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JOURNALISM, REPRESENTATION AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Edited by: Leif Kramp, Nico Carpentier, Andreas Hepp, Ilija Tomanić Trivundža, Hannu Nieminen, Risto Kunelius, Tobias Olsson, Ebba Sundin and Richard Kilborn.

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The role of media content in everyday life.
To confirm the nearby world and to shape the world beyond our reach

Ebba Sundin

Abstract

In this chapter, two classic assumptions about the role of media content are considered: the first involves media content related to individual experiences and how this content confirms and assures the ‘state of reality’, the second assumption involves media content related to how individuals can experience ‘reality’ beyond their own reach. Four classic works by Walter Lippmann, Marshall McLuhan, James W. Carey and John B. Thompson, are discussed with the focus on the assumptions of media’s role in interpreting the world. The chapter concludes with a discussion on how the classic texts are still valid from the shift towards a non-media centric viewpoint in the research of media, for example in studies based on the concept of mediatization.

Keywords: media content, reality, confirmation, media experiences, stereotypes, mediation, mediatization, non-centric media studies.

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 1920s Walter Lippmann (1922: 191) asked the following question: “*What better criterion does the man at the breakfast table possess than that the newspaper version checks up with his own opinion?*”

The question might look simple at first glance. Underneath, it bears important assumptions of how we interpret the world we live in and what role the media plays in this interpretation. Lippmann’s question also gives media scholars an idea of the importance of paying attention to the media’s role in everyday life when it comes to issues such as confirmation and assurance.

Lippmann was early in explaining his view that newspaper content not only provides the unknown to its readers, but also confirms or disconfirms reality as it was portrayed. From a McLuhanesque perspective, the already known and perhaps personally experienced events are the important news items in media. Forty years after the publication of Lippmann’s classic work *Public Opinion*, McLuhan wrote the following in *Understanding Media*:

The first items in the press to which all men turn are the ones about which they already know. If we have witnessed some event, whether a ball game or a stock crash or a snowstorm, we turn to the report of that happening, first. Why? The answer is central to any understanding of media. [...] Because for rational beings to see or re-cognize their experience in a new material form is an unbought grace of life. (McLuhan, 1964: 188-189)

The quotations of Lippmann and McLuhan are two examples of how media content becomes part of both the individual and social contexts of our everyday life experiences. In this chapter, the focus is on the role of media content in the sense-making process of the world and how these questions have been addressed in four classic theoretical works. The chapter is mainly based on the following classic media texts: Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, first published in 1922; Marshall McLuhan’s *Understanding Media*, first published in 1964; James W. Carey’s *Communication as Culture*, first published in 1989; and John B. Thompson’s *Media and Modernity*, first published in 1995. These works span over 70 years and they have been considered to be important contributions in the development of media theories.

Lippmann, McLuhan, Carey and Thompson represent the Anglo-Saxon perspective of media studies. Historically, the academic field of media and communications developed in the dominance of Anglo-Saxon perspectives. Scholars working in the academic milieus in the UK, Canada and the USA have made a large contribution to the field. This is not to say that scholars in other parts of the world should be neglected. On the contrary, bringing in as many perspectives as possible into the media studies will give a fuller understanding to the complex relationship between media and society.

The past must not necessarily be forgotten, and therefore, I address to the four media scholars Lippmann, McLuhan, Carey and Thompson in this chapter. They all shared some views on media and theorized the question of media's impact in everyday life. But the later scholars also criticized the writings of previous ones. With changes in society and the development of media this is natural. All theories undergo criticism and revisions when applied to new contexts. Although, in order to give these classic media scholars as much credit as possible, I have chosen to generously use direct quotations from their work. One of the reasons for this is to enthruse especially media students to continue the readings of the original texts and make their own standpoints of what has been written earlier and in different contexts than the contemporary media landscape.

Reading through these texts, two somewhat contrary assumptions can be highlighted. The first assumption is that we could pay more attention to the role of media content in bringing people information already known, confirming their view of reality. The second assumption is that we could also pay more attention to the role of media content in bringing information not known, shaping their understanding of reality.

2. The concept of reality

Media content crosses geographical distances in both local and global dimensions. When Lippmann and McLuhan discussed the recognition or affirmation of content in the newspapers, their starting point was the local context: events that the reader had possibly been part of, for example as someone in the audience at a sports event.

Today's media content situation is more complex, as is the concept of realities. We are all part of experiences nowadays referred to as 'IRL' (In Real Life) but experiences also take place in digital, virtual or online realities, sometimes also referred to as cyberspace. The terminology to define the opposite of IRL is questionable, as is the distinction between a real and an un-real world. For simplification, further discussion in this chapter about different realities will use the terms 'IRL' and 'digital realities', if not quoting or referring to specific terms outlined by other authors.

Communication, no matter whether we talk about IRL or digital realities, is necessary for the perception of reality. This idea has its own theoretical track, not only within media studies, but also in social studies, with an emphasis on social constructivism (see for example Berger and Luckmann, 1969; Blumer, 1969).

The variations of "realities" perceived and constructed in different media situations makes it possible for people to experience them in different contexts than those Lippmann and McLuhan had in mind. Still, it is important not to neglect the view that in addition to confirming known realities, media content also gives us, as individuals, information about realities that are beyond our own reach.

3. Conformation and assurance

Lippmann's main interest was in news content. Therefore, in his writings from the early 1920s, he was restricted to analysing and discussing newspapers and their readers. At the time, as well as in the present context, local newspapers played a strong role in providing information about a reality shared and experienced by the readers. According to Lippmann, it is when we ourselves have the possibility to confirm (or disconfirm) the information, that we are also able to form an opinion about the newspaper's credibility:

[...] each of us tends to judge a newspaper, if we judge it at all, by its treatment of that part of the news in which we feel ourselves involved. [...] And by its handling of those events we most frequently decide to like it or dislike it, to trust it or refuse to have the sheet in the house. If the newspaper gives a satisfactory account of that which we think we know, our business, our church, our party, it is fairly certain to be immune from violent criticism by us. (Lippmann, 1922: 191)

Lippmann refers to newspapers as diaries for people who like to read about themselves or events they already know about.¹ This could be viewed as one of the core meanings of local news, not only back in the early decades of the 20th century but also in the present day. Both from an American point of view, but in any society where information is valued as important for individuals.

It is important to note that Lippmann's basic assumption of the local news story as a 'reality-check' is only one fragment of *Public Opinion*, but nevertheless an important one. The news items were put on a larger canvas to deal with the problematic issues of information and democracy, and he highlighted the flaws of journalism.

Lippmann's contribution to media studies have been argued and discussed in many later works. As late as 1989, Carey wrote that he believed that *public opinion* was "*the founding book in American media studies*" because "*it was the first serious work to be philosophical and analytical in confronting the mass media*" (Carey, 1989: 57-59).

McLuhan (1964: 189) called the recognition of an experience in a new format an "*unbought grace of life*", and argued for this as one of the core meanings of media. He also expressed this feeling in the following way:

Experience translated into a new medium literally bestows a delightful playback of earlier awareness. The press repeats the excitement we have in using our wits, and by using our wits we can translate the outer world into the fabric of our own beings. (McLuhan, 1964: 189)

Carey (1989) also expressed ideas that can be interpreted as belonging to the approach that regards news as a 'reality-check'. In his *Communication as Culture*, he argues for a ritual view of communication, where news is equivalent to drama. Carey (1989: 16) did not value news for its informational value, but as "*a portray-*

al of the contending forces in the world". This is argued from the point of view that the word 'communication' has links to words such as 'sharing' and 'participation'. He continues:

A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs. (Carey 1989: 15)

Carey's (ibid.: 19) assumption was that reality was "*produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed*" by communication. This leaves room for an interpretation that local news has value in maintaining reality, which can be confirmed or disconfirmed by, for example, a reader of a newspaper.

Thompson (1995) takes the discussion about media and everyday life further with his typology of interaction. He does not specifically discuss the relationship between personal experience and media content like Lippmann and McLuhan, but his typology of interactions gives ideas that could connect to this theme. According to Thompson (1995: 85), interactions can be divided into three types: face-to-face, mediated, and mediated quasi-interactions. Although he makes a distinction between the types, Thompson acknowledged that interactions also take place as a mixture: "*a hybrid character*".

In the following part of Thompson's reasoning about this "interaction mix", some ideas about media's role in the local context can be understood, even if they are not specifically pointed out:

Individuals are increasingly likely to acquire information and symbolic content from sources other than persons with whom they interact directly in their day-to-day lives. The creation and renewal of traditions are processes that become increasingly bound up with mediated symbolic exchange. (Thompson, 1995: 87)

What we can understand from this viewpoint is that the local media also plays an important role in letting people experience events and matters within their own space, but not necessarily personally.

The idea of using media content to confirm an event that has already been experienced has been addressed in this part of the article. In the next part, the idea of shaping reality with the impact of creating images of experiences beyond the individual's own reach will be discussed.

4. Stereotypes and media experiences

We should not forget that the media have produced and disseminated distant news and information to individuals for a long time. Centuries ago, when the first newspapers carried information from remote places, the delay was significant; it might have made a reader feel more disconnected since time plays a crucial part

in whether we feel connected or not. Then, in the 19th century, due to innovations, information was no longer restricted to be carried physically from one place to another. According to Carey (1989), the telegraph was the first technology to separate communication from transportation. When communication was not dependent on time and space, the ideas of time and space changed.

With the telegraph and some decades later, the transatlantic cable, the news business prospered and the concept of journalism developed. The production of news that could be sent from one place to another through wire and printed in local newspapers everywhere gave the readers information beyond their own reach. More and more, the reality of a world not experienced by themselves became part of everyday life.

Lippmann (1922: 55) cleverly outlines the links between the two contrary assumptions about media content when saying:

Each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth's surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects we see at best only a phase and an aspect. [...] Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine.

The problem with the second assumption was, in Lippmann's view, that by being told about the world before seeing it, people constructed stereotypes of what to expect the world to be, and any threats to these stereotypes meant threats to the individual:

They (stereotypes) are an ordered, more or less consistent picture of the world, to which our habits, our tastes, our capacities, our comforts and our hopes have adjusted themselves. They may not be a complete picture of the world, but they are a picture of a possible world to which we are adapted. In that world people and things have their well-known places, and do certain expected things. We feel at home there. We fit in. We are members. [...] No wonder, then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of our universe, and, where big things are at stake, we do not readily admit that there is any distinction between our universe and the universe. (Lippmann, 1922: 63)

To “*feel at home*” in the stereotyped world, as described by Lippman above, can correlate with McLuhan's famous thesis about ‘the global village’. At a first glance, the idea of the global village may appear idyllic, but closer readings show critical perspectives on the idea just like Lippman's critical view on media's production of stereotypes. With the introduction of the internet, the ‘global village’ seemed even more confirmed than the time when McLuhan formulated his ideas. A new tradition and interpretation of McLuhan's ideas followed in the wake of new technology (see for example Morris and Ogan, 1996; Brown and Fishwick, 1999; Federman and De Kerckhove, 2003; Levinson, 2004; Lule, 2012).

McLuhan's original ideas about the 'global village' were based on a complex set of assumptions about human senses and how they connected to media. A general idea was that if people listen to the radio or watch TV broadcasting live at the same time, they become connected just like in a village. McLuhan has been criticized for his ideas of a global village because information is not free and accessible to everyone in the world. As already mentioned, reading McLuhan shows that he did not present his ideas without criticism himself:

Radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. That is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of this medium, with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber. (McLuhan, 1964: 261)

He continues to discuss the effects of radio using Orson Well's reading from H.G. Well's book *War of the Worlds* and the Mars invasion, which created a mass panic among listeners in 1938.² McLuhan developed his ideas of the 'global village' in later works, but as the quotation above shows, the idea was already clear in *Understanding Media*. It is also connected to ideas about the way media is creating images and experiences beyond individual's own reach.

From Carey's (1989: 23) point of view, the world is produced by symbolic work. One problematic aspect of this production is when worldviews are dominated by small numbers of producers, which was the case for the technological development of communications in the 19th century. According to Carey, the eastern corridor of American communication, i.e. the New York – Washington corridor, has dominated news and entertainment since the early 1800s, not only in forming a national culture but also international:

Although it aided in forming a national culture, it disguised how local – even provincial – this national culture was: a national and even international culture was defined increasingly by how the world was seen from a couple of distinctively local places. (Carey, 1989: 118)

Carey shares the view of Lippmann when it comes to the way the media is producing images of reality from a local point of view, with the risk of creating stereotypes. Thompson (1995: 34) also discusses the same line of thought as Carey and Lippmann, regarding experiencing the world first through media, and then in real life:

[...] our sense of the world is shaped by media products today that, when we travel to distant parts of the world as a visitor or tourist, our lived experience is often preceded by a set of images and expectations acquired through extended exposure to media products.

Thompson also questions how media experiences are related to everyday life:

Few people in the West today are likely to encounter someone suffering from extreme dehydration or starvation, someone shot by sniper fire or maimed by mortar shells; but most will have witnessed suffering of this kind on their television screens. Today we live in a world in which the capacity to experience is disconnected from the activity of encountering. [...] how can we relate mediated experiences to the practical contexts of our day-to-day lives? (Thompson, 1995: 208-209)

The early writings by Lippmann in the 1920's highlighted some of the core questions media scholars have struggled with for decades, and McLuhan, Carey and Thompson among others have made their contributions in the discussion of media's role for individuals. Lippmann, McLuhan, Carey and Thompson all expressed ideas about the role of media content in confirming and shaping realities. The media landscape in their writings looked different from today, and the landscape will continue to change.

5. Changes and media's role

During the last two decades with the development of digital communication technology, media content and personal communication have become more integrated. Today's technological devices serve the need of individual and mass communication at the same time: for example via smartphones and tablets.

We don't need to question whether the communication revolution of the 19th century, when communication became separated from time and space, had a great impact on people's sense of belonging and their identity-shaping processes. From a contemporary point of view the digital communication revolution has continued and altered this impact, leaving it up to scholars to continue their research in order to gain a better understanding of the media's role in the complex processes of sense-making of everyday life.

The theoretical starting point in the texts by Lippmann, McLuhan, Carey and Thompson can in many senses be labelled 'mediation'. This concept is complex, but one of the core elements is, described by McQuail (2010: 83) as "*versions of events and conditions which we cannot directly observe for ourselves*". 'Mediation' can be understood as assumptions of media's role for individuals and society from a media-centric view. When stretched also to concern processes in society where media forms for example have substituted "*non-media activities*" and "*media use becomes an integral part of private and social life, the media's definition of reality amalgamates with the social definition of reality*" (Schulz, 2004: 88, 89), media's role may be understood from a non-media centric view.

Within the field of media and communication studies, interest in the concept of the ‘mediatization’ of culture and society has grown. There are a number of scholars engaged in theorizing the ongoing changes of media, society and culture (Schulz 2004; Strömbäck, 2008; Lundby, 2009; Couldry, 2012; Hjarvard, 2013; Hepp 2013; Jansson 2013).

According to Jansson (2013: 281), social processes have become dependent and inseparable from technological processes, including mediating processes, and therefore “*analyses of mediatization should neither start out from the media themselves, nor try to isolate any particular process of mediation*”. Instead, Jansson (ibid.) suggests that the research starts from the transformations and in this manner the research also becomes non-media centric. The non-media centric view has also been raised for example by Hepp (2010), Morley (2007; 2009) and Moores (2012).

Reading the classics from the experience of how society occurs in the 21st century, we better agree on the facts that the foundations for study the media have differed from time to time. Lippmann (1922) had his own view on what should be referred to as ‘real’, or what were images produced by media. Although he acknowledged and problematized the impact of media for individuals, and his ideas still make sense, he did not recognize the relationship between media and society with concepts as ‘mediation’ or ‘mediatization’. Seventy years later, and with many media technological inventions along the way, Thompson (1995: 85) talks about “*hybrid characters*” of mediated interactions. Still, 1995 seems to be distant in time. Perhaps during the last 20 years, more changes have appeared in the media field, than in between Lippmann’s and Thompson’s texts. From this perspective, and in the interpretations of the classic texts, the non-media centric view makes sense to strengthen the overall field of media and communication studies.

In this chapter, I have addressed two assumptions about media content that have both been discussed and theorized since the beginning of the 20th century. They may seem to be contradictory, but their theoretical foundation is the same: media’s role in society and for the individual on an everyday basis, both in the perspective of confirming realities that are experienced, and shaping realities that are beyond the possibility to experience. No matter what changes we might expect in the future, in society or in the media landscape or combined, this theoretical foundation in the past linked to media-centric studies but lately to the opposite, will still be a core issue within the research field of media and communications.

Notes

- 1 The definition of a newspaper as “the printed diary of the home town” was coined by the contemporary scholar James Melvin Lee who wrote ‘The History of American Journalism’ published in 1917. Lippmann is referring to Lee in his text.
- 2 For an illustration of the panic of the listeners, I recommend a scene in Woody Allen’s movie ‘Radio Days’ from 1987.

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Biography

Ebba Sundin, PhD, is Associate Professor at the School of Education and Communication, Jönköping University, Sweden. Her main research interest is the role of journalism in everyday life from both a local and a global perspective and especially focused on children and adolescents.

Contact: Ebba.Sundin@hkk.hj.se