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DOCTORAL THESIS - Abstract
Mass-Media and the Self-Help Industry

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Abstract

The paper “Mass-Media and the Self-Help Industry” focuses on how ideologies of the self are constructed by both media and the self-help industry and how they are communicated to consumers. Topics related to health, mental health, parenting or relationships are now delivered through multiple self-help instruments such as books, podcasts, television shows, radio shows, mobile applications which are consumed by millions of people worldwide.

This ample study shows that there is a strong connection between the two industries that portray how people should be, live, love or think. This paper also portrays that there are numerous industries that construct ideas about who we are as individuals, but it is the self-help industry and the media who had an influential power over the years in defining ideologies regarding the self. How we think, how we dress, how we communicate or how we relax are largely defined in the self-help and mediatic discourses and their success is due to interdisciplinarity. The self-help industry adapted and incorporated over time ideas from multiple other domains such as religion, psychology, science, leadership, business and most recently, spirituality. This rapid evolution of the industry is because of its close relation with mass media. Together they have created an industry like no other.

The evolution of the self-help industry and its connection with mass-media

The self-help industry increased exponentially during recent years with the main focus of helping people become better versions of themselves. In a report published by Grand Review Research in 2020, “the US self-help market was worth \$39.9 billion including motivational products such as books, DVDs, audio books, motivational speakers, seminars, workshops, infomercials, personal coaching, retreats, holistic institutes, on demand courses, mobile apps, training organizations and more” (Grand Review Research 2020; Hodorog 2016). The industry is predicted to rapidly grow in the following years with an annual growth rate of 5.1% up until 2027, when it is approximated to reach \$56.6 billion, according to the Grand Review Research (2020) analysis conducted in the previous years on the self-help industry.

The creators of the industry are authors, speakers, masters, gurus, entrepreneurs or life coaches who come from diverse backgrounds and who decided to incorporate numerous topics into self-help instruments. Self-help books are among the most successful instruments of the

industry whose worth was more than \$18.6 million only in the US in 2019 (Gaille 2017). During the pandemic, in the first week of January 2021, the self-help book market had a blazing start with more than 17 million books being sold in one week. In the non-fiction category, books focused on mind, body and spirit increased with 63% (Milliot 2021). Other instruments such as meditation mobile applications, audio books, eBooks or podcasts largely increased the market.

The history of the industry is in close relation with the evolution of mass media. Television and radio shows, magazines and newspapers started to incorporate self-help topics into their agenda since 1960 (M. Ryan 2018). The interplay between the two industries is now called *lifestyle media* whose main purpose is to help people transform their lives. “The solving of ordinary problems, and the ‘making over’ of ordinary lives, is the very stuff of lifestyle media” (Raisborough 2011).

Due to this vast impact that both self-help and media industries have in portraying ideas regarding the self, the author of this PhD decided to further investigate the topic and better understand this relation and how it is constructed. Therefore, on the one hand, the study focused on how lifestyle media and its journalists write about self-help topics, and on the other hand, how the personal development industry with its self-help creators use media to communicate their messages.

The importance of the study

There are multiple reasons for focusing the attention onto this particular two industries and what type of ideas they communicate to their consumers. Firstly, there is scarce research on lifestyle media and its impact on people’s ideas about themselves. Wrapped in entertainment and motivational themes, lifestyle journalists address important topics related to mental health, health, relationships or parenting which were usually the topics of psychologists. With the influence of self-help industry, these topics are now included into the popular culture.

Secondly, most research on the topic still focuses on defining lifestyle media which grows continuously with other new topics integrated into the agenda setting of journalists every day. Thirdly, there is no clear understanding of how the two industries influence each other, and how they actually portray ideas about individuality and the self. Researchers reached a consensus on the actual interplay between media and the self-help industry, but the exact relation is not clearly

defined by scholars. What are the exact strategies and what topics are mostly communicated by the two industries to their consumers?

Therefore, the present paper is highly relevant for consumers, journalists, media scholars, psychologists, self-help creators and other researchers from diverse fields. All of them can better understand *what ideas* consumers actually receive regarding the self from both media and self-help and *how these ideas* are actually communicated for the masses. With the use of qualitative and quantitative research methods, there are several new findings on the topic with substantial insights that this study portrayed.

Structure

In doing so, the paper is structured in six main chapters that clearly presents how the two main industries evolved separately and also their dynamic throughout time. Chapter I focuses on how the self-help industry evolved and how it communicated self-ideologies throughout time. This chapter is of high importance because lifestyle media evolved from within the self-help industry and we could see the main trends from one century to another. First, the author showed that the term `self-help` is not clearly defined, not even today. The self-help industry originated in the times of Greek philosophers like Socrates (469–399 BC), Plato (429-347 BC) or Aristotle (384-322 BC) who managed to “discover the mind” (Snell 1948). The present PhD paper showed the evolution of the self-help industry from the ancient times and up until the 21st century and made the connection with other domains such as religion, psychology or sales.

Chapter II further describes the instruments used by the industry to communicate to masses such as: self-help books, audiobooks, eBooks, television shows, magazines, infomercials, mobile applications, self-help creators, movies and documentaries. The interplay between the two industries and the topics they address is also visible in this chapter which the author described in detail. Chapter II is highly important because it not only shows how the self-help industry communicated to its consumers, but also shows the important role of media in spreading some topics through television or radio shows.

The third chapter focuses on one main topic that self-help industry largely focuses on in the form of leadership. This chapter shows one trend among hundreds in the self-help industry and how it develops each topic to create new ideologies. Even though this chapter detailed analyzed only one particular topic, the same strategies apply to other topics self-help creators decided to

focus on, and each topic evolved as a singular domain communicated or promoted by the self-help movement.

Chapter IV focuses on the role of lifestyle media, defining it and presenting its characteristics as they have been portrayed by various researchers, while Chapter V defines transmedia. In constructing these chapters, the author included a vast bibliography with authors, researchers such as Bergsma (2008), Gauntlett (2002), Neville (2012), Blum (2020), Hall (1968), Foucault (1986), Fiske (1989), or Cawelti (1965).

The paper is dichotomous by nature as the second part, Chapter VI focuses much more on the research design, the data analysis and verification of hypothesis. ***The study has three dimensions as follows:*** the first one focuses on how journalists from *The New York Times (US)*, *The Guardian (UK)* and *Adevarul (Romania)* write about self-help topics into their agenda; the second dimension analyses how 50 experienced self-help creators communicate their messages and how they integrate media in doing so, while the third dimension provides another in-depth analysis into how self-help books are communicated by the journalists from *The New York Times (US)* and *Adevarul (Romania)*. All three dimensions helped to add new findings on all three dimensions in the research landscape.

The study focuses on three media institutions from three different countries because the study also analyses if different ideologies of the self are constructed based on cultural preferences and to better see the differences between the international and local dimensions.

There were several research questions which were put forward and answered to within this study:

1. How is the ideological-self communicated by the self-help industry and the media industry?
2. How self-help topics are communicated and included in the online newspapers?
3. How many media channels self-help creators use in their communication process?
4. Who writes about self-help topics in the media?
5. What is the exact relation between the self-help industry and the media?

There are no previous studies on the exact topic as most researchers focused up until now on either defining lifestyle media or on the importance of gender discourse in various media institutions. Therefore, by applying both content and discourse analysis, the study managed to show what type of topics journalists from the three online newspapers include when addressing

lifestyle, how they write these articles and what ideas they enhance and promote through their agenda setting. Moreover, the study also shows who are the exact journalists who write these articles and how their experiences actually influence the journalistic content.

By analyzing the three media institutions, the author found that self-help books are among the most communicated advice instruments in media articles, therefore, by further investigating this, the paper also shows how journalists write about self-help books in both international newspapers and local ones, and if differences exist among them.

To add more, on the other side of the spectrum, the study further investigated the self-help creators themselves and showed how they use transmedia in their content creation, what types of topics they address, how media is actually integrated into their communication process and what types of media they actually prefer to include as branding. Moreover, the paper clearly shows the interplay between the two industries and what messages are communicated to consumers around the world regarding who they are and who they should actually become.

New findings on the topic

The current study added numerous new findings on the topic of self-help and media. As there are few studies on how lifestyle media and the self-help industry communicate ideas regarding the self, the present study added new dimensions and completed other existing research from different angles.

New findings in the media industry

The present study showed that there are numerous self-help topics communicated by the *The New York Times (US)*, *The Guardian (UK)* and *Adevarul (Romania)* online newspapers, but each institution defines ‘the self’ differently and showed that each media institution includes different topics included in the Lifestyle category. More specifically, the readers from *The New York Times* will mostly read articles on topics such as: Health, Mental Health, Parenting; readers from *The Guardian* will receive articles on Relationships, Mental Health and Health, Romanian readers will receive articles on Leisure Time, Diet and Spirituality (astrology oriented) on *Adevarul* online newspaper.

International media institutions focus much more on Health and Mental health, while these topics are still growing in the Romanian media institution. From the ideological point of

view, it is visible that in the *The New York Times (US)* media institution the self is a healthy individual, with attention to his mental health and who takes into consideration his family. In the *The Guardian (UK)* media institution, the individual self focuses much more on his romantic relationships and pays attention to his health and mental health. In Romania, the self is portrayed as an individual who needs to pay attention to his leisure time, to relax, to take care of his diet and pay attention to spirituality. Mental health topics are still not so much included on the general media, and if they are, they are mostly cross-promotion articles.

When writing lifestyle articles, journalists write them in almost the same format and structures, which are predefined. All three online newspapers write mostly news articles when addressing these topics where they offer explanations and not so much solutions. Journalists prefer to write these articles mostly in simple text with no other elements to distract the reader, and if they include, they mostly prefer subtitles or advice format (how-to format).

Opinion articles are on the rise when addressing self-help topics with international journalists presenting their life experiences. Both *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* media authors have a tendency to structure their articles as opinions presenting their struggles, their experiences and their steps for overcoming a specific problem regarding health, mental health, relationships or parenting. The study showed a parallel with the self-help industry where most of the self-help products such as books, apps or courses are much more personal in nature, thus much closer to the public and his feelings.

Numerous Lifestyle articles focused on the self are written by journalists, and there is a new trend among international journalists who create their own self-help books and they are keener to promote others self-help authors within their articles. Moreover, most of the journalists who write about the self in international newspapers, *The New York Times (US)* and *The Guardian (UK)* are freelancers specialized on a specific topic. The study showed that this is not the case in Romania, where the majority of journalists are simply employees.

New findings in the self-help industry

The analysis on the **50 self-help creators with more than 10 years experience in the field showed that they highly use media and transmedia narrative techniques to communicate their ideas.** 52% of the self-help authors create 6 to 9 instruments of personal development individually such as books, podcasts, mobile apps, events, digital downloads,

newsletters or video materials. Other have their own radio and television shows as an instrument of communication. Transmedia storytelling and transmedia branding are highly used by self-help creators to further encompass other topics into their discourse. The analysis showed that, similar with journalists, most of them include self-help main topics on their websites, but their products address other topics too which are connected or not to the original ones.

Moreover, **self-help creators promote their appearances in multiple media institutions on their front page of their websites.** Being *Featured on* or *Recognized by the very best* is important for 84% of the self-help creators we analyzed.

New findings on the interplay of the industries

It is during the 21st century when the **self-help industry shifted to include Eastern religious practices** into its discourse promoting meditation, crystals, angels, reiki, yoga or ayurveda practices. From this three-dimensional analysis, it could be seen that general media started to slowly incorporate these topics into their discourse. The messages regarding ‘the self’ are congruent in both self-help and media industries, and the ideology regarding the self is as follows: Individuals should be spiritual in nature, control the emotions, pay attention to their mind and live a life with purpose. In order to communicate this ideology, journalists and self-help creators have linguistic choices in their articles including words such as *wellness* and *mindfulness* to communicate their ideas. The present study concluded that The New Age Movement influenced by Eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism or Taoism is present in media by including *techniques of the self* such as meditation, yoga or connecting with nature.

In conclusion, the current PhD paper achieved its purpose as it showed what is the exact relation between the self-help industry and the media and how both of them communicate ideologies of the self. On the one hand, the study showed how media authors from three international and national, online newspapers include self-help topics into their agenda, and on the other hand, how self-help creators use media, transmedia storytelling and transmedia branding to communicate their topics.

Key words: *self-help industry, media, identity, communication, transmedia*

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