

CHANGING PERCEPTION THROUGH MEDIA BOMBARDMENT AND DEMONIZATION

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Abstract: *The perception can be directed to a specific target, so as to result in a uniform interpretation of any message, textual or transmitted through the image, by "media bombardment". In the context of the negative collective perception of Russia, we have analyzed the effects of a simple farce. The psycho-sociological experiment based on this farse shows how perception is strongly altered by the context: people can no longer observe even the obvious details. Thus, it can be demonstrated how the "media bombardment" influences perception, in the paradigm of emotional communication.*

Key words: *Demonization, mass-media, perception, evidence, arguments.*

1. Introduction

Most manipulation strategies are based on the power that the image has over the target audience. Vladimir Volkoff describes in detail the disinformation techniques used, including in order to achieve this devastating result for the former Yugoslavia, in the "A novel of disinformation", recalling, among other things, the role of the media and, in particular, television, in such a situation. Campaign: "If the image is the natural ambition of the misinformers, television is his paradise, but a paradise surrounded by walls, from where there is no way to drive him out" (Volkoff, 2018, p. 180). Practically, the whole world was fooled by a reinterpretation of some images, when the reactions of the international press moved armed forces to destroy the "demon" presented by the media.

With regards to the role of mass media in shaping image, very important is the way the messages are sent by mass media professionals. Thus, mass media representatives must use terms that are specific to their field (Goian, 2010, p.86,) and when such terms or expressions are being used, professionals must provide short explanations in order assure a clear understanding of the subject (Goian, 2014). Even more, people working in mass media should have information literacy, which refers to the abilities and competencies of people to use information in an effective way (Repanovici, 2009,

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p.341). However, for a person who works in mass media, it is also essential to have copyright literacy: to be able to recognize documents that are protected by copyright, to obtain permissions to use certain materials and to use them in an ethical manner. (Todorova et al., 2017).

And, if the text can be read and analysed - which is becoming increasingly rare in the contemporary world, always invoking the lack of time and too much information that the individual should manage daily - the television image seems to say everything including that it presents the "naked" truth. That is why the most effective way to create hysteria at the level of the masses, but also the reactions of the authorities, is what can be metaphorically defined as "blindness through the light of the image".

Thus, the image can be considered a mental construction, a representation that people make with regard to the way they perceive things, events or individuals (Coman, 2018a, p.20). Furthermore, in the context of people being satisfied with their life, since the tactics used in order to have a fulfilled life are complex and involve many aspects that merge, such as social reputation, financial gains, life with no worries or knowledge (Coman, 2018b, p.245), through the information that it sends related to these topics, mass media can also influence and shape the image that people have about what it means to live a happy and fulfilled life.

If what seems to be seen is real enough, the reactions come immediately from the public opinion. This may explain why, at some point, the public comes to believe that a fake is genuine when the fake corresponds to a situation already accepted as real. Even more, mass media and its influence on shaping the perception of the public gains importance in post – communist countries like Romania, because after the communist period, mass media suffered changes and shifted from a field where news programmes were politically controlled to a more liberal field, where information can be sent through a wide range of channels (Rezeanu et al, 2018, p.7).

The simple fake news can be detected relatively easily, by checking several sources of information, but a large disinformation campaign is much more difficult to understand and combat. Hence, when it comes to the manipulation of public opinion, disinformation has a special place in this process because people who are already misinformed can be manipulated more easily, being easier to send and embed convenient messages and understandings into their minds (Coman, 2007, p.97).

Disintegrating a disinformation action requires expertise in several areas of activity and a complex analysis, and the real war against the phenomenon of "fake news" cannot be carried out starting from the analysis of the effects or methods of spreading fake news, if we do not find the roots of the falsity which acts on the collective unconscious, and in this point of analysis we must return to the origins: to the demons and trolls in folklore and the great legends of the world. The strongest image in the collective unconscious is the Demon. That is why most negative PR campaigns use the demonization of the characters, groups or even the countries they target, so that the effects of emotional communication are devastating, changing the public's perception of any other subject related to the demonized target.

1.1. Objectives

This paper aims to reveal the causality connection between the negative PR campaigns and the change of perception of the subjects which are demonized, by emotional communication. In this regard, we present the links between the mass-media and social media bombardment with the distorted image of the demonized object and how the misunderstanding of the evidence and details could be explained.

2. Literature Review

The influence of the press on perception has been studied since the appearance of the first newspapers. The press has been used for propaganda, in the totalitarian regimes. The influence of mass-media and social media has been used for decades in communication and marketing campaigns, but also in a negative sense, to denigrate and demonize a subject, not only in a positive sense, to promote a product, a service, a person or anything else.

Sociological studies in recent years show that the public receives and prefers "mediated" information, processed by the media, becoming a "participant" in this mediation. One can deduce from this relation of contemporary man to the influence of the media a kind of reinterpretation of the "social contract", as originally described by Jean-Jaques Rousseau, as the origin of the formation of the state. Basically, contemporary people give up their own freedom of thought, voluntarily entering the sphere of influence of the media, from which they expect to receive processed information, without seeking the truth alone and submitting to the power of the media as an accepted authority. In this regard, attention must be paid to the fact that mass media communication channels possess the power to influence and reach different types of public (Coman et al., 2018, p.41). The media, which at the beginning was the essential support for free public debate, was transformed, especially after the hegemony of television began to be felt, becoming the instrument of its suppression. Jurgen Habermas (1998) described the public sphere as: the "sphere of private persons gathered in public" that claims it (even if it is regulated by the authorities, its orientation is against power in order to be able to discuss with it the general rules of exchange). According to Habermas, the man as an actor on the public stage was exiled in a uniform and isolated from domestic space: the reduction of the private sphere to the more intimate spaces of conjugal life, deprived of its role and with diminished authority, offered only the illusion of a perfect private personal sphere, because people, as private persons, have withdrawn from their role as owners, which implies a certain social control, preferring the purely personal position of neutral users of leisure. They have come directly under the influence of semi-public authorities, without benefit from the protection of an officially protected family space.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic - March and April 2020 - many articles have appeared in the media about the danger of the influence of Russian propaganda and about "Infodemia" - the increase of the fake news phenomenon, made by Russian propaganda. Starting with these narratives about the influence of Russian propaganda,

any different opinion, any protest and even any doubt or question about the need for restrictions or other measures have been associated - by those who strongly believe in authority - with Russian propaganda. Thousands of these remarks exist in social media debates, labeling anyone as part of Russian propaganda (GEC Special Report: August 2020 Pillars of Russia's Disinformation and Propaganda Ecosystem, U.S. Department of State).

From this interpretation generated by the introduction of campaigns to combat Russian propaganda an accentuation of russophobia emerged, but also a distorted perception of reality, so that those affected by russophobia consider that everything that comes as news from Russia is automatically fake, and Russia is evil itself and the situation in Russia is disastrous. Even the online newspapers Sputnik or Russia Today are considered sources of "fake news" and presented in this way in the media in other countries, where in the mainstream media only official information is taken from the authorities. From this point of view, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a confusion was created between the correctness of news and the hypothesis that the authorities hold the absolute truth, which cannot be disputed. There is also a confusion between the correctness of the information and the political correctness, created at the level of public perception. The correctness of an argument cannot be confused with political correctness. There can be no single Supreme Truth, given by the authorities, because in this way we suddenly return to the darkest part of censorship in totalitarian regimes. "Unfortunately, the reality is more complex and depressing, and the necessary corrections require a state-centered approach." (W. Barney, 2010)

The „bombardment” of information, by text and images, in mass-media and social media creates a particular effect described by Carl Gustav Jung (2017, pp. 43-46). The psychoanalyst demonstrated that people are influenced by an image created by subliminal techniques and they will identify the image in anything that is linked with the particular subject, even if that image is not present, in reality.

3. Material and Methods

The research uses both empirical and theoretical, qualitative and quantitative methods: Analysis and Experiment. The main research hypotheses are that the demonic image of a subject and the repetitiveness of some demonic description of the subject in mass-media and social media have as result the distortion of the image in any situation, independently of the particular situations. Also, this distortion of image will influence the perception of the public. The arguments for defining these hypotheses are related to the results of a recent experiment made by a farce which was perceived as the incontestable reality in Russia. First we have made the analysis of the reactions in mass-media and social media, collecting and analysing what different individuals say about the farce. The research started with the qualitative methods (Analysis), continuing with the quantitative methods (Psycho-sociological Experiment). The psycho-sociological experiment aimed to emphasize the discrepancy between the real content of a farce and the effect it produces on the public, in the context of Russia's demonization.

An interesting social experiment was launched in Russia in March 2021, and in a few

days it arrived in Romania, but in a context favorable to misinterpretation. A "hidden camera" movie has provoked very different reactions, depending on the audience and the context. It is about a filming in a mall in Russia, where two actors play the role of guard, respectively the role of the beaten client because he does not wear a protective mask. In Russia, the experiment itself, filmed with a hidden camera, caused panic among those who saw scenes of violence in the mall. No one wore a protective mask inside, but almost all of them had masks, which they put on their faces, scared of the possibility of being beaten by the same guard.

4. Results

The Russian audience had a natural reaction to watching a movie from the "hidden camera" series. The Romanian public had several types of reactions. The farce appeared in Romania on March 19, 2021, one day before the announced protests, worldwide, against the restrictions imposed during the pandemic. Simultaneously, there were more comments on social networks indicating the organizer of the events as Russia, with the message "if you were in Russia, you could not afford to protest, because you wake up with a cane over your neck, from OMON forces."

During the same period, March 18-19, 2021, in mass-media and on social networks in Romania the public could see, repetitively, two filmed news items about real situations, with people being assaulted by police officers or Security, in the Czech Republic (Digi 24, 2021a) and the USA (Digi 24, 2021b). Two people were grounded and assaulted by law enforcement, also because they were not wearing masks. In the Czech Republic, a man was caught on the street, knocked to the ground, beaten and handcuffed by police in front of his six-year-old son, and in the USA, Texas, where local authorities no longer required wearing of a mask in public places, the guard of a bank had grounded and handcuffed a 65-year-old woman, a client of the bank, whom he then forced to stand up without help, with his hands behind his back. Particularly violent images have been associated by some of those who watched the filming with the demonized image of Russia.

Thus, those who received the film on WhatsApp, without comments, perceived the images as real, from Russia, where people are beaten in the mall, if they do not wear a mask. Not even all Russian-speaking connoisseurs noticed, at first glance, that at first the specification "our actor" appeared on film in Russian. Most have not noticed that no one is really beaten in the filming, and the character who seems to be the victim of the guard is the same, every time. Many of the Russian-speakers who saw the "hidden camera" movie on Facebook, Tweeter or WhatsApp, without further explanation, on March 19-22, 2021, in that context, believed that the images were real and considered that in Russia it is normal for people to be assaulted by law enforcement anyway, especially in the context of a pandemic, if they do not wear a mask - although even in Russia they do not wear a protective mask and there are no real images of this aggression in this country. while such news exists from almost all European countries, including Romania, but also from the USA. Only those who watched the movie on TiklTok perceived it as a joke, because they know that the role of the TiklTok channel is primarily to promote

some material. Even they, when asked if they still believe that the images in Russia could be real, considered it possible, because "it is known that in Russia people are beaten by law enforcement", identifying violent actions with this country.

Other opinions were related to the "lack of civilization and responsibility of the customers of that mall, but also of the guard". There were also reactions of revolt, from those who study the phenomenon of fake news and manipulation, perceiving its distribution as an action meant to manipulate public opinion. There was also a category of people who shared the footage on social networks, with the message: "look what awaits us". The most important thing is that regardless of the side they belong to, almost everyone claims that "the Russians would be able to apply such punitive measures anyway." The perception was distorted, in most cases, by the image that each subject already had about Russia, so that everyone tried to explain their film through the prism of the preconceived idea, without researching the details. Here is a relevant example: "The action of the clip takes place in Russia, a country that we can say takes very seriously the observance of the rules. Although, at first glance, it seems funny, the clip hides a great truth: people, no matter where they are, want to run away from responsibility and do not like to follow the rules. Of course, there are people who have a mask and pass quietly, but the others, only due to the action of the policeman, put on a mask. In this case, the authorities intervene to comply with the rules, even if the method is not exactly the most appropriate. After watching it, I have the same opinion about Russia: a country where you want to follow the rules by any method and at any cost. "

It should also be noted that no participant in the psycho-sociological experiment noticed that in the mall in Russia (Moscow) none of those caught by the violence of the guard wore a mask, which shows that during the period when the farce was filmed, not only did law enforcement or mall guards not beat people who were not wearing masks, in open and even closed public spaces, but there was not even an obligation to wear a protective mask, unlike in European countries.

The psycho-sociological experiment confirmed the theory that contemporary man is more affected by preconceived ideas than when there was not the enormous amount of information that appeared daily in the media and social media, when he did not communicate via the Internet. The evolution of communication, through state-of-the-art technical means, is, in fact, an involution, by reducing it to an exchange of automatisms. At the basis of the reasoning of those who interpret certain situations without a thorough, lucid and objective analysis will be the reasoning based on causation: if there is A, it results B. Thus, in the context of negative collective perception of Russia, we found that in the economy of this reasoning simplistically, if it is Russia, it turns out that violence is normal. If it is "known" that the violence of law enforcement in Russia exists, it follows that images such as those viewed by the subjects are undeniably real or, even in the case of those who knew they would watch a farce, the conclusion was that real, similar images could exist, because it was about Russia. Practically, it is demonstrated that the demonized image is stronger, in creating perception, than any relevant detail in an objective analysis of a situation.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The psycho-sociological experiment confirmed the theory that the contemporary humans being are more affected by preconceived ideas than when there was not the enormous amount of information that appeared daily in the media and social media, when they did not communicate via the Internet. The evolution of communication, through state-of-the-art technical means, is, in fact, an involution, by reducing it to an exchange of automatisms. At the basis of the reasoning of those who interpret certain situations without a thorough, lucid and objective analysis will be the reasoning based on causation: if there is A, it results B. Thus, in the context of negative collective perception of Russia, we found that in the economy of this reasoning simplistically, if it is Russia, it turns out that violence is normal. If it is "known" that the violence of law enforcement in Russia exists, it follows that images such as those viewed by the subjects are undeniably real or, even in the case of those who knew they would watch a farce, the conclusion was that real, similar images could exist, because it was about Russia. Practically, it is demonstrated that the demonized image is stronger, in creating perception, than any relevant detail in an objective analysis of a situation.

Demonization has a special role in the economy of a media-supported PR and lobby campaign. One of the main vectors of spreading "fake news" is demonization. The presentation of the target of a media campaign as a demon has immediate effects on the perception of the target audience, so that a negative collective perception of the person is reached in the shortest possible time, diminishing almost any chance of defense, even if he could prove his innocence in court. This practice comes from antiquity and has been used continuously with the best results.

The heyday reached its heyday in the Middle Ages, when it became the basis for executions, taking the place of any fair trial. In recent years, in Romania we have witnessed many demonization campaigns supported by the media, so that if we make an analysis of the demons produced by all negative PR campaigns, we see how all the camps in relation to political conflict are represented by such emblematic figures, with symbolic value in the psychology of the masses. Basically, we have demons fighting other demons, in the collective perception: Traian Băsescu, Florian Coldea, Liviu Dragnea, Ion Iliescu - these are just four examples of demons created by the media, from different sides. Victor Ponta himself was perceived as a demon - and even a high-ranking one in the hierarchy established by the propagation in media descriptions and comments meant to create this image. Obviously, this is just a top of the most popular demons, but this possibility of ranking is also part of the collective unconscious, so it can be a very good tool for manipulating collective perception, precisely because it is found in many legends and texts of sacred value, from all periods of history and from all cultures.

The legal principles "Audiatur et altera pars" and "In dubio pro reo" are excluded from the start, in the superficial and target-oriented analyzes made by the media and social media. Thus, Demonology has been enriched with new dimensions, in the contemporary period.

Demonization is now based on tools "a click away" in relation to the target audience of media campaigns and has been used extensively in creating and supporting political scandals. You can also see how the reaction of the public (public opinion) is used to create the collective need to help the forces of Good win, in the fight with demonic characters. Practically, analyzing this situation, beyond any political involvement, we can reach an overview that shows us that exactly this PR strategy is the basis of mass manipulation through "fake news" - but both ways through fake news, in itself, as well as by using the context that resulted in the demonization of individuals, groups, political parties or countries, labeled as generators of fake news.

The phenomenon of "fake news" is one of the most popular topics in the era of advanced technologies. However, the roots of this phenomenon are much more important to study than the effects, precisely because a superficial analysis of the effects produced in certain contexts can reverse the truth with the false and can upset more than the fake news itself. For this reason, there is a need for a more accurate analysis of the origins of fake news and the phenomenon generically called "fake news". And the origins date back to ancient times. That is why it is necessary to deconstruct and return to primordial images and symbols. The current trend is to return the study of the fake news phenomenon to the effects of communication in social networks, and research to find out the truth, to "verification from three credible sources." The rule of the three sources is known to the general public from the ethics of journalism, but such a verification may not be enough, especially in the contemporary world, characterized by false sources and contamination of sources - even the most credible, including official ones - with information distorted, falsified for various purposes, by those who disseminate the information, in one way or another.

The only possibility to eliminate - as much as possible - the phenomenon that has grown in recent years, more than ever in human history, receiving the generic name "fake news", is by searching for the truth. The only properly informed people will be those who are willing to study for themselves the evidence that proves the veracity of a news story and to apply the legal principles, from the court, to select the real information, from a multitude of forgeries. In order to achieve this performance, at the level of the masses, a campaign will be needed to raise awareness of the need for correct information, based on legal culture, civic education, ethics and an information culture, which will help people to distinguish between truth and falsehood, starting from scientific bases. Such an awareness campaign is absolutely necessary in the contemporary world, especially because access to information and fake news is almost unlimited, and the situation has changed suddenly, radically, after the generalization of communication through social networks, so that the upheaval of contemporary man, in the face of a huge amount of information, created informational chaos, in general. The situation which was reached and which generated what we call today the "fake news phenomenon" is natural, in the absence of a "guide of good practices" and a culture of information. In an ideal world, such a project to implement unlimited access to social networks, via the Internet, would have been done after a prior period of implementation of a package of measures to raise awareness of the dangers that arise in this situation. In the real world it is impossible to implement social projects in stages,

but it can be recovered, through information and awareness campaigns - which I propose, as a way to fight against the fake news phenomenon, as an “antidote” to diminish or to eliminate the phenomenon, in certain socio-cultural environments, which have the cultural basis necessary to understand some social phenomena. For the rest of the population, such an awareness campaign can be conceived, but adapted to the level of understanding of each category. The only valid solution is the trial of cases, with conclusive evidence and solid arguments, respecting the principles of law such as “Audiatur et altera pars” and “In dubio pro reo”, as in court. Only in this way will it be possible to eliminate the fake news phenomenon and misinformation.

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