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The role of media in the construction of social reality

Abstract

This paper analyzes the concept of media construction of reality and its impact on society. Recognizing the growing influence and importance of the media in a man's daily life, it can be said that the media and media culture itself are an important factor in modern society. The media have the ability to place information and to provide to the citizens-consumers to accept them without critical and conscious interpretation and real understanding. An important factor in the development of the media is and technological advances that contributed to the rapid spread of the media and gave more power to the presentation of reality and the state of society as it corresponds to the creators and the "constructors" of that reality. By understanding Baudrillard and his understanding of the simulation, we will present the impact and role of the media in constructing the social reality (simulation of reality).

Keywords: *media, media culture, the simulation, the media construction of social reality*

Introduction

The media are the part of our everyday life and have become the part of everyday life by constantly placing the updated information, or they constantly repeat other information so that they make them inevitable, creating an illusion in modern man that he is a member of the "global society" and that he tends to perceive it, but he has a feeling that his knowledge has been elusive. The highlight of this illusion is the created "image of reality" in which the life of the modern man is unthinkable without the mass media. The impact of the

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media on human's life is much higher in the past few decades than in the previous two centuries. However, the media does not only affect the individual, but also the entire society as a collective, as a space in which man - meets his individual needs, achieves interests and realizes (or loses) his potential, talents and ideas. Therefore, it is necessary to explore the relationship between media and society? How the society responds to the media activities? Can the company control the activities and operations of the media? Are the media an instrument of control of the individual, groups and society? When does it come to coordination, disagreement and conflict in the relationship the media-society? One of the functions of the media must be to inform about the events, phenomena, processes and developments in society, and to warn of the impending danger. Media should mediate between people, groups, communities, institutions and other social actors, to be the means of the mass communication in society. However, the media, through the explanation and interpretation of the information "construct" the social reality, in a way that they add to the information some elements that the original information did not have, that they form information according to the requirements or the expectations of the centers of power, or some other interest groups.

Mass media are not only news and information, they are not mere entertainment, and they are not powerful educational tool, they are all that together, and more than that, they are the instrument of social control by special interest groups, individuals, institutions and countries. The entire set of social entities affects the creating of the illusion of the existence of a specific, autonomous, necessary and "desirable" culture - media culture. The key term for understanding the post-modern media culture is a simulation. As Baudrillard says: "... imagine something beautiful that has absorbed all the energy of the ugliness: there you have fashion ... imagine the truth which has absorbed all the energy of the falsehood: there you have a simulation."³ The question is how does the media through simulation construct the reality? It all has double vision. The crucial that happened, is that it was erased the border between the false and true as well as between the real and the imaginary. Because of the identification of the process of creating the news, and the process of creating the social reality, the media can not be considered as a neutral intermediary between the event and the observer, between the creators and consumers. They actively contribute to the construction of reality, even when the dominant social institutions through them structure social and political processes. The media have the manifest role, to present a reality that is accompanied by hidden agendas and interests. The media through the manifest intention of informing society (providing not only

³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Reality*, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk- Croatian Sociological Association, 2001. p. 131.

information, but also some forms of entertainment), actually latently construct the reality according to their intentions, or intentions of some, visible or hidden, social entities, through manipulating human needs (safety, security, livelihood, promotion, development, competition) and through them they control the individuals and groups.

In the continuation of this paper we want to show how the media culture is formed, and how it becomes the basis, the matrix or the episteme (Foucault) from which are played the instruments and techniques with which is constructed the “media reality” as a social reality, the necessity and the path with no alternative. Media instead of helping the emancipation of the contemporary man, significantly affects the “colonization” of his “world of life” (Habermas). The underlying theme in this brief analysis will be the views of Baudrillard, Chomsky and Kellner.

The impact of technology on media culture

Communication technologies have performed a silent revolution in which information, entertainment and culture reached a high degree of usability in everyday human life. Increasingly present digitization begins a new era of global communication. Progress and development of technology has influenced how the society as a whole, as well as the development and impact of the media in society. The development of media, from the first newspapers, through radio, television, to the Internet has contributed to the growing influence of media on human life, especially through the merger of words, symbols, images and sounds into a single unit, a message or a new media product. Audio and visual illustrations contributed to the greater influence of the media and more efficient implementation of their goals. The development of technology has allowed faster flow of the information simply because the information flow does not know boundaries. The rapid flow of information from one end of the globe to another is facilitated by the development of technology because of the fact that for the transfer of certain information now takes much less time than before. The camera allows us to discover in real time what is happening on the other side of the world at the same time. Information has become a commodity like any other, but the question is how from the large amount of information which are present on a daily basis to choose, the right information? Respecting their motto: “faster, cheaper and more flexible”⁴, media carry out their goals by manipulating individuals and social groups. The media in each of us encourage the obsession

⁴ Francis Ball, *The power of the media*, Belgrade: Clio, 1997. p. 45.

for technology that we increasingly adopt as necessary. Almost all sources of information are united and guided by the same goal and that is to seduce the consumer, mislead the reader, entice the advertisers.⁵ The impact of the message sent by the media, its power to attract an audience (ie the whole society) and to keep it together as long as possible, is the ultimate goal of the media. Media follow us always and everywhere. All modern technical means, through their “applications” are used to keep us in touch with the media (android phones, tablet computers, lap tops, MP3/4/5 players; soon and wrist watches, sunglasses and bracelets). Wherever we are and whatever we do, we can keep track of media products: news, series, political shows, talk shows and reality shows programs. Techniques and technology have helped the media to “occupy” our life. Modern man has become a media person, or a man of the media application.

Media culture

After the advent of media culture, images, sounds and performances are beginning to participate in creating the content of everyday life, they begin to dominate our leisure time, to shape the political views and social behavior, and to provide material upon which people shape their own identity. Products such as radio, television, film and other products of industrial culture provide the forms on the basis of which we determine what it means to be male or female, successful or unsuccessful, powerful or weak. As said by Kellner, media culture participates in the formation of dominant understandings of the world and the highest values, it defines what is considered good or bad, positive or negative, moral or evil.⁶ Media culture is a form of commercial activities (culture) which should attract the private profit created in a huge corporations whose goal is even greater accumulation of capital. Media culture is also a culture of high technology, which applies the latest technological advances.⁷ It is an important area of the economy, one of its most profitable segments, and one that is gaining the global importance. Media culture is a form of techno-culture, which combines culture and technology into new forms and configurations, creating the new types of societies in which media and technology are becoming its main organizing principles. We are witnessing that in the last 20 years has more and more developed technology in order to save us as much time, and yet we have less time than ever before. It seems that we are becoming slaves to the technol-

⁵ *The Same*, p.46.

⁶ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, Belgrade: Clio, 2004. p. 5.

⁷ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, Belgrade: Clio, 2004. p.6.

ogy that was supposed to liberate us and make our lives more meaningful, creative and enjoyable.

After the “end of history” that was, a few years ago, prematurely announced by Francis Fukuyama, what is now “realistically” showed is the appeal of “the end of the space,” a small planet floating in the electronic ether of our modern means of communication (telecommunications).⁸ At the beginning of the 19th century, many scholars such as Edgar Poe, predicted that technology will occupy more and more space in the life of an individual, and that it will be transformed from a mediator and an instrument in human communication with society and nature, to the factor of dominance over him, his freedom and autonomy. “While man was strutting and playing the role of God, the infantile stupidity hit him, technology has reached its ‘highest level’ and threw off from its perch the chains which took the minds of those who created it.”⁹ Media culture is a technical and commercialized culture. In other words, media culture is a technical simulation, illusion, deception, delusion and surrogate of the true human culture, the culture that raises its spiritual level and which is the basis of human communication and interaction in society and nature.

The media construction of reality

In developed democracies, says Chomsky, people can most effectively be controlled by controlling the mind. Thoughts can easily be realized into the works and it is therefore necessary the more control. Chomsky believes that the media play a crucial role in the system of indoctrination, together with educational institutions. How is this system of indoctrination the one that teaches us how to behave and what to think, such things can be seen if we follow the media and try to understand their structure. The structure of the media is very similar to other structures, aimed at producing intellectual and business elites that will support the interests of powerful groups and individuals.¹⁰ Thus, the production of “responsible” (“appropriate”) people who need to take in their own hands, mechanisms and instruments of control of the whole society. The question is who are those responsible people? They have a certain power, actively participate in political life, they negotiate candidates for the elections, and deeply indoctrinated, control, or at least try to control the “bewildered herd of passive observers,” in the words of Walter Lippmann. Those people become

⁸ Paul Virilio, *Information bomb*, Novi Sad: Svetovi, 2000. p.12.

⁹ Cited by: Paul Virilio, *Information bomb (La Bombe Informatique)*, Novi Sad: Svetovi, 2000. p. 99.

¹⁰ Noam Chomsky, *Media, Propaganda and the System*, Zagreb: The Society for the Promotion of literature on the new media, 2003. p. 9.

(both individually and as members of various groups) “constructors” of social reality, and the everyday reality. They introduce and implement the “dictatorship of Reality” (Baudrillard).

Picture of reality that is displayed (designed, produced) by the media is fragmented, one-sided, with no alternative, often in contradiction with the real problems and difficulties that people have in modern society. Problems of “small” people media regularly omit, but if they choose to mention them, those are usually meaningless things related to the attitudes and behavior of their governments and “masters.” What appears as a problem is that an individual can hardly discover and find out the truth, because there is no access to the alternative sources of information which belong to the field of the rule of powerful corporations in which chains are generally the largest and the most influential media. Alternative sources are necessary if we want to know the true essence of the problem, ie, the latent dimension of a phenomenon, process or relationship.

The media, are mostly in the service of large corporations with which they form the top of the power structure and the dominance of the private economy (as opposed to public), which in turn, together, represents a great tyrannical structure of the global pyramid of power, which creates Reality and imposes it. For example, a newspaper owned by one of the global potentates performs the selection and processing of certain information and takes care that only certain things come into the public. Socializing role of elite education system teaches that there are certain things that are not desirable to talk about and certain thoughts that are not acceptable, and if you do not adapt to that, you will find yourself outside the system that protects and guides. For example, The New York Times is one corporation that cares about how to better sell their products.¹¹ This product is represented by the privileged people who need to be sold to the market, and the market are the market advertisers, ie. other corporations. Whether on TV, in newspapers or any other media, they sell audiences to other corporations. A state that can not control people by force (because it simulates democracy), is controlling their thoughts. The way to control the thoughts, ideas and attitudes of people is to create the illusion of a running discussion (dialogue), but what needs to be ensured is that the discussion stays within certain (given and constructed) limits. Therefore, it must be ensured that both sides in the debate adopt certain assumptions that are essentially a specific advertising system. The question is who are the leaders of this propaganda? It is a privileged educated elite (journalists, political, military and economic analysts, academics, leaders of the Institute, experts in public relations), which has the task of creat-

¹¹ Noam Chomsky, *Media, Propaganda and the System*, Zagreb: The Society for the Promotion of literature on the new media, 2003. 17.

ing a certificate that ensures effective management by the consent of the public, the masses, the citizens and all other consumers of the media products.

A particular problem is that there are only few of those who criticize this view and this state in media culture. The media tend to be closer to the state institutions and ruling elites, because they want the access to the classified information, and a way to achieve this is to play a game that involves covering up the truth and serving the country in a way that suits it. In this way, we have an impression that the real function of the media is covering up what is really happening in the State, society or the world? The problem is much more complex. State, politics and government are becoming another important lever (including the corporations) of the media constructions of reality and the imposition of the existing reality. The media today through a variety of entertainment programs, reality shows and spectacles are distancing citizens from the possibility of understanding the real problems in the world (poverty, risks, financial slavery, "colonization" of the human body). One of the main goals of the ideological system is diverting attention from the true intentions of government and focusing on marginal issues. "The way the government is defending is that any critical analysis the institution calls the conspiracy theory."¹² However, the question is in what extent is accurate to call that the "conspiracy theory"? In order for something to be termed the theory, or in this case the conspiracy theory is necessary to pass a complex scientific process that involves the discovery, understanding, explanation, prediction and knowledge, and all of this through a variety of discourses and theoretical disputes. If we call a conspiracy the theory, it would bring into question the meaning of the theory because the theory can not be accessed by anyone who is not scientifically trained for its presentation. "Conspiracy theory" is an instrument used by the media for their manipulation and handling of the citizens in the form of spreading fear of someone or something. Conspiracy is the practice of power and force of specific actors in society. Thus, the "conspiracy theory" becomes an instrument of the media construction of reality, very suitable for use by the government and various political entities.

Baudrillard suggests that the media are the monopoly of elites currently in power that turn them in its own favor. It justifies the assumption that the freedom of the media is increasingly under threat. Mass media are inherent to produce the non-communication (if we determine the communication as the exchange, reciprocal space of speech and answers, some kind of the responsibility, but not psychological, moral responsibility, but a personal relationship to

¹² Noam Chomsky, *Media, Propaganda and the System*, Zagreb: The Society for the Promotion of literature on the new media, 2003. 78.

each other in the exchange).¹³ Overall creativity of the media is based on the fact that they are the ones who always prohibit the answers, prevent the exchange process, except in the form of simulation of the responses, which are themselves involved in the process of sending, which further enhances the one-sided communication. That is their true abstraction and on that abstraction it is based a system of social control and power. The power is in the hands of the one who can give and to whom can be returned.¹⁴ To give and act in a way that to you can not be returned means to interrupt sharing in your own favor, and to establish a monopoly: the social process is thus unbalanced. Equally, in the field of media: they speak and act in a way that they can never be answered. They bring 'revolution' in the lives of people regardless of their content, ie. its very own technological structure. Media is controlled by the government and therefore the government through the media constitutes and controls the everyday phenomena that are represented to the population. In its current form means such as television or film can not serve the communication, they are an obstacle. They do not leave room for any interaction between the sender and the receiver of the message. Perfect shape of simulations for the media is that the answer is contained in the issue, it is pre-determined. Baudrillard says that the simulacrum is not that which conceals the truth, but what conceals the absence of the truth.¹⁵ The media in a latent way conceal the truth by not allowing the two-way communication between them and the audience, and social actors.

Conclusion

Often the question is what is the real function of the media? The manner in which power is defended is calling any critical analysis a "conspiracy theory." Calling it a conspiracy theory is simply part of the efforts to prevent seeing the world as it is. Through a variety of entertainment programs media are trying to cover up the real problems in society. It is much easier to place the audience an entertaining show than to deal with the serious issues of everyday life. To conceal and cast aside the problem is much easier than a serious approach to solve it. What is also a problem of a modern man (instead of the former problem of lack of the information), is dealing with a variety of information due to the excessive number of received information, and of course the reliability and veracity of

¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Reality*, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk- Croatian Sociological Association, 2001. 32

¹⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulation and Reality*, Zagreb: Naklada Jesenski i Turk- Croatian Sociological Association, 2001. 32.

¹⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The Pact of Lucidity or The Intelligence of the Evil*, Belgrade: Aripelag, 2009. 19.

the information. The man is “overwhelmed” with the information and fails to select, understand and use them. Also, one of the problems that arises is what happens to those who choose to work independently and in good faith? Anyone who decides on that move is suggested that he “turned from the right path,” the path that was imposed by the high social subjects who decide what and how much will be sent to the public. The message is simple: either you play by our rules or you are out of the game! All those who play by the rules are privileged, and any opposition narrows the future possibilities for the actors. As long as you are obedient, humble and disciplined, you can get far on the social and ideological rankings. We believe that in such a system, an individual can hardly come to the fore as a subject, but only as a pawn of the ruling elite, or in other words, a simulation by the system. As soon as freedom is restrained, hampered is creativity, independent decision, and therefore the truth, which again gives the advantage to the simulation. If we live in the world of simulation, as Baudrillard says, do we need to think in that direction? Does our society in general has more room for the true or the energy of the false is prevalent?

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