THE PERCEPTION OF THE JOURNALISTIC TEXT BY THE READING PUBLIC

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Abstract: During the entire process of journalistic communication the sender must permanently bear in mind the receiver; only thus it is possible to ensure the existence of the communicational feedback, which grants the success of the communication act. From this perspective, the process of journalistic communication is unique, since it is a procedure imposing a vital rule: the sender–journalist communicates only for the receiver–public. The journalistic style has a complex linguistic structure based on the necessity to maintain the sender–receiver contact during the information transmission. In order to obtain the basic features of journalistic style the journalist must respect some internal requirements, such as: to transform an event into a press information, to select the information, to create the text itself, and to transmit it in as clear and elaborated a form as possible so that the public may receive, understand, and assimilate it. Thus, the journalist can be seen as a “communicator” of the society.

Keywords: language, style, journalistic text, journalistic style

We must start from the premise that those who write in the press do not do this with a preconceived plan to modify the perception of the world, or to impose certain behaviours. The journalist, in his work, according to the norms imposed by the orientation of the publication, has to answer the readers’ questions, more precisely to anticipate what they would like. S/he has to offer answers which will be satisfactory to as many subjects as possible. The professionals of the press have to select the information, to use the employee as well as technique to produce a powerful impact. The information is selected according to the editor’s taste and skill. And even if the decision is often influenced by outer interests as well (political interests, the patron’s or sponsor’s interest in advertisement, answers given to one’s rivals etc.), the product offered to the public depends on the leader’s ability to deal with people. For example, those who transmit materials with violent content do not try to make people afraid of their fellow men, they pursue the sensational, the unusual in order to sell the product. Thus, they hide behind the expression: “this is what the public demands”.

We must also consider those media contents which wish to influence the masses in one direction or the other, used mainly in the field of politics. Gheorghe Schwartz, citing Gilles Ferreol and Noel Flageul, referring to the sender–receiver relationship, considers that the journalist constructs his discourse on the receiver’s interest, using certain techniques which can convince or manipulate.1 A model for reaching one’s goal is presented, in which the following measures are used: to clarify or classify an objective and to obtain an effect numbers are used; to present the conditions and to obtain a visible effect such words are used as: it is necessary..., we must..., in order to obtain doubt such questions are asked as: how can you on the one hand..., and on

the other hand...?; to achieve the readers’ involvement such statements are included as: you yourselves have observed...; the sender uses his own ideas, attitude giving him as an example by affirmations such as: I myself use...; to facilitate comprehension and to obtain the readers’ complicity such statements are used as: I agree with your opinion...

It is well known that, in contemporary society, good journalists are considered the shapers of public opinion. “The impact of a press material is shown when a dialogue takes place between the journalist and the receiver; when the latter considers what s/he has heard and tries to place them in his system of values; when s/he does not forget everything s/he heard immediately after s/he has read the newspaper, listened to the news, or viewed the TV programme; when the new information confirms his prejudices, or urges him to a new analysis.”

The system of the mass-media is based on communication, and if there is freedom of thinking in a society, this system has every chance of influencing in a certain measure the receiver of its message. But this influence as well is conditioned by the journalist’s ability to transmit his message, to apprehend what the reader is interested in, and to shape reality according to his wishes. Everything which fails to attain this goal is considered a failure by the press.

At the present moment the influence of mass-media over the population is evident. Certain behavioural models are adopted; certain types of products are bought due to the persuasive message of advertisements; certain dressing styles are accepted (mainly by teenagers); some words are used more often, or new words are introduced into people’s vocabulary; all these are done either consciously or unconsciously. It is certain that we can observe the influence of mass communication devices everywhere around us without being a specialist in the domain. We have mentioned before the adoption of certain behaviours due to mass media messages. Sociologists call this the theory of social or observational learning which explains the adoption of new behavioural forms by observing other people’s actions and adopting them as personal ways of reaction to different problems, mainly if this means the efficient solution of a problem. It is applicable to the present case, since “the description of social life is a frequent subject of the mass-media.”

Being preoccupied with the so called sport, movie, or music stars’ private life, mass-media has a cathartic function; through it ordinary people may savour all the articles and they may experience symbolically all that is denied to them in everyday life. The press comments on the income of some sportsmen, politicians, and artists, or the success of their activity may urge other persons to copy these activities. Thus, many young persons wish to become football players, therefore they join different sport clubs after they have been informed by the press on the positive results of such an activity.

Or, a great number of young people become involved in politics being attracted by the possibility of a successful career, and mainly by the material profit this status offers and which is so much discussed by most newspapers and the other information channels. This kind of behaviour can be explained by the modelling theory, more precisely by the modelling process which has several stages and was described by Melvin DeFleur: a person from society reads about or observes a certain person presented in the press; s/he identifies him/herself with that model believing that s/he is similar with him or wishes to be so; then follows stage of realization, the person thinks that the imitation of the behaviour seen in the press will solve certain problems of his/hers; the individual will reproduce the observed model.

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2 Ibid., 138.
4 Ibid., 218.
when he meets a stimulating situation; carrying out the action; using the action repeatedly.

Mihai Dinu states that the first preoccupations related to the definition of the functions of mass communication occurred in the context of rhetoric.\(^5\) “We owe the first classification to Aristotle according to whom mass communication may have the following functions: political function – the discourse establishes the opportunity or inopportunity of a public action, forensic (juridical) function – proves the righteousness or immorality of some already committed deeds, which are approved or incriminated by it, demonstrative function – praising or blaming some personalities by expressing satisfaction regarding a favourable event or deploiring some calamities.”.

The functions of mass - media have been established by theoreticians, sociologists, psychologists who demonstrated that the functions of press do not exactly coincide with the communicator’s aims. Thus, Ioan Drăgan, in Paradigme ale comunicării de masă (Paradigms of Mass Communication), cites Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, who defined three main functions:

- The status conferral function – it refers to the fact that the attention given by mass - media to some problems, groups, institutions, or persons increases their prestige and social importance. Moreover, it legitimizes publicly and confers status to persons, groups, or institutions which are brought to the limelight.

- The enforcement of social norms – using public exposure mass - media contributes to the respect for social norms. As Ioan Drăgan states, the public condemnation of deviant actions makes people realize they must take a stand against them. The reaffirmation of formal and informal social control as an effect of media has a preventive role as well.

- The narcotizing dysfunction – even if the intention of mass - media is to offer the greatest possible amount of information, mass communication may transform people’s energy from active participation to passive knowledge. Exposure to the flood of information may rather narcotize than energize the average reader.\(^6\)

Citing Melvin DeFleur, Ioan Drăgan enumerates the functions and dysfunctions of press, which are the following: exposing corruption; defending human freedoms; cultural goods are made available for millions of people; offers to the public a large area of everyday and harmless diversion; gives information on the events; by advertisements, it stimulates the economic system and promotes the living standards of the potential buyers.

On the other hand, DeFleur presents the dysfunctions of mass - media: lowers the public taste; stimulates delinquency; contributes to moral degradation; contributes to the lulling of political conscience; represses creative preoccupations and capacities.\(^7\)

To a certain measure this is a repetition in great lines of the three functions established by Lazarsfeld and Merton.

We must also mention the main functions of press established by G. Trade, according to which press transforms the mass into public and individual opinions into public opinion. As a conclusion, we speak here about the opinion forming function of press. Here are these functions: to form individual and collective opinions by diffusing the news; to express and diffuse opinions which facilitate the formation of currents in the public opinion, in general, of the public opinion phenomena; to mediate the influence of public opinion in social and political life and to help the public opinion to participate in the ruling of society, in taking


\(^6\) Ioan Drăgan, Paradigme ale comunicării de masă (Bucureşti: Casa de Editură şi Presă „Şansa” SRL, 1996), 168.

\(^7\) Drăgan, Paradigme ale comunicării de masă, 169.
decisions, or to influence the settling of public matters by a critical attitude and protest; to structure opinions and to modify cultural, economic etc. attitudes and behaviours. Among the different approaches to press, Drăgan mentions Charles R. Wright who established four functions of mass media: 

- The press has a supervising activity producing information useful to the authority and the citizens in order to warn them on certain dangers and to contribute to the development of culture and intercultural relationships. The information increases the prestige of the persons they refer to, or warn people about dangerous individuals. As a dysfunction, Wright mentions that press may cause panic, anxiety, or apathy; it may threaten the prerogatives of the authority etc.

- The function of connecting behaviours is realized by the interpretation of the information. Especially editorials and the articles commenting on some information suggest and prescribe conducts appropriate to actual events and situations. As a dysfunction, Wright mentions that the critical spirit diminishes with the increase of social conformism and the individuals’ passivity.

- The function of cultural transmission refers to the transferring of social values and norms from social groups to individuals, from one generation to the other. This increases social cohesion, encourages the individuals’ social integration, and helps the standardization of cultural norms. As a dysfunction, Wright mentions that the acts of socialization impersonalize due to the reduction of cultural variety.

- The leisure function means that press offers diversion and entertainment. The corresponding dysfunction is that it standardizes activities and tastes, and makes the individual inert. Of course, this function is applicable mainly to the television.

The same author described a series of positive functions at the level of society, namely:

- The warning function: the diffused information increases the sentiment of equality between the members of the society, and warns the population with regard to some dangers (natural disasters, wars etc.).

- Instrument function: data on the social environment are diffused, which are indispensable to contemporary society (information on traffic, offers of goods for consumption etc.).

- Ethic function: it acts by presenting some information referring to deviant individuals and to behavioural forms unacceptable by the laws of the society.

At a social level, media messages may also have dysfunctions by preserving a negative image on the economic, political etc. situation, creating thus panic. This may threaten social stability. R. Wright also presents the functions of mass media at the level of the individual:

- The supervising function: the media offers warnings to the population helping them to defend themselves.

- Personalized functions: The newspaper is the source of useful everyday information, and well-informed people have better chances to shape the opinion of the community they belong to.

Dysfunctions appear when these functions turn to their opposite, namely when media causes anxiety, isolation and apathy.

Lucian-Vasile Szabo, on the basis of the theories proposed by other researchers of the mass -

\[^{8}\text{Ibid., 170.}\]
\[^{9}\text{Ibid., 174.}\]
media phenomenon, presents some functions related to the construction of significations. One may assume that journalists, when a content is to be transmitted to the public, do not start working with the idea that this may have an influence on the reader’s behaviour. In case of a publication which lives on the selling of its copies, the aim of the journalists who write editorials is not to impose a certain behavioural action, but to sell the product as well as possible. Often, the personal opinion of the journalist writing an opinion material can be contradictory to that dictated by the publication, but the line imposed by the owner will constrain him to make a certain type of comment. Of course, journalists with a large experience often tend to believe that they are the shapers of public opinion, therefore their commentaries become virulent and peremptory.

At present, in most countries with a well-shaped democratic system, press is free. The idea that it shapes public opinion must originate from this fact. Nevertheless, when editing the next day’s newspaper, the editors will not select the articles with a persuasive role, nor will they write them in a manner to manipulate the readers. The ethical codes of journalism will not permit this, since great importance is given to objectivity, correctness, and the faithful presentation of the facts. It can be firmly stated that there is no such thing as a completely objective press material, be the writer as well-meaning as s/he might be, since any writing bears the mark of its author’s style.

In this context, we may also mention another function of press, namely, that it constructs significations. When elaborating a material, many small details of the actual event are lost due to the above mentioned basic rules of journalism. This fact leads to the presentation of facts only from a certain angle, to the presentation of the outer world through the eyes of the journalist who selected only those elements which s/he considered good for his/r publication and for the reader. The exclusion of some details may result in a boring article, or, on the contrary, in a sensational one which will cause next day’s paper to sell extremely well. In other words, the public can see the outer world as the journalist wishes it. For example, a material about a parliamentary session during which a violent conflict burst out between some MPs from the government party and some from the opposition will be extremely fascinating for the public. The receivers will wish to find out as much as possible about the event and will see it in exaggerated dimensions. In reality, however, the conflict might have been insignificant, boring, and without any sensational element.

The descriptions of the world we live in are influenced also by the time factor. The writing of any material is limited by the deadline, since it must be finished to a certain hour in order that it may appear in the next day issue.

The society we are living in shapes the style of the newspapers, since they depend on advertisements which are their main source of income, and, consequently they must select materials which will attract attention to the newspaper, and, implicitly, to the advertisements. Therefore, reality is shaped to a certain extant by the requirements of the market and society. The agenda setting function is presented by Ioan Drăgan who refers to two studies written in 1972 by Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, respectively by R. Cobb and C. Elder. McCombs and Shaw are acknowledged as the “authors” of this function; they demonstrated the theory through a study made on the 1986 presidential campaign in the United States.11

Politics occupies a considerable space on the pages of daily papers, irrespective of their

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11 Drăgan, Paradigme ale comunicării de masă, 263.
character. The agenda setting function of the press refers to the fact that the importance of political events is established by the press. The degree of this importance is different in every newspaper. Therefore, the public is influenced by this agenda according to the newspaper they choose.

It is not known whether press succeeds in imposing some preferences on the readers by the importance it gives to political events. For example, if the press publishes more articles from the opposition party, this does not mean that a person who does not agree with the ideology of this party will become the supporter of the opposition in result of those articles. Press may make the reader to give greater attention to those questions.

In Romania, after the political changes of 1989, the freedom of expression and the liberty of the press are often discussed. The press presented cases which show quite the contrary. The cases of some publications owned by mass media barons (a modish word created also by the press), who dictate the political orientation of the paper, has been pointed at. As this is almost unknown to the general public, the public exposed to the published content will give the same degree of importance to some political issues as these publications.

The most visible influence of mass media is the effect it has on the public’s language. The ordinary reader/speaker is influenced by the language of the press, often using some mistakes propagated by mass media, or, on the contrary, using the correct forms of expression met in newspaper texts. Melvin DeFleur mentions that there are two ways in which mass media modifies the entire range of communicatory actions:\footnote{DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach, *Teorii ale comunicării de masă*, 266.}

- by its influence over our language patterns – pronunciation, grammar, and syntax.
- by extending and modifying the vocabulary; these influences tend to change and stabilize speech, language, and senses.

According to the basic rules of journalism, the language of the press must be accessible to each social category, irrespective of their educational level. Practically, reading the newspaper every day, we observe the printed version of our usual vocabulary. Similarly, through this function the press has a beneficent influence over the reader due to the strictness of grammatical rules.

The devices of mass communication have, therefore, important influence over the language and senses. This happens in many ways: “they create new words with associated senses; they extend the meaning of existent terms; they substitute old meanings for new ones; and, above all, they fix the conventional meanings of the vocabulary of our language”.\footnote{Ibid., 267.}

After 1989, the press began to use a completely different language than before. Practically, the wooden language of communist party press was exchanged for a free language, new words being used. Shorter sentences were used; superlative adjectives and gerund forms were avoided; simplified sentence structures were experimented with. In the first years of the transition, the verb to implement was borrowed by the press from politicians, and later it became used by all the social categories exposed to the mass media content. At present, expressions referring to the sphere of crime have taken root: *mafia, corruption, barons, bribe, industrial mammoths* etc., but also words from other domains: *globalization, European integration* etc.

The extension of the word’s means that some additional elements are added to the basic sense of the word. DeFleur explains the development of the word *ecology*, which at first referred...
only to some technical issues applied strictly to this domain.\textsuperscript{14} Being used by media, the word received various connotations beside its basic sense. To fix the senses of the words existing in the vocabulary refers exactly to the strengthening of the uses existent in the language. Thus, coming in contact with mass-media messages each day, we fix the linguistic conventions of present day society.

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\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 268.