

Mass-media featuring Multimedia: “Consider this the hint of the century”¹

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Abstract: *The paper aims to look at mass-media and multimedia as the “happy couple” of the contemporary information society. The multimedia trends, vigorously exploited by the press, have already launched the mass-media into a new era, where the access to information is almost instant and highly comfortable worldwide. In these circumstances, we try to search for possible answers for some of the multiple questions that arise: what is the role of the new media in shaping the daily reality for its public and to what extent is the public really in control of the information they get through the new technologies?*

Introduction

The fact that we get on an *information highway* each time when we access the internet was signalized by Al Gore in the 1990s. The question is to what extent do we actually get to control the traffic there? This paper looks at the superhighway as the power of information (i.e. mass-media) doubled by the power of the technological

¹. R.E.M, “Losing My Religion”, album *Out of Time*, 1991

support (i.e. new multimedia trends). In the circumstances where everyone has access to information from everywhere it becomes highly disputable whether the power still belongs to the one who *has* the information. Theoretically, today anyone can have any information. That is why it seems more likely that the one who can either *develop* or at least *manipulate* multimedia devices actually has the power.

Therefore, the “marriage” between mass-media and multimedia seems one of the best unions of the century. To what extent can we, as public, profit from this union? Can we actually control the information presented by the media in any way, or does it actually control us? Does the mass-media use of multimedia devices offer us rather a mirage of the fact that we, as public, can control the information?

The paper will try to look at both sides of the coin in trying to give (some) answers to these questions. Clearly, the reality of today’s world is strongly impacted by mass-media and multimedia trends. What we call “everyday reality” is highly a construction of the alliance between the two.

The concept of new media has resonant connotations in the contemporary society. Since we already referred to the mass-media and multimedia as a “happy couple”, perhaps the simplest definition of new media would be the marriage between the means of mass communication and the late digital technologies. Reading a newspaper online is a common thing for most of us. The access to information is almost instant. Image, sound, text and video incorporated in the same material and available to us at one click. To what extent the new media has taken over the traditional media we shall try to see further on.

New media, new challenges

New media is highly associated with globalization. For some authors, globalization occurred as the result of the evolution of new media technologies. Among the many definitions of globalizations, some offer a great importance to the development of means of mass communication, although not always explicitly. The definition of “common sense” states that globalization is the process in which people from everywhere understand to accept what they have in common, while putting aside what separates them (Marin 2004). Similarly, the “definition of openness” sees globalization as the expression of a world system in the highest level of integration and permanently open to integration (Marin 2004). Both these definition talk about an open world in which people and ideas are constantly brought together. Although the mass-media is not mentioned, it is rather obvious that it represents the fastest way to support this process. Globalization and mass communication are interdependent processes. The evolution of communication technologies (particularly the electronic communication) shorten any kind of distance between people and communities (Flew 2002). In a globalizing world, almost any corner of the globe becomes known to us through broadcasting. The media presents realities we know little about, as well as the key to their interpretation. In the recent years, the power of the television image has been

overcome only by the internet in terms of rapidity and cost-effectiveness. Television still remains the king of the news for the time being, mainly due to the fact that the internet is still considerably new and not accessible at all levels of the society. In Romania's case, the rate of internet access and use is of approximately 30% (around 7 million people). There are no clear statistics yet, but the surveys conducted in 2006 and 2007 revealed an incipient stage of development of the information society (<http://bizwords.ro> 2009). However, this percentage is continuously increasing, which proves a high popularity of the new media technologies.

The development of the digital technologies launched the mass-media in a different era. For the means of mass-communication this was the perfect opportunity to achieve what they have always claimed: to inform the public with maximum speed. Digital technology was at the same time an opportunity and a challenge for journalism. It was something the media had to adapt to, at the same time adapting it for its purposes. Consequently, the new media becomes a new way of shaping the social reality. At the same time, the new media itself represents a challenge and an opportunity for the public. New media offers a different dimension of what we call social construction of reality. The next chapter clears the concept of reality construction through the media.

Mass-media, constructing reality

As sociology points out, the social representation is the result of the processes of interaction between the individuals, in their aggregated form, known as society. The social representation is the base of the social reality for each of us. Moreover, all of us tend to evaluate the world according to the social representations we develop. These representations are a system of values and practices which the individual integrates and constantly uses in perceiving and making sense of surrounding reality (Moscovici 1999).

Signification is an abstract concept and it makes sense only when it is attached to an object, a situation, an experience or a happening from everyday life. Signification is, therefore, an attribute of the environment, of reality, an attribute conferred by the individual. The objects and experiences in itself have no intrinsic meaning. They make sense when they are interpreted socially, in accordance with the individual's cultural background and knowledge. The reality exists for us only as far as we confer a sense to it.

People are usually very little concerned with what we call "reality". Most of us are used to think reality is an intrinsic characteristic of the objects and phenomena we come across with. The fact that we ourselves can influence the reality is not a common topic. The individual often considers "knowledge" the certainty that these phenomena and objects are real, that they have some recognizable and defining characteristics.

For the sociology of knowledge, "reality" is a construct based on the connection between the human thinking and the social context in which this thinking evolves

(Berger and Luckmann 1999). As a result, it rejects the intrinsic character of phenomena.

As we already stated, the evolution of the means of communication is a characteristic of the last few decades. Communication is the process that underlies any social activity. When talking about mass-media, we usually refer to it as to something more than a simple means of transmitting information. Mass-media has become a way of life (Jeanneney 1997) and it definitely is a major part of our lives.

We rarely differentiate between the media institutions and their products. In fact, as Marshall McLuhan stated it, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan 1994) – which means the medium leaves its print on the way the message is perceived by the public. In terms of sociology, this can be interpreted as a superimposition between the objective reality of the mass-media (which is the organized press institutions) and the subjective one (the media products). As such, the mass-media has become an important component of the social context, one we cannot ignore.

When talking about the social reality of everyday life we mean a reality built as a reflection of the outside world in the conscience of the individual². From what we exposed so far we can extract a role of the media institutions in building social reality: media institutions and media products offer a first reflection of the everyday reality, a construction of the reality at a first level. This is a conclusion of the fact that the media is in close connection with the different structures of the society. The purpose of the media is that of showing the citizens how the social structures operate and in which ways this affects their lives. So, if we look at reality as a reflection of the world in our conscience, we have a first conclusion, which is that media (more precisely, journalists) can be considered a first level of construction of social reality.

There is a very important aspect to take into consideration when analyzing reality as a construct of the conscience: the importance of direct perception. In other words if I, as an individual, am there and see a certain object or situation directly, I am sure it is the “reality”, because I have direct contact with it. But how about the events we have no direct access to, but which can influence our lives one way or another? The world is can be considered as a sum of spheres of reality (like the reality of Middle East, the reality of Europe and so on). It is rather clear that we do not have direct access to most of these spheres, although in a globalized world they can all influence our existence. This is a point where the mass-media gets to play a major role in recording and reflecting this events for the public. Based on this first level of media reflection of the events, we can (re)construct the reality of a situation or a part of the world we had no access otherwise.

In reflecting reality, as we could see, a major role is the one of conferring significance. While we perceive and mentally represent the surrounding reality, we tend to confer

² It can also be a reflection in the collective conscience of a community, in which case we are talking about a conventional reality.

it a meaning, a sense, in accordance with our experience and knowledge. When direct access to a certain domain of reality is not possible, the access is facilitated through the media products. Therefore, we read newspapers, we watch a TV feature, we listen to the radio or we surf the internet for the news about what interests us but we cannot access otherwise. Whether we realize it or not, the media products are already a constructed reality. The event we are reading about has already been reflected in an individual conscience (that of a reporter, of a photographer, of an editor) and therefore it has already been interpreted and already given a signification.

At this point certain clarifications need to be made. Our analysis is from a sociological point of view, therefore “objectivity” and “subjectivity” have to be understood in the presented context and only in it. When we talk about media construction of reality we do not refer to manipulation through mass-media, making up information, nor its tendentious presentation. These too are, obviously, forms of reality construction. We will not focus on them. Our purpose is to support the idea that the reality of an event to which we do not have immediate access it is offered to us as a media construction. In order to do that, we have to bring into discussion the “reality frame” argument. Thus we underline the connection between mass-media and the way social reality is constructed. The notion of “reality frame” refers to the possibility of perceiving and presenting reality in an organized way. A frame refers to an idea, a concept whose purpose is to organize daily events so that they make sense (Gamson and Modigliani 1989).

In this context we can detect the existence of a high number of reality frames. These can be larger or smaller. As for mass-media, the role of media frames is to organize the world of journalists, of those who have direct contact with the events and interpret them, as well as the world of the audience, of those who receive the media products and, moreover, count on them in order to construct the daily reality. In other words, media frames are patterns of thinking, interpreting and presenting, patterns of selection, inclusion and exclusion, on which the media discourse is organized and significations are being attributed to the surrounding reality (Wolfsfeld 1997).

Hence, mass-media constructs a reality at a first level and offers the public frames of interpretation and signification attribution. At its turn, the public interprets the media product and constructs itself a second level reality. Therefore we come to know that social reality can be constructed at two levels. The first level will be of a crucial importance when the public cannot have a direct contact with the events. The reality that the individual will shape regarding that particular event will rely on the perspective mass-media offered.

We did not sustain not for a moment during this presentation the fact that mass-media represented exclusively the first level of social reality construction of an event. But this level remains the most outspread, the most accepted and the most rapid way of constructing reality at a first level. Consequently, its overwhelming influence on society makes mass-media impossible to ignore. Mass-media became more than means

of mass information. Mass-media represents a social medium and we have come to depend on its existence in our reference to reality, in our social integration. Journalists remain exclusive leaders of opinion. The public opinion based its interpretation of reality on the one offered by the media. The medium is indeed the message, as Marshall McLuhan stated. This is what we mean by the social construction of reality.

New media and reality construction

All these things being established, it is rather clear how new media has influenced the social construction of reality. First of all, as John Pavlik notices, the digital technologies have influenced journalism in a way that it made it turn from storytelling to augmenting reality (Pavlik 2001). The author notices that there is a certain impact of the new media on the content of the news. This impact is generated by the new techniques that involve the audience in the message. The storytelling of the new media is highly interactive, the audience can find text, images, graphics and video in the same place and they also have the freedom to view them or not. Consequently, the audience can choose not to view the video that comes with the online story and read only the text, or they will not read the text and they will listen to the incorporated audio file.

New media offers the audience a lot of options of constructing a story. Following the idea that the media constructs the reality, we can conclude that the new media gives the public the possibility to choose the structure of the story. The webpage offers a certain layout, but the user can choose to respect it or not. A television or a radio program give just two options regarding a story: either turn it off or change the channel. The webpage, however, has alternative options. The online story often becomes a puzzle the reader solves in a personal manner.

If we are to try an answer to one of the questions raised in the beginning of this paper, we can say that the audiences have control of the information they get online in the way that they can choose what to consume, when and in which order.

New media has a few characteristics of main importance for the construction of reality. First, the fact that it offers the possibility to get the same information in different ways, which may lead to different perceptions of reality. To give an example, by reading the text first and seeing the video of an online article later, the perception of the message can be slightly different. The same thing happens when the viewer decides not to all the available items of the story. It is useful to say the information provided on the website is not always redundant. The video, the attachments or the audio information in an online article have the same subject, but they are usually complementary, in the way that each item brings some new information to complete the story puzzle. On a news website the written text is often formulated in short and dynamic sentences with key-words that are links to further reading in case the user is interested. Therefore, the reality online stories present highly depends on the choices the reader makes.

New media places the emphasis on the way the information is organized in the digital environment, while the quantity is left on a second place. The important thing is for the users to have access to all the information they might need *if they wish so* at a simple mouse click. The new media marches on involving the audiences in news making as much as possible. As a result, the construction of reality at the second level, the one of the public, becomes more visible³.

Some conclusions

We consider the paper has so far offered some answers to some of the questions raised in the introduction. The conclusions have been available throughout the paper. Certain aspects, however, deserve to be highlighted again, while certain amendments also need to be made.

The new media is becoming also a new way of life, although not in opposition with the old way of life shaped by the traditional media. The new way of life involves almost instant access to information presented in various ways that helps construct a reality of your own. Unfortunately, in Romania this way of life is still very new, in the way that the media is not very fast in incorporating and using digital technologies, while the access of the great public to the internet is still at a low rate. However, the conjunction between the mass-media and the multimedia tends to be the communication key-feature of the century, as it involves the public in constructing a reality of their own regarding the world.

The new media and the globalization continue to go hand in hand. They bring people together; while at the same times giving them the opportunity to understand what separates them and what they have in common. While the new media gives people more control in *selecting* the information they want, it is questionable whether at the same time it does not rather pull them apart in terms of reality. As everyone can choose what to read, see or listen to and build their own reality, it is interesting to see (perhaps in another study) how close these realities can be. After all, alienation is one of the negative effects some blame globalization of (Langman and Kalekin-Fishman 2006).

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³ It is more difficult to investigate the construction of reality at the second level, the one of the public, in the case of the traditional media. On the contrary, the new media aims at making the audiences a key-factor of the process.

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