

# Integrative and Disintegrative Media Functions in the Information Society

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**Abstract.** *The article aims to analyse the technological as well as ideological factors enabling integrative or disintegrative media role in society. The main assumption focuses on the social dimension of communication. The article states that internet should follow the media mission and preserve moral values. The conclusion is made that Catholic Church media doctrine seems quite effective and may be proposed as opposition to media liberalism that leads to destruction of responsible individuals, nations, and cultures.*

**Keywords:** *Catholic Church media doctrine, community, disintegration, ethics, function, integration, mass media, role, social communication, social media, value.*

Among the basic tasks of the mass media, beside to inform, educate and entertain, we can also record an integrative function (Lepa, 2003: 46). Due to the great advances in communication technologies, which have application in the mass media and directly influence their development and coverage, the modern civilization has reached the global dimension, and the technical stimulation of consciousness has become the process extended on the entire community (McLuhan, 2004: 33).

## Teaching of the Catholic Church on Moral Values as a Foundation for the Integrative Mission of the Media

The integrative function of the mass media – in the context of common good, development and progress – is strongly stressed by the doctrine of the Catholic Church related to the mass media and their role and significance in the modern world (*Listy...*, 2007: 762, *Sobór...*, 2002: 88–89). The teaching of John Paul II is particularly noteworthy as he recognized the media as the first modern Areopagus, which ‘unifies humanity and turns it into so called ‘global village.’ The mass media have gained such significance that for many people they constitute the main tool of information and formation, and, in addition, guidelines and inspirations to their behaviours as individuals, families and societies’ (*Encyklika...*, 2007: 554).

John Paul II, in order to emphasize the integrative dimension of the mass media, devoted a number of addresses, which were traditionally given during the World Days of Social Communication. The Pope recalled that the most valuable merit of the mass media is creating links between nations and cultures; he postulated ideals of brotherhood and international solidarity and indicated on the need of conforming to basic ethical values, which favour building the unity of the entire human family. The Pope, by enumerating the greatest goals of the mass media, namely presenting and transferring the truth, justice, peace, good will, active mercy, mutual cooperation, love and community, stressed that making the use of the mass media depends on a moral vision and ethical responsibility of all involved in the process of sending and receiving information. John Paul II highlighted the meaning of the new and more advanced methods and technologies in the field of social communication in the work of strengthening the bonds of brotherhood and mutual tolerance of different cultures and nations among people (*Orędzia...*, 2002: 158–159, 177–178).

In numerous speeches, messages and letters to the media people, various newspaper, radio and television editors, societies and associations of journalists, the Pope strongly emphasized that the true

unity of humanity is built through the service of truth, good, beauty and affirmation and defence of human dignity (*Media ...*, 2008: 277).

Pope Benedict XVI, in the subsequent addresses to the World Day of Social Communication, appealed to the media for responsibility, serving the truth, reliable reporting events, and a satisfactory explanation of public issues and an honest presentation of diverse opinions.

He opposed making the media a tube of economic materialism and ethical relativism and postulated the development of the pastoral care in the digital world (Benedykt XVI, 2010). Assessing the phenomenon of globalization, he pointed to the fact that it is the result of activities of particular individuals and nations and shall be what man generates of it (Benedykt XVI, 2009: 51–52).

The fundamental message of the doctrine of the Catholic Church on the media is to proclaim the priority of the ethical dimension as a primary criterion for the evaluation of any media coverage.

Elements favourable to creating unity, and thus, integrating humanity, encompass truth, good and beauty as well as freedom subordinate to responsibility and the authentic concern for the comprehensive development of recipients. The intention of serving the common good, building community of the entire world, thereby contributing to the development and progress, can be listed among the detailed criteria (*Media ...*, 2008: 364–366, Pokorna-Ignatowicz, 2002: 143).

### **The Media as a Tool of Integration in the Experience of the Contemporary Humanity**

The integrative function of the media can be examined in various aspects. The most vital ones include the common accessibility of communication devices, the phenomenon of social networking and globalization of the media coverage.

#### ***The Common Accessibility of Communication Devices***

The universal access to the media coverage and the specific ubiquity of the mass media in minds and everyday life should be considered

the basic mechanisms of integration of the information society on the threshold of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Receivers, media players – radio, television, computers, cell phones, CDs and DVDs, mp3 and mp4 players – have become objects of everyday use, instruments, which are universally available and used in the communication process (Sorlin, 1999: 60).

Another phenomenon affecting the social integration has become transfiguration of the model of communication. Beside the existing original and traditional pattern, which differentiates senders and receivers, i.e. the active and creative side and the passive recipients of media content, has appeared a form of interactive communication; it is the most visible and almost immediate on the Internet. The current information, evaluations and opinions can be, and indeed are, promptly commented on by the Internet users (Goban-Klas, 1999: 44, *Cywilizacja ...*, 2005: 147–148).

### ***The Phenomenon of the Social Networks***

The new media, mainly the Internet, have created the possibility of interactivity, namely the new opportunity for interpersonal communication (Goban – Klas, 1999: 77). Various social networks (i. e., My Space, Facebook, Twitter) have become both, the media and cultural phenomenon and an interesting sociological case. An impressive number of operators (MySpace – 300 million accounts, Facebook – more than 170 million active users, Twitter – in May, 2009 – 32 million) perfectly illustrates the need for social integration, which manifests itself in the desire to find old friends and acquaintances. Time and space constraints, which formerly prevented interpersonal contacts, were broken thanks to the Web. Thus, cyberspace has become a powerful tool of integration of active users of social networks, who form specific communities (Levinson, 2010: 174–175, 189, 202–203, 207).

### **Globalization of the Media Coverage**

Globalization of the media coverage constitutes another mechanism of integration, which occurs thanks to the social media (*Popularna ...*,

1999: 305–306). The reception of the media content by the huge audience, in other words, the massification of the media transfer, has a great significance for generating an image of one big human family that unifies while jointly experiencing a particular event.

The most dramatic, and yet most striking example of it, is co-participation – via the media coverage – in suffering, illness and death of Pope John Paul II. The presentation of death, which was experienced with pure conscience and a spirit of confidence, confirmed – to billions of people – the greatness and uniqueness of John Paul II as the notable witness of faith (*Odchodzenie ...*, 2008: 34–35).

Currently, the integrative function of the social media is being more stressed, which undoubtedly results from the emergence and development of the new media that improve and extend the possibility of interactive communication. The process of communication is regarded as a powerful force, which constructs the social world, namely the community (Morreale, Spitzberg, Barge, 2008: 40–44). Unfortunately, the mass media can contribute to its disintegrating as well.

### **Disintegrative Function of the Mass Media**

Destructive, or more precisely, disintegrative impact of the mass media on societies, has several dimensions. The most significant ones encompass the media liberalism, commercialization of the social media, visual dominance over logosphere and mainly, the generation of the false representation of reality.

#### ***The Media Liberalism***

The primary reason of the disintegrative media function can be found in a departure from their main task, namely spreading ideals of truth, good and beauty. One of the most characteristic features of the contemporary information society is seeking efficiency and effectiveness rather than the truth. Another mechanism of disintegration caused by the media coverage is blurring the boundaries between ideology, worldview and science, opinion and knowledge. Liberal ethics, which are perceived as negation of the role of society and, in a way, absolutising

an individual and making single freedom a supreme value, undermine virtues of social structures, which, in reference to the mass media, manifests in the rejection of responsibility as a vital moral value, especially pertaining to activities performed by the social media. The lack of distinction between responsible freedom vs. willfulness, or even disorder, is essential for the comprehension of the ethical dimension of the media coverage (Blackburn, 1997: 213, Drożdż, 2005: 43–47).

### ***Commercialization of the media coverage***

In the economic sphere, i. e. operating of the free market, the media liberalism causes commercialization of the media coverage, which constitutes the source of profit and enrichment; the subordination of the media content to commercial purposes significantly affects the shape and subject matter of the media messages. However, it should be noticed that the free market, including the media market, can be treated as the peculiar contemporary myth; pluralism and competence undoubtedly represent advantages of the free market economy, yet the media institutions, particularly in Europe, are viewed in terms of political and cultural projects, which are subject to specific legal regulations (Mrozowski, 2001: 155–159).

### ***Advertising***

The most visible example of the commercial nature of the media coverage is advertising; as a persuasive message, it affects the formation of needs, instrumentalizes culture, and above all promotes consumerist lifestyle. Additionally, advertising proclaims and confirms the belief that the possession of some material goods denotes the fulfilment of the deepest existential needs, dreams and desires. The combination of the advertising message content with elements of a sexual attraction contributes to the perpetuation of a false image of a woman as a sex object (Mrozowski, 2001: 176–183, Doliński, 2003: 149–150).

## ***Pornography and Violence***

The rejection of the traditional Christian values and old moral standards, in connection with the use of the latest media inventions and technologies, exclusively for an uncontrolled desire for profit, caused the development of the specific pornography industry. Promoting the sexual freedom, diverse deviations, not only undermines the value and significance of chastity, abstinence and celibacy, but also the marital sex; it also threatens family and especially woman's dignity. The media, by disseminating pornographic contents, act destructively on both, individual recipients and particular social groups. The objectivization of a human being, loss of a sense of shame, diminishing ethical sensitivity, especially in human sexuality and procreation, promoting false images of masculinity and femininity as well as absolutization of egoism, pleasure and enjoyment are categorized as negative effects of pornography, which disintegrate society. Cybersex emerged with the development of the new media – it encountered harsh criticism as it deprived moral restraints and norms, deformed psyche and shaped antisocial personality (Zwoliński, 2004: 347–356, *Seksualność...*, 2006: 120, 131–133).

Another manifestation of a disintegrative media function can be found in transmissions, which stimulate attitudes of aggression, violence, rape and cruelty. Not only do they threaten human dignity, but also distort images of suffering, illness, death and the value of human life. Violence on the screen has an impact on brutality of life and everyday behaviours and also teaches aggression, indifference to violence and suffering, causes emotional disorders and shapes a false vision of reality; it mainly questions the prohibition of killing (Zwoliński, 2004: 329–338). The specific aspect of the mass media is war propaganda which results in disintegration of the image of the unified human family, stresses real and fictional differences, fuels conflicts and hatred on the international scale, portrays violence and aggression as a way of resolving problems, distorts the traditional hierarchy of values and justifies killing; exaggeration belongs to specific

methods of war propaganda (Jarecka, 2008: 199, *Nikczemny ...*, 2009: 237). The interaction of violent scenes and aggressive computer games on children's psyche also belongs to disintegrative impact of the mass media (Braun-Galkowska, Ulfik-Jaworska, 2002: 220).

### ***Fun and Entertainment***

The contemporary society is dominated by fun and entertainment; work and effort are no longer considered basic values. The functions performed by the social media, i.e. to educate, inform, describe and comment on reality, once regarded as fundamental, became reduced and dominated by the entertaining function; even information is to entertain receivers. New forms of media spectacles, so called reality shows, based on watching and stimulating various human behaviours in specific circumstances, yet created only for the needs of a show, not only exceeded the boundaries of a good taste, but also stimulated the participants to perform unethical actions. Additionally, the recipients strengthened in their blameworthy attitude of unhealthy curiosity and glorified behaviours, which were unacceptable in the past.

### ***Anti-values of Pop Culture***

The mass media contributed decisively to spreading the idea of undermining the traditional hierarchy of values; production, labour, and intellect opposed consumption activity, fun, emotion, and passivity. These anti-values, which are present in mass and pop cultures, may play a pivotal role in shaping egoistic, materialistic and hedonistic, in other words, antisocial or destructive, attitudes.

### ***Visualisation vs. Logosphere***

Hegemony of an image is characteristic of the contemporary popular culture, mass culture and the information civilization. Reducing the readership for the viewing resulted in significant changes, both in media coverage (the development of tabloids and the visual



media) and their contents. A word given the role of a signature under an illustration or television or Internet image does not fulfil the basic functions, namely to exhaustively inform and thoroughly comment; thus, the overvisualization forms the sequence of negative mechanisms associated with the activity of the mass media. The dominance of the iconosphere, due to the great number of recognized images and with no possibility of a critical reflection on them, may lead to a mistaken outlook and evaluation of various phenomena. Presenting only the fragments of reality distorts the picture, which also is an element of disintegration. Furthermore, the development of folk culture and limiting the influence of high culture are the results of marginalization of a word.

### ***Fiction and Reality***

The most important media disintegrative mechanisms include blurring the boundary between truth and untruth, fiction and reality, good and evil, beauty and ugliness. In a sense, it results from the very nature of a spectacle, which is used by the audiovisual media. Identification of the media image with reality occurs automatically and is the result of the peculiar intellectual laziness, lack of criticism, pursuing simplification and the dominance of a subjective perception over an objective reflection on reality; obsession with fantastic elements and special effects deepen differences between reality and the media spectacles. The conflict with a form and content, which is spread by the media, may become the mechanism of alienation and influence shaping destructive attitudes such as apathy and loneliness. Subjectivity of assessments, lack of reference to the objective order and hierarchy of values, blurring differences between information and a commentary and most importantly, rejection of social responsibility of the media by postmodernism and negation of normative and ethical dimension of journalism also results in disintegration of both, workers of the media institutions and receivers. Free and subjective media coverage have an impact on the promotion and support individualism as well as

glorification of freedom with no limits, which are, *de facto*, necessary for the existence and development of any society.

### ***The Media vs. the Information Society***

The phenomenon of the information society is not possible to be described and defined in every respect; it is mainly due to an enormous dynamism of the current techniques of communication, which influence the form of the media coverage. It rather can be assumed that the information society is in a constant state of flux and undergoes various changes. The proposal of renaming information society to technology society seems justified. In the society that deals with advanced techniques of communication, the mass media play such significant role that they are called the Forth Estate, and even the peculiar contemporary religion. Media-crazy is becoming a concerning, if not threatening, phenomenon; the social media are no longer called the Forth Estate, they are called the First Estate. The great significance of the media in the contemporary world and technology society causes that the social media may become an essential factor of integration, yet also they can disintegrate the human family. The new media, as becoming more and more advanced means of interpersonal communication, generate the creation of specific groups in the network society; however, they would not replace traditional real communities. Supporting by the media natural and traditional communities, which are characteristic of a human being, and in which he/ she lives, learns and works, appears to be the best mechanism of the social integration. Whether or not the media will become factors of integration or disintegration – depends, eventually, on a human being, his/ her intentions, sensitivity and conscience.

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## **Integracinė ir dezintegracinė žiniasklaidos funkcijos informacinėje visuomenėje**

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### **Santrauka**

Straipsnyje analizuojamos techninę šiuolaikinio individo sąmonės stimuliaciją atspindinčios integruojanti (į bendruomenę suburianti) ir dezintegruojanti (individualumą skatinanti) žiniasklaidos funkcijos. Teorinių svars-

tymų pagrindu laikoma Katalikų bažnyčios žiniasklaidos traktavimo doktrina, socialinės komunikacijos esminiu bruožu pripažįstanti etinių moralinių vertybių puoselėjimą. Apžvelgus popiežių Jono Pauliaus II-ojo ir Benedikto XVI-ojo laiškus daroma išvada, kad fundamentali integrasinę funkciją atliekančios žiniasklaidos žinia – etinės dimensijos prioritetas, padedantis atsilaikyti prieš ekonominį materializmą bei etinį reliatyvizmą ir leidžiantis bendradarbiauti individams, tautoms, kultūroms. Teigiama, kad žiniasklaidos darbuotojų tarnystė visuotiniam gėriui, tiesos ir grožio saugojimui pavaldi atsakomybei ir autentiškam įsipareigojimui už auditorijos supratimo augimą.

Nors pastebima, kad dėl savo interaktyvumo naujosios medijos (socialiniai tinklai, internetas, kt.) integruoja visuomenę, buria bendruomenę, leidamos atnaujinti senas pažintis ir atkurti draugystės saitus, vis dėlto pastebima gana daug neigiamų pasekmių: reklamos generuojama komercializacija, vizualių elementų dominavimo paskatintas hedonizmas (prievara, pornografija, kt.), ekonominio materializmo nulemta falsifikuota tikrovės reprezentacija. Apibendrinant pabrėžiama, kad efektyvumo, bet ne tiesos siekimas turi įtaką vertybes naikinančiam procesui.

**Esminiai žodžiai:** bendruomenė, dezintegracija, etika, funkcija, integracija, Katalikų bažnyčios žiniasklaidos doktrina, socialinė komunikacija, socialinės medijos, vaidmuo, vertė, žiniasklaida.

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