This paper is taken from

***Citizenship Education in Society
Proceedings of the ninth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Thematic Network***

London: CiCe 2007

Stereotypes in civic journalism

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Abstract

The paper concerns the issues related to stereotypes in civic journalism. It analyses the research literature on the factors influencing the development of different kinds of stereotypes in society. Some small scale empirical research data is presented and analysed, and conclusions based on this data are developed. During the last decade the popularity of media has increased rapidly and information has become a very important matter for social environment in Latvia. Scholars have analysed the media's influence on social environment and stereotypes in the media.

Introduction

During the last decade the popularity of media has increased rapidly and information has become a very important matter for social environment in Latvia. Scholars analyse not only the media's influence on social environment, but stereotypes in media, and a number of research studies have been conducted by PhD students (Macevičiūtė, Stonkienė, Matkevičienė, 2002) at the communication faculty at Vilnius University. This university has been playing a significant role in Lithuania during the last few years. One of the most powerful research studies on gender social stereotypes in media was carried out in 2002 and in 2004. Navikaitė (2004) investigated female stereotypes in Lithuanian advertisements. She found that Lithuanian public and private television programmes were propagating a patriarchal family model in contemporary society i.e. women were rarely playing the main roles (except for advertisements on cosmetics) in advertisements they were virtually like 'decorations' or secondary heroes.

We decided to look for the reasons for the development of such stereotypes in our research and formulated the **major aim** of the research as follows: to analyse the different backgrounds of the formation of the social stereotypes in the media and clarify the assumptions of these stereotypes.

Method used during research**:** interview. Respondents (in total 32 experts) were chosen from different fields. For example journalists, psychologists, sociologists, government officials, etc.). The professionals had a possibility to express their own views, opinions, and attitudes towards social stereotypes in civic journalism.

Reflection of Stereotypes in Research Studies

Scientists have been trying to investigate the negative media influence over the past century, but it is obvious that it has been largely unsuccessful. Therefore, criticism has been more severe and there are more views stimulating the idea of transforming the trend of studies, as for instance the scientist David Gauntlett (1995) suggests to focus on

research about impacts and comprehensions, not as the present research studies which have concentrated on influence and behaviour. It was pointed out that it is necessary to do more research on stereotypes and their socio-cultural assumptions as key role payers in the media.

Despite many research studies on stereotypes which are employed in media, they have not been widely investigated. In the eyes of the world such kind of investigations are quite unusual. Lately the 'stereotype' concept is applied frequently, 'Taking into account the Lithuanian social and humanitarian academic context, just now the stereotype usage is followed by acceleration and became different in forms and varieties' (Gieda, 2005). Various researchers were fond of the influence of stereotypes on social background (Mackie, Hamilton, Susskind, & Rosselli, 1996; Hamilton & Sherman, 1994; Brewer, 1988). In addition, lately this research subject has gained the attention of researchers, especially those interested in psychological science (Bartholow, Dickter and Sestir, 2006; Guimond, Chatard, Martinot, Crisp & Redersdorff, 2006). The researchers demonstrated that the main function of the stereotypes is to preserve cognitive resources (Wyer, Lambert & Bodenhausen, 2003). Actually, the stereotypes were based on the interpretation of social information (Bodenhausen & Lichtenstein, 1987; Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). They were followed by and directed the negative evaluation and discriminatory judgments towards the social target (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996; Bargh, 1999; Fiske, 1998).

It can be viewed that Lithuanian journalists manipulate various stereotypes causing discrimination and ignorance of the weakest social groups; indeed, this is the outcome of employing abstract definitions in the means of social conveyance. In fact, the lack of media self-regulation and inadequate implementation of the law means there is little obstacle to the popularity of the stereotypes. Furthermore, state institutions which control the media do not lend their support. As a consequence, it constructs preconditions to an easy use of stereotypes as well as lets individuals and social groups stick the 'labels'.

The concept of the stereotype was introduced in the beginning of the 20th century and immediately became one of the most striking subjects selected for research in social psychology; on the other hand, research on media stereotypes in the context of communication and social science are fairly rare, and have hardly been touched in Lithuania. Only a few research studies have been performed to investigate stereotypes in the state's media (they are as follows: social sexes and national minorities in the media, and the function of the female in advertisements).

Our research was carried out in the period of February and June 2006. The 36 respondents were carefully selected according certain criterias (for example, five years of experience was one of them). The respondents delivered a speech or prepared an article on the media and employed stereotypes in it in the last two years. The method of gaining information was in a form-structured interview, spoken or written. The most beneficial results from data analyses are provided in the next chapter.

Main results of the Research

The majority of the respondents did not have a strong positive or negative attitude towards the impact of media on children and on society as a whole. As affirmative factors the concept of the media's freedom is emphasised for the significance of educator of social democracy. On the other hand, the drawbacks are defined as the consequence of inadequate and wicked knowledge. An experienced prominent journalist, working in this sphere for 20 years, states the means of society's conveyance to be as 'a good and inevitable attribute of civilization'; though, 'as with many other phenomena, the media has negative sides as follows: insipidity, superficiality, vulgarity, violence, which do influence viewers'/readers', especially children's, consciousness'.

Having been asked about the most influential means of society's conveyance, television was firstly named by each respondent. A fraction of them claimed the Internet and video game impact is considerably increasing nowadays and the most fragile are teenagers (see picture no. 1). The experts have completely agreed on television impact, however, they pointed out the influence of the Internet and video games. This is pointed out by other experts such as social psychologists, journalists, and psychologists who highly stress violence promotion in films, video games and the Internet. As well as the mentioned concerns, other fears have been highlighted as well, i.e. breaches of privacy and human rights, the presumption of innocence, xenophobia, homophobia, anti-semitism, racism, the sex cult inspiration, revealing secret information or personal data.

Diagram 1. Impact of different kinds of media
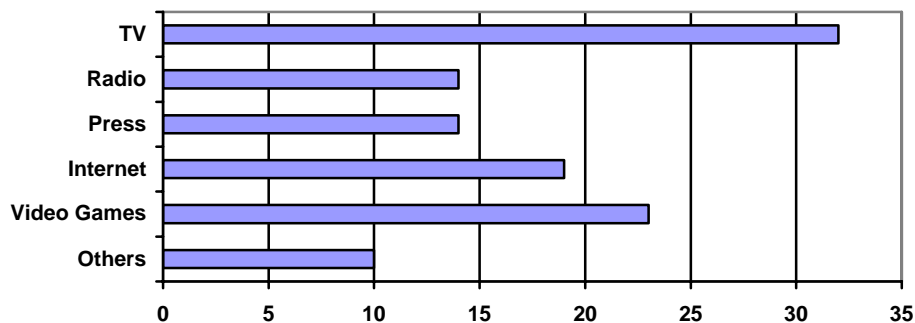
Violence and sex are declared to be the biggest threats hidden in social information. As a lawyer declared, 'provision of information is frequently not related to its moral or ethic evaluation. Indeed, this function is not direct, although it should play a more significant role'. In his opinion, much more attention ought to be paid by persons selecting and providing information to other sources, and standards should be implemented and solidly followed. For him, 'nowadays media outputs are of a declarative status mainly focusing on 'sensation' ignoring any decent means of receiving information; in addition, no one takes care of presentation consequences either for an individual nor for society. The negative outcome is hiding proper objective facts as well as endeavouring to satisfy the needs of a journalist's professional ego'.

Most respondents said that the media make stereotypes popular and consolidate them in society. One expert journalist declared the point of stereotypes in the media to be to simplify; on the contrary, a lawyer claims that it is not the media itself which directly makes them popular, but it makes conditions for their popularity. Despite this, 'the exception is tabloids who provide information appealing to certain stereotypes such as the following ones: "the Jewish rule the universe", "Vagnorius ruined state farms"'. Also, several examples have been presented to support the lawyer's ideas; transformed information given by media communication means the views of individuals who have already formed proper stereotypes are made stronger. For instance, information about the single breaking of state clerks supports the idea of everyone in the state sector to be corrupted. In addition to the lawyer's findings, Internet articles and their comments are typically read, hence stereotypes are backed up with opinions.

According to the view of a journalist, stereotypes are made popular for commercial aims, i.e. 'it requires considerably less effort to formulate the "news" for society in a sizably shorter time span on television or a smaller space in the newspapers.

Judging a philosopher expert's attitude, the media functions purify stereotypes, highlighting them, repeating constantly and never letting them vanish out of sight; however, the greatest importance is constructing an impression of reality. As, for example, gypsies are believed to be thieves, females as blondes and gays are interpreted as a chilling threat for heterosexual society and children. 'A certain situation is standardly framed and put in such terms and modelled in particular assumptions so that it definitely acknowledges an advanced view of "such cases"', affirmed the philosopher. She added that even while interviewing, peculiar questions formulated by a journalist tend to demonstrate the interviewed female as a traditionally pictured woman. 'In nearly every edition such headings as "Business", "Sports", "Politics", "Culture" are on the first pages and the one "For females" is at the end. Actually, this stimulates thinking that women are a slight fraction being keen on this tiny column having found a modest niche among significant and profound issues'.

Some of the respondents claimed that the popularity of stereotypes is not based on the media's impartiality; often journalists do not possess the right background or perform their duties carelessly, as a result it leads to stereotype popularity and harms the weakest social groups.

It has also been noticed that the media make stereotypes popular against social minorities and the most vulnerable social groups, especially against sexual ones. On the hand, some of the respondents stated a different attitude, as there are more tolerant articles.

Being asked to name the most typical and ordinary stereotypes in the media, the most common appeared to be the following: stereotypes of sexes, national minorities, political and social roles. Some of the answers were: 'the provinces are pictured as beetroots', 'the opening of the energy trade for Russian capitalism may lead to a threat to Lithuania sovereignty', 'Vagnorius and Landsbergis ruined the state farms', 'Russian sovereignty gave better conditions', 'Smetona's times were better', 'thieves in the state sector and insurance agencies', 'politicians are defined as pigs at feed-troughs'.

According to the philosopher, females, pensioners, ethnic groups (e.g. gypsies), sexual minorities and even some professions (police, teachers) are pictured ironically or standardised. In addition to this, a sociologist pointed out body cult as the media pay heed to young and skinny girls. Furthermore, a social worker noticed profession stereotypes on television programmes for teenagers. For instance, strength is a symbol of manhood whereas a female is interpreted as a 'home spirit'; what is more, a family is demonstrated as being maintained by a male with a wife taking care of children.

Taking stereotypes recorded by foreign scientists into consideration, they are as follows: 'George Bush does not have the gift of intelligence', 'Islam is a behindhand and ferocious religion', 'the west culture is predominant', 'the EU institutions are only a waste of tax payers' funds', 'Polish plumbers will flood Europe having liberalised the labour market', 'South European countries are depicted as sluggish lazy bones cashing in on the EU states', 'Eastern and Central Europe is behind economically and culturally, it will never reach the level of West Europe'.

The respondents of the Friburg University of Switzerland have complied with the idea of the most mocked stereotypes being immigrants (the blacker met an accident; and immigrant females are depicted as being weak and unapt).

The lecturer from Canada, an author of social research, declared the trendiest stereotypes to be a robust man and a weak though attractive and slim female. It is obvious that they are everywhere, i.e. on video games and musical clips, therefore they happen to be a striking example for children, especially adolescents who try to copy them.

Conclusions

On the basis of literature and empirical data analysis some conclusions can be drawn up:

The experts are completely agreed on television's impact: however, they pointed out the rocketing influence of the Internet and video games. The later sources are the most effective on teenagers. Surprisingly, radio and press impact have been evaluated analogously.

The respondents/experts have listed the prevailing stereotypes in the state's media. In fact, they are as follows: social sexes - a woman as a housewife, body cult – an attractive slim blonde, state minorities – gypsies as thieves, the Jewish as rulers, politicians ('Vagnorius and Landsbergis ruined the state farms'), violence against the under aged ('sexual slavery instead of ice-cream vendor').

A vast majority believe stereotypes to be more popular and consolidated in society; indeed, it is based on commercial goals usually saving newspaper room or broadcasting time span. Others have declared the media to be subjective as far as it concerns stereotypes and journalists have not got the proper background or perform their obligations unsuitably, hence in such way they harm the weakest social groups.

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