

THE MEDIA, THE INTERNET AND THE MENTAL REALITY

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*Abstract: Mass communication impacted the modern society in a way never imagined taking into account that the advent of television followed by the emergence of the Internet combined with the digital technology development completely changed the global communication landscape. The impact on the public and the way it thinks and perceives reality is truly significant as mass communication audience is fragmented, anonymous, an oversized collective entity spatially atomized among which the media takes the role of "a magic window" (Harris 2004, 3) or of "a selective mirror" (Baran 2004, 417). In the cognitive approach, mass communication is analyzed in terms of attitudinal and behavioral changes induced to the audience and the concept of "mental reality" coined by Harris means the worldview is extracted from the media and that the immediate reality is filtered by the media artificially constructed reality. Media is widely understood as a tool for reflecting the reality, being compared with a mirror or a window, and consequently people's view on objective reality can be molded by the media delivery. In the study *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication*, Harris sees media as a perceived reality and marks the characteristics of the artificial reality that media inputs in the audience's minds. Harris analyzes the cognitive processes that are taking place while the audience is actively engaged with the media, among which attention regards the selection process of the information that is to be consumed, while suspending disbelief is understood as a "social convention" taking the form of an agreement between the audience and the media producers on the story and characters which are accepted in order to experience their feelings. This paper aims to analyze the media consumption and the Internet usage in Romania based on the report titled *Measuring the Information Society* launched in October 2013 by the International Telecommunication Union.*

Keywords: Media Consumption, Mental Reality, Magic Window, Online Audience, Digital Natives.

The concepts of factuality and social realism are involved in the process of creating media constructed reality. The main question is to what degree people are able to discern the difference between objective reality and media constructed reality and its "representational nature" (Harris, 52). In assessing the media impact thoroughly, media research field studies the media content, the media exposure and then the media effects. Media effects are defined as types of influences exerted on individuals and society as a whole through media communication by which transformations in worldview, attitude and behavior are generated. The volume *Key Concepts in Journalism Studies* (Franklin et al. 2004, 144) explains the effects of media as results of environmental impact on the audience: "The term media effects implies that media messages have a direct and significant effect on knowledge, attitudes and even the behavior of audience members". Most researchers agree on the fact that "media have effects" (Baran 2004, 415), even though the effects are considered to be powerful, minimum or somewhere in between. The study *Media Effects* (Potter, 2012) makes it clear that effects are generated individually and socially. The individual effects are: psychological, cognitive, relief effects, attitude, affective and behavioral. *Mass Media Effects* (Jeffres, 1997) analyzes the effects on society exercised in the cultural, political and economic levels on the audience and on institutions. Jeffres lists the main theories of media effects in the following order: Cultivation, Third person, Agenda Setting, Uses and Gratifications, Priming, Cognitive

Capacity, Feminism, Social Learning, Elaboration Likelihood, Schema, Diffusion of Innovations.

New Approaches and the Six-Stage Model

In the study published by W. Russell Neuman and Lauren Guggenheim in the *Journal of Communication Theory* entitled *The Evolution of Media Effects Theory: A Six -Stage Model of Cumulative Research*, the authors proposed an alternative theoretical six-stage model starting from the classical three stages theoretical paradigm and defining the slight differences. New theoretical paradigm was shaped by research conducted scientific studies published in international academic journals over five decades, between 1956 and 2005. The six models are time distributed and structured as follows: Theories of Persuasion (period 1944-1963). Active Audience Theories (1944-1986), Theories of social context (1955-1983), Theories Society and Media (1933-1978), Interpretive Effects Theories (1972-1987), and finally Theories of New Media. The Theories of New Media are being researched starting with the year 1996 and are committed to analyze Computer Mediated Communication effects, new media technology impact and interactivity facets.

According to the study *Media Effects and Society* there are general types of media effects which are usually cognitive, affective and behavioral. The cognitive effects are related to the way human mind structures and restructures knowledge and turns it into beliefs. Affective effects regard the emotional media processing, various emotional outcomes and the attitude structuring. Behavioral effects concern the behavior in the society which can be pro-social or antisocial kind of behaviors (Perse 2001, 3). These effects may be direct or indirect, intentional or unintentional, time-anchored, active or passive. The area of media effects theory is polarized between the powerful effects approach and the minimal effects one.

Following Perse, Richard Jackson Harris in his *A Cognitive Psychology of Mass Communication* presents the types of effects as being direct, conditional and cumulative (Harris 2004, 22). The direct effects are listed as part of the *theory of uniform effects* which encompasses the powerful effects of media such as the magic bullet and the hypodermic needle approach. The conditional effects are a part of the selective effects paradigm which states that effects are recorded within a specific context, and various factors being taken into account. The cumulative effects theories point out that media effects are connected to the exposure time and tend to be powerful when exposure is repetitive. Harris talks about four different categories of media effects: behavioral, attitudinal, cognitive to which he adds the physiological effects. This class of effects deals with the human body reactions to the media input such as the heart rate. In order to assess media impact thoroughly, media research field should study media content, media exposure and consequently media effects.

Harris lists the major theories of mass communication starting with Social Cognitive Theory, continuing with Cultivation Theory, Socialization Theory, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Agenda Setting, Schema Theory and Limited Capacity Model. Social Cognitive Theory developed out of the behaviorist approach based on S-R model that claims people learn how to behave in a certain situation by imitating others. This process happens in four stages: exposing the person to the message which she or he will then encode and memorize it. The message is then turned into action and motivated by reinforcement.

The Cultivation Theory regards the media socializing function and the effects of the television exposure on audience whose view on social reality is modeled, converged and homogenized. Apart from the mean world syndrome, television mainstreaming works on audience conceptions about group identity, gender roles, politics and crimes, health and environment protection. Socialization Theory defines the learning function of media for the segments of the society. Media mainstreams society and erases border lines between generations and genders and is particularly efficient when there is a lack of information and personal experience of the consumer.

Uses and Gratifications Theory analyzes the audience's needs and the way these needs are satisfied by specific media products. The audience is actually active in the process of deciding what media to consume. The predisposition to escapism and heavy TV viewing is studied with great interest in this context. Agenda Setting is an instrument used to create public awareness and to initiate debates on specific social issues. By selecting certain issues, media calls for the public attention and challenges it to focus on those problems. Schema Theory studies the way audience structures the knowledge acquired from media into frameworks that are mixed with previous memories and experiences. People interpret certain situations according to the schemas previously formatted. Data stored into mental schema can be activated by media messages consisting of visual, auditory and textual information. All this convergent information is organized into media scripts that are processed by the audience and used for a better learning outcome.

Scripts are particularly useful to the audience segments that have little knowledge about peculiar or dangerous situations and teach them how to act on it. Defined as "skeleton structures of some activity" (Harris 37), mental scripts are necessary when a person becomes a victim of a violent attack, robbery or incest. Limited Capacity Model is tailored on the human limited capacity for processing information, research study published by the cognitive psychologist George Miller in 1956 which proved that the memory span is limited and structured into information chunks, divided into bits of information.

The chapter *Cognitive Components of the Media Experience* is dealing with the cognitive processes that are taking place while the audience is actively engaged with the media: Attention, Suspending Disbelief, Identification, Empathy, Suspense, Humor and Mood Management. Attention regards the selection process of the information that is to be consumed operated by the audience and consequently ignoring the rest as connected to the concept of the Limited Capacity. Suspending Disbelief is defined by Harris as a "social convention" (Harris 42) expressed as an agreement between the audience and the media producers on the story and characters which are accepted in order to experience their feelings. Identification deals with the viewer's ability to identify with a character and the degree of that identification process.

Empathy consists of cognitive and emotional load. Cognitive empathy concerns viewer's capacity to understand a different perspective while the emotional empathy is understood as an emotional response to a certain situation. Suspense highlights the level of the uncertainty experienced by the media viewer combined with his "omniscient status" (Harris 2004, 46). Humor consists of funny entertainment consumed by the audience to trigger the catharsis phenomenon in order to release suppressed "dark feelings" (Harris 2004,

47). Mood Management regards the audience use of media when affected by negative feelings or emotions as an efficient instrument to balance their mood.

Negative media effects embodied in antisocial behavior are tackled on in the most research studies conducted for crime, violence and sexuality in the media coverage. The effect of “copycat” is defined as some of the audience slight tendency to commit crimes after being repeatedly exposed to violent movie content. A well-known case is the movie *Natural Born Killers* released in 1994 which predisposed some viewers to commit copycat crimes (Bryant et al. 2013). The authors explain how the teenagers Benjamin Darras and Sarah Edmondson, unbalanced fans of the film *Natural Born Killers*, imitated the characters behavior in the movie and killed two people in 1995. A person’s aggressive behavior is strengthened by being accepted and acclaimed by others and if it is rewarded or if the aggressor finds satisfaction in it. Other negative effects are alcohol and drug use, unprotected sex habits and gender stereotyping.

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According to Baran, the violent behavior is triggered by violent media content based on the stimulation delivered by the aggressive cues that media messages contain which deliver women and other minorities as targets for intended aggression. The casual relationship between violent media content and aggressive behavior has been demonstrated in research studies, and it has been proven in over three thousand studies conducted for over fifty years that in 99, 5% of the cases the exposure to media violence has negative effects (Harris, 259). After watching a violent movie scene, the viewer tends to manifest fear, aggressive intentions and a slight desensitization. The process of desensitization is explained as a diminished ability to emotionally respond to negative stimuli after being repeatedly exposed to it.

Media and Internet Usage in Romania

Media consumption is also called media diet and it represents the media information people consume in a certain amount of time. The information is consumed by the audience while performing activities such as watching TV shows and cinema, listening to music, reading newspapers and various books. An active media consumer is considered to have the capacity of understanding, judgment, critical thinking and have the access to media technology.

According to the *Measuring the Information Society* ITU report on 2013, media in Romania is largely consumed on Pay-TV including technologies such as analogue cable,

digital cable, IPTV, pay DTH satellite, pay DTT. Romania is ranked in top 15 countries by percentage of households with pay TV in 2012 with 82% on position 14. *The Media Fact Book Romania 2013* launched by the Initiative Media reports that the television is still the leading media in Romania with a TV consumption of 5.6 hours per day among the urban audience aged between 18 and 49. ProTV is reported to be the leading channel in television market with a 4% rating/Shr 17.2%, closely followed by Antena 1 with 2.8 points rating percentage/Shr 12.1%, Kanal D Rtg 1.5%/Shr 6.3%, Prima TV Rtg 1%/Shr 4.1%, TVR1 Rtg 0.6%/Shr 2.6%, Realitatea TV Rtg 0.6%/Shr 2.6%, National TV Rtg 0.6%/Shr 2/6%, Disney and B1 TV Rtg 0.4%/Shr 1.7%. Romanian audience usually consumes talent shows such as *Romanian Got Talent*, *The Voice of Romania*, *X Factor*, cooking shows such as *Masterchef*, *Top Chef*, and entertainment shows such as *Do I Know You from Somewhere?*, *Dancing for You*, *Romania Dancing*. Romanian viewers also enjoy watching comedy shows and major international sports events.

According to the statistics released by Internet World Stats on June 30, 2012, Romania had 9,642,383 Internet users with a 44.1% penetration per ITU (International Telecommunication Union) for an average population number of 21,729,871 reported on 2014. Regarding Social media consumption, there were 5,374,980 Facebook subscribers on December 31, 2012 and a 24.6% penetration rate, while the Broadband download speed was 57.36 Mbps on March 2014 per Net Index.

IDI is the Information and Communication Technology development index which assesses ICT access, usage and skills related to a benchmark of eleven indicators. According to the International Telecommunication Union report titled *Measuring the Information Society* launched in 7 October 2013, Romania's position in 2012 world rank was 55 with an IDI of 5.35 below the regional European average of 71%. Romania's Internet user penetration rate in the international rank was 50% in the region (Chart Box 2.13 in the report). Regarding ICT skills, Romania's position in the international rank was 38 with 8.45 points out of maximum of 9.86 points in 157 positions listed. Romania was reported to have 12% increase in the proportion of household equipped with a computer (up to 57% in 2012 from 54 in 2011) and a 14% growth in Internet users. Europe's Digital Agenda main goal is to have 75% of the population in every European country using the Internet by 2015.

DTI Digital natives index represents the number of the digital natives in a country. Being also called net generation or millennials, the digital natives are young people aged from 15 to 25 that have an average experience of more than five years using the Internet. According to the *Measuring the Information Society 2013* report, there are over 300 million digital natives among 7 billion world population that would make 5.2 percent. The digital natives are important mainly because they play a decisive role in "shaping and driving the information society" (*Measuring the Information Society 2013*, 127).

In Romania, the total number of the digital natives is 1.584.515 representing 7.4% out of the total population number, 60% out of youth population and 12.3% share of total population. Regarding the Internet user penetration measured on the first hand on youth population and then on the other hand on total population number in 2012, here are the numbers: youth Internet user penetration is 83.2% while total Internet user penetration is 50% taking into account an age gap of 1.7%.

Measuring the Information Society 2013 International Telecommunication Union report offers a series of indicators for Romania regarding the telephone subscriptions per 100 inhabitants: 21.9% Fixed telephone subscriptions, 106.1% Mobile-cellular subscriptions, and 115.955 International Internet bandwidth Bits per Internet user. For 2012, the percentage of households having a computer is 57.0% and the percentage of households with Internet access is 54.0% which means that more than a half of the Romanian households are connected to Internet so far. The Internet use indicators are as follows: 50.0% of individuals were using the Internet for the time span 2012, the fixed (wired)-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants were 15.9% while the active mobile-broadband subscriptions per 100 inhabitants were 23.8%.

Measuring the Information Society 2013 International Telecommunication Union report shows there is an obvious connection between the ICT infrastructure and the marketplace, the education strategy, the gender balance, and the economic development. In order to grow the digital natives segment, there is need to increase the Internet access, and work on enhancing the secondary and tertiary education system. The digital skills are related to the gross enrollment ratio which in Romania is 97.2% in secondary school and 58.8% in tertiary education with an adult literacy rate percentage of 97.7% in 2012. It is important to retain the data regarding the ratio of females and males in high school and university as the report points out the “the higher the enrollment of females in secondary and tertiary schools, the higher a country’s share of digital natives” is (*Measuring the Information Society 2013*, International Telecommunication Union, 173).

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