

Zigi Ekron*

A critical and functional analysis of the mirror metaphor with reference to the media's responsibility towards society

Abstract

Attempts to define the media's role and function as the fourth estate often rely on the use of the mirror metaphor to describe its relationship towards its audience. The metaphor suggests the media and its contents are merely a reflection of reality. The assumption is that this reflection serves society's need to have an unbiased, objective and critical view of itself. The image presented in the reflection should therefore enable society to evaluate and adjust itself accordingly.

Although this apparent pragmatic approach satisfies the most basic description of the media's role as a mediator of reality, it fails to consider the factors that may influence the reflection that is presented and the manner in which it is received.

This paper applies critical theory to examine the manner in which factors, such as media concentration and commercialisation, distort the reflection in the mirror. It also analyses the notion of a mass audience which consumes media content. The paper challenges the outdated assumption in normative theory that the media serves a homogenous society. Instead it proposes a move towards pluralism of the media as a means to address the needs of diverse and multicultural societies.

Key words:

Mirror metaphor, commercialisation, concentration, mass audience, pluralism, diversity, society,

** Zigi Ekron is the editor of WegSleep-magazine and currently enrolled in the MPhil. programme at the University of Stellenbosch's Department of Journalism*

INTRODUCTION

'Journalists hold up a mirror to society'. From the media's perspective this statement may at first glance seem like an accurate description of a worthy industry. From society's point of view it may, however, seem like an inept attempt to describe the way in which the media perceives itself as mediator of reality. Neither of these opinions can unequivocally be called true or false, but as McQuail (2005:83) states 'the notion of mediation in the sense of media intervening between ourselves and 'reality' is no more than a metaphor, although it does point to several of the roles played by the media in connecting us to other experience'.

McQuail uses seven communication images through which the media is perceived to connect us with reality. The images are that of a window, a mirror, a filter or gatekeeper, a signpost, a forum, disseminator, and interlocutor, each with its own function.

About the media as a mirror McQuail (2005:83) says:

As a mirror of events in society and the world, implying a faithful reflection (albeit with inversion and possible distortion of the image), although the angle and direction of the mirror are decided by others, and we are less free to see what we want.

If one therefore reconsiders the initial statement it becomes apparent that it is an oversimplified notion that does not take into consideration external factors that distort the reflection or disregard the beholder. Any attempt to understand the true dynamics of this relationship inevitably raises two pertinent questions. Firstly, whose mirror is it and, secondly, which society are we talking about?

Within the context of mass communication studies the first question stems from critical theory while the second seems to be informed through functionalism. In this article I will use aspects of these approaches to investigate these questions.

WHO'S MIRROR IS IT? – THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE MEDIA

According to Fourie (2007:130) critical theorists focus mainly on the media's ideological impact on the masses. The central argument stems from the work of theorists such as Karl Marx about the possibilities for media owners to abuse their power to further their own capitalist ideals. In short, Marxist scholars argued that institutions such as the media, the church, industry, and educational institutions could manipulate the masses to either consciously or unconsciously accept the manner in which they perceive the world – i.e. capitalist ideology.

The concept of ideology, however, is not restricted to Marxist theory about a class struggle, but can also be used to describe an individual's world view or that of an institution or company. Once the ideology of a certain individual or institution has been ascertained, one is in a better position to judge the motive and goal of their actions (Fourie, 2007:133).

In critical theory it is assumed that there is a close relationship between politics, the economy and the media (Fourie, 2007:134). This relationship, known as the political economy of the media, provides the context in which to analyse the impact of media ownership on media content and the resulting pervasive ideology.

- **Commercialisation of the media**

One of the determining factors in the political economy of the media is the commercialisation of the media (Fourie, 2007:141). In its efforts to show a profit, the media are reliant on the same business principles as a factory that produces any other commodity.

Even though journalists see themselves as objective observers and messengers, the production of mainstream media is a capitalist venture and is therefore controlled by economic considerations. The aim of a free market media industry is, after all, to sell content – whether in print, digital or broadcast media.

It would be unreasonable to assume the public interest would remain paramount in the boardrooms of media houses if it contradicted the interests of the company.

Whilst the business approach to journalism is not necessarily contradictory to the ideals of the profession, the over emphasis on the profit factor by the industry and the resulting ‘skewing of media content towards commercial ends’ is reason for concern (Picard, 2004:55).

McQuail (2005:125) shares this view and agrees that whilst the term ‘commercialism’ may on the one hand refer objectively to the way the media functions in a free-market economy, it also has the implicit negative connotation that suggests adverse influences on the quality and type of media content which is mass produced and sold as a commodity, and the relationship between the media institutions and their customers.

Picard (2004:61) argues that, because newspapers mainly carry commercialised, cost effective content designed to appeal to the broadest possible audience, and whose attention can be sold to advertisers, news judgment is adversely affected. Stories that are judged to be less appealing or entertaining to a publication’s intended target market are therefore not deemed newsworthy.

For example, a South African newspaper with a predominantly older, white, readership such as *Volksblad*¹ might rather devote column space to the popular soapie *7de Laan* than to health or educational issues in a black township community.

As a result stories that may be deemed offensive to the readers’ sensibilities are not covered, while those that seem more palatable and entertaining to a potentially larger audience receive prominence. Content that carries cost implications determines which stories are covered and which are downplayed or ignored. ‘This leads to a homogenisation of newspaper content, to coverage of safe issues and to a diminution of the range of opinion and ideas expressed (Picard, 2004:61).

- **Concentration of the media and diminishing diversity**

¹ According to Ads 24. (2008) 72 percent of *Volksblad* readers are white and the largest demographic group are over the age of 50.

Fourie (2007:141) also highlights the tendency towards media concentration and shrinking diversity as propositions of the political economy of the media and a concern with regards to its impact on the public sphere.

The right to a free and independent media is of very little value if it is not used to express diversity of opinion.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) reiterates the need for a free and independent media unhindered by government, political and economic control and which is, most importantly, pluralistic. (UNESCO, 2005).

Although McQuail (2005:125) regards the issue as the subject of normative theory his argument can just as easily be applied to the critical approach, specifically in the context of political economy of the media. He claims the prevailing norm in debates about media and society opposes a concentration of media ownership in favour of plurality in order to present audiences with diverse views, opinions and ideologies.

McQuail (2005:166).writes:

The guiding principle is that the media should not be dominated by a few controlling interests and that citizens should have access as senders and receivers to media that reflect their ideas and meet their interests and needs.

The need for media diversity in South Africa has manifested itself in the establishment of the Media Diversity Development Agency (MDDA) which aims to encourage ownership and access to media by previously disadvantaged communities. Diversity of media ownership in itself does not, however, imply progress.

Since 1994 and the advent of democracy in South Africa, there has been significant change in media ownership in South Africa, particularly in the print media section. Before 1994 South African print media was divided into two distinct groups, the English press and the Afrikaans press. In turn, each group was divided in two whereby the Argus Group and Times Media Limited (TML) constituted the English press and the Afrikaans press consisted of Naspers and Perskor. In 1995 the Irish Independent group gained control of the Argus Group and the following year the black empowerment consortium Johnnic Communications bought a controlling share in TML. In 1998 another change in ownership saw Caxton assume control over Perskor. Thus, even though the ownership of the South African print media has changed and become more racially diverse, it remains under the control of just four companies (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:39 - 40).

The market dominance of these companies indirectly threatens the diversity of opinions in the public sphere. As their stature as powerful institutions in society grows so does their political influence and the potential to stifle debate (Meier & Trappel,1998:39).

Meier & Trappel also make an important distinction between media diversity and a variety of media. In this distinction variety merely signifies a choice of products and diversity represents disparate views.

The advent of the new millennium saw new newspaper titles such as *This Day* and *Die Wêreld* make brief appearances on the South African print media scene. The economics related to establishing an independent title in a market dominated by the four companies mentioned above however proved too hard and both newspapers floundered.

However, since 2000 the newspaper market has witnessed the rise of a multitude of tabloid newspapers in South Africa such as the *Daily Sun*, *Die Son*, *The Voice* and *Sondag*. All of these newspapers belong to one or the other of the four main print media institutions.

Wasserman & De Beer (2005) contest that even though the variety of media has increased, it has done little to expand media diversity. Viewed from a critical perspective and assuming the arena of public debate and interaction should be open to all citizens, they pose the question as to whether the South African media landscape is diverse and pluralistic enough – even ten years after the advent of democracy – to truthfully ‘represent the “public interest” in as wide a sense as it purports to’ (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:40).

WHICH SOCIETY ARE WE TALKING ABOUT? –THE FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH

The functionalist approach proposes that society consists of a series of subsystems that each make an essential contribution in order for society as a whole to maintain equilibrium. The media is seen as one of these subsystems (Fourie, 2007:186).

As such the media has five basic functions relating to information, correlation, continuity, entertainment and mobilisation (Fourie, 2007:188). Each of these functions can be divided into a variety of tasks ranging from the provision of information about events and conditions in society (news) to campaigning for societal objectives (McQuail, 2005:97-98). In other words, the media are expected to serve a purpose in society. As a subsection of the functionalist approach, normative media theory concerns itself with what this supposed purpose is and what it is that society expects of the media.

One of the main objections to functionalist theory, however, is that it takes a homogenous society for granted and assumes consent about the media’s responsibility towards such a society (Fourie, 2007:187).

The concept of mass communication not only suggests the existence of mass media, but also inherently supposes the existence of a mass audience. Deuze (2004:282) refers to Morris & Ogan when arguing that in an increasingly globalised and multicultural society, where the mass audience is understood to transcend traditional divisions such as nationality, race and religion, a ‘one size fits all’ view of society is no longer adequate in determining the public service of the media.

In fact, in this context it can be disputed as to whether the media have any obligation towards society whatsoever, as the established notions of ‘public interest’ and ‘the public good’ become vague and almost impossible to qualify (McQuail 2004:7).

New thinking about normative media theory acknowledges that multiculturalism is one of the foremost issues that faces the media and its perceived responsibilities in contemporary society (Deuze, 2004:281).

Pluralism in media seems to be a ready made solution and Fourie (2007:194) quotes McQuail who argues that ‘the media collectively should represent all social groups and reflect the diversity of society by giving people access to a variety of viewpoints and the right to react to these viewpoints’. This forms the basis of the argument to promote pluralism in the media.

The pluralism of media is understood to mean the manner in which it serves democracy by providing citizens with a variety of views and information which enables them to exercise their citizenship. It is also a vehicle for minorities and marginalized groups to voice their opinion (Meier & Trappel, 1998:40).

Media pluralism can therefore be seen as a vital prerequisite for effective civil participation in democracy with distinct political functions that compliment the functions that McQuail (2005) defined. Whilst a single newspaper with one dominant ideology may serve the needs of a particular group or society it cannot be assumed that it also serves the rest of society.

In South Africa, where societies are divided by race, language and culture, the need for media pluralism becomes self evident. Tabane (2007) argues that pluralism in the media is especially significant in South Africa, not just because of the country's diverse populations, but also because of the challenges of access to media – and what implicit effect it has on whose views are heard. He posits that less than half of the South African population have access to the print media due to language, literacy and distribution impediments.

The vital role of media pluralism in our young democracy is perhaps more visible when one considers the history of the South African media under the apartheid regime where alternative print media played a significant role in bringing about social and political change. Newspapers such as *The Weekly Mail* and *Vrye Weekblad* aimed to counter the predominantly white mainstream media which either served as mouthpiece for the ruling party or fought a seemingly never ending battle against oppressive state intervention and censorship. Alternative print media played a significant role in bringing about social change (Wasserman & De Beer, 2005:38). Once democracy was established in 1994 these newspapers disappeared after apparently having served their purpose and those sectors of society which embraced the changing political landscape (14th World Editors Forum Report, 2007).

The most pertinent question, however, is not about the need for media pluralism, but rather how to establish it.

As noted before, changing media ownership and diversity of ownership does not automatically imply a change in media content or an expansion of the public sphere. Wasserman & De Beer (2005:39) point out that:

The [South African] mainstream print media still operate according to the same functionalistic logic that...has as their target market the lucrative – and arguably white, or at least affluent black – elite market. In the tabloid media, where these titles are mostly aimed at a black/coloured audience/market the commercial imperative seems even stronger. Consequently, despite the ostensible diversity...questions may still be raised about whether they have significantly broadened perspectives.

Tabane (2007) concurs that changing ownership is a move in the right direction, but not the only one to be taken. He proposes that government should strengthen the MDDA and increase its annual budget if it is serious about creating an alternative voice that can reach as many people as possible.

He acknowledges the fact that the South African media has transformed notably with respect to ownership and management, but reaffirms Wasserman & De Beer's (2005) scepticism about whether this means the news media really reflects the broad aspirations of the country.

Tabane (2007) suggests that transformation should also be spread through all levels of the media right down to the rank and file of the newsrooms. In this way the plurality of society can be reflected in the individual journalists who cover stories, each with their own ideology and historical frame of reference that represents a certain perspective from society.

The recent revival of the Forum for Black Journalists (FBJ) sparked heated debate about the segregation of the industry along race lines (Makoe & Direko, 2008). Abbey Mokoe, the political editor of the SABC and chairperson of the FBJ, however maintains that even after the advent of the new democracy and the subsequent changes in the media, it is indeed his race and cultural background that dictates his perspective as a journalist (Makoe & Direko, 2008):

Granted the dynamics may be different, but the reality we still face as media practitioners, and the manner in which we deal with it, is based on our different approach to issues as a result of history, schooling, culture, traditions and comprehension of issues among others.

Tabane (2007) argues that only when journalists are educated to pay attention to social interest as inherent to all human beings and rid themselves of the notion that they are blessed with a superhuman sense of objectivity by virtue of their profession, will they be in a position to represent the diverse needs of society.

CONCLUSION

In his description of the metaphor in which the media fulfils its obligation to society as a mirror which reflects reality, McQuail (2005:83) warns that the reflection may be distorted.

The influences that distort the image may be legion, but it is clear that commercial pressures and a concentration of ownership have a significant impact on the 'reality' that is reflected in the mirror. As in real life, the metaphorical mirror should be used to examine and evaluate the reflection in order to affect change where it is needed. Knowledge of the factors that distort the image would place the beholder in a better position to make exact and pertinent changes or at least better evaluations.

In its eagerness to serve society, the media should be aware of its own shortcomings. Its moral, ethical, political or emotional stance on a particular issue may suffice for one segment of society, but unless it has the ability to address the same issue from a different perspective in order to satisfy the needs of other citizens its job is only half done.

It therefore becomes apparent that the original statement might have more value if it was stated in the plural so that journalists can hold up many mirrors to diverse societies.

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