

Information Quality Violations in the Mass Media and Its Impact on Communication

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Abstract

The general goal of the article is to show that media present the news as purely informative and fully objective, the texts, however, fail to meet these criteria. The specific goal is to prove that it is possible to establish taxonomies of language means that have a potential to implement into the news a function other than informative or to make the message of the news incomprehensible. There are two underlying theories, mutually cooperating: a) functional stylistics, and b) the normative theory of mass media. The Czech tradition of functional stylistics builds the stylistic norm of the news upon an assumption that the basic role of a news communicate lies in its informative function. Based on this assumption the basic requirements concerning the language of the message are stated. Due to the indisputable potential of media news to influence individual recipients, to influence the public opinion as well as the state of public affairs and bearing in mind that that the relation of the emitters of the message to the message recipients is asymmetrical, the news is regulated socially by legislation. The law provides regulations with respect to qualitative standards of the news production. The normative theory of mass media explores the social frame in which the media, including the news operate. What is applied here is the information quality concept established by Jörgen Westerståhl. The concept is fully compatible with linguistic view of informative function as a pure attempt to establish equality with respect to the information held by the emitter and the recipient of a message. To meet the criteria stated by the concept a message must be truthful, relevant, informative, balanced and neutral, by means of which it is possible to describe individual language devices with respect to their position on the marked - unmarked scale. The taxonomy proposed within the project will cover the marked language means reaching from phonetics, morphology, lexicology, syntax to the level of texts. Listed will be the means showing a potential to break the norm of news texts. The proposed taxonomy will be an universally applicable tool to identify language means interfering with the rules of news information quality. The taxonomy will be used to analyze the TV news

broadcasted by public service television in comparison with TV news broadcasted by the most widely watched commercial television station TV Nova.

1. Society and Media

Media organizations operate in the public space and as such they have the ability to shape public opinion. Their own interests that they might follow may not be necessarily advantageous neither for the public nor for the society as a whole. The relationship between media organizations and the recipient is asymmetric. Communication is unidirectional, what is absent is the full feedback. On the one hand there is a well-organized institution with financial and human resources and access to information tools, on the other hand there is a recipient with the lack of all that stuff. That is why the society demands from the media a socially responsible behavior. It is manifested in regulation of the media activities: formally through legislation, informally by the pressure coming from the social space, i.e. from institutions, associations, interest groups, individuals, etc. (see McQuail, 1999).

2. News Reporting

As a product of media organizations' own activities the news reporting is considered one of the major types of media contents in which the media organizations endeavour to maximize the viewership / readership. That may be proved by the frequency of television and radio news reporting programs, by placing the news in the prime-times or on the first pages in print media, by the number of ads on radio and television news reporting programs during the broadcast, and by establishment of special news reporting channels or web portals.

2.1 The Properties of News Reporting

The news reporting is presented as reflection of current reality and as such it is attributed by positive values: the news reporting production is presented as truthful, objective and balanced. The media organizations claim that the message meets strictly informative function and its purpose is merely to compensate information contents of the sender and the audience. The recipient is offered interpretations of news, the so called preferred reading (see Reifová et al., 2004, 35–36.)

This part of media production is given specific attention by:

- social sciences and humanities (communication theories and theories of mass communication),
- stylistics (in the field of linguistics),
- the jurisprudence (in broader social context).

Here it may be assumed that based on the analytical tools one can capture deviations from the proclaimed values of the news reporting and reveal breaches of standards of objectivity and also / moreover determine the value orientation of media - the ethical principles of journalistic work, social norms, or even respect for the legal rules.

3. Normative concept of media and mass communication

The normative concept of media observes the relationships between society and media. Generally, media are respected as independent subjects but on the other hand there are some expectancies from the society towards them. Above all there are requirements of the socially responsible behavior of media that cover:

- respect for the public interests (activities that are beneficial to society, and/or that do not harm the society,
- support for plurality of views, including the interests of minorities,
- rejection of socially pathological phenomena,
- criteria for quality of information (in broader sense of the word).

Within the normative concept of media, special attention is paid to news reporting (McQuail 2005). The qualitative criteria of news reporting production are named in the concept of information quality principles by Jörgen Westerståhl (see 6).

3.1 The position of the normative concept in the field of mass communication and social sciences

In the Czech environment the normative concept of media stands outside the mainstream theory of mass communication which is rather constructivist and does not accept the requirements for predetermined qualitative values of media communication, including news reporting. One reason is the emphasis on recipients (the audience) and their socially conditioned interpretation of the text. Hence the interpretative approach aimed at recipients outweigh the emphasis on the author, i. e. the agent of communication, who consciously adjusts the form of communication to the anticipated effects on the recipients. Another difference is in understanding the informative function, namely in functional stylistics and the theory of mass communication. The functionalist mass communication approach that defines the function of the media in society, although operating with the function of information it does not see it identical with the linguistic informative function (see 5). The function of information is defined as providing information about events and conditions in society and in the world, suggesting power relations, promotion of innovation and progress, facilitating adaptation (see McQuail, 1999, 101–102). It is understood as a means of influencing and shaping the human consciousness, which is necessarily reflected in the behavior and conduct of the recipients (see Jílek, 2009, 58). The definitional framework of the function of information is therefore different from the linguistic definition of the informative function, as it implicitly includes other conative functions, particularly the persuasive one.

4. Normative concept of media and the theory of law

Law is a social normative system that reflects the need to reduce the entropy of the society (disorder of competing human interests, behavior, satisfaction of needs) and that as the prescriptive regulatory system protects individual interests, providing protection against other interests, and authoritatively resolves conflicts between them (see Knapp, 1995, 30–34). The theory of law is compliant with the normative concept of mass communication. The media organizations operate in the public sphere, they have the ability to shape the public opinion, their relationship to the recipient is asymmetric, the news reporting is presented as informative. These are the reasons why society demands from the media socially responsible behavior, respect for the public interests (as opposed to the particular ones) and regulates their activities in the form of laws. The media organizations are also under pressure by

nongovernmental institutions, associations, interest groups and individuals, on the other hand they themselves adopt self-regulation, codes of ethics etc. A comprehensive concept of socially responsible behavior of the media is included in the normative theory of social responsibility (Pürer, 2003, 57–86, McQuail, 1999, 147–180, McQuail, 2005, 161–188, Reifová et al., 2004, 206, 279, Weischenberg, 2002, 152–189.)

4.1 Legal regulation of the media in the Czech Republic

Media activities are regulated through laws, including enforcement of the state:

- general laws (criminal, civil, administrative, labor, financial law),
- specific laws regulating certain aspects of the media or having the effect of their actions (regulation of advertising, free access to information, copyright law, etc.),
- media laws (The Press Act, on Czech Television, on Czech Radio).

On this basis Boards of public service media have been established, i. e. authorities, with the public's right to control the media.

4.1.1 Media self-regulation

Self-regulation is the crucial reflection of normative theory of mass communication and the source of legitimation of the quality requirements in the media. It has found its expression in so-called Codes of ethics for media. They are accepted by all media organizations (electronic, print media), they are published on the websites of media organizations, by them the media organizations claim to respect objectivity, fairness/balance and neutrality.

In the Czech media environment they have been derived from the Code of Ethics for Journalists of the Syndicate of Journalists of the Czech Republic. Once the Code of ethics has been publicly declared, it is legitimate to require its compliance. In the case of Czech Television, the Supreme Administrative Court did so, despite the existence of a special law (see the judgment of the Supreme Administrative Court of 15. 12. 2004, ref. 7 As 38/2004 – 58). To justify their decisions the Courts have been also using linguistic theory.

5. Normative concept of media and stylistics

Functional stylistics in its processual approach sees function as the basic pragmatic factor of producing the utterances. All procedures as shaping the utterances, the choice of adequate and stylishly unmarked means of expression at the respective levels of language, text composition, as well as the thematic and content organization of the utterances are subordinate to function. Function is also the basis for determining/establishing stylistic areas (as sets of stylistic norms). For the news reporting stylistic sub-area the functional stylistics considers as the basic standard-setting aspect the informative function, while the other functions should be excluded. Also the Czech (and Slovak) stylistics understands the informative function crucial for news reporting (see Čechová, 2003, Bečka, 1992, Mistrík, 1985). The informative essence of news reporting is the basis of setting the standards for the style type – they are neutrality, factuality of linguistic means, the lack of implicit and explicit subjectivity and clarity. From linguistic view the informative function is a pure attempt to establish equality with respect to the information held by the emitter and the recipient of a message, namely with the exclusion of formative/persuasive intentions (see Jílek, 2009).

6. Information quality concept

Principles of information quality (objectivity) as a tool of assessing linguistic means were elaborated by Jörgen Westerståhl. His concept is based on the normative theory of social responsibility and as such it identifies qualitative criteria of news reporting.

The qualitative criteria include (see Jílek, 2009, 58):

- methods of selection and retrieval of information,
- work with information in terms of their distribution,
- linguistic representation of information.

As far as the linguistic representation of information is concerned the linguistic means can be distinguished as unmarked (they do not violate the principles of information quality) and to marked (they breach the information quality principles).

Westerståhl (see Westerståhl, 1983, 403–424) having in mind the principles of information quality has constructed factor of factuality with aspects of truthfulness, relevance, and informativeness and factor of impartiality with aspects of neutrality, and balance (see the scheme below):

Basic value factors of OBJECTIVITY



The basic requirements for the aspect of truthfulness are:

- presentation of events without comments, or clear separation of news reporting from comments,
- accuracy of reports,
- completeness of reports.

The marked language means potentially evoking sort of comments include evaluating expressive means (wordformational and lexical), context expressivity, means expressing irony and any kind of emphasizing that could hierarchise the importance of the information. The marked means that potentially violate the accuracy of news reporting are phraseology, metaphors and metonyms and vocabulary with indefinite semantics as *masses, circles, public* etc. For not following the requirements of completeness the marked language means encompass the failure to comply the text pattern, or the lack of response (direct or context) to one of the basic questions *Who? When? Where? What?*.

The aspect of relevance covers selection of information to be published on the one hand, and inclusion of information on a specific place in news reporting programs/news reporting sites on the other hand. It also includes work with information itself – thematization of information (i. e. area which is given to it) and proportionality of partial information about the event. According to this aspect media can be generally classified into serious, popular, and tabloids. By fulfilling the aspect of informativeness such a form of communication is realized, which can ensure a smooth reception and perception. From the linguistic point of view it regards the intelligibility of the news reporting. Among the marked language means attacking that rule are fast speech tempo, territorially limited vocabulary, sociolects, historicisms, scientific terms, abbreviations, acronyms, neologisms, and large and complex sentences structures. Prerequisites for the aspect of balance are putting opposing views in the form of quotations or paraphrases, which are given in the same or corresponding time ratio, space and form. The marked means consist of combination of quotes and paraphrases and in spatial disparity between opinions and opposing views. The aspect of neutrality then assumes non-emotionality of expression, the use of standard language and the use of neutral language means. If the functional stylistics understands the informative function as a mere compensation of the author's and the recipient's information contents, and if it excludes any formative intentions of the news reporting, one can conclude, that the Westerståhl's information quality concept counting with concepts of factuality and impartiality is fully compatible with it.

7. The possible causes of violations of the information quality

Basically there are institutional and individual causes of such violations. The institutional ones cover both commercial and political interests.

Primarily, the breaches of information quality are motivated by commercial interests. The aim is to maintain and increase the audience of media content, i.e. the interest in the medium itself, which is reflected in the interests of advertisers and in the price of advertising products. Media institutions, their management or owners can also follow political interests. By commercial interests also the public service media are affected, although it should not be so. Even in the case of public service media management and media councils political pressure can not be excluded. What is considered the primary indicator of success even with the public service media is the media ratings, regardless of the fact that the media law guarantees their financial income from public sources. Media adapt information about the outside world to detected, but more dominantly to constructed characteristics of the audience and to its basic non-intellectual expectations. They assume a recipient who does not have the time or knowledge enough to navigate through a complex reality, or to think about the meaning of events. Therefore often such topics appear that apply to fundamental human motives as crimes or scandals. On the other hand socially important topics are presented as entertainment.

Hence the normative principles of information quality such as truthfulness, relevance, informativeness, balance, and neutrality have been constantly violated and the result is penetration of non-reporting intentions, especially persuasion, acquisition and entertainment to the sphere of news reporting. Thus the news reporting has been effectively transferred to the sphere of commentaries, i. e. analytical genres (publicism).

As far as individual causes of violating the information quality are concerned the pressure of time or allocated space may be mentioned. The resulting text can also be affected by professional competences and/or by personal opinions of the author, his attitudes, but with the same impact on the breach of information quality (objectivity), as in the case of the institutional influence (see Jílek, 2009, 65–71).

8. Grant project *The Taxonomy of Language Means Breaking the Norm of Media News – an Analytical Tool to Assess the News Reporting*

8.1 Hypotheses of the grant project

- a) It is possible to establish taxonomies of language means belonging to individual language plans within internal linguistics and on the level of text.
- b) The taxonomy used for the research purposes will pay special attention to language means showing a potential to implement into the news reporting a function other than informative or to make the message of the news reporting incomprehensible. Listed will be the means showing potential to break the norm of news reporting texts.
- c) The proposed taxonomy will be a universally applicable tool to identify language means interfering with the rules of news reporting information quality.

8.2 The taxonomy as a tool

The taxonomy will be used to analyze the TV news broadcasted by public-service television in comparison with TV news broadcasted by the most widely watched commercial television station TV Nova. For both stations the analysis will identify actual language means breaking the norm of the news reporting and the frequency of individual trespasses. The description of individual kinds of trespasses against the norm will be based upon mutual comparison of both stations with regard of the differences and/or similarities of the language means used.

9. Conclusion

Media present the news reporting as purely informative and objective, the real texts, however, do not meet those values. The mass communication normative approach based on the requirements of socially responsible behavior of media identifies the qualitative characteristics that should be met by the news reporting and it formulates the news reporting standards. As a major source of the standards the legitimate claims on the form of news reporting must be considered. It legitimizes the requirements for compliance with the quality standards of news production. The normative Westerståhl's concept is compatible with functionally oriented stylistic insight on news reporting and its understanding the informative function and as thus it is applicable for determining the news reporting style sub-area, as well as an analytical tool to assess applicability of the respective language means in the news reporting.

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