Approaches in the Study of Mass-Media Functions

Asist.drd.Matei Damian
Universitatea "Dunărea de Jos" Galați

.

Abstract: *Nobody can deny the fact that media answers to certain needs or endeavors belonging both to individuals and to society. Even if these needs are certain or diffuse, they have the power of shaping the discourse of the press; in the same time, media creates conditions in order to influence social life, though modifying the actions of individuals. Starting from this point, journalists, politicians, philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have tried to find out the place that media takes into social existence, the bond that appears between press and other groups or institutions, the power of these interactions and the importance of media through the processes of economical, social, political or cultural change.*

Mihai Coman identifies the following functions, while operating restrictions in the naming process: *informing, interpreting, "connecting", dissemination of culture, entertainment.* (Coman, 2004: 37) It is quite obvious that the *informing* function identified by Coman corresponds to the *surveillance of the milieu* (Bertrand). Similarly, we can establish the following connections: *interpreting – presenting an image of the world, "connecting" – "forum," dissemination of culture – cultural transmission, entertainment – stimulating entertainment.* Of the six functions acknowledged by the French theoretician, only five can also be found in Mihai Coman's list. For the purpose of integrating the *promotion of consumption,* Dorin Popa identifies a sixth function of the media: the *advertising* function. (Popa, 2002: 71) Although most works on the topic attribute only a secondary place to this particular function, setting it under that of informing, Popa finds solid arguments in favour of the division: he approaches advertising first from an economic perspective, then from a historical one, making then a short presentation of the structure of advertising industry. Finally, the researcher insists on the importance of choosing the suitable distribution vehicle by the buyers of advertising space.

We cannot overlook the presentation made by Cristian Florin Popescu in his *Dictionary,* where the concept of *function* is seen as diffuse, interpreted in various manners, but always in close connection to another concept: *effect.* It is not mere coincidence that Claude-Jean Bertrand mentions**,** in connection to the *forum* function of mass-media, that: "Government officials make their achievements and their projects public. Politicians try to use mass-media to convince the electorate, not without distortions or omissions. Those who steer economy also use mass-media, more discreetly, but more efficiently. That is why an eminent observer like Jacques Ellul considers that the essential function of mass-media is propaganda." (Popescu, 2002: 184) Popescu gives special notice to Serge Tchakhotine's effort (1939) to explain the hypnotic effect of the Nazi propaganda on the German people, focusing, among others, on a relatively new medium at the time: radio.

The behavioural perspective, according to which the public, as "inert mass", can be spontaneously moulded by the message (the stimulus-reaction diagram), is supplemented by the primary variant of the function-effect line, by the course established by Harold D. Lasswell (1948), who sees the relationships between media and the social system as being organized on three levels: a) media supervises the environment; b) media correlates the different components of society; c) media transmits the socio-cultural heritage from one generation to the next. We notice, therefore, a "rudimentary" form of the list proposed by Bertrand, where the functions of informing, connecting and disseminating culture can be identified.

C. F. Popescu mentions that the function of coagulating different social elements will become the subject matter for the research initiated by the Empirical School, which will re-evaluate the role of the social context to which the individuals receiving the media messages belong. Thus, two paradigmatic models become imperative: the *theory of the limited effects*, the main concern of most treaties on the sociology of communication and the *two-step-flow*.

The theory of limited effects, which maintains that messages are received by way of three filters (perception, exposition and memorization – all selective), started from the idea that media tells us what we should think and what we should do. Additionally, the technological paradigm considers that media designs a thinking pattern for us. The *two-step-flow* theory presupposes the following division: firstly, media influences the leaders (be they formal or informal) who, in their turn, influence the members of the group. In time, the concept is completed by the *multi-step-flow*, a view which starts from the reality that an individual belongs to more than one group (family, church, school, workplace, etc.)

Next, C. F. Popescu remarks that the theories of limited effects and of two-step-flow produce an implosion of the imperative, the *have to* level somehow indicating the power of the press and the journalist's status as leader of opinion. In the same area of effects, the political paradigm is also illustrated by the *setting agenda* (described by McCombs and Shaw in 1976), according to which the media, by showing increased interest in one problem, shapes the structure of the citizen's hierarchy of preoccupations. This will constitute the subject matter for the Frankfurt Critical School (T. Adrono, W. Benjamin, J. Habermas, H. H. Marcuse), which will emphasize the idea that the economic and the political systems rule the media system and, through it, they control society. The radical nature of these views can be explained by the Marxist descent of the above mentioned school of thought; nevertheless, even with this in mind, Herbert Marcuse's statements (1977) seem shocking at the present. According to him, the function of language and the media would be that of creating the *one-dimensional* man, completely atrophied as a critical element of society.

Moving on (historically) to the liberal perspective, we notice a change in emphasis; from the mechanistic view of the Tchakothine-Marcuse line, according to which the media is all-powerful, and the people mentally, and, therefore, socially helpless, one reaches the modern view, according to which the public is an active one. The problem is no longer *what the media does with people*, but *what the people do with the media*. As a formula, active receiver + the pluralism of the media supply (including entertainment, see Bertrand) = segments of the public (even "publics"). In this case, the public *makes* the press, and the functionalists (B. Berelson, C. Wright, J. Blumler) believe that the *receiver* is more important than the *message*, therefore it occupies the central place in the circuit of information, in the detriment of the media, becoming, at the same time, the subject matter for the sociology of reception or for the reception aesthetics (U. Eco, H. R. Jauss).

We arrive at the more recent approaches to the functions of the media. Mihai Coman mentions, beside the classic stand-point of Lasswell, the more ample plan belonging to Wright, which draws a scheme that distinguishes, on the one hand, between *functions* (consequences in favour of maintaining the system) and *dysfunctions* (unfavourable consequences), and, on the other hand, between *latent functions* (unexpected consequences) and *manifest functions* (the expected, predictable and desired consequences) (Coman, 2004: 78-79) An American sociologist, Leo Thayer, identifies seven functions of the media: socializing, identity, mythologizing (which can be assimilated, to a certain degree, to the cultural function), compensating (which offers vicarious experiences), informing, entertaining, and educating. To be remarked is that the *compensating* function identified by Thayer can be partially identified with the *cathartic* function labelled by Jean

Stoetzel, as quoted by C. F. Popescu (Popescu, 2002: 312), a function which would stand for the *life by proxy* of the media receiver (the so-called vicarious experience, or the *identification of the receiver*, done through film**,** reports**,** reality-shows, etc.) Mihai Coman also quotes F. Balle, who identifies the functions of *social insertion*, *recreation* and *soul purging*, and M. Mathien, who opts for a seven function alternative, somewhat similar to the one detailed by Thayer: escape, social cohesion, knowledge distribution, actuality deposit**,** guide for actuality**,** recreation**,** purification. M. Wiley maintains that the media fulfils five functions (providing and interpreting information, providing a reference frame for knowledge, entertainment and distributing encyclopaedic knowledge), whereas D. McQuail classifies the functions in two main types: a) for society (informing, correlating, ensuring continuity, entertainment, mobilizing); b) for the individual (informing, establishing personal identity, social integration, entertainment). (Coman, 2004: 74-76)

Being in the position to choose among so many classifications the one that would satisfy a series of disputable criteria, we opted for Claude-Jean Bertrand's view. The French theoretician has the appearance of someone who can achieve completeness, but who prefers conciseness, without abdicating from the earnestness appropriate to an academic endeavour.

Bibliography:

1. Coman, Mihai, *Introducere în sistemul mass-media*, ediția a II-a, Iaşi, Polirom, 2004.
2. Kapferer, Jean-Nöel, *Zvonurile*, Bucureşti, Humanitas, 1993.
3. Popa, Dorin, *Mass-media, astăzi*, Iaşi, Institutul European, 2002.
4. Popescu, Cristian Florin, *Dicţionar explicativ de jurnalism, relaţii publice şi publicitate*, Bucureşti, Tritonic, 2002.
5. Randall, David, *Jurnalistul universal*, Iaşi, Polirom, 1998.