

Cultivating Reality through Stereotyping in the Media

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Abstract

Often our judgment related to certain people or groups in the society are created with no actual contact and with superficial cues. In nowadays society the information we got on the world are much greater, as a result of increasing of the role media plays in the society. Today media using major achievements of communication tools & techniques, manages to reach every member of society. In particular, the extraordinary growth of the Internet has become an enormous tool to access media which uses this new channel of communication, in addition to other traditional channels such as television, radio or newspapers. This access has made society utterly dependent and on the other hand has made media an important factor which creates perceptions and even affects the education of whole society categories. In particular, the impact is greater among children and young people with less life-experience. They create shared convictions and beliefs influenced by the media. In this context, in many cases, if a media creates stereotypes of various persons or social categories, they are transmitted through it to a large part of society, affecting primarily those with less life-experience. This is how, often, a stereotype is commonly believed as truth. This phenomena can be observed greatly even in the Albanian media, which commonly categorizes people of different social groups, based only on one point of view. This impacts society greatly in creating prejudices that affect directly our lives and those of others. This article assumes precisely analysis through focus group discussions with students of communication sciences. These students are able to think critically about the role and influence of stereotypes in the media and give their opinion on this phenomenon.

Keywords: media, stereotype, media literacy, students, critical thinking

1. Theoretical Background on Media and its Creation

Many analyzes in the field of cultural studies say that the media is the process of transmitting messages to viewers, by defining the situation, and further transmit ideology. This is the construction of reality through media (Hall, 1982). Media images help us to form our view of the world and perceptions of values accepted by us as what we consider good or bad, positive or negative, moral or immoral. Media stories provide the symbols, myths and resources by which we build a common culture and through acquisition which we place ourselves in this culture (Dines & Humez, 1995). To understand our culture and society, as Jonathan Culler said, is to not think individually, but to build perceptions on the basis of a system of symbols. This is the meaning of the combined individual objects and behaviors, which then creates the university system and the people around us and society (Culler, 1981: 25). According to the semiotic theory, television consists of symbols, rules and data, which means diversity and text sequences, to ensure the consistency necessary to make it convincing. In the semiotic theory, the indicator is a word, visual images or audio sound that show the presence of notions.

Lull has stated that the mass media plays a creative and transformative role - not only to build the power of thinking, or to repeat certain content, to attract people's attention, but also to standardize thinking, establishing a rule / precedent which not only affects the audience but also affects the media themselves as creative and / or inventive (Lull, 2000).

Reproduction of beliefs, values and opinions, and the importance of the media in creating the notion of mass culture in the society have been emphasized by numerous theorists. Althusser¹ also showed that the mass media is powerful enough to invade the consciousness of people and to make them change their views of the world and society. Wober and Gunter stated that, "the more time individuals spend watching television, the more they are likely, to be

¹Ideology and state ideologic institutions: Some notes toward an investigation, 1971

influenced in their socio-cultural beliefs by its dramatic content" (Wober & Gunter, 1988: 4). Wober and Gunter analyze that "through analysis of the relationship between reported customs of individuals, viewing television, especially the amount of time they spend watching and their perceptions of their social and cultural environment, is able to reveal the contribution and influence TV has on attitudes, beliefs and values that people hold about the world in which they live" (Wober & Gunter, 1988: 3). Cultivation theorists (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, and Signorielli, 1994) are mainly responsible for research developed in this field. Cultivation theory says that long-term exposure to television, influences the ways in which people see the world. The effect of television, based on the theory of cultivation, is to show that people who have certain beliefs about social reality can be attracted by television programs that confirm these beliefs.

Once upon a time, it was what you were, what you did, what kind of choices you made and your moral, political and existential commitments, which accounted for individual identity. Today everything is about how you look, your image, your style, and how the appearance constitutes identity; and it is media culture that increasingly provides materials and resources to build the identity (Kellner, 1995).

2. A Case Study from a Student of Journalism

Tefta: During this week, I followed closely a story about an event that happened at a school in Tirana, where two teenagers, high school students were involved in a violent fight, using also knives among others. What struck me in this story, was the comment of the journalist after he reported the event. He stated that this is not an isolated case in high schools in Tirana and around the country. According to him there are many quarrels and fights that take place in these schools, and almost always the cause of these fights, is a girl. I think that this assertion is abusive, untrue and unfounded in fact. It creates the idea that schools foster fights, hassles or is only thought about love between boys and girls; while the fact is that we have also been in a gymnasium and from my personal experience I can say that during the 4 years I have been there, there has never happened any case of conflict between boys, especially for a girl. In this case, my conviction is that parents who have children in these schools are found in a situation of stress and fear, but also of distrust towards their children. While in the rest of society, is created the idea that students don't want to learn anymore and are more concerned with entertainment and such.

Note: In this case Tefta has given a clear picture of "distortion" by the media. It even goes beyond just the identification, distinguishing between fact and comment, but goes on its analysis within critical thinking. Tefta also is able to position her thoughts towards a very important element in the study of media literacy, a fundamental question raised by it, that information or news is seen differently by different groups. In this case it has identified parents as powerful interest group in the entire event, who seemingly unaware of what happens at school, feel anxious and even create mistrust towards their children. We can notice clearly a powerful impact of television in the minds of the rest of society, which creates unconsciously, the profile of high school adolescents, who does not think about lessons but indulges to entertain or be involved romantically with others. The fact is that if we analyze how reliable this case is to Albanian society, we will undoubtedly conclude that this stereotype of the Albanian teenager is already deeply embedded in the society. We have accepted as truth this definition unconsciously, manipulated by the media about this fact. That's because we do not really know what happens in our schools if we do not have a personal experience with them, and the information we receive comes mainly through the media.

3. Focus Group Discussion

A group of students came together in a focus group in order to discuss upon the issue of stereotyping in the media. The students were asked to think about a case they have discovered stereotyping in the media. All students referred to personal experiences and realized that the portrayal of stereotypes is common in society. How can you resist the inculcation of stereotypes when they are constantly portrayed in the media? In connection with this question most students did not give an answer. They remained silent, not knowing what will be the right path to follow of the action to follow in order to achieve this.

Students seem to clearly define stereotyped images on TV but seem paralyzed to take action. They think they are too small and insignificant to undertake a positive action, so just ignore what is not right.

Critical thought has been developed

Class transcript

Social Issue, Stereotyping

Valbona: Two days ago I watched on television a news that had to do with a Roma family who faced many economic

difficulties and was forced to put children out in the streets to beg. What I mean is that not all Roma families develop such life.. I know many of these families who live in my neighborhood, people who are very rich since they are occupied in trade. Nevertheless, I have never seen in any media a news on the Roma this other category. I have the impression that the media is only concerned with the negative aspects of Roma and portray them wrong.

Sokol: I think the media is right. Roma and Egyptians, or to say it in simple words, gypsies (laughs), live in that way, street begging and then all the money collected during the day in drinking. The only think in the tambourine (laughs again, referring in this case to a familiar Albanian humor parody interpreted by Fadil Hasa).

Valbona: It's not true and I can prove what I say. They are normal people like all of us, develop a normal family life, and I know many who have taken their children in the best private schools.

Note: In this class dialogue we can clearly see stereotyping of a certain category, for which almost the entire society has an opinion, influenced unconsciously from the media, but also from other life-experiences. In this case Sokol is the authentic bearer of the definition of stereotypes; he represents the majority of the public opinion shared in the Albanian society. Throughout the years the media has strongly influenced to "embed" this perception, in relation to this category of Albanian society and it seems that it has strived. In Albania is deeply stuck in peoples inds that the Roma and Egyptian minorities, develop a nomadic life on the streets, not working but begging, abandoning school and remaining completely illiterate. But as Tefta says, this is not true. Many people belonging to such minorities, develop a normal family life, they have a good and comfortable home, conduct successful commercial activities or work in other sectors of the economy and educate their children. This side of the story is invisible and the media rather than serving as a bridge between the public and the positive reality, focuses mainly on the downside. Tefta, in her analysis proves with facts the distortion of reality by the media, but also encounteres resistance from Sokol, who has not given up from the stereotype in relation to the definition of this sociaty category. This happens because Sokol believes media uncounciously and undisputably as his friends with whom he shares the social environment. It seems that his conviction is great and his truth undeniable, since its is supported broadly by the rest of the society.

If we would witness these situations evidenced during classroom discussions, we will notice that stereotypes are widespread in and through the media in society. The impact of media is indisputable in a world that is increasingly becoming virtual and losing direct links. Personal experiences remain somehow the only way to confront these stereotypes, as it was observed by class discussions. *diskutiminë* class. Students who opposed the presented stereotypes, had a personal experience of the past, which made them confident in their opposition.

4. Conclusions

To conclude, we can assert that stereotypes are widespread in the media. Today's society creates its opinions in most cases through the media and and in the same way chooses to define certain social groups. In the qualitative analysis which was conducted through several class discussions, we realized that these perceptions are quite strong and often do not match reality. Stereotypes of women on television, which present a pleasant face and physical apperance, those of racial origin or the area where you were born and have lived or those of age, are some of the most frequent in the Albanian media.

Given this situation, it results as necessary and imperative that media literacy is part of school education in the Albanian curricula. By these means we can influence the younger generation, to view media critically, to think critically towards the information it distributes and to the way it presents truths whether the latter are based on facts or reality. The most compelling reason for promoting media literacy is the need for education in contemporary society. This is because the principles and practices of media educations are applicable to all forms of media, either through TV, t-shirts, billboards or the internet (Thoman, 1995). Thus, this not only allows the students to gain knowledge from the use or functions of TV or media, but also allows them to develop a critical attitude and habit, which can be used and applied in their daily lives.

Realizing one's consciousness is a needed first step of praxis, which is defined as the power and know-how to take action against oppression, while stressing the importance of a liberating education. Although this research reveals 'taking action' as a result far ahead from the present, developing a habit of critical thinking will serve as a good start towards that goal. Teachers and students are the core of education, thus, they need to work together in order to apply the concepts of pedagogy and praxis. Only by being active and not passive followers of the media, we will be able to reduce misperceptions and eliminate somehow the influence stereotypes have on the thinking of our society.

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