

THE INFORMATIVE FUNCTION OF THE MEDIA: NEGATIVISM AND THE IDEOLOGICAL COMPONENT OF NEWS

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Abstract

One of the basic functions of the media is the informative function whose sole purpose is to inform the recipients with a message of public interest which is to promote public awareness and a certain relation to the new, the unknown, the current and, above all, the true and the objective. Such performances of information in its basic form of media expression should contain the news, regardless of the media used to convey it, i.e. whether it is a radio or TV announcement, a printed article in the daily newspapers or piece of information published on the new social media. The media framework or the famous theoretical perspective - agenda setting - in media practice nationally and worldwide strays from objective criteria on structure and reorganization of the news and, above all, in terms of the thematic choice on which piece of information or which current event deserves to be published. Negativism and the ideological coloring of the news are central in daily newspapers and informational shows, i.e. in radio and TV news.

Key words: *informative, function, media, news, objective*

1. INTRODUCTION

If we start from the famous news maxim - that comment is free, but facts are sacred - then the main premise in the realization of media functions and in the execution of the journalistic profession is placed on the informative function as one of the basic forms, and on the news as the most basic form of journalistic expression, i.e. a media product which is most concise in form and content, and in accordance with the time needed for creating and publishing the fastest information. Also from a chronological aspect it has primary meaning and it is no coincidence that it is dubbed the embryo of journalism. In its long tradition news did not lose, but, on the contrary, gained more and more in meaning, which is confirmed by the fact that in the daily newspapers, radio and television it is the most widely used genre. The author of the news of the day is the hero of the day, and the agency that published it is the most cited one across all meridians. Although the presence of the news and the constant interest for it does not mean that it represents a once-and-for-all determined form, still, media practice shows that it retains its primacy just by being new, fresh, true, important or interesting. Still, the informative function of the media opens a great deal of debates in academic and media circles connected with the meaning of information organized into news and its influence in social reality, i.e. the effects on the public. It is especially important to emphasize the issue on the social and human aspect of the new information, its influence in forming public opinion and the intensity of increasing the cognitive dimension with certain interest groups. The selection of topics and values, and issues regarding the facts determine the dimensions of media influence, and the construction of media reality in everyday events contributes to the homogenization of media content. In addition, the media has influence in the determination and the structure of topics. The media are especially important in creating opinions on unknown subjects especially if there is a recurrence of information on issues unknown thus far by the general public, and in addition, the pluralism of information sources is reduced or there is an objective inability to follow the contents of other media. The ideologically colored news directly influences opinion making that approximates or distances one from a political option as well as politicizing decisions, aspects and processes especially with neutral recipients or with the less educated public. The instrumentalization of information leads to manipulation of public opinion. This means that often times media content is chosen according to the possibility of their use (instrumental value) in group life. The syndrome of identification and projection of negative news connected to existence, life, personal safety and security of the public increase the preconditions for their multiplication in reality and contribute to asocial occurrences and changes in social psychology and in realizing certain social roles. Apart from this, objective standards in creating media information

can also lead to a rise of the factual degree of received information and of knowledge without a change of opinion and behavior.

2. INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION

The dynamic pace of life imposes a daily exchange of numerous messages; interesting, useful, boring, provocative, educational, and dramatic ones. This bares the question - is that information or communication?

There are numerous definitions by various authors on the subject. According to Norbert Wiener: "Information is a name for the content of what is exchanged with the outer world as we adjust to it, and make our adjustment felt upon it". 1 For others, information is something that eliminates the vagueness of the choice, while for Umberto Eco it is: "an active quantity of something that's been added to what we already know and what is presented before us as an original gain". 2 These definitions are connected by the fact that information is always something new, current, meaningful and of public interest. Its massiveness is seen in the organized approach and the distribution of assets for mass communication and that is why information can be used by an unlimited number of people at the same time. It lives and acts for a specific time, and then allows for another one, a new piece of information. And most important of all - information is a dialectic unity of form and content, a universal connection and interdependency of nature, man and his opinion. In short, information is the way one sees, experiences the world and influences it. Moreover, according to Cooley, American sociologist and psychologist who in 1909 was the first to define human communication, it is "the mechanism through which human relations exist and develop—all the symbols of the mind, together with the means of conveying them through space and preserving them in time". 3 And for Kotz, it is a "flow, exchange of information, opinions, views and drawing logical conclusions, decisions, solutions". 4 According to Berelson and Steiner, communication represents "the transmission of information, ideas, emotions, skills, etc. by the use of symbols – words, pictures, figures, graphs, etc.". 5 The analysis of the indicated, as well as the other definitions shows that all of them should contain the term information, which implies that neither information can exist in isolation from communication, nor communication can be achieved without the presence of information. Hence, we can conclude that with information a certain content through speech, pictures and signs is announced by using specific channels, which means that there is communication. Communication, on the other hand, is a process that is comprised of numerous elements (signals, codes), which uses different means (words, gestures, mass media), and the mutual interaction is, in fact, transmitting, circulating and announcing information. And the term information society that is used by the European Commission for Human Rights, in its fundamental meaning is aligned with the information that contains the information activity. Within that, the structure of the information society is made up of numerous information which through different forms of transmission arrive on the air daily, as well as the consumers, i.e. the citizens that receive them and used them for their purposes. The immediate meaning is actually that information society possesses two basic elements that comprise its infrastructural content, and those are organization of information and recipients, i.e. the public. With integration of the globalizing process, the treatment of information becomes more and more a consumer product and contributes that the citizens, as information beneficiaries, become a faceless and passive part of the structure, while the reorganization of the information market and the profile gain priority.

Such a set up of elements in the system brings the issue of quality and ethical content, and the role of the media as subjects in the information society into question. The exceptional market orientation of the means for mass communication is much more concerned with the economic interests of its own sponsors than the citizens themselves as key customers and beneficiaries.

3. INFORMATIVE FUNCTION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF INFORMATION

The value that the media have is the effect that they achieve while executing their informative function. It is the most fundamental form of their existence and the creation of the socio-economic, political and cultural reality. Its task is to try to provide as thorough, as timely and as objective information to the public of all significant events in society as possible. The development component of the informative function connected with the historic and dynamic character of the society, the socio-economic and cultural conditions of its existence, as well as with the place and role of media in society and their social, professional and ethic dimension in separate forms of social awareness which represents a reflection of the democratization of institutions of society. The informative function consists in collecting, selecting and processing of information of social and public character on a local, national, regional level and worldwide. That is where the need for information from back in the day originates from, while in the modern world this is transformed into a need for objective, honest, timely and truthful information. Reports acquired through the informative function of media inform and teach recipients, and thus we may have a discrepancy in what is received as a message from the mass media and the personal opinion of recipients. This phenomenon in sociology of mass communication is called cognitive dissonance that can be discussed on two levels. The first level is when the informative function influences on the lowering (reducing) or increasing the dissonance between thinking and acting. If information is contributing to the harmonization of attitudes and practical acts of the person, then we are talking about a reduction of cognitive dissonance. The second level of cognitive dissonance regards to the dissonance between content of the message that arise from the means for mass communication and the personal opinion of the recipients of the messages. Each piece of information in the process of mass communication influences on the harmonization or the reduction of this recognized dissonance. The analysis of media practice shows that when information that comes from the mass media are in function of a faster social improvement they are accepted really fast and there is a reduction in cognitive dissonance.

In modern societies, the informative function of the media and the information are used for creating, developing and changing of the contents of a certain view of the world, thus having the power to destroy a certain view of the world in a relatively short period of time. In the broadest sense of the word ideology means a rounded systematized image of the world as a whole and the position of man in it. In its specific, negative meaning, ideology, regards to an array of ideas that represent the biased opinion on reality. The ideological aspect includes values and value opinions that disregard the way things are, but regard the way they ought to be. Thus, ideology serves as a tool for an interpretative, unreal vision on the total social reality. Accordingly, ideology in this manner is determined as criticism of the world, society and man and connects them with a system of goals that are subject of human activity, and a system of norms which man uses to regulate and to justify his activity. In this sense, information influences not just the building of general ideology, but also numerous specific ideologies that regard certain areas of society. In this sense, the most important and the most general one is political ideology.

3.1. Complexity, comprehensibility, accuracy

The functions of the media influence the democratization of the society in all its spheres. The socio-political, the economic and the cultural influence, despite the social conditioning, can be achieved by the media through a new quality of information. The quality arises from the content created based on professional criteria such as objectivity, complexity, comprehensibility and accuracy. Irrefutable is the fact that during mankind's history, the struggle for communication rights and freedoms of man are in the center of the political struggle for freedom and democracy. Since Ancient Greece, up to today, the concept of democracy presupposes an open information and communication system which the decision making process on all issues of public interest is founded on. This presupposes a well-informed citizen, his interest in politics (as a consequence of socializing), equality in freedom of speech and participation in decision-making.

The complexity presupposes an all-around analysis of the conditions, events and problems, as well as pointing out the complexity and inconsistency of the social processes being communicated. This arises from the awareness that society is a dynamic, contradictory and conflict union consisted of different

social, political, ideological, national, religious and other social groups and communities. The information should encompass all events in society. This must not be limited to just a few events, inconsistencies and conflicts or to direct the influence on certain groups or parts of the world.

Comprehensibility means that the events and problems should be structured creatively and professionally in a comprehensible information that will be available to all citizens regardless of the level of education, profession or expertise, as well as regardless of the economic or political status. "Only then does the communication action reach its constant goal - understanding of the event as well as communicative interaction - active inclusion in social dialog, the process of public opinion, negotiating and cooperating". 6 When we are talking about accuracy, communicologists warn of some deformation such as the subjective selection of information, the unilateral summarizing of debates and speeches, the manner of paraphrasing, the voluntary translation into a less professional language, taking words and quotes out of context, as well as distorting the basic announcement of the speaker. All these imperatives of information form, i.e. deform the image of a democratic society.

3.2. Objectivity: controversies and criteria

The relation between media statements and reality, in the broadest sense of the word entails the discourse of objectivity. In the German dictionary on mass communication, it is defined as the representation of reality as it is. Surely, such a definition does not provide an answer which criteria are used for the decision of the accuracy of the representation. Restraint as a criterion in terms of reporting refers to the complete content of a medium, of the interest that exist in a society, which within the same medium are competing in the struggle for the public opinion. Within such a struggle for audience, if the information should remain neutral, there is a danger to only get a dose of restraint (balance) of already established interests.

In socialist countries, there was no problem of objectivity because it aligned with the party's media coverage, whereas opinions that strayed away from that were immediately considered as wrong.

Objective reporting can be achieved when information can be presented in a manner that the recipients can create their own opinion. Objective informing is considered as freed from prejudice if it conveys and arguments facts. It is a non-party informing, freed of feelings and truthful. Still, the question whether the discourse objectivity has the same meaning as honesty and balance remains. If a piece of information or news ceases to represent facts, has no relevant sources of information and at least three sources, especially ones that represent the statement, the opposing views and the neutral opinion in terms of the media coverage, then the honest intentions in the information do not stand for objectivity. Actually, the neutral attitude entails including a third side, i.e. feeling the pulse - the impact that the content has on the public. Balanced informing, which is one of the fundamental criteria in the organizing and structure of the BBC News, means setting a balance between the proposed opposing opinions, without specifying the value of the objective, i.e. the truth in the story. Hence, due to the free dimensioning of the term objectivity, there is a freer interpretation of the term - lack of objectivity, incapability to recognize the truth. This could be equalized as a result of political negotiation as to when a certain informing is objective, and when it is not. If we draw a parallel between the term objectivity in the scientific-theoretic discussion, you will see that it no longer regards to the connection between the statement and reality, but that objectivity is a characteristic of the scientific treatment and signifies the intersubjective possibility for verification. Such an idea on objectivity can only be applied with information where objectivity is a marking of professional research and informing when through facts, outside of party interests and non-manipulative actions we try to separate the news from the comments. According to communicologist Günter Bentele from Leipzig, to that purpose we can use other manners of processes and behavior: "(...) reporting without emotions; factual reporting, use of neutral expressions for signifying conditions - use of quotes; stating opposing sources - presentation of additional records, as well as structuring according to an appropriate order (determining total value, place etc.)" 7. According to this concept, it entails that the objective news are signified with accuracy, completeness, are verifiable, factual and neutral. Neutrality is of special importance because in the forming of public opinion there is an increase in the cognitive dimension for the event or phenomenon that is being reported, without specifying one side, stating one source,

and minimizing the other, which channelizes the opinion in the forming of attitudes in the sense of journalistic information, i.e. manipulating the public.

4. PLURALISM IN THE DAILY-INFORMATIVE SHOWS ON NATIONAL TELEVISIONS

The definition for what is pluralism of informative shows entails enabling maximal flow of different, opposing opinions in relation to the relevant aspects of one social topic. It is that informative quality which is an element of factographic genres. Often times, in journalistic stories there is a lack of opinion on the so-called other side of the story.

Focusing the analysis on the central daily-informative shows is justified for several different reasons. First, it is because they represent a concentrated shape of achieving the informative function of the media. Second, because those with high rating in relation to other programs are broadcasted in prime time, in the periods when televisions have the most viewers. From a methodological aspect, the analysis in the program week is implemented on two levels:

- All reports in the news are analyzed from the aspect of the following characteristics: measuring the duration of each specific report, determining the thematic affiliation of the content (areas from social life which refer to the reports) and measuring the duration of different political subjects (political parties and segments of government).
- In order to compare the manner of reporting of different media, two events, two reports are analyzed from the aspect of: the vocabulary that is used in the coverage of the event (use of attributes, emotional expressions, comments, etc.), displaying opposing views, presenting additional facts and information regarding the events, use of citation in the reports, using sources (if and how sources are used, citation and paraphrasing), using video footage (authentic, archive or from another medium), the order of the analyzed reports in the news and the context in which the medium reports on the subject (positive, neutral or negative).

Criteria on the choice of the two events are: the event must be from a broader social meaning and to show up in the informative treatment, if not on all, then at least on most of the researched media.

Generally, analyses of the prime time news of national televisions in the program week in the Republic of Macedonia show that the Macedonian public is formally being offered a high degree of informative pluralism, in terms of topics that make up Macedonian everyday life, as well as the representation of the institutions of the government and of the political parties. However, it can be concluded that pluralism, i.e. the propulsiveness for different viewpoints are understood by the media as a transmission of a quantity of information rather than a quality of processing of information. This is seen through the dominance of the level of information, i.e. the presentation as opposed to the level of analytical approach, i.e. the creativity in the news. We can conclude that there is a bigger frequency of informative as opposed to analytical genres. Some televisions show an especial expression of political coloring in the general and individual previews of the reports. Using attributes, emotional expressions and comments, the informative element of the news instead of a neutral has a positive or a negative media context. In terms of the analytical creativity in the daily-informative shows, it is often reduced to presenting the editor's opinion that reflects the editing policy of the specific media house. In addition, no opposing opinions and additional facts are being displayed, nor information on events which objectively would support the comment.

In informing on the social-political events, the media in the Republic of Macedonia use numerous inaccurate and unclear sources of information, unmarked and illustrative materials without a distinct background, as well as reports of a conflicting character where only one side has been consulted. Also there are a recurrent number of cases of unsigned texts, especially on topics with insufficiently defined sources and factographic data. Analyses show that the media usually use the unnamed or generally defined sources to place unconfirmed information from the domestic scene, but also when reporting on events that occur outside of Macedonia, as well. If we make a comparative analysis with 2005 we can notice that unlike now - when the economic topics and the internal-political relations are treated the most, back then most of the influence in the media was on Macedonia's relations with the neighbors,

especially Kosovo and Serbia, and the euro integrative processes, and most focus was on Macedonia's relations with NATO.

5. MTV AND THE INFLUENCE OF THE POLITICAL ELITES

In a survey conducted by the Broadcasting Council of the Republic of Macedonia, in December 2013, 34% of the respondents said that they spend over four hours in front of the television, whereas 32.5% of the respondents said that they spend between two and four hours watching television. Only 0.9% of the citizens said that they do not watch television at all. The retired with 63.3% and the unemployed with 39.8% spend the most time watching television.

84.3% of the respondents watch television for the news, while 62.8% enjoy Turkish soap operas. At the same time, educational program is the least watched program with only 8.7%, cartoons with 7.2% and the children's program is at the bottom with 2.5%.

Out of the Macedonian televisions, the citizens mostly watch the news on Sitel - 58.1%, then Kanal 5 with 54.5% and Telma with 33%. When we talk about the soap operas, citizens usually also watch them on Sitel - 86.3%, then on Kanal 5 with 79%.

More than half of the citizens believe that culture, educational, children's, documentary, music and movie programs are insufficiently represented on domestic TV channels and note that there is a lack of content with an entertaining and educational character with an appropriate quality.

Although they are the most watched programs, many of the remarks on what's been aired on television, or 24.7% of the respondents, refer to the extensive airing of Turkish soap operas and the lack of enough documentaries, educational and scientific shows, and there is also a lack of sports, music, entertainment and humoristic program.

Parents mostly comment on violence broadcasted on televisions, believing that such scenes are especially harmful for their children, but at the same time fully agree that the protection of their children will increase if each program is aired at an appropriate time in accordance with the age group it is intended for.

Data shows that we are a nation that spends a lot of time in front of the television, but also that the Internet is considerably a vast source of information and an opportunity that people can get to all the current events that are happening in the country and in the world.

The Macedonian Radio and Television, according to media experts and researches has been and still is under the influence of political elites in charge. On the other hands, the rough commercialization and partisanship of other televisions with national concession, also drastically decreased the ratings of the most influential media, the radio and television. Macedonian citizens watch foreign programs, out of which the programs of the Croatian Television are the most popular and some research shows that they have the highest ratings in urban areas. Separate media experts claim that the influence on the government in the public service MTV was the highest in the period from 1992 to 2002. The political elite, which was in power in this period, used mostly the Macedonian Television as a tool for propaganda, while the Macedonian Radio was used less although they are a part of one system. However, it is a fact that political elites understood that the misuse of the public service creates a political resistance in the constituents. Meanwhile, MRTV's ratings went down, as well as its influence among the population that contributed to the decrease in its direct political influence. The new media practice shows that there is a dimensioning of a realer assessment as to the degree of its aid to the politics of the party in charge and the political forces in the opposition. The influence of the parties on MRTV is increased during election time, but is not neglected in the time between elections. The government places ideas for which it expects support. - Now the political influence is carefully distributed between the two opposing options in the Macedonian block, with the exemption of the influence of the Albanian block in the government, which is highly expressed - explains a media expert (from interviews realized with media experts and journalist, March, 2014).

6. CONCLUSION

The practice in the media profession shows that there are unwritten rules on proper, objective description of reality, i.e. in executing the informative function of the media, through its fundamental and most concise form of expression - the news. The first and fundamental rule is that all public facts should be correct. This entails that the uncertainties should remain as such, i.e. the undefined source should be pointed out. For example, as found from unofficial source, then - according to source in the specific media, or according to sources in a given ministry, organ or institution. The credibility entails integrity and balance in constructing the information, and the representation of the three views - the positive, the opposing and the neutral, with equal space and manner of presentation of facts in the same news. The de-ideologization of the news entails neutrality in the ideological coloring without the usage of phrases, epithets or narrative words of the type - however, despite, as opposed to, still, which implicitly mean distancing from another point of view, expressing bias to one source, and expressing the author's opinion which cannot be the subject of the report. At the same time, this means the unfounded tendencies, i.e. fact for decoration and addition should not be used. The excessive use of news with negative connotation, which is a common case in the media practice in the Republic of Macedonia, lead to a feeling of dissatisfaction, permanent criticizing of the conditions in society, a feeling of fear, uncertainty, danger from negative occurrences which media negativism multiplies in reality, feelings that determine life - on a day to day bases, feelings that determine the struggle for certain ideals and feelings of pessimism and skepticism.

In media representation of objectivity facts play a significant role. Analyses show that information spread an image of a colorful world, which supposedly is consisted of numerous unconnected pieces. Through the choice of facts, i.e. events according to their relevance and meaning, in the eyes if the recipients there is an image that looks like a colorful kaleidoscope. Facts are presented one next to another, without comment or a deeper analysis so that the reader, i.e. viewer can make his own image of reality. However, there is a danger of stereotypical journalism, because for deeper analyses, besides time, there is a lack of theoretical assumptions that would ease the distinction of truth as opposed to disinformation, of the important from the unimportant.

The majority of professionally articulated, different and personal political views should be the focal point in the informative function of the Public Service. It is the only precondition for creating and maintaining a continuity of quality public opinion, which will include citizens that are well informed, especially in terms of social issues immediately tied to civil rights and obligations that require a current, relevant political response. In that sense, citizens should experience the informative program of the Public Service as a reliable and convincing, active source of professionally processed and presented information, acquired from active social stakeholders on a relevant social topic, without any pressure from centers of political or economic power.

Endnotes:

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