
FROM MASS MEDIA TO SELF-DESCRIBING SOCIETY: AN ANALYSIS OF ARMENIAN MASS MEDIA AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM ACCORDING TO N. LUHMANN'S THEORY

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Mass media seems to be the most influential social system presently. The societies of nowadays realize their self-description process by the means of mainly this system¹. The points of importance here, and the problematic ones, are the reasons and the quality of these self-descriptions.

The public sphere created by the mass media system within a society disrupts the ability of individuals to think critically and independently. Giving much importance to its commercial interests this system necessitates the public sphere to become (slowly, but surely) an indicator of fictional reality². Thus, the public sphere develops into a hyperreality of images and symbols. So, the media patterns produce an environment in which individuals are identified as passive receivers of media messages³. There is a manipulation at work hidden in the operations of the current mass media systems and this is unavoidable, but the question is: is the self-description of modern societies in accordance to this manipulation unavoidable either and shall we always consider the up to date societies to be permanent “victims” of mediated manipulations?

Referring to N. Luhmann's system theory, taking into consideration that social world is created as a result of social systems' operation, we may conclude, that media imperialism is not necessarily formed only by the mass media, but, as N. Luhmann shows in his book “The reality of the mass media”, this system makes structural couplings with other social systems such as the political (1), economic (2) and art (3) systems are. Observation of this and similar interconnections between the system of the mass media and other social systems within a society may become an explanation of the self-description process of the former rather, than the reality of the mass media itself. We can identify how other systems make structural couplings with the mass media system and how this process, and mainly this process, changes the quality of a self-describing society.

N. Luhmann had created a realistic vision of the reality of the mass media: manipulation at work is one of its main characteristics as this system observes the society in order to give the former the selected information, but still much information remains unobserved or unspoken of (1). Mass media has its own reality

¹ See **Luhmann, N.** *The Reality of the Mass Media*, California: Stanford University Press, 2000.

² See **Habermas, J.**, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Cambridge: Polity, 1989.

³ See **Baudrillard, J.**, *In the Shadow of the Silent Majorities or The End of the Social and Other Essays*, New York: Semiotext (e), 1983.

and although it is transformed to the society as social one, there is always a difference between its reality and the reality of the society. The society uses mass media to create problems which need solutions which create problems and so on, and the quality of continually created problems and solutions refers to the reality of the society (2). N. Luhmann's theory of social systems underscores that mass media is just a system as other systems are, and one with limited boundaries and contours. Mass media cannot advance its own popularity. The influence of the system of the mass media within a society results from the social understanding of the messages delivered by it. May be, it is not the mass media that creates the hyperreality of modern societies, but other social systems operate so as it is able to create it?

How the regular and daily practices of the mass media become consequential for the society as a whole? For analyzing this central question in relation to the Armenian society we will continually refer to N. Luhmann's system theory and the mass media as observed in his book "The reality of the mass media". When describing the mass media system N. Luhmann distinguishes three main programming strands (not subsystems): news and in-depth reporting (1), advertising (2) and entertainment (3) each of which makes structural couplings with the political (1), economic (2) and art (3) systems⁴.

On Armenian News and In-Depth Reporting

The mass media may be associated with the concept of loyalty, because the public expects truth from news and in-depth reporting⁵.

Aristotle was loyal when saying "Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas" ("Plato is my friend, but truth is a greater friend")⁶. Loyalty is socially negotiated, contested, constructed and re-enforced emotion which operates within the web of social structures. In the social context loyalty is more natural (i.e. not contractual) and originates from human relationships. It develops a moral reasoning of social reality which is expected and accepted by social units⁷.

News and in-depth reporting is one of the most important program strands inside the reality of the mass media. N. Luhmann assumes that events have to be dramatized as events and they have to be suspended in time⁸. The "key events" mainly in politics are delivered to public to surprise and shock. Taken from the social reality into the reality of the mass media, the events (events as information) become main elements for the construction of the reality inside this system in order to be returned to the society in the selected form, in the form which the society is expecting or must expect. It irritates the society which wants to be irritated (this is what mass media mainly observes in the society). It is clear that mass media is 'manipulating' public opinion and is not accountable for this. While all this happens inside the system of the mass media, the social consciousness develops so as the political mood of the society is constructed. Here mass media, albeit not fully,

⁴ See **Luhmann, N.**, *ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁶ See **Porter, R., Park, K., Daston, L.**, *The Cambridge History of Science: Early modern science*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 381.

⁷ **Connor, J.**, *The Sociology of Loyalty*, Canberra: Springer, 2007.

⁸ See **Luhmann, N.**, *ibid.*

controls what can develop further as pieces of sociopolitical communication. The social memory begins to be filled with the political identities created by mass media system. Here is where the loyalty, which is in some sense always distant from the mass media⁹, important. Surely, N. Luhmann's theory reveals that by news and in-depth reporting the mass media system delivers not the truth, but just the information/non-information (its code of functioning). But, each program strand of news and in-depth reporting may be considered to be loyal when the public observes it as such, when the public has an opinion that "something or someone is a friend of the mass media, but the truth is a greater friend for it"¹⁰. So, the public decides whether the program strand of news and in-depth reporting is loyal or not. The public observes it as loyal/not loyal, while the sociologist has to observe whether it does so, or not. It may be sociologically concluded that if the public accepts the news and in-depth reporting as loyal, the sociopolitical self-description of the society is more or less stable and if the public knows something from the news and in-depth reporting, it knows it for sure. This does not change the reality of the mass media which always remains much the same (on the other side of loyalty), it just changes the public opinion, the sociopolitical self-description of the society. N. Luhmann states that "when information is offered in the mode of news and reporting, people assume and believe that it is relevant, that it is true"¹¹. The question is how much of it is considered to be true and in which society?

According to a survey of 450 respondents¹², the majority of Armenian population watches the news from variety of channels. The Armenians spend time on watching as much news as they can (by various channels) probably seeking to reveal patterns across the Armenian news and in-depth reporting (they make daily "content analysis" of the news delivered by channels to find their own truth). There are some channels the news program of which is more accepted, than the others and there are journalists whom the public trusts more or less, but the Armenian public does not believe that there is a single channel which delivers only the truthful information.

The Armenian media tells a lot by not revealing the truthful to public¹³. The cycle of problems created within the public by the means of Armenian news and in-depth reporting need solutions which create problems etc. and all of the problems are reproduced so as the public never stops on something which is known for sure. This brings to the very issue of the multiple communication channels and influences outside the reality of the Armenian mass media which makes the self-description of the Armenian society exceedingly irregular. N. Luhmann points out that media makes structural coupling between news and in-depth reporting on the one hand and the political system on the other which is divided into two main political groups in

⁹ As Luhmann says with digitalization the array of possibilities of manipulation might be accepted to increase. See **Luhmann, N.**, *ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ Aristotle's expression "Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas" ("Plato is my friend, but truth is a greater friend") is paraphrased.

¹¹ See **Luhmann, N.**, *ibid.*

¹² The research the results of which are analyzed in this paper was done by "Societ" expert centre (www.societ.am), summer 2010.

¹³ The survey research showed that the Armenians regard it as not revealing the truthful information.

Armenia: the opposition and the party-in-power. The Armenian people who associate themselves with one of the mentioned political groups separately discuss the news delivered by Armenian mass media. Moreover, the separately discussed news topics are separate interpretations of the news, which vary from opposition to party-in-power and vice versa. As a result this polarizes the public leading to separated and heterogeneous sociopolitical reality of the Armenian society. People label and associate most of the Armenian channels and press, the political sites as either oppositional or those related to party-in-power. Where is the loyalty? When trying to observe it within the system of science which operates, as N. Luhmann points out, by the truth as its code, we find the difference between the systems of mass media and science (i.e. the difference between the information and the truth). Surely, no one argues that the system of science has to deliver truth through media¹⁴, but when the in-depth reporting delivers opinions of well-known and accepted scientists and experts (well-known not due to the mass media, but within the system of science), and when the analysis of the news is discussed from various expert perspectives, the monopoly of the news and information is difficult to achieve. Meanwhile, the content analysis of Armenian channels shows, that the most infrequent type of delivering information is in-depth reporting which is structurally related to the Armenian science system.

For self-describing society through news and in-depth reporting which makes a structural coupling with the political system two major aspects of the reality of the mass media are important: the pluralism of opinions (1) and information on mass media (mass media may deliver information about media (i.e. itself) in order to help the public analyze its messages) (2). These two aspects of the reality of the mass media may be basic means for the public to identify the news and in-depth reporting delivered to it as loyal and to organize an unwavering self-describing process.

Only 20 % of 450 Armenian respondents gave more or less positive answers compliant with the Armenian mass media system. Shall we then expect from Armenian society to describe itself as democratic in a situation when one of the main democracy agents in the society (the system of the mass media) is considered to be a source of unreliable information?

On Armenian Advertisement and the Delivery of Taste

Advertising is one of the main marketing tools. It relies on mass communication. In the sociological sense it is important what happens within this mass communication. Advertising presents not only a brand, product or service, but the ways of behavior, the origins of everyday life, the taste one might have. It targets the memory and motives of a person. The format of its content can dilute and diminish information, but store habits. N. Luhmann states: “One of the most important latent functions of advertising is to provide people who have no taste with taste”. He notes: “After it was proved to be impossible to turn education into money, the reverse possibility-making money seem like education does have a certain chance of success”¹⁵.

¹⁴ See **Luhmann, N.**, *ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

The taste is a system of schemes, which deals with social circumstances which constructed it¹⁶. It is something which owns a particular person in a particular social environment. Mass taste, hence, is something which owns the majority of people in the society. The quality of the mass taste refers to the environment in which it is emerged. Advertising is something (it mostly is) that is taken from the mass taste in order to be returned to it. But, the poor taste even if taken from masses decreases the cultural capital of the society by the means of mass media. Meanwhile, the cultural capital indicates the ideological wealth of a society¹⁷. The taste structures desire, but the quality of it refers to what is desirable¹⁸.

The language, symbols, colors, the music and behavior in advertising are some of the indicators for assessing it. Observations of these indicators in Armenian advertisements (especially on TV) expose the delivery of poor taste to the society. Aside from the price of the advertised product, the Armenian society pays much more dearly for the advertised ways of behavior, speaking manners, music and ideas, and in general, the poor taste as delivered through advertising. In-depth interviews with Armenian artists show that the advertising sphere and the art system of the society are rarely related. Surely, advertising is first of all related to the economic system of the society, but in order to operate inventively, creatively and innovatively not losing the incomes, it needs to contain art (even “cheap” art) at least to some extent. In the Armenian case we shall speak about the processes of copying advertisements from other international advertising agencies (1) and about the expressions of Armenian everyday life which makes the social reproduction of the everyday social disadvantages easier as a result (2). So, the public receives either a taste which does not suit its cultural peculiarities (1), or it becomes aware of its own social problems as common aspects of its everyday life (2).

On Armenian Entertainment, Soap Operas and Its Targets

Entertainment as a programming area represents various aspects of the reality of the mass media. In this sense there is a need for restricting the margins of discourse on entertainment. Indeed, entertainment media has its social impact on the social reality in various respects, but this part of the paper focuses mainly on the Armenian family. Women in Armenian families, indisputably the main socialization agents of Armenian children, are also the main target group of Armenian soap operas. As soap operas (the new series) start from approximately six o'clock in the evening and continue until eleven, it is not hard to imagine that the family time at the end of the work/school day overlaps with soap operas (the success of soap operas in Armenia shows that there are a lot of such families). The quality time for the families becomes replaced by the soap opera time. Surely, it is difficult to measure the social impact of soap operas in the case of each family because it is highly personalized and can vary from family to family, but in any family where the television is on and somebody watches them, a child who is present, becomes

¹⁶ See **Bourdieu, P.**, *The Origin. Choses Dites*, Moscow, 1994 (Rus.).

¹⁷ **Gunnel, L., Elnaz, D.**, A Swedish Perspective on the Importance of Bourdieu's Theories on the Career Counseling, in “*Journal of Employment Counseling*”, Michigan: Gale Group, 2000, vol. 137, pp. 194-203.

¹⁸ See **Luhmann, N.**, *ibid.*, p. 46.

indirectly exposed at least to the substandard use of his/her native language and the content of these films. In addition, aside from the negative exposure a child is faced with the absence of a family member especially in the evening hours.

The interest of Armenian women in soap operas is essential when discussing it in the context of N. Luhmann's analysis of entertainment. The world of imagination is to be observed in soap operas which is invisible in reality, but which gives a liberty to Armenian women to interpret their own life situations accordingly within a society where the gender problems are specific and frequent¹⁹.

Almost every Armenian child attending kindergartens and elementary schools currently knows the names and characteristics of the soap opera heroes (this became obvious during the in-depth interviews with teachers and pedagogues in Armenian kindergartens and elementary schools). A pedagogue in a kindergarten said, that she was really surprised to discover the children drawing pictures of soap opera heroes as their favorite ones.

It will not be wrong to conclude that the self-description of the future Armenian society started its development at the present by the impact of Armenian soap operas.

So, the Armenian mass media observed by the methodology of distinguishing three programming strands portrayed the above described reality of Armenian mass media and the specified self-describing opportunities and processes for the society. Each program strand was observed referring to one special social problem: the problem of loyalty of the news and in-depth reporting (1), the problem of taste as delivered by Armenian advertisement (2) and the problem of the impact of Armenian soap operas on the children's socialization process (3). These are the problems of self-describing Armenian society nowadays. Of course, this discussion is meant to stimulate further research on the subject, and it is far from being exhaustive of the topics. However, more policy relevant question is to ask whether such an outcome for the self-description of Armenian society, as described above, is inevitable? Is it possible to manage the situation otherwise?

On a lighter note, once upon a time the system of the mass media in Armenian society was operating differently. Historical analysis through archival research reveals that enlightenment and education were central topics in the Armenian press of the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th²⁰. The famous Armenian social scientist G. Artsruni who was the editor of the most popular journal at the time "Mshak" argued that people have to be active in the social life of the society (in this sense the people are not passive receivers of media messages). He pointed out that the educational institutions are among many in the society responsible for the delivery of education and suggested the term "social education" as the core of the civic education and civilized society and, what is more important, he valued

¹⁹ For gender problems in Armenian society see e.g. "The Mosaics of Gender Relations: Studies of Gender Socialization, Gender Tolerance, Gender Identity", edited by H. Gevorgyan, Yerevan, 2001, pp. 40-77 (Arm.).

²⁰ See e.g. **Voskanian, S.**, The Western Armenian Press and Its Role in the Development of the Enlightened School, in "Haykazian Journal of Armenian Studies", Beirut: Haykasyan University, Department of Armenian studies, 2006, vol. 26 (Arm.).

journalism (not anything else) as a means for spreading education for the whole society; for educating people outside of the educational formal institutions²¹. “Mshak” had other famous editors which were active in developing Armenian social life and enhancing society’s ideological wealth and its prosperous cultural capital (the cultural capital closely connected with the educational one). Armenian journals used to pay attention to the works of famous pedagogues of the time, publishing parts of their works. The education of Armenian women²², the role of the school in the society, social position of Armenian teachers, education and re-education of Armenian teachers were among the most widely discussed topics. These are topics which are not dominant in the reality of current Armenian mass media, but which are needed in the reality of the Armenian society the main resources of which are the human resources. There were many journals for children (much more than there are nowadays). These journals aimed at filling the gap of the textbooks used in the schools. Works of C. Dickens, H. Longfellow, J. Lafontaine, H. C. Andersen, V. Hugo, G. Byron, and L. Tolstoy were published to expose children to these writers. If this was a case today, may be the Armenian children in kindergartens and elementary schools could have an opportunity of drawing other heroes than the ones present in soap operas? Famous social scientists and Armenian pedagogues used to publish articles for Armenian mothers. In short, the media was intertwined with the systems of education and science. So, the Armenian press at the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th may be an example which shows that except the political, economic and art systems there are other social systems possible to be structurally coupled with the mass media (i.e. the education system and the system of science).

What explains such drastic differences in the public role as played by the Armenian media at the end of 19th century and the beginning of 20th century and currently? One explanation lies outside of the media, and it rests with the scientific and educational systems. These systems (education and science), and not the mass media, the political, economic or art systems are initially “responsible” for the ideological wealth of a society.

Communication has three major elements: the information, the message and understanding. What is mainly important in relation with the self-description process of the society is the understanding. The information is just a difference which makes a difference. The mass media is a system which makes it possible for the difference which makes the difference (i.e. the information) to exist to a large extent. The understanding processes which are present in social communication ensure the quality of the differences²³.

The fundamental function of an educational system is not to impart knowledge or to discipline, but to enable and foster social communication²⁴. It strives for

²¹ See **Grigor Artsruni**’s article titled “Social Education” (Arm.) in “Grigor Artsruni’s Works 1865-1871” Tbilisi: Mshak, 1904.

²² Armenian pedagogues believed that changing the woman one changes the family, changing the family one changes the school and the society, See **Hindlyan, H. T.**, Twenty five years’ life, Constantinople: “New School” bibliography, 1934 (Arm.).

²³ See **Luhmann, N.**, Social Systems, California: Stanford University Press, 1995.

²⁴ See **Luhmann, N. & Schorr, K. E.**, Problems of Reflection in the System of Education, Germany: Waxmann Verlag, GmbH, 2000.

reaching the understanding between communicating subjects. The system which is in the position to socialize the individuals is not the mass media, but the education. However, if the media manages to deliver information to the society at a faster rate, then the impact of the system of education is limited. If the system of education is unable to deliver interesting educational content and provide the appropriate environment, then mass media can fill this void. It can educate, teach the members of the society how to live, what to like or dislike, what to talk about, what to wear and eat, and even how to make relationships more, than the systems of education and science manage to. Education is not always positive and if it takes place outside of the formal institutions of education (such as through the mass media system), it can have negative consequences for the society. This depends on how the educational system of a given society responds to the channels of education that are located outside of its own institutional domain.

It is important to highlight the concept of “media pedagogy” which may be considered to be one of the basic tools to change the self-description patterns of modern societies. “Media pedagogy” presupposes media education (1), which is education in the subject of mass media; media socialization (2), which is education within the context of media society in which the learners are experienced media users; educational media (3), which is the media used for educational purposes. “Media pedagogy” is a special kind of educational theory focusing on media teaching and media training. It focuses on teaching and upbringing in a media society. Shall the system of education teach how to deal with the mass media? “Media pedagogy” may be extremely useful in finding solutions to the problems drawn by the operation of the mass media system and other systems related to it in the context of the self-describing societies²⁵. Armenia is a clear case where there is no systematic and sophisticated approach to “media pedagogy”. This explains to a large extent the negative consequences and the regressive social impact of the mass media on the self-describing Armenian society.

Definitely, N. Luhmann’s system theory and his observations of the system of the mass media give numerous opportunities for analyzing the mass media system and the society, but the main question to discuss remains the same (i.e. how the regular and daily practices and operations of the mass media become consequential for the society as a whole?). The reality of current society and the self-description of it are results of mass media-environment relations. Methodology of distinguishing program strands within the system of the mass media as offered by N. Luhmann gives the ability for taking into consideration, that the mass media-environment relations are emerged due to the structural couplings between the program strands of the mass media system and the operations of other social systems. For this reason, one of the selected ways for identifying the problems of self-describing Armenian society in this paper was the association of the mentioned program strands with specific social phenomena (loyalty/taste/ socialization) and the analyzes of the formers.

²⁵ See **Trifonas, P. P.**, *Revolutionary Pedagogies: Cultural Politics, Instituting Education, and the Discourse of Theory*, Routledge, 2000.

The research done in Armenia in accordance to the described phenomenon identifying logic highlighted the above described social problems the solution perspectives of which can be found in “media pedagogy”. Yes, mass media educates, teaches the members of the society. This creates the portray of a society at risk, which educates itself and describes itself by the means of mass media system rather, than the education and scientific systems. And if we do not talk about the systems of science and education in cases when Armenian society’s evident self-description problems resulted by mass media system are identified, we distinguish only the system of the mass media as the one which educates.

ՍՈՆԱ ԲԱԼԱՍԱՆՅԱՆ – ՁԼՄ-ից մինչև ինքնաբնորոշվող հասարակություն. հայաստանյան ՁԼՄ-ների՝ որպես սոցիալական համակարգի վերլուծությունը ըստ Ն. Լուիմանի տեսության – Հոդվածում Ն. Լուիմանի՝ ՁԼՄ-ների տեսությամբ վերլուծության է ենթարկվում ինքնաբնորոշվող հասարակության հայեցակարգը: Առաջադրվում է հետևյալ հիմնահարցը. ինչպե՞ս են ՁԼՄ-ների համակարգի առօրյա գործընթացները վճռորոշ դառնում հասարակության՝ որպես մեկ ամբողջական համակարգի համար: Նշված հիմնահարցը հողվածի շրջանակներում վերլուծության է ենթարկվում հայկական ՁԼՄ-ների և հայաստանյան հասարակության տեսանկյունից: Քննարկվում են նաև ՁԼՄ-ների համակարգի երեք հիմնական ծրագրային միավորումների (լրատվություն, գովազդ, ժամանցային հեռարձակում) դրսևորումները հայ հասարակության մեջ: Տրվում է նաև կրթության և ՁԼՄ-ների համակարգերի միջև կառուցվածքային միավորման հնարավորությունը: Այս հիմնախնդիրը դիտարկվում է նաև «մեդիա մանկավարժություն» հայեցակարգի շրջանակներում, որի սոցիալական դրսևորումը հասարակության ինքնաբնորոշման փոփոխման եական գործիքներից է:

СОНА БАЛАСАНИЯН – От СМИ до общества самоописания: обзор армянских СМИ и армянского общества в рамках теории Н. Лумана. – В статье анализируется концепция самоописания общества с точки зрения теории Н. Лумана. Каким образом каждодневные практики и процедуры в системе СМИ становятся решающими для общества как для единой системы? Этот вопрос анализируется применительно к армянским СМИ и армянскому обществу. Рассмотрены три основные программные группы в системе СМИ Армении: вести, реклама, развлекательные передачи. Ставится вопрос о возможности структурно объединить две системы – СМИ и образование. Этот вопрос проанализирован в контексте концепции «медиа-педагогика», социальное проявление которой – один из главных инструментов, изменяющих самописание общества.