

## MISSION, REALITY AND CURRENT CHALLENGES OF THE MASS MEDIA IN THE 21st CENTURY

Marcel LINCÉNYI <sup>1\*</sup> - Getnet TAMENE <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Department of Political Sciences of the Trenčín University of Alexander Dubček, Študentská 2, 911 50 Trenčín, Slovak Republic*

\*Corresponding author E-mail address: marcel.lincenyi@tnuni.sk

Received 29. 04. 2013; accepted 26. 06. 2013

### Abstract

The mass media plays a significant liaison role of providing the social reality to recipients of the current society. During such commercial period as of today, however, the mass media prefers the entertaining function, while minimizing, or even eliminating, the informative, canvassing, cultural and educative functions, thus fails to realize its public role for the society. Most media, today, from news to advertising, rely on spectacle, simplification and exaggeration to grab and hold audiences. Much of the current media is beset by idealization and demonization in which media manipulators depict themselves and their allies as heroes and saints, and their opponents or targets as villains, fools and disturbed characters, both to create exciting stories and win battles. What is missing is precisely the information, which would discredit the system and result in reforms that would lock out many of those who now work to maintain the system solely for their own benefit.

**Keywords:** mass media, role, features, public opinion, social reality

### 1 The Significance of media

Several theorists have pointed out the importance of media. For instance Denis McQuail indicates the mass media as the source of power (McQuail, D. 2007, p. 21). This is related with the mass media's potential, as a means of influence, control and promotion of innovation in a society and also because it serves as a source of information vital to the functioning of most social institutions. The mass media provides an environment, in which a number of events take place in the public life from across the national and international arena, and it is an important source of public knowledge, it provides an interpretation of social reality and ideas about it. In this regard, the media holds a significant status; as a result it is capable of creating famous public personalities, including politicians. Moreover, the mass media plays a role of value-determining; the media is expected to reflect what is normal and what is not.

The mass media produces a number of positive effects: among others, it makes culture accessible, updates the timelines of information, disseminates a huge amount of direct knowledge, and enables the concurrent information as well as opinion homogenization of societies at regional, national and international, or global levels, while providing option of expanding serious alarm information.

A traditional view on the role of media in a democratic society has been summed up by the German sociologist and philosopher Jürgen Habermas:

- oversee the socio-political environment,
- explain the problems,
- liaison to convey the multi-party dialogue and multiple perspectives,
- provide a mechanism that holds policy makers responsible,
- facilitate the participation of citizens in public life,
- seek to disrupt the normal routine of some political procedures. (Musil, 2008, p. 43-44)

One of the examples that prove the impact of media may be the fact that most of the time in the Western civilization after bed and work people frequently devote to media tracking. With this regard, the time range for the Czech Republic has been 37. 2 hours a week for the younger generation of 15-30 years of age group; and 42. 38 hours a week for the population over 30 years old in 2000. (Musil, 2008, p. 21)

Mass media in contemporary democracies serve as a link between the society and the sphere of power. Media is capable to formulate themes, and to make the themes publicly available. (Řichová, 2002, p. 177) A French thinker and significant cultural critic Jean Baudrillard believes that the communication technology is designed to serve us: "through its disturbing practice it rather assumes the role of depleting our faith in reality." (Horrocks, 2002, p. 36-37)

Concerning the Slovak mass media, in recent years it is majorly dominated with entertainment and negative information. A large number of publications refer to various scandals, reports, various tragedies and misfortunes. It thus raises question whether the mass media should be an informer, or an entertainer.

I. Rožňová is confident that the Slovak and world media markets can't exist without the tabloid. "The objective is not to strike a nonsensical restriction measures, but to build a healthy media public awareness and take effective steps to weaken the position of the boulevard." (2010, p. 66)

In Europe since the seventeenth century the conventional understanding about newspapers and similar publications has been that they are instruments of political liberalization and socio-economic progress, or they are seen as a legitimate means of opposition in the face of the established power. However, a significant shift has occurred in the perception of the mass media in the American Committee for Freedom of the Press, which in 1947 published a report in which in addition to the principle of freedom has stated the concept of social responsibility. (McQuail, 2007, p. 149)

According to the theory of social responsibility the mass media has commitment to the society and media ownership is solely a public matter. Mass media is supposed to provide a forum for publication of ideas should be self-adjustable and observe codes of ethical conduct and professional principles. (McQuail, 2007, p. 150)

In addition to the theory of social responsibility, several print theories attempt to define the role of media: authoritarian concepts, democratic Socialist concept, libertarian concept, revolutionary concept, concept development, Soviet type Communist concept (Repková, 2004, p. 2) are among others.

The mission of media has been characterized by many authors with reference to the functions that should be filled by the media. Concerning media function, theoreticians emphasize each of the following features: articulation of ideas, influence on the public, control of political activities, training and education, political socialization, influencing economic activity, advertising, and creation of a dedicated public opinion or mutual communication of groups that actively participate in socio-political process such as various lobbies and other interest groups, political parties and the like. (Kunczik, 1995, p. 33)

## 2 Media functions

The functionalist approach is based on distinguishing six functions (Burton, 2001, p. 140): among which are informative, social (correlative), political (canvassing), cultural (continuity) and entertaining functions. For now, we will embark on the first three functions.

Thanks to the informative function, *inter alia*, from the foreign news media, among others, we learn about foreign events and we could be able to get to distant places. Many television viewers, respectively internet newspaper readers could watch the election process of the new pope live, at times look into the Sistine Chapel, even though they have never been to Rome in person. Right to informations and media pluralism in article 11 guarantees the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. (Kubišová, 2012, p. 96).

The mass media offers, with regard to our social functions, own patterns of behaviour, which then is being accepted by the common individual. For example, the mass media presents a slim malnourished model as a pattern of beauty, despite the fact that surveys show that men are more attracted by ordinary and even rounded up women.

The mass media experiences a number of challenges within the realm of social function. For example, it can spread the idea that the family is the most important element in helping the elderly person to cope up with the changes associated with aging. (Bočáková, 2011, p. 161) Mass media can also support a variety of humanitarian actions that are set to tackle poverty across the world. (Tomášiková, 2011, p. 225)

In the political sphere, the mass media plays a liaison position; it communicates about politics to the citizens, thus facilitate linkage and citizens' involvement into the political life. Subsequently, the media plays an important role in agitating citizens before the launch of elections, or referendum. Some authors consider the control of the political system as the most dominant function of mass media. Other experts claim the role of entertainment as the most dominant feature in private-business media; they emphasize that the prior function of the public media is the informative one, i.e. reporting and disseminating objective information. One of the world's most famous theoreticians of mass media and sociology of culture, the Canadian Herbert Marshall McLuhan draws attention to the fundamental role of the media: storing information and facilitating their movements. (1991, p. 151)

An independent expert of the media and dean of the Faculty of Mass media at Pan European University in Bratislava, Samuel Brečka argues that the function of mass media is intermediating politics, based on the following facts:

- Thanks to widespread media and increasing range of media tracking, citizens receive the most important sources of information about society and politics.
- The media brings up its own picture of social and political life.
- The media is an essential intermediary of public and political relationship.
- The media is an important factor of political socialization.
- The media plays a significant political role, especially during election periods. (Brečka, 2002, p. 135)

Theorists are not unanimous in defining the functions of the mass media. For example, Lutz Hagen indicates that the tasks of mass media is reporting information, disseminating facts and opinions and also plays the watch

dog and criticize politicians (Schulz et al., 2004, p. 51). Juraj Vojtek recognizes six media functions: information, political, social, aesthetic, and cultural and education. (Matúš, 2008, str. 31)

### 3 Public interest

Since the media is expected to serve the public interest or general welfare, we may agree with most authors, concerning the role of public media as consisting of three sub-functions:

- The media possesses a reporting function – this allows citizens involvement in the political process with a rational manner and on the basis of ever updating lengthy information.
  - The media should enable individuals and groups to disseminate further facts and opinions.
  - The media should watch or criticize those, who exercise power, misuse it or undermine democracy.
- (Schultz, 2004, et al., p. 51)

The general concept of public interest is hard to define. So far, there is no vivid vision of what public objectives should the mass media target to fulfil so that its role should continue to be based on socio-normative principles.

### 4 Media criticism today

Media criticism is at its lowest stage, today, largely because the mainstream media allows virtually no open discussion of the subject. Some criticism does get to the public, of course, but most of it is corrupted by the same forces that have turned the rest of the media into a source of manipulation.

How to responsibly incorporate new media, including social media, into responsible daily journalism remains the focus of ongoing discussions. The news media has become a part of the power and economic system that it is supposed to report on. Instead of standing at a distance from events and trying to provide an accurate account, all too often it is just another inside player manipulating information for its own ends. This not only means that media companies have a conflict of interest but also that journalists who would prefer to be honest end up subordinating themselves to those in power in their own organizations and shaping their coverage accordingly. It also means that media criticism that isn't afraid to report on what is taking place is now essential to the maintenance of democracy. (Ken, Sanes, 2008)

Nevertheless, this is not often the case. According to Chomsky, a well-known critic, the job of media is not to inform, but to misinform: Divert public attention from important issues and changes decided by the political and economic elites, by the technique of flood or continuous flood of distractions and insignificant information. He summarizes his critics in what he calls the ten strategies, three of which include: the strategy of distraction, creating problems then offer solutions, the strategy of encouraging the public to be complacent with mediocrity. (Timsit, Sylvain, 2010)

He argues that the primary element of social control is the strategy of distraction which is to divert public attention from important issues and changes determined by the political and economic elites, by the technique of flood or flooding continuous distractions and insignificant information. Distraction strategy is also understood as essential to prevent the public interest in the essential knowledge in the area of the science, economics, psychology, neurobiology and cybernetics. (Timsit, S. 2010)

Concerning the strategy of creating problems and then offering a solution, also known as “problem -reaction- solution”, he goes on arguing that it creates a problem, a “situation” referred to cause some reaction in the audience, so this is the principal of the steps that one must accept. For instance, the act of creating an economic crisis, to accept as a necessary evil, to generate retreat of social rights and the dismantling of public services (Timsit, S. 2010).

Also, there is strategy of encouraging the public to be complacent with mediocrity, as argues Chomsky in similar material above, this could promote the public to believe that the fact is fashionable to be stupid, vulgar and uneducated. Further criticisms indicate that media is owned by wealthy men who have every interest in not having certain ideas, opinions or attitudes expressed, and this makes it an ally of power.

In his book, *Media Control*, with regard to democratic societies such as the US situation, Chomsky emphasizes fear as strong ingredient in manufacturing consent. On the ground of fear and with the help of media, the masses are made to support a war as well as other government initiatives. They are influenced to fear the evil despot of a foreign land who is hell-bent on taking over the world. Fear unites the public like no other, and the jingoistic slogans feed the mass hysteria making the bewildered herd that much easier to manipulate. However, “the picture of the world that’s presented to the public has only the remotest relation to reality.” (Chomsky, 182) Reality does not matter in the court of public opinion as long as it pushes the agenda forward. The agenda, of course, only serves the narrow democratic governing body that decides what is right for the public, because they cannot think for themselves. In fact, the validity of this interesting critical thought is open for further analysis.

## 5 Conclusion

In recent years, mass media has increasingly preferred fun features and entertainment to other functions. The other functions are either minimized or completely eliminated. Academicians and media experts should keep criticizing the declining tendency of media obligations arising from the theory of social responsibility.

Today, all media is a form of action. Stories, rhetoric, sensory images and manipulated impressions are all efforts to influence people's perceptions and action, evoke fears and desires, and play to values. The omission of information from the media is a form of action, as well.

Also, at present, the media is full of efforts to get at the truth, which are often disguised or limited in various ways. Many of these efforts to tell the public the truth can be found in the fictions of movies and television which openly depict the con artist culture we now live in and the corruption of the media.

Finally, it is necessary to increase media literacy, education to the public through the media, so that people could be aware of the role of the mass media. The major challenge for the media mission is to be able to define what constitutes the public interest.

## References

- [1] O. Bočáková: *Sociálne aspekty v starostlivosti o seniorov v kontexte sociálnej politiky štátu*. In.: O. Bočáková., A. Tomašiková.: *Aktuálne otázky politiky*, Zborník príspevkov z medzinárodnej konferencie konanej dňa 4. februára 2011, Trenčín, Trenčianska univerzita Alexandra Dubčeka v Trenčíne, Celouniverzitné pracovisko, 2011, 400 s., ISBN 978-80-8075-485-3.
- [2] S. Brečka: *Médiá v Slovenskej republike*, Trnava, Univerzita sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, 2002. ISBN 80-89034-12-8.
- [3] G. Burton, J. Jiráček: *Úvod do studia médií*, Brno, BARRISTER & PRINCIPAL, 2001, 392 s., ISBN 80-85947-67-6.
- [4] M. Fabuš, M. Kohuťár: *Motivation - the Determinants of Job Performance of Human Resources in the Enterprise*. In: Visnyk of Volyn Institute for Economics and Management, Visnyk of Volyn Institute for Economics and Management, 2012/003, No. 3 (2012), p. 47-50, ISSN 2224-8609.
- [5] N. Chomsky: *Media Control*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Canada. 2002, ISBN 1-58322-536-6.
- [6] Ch. Horrocks: *Marshall McLuhan a virtualita*, Praha, Triton, 2002, ISBN 80-7254-269-9.
- [7] Z. Kubišová: *Charta základných práv EÚ*. BOČÁKOVÁ, O. Výzvy spoločnosti 21. storočia, zborník vedeckých prác, Trenčín, 2013, ISBN 978-80-8075-574-4.
- [8] M. Kunczik: *Základy masové komunikace*. 1. vyd., Praha, Univerzita Karlova, vydavatelství Karolinum, 1995, ISBN 80-7184-134-X.
- [9] L. Hagen: *Informační kvalita a její měření*. In.: SCHULZ, W. et al.: *Analýza obsahu mediálních sdělení*, Praha, Univerzita Karlova v Praze, 2004, 149 s., ISBN 80-246-0827-8.
- [10] D. McQuail: *Úvod do teorie masové komunikace*. Praha, Portál, 2007, 447 s., ISBN 978-80-7367-338-3.
- [11] M. McLuhan: *Jak rozumět médiím*, Praha, Odeon, 1991, ISBN 80-207-0296-2.
- [12] J. Matúš: *Návrh koncepcie výchovy k mediálnej gramotnosti na stredných školách v podmienkach Slovenskej republiky*. Trnava, Fakulta masmediálnej komunikácie Univerzity sv. Cyrila a Metoda v Trnave, 2008, ISBN 978-80-8105-051-0.
- [13] M. Mečár, M. Kordoš, N. Štefková: *K niektorým aspektom spoločenskej zodpovednosti firiem*. 2006. In: *Verejná správa a regionálny rozvoj*, ISSN 1337-2955, roč. II, č.3(2006), s.52-60.
- [14] J. Musil: *Úvod do sociálnej a masové komunikace*. Praha, Univerzita Jana Amose Komenského, 2008, ISBN 978-80-86723-44-0.
- [15] L. Mura: *Uplatňovanie etiky v podnikateľskej praxi ako základ pre spoločensky zodpovedné podnikanie*. In: *Sborník z konferencie Spoločenská zodpovednosť firiem – transfer vedeckých poznatkov do praxe*, Olomouc, MVŠO, ISBN 978-80-87240-69-4.
- [16] I. Polakevičová: *Analýza manipulatívnych prvkov komunikačných modelov*. In: FICHNOVÁ, K. *Vybrané otázky identity, kultúry a masovej komunikácie*, Nitra, Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, Filozofická fakulta, 2010, ISBN 978-80-8094-847-4.
- [17] J. Rožňová: *Bulvarizácia printových médií na Slovensku*. In: FICHNOVÁ, K. *Vybrané otázky identity, kultúry a masovej komunikácie*, Nitra, Univerzita Konštantína Filozofa v Nitre, Filozofická fakulta, 2010, ISBN 978-80-8094-847-4.
- [18] B. Říhová: *Úvod do současné politologie : Srovnávací analýza demokratických politických systémů*. Praha, Portál, 2002, ISBN 80-7178-628-4.
- [19] T. Repková: *Ako robiť profesionálne noviny*. Bratislava, Nadácia otvorenej spoločnosti – Open Society Foundation ako účelové vydanie vo vydavateľstve LOGOS, Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška, 2004, ISBN 80-88800-29-3.
- [20] K. Sanes: *Media Studies: Big Media & Bad Criticism*. 2008. Available on: <http://ekawenats.blogspot.sk/2008/09/big-media-bad-criticism.html>
- [21] W. Schultz, L. Hagen, H. Scherer, I. Reifová: *Analýza obsahu mediálních sdělení*. Praha, Karolinum, 1998,

ISBN 80-246-0827-8.

- [22] S. Timsit: In *Pressenza*: "TOP 10 MEDIA MANIPULATION STRATEGIES". Paris. September 21, 2010. Available on: <http://www.syti.net/Manipulations.html>
- [23] A. Tomášková: *Chudoba vo svete*. In.: BOČÁKOVÁ, O., TOMÁŠIKOVÁ, A.: Aktuálne otázky politiky, Zborník príspevkov z medzinárodnej konferencie konanej dňa 4. februára 2011, Trenčín, Trenčianska univerzita Alexandra Dubčeka v Trenčíne, Celouniverzitné pracovisko, 2011, 400 s., ISBN 978-80-8075-485-3.

*Review: Mária Kovářová  
Alena Tomášiková*