

THE MASS MEDIA INFLUENCE ON THE IMPACT OF HEALTH POLICY

Cătălin BABA

*Associate professor, Faculty of Political,
Administrative and Communication
Sciences, Babeş Bolyai University, Cluj
Napoca, Romania*

Răzvan M. CHERECHEŞ

*Research assistant, Center for Health
Policy and Public Health, Institute for
Social Research, Faculty of Political,
Administrative and Communication
Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj
Napoca, Romania*

Olimpia MOŞTEANU

*student, Faculty of Political,
Administrative and Communication
Sciences, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj
Napoca, Romania*

The theme of this study is a distinct examination of the issues regarding health policy, social representations and mass media. The analysis of the mass media influence on the impact of health policy leads to a portrayal of the related programs and the way they are received by citizens through mass media. Owing to the mass media quality to be an indicator of democracy it is very important to study its role in setting people daily agenda considering how it is able to maintain and create trends merely through recurrent messages. The issues frequently conveyed by media industry influences citizens' interest with regard to community, producing effects on public policy. We must bear in mind that the more persistent in media they are, the more relevant for community this issues will be. The authors of the study put forward a method through which diverse programmes can be analysed. A comparative analysis of mass media and citizens' social representations and its findings provide information about the influence between them. According to agenda setting theory and many international studies on health policy the authors conclude that mass media institution highly influence the impact of the health policy in health. Moreover, it is important to mention that the impact refers to all the stages of a policy-making: beginning with the problem identification and ending with the evaluation of the implementation process.

*Transylvanian Review
of Administrative Sciences,
19 E/2007, pp. 15-20*

This paper is the result of the necessity for an innovative approach towards health policy, in the context of the recent integration of Romania in the European Union and with respect to the provisions and resolutions¹ elaborated at this level during the past years. The authors consider that determining the influence of mass media on the impact of public policy in the field of health will provide relevant information for understanding the degrees of citizen involvement in all stages of public policy-making from design to implementation (similar to the international concept of community-based health policy reform). Mass-media can play a crucial role in shaping the public opinion and expectations and thus molding the entire process of policy making.

The objective of this paper is to analyze the importance the mass media holds in considering either the manifest or the latent impact of public policy in health, i.e. the relevance of the media institution regarding both factors and effects that determine or are consequences respectively of health policy. The method through which the importance of the media institution with respect to various health policy can be determined through the analysis of the social representations of the population and those promoted in the mass media based on the values structured by the programs afferent to the policy pursued. One of the international studies that sustain this method is "The future of the public's health in the 21st century"² that analyses the relation that should exist between the institutions involved in the process of system transformation and the mass media so that together they can solve or at least ameliorate the existent problems.

The mass media corresponds to a complex universe of messages, codes, transmitters, receivers, values' systems and repertoires of emitters, respectively receivers. The governmental institutions try to convey laws or information about governmental program that will be implemented at the population level using media channels. There is a notable distinction between the content of the existent social representations in a community and the content of representations in the mass media. Although the social representations specific to the mass media have a structure primarily based on the representations of individuals, they have several particularities that come from their interaction with all the other social institutions existent in a community. The functions of the mass media conditions the intensity of certain messages, the detail and other elements related to the direct interaction with other institutions of society. It does not interfere with the core of the message, which must be constant in both systems of representation due to social values in a community.

The relation between the two systems of social representations as it regards the public policy system is vital, considering the growth of consensus towards certain elements of public policy. If the population makes the necessary step towards involvement, the design, lawmaking and implementation follows the values from the society. One of the motivations of structuring this paper is finding out the answer to the question - does the way in which the mass media reflects the programs afferent to public policy create attitude or behavior trends among the citizens? To offer an answer to this question we resorted to the aforementioned method, that of comparative analysis of social representations at the population level and representations in the mass media, more particularly the analysis of peripheral elements specific to social representations.

The idea that set the foundation of this method is the certainty that the mass media presents health policy by filtering it through the value system of the community where it is transmitted, that is why the two systems of social representations –that of the media and that of the population- must

¹ European Commission, *eHealth – making healthcare better for European citizens: An action plan for a European eHealth Area*, COM (2004) 356 final, Brussels, 2004a, disponibil la: http://europa.eu.int/information_society/doc/qualif/health/COM_2004_0356_F_EN_ACTE.pdf

² Committee on Assuring the Health of the Public in the 21st Century, *The future of the public's health in the 21st century*, Washington: The National Academies Press, 2002. Disponibil la: <http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10548.html#description>

resemble significantly. The values implanted by the public policy in the mass media refer not only to official articles but also to the general view of the media on the actions of the government. All these reflections of the process of policymaking forms the structure of the social representation of the mass media with respect to public policy.

The expansion of the health policy field due to key factors in the context of globalization has come to be beyond anticipation:

1. At the level of the European Union there have been elaborated programs that try to create similar indicators for all the member states through which the situation of national health systems is to be measured (Health for all monitor³). Considering that health promotion is a subject of great social impact, the E.U. has allocated time and significant resources for the development of educational programs for health promotion (i.e. educational programs specific to the three types of education: formal – through school curricula, for example; informal – through information programs on the danger of drug consumption, for example; non-formal – through programs like those that encourage sports activities through high-schools for the prevention of sedentary behavior)
2. The integration of Romania in the European Union imposes the alignment to these health monitoring indicators and implicitly indicators of alignment to the health policy that need be legislated so that the discrepancies existent between the health of citizens in Romania and those of other E.U. member states be gradually reduced.

The mass-media system constitutes one of the state institutions alongside the functions attributed to it. During the past few years the hypothesis that the media, together with the educational institution, has an important role in the perpetuation of social inequalities through the promotion of social representations that sustain univocal images, opinions, attitudes towards minority groups or controversial topics has been validated. The consequence of this validation has been the apparition of trends that upheld the analysis of the forms of media appreciated by the public from the perspective of the promotion of democratic values, citizen involvement in the problems of society, but also seen as a resource for the health system. The educational role of the media institution (this type of education is included in the category of non-formal education) is internationally acknowledged. Coming back to the media analysis in the perspective of democratic values, we find that, in fact, these two subjects are interdependent. Through its educational role, the media institution supports the democratic systems, on one hand, because it is itself a consequence of the right of free speech and free access to information and, on the other hand, the media assists the society in maintaining a democratic system by offering a space in which the right to express oneself is offered to all the members of the society in the same measure.

The functions through which the mass media solidifies its position in society:

1. the information function, covering the understanding of social reality (the mass media presents both a perspective on the micro-society and a panoramic view on the world);
2. the function of controlling the problems of general interest – the role of the mass media is to listen to the wants and needs of the public opinion;
3. the social integration function;
4. the entertainment function;

As early as 1922, appeared the idea of analysing the influence of the messages transmitted through the mass media at the level of public perception. The one that elaborated this analysis was Walter Lippmann in “The world outside and the pictures in our heads”⁴. The thesis that Lippmann presented

in this paper starts from the influence of mass media messages and finds that the messages transmitted are subjective, already being distorted by the perceptions of communicators. Starting from Lippmann's arguments, Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw⁵ developed the concept of "agenda setting" which follows the correlation between the importance the mass media gives some subjects and the public opinion concerning the importance of those subjects. McCombs and Shaw continued studying the implications generated by the individual representations which we interpose between us and reality and concluded that the mass media has a very important role in producing consensus between the multitude of individual representations.

As we mentioned in the introduction, through the "agenda setting" theory we can understand the way the mass media influences the attitudes and behavior of citizens. Agenda setting or the establishing of interest - public opinion, assumes a function of mass media little studied in Romania, but with international validation. In conformity with this theory, the media does not tell the individual what to think but conveys subjects the public opinion is meant to think about, demanding a critical analysis. Although the media only offers subjects rather than imposing them, it manages through approaching some themes over a long period of time to direct the public interest to certain problems and remove other problems from the discursive horizon. Coming back to topic, we can conclude on the basis of this theory that the way in which the media institution reflects certain subjects and manages to maintain them sufficiently, so that it determines the individual agenda, will influence all the stages of health health policy.

Examples of this approach are presentations in the media of the campaigns of health promotion: formal programs (e.g. hygiene and contraceptive education in schools), informal educational programs (e.g. organizing public campaigns against substance abuse) and non-formal programs (e.g. programs developed in cooperation with NGO's that promote public awareness campaigns and activities on sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS).

The agenda setting function was used also in the North-American area in research studies that highlighted the way in which the media campaigns influence positively certain areas of public health. In this way, the study "Evaluation of a mass media campaign for the primary prevention of alcohol related problems"⁶ presents a comparative analysis of two cities in which a media campaign for alcoholism prevention has been applied compared with two other cities, in which existed also formal-institutional community involvement. The study findings reveal that the aim of changing individual alcoholic behavior succeeded to set the agenda of the whole community. Recurrent representations, which emphasize the theme of alcoholism prevention, were used. What is more, it was not identified a significant difference in citizens attitudes and behavior in the cities in which the media campaign was accompanied by an institutional community involvement.

Media institution influences the relationship between health policy and community on two different levels, using its previous mentioned function – agenda setting:

1. at the attitudinal and behavioral level - citizens appropriate media's frequently presented models
2. at the community involvement level - citizens are acquainted with the community issues, and more important with the means by which they can actively participate in the policymaking process. These means are essential in empowering the citizens, who will devise health policy which really illustrate the needs of their health area.

⁵ McCombs, Maxwell, Reynolds, Amy, *News influence on our picture of the world*. In Media Effects, 2nd edition, Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, eds., Chapter 1 (pp.1-18). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002.

⁶ Casswell, S., Gilmore L., *Evaluation of a mass media campaign for the primary prevention of alcohol-related problems*, In Oxford Journals, Health Promotion International, Vol. 5, No. 1, 9-17, Oxford University Press, 1990.

The social involvement issue is related to problems such as a fairly small number of volunteers for nongovernmental organizations or a low level of satisfaction with the administrative solutions. Taking into consideration the important role of social participation in the field of social integration, citizenship and democracy, we reckon that politicians must be aware of the importance of maintaining strong bonds between citizens. Furthermore, we think that individuals concerned with issues such as citizens' withdrawal from the field of politics must realize that any national policy reflects people's needs. We believe that citizens' involvement in the decision making process is the most efficient way of community problem solving, leading to a balance between personal benefit and the community's advantages. Thus, citizen's participation to public policy initiatives has a twofold effect – on one hand, assures the connection between policy and needs, and, on the other hand, increases the satisfaction and tolerance level regarding public actions, endorsed by the feeling of participation to government. Bearing that in mind, the administrative system must try to identify the populations' needs and continuously adapt its form to those needs.

Social representations are common elements of knowledge shared by people and they refer to the language, ideas, images, attitudes, behaviour, rules, and norms⁷. The production of social representations is a specific trait of human beings. Thus, Moscovici settled that individuals construct and reconstruct representations through the interaction with others during the lifetime⁸. Bearing in mind Moscovici's ideas, R. Farr concluded that social representations are both parts of the human culture and of the cognition system⁹. Social representations mould interpersonal relations, as part of the process of communication. Consequently, we must analyse the system of social representations only in the field of human communication. Moreover, the social representations system assumes the values of the culture in which it evolves, and also comprises series of stereotypes and preconceptions.

The last decades of the 20th century brought changes in the social representations paradigm: J-C Abric in „Specific processes of social representations”¹⁰ and the author of the „Social representations as emerging from social structure. The case of the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel”¹¹ changed the perception of the content of representations. The findings of the „Social representations as emerging from social structure” explain how any community having its own social representation system will convey specific attitudinal and behavioural patterns. J-C Abric analysed the content of social representations in terms of central core and marginal elements, distinguishing between a stable, coherent, non-negotiable structure and one which is shaped by individual preferences and normative systems. Considering the objectives of this study we emphasize the importance of the marginal elements of social representations, because these express individuals' attitudes and ideas with regard to mass media and its impact on health policy. Furthermore, these elements provide information about citizens' normative system and their involvement in the policymaking process, that can be combined with those referring to agenda setting and, eventually, reveal how media institution could alter the existent situation.

⁷ Wagner, W., *Can representations explain social behaviour. A discussion of social representation as rational systems*. Papers on social representation, 2(3):236-249; 1993.

⁸ Moscovici, S., *The phenomenon of social representations. Social representations*. In R.M., Farr & S. Moscovici (Eds.). London: Cambridge University Press, 3-69; 1984.

⁹ Farr, R.M., *From collective to social representation: Aller et retour*. Culture & Psychology, 4(3):275-296.

¹⁰ Abric, Jean-Caude, *Specific processes of social representations*, In Papers on social representations, vol. 5, (1), 77-80; 1996.

¹¹ Levin-Rozalis, M., *Social representations as emerging from social structure. The case of the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel*, In Papers on Social Representations, Volume 9, 2000.

Conclusion

Health policy that focuses primarily on strategies and actions towards a healthy behavioural models is shaped at community level through social representations. They are being reflected in media and in the general population and are the fundament of the human behaviour. Taking as a given the bilateral relationship between mass media and the population, the thorough analysis of media social representations can easily offer an overview of the level of population involvement in policymaking. Since the only guarantee of matching needs of the population and policy design and implementation is community involvement, media covers this rational gap by influencing the way the social representations are reflected in the public. Media can create trends and directions towards a healthy lifestyle by only shifting repeatedly the view on issues health related. Therefore, media analysis for social representations reflection is a powerful and precise instrument as regards to automated behaviours of the population. It would be an incomplete approach to the policy making process to leave aside the media influencing channels in stimulating public involvement. Health policy engages public behaviour concordance in order to assure real population impact. The design and evaluation of public policy are mostly public sensitive and these stages of policymaking have to be directly related to social representations existent at population level. Furthermore, media involvement in public agenda setting assures a medium and long-term behaviour modification, as a direct result of recursive directed focus on certain social representations.

References

1. Abric J.C., *A theoretical and experimental approach to the study of social representations in a situation of interaction*. In R. M. Farr and S. Moscovici: *Social Representations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.169-183; 1984.
2. De Fleur, Melvin L., Ball-Rokeach, Sandra, *Theories of mass communication* (5th ed.), Editura Longman, New York, 1989.
3. Fiske, John., *Introduction to communication studies*, London: Routledge; 1982.
4. Farr, R.M., *From collective to social representation: Aller et retour*. *Culture & Psychology*, 4(3):275-296.
5. Levin-Rozalis, M., *Social representations as emerging from social structure. The case of the Ethiopian immigrants to Israel*; In *Papers on Social Representations*, Volume 9, 2000.
6. McQuail, Denis, *Mass communication theory: an introduction* (2nd ed.), Editura Sage, London, 1987.
7. Moscovici, S., *The phenomenon of social representations. Social representations*. In R.M., Farr & S. Moscovici (Eds.). London: Cambridge University Press, 3-69; 1984.
8. Neculau Adrian, (coord.), *Reprezentări sociale*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1997.
9. Neculau Adrian, *Psihologie sociala. Aspecte contemporane, prefață de Serge Moscovici*, Editura Polirom, Iași, 1996.
10. Salwen, M.B., Stacks D.W., (coord.) *An integrated approach to communication theory and research*, Editura Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1996.
11. Sorirakoponlou K.P., Breakwell, G.M., *The use of different methodological approaches in the study of social representations*, In *Ongoing Production on Social Representations*, Vol 1(1), 29-38; 1992.
12. Thompson, B., John, *Media și modernitatea. O teorie socială a mass-media*, Editura Antet, Prahova.
13. Wagner, W., *Can representations explain social behaviour. A discussion of social representation as rational systems*. *Papers on social representation*, 2(3):236-249; 1993.
14. http://www.jims.cam.ac.uk/research/health/polifutures/polifutures_f.html