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THE MEDIA INFLUENCE ON THE AUDIENCE: ABSOLUTE OR RELATIVE?

This question was answered in 1960, based on numerous empirical studies, by the American researcher Joseph T. Klapper, who formulated the theory of multi-stage information flow. Real scientists, like Clapper, avoid statements like “Yes, the media is omnipotent” or “No, the media can’t do anything.” Clapper formulated his idea as follows: the media impact on the audience can vary in strength and effect, it depends on a number of reasons, but in most cases it is very relative [1].

The main conclusion that the researcher came to is that the impact of the media on the audience is most often not absolute, it is only one of many factors that influence the way we think and act. In a normal society, in a state that tries to avoid propaganda and focuses on the development of quality journalism, on ensuring freedom of speech, assembly, religion, media is only one of the factors influencing public opinion. Therefore, the media are usually not a necessary and sufficient reason for changing perceptions.

In most cases, media messages reinforce rather than change audience beliefs and behavior. Other circumstances of our life - socio-demographic characteristics, values, group attitudes, “opinion leaders”, etc. - are responsible for the formation of a certain picture of the world in us, and the media only strengthen this picture of the world. The media themselves, in isolation from previous factors, are usually not capable of forming certain beliefs.

Some researchers consider that between media messages and the audience there is a complex social structure with a large number of so-called “intermediary factors”. The first mediating factor was named by Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet in the theory of “two-stage flow of information” [2], these are “opinion leaders”. The role of “opinion leaders” is that they help the audience navigate media information by emphasizing, explaining and commenting on media messages. The very presence of “opinion leaders” already makes the influence of media relative. It is worth drawing attention to the fact that, in addition to “opinion leaders,” there are other intermediary factors that perform a similar function - they are a filter through which the audience passes media information. Therefore, it is more correct

to talk not about a “two-stage”, but about a “multi-stage” flow of information from the media to the audience.

It is clear that at each “step” media information is lost, changed, and rethought. But sometimes it gets worse.

The most important mediating factor, according to Clapper, is the personal attitudes and beliefs of a particular person. It is they, and not the media at all, that become the foundation that determines what a person thinks on a particular issue and how he acts. Conditioned by upbringing, education, professional and personal experiences, cultural and national context, these attitudes and beliefs primarily determine the choices we make. Why do different people perceive the same media message differently? First of all, because they have different attitudes and beliefs.

The second mediating factor, according to Klapper [1], is our socio-demographic characteristics. Age, gender, education, residence in a certain area, income level, etc. significantly influence how we perceive media information. Of course, not everyone, for example, living in the capital or having an academic degree, thinks and acts the same, but in general we can very confidently predict the opinions and behavior of social groups in relation to this or that information.

The third important mediating factor is group norms. A person usually does not exist on his own, but is a member of one group or another. Groups are formed at work and/or study, on the basis of neighborhood and family ties, various interests (hobbies, faith, politics, local problems, etc.). Clapper estimates that the average person belongs to at least 20 groups. Today, thanks to the development of social networks, our opportunities to join different groups have expanded significantly, just as the number of groups themselves has increased due to the formation of virtual, but living and sustainable communities. Groups play a big role in people’s lives. Each group has established opinions and preferences on many social issues, has its own “opinion leaders”, the group is a society in miniature. Accordingly, media information must pass through a group filter, but it may not pass or may pass through with significant adjustments to the original version. In addition, being a member of several groups makes it possible to compare interpretations of media messages made in different groups. This increases the criticality of perception of media information and allows you to develop a more balanced attitude towards it.

The named intermediary factors - “opinion leaders”, socio-demographic characteristics, personal attitudes and group norms - enter into complex relationships with each other, as a result one may contradict each other in some way, as well as complement, develop, strengthen certain views and attitudes and, most importantly, contribute to the audience’s critical attitude towards media messages. Accordingly, according to Klapper, the process of mass communication occurs as follows: the media do not directly “penetrate” the audience, but pass through a complex system of intermediary factors that act as information filters, blocking some information, developing and supplementing certain points, emphasizing and commenting. As a result, the media can only strengthen the views

that the audience has already formed due to the action of intermediary factors. However, in some cases, Clapper emphasizes, the media can change public opinion. This usually happens in a society where the media is monopolized or limited, and where government propaganda is strong. To do this, at least one of two conditions must be met.

The first condition: intermediary factors do not operate, as a result, the influence of the media turns out to be direct. Such situations are rare, but they do occur, primarily due to the marginalization of the individual, falling out of habitual social connections. For example, a person, for various reasons (dismissal, retirement, illness, relocation, etc.), limits his social contacts, falls out of most groups to which he previously belonged, does not form, for example, due to a language barrier, new connections, and is deprived of his usual “opinion leaders”, begins to doubt his own life principles - and as a result, he finds himself “face to face” with media messages. In such situations, the media are quite capable of changing even what seems to be a long-standing and firmly established opinion.

The second condition: mediating factors themselves promote change. Then media calling for change, based on the action of intermediary factors, can significantly transform the initial views of the audience. If, for example, the state begins to promote militarism and revanchism from kindergarten, introduces a similar ideology into the entire education system through textbooks and events, promotes it at the level of mass culture through TV series, song shows, through “opinion leaders,” etc., as well as in the media, then over time a significant part of citizens with different socio-demographic and value characteristics radically change their beliefs from “Never again!” to “We can do it again!”

So, the most likely effects of media influence on the opinions and preferences of the audience will be the following:

1. Strengthening existing views - most often.
2. A small change in existing views - if the initial position is unstable or there is a lack of knowledge.
3. A radical change in existing views is rare, only in a situation of marginalization or joint action of the media and intermediary factors.

References:

1. Klapper J. The effects of mass communication. New York: Free Press, 1960.
2. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, Hazel Gaudet. How the Voter Makes Up His Mind in a Presidential Campaign. Legacy Edition, New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.