

Mediamyths: the Struggle to Influence Society through Journalism

Maarja Lõhmus

When in the 1920s the United States was caught into a debate over the influence of the media and controlling public opinion (first postulated in 1922 by Walter Lippmann in his work *Public Opinion*), no one could possibly have conceived that by the end of the century this issue would become the focus of media studies. The emergence of the sc. global electronic media irrevocably changed the essence of journalism all around the world. It began with the illusion of conquering distance, which, being so strong and intense, affected universal processes. With humanity's triumph over the speed and distance of media the world became smaller, more substantial and perhaps more perceivable in its entirety. Media texts were attributed with more significance, but at the same time single media texts lost their singularity and importance as they merged into general media flow. Although McLuhan predicted the emergence of the global village already in 1964, it only assumed its actual mythological form after the next wave of technological innovations, reaching its peak in today's turn of the millennium atmosphere (see e.g. Castells 1997).

Getting to the bottom of mediamyths researchers usually turn to the relationship between society and media. Media functions as a means of turning phenomena and processes into social and institutional ones and presents these as such. Digital form attributes mythological qualities – narrativity, voiced performance, anonymity, the obsolete use of universality-generalisation, closeness, plausibility – to social texts.

In order to study the main problems associated with the functions of media, we should first and foremost look at texts in the field of media (I) and then look at the struggle within journalistic texts. (II) In the interests of comparing them together these subjects will be generalized under 26 general points.

I. JOURNALISM AS A BATTLEFIELD

1. The **need to communicate** belongs to the basic human needs along with the need for nutriment, habitation, warmth, etc. Journalism came into being when the basic needs of communication had not only been satisfied but had also been subjected to different social purposes. If people of today buy a newspaper to satisfy their need for communication, they get something more with the paper. The linear nature of radio and TV programs is unavoidable. The multifarious utilisation of humanity's communicational needs and the creation of new needs, together with other interests, constitutes the history of journalism.¹

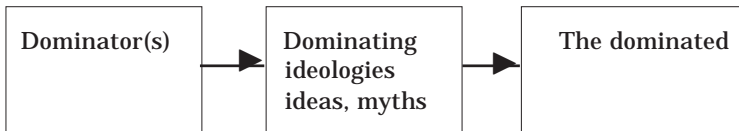
2. The principal means and principal carrier of the need for communication is the journalistic text, which for various interest groups functions as a vehicle of self-expression, in order to influence the public and opposition.

3. The struggle to make oneself publicly known and heard continues in society.

4. The most serious struggle in society concerns the **definition** and **interpretation** of those processes as they occur in society.

5. Different interest groups attempt to impose their ideas into the text either covertly or overtly.

6. Journalism is essentially a field of mediating ideas and the means for establishing and consolidating ideologies.



7. The large number of interest groups and overlapping interests (different directions and mutual intersections) complicates the situation.

The empirical point of view of communication theory is that the 'truth' of the first source and its interpretation is crucial. Later interpretations will not make it non-existent but might have the ability to shape this. Thus the struggle is for quick interpretations of events and phenomena.

In the battlefield of texts the main issue is whose text and with what kind of structure will it be published first.

8. Journalism is one of the specific public domains whose **ideas** and **myths** affect other public (and social) domains (cf. Bourdieu's 'political domain', 'symbolic systems' – 'art', 'religion', 'language'). His approach to 'domains' is based on their role in society). Using the conceptual system of Bourdieu, journalism is seen as the arena for all struggle for political and symbolic power, for the determination of exchange values: symbolic power, a subordinate type of power, is merely the transformed, i.e. misrecognised, transfigured and legitimated version of other forms of power.

Contemporary myths, spread by the press, form a part of every established ideology.

9. Interest groups whose texts do not proceed from established ideology must use more complicated structures to express their ideas. The more closed the situation in the social battlefield and the more difficult the access to publicity is, the more complicated is the inner structure of the text and the more intensive are the inherent problems within the text.

10. Assuming that we are seeking objectivity, then on the first level we encounter semantic problems, on the second level shared rules concerning particular texts. On the third level, however, we observe general ethical rules (cf. Habermas 1967/1988). As a rule, journalistic texts do not strive for objectivity, as the application of rational principles in journalistic texts is inconsistent.

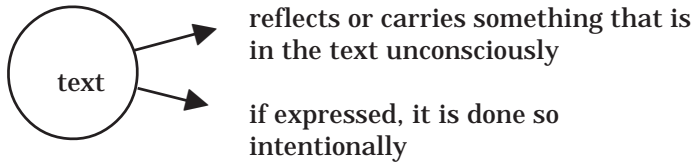
11. Each text forms a 'cloud of meanings' which in turn is a part of semiosis (cf. Biber 1989). Semiosis includes all possible meanings of the language, shades of meanings in different discourses in different contexts of the linguistic environment.

12. The state of society and the semiotic use of the language spoken in society are interconnected. The more closed the situation in social (public) battlefields, the richer and more activated the semiosis is, and therefore the inner potentialities come to use. By increasing in density, semiosis generates more mean-

ings. The struggle in a closed society goes on in terms of a hyperdense semiosis.

With the opening of society semiosis expands and becomes thinner.

13. We must carefully consider comprised and non-comprised semiosis: does all that is expressed coincide with what can be expressed.



Journalistic texts reflect the conscious and unconscious voice of interest groups. Journalists are rarely aware of whose domain they work in. In speaking of journalistic texts it is also important to determine whether they are conscious and to what degree they are so. The unconscious forms a deeper structure which affects all people in the same way (Levi-Strauss 1955).

14. Journalistic text as '**an active text**' is a social phenomenon; it has the power to influence social processes.

15. It is characteristic of the text that apart from what is intentionally expressed in the text (objectivity, unambiguity) something additional is always expressed in it (subjectivity, ambiguity).

The struggle within the text is evident even if it is not explicitly expressed in it.

16. Media favours self-domination. Media may choose to pass existential judgement: while being subordinate and susceptible to influence, it might choose to turn participating subjects into objects, attempt to become the only irreplaceable link between the dominator and the dominated, increase its power of influence. Media develops towards higher control in order to make dominators dependent on themselves.

17. We could picture text and everything that affects it in the form of a model (Fig. 1). Here I use the notion of 'model' in a very general sense: a model is the analogue of the cognised object, which replaces the object in the cognition process. The model does not conceive of media as an independent phenomenon but

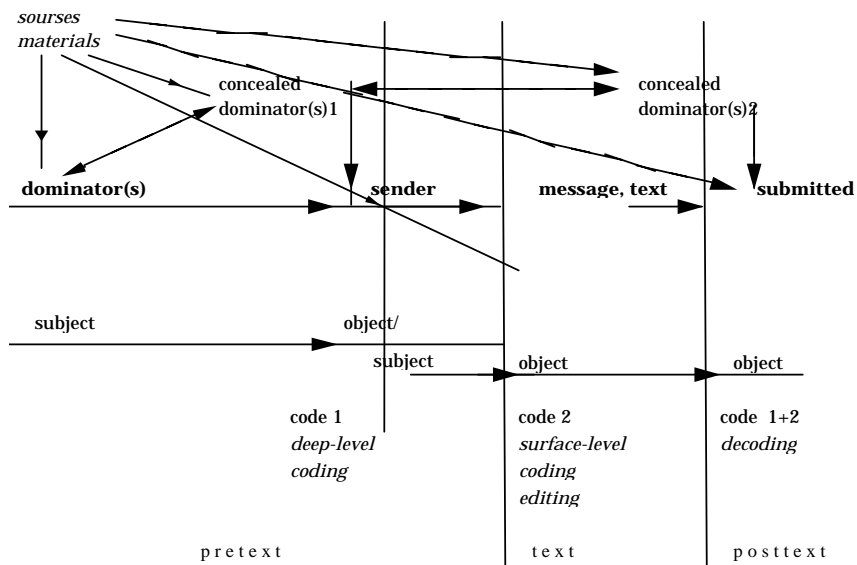


Figure. Model of struggle-field in media

as a part of the struggle of ideas (myths) and for domination. (Even the most independent publications present texts that express evaluative manners of thought.) The main questions here are therefore: How to characterise the battlefield of journalistic texts? Who are the participants and how are they interrelated to each other?

Participants in the symbolic battlefield are:

1) **Dominators** (overt and hidden) who directly wish to make sure that their ideas will reach the public through the journalistic text.

2) **Concealed dominator(s) 1** representing (independent) attitudes towards other dominator(s), material and topic, and whose existence influences the sender.

3) **Sources and materials** existing independently of the battlefields and those who participate in these, although the main struggle of how to encode them takes place in the phase of pretext.

4) **The sender** who encodes the material and sources it in some way (independent, influenced) using the journalistic message. In complicated semiotic situations the central role is played

by the author who him/herself becomes a distinctive sign (and code) in the field of texts. (Senders can be dominators, concealed dominators, authors, interpreters-editors).

Society, environment, publication, sender-author determine whether the encoding takes place only once (code1), in the form of deep-level encoding, or it is completed by additional, surface-level encodings (code 2).

5) The message, or the text, is the result of the struggle. It is also an instrument of the struggle. (Text as institution; text as instrument.) It contains some manner of thought, which has been encoded in a specific way.

Journalistic text can be very effective when advocating different social interests. It is the means of influencing and also the object of the struggle aiming to influence.

In the battlefield, texts acquire symbolic meaning as representatives of corresponding discourses. The appearance of one or another text attests to this fact that one or the other discourse has appeared in society. (In a closed society such appearance has been called 'the front line' and journalists, the senders of the texts – the 'soldiers of the ideological front'.)

6) The submitted are the recipients who turn to journalism in times of need for communication and they become submitted to the power of journalistic texts. In the process of decoding the texts they are often unable to distinguish the different structures hidden in the code.

7) Concealed dominator(s) 2 representing other (independent) attitudes towards the dominator(s), material, topic, and journalistic message, influencing those submitted with its own existence.

II TEXT AS A BATTLEFIELD, THE STRUGGLE WITHIN THE TEXT

18. In the symbolic battlefield the text undergoes three phases:

- 1) pretext
- 2) text (itself)
- 3) posttext

The struggle about and for the journalistic text takes place mainly in the first phase, in the pretext (see Tarasti 'pre-sign').

19. Text contains tensions, which arise from the nature of the text itself and are manifested on different levels:

1) grammatical tensions – sentence structure and the relationship between parts of sentence;

2) semantic tensions – content components and inner logic;

3) semiotic tensions – relationship between the text and the surrounding semiosis, codes used, and text as a discursive whole.

20. Text therefore has its inner parameters, which, if changed, change the text. In the course of the struggle around the text this changing may be exercised purposely. The struggle within the text primarily involves hidden meaning and textual codes.

21. The potency, or potential energy of the text, which becomes altered in order to exert an influence, is also important. The potency of text consists of the inner tensions of the text, when the text provides all alternatives for interpretation. Thus the text becomes an effective asset in the battle.

An unambiguous text contains no tension. The appearance of alternative thoughts brings along tensions between different ways of interpretation of the text and within the text itself, which instigates a struggle to influence the possible alternative meanings of the text, and by this means to manipulate it.

The **covert** problem of the struggle is that it seeks acceptance to, say, two out of three meanings, whereas the **hidden** problem lies in the fact that all the alternative meanings of the text can never be unambiguous and unidirectional, otherwise the text would be reduced to a one-dimensional level. One of the important characteristics of the text is its meaningfulness, and difference in meanings creates the **inner tension** of the text.

22. The more complex the deep-coded textual code of the sender (code 1), the stronger the inner tension within the text. The more the text contains surface codes (codes 2), the stronger is the reciprocally related inner tension in the text (different tensions follow different directions, their vectors and force diverge). Text potentials become contradictory, thus rendering the influence of strongly edited (on the surface level) and/or censored text insignificant.

23. Censoring and editing of the text is the same as encoding, subjecting the text to new codes. In this process the inner force of the text decreases. The tension between deep coding, or code 1, and surface coding, or code 2, causes inconsistencies within the text structure, which is reflected in the weakening potential of the text. The greater the differences between code 1 and code

2, the stronger the structural inconsistencies and inner tensions between different encodings. If the sender, who uses code 1, and the editor, who uses code 2, happen to be one and the same person, he or she might experience a conflict of (roles) on the personal level, as he or she must assume two different roles in order to be able to perform the encodings.

24. Repeatedly encoded text can never be complete, because additional encoding changes the text. Censoring has the effect of causing surface codes to hinder the coding of the deep code, decreasing the influence of deep coding, destroying the wholeness of the text. It appears that the larger the number of contradictory surface codes in the text, the more chaotic the deep structure becomes.

25. Even though each encoding may have been performed according to a systematised code, their interaction can produce a totally unsystematic code, or one with an unrecognisable pattern.

26. Each code should have a structure and a key. However, numerous codes together rarely convey the code structure necessary for actual decoding. The recipient-submitter performs decoding by using deep and surface code, the total sum of different codes, but is unable to open the code structure necessary for actual decoding. The recipient is unable to differentiate between and decode single codes, which are too different from the total sum.

One of the prerequisites of censorship is the possibility of encoding the texts by means of different codes, while decoding can be performed only through one code, where the total sum of components does not conform to the structure of component codes.

In a closed society, the text can never be a public battlefield: the struggle occurs on the structural level and on the level of hidden signs-codes. The text is therefore public, but the struggle to interpret signs and codes remains hidden. In an open society, media texts develop their own structure, and their key elements are organised differently from the texts of a closed society. The status of text in the media field is far more important than the structural issues of the text.

Nevertheless, the main issues of media texts in both models of society are surprisingly similar.

Translated by Kait Realo

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