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Influences of cultural identity on communication

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Abstract: The situation in the region occasionally shows a climate of tension between populations with different national identities. Social facts demonstrate that in terms of media multiculturalism, differentiation and division between ethnic communities are increased. This has happened because each medium is mono-cultural, has its own identity, even a very strong identity, due to its "neighbors", TVs and radio stations associated with cultural communities sharing the same territorial space. Under these conditions, ethnic and national communities live within a certain multicultural landscape, but these communities as an audience, follow a number of media selected according to strict ethnical criteria. Unfortunately, freedom of expression still does not ensure the coexistence of different national groups. It may even happen that freedom of expression worsens this coexistence.

Keywords: Multiculturalism, Ethnicity, Semiotics, Codification, Media, Conflict

1. The Role of Communication in the Deepening or Mitigating Cultural Differences between Different Social Groups

There are many communication specialists that support the thesis for the influence of cultural identity on communication, and vice versa. This relation implies inter alias that the way in which we communicate in cultural contexts often reinforces our sense of cultural identity and awareness of cultural differences. Communications specialist Allen (2004) explains that "through communication with family members, friends and people coming from different cultures, we come to understand ourselves and our identity. At the same time, we reveal our identity to others."(p.68). Each individual highlights Meunie & Peraya (2009) "…builds his unique self - the image with which he/she is identified – by disconnecting ties with the other who is different from him/her and every social group builds its unique cohesion by excluding other groups which it considered alien to itself." (p. 274).

Generally, members of a social group exhibit a tendency to socialize, to participate in the same activities and belong to the same group. Following this dynamic, society is fragmented into communities that oppose each other.

There are many factors contributing to this difference. For many researchers, communication is considered the most important factor in the deepening or mitigating cultural differences between different social groups. That is why C. Wright Mills (1956) notes that "between consciousness and existence stand communication which influences such consciousness as men have their existence."(p.67). In this context, analysis of communication becomes very important.

Researchers, David Morley (1992) and Stuart Hall (1996), argue that the effort to adapt to the characteristics of anyone in conveying the message and at the same time, the interest to be differentiated in order to preserve identity, become necessities during the communication. However, there are cases of lack of desire to put oneself in the position of the others, in order to understand their views in the final stage of formulation of the message, thinking that this is not necessary. This can happen because "... they have a series of internalized schemes through which they perceive, understand, value and appreciate them" (Bourdieu, 1989: 14 -25).

It considered that these social realities are better reflected in media than anywhere else. "Journalists, beyond nature and logic of work, belong to social and cultural environments that are produced and reproduced through their discourses."(Maigret, 2003: 191). According to Schlesinger (1992), social and cultural influences heavily

affect the journalists. Often they serve as a lens to view and judge reality. This aspect is too evident in a multicultural society, where differences between different social groups are easily noticeable and discursive content highlights them to a larger degree.

2. Multiculturalism as Public Relations

For a long time, in the Balkans – with a significant percentage of Albanian population with various social and legal statuses, we hear about a media, educational, religious, linguistic and multicultural landscape. Many information agencies with private owners of Albanian ethnic origin, broadcast in Albanian language. Especially in Macedonia, statistically, the last decade has given rise to a very rich multicultural reality,

This reality of the media, created over the recent years, is certainly an indication showing that the minorities, especially the Albanians in Macedonia, have achieved certain rights. Based on Amendment No. 8 to the Constitution, approved in November 2001, which allows members of ethnic communities to have the right to establish cultural, artistic and educational institutions as well as scientific associations for expressing, cultivating and developing their identities, specifically "Law on public media", Article 45, paragraphs 2 and 3, oblige media companies to broadcast their programs in the languages of ethnic groups where they constitute a majority of population.

As a result of these changes, a much diversified media landscape is developed in Macedonia. Today, in addition to Macedonian media that occupy most of the media market, there are 73 media in Albanian, 8 in Turkish, 4 in English, 4 in Vlach, 2 in Serbian and 15 other multi-language media. These developments in Macedonia are considered by many communication specialists as very positive steps, because "having media space to broadcast in the language of minority groups heavily affects the preservation and enrichment of their culture."(Hammer, 2007:12). Such a thesis is well grounded. Many authors believe that having media space to broadcast programs in different languages enables respect and compliance to cultural differences of ethnic groups. Furthermore, there is a probability of lowering ethnic-based tensions and conflicts. McGonagle (2010) synthesizes this situation with the following: "The more different groups know about each other and the more they interact with each other, the smaller is the risk of tension in society."(p.17).

So how these communities are portrayed in the media takes on a special importance, as the latter becomes the main source of information and identity preservation. Some communication researchers argue that people' and minority groups' perceptions, including cultural minorities, are influenced to a large extent on how they are exposed to the media. This is explained by the fact that many different social groups, living in areas separate from each other, often have no direct contact between them, and in such circumstances, the concepts are generally formed by what they receive through electronic and print media.

Based on this premise, the role of media in mirroring this multicultural reality becomes decisive. As Karlsrajter (2003) rightly underlines, "Purpose of the media must be the reflection of a multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic society, rather than focusing only on its community, ignoring thus the needs of other groups."(p.10). Delivering speeches or comments based on racial or ethnic discrimination can often be the source of keeping alive a conflict or promoting hatred of ethnic communities against each other.

Unfortunately, this challenging aspect of the media can easily recorded in Macedonia. Harmony and respect for ethnic communities in this country, despite improvements in terms of the media market, "continues to have the same problems of the past." (UNDP & UNICEF, 2012:1-6) Despite positively evaluating the steps taken on respecting the rights of minorities, many reports and surveys conducted by national and international institutions highlight the problems of language used in the media by journalists of different nationalities. Such a fact is also noted by Council Europe, where it is underlined that: "Macedonian society remains deeply divided between the two main ethnic groups, while Albanians and Macedonians are living parallel lives - without interaction between them. This parallel existence is mainly observed education, media, politics and other areas." (2005:25).

Unfortunately, in Macedonia, plurality of media has made it possible for ethnic and national consciousness to become even more segregated and isolated, compared with the past. Paradoxically, although it was not expected, "…the respective communities are increasingly raising their ethnic tensions, vote for their ethnic representatives, are more and more confined within groups, communes and territories, having as their neighbours their compatriots, and follow only the media where their culture is broadcasted." (Fuga, 2011:21). These social facts show that, under the conditions of the current media multiculturalism, the augmentation of differentiations and separation between the different ethnic communities is further deepening in this country, while the opposite is expected.

Apparently the common media spaces not necessarily imply the unification of customs, traditions, beliefs, behaviours that the ethnicities carry from their past. Moral norms or fixed codes of these ethnic communities - as a result of a long process of socialization - often minimize the ability to percept another culture different from what they know. As they leave this cultural reality for various reasons and contact other cultures, in many cases these subjects are forced to shut them off. Of course, we can not exclude the possibility of confirming meanings and new lines of meanings, but this requires time and a different policy from that which is followed by the media in Macedonia.

All this is clearly illustrated in the media and reinforced through the media. For some researchers dealing with such phenomena, the problem is related with the way certain medium is built and structured. In Macedonia, the media are not built as multicultural institutions, but as ethnic ones.

Journalists - most of them, Macedonians in the Macedonian media and most of them Albanian in the Albanian media – report and comment on events of various political, economic and cultural events through the lenses of "their ethnic group". This situation, directly or indirectly, affects the way of contextualizing the discursive events and determines their rhetorical strategy. This tendency is highlighted in many studies. Specifically, the study conducted by UNDP, UNICEF and UNESCO (2012), underlines examples of ethnocentrism, negative stereotyping and symptoms of xenophobia and intolerance toward the identity of "Other" cultural groups. Despite the professional framework within which journalistic profession should generally operate, it imposes rules of essential and formal nature, which must be respected to provide social credibility and promotion of principles of tolerance. But the on-field data show the opposite. Frequently events are reported through the ethnic prism, which leaves the impression that the ethnicity of the newsroom (or editorial office) or of the public which the message is addressed to, defines the formulation of news content and reporting.

In general, the media with Albanians or Macedonian owners and with a majority of Albanians or Macedonian journalists simply address to the public those messages that part of the ethnic community is inclined to know. Often the reporter selects preset news and comment on them in accordance with the expectations of his/her audience. In a way, this method is decisive on how the journalist shall convey the news. Frequently media report through the prism of "their ethnic group". This directly affects the way of contextualizing the discursive events and determines their rhetorical strategy.

Umberto Eco (1976), considering this tendency of media in a broader context, argues that the media is going through an entropil process – destructuration of information - and transmits only the news the public wants to hear. (Pozzato, 2009). "The latter simply follow that medium that only reinforces its beliefs at political level or at its moral values level."(Maigret,2003:245) In a way, the media contributes to the preservation of the status quo of the audience level, while the latter further contributes to media profiling.

Some researchers of multicultural coexistence argue that in order for the multiculturalism to be true and to produce results, it should primarily be multiculturalism as public relations within public and private institutions and agencies, and not simply a forum from where these differences could be expressed. Following this logic, although a media multicultural reality might be formally built, it is important to have multicultural audience capacity to absorb the multicultural flow of information and media messaging, otherwise "...if, due to language, trends, interest, culture, tradition, social tensions or culture of hatred towards others, an audience with the same cultural identity, follows only its media and, for this audience, the other media have no significance at all." (Thiesse, 2004: 25 – 89). Therefore, this kind of multiculturalism is not only a division or isolation of ethnic communities, after a period of wars and repressions.

For the multiculturalism to be true, as said above, it is suggested that it should primarily be multiculturalism as public relations within public and private institutions and agencies. An early project contributing to this achievement has been the increase of contacts between different groups and the exposure of the people to the complexity of their members in order to ensure information that helps in breaking the stereotypes, prejudices and mutual stigmatization. And this is well grounded as we know that when minorities are less likely to interact with each other, there are fewer opportunities for the social distance to fade away or for the social tensions to be mitigated. "The situation might change in those cases when mixture between ethnic groups and contact between them are to a greater extent. The greater is the social distance, the more difficult and slow becomes the integration between them."(Hammer, 2007:10). It is precisely this principle that is not properly materialized in the electronic and print media in Macedonia. Numerous media are employing either Macedonians or Albanians. Under these conditions, the possibilities of interaction between different ethnic communities are very small.

Some other scholars are convinced that only the building and strengthening of institutions on the basis of ethnic plurality may lessen significantly the existence of isolated and underrepresented institutions in terms of ethnicity and different ethnic interests. This happens as a result of intensified relations and opportunities to communicate between each other. In such a situation, people are able to create common conventions that allow unifications and divisions between individuals or different social groups.

Freedom of speech, despite being one of the main components of Universal Human Rights, does not ensure yet the coexistence of different national groups. Indeed, it happens that freedom of speech might aggravate this coexistence. Especially, at a time when society is increasingly divided culturally, linguistically and mediatically in terms of information, mode of expression may become the source of the problem. Cultural isolation within the today's "multiculturalism", understood and implemented based on a wrong and incomplete model, becomes the cause of tensions and crises to achieve the coexistence, as we are witnessing today."(Fuga, 2012: 21). As long as we do not see changes of this situation, inter-ethnic coexistence shall be problematic and will remain stuck in a cul-de-sac.

3. Conclusions

Referring to the situation exposed above, it is imperative to undertake several initiatives aimed at reducing the social distance that currently exists between different ethnic groups in Macedonia. The most important thing in this process is to address perceptions of different ethnic groups regarding their inferiority or superiority in relation with other groups, as manifested through communication. Breaking these stereotypes, stigmatizations and prejudices is the milestone

in enabling these groups' integration.

"Mechanisms that can be used in this part of the integration strategies include: providing equal and multiple opportunities of access to different levels of government, policies promoting inter-group cooperation, policies encouraging groups with broad-based interests affecting all different types of inequalities between groups, thus reducing the overall social discontent."(Horowitz, 1985: 56). In fact, when minorities have power, few capacities and limited interaction, possibilities of deepening social distances are much greater.

"The situation may change with the increased contact between ethnic groups." (Fuga, 2011:21) So it is necessary to build multiculturalism as public relations within the institutional and public agencies. Building of institutions on the basis of ethnic plurality may lessen significantly the existence of isolated and underrepresented institutions in terms of ethnicity and different ethnic interests. At the same time, it leads to an enhancement of relations and opportunities to communicate with each other. In such a situation, people are able to create common conventions that allow unifications and divisions between individuals or different social groups. Attempt to adapt to anyone's features and at the same time the interest to be differentiated due to identity preservation, become indispensable requirements to formulate actual conventions for the groups to address to each other.

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