

Television and the Pictures in Our Heads.

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Vaše Magnificence, Spectabiles, Honorabiles, vážení hosté, mili kolegové.

Let me begin by expressing to you my deeply felt gratitude for awarding me the title and the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa of your famous and highly reputed university. I am very proud of receiving this great honour. At the same time I regret that I am not able to express my feelings and the following speech in your language. And since my poor Latin would be an insult to the genius loci, I am falling back on American English as the Lingua franca of the academic world of our times.

A book about "Public Opinion" by the famous American journalist Walter Lippmann takes the reader back to when the First World War broke out. It begins with the story of a few Englishmen, Frenchmen, and Germans living on an island in the ocean. No cable reaches that island, and the mail steamer comes but once in sixty days. When the mail steamer arrived in mid-September 1914, the little colony on the island learned that for over six weeks now those of them who were English and those of them who were French had been fighting against those of them who were Germans. And the author concludes: "For six strange weeks they had acted as if they were friends, when in fact they were enemies." (Lippmann, 1922)

Lippmann tells this story to illustrate that we act upon the pictures in our heads. It is our image of reality, rather than reality itself, which directs our actions.

Lippmann published his book in 1922 in an era when the printed word was still the dominant news medium. Since then the media scene has changed fundamentally. Particularly the appearance of television gave Lippmann's epistemological doctrine a new meaning. It is television that molds the pictures in our heads, and it is television that defines our images of reality and directs our actions.

The television images are deeply engraved in our visual memory so that we can easily imagine those highly impressive pictures, for example of the alleged Serbian massacre in the Kosovo village of Racak, or of the bombing of Bagdad transmitted live by CNN's reporter Peter Arnett. Television distributes such pictures nation-wide, even globally. Sometimes such pictures give world politics a new turn. Some become part of the collective memory of whole nations, even of mankind, - imagine, for example, the TV pictures of the first landing on the moon.

Television reaches almost the whole population in all countries of Europe, and in many other parts of the world as well. 96 per cent of all European households have a TV set, in the Czech Republic the penetration is even 99 per cent. Most people watch TV every day. On an average day they spend more than three hours in front of the screen.

In view of such an intensive supply of information, and certainly if one considers also other news media like newspapers, radio and the internet, an episode like the one told by Lippmann seems unlikely nowadays. If a conflict breaks out somewhere in the world it is immediately reported by mass media. Times are gone when people could live like friends while in fact they were enemies.

But is this really so? I will address this question in two steps: First I will look at which type of events are selected by mass media, particularly by television. How are events covered and why in this way? And secondly I will ask: How do audiences process the media content? What images of reality do audiences receive from television, and how do these images determine people's behavior?

These questions relate to the most important fields of communication studies. I have to confine myself to a few short answers, and I will continue to concentrate on television.

First question: Which of the events worldwide are selected by television?

Let us remain with wars and conflicts, as unpleasant as they are. Do we really get a comprehensive and up-to-date coverage? Occasionally we may have seen something on TV about conflicts in the Near-East and in Macedonia, in Chechnya or East Timor. But even if we had watched the news attentively, we would not have heard of all wars or warlike conflicts going on in the world. Presently they amount to about 50.

The information capacity of television as well as of other news media is very limited. Mass media must be highly selective. Mass media select according to the news value of events. Only events with highest news value enter the media. Wars and violent conflicts have a high news value, and this is why we get a relatively comprehensive picture of the wars and conflicts worldwide. But considering how incomplete the coverage actually is of the 50 wars and conflicts presently going on, we can imagine how poorly informed we are about other subjects and areas.

Which events mass media do cover and how they cover the events has been studied extensively in communication research. Let me illustrate this by a theory explaining the mechanisms of news selection, the so-called news factor theory.

News factors are features that characterise an event and determine its news value. Negativism, for example, is a powerful news factor. The more negative an event, the higher its news value. Typical negative news are wars and conflicts, terrorist acts, violent threats and all kinds of protest.

If the mechanisms of news selection are known, it is possible to predict the chances of an event to become news. It is also possible to enhance the news value of an event through event management. Activist groups are specialized on this, and so are many freedom fighters and liberation armies. It is easy to stage negative events for making news and for instrumentalizing mass media. The rule of thumb is that „Bad news makes good news“.

Power is another effective news factor, and this includes in addition to military power also economic power. An empirical study of foreign news in leading mass media worldwide, in which I cooperated with colleagues in more than 40 countries, may illustrate this. When we ranked all world nations according to the news attention they got in the media, we found the United States on top of the list, followed, though with considerable distance, by Great Britain, France and Germany. Many small countries do hardly get any news attention, for example countries like Guayana, Kiribati or Tuvalu which ended at the bottom of our list. In our study the Czech Republic was among the 10 per cent of countries with lowest coverage.

News factors are the ingredients that make an event become news. The more factors apply to an event, the higher its news value. But news factors do not only function additively, they can also substitute each other. If for example the factor power is missing, it can be compensated by the negativism factor.

For this reason, countries without power enter the media if they make negative news. We know this as the Banana Republic Phenomenon. However, the phenomenon is not confined to Third World countries. If we look closely at the coverage of the Czech Republic in foreign news media, we will find that negative events prevail. For example, the media in Germany recently gave high attention to the Czech Republic on the occasion of the television crisis and the violent conflicts during the IMF/World Bank meeting in September in Prague. The reporting emphasized the protest actions. Bad news makes good news.

In addition to the selection of an event as news, the news factors also determine how an event is covered. One of the laws stated by the news factor theory is: Those components of an event deciding on its news value are emphasized in its publication. As a consequence, the coverage is distorted. If, for example, the news value of an event depends on its negativism, the negative aspects of the event are emphasized.

Due to its limited news capacity television is forced to select very sharply and to concentrate on events with highest news value. Because of this television news is usually much more distorted than the reporting of newspapers. Television shows us a world full of conflicts and controversies, accidents and disasters.

News on Czech television is a typical example. As a recent content analysis of the major news programmes shows, the foreign coverage puts highest attention on crime, accidents and disasters abroad. This pertains not only to Televizni Noviny on the commercial channel Nova with its large audience, but also to foreign news on the public TV channels.

The circumstances of news production for the television medium contribute to the distortion of news. A specific media logic determines what can be presented on the screen and how it should be presented. First of all, television needs pictures. Events that fit the media logic of television must have a visual quality. But quite often events do not materialize in scenes or actions which can be perceived visually. In this case television offers, as a substitute, "talking heads", i.e. people talking about happenings or about other people. Quite often television does not show the reality, but rather a personal interpretation of reality, mostly given by politicians or journalists.

This leads us to the second set of questions: How does the audience process this kind of television reality? What pictures in people's heads result from the media logic of television? And what impact have these pictures on people's behavior?

Many communication researchers subscribe to an adaptation of Lippmann's doctrine: Television molds the pictures in our heads. These pictures represent the television reality rather than "real reality". Television's reality is a mean world because television emphasizes the negative and the threatening aspects of reality. As a consequence, many people feel threatened, they mistrust other people and they are particularly cynical about politics.

Several factors account for such effects of television viewing, in addition to the high frequency and duration of TV usage. For example, when people are asked in representative surveys what their most important source is for being kept informed about current events, they mention television by far more often than the newspaper or the radio. Moreover, television is considered the most trustworthy of all news media. This is because television conveys the illusion that people can see with their own eyes what's happening. And seeing is believing.

Not only are pictures trustworthy and persuasive. They also can be processed very easily and transferred directly into images of reality. This is the most important difference between words and pictures. And above all: Pictures stimulate spontaneous emotional reactions. This explains much of the fascination of television and its persuasive power. It also explains, for example, why news on television is entertaining even if its content is alarming, threatening or disgusting.

Recently a German colleague, Siegfried Frey, published a book entitled "The Power of the Image" (Die Macht des Bildes; Frey, 1999) which is at the same time fascinating and irritating. He presents the results from a series of experiments with television viewers in Germany, France and the United States. The viewers had been confronted with realistic clips from TV news showing more or less prominent politicians making a statement, - the usual "talking heads" that constitute a major part of the news. These clips were presented without sound in order to observe the viewers' reactions merely to the visual images of the politicians. Viewer reactions were measured with a so-called Semantic Differential, in addition to several physiological measurements.

One central result of the experiments was that television viewers were prone to assess a politician spontaneously even if the politician was completely unknown to them, as in the case of most foreign politicians, particularly the French and German politicians presented to American viewers (and vice versa). The subjects did not hesitate to evaluate a politician, for example, as competent, sympathetic, intelligent, or as dishonest, fearful, boring. The viewers formed their opinion solely on the television image. Opinion formation took place within fractions of a second, spontaneously and uncontrolled, without reflection or consideration.

In explaining his results Siegfried Frey refers to the racial history of mankind. The human ability to assess another person instantly and at first sight is a mechanism of survival. For our ancestors it was a matter of life or death to decide as fast as possible whether a stranger encountered in the African savanna was a friend or an enemy. Those with the shortest reaction time were the fittest for survival.

Fortunately, in our times when we encounter a stranger it is rarely a matter of life or death. But we have nevertheless kept our ability to assess other persons at first sight, even in a virtual encounter via television. If we use this ability to assess politicians by their television image it might well improve our chances of survival.

The power of its images predestinates television as an instrument of power.

Television therefore became the most important bulwark that has to be conquered for bringing about a change in political power, whether in a peaceful and democratic way or through a violent revolution. Television is an effective means for deceiving a whole population, for creating political illusions, for stirring up hate, as the developments in Serbia and in other Balkan states have demonstrated. If citizens go on the street and demonstrate for an independent television, as we have seen it last year in Prague and recently in Moscow, they do it for very good reasons.

Television is much too powerful to hand it over to politicians.

References

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