

INFORMATION, RUMOUR AND NEWS IN CONTEMPORARY
COMMUNICATION

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Abstract:

Information in contemporary times uses new ways of research, development and evolution, especially through enhanced dissemination capacities. At the same time, under the pressure generated by the promoted mistrust of the postmodernist trend, the use of information, the effective ability to reach people/audience for whom it is relevant and necessary, is disturbed by mistrust. On the one hand, we have the, informed and technologically apt global village with increased access to in-depth information. On the other hand, much of the information is of dubious quality. It is difficult for users to discern, especially when the information sources are no longer classic media channels, but social media. The data is collected (or rather made up!) by non-professional, but very persistent individuals, often uninterested in ethical valences. Media communication professionals are in a delicate situation, being faced with giving up some of the rigorous conditions of the job in order to cope with this assault. The purpose of this study is to bring back into focus some of the principles of quality information in the communication process. The study analyses the characteristics of information, the relationship between the journalistic piece of news and the entertainment content regarding the events it depicts. In this context, deficient information is analysed, as rumour, being very present in contemporary communication.

Keywords: information, communication, rumour, event, opinion, message, mass-media

1. About communication

Information is a fragment of the world that brings something novel to the audience who receive it. The element of novelty brought to the attention of the user is the essence of the information. There are several fields of research and use of

information, areas that bring, in some cases different definitions for the term. Even in the field of communication, information defining solutions are embedded in a wide range of concepts. There are attempts to demarcate one meaning according to one of the characteristics of the communication process. Information is defined by confusion and diversity, both stimulated by postmodern mistrust in a definitive, immutable status of the concepts and fields of reference, but also by social-media expansion that facilitates the interactivity and involvement of any person, not only the communication professionals, collecting, processing and transmitting information. Some landmarks can, however, be identified.

Rémy Rieffel will consider information thusly that "it belongs equally to the vocabulary of computer science, biology, linguistics or telecommunications (as a set of coded signals). Consequently, information will be understood as a *data stock (messages, signals, symbols) that are transformed through the communication process*" (Rieffel, 1995). Obviously, information means more than this linear pattern. At this level, we retain an element that characterizes it, given the ability to be modelled. Communication is a human action marked by subjectivity, the emotional dimension will also mark the information transmitted. However, the selection and organization of data takes place through an objectification phenomenon (Szabo, 2017).

In the media process there even are strategies for engaging the public to make them actually feel what is being related. It is a context identified by a researcher who will reformulate the problem: "In the everyday sense, the word information refers to very different objectives: news, data, and knowledge. We seek information to clarify a legal issue; we offer journalistic information; we transmit electromagnetic information" (Lohisse, 2002). Obviously, in this paper we will address the information according to its practical utility. However, this way of working does not exclude suggestions from the theoretical approach. The philosophy of information is a fertile and interesting subject. In order to understand the concept, the synthesis of Andrew Iliadis in *The quick history*

of philosophy of information, starts off from the mathematical model practiced on the first calculating machines and reaches to today's computerized digital expansion (Iliadis, 2017). A specialized approach is that of Luciano Floridi, perhaps the most important contemporary author in the field of information philosophy. He makes a distinction between information and knowledge with a higher dose of scepticism than we would have expected (Floridi, 2010). In fact, L. Floridi was one of the first researchers to warn about the increase in misinformation opportunities in the Internet era. In a study published in 1996, he showed that misinformation is possible by affecting the internal structure of information, i.e. lack of objectivity, being incomplete, or being censored (partially or completely) (Floridi, 1996). In this way, we also find out what the basic characteristics of the information in the communication process are, the qualitative choices sought by the collector, who then writes them in communication content and passes them on to the public. There are topical issues, increasing media and technology convergence by facilitating the dissemination of manipulative communication content (Szabo, 2014).

In an instrumental approach to how information circulates, some Dutch researchers have proposed another meaning for communication information. Their proposal to define is as follows: "What is communicated in one or the other of the available languages", arguing that "information must be considered as a combination of signals and symbols" (Van Cuilenburg, Scholten, Noomen, 1992, 25). New notions are introduced into the system, specific to the communication process, but the advance towards the complete understanding of the information term is not very high. Information does not only represent the message; it is not only identified with the quantitative elements transmitted from one side to the other. However, there will be a breakthrough, because of another specialized journal, *Small journalism dictionary*; there will be no fixation on the term information, although we will notice the attempt to define close notions such as zero informational content, misinformation, information,

false information, pseudo-information, under-information or over-information!
(Popescu and Bâlbâie, 1998).

Information and content

The information is defined by a few characteristics, starting from the need to have it present; it means searching (which can be a difficult action), collecting (also with many difficulties in the actual process), fixing, editing, storing, publishing and using it. What is transmitted is often more than a linear message, but an unpredictable content in its effects. It does happen that seemingly benign information in ordinary conversations between people (even at the level of gossip) inflames spirits or cause unexpected reactions and actions. Here we realize that an explosive potential exists in every such content. All the more so in the field of communication, where significant data, from the beginning, is searched for and collected, even with a "bomb" character, as is the case in journalism. The communicator (journalist, relationalist, and librarian) works with relevant information (important to a specialized audience or the mass-media consuming audience). It is not a simple data carrier from a source to a recipient, but it has a complex role throughout this route.

Umberto Eco distinguished information as the potential of the source from the one actually transmitted (Eco, 1979, 42). At the source, the information is massive, from which the communicator selects what they consider significant. Selection, of course, is a subjective component, but collection is made according to the rules of the profession, with an increased attention to the negligent or intentionally manipulative approaches (by omitting some data or by highlighting some of it). Subsequently, the researcher will return and make a distinction between the source's information and the message information, which can be "defined as a state of disorder in relation to a subsequent order; as an ambiguous situation in relation to a subsequent disambiguation" (Eco, 1979, 262-263). The Eco formulations are rather ambiguous and disordered themselves,

but what we have to remember is that meaningful information about a fact worthy of communication can be ignored and nothing is transmitted. Certainly, in nature and in society, there are worldly notions that no one knows about! When something is communicated it is made content (messages), then, in turn, it become the source for other acts of communication or prolongs the existing one. Robert E. Babe, who will study the information in accordance with Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker's theoretical assessments, will speak of the dual nature of information, that is, an objective (what we think) and a subjective side (what we perceive) (Babe, 2011).

In this context, we can opt for a classification of information present in content-based communication. Methodologically, four types of specific content can be identified: 1. Data with strictly informative content, tasked with focusing the attention of an audience interested in new things about the surrounding world; 2. Entertainment content with the purpose of creating good mood, facilitating escape from everyday life; 3. Educational data, structured from the start to help train the user; 4. Elements of communication with a low informational load, designed to facilitate socialization, to get together people to connect. These are rumours and gossip. This taxonomic division has the role of facilitating understanding, because in practice, information is hardly ever found in the simple forms of each category. A single unit of communication may also contain a novelty element of information, may amuse and offer the possibility of training, but may also have the role of bringing together people, which is one of the basic meanings of the notion of communication (Szabo, 1999).

The Romanian press has had a long tradition of organizing itself in the two components: 1) to inform; 2) to comment. It follows the French model, particularly combative, and less English (and American), which favours the informative dimension. It is a situation in which there is a bipolarity of journalistic activity, "characterized by the opposition between information and commentary, if by commenting we mean the distancing of the information itself" (Mouillaud and Tétu, 1989, 62). The two authors will

go further and identify in two large French publications, *Le Monde* and *Libération*, a kind of "metajournalism" in which "information is partially a discourse on information", which means "we cannot understand the information without reflecting on the forms of language through which it is constituted." It is also important to keep in mind that the media report is not a true copied depiction of the event, does not replicate it in detail, nor is it a reflection of reality (Eco, 1989, 112). The information is structured in media content (speech), loaded with meaning stemming from the place where it was collected and the psychological (emotional) implication of human sources.

Events, information and news.

Between the three elements there are instances of meaning overlapping but also differences. Information refers to an event, to a fact, the specialized form of news as it gets into the communication circuit. In fact, about a story, something worthy of reference, we do not have one piece of information, but many, these are concordant or contradictory, obscure or incomplete, which sometimes makes drafting the news difficult. The information, that is, the interesting and new content, is not in the air or in a diffused place, but in everyday reality. And important facts that are worth mentioning are the events. There has to be something important, relevant, out of the ordinary to capture the attention of a communicator to consider collecting the data and disseminating it to those interested. We identify this significant occurrence with the term event. They can happen unexpectedly; they can be considered or be programmed. Speaking of what might be the maximum event, the mega-event, in relation to the catastrophe, also considered maximum odds, of extinction, Jean Baudrillard. It is a theme of reflection on the meaning of life and of the world, the misunderstanding and the lack of values or benchmarks: "The catastrophe is the maximum gross event, the something more eventful than the event - but an event without consequence that leaves the world in suspension" (Baudrillard, 2001).

In communication sciences, especially when dealing with the practical aspects of information and opinion exchange, such depths are rarely addressed. We work with concepts with a more prosaic meaning, finding that public events and events with a public impact are numerous and diverse, context in which "the more a particular fact or event is more unusual, the more the information value of a news about that fact or event is higher "(Vassas and Ulmanu, 1997).

Events are conflicts (armed), road accidents, explosions, epidemics (generally catastrophes and threats), but also scientific discoveries, political assemblies and statements, elections, competitions (sports), cultural or tabloid-type activities. Obviously, the way such incidents are perceived is different (but not opposed) for journalists and relationalists. The former are less interested in the fact that the image of a person or organization suffers and rush to disseminate the news. It can be the case that the news is built precisely on the negative aspects identified in the actions of some people or in the activities of some companies or institutions. Public Relations Professionals are concerned with maintaining a positive image, mitigating the impact, when problems occur, and the image is affected, by a rapid return to an area of acceptability. The analysis of significant elements is also tempting for researchers even in the arid-academic registry. When analysing Franz Boas's glosses started from the sentence "The man killed the bull," Roman Jakobson will provide a list of 28 verbal forms for to kill, although he could have chosen a more prosaic verb!

As a temporal arrangement and as a succession of communication operations, the event has an essential role. First something happens, and then the data is written in professional formats. There is news (as a generic name) for mass-media or public relations materials in public relations. Considering the metaphor of the river, Mouilland and Tétu will state on the route: "we can represent the information device (agency networks) in the form of captors who capture the "facts" *in situ* and guide them to a centre. When the same device disseminates agency news from the centre to the

periphery, we can talk about information or news (Mouillaud and Tétu, 1989, 21). *In situ* is the very place where something significant has happened.

In mass communication, the circulation of information has its own specificities. From the source, the information finds its way to the recipient (audience), where it is updated according to the proposed novelty degree. Under these circumstances, we identify the information as novelty, that is, content item previously unknown for the receiver. A second association presents information as news, represented it in the mass media register. The term "news" has several meanings in the field of communication (especially the journalistic one), two of which are fundamental. The former refers to the news as new information with a high degree of relevance. The second meaning is journalistic, with two areas of coverage: 1. news as a small media product, in which the subject is presented in the essential data; 2. news in the broad sense, meaning any advertising product in the area of informative genres. A fundamental relationship is established between information and event; the latter being understood as a significant occurrence in the life of a community, an event that community members want to know about.

Information and opinion

The goal of every communicator and every media organization is to provide, to place information of maximum interest in the public sphere. For public relations professionals, it is important that the significant news be favourable or to reduce the negative impact on the represented institution as much as possible. For journalists, all significant news with wide impact, often with negative implications for some people or institutions, is important. It is a continuous struggle, where the results can be contradictory when we analyse the impact through effective information. The tendency to overestimate events, information and news is a constant phenomenon of today's media activity. Analysing this type of work in the American press, Raluca Soare will

conclude: "The declared goal of the Anglo-American journalistic model is doubtless what we might call, in an approximate translation, the news bulletin (*Major News*), a concept that defines a shocking piece of information meant to overturn the edifice of the common perception of reality, but defying this true hunting of the unprecedented and the spectacular, most news of a day does not go beyond the status of facts that no one would miss if it would not be included in the evening news discourse "(Soare, 2004).

The Anglo-Saxon model favours producing news in which the accuracy of the facts is the main target. It has also been theorized in Romania after 1989, and was even followed in times to come, but often only declarative, not materialized in practice. The Romanian media rather followed the continental (European) model, which favoured the comment, "forming opinions and educating, rather than presenting facts" (Petre, 2013, 11). The Romanian press has a long tradition of the French press and, to a certain extent (in Transylvania and Banat) of the German press. Opinions are highly valued on the French channel, but German influence translates into focus on analysis and reporting. However, we note that quality information is indispensable for the journalistic approach. There cannot be a political or economic commentary without the situation to claim its necessity. Thus, we see that quality information is necessary in any type of journalistic approach, but the presentation form differs. Information has an upward impact on opinions, influencing them decisively. Consistent opinions can only be formulated if there is sufficient and valid information, otherwise if there are no new elements, "in the absence of any other information, people put more weight on their own opinion than on the opinion of others" (Trouche et al. 2018).

Significant novelty

The information in the sphere of communication has various characteristics, appreciated by the final recipient in the transmission process, it being the public, important aspects of the collection activity carried out by the specialist in the field.

Some information is more important than other, but its selection and presentation raise issues of context analysis. Adapting to the public, especially to a specialized one, requires the communicator to provide only a certain type of information. Readers of a sports daily newspaper will be less interested in a government change. The flow of information is not kept constant. There are days with important events, thus with first-hand information, and then other news, interesting in its own way, is removed or limited in time and space in the broadcasting process. On other days, when major events are missing, a second category news can be used as a flag-carrier.

In society there is a manifest interest in recent, "fresh" information. Novelty is again a criterion for analysis. The already familiar data, especially broadcast on the major channels of communication, is only received by accident. However, there are situations when the facts are not recent, and even some are very old, but signs of their existence are only recently received. The information can therefore have a great deal of novelty. We can exemplify this with a natural phenomenon in a cave or a well masked crime by the perpetrator.

Information in the field of communication sciences is collected by professionals, i.e. communicators. They may be journalists when talking about mass communication, librarians in information science, and relationists or public relations professionals in public relations. The data is not kept for personal use but has the wide or specialized public as end-user receiver. In this context, the methods and techniques employed will be adapted to the subject and field specificity in order to facilitate good transfer to the receiver. In other words, information will be gathered in formats that allow for proper writing and presentation in accordance with the information purposes assumed.

In the field of communication and information sciences another structural characteristic of information is the significance character. Significance is understood in this context not in language, the meaning of the elements of language (words, gestures, signals), but in the representation level of the related event (the one under discussion).

The information is all the more powerful when the subject in discussion has a broader meaning, with an interest in a wider audience. Information cannot exist outside the event, that is to say, the occurrence characterized by out of the ordinary elements, those capable of stirring up the interest. Journalists gather decisive information to characterize the facts relevant to human existence, and their impact is measured by several values of the news, including the interest for a widened audience. Low-profile, often specialized, information is also important in two situations: 1. Have the potential to be used later in wide-audience reporting; 2. Are relevant in specialized fields (education, research, army, security, justice, etc.). Scientific data becomes interesting for researchers, for specialists, but later, often processed, becoming various subjects for mass communication. The significantly wide or specialized information potential is also exploited in library science, where events are rarer, abounding documentation on already systematized data. However, we keep in mind that any information circulates (is communicated) in specialized circles or for the general public, if it is significant, if it transmits relevant elements for the audience.

Information, knowledge, entertainment

There are three main directions of public communication. Rarely is the information presented in its raw state. A certain degree of structure will always exist to make communication possible. At the same time, some ways of presenting leave the data in its simple form, and such presentations are often encountered in everyday life. The stock exchange indexes, the evolution of stock prices, the exchange rates, to take a few examples from the financial and banking domain, the train and bus routes, the program of the artistic show institutions, the timetable of the community services, in the utilitarian-bureaucratic field of everyday life, eloquently shows the occurrence of accurate information. The data will be remembered according to the interest level of the users, who will use it as needed or integrate them with information or broader

knowledge structures. In this way, the information will find its place in the education system, embodying the form of knowledge. The education system is complex, its efficiency being given both by the quality of the information provided and by the way knowledge is structured according to certain criteria (learner age, ability to understand, type of education followed, etc.). A specialized form of information, accumulation and use of knowledge is scientific research, where the rigors of activity are set according to certain standards (sometimes quite high).

Entertainment is, at the same time, more and less than information. It builds on more easily accessible data, structured in ways capable of facilitating simple access. These products are items meant to bring about a feeling of well-being, in contrast to the problems of current existence, which they cover to a certain extent or make them easier to accept. Entertainment is based on specific types of speech, using positive information, but also fictional elements. Consequently, in entertaining we will not necessarily seek information, although it exists, but the fun, the escape from the everyday life. All three dimensions are important, their evolution being linked: "Both education and entertainment have a long history that goes back to antiquity, being found in academies, libraries, games and theatres. So is the case of «news». The verb «to inform» derived from Latin, originally meant, both in English and French, not only to expose the facts, sometimes incriminating, but also to «form the mind». The importance of the information was already evidently appreciated in some 17th century (political and scientific) circles, but it was further accentuated in the commercial and industrial society of the 19th century, when the notions of *speed* and *distance* (and others) suffered changes" (Briggs and Burke, 2010, 179). The three components of communication will never separate, for nowadays users read books and newspapers, or watch TV programs to get informed, to learn for entertainment as well.

Using rumour

Following the route of the methodological delimitations (at least to setting some working concepts in the realization of this work), it is necessary to talk about true or false information and rumour. The truth is that false information (in whole or in part) can very well constitute news items. There are three types of approaches here. One is serious and professional, where steps are taken to remove monumental fakes. A second direction is the promotion of fake and falsehood as a reality, such printable materials not being verified or, if they are, the opposing elements are silenced or interpreted in order to confirm the sustained thesis. The third category, the most common one, is the mixture of false and real data, with the use of vague or unsubstantiated sources to support, often only partially, what is contained in the message. There is a registered difference from true content information, but it cannot be proven. Some professional communicators refuse to make information public if they do not have confirmation from safe sources. The link between rumour and public communication is emphasized by Jean-Noël Kapferer, one of the great specialists in the field: "We will therefore call rumour the appearance and circulation within the society of information either unconfirmed publicly by official sources or denied by them" Kapferer, 2013, 13). Of course, nuances are possible, as do other approaches.

The rumour has a complex structure, being defined as a fuzzy mixture of mostly false data, generally covering a subject with a significant emotional load. Like the true and verified information, the rumour refers to areas of greatest interest in human existence, and thus its ability to survive and circulate in the community is explained. In a way of deeply subjective perception, "the public calls information what they consider to be true and rumours what they consider to be false or unverified" (Kapferer, 2013, 12). The same author will show that we are witnessing a value judgment, the attribution of the quality of information (truth) / rumour (fake) being made according to the beliefs of the persons in the data they are processing. The doubted rumours die, claims Kapferer,

and the beliefs survive, sometimes despite systematic efforts to prove their groundlessness. In communication, rumours are not to be neglected. The specialist in the field knows that they also contain real elements that can be communicated to the general public after a thorough check and completion with other relevant information. For public relations people rumours are a test stone. Often, companies suffer under an intense rumour that leads to the boycott of their products and services.

However, the problem of the rumour in communication is not easy to clarify. Yves Agnès radically affirms: "The rumour is not information" (Agnès, 2008, 392). Then he admits that it is present in the media landscape, underlining that it is used in dubious practice. Further on, however, the same rigorous author will admit that there are rumours that can rely on real elements, a sense of truth, or even less well-known real facts. The process of ignoring rumours by communication specialists, journalists or relationalists may be a professional mistake. Press people do not ignore of a thread, which, being spooled out, can lead to an important discovery. Also, PR people cannot ignore rumours about the organization they represent. Sometimes, stifled at an early stage, rumours and lies tend to go away, though, as we see in practice, a shadow of doubt remains, especially when it comes through the process of media amplification. Rumours, with their rare, but persistent, even irritating content, require attention. Checking them is the correct action to follow. Covering them in newspapers (printed or online) or on radio or TV stations, without the information being clearly attributed, often amplifying the facts by assumptions that seem to be believable, deriving from the logic of the facts (supposedly true) taken from the audience, is clearly in the category of fake and lack of professionalism

Other researchers pay much more attention to rumours, arguing that they can be the basis for widespread social change in crisis and danger situations: "At such times, interpersonal communication networks are particularly active, which leads to spontaneous, unusual, uninstitutionalised phenomena such as agitated behaviour and

crowds, demonstrations, generalized panic, leaving home" (McQuail and Sven Windahl, 2001, 85). If the rumour is not information, however, these important consequences cannot be ignored, and even become the first-hand communication topics. The two authors form these opinions in 1993, so before the generalization of Internet communication, the virtual environment is currently experiencing an extremely surprising dynamics of the rumour and mobilization in discussions and actions.

Conclusions

This analysis has pursued some classic aspects of mass communication, focusing on understanding a basic concept, information. Definition difficulties are obvious, because the term information is used in various fields. The mistrust generated by the postmodern approach and the fluidity of understanding the information in the vast social media and virtual communication platforms could be methodologically overcome in analysis by referencing the field of media communication and its actors. We have thus found that the term information can be more easily understood in practical communication situations, on a scale that has strong information at the one extreme, and on the other the weak information (pseudo-information). There was also a need for breakdowns in relation to the event, news, entertainment content and the rumour.

Research has limited itself to the pre-internet expansion period, in order to facilitate the understanding of some fundamental elements of communication. In the future, the investigation will also focus on other contexts, such as those generated by generalization of Internet access, interaction and interactivity, and how information and misinformation, rumour and manipulation become visible phenomena especially through social media expansion and offered facilities. Also, a research route is represented by information manipulation ways in contemporary society, creating false content, and spreading messages, especially through altered or counterfeited images (photo and video). It is, of course, a vast field of research.

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