

PROMOTING POLITICS AS WAY OF EXISTENCE IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN MEDIA

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Abstract. The article focuses on the promotion paradigm in media activity, it examines various aspects of the concept of promotion, and presents the accumulated experience of the Moldavian and Romanian media in the coverage of the political process through the comprehension of promotion as the primordial current function of media institutions. The paper looks at the peculiarities and the consequences of the promotion process, interpreting it as an expression of the increasing media intrusion into the political domain. A thorough examination of the evidence reveals that the ruling class manages to keep its functions in front of the expanded media power.

Keywords: democracy, political communication, mass media, promotion, media power

The studies lately dedicated to media provide an increasing frequency of the term *promotion*. The term (placed in the Moldavian dictionaries at the neologisms category) is used to refer to the general media activities and it seems to encompass the full set of features that describe the mission of journalism in a society. Recently, several authors in the field made considerable efforts to explain and to articulate this concept¹

The examination of different contexts regarding the media processes reveals an ambiguous treatment of the concept of promotion, which, at first, it is understood as an elementary process of information dissemination or as a set of specific media activities that exceed the limits of a mere reflection of events. This way, they deliver the grounds for the ambivalence of the concept of promotion, and, subsequently, to the concept of political promotion.

Thus, in most cases, the interpretation of the term *promotion* relies on its understanding as *media coverage* of the reality (of the political area, in our case), as a *presentation* of these realities in the media pages. To be more precise, this is the most common interpretation. We will mention only a few examples of using the term in this perspective (which we have observed in the journal publications):

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- “*Médiatiser La Paix*”, named his intervention one of the authors of *Le Monde*, launching a call for more actions of media coverage in defending the peace;
- The state television has *promoted* 15 times more representatives of the leading party compared to the opposition actors, while the private television did the same only 13 times more...”;
- “*The better promotion* of the leading party agents had brought with itself the concern with issues they care for, a fact which overshadowed the many issues important to the public ...”. All these examples highlight the correlation between our term and the notion of *reflection* or *coverage*.

Approaching this way, the interpretation of the messages circulation in the media may surprisingly gravitate towards the quantitative aspects at the expense of the qualitative one, which means a vision that reduces the consistency of the concept representations. However, this observation does not have an effect on the use of the term just for the analysis of the media practice: the promotion of the reality is, no doubt, and perhaps primarily, its intense and multidimensional reflection, if, by reflection, we understand the purpose of delivering to the audience relevant and varied information.

Accordingly, as a first understanding of the phrase *promotion of politics*, we will recognize all actions undertaken by the media in order to reflect in its pages the political aspects of reality. Nevertheless, our conclusion is that such a feature may partially include the essence of the phenomenon, which reveals new meanings lately, due to product developments in the political sphere and in the media, marked by the new relationships established between them. Certainly, the promotion is not only about recording action and informing the public but also on evaluating, commenting, interpreting facts, events, positions, phenomena, which may manifest both within information materials and in special programs and events.

No matter how tempting it is, limiting the term *promotion* to the creation and dissemination of media messages that the media reality dictates, to the persuasive potential of the message produced by the media, is based on the need to reconsider the narrow perspective that it incorporates. The persuasive intentionality (sometimes even unconcealed) of the media establishes the frequency of turning the journalists into “directors of the social and political reality”² and, even more incisive, into *handlers*, manipulators of the image in the field of their work, which should not be the puppetry³. It is common trend now to criticize the journalists on how they address reality as the experts ask⁴: towards what they do prepare the society and which names they use most often when speaking about turning the republic into a virtual theatre?⁵. In this context, communication is understood as a persuasive action (and persuasion is considered to be communication). The given meaning of communication meant to change the behaviour, the values hierarchy, the preferences and the choices of the audience, the persuasion can be expressed both directly, promoted and controlled by the political actors during their political campaigns, and indirectly, being presented as information disseminated by the media. Thus, if by promotion we understand all actions carried out by the media to reflect current events, it is natural to include there

those specific actions (inherently abundant) concerning the persuading media communication. The definitions of the specialized dictionaries talk exactly about the features characteristic for this second interpretation of promotion (condensed, according to some authors in the phrase “intervention”⁵) like, for instance, the definition by Mihai Coman in the *Dictionnaire encyclopedique des sciences de l’information et communication*: “the promotion refers to the act by which certain messages are changed under the influence of the media system during the production and distribution actions specific to mass communication” (my translation)⁶. Moreover, precisely the same meaning – of *construction / representation of reality* – given to our term shows up in the following statements belonging to DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach: “One of the main features of the current transition towards the era of mass media is that we increasingly come in contact with mediated representations of a complex physical and social world, rather than coming in contact with the objective aspects of our environment” (my translation)⁷. The creation of the *pseudo-environment* (Lippmann), of the *second reality* (Lang), of the *virtual* and *symbolic reality* constitutes the essence of promotion (in its narrow meaning). The fact that the media is not limited to the dissemination of the message in the contemporary era, i.e. the conventional, “information only” or the transmission of opinions in a society, but rather it adopts the biased position of a genuine creator of reality, appears as the cardinal prerequisite for the proliferation of this type of media action. It is only the media tendency to create and build-up a reflected reality, to impose a specific vision of this reality which interests the researchers interested in the analysis of the political and media processes.

The willingness of the politics to be promoted relies in the very mechanisms of political action, which are directly linked to the creation of symbols. “Any event or political process involves a symbolic register” - indicates Grigore Georgiu⁸. And, it is by the means of the media that the circulation of political symbols occurs. “For most people, politics is a series of mental images generated by current affairs on television, newspapers and magazines, as well as daily discussions - notes Murray Edelman. - They create a moving panorama, conducted in a world that, though the public never comes in contact with, people come to fear or cheer it, doing it so often with passion and sometimes with action. They are told about the new enacted laws, about foreign political figures representing a threat or about the trading treaties, about the beginning or the ending of the wars, about the candidates that lost or won in the elections for public positions, about the decisions on spending huge amounts of money to go to the moon...”⁹. In turn, Pierre Bourdieu reveals the specific political domination through the correlation to the construction of the symbolic field, showing that, in the perception of the social universe, the balance of the objective forces tends to go in favour of the symbolic force. In such a framework, according to Bourdieu, the representation of the social universe is no more “a given fact, rather than being a record, a reflection, it is the product of numerous actions of construction which are always done and should always be restored. It is stored in common words, in performance terms forming the meaning of the social universe equally as much as it records it in slogans that contribute to the social order by informing on the thinking of this world and by producing groups that names and mobilize them”¹⁰.

However, as noted by Harold Lasswell, in this world, the solution found in controversies is, most of the times, “a magical one, and it does not change any of the terms affecting the level of tension in the community, but it only allows its attention to be distracted and to be focuses on another set of symbols which are irrelevant. The numerous laws that are passed or the number of executive decrees which do not change anything in the permanent activity of the society represent indicators of the role of magic in the politics” (my translation)¹¹.

The thorough analysis of the phenomenon of symbolization in politics (even if it includes fewer references to the role of the media in this process), presented by Murray Edelman in *Politics and the use of symbols*, enables the author to conclude that the virtual image of the reality produced by symbolism is nothing but „a simplified model or an appearance of reality”. According to Edelman, the resorts for this situation must be searched in the fact that “most of our society is characterised by thinking in stereotypes, by personalizing and simplifying to the maximum, is unable to recognize or tolerate complex or ambiguous situations and therefore is reacting to symbols that are simplified to the maximum or are distorted”. The author explains that, according to T. Adorno and H. Lasswell, in circumstances determined by economic and political events influencing the individual’s life in its most deep and intimate areas, only trust in stereotypes and escape from reality reduces the feeling of unease and uncertainty, at psychological level, giving the illusion of a certain type of intellectual security. In such cases, the political symbolism fulfils a cathartic function.

The referential framework suggested by these statements implies the understanding of *political promotion as a set of specific actions promoted by the media, developed within the construction of the symbolic area of politics*. After the emergence of a world which is more receptive to the production and the use of symbols, the media gradually grants itself not only the role of land for politics and for its practitioners, but also the role of basic element in the political process, expressing its claim of being able to influence and even manipulate it.

The principles of the promotion focus the attention of the media on the construction of “virtual characters”. During the elections campaign of 1996, such characters have been President Yeltsin¹² and, for the Moldavian media, general Alexei and Ilie Ilascu¹³. *The Virtualization* of these media characters was possible by granting them maximum visibility in media. However, in this case (and the other ones), it was not followed by consistent coverage in configuring the profiles of these media heroes: the audience did not know the detailed and explicit presentation and the thorough explanation of the factual circumstances that led to their entrance in the spotlight of the journalistic attention and which remained (deliberately or by default) outside the media eyes. Yet, there were emphasized certain aspects of an outside origin, meaning that these characters were linked to political interests and political agendas, apparently blurring the reality. In fact, it is a law of the political promotion which is directed to explore the superficial layers of things, highlighting some casual message, underlining the appearances, providing a virtual image of the reality.

One relevant example of this promotion is the case of the article “Operation Golgotha”, published in Moscow. Almost immediately, the translated version was published in Kishinev, in the *Moldova Suverana* newspaper and, on the eve of

parliamentary elections in 2001, by the *Jurnal de Chisinau* newspaper. In this article, Michael Liubimov was exposing an operation of the secret service, led by Yuri Andropov, with a clear purpose: the Soviet transition from socialism to ... socialism. "The system has died, the head of the KGB, involved in the project, explained to the author, - hence, the task consists of its final annihilation and its replacement with a genuine socialism, supported by all the people. But, it has to be based on free elections!" The author describes thoroughly the details of the implementation plan of the "wild capitalism" in the Soviet Union along with the preparation stages to control the reactions of the society. The abundance of factual arguments, apparently truthful, created the impression of a sensational disclosure and has captivated the interest and prompted perhaps editors to make way for the article in their newspapers. What failed, however, to detect those who decided to translate and publish "Operation Golgotha", was the grotesque and absurd emphasis on situations already describing a sign indicating an apocryphal form of a satirical fantasy like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. M. Liubimov's "The Memoirs" were only one version of the events, a virtual version, and, deeming his work truthfully, was a really inappropriate response of the Moldovan journalists (and not only theirs) to a quite subtle political action, achieved through the media channels. Ultimately, the quoted article can serve as an eloquent image of the potential of the political promotion.

However, the mentioned case is somehow different, while a special interest for analysis is the systematic promotion, eloquently illustrated by the election campaigns. According to the Romanian researcher Ion Dragan, these are designed and organized forms of the political promotion (themes, slogans, types of speeches, means and manners of presentation and dissemination) "in a media style, a style that is appealing, if not exciting and spectacular in forms conforming to the patterns of the media structures"¹⁴. The creation of political option during the elections happens particularly in the virtual reality of the electoral field. The 1996 and 2000 experience of Russia is eloquent. The Russian media developed and successfully implemented in the electorate's conscience the Boris Yeltsin's myth of fighter against communism, as well as the Vladimir Putin's messianic one ¹⁵[18]. The same trends of mythologizing can be traced to the electoral campaigns in Moldavia. Precisely, the proper exploitation of the "country saviour's" myth assured the success of PCRM leader, Vladimir Voronin, in the 2001 presidential elections campaign (although we cannot compare it to the extent of political and media activities carried out in Russia in terms of ratios, invested resources or professionalism of the performance).

Once we certify as a characteristic sign of the promotion the creation and implementation of a virtual reality in the conscience of the social groups, one justified question shows up: Was the Soviet period characterized by the same creation and implementation of virtual reality? The difference and similarity must be sought, probably, in the specificity of the used methods. The propaganda method claims an open persuasive influence; it is unidirectional and oriented towards the organization of a system of actions of ideological indoctrination. From a historical point of view, it was more common during the totalitarian period, undergoing significant changes with the increasing influence of the television as means for communication to the masses. The promotion implies a fundamental difference: the transition from the use of

information as a(n) (additional) way of political struggle to the implementation of manipulative techniques, aimed to altering meanings, manifesting itself more like an *informational war* between different political forces. Consequently, the rational interpretation of events, typical to propaganda, becomes a myth which manifests into irrational and exciting mass representations. The fact that brings the promotion and the propaganda to be more likely is the ability to manipulate the public opinion, and one of its basic features is “the implementation into the public conscience, as objective information, the desirable content favouring certain groups”¹⁶.

However, experts estimate as extremely high the media potential in this regard. Experts note that, according to statistics, the average consumer of information spend about four hour daily, watching the television and listening to the radio: more than enough time for a specialist in neuro-linguistic programming, using the phonogram and video sequences in order to form in the audience’s conscience the necessary representation of the respective customer, even though the reality may look different.

It is clear that we can talk about political promotion as a phenomenon only when the media represents the main area of political communication, when the owners’ interests turn into media political positions, under their control, while the twining between politics and media is final at last.

In any case, at present, the phenomenon of political promotion causes various attitudes and leads to relevant consequences. According to a poll, quoted by Jacques Gerstlé¹⁷, the promotion of the political life raises a cautionary feeling, including a critical one from a part of the population, for which the promotion is a sign of the public debate poverty. Only a small number of respondents saw the promotion as a sign of modernization. As for the consequences caused by the phenomenon, the most important of them was observed and synthesized by Jürghen Habermas: “the turmoil in the GDR, Czechoslovakia and Romania was a chain reaction, which occurred not simply as a television broadcasted historical event, but as being made according to the rules of TV broadcasts”¹⁸. The German philosopher’s observation draws attention on the very important phenomenon which condenses, in fact, the essence of the political promotion: *the current political action, produced to be disseminated through the media, shows the signs of subordination to the media logic concerning the terms of deployment and mode of delivery*. Precisely, the impression of media styles into the political action is a basic characteristic of the current political promotion. We could highlight such more emphasised components of the recent political and media actions as personalization and showmanship¹⁹

Conclusion

In fact, the proliferation of political promotion, seen primarily as the intrusion of the media in the politics, is due, on one hand, to media logic itself (having some commercial interests that cannot be neglected), which captures the audience’s attention as much as possible by using active media means (sensational information, talk shows, politics personalization, political entertainment – making a show to present the political message), and on the other hand, to the logic of political action that finds in the media an ally of convenience, with potential and resources that can

be used successfully (although there are cases when media claims an autonomous role). At the crossroads of these two trends it appears that media faces the need for a more pronounced vocation towards political promotion as way of existence.

Because of the huge development of the contents, in volume and diversity, in the new media environment, the recipients can choose from an excessive range of ready-made media products according to their individual needs, and they can select more freely in terms of time and location. Consequently, we can expect not “the end of the promotion”, as some authors predict²⁰, but a predominance of the promotion phenomenon.

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