

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE RUMOUR COMMUNICATION IN THE MASS MEDIA IN THE REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA

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ABSTRACT

The characteristics of the rumour communication in the mass media in the Republic of Macedonia

Rumour communication, although always present in different areas of mass media in the Republic of Macedonia, has not yet been researched. Topics devoted to various rumours, unverified information spread, “gossiping” circulation of information of specific purpose were particularly popular in 2015 through a part of this kind of information transmitted in the mass media as information “bomb”. The scientific approach to define such information was especially present in the yellow press and in researches related to “hate speech” as an opportunity for mass dissemination of specific information of specific purpose. Here is an overview and analysis of rumour communication and the ways it is expressed in the mass media in Republic of Macedonia. Special emphasis is given to the linguistic devices used in the dissemination of such kind of information.

Keywords: rumour communication, Macedonian language, mass media in the Republic of Macedonia, information “bomb”

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Language as the most perfect system of symbols and as a means of communication, coupled with other communicative codes (verbal and non-verbal), enables humans to establish relationships with one another, but at the same time to start perceiving the world through the transmission of the mental lexicon, composed of perspectives for concepts, in words that allow him/her to create the complete linguistic image for himself/herself.

Thence the need for connection with others appears the need to be a part of a certain social group where the communication takes place directly and indirectly. Through language, we are coding and decoding a form of conformism, which is becoming more and more highlighted as time goes by. Today, it is almost impossible to be isolated, since communication channels are very sophisticated compared with the past. This is especially relevant for communication through electronic media, where a visual and an audio virtual world are being created in which they are all competing (even without knowing it) for a better space. In this way, language can be used with different purposes and in numerous ways, beginning with usual exchange of information, everyday communication, but also manipulation for self-presentation, self-advertisement etc.

As regards the choice of means for mass communication now, electronic means of public information are selected as a powerful medium with strong influence on the forming of public opinion and they are establishing linguistic awareness, and through it also the linguistic image of the world. However, there are no equal opportunities for communication around the world. Developed countries are oriented towards progress of electronic communications as an efficient means within the frames of mass communications, firstly, because it can include a large audience, especially if the information provided is well-thought, thus creating interesting communication content composed of various codes (language, photography, sound effects etc.). Critical analyses of the discourse of all forms of mass media open a large number of questions, and if one would like to provide a frame for research implementation, it must take into consideration the application of a multidisciplinary approach that will collect common opinions from different inquiries in multi-scientific areas such as: communication, cultural studies, linguistic, sociology, psychology etc. All this is necessary in the process of information creation because the education of the journalist and the possibilities offered by journalism itself should be based on all those inquiries and to bring the prospect of their sublimation. The manner in which certain events and persons have been presented (with which expressive tools) and in which way the information has been created exerts a strong influence on the way in which it has been interpreted. The mass media have an enormous influence on the modern individual; they create his/her culture, develop his/her linguistic personality and create a communicative person. As a result, the use of the mass media in the contemporary way of life is widespread. During the transfer of information, the linguists take in consideration the appropriateness of the language in communication, whether the

norm is sustained, the structure of the sentence and everything else is a subject of investigation in other disciplines.

The goal of the mass media is mass communication established as one process where information is spread from a determined centre towards certain groups that receive the information. The term mass media itself is undergoing new transformations from one day to the next as the means and possibilities for its application have been developed ever further.

Although the first aim of the mass media is to inform, educate and so on, they appear in the function of the “hidden convincers”, and the people are not even aware that they are under their influence. Thus, the mass media appear as powerful tools for creation of attitudes and opinions; they have a steering integrative role, but also a disintegrative role in certain environments and communities. Consequently, a global media communication and culture industry has been developed, in which the methods, actions and approaches have been copied from one population group to another and from one country to another. In different places and within different population groups the same manner of information dissemination is used.

The people are becoming dependent on the day-to-day intake of information through the newspapers, radio, television and internet. Common people are becoming analysts by comparing the same information received via different media and different origins of information, for example information is broadcast to several TV channels, and afterwards it is published on several social networks. As a result, a media culture develops as a basis for the interpretation of messages.¹ Without a media culture, the people would bear the burden of a large number of information and at the same time could have a wrong impression of the information received. A part of the media culture is the ownership of a certain degree of linguistic and language culture. The same information can be created using different language tools, but the effect would not appear the same. It can cause manipulation and conflicts, but also empathy and compassion; therefore, it is very important how and to whom information has been communicated.

The most frequent mass media, which have also the biggest influence in the Republic of Macedonia, are the newspapers, radio, TV and internet (and especially social networks). Under the pressure of the appearance of new and sophisticated media over the last decade, the end of the use of the old media (newspapers, radio and TV channels) has been proclaimed. However, all of this has been proved to be wrong because the old media have only found new forms of functioning, so the means of mass communication have preserved their interaction permanently. The mass media are merging towards the internet with the most advanced technology through such means as smartphones and network connections with different media. All this represents a new communication cycle in the development of the human kind. The internet as last in the chain of communica-

¹ <http://www.medijskapismenost.net/o-medijskoj-pismenosti>.

tion means in the developed world does not eliminate the classic media but facilitates their accessibility because the internet itself is a fast and easy connection to other media. It is a global mass medium characterised by hyper textuality, and as a discourse it presents a connection with other discourses. If one is present on the internet, it means one exists, and everybody can know everything about them at all times. In the means of mass communication, behind the mass media, nonetheless, at the centre of information is the person who creates and disseminates information, i.e. the journalist and their team.

Macedonian journalism and the press have a very rich but unusual history, highs and lows yet also unquestionable accomplishments and ethics. The appearance of the daily newspaper *Nova Makedonija* (1944) marked the start of modern Macedonian journalism in a free country with its own territory, people and language, three basic prerequisites. The period 1941–1944 marked the beginnings of the modern press in Macedonia. The Macedonian radio – Radio Skopje appeared in 1944, and the Macedonian television in 1964. Modern Macedonian journalism developed in that way as a rounded informative communication area in a free country. Big progress in Macedonian journalism and the information – communication system was established with the constitution of the independent Republic of Macedonia (8 September 1991). The number of newspapers, magazines (various kinds of printed media), private radio and television stations and increased, mass computerisation began and the new mass media (internet) had their breakthrough. Thus the role of the media and the manner of presentation of information changed. The experience of developed countries penetrated Macedonian journalism and the mass media started to implement the technique of providing information at a great pace, which had (and has) both good and bad sides. The good part is the speed at which information spreads and the fact that everyone can always access latest news, develop the information culture, analyse, select and get to impartial information. The bad part is that in the search of sensation one gets into manipulation by the media. R. Martinovic distinguishes as many as fourteenth techniques (14) of subconscious manipulation through quiet, peaceful, linguistically packed launching of information (true or half-true), such as panic selling; destruction of a character (denying persons, usually well-known, the possibility to defend themselves); projections and twisting of accusations; historical revision; “scapegoats” or imaginary culprits (collateral damage); merging violence and violence combat; violent mockery; creating confusion; developing populism; awakening the sense of community (religious or other); saturation (persistently repeating lies, manipulation); institutional guilt; belittling the true connoisseurs and experts; diversion (distracting one’s attention with some secondary information when caught lying).

From what we have as the mass media in the country, all has positive and negative characteristics, but it is the same everywhere. Therefore, a need for continuous monitoring of the freedom of the media is created so as to avoid information turning into manipulation.

As an illustration of what has been said so far, we present rumour communication in the mass media in the Republic of Macedonia. The research related to rumour communication is commonly practised in sociology, psychology and communication studies, but it most often appears in the mass media. Although rumour communication is constantly present, it is barely studied. In principle, it means a transfer of information at high speed, and the information itself should be fresh, reliable, containing a message that has not been yet confirmed. It is part of “allegedly accurate information which circulates among the people or the media without having verified evidence that it is indeed true, and is of public interest.”² The key to this information which is an unverified “truth” is in the dissemination of the message or distraction of attention while transferring the information, where the message suffers most linguistic changes. The name comes from the US *rumor* or English *rumour* that in the Macedonian language are equivalent to *romor*. Its basic part is the news (a kind of statement whose authenticity has not been confirmed) – news, updates, unverified information covering a notion that spreads by using various structural elements in which the basic text formants remain, but some new are added making the information more interesting even to the extent when the attention is directed to secondary elements. Rumours are often associated with the term misinformation or deliberately false information launched by the media. Especially press headlines feature defocusing by the use of words that suggest something else than the content of the information; in particular, the use of stylemes which have inbuilt metaphors. Some scientists reduce rumour to a subset of propaganda. Rumour as part of rumour communication finds its basis in the research of the German scientist William Stern³ concerning some “word-of-mouth” stories where he discovered that the story was either shortened or changed early in the transfer of information, and eventually the story was not the same.

In 1944, Robert Knap reports on more than thousand rumours in his “Psychology of rumours”⁴ published in the column “Clinic for rumours” in the *Boston Herald* daily. He distinguishes three types of rumours: dream rumours, rumours causing fright, and rumours aiming to defocus the audience through false information. It is about reproduction of information, transmission. It usually appears as information coming from various spheres of human life. Typically, in the mass media, this information concerns public figures (artists, sportsmen, politicians), but may include a completely anonymous person and build a story about them. It affects collective behaviour and is largely responsible for civil disturbances; it plays a fundamental role in the evolution of human intelligence and social life, but all in all, rumour can have both positive and negative social effects. Its appearance and currency is constant, in particular with the development of electronic

² <http://www.scribd.com/doc/134000481/Megatrend-Komunikologija-Zorica-Tomic>.

³ <http://www.education.com/science-fair/article/can-you-keep-a-secret>.

⁴ <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/8/1/22.full.pdf>.

mass media. Rumours are constantly found in the “yellow press”, accompanied by paparazzi’s photos and texts that are often metaphors and do not correspond to the information, and so sensation is built from a rumour. The rumour discourse is conceptualised as an attempt to minimise anxiety or uncertainty through the process of socialisation. In the mass media, there also appear commissioned rumours in order to turn people’s attention to a certain personality, in particular entering into the most intimate part of his/her life. Positive and negative rumours circulate among people and the media causing great interest. Rumours in a way are “collective creators” freed from personal responsibility. The content of rumours in this era of the mass media is mainly withheld and repressed and is controversial information that receives a complete meaning in parallel, verbal and unofficial reporting. Rumour communication also includes the so-called “free riders” (people who have benefited from society for spreading rumours, without paying even a penny for it), and they build a particularly powerful system for control of the masses. Such practice is especially topical in politics (emphasised during election and pre-election campaigns). Here we have to note that all that is practised in the mass media in Macedonia is reproduced by other countries (Western Europe, the EU and the US) where this has a longer tradition.

In the 21st century, rumour used for political purposes is considered to be a big social and psychological public issue and, from the legal and scientific perspective, it is largely related to defamation, invasion of privacy, personal reputation, etc.

Within rumour communication, there occur different types of information, such is “rumour bomb”, a term introduced by Harsin Jayson regarding communication between the media and politics in contemporary relationships, emphasising the destructive power of rumours when used with political intent (Jayson 2008). For him, it is information which often does not have a clear source, even if its intentions and origin are clear. It is a kind of rhetorical strategy of the media and politics in many societies.

The Strategic Political Communication seeks to shape events or statements in a way that is politically profitable for one party but at the expense of the opposing party.

Rumour bombs commonly occur between people who launch information, the so called misinformers, and the media, are mostly produced on the internet, and have a major impact on the production of media content.

Depending on the type of rumours, in certain cases they can be interpreted as a “weapon of mass destruction” and their ambiguous nature makes them attractive to diverse public which can interpret it in different ways. We attempt to distinguish between rumour and gossip, namely rumour is related to issues of public interest and gossip is associated with private, trivial things (e.g. the case of Monica Lewinsky, the case of the former Italian Prime Minister Berlusconi, etc.).

Rumour communication by dissemination of rumours has a clear goal, especially when it comes to rumour “bombs”, the motive is on one side, and the reason is hidden and will appear later. The spread of rumours carries a certain perception

of their aim because their production shapes the person before the public or shapes the others – it builds a definite identity for rumours or for the others. The public which consumes information emitted with the mediation of the mass media is often determined as mass society or small and large social groups. These societies are subjected to modern kinds of media impact (advertisements, misinformation, propaganda, etc.).

There is an obvious perception when it comes to the mass media in the Republic of Macedonia that recently a practice has been developing where everyone can write what they want, comment on, publish, speak on various programmes, post information on the internet or social networks and yet hide behind the screen of freedom of expression, freedom of the media. It is about maximum utilisation of the media and development of a system of rumour communication which will include all the media where information is taken from one medium to another (from a press conference to another medium, then on social networks or other formats of the internet). Unfortunately, most people are interested in rumours like scandals, murders, sex (especially if coupled with images or videos), various miracles (the more unreal, the more interesting to read), etc.

If we want to single out the rumour that has marked the scene of the mass media in the Republic of Macedonia then it is the information “bomb” that fosters sensationalism. This approach is known in rumour communication and it is based on the spread of news, information that will arouse interest, encourage the need to be heard, to become a topic of discussion. Publicly, the political discourse uses rumour communication largely as a means to influence public opinion. Information “bombs” can cover different spheres of people’s lives (Estrada, cultural entertainment, arts, sports, politics, etc.). The target groups are public figures of those areas, their life, work, behaviour, particularly personal (private) information about them as part of their intimacy. Such news are easily and quickly absorbed and spread regardless of the truth. In that, one does not care whether certain information concerns defamation and offense of a person, since information gets lost in media corridors and spreads through mediators. In some instances even the basic (first) source can be stopped, and the news nevertheless is not inhibited. Linguistic traps built into the headlines by using metaphors only encourage interest in the information being offered. The spread of information and its frequency can be monitored when it comes to electronic media (especially written ones) by attending and reading the news, even seeing the effect through comments or via forwarding or downloading, etc.

By way of illustration, we will single out information as rumour communication in the mass media that caused the greatest sensation:

The information called “bomb” by the opposition party of SDSM, at press conferences of the opposition leader Zoran Zaev. The first “bomb” was posted on 09/02/2015 when H. Zaev released recordings of wiretapped conversations in which he is alone with journalists, co-workers, Radmila Sekerinska and his underage daughter. This first information is complemented with other telephone con-

versations with opposition politicians. 38 information “bombs” were published and as a result a political crisis developed that went even so far as there was a need for assistance of foreign intermediaries. All that information can be followed on social networks and via electronic means of mass communication. It inspired the serial called “The Truth about Macedonia.” Finally, the currency of the information was lost and it became blurred because most of the so-called “bombs” offered material which presented opinions of officials from the current government (the Prime Minister, ministers, government leaders). Such information lost its efficiency if it went on for a longer period of time. Any curiosity of participants was gone, but a process in which rumour communication is emphasised developed because this information was transmitted through different media.

Rumour communication in the mass media is present in Republic of Macedonia. Examples show that this practice is taken from more developed areas where it appears. The key is to get attention, increase interest. The fact remains that the media lack true investigative journalism that would offer reliable, researched information in which rumours will get the truth confirmed by facts and show that information is given a fully professional and impartial treatment whether it brings good news or bad.

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STRESZCZENIE

Plotka w komunikacji medialnej w Republice Macedonii

Plotka – mimo że jest stale obecna w różnych sferach funkcjonowania mass mediów – nie stała się w Macedonii przedmiotem badań. Tematyka szerzenia nieprawdziwych informacji, pomówień, przekazywania wiadomości w określonym celu była w mediach szczególnie aktualna w 2015 roku jako informacja „bomba”. Materiał badawczy służący definiowaniu tego typu wypowiedzi został zaczerpnięty z tabloidów i stanowi część zjawiska opisywanego jako „mowa nienawiści”, która umożliwia szerzenie na masową skalę informacji w określonym celu. W artykule została przedstawiona analiza zjawiska plotki występującej w macedońskich środkach masowego przekazu. Szczególną uwagę poświęcono językowym środkom wykorzystywanym w tego typu informacji.

Słowa kluczowe: plotka, język macedoński, media w Republice Macedonii, informacja „bomba”