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News Literacy theoretical background as a tool to understand media populism

For over 60 years the media, first television and then the Internet, have become the main source of information on what happens in both the close and the distant social environment of people. In line with the view expressed by Harald Lasswell, the media not only inform, but also correlate the unconnected parts of the social experience, creating, in the minds of their audiences, comprehensive picture of social reality. However, this is not a reflection of reality, but rather a kind of artificial construct failing to reflect the complexity of the modern world and focusing on selected problems of which social significance is often questionable.

From the beginning of mass communication research the impact of media on audiences has been one of the most important academic reflections. It can be observed on three levels: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. From the perspective of News Literacy, each of them is as important as the other. Cognitive and affective attitudes may affect individuals' behaviors in many ways, which can be observed, for example, during political elections. The hallmark of recent years in media news production, especially in coverage of political and economic issues, is the increase in populist communication. This increase can be traced to the following overlapping reasons: the progressive commercialization of the media; the increasing concentration of media ownership; media dependence on sources of financing (advertising); a strong focus on the commercial values of news; and development of the Internet. What we consider specifically challenging for News Literacy curriculum in this context is also a shift in news circulation and production.

When it comes to news circulation, one of the most relevant tendencies that we underline in our teaching practice is news customization that leads us to Eli Pariser's concept of a filter bubble. A filter bubble is the restriction of a user's perspective that can be created by personalized search engines based on algorithms. News and information used to create personalized search filters originate mainly from user's search history and its tracking. For that reason, the websites are more likely to present only information that will abide by the user's past activity (Pariser, 2011). As a consequence, a filter bubble may lead

to intellectual and cognitive isolation of the user increasing a tendency to confirmation bias.

Another important factor in news production and circulation environment is the appearance of Web 2.0 which is described as the second stage of development of the Internet, characterized especially by the change from static web pages to dynamic or user-generated content and the growth of social media (O'Reilly, 2005). Enabling interaction, but also the emergence of platforms that facilitate the creation and dissemination of user-generated content leads us to a term *produser* (a blending of producer and user) defined by Axel Burns as user of news Websites who engage with such sites interchangeably in consumptive and productive models (Burns, 2005). The emergence of this new entity opens the field for reflection on the role and place of professional journalism, a key point of reference for the News Literacy program.

The aim of this article is to present theoretical approaches relevant to the study and teaching of News Literacy concepts. The key, in our opinion, are the framing; priming; and the agenda setting theories which relate to shaping of both individual and group imaginations about social, political, and economic realities in which people live and make decisions. The additional focus of our interest is the way News Literacy can be an effective way to decode populist messages in the media.

The creators of agenda setting theory, Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw (1972), found, in their research on 1968 US presidential campaign – featuring Richard Nixon, Hubert Humphrey and George Wallace – that the majority of media exposure and materials focused primarily on the campaign itself (its success, polls, and chances for the win), rather than the merits and policies of the candidates. They also discovered a clear correlation between a certain issue's media exposition and voter perception regarding its importance. They concluded that the process of selection and presentation of news gives publishers, editors, and broadcasters significant influence over shaping the political reality and its public perception. Viewers and readers alike receive not only the information itself, but also its relative importance. By relaying specific things said by the candidates, the media have power to convey and assert their importance thus setting the agenda. (McCombs and Shaw, 1972, p. 176).

Agenda setting theory highlights the interaction between the public and the media, particularly in terms of the interdependence of contact with media, audience's motivation to seek information, and their perception of public matters (Baran and Davis, 2007, p. 367). In its extended version, the theory connects to the process of issue prioritization

caused by the interaction of all political communicators. Agenda-setting has two levels: assigning subject importance (the traditional view), and assigning importance to the subjects' attributes. McCombs (2014) concludes that the attributes as presented by the journalists and received by the audience (when the subject is being thought or talked about) are an important part of information agenda and the set of its subjects.

The News Literacy module closely linked to the concept of agenda setting is one of the initial topics: *What is news?* During this practical class we underline and discuss with students four elements that formulate environment of agenda setting and determine news: 1) Universal News Drivers, 2) Editorial Judgment 3) The Audience, 4) Profits and Competition. During our teaching practice we have noticed that more advanced groups after this class require more in-depth expertise and a theoretical framework. This need meets the introduction of agenda setting concept based on case studies in which the News Literacy program abounds.

The aforementioned agenda creation is one of the most important functions of media in general, particularly in the political communication setting. Media, focusing on particular subject matter, emphasize its importance, effectively telling their audience what is important and what should be given more thought. This process is reinforced by the so-called pack journalism, first introduced by B.C. Cohen in his study on foreign correspondents in which he discovered their tendencies to peer-assess each other's materials, discuss possible headlines and sections, and to seek reaffirmation of their opinions in others' work (Bennett, 1980, pp. 330-331). Pack journalism can be defined as journalists' tendency to cooperate, agree, reaffirm, converge (in the content they report) and to use the same sources (McQuail, 1991, p. 282). This results in similarities in content and presentation of news across competitors (Piontek, 2011). Aware of this phenomenon, politicians and PR specialists alike aim to co-create the agenda and run their campaigns in a way that is attractive and easily reportable by the media. This part of the theoretical assumptions based on pack journalism term corresponds to the *Truth and Verification* and *Evaluating Sources* modules of News Literacy curriculum - practical manifestations of reflection on the selection of journalistic sources and their consequences. From the point of view of the main purpose of the course, which is the development of the critical thinking ability, reflection and analysis of journalistic sources is of particular importance. In our opinion, the problem of verification in journalistic practice and procedures should also be considered in the context of the tendency of pack journalism, because it allows us to deepen the reflection related to the profession of journalism and its cognitive challenges.

Average voter's day-to-day exposure to politics is curated by the media, mostly television and Internet, and as such their political reality could be described as *second-hand* (Gladys and Gladys in McCombs and Shaw (1972, p. 176)). Political reality consists of three categories: objective, subjective, and constructed. While objective reality represents political events the way they really are, its subjective counterpart is as perceived by participants and by-standers (political actors and voters). Constructed reality on the other hand is created by its presentation by the media (Kaid et al., 1991, p.12). In line with Gerbner's (1956) perception model, media content does not relate to the event itself, but rather to its perception. The model assumes that process of perception is not simply a matter of taking a picture of event, but it is a process of active interpretation. This perception is a result of an array of variables: selection, distance, context, availability, and the interaction between the events themselves. The message consists of its form and its content, and the way those interact with each other is dynamic and could gravely affect the way it is received. Message format can determine the understanding of event's importance through the perception framing effect. Subjective political reality, as perceived by the voters, is shaped mostly by its artificial counterpart (which in turn is not necessarily sourced in real events). The agenda can at times be imposed by socially important (in terms of actual or consequential importance) media events (Dayan and Katz, 1994).

The Polish presidential campaign of 2010 was dominated entirely by two such events – namely the Smolensk presidential airplane crash and a catastrophic flood, leaving media (and to certain extent, also politicians) little room for other subject matter. Despite content restrictions, journalists (through their reports) and politicians (through their actions) were in charge of the way those events were framed, and as such of the way the agenda, at the level of subject attributes, was set. One of the most important issues of the 2015 double elections (with both presidential and general elections taking place during the same campaign period) was the European refugee crisis. Although the Polish electorate was not directly affected by the influx of migrants and refugees, media inadvertently introduced the issue into the public and political agenda through their incessant reporting on the matter.

As Bernard Cohen stated in 1963 (p. 13) – the press cannot succeed in telling people what to think, but it can sure tell them what to think about, as observed in context of the priming and framing mechanisms.

The concept of priming was built on the idea that media provide a context for public discussion, setting the stage for audience understanding. As such, the position and

time spent on a given material can influence audience's attitude and sensitivity towards a given issue (Iyengar et al, 1982). Priming, on the other hand, is a mechanism highlighting a certain issue through its repetition, strategic positioning, and endorsement supplied by respected commentators (Skarzynska, 2005, p. 318). As the audience falls into certain cognitive traps, priming succeeds by evoking people's first associations to help make decisions, often disregarding the full spectrum of available information.

The idea of media providing a focus and environment for reporting a story, introducing how audiences will understand or evaluate it, is the basis of the framing theory (Goffman, 1974; Entman, 1993). As such, it deals with the social construction of meanings on two levels: the journalistic perception of social occurrences and the public interpretation. Framing, in this context, refers to cognitive (interpretive) frames, and it influences reality through the way phenomena, events, and issues are depicted by the media. The media, in turn, underline the subset of potentially important conditions, resulting in individuals using those conditions while forming their own opinions (Druckman, 2001, p. 1042). Cwalina and Falkowski (2006, p. 273) claim that framing relates to the process of determining *what is the object and what is the background*. In the same way as agenda setting relates to the relationship between issues covered by the media and their public perception. It however focuses on *what* and *how* people think and talk about the issue, rather than the issue itself.

Skarzynska (2005, p. 315), on the other hand, defines framing as making sense of complex phenomena which can be interpreted in a variety of ways. The frames are created not through reporting of new information about various events, but through putting the existing information in a particular perspective –organizing, or reorganizing knowledge the audience already has. Media put what we know about social reality in a perspective; they create frames in which social phenomena are organized, interpreted and judged.

Cognitive frames can be wide – pointing out the essence of politics by connecting past and present events; and they can be narrow – pertaining to particular issues and controversies. As Skarzynska underlines, they are not neutral; instead they suggest and report one political option as better, or more objective. Moreover, they indicate the best course of action (ibid.)

To illustrate these perspectives we can use the News Literacy module *Balance, Fairness and Bias*. Problem-solving exercises and simulations based on case studies provide us an appropriate didactic space to answer such basic questions as: In which way are the media biased? How the biased context of news influences the news itself? As a

complement to the concept of framing and priming, we consider the problem of audience bias and how they are developed or reduced in contact with the media. Equally important is the concept of balance (mechanical or quantitative measure of time and intensity which can be used in the pursuit of fairness) and fairness (qualitative judgment primarily about whether the news report is fair to the evidence). Ways of spotting fairness are fair play (giving subjects the right to be heard), fair presentation (the avoidance of prejudicial images such as unflattering photographs of public figures) and fair language (the avoidance of loaded words and terms such as saying a source 'admitted' instead of simply 'said.')

The possible application of framing and priming in the News Literacy course is also the module *Who is a journalist?* which gives an opportunity for reflection on blurred lines between journalism and promotion or journalism and propaganda. We can assume that these ambiguous genres use the form of true journalism to prime and frame the content relevant for their interest like the promotion of ideas or products.

Robert Entman's 1991 article outlining how, even in the era of global flow of information, the manner in which an event is reported changes its perception, was a starting point for research on contextualisation of news as a counter-concept for agenda-setting. The audience can also create its own frames when relating the events to their own experiences, whether personal or borrowed. Semetko and Valkenburg (2000, pp.95-96) outlined five most common framing mechanisms of media-reported events:

1. Event as a conflict: coverage is focused on dissonance, disagreement, differences, competition; political events are often presented in this way.

2. Event as a human interest (personalization): news introduces an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, an issue, or a problem; it focuses on individuals who are victims of disasters, wars, crises of various nature; it assigns greater importance to individuals than to facts or numbers which are difficult to grasp; in scope of politics it leads to personalization.

3. Event as a consequence: it presents the consequences which can occur in different areas of social life (e.g. economy) and at different levels (local, national, global).

4. Event as a moral issue: the media are prone to moralizing, especially with regard to politicians whose personal actions are reprehensible, as well as to moral assessments of political projects.

5. Event as a responsibility: assigning responsibility for the cause and/or effect to someone / something.

These framing mechanisms are parallel to *News Drivers* and *Mission of the Press* modules which examine the causes of news attractiveness and its relevance for the audience.

According to Entman, framing means *selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution* (2003, p. 417). Words and images that build frames are easy to distinguish from the rest of the news, because they have the ability to stimulate support or opposition to the sides in political conflict. Framing is, in his opinion, a central process through which politicians and the media exert influence on one another and the public. The ability to influence can be measured by *cultural resonance* and *magnitude*. The use of terms with greater cultural resonance gives greater potential for influence. They are characterized by being *noticeable, understandable, memorable, and emotionally charged* (ibid.). Substantive news frames play at least two of the four functions in reporting events, issues, and political actors: they define the effects or conditions as problematic; identify causes; convey moral judgments about individuals in the framed events; endorse remedies or improvements to the problematic situation.

Beyond aforementioned research approaches studies related to the media logic and criteria of gatekeeping processes in the media institutions are also of a great importance for News Literacy. Knowledge on the topic allows for critical evaluation of media-created social reality. When analyzing this theoretical framework, one must mention the pioneering research of Galtung and Ruge (1965), the later works of Harcup and O'Neill (2001), and Gans (2004).

When discussing and comparing the five most important concepts relating to gatekeeping process, Vincent Campbell (2004) stated that there is no universal formula or a commonly held set of journalistic values that shapes media's conduct around the world. The most well-known gatekeeping process models were formulated based on the analysis of journalists', publishers' and editors' behaviours, and their differences were said to be explained by the technological and organizational factors. The value of an event as news is strongly dependent on its context, i.e. on other events occurring at the same time, and on material, human, situational and other resources a given news outlet has at their disposal (pp. 115-124). They may limit the freedom of decision-making and influence media's agenda, at times contrary to the wishes and preferences of journalists. Campbell concludes that the most commonly used attractiveness criteria include: participation of persons

belonging to elites (variously defined); influence- or consequence- related importance; dramatic factor (conflict, negativity, surprise, controversy, scandal) (p. 116). News Literacy curriculum explore those criteria within the module *News Drivers* also comparing this attractiveness in traditional and digital, especially based on user-generated content, media platforms.

Most contemporary media researchers share a view that, in the last 20 years, two processes had the strongest influence on media practices and are strongly revealed in News Literacy teaching frame; namely, dynamic technological change and progressing commercialization. Alongside aforementioned media effects – agenda setting, priming, framing – they make up conceptual framework for the analysis of the media phenomenon which is put into new and even more demanding context in the Digital Age – populist political communication.

The phenomenon of populism in the media seems to be one of the most important challenges for News Literacy in contemporary democracies.

It can be defined as an ideology, but also as a tool aimed at achieving institutional goals. Majority of populist-related research focuses on the actions of politicians and political parties using populist messages as a vote-gaining tool.

In times of liquid post-modernity (Bauman, 2000) this strategy is very successful and brings surprising electoral results, as evident in Brexit or the election of Donald Trump for US president, where the slogans about self-serving elites and out-groups such as immigrants were abundant, and the campaigns were eager to define themselves as representatives of the ‘ordinary people’. These elements fit strongly with current definitions of populism.

In 2007 Jagers and Walgrave suggested a distinction between different types of populism: *complete populism*, which includes reference and appeals to the people, anti-elitism, and exclusion of outgroups; *excluding populism*, which includes only reference and appeals to the people, and exclusion of outgroups; *anti-elitist populism*, which includes reference and appeals to the people together with anti-elitism; *empty populism*, which includes only reference and appeals to the people.

Three particular perspectives: populism by the media, populism in the media and populist citizen journalism were prevalent in the European research on the relationship between media and populism, which is a part of an international populist political communication project (Aalberg et al., 2017). Populist newsroom logic, their common ground, results in depicting politics - depending on the time period – as a personal

competition of individual politicians, as a war and at the same time as entertainment (during the election period). It also reinforces emotionalization and dramatization (between election periods), which in turn strengthens prejudices and resentments; spreads fear and justifies xenophobic feelings (Plasser and Ulfram, 2003). This logic, however, is not a consequence of media instrumentalization by politicians, but that of a market impact on the media competing for the audience. Another significant factor is the expectation of the audience which also influence the emotionalization of the message provided by news.

Looking at the media and how they cover populist parties and politicians across Europe and in the USA three cross-national patterns can be identified: the previously limited coverage increased, often spurred by rising poll figures; with the increase in coverage we often see an increase in “negative” coverage – but given the anti-elite and anti-establishment feeling among many citizens, such negative coverage is not actually always negative for populist actors; some media actively engage in critical coverage of populist actors out of concern for democracy. In this way, we can think about the role of the media as populism by the media, populism through the media, and populist citizen journalism.

Populism is a hallmark feature of tabloid media and as such is visible in both the ideological and the stylistic dimensions. Media are often depicted as representing the people, and being a natural opposition to the elites, independently controlling and evaluating their actions. They reveal the misdeeds and hardship the establishment brings onto the common people. But as anti-elitism is no longer a feature of just popular journalism, and is increasingly becoming common amongst contemporary quality journalism, the personalization of politics is on the rise. The media move towards an informal and personal style of conversation and presentation of politics; they remove the distance between the journalist and the politician, even when the politician is used as a source of information (Piontek, et al., 2013)

This unintentional support populism is garnering comes from its media attractiveness – as exemplified by the actions of some American outlets during the last national presidential elections. Moreover, media’s attempts to distance themselves from the populist agenda is what drives the idea, and its supporters’ claims, that it has, in fact, assimilated into the mainstream.

Populism in the media is embodied by the strengthening of the populist political messages through their increased exposure, and, at the same time, media’s participation in popularizing and legitimizing of populist practices. Populists’ and media’s interests

converge in this instance, as the media are driven primarily by the logic of production and the need to acquire funding.

Although there is no consensus regarding what is and what is not journalism in terms of supplying unverified information; and presenting citizen journalism as an analytical category is controversial; the term is in use, and professional journalists invite increasingly large numbers of populist commentary supplied by the audience. In these circumstances empowering the audience by developing their critical thinking skills seems to be a basic necessity for theorists and practitioners of communication sciences.

Mainstream media hypocritically reinforce the, previously associated mostly with the Internet, populist position. All tendencies indicated above have been properly identified by the creators of News Literacy curriculum a decade ago. Current scientific studies (like to one described in this paper) only confirm that the problem of media populism is deepening. As the ever-increasing feature of the media-political environment is the dissemination by entities participating in political game of unprofessional, incomplete or false data, the purpose of the News Literacy course should be to enable the audience to receive this type of content critically.

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