post-war propaganda.

Researchers place the **second stage** between the 1940s and 1960s, with the flourishing of communications research in the United States, where empirical methods were used to investigate certain questions about the effects and effectiveness of mass communications. Research considered to be most important

in this field are those conducted by Lazarsfeld in 1944 (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944) and Berelson in 1954 (Berelson et al., 1954) to analyze US presidential elections of 1940 and 1948, and the set of research papers on the use of film in training and the indoctrination of US soldiers and public administration employees conducted by Hovland in 1950 (Hovland et al., 1950). However, only a limited number of studies quoted from this period provide a deeper depiction of media effects. The research was mostly focused on the behaviour of the individual and the alteration of his or her views or actions as a result of the media (TV, radio, press), and most of it could not determine the impact that media have, i.e. the results of the research were either negative or, the media effects established were found to be insignificant.

The third stage, which is still ongoing, offers a new way of viewing and researching, above all, television, and the media effects it produces. These issues started becoming topical once again in the 1960s, with research conducted by Lang and Lang in 1958 (Lang and Lang, 1958), Key in 1961(Key, 1961) and Blumler in 1964 (Blumler 1964). According to them, if previously conducted research could not determine what the effects of media are, it was because the questions and methodology were wrongly set, seeing as they should, in their view, be more precise. Their second criticism is based on the fact that most studies done in the previous stage were solely based on determining the short-term effects that media have on people, i.e. individuals. Hence, in this so-called third stage, attention is increasingly turning to the collective phenomenon and media effects. According to Bernard Cohen, the media are not successful in telling people what to think, but what to think about (Cohen, 1963). However, the impact and measurement of mass media effects have been criticized for not being able to quantify the thoughts, feelings or reactions of voters (McGuire, 1986). The research has also been criticized for failing to provide a way to explain the process as a whole, i.e. it was focused, above all, on the connection between media information and people's behaviour and beliefs, while almost no focus at all was placed on cognitive processes occurring in these relations (Hawkins & Pingree, 1990; Reeves, Chaffee, & Tims, 1982; Wyer, 1980).

MEDIA REALITY AS PUBLIC INFLUENCING CONCEPT

Social understanding, or the perception of reality, can be explained as a cognitive process that occurs in certain situations that take place in a society (Reevs, Chaffee, & Tims, 1982). Research over social or cognitive processes is attempting to open the black box that operates between stimulus/information on one hand and reaction/ conclusion on the other (Wyer, 1980), i.e. the processes that occur between these two ends (Wyer & Srull, 1989). Social processes and understanding are part of

many research fields - marketing, politics, intercultural psychology, organizational development, etc. There are a number of research models developed on how people collect, process, and use the information they receive on their environment, but researchers seem to agree that the most complete of all is the one provided by Weyer and Srul (Wyer & Srull, 1989). L.J. Shrum (Bryant and Oliver, ed; 2009), highlights two important and interrelated principles underlining research over social perception and understanding. The first principle refers to the information that people use when making a certain conclusion. According to this principle, at the moment when people make a certain conclusion about a question they do not use, i.e. do not recall from their memory all the information and knowledge they have on that issue. On the contrary, they use only a small number of information that is within reach in the process of adopting conclusions, or only as many as would be enough to draw a certain conclusion. Hence, according to researchers, determining the adequacy of the information required in this cognitive process depends on their motivation and the capacity for processing that information (Wyer & Srull, 1989). The second principle refers to the role of accessibility of information when constructing a particular conclusion. In its most elementary form, this principle highlights the fact that the quickest information that comes to mind is most easily processed in the decision-making process and it is precisely that information that will be used to draw a conclusion (Carlston & Smith, 1996; Higgins, 1996; Wyer, 1980).

There are several factors that can influence the process of recalling or referencing information in a cognitive process. According to Shrum (1995), the most frequently encountered such factors are the frequency in the process of activating constructed information (memory), the recentness and vividness of this process, as well as the relations between all aspects and causes that are active in the construction process. Constructs that are often triggered come to the surface more easily (Higgins & King, 1981). They even become chronologically and continuously accessible, even spontaneously activated in different situations. The same applies when considering the exact points in time when they was last activated, i.e. if a construct has been activated recently, it is much easier for it to be reactivated (Higgins, Rholes nad Jones, 1977). However, frequent activation of constructs takes on a dominant role in this process. When investigating media effects, this, for example, can be determined through the premise that frequently watching television alters the opinions and beliefs of viewers. Furthermore, picturesque constructs are much easier to activate than memory, and this is also applicable when investigating media effects. It is reasonable to think that television recordings are much more vivid than real experiences of people, such as conflicts, wars, family situations, etc. Picturesqueness can also be seen in certain journalist texts processing case studies or easy-to-remember statistical data (Zillmann, 2002).

Increasing accessibility to a particular construction enhances its impact on the creation process. This concept proved to be consistent when it comes to networking, i.e. the memory activation model popular in cognitive psychology as a way to explain the interconnection and networking of knowledge (Collins & Loftus, 1975). According to this model, the constructs are stored in memory in the form of nodes that are interconnected. When a particular node (stored structure) is activated, then the nodes connected to it are activated to the exact extent that they have been connected. This concept of connected nodes has its own application in the research of media effects. This particularly applies when certain behaviour patterns are constructed, especially on television or in films, such as the portrayal of anger, violence, or class differences. This becomes a certain script of behaviour - how to react when a particular individual is found in a particular situation (Shank & Abelson, 1977). Weyer (Wyer, 2004) calls this a situational model, which is actually a construct of how to react in a particular situation. Taking into account the accessibility of the construct, the activation of a given construct (anger, aggression) can trigger a script of behavior that is networked, i.e. interwoven with a given construct or node (for example crime, violence). The explanations that information received from the media can play a certain role in making a particular thought construct accessible are not sufficient to explain and confirm their effects. It is further necessary to show how accessibility and continuity produce these effects and support it with theory and scientific literature. Aside from accessibility, in constructing a certain conclusion, scientific literature determines the type of conclusions based on which these constructs and influences function, while the media form an inseparable part of these theories and research, too. The types of conclusions that most people construct are conclusions made on other individuals, conclusions that relate to certain behaviours and beliefs and conclusions on certain groups. These conclusion-making constructs have been tested by research into the effects of journalistic reporting on individual perceptions on certain issues, the effects of television on social perceptions and understanding reality, and the effects that the media induce on people when it comes to portraying violence (L.J. Shrum, 2002).

FOUR MAJOR MEDIA THEORIES WITHIN COMMUNICATION THEORY

From the multitude of communication theories, theorists distinguish four that they consider to be media theories related to the influence of the media and their effects on the public. This group includes the analysis of cultivation, which focuses on the role of television in everyday life and the shifting of worldviews in people;

the theory of the use of pleasure, which claims that, in watching/listening/reading media products, man has the opportunity to choose; the theory of the spiral of silence, which refers to the influence of the media in making people speak on a particular matter or not; and the theory of media ecology, which claims that the media in this era of communications (primarily social media and the internet) have a greater impact than the content of the message itself (Vest and Lin, 2011).

THEORY OF CULTIVATION ANALYSIS

The theory of cultivation analysis claims that television and all other media play a very important role in the way people perceive their environment (Vest, 2011: 429). Since most of our experience is not first hand, but is the result of the information we receive from other, indirect sources, it is logical to conclude that intermediate sources shape the worldview of a man. If television is continuously broadcasting violence, an individual who watches a lot of television will think that there is much more violence in the world or in its surroundings than there actually is. Further, the attitude of that individual differs from those who do not watch television continuously and are not under the influence of an intermediate source - in this case television. The cultivation analysis is a television-based theory that presupposes the relationship and connection between the media and culture. It is based on three assumptions: (1) television is a different medium than all others; (2) it shapes the way people think and their interrelation with their surroundings; (3) nevertheless, the impact of television is limited. In order to confirm their belief that television has a continuous and consequential effect and impact on viewers, theorists have developed a four-step process. They argue that, if the analysis of cultivation is to be explored, the first step is a detailed analysis of the content of television programs, or, in other terms, a message analysis system. The second one deals with the preparation of questions about people's understanding of their everyday life, i.e. formulating questions about the social reality of viewers. The third step is analyzing the audience. In it, the same questions from the previous step are placed to viewers, i.e. a survey of the audience is carried out. According to Gerbner, the last, fourth step, is drawing a comparison between the social reality of those who watch television often and those who rarely do. He argues that there is a "cultivation differential" between these two groups and it can be established via a percentage-based difference. According to Gerbner, the differences that occur in cultures are decreasing in the frequent viewers of television (Gerbner, 1998: 183).

Cultivation analysis is highly criticized, especially in terms of its logical consistency, utilization, and standing the test of time, yet, when it comes to theories

of mass communication, it is the third most widely used. Its influence is particularly important in establishing television to be an important factor which not only shapes people's thinking, but society, too.

THEORY OF USE AND SATISFACTION

The theory of use and satisfaction is a continuation of Maslow's theory of needs and motivations (Maslow, 1970), according to which people are active when trying to satisfy their hierarchy of needs and, after achieving the goals placed on one level of that hierarchy, they can move towards the next.

The theory of use and satisfaction focuses on the question of what people do with the media. The basis for this theory accepts the fact that the selection and consumption of certain media depend on people and their activity in the process of meeting certain needs. The theory highlights the limiting power of the media and emphasizes the perspective of the limited effects because the audience has the right to choose a certain medium and the right to control. People know and understand the media as a way to meet their needs and are fully aware of this. The theory is subject to criticism, especially the concept of an active audience, which has been re-examined several times by its critics. Consequently, some observe that people actually watch television passively and for this they need little concentration (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Others believe that this theory does not pay enough attention to all the unconscious decisions that every person makes. According to Denis McQuail (1984), this theory lacks theoretical consistency and relies excessively on the functionality of media while ignoring the fact that the media can be unethical, reckless, and irresponsible. Today, the value of the theory of use and pleasure is in its power to provide a framework to explore audiences and their individual members.

SPIRAL OF SILENCE THEORY

The spiral of silence theory points out that the media have the power to influence public opinion. Mass media work with the opinion of the majority and try to silence minority views and beliefs, especially when it comes to social issues. Individuals who are a minority with their attitudes and beliefs are afraid of isolation, so they often accept the opinions of the majority and reaffirm its views. In this acceptance process, the appearance of the so-called quiet majority using activism as a means to an end can also be observed, since the majority is encouraged by the influence it possesses. Although, over time, the majority will overestimate its own power, its

views will be taken over by the media informing them of their activities (Noelle Neumann, 1983). This theory establishes a connection between public opinion and the media. That's what Elisabet Noelle Neumann studied since the 1940s, while, in the early seventies, she devised the spiral of silence theory.

In her book The Silence of Silence: Public Opinion - Our Social Skin (Noelle Neumann, 1984, 1993), she divides public opinion into two categories: publicity and opinion. The public suggests that it is open to everyone and here the legal, social, and social-psychological concerns of people are intertwined whereby they know whether they are being exposed or protected from the public's view (Vest and Lin; 2011: 468). Opinion, on the other hand, is an expression of attitude, and it differs in intensity and firmness. Hence, according to Noel Neumann, public opinion is the attitudes or actions that a person must express publicly so as not to isolate itself. She warns that, under the influence of the media, many people adjust their opinions so as not to be isolated or alone in their attitude. Noel Neumann goes so far as to claim that the media even provide phrases and words which people later adopt as their own and confidently talk about a particular topic. However, the public is not offered a wide picture of a certain event, but is rather presented with a limited view of reality. In Noel Neumann's view, this restriction narrows the perception of people. The media are everywhere (they are omnipresent), they repeat themselves (have cumulative ability) and are believed to agree, i.e. that they share similar attitudes and beliefs. The last feature stems from the tendency of journalists confirming their personal opinions and attitudes by presenting them to appear to emanate from the public.

The theory is criticized by both theoreticians and researchers, who feel that it lacks any consistent logic in the terminology and concepts it formulates. According to Simon and Klein, this theory fails to include ego as a factor in the research of the spiral of silence (Salmon & Kline, 1985). The theory also fails to incorporate selectivity processes, hence Glin and her colleagues believe that it does not provide enough support to the idea that individuals will speak publicly only when their views are met with a wide support (Glynn at al., 1997). In their view, Noel Neumann does not empirically test her assumption that fear of isolation makes people speak publicly, while they also dispute the view that reference groups and communities do not affect people's attitudes.

THEORY OF MEDIA ECOLOGY

In Understanding the Media, Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan, 1964, 2002) writes about the impact that technology has on people. Although some of the elements

he writes about today cannot be categorized as technology (clocks, telephones, roads, but also television, radio, and films), McLuhan deals with the impact of these forms of communication on society. This popular and world-famous scientist has studied the relationship between technology and the members of a particular culture. He suggests that there is a symbolic connection between technology and people - we create it, and it creates us in return. He feels that electronic media are revolutionizing society and communication processes. He dubs technology an intermediate and emphasizes that this role that technology plays makes society and its development interdependent between each other. This actually defines the theory of media ecology. It is based on the claim that society can not avoid the impact of technology and that it is a central element in all stages of life.

Although there is not a small number of theorists who believe that McLuhan's theory passivizes the audience and even alienates it, he, however, believes that audiences can indeed be active as they are obliged to adapt to advancing technology and everyday changes (McLuhan & Fiore, 1968: 11). No one can escape the media, neither can they ignore them or avoid their influence. McLuhan states that the organization of our lives and perceptions of life are influenced by the media, arguing that this influence of the media is continuous and that people are manipulated by the media, and, first and foremost, television. According to Bugeja (Bugeja, 2005), McLuhan views television as an instrument that erodes family values. His famous phrase defining the world as a global village actually refers to the third assumption of the theory of media ecology, and that is that that the media make it possible to connect the world. The power and influence of the medium are much greater than the content of the message being sent. Paul Levison (Paul Levison, 2001) believes McLuhan to be thinking that content attracts our attention, but the medium is the one that unconsciously affects our condition. The medium shapes the message, while our unconsciousness of the medium makes the message that much more meaningful.

McLuhan's media ecology theory is also interesting for both theorists and the general public alike. This globally-known theoretician divides opinions to this very day, primarily due to the logical consistency of his theory, but also the inability to verify it. However, it is widely used, its author is quoted on a worldwide level. The epitaph on his tombstone reads: "The truth will set you free". However, no one can confidently claim that McLuhan thought he had finally discovered the truth.

CONCLUSION

The media do not just impact political life and the development of society, but also the ways in which these influences reflect on political agendas and the

decisions of the citizens. The effect of fast living, too quickly produced and disseminated information creates distrust among citizens because of the lack of sufficient information for them to be able to draw their own judgments. The distrust of the media in general is additional factor that some people have no desire to understand what is happening in the world or in their immediate surroundings. All this passivizes the citizens and creates an apathetic society that is difficult to activate or stand behind a certain topic of interest for society as a whole. A citizenry asleep in circumstances of modern technology, media, and 24/7 information, does not contribute to the development of democracy, but quite on the contrary - it has an opposite and devastating effect (Blumler, G. Jay and Gurevitch, Michael, 1995).

Some researchers claim that the media play a negative role and destroy the political process, that is, that they contaminate it with media effects that are not the result of the content of the media product in and of themselves, but are rather a product of the overall process and the set of influences in which the media function (Newton, 1999). Due to the need for a larger marketing share, more ads and more audiences, the media attack democracy in a society and even have a malignant effect by reducing so-called social immunity through the "video malaise" they provoke (Robinson, 1976). Thus, even the tiniest of signals, notions of scandal, corruption, or a small conflict, tends to be increased and exaggerated by the media, or even created by them, all with the sole intention of being the first to present a story or grab an exclusive. Both theory and theoreticians define this as "attack journalism", especially in periods of election campaigns, during which it is vital to attack the opponent in journalist products, rather than present one's own position or a demonstrative case backed by facts and arguments (Hall- Jamieson, 1992 : 184-5). The combination of this kind of attack journalism, bad news, and negative policy contributes to creating a circle of cynicism, distrust and suspicion of modern politics and politicians. The speed in which events change, coupled with the fact that there is no longer an analytical approach due to yesterday's news overlapping with today's scandals and the news of the day, creates additional pressure throughout the media, but also among the citizens. A very small number of events are backed up by elaborate and comprehensively processed information, as there is no time for it.

The media malaise effect applies to all types of democratic pathology that may be provoked or partially caused by the media, such as political apathy, alienation, cynicism, destruction, confusion, illusions, and even fear. Recent research on the effects of the media in the creation of social reality suggests that certain effects, especially those that can be described as negative (increased materialism, less confidence, misconception about the environment and everyday life) may be reduced. Hence, there is a urgent need for developing media information literacy knowledge for all segments of the audience which in turn needs to be educated in

order to become aware of the influences of the constructs to which it is exposed while watching television or reading a newspaper. However, media reality programs should not only teach the public, i.e. the audience how to "read the media", but rather how to "read the conclusions" that the media construct. The only way in which they would be able to do that is to educate the public in such a manner that it becomes aware of the impacts of the constructs to which it is exposed while watching, for example, television, as well as that they enable it to distinguish the different strategies that are based on the processes of creating constructs of social reality that the media wish to impose.

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