THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA AND SOCIAL MEDIA IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT: *The paper explores the space of mass media and social media both from a diachronic and a synchronic point of view, attempting to analyze the contribution of their specific discourses and areas of influence to the dynamics of business communication over the past few decades. At the same time, the directions of the study converge towards the understanding of the fragile balance between face-to-face and virtual communication in the construction of a new business rhetoric.*

KEY-WORDS: *mass media, social media, discourse, business communication, business rhetoric.*

JEL CLASSIFICATION: *Z13.*

1. FROM GUTENBERG TO ZUCKERBERG. A BRIEF HISTORY OF MASS COMMUNICATION

1.1. Mass-media

The need for communication has undisputedly been the motor of human intellectual evolution, as well as of mankind's cultural and social progress. In terms of communication, the millenary evolution of human society culminated with the era of mass communication, whose beginnings date back to the 15th century, when Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the movable printing press marked the transition from hand-written manuscripts to the mass printing of books. This major technological breakthrough boosted the production and spread of printing material and, implicitly, facilitated the spread of knowledge and information capable of sustaining the paradigm shift from the Middle Ages to the massive cultural movements of the Renaissance period that marked the beginnings of modern society.

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Another important landmark in the production of printed media was Friedrich Koenig's steam powered printing press at the beginning of the 19th century, which inaugurated the industrial printing and led to the first actual mass information medium – the daily newspaper. Apart from its informative function, the printed medium also played an important economic role, since it provided individuals and companies with efficient advertising space.

However, the most important technological development of the 19th century, which inaugurated the modern era of communication, is the electrical telegraph, patented by Samuel Morse in 1837, and described by the press of the time as "the greatest discovery since that of Columbus."(Briggs & Burke, 2009) The telegraph freed messages from the paper support and insured their almost instantaneous transmission across the globe, breaking the ground for the subsequent discoveries in the field of wireless communication.

By the end of the 19th century, the first wireless radio system, developed by Guglielmo Marconi was used for military communication, to spread massively as a domestic application in the first decades of the 20th century. The popularity of the radio as a household device was due to its affordability and its capacity to bring huge audiences together. These two characteristics contributed to the expansion of consumerism, providing "a glorious opportunity for the advertising man to spread his sales propaganda." (Briggs & Burke, 2009).

The first decades of the 20th century also witnessed the rapid ascension of television, a new form of mass communication that gained ground due to its ability to combine sound and moving pictures and, moreover, to broadcast events all over the world in real time. Television not only conquered the emerging consumer society, but also contributed decisively to its development by providing information, entertainment, education, and publicity, all accessible by pressing a button in the comfort of one's home. The influence of television, with its debatable pluses and minuses, fostered irreversible changes in people's mentality by imposing role models, trends of thought and behavior, political and religious beliefs, all of which shaped the society of the 20th century from a cultural, economic and social point of view.

The most recent stage in the development of mass communication, namely the advent of the personal computer and the Internet in the 1970s, inaugurated the digital era, offering virtually unlimited access to information, and gradually modelling the world as we know it today. Actually, the devices, gadgets and applications we use nowadays fulfill all the functions of their predecessors – information, education, entertainment and advertising – but concentrated into incomparably smaller spaces and at incomparably higher speeds, which annihilates physical time and space altogether and turns us into temporary residents of the newly-created virtual world.

1.2. Social media

The spectacular developments in the field of digital technology and artificial intelligence over the past few decades have blurred the line between the real and the virtual to the point where people tend to be more and more absorbed into the virtual space, which they use not only for getting information, having fun, doing research or conducting businesses, but also for establishing social interaction. Thus, in a matter of a few decades, traditional ways of real-life socialization have been massively replaced by virtual communities in which individuals connect on digital platforms, generically called social media. The surge of social media over the past two decades is shown by Madeleine Streets, Senior content manager at Tech Target, who points out that the percentage of Americans communicating through a major social platform has increased from 5% in 2005 to 72% in 2021 (Streets, 2023).

Social media is defined as "a collective term for websites and applications that focus on communication, community-based input, interaction, content-sharing and collaboration". (Lutkevich, 2023, https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/social-media). As it follows from this definition, the distinctive feature of social media is their collaborative character, which involves, besides uploading and sharing content, a deeper engagement of the users in interactions that differ according to their fields of interest.

Madeleine Streets identifies the following current social media platforms that cover various demographic segments and areas of interest:

- **LinkedIn**, set up in 2003, is the only platform with a purely professional focus that provides its users with the interactive tools specific to career development and personnel recruitment;
- **Facebook,** created by Mark Zuckerberg in 2003 and initially available only to his Harvard fellow students, expanded at such rate that it is now considered "the most well-known social networking app of the modern age - with an average of 2 billion daily active users." Moreover, its accessible and user-friendly character ranked it as "the third-most visited website of 2022, after Google.com and YouTube.com." By allowing its users to share thoughts, pictures, and videos, as well as to react to each other's posts and establish friendships based on common ideas and preoccupations, Facebook has not only maintained its popularity among individuals over the past two decades, but it has also become attractive to businesses that identified the platform as a profitable customer pool, easy to reach by free advertising. Therefore, in spite of still unsolved privacy and data management issues, the platform remains the most popular social medium, especially among the representatives of Gen X;
- **YouTube** was created in 2005 as a "predominantly viewing platform" meant to offer its users the possibility to subscribe to different channels, to react to the viewed content or create their own, which, alongside with "a comprehensive advertising model", made it attractive to individuals and businesses;

- **Pinterest** was launched in 2010, stemming from the growing interest in "photo-dominant platforms" that offer the option to bookmark images from different sources and collate them into different themes and boards. Thus, the platform operates as "a digital version of a traditional pinboard", but reaches a higher level of interaction by allowing users both to upload posts of interest and follow other people's boards.
- **Instagram** started in 2010 as a "the domain of photographers and artists", but its popularity increased rapidly with a wide range of users, especially of young age. Except the case of private profiles, followers can make comments either on the images and reels, which are permanently displayed, or on the 'stories' that remain online for a limited time lapse of time;
- **TikTok** is the newest of all social media currently operating on the market. After its launch in the American market in 2017, it rapidly gained world-wide popularity, especially with the young generation. Among the characteristics that make it the most sophisticated and interactive social platform so far are the possibility it offers the users to "layer saved audio tracks over their videos" and an AI algorithm that "delivers suggested content to members" For You page, leading to a highly curated experience." (Streets, 2023).

1.3. The impact of mass media and social media on society

The evolution of communication technology is so closely connected to the development of society that the relationship between the two phenomena can be considered an endless interplay of cause and effect. This means that if a certain moment in mankind's existence called for more complex means of expression and interaction, the respective means created, in turn, the favorable context for a paradigm shift in the historical evolution of civilization. Thus, every major technological breakthrough, from the invention of the mobile printer to electricity and the Internet, has coincided with a leap in terms of economic and social relations, with immediate impact on the patterns of thought and behavior.

The subtle interplay between the development of communication technology and the evolution of human society was first acknowledged by Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan, whose groundbreaking studies consecrated him as the founder of media theory.

In his book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man,* first published in 1962, the researcher remarked that the influence of mass media reaches as deep as the cognitive level, influencing the way in which individuals experience reality. In this sense, he stated that, by stimulating different levels of individual perception, new communication technologies have a detectable impact on a society's culture, the effect being "comparable to what happens when a new note is added to a melody." (McLuhan, 2011, p. 41).

Two years later, McLuhan took this idea one step further, in his best-known work, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (first ed. 1964), where he made his

most quoted and controversial statement, namely "the medium is the message." (McLuhan, 1994, p. 8) Reductionistic and simplifying as it may seem today, we cannot but grant him the merit of detecting, albeit just on an intuitive level, the complex relation between text and context defined by Paul Ricoeur one decade later as the foundations of modern hermeneutics. According to Ricoeur, the fundamental purpose of hermeneutics is the establishment of meaning by the appropriation of discourse in different historical contexts: "The purpose of all interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself. By overcoming this distance, by making himself contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself…" (Ricoeur et al, 1978, pp. 101-106).

By extrapolation, we can conclude that the meaning and impact of a message can vary not only as a result of being retrieved from its original context and projected against a different historical and cultural background, but also according to the medium chosen to carry it. A relevant example in this sense, as far as traditional media are concerned, is the difference between the way in which the same message is conveyed by written and visual media in terms of pace, depth, and the relation with the receiver. Thus, if a written story establishes a close and repeatable relationship with the reader, requiring a higher intellectual involvement, a story covered live on TV sets a more impersonal, unrepeatable interaction, yet offering a more impactful and comfortable reception due to the enhanced emotional and reduced intellectual involvement.

The immediate consequence is that different media shape different patterns of thought, hence different ways of perceiving reality. The analyses and debates regarding the social impact of the media have generated a vast amount of literature pointing out positive and negative aspects, which will be further discussed from a double perspective, namely interpersonal relations and business interaction.

1.3.1. The impact of social media on interpersonal relations

No matter how divergent their opinions on the pluses and minuses of social media, researchers in the field of communication agree upon one aspect, namely the Internet era has changed contemporary world fundamentally and irreversibly, by shaping new patterns of thought and behavior. In their turn, these newly formed patterns generated a paradigm shift in all aspects of human life, from everyday human interaction to information, education and entertainment. Starting with mid-twentieth century, the virtual environment has gained ground constantly in all the fields of human activity, to the point where, today, we witness in awe how AI imitates, distorts, or even creates new reality.

In this context, the virtual environment has become the most accessible interface between the individual and all the levels of contemporary society, mediating the comprehension of a fast-changing world and facilitating the adjustment to its requirements and the adequate response to its challenges. Consequently, the need to adapt to a new, ever more challenging society, gradually induced people's dependence on the Internet and the related technology, even in cultures that are supposedly less prone to succumb to the pressure of modern civilization.

Relevant in this sense are the findings of a study entitled *Role of Social Media in Interpersonal Relationship Among Youth*, conducted by Imam and Tanisha and published in the "International Journal for Modern Trends in Science and Technology" in 2023. Based on a questionnaire regarding the influence of social media on interpersonal relations, applied to 100 respondents aged between 20 and 30, selected from Patna, India, the study reveals the following important aspects:

- **the most popular social media platforms** (ranked as percentage of usage from a total number of five) are Instagram (97%), WhatsApp (94%), and Snap chat (69%). It is also interesting to notice how Facebook and Twitter have lost serious ground with the young generation, representing just 39%, respectively 27% of social media usage (p.14);

- **the major reasons for using social networking** are to keep updated with the news (40%) and to interact with new people (32%). Sharing and liking posts appears as a secondary purpose (25%), followed at considerable distance by two completely marginal purposes, namely watching memes and entertainment, covering a 2%, respectively 1% of the respondents' options (p.15);

- in terms of **the positive impact of social media**, the benefits were ranked as it follows: the possibility to be "updated with the latest information of various fields such as academics, politics, business, and market products" (69%), followed by socialization (55%), and staying connected with family and friends, indicated by 54% of the respondents (p. 15);

- when asked to indicate **the best advantage of social networking sites**, 67% of respondents indicated staying in touch with friends far away and making new friends, whereas 54% of pointed to the improvement of technical and communication skills. In contradiction with the first option in the ranking, only 41% considered socialization as the most important advantage of social media (p. 16);

- regarding **the worst disadvantage of social networking sites**, the respondents considered the most serious issue is reduced physical activity, which is ultimately a health hazard (61%). The other disadvantages, in order of their ranking are reduced focus on studies and deterioration of academic performance (44%), cyberbullying (31%), as well as the lack of privacy and the decrease of social skills, covering equal shares of 29% (p. 16);

- when asked about **the impact of social media on real social life,** 52% of the respondents admit to spend too much time on social media, to the detriment of face-to-face communication (p. 16);

- finally, appreciating **the effect of social media on interpersonal relations**, 60% of the respondents concluded that social media help to strengthen interpersonal relationship (p. 17).

From the perspective of the figures above, we can conclude that, although the respondents seem to have a clear picture about the hazards of the virtual space, they seem

to get confused when it comes to its benefits, not being capable of distinguishing between *getting/keeping in touch* and *socialization* in both its senses, namely "going out and meeting people or hanging out with friends" and "the act of adapting behavior to the norms of a culture or society" (https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/socialization).

The strongest argument in this sense is their belief that social media strengthens interpersonal relations simply because they make it easier for us to establish and maintain contacts. Ultimately, this perception points to the greatest paradox of social media, namely keeping people apart by bringing them together in illusory interactions accommodated by a space in which the line between the real and the virtual is less and less perceptible.

1.3.2. The impact of social media on business communication

Since business communication is nothing but an instance of social interaction, the situation presented above is accurately reflected in the way in which economy has adapted to the contemporary society by adjusting its tools and strategies to the virtual space. In order to survive in the new cultural and social context, businesses around the world must keep pace both with the changes in the consumers' behavior and the developments in information technology. Therefore, the shift from traditional face-to-face interactions to virtual communication has shaped new ways of business management and marketing. Moreover, stimulated by the pandemic period, such concepts as 'the Zoom meeting' launched an irreversible process of virtualization of all human activities, from business to education and art consumption.

This context provided an ideal opportunity for companies to tap into the immense pool of social media users in order to promote and sell their products and services at minimum costs. Ecommerce specialists identify the following advantages of an on-line business:

- Increased sales due to access to a wider market by eliminating geographic barriers;
- Reduced costs by elimination of physical stores and transportation costs;
- Improved customer services by providing 24/7 access, the possibility to compare prices among different retailers, and the possibility to post reviews and ratings for each purchase;
- Increased efficiency by quick placing and processing of orders through the website, which eliminates paperwork and reduces human error. (https://unacademy.com/content/bank-exam/study-material/general-awareness/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-e-commerce/)

On the part of the customer, the benefits of the on-line purchase are similar in terms of the range of choices, efficiency and accessibility. On the other hand, there are also some serious disadvantages of e-commerce to be taken into account from the perspective of the buyer, namely:

- Lack of social interaction and the impossibility to see and touch the products, which can cause dissatisfaction;

- Security risks related to personal and financial information being exposed to fraud, as well as to product quality and authenticity or the possibility of being scammed;
- Difficulties with returns and possible additional costs pertaining to the process (https://unacademy.com/content/bank-exam/study-material/general-awareness/advantages-and-disadvantages-of-e-commerce/).

2. CONCLUSIONS

Over the past century, mass media and, more recently, social media have evolved in close connection with human society, in accordance with people's needs to adjust to a rapidly changing world. Thus, technological development induces social change which, in its turn, calls for adequate coping mechanisms, under the form of new forms of perception, expression and communication.

In this context, business communication has successfully adapted its tools and strategies to the virtual space, constructing a new rhetoric and making further contribution to the shaping of new mentalities and types of consumption, less and less dependent on direct human contact. The far-reaching consequences of this process of business virtualization are already detectable from the perspective of today's unprecedented consumerism and the increasing prevalence of cyberspace over the social space on all levels of business interaction.

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