

The roles media plays in contemporary society



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Media communication is full of contradictions, nevertheless one cannot deny the important part it plays in social life, part which has kept and will maintain its importance along time. In this essay, I will analyze the importance and the impact of mass media in contemporary society, presenting both their positive and negative effects, in terms of the roles they play. I will start by presenting the advantages of the informative and interpretative functions (which are essential in a society dependant on mass media for information), while also mentioning their negative effects, by referring to the manipulation of public opinion and the using of media as a medium of propaganda. I will continue by discussing the presence of infotainment and its benefits, but also the educative role of mass media, nevertheless without ignoring the negative aspects which come with access to information for a population segment which does not have the ability to select and process it. I will not miss the opportunity of speaking about the social binder (between people or civilizations) function, and also about the tendency of the population of aligning to opinion streams; I will close by presenting some limiting factors for the mass media power.

Most people get informed by means of press and television, these channels satisfying, by the information they provide, a fundamental need of the modern man - information. Furthermore, by their dimensions, mass media facilitate spreading the information and increase the speed by which a message is relayed. The continuous worldwide information flow helps individuals find the latest news which may influence their decisions, coordinate their businesses, help them know which areas are or will be affected by natural disasters or conflicts in order to avoid them and so on.

Still, many times, the media offer more than information. By means of media, one can influence, orient and direct public opinion, interests and motivations, consciences, even beyond one's own will. Mass media may lead even unto the destruction of the discernment and the creation of an apathy, it may destroy the will to understand and act. American mass media theorists, Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948), have argued that we may be guilty of paying such close attention to the information with which the media bombard us, thus getting to confuse knowing about social problems with doing something about them. They called this confusion the "narcotizing dysfunction", linking it to the social consequences of mass media. Individuals replace reality with a surrogate of reality. Furthermore, people can be misinformed through mass media. Many times, we read untrue articles in newspapers and magazines, whether these articles are about what is happening around the world or about important persons in social life. The media build but also destroy reputations, which happens most of the times in politics. A good example, according to Layborn (2002), are the scandals surrounding the Secretary of State for War, John Profumo (1963) and the Liberal Party leader Jeremy Thorpe (1970s). Politicians are presented, "launched" to the public with the same techniques used in launching a new brand of toothpaste or soap. Pop stars, as a class, are the creation of media. Remaining in the area of negative aspects, I can also include the fact that mass media create cognitive, affective and behavioural addictions. These addictions lead to a certain level of defiance which aggravates the cognitive gulf. Those who are informed become more and more informed and those who are misinformed remain misinformed.

As to the interpretative function, this is somewhat related to the informative role, because it supposes the acceptance of the information by the individual without processing it through one's own reason. The contents of communications are generated by the public's needs, so the information will be processed enough to satisfy these needs. Information consumers may also receive direct help in interpreting some events by the means of editorials or comments in newspapers and magazines. Thus, the reader or viewer not only received the information in the state it was conceived, they are also given the manner in which they should regard and understand that information. The press relies on the authority of the written word, while television relies on the fact that images seem authentic and the citizen tends to say, most of the times " I have seen it with my own eyes", not realizing that they have actually only seen what others wanted them to see.

The media cease to be a news organ and become an instrument of propaganda. In all societies and in whoever's service it may be, propaganda aims to shape certain attitudes and impose social stereotypes, it tends to impose conditions on the individual, by creating automate mechanisms with the purpose of controlling and manipulating behaviour or society (voting for a certain political party, purchasing certain goods, etc). Great leaders of all times have used manipulation techniques, some of them to keep their power, others to control population. Even Napoleon had paid attention to the means of information at that time, which have offered him advantages before his enemies. His statements remained famous: " Four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets". World War I is considered to have been a propagandist battle between the English and the

Germans and that the American audience was the target of messages in pamphlets, posters and other means of communication. During World War II, the Nazi have developed an elaborate propaganda system in order to obtain regime support both in Germany and abroad. It is one of the convictions of Media Lens that “ the corporate mass media constitute a propaganda system for elite interests” (Edwards and Cromwell, 2006). Those who have high social positions, govern or lead large institutions have control on the media (or even own it, as it is the case for the Italian prime-minister Berlusconi), using them to manipulate population with the purpose of meeting their own interests. The renowned professor Chomsky (2003) implements “ The Propaganda Model” in the case of the Iraq war as well. Large corporations, among which Haliburton or British Petroleum, have used the mass media in order to internationally spread false information on Saddam Hussein, such as him producing mass destruction weapons and supporting terrorism, information which later proved to be untrue. The population, being scared by the artificially created reality, has eventually joined in, by sustaining the war in Iraq and, indirectly, the interests of the great moguls. New York Times revealed (1st December, 2005) that the USA had used black propaganda by paying Iraqi journalists to translate and publish in local newspapers articles written in the US by a public relations company financed by the Pentagon. Furthermore, after investigations were lead, false journalists providing news articulated to the BBC were discovered. False information was broadcast by television, while the “ journalists” were secretly working for organizations sustained by the British Ministry of Defence in a propaganda operation (Media Lens, 2005).

As to its entertainment function, the mass media, especially television, offer the cheapest and most accessible means of entertainment, compared to attending concerts and shows. A few minutes of one's favourite show can relax, make one forget the hard time they are going through. The internet is a good mean of entertainment through its multitude of online games, music, the possibility of interactive communication with friends. One of the researchers of the contemporary phenomenon of media, Claude-Jean Bertrand (2000), notes that most of consumers search for entertainment in the mass media. Thus, most means of communications provide it, even newspapers. This function plays a particularly important part in today's society, even more that it combines extremely efficiently with the others. Vicky Hay (1990) considers that the challenge of infotainment development in television, with its various kinds and media formats (talk-shows, contests, games, interactive transmissions, etc) represent the main cause of cultivating this tendency in the written press as well. The second cause is money, respectively in an industry such as the media one, which operates on a competitive market, where it is all about maintaining/gaining/regaining a larger audience segment, which brings in itself publicity, money that is. But there is also a negative aspect in the entertainment function of mass media, which is the risk of relaying obscene or negative messages through music or violent movies, or by (even involuntarily) creating false, "bad" models for the public which is exposed, but has no ability to select or process information, such as children.

The audiovisual channel continuously dimensions the knowledge universe of the receivers, by influencing and inducing them values, conceptions,

convictions, stereotypes, etc. That is why the educative role that the media have in society has an importance that should not be underestimated; the large spectrum of TV channels, from the most various domains, constitutes an important source of broadening one's knowledge horizon. Also, television can be a culture broadcaster, thus concerts/theatre plays gathering more viewers than spectators. Documentaries, homage evocations of personalities, flashbacks have more power than books do in refreshing the public's awareness on a personality or even on history, in general. But, as a negative effect of the educative function, we must mention that television, as a time devourer, has brought a real "reading crisis", television shows meeting the cultural needs of a mankind too rushed to be able to focus on traditional means. Also, in countries with a reduced cinematographic production, flooding the market with foreign commercial productions may lead to the cultural "denationalization" of the audience. Studies lead by American psychologists regarding the impact of American serial movies with youth as their main audience indicate that 45% of teenagers shape and complete their sexual knowledge based on these movies and also learn how to communicate with their parents from them. (Van Evra, J., 1990) The negative side of this aspect is that, by having access to adult subjects, children lose the naivety and innocence specific to their age and are a lot more prone to yielding to various temptations (from smoking and drugs to delinquencies).

Live broadcasting of an event makes the latter dilate, and public (national or international) opinion becomes a resonance box where the echoes of the event ensure its amplification. Thus, television has the role of ensuring the

social bond in individualist mass society (any person being able to connect when and how they want from home, being able to freely participate, in their privacy, in a fundamentally collective activity). Thereby, mass media may generate a social solidarity mechanism in case of natural disasters or special personal situation which requires help from the other members of society.

By analyzing the effects of mass media, one can define the term of consonance as aligning to opinion streams. The Spiral of Silence (“Schweigespirale”) theory describes this phenomenon starting from the dependence of individual opinion on the dominant opinion expressed by the mass media. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1993) synthesises this theory as follows: society threatens the deviant with isolation, individuals are more afraid of isolation than of error, individuals evaluate the favourable or unfavourable climate of their own opinion, evaluation leads to taking an attitude (expressing one’s opinion or keeping one’s opinions secret). Individuals who share the dominant point of view easily share it, while individuals who do not share this opinion enclose themselves in silence, for fear of isolation. Thus, public opinion represents, from this perspective, the opinion that can be expressed publicly without the risk of isolation.

A secondary function of mass media, that of reinforcing social norms, is achieved through the fact that television exposes any deviation from these norms to the judgment of public opinion. According to DeFleur (1989), the individual behaviour is guided by one’s perception on cultural norms. Thus, by the means of presentation, underscoring and selection, television reinforces the viewer’s opinions on these cultural norms. Television also has

a massive impact in imposing fashion and the feminine or masculine beauty type.

One of the moments which brought glory to the mass media is the Watergate Process, journalists being the ones who caused the resignation of the American president Nixon on August 8th, 1974, thus gaining the fame of “fourth power in the state”. The death of princess Diana has again given television the opportunity of showing its advantages in catching public interest and transforming an event into an international tragedy. Still, there are limits to the power the mass media has, opponent forces - whether political, institutional, or representing the private business environment - which, at their turn, manipulate the information the press offers. Also, the commercial pressure of profit and competition, as well as direct pressure from political institutions or even people’s scepticism limit the power of mass media.

What are the conclusions that can be drawn from these aspects we have presented? The mass media are a double-edged tool. On the one hand, they form and on the other they deform. In a post-industrial society where information reaches the same value as capital or resources, using means of information and communication such as mass media becomes a necessity. Nevertheless, I consider that the mass media are both a positive image and a negative image creator, a source of information as well as a tool of propaganda, a sine qua non of modern society.