The Communication Contract Between the Public and the Press: Claims and Limits in the New Media Era

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ABSTRACT

In a "liquid society"– as Umberto Eco characterised postmodernity as it is "crossed" by the crisis of the state, of ideologies and of the community –, an era of "unsettled individualism" and consumerism in the form of "bulimia without purpose" (Eco 2016, 7-8), responsible journalism is necessary, one that is interested in practices with cultural value and heralds the beginning of a new role for the media. It's about the daily inclusion of at least two pages of Internet site analysis, showing which ones are valuable and which ones spread "hoaxes or inaccuracies" (Ibidem, 363). On the one hand, this would represent an incentive to the public to read the press, and, on the other hand, the confirmation that not all users can distinguish "rambling ideas from well-articulated ones" (Ibidem, 362).

In the spirit of the uses and gratifications theory, the public's expectations of the mass media to satisfy needs such as "...to learn things about myself [...], to feel emotional, to feel less lonely [...], to get someone to do something for me" (Severin & Tankard Jr. 2004, 311) are to be rewarded and generate credibility and loyalty, regardless of whether one analyses the individual choices and uses or the common effects of media contents on the public (Drăgan 2007, 54-55). With all the limits and criticisms of this model: it is only the reaffirmation of the theories of selective influence (DeFleur & Ball-Rokeach 1999, 190), it exaggerates the power of the individual and the freedom of the consumer, it leads to the cancellation of the content of the message in favour of interpretation, etc., it proves viable in the public space dominated by New Media and in the context of the sources-press-public communication contract.

Keywords: Uses and Gratifications, New Media, communication contract, user (public) expectations

1   INTRODUCTION

Tolerating or encouraging certain discourses, images, narratives, and identity strategies in an age saturated with media preserves in actuality the dilemma stemming from the media communication contract, which some authors appreciate as elementary, univocal, monologue-type (the media hold the monopoly of information, and the public can only passively register the messages sent "to" it), while other researchers "judge" it more nuanced, in the spirit of dialogic communication, according to which the message does not reach an amorphous, inactive mass, which only accumulates information but the recipient is a fragmented, selective public, competent in preferring some messages and rejecting others, adopting or rejecting the mediatized point of view, acting or remaining expectant.

It is to the credit of the social sciences to have discussed the role of symbolic interaction in the "architecture" of consensus on which society is based and to have persuaded that at the foundation of social order lies communication—"the great Tool and Common Link of Society" [4, p. 246]. "How do people know the nature of the objective external world?" had been the question of epistemologists, to which, over time, the answer has grown steadily: by reasoning and observation. It remained to be "decided" how to separate the truth from the false and otherwise than by probability.

In this connection, the principles related to the existence of the individual are useful to us: (1) "There is a reality in which we live"; (2) "Human beings conceive a form of mental representations that give meaning to that reality"; (3) "There is a process by which individuals construct subjective meanings about reality"; (4) "Our subjective meanings and interpretations guide our personal conduct"; (5) "Mankind's behaviour patterns [...] require a social order [...] founded on fair rules. In turn, that order influences the conduct" [4, p. 247-248]. Have the social sciences internalized the not-so-easy doubtful of the process by which meanings are obtained in relation to reality and how does subjectivity "play" in establishing the conventions necessary to interpret the world? Sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and psychology report the "obsession" for constructing subjective meanings in the interest of finding out how individual knowledge of reality makes communication possible, how communication determines individual and social behaviour. Important for our approach are several conclusions: (a) the development of semantics has led some researchers to attribute the induction of wrong meanings (by deception and manipulation) in the negative perception of reality; (b) language guides and conditions the individual's thinking with reference to the society in which he lives, so that we can see that "the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built on the language habits of the group" [4, p. 252]; (c) personal ideas (Charles Horton Cooley) and the "sociology of knowledge" (Max Scheler) would represent the synthesis of the concerns for many sociologists regarding the mode of symbolic interaction, people thus acquiring "common definitions of the meanings of things, including the rules of social coexistence and even one's own nature"; (d) the meaning-behaviour tandem "gives work" to psychologists in love with experiment and *social knowledge* (E. Torry Higgins, C. Peter Herman, M.P. Zanne); (e) sociopsychology confirms the existence of a relationship between acquisitions through social learning and our response through personal organizations of subjective meanings/ schemes/ constructions. In other words, "stored meanings represent the basis of knowledge; ...such meanings [...] represent the basis of communication. In turn, communication represents the basis of social order" [4, p. 257].

2 THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE (LITERATURE REVIEW)

Starting with the mid-20th century, researchers in the field of mass communication—especially in the area of "effects and the mechanism of operation"—exploited the idea that the meanings and interpretations regarding reality are born in the social environment, the mass media being a big "culprit," with their subjective lens, with their agenda of urgent and important subjects, with their actors specialized in the art of the word, promoting the interests of the dominant class (the hegemonic model is "witness"), transforming into normal, natural, indisputable different values, directions of thoughts, visions of life and society, which the consumers of the media message internalize without using critical thinking (since it does not prove imperatively necessary in a process of persuasion "with kindness", "gentle," without harshness).

The *mediatized representations* (M. DeFleur, S. Ball-Rokeach), this spectacle of reality ("pipolization" [1, p. 387]) generated through the "eyes" of the media, offer a rational explanation for the establishment of a genuine media age or, in other words, of the recognition of the media's dominance over the public space. Isabelle Pailliart's acceptance of public space—an "ideal and normative" one—is perfectly circumscribed to our approach,

precisely because it does not "sympathize" with the older "view," which considered the public space, in a restrictive manner, "the sphere of the political, as it is traditionally defined through Parliament, mass media, politicians, public opinion" [7, p. 198]. The different organizations and the school form "partial public spaces," social micro-spheres in which conflicts between different interests unhinderedly "play" and, on the other hand, power relations often cleverly camouflaged in a "more diffuse form of symbolization" [7, p. 198], but in which "the opposition between the universality of the citizen and the specificity of man as a private person, member of civil society" [7, p. 198] is woven—the basis of democracy.

Let's return to the key question in the media communication contract issue: what role do the media's contents play in the social construction of meaning? We choose as a starting point what the authors call *the paradigm of meaning*, which is based on the principles of knowledge, language and behaviour [4, p. 259] and which involves several statements, among which are very important: "Human memory makes possible the development of *knowledge*; knowledge exists in the form of *concepts*, which are structures of meanings...; meanings for concepts can be created by a person through direct *sensory contact* with certain aspects of reality, or through *symbolic interaction* within a language community; the linguistic symbols and conventions agreed upon and used by a certain group shape *perception*, *interpretation* and *conduct* towards the physical and social world..." [4, p. 259].

In *Human Communication as a Biosocial Process* (1980), M. DeFleur and Timothy G. Plax even asserted that the mass media had a language-shaping function after Walter Lippmann had "decreed", six decades earlier, that the mass media exercise a function of *constructing meanings*. Even at the risk of providing distorted or false descriptions of reality, the media "operated" with meanings and interpretations that perverted the consumer's mind and generated behaviours unrelated to the "truth of the outside world". Fortunately, a century ago, the mass media did not deliberately choose to mislead readers, journalists being attached to ethical codes with conditions such as: "objectivity," "correctness," "meticulousness," "strict reporting of facts." Unfortunately, following the analysis of the French press, for example, after 1990, there is talk of drifts, and many "'small errors′ caused by the increasing lack of rigour of journalists are noted: unverified information, poor spelling and grammar, language distorted by countless 'media′ clichés" [1, p. 387]. According to Y. Agnès, the ideal in the journalistic profession looks like this: "honesty, care for the truth of the facts, respect for the diversity of opinions, the refusal to manipulate consciences, the refusal of corruption, the duty to publish what is of public interest...," in close dependence on (a) *rigour in information* (for the benefit of the consumer with full right to informational quality and truth); (b) *the respect of the persons* it relates to; c) *the independence of the journalist* [1, p. 387].

The small detour within the "territory" of media ethics brings us back to W. Lippmann, finding him, through his theory, perfectly current: in the era of New Media, the creation of images in the users' minds is the rule, and it does not matter now if it is about representations based on accuracy or distorted constructions of reality. The images created by the media in our minds contribute to the knowledge of reality that "shapes" our behaviour [4, p. 260-262].

In *Theories of Mass Communication*, M.L. DeFleur and S.Ball-Rokeach teach us that not only the contents present in the mass media attract and build loyalty, developing degrees of dependence of the receiver on the sender of the message. The same idea, exemplified by the confrontation of the US presidential candidates in 1960 (Richard Nixon and John F.

Kennedy), is supported by Mihai Coman (*Introducere în sistemul mass-media / Introduction to the mass media system*). The broadcast of the final debate on television—for the first time in the history of the media coverage of election campaigns—, at the same time as the radio broadcast, revealed the public's positioning in favour of the young Kennedy (it is true, by the small difference of 118,000 votes) thanks to *the image* of the future president: the message spoken in harmony with the accompanying gestures, the fresh and made-up face—elements that emphasized the affective charge of the reception—, while the radio listeners formed their "face" of the potential president in a rather rational manner (following the structure of the speech, the ideas, arguments and particularities of voices, but not having the complete "picture" of the candidates' persuasion in front of them). The sympathy generated by the telegenic appearance of the much younger president constitutes an argument in the analysis of many Western authors regarding the motivation of consumer preferences. M. Coman talks about influencing the public "following and through exposure to mass media action," invoking the different reception and, consequently, the different effects, determined by "the type and characteristics of the media channel" [2, p. 105-106].

The study of the media's influence on the behaviour of the audience segments has materialized in several typologies and models, grouped mainly according to the power of the message's action, but also the strength of the persuasive agents operating in the world of the media. [5, p. 357-387]. We are talking about:

- the tripartition announced by Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl: (1) personal influence, diffusion theories and the short-term effects of mass communication on individuals; (2) the effects of mass media on culture and society; (3) audience-centred models [6, p. 55-85];

- the tercet of Werner Severin and James W. Tankard, Jr.: (1) agenda effect; (2) the knowledge gap hypothesis; (3) mass communication effects (bullet theory, limited effects model, cultivation theory, McLuhan's media determinism, spiral of silence, third-person effect, media hegemony, effects of television violence, social learning theory, strong effects model) [8, p. 235-259];

- five categories of effects proposed by M. DeFleur and S. Ball-Rokeach: (1) mass society and the magic bullet theory; (2) theories of selective influence; (3) socialization and theories of indirect influence; (4) construction of meaning; (5) theoretical persuasion strategies [4, p. 151-291];

- the centrifugal/centripetal effects, concentrated in an analysis bearing the signature of Ioan Drăgan: (1) the relationship between functionalism and the theory of minor effects of mass media; (2) the psychological model (Comstock) applied to the relationship between television consumption and individual behavior; (3) the "cognitive gap" theory; (4) the effects from the perspective of pragmatics of communication; (5) the comprehensive sociological model of influence [3, p. 179-398];

- the synthesis assumed by M. Coman: (1) theories of strong effects; (2) theories of limited effects; (3) theories of weak effects [2, p. 105-132].

Particularly interested in the typology of the last cited author, in the present approach, we would reconsider the anachronistic character of the "stimulus-response" model (the first, in chronological order, among the powerful effects), noting that in "the World" of digital

information the users' impression can be quick (even instantaneous in relation to broadcasting), but also that the public's reaction is similar to the one provoked by a sting, before any search for the preceding cause, a normal mechanism in an era of stimulating a greater immediate, emotional response.

Why do we think so? Maybe because the press remains "fascinating, tyrannical and impersonal," maybe because "obscure forces [...], skilful propagandists, united in a cunning conspiracy..." [2, p. 111] are acting against the free press, or maybe it is to be taken into account the argument of D. McQuail and S. Windahl: modern society is "translated" by a mixture of individuals who are not guided by genuine social group relationships and obligations, but are driven by personal interests. If we also accept that the mass media collude with political parties, advertising agencies, government-related organizations, etc., participating in campaigns to shift behaviour in one direction or another, we have the full explanation of the immediate, predictable, uniform reaction as a result of injecting any content "into the veins of the audience".

Among the weak effects, we would now privilege the *uses and gratifications* model, exemplary, in our opinion, for the "age" in which mass communication is located, but also for the way it responds to the public's expectations. The scope of new communication technologies has consolidated a field of research with reference to the influence of mass media on receivers. TV channels specialized in sports, music, cartoons, documentaries about civilization or specific behaviours in the animal kingdom, etc., receiving messages via cable, satellite, Internet, etc. raise the issue of the public's choice of suitable, desired, expected offers. The information monopoly is no longer valid in the modern era, the consumer holding the trump cards in the media communication contract: he is active (although very fragmented), exposing himself only to the messages that suit him (regardless of their persuasion and frequency), he "abandons" the interpretation of media texts in order to satisfy his specific cultural needs, building individual meanings regarding the social environment in which he exists and which he wants to know under control.

The *uses and gratifications* ("U and G") model is based on the press-public communication relationship dictated by the latter's expectations. The competition between media institutions in giving the audience what they want more (or faster) is well known. The rush after the audience results in a favourable or unsatisfactory rating of the various media, which is similar to prestige, financial profit, resistance on the market or vice versa—discredit, bankruptcy, and disappearance from the media landscape. Audience loyalty to shows, channels, programs, publications, etc. places the consumer at the centre of the communication contract, dethroning the media. In just a few decades, operating with different "figures" of the media audience (from the "passive entity", the possessors of a "relative autonomy", the "fairly active" status, to the "active audience"), researchers could observe the evolution of the media communication contract from the goals of mass media institutions "on the shoulders" of consumers [8, p. 306].

The research on the *weak effects* had two premises: the active nature of the receivers [4, p. 190] and their double objective—to solve their needs and to obtain satisfaction as a result of the consumption of media messages (regardless of whether they are considered post-consumption "gratifications", symbolic-type "gratifications"). The selection and use of those contents that they expect, and appreciate that bring the necessary degree of satisfaction

("consumption happiness") give media users the ever-coveted position: "Our customer, our master."

Two stages have been delineated in "use and gratifications" research. The classic one (the 4th-6th decades of the last century; according to other authors, the 3rd decade), concerned with receivers' responses regarding the choice of radio series, regarding "what they felt" when (temporarily) the written press disappeared, etc., complete with a "portfolio" of reasons for media consumption: creates the framework for interaction, stimulates the imagination and social relations, relaxes. So, nothing about the value of the contents... The modern stage (60s-80s of the 20th century) sets as its objective to find "the social and psychological origins of the needs that create expectations towards the mass media and other sources, which lead to different patterns of exposure to the media message (or involvement in other activities), resulting in the satisfaction of these needs and other consequences, most of which are probably unanticipated." [8, p. 114]

From the work *Perspectives on theories of mass communication. Their origins, methods and use in the mass media*, we find the long and complex route of the tower regarding the public's ability to use media messages, not exclusively to react to media proposals (as in the magic bullet theory!). B. Berelson, E. Katz, W.A. Gamson, D. Croteau, W. Hoynes and T. Sasson, J. Bryant and R.L. Street, Jr., J.G. Blumler and D. McQuail, M.R. Levy, W. Schramm, J. Lyle, and E.B. Parker, E.M. Perse and J.A. Courtright, G.E. Lometti and T. Addington et al. reached conclusions that are still valid today, and of which we present a selection:

- Solving different needs (solutions to own problems, relaxation, escape), starting from the same media content;

- The existence of "immediate" and "deferred" gratifications or, according to other classifications, "informational-educational and fantasy-escapist (entertaining)", "diversion, personal relationships, individual psychology, control";

- Books are preferred for self-knowledge, and movies, TV programs for emotions;

- At least for some of the receivers (television audience, for example), not internal needs but habit determines the consumption of mass media messages;

- Cable transmission of TV programs led to an "individual's repertoire of channels", which implies the use of search strategies such as: automatic, controlled, elaborated, exhaustive, limited, the preponderance, in young adults, being of controlled, elaborated or exhaustive strategies;

- The video equipment increases the active character of the users, through the flexibility of viewing times and the diversity of the offer for the proposed messages;

- Regarding the use of computers as communication devices, initially, it was found that they satisfy to a very small extent needs such as self-awareness, relaxation, pleasure, entertainment, so that, later, the situation changes radically;

- "Computer connectivity" through the Internet and information services indicated (1995) satisfaction in learning, social interaction, getting out of everyday life, fun, and escapism; the fact that the passage of time and the escape from everyday life entailed the ritual use of the computer-generated the fear of addiction among users;

- Relinquishing the division of the audience into passive and active, it was observed that the public is sometimes selective and rational and, at other times, uses the media for relaxation or escapism, which could have consequences at the level of the mass-communication effects [8, p. 308-315].

D. McQuail and S. Windahl will divide mass media messages into two "areas" of use: informational and cultural (including escapism and recreation). With a new name ("cultural" experience towards the media [6, p. 118-119]), the theory of uses and gratifications will incline the analysis towards the affective content of the media, towards not so much instrumental, but ritualistic use. Targeted or fortuitous, choice and attention (as endings of the desire to experience "culturally" and as consequences of social-individual modelling) generate the mental "stop" that leaves an imprint on the receiver's choices, strengthening or weakening the system of everyone's preferences. The culturalist model clearly departs from that of instrumental use, for at least three reasons:

- the consumption of media messages is not guided by interests (problems) considered urgent (e.g. obtaining information), being perceived rather as pure pleasure of consumption, hence the non-identical satisfaction of consumption to that of the instrumental model;

- there is no cause-effect relationship between the social context and the nature of a cultural experience;

- unlike the instrumental model, here we cannot "blame" the "effects of the mass media message" when we analyze the position or behaviour of the users towards the institutionalized sources of media content and towards their cultural offer. McQuail and Windahl believe that the consumption experience is a result (not a cause) or "a simple sequence of time" [6, p. 120].

Ioan Drăgan identifies the source of the "U and G" theory in a double approach: psychological and sociological-functionalist. The first privileges individual choices and uses of mass media—in which case we are talking about purposes, functions, uses—, while the second, as a complement to the first, recalls the existence of common effects of media contents on consumers [3, p. 54-55]. In the analysis of the professor from Bucharest, there are key concepts used by his predecessors (need, motivation, method, satisfaction, values, self-respect, personal security, socio-cultural contexts, functions, effects, uses, causes, purposes, etc.), as well as ideas that augment the "U and G" theory: for example, "Our actions and behaviours are motivated, oriented, directed (the motivation-satisfaction relationship) by the influences exerted by culture, by our socialization, by mass communication" (J. Lull) or the fact that "the mass media act mainly in the direction of social stability, protecting the existing social structures against dissatisfactions that could become sources of social instability"—as claimed by Michèle Martin.

Among the authors with a critical discourse on the uses and gratifications model are M. DeFleur and S. Ball-Rokeach. They felt that it was too much to consider "uses and gratifications" as an independent theory, being no more than "a limited restatement of certain aspects of the selective influence theories" (individual differences theory works perfectly here: public attention to certain contents of the media is determined by the individual needs and gratifications that consumers obtain from exposure to media messages [4, p. 190]). Secondly, the mentioned researchers see the perspective of needs and gratifications as limited

and unsystematic [4, p. 190]. Non-theoretical and vague in the definition of key concepts (necessity, for example) are two other critical "appeals" of the "uses and gratifications" model. The insistence on the individual is another dissatisfaction with the model under discussion, the retort being the placement of man at the centre of the social universe, which justifies modelling the needs of individuals.

Among the limits attributed by I. Drăgan to the model under discussion (regarding the functionalist component), it is worth noting:

- taking over David Morley's criticism of the "naive apology of the viewer," on the well-founded grounds of a difference between the user's autonomy and his full capacity to "recode and poach" the television stream to the level where the content problem of the messages loses any importance: content no longer counts as "power to influence" in front of the "sovereign" viewer [3, p. 92];

- the exaggeration in using the notion of "evasion" (following Fr. Balle), since some media contents are deliberately evasive, while in others, evasion is a secondary effect [3, p. 92-93].

3   RESULTS

One of the explanatory models of the *uses and gratifications* theory belongs to K.E. Rosengren who starts from needs—considered problems—, which should lead to significant actions and put solutions into use. The personal and social structure of the individual determines the "route" of media consumption, so that, at the end, the gratification is ascertained. Satisfaction or its opposite indicates a return to the initial moment, where the characteristics present in each consumer's DNA account for the consequences [6, p. 115-116].

In *media expectations* theory, P. Palmgreen and J.D. Rayburn introduce the "expectation" variable, the causal relationship between the consumer's merit of receiving, in the post-consumption stage, a significantly higher degree of satisfaction than his own claim (based on a consumption experience with motivational value in this expectation) and the evaluative response of the mass media. When the "obtained gratifications" are higher than the "expected or sought gratifications", audience satisfaction and appreciation of media messages are also increasing.

The relationship established in the communication contract is based on the ability of the media to put "on a tray" imagined, expected goodies, an offer that meets perfectly with the one who has been feasted, so that he always returns to the same table, ignoring other proposals of informational hospitality. To older formulas such as: "Be with us", "Stay with us"—identified in the analysis of authors such as R. De Berti, A. Negri, P. Signorelli (and which, in our opinion, rather suggest a request, support) —, we can add others, practised by post-December Romanian televisions: "Don't leave", "Don't leave, because you don't even know what you're losing", "We'll be back in a minute", "Bomb-information after the break", "Breaking news" etc., which almost send to summonses, to conditionings (which illustrates the pressing need of media institutions to keep their audience and conquer new waves of sympathizers). Encouraging public participation in the 1990s looks now like an incentive-obligation, depending on each medium (filming with your phone for television X is an incentive and help, while creating content—out of a pressing need—in the New Media area

transforms each user into a practising journalist, without confirmation through studies and professional certificates).

4   CONCLUSIONS

From the attempt to identify the "social and psychological origins of the needs" of the modern consumer with the help of the "uses and gratifications" model (in the second stage of the evolution of the famous paradigm), "strong statements" emerged as true conclusions, challenges for the next generations of researchers. They show the following:

1. Audiences are active actors and make informed choices (based on previous media consumption experiences);

2. In order to obtain good information, favourable psychological states, signs of participation in social networks, etc., consumers do not primarily use mass media, but family, friends, and work colleagues;

3. In order to interrelate, consumers turn to the media only because they can be viable alternatives to real communication relationships and because they can be a trigger in socialization.

In the New Media era, could we deconstruct such "verdicts"?

For the first conclusion, the only counterattack would be the passive character of the audiences "delivered" to the screens (on which images and words run non-stop, accompanied by a sound background strategically chosen to persuade-devote), doubled by the indifference or incompetence of suitable consumption choices.

The amendment to the second statement can be supported by the existence of numerous truth-bearing information, the stimulation of interactivity, the expression of opinions, and social validation through "virtual friends".

At this moment, I have not identified any counterarguments for the last conclusion, agreeing with the very important role of mass media content in socialization, regardless of the era, technologies, audience loyalty strategies, etc.

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