Objectivity versus Manipulation in the Media

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Résumé: En partant de la présomption qu'il n'y a pas d'énoncé complètement neutre, parce que toute communication porte l'empreinte de l'émetteur, qui construit son information de ses propres croyances, convictions, principes, nous proposons une analyse du discours médiatique écrit, notre attention se dirigeant vers les deux pôles de la communication: l'objectivité et la manipulation. Le rôle essentiel de l'émetteur est de choisir les mots avec un potentiel interprétatif réduit, ou au contraire, d'utiliser des mots qui ont une forte charge émotionnelle.

Mots clés: discours médiatique, communication, objectivité, manipulation, persuasion..

I. Introduction

In the last years media have become more powerful than anyone could imagine a few decades ago. In a democratic system one would expect to be informed in a neutral way about any internal or external event which takes place. But these two concepts, objectivity and manipulation, represent themselves a subject of debate. Are the media[1] in general, or any type of media in particular, objective sources of information? When does manipu-

[1] For McLuhan the media themselves represent *the message*, because "each form of transport not only carries, but translates and transforms, the sender, the receiver, and the message" (p.91).

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lation occur and why? It is a fact that without the media we would not have access to the main events which take place in the world; people separated by huge distances are brought together by the media. The need of objectivity in the media rises from at least two reasons: the media represent a main source of information and *interpretation* of the reality; the media can increase or decrease the social contact, by providing stories which bring people together or, on the contrary, create controversies among the readers.

II. **Objectivity**

Objectivity occurs when a story is presented by the journalist in a way which do not take into account his / her personal opinion, or, as David Brooks[2] points it out, objectivity represents the capacity of gathering and processing information, taking into account all the facts and processing them in an impartial way. With other words objectivity is *a style of writing*, characterized by simple language and lack of personal opinion.

Irina Stanciugelu considers that *influencing* the audience represents the *neutral side of communication*, persuading the audience represents the positive side of communicating, and manipulating the audience represents the negative side of communicating. (Irina Stanciugelu, *Mastile comunicarii*, pp. 176-189) We totally agree with the first part, as any act of communication represents an attempt of influencing the receiver. However, as the border between persuading and manipulating is extremely fragile, we consider that is difficult, even for a specialist to make a clear distinction between the process of persuading or manipulating someone, in other words is difficult to say where persuasion ends and where manipulation begins.

According to David Brooks objectivity can be achieved through certain stages: a) the first stage is represented by the journalists' ability to suspend judgment while looking at facts; b) the second stage is represented by modesty, which means that

[2] David Brooks is a columnist for the New York Times, former senior editor at the Weekly Standard and op-editor at the Wall Street Journal.

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journalists have to suppress their ego and see the truth[3] no matter if they like it or not; c) the third stage is the ability to process all data taking into consideration all the fact and honestly putting them into a pattern; d) the fourth stage is the ability to be faithful to truth and to betray friends, when necessary; e) the fifth stage is the ability to ignore stereotypes.

We are permanently moving in a world in which *meanings are exchanged through language*, certainly when we are talking about the written media. As Halliday points it out, "individuals do not exist out of context". People exist in interaction with each other and "meaning is the principal form that this interaction takes" (Halliday, 1979, p. 160). One may argue that our world is continuously under *a real informative air raid* which uses as ammunition all types of speech and has as target the entire population of the planet (*Cf.* Ardeleanu, Sanda-Maria & Coroi, Ioana-Crina). Journalists have always pretended to be objective. In our opinion objectivity in media means that any piece of information is presented taking into consideration the following aspects: the journalist does not express his/her beliefs, critics, evaluations; the journalist presents the fact as accurate as possible; as far as language is concerned, the journalist chooses from a wide range of possibilities the one with the lowest interpretative potential.

III. Manipulation

Manipulation is defined as a social situation created with the unique purpose of influencing the others' reactions and behaviors in a way which brings an advantage exclusively for the manipulative part. The difference between persuasion and manipulation consists mainly in the techniques used by the manipulative agent. In the first case the agent uses open techniques, based on arguments and explanations, while in the last case the agent uses hidden techniques, false arguments, lies.

[3] Brooks compare journalists with judges, as both are doing a job for the society. Journalists and judges have to suppress their personality in order to see the truth entirely. It's all about self-control.

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As far as the media is concerned manipulation occurs in several situations for at least two reasons: the *selection* of the story can be considered an act of manipulation, simply because the journalists must decide which story is worth telling and which story would not be interesting, and thus is left aside; another important decision is *how* to tell a story, whose side to present.

IV. Conclusions

In a world dominated by power and financial advantages where the media are more and more depending of advertising, with the media owners influencing the selection of the news in order to attract advertisers, we consider that objectivity still exists. Referring to objectivity David Brooks said: "I think there is truth out there and that objectivity is like virtue; it's the thing you always fall short of, but the thing you always strive toward".

However, the objectivity in the media does not mean seeking the truth in the same way scientists do, it means that journalists, as we have said before, have to present any information without expressing their own beliefs; it means that journalists have to maintain an equilibrium, by presenting both sides of the story; and finally, it is important, for accuracy, that journalists use only reliable sources.

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