

Reality: a news-generated product

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Rezumat: Fiind un concept care nu poate fi abordat cu instrumentele unui singur domeniu, termenul "realitate" nu se explică decât printr-o abordare pluridisciplinară atât timp cât recunoaștem faptul că ne aflăm în căutarea unei realități obiective, deși nu reușim decât să subiectivizăm și mai mult realitatea subiectivă în care trăim.

Cuvinte cheie: realitatea subiectivă, realitate obiectivă, discurs mediat

Everywhere we go, everything we do, buy, worry about, every moment we enjoy or hate while watching TV, reading the newspaper, listening to the radio, or browsing the Internet sites is, more or less, connected to what we all have come to call 'news'. Whether we like it or not, we, twenty-first century citizens, feed on news regularly, therefore it would be most interesting to see what exactly we 'digest', under what conditions, and to what result.

Linguists, psychologists, political commentators, or journalists of all ranks have commented on the nature of news, and a great deal of literature has been produced in the last thirty years or so. At the core of all discussions there lies the fact that news is transmitted through a system of signs, both linguistic and non-linguistic, which structures its components according to particular rules and in order to achieve particular goals.

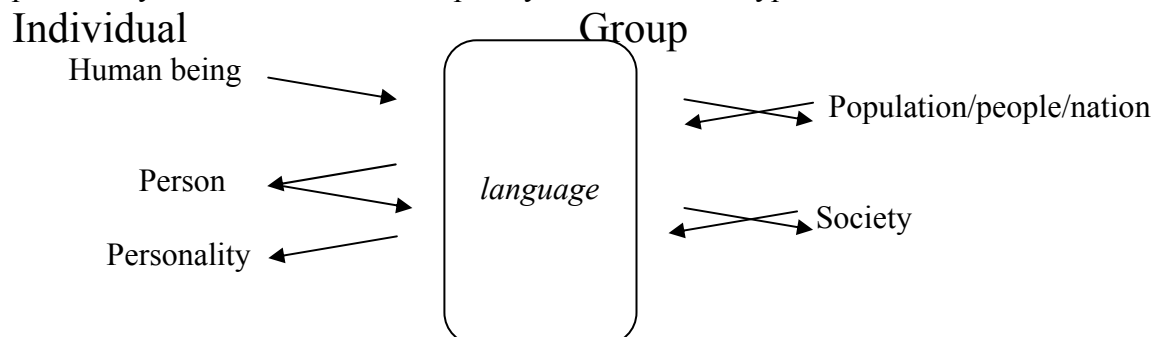
In order to approach this particular system, it would be worthwhile looking upon the differences between the two domains of the so-called 'experienced culture', namely those of *experimented* (or *first hand*) significances, on the one hand, and *mediated* ones, on the other (Hartley, 1999:146). The former are produced while individually interacting at the subjective level, derived mainly from conversations, and eventually mastered with friends, in the family, at school, or at work. All these generate conversational situations where *primary socialization* is acquired and where we start promoting a *subjective reality*. It is this type of reality that organizes and strengthens our self-consciousness in such a manner that the world structured in concentric circles around us loses its relevance the farther it gets from us. *Mediated significances*, on the other hand, are acquired through the experimented ones, and our external world is built on them. Such significances are transmitted through mass media, parents, teachers, etc. In other words, we produce mediated significances in the context in which we produce the experimented ones as well.

In Hartley's opinion (1999:147), we interact with the *objective reality* in the process of *secondary socialization* by means of translating mediated significances into experimented ones. Naturally, news belongs to the domain of mediated significances and it represents one of the fundamental ways through which the external world manages to enter our personal territory. Therefore, whenever the experimented significances contradict the mediated ones, a 'negotiation' takes place after which both may either change or not, in the latter case still preserving their state of contradiction. Also, mediated significances play an important role in the manner we grow to perceive reality.

As seen from above, we internalize the mediated significances in our subjective reality, using them to structure and understand the world around us. Nevertheless, subjective reality is hardly a given fact, and it is influenced by the significances it gets into contact with, and subjective reality represents a product of the interaction between the two types of significances (Hartley, 1999:147). The experimented significances that we build by means of conversation possess the potential conveyed by language, which is a 'social organism', if we may say so. Consequently, our subjectivity itself represents a social phenomenon determined by the types of discourse that we have encountered since birth. Mediated or experimented, they build our individuality through negotiations.

To put it differently, some discourse types seem to work in parallel, producing significances that validate one another, while others intersect and disagree, turning our

individuality into a ‘battle field’. The following is a representation that, in Halliday’s opinion (1978:15), clearly shows that the nature of the individual is not biological but social. Thus, by means of language the human being joins a group, and can be identified as a person; and as such, the individual establishes social relations within the structure of society, where different roles are fulfilled through different discourse types; as a consequence, the personality of the individual is shaped by these roles and types of discourse.



In a society as complex and industrialized as the western one, countless systems of specialized significances or “discourse types” can be identified, but not all of them are considered equally important. For instance, the world of public matters, of politics and every day events seems to enjoy a greater prestige than the somehow private universe of domestic life, of interpersonal relations, of sexuality or feelings. As far as this phenomenon of selection is concerned, it seems that there is a social process at work in which certain facets of our general culture “matter” more than others. News is one of the most important factors responsible for this process. The institution of news enjoys a privileged rank in the hierarchy of our cultural values, and it represents a social and cultural institution among many others, sharing the same broad characteristics. Generally speaking, news has three roles: a political, an economic and a social one (Hartley, 1999:18) and its main purpose is that of acting as a “watch dog” paying attention to everything that moves in our yard and letting us, the masters, know if something important happens. Still, somebody has “to watch the watch dog” since, otherwise, we would not have any independent confirmation of the accuracy of certain statements that sound so natural and credible in the news. This type of discourse comprises words and images, which makes it a specific sub-system within language and, in order to understand it, we need to learn its language codes and conventions, taking into account the fact that we perceive and interpret the world we live in using terms partially derived from the inventory that news familiarizes us with. News is a type of discourse articulated/structured/modulated by the larger discourse of television, which, in its turn, is dependent on the general system of language, both by its elements (the signs) and by its rules and conventions (the codes). In other words, news represents a discourse produced by a general system of signs and related to a social structure. Therefore, news is written in a creative and active manner – it does not simply “reflect” the linguistic, social or historic determinants, but it works upon them. It transforms the raw material into a recognizable product we accept as familiar.

If we look up the definitions of ‘news’, this is what we find:

news [nju:z; nu:z] *pl.n.* (used with a sing. verb). **1.a.** Information about recent events or happenings, especially as reported by newspapers, periodicals, radio, or television. **b.** A presentation of such information, as in a newspaper or on a newscast. [Middle English *newes*, new things, tidings, pl. of *newe*, new thing, new. See NEW.]

WORD HISTORY: If you take the first letters of the directions North, East, West, and South, it is true that you have the letters of the word *news*, but it is not true that you have the etymology of *news*, contrary to what has often been thought. The history of the word is much less clever than this and not at all unexpected. *News* is simply the plural of the

noun *new*, which we use, for example, in the adage “Out with the old, in with the new.” The first recorded user of this plural to mean “tidings” may have been James I of Scotland; a work possibly written by him around 1437 contains the words “Awak . . . I bring The [thee] newis [news] glad.” It is pleasant to see that the first news was good. However, his descendant James I of England is the first person recorded (1616) to have said “No newis is better than evill newis,” or as we would put it, “No news is good news.”

(The American Heritage Electronic Dictionary)

According to this definition, news is not the event itself but rather a ‘report’ or a ‘presentation’ of the event. The discourse turns into a meaningful story, the same way as *parole* is made out of the elements of *langue*. As in the case of *parole*, news is made out of words but not only. Therefore, we need a concept larger than language, which should be able to refer to meanings, in order to understand the “fabric” of news. News discourse is made out of signs combined by means of codes and this discourse is used to talk about reality but, speaking from a semiotic perspective, ‘reality’ is a mind-generated concept. Natural and social world does not consist of objects, forces or events, independent of the observer, with intrinsic identities and characteristics. Adopting this viewpoint, it becomes obvious that reality consists not in objects but in relations and, if we are made out of relations that we preserve in orderly systems from the closest one, socially speaking, such as family, school, neighborhood, friends, to the more general ones – social class, language, culture, generation, it results that these relations exist only as long as they are kept active and continuously generated. Such a perspective might help us understand to which extent the ‘nature of reality’ is a result, an effect of language, and not a source of understanding reality for us. To put it differently, the world is “realized” (in both meanings of the word: made real and understood as such) through language. From the angle of this ‘realization’ process, news discourse has two major determinants:

- (i) the language (the system of signs) in which it is encoded and
- (ii) the social forces that determine the way in which its messages are produced and ‘read’.

We cannot define news as an autonomous system of signs, independent of the conventions and characteristics specific to language but there are certain features specific to news discourse that differ from those characterizing spoken language. The combination between general and specific features gives news significance. It is not the reported event that determines the shape, content, significance or ‘truth’ of a piece of news, but the news that determines the significance of the event: it results from the features of the system of signs and from the context in which it is generated and received. Neither news, nor language is a transparent window towards the world, but rather conventional representations of it. News does not show us the world as it is but it rather offers us a map of the world and, as any other map, it is an abstraction, suggesting way by means of which various and contradictory phenomena could be artificially categorized, classified and differentiate. The meanings we give to a map depend on the way we use that map. The way news ‘maps’ the world and establishes its meaning for us depends heavily on the nature of the various signs employed by the news discourse.

What determines the value of any sign is not the degree to which it suits the pre-existent entity or concept (of thinking or of nature) since the signs themselves define what is and what is not a concept. Their value is determined entirely by their relations with the rest of the signs in the system. The principle is valid in the case of news, too. Let us take for instance an announcement which may frequently appear in the evening news bulletins: “Today, terrorists attacked Beirut again”. Clearly, the sign ‘terrorist’ is not determined by any intrinsic features of the persons referred to. The significances this word can generate in this context do not depend on the external referent, but on the position this sign takes in a ‘natural’ social

selection of signs governed and combined according to certain rules conventionally accepted. We shall not insist here upon the rules of phonemic combination but upon the fact that, as a full sign, 'terrorist' differs from other signs that might have been selected instead: 'soldier', 'freedom fighter', 'volunteer' or 'gunman'. There is a hidden motivation for the choice of this sign and it is connected to the permanent struggle of the news people to create a certain significance for a certain event. Once chosen, the sign 'terrorist' leaves enough room for discussions, since its interpretation will depend on the ideological perspective of the reader or viewer upon the conflict. The significance of 'terrorists' derives not from the actions or identities of those called like this, since they may hypothetically match any of the alternatives above mentioned, but from the relation between the sign 'terrorist' and other signs. As long as there is a unanimous acceptance of the value of 'terrorist', the possibility of approval is excluded. Thus, even if grammatically correct, it is practically impossible to say 'Terrorists peacefully demonstrated' or 'terrorists freed...' It would seem more appropriate to combine this sign with 'hostages', 'invasion' or 'occupation' than with 'freedom'. Apparently, the option of combining or not the sign 'terrorist' with the sign 'freed' is linguistic when, in fact, it is ideological, the two signs belonging to two adverse social types of discourse. The negative connotation of this sign is not linguistically motivated since there is no intrinsic feature to justify it. It is a matter of how one uses the sign's potential of significance. This potential can be accentuated or directed towards a certain type of significance that depends on the speaker and the context of utterance. Thus, signs become 'a battle field', and the social forces representing opposite interests fight by means of various discourse types. One of the elements involved in this fight for the 'right' significance is the addressee of the discourse, since the significance is the product of a mutually oriented interaction. Any verbal interaction is an active negotiation between the emitter and the receiver, an active transformation of the raw material in a product with a certain significance.

A distinct type of interaction is to be found in the case of TV news, in the discourse of which simultaneous signifiers combine to either modify or strengthen their significances. A poll has been conducted among average viewers of TV news bulletins (citizens of Galati) in order to examine the manner in which significances are built in the viewer; as a result, their views on news understanding and reliability are as following:

Question:

1. Do you watch news bulletins?	Yes	No	Sometimes	Rarely	In case of an important event
	43%	5%	26%	15%	11%
2. What channels do you watch?	Nation wide		Local stations		International
	80%		27%		20%
	Public		Private		
	58%		73%		
3. What do you expect to find in a news bulletin?	Internal events	External events	Weather forecast	Sports	Miscellaneous
	87%	21%	15%	10%	5%

4. Is there a difference between facts and the news reporting them?	No 38%	Yes 23%	Never thought of 30%	Do not care 9%
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5. Can you give examples of counterfeited news?	FNI 53%	Strikes 13%	Turkish-Romanian Bank 15%	Romanian revolution 12%	Others 7%
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Mention should be made of the fact that the poll presented above does not mention any television station explicitly, as the aim is to analyse the audience's perception of the news phenomenon, and not the professionalism and credibility of certain TV stations, Romanian or others. As far as percentages are concerned, there were many who admitted watching several TV stations, be they nationwide, local or international, both public and private (Question no. 2), therefore the percentages are not contrasted to a sum total of 100. The same resulted from interviewing about assumptions (Question no.3), many subjects offering complex answers, as they were looking for one, two, more or all categories in question. The poll was conducted on May 13, 2001, before noon, in a shopping area. As it is not a highly specialized poll, the interviewer (people seem to prefer females) chose 100 persons, 56 women and 44 men, aged 18 – 70, of all social status and even some representatives of the local minorities. Since 23% of the interviewees admitted the difference between facts and the news reporting them, the next step in our research was to analyse the manner in which these facts were structured and offered the public within 15 h of TV broadcasting (from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m.). Four TV channels were chosen on May, the 14th, conventionally labelled as **A**, **B**, **C** and **D** in our study, as the subject of the study is not a particular TV station, but the structures that are employed.

If we are to discuss the type of these verbal and non-verbal signs, they could be structured under the following headings:

- non-verbal structures, represented by the news presenter, the news reporter /correspondent / commentator, the material filmed, and
- verbal structures, which resemble a genuine dialogue, and belong to the news presenter, the correspondent or the commentator; regardless of the person who actually utters the words, they function only in relation to the news covered and the significances are conditioned by the larger context in which the item is located (Hartley, 1999:115-6).

Applying Hartley's classification to the case in point, non-verbal structures have been analysed and the following conclusions have been drawn:

- **A** has 2 presenters (male and female) while **B** and **C** have only one (female); on the other hand, **D** uses only the voice of the presenter (male and female alternatively), directing the viewer's attention on images offered at the same time with the presentation. A variety of this strategy would be the 'No Comment' news flashes, whose aim seems to be reaching total impartiality, inviting the viewer to reach personal conclusions.
- The correspondents are usually introduced at the beginning of their intervention, then their commentary unfolds the story while images (live or recorded) are supposed to support it. It is worth mentioning the fact that many of these images tend to be violent and dynamic. In addition, the correspondent's pitch and rhythm of speaking vary according to the nature of the event reported.

Verbal structures seem to be divided in two subclasses: 1. dialogues (between the presenters and between the presenters and the correspondents or guests); 2. the 'monologue'

of the presenter(s). While the former could have the function of creating the image of people working in a team for the benefit of the viewer, the latter is the most interesting to analyse, referring to the news itself.

Thus, all four televisions presented approximately the same events although their order, broadcasting time and manner of reporting were different. **A** and **C** started their bulletin expanding on marches of protest regarding the FNI matter, while **B** introduced this news second to information about police arresting several ex-managers of FPS subsidiaries. Unlike them, **D** opened the bulletin with details about the elections in Italy, graphics about the main parties and leaders involved and percentages representing exit polls. Also, the rank of the news stories to follow in **A**, **B**, **C** and **D**, were ordered and reported differently, this leading to the conclusion that some pieces of news were considered more important than others. Supposing the viewer chooses one TV channel only, he/she will rank events starting from the viewpoint and hierarchy in which they are presented. The more channels, the more chances for the viewer to approach a particular piece of news in all its complexity, from various perspectives and, thus, to develop a well rounded perception of what has really happened.

Taking into account the various features of these structures, can we still assume that **the fact** is the same thing as **the news covering the fact**? The question is worth answering as, after the analyses presented above, the viewer has every chance to use significances that may well not send to the referent, namely, the fact or event reported as news. Thus, the same event can be exploited so differently in various news bulletins that the end - products seem to report different events.

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