

The Media and Collective Memory

Places and Milieus of Remembering ¹

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ABSTRACT:

The paper offers a longitudinal analysis of media dynamics and through this it aims to capture the media as the vehicle of collective memory in modern societies. We recognize that associating the media with memory is somewhat counterintuitive – in fact sounds paradoxical – given that the media is usually associated with focusing on novelty and actuality, forgetting swiftly what happened yesterday. While, indeed, the media in a sense lives in the ‘present’, we argue that parallel to its topicality the media creates the communities of remembering in modern societies. Hence, we suggest that what Pierre Nora called the *milieux de memoire* is not lost in modernity merely moved from the level of interpersonal interactions to the space of the mediated reality of the media. Next we also identify in the media what Pierre Nora called the *lieux de memoire* – i.e. places of remembering – that offer shared reference points for the community to recognize itself, and to remember its past. The distinctive feature of our analysis is its ontological position to focus not on individual actors of the media and the news they transmit but to concentrate on the *news-flow*, that is, the way reporting on a particular topic evolves throughout time. Our investigation and the analytical tools we apply for the analysis of the temporal dynamics of news-flow are inspired by the general literature on diffusion mechanisms.

Keywords: memory, media , *lieux de memoire*, *milieux de memoire*,

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of our study is to scrutinize the role of the media in the formation of the identity of modern societies by providing a vehicle for maintaining social/collective memory. We try to resolve the paradox in our paper that although the media is generally perceived to be obsessed with topicality, and focus on the present, nevertheless while focusing on the ‘here and now’ at the same time the media also plays a crucial role as the source and agent of remembering in today’s differentiated societies. We resolve this paradox by showing that the media has a dual time reference. On the level of its conscious agents – journalist, publishers etc. – the media tries to grasp the novelty, the

¹ The research is done within the framework of OTKA’s project No. K73033

topicality and thereby it tends to be forgetful – rarely remembers beyond a few weeks or a few months. At the same time, however, if the media is looked at from the system level, and approached as a subsystem within today's differentiated society than it can be shown that its daily novelties are immersed in the permanent *news-flow* through which it takes care of the long-term memory of the society.

The question to scrutinize the relationship between media, social memory and social identity is rooted in an approach, which neither focuses on the actions and behavior of individual journalists, publishing houses; nor on the representation of a particular event, but tries to grasp how topics evolve in the long term, appear in the media and later disappear. In other words our research is interested in how the media as a sub-system of the society operates, thus we are not interested in how individual articles capture and frame reality consciously or unconsciously (Goffman 1986; Entman 1993), because the object of analysis for us is the sum of all the articles published on a topic by the media in general, or by one of its medium, such as a journal.

In our analysis we rely on ideas developed by the French historian Pierre Nora, who argues that modernity changed the mode of remembering. Modernity undermined the organic communities of remembering of classical societies – Nora argues that in classical times the vehicles of remembering were what he calls the *millieux de memoire* – and instead modern societies create what he calls the *lieux de memoire* – i.e. the places of memory. These are the points of reference in relation to which modern societies identify themselves, such as dates and places of heroic events; figures of exceptional significance through which the community can get in touch with its imagined past.

In the paper, first we provide a basic typology how topics evolve in the media and second we underline the special role of sensations in creating both the milieus and the places of memory in modern societies through the intense emotional effect they have on the audience.

2. VEHICLES AND MODES OF REMEMBERING

It is our memories that make us into who we are as our identity is rooted in our memories, and without our memories we turn into nothing – noted Bunuel. As much as this is true of individuals, it is also true of communities. It is memory that creates the link between the past, the present and the future and enables members of the community to identify who they are, because it is common

reference points in the past that brings them together, and allows them to recognize themselves as a community.

In pre-modern societies memories were transmitted predominantly through personal interaction rooted in tradition. This was the case in antique Greece or in Western Europe during the middle ages. In these 'traditional' societies communities were typically small, and even if they extended beyond the family already at the time of Odysseus, it was the *oikos* with the ties of relatives that created the bases of belonging and not the yet uncertain and fluid institutions of territorial monarchies. In such pre-modern societies writing was limited to a few within the elite (Misztal 2003, 24), and remembering took place through the handing down of customs and routines from the older generation to the younger one. In fact the old were not just a burden on the shoulders of the young, but they had the function to take care and cultivate the past, to keep it alive by re-living it through their anecdotes and stories (Halbwachs 1992). Thus younger generations got habituated to the customs of the community through following the routines of the preceding generation and listening to the account they offer of it. Here tradition is a continuously re-created system of norms and values, which are rooted in the practices of the community (Horváth 1999). As the past is transmitted as a live experience from generation to generation the documentation and the actualization of the past are not separated. What mattered was remembered without actually making an effort to remember, while everything else was forgotten. This link between forgetting and truth is reflected in the Greek word – *aletheia* (truth), which consists of the word *lethe* (to forget) and the 'a' prefix for negation. *Alethia* means therefore that what is not forgotten is the truth - the position which reflects the way of thinking about remembering in a traditional society.

Contrary to such traditional societies in modernity the community's relation to its past has radically changed, to the extent that the French historian Pierre Nora asserted that in fact modernity understands something very different by the word remembering than earlier ages did (Nora 1999). In modernity the nation replaced the organic communities of traditional societies with its institutions making the past not directly accessible but only through specialized institutions of remembering (Gyáni 2000). Thus, personal interaction as the vehicle of remembering got limited to the family, as the function to take care of the past got increasingly institutionalized.

The reason for this change is rooted partly in Enlightenment's new understanding of both the spatial as the temporal characteristics of society. The modern state required files, data and statistics to make it governable (Foucault 2009), by feeding its extensive bureaucracies with documents. Although extensive bureaucracies are not a novelty as great ancient empires had already

relied on them, nevertheless these classical bureaucracies were not entrusted upon the task to buttress the cohesion of the state in the modern sense. The demand for a shared past, of shared memories on the macro-social level appears first with the dawn of nation states, requiring to document, to make notes of the past in order to forge a given aggregate of people living on a given territory into a political community (Halas 1999). In order to achieve this modern state creates storehouses of remembering, to note down and preserve its purported past. Modern societies entertain an almost religious obsession to store, preserve and archive documents, and they end up with such an abundance of materials that are in fact impossible to process. Pierre Nora noted that the files of the French Social Security by now extend over 300 kilometers (Nora 1989, 14), a quantity of files that are impossible to deal with meaningfully. It is ironical that modernity regards at these huge storehouses of data as its memory, miles of files that instead of assisting to remember tend to hide what there would be important to remember (Nora 1999). Modernity behaves like the cartographer in Borges's short story who creates a map at the 1:1 scale. Yet richness of its detail makes such a map totally useless, because it cannot perform the essential role what maps are made for – i.e. to make a selection between what matters and what is insignificant.

Along the obsession to collect the relics of the past for modernity remembering itself became a problematic enterprise (Miszta 2003, 63). While in classical societies remembering was essentially the repetition of the past, in the present modernity is permeated by the myth of progress where the past is not an example for the present to follow, but rather an object to transcend, to surpass. This turns every instances if the present into a crossroad where decisions are needed, to decide which direction to proceed. Paradoxically, however, in order for the present to be able to interpret itself and to avoid the impression that it is not the master of its destiny, there is a permanent demand for a narration in which the present logically follows the past, as modern man wants: *A posteriori, nous aurions pu prévoir l'événement* (Bensa 2006, 173) – afterwards we want to see that we could have known the present. Modern man wants to feel that his present was predictable, or more precisely it would have been predictable if he would have known where to look for indications. In other words there is always the need for a narrative link between past and present that renders everything to its proper place. Yet, as this narration is demanded exactly by a rupture in tradition and the lack of classical remembering that - contrary to what is frequently assumed – classical remembering is not synonymous with history (Nora 1999), as history is in fact less a preservation than a creation of the past.

With the institutionalization of remembering the past turns into the object of manipulation and construction. Just as there are a variety of maps one can

make of a land there are also a variety of ways to remember the past. While in the classical times through personal interactions handed over tradition in an organic manner, hence what to pass over was selected naturally, in modernity the present needs to make a choice from a range of alternative narratives of the past, and choose the one that it finds most appropriately to fit its present.

With the past losing its triviality the space is opened up for professional architects of the past to tell the people their history. With the rupture in tradition remembering turns into an interpretative – hermeneutic – enterprise an ‘official’ narration needs to get settled upon (Halas 2008, 109). As the nation is not a spontaneous self evident entity (Gyáni 2000, 82), an imagined community concomitantly history is also imagined. Putting it differently in modernity documentation of the past is separated from its actualization, as the latter means activities when the past is made public, such as for example the creation of dates of remembering, speeches of commemoration held, public festivities organized. Pierre Nora argues that modernity destroyed the communities of organic remembering, thus what he calls the *milieux de mémoire* (milieu of memory) and instead of them created what he calls its places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*). Paradoxically, however, although there are no communities of remembering anymore, yet there is a desire to remember, and the *lieux de mémoire* creates the reference points for this. These places of memory are places in the abstract sense as although they can refer to actual places – such as sites where big historical events took place, but they can also refer to charismatic leaders of the people or can be festivals, national holidays that offer the opportunity for members of the community to invoke its myths and interpretations about their imagined roots (Horváth 1999).

Nora asserts that in the modern age media crowded out the intimacy of personally experienced tradition with *the ephemeral film of current events* (Nora 1989, 7). This interpretation by Nora is typical as it suggests that the media tends to focus on the present, where media is seen to be driven by the constant need to have something new on the front page (Zelizer 2008, 379), and thereby the media is regarded as the antithesis of tradition. This is the picture, however, not merely how the media is seen, but also how the agents of the media see their own role, and thereby it offers a good way to grasp the essence of the operational logic of the media. Arguably, however, by only focusing on this aspect of the media we leave out of sight the secondary function of the media, which is not tied to the constant search for novelty, but which is characterized by continuity and the maintenance of the cohesion of society and the offering of vehicles of remembering under the modern condition.

There are occasions when remembering is part of the conscious activity of the media when, for example through regular special issues, special historical

sections, the recollections of the events and famous people of the year, the decade or the century the media takes part in the consciously forming the past, and the public's opinion about it (Zelizer 2008, 384). Here the media joins the ethos of the age to document and note (Nora 1999). We argue, however, that this is merely the conscious, intentional aspect of how the media is involved in the forming of the past and remembering.

We contend that there is another – non conscious and intentional aspect of the performance of the media – where remembering can be captured not in individual pieces of news but in the *news-flow*. In the remaining of the paper we will offer first a methodology for creating a typology of different types of *news-flows*, and second we will focus on sensations and suggest that it is in case of sensations that one can point at how the media contributes to the maintaining the memory of the community by creating both places and milieus of memory in modern societies.

3. THE DYNAMICS OF THE MEDIA, **THE EVOLUTION OF TOPICS**

With the dynamic analysis of the media we have the ambition to show how the media works on the system level, and contributes to social remembering. It must be underlined, however, that the question for us is not how communities remember – that we leave for psychologists – except for assuming that emotionally intensive moments work as a catalyst both for individuals and collectives to remember. What we ask is therefore: *how the media creates continuity between past and present* and thereby contributes to the society to re-create, maintain itself and to make its present interpretable on the basis of its past.

3.1. TOPICALITIES

Let's start by pointing out what characterizes the operation of the system of the media. In Luhmann's interpretation every sub-system of modern societies relies on making a distinction along a binary logic. The currency of the media is news, which it distributes and the operational logic of the media is based on making a distinction between *news* and *no-news* (Luhman 2007). As the child of modernity media reflects the relation of modern societies to time, the impression that the world is always in change and what is true today would get outdated by

tomorrow. This in case of the media means – which is true for television, newspapers or the internet – is to look for novelty and share the news of the day with the audience before others would do so and before the audience would lose its interest in the topic, thus before *news* would turn into *no-news*.

Although the process through which news turns into *no-news* can vary, we contend that there is nevertheless an underlying general pattern for this. In case an event is not unpredictable – for example an election, an important centenary - the media is aware of it in advance, knows that it would soon become topical. Hence, as the event approaches the media increasingly publishes reports relating to it, becomes most active around the date of the event, and then after the event reporting about the topic gradually disappears from the media. If we measure the activity of the media related to the topic with the quantity of articles publishes on a given topic on each day, than we can depict the dynamic how the media deals with the topic with the well known bell-curve (figure 1.), or alternatively we can use the figure typical in analyzing diffusion mechanisms, when we get the also well known 'S' curve (figure 2.). In the latter, the figure shows at every moment the cumulative number of articles published on the topic since a particular point of time (on the vertical scale are the number of articles and on the horizontal scale is time).

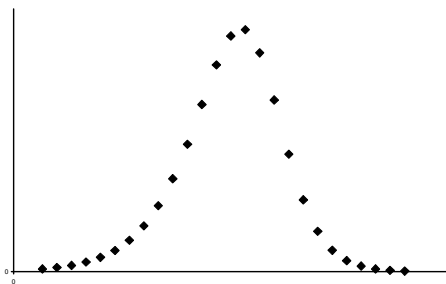


Figure 1.

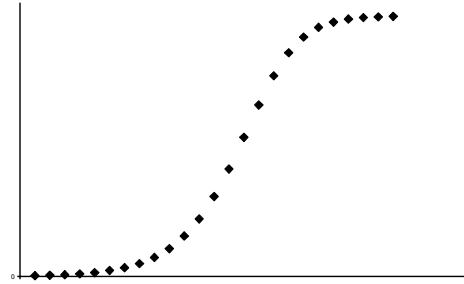


Figure 2.

The 'S' curve starts off with a low value, starts to grow slowly, than speeds up, reaches a phase of intense growth after which it slows down and reaches a point of saturation as the line becomes horizontal. This in case of the media could be understood as the as the topic turns from *news* to *no-news*.. Below is a figure on how the most popular Hungarian daily paper – *Népszabadság* – reported about the anniversary of the 1956 revolution (figure 3.).

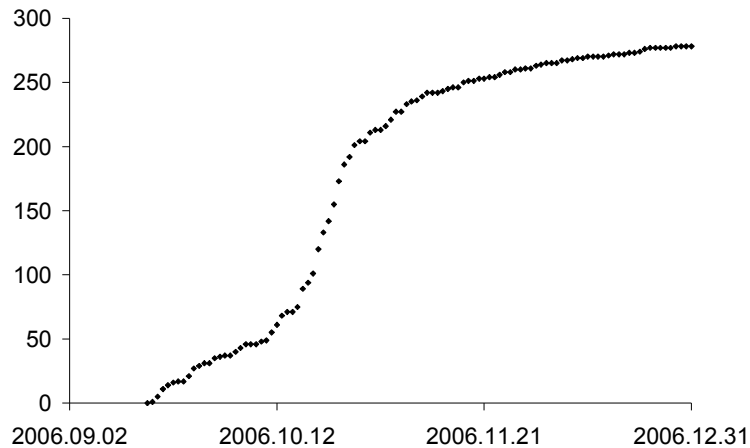


Figure 3. 1956 revolution

On such figures we can see the life-cycle of the topic, how news turns into no-news. This we identify as the *time-horizon* of the media, the period after which the topic loses the attention of the media. We tentatively suggest – on the basis of the topics we analyzed – that typically this life-cycle is usually not longer than a few weeks, and only very exceptionally exceeds three months.

3.2 EVERGREENS

Along the ever changing novelties of the media, there are also certain constant elements in its working. Approaches that emphasize the ritualistic operation of the media highlight the role of repetitive elements such as the news that come every evening at 7 o'clock, the weather report, the daily tragedy, but also permanent topics – such as reports on the performance of the economy – or information about healthy living, are part of the given *zeit geist*, and are ritualistically reported about. Through this ritual activity where with the repetition of topics and forms the media takes part in the creation of *meaning and significance* it contributes to impose an order on the world (Carey 331 and 314). The topics that are in this was always part of the media, with more or less identical intensity we called '*evergreens*', as there is always a demand for them, although this demand is never very high, thus these topics would hardly make it to the front-page.

Below as such an ever present we show the topic of politicians who tend to be deceitful and lie and thereby does not deserve the trust of the public. This topic is permanently present in the media, as there are always minor scandals around, thus articles about it can be depicted with a graph that grows linearly,

yet not too steeply. Below is a figure how articles about 'lie' occurred in the other main Hungarian daily: *Magyar Nemzet* during a period of five years (Figure 4.).

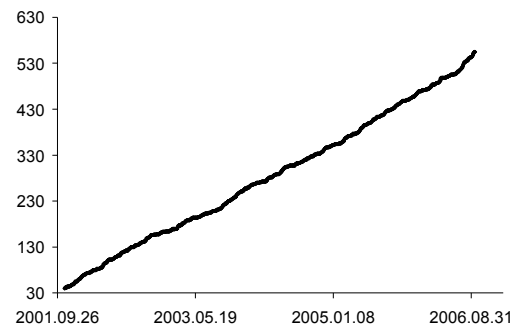


Figure 4/a 'lie'

The linearity of the graph suggests that interest in the topic is not related either to the earlier performance of the media, or to any topical event. While we depicted these topics as 'evergreens', perhaps we should rather say 'evergreys' as they are hardly exceptional, hence the individual reports are hardly preserved in the memory of the public. We know of them but we also make sure to forget about them. In the following section we will turn our attention, however to sensations, which are the exceptional elements of the media's operation.

3.3 SENSATIONS – MILLIEUS OF MEMORY

The unexpectedness of sensations means that they enter the media scene without any precursor. As they come out of the blue the coverage is intense and occupies suddenly a considerable space of the media. In a graph this is reflected in a vertical jump upwards without the topic to have had an 'incubation' phase. As an illustration below is a figure about the articles of Pim Fortuyn (who was murdered on the 6th of May, 2002) as reported by the *Guardian* (figure 5).

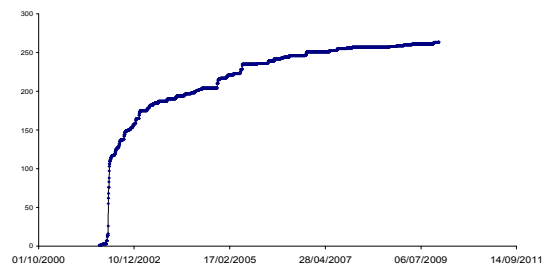


Figure 5.

As another example for a sensation you find below the graph on the number of articles on the topic 'lie' from the Hungarian daily – *Magyar Nemzet* - following 2006 September 11th (figure 4/b). The date is very significant as it was on this date that a speech of the Hungarian Prime Minister became public, in which he publicly admitted to have been kept on lying to the public in order to get elected. This caused a public outrage, with thousands protesting on the streets, the burning of cars and later in October an assault on the building of the National Television.



Figure 4/b. 'lie'

Such sensations could be depicted to be unexpected, special, shocking or scandalous yet what is important to note is that they invoke intensive emotions. We contend that it is this emotional extra that makes these topics exceptional for memory. Sensations we argue are such collective experiences of the community that keep the whole community in a state of excitement, people talk about it on the street, everybody feels that s/he has to have an opinion about them. Thus sensations – even if only momentarily – forge the audience together and thereby we believe a community of memory is created similar to those of traditional societies that Pierre Nora identified as the milieus of memory - *millieux de mémoire*. If we combine *figure 4/a* with *figure 4/b* we can see how the topic 'lie' suddenly changed its dynamics, turning from an evergreen into a sensation. (see *figure 4/c*) The little grey box on the *figure 4/c* is when the topic 'lie' turned into a sensation, thus it is the copy of *figure 4/b*, in a little different scaling in order to have the longer time period to fit the figure.



Figure 4/c. 'lie'

Remembering here operates as a confirmation of the belief that the people entertain about their world. In case of the topic of 'lie' the general knowledge of the audience is reinforced that politicians are corrupt and unreliable. Thus the sensation contributes to the maintaining of the memory of the community by reinforcing existing cognitive patterns and interpretations of the world. As Halbwachs noted memory operates not by the past being preserved but by being recreated in the present (Halbwachs 1992, 40), which recreation in this case is performed by the sensation. We believe that the analogy is strong between Pierre Nora's *milieux de memoire* and sensations as in case of both remembering takes place as an organic processes. Remembering is not the product of a conscious activity, but the milieu – the emotionally intense moment – provides a fertile context for remembering to take place, for the moment to leave a lasting mark through an organic unconscious process.

It is important to underline, however, that even with sensations paradoxically the media does not – or very rarely - present something radically new. Mostly sensations reinforce the existing worldview. Thus here we can capture the significance of what Luhmann pointed out when he noted that even in: *order to recognize novelty we need familiar contexts* (Luhmann, 2007 28). In other words even in case of sensations it is crucial that they need to match the background knowledge of the audience, because it is only then that audience can have the feeling of recognizing what they have already known, or suspected; hence they could say to themselves: *you see!* – where recognition is intense given the feeling of shock, outrage and excitement related to sensations.

Despite of their emotional content, however, sensations are forgotten as one sensation is followed by the next, where each reinvigorates the collective memory of the community, by forging them into a community of remembering.

We assume that there is probably always a 'normal' amount of sensations at any given period of time in the media, i.e. there is a need, a demand for sensations yet there cannot be too many sensations either. There should be just enough to provide for the emotional involvement of the audience in the concerns of the public, and as a byproduct to create one after another the *millieux de mémoire* of modern society.

Yet here a caveat is needed. As modern societies are segregated not all sensations reach every stratum of the society the same way. Thus the milieus of remembering do not always involve the whole of society as some events may only trigger sensations and turn them into a community of remembering. For example, some topics may prove to be sensations for the intelligentsia while others for the extreme rights. Nevertheless the sum of all these communities – and their memory – is what society comprised of.

3.4 SENSATIONS, THE PLACES OF MEMORY

Although sensations typically have only a short lifespan, not all sensations are swept away by the river of *lethe* – the river of forgetting. Certain sensations – although not as sensations – remain within the public discourse and the media keeps on referring to them. We argue that in such cases sensations are transformed into points of reference for the community that helps its members to identify themselves and interpret the world around them. Events such as landing on the moon or the marriage of Diana were such milestones of their age that they were kept on referred to (Dayan és Katz 1994), frequently in a metaphorical sense thus the landing on the moon became a metaphor of humanity's technological and scientific progress, just as much as a symbol of the competition between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. As such events do not simply refer to the particular event, but they become to signify a whole problematique they in a sense become more than themselves (Gyáni 2000, 82).

We believe that some sensations – once they are beyond the phase of extreme intensity – may get transformed into what Nora called the places of remembering (*lieux de mémoire*). Tentatively we would say that 9.11. or the murder of Pim Fortuyn are events that became such reference points of the modern age (the former for a longer the latter perhaps for a shorter span of time), that carry a complexity of meanings and interpretations, the quintessence of a whole – perhaps contentious – problematique. In the words of Pierre Nora they are capable to carry *un maximum de sens dans le minimum de signs*" (Nora-t idézi Erll és Rigney 2009).

At this stage it is again worthwhile to return to the Hungarian example on 'lie' and to look at a graph that goes beyond the period when 'lie' became a sensation. Here we can see that after the period of excitement the people get used to the 'news' of the sensation and the media concomitantly pays less attention to the topic. Nevertheless it is interesting to note that following the sensation the graph became steeper (figure 4/d.). We interpret this as the 'lie' became a *lieux de memoire* as the media kept on refereeing back to the scandalous speech of the Prime Minister in which he admitted openly that he lied to the people. The increased steepness of the graph shows this 'lie' to have become a reference point for the community, the symbol of a whole era, a constant vehicle to remember and make the present interpretable in regard of the past.

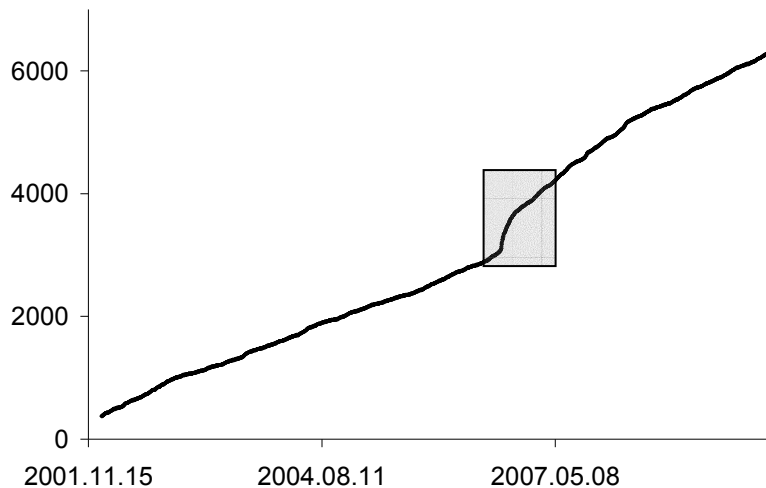


Figure 4/d 'lie'

4. CONCLUSION

In the paper we focused on the *news-flow* and offered first a methodology how to create a typology of the dynamics of different topics entering the media, occupying its place, and than disappearing as they become – in the words of Luhmann – *no-news*. Second we argued that despite of the fact that the media is customarily depicted to live in the present, and to concentrate on the *here and now*, nevertheless it lives in a *dual time*. We tried to capture this dual time of the media by focusing not on the activity of individual agents of the media but to grasp the media as a system, and pointed out that in modern mediated societies the media contributes to the maintenance of the collective memory of the community.

In order to capture this we focused on sensations. Sensations are special in the sense as they have an emotional impact on the audience, as they are shocking, scandalous, exciting topics, and thereby establish under the modern conditions momentarily what Pierre Nora called in the traditional world the *milieus of memory* (*millieux de memoire*). At the same time we also pointed out that the media also creates its points of reference, such reference points in relation to which members of the community can identify themselves and can interpret their present in relation to their past. We argued that these could be interpreted as *places of memory* – or in the words of Pierre Nora as the *lieux de mémoire*.

Thus our argument was partly methodological, partly theoretical. While we used a few empirical examples – predominantly from the Hungarian media – these were introduced only as illustrations. This being said we believe that our arguments hold true in general concerning the modern media, even if local differences needed to be taken into account.

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