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THE MASS MEDIA AND ITS MANIFOLD SOCIAL ROLES. THE US MEDIA – A CASE STUDY

Maria-Miruna CIOCOI-POP VECSEI
miruna.ciocoipop@ulbsibiu.ro

"LUCIAN BLAGA" UNIVERSITY OF SIBIU, ROMANIA

ABSTRACT:

The present paper aims to trace both the development of the main media channels throughout the centuries, and their often hard to pin down and define influence upon their consumers. From newspapers to the radio, the TV and nowadays the internet, the media has always directly or indirectly shaped the way people think, feel and act. This is nowhere more visible than in the USA, where especially political life and discourse is inextricably linked to the media and its manifold propagandistic and sometimes manipulative strategies and tendencies. Media has moved in recent decades more and more overtly from delivering a message i.e., information, to creating incentives for purchasing goods (via advertising) or for following a certain political ideology. Last but not least, the present paper addresses the complex issue of the media's influence on human behavior, especially in the case of young people, with critical voices stating that certain types of media may negatively influence behavior and lead to aggression, violence or obsessive behavior.

KEYWORDS:

Media, TV, newspapers, radio, internet, propaganda, manipulation, objectivity

1. Introduction

When most people think of mass media and its messages, they tend to think predominantly of TV announcements, news bulletins and/or political and commercial advertisements. Media outlets provide a platform for communicating a message via a certain medium, whether the message is the incentive to purchase a product or a politically tinge done.

Although the media sends out messages intended for the general public, they also broadcast messages that are not properly classified as propaganda or persuasion, but are in fact of such nature. Critical voices thus claim that these types of messages have a profound impact on human behavior, particularly among the youth. Furthermore, media consumption has been connected to violent and obsessive behaviors, raising serious questions regarding its impact on society and individuals.

Although it is still a matter of heated debate whether violent media truly causes real-life violence, certain forms of media undoubtedly communicate an emotional message to which people, especially young ones, respond. The use of emotions such as fear, love, happiness, and depression in media messages is not restricted to overt claims in fact, most of it can be said to happen subliminally. Human emotional responses triggered by indirect stimuli help to explain the media's staggering power in global culture.

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Apart from the aforementioned aspects, the media also emits cultural values-reinforcing signals and messages, up to the point that we could safely claim that to a certain extent media births and creates culture. Celebrities, their astounding influence and the roles they play are one of the most obvious examples in this respect. By the mid-twentieth century, several actors came to symbolize aspects of masculinity and femininity that were incorporated into mainstream culture. Marylin Monroe thus became the image of ultimate femininity and seduction. Michael Jordan was portrayed as a paragon of athleticism and willpower in television, cinema, periodicals, and commercial campaigns during the 1990s. Musicians, especially rock stars, embodied a sense of liberation and defiance of conventional culture.

Although many hold celebrity culture to be superficial and unrepresentative of a country's beliefs and value systems, not all celebrities are merely entertainers, and it would be naive to reduce them to just that status. Through their representations in the media, civil rights activists, social reformers, and other well-known public icons, have come to represent significant cultural triumphs and achievements. When photographs of President Kennedy or Neil Armstrong surface in the media, they evoke cultural and historical ideas that go beyond a mere celebrity status. In addition to this, nowadays an increasing number of celebrities are lobbying for human rights, against domestic or mental violence, and pollution, and they are looking for better (media) resources to convey public awareness.

Celebrities and the media can also contribute to the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes. For instance, women were frequently depicted in a passive, domestic role on television and in magazines throughout the mid-twentieth century, reflecting and reinforcing the cultural limits imposed on women for a long time.

Therefore, it is safe to assume that media is never just media. It just as much a creator of culture as it is a conveyor thereof.

2. The media nowadays. The rise of the internet

The internet has provided the general public with an astonishing amount of new information. This abundance of data, as well as the manner in which individuals process it, has a significant impact on global culture. As information, even if not knowledge, becomes more readily available, new perspectives on it are emerging. Past media consumption patterns were based on thorough information processing via some type of media channel. In the past, media consumers read, watched, or viewed a complete news bulletin, for example, as part of a news publication or program. Fictional works were published in the form of a printed book or a magazine.

Because information is much easier to come by nowadays, it is more likely to be shared across different platforms freely, rapidly, and unfortunately, often irresponsibly. A person can read an article on a news website and then forward a part of it to another person. Then, without knowing the original context, that person may tell “the news” to somebody else. As a consequence, the media is increasingly coping with this practice of hunting for information that is not contextualized or spreading partial or even fake information (the “fake news” phenomenon). The issue is further complicated by the fact that in the run for the most attention-getting material, fake information is frequently published at the expense of truthful pieces of news.

The rising degree of subjectivity of the media's approach to information is another significant present-day development. The term “cyber balkanization” has been coined by theoreticians in order to describe how media consumers filter information. After World War I, the Ottoman Empire crumbled into a wide array of ethnic and political minority groups, resulting in the political fragmentation of Balkan Europe. Similarly, in what the internet landscape and social media are concerned, personalized news feeds (for example on Facebook) allow social media users to see

and read only the news and information they want, effectively blocking sources that report on stories or insights they do not want to hear about. Many cultural critics have identified information filtering as a driver of escalating political polarization and civic dialogue loss. The issue with this is that when media consumers only hear what they want to hear, the common ground of public debate that results from broad agreement on fundamental values necessarily shrinks (Kakutani, 2010).

Convergence is another present-day phenomenon identifiable in the media. It can be interpreted in a variety of manners. Henry Jenkins offers an excellent explanation of convergence as it applies to new media in his book *The Culture of Convergence: Where Old and New Media Collide*. A perfect example of convergence would be a video on YouTube that becomes viral and thus attracts the attention of a news organization: the video appears and becomes famous, a news outlet publishes an article or broadcasts about it, thus increasing the video's popularity on YouTube even more and drawing in an even larger audience. This movement also works the other way around, with excerpts from comical or emotional TV or radio programs being frequently shared across social media sites or video viewing platforms like YouTube, where they gain popularity and are watched by far more people than the original TV broadcast.

Interactivity is yet another present-day characteristic of the media. Consumers today perceive all forms of media as interactive, thanks to the new types of media. The popular US TV program *American Idol*, for example, mixes an old media format, the TV, with newer media consumption channels (smart phones, computers), allowing viewers to vote for their favorite contestant from their own homes. *American Idol* fragment clips are then frequently posted on YouTube and other websites, where viewers who have never actually watched the show can analyze or comment on it. Following the airing of the show, phone service providers reported an increase in phone traffic, which is probably the result of viewers calling to vote or discussing the program with others. Consequently, "more individuals are exposed to *American Idol*'s theme and culture than the show's actual TV viewership" (Jenkins, 2006:2). As Poniewozik also notes, "*In the 21st century, rabid fans could turn their attention to a whole swath of pop stars in the making when the reality TV program American Idol hit the airwaves in 2002. The show was the only television program ever to have snagged the top spot in the Nielsen ratings for six seasons in a row, often averaging more than 30 million nightly viewers. Rival television network executives were alarmed, deeming the pop giant "the ultimate schoolyard bully," "the Death Star," or even "the most impactful show in the history of television," according to former NBC Universal CEO Jeff Zucker. New cell phone technologies allowed viewers to have a direct role in the program's star-making enterprise through casting votes, signing up for text alerts, or playing trivia games on their phones. In 2009, AT&T estimated that Idol-related text traffic amounted to 178 million messages*" (Poniewozik, 2009:49).

The new types of media thus create more personal involvement in the media generally speaking. Although the long-term cultural and social implications of these new and hybrid forms have yet to be determined, the tendency is undeniably revolutionary. This overall trend will certainly continue to develop as the general population becomes more knowledgeable at accessing the new types of media.

3. The media under pressure

Accusations of subliminal messages or more or less overt propaganda in the media have always been a stringent problem, but as the omnipresence of the media becomes more and more of a reality, the discussion about media messages

becomes a necessary and vital one to have. It is an undeniable fact that the media has always been used to sway and persuade people. The use of the media as a propaganda tool has created a multitude of modern propagandistic techniques. When analyzing the plethora of media effects, the function of propaganda and persuasion cannot be overlooked.

One of the most complex issues is the one of the effects of video games on young people's mental health, along with the more or less overt glorification of video game culture in the media. The destructive effects of video game violence on youngsters' mental health have been the topic of much heated debate during the past years. On the other hand, defenders of video game culture hold that violent individuals are naturally attracted to violent video games, not that games per se cause violence, and cite a drop in overall teenage violence in recent years compared to previous decades (Adams, 2010). Furthermore, these voices also argue that by keeping people with naturally violent tendencies at home in front of a computer screen, violent media has helped reduce real-life violent activities in society (Goodman, 2008).

Public debates regarding the consequences of excessive media exposure in the case of young people and children evince a wide range of perspectives and opinions. Parents are particularly worried about how early media exposure and violent content may affect their children's mental development and overall behavior. Efforts to limit media exposure and its effects on young minds, however, have also raised important considerations regarding the types of media and of interactions that should be monitored, the degree to which media consumption should be restricted for certain age groups, and the need for governmental regulatory interventions along with parental supervision and professional measures. Questions of safety thus clash with questions related to freedom of expression, with certain ideas, for example those advancing parental warning labels on CDs with explicit content, causing heated debate about censorship and the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

At present, there is not enough evidence regarding the impact of video games, social media platforms or music lyrics on young people's mental health and overall development, or regarding the role they have in the creation of a sense of identity, social belonging, and parent-child relationships. Pros and cons regarding the potential benefits and perceived dangers of various types of media consumption are frequently tossed around, but they are seldomly backed up by qualitative research.

Lastly, one other tremendous issue regarding media consumption nowadays is over-exposure to too many media channels simultaneously. Computers allow their users to rapidly switch between the Internet, a social media forum, a video viewing platform, and a word processing program, for instance, while often at the same time music is playing in the background, the users are simultaneously playing a video game or are writing an e-mail or instant messaging someone. All of these activities can be performed while wearing earbuds or while watching TV, making phone calls etc. Images may be sent through smartphones, new devices allow their users to download videos, movies, and series to watch anywhere, anytime. All of this results in an obvious over-exposure to media, the effects of which are still widely unexplored.

4. The media and public interaction in the US

The media plays a variety of key functions in US culture, entertainment being one of the most obvious ones. Media, especially with the advent of social media, can be a means of fostering imagination and providing escapism. Another positive aspect of the media is its capacity to provide a public platform for discussion and debate on key social, political and general human issues. Social media users

can converse with or reply to journalists or share their views on current events by writing comments on the social media posts of news outlets or on live broadcast videos. American society has a long-standing tradition of such interactions between newspapers and their readers, with readers' letters being sent to the editors of American newspapers even when the US was a British colony. This type of media consumer-media producer interaction continues to function as a platform for public debate even at present.

The media's importance in nowadays' American society cannot be overstated. Its impact has influenced among other things the development of the US government, especially in what policymaking is concerned. It is important to understand the manifold functions of the media in the rise and fall of political leaders, parties and institutions, in order to accurately grasp the political decision-making process in the US.

The American mass media landscape is a multibillion-dollar industry. Most of the US' main mass media outlets are owned by large multinational companies involved in a variety of media and non-communicative commercial activities. The majority of American news coverage is provided by the so-called "Big Media", including CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, *The New York Times, The Washington Post, Time*, and the Associated Press, to name but a few. As a direct consequence, with an enormous impact on the media's degree of objectivity, a large amount of news stories, events and developments go unnoticed until they are picked up by Big Media, perceived to be the decisive element that gets general attention. Furthermore, bias in the news is difficult to identify because journalists and editors are tempted to claim absolute objectivity while reporting on events, while in fact often allowing their own views to interfere with the reporting process. It is thus impossible to perform entirely objective journalism, since that would require journalists to report on issues and events without allowing their own values to interfere in the process.

Given the media's importance in American culture, it is not surprising that numerous voices regard the media as a fourth department of American government. According to this perspective, the media holds equal power and authority as the executive, judicial, and legislative departments of the US government in determining public policy. One may even be tempted to claim that the media has more power than the government in determining the political agenda. This perspective is upheld partially by the fact that the media has the capacity to directly influence and sway the people and is also shielded from liability under the First Amendment.

5. Conclusions. The media's effect on its consumers

While certain studies opine that the media profoundly influences people's attitudes, opinions, beliefs and actions, other research doubts this claim. It can however be safely stated that most people believe that the media is most effective when it reinforces rather than challenges or tries to abolish already existing beliefs and values. Nevertheless, influence or control over the decisions of others is a result of one's capacity to govern their intake of knowledge. Consequently, it is considered that the media has the capacity to influence both what and how people think and act.

A perfect example of the media influencing the way its consumers think is for instance the fact that the context and manner of presentation of news items are more important than the amount of space devoted to the topic. The type of news items presented can also be important in terms of how it affects the individual who consumes it. The manner in which information is processed is influenced by a series of communicative aspects. "The materials on which words were written down have often counted for more than the words themselves", according to economist Harold Innis (in Katsh, 1989:11). The medium is, in this respect, often the message.

Secondly, audiences are affected by technological developments in the field of communication, for example by the manner in which information is stored and accessed, by the degree of efficiency and convenience of using certain media channels. Modes of communication shape the organization, operation, and perception of our institutions, as well as our individual thoughts and behaviors. News commentary performed by anchorpersons, reporters, or editorial critics, coming from experts or scientific studies, has a tremendous impact on public opinion regarding any given topic.

Media and the journalists have a huge impact on government policies by basically creating the reality in which political leaders operate, by functioning as mouthpieces of public opinion, focusing on specific topics while neglecting others, and by acting as connectors between governmental agencies. Some journalists are even candidly confessing to being active participants in the political process.

Considering that the media cannot possibly offer all information to the public, they choose what information people will receive. The media must therefore decide which problems and events are of the utmost importance, and from what perspective they will be offered to the public. Consequently, the degree to which information is spread is decided by what the Bigmedia include or omit regarding a news item. To sum it up, "*each media has a unique manner of conveying ideas that emphasizes certain modes of thinking while undermining others*" (Kay, 1994).

To conclude, we might state that media output as well as technology have a vast range of effects on people, some of which will not be fully understood for a long time.

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