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PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA ON THE CONSUMERS – A REVIEW

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Abstract
Mass media has a significant influence on the people’s beliefs, attitudes, opinions, emotions, values and even behavior. In Romania, in a top of institutions of trust, mass media is placed on the third place, after university and army. But what are the psychological effects of consuming mass media? Can be mass media considered a public threat, like some of the authors argued? This paper aims to be a review of the main findings on the psychological mass media effects research. This will underline important theoretical disputes and lead to suggestions regarding future directions.

Keywords: mass media; psychological effects; cultivation theory; public threat; social influence

1. INTRODUCTION

Mass media is a constant and persistent environment in our lives, so its influence goes very deep. Also, mass media has a global nature, which surpasses the social and geographic borders. The mass communication is a form of social influence. Gerbner (1981) underlined the importance of this influence, comparing the impact of the television with the impact of religion.

A normal person, according to statistical media, until the age of 20 has been exposed to almost 15,000 hours of television. One can add 10,000 hours for every 10 years of life. The only activities who receive more time in an adult’s life are the working and sleeping.

A national representative study made in Romania in 2008 indicates that young people are more interested on internet than television. The high level of education correlates with low consume of television. The public is not prevented on the mass media influence on their attitudes and behaviors, thinking that it only happens to others. The crashes, the offenses and the politics are too present in the television programs (Agenția de Monitorizare a Presei, 2008).

We have scanned main academic journals published between 1950 and 2015, with the purpose of determining the main findings of this field.

The studies on the psychological effects on mass media consume begun around 1920 and expanded in the ‘70’90’s, with the researches of: Gerbner, Gross, Schramm, Huesman, Taylor and others. If the older ones are centered on the negative effects of the violent content of mass media, the recent studies include also the positive effects that media can have on the audience.

The mass and variety of effects research centered on many aspects: type of effect studied (short or long term effects, effects on beliefs or behaviors), target of population studied (children, adults), type of media studied (television, film, cartoons). Although some of the findings remained stable through the years (the negative influence of violent content on media consumers), we must use a more flexible approach, regarding that the media and the society/ consumers have changed a lot in the last 50 years and they are in a continuum of modifications.

The most controversial categorizations of the mass media psychological effects, which we will follow in this study, are made by their polarization.
2. NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA

Most of the studies – both old and new ones – concerned the massive presence of violence in the mass media products. It analyzes the psychological effects of being exposed to such content.

2.1. Early studies

Between 1960s-1990s, Gerbner conducted a large body of studies on media effects, specifically whether watching television influences the audience’s idea and perception of everyday life, and if so, how. His findings are very controversial and had a high impact on the media theory. He formulated and developed the cultivation theory. It suggests that television and media possess a significant influence on the attitudes and beliefs of society about society. Those who absorb more media are those we are more influenced. Also, it states that high frequency viewers of television are more susceptible to media messages and believe that they are real and valid. Heavy viewers are exposed to more violence and therefore are affected by the “mean world syndrome”, the belief that the world is a far worse and dangerous place then it actually is.

Defining television as an "environment of symbols," Gerbner & Gross (in Palmer & Dorr, 1981) interpreted it as a world "ruled" by violence. The psychological effects of mass-media on the audience, that are emerging from the studies of Gerbner, are: the stimulation of the aggression in the impressionable viewers, imposing the pattern of power and risk and the role of victim and aggressor to them; “cultivating” the fear, the anxiety among people, the tolerance to injustice and violence (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981, p. 152). “Television is now our common and constant learning environment.” (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981, p. 150).

Television demands no mobility, literacy or concentrated attention, so do not stimulate the people’s attention and intelligence. Also, most of the television’s characters are male implied in aggressive actions, concerned about obtaining power. “Violence is thus a scenario of social relationships.” “The exercise of power through violence is clearly a central feature of that world” (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981, p. 152). Most of the prime-times and day-times programs contain violence.

In his researches, Gerbner found some conceptions about social reality that television cultivated in its viewers. “Violence-laden television not only cultivates aggressive tendencies in a minority but, perhaps more importantly, also generates a pervasive and exaggerated sense of danger and mistrust” (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981, p. 157). Comparing the profile of “heavy viewers” (watching 4 or more hours a day) with the one of the “light viewers” (watching 2 hours or less a day), he discovered that the first ones are more suspicious, tending of overestimating the prevalence of violence and risk, believing that people are selfish. The effects were consistent for both children and adults. He concluded that heavy television viewers perceive social reality differently from light television viewers (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981).

“The violence scenario thus serves a double function. By demonstrating the realities of social power, it generates insecurity and dependence and serves as an instrument of social control.” (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981, p. 160). Television also maintain, stabilize and reinforce conventional values, beliefs and behaviors (Gerbner & Gross, Signorielli & Morgan, 1980).

Wilbur Schramm (1961, 1967) conducted a series of studies on the mass media as a learning environment. He showed how television and radio programs can be used as a special kind of teacher and made a comparison of the class learning and the mass media learning. He made some suggestions on how the media can be developed and used with positive effects on education. He explained how the characteristics of the radio and television programs facilitate the process of learning and motivate the students to involve more in this activity. Even if the teaching process and the content of media programs changed a lot in our days, the idea of using the media as a tool for education is still current.

Other authors (Malamuth & Check, 1981) showed how exposure to films that portray sexual violence as having justification and positive consequences increased male subjects’ acceptance of interpersonal violence against women. Also, repeatedly exposure of male subjects of violent pornography resulted in self-generated rape fantasies.

2.2. Recent studies

Further studies confirmed and extended Gerbner’s ideas. A parallel with the critical cultural studies shows some commune findings for both. First, they postulate that “there is a dominant group presenting concepts of social reality through mass media concepts to a subordinate group or the general public, who in turn adopt the hegemonic construction of social reality” (Bailey & Park, 2006, p. 9). Media also presents distorted and
erroneous realities with negative implications for marginalized groups. Both concluded that these media constructed social realities can have negative effects on the public’s perceptions of reality (Bailey & Park, 2006).

Although, the cultivation theory was criticized for the fact that it did not sufficiently take into consideration variations in audiences’ experiences and demographics. Further studies extended it with the concepts of mainstreaming and resonance. The first one postulated that heavy viewing of television may absorb or override differences in perspectives and behavior due to other influences. Resonance occurs when the cultivation effect rises from a certain population group because that group’s experience “resonates” with the pattern of social reality constructed by television (Bailey & Park, 2006).

Significant evidence suggests that the display of aggressive thinking or aggressive emotions is a valid predictor of risk for violence. Huesman & Taylor define media violence as “visual portrayals of acts of physical aggression by one human against another” (2006, p. 395). This lead to an aggressive behavior, defined as “an act intended to injure or irritate another person” (Huesman & Taylor, 2006, p. 395) and this can be physical or nonphysical.

The main negative effects of mass-media, as the recent researches show, are: television violence causes an increase in violent and aggressive behavior, for both male and females, children, adolescents and adults, for people who are normally aggressive or normally nonaggressive; longitudinal studies have shown correlations over time of childhood viewing of media violence with later adolescent and adult aggressive behavior (Huesman & Taylor, 2006). Violence in video games also increases the aggressive behavior in short term.

Similar outcomes results from the exposure to violence depicted in news. Related to this, the researches postulated the “Marilyn Monroe effect”: highly publicized suicides are followed by an increase in suicides among the populace over the course of about two weeks.

The mass media promotes some values and ignore others, establish a large variety of social and personal standards. For example, mass media has a huge impact on the beauty standards. The influence of the media on the girls’ weight concern, perceptions on body weights and shape was demonstrated (Field et al., 2013).

The effects of media violence is mediated by different factors, such as: the situational characteristics of the presentation, personal characteristic of the viewer and characteristics of physical and human context in which the children are exposed to violence. We agree more with Bandura’s concept of “reciprocal determinism” (1986): people are searching for different kind of media, depending on their personal psychological characteristics, and are also differently affected by the media content.

3. **POSITIVE EFFECTS OF MASS MEDIA**

The positive effects of mass media are less discussed. Thus, the literature mentions the media effects on health behavior change. Health communication campaigns made through mass media educated the people on the negative effects of some lifestyle behaviors (smoking, alcohol abuse etc). Focusing on news coverage effects on youth binge drinking between 1978 and 1996, Yanowitzky & Stryker (2001) hypothesized that media have contributed to the reduction in this behavior by increasing perceptions of social disapproval. “Mass communication channels may be a powerful tool for promoting health behavior change if they are used for stimulating social and cultural changes that, in turn, provide people with an additional source of motivation to quit or modify their involvement in risky health behaviors” (Yanowitzky & Stryker, 2001, p. 210).

After reviewing 40 mass media programs/ campaigns designed to influence cigarette smoking, Flay & DPhil (1987) concluded that the information/ motivation provided by these endeavors produced changes in awareness, knowledge and attitudes. Thus, they observed that the knowledge necessary to ensure the success of these campaigns is seriously lacking.

Other studies rely on the positive influence of the pro-social programs. Hearold (1986) conducted a meta-analysis of 1043 media effects reported in 230 studies with over 100,000 subjects ever the past 60 years. He found that the overall effect size is around of 20% of antisocial responses following violent or stereotyped content and 50% of prosocial responses following positive content, after a single viewing session.

Recent literature also mentioned the significantly effects of mass media campaign to increase the physical activity among children 9 to 13 years of age (Huhman et al, 2005) or to reduce drinking and driving and alcohol involved crashes (Elder et al., 2004).

The cultural content of the media can have also a cathartic effect on people. Films and cartoons can be intentionally used by the teachers and by the therapists, with positive effects on people’s personality. Mills and Crowley (2014) used cartoon therapy as a metaphorical approach to child abuse. The cinema therapy was described as a useful adjunct to more traditional approaches to therapeutic change (Sharp et al., 2002). It was used also for enhancing the perceived self-esteem of adolescents with serious emotional disturbance (Powel et al., 2006).
4. IS MEDIA VIOLENCE A PUBLIC THREAT?

Multiple researches argue that exposure to media violence – especially during childhood – causes significant effects on viewers and can be considered a public threat (Gerbner & Gross, 1981, Huesman & Taylor, 2006). Evidencing the importance of television in everybody’s life, they argued that “it is the first mass-produced and organically composed symbolic environment into which all children are born and in which they will live from cradle to grave. No other medium or institution since preindustrial religion has had a comparable influence on what people of a tribe, community, or nation have learned, thought or done in common” (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981, p. 150). People no longer learned their cultural identity from their family, schools, churches and communities but instead from “a handful of conglomerates that have something to sell”.

According to contemporary studies, the long-term size of the effect of exposure to media violence in childhood on later aggressive or violent behavior can have real social significance. Comparing the size of the effects of media violence on public health with other recognized threats, the first one is greater than all the others, except the correlation between smoking and lung cancer (Huesman & Taylor, 2006).

“Children can learn new prosocial or aggressive behavior from a single exposure, violence portrayed as punished is less likely to be imitated, violent images in the news affect older children more while younger children are more affected by cartoons, boys, younger children and more aggressive children are more influenced by antisocial content” (Livingstone, 1996, p. 311).

Repeated exposures to emotionally activated media or video games can lead to habituation or desensitization. These effects occur without the awareness of the child.

Thus, the authors conclude that “not everyone who watches violent television becomes aggressive, and not everyone who is aggressive watches violent television. Watching violent TV programs is not the only factor that causes aggression, but it is an important factor” (Huesman & Taylor, 2006, p. 408).

Criticizing the early studies, Livingstone (1996) sustained that beliefs and behaviors learned under experimental conditions cannot be generalized to viewers’ everyday lives, whether routinely or on occasion. Admitting that the results of studies on media effects are controversial, and that media can have some influence on some people, she underlined the role of audience in selecting and interpreting the media content, depending on their own experiences and socio-cultural background.

5. COMMENTS

After raising the problem of violent media, Gerbner gave also some solutions for this: the education of creative resources and critical viewing skills – as a primary task of schooling; a freer market in television production, liberating this institution from total dependence on advertising monies and purposes. “We need education for the age of television” (Gerbner & Gross in Palmer & Dorr, 1981, p. 161).

Almost all the studies argue that mass media has significant psychological effects on the people and also a wide contribution to the social construction of reality. The proportion of positive and negative effects doesn’t reach a consensus, even if the negative ones had been better explained.

Most reviews of the literature agree that viewers learn both pro-social and antisocial attitudes and behavior from mass media, especially from television. But the contemporary media studies present the statement with more flexibility, including also other mediating factors.

The effects of mass media exposure should include as mediators the social and material environment, the influence of the family and school and a lot of individual characteristics: gender, age, intelligence and cultural level, significant life events, etc. “The study of effects necessarily involves the study of active audiences, interpretative communities, parent-child relations, living room culture, developmental processes, historically changes media cultures and so forth” (Livingstone, 1996, p. 320).

Considering the influence of mass media on people, we assume that, like any other large consume product (even food, different substances, beverages etc.), it has the potential of harming people, but this fact occurs only in some situations favorable for this kind of outcome, with some people and with some contents. This risk, even we don’t know exactly its extension, can be prevent by all the human factors implied: mass media, audience, and state institutions, especially cultural and educational ones. More education and more information about these effects should be given to people.

We think that the most important solution is educating the children and the young people to select and criticize the mass media content. In Romania, in some high schools, an optional discipline already exists: “media literacy”. Teaching this kind of disciplines should have a wider spread.

A high-level national commission is needed to examine the ways in which democratic countries around the world manage their mass media systems in the interest of children and minorities as well as in the interest of the
big middle-consumer majority. In some countries (Germania, USA, Norway, Sweden, Canada) an institution that surveys how the interest of population is served by the press already exists. It is called ombudsman. In 1978 was created The International Ombudsman Institute, that handle complaints from the public against violation of their rights, abuse of power, unfair decisions and maladministration, including the monitoring of the mass media content.

Regarding the effects of mass media in promoting values and models, we think that an increased collaboration between cultural institutions and mass media is needed, in order to improve the quality of the media content.

Our opinion is that mass media can be defined in a larger context, as a product of a specific culture and society, but also can be explained as a product of a specific professional category: the journalist. The education, the personality and the work of the journalists must be also taken into consideration. One important future direction of research would link the personality of journalist with their products and explain by this the effects on the public.

There are more variables that can be discussed in explaining the media effects and the result is not a direct cause-effect one, but neither one that can be diffused and lost in the multitude of all the other variables. The responsibility for the type and the psychological influences of the mass media are due to all the human factors: journalists, audience and social institutions.

6. LIMITATIONS

Due to the large body of research in this field and to the multitude of the mass media effects investigated through time, it is hard for a theoretical review to be exhaustive. Also, due to the fulminant development of online media, new controversial directions are to be developed. Real time media sharing is a new concept, rising a lot of questions in media related fields. So, many others studies and arguments can be discussed related to this subject.

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8. REFERENCES:


