THE EVOLUTION OF INFLUENCE: FROM CULTIVATION THEORY TO SELECTIVE TARGETING

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Since ancient times, the aim has been to shape the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of internal and external audiences. Changes in the technological sphere, specific to the current century, have contributed to the discovery of new methods to more efficiently achieve these behavioral, perceptual or attitudinal changes among the targeted audience segments.

The purpose of this article is to describe the specificity of cultivation theory and to highlight the basic characteristics and efficiency of using selective targeting. The article also includes an example where you can see the methods used in the 21st century in the online environment.

Keywords: cultivation theory; selective targeting; social networks; online environment; persuasion; influence.

This article highlights the characteristics of cultivation theory and selective targeting and briefly discusses some situations in which each of these two processes were used.

We start from the idea that people are beings who mostly act emotionally, are influenced by expectations and personal beliefs and tend to seek information that supports and consolidates already formed opinions[1]. In order to be able to influence perceptions, to change attitudes and behaviors, you must perform an analysis of the audience that is addressed in order to formulate appropriate messages and ensure the attainment of the desired effects. For this, it is necessary to know in detail their vulnerabilities, preferences, desires, fears. Also, the economic, religious, cultural, political, military, etc. context must be taken into account. Changing the perceptions, attitudes, behaviors of an audience can be a long-term process[2].

Traditional mass media, new media and social media represent categories that can contribute substantially to the amplification of effects and can also serve as dissemination channels, each exhibiting specific advantages and disadvantages.

Cultivation theory

George Gerbner articulated the cultivation theory in the 1960s, one of the three most cited theories on the effects of mass communication

(along with agenda-setting and sanctions and rewards)[3].

The cultivation hypothesis assumes that people who spend more time in front of the television tend to perceive reality in ways that reflect the most frequent and recurring messages in the fictional world of television. According to the cultivation theory, media patterns can be assimilated by individuals frequently exposed to messages that include them, the result of this process being the change of perception about reality. In short, if the media patterns are assimilated, then the individual may consider that the attitudes, behaviors, situations presented in the media have a correspondent in reality and change their perception according to these patterns.

The theory started from a stand-alone study commissioned by US President Lyndon B. Johnson for the National Commission for the Prevention and Research of the Causes of Violence. The research of the problem of violence in American society, with emphasis on the effects of television, considered 3 areas of analysis[4]:

• Institutional processes – how to create and distribute messages;

• The messaging system – a certain image about the social reality, as it is constructed as a whole;

• Cultivation analysis – how the messaging system influences the public's perception of social reality.

One hypothesis was that television models the way in which individuals imagine their social reality. Not just the cultivation of specific attitudes,

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but rather, assumptions about the fundamental truths of life or certain criteria based on which judgments and conclusions regarding social reality are formulated.

The media cultivates opinions, conceptions, beliefs, just as a farmer cultivates his land or the gardener cultivates his garden[5]. Gerbner's studies actually dealt with the impact of television on the television audience. He considered that this extended delivery channel is the primary way for messages to reach the targeted audiences. Gebner also concluded that television, to some extent, restricts the ability to decide in the case of audience segments, in the sense that television delivers the same type of message to a wide audience. As a result, the cultivation theory, through the use of television, is aiming to cultivate common perceptions about reality on different audience segments. Regardless of their characteristics, over a long and repetitive period in certain sequences that describe a certain reality, the television will cultivate similar expectations and a shared vision of what reality means.

Gebner's conclusion in 1970 was that the dominant environment forms the dominant perspective. Television, the dominant medium in the 1960s, was responsible for the mass production and distribution of messages, thus forming new symbolic fields that reflect the structure and functions of the institutions that broadcast them. These structures short-circuit other social communication networks and superimpose their own forms of collective consciousness on other social relations[6].

In this regard, case studies have been elaborated regarding the increase of violent tendencies in subjects exposed to highly violent TV programs (*mainstreaming and resonance*[7]), the effects of watching romantic comedies/dramas on the formation of perceptions about the emotional life, etc.

The gradual cultivation of the perception of reality among the internal audience has the potential to lead to changes in the way an individual perceives and relates to social situations, can trigger a greater degree of acceptance of authority and can lead to stable attitudes, which tend to be repeated in real social situations. In addition to the potential to induce a higher level of censorship and repression measures and support for extreme government regulations, such as capital punishment, pattern

assimilation, there are perceptual changes in gender and race roles or in other notable issues such as attitude science. The advantages of using cultivation theory include the following:

- the emphasis on both visual and auditory;
- TV does not require literacy;
- the costs are low;
- addresses a broad spectrum of ages at the same time;
- uses easy-to-understand narrative strategies, which have the ability to be memorized from the first viewing through the fact that the information is embedded in a narrative thread.

Cultivation theory can be found in the 21st century, in the era of new media. The information environment provides numerous ways of presenting the content and diversity regarding the possibility of choices. Many platforms still have operating principles similar to TV, namely: focus on video, on the delivery of fictional programs, prolonged exposure to the same type of narrative strategies. What is different is the way we receive certain content, but this content continues to reflect a certain way of representing aspects of social reality.

The traditional methods used to change perceptions, attitudes, behaviors (radio, television, print media, etc.) have been and are very useful and efficient. What the current technology and the presence of the information environment offer, however, is difficult to counter. We are subjected daily to a process of shaping our own beliefs, opinions, interests.

Selective targeting

New media and social media allow a segmentation of potential audiences, thus further allowing the formulation of messages according to the vulnerabilities, passions, fears, needs of the audience. The audience segments formed have different features and methods of approach starting from the dissemination method through which one reaches the desired segment, to the way in which information is modelled to obtain the desired behavior, attitude, perception.

A target audience segmentation method specific to the 21st century is selective targeting, method that makes it possible to manipulate information at different levels[8]. To get the same type of behavior / attitude / perception from different people, with different behaviors, vulnerabilities and beliefs,

different messages and techniques are needed. Segmenting the targeted audience into several subcategories to be addressed in a different way, with dedicated messages, created specifically to speak the language of a specific segment, is part of the process of selective targeting.

How we express our preferences in the online environment can help this process by providing certain personal details about what and how they influence us, interest us, or convince us to resort to action in certain situations. These details that we offer voluntarily or involuntarily, consciously or less consciously, put together, map to some extent how we tend to act or form our opinions. Based on these details, analysts are able to write messages that in time convince us of certain issues, turn us into supporters of certain causes or incite us to protests, riots, etc.

Cambridge Analytica

The *Cambridge Analytica* (*CA*) case study is a clear example of the power and effects that selective targeting can have. This phenomenon is possible due to the intense activity in the online environment and the exposure of privacy. Selective targeting makes it possible to manipulate information at different levels[9].

Cambridge Analytica was a British company that provided services, among other things, supporting election campaigns or certain projects. The company came into possession of the data of millions of people (Facebook users), data that they subsequently used to send messages that are appropriate to certain categories of audience. Basically, the CA specializes in creating user profiles (psychological-behavioral profiles of consumers) and in establishing the ways in which an individual can be influenced, without realizing it, in choosing products or validating electoral candidates.

The company is considered to be involved in influencing certain behaviors in the United States (the vote for Donald Tramp), Great Britain (the Brexit LeaveUE campaign), Australia, India, Malta, Mexico, Argentina, Nigeria, Czech Republic, and Philippines etc.

The company later acknowledged that it used the personal data of the users (data obtained after Facebook users completing a questionnaire) to segment the target audiences by using psychological analysis, thus allowing a detailed knowledge of the

audience. Analysts created 32 initial psychological profiles based on which they made specific messages to determine the perception of certain audience segments on different topics. The psychological mapping of the target audience and its segmentation into subcategories was made possible both by the users' unconsciousness, as well as by the collection made by Facebook and the subsequent sale of data to the CA[10].

Question-type games like *What character in Game of Thrones are you*, *What dog breed fits you*, *How would you look if you had the opposite sex*, *What would your dream vacation look like*, *What is your most burning desire*, came to have a resounding success and few know that by accessing them they make available their personal data that can later be used to create dedicated messages that lead to a certain type of behavior or perception.

Cyber-psychology explains how our needs in the digital environment are what underlie the digital behavior of users. By making available personal information, actions that seem harmless at first sight (games, questionnaires, posts, comments, locations, distributions, ratings, etc.), we actually make selective targeting possible. This involves the formation of messages dedicated to a particular person, created to attract a certain type and to obtain a certain perception, attitude, behavior. At the same time, segmentation, profiling, precision persuasion, algorithmic generation and amplification of reactions are possible only if those who want selective targeting have enough data to create dedicated messages.

Conclusions

The traditional methods used to change perceptions, attitudes, behaviors (radio, television, print media, etc.) have been and are very useful. However, the current environment allows for quantifiable results to be obtained in a shorter time and with a much higher success rate. Many of us have expectations arising from the cultivation theory regarding love, couple life or violence.

The online environment, the new-media and social media, however, allow a much more efficient modelling of audience behaviors by segmenting potential audiences; this technique allows the formulation of messages according to the vulnerabilities, passions, fears, needs of a certain audience segment (particularities and

different methods of approach, starting from the dissemination method through which the desired segment is reached, to how the information is modelled in order to obtain the desired behavior, attitude, perception).

The effects of lack of good information about the online environment and the impact that our actions can have in this environment can create strategic level effects. We navigate daily in an environment that we do not fully understand, but which makes us feel valuable, important, untouchable; these aspects describe the perfect environment in which to remain naive, unaware of the risks we take, vulnerable to the realities of the present century, pawns used to fulfil strategic objectives. Excessive and unconscious exposure of one's choices in the digital environment can lead to effects that we have little chance of identifying when they occur.

It is very difficult to become aware at every step of why we do what we do or the effects that a particular action can have. But, based on some principles to guide our behavior, we have a higher chance of not ending up in situations we do not want. In this direction, I propose the following steps in order to formulate a future strategy for neutralizing specific risks in the online environment:

• Regulations regarding the use of the data of the media users;

• Digital literacy;

• Emotional skepticism;

• Cultivating a security culture adapted to the current realities and implemented among the population;

• Awareness programs for persons / institutions with strategic positions, which can be targeted by hostile entities;

• Investing in the education of the young generation;

• Identification of vulnerability at the level of perception and attitudes of the population.

• Train critical thinking.

A general conclusion is that the online environment, although initially perceived as an environment with fewer risks and threats than the real environment, has become the appropriate place for various threats to manifest. Knowing and understanding how these changes of perceptions, attitudes, behaviors take place, is a first step in order to raise awareness of the effects that certain information can follow, which comes in a form that convinces us to pay attention.

Cambridge Analytica is just one example of how our data can be used to trigger a certain behavior. Is this the only example of this kind? Storing user data on certain servers for later use to obtain certain behaviors seems to be a possible scenario at the moment.

NOTES:

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2 *Psychological Operations (United States)*, https://military.wikia.org/wiki/Psychological_Operations_(United_States), accessed on 11.11.2019.

3 George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorelli, James Shanahan, *Growing Up with Television: Cultivation Processes,* B. Jennings Publishing House, Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research, New Jersey, SUA, 2002, pp. 43-44.

4 *Ibidem*, pp. 50-52.

5 Ioan Drăgan, *Paradigme ale comunicării de masă*, SANSA-SRL Publishing House, Bucharest, 1996, p. 216.

6 Alexandra Nicu, *Dinamica familială în cinematografia din România: tipare. Un studiu comparativ al filmelor din perioada comunistă și cea post-comunistă*, PhD Thesis, SNSPA, Bucharest, 2017, pp. 43-44.

7 George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorelli, James Shanahan, *op.cit.*, pp. 51.

8 Sorin Topor, *Terorismul cibernetic*, Top Form Publishing House, Bucharest, 2019, pp. 39-44.

9 *Ibidem*, pp. 39-44.

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