Andrea SZAK

MEDIA INFLUENCE AND RECEPTION ANALYSIES

MÉDIAHATÁS- ÉS BEFOGADÁS VIZSGÁLATOK

In this treatise I would like to summarize the scholarly theories and empirical inquiries trying to explain the impact of media on the public; scientific literature treats them as landmarks in the influence and reception analyses.

A tanulmányban azokat a tudományos igényű elméleteket és empirikus vizsgálatokat szeretném összefoglalni, amelyek a média közönségre gyakorolt hatását igyekeztek megválaszolni, és amelyeket a médiahatás-kutatás és a befogadás vizsgálatok mérföldköveinek tekint a szakirodalom.

BULLET THEORY

In the twenties and thirties both public and scientific thinking were characterized by the so-called 'bullet theory' according to which mass media has a considerable and direct impact on the people, i. e. the messages coming from the media are banging as bullets into the public making a permanent change in it. Bullet theory is also known as 'hypodermic model'. This theory had been evolved in its most coherent form in Harold Lasswell's book entitled *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* (1927). Lasswell wondered how the propaganda techniques applied in the First World War were able to produce a large-scale change of opinions so setting Europe on fire. Bullet theory represents mass communication as a one-way process (media stimulus – reaction of public) in which the public plays a passive and uncritical role, so there is no way to affect media (i. e. for active feedback). The public in this theory is assumed to be a homogeneous mass each member of which reacts upon the messages falling on him or her as the bullets in the same way. Social theory at that time noted the loosening of personal ties, the dissolution of traditional identities, the atomization of society (i. e. the appearance of „lonely crowd") as facts. Therefore it was thought that the public becomes especially exposed to the manipulation efforts of the media. Lasswell expounded in detail the devices of successful propaganda such as the creation of an image of enemy and the deliberate lying.

Lasswell's research seemed to be supported by the fact that in the thirties the totalitarian states of Europe – and in particular the Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union – made the best of the opportunity of propaganda in a previously unknown measure relying on the modern means of mass communications (and first of all on the radio) which plunged the whole world into war a few years later (see Brown, 1963). A well-known instance for the great impact of the media is the radio play entitled *War of the Worlds* produced in 1938. Orson Welles' science-fiction depicted the attack of the „aliens" on the United States by means of news programs. According to the contemporary reports the radio play threw the crowd into a panic because the ones who hadn't heard its prologue thought that was an account of actual events.

TWO-STEP FLOW OF INFLUENCE MODEL

After the researches in the '20s and '30s assuming great influence of media, there had been coming a new paradigm in the scientific surveys in the '40s: the model of the *two-step flow of influence*, in which it was stated that media is capable of affecting the public opinions only in a small compass and indirectly.

Paul Lazarsfeld and his co-researchers studied in their *The People's Choice* (1948) the affects of the presidential campaign in Ohio State in 1940 on the electors. In the campaign, through their repeated measurement in a six month

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period, they discovered that people's political preferences were barely changed, which means they were resistant to the attempts of influence. Accordingly, they were concluding that people played an active and critical role in the process of mass media. They presumed the public did not respond to the massages coming from the media as a homogenous mass, but everybody was accepted it in their own way, because the impact of media met with other effects (i.e. the model of media-stimulus – public-response must be complemented by new variables). Lazarsfelds felt that media is able to affect the thinking of electors only indirectly and in a two-step flow. People listen mostly to the supremes in opinion's forming – for instance in the family and at their workplaces – which proves the greater influence of interpersonal communication as opposed to mass media. The supremes in opinion's forming, at the same time, develop their opinion leaning primarily on media and so – in a restricted and indirect sense – media is affecting people after all.

SELECTIVE PERCEPTION THEORY

Selective perception theory seeks an answer to the question why the media has so limited effect on the society, that is to say, why the political campaigns are so inefficient.

In his book entitled *The Effects of Mass Communication* ([1949] 1960) Joseph Klapper explained the results of Lazarsfeld's (and his colleagues') research by the selection of the people overwhelmed by messages. People are seeking for the messages confirming their views and are shunning those being inconsistent with them. Klapper distinguished three levels of this selection:

— selective choice means that people don't pay particular attention to any newspaper or program of which they are convinced to represent opinions opposed to their own views;

— selective perception means that even if they run into such messages they let them go by;

— and finally, if they make a mental note of them they will wipe them out fast.

Klapper interpreted this, reclining upon Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive discordance-reduction (1957), as a characteristic of human nature to avoid disharmonic situations, i.e. it endeavor to get rid of all those informations and opinions which make human beings to rethink their own elaborated worldview because this rethinking would eat up too much cognitive energy. It follows from the theory of selective-affects, thought Klapper, that media has a role primarily in the affirmation of the existing opinions and not in provoking change in opinion. To be more exact, as stated by the Hungarian media-researcher Angelusz Róbert (1983), the heavy is the distance between the communicator and the receiver the small is the possibility for change in opinion.

CULTIVATION THEORY

The decisive media-effect theory in the '70s was the *cultivation theory* associated with the Hungarian linked American media-researcher George Gerbner, who thought the great social influence of media is certified. The wide range spread of television played a role in the emergence of the new theory, which seemed to have a more influential affect on public opinion than the printed media and radio which were in monopolistic situation by that time. According to Gerbner, the affects of media manifest itself in the long term, i.e. it gets on in a cumulative manner, viz. on a way of homogenizing the heterogeneous opinions existing in the society. The researcher, died at Christmas in 2005, stated that television, which became a more important source of information than personal experience, not only confront with reality but also shape this reality: it rearranges the images of reality following certain roles, creating a new (virtual) reality. Media is selective: some elements of reality are cultivated, while others are played down. Media has, accordingly Gerbner, an acculturative role, i.e. it influences culture and conceptions of culture, it is to say, under its impact who spend a great amount of time watching the screen, progressively accept the images shown in television as the true representation of reality.

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George Gerbner published his theory first in his study entitled *Toward cultural indicators* (1969). To start with, he demonstrated through quantitative analysis of content what media cultivates, for instance, how often and in which context appear Afro-Americans in the media. Later, he divided people, in his empirical research, into two groups: the heavy viewers, watching television more than four hours for a day and the light viewers, watching television less than this. Comparing the world-view of the heavy and light viewers, he discovered that those worldview who watching more television is nearer to that of television, for instance, they tend to underestimate the amount of Afro-Americans, but at the same time overestimate the rate of Afro-American criminals in society. Gerbner's in short time successive theory was criticized by many. It was hold against him that we cannot talk about a unified worldview on the basis of our contemporary multichannel television market where one channel is broadcasting action films all the time, the other one news, and the third one is cooking programs. At the time of Gerbner's first inquires, the television market of the United States was dominated by the oligopoly of the three big television networks, *ABC, CBS* and *NBC*, while the contemporary American viewer can choose from 200-500 channels on cable. Critics emphasized the fact that not everybody has the same habit of watching television: those who watching television principally in the morning, face with other massages than those who watching television at evenings. They hold it also against Gerbner that he used crucially quantitative and not qualitative means of investigation, i.e. neither does he take into account the contexts of massages, neither the different walk of life and personal experiences of the viewers, in turn these have influence on the interpretation of what they watching on television.

AGENDA-SETTING THEORY

Contrary to Gerbner's cultivation theory, which belongs to the models which presume the heavy impact of media, the *agenda-setting theory* seemed to strengthen again the school of limited effects couple of years later. It was Bernard Cohen who first stated in his book entitled as *The Press and Foreign Policy* (1963) that media, especially news-media, specified primarily not what we should think but rather about what should we think. Media influence indeed the agenda of public opinion, but it has not that much effect on the interpretation of the themes listed in the agenda.

Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in their *The agenda-setting function of mass media* (1972) argued, referring to their study about the electioneering in 1968 in the North-Californian little town, Chapel Hillben, that media was playing the role of *information gatekeeper*. It sets out only a limited number of events from those happening almost infinitely in the world. The results of their research are summarized as follows by the authors:

Thus, selecting from the events media establish an order of importance (i. e. a value-hierarchy): it regards certain events as important, and finds others less important. The majority of people thinks the important topics are those appearing in the headlines and in bulky news coverage. But their judgements on the individual cases are not remarkably affected by the mass media.

The reality has been considerably influenced by the discovery of the priming role of media: one aim of modern political communication is to prime successfully, i. e. to determine the agenda advantageously for the political friends and disadvantageously for the political foes.

FRAMING THEORY

If the agenda of media is able to affect the agenda of public opinion and politics, then another question arises: what affects the agenda of media? One possible answer is that the owners of the mediaholdings, the informants frequently quoted in the news, and other influential persons have determinant impact on media contents. According to framing theory media is kept under the control of political and economic elites and at the same time rank and file (devoid of money, power and competence) can reach media only as receivers. In sharp contrast with „masses" elites are able to

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affect media messages efficiently. In consequence media doesn't represent the messages (and in particular the news) impartially but it distorts them, i. e. it presents them in an interpretation frame that lays stress upon some elements of the context of events and obscures others. Therefore during the presentation of political problems news automatically offer certain interpretation giving them preference over others, that is to say, they provide a „preferred" reading. According to this marxist-rooted approach media bears the dominant social ideology thereby it inevitably gives a distortion of reality; media is an instrument of the ruling classes to shape the consciousness of the masses and to legitimate the existing order (conf. the notion of „culture industry" in the Frankfurt School; see Silverstone, 1999). According to this theory the influence of media is less in the case of elites getting their bearings from different sources than in the case of non-elites dependent on mass media. For the elites media is just a new source of information while for the „masses" it is the sole source of information.

The theory was formed in the '70s in the writings of the journal *Screen*, but its most coherent form can be found in Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent. The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988). As a matter of fact, Herman and Chomsky stepped forward with a new variant of the early propaganda-theories, claiming that there is a decisive role of governmental power, which influences media, and the connected interests of the big business concerns in forming public opinion, and this influence is facilitated by the conception of media, as well as the fact journalists willingly rely on official sources. Making of consensus is nothing else than the homogenization of the heterogeneous opinions can be found in society. As they write, their new propaganda-model discloses those manners in which money and power sort it out what news are worth for communicating, and provides facility for the government and the dominant private interests to be able to pass their massages to the public.

Nevertheless, Herman's and Chomsky's „propaganda model" differs in several points from the classic model (such as that of total regimes) since the mainstream media of western societies doesn't use systematically devices such as creating an image of enemy or deliberate lying. So the use of the term 'propaganda' is problematic – even within the frame of the theory. It ignores the well-known cases when media is apparently not an instrument for maintaining the status quo but for changing it – see for instance the above-mentioned McCarthy- or Watergate-case.

Framing theory is questioned by the technological development as well. As for the variation-coloured media market amateurs came on the scene beside professional communicators who hadn't been able to put in a word in the past – for instance at the communal radio stations. And although such mediums never belonged to the mainstream media (i. e. their share of   audience was minimal), they offered an alternative interpretation of reality independent of political elites. Since the internet came into existence the most important traditional mediums (the newspaper, the radio, the television) have lost their informing and opinion-forming hegemony. Internet provides a comparatively cheap opportunity not merely for a multi-source controlling of information but for expressing views as well; this means that it can equilibrate handicaps rooted in the differences of social status (at least theoretically). But at the same time the sources of internet information is held less reliable than that of traditional mediums, and the access is far from being general, so it is limited exactly for the socially disadvantaged groups which confines the role of this new medium in the mass communications.

SPIRAL OF SILENCE

Following the theory of *bandwagon-effect* or the „hang on with the winner"-effect, when people perceive from the pictures shown in the media that one of the political powers are going to win, they tend to represent themselves as followers of that political power, moreover they possibly is going to vote for that political power, albeit they are sympathetic with a different one. Their motivation is rooted in the fear of isolation or in the desire of "hanging on with the winner". The formulators, the already mentioned Lazarsfeld and his co-researchers (1948), accentuate at the same time that the bandwagon-effect can be accommodated only in the case of those electors who do not have too much interest in politics

and those who do not have fully developed political preferences. Media, accordingly, influences people's opinion and behavior, but only in a restricted area and under certain circumstances (see also Angelusz, 2002).

The theory of spiral of silence was developed further from the bandwagon-effect which was a return to the theories arguing heavy social influence of media. According to this, media is affecting people's opinion and habit through creating a climate of opinion: it makes them believe that the dominant public opinion is different from theirs. This theory was articulated is *The spiral of silence: a theory of public opinion* (1974) written by the German politologist and pollster Elisabeth Noëlle-Neumann. Accorting to Noëlle-Neumann, those who feel that their opinion is in accordance with the public opinion, are louder in their voice in stating their standpoint, but those, who feel they represent a minority report, stay in silence or change their public opinion because of their fear from social isolation. The theory of spiral of silence was plastically drawn by the British historian and media-researcher John Keane in his book *Media and democracy* ([1991] 1999). Keane believes the spiral of silence is an oblique, stated in other words: self- or inherent, social censorship.

Thus, according to Noëlle-Neumann media affects the perception of reality because it can be found everywhere and because different mediums are prone to expressing the same views. Mass media keeps showering information on the people and keeps influencing their notion about social reality – i. e. it keeps conveying norms.

ENCODING/DECODING MODEL

The encoding/decoding theory can be labelled as a part of limited influence school. Its starting-point (after Valentin Voloshinov, 1975) is the semiotic consideration according to which a text is always polysemantic, that is to say, it is not evident by any means that the message has the same meaning for both the sender and the receiver. A text never has an immanent meaning independent of the receiver; meaning is a matter of constant strife in social interaction.

The encoding/decoding theory was articulated in the book *Encoding/decoding* (1980) written by the British Stuart Hill. His starting point is the meaning is coming to existence through usage. To connect a meaning to a sign depends primarily on the context. Interpreting a news is determined, beside other things, by the circumstances of news-making (for instance by the number of news-sources used by the medium), by the groups which influence the narrative of the affair, by the social and economic status of the receivers and by the material conditions of reception. The language of media is consequently always ideological, i.e. it carries always a preferred interpretation inspired by the dominant values, argues Hall in accordance with the framing-theory, but he also adds that the receiver is free in accepting, considering or reject this interpretation.

Hall's encoding/decoding theory was empirically tested by David Morley. In his work entitled as *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* ([1980]1992) he formulated the assumption that the viewer plays an active role in decoding the sign; the meaning is shaped by the circumstances and context (the antecedent of subject) of reception. The viewers use different strategies in the process of interpretation.

Morley – adapted from Hall – distinguished three possible theoretical strategies of interpretation of messages:

— dominant position (the viewer accepts the preferred meaning of the message);
— negotiated position (the viewer accepts certain parts of the predominant code, and discards others);
— oppositional position (the viewer discards the predominant interpretation as a whole).

The question of what affects the interpretation of a TV-program is discussed by Morley only in general in his work quoted above. He thinks the way of reception is affected by the psychical structure, the socio-economic position, the sub-culture, the manner of viewing, and the sex of the individual .

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