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Media affecting the society – does the media manipulate us? 2018 parliamentary election in Hungary

Joanna Buczulska

Faculty of Management and Social Communication, Chair of Journalism, Media, and Social Communication, Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Poland

E-mail address: jbuczulska@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to answer a pressing question of whether or not the media affects the recipients and – if so – to what an extent and under what circumstances. The author of this publication, basing on scientific theories and media influence models divided into concepts of the omnipotence of the media and its indirect influence, touches upon chosen elements of election campaign preceding 2018 parliamentary election in Hungary. The predominant goal of this dissertation is to check whether or not the media manipulate us.

Keywords: Communication, Media, Manipulation, Politics, Parliamentary Election, Hungary, Media Influence, Omnipotence of the Media, Moral Panic, Magic Bullet Theory, Cultivation Theory, Spiral of Silence

1. INTRODUCTION

On 8th April 2018, the citizens of Hungary were granted yet another opportunity of deciding about the composition of the Parliament and choosing people, who would rule the country for the next four years. For the third time in a row, the voters expressed their trust in the then ruling party, Fidesz, whereas Viktor Orban was entrusted the task of forming the

government. As the direction Hungary had been heading had met with a strong criticism of the European Union, many people were surprised with such a high support for the aforementioned party, which once again won a qualified majority in the Parliament. The outcome of the election was undoubtedly affected by many factors, but many people may ask how do identify them and, most importantly, does the media have an impact on the final result. Within the scope of this article, the author is going to present scientific theories, by means of which she is going to attempt to answer the question above, while at the same time referring to elements of election campaign preceding 2018 parliamentary election in Hungary.

2. INFLUENCE AND RECEPTION OF THE MEDIA

It can be stated without a doubt that the media has become one of the most important sources of information, which, however, cannot be provided as an argument confirming the formulated thesis that it can manipulate the recipient to a notable extent. One has to differentiate communication from influencing. In the first case, the recipient is presented with a message and can, basing on his or her knowledge and opinions, decide whether or not he or she accepts it. In the case of influencing, the beliefs and opinions of the recipient are adjusted to the needs of message sender. According to the ritual model presented by James W. Carey, media consumption is an action, where not a given piece of information is important by itself, but rather – the possibility of experiencing the reality created at the moment of its reception (Newcomb, Hirsch, 1983). Following this logic, if ritual communication serves an integrative role and maintains strong bonds within a particular group, then media message recipients become a part of a virtual reality created by said media, which is discussed by J. Hartley in his scientific article entitled *Radiocracy*. To put it differently, the known reality becomes transformed by the media to such an extent that one can formulate a thesis about the existence of a media-created reality (Meyrowitz, 1998). Can the media affect the recipients in a way that is troublesome to notice? Are we manipulated? Such questions are of utmost importance and have to be answered, as it is believed that a properly informed, autonomic society is the only one which can make sensible political decisions. As the media can manipulate the society, the entire democratic model can be distorted or threatened (Croteau, Hoynes, 2000).

3. THEORIES AND MODELS

The question of whether or not the media can influence, affect, and shape opinions, tastes, and beliefs has been with us since its emergence. Available theories and models are created, changed, adjusted, or expanded on in order to account for the passage of time, the development and transformation of the media, as well as to follow political, societal, and cultural changes. Relations between the media and recipients are, however, so complex that there is no one definitive model or theory that would comprehensively discuss the impact of the media on people. At various occasions, theoretical scientists have tried to encapsulate the vastness of the issue and prove – depending on their major research goal – an overwhelming or a highly limited impact of the media on the recipients. Due to the fact that together with the development of technology, societies change, as well as the media changes its mode of operation and available tools (it is true especially in the case of the New Media), new

phenomena emerge, which will be probably addressed in future models and theories. It can be stated unequivocally that it is simply impossible to create a universal theory that would specify the extent of media influence. That is why the author is going to present certain theories proposed by scientists divided into those assuming the exceptional effect of the media on the society and those which consider the media to have a rather marginal influence on people.

3. 1. Theories relating to the direct impact of the media proposed between the 19th and 20th century – the omnipresence of media basing on the Magic Bullet Theory

Between 1920s and 1930s, when messages were sent to the recipients of the press, movies, newsreels, posters, and radio, the Magic Bullet Theory emerged (Sproule, 1989). According to its assumptions, due to the atomization taking place in mass societies, people isolate socially and the level of social control is highly limited. What is more, individual people are equipped with a similar set of instincts which means that they react to certain events similarly and interpret media messages almost identically. Media messages are here considered to be „bullets" hitting the eyes and years of the individuals and changing their modes of behaving and thinking. The changes are not only immediate, but also identical, which makes them remarkably dangerous. The idea was presented in the most concise manner by Harold Lasswell, the creator of persuasion model being a part of his propaganda theory. He checked how propaganda techniques utilized during the First World War had caused mass opinion and attitude changes. Amongst effective propaganda tools, there are creating *the image of an enemy* and a *conscious lie.* They are both strictly connected to a famous statement of J. Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda of the Third Reich, who said that if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth. As it usually is, such obvious statements are not as obvious as it may seem, because if such knowledge was common and people were able to identify such elements in messages presented to them, where would not be such phenomena as the contemporary „fake news" and „post-truth" (Harsin, 2018).

3. 2. Direct media impact theories proposed between 1960s and 1970s – return to the concept of the omnipotence of the media

After some time, when research started to focus on a new, alternative paradigm, basing on which the media affect the recipient in a limited and indirect manner, in the 60s, there was the return to the concept of the omnipotence of the media. It has to be remembered that at that time, aside from the press and radio, television started to be a very popular way of spreading various messages as well.

3. 2. 1. Cultivation Theory

There were counter-theories proposed to the concept of indirect media impact, among which there was the cultivation theory created by Georg Gernber. It states that the media present mainstream opinions, over-representing stimuli directing the recipients towards conservatism. Television blurs differences in perceiving the reality, blends various opinions with the mainstream, and bends them in such a way to be adjusted to external agendas (blur, blend, and bend concept). To put it differently, television not only mirrors the reality, but also creates its new, virtual version. It is selective, for it picks certain elements of the factual reality while at the same time neglecting some others. The more time the recipients spend in

front of their TVs, the more they believe in the reality presented to them. The theory proposed by Gerbner was criticized on many occasions, but empirical examinations carried out to date have shown its validity.

3. 2. 2. Agenda-Setting Theory

This theory was the result of research on election-related behavioral patterns during the 1968 presidential election carried out at Chapel Hill by M. McCombs and D. Show and specifying the role of the media as an information gatekeeper. The media typically shows what it considers to be important. The importance of a given information is characterized by the frequency and mode of its presentation. The more limited the knowledge of a recipient in a given field, the higher the possibility of influencing him or her. Commitments, promises, and other rhetorical elements that are presented in the news, in headlines, and in articles present the core of a particular information and help recipients assume a given angle of perceiving them (Mccombs, Shaw, 1972). The aforementioned theory was then developed by E.M. Rogers and J.W. Dearing who stated that the agenda has to always be analyzed in three different categories: media-oriented, general public-related, and political one, providing that none of them is dominated by topics being of factual importance for the real world. To sum up, media creates a map of things that are important in our minds and then – consolidates certain ideas by repeating them in a regular fashion. For example, a piece of information on a highly specific threat will directly translate into the feeling of safety (or lack thereof) of the recipients of such a message (Rogers, Dearing, Bregman, 1993).

3. 2. 3. Spiral of Silence

The spiral of silence theory was formulated by a German public opinion expert, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. According to its assumptions, the impact of the media on the recipients is based on the creation of a specific opinion that is seemingly expressed by the majority. People who are afraid of criticism, exclusion, or isolation tend to hide their opinions when a given topic is brought up (for example issues connected with a given political party) in the media or during a conversation. Such people also tend to express views being contrary to their true beliefs in public. As a result, the dominant opinion becomes even more prevalent and people who are silent about the given matter become increasingly more convinced that they are truly in the minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1977). According to the discussed theory, the impact of the media is based on changing public patterns of behavior without truly changing people's views. This theory is proven by, for example, by pre-election polls that tend to be drastically different from the factual election outcomes. People, who vote for their candidates in an anonymous manner express their true opinions while not being afraid of consequences of their choices and the lack of understanding of the society.

3. 2 .4. Media Framing

The framing theory is remarkably similar to the agenda-setting one. It can be even said that it is its expansion based on the phenomena itself, without going into its details. The basis of this theory is the statement that the media tends to focus on particular events which are then set in a given meaningful frame. Such frames help order information by showing the recipients not only what to think about (as it is in the case of agenda-setting) but also – what to think about a particular issue. A question can be asked of who decides about making such

frames. Is it a conscious and autonomous decision made by journalist? As it can be concluded on the basis of the discussed theory, the media is controlled by political and economic elites, so it is the carrier of a dominant ideology, helps shape the awareness of masses, as well as legitimize the current societal order.

3. 2. 5. Propaganda model by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman

The "propaganda model" proposed by Chomsky and Herman assumes the existence of five filters, which are used to sieve news and other materials presented by the media and in such a way – build the loyalty of the recipients. The very first filter is ownership. Rich people, who are a part of the corporate establishment, control the media and dominate it. The second filter is advertisement, which is the most important source of income generated. Advertisers require a media environment that will help them sell their goods, so a given communication channel has to meet their standards. The third filter is news, which has to be trustworthy, sensible, and relatively cost-efficient. Therefore, the media is closely connected to governmental bodies. The fourth filter is disapproval, which relates to negative attitudes towards the media, being a way of disciplining it and strengthening the position of key information sources. The last filter that has to be touched upon is ideology. In America, an important ideology was anti-communism, as well as the belief that the national market was so powerful that it would solve all other economic problems (Herman, Chomsky, 1990). To sum up, key role in shaping public opinion is played by ruling elites and corporate interests that are strictly connected to them. Such a relation is strengthened due to media concentration and that journalists are not keen on taking advantage of official sources of information.

3. 3. Limited influence theories proposed between 1940s and 1960s

In the 40s, there was a rapid turn, as well as demythologization of the role of the media. The carried out examinations showed that the media was not the decisive factor affecting the opinions and attitudes of the public, but rather one of such factors. It was also believed that the effect of media engagement is maintaining the status quo, not stimulating changes.

3. 3. 1. Two-step flow of influence

Examinations carried out during the American election campaign of 1940 made it possible to discover that decisions made by voters were to a limited extent influenced by the media. The most important factor in that case were relations with other people. It was a groundbreaking discovery which changed the paradigm related to the omnipotence of the media. The two-step flow of influence theory proposed by Lazarsfeld and Katz was a model assuming that individuals are not isolated in a given society, but interact with others thanks to societal connections. The media does not affect individual people directly, but rather in an indirect manner through leaders (opinion creators) who are considered to be authorities in their respective communities. At the same time, leaders base their opinions on information taken from the media, so it can be stated that the media affect the society, but only in a limited fashion (E.Katz, 1957).

3. 3. 2. Selective Perception

A limited impact of the media was also the main claim of the concept proposed by Lazarsfeld, within the scope of which 3 models of individual reactions to a media

communicate were distinguished, namely – selective attention, when individuals decide what and when to watch and avoid messages that are contrary to their beliefs, selective perception where individuals watch messages that are contrary to their beliefs, but do not pay attention to them, and selective memorization, where individuals do not avoid messages that are against their beliefs, but forget them relatively quickly.

3. 3. 3. Use and gratification model

Use and gratification model was formulated by three scientists: Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch. It claims that people have their own, individual patterns of taking advantage of the media. Recipients have different needs and expectations about the media, so it can be said that people affect them by shaping them, not the other way round. Then, it can be also stated that the media does not affect the public opinion, but the recipients shape the media by expressing their needs (viewership is the key factor when it comes to media popularity). According to the discussed theory, media use is an interactive process, where recipients select what they want consciously. Nevertheless, the concept does not exclude the possibility of unintended impact. The media can influence the audience only partially, as it has to adjust to the needs and expectations of people.

3. 3. 4. Encoding/Decoding Theory

The coding and decoding model was proposed by a British scholar, Stuart Hall, and completely rejects the concept according to which viewers of TV shows are considered to be passive and mindlessly accepting all the content presented to them. Hall stated that media communicates do not directly affect the reality, but rather try to reproduce it. Meanings are created after using signs, but the way a given sign is decoded highly depends on the context. A recipient, being the decoding party, makes an active effort. If the coding party have taken into account the language the decoding party uses and its cognitive capabilities, then the coding process is effective. Media language is always ideological in nature, which means that it is the carrier of preferred values. However, recipients choose whether they want to accept, analyze or reject the message (preferred, negotiated, and oppositional decoding). The media has only a limited impact on the viewers due to various decoding methods. It can all be summed up by stating that even though all people watch the same show, they can see different things.

4. MORAL PANIC

Following the creator of the notion, Stanley Cohen, Sheldon Ungar provides a definition which states that moral panic can be identified when „states, events, people, or groups of people are presented as threats to social values and interest; their character is taken advantage of by the media, priests, and politicians" [Sheldon Ungar, 2001]. In other words, particular groups of people are considered public enemies that threaten the existing societal order. Thanks to the engagement of the media and presenting a given situation in a controversial, shocking, and simplified manner, a given group becomes easily identifiable. Exaggerated, frequently presented messages adjusted to a given concept or relating to the past are used to make the experienced fear stronger.

The recipients are not only ensured that the problem they facing is serious, but also – that it affects them personally. The media additionally makes such messages stronger by including opinions of experts confirming the threat in them. Such an engagement of the media frequently leads to the public requesting authoritative solutions. Then, each and every action of governmental bodies is not only legitimized by the society, but also welcomed and accepted. According to Angela McRobbie, creating moral panic is predominantly the way of distracting the public and making it impossible for people to focus on real problems. Moral panic typically grants success to those who have started it. As it was stated by Cohen, it helps direct the public towards irrational solutions.

5. 2018 ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN HUNGARY

2018 election campaign in Hungary, in compliance with art. 9 § 28 of the ordinance of the Minister for Justice no. 3/2018 on the specification of dates connected with parliamentary election to take place on 8th April 2018, started officially on 17th February 2018, exactly 50 days before the election proper. Principles governing broadcasting political advertisements during the campaign were specified 6 years earlier. The act of 26th November 2012 introduced ban on broadcasting election-related ads by commercial TV stations, but the act was found unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in a verdict of 06.12.2012 (act ID: I/03653/2012).

The ruling party then amended the adopted act by adding a provision that commercial stations can broadcast political adverts in a toll-free manner, but no obligation to participate in election campaigns was introduced.

According to § 30 of the ordinance of the Minister for Justice no. 3/2018, media-related service providers offering customers linear media services of a nationwide scope were required to present the State Election Commission a document confirming the possibility of broadcasting political adverts being a part of the election campaign up to 17th February 2018, 4:00 P.M. Such documents were presented by two TV stations only, namely: oppositional RTL Klub and ATV. Public television was not required to issue such a document, for it was obliged by law to broadcast political adverts toll-free. The ordinance in question also introduced a number of new regulations relating to various forms of election campaign which are not going to be touched upon within the scope of this dissertation, for they are not important from the point of view of the issue being the subject of this paper.

There was a remarkable media controversy concerning the new regulations governing election campaigns. It was predominantly discussed whether or not there will be conditions for all political parties' adverts to be broadcasted, for it was not sure if any TV station would devote its airtime to all candidates. The introduced legal regulations resulted in the removal of the first filter discussed by N. Chomsky and E. Herman, namely – the filter of ownership. The state deprived the media from a part of its initial power. Even though there was seemingly still a full freedom granted to TV stations, the factual choice was the one between silence and the lack of control. It created a dilemma of whether said stations would lose its viewership due to the lack of vital news being broadcasted or due to the lack of control over the broadcasted content that could not be adjusted to the needs and expectations of the recipients (see: use and gratification model).

The interest in decisions to be made by the owners of media company owners were not only focused on whether or not any new company would join the debate but also – on what

the form of the debate would be. As it turned out, the first day of election campaign brought no changes in state-owned media, but one cannot state that there was no campaign at all. It has to be said at this point that Hungary had been in the state of permanent campaigning for many years, for in 2010, Viktor Orbán announced the institutionalization of national consultations. As promised before the election in 2005, V. Orbán had decided to focus actions of the government on dialogue with the voters and every year, the Hungarian government had been announcing the topic of national consultations.

The Chancellery of the Prime Minister had been sending forms to voters via traditional letters, touching key issues for the country. They had been analyzed by the representatives of the Central Office for Administrative and Digital Public Services. Starting from 2015, the analysis-related responsibilities have been taken over by Chancellery of the President. In 2015, consultations were focused predominantly on the pension system, constitution, social and economic issues, migration, and terrorism.

In 2017, two consultations took place. The first of them was entitled „Let us stop Brussels" and related to problems connected with migration, whereas the second one was oriented towards the so-called Soros plan and presented goals of the government that were not in line with theses proposed by George Soros (Rebuilding the Asylum System) on changing the nature of the European asylum system. What is more, in 2015, the government also launched an informative campaign based on setting up billboards, publishing leaflets and posters, as well as on creating multi-language informational websites. They all warned about dangers of illegal migration. Campaigns announced and started in both 2015 and 2017 were highly connected with the election campaign.

Public media (TV, radio, online portals, and press) published news on threats connected with mass migration to Europe, plans and actions taken by George Soros, as well as on recent and earlier terrorist attacks almost on daily basis. Media communicates were accompanied by billboard campaigns. On 26th March 2018, the Hungarian government launched an additional informational campaign informing the citizens about threats of mass migration by printing and distributing posters representing a stop sign and marching migrants in the background. The Supreme Court of Hungary, in its verdict of 6th April 2018, no. Kvk.III.37.421/2018/8 claimed that the government breached the political party balance principle, as by starting campaign against immigrants/asylum seekers, it made the FIDESZ-MPSZ and KDNP political campaigns even fiercer.

Said court also ordered the government to stop the campaign. The aforementioned verdict was exceptionally important, because it showed that the campaign had been based on creating the sense of threat, as well as that the government had used public funds to manage political campaign and therefore – undermined the position of other parties taking part in the election. It was moral panic in its pure form. What is more, the performed undertakings were also in line with a thesis formulated by an American political scientist focusing on symbolic politics and political psychology - Murray Edelman, who stated that a distinctive feature of the ruling party is the engagement in the so-called communicative game based on balancing between generating the sense of danger and calming the citizens down. At first, it communicated that a massive threat is near, just to state that the nation can be defended against it some time later (Edelman, 1985).

While taking a closer look at the campaign, one can identify numerous factors characteristic for the direct impact of the media on its recipients.

The very first one is the creation of the image of an enemy, which was touched upon earlier while discussing the persuasive model of Lasswell. The spiral of silence cannot go unnoticed as well, because even the ruling party, basing on pre-election polls, was not expecting such a huge support and becoming the strongest party in the parliament. What is more, one can also point to the created virtual reality strictly connected with the ritual model and the cultivation theory.

Even though the recipients did not experience the presence of "foreigners" threatening the entire Christian civilization, they were afraid and expected a real danger to become their nation's problem. Agenda-setting and framing were so obvious in that case, that any commentary seems not to be necessary. One could also touch upon the two-step flow of influence theory, but the limited impact of the media would be justified if the dominant element of the campaign had not been stimulating the sense of threat and panic. Due to the fact that election silence had been cancelled, state-owned media asked the citizens going to vote whether or not they wanted to live in a safe or in an endangered country even on the day of the election.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Examinations and considerations on the relations between recipients and the media, with the latter being the main source of information, have been carried out since the emergence of the media as such. To simplify it a bit, one can divide the executed examinations into those proposing the idea of the omnipotence of the media and those which claim that the media affects the audience, but only to a limited extent. In some of them, recipients are a passive and unified mass of people who decode messages without thinking about their sense, whereas others notice the active participation of such recipients in the process of decoding such messages.

Theories presented within the scope of this paper have been provided in a chronological order with the specification of period when they were formulated and therefore - showing how concepts changed over time. As it was stated by Denis McQuail (2003), it is possible that the impact of the media on the society changes together with the change of political, economic, technological, and cultural conditions. It has to be also indicated that in the case of an internal threat, the society is more open to new information and to changing its opinions and beliefs, whereas if an external one is presented the society tends to unite and homogenize its opinions. Scholars and thinkers opting for the concept of a limited impact of the media state that in modern democratic countries, the media is only one of factors influencing a given society.

The number and availability of information grants the possibility of reaching information being not only strictly in line with one's opinions, but also – data on different, new, and alternative beliefs. At this point, it has to be stated that the question formulated at the beginning, namely – if the media manipulate us – cannot be answered in an unequivocal manner. Similarly, it is impossible to create a single, universal theory relating to the impact of media. It is, however, achievable to formulate a thesis that the media can directly affect recipients if only it is provided with proper conditions to do so.

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