A DIVIDED SPACE OF MEDIATIZATION: ROMANIAN CHILDREN AND THE INTERNET

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Abstract: Media culture, stimulating the "fabrication of identities" – under the conditions where common people, dangling between globalisation and atomisation, are afflicted by a "transfer of anxiety" – asks for an efficient media pedagogy, understood as a new policy of media culture that maintains the distinction between popular and elite cultures, but demolishes the distinction between culture and communication: culture cannot be but communicational. In this framework, the present paper analyses the divided cultural space of the Romanian child who is caught between the internet society and the lack of simple and bare competencies of using the internet in its best ways. We draw the attention to the excessive interest of the internet use in the mediatized world and the receiver's ignoring mediations aiming at practices, relations and social, cultural/ educational institutions. For the critical positioning in front of this socio-cultural phenomenon media pedagogy is needed, understood as a critical theory of society in the context where communication became a phenomenon of total civilisation (Rachieru, 2001, 12).

Keywords: mediatization, media culture, media pedagogy, media effects, children and media.

1. Introduction

Today context is of children submersed in a mediatized world and society. The issue addressed is not any more focusing on what is media doing to the children (media effects), but how adults (parents and teachers) can do with media for children. Recent studies developed in Romania (Velicu, Mascheroni, Olafsson, 2014) demonstrates that Romanian children aged between 9-16, use the internet from their home (especially from their own room – those with a high economical level) and they receive different types of mediation, but more on restrictive bases than creative and pro-active. Their main activities online include: listening to music, watching videos on Youtube and socializing on different sites. In the same time, other social reports (Badescu, Petre, Angi, 2017) show that 1 of the 10 children of the rural area goes hungry to sleep in the evening and he/she is co-participating with the family's farming activities. These gasps reflect the social reality of the level of the media culture existing and the problem of the lack of media education and digital competencies.

2. From media culture to media pedagogy

Media culture, stimulating the "fabrication of identities" – under the conditions where common people, dangling between globalisation and atomisation, are afflicted by a "transfer of anxiety" – asks for an efficient media pedagogy, understood as a new policy of media culture that maintains the distinction between popular and elite cultures, but demolishes the distinction between culture and communication: culture cannot be but communicational. Kellner draws the attention to the excessive interest in

text and the receiver's ignoring mediations aiming at practices, relations and social, cultural institutions.

Kellner notices the marked manifestation of media culture to be specific to contemporary society. For the critical positioning in front of this socio-cultural phenomenon media pedagogy is needed, understood as a critical theory of society in the context where communication became a phenomenon of total civilisation (Rachieru, 2001, 12). Thus Kellner associates media culture to the following dimensions (2001, 13):"culture of the image" addressing hearing and sight preponderantly; "industrial culture", organized on the basis serial production for general consumption; "high-tech culture" combining culture, communication and technology and coming to new forms, configurations based on media and technology.

Therefore, the position assumed by Kellner as to the necessity of a media pedagogy is stated clearly:

"*We are immersed from cradle to grave in a media and consumer society and thus it is important to learn how to understand, interpret, and criticize its meanings and messages. The media are a profound and often misperceived source of cultural pedagogy: They contribute to educating us how to behave and what to think, feel, believe, fear, and desire […]. Consequently, the gaining of critical media literacy is an important resource for individuals and citizens in learning how to cope with a seductive cultural environment. Learning how to read, criticize, and resist socio-cultural manipulation can help empower oneself in relation to dominant forms of media and culture. It can enhance individual sovereignty vis-à-vis media culture and give people more power over their cultural environment*" (2001, 104).

Therefore, we consider as the context of the media pedagogy determinations:

- The growth of the level media consumption regardless of their form, but with acute spikes as to television and the virtual space (the Internet, video and on-line games);

- The development of the new information an communication technologies and the invasion of the private space, and also the modification of the public space (by models of e-government, e-learning, e-commerce, e-banking, etc.);

- The abundance of information as a result of the almost instantaneous production and reproduction of information due to the of the multiplication of producers (especially, the individuals in the virtual space), of the ubiquitous computer, alongside the statistical weight lag between the existence and the physical use of the media, of the new media and information and communication technologies (gaps between the citizens of the super-developed countries and the ones below the poverty line);

- Cultural and social determinations triggered by the changes appearing at the level of the individual's, the group's self-images and of the growing need of an *alter ego* (from promoting values regarding cultural diversity, to the proliferation of the lack of control of the source, of its legitimacy.

There is a discrepancy between the impression of the whole concerning the strong influence of mass media and the analyses of the mass media effects found in sociological research, for the following reasons (Pop, 2001): The majority of the studies used to have a narrow approach the effects (considering only the "direct" effects – be they commercial or electoral); the studies start from the premise that people are not inclined to learn for mass media and reach the conclusion of some "minimal mass media effects", because the impact of the stimuli induced by mass media is an integral

part of a combination of social stimuli, and scientists are not able to recognize either the receiver's pre-existent background of knowledge and attitudes.

During the last 20 years, a greater and greater attention was paid to the problems of media literacy, more precisely to the vaster domain of the media pedagogy, a domain that we consider developed because of the interest and researches undertaken in this area of speciality and that evolved from mere literacy to a true pedagogy.

Thus, Elizabeth Thoman and Tessa Jolls (2004, 21) show how, in the beginning, media literacy resumed to a mere activity of teaching the students about media: how advertising works and its effects and how to analyse the news. In her work *Literacy in Digital World: Teaching and Learning in the Age of Information* (1998), Kathleen Tyner, making use of the concept *media education*, appreciates that it refers more to education than media. Her assumption is that media education extends literacy by including activities of writing and reading within the use of the new means of communication. *"It is learning that demands a critical, independent and creative use of information"* (1998, 196).

Today, the domain has matured by a greater understanding of its own potential, not only as a new form of literacy, but a dynamo of transformation of the essence of learning in a multimedia environment at the global level. As it was pointed out in the framework programme *Partnership for 21st Century Skills* (2003), *"Students will spend their adult lives in a multi-tasking, multifaceted, technology-driven, diverse, vibrant world — and they must arrive equipped to do so."* From the pedagogical perspective also, especially the one process-oriented, media literacy is not a discipline to teach, but a new way of teaching, or even more, a *new way of learning*.

3. Blue Whale effect and Mars Invasion – a reality of the Romanian media culture space

The first studies on the mass-media effects are presented as a remarkable episode by books on communication sciences. On the 30th of October 1838, the CBS radio channel aired, for the first time, a drama play after the H.G. Wells' novel "War of the Worlds", where a Martian invasion is described. Approximately 6 million listeners listened to the radio at that time. A boring show determines them to change channel exactly at the moment when the "news" on the so called Martian invasion is presented. A phenomenal panic state spreads fast, people leave their homes, an electrical blackout takes place in a small town in Washington at the same time and an amateur radio station managed to send a message which said nobody was listening (Dobrecu & Bârgăoanu, 2003, 140).

The macro-social context in which panic spread was determined by a series of factors: the American society found itself during a difficult period after the great economic depression, the Second World War was about to start, and the radio remained the most important means for news transmission, listeners investing a high trust level in radio channels. In addition, studies realized by H. Cantril (1940) underline the all-powerful media, and the popularity and rapidness of such media means as a factor of exponential multiplication of information and of its effects.

After almost one century, in March 2017, in Romanian social media, news on the dangerous effects of an online game, played mostly by teenagers and pupils, begins to receive more and more shares and comments, becoming and "informational bubble"

for worried mothers and parents, entering the news websites and of media agencies with a list of online visitors. On the 17th of March, a group of 4 pupils from Iasi are considered victims of this online game. It is the moment of a general hysteria inception: a state secretary from the Ministry of National Education warns on the risks of this online game; the Romanian Church takes attitude and incriminates the contemporary virtual society and local authorities from the West side of the country are alerted, when a teenager confesses on being harassed by the game managers. Panic is again triggered. The online game involved in this case, "The Blue Whale" is a nefarious and macabre, supposing the creation of a youngsters' network, of a virtual community, in which members had to fulfil a series of tasks, highly risky for their health. Those who didn't fulfil tasks received were threatened and/or excluded from the game. A series of deaths were reported, as a result of participating in this game, as stated by different websites.

What created panic? As in the case of the Martians invasion, as proved by H. Cantril's research, the existence and the presentation, during the news, of "experts'" confessions, respectively of officials from the Ministry of Education, the Romanian Orthodox Church and the Romanian Police, in the case of our country; to which one can add the use of dramatic title in renowned press agencies (*The Blue Whale, the unknown face of the game* – evz.ro, *The Blue Whale, what is hidden beneath and what send towards mass hysteria* – playtech.ro; *The Police begun a prevention campaign* – *mediafax.ro*).

Thus, one could observe in this time cycle, H. Cantril's research conclusions (1940) are contemporary: people act according to mental schemas through which a reduced metal capacity is underlined, to interpret the situation at hand and to appreciate inter-human relations. This fact is due to a general context offered by a social state of emotional instability, determined by a sustained financial and economic crisis (the socio-economic context being similar to that of today's Romania), the note of increased social insecurity resulted from an increased unemployment rate, the destruction of families with children left in the case of grandparent or of other members of the family; the present geo-political context, offered by a mental schema of the "red threat", the game being created by young Russians, one of the initial game managers being already deceased.

The theory of all powerful media, regardless of the means of communication aimed at, remains a present theory which demands deep social research. One of the conclusions to be drawn from the two cases is the need to practice and form critical abilities for media consumption, the higher need of media educational programs applied at a large scale, in school aiming at youngsters, but especially at didactic personnel. Contemporary society is a society in which the all-powerful media manifests itself freely and without critic limits. Thus, social processes will be intense, as long as educations, teacher and real opinion developers won't be aware of the need of media education campaigns.

In addition, when speaking of a divided society and in the field of media education, a strong cleavage is observed, mainly due to economic matters. On a secondary level, the lack of qualified human resources to support the children's educational process is also observed, for daily instructive-educational activities and for extra-curricular activities. Unfortunately, Romanian school is not prepared, and the effects of media continue to produce effects and to accentuate the defensive side of media consumption, the evaluation-coercive nature of parental mediation and the lack

of media competency of young people. Even if Romania registers the highest internet speeds, fact which also determines a high consumption, media education (which includes net surfing) demands a special attention.

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