



Overcoming of Prejudices and Stereotypes in Multicultural Society and Media Literacy

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Abstract

Stereotypes and prejudices are catalysts and creators of various injustices and conflicts within societies. Their presence in media contents are enormous and therefore their influence as well. Prejudices and stereotypes often cause social injustice and unfairness for those who are their sufferers and victims. When this happens, then there appear on the surface very serious humanistic and moral questions. It never overcomes an important context of social justice and therefore it is vital to devote a serious attention towards their overcoming. Alongside the presentation of several basic elements regarding prejudices and stereotypes concept, article focuses on significant presence of stereotypes and prejudices in various media contents. One of the ways for overcoming prejudices and stereotypes in multicultural society is media literacy. In contemporary developed societies, media literacy presents an important part of wider education, which immanently strengthens intercultural dialogue within entire society and better understanding and mutual respect among different members of community.

Keywords: Stereotypes; Prejudices; Society; Competencies; Media; New media; Media literacy

Introduction

“Tonight, sheik was walking in the town, carrying the torch in his hand and screamed: I am tired from beasts and devils; human being is my desire. “(Rumi)

Each society creates the ways of categorization each individual and groups and defines the set of characteristics that are considered as consistent for the members of existing categories. Defined routine in social relations is greatly tinted by prejudices and stereotypes, which enable people to be related towards “anticipated others”, without much attention and thinking too much.

Prejudices and stereotypes are accredited mental perceptions about certain groups in the society that are most often applied on its members. In today’s complex world filled with confusion, vagueness and obscurities, people constantly try to find the ways for simplifying their everyday reality and their own life. Our complete knowledge about the world is mostly subsidiary and significantly based upon information and contents received via media. Contemporary human being attempts to place all that knowledge into the certain ‘files’ and to adjust them into already

existing perceptions about the others. That is the beginning of the process related to creating a prejudices and functioning of stereotypes, which are a type of defence mechanisms for individuals to hide their lacks in order to justify their own feelings and tendency for superiority.

Prejudices and stereotypes often cause social injustice and unfairness for those who are their sufferers and victims. When this happens, then there appear on the surface very serious humanistic and moral questions. It never overcomes an important context of social justice and therefore it is vital to devote a serious attention towards their overcoming.

Actions and influences of stereotypes and prejudices are in most cases related to sexism, race, religion and ethnic elements but these types of social relations exist in almost every type of social interaction. Global jokes on “stupid blond” use stereotypes that minimize intellectual abilities and capacities of a larger women’s population in general. Similar connotation occurs in the humoristic media contents and jokes about “stupid Bosnian” very present in the entire region in Western Balkans. Furthermore, poor people are presented as failures and socially maladjusted

Received date: 25 December 2020; **Accepted date:** 30 December 2020; **Published date:** 31 December 2020

Citation: Bakic S, Camo M. Overcoming of Prejudices and Stereotypes in Multicultural Society and Media Literacy. SunText Rev Arts Social Sci 1(2): 111.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51737/2766-4600.2020.011>

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individuals while persons with mental illness often were described as violent and dangerous. On the other side, in the reality, most of them are dangerous to themselves and not to the others. Some nations are portrayed as peaceful, romantic or fun, while some others are presented as cold, aggressive or even primitive.

Media represents a vital ‘window of the word’ and the easiest way we learn about people and the world that we are not able to directly meet and experience. They are a sort of cultural catalysator and inevitably influence our understanding of the world. While media inform us even while entertaining us, they powerfully transmit social values together with stereotypes and prejudices as well. According to Walter Lippman, media and journalists due to the lack of time or various limitations, sometimes due to their natural insensibilities, switch the complete picture and context and pay the significance and meanings to stenographic codes of words and pictures that are highlighted with stereotypes” [1].

With already mentioned, and within an enormous influence of media on culture, media have a huge responsibility to accept responsibility for learning and understanding differences between stereotypes and prejudices and reality itself preventing demonstration of stereotypies and contents ‘tinted with prejudices’ that lead to various serious discriminations in every society.

Therefore, media literacy is vital not only from the media’s perspective but from recipients standpoints as well. Media literacy and development of media literacy in each society can contribute towards overcoming of prejudices and stereotypes what greatly influence on general education and culture of every individual but also influence the future of every society likewise.

Some of the Main Characteristics of Prejudices And Stereotypes

In the most European languages basic meaning of prejudices points out development of interaction before the “judgment”, on its irrational nature [2]. For this purpose, independently of real verifications, individual develops favourable or unfavourable attitude towards someone or something, resisted towards changes without any consideration for additional evidences. In everyday usage but also in the social and humanistic sciences as well, this term is related to the negative attitude towards certain groups or individual.

Overall model of prejudice is basically in concluding process based upon non-representative sample of characteristics and representative sample of group members as well with a final and general conclusion as the result. Prejudice involves apparent rational foundation, which is consisted out of already taken partial characteristics, mostly unrealistically exaggerated, viewed as

imperative features and appearances of personalities to be concluded about (though they are few and irrelevant). Furthermore, some of these features are getting generalized on entire group, although they cannot serve as the factual sample regarding the group in question. Rudimentary psychological and sociological problem is situated in question why this huge concluding mistake happens at all, why this mistake has a extensive handover on entire system of beliefs, opinions and behaviours within individuals and groups and why is it resistant to the change regardless of obvious, serious and opposite verifications. Explanations that are mostly present and accepted in psychology and sociology are eclectic ones. They grip psychoanalytic assumptions about influence of irrational, as well as the learning theory with accentuated influence of early socialization and influences of social, usually hidden mechanisms [2]. Psychoanalysts consider that spectrum of explanations stress out the presence of certain direction of irrational expansion related to the certain group or individual. If it is frustrated expansion, there is a prejudice that develops towards the source of frustration. This is the way how prejudice becomes one aspect of aggression with various modalities towards the source of frustration [3]. In other words, prejudice becomes only an ‘alibi’ for hatred already existing in acceptable social circumstances.

Within the structure of individuals’ values and attitudes, prejudices are basis for formation of stereotypes, completely simplified; predetermine constructions related to various aspects of social reality. Similarly, stereotypes are configuring in the process of individual’s socialization and they are mostly based on social groups and their members in the context of race, ethnic, religious, political, professional, sexual and other components.

It is important to stress out that stereotypes as well can be negative and positive ones as well. This results in unfounded and unjustified glorification or stigmatization of all members related to the specific social group, regardless of their individual characteristics and differences concerning other individuals in the certain group. What needs to be added is that stereotypes produce sense of social solidarity and unity. In the sociological context, stereotype is rigid and mainstream perception and opinion about certain part of reality where people participate in. I time, this perception and opinion becomes sightlessly perception and understanding of reality [4]. Furthermore, sociologists use this concept for a very long time in order to analyse and explain various forms of deviant behaviour, especially in researching causes and variations of deviant behaviour, analyses of race interactions and stereotypes regarding gender issues in the area of education and professional relations as well.

Formation of stereotypes is tremendously human beings’ characteristic, but modern and scientific concept of stereotypes that is related to the context of this article was introduced by Walter Lippman in his book *Public Opinion* from 1922. Major



framework of his intellectual thought is that human's reliance on stereotypes is necessary and even more unavoidable for everyone to be able to cope with miscellaneous social interactions and relations.

“Between ourselves and our real natures we interpose that wax figure of idealizations and selections which we call our character. We extend this into all our thinking. Between us and the realities of social life we build up a mass of generalizations, abstract ideas, ancient glories, and personal wishes. They simplify and soften experience. It is so much easier to talk of poverty than to think of the poor, to argue the rights of capital than to see its results. Pretty soon we come to think of the theories and abstract ideas as things in themselves. We worry about their fate and forget their original content” [1].

Prejudices and stereotypes in media contents

It is important to underline that none of prejudices or stereotypes' pattern are never neutral because their usage always include our personal understanding and reality experiences as well what is in most cases irrational and jam-packed with emotions that are related to them. As already mentioned, it is about vital elements of our defence mechanisms whereby which individuals feel safe and protected within the specific position they are in. Simply discarding and superficially understanding of these phenomena, whatsoever viewed as wrong and tasteless would be a huge mistake. Especially bearing in mind that media represent very influential and powerful institutions taking into consideration that various media contents such are news, entertainment, commercials are filled with stereotypes, which strengthen different prejudices that further lead to miscellaneous ways of discrimination and stigmatization.

It should be more than clear that in every multicultural society, social interactions and relations coloured with prejudices are never righteous, decent or fair so we can conclude that if we judge about something or someone with prejudices or some kind of stereotypes, therefore we are in the situation to directly or indirectly influence on other's human rights' violation or violating person's being and self-determination that are basic civilization values.

Peter Orlik in his comments related to stereotypes in the new media in his book *Electronic Media Criticism* has said: „When members of different age, professions, gender, religion or race have been shown in a stereotype's manner, relation towards them becomes potentially unfair. All people from Texas, all Indians, members of Baptist Church, all policemen are not the same. Representation of every member of certain group in a same way is actually functionally unfair and dishonest behaviour regarding to the concept of individual human dignity“ [5].

Serious problem in the context of media and their usage of stereotypes is when the usage becomes so accentuated, thus it

neutralizes every critical ability of recipient 'not to trust' in media content erasing every possibility of an adequate opinion regarding certain members of society. In the multicultural society, such is society of Bosnia and Herzegovina, media representatives together with representatives of educational and cultural institutions should constantly take into consideration and question the system that traditionally creates stereotype and strengthen prejudices towards certain individuals, groups and segments within society in general.

Furthermore, theorist Louis Alvin Day considers that basically the problem of stereotypes in media is not only in creating prejudices and discrimination yet that many stereotyped messages and symbols in the media contents constantly impose questions of what should be the role of the media in one society. According to Day, one of the important dilemmas is whether media should be the engine of the society eager to construct more egalitarian culture or that media should just transmit already existing social values, firming cultural norms that are immanently including stereotyped picture of our reality. Day illustrated this dilemma in the context of commercials: „ Critics claim that many commercials create stereotypes that are correlated to the huge segments of society, especially women, minorities and older citizens. Question of stereotypes' formation relates to discussion whether commercials shape social values or just articulating and expressing them. If you believe that commercials can shape our values and our perception of the world, then you are very familiar with understanding that creators of commercials should be deeply aware of how different groups are presented. Contrary to this, if you believe that commercials reflect society, you will consider creators of commercials obligated that what is presented should be exact and representative“. In this context, overcoming prejudices and stereotypes involves constant effort in balancing between commercial and “new aesthetics” magnetism of specific cultural stereotypes opposite to the values such is respect of every member of the society and accurate and fair presentation.

One of the most serious consequences related to prejudices and stereotypes in media contents is the hate speech. Hate speech is presented in all levels, from political, where different representatives of power often using abusive and insulting words and negative stereotypes, speak negatively about other nationalities, members of national and sexual minorities and women as well, then through entertainment media sphere until individual private sphere. In this context for a long time of unsanctioned and frequently permitted public hate speech as a result we have many people with wide spectrum of prejudices especially young people.

Moreover, constant repetition of stereotypes' and prejudices' mechanisms appears through humoristic speech, for recipients with lower criticism threshold, then through entertaining reality show programs, sport programs and similar contents. These kinds

of media contents, unfortunately often submit the spirit towards certain forms of acting, legitimize them and adjust people on what is today desirable way to talk, think and act. Aggression, voyeurism, narcissism, vulgarity, ignorance and stupidity continuously invite participants to enjoy in this infantile and degrading picture of reality without any participants' motivation and urge to escape from this environment and 'choice'.

Media literacy as the central mechanism for overcoming prejudices and stereotypes

The fact that more ignorant people consciously avoid 'serious' media contents and enjoy more in above mentioned media and cultural contents, according to Bauer [5], does not imply that media literacy does not exist. It does not mean that media literacy is limited but it is a confirmation of undeveloped ability and capacity for future and emancipation. Reinstating and developing of media literacy when overcoming stereotypes and prejudices in multicultural societies in question, is essentially one of the most important competencies for future and the most important dimension of communication abilities as one of the crucial elements for life competency at all. In this context, Bauer claims that theoretical and empirical studies on questions related to the influence of media today confirm existence of aimed and purposed usage of media by recipients [5]. Specific lifestyles and personal worlds of individual and groups, cultural and social capitals and specific life interactions and relations as well, create an outline for media influence and acceptance of media contents. All these elements impact on attraction and receptiveness of stereotypes and prejudices in times when lack of immediacy and life relations quality helps for this kind of shaped and presented reality in comparison with reality itself become easier and more bearable. This is the way we confirm the complexity of these phenomena we talk about. There is nothing more cynical than an individual who carries the ethics problems of the society he or she belong to.

Today, media literacy is one of the most increasing areas in media and cultural studies. In the context of media reflected world in which we are all living in, plain learning of reading the "text" is not enough. It is necessary to learn how to read various media messages and this learning process should start as earlier as possible. Media literacy and media education should start from the elementary school. Criticism approach of media literacy should create education for media literacy towards political what will significantly influence on overcoming stereotypes and prejudices. But in most cases, there are 'referring' on direct regulatory interventions within media content, while at the same time, there are absences of critically analyses related to hidden mechanisms of production, distribution and promotion of mentioned artefacts. Therefore, real participants of media

production and industry remained unquestioned and uncritical. Media literacy should consider visual images very seriously and responsibly. Importance of this (visual) literacy has no only humanistic and aesthetic dimensions but political dimension as well. Media literacy should, additionally, serve the widening of trans disciplinary pedagogical sphere, initiating necessity and importance of intercultural dialogue, but dialogue between cultural studies, sociology, education, media, art, postcolonial and feminist' studies.

Media literacy implies too (or before call) the competence for recognizing prejudices and stereotypes, difference between media violence and violence in the real world. In other words, it is about capability to read "between the lines" what the truth values are, and what are for example kitsch contents, questioning relations between music, film and sport culture and their authentic values and images. Improvement of media literacy is (or it should be) in the responsibility of governments, various institutions and organizations, teachers in order to define how to prepare pupils and students to understand media dominated contemporary world in a way that they can competently function in such a world. This can be achieved in developing their competencies to use new media in a way for new media to be their tool for real participating role as future citizens within the cultures and society they belong to. This is the way future citizens get liberated from various forms of prejudices and stereotypes with critical relation towards stereotypes of any kind.

Additionally, to this, if high quality development related to social relations and individual media culture represents the goal of media education and media literacy, then there is a need to create a space for communicative values that impact on social and individual shaping of life. According to opinions of Bauer, media literacy implicit an area of critical analyses of relations and interactions between people and media, while at the same time, it implies trying for undertaking cultural and ethical criteria in order an adequate shaping of this specific link [5].

Conclusion

Media literacy is today the basic of social sensibility today because our world is moulded by media culture. Other knowledge's should be upgraded as well together with social praxis that makes democracy what democracy essentially is. Understanding of media "system and dynamic" is the key competency in various areas of social actions and it does not tackle only media professionals but media recipients and users as well. Analyses of media sphere's social character should be directed not only towards economic, political and ideological, but on social area as well. It is related to the spheres of human rights and freedom, minorities' rights and movements, right on diversity and intercultural dialogue. Due to the specific bond of various practices related to media, necessary skills overcome their "craft"

character and even more today, they are imposed as inevitability for all media users, whether to get information or distribute information to others. Consequently, in order to take over responsibility for various media usages, it is vital to gain knowledge on media competencies and skills with various components (technical, symbolical, cultural competencies as well).

New media technology furthermore stressed out the meaning of media literacy, at the same time directing it not only on information and computerization that are just a part of media literacy, which is pretty much prevailed especially among young people. Nonetheless, communicative abilities of people today regard to interpretation of media contents that include understanding of principles and contexts of media together with their ability to recognize stereotypes and prejudices with all their characteristics is still not mastered at all.

Significance of media in pacification destructive conflicts as consequences related to stereotypes and prejudices cannot be replaced with anything else. Media that are not freed from authoritarian culture are remote far away from ideal of broad-mindedness, nonviolent culture, mutual living, civic rights and humans' freedom. That is why media literacy gains huge importance in revival of public sphere especially cultural and political communication. In this communication today there is a lack of clear and prudent word, critical thinking and sincere empathy. Educated and highly sensible and sensitive journalists who are competent to use new knowledge and new technologies can become a force of social changes in societies such is Bosnian and Herzegovinian [6]. They can become an influential factor of atmosphere tinted with civilized dialogue and existence.

People and media as well are antithesis to the indifference or passivity. Without media freedom there is no truth about society or freedom. And when we talk about prejudices and stereotypes in societies, we are talking about millions of people that were terrified on purpose, attacked on their self-respect and identity, their security. They were humiliated; they were desperate and led to even death.

Declaration of Interest

The author has no relevant affiliations or financial involvement with a financial interest in or financial with the subject matter or materials discussed in the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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