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A hypothesis on maintenance of fears

“The end of the world postponed“
(After Dec. 21, 2012 – headlines predominating in the Bulgarian media)
“The expected flu will have much graver consequences“ (January 2013)

ABSTRACT

The article is focused on a function of the mass media that stems from the tacit rule that “bad news make good news”. This refers to emphatic coverage of negative events, facts, processes and media violence, which instill fear, insecurity, anxiety, tension in the audience.

No mass media make an exception to this trend. One can watch, hear or read coverage such as: “The end of the world has been postponed”, “The flue epidemic this year is expected to be much bigger and worse”, etc.

Negative coverage instilling fear and insecurity refers above all to various forms of violence: killings, beatings, psychological harassment, sexual harassment. Fear and insecurity are also engendered by coverage of drug abuse, alcohol abuse, traffic accidents, disasters, failures, abuses related to product quality, prices, expiry dates, financial or document crimes, etc.

A content analysis study of central evening news broadcasts on three of the most widely watched Bulgarian television stations, conducted under the author’s leadership in 2011 and 2012 is used for developing the fear maintenance hypothesis.

Most generally, the similarities between the two set of data are the following:

- the media inspire fear, anxiety of various kinds, and the feeling that the problems are unsolvable;
- violence in the media is shown daily and holds a relatively high share of the coverage;
- the media predominantly inspire pessimism.

The author's thesis is that the mass media maintain people's fears and anxiety; this is more than a hypothetic construct. It would be appropriate to designate this as the fear maintenance theory, and place it alongside the theory of cultivation (G. Gerbner), the social learning theory (A. Bandura), etc.

Key words: fear, media violence, media negative news; mass media effects.

INTRODUCTION

One of the functions of the mass media, which stems from the tacit rule that "bad news make good news", is to cover and disseminate negative events, facts, processes. These processes very often create fear, insecurity, anxiety, tension in people.

The dissemination of such coverage through the media develops in all possible directions, and using a full range of creative forms. No mass communication is excluded from this trend. On any single day of the week at the end of 2012, in any Bulgarian mass media, one could watch, hear or read coverage such as: "The end of the world has been postponed.", "The flu epidemic this year is expected to be much bigger and worse", etc.

Negative coverage instilling fear and insecurity refers above all to various forms of violence: killings, beatings, psychological harassment, sexual harassment. Fear and insecurity are also engendered by coverage of drug abuse, alcohol abuse, traffic accidents, disasters, failures, abuses related to product quality, prices, expiry dates, financial or document crimes, etc., including those committed by "white-collars", political and economic influence abuse, negative expectations of specialists, experts, ESP mediums, announcements about bankruptcy, etc. The list of topics inspiring fear and insecurity is long indeed.

On the basis of intense negative coverage in the daily national and foreign media, and the findings of research studies on this topic, we argue that media in Bulgaria increasingly create fear, insecurity, anxiety, and tension in their audience.

In order to test this hypothesis, we have conducted content analysis of prime time broadcasts on three of the most widely watched television stations in our country (Nova televizija [New Television], Kanal 2 [Channel 2] of the Bulgarian National Television, and Btv). The study, under my leadership, was conducted in 2011 and 2012 within the framework of the project "Value Indicators of the Young Generation in Postmodern Society". The content analysis was carried out jointly with students in sociology and social activities at Neofit Rilski Southwest University, during the academic year 2011–2012. The study encompassed the central news broadcasts during the months of September and October 2011 (30 days) and May and June 2012 (30 days).

GENERAL THEORETIC BACKGROUND

Violence in the media is not a specifically Bulgarian feature. It can be observed largely throughout the world. Everywhere people are concerned about the fact that television prime time shows too much violence and cruelty. People are worried about the effects this may have on themselves and their children. It is not accidental that the problem of violence in the media is one of the most debated topics among specialists, media professionals, and politicians [Bryant & Thompson 2002].

Before presenting the results of the study, we will offer a general theoretic discussion of the problem of violence in the media, with an emphasis on certain prominent views and findings put forward by foreign experts in this field.

Content analysis studies on this topic, some of which were mentioned above, began in the 1950s and continue in our time [Smythe 1957; Schramm, Lyle, Parker 1961; Gerbner 1967, 1972; Bandura 1978, 1979, 1982, 1985; Potter et al. 1997; Federman 1998].

The studies have shown a permanent growth and increasing variety of forms, and have led to a series of hypotheses and theories, including: G. Gerbner's cultivation hypothesis, A. Bandura's theory of social learning, etc. The theory presented here – "the instilled fear hypothesis" – is a continuation of the efforts to conceptualize this aspect of media impact.

So far G. Gerbner has contributed more than anyone else to the study of violence in the media. In his theoretical model, jointly with his colleagues, he proceeds from the definition that "violence is the overt expression of physical force against others or self, or the compelling of an action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed" [Gerbner, 1972, p. 32]. In 10 years of research, based on this conceptual framework, the authors have established through content analysis that 6 out of 10 media characters took part in acts of violence. What is more, the researchers found that children's animated cartoons contain more violence than any other kind of entertainment programmes, including action and crime movies. They also found that it was rarely shown in children's programmes that crime should be followed by retribution.

More recently, other researchers have reached similar conclusions and found that not even the negative consequences of violence are shown in the media [Potter et al. 1997; Federman 1998].

One such study conducted by sociologists in Santa Barbara, which continued for 4 years, has concluded that television violence has a more negative impact on children than on other age groups. In including the context of media violence in their research framework, the research group has defined some key components of the context and the connection of these with children's susceptibility to negative media impact. They have concluded that children are more inclined than others to imitate the violence they watch on TV, providing its presentation contains at least one of the five components defined by them, namely:

1. the criminal is an attractive role model;
2. the acts of violence seem justified;

3. violence goes unpunished (criminal acts do not result in repentance, are not condemned or punished);
4. there are minimal consequences for the victims of violence;
5. violence is depicted realistically.

The researchers define these five contextual characteristics as “high risk” elements [Federman 1998, p. 33]. Their studies have also shown that over the years many television programmes have come to include these high-risk characteristics. The data show that about $\frac{3}{4}$ of violence depicted on television is not linked with the repentance or punishment of the perpetrators. The authors have concluded that these elements not only show a high level of risk but appear as factors conducive to the formation of aggressive behaviour patterns. In pre-school age, the average US child, mostly watching animated cartoons, sees more than 500 scenes of high-risk violence per year [Federman 1998: 29–34]. This study on television violence has confirmed the connection between violence on television and viewers’ aggressive behaviour. The results have shown that not only is the amount of media violence presented on prime time broadcasts increasing, but the manner of depiction of violence is changing: the scenes are made in a way that encourages imitation. The study has shown that when broadcasts are marked for age restrictions, the amount of violence they contain is not indicated.

In her book *Violence on Television*, Cynthia Cooper [1996] identifies the following general tendencies related to the topic of violence in the media:

- most scenes of violence are becoming increasingly intellectualized (the physical results are not shown);
- scenes containing intense physical aggression are presented as something commonplace;
- very few broadcasts emphasize the efforts made to oppose violence;
- about 60% of television programmes contain scenes of violence.

Cooper has found that the amount of television violence shown in prime time is increasing on national television programmes and on the cable channels. Also, in a typical show containing violence, there is an average of at least 6 violent scenes per hour.

The problem of media violence has been studied with respect to its impact as well. On the basis of meta-analysis of past studies on media violence, US researchers have found several correlations to exist between depicted violence and viewer’s aggressive behaviour in real life [Andison 1977; Carlson, Marcus-Newhall, Miller 1990; Paik, Comstock 1994; Wood, Wong, Chachere 1991]. The cause and effect relations are as follows:

- imitative behavior – this is said to be the most salient result of the impact [Liebert, Schwartzberg 1977];
- fear – this is found to be a constant consequence of violence presented in the media [Cantor 1994];

- loss of sensitivity (desensitization) – this is indicated as the third negative consequence of media violence [Drabman, Thomas 1974; Linz, Donnerstein, Penrod 1988];
- alienation from the problems of the characters viewed in the film and from the problems of the viewer's relatives and friends in real life.

It was A. Bandura who showed early in his studies [Bandura 1978, 1979, 1982, 1985] that children imitate what they see depicted on the screen. He explained this in terms of learning through observation. He also showed that children who watch a lot of violent scenes on television tend to turn less often to their parents for help. This finding has been confirmed by other authors, as has the observation that regular viewers of fictional violent scenes become more receptive to them and are more prone to accept violence in real life [Drabman, Thomas 1974; Thomas, Horton, Lippincott, Drabman 1977].

Other studies have focused on the fear aroused in children by media violence. According to J. Cantor [1994], there are three elements in media contents that cause fear:

1. various kinds of dangers and threats related to health and life;
2. distortion of natural forms;
3. perception of danger and fear through the experience of other people [Cantor 1994, p. 222].

All three elements are largely present in television programmes.

Cantor has identified several important factors causing emotional reactions among viewers of frightful scenes:

1. realistic depiction;
2. viewers' motives;
3. other factors impacting on viewers' emotions [Cantor 1994, p. 225].

Cantor has found that the greater the similarity between real life and what is depicted on the screen, the more the screen depiction will be generalized, and the stronger the provoked fear or emotional response.

The largest scale study in this field is considered to be that on fear engendered in children by media contents, conducted in 1998 by a group of researchers under the leadership of J. Cantor [Cantor 1998]. They have found a correlation between television viewing and the fear engendered in children of different age groups [Cantor, Hoffner 1987; Cantor, Reilly 1982; Cantor, Sparks 1984; Cantor, Wilson, Hoffner 1986; Sparks 1986; Sparks, Cantor 1986; Wilson 1985]. They have found that smaller children are afraid of menacing characters and situations, while older ones are affected by both abstract and concrete depictions.

Studies dating from 1996 showed that children experienced fear when watching not only movies, but the news as well. Cantor and Nathanson point out that nearly 40% of surveyed children were frightened or distressed by what they saw on the news. Particularly frightful to them were announcements on television about acts of violence carried out by unknown persons. Fear is also caused by reports on natural disasters, famine and wars in other countries, etc. For older children, in addition

to this category of news, the threats of nuclear war, earthquakes, etc., also proved frightening [Cantor, Nathanson 1996].

Many other studies have shown convincingly that media contents cause fear in children. M. Singer, K. Slovak, T. Frierson, P. York 1998] have studied more than 2,000 Ohio schoolchildren in the third to eighth grade; the findings of this study show that the children who spend more time watching television show multiple symptoms of anxiety and susceptibility to post-traumatic stress. Parents interviewed in other surveys pointed out their children had troubled sleep after prolonged television watching. Insomnia is reported to be much more frequent among children who have a TV set in their bedroom.

As mentioned, G. Gerbner concludes that viewers who watch more television tend more than others to perceive the world as a dangerous place to live in [Gerbner 1972; Gerbner, Gross 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Eleey, Jackson-Beeck, Jeffries-Fox, Signorielly 1977; Gerbner, Gross, Jackson-Beeck, Jaffries-Fox, Signorielly 1978; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielly 1980]. Gerber and his fellow researchers also found that children watching violence on television tended to exaggerate the actual risk of violence occurring in real life.

Could this possibly be intentional: to instill fear of real life by the excessive presentation of violence on TV? Gerbner and his colleagues do not give an answer to this question. But other scholars have considered such a possibility [Blank 1977]. According to some, fear is instilled purposefully, in order to make it easier to manipulate. Others believe the focus on negative news is a means of distracting people's attention away from the serious problems of society and towards concerns for their personal health and safety.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION OF THE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF BULGARIAN MEDIA

The content analysis study of prime time broadcasts on three of the most widely watched television stations in Bulgaria has identified several aspects that are very revealing with regard to our topic:

Negative coverage of events, processes, facts is predominant in the communicative units (CU) in the prime time. The concrete values are given in the following table:

The communicative unit presents:	<i>New Television (%)</i>	<i>Channel 1 (%)</i>	<i>Btv (%)</i>
Aggressive behaviour	18.3	22.9	38.4
Manslaughter	4.9	5.6	10.3
Conflicts	18.3	14.1	10.8
Distress	10.7	14.5	15.3

Abuse	7.1	2.8	4.9
Protests	9.4	6.8	5.9
Frauds	9.8	8.4	5.4
Disasters	4.9	4.4	3.9
Breakdowns	1.3	2	1
Traffic accidents	3.6	1.6	3.9
Epidemics	11.2	15.7	21.5
Other	11.2	15.7	21.5

Whereas the world average for the percentage of the communicative units containing negative news and engendering fear, anxiety, insecurity, etc. is approximately 60%, in Bulgaria this share in the prime time is over 80%.

Particularly telling are the data on communicative units inspiring fear, insecurity, and anxiety in the three most watched television networks.

CU inspiring:	<i>New Television (%)</i>	<i>Channel 1 (%)</i>	<i>Btv (%)</i>
Fear	15.3	11.6	16.4
Insecurity	24.1	21.3	22.2
Anxiety	40.4	43.1	49.2
Security	9.4	12.9	4
Other, namely	10.8	11.1	8.2

In fact, anxiety and insecurity could also be classified under the more general category of fear. They are, in a way, subcategories and concrete expressions of the latter. All of these together amount to over 80% of coverage in the most watched television channels.

It is particularly revealing that the communicative units are not coupled with optimism, and that pessimism exceeds optimism.

Percentage	<i>New Television (%)</i>	<i>Channel 1 (%)</i>	<i>Btv (%)</i>
Pessimism	48.5	52.3	53.4
Optimism	16	15.3	10.4
Neutral	35.5	32.4	36.3

The fear, anxiety, and insecurity engendered by broadcasts in the prime time of the three most watched TV channels is related not only to existing problems but to relatively new ones as well.

The problem in the CU is:	<i>New Television (%)</i>	<i>Channel 1 (%)</i>	<i>Btv (%)</i>
An already existing one	50.3	51.2	44.9
Relatively new	49.7	48.8	45.1

Another interesting observation evidenced from the data is that, in the negative coverage, the biggest share of attitudes expressed in communicative units is that of indifference.

CU expresses:	<i>New Television (%)</i>	<i>Channel 1 (%)</i>	<i>Btv (%)</i>
Blame	23.4	18	27.5
Discrediting	6.6	9	10.4
Indifference	33	36	29
Censure	15.7	12.8	15.5
Justification	4.6	6.2	5.7
Other	16.8	18	11.9

Also, as the following data show, viewers express the feeling that coverage of problems is excessive:

The problem in CU:	<i>New Television (%)</i>	<i>Channel 1 (%)</i>	<i>Btv (%)</i>
Gets excessive coverage	72	71	66.8
Underestimated	20	22	30.1
Neither of these	8	7	10.1

Excessive coverage, however, does not prevent the media from creatively expanding on communicative units of a negative kind. Their presentation is carried out using a full array of creative forms.

CU accompanied with:	<i>New Television (%)</i>	<i>Channel 1 (%)</i>	<i>Btv (%)</i>
Telephone contact	5.6	6.6	6.6 1
Reporting	52.8	57.2	55
Interview	34.1	26.2	27
Archive material	2.3	3.5	7
Photos	1.9	3.5	2.5
None of these	3.3	3.1	7.5

Moreover, in the three networks this type of coverage is placed as top news at the beginning of the news broadcast, in the following percentages of the cases:

New Television – 34.7%, Channel 1 – 32.6%, Btv – 19.8%.

The content analysis of these data from the 2011 study, and a comparison with other similar studies [Peicheva 1991; 2001] indicate that the presence of coverage inspiring fear, anxiety, insecurity, etc., is an indisputable fact in a growing portion of the broadcasts on the most watched TV channels.

Comparisons with earlier studies [1991 and 2001] reveal a gradual increase in duration and volume and a growing variety in the presentation of such news. We see an expansion of their “geography” as well, a wider variety of the age and professional categories of the targetted audience; they are increasingly often presented at the start of the programme as top news stories in TV and radio broadcasts or on the front pages in newspapers and magazines; the fact that crimes go unpunished is clearly indicated.

From a social perspective, the engendered fear has a functional and a dysfunctional aspect. Fear may motivate people to try to resolve their problems, overcome threats, and regulate the goals and tasks they set themselves. “Preceding and engendering repression, fear – as social fear – is an active driving force of the socialization process and an active mechanism of social control”, writes G. Fotev [Fotev 2006: 113].

But besides this functional aspect, fear may also lead to dysfunctional responses. These are dependent on the complexity, duration of impact, the range, scope, objects and sources of fear.

The complexity of media coverages provoking fear, tension, and anxiety is more than obvious. Negative news are complex reflections of macro and micro processes, and they affect all aspects of relations; they are an intersection point of social, individual, and group interests.

Continuity is another dimension of dysfunctional fear, anxiety and tension. Far from decreasing, the number, force, and various combinations of sources of fear, anxiety, and tension have been increasing over time.

The range of sources of fear is also growing constantly: it encompasses all age categories, all territorial units, and all professional strata.

These sources are positioned across the full range of social spheres, including the economy, politics, healthcare, education, etc.

It is hard to say which aspect of fear – the functional or dysfunctional – is predominant for separate individuals, groups, and society as a whole, or what post-stress reactions will appear after prolonged persistence and intense dynamics of dysfunctional fear. In any case, there is a limit beyond which responses become unpredictable.

CONCLUSIONS

A comparison between the data from content analyses and from surveys on the opinions of people regarding the messages of the media, support these findings.

Most generally, the similarities between the two set of data are the following:

- the media inspire fear, anxiety of various kinds, and the feeling that the problems are unsolvable;
- violence in the media is shown daily and holds a relatively high share of the coverage;
- the media predominantly inspire pessimism.

Today, the European Convention on Transfrontier Television and the media legislations of European countries, contain regulations that take into account the age of children and aim to minimize the negative impact of media violence on them. Concern is also raised with regard to children's use of the Internet. Films are rated, and ratings involve respective prohibitions.

Children have always been the object of concern on the part of society, but the question is how effective this concern is – especially with regard to programmes on children's topics but not meant for children.

Instead of making a final generalization, I would like to cite a drastic example taken from the Bulgarian TV entertainment “The Channel Show”, broadcast on January 19, 2013 in the prime time of Channel 1 (Bulgarian National Television), a show that is watched by children as well, who lack the critical thinking of adults and cannot detect the underlying irony. The following may be considered a lesson in violence and cruelty.

Marta Vachkova: “According to the Julian calendar, today, February 2, is the great Bulgarian holiday Rooster's Day, dedicated to the fertility of young boys. It is celebrated in two different ways – one cruel, and the other, even more cruel. Before the holiday people should smear themselves with some kind of animal fat so their faces will glow. Little boys are given the hardest tasks so they might be healthy. Then they are let into the chicken coop, where they must catch a young rooster with colourful feathers. The more the hands of the children are pecked, the more fertile they will be. It's even better if the rooster is savage. The little boys are given a sharp knife with which they must kill the young rooster they catch. But the important point is that they have to kill it in two stages, while continuing to chase it. So, first they start cutting the head off, but just a little cut, and they do this outside the front door, and

they finish cutting it off on the threshold of the home. It's very important for the rooster not to die outside the home, because that would portend rooster's disease. I've seen some people cut the head off, just like that, at a stroke. But no, it should be done in two stages – slowly, painfully it should be done, the rooster's head should be spraying blood all around. In the villages around Kotel and some other villages, the little head is cut off together with the ring of feathers around the neck. The head is hung on the front door together with a sprig of common balm and three or four snowdrops, but the little beak should point outwards – to ensure fertility and to show respect for the old-style Julian calendar. The rest of the rooster is boiled, and while it boils the boys sing folk songs and are not allowed to sit down. If a boy crouches or sits, he is left without food for about ten days, so he won't get weak at the knees in life. This is very nice, very humane!"

Toncho Tokmakchiev: "You mentioned there was another and particularly cruel way of celebrating Rooster's Day."

Marta Vachkova: "Yes, what I just told you about was the humane way, and the much crueller way is this: In some villages the little boys take the remains of the killed rooster up on the roof and spend the night there with the remains. But if a boy should fall asleep and fall off the roof, he must then walk three days and talk without stopping all the time, in order to get rid of the bad omen. He must go to the Silent Water, and there he may stop talking. But there's a special point here. Little boys must sleep for 40 days on chicken feathers soaked in blood, so as not to be afraid of nightmares. If you have a son, a grandson, or a nephew, it's worth the effort to do as the old custom requires, so you won't have to worry – he'll grow up to be a real man after that. I present to you this colourful little rooster, so you can kill it tonight, nail it on the front door, with its beak pointing outward according to the old style calendar".

Toncho Tokmakchiev: "But I observe the new style".

Marta Vachkova: "In that case you won't sleep on blood-soaked chicken feathers. I advise everyone to observe the tradition, so that men will be healthy, strong, and fertile."

I will not comment on this, but will conclude with a quote from the collective work *Sociology of Deviant Behaviour*, in which prof. G. Fotev expresses his concern: "The nature and scale of crime and socio-pathological phenomena are alarming for our society. The media inform us every day of dramatic cases, and provide disturbing statistics on crime. People comment, public discussions are held, dissatisfaction is expressed with the offered explanations for what is happening. Painful questions are raised regarding the ineffective countermeasures against deviant behaviour".

Perhaps our hypothesis regarding the maintenance of people's fears by the mass media may be considered something more than a hypothetical construct. Possibly, it could be classified as a theory, by analogy, for instance, with Gerbner's theory of cultivation and Bandura's social learning theory.

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