

The Role of Mass Media in Modern Democracy

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Abstract

Based on reviews of communication literature, the present paper intends to analyze the functions of mass media from the theoretical points of view. It is established through the findings that mass media plays a significant role in modern society. They bring about a general diffusion of knowledge about life in the world today, thus influencing many aspects of our social, political and economic patterns. Mass media has certain important functions to perform which include influencing public opinion, determining the political agenda, providing a link between the government and the people, acting as a government watchdog, and affecting socialization, entertainment, educating the masses, and mobilization as well.

Key words: Media, communication

J.E.L. Classification: L82, M37

1. Introduction

The term "mass media" in the literature on mass communication theory covers a wide spectrum. By definition, mass media is any medium used to transmit mass communication i.e. a message created by a person or a group of people sent through a transmitting device to a large audience or market at the same time. From this definition we can immediately outline the main types of mass media: newspapers, television, radio and cinema. For example, television, when it broadcasts, it goes elsewhere and the people of different places can watch it. In another way, mass media can be called as the function in communication that is apparent through a carrier of signals to multi point destination: such as, language, design, facial expression, print, radio, television, mobile phone, billboards and musical instruments etc. (Berger, 2002). In the electronic age, some new tools of communication become prominent because is reaching an increasingly mass audience. It is called 'new media' and includes the Internet, mobile phones and others. From other points of view, mass media was defined as comprising of eight industries: books, newspapers, magazines, recordings, radio, movies, television and the internet.

2. Developments on the media market

The development of the mass media during the last several decades is characterized by the following main tendencies (Fog, 2004):

- *Convergence*: Different media like newspapers, radio, television, telephone and internet are increasingly being fused together, technologically as well as economically.
- *Concentration*: Media companies are being merged together and controlled by fewer owners. This concentration is horizontal (several media under the same owner) as well as vertical (several links in the "food chain" under the same company group). Different media bring news from the same sources. In Romania, more than half of the media deals— regarding the print sector and news agencies as well as TV and radio stations – are done by media groups that are controlled by three Romanian businessmen (Pavel, 2010):
 - Adrian Sârbu, majority shareholder in the Media PRO group;
 - Dan Voiculescu, founder of the Intact media group and,
 - Sorin Ovidiu Vântu, owner of the Realitatea-Cațavencu media group.
- *Globalization*: The media are owned by multinational companies broadcasting across borders. For example, The Ringier, a Swiss-owned company has a massive print business with operations in 10 countries, and a portfolio of about 100 titles. In 2010, in Romania, its portfolio includes: the former market-leader of the newspaper market and now second most important, Libertatea (is the daily newspaper issued in tabloid format); Libertatea de Duminiță, (issued in tabloid format), Libertatea Pentru Femei (weekly magazine for women), Unica (monthly glossy magazine), Joy and Lumea Femeilor (two trend magazines for women), two TV guide, (TV Mania, and TV Satelit), Auto Bild (a bimonthly magazine dedicated to the automotive industry), and two magazine dedicated to teenagers (Bravo and Bravo Girl).
- *Commercialization*: Advertisements are sneaked into entertainment as well as news stories. The distinctions between advertisements, news and entertainment are increasingly blurred. Audience groups with less spending money are not considered.
- *Commercial influence*: Advertisers and owners have influence on editorial decisions.
- *Trivialization* that means:
 - More sex. Until the 1990s, the Romanian television constructed the mainstream viewing public as idealized replications of the middle-class nuclear family, defined as monogamous, heterosexual couples with children. In response, the overwhelming trend was to provide programming targeted toward this consumer group. After the 1990s and the introduction of demographic measurements, the television broadcast networks defined mass audience as an index of a program's popularity to set commercial rates for advertisers and start to produce and broadcast a plethora of programs built

- around the values and concerns of the contemporary nuclear family, where pleasure became a more acceptable foundation for sexual activity.
- More violence, which has negative effects because, causes aggressive behaviour. It has often been feared that children are particularly vulnerable to violence on television because their immature cognitive development does not enable them to discriminate between real and fictional violence. Another dimension of the e.g. television violence debate has been a concern that frequent viewing of violence on television makes people unrealistically fearful of violence in their own environment. In Romania, if we quantify the extent of violence on our screens, we can say that 80% of prime time Romanian television contains at least one incident of physical violence.
 - More prying into the private lives of celebrities. As long as there are celebrities, people will be interested in their private, as well as their public lives – and the media will try to satisfy this desire. Celebrity photographers, or „paparazzi”, armed with zoom lenses and the promise of huge cash rewards for an exclusive exposé, pursue the rich and famous. Photos of Princess Diana and Dodi Al Fayed kissing on a boat in the Mediterranean may have constituted the biggest celebrity exclusive in the history of tabloid journalism. The Daily Mirror paid a reported \$450,000 for British rights to publish shots of Princess of Wales and Dodi Al Fayed on their vacation off Sardinia. Italian photographer, Mario Brenna earned an estimated \$5 million (£3 million) from global sales of the pictures. On the other hand, media editors have also been known to use private investigators to find out about the private lives of the rich and famous people because when a celebrity is involved, the value of that sale can be quite substantial. The past few years have seen an explosive rise in the prices paid for exclusive celebrity photos. For example, in the Topping the Forbes' list of the 10 most expensive celebrity photos is a photo of twins of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. According to published reports, People magazine, has paid between \$11 million and \$15 million for exclusive first shots in August 2008. The second most lucrative photo sale to date came in March 2008, when bold-face pair Jennifer Lopez and Marc Anthony sold exclusive first shots of twins Max and Emme to People magazine. In return for the lavish spread, the glossy allegedly forked over \$6 million. Third place went to Pitt and Jolie for photos of their first biological child, photos for that People magazine paid in June 2006 \$4.1 million (Rose, 2009).

This examples show us that media avoid controversial issues and serious debates. Debates are reduced to an entertaining clash between personalities, resembling a boxing match, where the issue of controversy has only secondary importance.

3. The function of mass media

The functions of mass media became an important field of research during the 1940s and 1950s, a period of rapid and extensive development in the mass media. This was also a time when struggling economies and other consequences of the Second World

War were causing disruptions in society. Researchers became interested about the effects of mass media messages on people and society: how they affect opinions and attitudes, culture, habits etc. This kind of effects was called functionalism. Earlier forms of structural-functionalist theories were used in anthropology and sociology and set out to interpret society as a structure with interrelated parts. Functionalism addresses society as a whole in terms of the function of its constituent elements; namely norms, customs, traditions and institutions. A common analogy, popularized by Herbert Spencer, presents these parts of society as "organs" that work toward the proper functioning of the "body" as a whole (Urry, 2000).

Merton (1949) introduced a form of functionalism that has been widely adopted by media researchers. He criticised functional unity, saying that not all parts of a modern, complex society work for the functional unity of society. Some institutions and structures may have other functions, and some may even be generally dysfunctional, or be functional for some while being dysfunctional for others. This is because not all structures are functional for society as a whole. Some practices are only functional for a dominant individual or a group (Holmwood, 2005). Thus, televisions that show crimes might be functional for the viewing audience as a whole but dysfunctional for children who learn that aggression is a good way to deal with problems. The functions for society (the larger audience) may be offset by the dysfunctions for an individual child or for a particular group of viewers (children).

Directly applied functionalism to mass communication, according to Lasswell (1948), the main functions of media in society, were surveillance of the environment, correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment and transmission of the social heritage from one generation to the next (cultural transmission). Another theorist, (Wright, 1960), developed this basic functions to describe many of the effects of the media and added entertainment as a fourth key media function. This may be part of the transmitted culture but it has another aspect - that of providing individual reward, relaxation and reduction of tension, which makes it easier for people to cope with real-life problems and for societies to avoid breakdown (Mendelsohn, 1966). These four functions became known as the “classic four functions of the media”.

3.1. Surveillance of the environment

The first function of mass media is surveillance of the environment, because inform the people about what, when, where, who, why and how things are happening pertaining to personalities or institutions. The media keeps the public informed about national and international news, ranging from world stock-market prices and revolutionary uprisings to local traffic and weather conditions or as to the actions and policies of government agencies and officials.

So, we can say that the mass media has watchdog role as the “eyes, ears and voice of the audience” because the peoples accept their reports and use them as a basis for shaping their thoughts, attitudes and actions. There are two types of surveillance:

- ***Beware or warning surveillance*** that occurs when the media the people about natural calamities like floods, depressed economic conditions, malfunction, evidence of corruption, abuse of power, increasing inflation or ineffective policies and programs. An important role in surveillance of the environment has

investigative reporters such as those from Antena 3, that often uncover evidence of unethical and sometimes illegal conduct of officials, thus causing the resignation of high government officials. Although the media has been criticized of having a "liberal bias" all presidential administrations have been closely observed by the media.

- **Instrumental surveillance** that refers to the transmission of information that is useful and helpful in everyday life. For instance, the advertisements provide news about the new products, health issues, fashion ideas and so on. They help the customer to make purchasing decisions. At an individual level, the surveillance of the environment function of media increase personal esteem, provide base for social interaction, provide knowledge and information, confers social status and prestige.

3.2. Correlation of the parts of society in responding to the environment

According to Lasswell (1948), closely linked to surveillance is the correlation function. The mass media do not only supply facts and figures when they provide news and information. They also provide information about the meaning of many of those news items. Correlation function refers on the one hand to how the mass media selects, explains, interprets and comments the meaning of events and information about the environment, and on the other hand to the response of the whole society to the environment – that is developing public opinion. An informed or enlightened opinion is essential for a healthy democracy.

Articles in newspapers, or discussions on radio and television shows about political, economic or social events, for example, have been selected and interpreted by the mass media, and have consequences for how the audience understands and responds to these events. People's attitudes and their opinions about political figures, for instance, are often influenced by the impressions that they receive from the mass media. A negative impression of the Romanian Government, for instance, was reinforced by some press and television, which continually portrayed the government as corrupt. On the other hand, other press and television highlighted the positive contributions of government departments and commercial institutions.

Through the media, audience can read, watch or hear the views of a variety of people: politicians, economic analysts, political analysts, cultural critics, academics and so on. There are two main advantages of the mass media performing this function. Firstly, audience is exposed to a larger number of different points of view about an issue than would be possible in interpersonal communication alone. Also, the mass media make available a wide range of expertise that individuals might not otherwise have access to.

Interpretation can take many forms. Because of that, the downside of the correlation function, that is often regarded as editorializing function of mass media is that there is no guarantee that interpretations by media commentators and other 'experts' are accurate and valid. There is also the danger that an individual may come to rely too heavily on the views carried by the media and become a passive and uncritical recipient of mass messages.

3.3. Transmission of social value

Today media have assumed the functions of transmitting social value, which was done by parents, teachers and other elders. This is also called the cultural transmission or socialization function of mass media. This third function refers to the media's ability to communicate the norms, rules and values of a society. Various aspects of our habits, desires and relationship, both as individuals and as groups, are examined by the media. Thus it helps in shaping social values and people learn how they are supposed to act and what values are important.

Media today provide main frames of reference to society. Cultural transmission is a teaching function of mass media and tries to create common bonds among members of society. For example, the audience learns that motherhood and child rearing are activities that have a positive value for society and it is assumed that mass audiences will accept this value. Many television reality shows promote values such as respect for authority and family harmony. Other programs are built around a specific theme such as health, literature, culture, art, religion, environment, or sport, designed to educate the audience and encourage behaviours which are considered appropriate in a given society.

In the same time, urbanization, relative anonymity, social uprooting, and the shift from traditional social organizations like joint family, clan have increased the role of media as transmitters of knowledge and values.

On the other hand, the media is considered an agent of socialization, because teach audience about the political facts and opinions and finally help people to form their political belief-structures and their political culture. The transmission of value through media, most of the time, is subtle but important and because of this, mass media have today become essential to carry out functions of socialization and transmission of social heritage.

3.4. Entertainment

The fourth function of the mass media, entertainment, refers to the media's ability to present messages which provide escapism and relaxation. Sometimes entertainment is called the diversion function because it diverts us from the real world. Entertainment always has been part of society, increasingly so in an age in which more people have a greater amount of leisure time. Through sound recordings, film, press, radio, television and internet, entertainers have been able to attract audiences around the globe. Such entertainment may involve *stimulation* of the senses (as an antidote to boredom), for example by use of music. Another type of entertainment focuses on *relaxation*, with the media offering verbal, visual or musical assistance in calmness and tranquillity. The third aspect of entertainment is called *emotional release*, in which the media provide a means for getting rid of tensions, hostilities, anger or fears.

Although the entertainment function of the media has frequently been criticized because of the low quality content of some programs, we have to recognize its positive consequences because mass media learn us about things in general, seek relief from boredom, stimulates our emotions and satisfy our curiosity, helps fill our leisure time, exposes us to experiences and events that we could not attend in person, keeps us company for pass the time.

Conclusion

The mass media constitute the backbone of democracy. The media provide information, identify problems in our society and serve as a medium for deliberation. They are also the watchdogs that people rely on for uncovering errors and wrongdoings by those who have power. It is therefore reasonable to require that the media perform to certain standards with respect to these functions, and our democratic society rests on the assumption that they do.

We cannot give any general rank order to these functions, or say anything about their relative frequency of occurrence. The correspondence between function and precise content of media is not exact, since one function overlaps with another, and the same content can serve different functions. The set of statements refers to functions for society and needs to be reformulated in order to take account of the perspectives either of the media themselves (their own view of their tasks) or of the individual user of mass media, as in 'uses and gratifications' theory and research. Media function can thus refer both to more or less objective tasks of the media (such as news or editorializing) and to motives or benefits as perceived by a media user (such as being informed or entertained).

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