

Rumour, websites, the family and the media and young people's communication

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Abstract: Nowadays, web sites and social online networks expand the communication space and enter the influence field, which some 20-30 years ago was occupied by the family, the close social entourage or the printed or electronic media. Communicational channels are now reorganised. In a research perspective, it is important to determine the tendencies in the development of interpersonal and of intergroup communication. The object of the research paper is young educated people and the subject encompasses their preferences for a communication channel, as well as the amplification of the threat, posed by rumours and errors in mass behaviour. The aim is to achieve at least partial scientific justification of the present changes and the degree of their completion. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used: a non-representative sociological research was conducted via a pool survey with voluntarily engaged participants - students from Bulgaria, Romania and France. The results show that young educated people trust traditional media the most, while at the same time they prefer social online networks and sites when looking for information about companies. When it comes to getting to know a particular person - direct communication is favoured. According to the data, only one half of educated young people are willing to engage in online surveys. The participants declare certainty that rumours are spread on the Internet.

Keywords: rumour, social online networks, family, traditional media, communication.

Introduction

The emergence of new channels in message exchanges in interpersonal and public communication creates a new type of noise in the message pathway and inflicts new unprecedented in their speed of spread threats to introduce directed or accidental errors in mass behaviour. More and more examples confirm that our information-dominated society is undergoing changes. Nowadays, a significant part of young people's communication takes place on the web. This concerns meetings; sharing of information about people, companies, events and generally – a significant part of the picture of the surrounding world is formed in the consciousness. The predispositions for concrete behavioural acts are also formed in this way. Parallel with this, the current expansion of the communication on the web is clearly driven by managing the perception of today's conversations. It is logical to assume that some of the factors, definitive for mass perception, have changed: The family's and friends' informer and consultant expertise is no longer capable of competing with the overload of easily accessible and especially up-to-date information in the Global Network. The traditional print and electronic media have lost the position of a first and only source of messages about reality. A significant part of the problem is confined within the boundaries of the questions related to potential conflicts, induced by the unknown in both information transmission and information management.

Although partially, the nature of these changes is defined in the **object** of the current elaboration, which extends to the global and the glocal aspects of news. To achieve this, certain tendencies and their degree of completion are outlined, by courtesy of an empirical sociological research, conducted amongst young educated people from Bulgaria, Romania and France. A qualitative approach facilitated the projection of the registered relations over

threats coming from rumours “bending” mass perception, the “initial information effect”, etc. Micro-targeting is one of the ways to extract the discussed problems from the Web and to place them in the non-digital reality. It turns out the channels young people use to obtain information are on the verge of changes, caused by expected novelties.

The rumour as a major reputation threat

Jean-Noel Kapferer describes the rumour as “the oldest tool for information exchange” [1]. The rumour itself induces a specific deformation in messages which is determined by the natural for the human mind affinity to fill the missing parts in the puzzle of the surrounding world. In most cases, the appendices are the result of our imagination and although the existing options are probably numerous, the synthesised picture is almost always different to reality. In the middle of the 20th century G. Allport and L. Postman generalised the shown relation in the logical operator, which describes the rumour as a function of the multiplication of Ambiguity and Importance of the topics that are interesting for the public. [2] Around that time R. Knapp defines the significant characteristic that rumour messages are independent from the existence or the absence of trustworthiness [3]. This specific categorically differentiates a rumour from a lie and presents the perspective for its adequate evaluation in the environment of intensive communication expanded on the web.

One of the reasons is the high speed of information transmission and information exchange which unbelievably accelerate the multiplication and the mutations of a rumour. Another, no less important element, is the virtuality on the web. Virtuality itself creates pictures which are even more attractive, but meets the trustworthiness criteria only partially. [4] This characteristic not only lowers the criticality, but also fully corresponds to the property defined by Knapp. In this way, the web transforms itself into an environment conducive to creating and spreading rumours.

The consequences for the relations in the public space are dangerous. Because of the discussed peculiarities, a rumour is flexible and has an enormous potential for invading the management of mass perceptions. Gustave Le Bon (1841—1931) notes this circumstance as a defining factor in crowd psychology [5]. This conclusion was reached 125 years ago. Today, we understand that a rumour intervenes in the management of contemporary social processes too.

The occurrence of ambiguity in the emitted messages amplifies the differences between the public expectations and what is emitted to critical levels. In this environment, even the most friendly public generates rumours. They are not only different to the expectations regarding an adequate social development, but because of their variability, they are also unpredictable. The role of the family and the traditional print and electronic media also falls within the multitude of counteraction possibilities. The family is one of the leading factors for forming mass thinking. [6] The family has its limitations – the smallest numbers being on however its relatively constant social circle gives it the authority of a trustworthy commentator of reality. After discussing the rumour, a consultation with the close social entourage not only clarifies the unknown in the puzzle of reality, but gives the answer to the question: Where do we go now? Newspaper, TV and radio occupy the position of emitters of trustworthy information and credible comments, which has been functional for centuries. These media also retain their role in the formation of mass behaviour. After the quick introduction of the Internet in the prevailing part of social spheres, this position is not of an informer anymore, but of a trusted observer and commentator of events.

In the prevailing part of the cases, the shown authority is built upon the opportunity to enhance objectivity through time delay – a consequence of the periodicity of issues. Because of that, the intensity of the exchange of messages and the development of opportunities for the management on the “river” of information, introduced via the Internet, amplifies present options and establishes new ones for the threats. The increase is determined by the expansion of communication on the Web and by the level to which the public allows changes in its social everyday life.

Methodology

The developed thesis is confirmed via existing elaborations, examples from practice and statistically evaluated results from an empirical sociological research. It is done by a self-completion, uncomputerised survey which is carried out amongst volunteering students from universities in Bulgaria, Romania and France. The sample, consisting of young educated people, is non-representative, but variable and allows the expansion beyond the local socio-cultural borders of the different countries. The empirical sociological research meets the criteria for confidentiality, anonymity and providing primary information.

The questionnaire was answered by volunteers from universities: in Bulgaria – 237 participants; in Romania – 96 participants and in France – 34 participants.

The results are statistically evaluated. Some of the questions allow multiple combinations of answers. The presence of more than one answer is accepted as a sign of hesitation whose level is calculated for each question individually and is measured by taking the number of multiple answer instances and calculating it as a percentage of all participants that have answered the question.

The empirical sociological research was conducted during the preparation of my PhD dissertation. [7] Part of the data is shown in Table 1, secondarily analysed and used for the aims of the thesis on this topic. The new results are compared with other pieces of scientific research and with cases, published in the press.

Some characteristics of young people’s communication. The results of the Empirical Sociological Research

The present survey results show that young educated people prefer direct contact with a person, when in search for information about a member of society. Contrary to this preference, they visit corporate sites, when they are looking for data and messages about companies. As far as the survey extends, this result shows that social networks are a preferred information channel, or at least equal to the family, when participants are interested in a person. This fact shows that the influence of the close social entourage consisting of relatives, friends and colleagues on interpersonal interactions is probably decreasing. Parallel with this, the occurring gap in the options for the management of what is perceived, is being filled by online sharing platforms.

Contrary to family influence, these options are bigger in number and predispose to more virtuality, in addition to being more unpredictable. The trust in traditional media is the highest, however, probably because of its periodicity, in times of extreme situations, the interest in them is lower than the one towards online editions. When a scandal occurs, i.e. the situation has a clear crisis character, social media and information agencies have the leading role of a primary informer.

<i>Grouping criterion:</i>			<i>Recorded statistically significant differences (t=2; P(t)>95%)</i>	<i>Hesitation</i>	<i>Side effects</i>
Preferences as far as collecting information about a person goes	Face- to- face conversation	72,36%	None	19,47%	Incompletion of the process of choosing a source of information
	Social networks in Internet	16,59%			
	Family, neighbours, friends	11,06%			
Preferences as far as collecting information about companies goes	Social networks in Internet	25,60%	None	27,26%	Incompletion of the process of choosing a source of information
	The site of the organisation itself	59,85%			
	Family, neighbours, friends and colleagues	11,79%			
	Other channels	2,76%			
Preferences as far as collecting information in the event of a crisis goes	Traditional media	33,94%	None	67,34%	Incompletion of the process of choosing a source of information
	Corporate site	12,29%			
	Social networks in Internet	28,80%			
	Online informational agencies	20,00%			
	others	4,95%			
Trust in sources of information	Online informational agencies	20,73%	None	16,32%	
	Social networks in Internet	9,84%			
	Traditional media	47,15%			
	No opinion	22,02%			
Affinity to answering to online surveys	answered	37,09%	Romania	23,40%	Influence of local factors. Disbelief in online surveys.
	unanswered	62,91%	France	3,06%	
Assuming the presence of rumours in the web.	Yes	98,7%	None	None	None
	No	1,3%			
Assumption of trust present in rumours, which are in the Internet	Yes	47,63%	None	None	None
	No	52,37%			

Note: “t” stands for the Pearson regression coefficient

Table 1: *Statistical results from the survey*

In the context of the research, the following conclusion is reached, i.e. that the need to gain information about what is happening decreases the level of criticism applied to the received messages. Even subsequent examination of the information and of the comments in traditional media is probably incapable of changing the expectations that have been formed after receiving the initial information. A similar conclusion shows the threats, transferred via communication, undergo a transformation to a higher level.

An expression of opportunities for rumour forming and managing via changing online content priorities is observed. Today, messages are easy to personify, multiply and

transform via computers and the Global network. The survey answers confirm this conclusion. The respondents categorically state the existence of rumour spread on the Internet. With regard to the rumour trustworthiness, they are divided in an almost equal proportion (48:52). This differentiation shows that the Knapp law holds true for the web as well. Parallel with this, is observed the typical characteristic that truth is irrelevant to rumour information content and this is reflected in online surveys. Undoubtedly, online requested and received answers sketch a quick, although untrustworthy picture of the actual reality. There is a high level of ambiguity, which is generated by the unrequested and the unreceived answers. Given that the happening is important, the shown ambiguity brings the online survey results closer to a rumour, rather than an objective finding.

The threats

The survey results show the communication expansion on the web dimension occurs in young people's activity, which has a dominant role in forming processes in the future. A certain attitude against virtuality in online interactions is registered. Such are: preferences for "Face -to-Face" contacts, when the subjects are the individual members of society; high trust in the traditional media and a registered lack of willingness to fill in questionnaires online. A statistically significant difference between the answers in Romania and France is registered with regard to this paradoxical lack of willingness. Based on this result comes the assumption that the communication expansion on the web is functionally limited by some local factors. This conclusion is independent of the registered variations. The tendency is clear: the Internet invades more and more actively the social spheres in young people's lives.

The consequences allow for the evolution of some conflicts: from the lack of willingness of the browsers and other software platforms to delete personal data (the right to be forgotten), to using the published accessible data in the social platforms which is available for commercial purposes. The problems are not few, however what is clear is the increasing online-determined possibility to micro-target the environment.

Within the limits of the thesis, micro-targeting is related to the assumption that people unite around social networks because of an idea – not a product or a service [8]. This circumstance brings the necessity for companies to connect some products or trademarks with a doctrine to which a certain social activity is directed. To achieve this, an organisation needs to precisely detect and identify potential users and their attraction to the idea. As the survey results demonstrate, the students are inclined to adequately react to the shown activity. Young educated people look primarily for information on social online networks and parallel with this, they publish more and more wanted and unwanted data about themselves. This data contains not only legal personal information (date of birth, personal identity number, etc.), but also the most often used services, their favourite places, the most frequently bought products, etc. The intensive sharing on the web leads to the accumulation of extraordinarily big data bases. The information there is attractive to businesses, however it could prove harmful for the people it belongs to. This sharing creates the opportunity for malicious use of people's information for directing the individual and mass behaviour and for inducing an error in attitudes. The digitised and collected data allow for a high precision when the various players collect intelligence, marketing and other kinds of information and, after evaluation, use it for targeting customers, as well as for intrusions in people's private space. To what extent it fits in the moral frame of the democratic society, is a hot

topic. Thus, micro-targeting via social online platforms becomes an increasingly desired business. A necessity to decrypt the Big Data base arises, which is not an easy task.

English researchers relate the content published in private profiles with personal psychological specifics and prove that in social online networks: 68 reactions (likes) are enough to determine the skin colour (with 95% certainty), whether the person is homosexual (with 88% certainty), the affinity for either the Democratic or Republican Parties (with 85 % certainty), etc. According to the same elaborations, 70 reactions bring more information than one's friends have about the person; 150 - more than one's family has, and 300 – more than one's partner has. [9, 10]

On the one hand, micro-targeting is very useful for companies in competing with their counterparts. On the other – it provides a solid data base for guiding rumours and for managing the mass attitude. To what extent the approach of using personal shared data is compatible with the ethical limits of the democratic society, is a matter, which undoubtedly needs to be solved.

The legal action, deposited by the Russian network company VKontakte against the National Bureau for Credit History and Double Data confirms the problem. VKontakte have doubts that the two companies have used the personal shared data in the social network platform for evaluating their clients' financial stability, their credit history, etc. The case is from the beginning of 2017 and the legal action is for the symbolic amount of one rouble. [11]

As for rumours, a decision probably does not exist. Rumours are a typical part of communication.[12] Parallel with this, social networks are the natural environment for their initiation and spread.[13] The combination of the two factors with the micro-targeting of the audience, increases several-fold the efficiency and efficacy of the rumour action over mass expectations. The most common scenarios are false news. They create the virtual picture of an extreme event, no matter whether this event exists. The composition topic is undoubtedly important and the virtuality introduces a significant dose of ambiguity. It has to be persuasively refuted, however, this is not always possible. In the cases of lack of success, this communication tactics initiates only the reaction of rumour synthesis. The problem in these cases is that the situation cannot be kept under control. Rumours are impossible to manage, however they are both attractive and important to the public.

Sometimes, it is not necessary to produce false news. It is enough to exclude the needed part of information from the context of the news and precisely send it to the emotionally engaged and predisposed to undertaking actions members of the public. The so called “dark posts” on Facebook or similar services on other social platforms are convenient tools for such realisations. These services allow sending not only advertisements, but other messages to the public, which are sorted by courtesy of micro-targeting by age, ethnicity and other factors. The use of micro-targeting to direct mass attitudes towards publicly important themes activates the oscillating, self-inflicting chain reaction of introducing changes in mass perception. This collaboration allows for some predictability of the result. In such cases, micro-targeting is a significant tool for the high efficiency of the manipulation.

Discussion

The statistical evaluation of the results from the survey shows that the influence of local factors is not major. The only exception is the small, however statistically significant

difference between the answers in France and in Romania about the affinity for online-conducted surveys.

The measured hesitation is significant with regard to threats. The highest level is recorded in the answers about information channels in crisis times (67,34%). This is definitive for the threat of deformations in the initial information. Its development path is unclear, due to the fact the audience has not accepted completely the communication changes - something derived from the high levels of hesitation.)

Hesitation is also recorded in the answers to the rest of the questions. The levels are approximately 15-20%. This results show that the completion of the processes of choosing sources is incomplete.

This incompleteness shows that the preferences for information channels are unstable and that the future of threats, which are transferred in this way, is unknown. The registered hesitation indicates a possible change in tendencies.

Conclusion

The survey results correspond to the tendency for the continuing expansion of communication on the web, as well as the active introduction of social online platforms and web sites in more social spheres.

The audience consisting of young educated people reacts adequately to the changes.

The public is not passive, which is apparent in the remaining high trust in traditional media and in the low activity exhibited after receiving an invitation to fill an online questionnaire.

The remaining tendencies for the evolution of rumours on the web, show that despite the active (or not clearly passive) behaviour, the audience of young educated people stays under the dynamic threat of unwanted communication influences.

The combination of high velocity of message spread on the web and the possibilities for micro-targeting of the audience increase several-fold the threats to induce errors in mass behaviour in the future.

Participants' affinity for giving multiple answers to a single question confirms both the presence of hesitation and the fact that the distribution of today's communication preferences for information channels is incomplete.

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