

### **Agnieszka Szymańska: The Complexity of Relations Between the Media and Politics**

The presence of the mass media differentiates modern social and political reality from that which appeared in the past. Through their *information management*[1] the mass media manipulate information within the limits of the society, whose members - rather sporadically having access to political information without the medium of the mass media - are to some extent sentenced to the media and their transmissions as a source of information about the public sphere of life and along with this, politics as well. It depends on the way the media see the problem: whether and in what depiction and in what light does it manage to make its way through to the first page of the newspaper, and thanks to this can it exist or not in the public consciousness. At the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was possible to introduce a series of social reforms, and even complete revolutionary change without the participation or support of public opinion in the mass sense (Rucht 1994, p. 350); nowadays it is difficult to imagine such a situation. A good example can be the political breakthrough carried out in the German Democratic Republic in 1989. The uncommonly significant role of media transmissions, especially television, in the context of the changes of the times proves the term found in literature *Medien-Wende (media breakthrough)*, as normally used with reference to these events (Schneider 1999, p. 602). In principle, however, since the times of the memorable radio audition *War of the Worlds* by Orson Welles (1938) there has not been a way to belittle the public power of the influence of the mass media.

The mass media still do not possess power in the strict sense of the word, this is to say that governing in the long-term is not their domain. The colloquial and increasingly popular term "the fourth estate" is only a metaphor. The media do not possess, after all, the formal legal attributes of a (democratic) government: they are not elected, they are not subject to socio-political control, they cannot be dismissed, and, finally, they do not administer any coercive sanctions towards their audience. It is worth remembering, by the way, that in opposition to the organs of the state - perhaps with the exception of public radio and television broadcasting stations (and these only to some extent) - they are not financed from public funds (compare Dobek-Ostrowska 2004, p. 141-143). The advances in technology and transmission techniques, and also the progressive processes of concentration and commercialization of the media cause their role nowadays to cease to be strictly informative. Modern media activity is not only a reaction to events. On the macro scale, that is on the scale of society as a whole, the creative role of the media is more frequently discussed, and the issue of the relation between reality and its image in the media has occupied academics of the process of political communication since the beginning of the 1950s (compare Merten 1994, Schulz 1990) and has become an inspiration for many hypotheses (among others: agenda setting, framing, priming, refraction, new bias, the concept of mediatization and the cultivation theory). In a book concerning this problem, Hans Mathias Kepplinger (1992) introduces the separation into three kinds of events about which the media inform: *natural (Genuineereignisse)*, *mediatized (mediatiesierte Ereignisse)*, and *performance (inszenierte Ereignisse)*. The first two are those that take place independently of an informational media transmission (for example earthquakes or accidents). The *performance*-triggered events are exclusively for media use. This is any kind of pseudo-event: press conferences, demonstrations, rallies, etc. However, mediatized

events are what one can assume would happen even without the presence of the media, but the course of action would then have an undoubtedly different character (for example the Olympic Games, party conferences, presentation of products, or book fairs). On this basis the author states that *the causal relationship between the event and the transmission* [in its topic] *with time adopts the form of the desired causal relationship* (Kepplinger 1992, p. 45). The more technologically advanced development of the media, the more frequently and clearly we have contact with media performance of events, in other words triggered events either through the media themselves and/or their presence. The phenomenon carries the name of issue-management (in German *Ereignismanagement*).

In a political context this can also be seen as signifying that the mass media have currently taken over certain functions, which were not long ago reserved for politics (Schulz 1997, p. 28). Among the ranks of various functions filled by media transmissions (compare, among others, Schulz 2001, p. 10; Oniszczyk 2002, pp. 30-36) the common function of creating a forum for public debate or discussion and exchange of opinion can be named here. Customarily parliament fulfilled this role. Today, in parliamentary discussions in progress, almost exclusively, arguments are pursued which earlier had already appeared in media broadcasts (Kepplinger 1992). Through its methods of informational operation, this is through an appropriate choice of subject matter and form of presenting content, the mass media shapes the picture of that which society recognizes as the priority in the hierarchy of social needs in a given moment. In this way the media sets in motion a mechanism for making political decisions and then tracks its course. In other words the media *pre-forms a political decision* (Kepplinger 1992, p. 28). The mass media of today belongs to a family of the most important centers of information transfer in the dimension of foreign policy (Kepplinger 1998). In this way to a certain extent the methods of mass transmission have taken over the traditional assignment of the diplomatic corps and intelligence agencies (which to a great extent currently use media broadcasts in their work). And at the same time they accomplished this so that today it is possible to talk about the so-called *diplomacy of the media* (among others Ociepka 1999, p. 78). As we know from observations of recent events (a worsening of Polish-German relations) this does not always happen to the benefit and satisfaction of the diplomatic service (*Newsweek* 2004, p. 18-22).

The mass media, in shaping the method of seeing politics, in a specific way "steer" (manage) therefore political information within the limits of modern society. Such active behavior of the media must possess numerous repercussions in reference to the political system. The political world cannot and does not remain passive towards this process. To some extent its natural reaction in this situation consists of diverse influence on the conditions of functioning and/or transmissions of the mass media. Besides the actions concerning the creation of appropriate legal frameworks inside the political system, which would regulate the issue connected to the existence of the mass media, or to make attempts anew to obtain the influence based on the content of their broadcasts (especially television), political actors do everything as well to not become merely passive *objects* of media transmission. Many political actors, appreciating the meaning of the media and handling the issue of their image in the media unusually seriously, strive for and extremely precisely calculate the actions of the media in their own operation. Hence the next crucial element of

relations between the media and politics is the progressing of a purposeful, deliberate mediatization of political action. More and more often political actors have an entire staff at their disposition, who specialize in the field of giving counsel in media contacts, a professional shaping of the media image, etc. (compare Sobkowiak 1999, Wiszniowski 1999, Dobek-Ostrowska 2004). New professions come into existence, new scholarly specialties, and new market segments. All this leads to the fact that we currently have to deal with the reality of the so-called *double bottom* (Schulz 1997, p. 12). Information very often becomes transformed from the point of view of usefulness to the media, however, before it makes its way to any editor, where it is transformed again, this time by the journalists who hired them. A particularly evident behavior of this type is especially apparent at the time of election campaigns. Such phenomena as the so-called *individualization* or *americanization* of politics have become increasingly clear (Radunski 1996). In this way the expansion of the mass media - influencing the necessity of increasing the attractiveness of political broadcasts - rearranges itself clearly in the way of controlling politics.

The emergence of such situations proves unambiguously the significance and power of the media in the process of managing political information in the area of modern democratic societies. That is why it is important and necessary to search for answers to the question: How is the mutual view of relations between the mass media and politics formed? Observation and research in these relations as well as continuous, systematic subjection to their scholarly reflections are critical. Such research and scholarly actions make up the content of political communication.

### **The Concept of Political Communication**

The essence of political communication as a scholarly (sub)discipline in the field of learning about communication is to find the answer to the question as to how social communication operates within the method of controlling politics (pro, con, neutral?), the activity of the political members of society (as above), and also how politics influences social communication. An explicit definition of the term *political communication* offers many difficulties, and according to some authors it is simply impossible: (...) *it is impossible to talk about any agreed upon and clearly defined subject of study, but rather a hypercomplex conglomerate of relations is openly indicated which (...) only with great difficulty can be separated and demarcated, and then defined* (Saxer 1998, p. 21).

It is helpful in an attempt at a more closely specified area of scientific inquiry, on the basis of political communication, to distinguish its component elements, which is to say politics and communication. All the differences in the definition of the subject of political communication as a science result therefore from a dissimilar understanding of politics and/or communication. In the most general terms politics can be understood as a subsystem generating universally binding decisions, social communication, on the other hand as a process of changing the meaning and as a determining instrument of the existence of social being. With such an approach it is possible to accept the working definition of political communication, proposed by Ulrich Saxer (1998, p. 25): *political communication is the central mechanism [serving] the emergence, railroad, and justification of commonly binding political decisions.*

Research in the area of this discipline concentrates in general around the issues of social communication in

the mass dimension, while particularly concerning the political role of the mass media.

The basis of theoretic deliberation of political communication in the mass dimension is presented by various explanatory models. Four approaches dominate the area which partly oppose each other. The first of these assumes the domination of mass media transmissions over politics. Among the main representatives of this trend are, among others, H. Oberreuter, H. M. Kepplinger, E. Noelle-Neumann, and D. A. Graber (Oniszczyk 2000, pp. 102-103; Schulz 1997, 2002, p. 1). The second approach accepts the supremacy of politics over the media. H. Schatz and O. Jarren (compare Oniszczyk 2000, Schulz 1997, 2002) take this position. The third model is characterized by the assumption of the reciprocal independence of the media and politics, while the fourth establishes that they function in a symbiotic relationship. Among proponents of this trend are U. Von Alemann and U. Saxer (compare Schulz 1997, 2002).

Models assuming an initially antagonistic shape of the relations of the media and politics assume the existence of certain hierarchical structures of dependence between them. Two approaches dominate this field: the *concept of dependence* and the *concept of instrumentalization* (Schulz 1997, pp. 30-46; Oniszczyk 2000, 2002). The *concept of dependence (Dependenzthese)* assumes, that as the omnipresence of the media grows, politics become increasingly dependant on the media. The creators of this approach take the stand that the political process has currently fallen into a deep dependence on the media, and some authors even talk about the domination of the mass media over politics (Oberreuter 1982). This situation is thought to be historically new. Followers of the opposing *concept of instrumentalization (Instrumentalisierungstheese)* believe, however, that the media are dependant on politics. These authors attach particular attention to the existence of media autonomy, expecting from them that instead of fulfilling their subsidiary role towards politics, they will be active representatives of society's interests, because their task is the articulation of these exact interests and control of power. In the opinion of these authors the modern working of the media not only characterizes decreased autonomy, but is still systematically limited, especially with reference to the sphere of the public media. Hence, depending on the accepted view that the impression of the existence of a *weaker* or *stronger* media is born (Sarcinelli 1991). This picture of relations is however quite simplified. An entire litany of empirical research is cited in defense of both arguments. These, however, refer to a very thin slice of reality and as such cannot be decisive (Schulz 1997, p. 25).

The view of mutual relations between the media and politics in the model *Input-Output* (its creators are D. Easton and G. A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, Jr.) is completely different from the antagonistic model. This model assumes the shared dependence of the world of the media, and the world of politics. This view - through a division introduced in the political system between *structures and political culture* - is one of the few with a base in political science, which takes into consideration the meaning and usefulness of social communication for politics. This model takes into consideration the fact that the media take part in a "conversion" of *Input* into *Output*, which is to say, an exchange between the sphere of politics and the surroundings, and beyond this as well, in the process of political socialization (Schulz 1997, pp. 32-37). Almond and Powell differentiate the twofold character of *Input* as demands and supports. *Output*, however,

takes note of the form of every activity of the particular branches of power: the executive, legislative, and judicial. This conception, in spite of unquestionable advantages, is however rarely used, even in the forum of political science, as is research about communication (Schulz 1997).

Opposition to the system of the media by the political system is typical for the political science approach. Research into communication is characterized by a devotion to the Lasswell Formula for the flow of information (communication). This often refers to one (or many) stages of this process. Authors of a political science origin order the field of research of political communication most willingly through the help of the categories of "polity" (mass media analyzed as an institution of political participation), "politics" (mass media perceived as an instrument of action on the process of emergence of public opinion and articulation of public needs), and "policy" (the media are seen as a part of the political arena, in the sense of politics of the media or political communication) (Schulz 2002, Oniszczyk 2000).

Two views dominate the research method of political communication, on the basis of which, the commitment it attempts to clarify the relations between the world of politics and the media is commonly made: the *functional* (*funktionaler Erklärungsansatz*) and *causal* approach (*kausaler Erklärungsansatz*) (Schulz 1997, p. 27-29). The functional view assumes the premise that the media fulfill a specified function in reference to politics: they are the political debate forum and constitute the public sphere, etc. Despite a significant number of attempts to explain the mutual relations of the media and politics made in the field of the functional approach, a final decision has not yet been reached. One of the weak points of this approach is that various authors very diversely expressed the term *function* - it depends on accepted assumptions (Oniszczyk 2002, p. 29). Relations between the media and politics are decided therefore on a very high level of abstraction. Similarly the needs and problems of the political system, which in the scope of mass communications should be functional or dysfunctional, are also written about on a very high level of abstraction. This definitely hampers the rearrangement of the theoretical problem into a research language. Despite substantial popularity, to this date the approach has rarely become an initial point for systematic empiric research. It is more often the basis for interpretation and/or systematization of obtained results (Schulz 2002).

In the case of the *causal* approach the central area of interest is the media and the quality of the influence they have over politics. In the area of this approach, the analysis is completed on three levels: *micro* - knowledge, beliefs and motives for the actions of specific players, *mezo* - on the level of the organization, *macro* - on the level of the political system as a whole. In the introductory phase in the 1940s, research depended on the simple and sure model of stimulus and reaction (*Stimulus-Response-Model S-R-Model*), in time supplemented by successive elements having an influence on the effectiveness of stimulation and the intensity of reaction (*O-S-O-R-Model*, where O is the determining factor, possibly modifying the result) (Schulz 1997, p. 29). There are currently a large number of results from various types of research to deal with. However, their greatest concentration refers to the micro level. Depending on economic causes the research most often takes into consideration only a few factors, influencing the relations between the media and politics. For this reason an objection is often found in literature on the subject of atomization of

research and on the fragmentary character of analysis. Doubts are also aroused by comprehension of the term *interaction*. The causal approach found wide interest in the arena of political practice: specialists from political public relations often take advantage of the results of such studies in their work. The possibility of agreement between the functional approach and the causal approach would be offered by the *Input-Output-Model*, however - as mentioned above - this is rarely applied (Schulz 2002).

To some extent, due to the nature of things, research of political communications is a concrete historical-political occurrence. Next to historical events no less important, another field of interest in political communication is the period in which political elections and election campaigns are conducted. The object of research is in this case the perception of the way in which the set of problems is brought up in a given election campaign (among other questions, by whom?), which image of particular election programs and of candidates is presented by the mass media, how effective in the media are particular candidates or the political parties they represent and what support and from which of the media do they receive this support, etc.

In the area of research of non-media political communication, scholarly interest focuses first of all on analysis of political language and forms of symbolic action, which at first glance are not perceived as a type of communication, but despite this they can fulfill both political and communicative functions (among others rituals, ceremonies, demonstrations, and acts of violence) (Schulz 2002, p. 2). It is fundamentally difficult to separate political action from political communication. Some authors even point to an identity between politics and communication, or even communication as a political medium: *political communication is not only an instrument of politics. It is politics itself* (Saxer 1998, p. 25). Lasswell, Lazarfeld, Hovland - the fathers of political communication as a scholarly discipline - contributed to the introduction and development of the basic research methods used in the field of political communication. Up to the present day analysis of the contents of speeches, surveys, and experiments, that is to say standard research instruments used not only in the area of research about communications, but social studies in general, belong to them. With reference to the political content in journalistic media transmissions, a quantitative content analysis of speeches is most often used; while procedures of linguistic analysis or discourse analysis are more rarely used. The field of study examined is typically the picture of politics transmitted by the media, the image of particular political actors, or the deformation of reality or the journalistic quality of the transmission. Often included in the research is a television broadcast (more rarely radio), but most often, however, the analysis submitted is a speech and a text.

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Currently the term *management* is often used with reference to various aspects of the process of political communication. In German-language specialist literature the following terms may be found, among others: Kommunikationsmanagement, politisches Kommunikationsmanagement, Informationsmanagement, Ereignismanagement, Themenmanagement.

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