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MEDIA IN THE XXI CENTURY: INFORMATION OR MANIPULATION

Artur Życki - Donat Jerzy Mierzejewski*

ABSTRACT

The information transferred by the media has a great influence on people's choices, hierarchy of values, belief on personal success, or failure. The media play various roles for the individual sectors of life. For the political systems they are in the first place an instrument for the fight for the authority; for the economic system they are mainly an area of economic activity, whereas the receivers treat them as a source of entertainment. Ubiquity, and wide influence on the reality which the media have causes that it is important in whose hands they are, which values they represent, and in whose interest are they doing it. The author critically refers to the contemporary role of media. Characterising the literature he refers among others to Noam Chomsky, who states that media in the first place manipulate the society: private media act in the interest of advertisers and owners; state ones strengthen the ruling class. In his article the author presents how information and manipulation appear in the media, if we follow their objectives in liberal, Marxist, and according to the hegemonic theory depictions. To conclude, the author doesn't try to measure how much reliable information and how much manipulation there is in a particular medium, but points out that following the media of authoritarian states one may have an impression that time has stopped, whereas "the information blizzard" constitutes inherent feature of democratic societies. To make possible the development of those societies, the media shouldn't yield to the temptation of manipulation, but have to provide the reliable information.

Keywords: Internet media, information, manipulation, democracy

The reality and the media

Information is such an important thing for the democracy as water for life. There is no life without water (that's why news is always information – later denied – that the scientists discovered water in the distant planets). There is no

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democracy without reliable information and freedom of speech. Saying more precisely, we have its pretence, and not the real authority of the majority (who is aware of the consequences of their decisions), with the observance of the rights of the minority. Such a situation takes place in Russia, where the results of the elections in March 2012 were known before the act of voting. This is an authoritarian government with certain elements of democratic competition.

The rulers have always had the awareness of the importance of information, and this importance is connected with the democracy since the ancient Greeks' Polis. The first amendment to the first constitution in the history, i.e. the American constitution passed in the 1791, says among other things about the freedom of speech, freedom of press, and introduces the ban on censorship. At the same time in Europe **Napoleon**, who wanted to strengthen his authority, used to say that the printing-house is an arsenal, to which not everyone should have access (Žycki, 2006). Information exposed to manipulation may lead to such an unbelievable event as Hitler's ascend to power in 1933. He became the prime minister of Germany not by coup d'état, but as a result of the democratic elections.

Currently, information is media. They have a great influence of peoples' choices, the hierarchy of values, belief on personal success, or failure. People, therefore, observe them, check in whose hands they are, ask which values they represent, and in whose interest they are doing it. The criticism of the media expressed by the intellectuals is presented below.

In 1988, **Noam Chomsky** together with **Edward S. Herman** in the publication entitled *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* published the results of research on the macroeconomic premises, which follow the media in their everyday activity. The results of the research are determined as "the propaganda model". The private media say what their owner, or sponsor demands from them. Most commonly this propaganda is far from the objective truth. The suggested model implies that the information in the private media is filtered out, or, to put it more bluntly, undergo censorship. The authors of the publication don't have a good opinion on the contemporary society, as they state that asleep and blind people submit themselves to everything what they hear in the media. Moreover, the authors treat the free market doctrine as an academic theory, in which big corporations that, according to them are totalitarian organizations, dominate.

Referring to the manipulation activity of the media **N. Chomsky** appeals to the first big contemporary propaganda operation, carried out by the Woodrow

Wilson administration. Wilson was elected president in 1916 thanks to the slogan: "Peace without the victory". This took place amid World War I and the American society at the time had a very pacifistic attitude, and hadn't seen a good reason of taking part in the war in Europe. The Wilson administration, who decided to take part in the war, had to find remedy to this situation. For this purpose the government propaganda commission – The Creel commission – was created. This commission managed to change the pacifistic society into hysteric fighting community, burning with desire to destroy everything what they treat as German (Breen 1984).

The US have joined the war, and won it. This was a significant propaganda achievement, which paved way for another, similar manipulations, when the manipulation technics were used to arouse the hysteric anxiety of so called "Red Threat" in the period of the existence of the "Evil Empire", i.e. the USSR. These experiences lead **N. Chomsky** to the conclusion that the state propaganda supported by the educated classes may bring the significant results when one cannot oppose it.

Here **N. Chomsky** refers to the liberal theorist of The Democratic Party in the USA – Walter Lippman, the doyen of American journalists, who was trying to prove that "the revolution in the art of democracy" can be used to "fabrication of consent" – that is, supposedly, thanks to the new propaganda technics, the agreement of the society on what the society doesn't feel like. Lippman divided the society on specialized class, i.e. the one of responsible people who think about the public goods, and who understand what the term "public good" means, and therefore they are predestined to perform the executive functions; and the flock, to whom the role of viewers, not the role of the participants of the activities, is attributed. To tame the disorientated flock and not to let the flock to trample the specialized class the "fabrication of consent" is required. This may be obtained by education, pop culture, and first of all by manipulation (propaganda), flowing from the mass media. The propaganda thus, according to Lippman, is for the democracy what a truncheon is for the totalitarian state.

The Creel Commission and its success connected with the change of the society's attitude towards the American war in Europe represent the first big success of newly created sector of mass communication, i.e. public relations. No matter how huge industry it is now (the spending on public relations reaches billions of dollars every year), and no matter that nowadays it defines its activity as persuading the organizations for which it works to engage in positive activities and inform about them, in its infant period the aim of public relation

was, defined as *expressis verbis* – controlling the society.

The real aim of public relation is to create an illusion that there are no differences between the social classes and groups, there is no exploitation, contradiction, and there is no real basis to carry the class struggle, because all of us want to be together, and have the same values. This message that this illusion tries to convey is that both the managers of a company and its cleaners have the same interests. Moreover, it suggests that the society should get rid of any kind of organizations, because the society which is organized brings a lot of trouble. People should watch the television alone, and accept the message that the only aim of life is to have more and more goods.

Such a situation is an ideal state, but the disorientated flock can cause some problems; therefore, it is necessary to take care of this flock, and do not allow it to become angry. To stay calm the flock should watch some football games, comedy serials and movies, which are full of violence. Calm flock is passive, and full of apathy; therefore it is extremely easy to brake, as Norman Podhoretz used to say, abnormal resistance against the use of military power and convince it that wars are necessary to maintain the social order. Such a message can be sent to the society if one takes control over the media and the education system. With this control one may falsify the history, as well as current political events saying, for example, that the act of aggression towards one country was in fact an act of resistance against the aggressor.

The mass-media in the liberal democracy and the market economy

Chomsky's criticism of mass media is not the only one. Similar criticism is expressed by **M. Mrozowski**, who divided the role of mass media in the individual segments of social life. For the political system the media are, in the first place, an instrument in the struggle for the authority; for the economic system they are mainly a branch of an economic activity, whereas the receivers treat them as a source of entertainment. This author characterized the role of media in the liberal, Marxist, and according to the hegemonic theory depictions.

In the liberal doctrine the role of media is presented in a transparent way. The society consists of sovereign individuals who pursue their necessities by the rational choice of behaviour. The only thing which should be provided for them is an access to information on the conditions and ways of behaviour to allow them to make the rational choices both in the political and economy

spheres. The liberal doctrine assumes also that the atomization of the society goes together with the decentralization of the authority, which should be limited to the control of the legal frames of the social life. Media, therefore, need the freedom of action to be able to compete as a source of useful information that may help people to make a rational decision.

This model, however, is far from the reality, especially in its two fundamental assumptions. First, it is the belief that individualism and atomization of the society reinforce the political and economic relations based on the balance of power between the institutions and the members of the society. Second, it is the belief that individuals are driven by the critical judgement and make rational choices both as citizens and as consumers.

The first assumption is theoretically right: atomization leads to the decentralization of the social order, and relative balance of power between the forces of this system. The thing is, however, that such a balance has never been created.

The state has never been limited to the role of “night watchman” taking care only about the order, and leaving the matters to go their own course. The impulsive competition in the economy sphere leads to concentration of the ownership in the hands of a narrow group (class) of owners, and to the impoverishment of the rest of the society. This is the direct reason of many political crises, or even revolutions. To provide minimum level of security and social stability, therefore, the state has to interfere in the economy, reduce concentration of ownership, and develop welfare. The democratic legitimization of the state is a necessary condition to gain the acceptance of such steps, which guarantee representation of interests of every social group, and give every group real impact on the authority (in the act of voting). Acting in the name of freedom the state has to limit the amount of freedom of every citizen, so that this freedom does not disturb the rights of others (Mrozowski, 2001; Gray, 1994; Giddens, 1998). The politicians’ struggle for gaining the control over the state culminates in free elections and taking over the authority leads to the polarisation of the political scene. Every party wants to have the maximum access to the media, and by this means gain the social support. The victim of partisan inclinations is, in the first place, the public media. What’s more, by the concession policy, law regulations, and donations, parties can have a great influence on the so called independent media.

The media itself create a political spectacle in the frames of the public sphere, in which political freedom is reduced to the freedom of speech, and the

democracy to the symbolic gestures and personal conflicts which cover the actual decisive mechanisms. The media create impressions that they help in understanding how the political system functions, and provide every individual a participation in control of this system – everything without leaving home.

The media create a new meaning of consumption. Thanks to advertisement the products introduced on the market symbolically gain a new value. The process of purchasing of these products is nothing else than an act of creation of the purchasers' personal image. The freedom of choice that the market and advertisement offers becomes an act of choice of one's identity. This way, thanks to the media, the market becomes a "kingdom of freedom" in which one gains not only the freedom of choice, but also a freedom of identity. The only disadvantage of such a state of affairs is that all of this takes place in the sphere of symbols, whereas in the reality the market and the advertisement have full control over their customers, and what's more they create their behaviour. This control has never been so deep and subtle. Furthermore, the market and the advertisement impose certain style of life, which appeal more to one's emotions than to rationality (Bauman, 2004).

In the developed market economy, the mass-media contribute to a dual transfer of individual freedom – from the area of struggle for authority to the area of consumption, and from the material reality to the area of symbols. The market becomes an extension of a public scene and a substitute for democracy; the individual consumption a poor substitute of participation in social life. All of this is a sign of human susceptibility to manipulations, which undermines the second assumption of liberal model - a belief of human rationality.

Monopolisation of contents provided by the mass-media

The Marxist alternative characterises the society and the state differently than the liberal thought. The society is not an accumulation of the individuals (individualism), but the system of classes (collectivism), which emerge because of the participation in the labour division, and in the division of the capital goods. The effect of such divisions is discrepancies in economic interests. Two the most important classes are: bourgeoisie (the capitalists), who own capital goods, and the proletariat (the workers), who sell their labour. The relations between capital and labour are antagonistic from their nature, and this antagonism has a great influence on the entire social and political relations. In such conditions the state becomes nothing else but the machinery of class

authority. Its aim is not, as the liberals postulated, passing the law designed for everyone and solving the social conflicts, but the protection of class interests of bourgeoisie, and keeping the proletariat in frames, that is maintaining (reproduction) of social order based on the class conflict.

Marxism distinguishes two levels of organisations of the social structure: the basis, and the superstructure. The mass-media – according to this conception – are a part of the ideological mechanism, subordinated to the ruling class, which aim is to widely understood socialisation of the social mass according to the current ideology. Dependence of the media on the capitalistic Establishment leads on one hand to “commoditisation” of media products, on the other makes from the media a “transmission belt” of the capitalistic ideology. The information provided by the media is not a cultural, but a consumption good, which makes the media owner richer. Simultaneously, this information is characterised by the capitalistic ideology, and has to portray this ideology as the only right option.

Both liberal and Marxist theory do not fit into the contemporary reality, offend with many simplifications and the extremity of judgement (Mrozowski).

The theory of hegemony is an answer to both liberal and Marxist theories. According to this theory the dominating class can have full – not only political, but also cultural hegemony. This situation takes place when the dominating class gains “the consent” of the social mass for wielding the authority; i.e. if this class succeeds in convincing other classes to voluntary acceptance of its ideas, moral values, and world view as the only right (Gramsci, 1961; Syrinati, 1998). Hegemony is an ideological wielding of the authority in the media, and culture. Monopolisation of ideological contents passed in the works of art, and the mass-communication makes the wielding of real authority possible, or easier (Gramsci, 1961).

To gain above mentioned consent the hegemonic class has to on one hand legalise its ideology, and on the other make numerous concessions to the interests of subordinated groups. The best way of legalisation of the ideology is proving that the vision of social order contained in this ideology is based on the universal rights of “human nature”, and the social position of the dominating class is not a result of its economic position, but of the entrepreneurship and leadership skills. The concessions made by this class to the subordinated groups must be of economic character, and have to respect the ideas and values of these groups. By recognising these values in the dominating ideology the subordinated groups can accept this ideology as representative of their

interest. Only this may convince them to voluntarily consent to the dominating class leadership.

Such hegemony, however, is based on fragile and unstable acceptance of the domination by the rest of the society, and the area of steady ideological struggle for this domination are – according to Gramsci – the media. All kinds of media ways of communication from cartoon for children to classical music are designed to maintain this hegemony. However, if this hegemony is based on patriarchal social relations then the role of maintaining these relations falls to all of these kinds of popular entertainment which strengthen the male domination. The television in its offer for boys and men will provide crime series, which show different types of manhood, mainly based on the physical strength, the knowledge of technics, ingenuity, or wisdom. The basis of patriarchal domination is not the descent, or capital, but the natural predispositions, heroic difficulty, and personal responsibility (for the family, nation, state). The counterbalance of a typical “men” genres are typical “women” ones, for example soap operas. These genres show that the natural destiny of woman is to be a house woman, who cares about the children, and the place of realisation of this destiny is the family home.

Abundance and diversity of “male” and “female” series (as well as male and female press) allows showing a wide spectrum of characters of both genders, and the relationships between them in various social situations. Thanks to that, and especially thanks to the realism of the popular series, all, or nearly all of social underclasses find their representatives, i.e. characters typical for their background, which express their feelings in this discussion.

These discussions have to be hierarchized, which causes that the dominant discussion will be the discussion of the ruling class. Its mouthpieces are not the representatives of the ruling class, but the representatives of middle class, who take over the ideas and values of the ruling class by aspiring to higher social status. Because the lifestyles of the middle class, associated with the styles of consumption express the level of aspiration of underclasses, these classes also take over the ideas and values of the middle class. For this reason underclasses voluntarily, without their consciousness submit themselves to the hegemony of the prevalent ideology. Therefore, the appropriate structure of the plot, and sort convention of the popular series become the machinery of the authority, because they cause that, first, the pluralism of the discussions in the world presented in the series is based on the hierarchizing, which provides the dominant position of the ideas, and values of the ruling class; second, this

hierarchizing is favourable to the voluntary adoption of above mentioned ideas and values by underclasses, strengthening their belief that they express the natural, and therefore normal social order (Mrozowski, 2001).

The three above mentioned doctrines: liberal, Marxist, and hegemonic point out that in the contemporary world the media have a crucial position in the struggle for the authority, as well as in the struggle for maintaining it. Their role isn't also overestimated by winning wide social approval for wielding the democratically gained authority. The interest of the media expressed by political parties, and the attempts not only at taking control over them, but also at manipulating them, can be justified with these facts.

Manipulation at the national and global level

The political authority is, however, wielded at different levels: local, national, and partially also at the global one and the media must be present on all these levels. From one hand the processes of globalisation brought the cosmopolitisation of the mass-media, from the other it is the local or regional authority and the local media subordinated to the local authorities, which act for the rise of the local identity. An attention on this important and progressive process of loss of control of the state over the media was drawn by Jeremy Rifkin in the book entitled *The Age of Access*. He pointed out that in the age of globalisation some functions of states are declining. Among them the author mentioned the decrease of the regulation functions of the state, resulting in the international telecommunication agreements. These agreements, concluded at the global scale, take back from the states an important political instrument, i.e. the possibility of introducing the media policy, thus significantly reducing the role of national institutions which allocate the frequency for the use of the radio and television (Misiak, 2007).

This fact reduces not only the state's possibilities of providing the desired level of information, which is important from the authorities' point of view, but also makes it difficult the transfer of new ideas and values around which the authority would like to gather individuals and social groups. This state of affairs also reduces the manipulation possibilities of the governing elites (but only at the national level, not local, or global); makes it difficult for the certain groups of people with common interests using the media to create the social problems (such as the fear of crime). These problems are usually created to divert the

citizens' attention from the other, real problems, such as unemployment, new symptoms of poverty, or the environment degradation (Ciepiela, 2008).

On the other hand it is necessary to point out that the hopes placed in the belief that the area of freedom and the possibilities of participation in social life rise together with the economic development, may turn out to be wrong. The situation in which well-being will not be shared by the entire society may become more and more common, leading to the unprecedented polarisation of the society. The public order, then, will not be possible to reach by the democratic solutions, but by the manipulation, indoctrination, and as a last resort by the use of force (Sujkowska, 2009).

The clear signal whether the above mentioned processes of manipulation are taking place or not are the mutual relations of the world of media, and the world of the politics. The conflict between the journalists and the personalities from the public sphere is something normal, and its softening may constitute a warning symbol of the degradation of social functions of journalism. The fundamental feature of the democratic journalism is its independence both from the state and institutions of authorities, as well as from the owner of given medium. The importance of this feature was noticed by the big European institutions, and the sign of this importance can be among others the Resolution 1003 concerning the ethic of journalism, passed by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe on July 1, 1993 (Golka, 1997).

In the age of the market economy and its crisis on the labour market the biggest threat to the independence of the media and its social mission gives the temptation of manipulating of the information by the "commercial censorship". In the state of liberal democracy the censorship is impossible and forbidden, but the principle "I pay, so I demand" may function. The advertising companies place their products preferably during the programmes with the biggest audience; "advertisers shoot, where the ducks are the fattest". The more advertisements, the lower is the price and the higher profit. This way the advertisement exerts great influence on the television schedule and decides what the citizen should read, listen, or watch. The advertisement gives some privileges to the corporate language. Concentrating on increasing the number of viewers, and on the minimisation of the costs the advertisement makes the material in which only a small limited group of citizens is interested, difficult to get. The advertisement reduces the programmes, in which the minority is interested, which topics bring some intellectual challenges, and political controversies, the topics which do not attract a huge mass of receivers, and

therefore do not encourage the advertisement specialist to reach into their pockets.

Then there is a structural contradiction between the freedom of communication and the unlimited market freedom, and the liberal ideology of individual freedom of choice is in fact a justification of the privileged role of the corporate language. This ideology is a praise of the power of huge businesses which organise, determine, and therefore censor the choice of individuals in the area of what they listen, read, or watch. (Sujkowska, 2011)

“The information blizzard” constitutes inherent feature of democratic societies. In the dictatorial regimes one may have an impression that the time has stopped. Despite the fact that people are born, grow up, fall in love, argue, have children, and die, everything around them seems to be frozen, and repetitive. Life is terribly boring. In the democratic systems everything is on the move. Everything, which is alive and unexpected, loves the democracy. The citizens thanks to their freedom are in the insecurity and nervousness states.

They feel the abnormality of normality; they are able to tolerate many abnormal activities. The unity of aims, and the community spirit, which take place in the pre-democratic societies is broken. The differences come out, as well the constant rivalry between the groups of different forces, which want to create, and define the reality from the beginning. All of that is inevitable, and natural, because the main advantage of the democracy is not that it provides the order and good manners, but that it offers the citizens the right to judge the decisions which have been made. The democracy is the authority of people, who publicly judge the decisions that have been made (Keane, 1992). To let the democracy exist and develop, the media must inform the citizens, and the treasury of manipulation should be overcome.

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