The Society of the 21st Century – A Need for Information in Communication

*Marek Walancik**

Abstract: The author in this article points to the need for information as a fundamental human need in the information society. The realization of this need is a part of the process of communication which is a kind of social phenomenon. The author seeks to entice the reader to satisfy the information needs related to the problem. He notes that satisfying the information needs and the provision of specific information is an ongoing continuing process of education.

Key words: need for information, communication, society, education.

1 Introduction

My considerations concerning the need for social information will refer to the information needs of a primary man in the context of mass media basic functions in a contemporary society. The process of communication is a specific phenomenon, “it is an inseparable element of human functioning in a society.” (Majka-Rostek, 2010). It refers to all stages of humanity development and it includes all individuals and social groups, so communication has become a process both in information and semantic perspectives. Communication connects, joins and unites all the aspects of social life. Therefore, the history of communication is inseparably connected with the stages of social development. With reference to Tomasz Goban-Klas’s opinion, it is an advantage to distinguish, on the basis of used materials, the categories of epochs (the Stone Age, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age) according to the archeological division. “But it is more accurate to classify the historical epochs on the basis of used communication, meaning there are Homo Sapiens and basic culture instruments.” (Goban-Klas, 1999) These are the eras of signs and signals, writing, printing, mass communication, telecommunication and computerization. Definitely, an acceleration came after the invention of the telegraph. Inventions like the telephone, photograph, the gramophone record, film, radio and

* Marek Walancik, Academy of Business in Dąbrowa Górnicza, Dąbrowa Górnicza, Poland; mwalancik@wsb.edu.pl

television were being developed rapidly. This dynamic development in the scope of mass communication meant that the above mentioned inventions had a short history. Almost all of them were used by masses in the second half of 19th century (press), radio and television after World War II. "The awareness of our globe citizenship was shaped between the second half of the 19th century and at the end of the 80's in the 20th century it came by mass media." (Mattelart and Mattelart, 2001) The second half of the 20th century is called the era of computers and the Internet. Due to the fact that entire social situations refer to the communication process, which includes all the forms of human interaction (interactions of everyday and public lives, interaction among units or social groups), information seem to be crucial. The contemporary reality is characterized by people and cultures. The interdependence causes us to face requirements in the scope of the communication process. It is not related to the mobility of people, although the transport technology is constantly improving, but it is about technologies connected with the flow of information. The contemporary, globalized world forces us to acquire intercultural competencies, to be familiar with new communication technology that is accelerating the flow of information as well as increasing the scope of information transmitted, liquidating the time and space boundaries at the same time.

2 The communication process and the functions of communication

Before I proceed to the analysis of these information needs, I will briefly present the concept of communication and its functions. The traditional social studies ambiguity and the multiplicity concept will occur here. In the contemporary world, these concepts are commonly used. It is assumed that in order to understand the concept of communication, the following definition presented in 1909 by Cooley has prevailed: "Communication is understood as a mechanism, by means of which human relations can exist and can be developed. This mechanism takes into account all intellect symbols including mass media, transmitting those symbols in space as well as behavior in time. It involves face expressions, postures, gestures, a voice tone, words, writing, printing, railways, telegraphs, telephones and all these which can be called achievements of time and space conquest." The gradual separation of transport and communication means less communication to evaluate as a culture element. The defining extent is difficult because the process involves all aspects of social life as well as culture.

Principally, there are two or even three perspectives of defining communication - the communicatory and the semantic. From the first perspective, communication is regarded as an information transmission from one place to another, in the second one it is considered a process of giving the meaning to broadly understood stimuli. The third perspective joins the first and the second

one saying that “Communication uses information in order to create meanings.” (Frey et al., 1991) According to pragmatic linguistics mentioned by Zbigniew Nęcki, communication is considered as a conventional exchange of verbal and nonverbal signs (symbols) (Nęcki, 2001). Such an approach indicates the intentionality of behavior as well as the acceptance of a defined set of signs and symbols. Sperbra and Wilson’s (1986) definition characterizes communication as the intentional, modifiable space in the recipient’s perceptual sphere, it is about communication in the context of ambiguity of an information carrier. In this case, the communication acts are something like puzzles – easy or difficult to percept. Communication is in progress thanks to the transmitted symbols, not necessarily words. These can be things such as architectonic activities, behaviors (houses, decorations, constructions of the Mexican or Israeli Walls, the demolition of the Berlin Wall) or even graphical signs, graphic words (i.e. a logotype) (Szczepańska-Woszczyna, 2010).

The separation of communication from language seems to be crucial. We find signs, signals and symbols here. The first ones are called internal stimuli referring to other objects, the second ones are created by living organisms and the third ones can refer to abstract objects. The language is a tool of information processing and transmitting in the process of communication. In this process, we should take into consideration the symbolic aspect of a language. The utterance context (linguistic, instrumental, interpersonal and cultural) also seems to be of importance. The linguistic context refers to former utterances hence they have been linked with current communication. The instrumental context is considered as a task and situation area linked with a communication process. The interpersonal context is an important element of current communication with an interlocutor. The cultural context refers to the interpretation of facts defined in a way specific for a given culture.

The communication process is conducted on many levels and it performs defined functions. Its levels are as follows: the intra-personal level (communication with oneself), inter-personal (two or more people), group level (communication on the basis of social roles), and social level (partners’ recognizing it is not crucial). Communication possesses its informative, integrating, persuasive and instructive functions, but it should also be mentioned that activity coordination and message transmission have an influence other people.

3 The need for information as a basic need

It seems to be crucial for further research to define the following terminology: social information and information needs. Michał Szulczewski’s (1979) statement is frequently adopted. It defines social information as a part of knowledge transferred by all forms of communication between people used in the context of the surrounding world’s orientation and activities.

Before I proceed to the description of the concept of information needs, it is worth paying attention to the fact that from the psychological point of view, according to Tadeusz Tomaszewski (1978), the properties of living organisms are described by means of the concept called “a need”. It explains that in order to stay alive, develop and reproduce, several conditions must be maintained. The development prevention or violation or destruction of any structures are the consequences of not fulfilling those requirements. It does not raise any doubts that information plays a social role. With reference to above quoted Szulczewski (1979): “Information needs are objective, their importance is specifically descriptive, they can refer to indicated situations that are described as perceptible or lack of sufficient understanding. So they should be met in order to make an individual or a society function properly.”

In the opinion of Anna Kozłowska (2006), two states like “the state of a man being informed and the state of a man not being informed” should be distinguished to understand the concept of the information needs in full. The first state reflects the level of meeting information needs by a man. It usually decides on a social well-being, it also constitutes an important condition describing the method as well as the quality of functioning of a given individual in the surrounding world (Kozłowska, 2006). Meeting man’s information needs is the implementation of his safety necessities, but on the other hand, information can cause a man to feel threatened. All undertaken activities aim at increasing the level of public information. With reference to Wiesław Sonczyk (1999), it is not only about the quantitative increase of communication entities, but above all, the increase of the amount of information that is accepted by a society, taking into account the society’s interests, aspirations and values. The second state describes the situation “where a given individual or a social group do not meet their information needs. It brings intense consequences for them. The consequences usually concern the conviction of insufficient knowledge on the surrounding world, the feeling of collected life limited participation as well as the awareness of a reduced opportunity of individual expression.” (Sonczyk, 1999). This state is considered to be a destructive condition for an individual or for a social group. It also weakens the community’s readiness to undertake activities, thereby decreasing individual expression or opportunities. As a consequence, it can lead to exclusion and social marginalization understood as a state or a process in a social structure, which is manifested in limited opportunities using commonly available goods and forms of a collective life. Both phenomena seem to be inseparable, to occur in every society and on every stage of development. The phenomena’s commonness and stability make them a prosaic and an all-too-familiar element of society in which there are consequences, loss of power for arousing emotions and objections. It is commonly accepted as a normal thing that in everyday society there are individuals and groups typical for a “not being informed state” that create the, so called, groups that are rejected (the excluded or marginalized). The system of specific relationships between the state of a man

being informed and the state of a man not being informed”, as well as the personality of people who create those groups, has an important influence on the position in those groups. In the opinion of Maria Jarosz (2007), “the concepts of social exclusion and social marginalization are phenomena, the size and structures of which are not entirely known”.

It is worth paying attention to the category of information needed in the case of scientific information. Without going into defining information itself, we can assume that it is a complex concept and “that it is difficult to define and describe this concept in a uniform and satisfactory way that would be acceptable by different researchers.” (Stefanowicz, 2004) I agree that the concept of information needed is a permanent fixture in science, especially in problems devoted to management. David Nicholas, the British researcher, has “described information needs in the following categories: a subject/course, a function, a type, an intellectual level, a point of view, quantity, quality, credibility, a chronological range and timeliness, a delivery speed, a place of publication or a place of information creating, processing and packaging.” (Materska, 2007) Maria Próchnicka (2004) presents the information needs as a category of user’s subjective experience. According to the quoted author, the information need leads to cognitive activities performed by a user. The activities include the feature analysis of a situation where the following operations take place: searching, components defining, finding mutual relations among these activities, precise objectives determining, constructing action plans, searching for goals, plan evaluations and verifications after completing the process. With reference to Katarzyna Materska (2007), “On the basis of scientific information, information needs are often considered in categories of man’s cognitive needs i.e. some gaps and shortages of mental knowledge and possibilities of understanding something. These gaps can be expressed/represented in the form of questions or words that are reported to information – search systems or to other sources. Meeting a cognitive need means then searching for information that exists objectively in a document or in an information system and whose description is accepted by a user.” With reference to Jadwiga Woźniak (1989), the existence of a separate subcategory of information needs requires a discussion. In the author’s opinion, man’s needs such as physiological and emotional can be met (directly or indirectly) thanks to information. As it is quoted by Wanda Pindlowa (2004), information needs reflect user’s knowledge gaps, gaps about the user himself and about his surroundings. They can be a basis for a conclusion that concerns a user’s convictions and goals as well as his knowledge, self-knowledge or the lack of knowledge (our knowledge can be completed but our ignorance is infinite). All of these are used, for example, in the construction of intelligent information search systems (Próchnicka, 2000). As it is ascertained by Materska (2007), “Knowledge shortage can represent different types of small gaps, larger gaps, uncertainty and the lack of linkages (cohesion) among the knowledge particular elements. The hypothesis of Nikolas Belkin (1980, 1982)

treating the information need as an abnormal state of knowledge, (*anomalous state of knowledge* – ASK), assumes that knowledge seekers often are not able to define their information needs as long as they can easily express what they do not know and what is the knowledge they lack.” In an organization, in social functioning, an individual requires information to meet his needs. A part of seekers has acquired information so far, a part of them is involved in the process of information acquisition. As it is noticed by Józef Oleński (2004), some information often exist out of an individual’s reach creating an information gap.

4 Conclusions

With reference to Szulczewski (1979), it can be assumed that information should be treated. On one hand, as a necessary element of individuals’ and social groups’ activities in a public life and as a factor that harmonizes all those activity manifestations, and on the other hand, as a form of activity by means of which a man strives to self-realization in a society. As it is provided by Zdzisława Dacko-Pikiewicz (2003): “A specific form of social communication is communication between parents and children. A parent influences his offspring through passed on messages shaping the child’s personality. In a family, the process of socialization is carried on.” Meeting information needs is often connected with information entities functioning. Undoubtedly, nowadays the press, radio, television and the Internet belong to them. What is worth mentioning here is the socialization process. As a rule it is assumed that it is an individual’s process of internalization, acquisition and reception of values, norms, and behavior patterns (Filipiak, 1996). In modern times, information is a turn. It changes contemporary reality; it is a man’s basic need. Mass media, including the Internet, are mainly used to change the world. On one hand information contributes to a tremendous progress, work effectiveness and life quality improvement, but on the other hand it can be biased on and not reflect the entire reality, thus creating a distorted world in which information penetrates all spheres of social life.

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