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Mass media and democracy crisis
- a search for causality across paradigms

Abstract

Scientists typically specialise in one paradigm and apply this paradigm to different subjects of concern. In this article I am using the opposite approach of first choosing a problem field to study and then systematically investigate all available paradigms for what they might contribute to illuminate this issue.

The article has two purposes. The first purpose is to advocate this research method by showing an example of how it can be done. The second purpose is to report the results of this research.

Philosophical problems originating from the clash between apparently incommensurable paradigms are worked out from a realist point of view. The paradigms applied include social systems theory, risk sociology, sociology of deviance, social constructionism, risk analysis, economic theory, media studies, and cultural selection theory.

The subject of study is the question of which factors influence the mass media, and how the media in turn influence the political climate and the social structure.

The study shows that a fierce economic competition forces the media to produce entertaining products that people can identify with and that appeal maximally to people's emotions. Preferred topics include risk, danger and crime, which the media select and frame in ways that are counterproductive to an optimal political allocation of danger-fighting resources. Furthermore, it creates a distorted world-view in the audience which influences the democratic process strongly in the direction of authoritarianism and intolerance. This effect is an unintended consequence of the economic structure.

The fact that these mechanisms are unchecked by democratic control is a fundamental problem to our political system.

Introduction

Most scientists specialise in a particular paradigm and then search for subjects that can be studied on the basis of this paradigm. I want to advocate the opposite approach of first choosing a problem field to study and then systematically investigate all available paradigms for what they might contribute to illuminate this issue. The analysis across paradigms reveals a web of causal influences, which is not seen as long as the analysis is limited to a single discipline or a few related disciplines.

This method can hardly be explained without an example, and the present article provides such an example.

Bridging different paradigms can be difficult when the respective schools of thought disagree on fundamental philosophical issues such as: causal explanations versus hermeneutics, constructionism and epistemological relativity versus ethnocentrism, nature versus nurture, etc. A workable stance on these issues is taken in the article based on a realist worldview.

The aim of the study is to investigate which factors influence the mass media, and how the media in turn influence the political climate and the social structure.

Media credibility

I read in a newspaper recently that women are imported into the European Union where they are forced to work in the sex industry, and that this trade amounts to 500,000 women each year. This slave trade is alleged to be the biggest illegal industry next to drugs and weapons trade. Now, this was written in one of the most serious quality newspapers in Denmark. But

since the number seemed incredible, I decided to make some simple calculations. No matter how I turned the numbers, there weren't enough customers for all these prostitutes, even if every man over the age of 18 visited them once a week[1]. It turned out that this implausible figure has circulated for years, and has been echoed by news media all over Europe and even in America, and that politicians and official organizations have cited it[2].

Now, journalists are supposed to select the news for us according to criteria such as importance and reliability. But obviously, there must be other *selection criteria* at work here. Some politicians and organizations may have an interest in exaggerating the extent of the problems. Maybe they even *have to* exaggerate in order to get attention. Another selection criterion is political correctness: Nobody dares to deny the claims for fear of being accused of being against the good cause. But the most evident selection criterion is, of course, that the newspapers need a new sensation on the front page every day to boost their sales, and preferably something with sex and violence.

Consequences of media news selection

At first thought you may think that media exaggerations and focus on bad news is no big problem: After all, we are media consumers and we want to be entertained. We are all buying the good stories and we get what we pay for. But the situation looks much more serious if you consider the consequences to society as a whole.

The media have a crucial influence on our perception of risks (Kone & Mullet 1994). It is therefore obvious that the exaggeration of a social problem can lead to inappropriate prioritizations. In 1986, for example, there was a lot of fuss about asbestos in Danish schools and daycare institutions. This debate forced the municipalities to spend huge amounts of money on removing the asbestos, even though experts said that it was better to leave the asbestos where it was. The same money could have provided much more health improvement, had it been applied elsewhere (Høj & Lundgaard 1989). Even more absurd is the amount of money spent on fighting the mad cow disease in Europe.

But the media excesses do more than this, they shape people's world view. The intense focus on everything that is dangerous makes people believe that the world is more dangerous than it really is. And most of the time we are afraid of the wrong things. A bizarre and unusual sex crime can get full media coverage even if it takes place on the opposite side of the Earth, while other trivial, but much more relevant, dangers like traffic accidents, smoking, and unhealthy life style are considered much less newsworthy. The consequence is that we spend resources on protecting ourselves against dangers that are extremely unlikely to affect us, all while the much bigger everyday risks are ignored (Glassner 1999).

Sociological explanations

Let's start our analysis of these problems with looking at what existing sociological models can contribute.

In the theory of Jürgen Habermas, the mass media are controlled by political and economic forces, which have an interest in manipulating the audience. The political manipulation is a kind of opinion making and PR, where the media not only transmit debates, but also create and shape them. The commercial manipulation uses the carefully designed and tested psychological methods of advertising. The media explore themes and identification possibilities that appeal to the unconscious dispositions of the audience. Habermas mentions the following themes as attracting common interest: romance, religion, money, children, health, and animals (1962).

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[1] Under the assumption that the career of each woman lasts for 10 years, and that they need at least five customers every day in order to pay the 'rent' to the pimp.

[2] Most news media fail to mention a source for this information. A French news agency mentions *International Organization for Migration* as the source (AFP Nov. 30, 1999). This organization has published several reports on the subject, but these reports all mention considerably lower numbers. (See e.g. *Trafficking and Prostitution: The Growing Exploitation of Migrant Women from Central and Eastern Europe.* International Organization for Migration, 1995.)

The German politologist Peter Klier criticizes Habermas' manipulation hypothesis because absolute objectivity doesn't exist (Klier 1990). Klier thinks that the amount of information in modern society is so huge that media as well as citizens and politicians have to make a very strict *selection*. Members of the public can neither grasp the many topics, nor penetrate sufficiently deep into a particular topic to fulfill the role that they are supposed to according to the norms of democracy. Klier thinks that this selection is such a big problem that you don't need any manipulation hypothesis to conclude that democracy has a legitimacy problem. He stresses that people's reality image is more determined by the media-reality the more they are dependent on selective media and the less their chances are of getting corrective information from primary sources. Klier advocates this obvious observation as a *counter thesis* to the manipulation hypothesis (Klier 1990:54). But this so-called counter thesis confirms the very fact that the media produce a skewed image of reality. We are only left with the question of whether this distortion deserves to be called manipulation.

Niklas Luhmann, in his social systems theory, sees communication as a fundamental process in any social system. The communication forms a triple selection process (1984):
1. selection of information at the sender,
2. selective attention at the receiver,
3. the selecting effect of the received information.

The communication is very much controlled by the media in the modern society. Luhmann describes the mass media as a self-referential and self-maintaining (autopoietic), almost autonomous system (2000). Unfortunately, Luhmann does not go very far in his analysis of how this media system is integrated into the bigger social system.

Luhmann finds that the most important selection criteria of the media are the following: surprising news, topicality, conflicts, quantitative data, local relevance, as well as scandals and norm violations in relation to individual actors and moral judgments.

Luhmann is not clear in the question of whether the media distort reality, because he emphasizes that there is no objective measure to evaluate the media reports against. He tries to evade the problem by saying that the media are *accused* of manipulating, rather than just saying that they manipulate. We also have to accept that the media fit reality into certain frames of reference, because there is no other option (Luhmann 2000).

However, this relativist line of thought doesn't deter Luhmann from giving specific examples of how the media influence society by their selectivity. He mentions the Golf war, AIDS, and immigrant crimes as examples. He even recognizes that the media may provide falsehoods if the need for news and sensations overweigh the risk that the deception be revealed (Luhmann 2000).

Unfortunately, Luhmann only mentions the role of the mass media superficially in his book on risk sociology. Here the selectivity of the media is only mentioned in a footnote, and he is ambivalent to claims of distortions, although he recognizes exaggerations as well as understatements (Luhmann 1991).

Risk sociology

If we want to study the exaggerated fear of certain dangers and risks, it seems obvious to start with the risk sociology that is based on Ulrich Beck's book *Risk Society* (1992) and Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger* (1966). Unfortunately, Beck doesn't pay much interest to *exaggerations* of risks. His project is, on the contrary, to investigate *understatements* of risks. Admittedly, this can be quite relevant in the context he is working in, since environmental risks have been underrated and hushed up for many years. Beck deprecates the importance of statistical calculations of risks because risks are always evaluated in relation to political and moral norms. Beck does, nevertheless, give an example where he considers a risk-claim to be exaggerated, namely the Brent Spar-conflict. But here he blames Greenpeace, not the media, for the exaggeration (Beck 2000).

There is much importance attached to the influence of semantics and symbols in Beck's theory, and he explains that experts and mass media can get a key position in society

by defining risks. It is therefore surprising that he pays so little attention to how the media handle and select this means of power.

Mary Douglas tells us that what we fear most are the things that disturb our sense of the order of nature (1966).

Her studies are based on tribal societies where modern mass media are nonexistent. Subsequently, she has tried to apply the same theories to modern societies, together with Aaron Wildavsky (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982). The analysis of the environment protection movement performed by these two anthropologists has been interpreted as a claim that these organizations create fictive risks in order to consolidate their internal organization (Kaprow 1985; Johnson 1987). In a reply to this criticism, Douglas vehemently rejects this interpretation, and she even goes as far as to completely deny that humans are liable to construct fictive risks (Douglas 1992).

She reveals a great insight in the political significance of who gets the blame for mishaps, but accidents are always real to Douglas. She is ambiguous on the question of whether a person can gain advantage by exaggerating or constructing dangers.

People are not good at evaluating risks and making rational choices based on small probabilities. The choice of which risks to accept and which to combat is a social process depending on the social organization. Douglas and Wildavsky do not consider the role of mass media in this selection process (1982).

Psychologist Karl Dake (1991) has defined four different types of orienting dispositions based on Mary Douglas' group/grid model of social organization (Douglas & Wildavsky 1982): hierarchical, individualist, egalitarian, and fatalist. These dispositions bias people in the way they perceive different types of risks.

Hierarchically oriented persons are most concerned with dangers connected with social deviance and crime. Individualists support economic liberalism and fear those risks that threaten the market economy. What egalitarians fear most is technological risks that threaten the environment. Finally, the fatalists are not very concerned about risks at all.

Statistical investigations find that it is difficult to divide individuals into these categories. Nevertheless, the statistics find a small, yet significant, correlation which largely supports the predicted tendencies (Dake 1991; Marris et al 1998; Sjöberg 2000).

Based on risk sociology, Maarten Hajer (1995) has submitted the environmental debate to a discourse analysis à la Foucault. According to this theory, the discursive order is defined by *story lines* (paradigms) which provide the frame of reference and define the moral order of the debate. The story lines determine which objects are communicable in a given culture. Hence, social actors can exercise power if they succeed in defining the story lines.

The mass media are only mentioned cursorily, even in Hajer's discourse analyses. Apparently, he only sees the media as a passive service organ for the communication of social actors, while the role of journalists as social actors in only mentioned in a parenthesis (Hajer 1995:66).

Sociology of deviance

Risk sociologists may have ignored the significance of the mass media, but this is not the case for the *sociology of deviance* and the closely related *sociology of social issues*.

The objects of study of these disciplines overlap quite a lot with the aforementioned risk sociology. It is therefore very odd that these branches of sociology apparently have developed largely independent of each other with very little mutual inspiration.

The sociology of deviance is a well-established discipline that has made a lot of progress in recent decades. Unfortunately, this branch of sociology is little known in Europe, with Michel Foucault as a notorious exception.

The sociology of deviance is a study of how society defines certain persons, phenomena or behaviors as deviant and dangerous. The dangerous is thus a social construct. Society can control unwanted behaviors by defining them as sinful or sick. Whoever has success in defining the norms of what is considered deviant and dangerous has thus gained a key position in the social power apparatus (Foucault 1980; Ben-Yehuda 1990).

Sometimes, a social deviance is considered so dangerous that it must be combated with the most draconian means. Such a manifestation of exaggerated fear is called a witch-hunt or moral panic. Such persecutions have been compared with magic rituals in accordance with Mary Douglas' theory (Bergesen 1978).

In modern society, there is a fierce competition for defining what is dangerous to society. Numerous organizations and lobbying groups compete for setting the agenda for the discussion of social problems in order to get more resources for their particular cause. This has very aptly been called the *social problems marketplace* (Best 1990).

Throughout the times, various professions like priests, lawyers, psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, etc. have had monopoly on making statements about certain dangers and deviancies. Thereby they gain power and influence through what has been called *issue ownership* (Jenkins 1992).

Media sociologists enjoy describing how certain social problems get inflated to hysterical proportions, but their causal explanations are usually limited to the observation that certain groups gain influence by drawing attention to their cause (Glassner 1999). These branches of sociology have little to say, however, on why some interest groups have more success than others, in exercising this discursive power.

Theoretical dilemmas

A methodological excursion is needed here. The discussion of whether news media exaggerate or downplay a certain social problem gives rise to a fundamental epistemological problem: Do we have a sufficiently objective yardstick to compare with. This is a general problem that bothers many of the scholars mentioned above.

The problem may be viewed as a conflict between a strict constructionism and a more pragmatic social analysis. Strict constructionism assigns the same shaky status to the scientist's own constructs as to the constructs he studies. A more realistic variant of constructionism allows an analysis of the realities behind a construct.

The problem with strict constructionism is that you cannot differentiate credibility. Most constructionists have now realized that this epistemological relativism is unworkable, and makes it impossible to distinguish between science and superstition (Sarbin & Kitsuse 1994).

Therefore, I find it necessary to apply a contextual constructionism, which allows an analysis of the realities behind a social construct (Best 1989). When comparing risks, we have to look for support in various natural sciences, such as statistics.

Another vexed question among contemporary sociologists is *causality*. Many sociologists reject causal models and maintain that sociology should be purely hermeneutic. They regard causal models as impossible an unwanted because any phenomenon has an infinite number of causes. Such an approach can hardly fulfill Popper's (1972) criterion of falsifiability, and it is unsuited for practical problem solving. On the other hand, any causal model of the form *"If A then B"* will be rejected under a naive falsificationism, because society is a complex system where all rules have exceptions. I will therefore apply the realist approach that sees society as an open system (Ekström 1992). According to this view, causal powers are seen merely as tendencies because external influences can make any prediction fail. We have to concentrate on identifying the most potent causal factors, and then gradually refine the theory as more causal factors are found. This approach is in accordance with the sophisticated falsificationism defined by Lakatos (1974).

Risk analysis

Risk analysis is a research tradition based on statistics, psychology and sociology.

Risk analysts have found that experts evaluate risks on the basis of statistical criteria, while lay people tend to base their evaluation on political and moral criteria and on how the individual risk affects people.

The characteristics of different risks have been divided into two main factors according to the so-called psychometric model: Factor 1 comprises risks that are unknown to the persons affected, unknown to science, new, involuntary, and with slow effect. Factor 2 characterizes risks that have fatal, dreaded and catastrophic consequences as well as consequences for future generations. It has been found that people's fear and their demand for risk-reducing intervention is influenced much more by factor 2 than by factor 1 (Slovic et al 1985; Marris et al 1998).

Risk analysts have also adopted Dakes (1991) cultural theory. Paul Slovic (1999) has identified a group consisting mainly of white men who consider many risks less serious than the rest of the population do. This group is characterized as mainly hierarchical and individualistically oriented. On the basis of both the psychometric and the cultural model, Slovic concludes that people's emotional response is primary to their attitude towards risks, and that their evaluation of advantages and disadvantages of risky activities is secondary and at least partially determined thereby.

It is also important to what degree people have trust in the organizations or authorities that are supposed to control risks. It is noteworthy, that trust is easier to break down than to build up. Sources of bad news are regarded as more trustworthy than sources of reassurance. A single investigation finding that a certain activity is risky has more impact than a large number of investigations finding no risk (Slovic 1999).

Risk analysts have set up a model of how the social effects of a risk are amplified or attenuated when channeled through the different units of society. The direct effect of the risk factor in terms of damage or exposure to danger has influence on people's risk perception directly as well as through the mass media. The risk perception so formed gives rise to individual as well as collective reactions which may have a range of cultural and socioeconomic consequences. These consequences often feed back on the risk factor with the effect that it is either decreased or increased (Renn et al 1992).

Risk communication

People tend to evaluate the probability associated with a risk on the basis of the amount of information they receive about the risk factor. The perception of a risk is thus shaped by the amount of media coverage and the vividness of this information (Wåhlberg & Sjöberg 2000).

Scholars of risk communication tell us that it is important how the responsible authorities inform the population about risks. The population should be kept informed about the newest knowledge about technological risks and the efforts to reduce these risks in order to build up trust. It is necessary to bridge the gap between technical descriptions and peoples personal perception of security.

An information vacuum is created if the responsible organizations ignore or deny a risk. The population, the media, and grassroots organizations will seek to fill this vacuum with information from other sources. The lack of trust that arises, leads to an amplification of the conflict with increased media coverage and excessive fear as a result. This may often force the authorities to implement quite drastic measures against the risk that they originally tried to downplay.

The handling of the mad cow disease by the British government is a good example of how a problem that the authorities originally denied, developed into a major moral panic which in the end forced the society to spend enormous amounts of money on fighting the problem (Powell & Leiss 1997).

In conclusion, the study of risk communication provides part of the explanation of what makes the population and the media overreact to certain risks.

Economic theory

Most newspapers, radio- and TV stations get most or all of their income from advertisements and sponsoring. The media will therefore seek to optimally satisfy the interests of the

advertisers, which are not necessarily coincident with the interests of the readers, listeners and viewers (Baker 1994).

The predominant view among economists is that free competition generally benefits society because it provides the most differentiated supply of commodities to the optimal price. This line of reasoning dominates European as well as American media policy (Blumler 1992; Graber 1993; Sepstrup 1989).

It is well-known, however, that free competition does not always consider all interests. The term *market failure* describes the situation where the free market forces do not automatically lead to maximal welfare (often defined as the sum of benefits to all parties) (Cowen 1988). For example, this may be the case when consumers are unable to evaluate the quality of a commodity. In this case the market forces will lead to a sub-optimal quality; and a political intervention such as required informative labeling or minimum standards for quality may be justified (Sinn 1997; McManus 1995). Another example of market failure is when third party interests are affected, as in the case of pollution.

In the case of commercial mass media, there is no guarantee that public interests are served well. This is the reason why many countries have public radio- and TV stations with public service obligations.

You may expect that at least free competition leads at to an optimal satisfaction of the interests of the advertisers, but this is not always the case. Theoretical calculations show that free competition may favor products with high variable costs rather than products with high fixed costs, because as the number of suppliers gets higher, each supplier has less income for covering the fixed costs (Spence 1976). When applied to mass media, this means that *more competition may lead to lower quality* if we assume that there is a positive correspondence between production costs and quality (Spence 1976; Baker 1994).

The main rationale for liberalizing the media market has been to assure diversity. However, this strategy has often failed because increased competition does not necessarily lead to increased diversity (Berry & Waldfogel 1999; Mankiw & Whinston 1986; Blumler et al 1986; Sepstrup 1989; Hjarvard 1999). Assume, for example, that a country has two competing TV-stations with each one channel. In this case they will both try to maximize their market share by sending the same kind of programs that appeal to the broadest possible audience. But if, on the other hand, both channels are owned by the same TV-station, then the owner will seek to minimize competition between the two channels by sending different types of programs on the two channels. The conclusion is that reduced competition may lead to increased diversity.

Until 1988, Denmark had only one TV station. The parliament then decided to establish a second TV station in order to improve the quality and diversity of the program supply and to make sure that minority interests were satisfied. A government commission recommended competition as the means to obtain these goals, in spite of the fact that they were aware of experiences from England and Sweden showing that competition might have the opposite effect (Mediekommissionen 1983). The commission was not aware of any theory that could explain this effect[3]. A recent investigation has shown that the competition has not had the desired effects on the news production (Hjarvard 1999).

Quality criteria

Many scholars refuse to define the quality of media products because an objective evaluation is hardly possible. The classical measure is the number of viewers or listeners, but this doesn't say much about their satisfaction (Blumler et al 1986). Interviewing media consumers may give a better picture, but of course these consumers can't say what information they miss if they don't know that this information exists.

Let me give an example to show that these quality measures may be insufficient. As long back as I remember, the media have reported about the conflict in Northern Ireland.

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[3] According to personal communication with Prof. Bjarke Fog, member of the commission.

Every time the media told about the IRA making another terror bombing, I thought this is bad, and then I didn't think more about that. Until one day when I happened to see a program on a little alternative TV-station showing what the conflict looked like in the eyes of the IRA. I was shocked to see that there were so many aspects of the conflict that I had never heard of before. Nobody had informed me that the British media were subjected to severe restrictions and that the media in my country uncritically echoed the reports from the British news agencies without seeking alternative sources and without informing their audience that they were conveying censored news.

Poor communication may render a conflict unsolvable. Could it be that the conflict in Northern Ireland had been less prolonged and less hateful if everybody (including the international community) had received more balanced news, seeing the conflict from both sides?

It is worth discussing whether general social considerations should be included in the evaluation of media quality.

Media studies

Traditionally, media scientists have described the selection of news with concepts like *gatekeeping* and *newsworthiness*. These concepts are based on a scenario where an editor or journalist sorts incoming news according to news value and political criteria.

A story is always told within a certain frame of reference, which gives meaning to the story. The public opinion on an issue is very much influenced by how the issue is *framed* in the media, i.e. which frame of reference it is put into. Thus, people's attitude towards a risk depends on whether it has been described in strictly scientific and statistical terms, or the media have focused on uncertainty, economy, health, environment, who is affected, justice, equality, etc. (Vaughan & Seifert 1992).

The dissemination of news may occasionally be so selective and biased that you may accuse the media of manipulation and propaganda, for example in connection with war (Herman & Chomsky 1988). But most cases of selection in the news media can be explained by structural factors, such as the organization of news agencies, financing, dependence of sources, and ratings competition (Ericson et al 1987).

The media play a key role in the public debate on risks, but their coverage is highly selective. At times the media exaggerate minor risks where reassurance would be more sensible. In other cases they ignore serious risks, e.g. when new technologies are uncritically described as progress (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997).

The news coverage is determined by such factors as the journalist's knowledge, predefined news formats, deadlines, the authority of sources, and the possibility of obtaining good pictures. The media may not publish a story if it doesn't fit into an existing format or if it doesn't relate to an existing theme. The media are self-referential to such a degree that the newsworthiness of a story may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. A topic is interesting because all the media tell about it.

Violent crimes and sex crimes are areas where the newsfeed is highly selective. The media prefer emotional stories, crying victims, and stories that fit into the political agenda and confirm the image of the criminal as a monster. The use of expert sources has been found to be extraordinarily selective (Soothill & Walby 1991, Ericson *et al* 1991, Chermak 1995).

It is an essential problem when informing about risks and dangers that the concept is abstract and invisible until it manifests itself in a specific accident or disaster. The media do not like to report on hypothetical risks. They need a real event that the theoretical discussion can be related to and real people to give the story a human-interest dimension.

Risk analysts have been criticized for ignoring these problems and not focusing enough on the mass media. The media may be attracted to risks, but not unconditionally so. They are not good at maintaining attention to a theoretical risk when there are no actual events to make the topic newsworthy (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997).

There is an unusually fierce competition between sources when it comes to informing about risks. Various interest groups, politicians and experts seek to promote each their agenda on which dangers to fear. The media inevitably play a key role in this conflict because their choice of sources influences the definition and framing of risks. The politicians have to take a stance to whatever problem the media put on the agenda. This is a fundamental democratic problem. The media's decision on who is allowed to define a risk problem, or whether the risk is mentioned at all, is not controlled in a democratic way (Kitzinger & Reilly 1997).

Developments on the media market

The development of the mass media during the last decades is characterized by the following main tendencies:

Convergence: Different media like newspapers, radio, television, telephone and internet are increasingly being fused together, technologically as well as economically.

Concentration: Media companies are being merged together and controlled by fewer owners. This concentration is horizontal (several media under the same owner) as well as vertical (several links in the "food chain" under the same company group). Different media bring news from the same sources.

Globalization: The media are owned by multinational companies broadcasting across borders.

Commercialization: Advertisements are sneaked into entertainment as well as news stories. The distinction between advertisements, news and entertainment are increasingly blurred. Audience groups with less spending money are not considered.

Commercial influence: Advertisers and owners have influence on editorial decisions. For example, tobacco advertisers have successfully suppressed information on the health hazards of smoking.

Trivialization: More sex and violence. More prying into the private lives of celebrities. The media avoid controversial issues and serious debates. Debates are reduced to an entertaining clash between personalities, resembling a boxing match, where the issue of controversy has only secondary importance.

Several media scholars agree that the main cause of these tendencies is the liberalization of the media market (Bagdikian 1983; Baker 1994; Humphreys 1996; Herman & McChesney 1997).

Popularization

The simulation of proximity is an important element in popularization. A political decision can be difficult to explain in abstract terms. It helps when the medium shows an ordinary person telling what the consequences of the decision is for him or her. The audience feel that a story is more convincing when they see an example that they can identify with (Hjarvard 1999). But in fact it is less credible, because the example may not be representative. A magazine can show a person who felt better after taking a certain brand of alternative medicine, and fail to show the 99% who felt worse after taking the same medicine.

Advertising has a profound influence on the choice of programs. TV advertisers prefer to have their commercials shown in association with soft entertainment. Ideal from the advertisers point of view are shows such as competitions where you can win sponsored merchandise, or soap operas that portray a privileged lifestyle where luxurious goods give status.

This does not provide good conditions for the political debate. It is difficult to find sponsors for serious political debates because these do not make the viewers relax, and because some of the viewers will disagree with the points of view presented (Herman & McChesney 1997; McManus 1995).

Furthermore, the commercial media are not very inclined to cover controversial issues in a balanced way. People prefer to hear points of view that they agree with. It is therefore adverse to the media's economy to view a controversy from both sides and present alternative

points of view. The media are prone to choose side in a controversy, and if later evidence should favor the opposite side they are likely to keep silent about the matter rather than loosing face. Disclaimers are not profitable. This is a self-amplifying process. The more the media create consensus about a particular issue through biased coverage, the fewer proponents of the opposite view will there be to balance the issue, and the more difficulties will these proponents have in gaining access to the media (Ericson et al 1989).

Nowhere is this bias problem worse than in crime reporting. The media often take a stance on the question of guilt before a verdict has been made. The police and the prosecutor are often very willing to express themselves because it gives them a PR gain and an opportunity to ask the public for help in solving crimes, while the suspect has few, if any, possibilities and resources for replying (Ericson et al 1989). It is very unlikely that judges can resist being influenced by this when a media frenzy has created a public outcry against a suspect.

The legal possibilities of forcing the media to publish disclaimers or to give a voice to alternative points of view are quite illusory, and the means of sanctions are far from effective (Ericson *et al* 1989, Soothill & Walby 1991).

The printed media cannot compete with the ability of the electronic media to keep their audience spellbound with strong sense impressions. The newspapers have their strength in the possibilities for in-dept analysis of social and other topics. However, this possibility is not fully exploited because the journalistic resources are limited by economic competition, and because this parameter of competition only gives access to a limited niche of the reader market.

Many papers and magazines therefore compete on news about celebrities and topics that appeal to the emotions. Everything that is dangerous, deviant or wrong has a prominent place, especially in those papers that are mainly sold from newsstands. They want to have a new scandal on the front page every day in order to tempt people to buy the paper. We may expect to see similar approaches when electronic pay-per-view media become common.

Radio- and TV-channels based on advertising use fewer horror effects, because this would conflict with the principle of bringing the viewers into buying-mood. This does not improve the journalistic and artistic quality, however. Many media workers are frustrated that their creativity is curbed by the economic structures, and the situation is hardly better for advertisement-free commercial media, such as home video and pay-TV (Blumler & Spicer 1990).

Cultural selection theory

Cultural selection theory is a theory that explains social change based on selection events. Humans may make conscious decisions based on intelligent planning as well as unconscious or irrational decisions. All decisions count as selection events. Selection events can also be caused by external influences, the environment, or be necessitated by the logic of the social structure. The systematic study of selection mechanisms shows that the combined effect of many small selection events can bring about macroscopic changes in the social structure. These social changes are often planned and beneficial, but they may as well be unplanned, unexpected and undesired. An important advantage of cultural selection theory over other models of social change is that it can explain undesired developments (Fog 1999).

When applying this theory to the mass media, we already know that news and stories are selected by the media, and the selection criteria have already been discussed. But there is also a selection going on at a higher level, namely the economic competition between mass media. The relentless economic competition forces the media to concentrate on those topics that immediately catch our attention and make us buy today's newspaper or stay tuned on the TV channel through the commercial breaks. Serious quality media that do not mesmerize their audience with psychological means get fewer customers and thus less revenue from advertisements. The reduced income forces them to cut down the journalist staff whereby the

quality is reduced and more readers or viewers fall away. This vicious circle continues until the medium goes bankrupt or changes its policy.

Many journalists are frustrated by the increasing tabloidization of their media and try to improve the standards, but to no avail. The higher level economic selection can always override the lower level selection within the individual news organization.

Pushing the right buttons

We now know that those media that survive on the conditions of a free market economy are the ones that are best at catching people's attention. But what are the criteria for a story that catches our attention? The study of what catches our attention most, reveals that our primitive instincts actually play an important role. Some of the most important survival factors for primeval man were *food*, *danger*, *sex*, and *children*. It is deeply ingrained in every human being that these topics catch our attention wherever we meet them. For example, it has always been of vital importance to collect knowledge about everything that is dangerous. Therefore, we listen attentively when the TV tells about disasters, and we always buy the newspaper when the front page tells about dangerous criminals.

Such attention-catching topics are metaphorically called *buttons*. A story that sells well is said to push our most sensitive buttons. There are other buttons as well, but these four are the most important (Brodie 1996).

This list of attention-catching subjects is more in accord with Habermas' than with Luhmann's observations. Brodie's theory is based on evolutionary psychology (Shoemaker 1996) - a discipline that was unknown when Habermas wrote down his theories. The attentive reader may object that risk sociologists and risk analysts make a clear distinction between risk and danger. Such a distinction is not important here, however, because they both have approximately the same psychological effect.

You may ask if the media really are so cynical that they exploit our deepest emotions in order to increase ratings? The answer is yes, actually. The economic competition between the media is so fierce that those who fail to push the right buttons will eventually perish, unless they have an alternative source of funding. This is *survival of the fittest*. But you can't blame the journalists. They leave the school of journalism with the highest ideals of fair and thorough journalism and consider this the hallmark of their trade. They soon get disappointed to discover that the real world is different. Some discuss the problems of journalism ethics in their media or in trade journals, but to no avail, because they can't change the logic of the free competition. The principle of *survival of the fittest* has never been compatible with altruistic ideals.

When the danger button is pushed hard and persistently, the result may be a moral panic, as defined above. A colleague in the Netherlands has sent me a report about moral panic phenomena in the Dutch media. The most noticeable examples were: *random violence*, *suspicious deaths in old-age homes*, *sexual abuse of children*, and *mad cow disease* (Vasterman 1999). Does something sound familiar here? Exactly the same moral panics have been rampant in my country, and if the reader lives in a country with strong media competition, you will no doubt recognize some of these topics too. The fact that we may exchange funny ideas across borders is only part of the explanation why the same phenomena pop up in different countries. It is also because the same causes have the same effects.

We should therefore see such cases of media hysteria not as unique products of crazy people's minds, but as the logical consequence of certain cultural and social psychological mechanisms. Note that the above examples push exactly the four buttons: *food*, *danger*, *sex*, and *children*.

These buttons are found everywhere in the media and entertainment industry. A plethora of politicians, interest groups, charity organizations, religious groups, PR agents and advertisers are incessantly *competing for our attention*. Those who can hold their own in this fierce competition are the ones who can push the right buttons - which is not necessarily the ones who have the most important messages to tell.

The psychological appeal in the media lies not only in the choice of topics but also in the way they are framed. A message is more appealing when it is focused on a real person that people can identify with. Therefore, the media prefer to give a story a personal angle rather than discussing abstract principles. Thus, political debates are often presented as personal conflicts between politicians rather than as discussions about ideologies. The personality, private life, and media appeal of a politician thus becomes more important than his ideological stance (Fog 1999, Sennett 1974).

Authoritarianism

The intense focus on crime reporting and the personalized framing of these reports has serious political consequences. The focus is directed towards criminals and victims as persons rather than towards statistics and social causes (Chermak 1995). This personalized framing gives the audience the impression that crimes are caused by moral defects in individuals or by an ineffective penal system.

The focus on victims and their grief gives more fuel to the primitive motive of revenge than to rational deliberations on the preventive effect of various forms of punishment. The consequence is that ever more resources are spent on ineffective punitive measures and less on preventive social measures directed against the root causes of crime (Ericson et al 1991). In the USA, where the competition between mass media is most fierce, this leaning has made the incarceration rate grow to extreme dimensions[4]. This may also happen in Europe and elsewhere unless the economic conditions of the mass media are changed fundamentally.

This unfortunate social consequence of the intense media focus on crime and danger is an example of a general tendency, which the cultural selection theory has uncovered: The more the population fears for dangers that threaten the nation or the social order, the more the culture develops in a direction which is called *regal*. A regal culture is characterized by authoritarianism, unification, intolerance, harsh punishments, and bellicosity. If, on the other hand, the population experiences peace and security, then the culture will develop in the opposite direction, called *kalyptic*, which is marked by tolerance and individualism. It appears that the persistent focus on bad news and horror stories in the media influences not only the criminal policy but the entire culture in the regal direction (Fog 1999).

Conclusion

The mass media constitute the backbone of a modern democracy. This is the indispensable communication channel for the democratic process. The free press is often hailed as the cornerstone of democracy, but unfortunately the press is not free. It is controlled neither by the conscience of journalists and editors, nor by any democratically elected organization, but by the inescapable mechanisms of a free market economy.

The unrestrained competition is forcing the media to select and frame their stories in ways that are counterproductive to an optimal political allocation of danger-fighting resources. Furthermore, it creates a distorted world-view in the audience which influences the democratic process strongly in the direction of authoritarianism and intolerance.

This is a serious and fundamental flaw in our democratic system, which cannot be ameliorated unless alternative sources of media funding are implemented.

Many scholars have pointed out part of this problem complex, but nobody has assembled the jigsaw puzzle to a complete picture before. The integration of contributions from many different paradigms has been hampered by the poor communication between scientific disciplines, and by the fact that different scientific communities disagree on fundamental philosophical issues.

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[4] The incarceration rate in USA has quadrupled during the last two decades and is now the highest in the world. A black male has a 29% chance of serving time in prison at some point in his life, according to www.sentencingproject.org.

There is an obvious need for more research in these areas, and I would therefore be happy to hear from scholars who can contribute to this.

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