

THE 'PUBLIC MAKING ABILITY' OF MASS MEDIA: THE STUDY OF THE TOPICS OF DISCUSSION FROM TOTALITARIANISM TO DEMOCRACY. THE CASE OF ESTONIA, 1940—2005

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We discuss the results and challenges of a content analysis project entitled “Media as the creator of Estonian public sphere and ‘public’ in Estonian media from 1940 to 2005”. This retrospective study of Estonian media is based on an understanding of mediated communication as a kind of ‘creator’ and ‘mediator’ of public sphere. In this context, the very object of our research was what we call ‘media’s public making ability’ (Gerbner).

The ‘public making ability’ of mass media can be described via the same variables that we use to describe how an individual relates to its environment: topics of his interests, values that are important to him, questions that are considered relevant from the perspective of social development, etc. In democratic society media is considered as the ‘fourth power’, as its function is to be a mediator between citizens and their state. Totalitarian society was different in the sense that it was based on the simplified understanding of public communication: media as the creator and moderator of man’s environment.

The case of Estonia is unique in two aspects: a) the double structural change of political regimes (1940 and 1989) is a reference that allows us to compare the evolution of totalitarian, post-totalitarian and democratic media systems, b) the relatively small mediascape is what makes easier to study those factors that seem to be most influential from the point of view of change (the population of Estonia is approximately 1,5 millions).

In our analysis we clarified, that there are three aspects that are important from our point of view.

First: it really seems possible to refer to the four types of topics that occur in our 70 years period: topics typical for totalitarian media, topics of ‘stable societies’ that are likely to occur in totalitarian and democratic media systems, topics of transition societies and topics that are likely to occur only in stable democratic societies.

Second: The fact that the list of the topics that are likely to occur in stable societies (totalitarian and democratic both) is rather long compared to the other three groups, leads us to the understanding that totalitarian ideology must have had its specific manifestations on the textual level of topics.

Third: The study of the functionality of mass mediated texts shows us, that topics can be considered as basic instruments that carried on the ideological messages of the totalitarian system to the context of their consumption. At this level of generalization we point that in all decades there was two most amplified groups of textual functions: a) functions that were considered as informative-framing and b) functions that can be defined as political-ideological.