

## Mass Media Effects and News Items

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### Abstract

Mass media has very powerful tools to create public opinion. In every day life, we are influenced by media in different ways. Media coverage helps to define the things we think about and worry about. The Mass media influence us, but scholars are divided about how much. People choose what they read and what they listen to or watch and they generally filter the information and images to conform to their notions and personal values. The Media tries to fit into the lives of their audience. The Media contribute both to social stability and to change.

### მასმედიის გავლენა საზოგადოებაზე და ახალი ამბების როლი

ნათია კალაძე  
საქართველოს უნივერსიტეტი

მას მედია ერთ-ერთი ყველაზე ძლიერი იარაღია საზოგადოებრივი აზრის ჩამოყალიბებაში. დღის განმავლობაში ადამიანი მრავალმხრივ ექცევა მედიის გავლენის ქვეშ. გაშუქებულ თემატიკაზე დაყრდნობით განისაზღვრება რა აინტერესებს მსმენელს და რა აწუხებს. მეცნიერები აანალიზებენ რა სიხშირითაა მედია კითხვადი, თუ სმენადი. მოღებული შედეგების გაფილტვრის შედეგად ხდება ცნებებისა და ღირებულებების შედარება. მედია ცდილობს მოერგოს თავის აუდიტორიას. ორივე შემთხვევაში, იქნება ეს ინფორმაციის მიღების არხი თუ აუდიტორია, მედია არის სტაბილურობისა და ცვლილებების განმაპირობებელი.

During the last century, mass communication scholars thought that the mass media were so powerful that ideas could be inserted as if by hypodermic needle into the body politics. In 1940s scholars began to doubt whether media really were so powerful and they produced research questions about the media effects and made assumptions that media effects were most modest. Nowadays, worldwide most media scholars believe the effects of the mass media generally are cumulative over time. “In the media exist few types of effects, such as the powerful effects theory (that media have immediate, direct influence), the minimalist effects theory (that media effects are mostly indirect), the cumulative effects theory (that media influence is gradual over time), and the third-person effect (that one person overestimates the effect of media messages on other people)” (J. Vivian, 2007, p.365).

Firstly, mass communicators thought that mass media had a direct effect on people and they called it the powerful effect theory. In 1922, social commentator Walter Lippmann wrote his book *Public Opinion*, in which he argues that “people see the world not as it really is, but as “pictures in their heads.” He said, the “pictures” of things we have not experienced personally are shaped by the mass media. Lippmann's description of the media became a precursor of the powerful effects theory that evolved among scholars over the next few years. Later Harold Lasswell, Yale psychologist, embodied the effect theory in his famous model of mass communication: “Who, Says what, which channel. To who. With what effect”. From experience, we are able to assume that the media could inject information, ideas and even propaganda into the public, what generally calls the power effect theory.

Paul Lazarsfeld of Columbia University was the first researcher who tested media effects on an election. “His researchers went back to 600 people several times to discover how they developed their campaign opinions. Rather than citing particular newspapers, magazines or radio/TV stations, as had been expected, these people generally mentioned friends and acquaintances” (K. McAdamas, 2007, p. 183-184). The media had hardly a direct effect. Clearly, the hypodermic needle model was off base and the powerful effects theory needed rethinking. From that rethinking emerged the minimalist effects theory.

In recent years German scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has parted from the minimalist and resurrected the powerful effects theory, although with a twist that avoids the simplistic hypodermic needle model. She concedes that “the media do not have powerful

immediate effects but argues that effects over time are profound” (J.Vivian, 2007, p. 365). Her cumulative effects theory notes that “nobody can escape either the media, which is ubiquitous, or the media's messages, which are driven home with redundancy” (J.Vivian, 2007, p. 366). To support her point, Noelle-Neumann cites multimedia advertising campaigns that hammer away with the same message repeatedly. There is no missing point. Even in news reports there is a redundancy, with the media all focusing on the same events.

However, there exists a remnant of now-discredited perceptions that the media have powerful and immediate influence that is called third-person effect. In short, the theory holds that people overestimate the impact of media messages on other people. The most significant fact is that people read, hear and see the same things differently.

“Mass communication is the process that mass communicators use to send their messages to mass audiences” (C.Howard and W.K.Mathews, 2006, p.40). And they do this only through mass media. Let us think of these as the five MS: mass communicators, mass messages, mass media, mass communication, and mass audience. The heart of mass communication is the people who produce the messages that are carried in the mass media. Mass communicators are different from other communicators because they can't see their audience.

A news item is a mass message. The message is the most apparent part of our relationship to the mass media. It is for messages that we pay attention to the media. We do not watch newscast, for example, to marvel at the technology. We listen to hear the news. It is the mass media which are the vehicles that carry messages. And the process through which messages reach the audience via the mass media is mass communication. “This is mysterious process about which we know far less than we should” (R.J.Cappon, 2000, p.15). Researchers and scholars have unraveled some of the mystery, but most of how it works remains a matter of wonder. For example, why do people pay more attention to some messages than to others? How does one advertisement generate more sales than another? Is behavior, including violent behavior, triggered through the mass communication process? There is reason to believe that mass communication affects voting behavior, but how does this work? Which is most correct to say that people can be controlled by mass communication? Or manipulated? Or merely influenced? Nobody has the answer.

“The size and diversity of mass audiences add complexity to mass communication. Only indirectly do mass communicators learn whether their messages have been received. Mass audiences are fickle” (J.Vivian, 2007, p. 326 ). What attracts great attention one day may not the next. The challenge of trying to communicate to a mass audience is even more complex because people are running in and out all the time, and when they are tuned in, it is with varying degrees of attention.

Communication models illustrate different aspects of the process. But the process itself is so complex that no single model can adequately cover it. Two Bell telephone engineers Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver laid out a basic communication model in 1948. “The Shannon-Weaver model identifies five fundamental steps in the communication process: 1) The human stimulation that results in a thought; 2) The encoding of the thought into a message; 3) The transmission of the message; 4) The decoding of the message by the recipient into a thought; 5) The internalization of the message by the recipient. So the basic communication model -shows sender, encoding, transmission, decoding and receiver”(K. McAdams, 2007, p. 120).

Shannon - Weaver reduced communication to fundamental elements in their model. Communication, they said, begins in the human mind. “Messages are then encoded into language or gesture and transmitted. A recipient sees or hears the message and decodes from the language or other form in which it was transmitted and internalize (making sense of a decoded message) it” (J.Vivian,2007, p.349). Those fundamental elements are also present in mass communication except that there is a double encoding and double decoding. In mass communication not only does the communicator encode the message into language and another form to be communicated but also the message then is encoded technologically for transmission through a mass medium. In radio, for example “the words are encoded into electronic impulses. At the decoding site a piece of machinery - a radio receiver - decodes the impulses into words, which then are decoded again by the human recipient to internalize them” (J.Vivian,2007, p.354). With print media two steps in decoding are not as obvious because they are so integrated. One is reading the words. The other is converting those representations into concepts.

If we will think globally, mass media are pervasive in our everyday lives. Millions of people wake up to clock radios and political candidates spend their campaign mostly on television advertisement to attain voters. “The worldwide consumer’s economy depends

on advertising for creating mass markets. For example in the United States kids see 30,000 to 40,000 (according to data to 2006) commercial message a year. Because the mass media is very influential, people need to know much about the media work” (Kleppner, 2007, p.145). From the mass media people learn almost everything. What would we know about Rose Revolution in Georgia or/and Orange Revolution in Ukraine, if were not newspaper, television or other mass media coverage?

We need to consider: well-informed and involved citizenship is possible in modern democracy only when mass media is able to work well. Mass media help people to express their view points widely; Influential forces use mass media to power people with their ideologies. The mass media are the main tool of propagandists, advertisers and others.

One of the main importance of mass media, that to be considered by each nations is culture and values. “Historically, mass media treatment of socially divisive issues has helped to create new consensus” ( J.Vivian,2007, p.11). Nowadays, this culturally binding media role may be fading. Because the “exponential growth in media channels in recent years has created separate nests where like-minded people find enduring support for their perspectives and prejudices, which solidifies diversity at the expenses of consensus. If we back to binding media, we will see that it has a great influence, because mass media binds communities together by giving messages that later become a shared experience” ( J.Vivian,2007, p.237). Stories on misdeeds, which are very commonly covered by Georgian media help us figure out what we as a society regard as acceptable and as inexcusable. At many levels the mass media are essential for the ongoing process of society identifying its values.

The importance of the mass media in binding people into nationhood is clear, the best sample was the Rose Revolution in Georgia, November, 2004. Around the world leaders try to take over the national media system right away as an essential vehicle to unify the population.

You might ask whether the media, in covering controversies are divisive. The answer is *no*. But in developing countries, like Georgia, where professional standards are not considered as one of the most important part of communication/journalism, so of course it is divisive. In western countries the media create controversy seldom, they just cover it. Full coverage, over time, helps to bring societal consensus - sometimes for change, sometimes not. For example, most

representative of Georgian opposition parties and population opposed reform in education system (or/and any other reforms proposed by Georgian government), but today, after exhaustive media attention, a majority consensus has emerged that reforms are very important. The same is true of many fundamental issues, such as human rights, integration process and government budget priorities. It should be taken into consideration, that despite culture and values, one of the most significant is personal values of journalists during covering the news. They make important decisions on which events, phenomena and issues are reported and which are not. The personal values journalists bring to their work and that therefore determine which stories are told, and also how they are told, it is generally coincide with mainstream of Georgian values.

What are concepts of news? It is impossible to define the concepts of news in the Georgian Model, because through years there was existed a Russian Model or a Communist Model, which is not actual for the whole world. I prefer to consider the U.S and European Models, because later or soon Georgia will accept one of them.

*U.S. Model* - "From colonial times to the mid - 1800s, more than 150 years, partisanship largely marked the content of American newspapers. So dominant was opinionated content that U.S. media historians characterize the era before Benjamin Sun introduced his one-cent New York Sun in 1833 as the partisan press period. (After the Revolution, newspapers divided along partisan lines. What is called the Federalist period in U.S. history is also referred to as the partisan period among newspaper historians). Two phenomena in the mid-1800s, both rooted in the economics of the newspaper industry, introduced the notion of value-free news - or objectivity" (J.Vivian,2007, p.237).

Worldwide mass media audience needs truth and nothing more or less. They want journalists to be the third side, to be a watchdog. Journalists are obliged to give a truthful description of reality through detailed and comprehensive information. A readership want the journalists not be involved in activities threatening his/her independence of judgment which would limit his/her objectivity in publishing true facts and undermine journalistic dignity. By Merriam Webster Dictionary for "Journalistic Objectivity" - "Expressing or dealing with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion feelings, prejudices or interpretation." According to a dictionary word combination it's said, that it is impossible for journalists to be completely objective because they are humans and humans are subjective

by nature. It is impossible, however, for journalists to strive to be objective. To mention an anecdote there was a journalist who used to say “I am objective,” he was asked who he was. “Everybody but the journalist” - was the answer. Objectivity in journalism is assumed synonymous with a bias-free story. In reality it means that the story is fair and balanced-featuring the main view and a bit of dissenting view.

*European Model* - “The notion that news could be conveyed neutrally, devoid of perspective or values, was peculiarly American. In Europe newspapers traditionally have flaunted their partisanship to attract like-minded readers. The result is flavorful, interesting reporting that flows from a point of view - and, say its defenders, is more truthful than the U.S. model. Leonard Doyle, foreign editor at the *Independent* in London, claims the “European model encourages journalists to tell about events as they see them, rather than through the eyes of government or officialdom, which can have its own agenda” (J.Vivian, 2007, p.227). The U.S. model, by contrast, tends merely to chronicle claims as provided by supposedly credible albeit partisan sources. There is too little attention in the U.S. model, say critics, to sorting through the claims with journalistic analysis”.

In a forum sponsored by *Columbia Journalism Review*, Doyle offered striking examples of failures of the U.S. model. One was during the 2002 Afghan war. CNN quoted Pentagon authorities who said that “B-52 bombers had dropped dozens of precision-targeted bombs in the Tora Bora area in an attempt to flush out terrorist mastermind Osama Bin Laden. That, in itself was accurate, but CNN missed what the Pentagon had not released: that the bombs had killed 115 people in the village of Kama Ado. The British press, less inclined to merely echo official views, told about the Kama Ado carnage -the whole story” (R. J. Cappon, 2000, p.101).

Doyle says that “U.S. journalists’ quest for “objectivity” has led to the tying of every fact to a source that can be named”. This is a kind of timidity that Doyle says leaves journalists vulnerable to being duped: “The loudest demands for objectivity are made by groups or lobbies who want to ensure that they get equal time” (R.J.Cappon, 2000, p. 105). The loudest and most persistent groups make the news. The U.S. approach, as Doyle sees it, is largely clerical and lacking the probing that would serve the audience better by coming closer to truth.

Even with the values-free excuse under which most Georgian mass media functions, values can't be wished out of existence. The fact is that communicators make choices. The famous NBC newscast-

er Chet Huntley, after years of trying to come up with a definition of news, threw up his hands and declared: “News is what I decide is news” (J.Vivian,2007, p.251).

In other respects, the mass media is a stabilizing influence. The media try to fit into the lives of their audiences. The media not only react to audience lifestyles but also contribute to the patterns by which people live. The media have effects on individuals and on society, but it is a two-way dimension. In democratic countries, society is a shaper of media content, but people make the ultimate decisions what to read, listen and watch. The influence issue is a very complex one that needs further research and thought.

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