

Homogenization and Mass Identity vs. Individual Identity. An Analysis in the Light of the Theory of "The Three Dimensional Spiral of Sense"

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Abstract

This study tests some hypotheses included in the psycho-social-communicational paradigm, which emphasizes the cognitive effects of the *media* and the role of the psychosocial subject as the recipient: the hypothesis of "agenda-setting" (Cobb y Elder, 1971; McLeod-Becker, 1974; McCombs y Shaw, 1976). It also conforms a new systemic theory of the author called "The Three Dimensional Spiral of Sense" (2015 d), applied at the area of Media. It is the first study in Latin America. The approach was macro-micro-meso-macro, micro, not quite common yet. It consists of a kind of *sui generis* systemism which recovers relationships (links, back and forth) between individuals and contexts, without overlooking neither the former nor the latter, thus, avoiding any type of reductionism. Individuals, organizations and frameworks interplay and feedback themselves. The four main objectives were: 1. Determining the degree of impact of the press in the mental patterns et detecting levels de homogenization en university graduates; 2. Analyzing the relation between institutional ideology, political ideology and media choice graduates make (traditional vs more progressive media); in other words, the meso, macro and micro interplay. 3. Ascertaining the personality factors that condition differential receptivity ("Filtering" of the news), related to the social-evaluative context. Methodology used included qualitative and quantitative techniques. The results show: a) a high level of influence of the media on the problems which have been prioritized by graduates; b) a high level of coincidence of the topics prioritized by Faculties (prevailing "ideologies"); c) individual and institutional homogenization which gets feedback within a macro context of homogenization of the news and of globalization. All this impacts on institutional and individual identities.

I. Introduction

"Mass media main function is building 'operational maps of de world'"

for users" (Cohen, 1963:13)

Social building of knowledge and homogenization of "mental maps" (in our opinion, more and more unified in a context of growing globalization of rendering and acquiring information) is a problem which, at the end of the millenium, remains unsolved, despite the many attempts made by the different disciplines and from the different theoretical-methodological points of view.

The seriousness and implications of the issue inspired a *sui generis* study which analyzes the influence of the media in social and mental constructions, from one of its models: the agenda-setting. The main concern about the issue was that qualitative homogenization of the information received is an aid for the dissolution of the psychosocial identity (social basic personality) of the different peoples (regardless of audience segmentation or the increase of information).

¹ Topics: Psychology, Communication, Sociology, Identity, Homogenization – Others: A New Paradigm

A part of Cross-Cultural Psychology, Social and Cognitive Psychology, the present study focuses on *the effect of the mass media on a public from different educational backgrounds in the mental homogenization and on personal and collective identity (micro level and méso level)*.

The study is based on communicational, psycho-sociological hypotheses conceived in the 70's, among which are the *spiral of silence* and the *agenda-setting hypothesis*. The data are use here at the light the *sui generis* paradigm systemic of the author: le Spiral Three Dimensional of Sens The latter paradigm was of special interest to us, due to the impact it causes, the epistemological and methodological renewal it represents and, above all, to its implications and consequences, highly motivating for those working in the field of social psychology.

Of an exploratory nature, this study (carried out in the unique cultural and social Argentine context) lies on the bases of real referents and involves important works in the field, as well as a sophisticated methodological task.

The centralization of the so-called "fourth power" is analyzed as an influential factor in people's systems of believes, attitudes and perception of social reality, and in relation to a wide range of basic variables, including the social-cultural, the psycho-social, the pedagogical-institutional, the structural and the communicational in a strict sense; always considering the consequences of their impact in the frame of a growing globalization (macro level).

Finally, several disciplines whose purpose is the analysis of processes in the formation of public opinion can join their efforts here, from the Cross-Cultural Psychology, to the Social psychology, to the Social and Political sciences; thus recovering the social, methodological and epistemological interrelation. The theoretical frame, the social and cultural relevance of the hypotheses at stake and the work in the field turn the present research into an original, holistic contribution in a developing Latin American country already sensing the influence of globalization.

The Objectives

The primary objectives were:

to elucidate such effects in audiences with different levels of education (micro level),

to detect levels of manipulation and homogenization of the "mental maps" linked with the centralization of the "fourth power",

to ascertain personality factors which condition differential receptivity of the addressees ("filter" of the news) related to the social-evaluative *context* (méso level),

Two lines interest us:

the first emphasizes the effects of the *media* according to each individual's psychology (Gerbner y Gross, 1973);

the second, based on the theory of "mental maps" which holds that the level of permeation of the mass media on people's mind depends extensively on different parameters connected to psychosocial characteristics of both the youths and the messages themselves (Tichenor, 1970; Galloway, 1974; Ettema, 1977) (méso level / micro level).

II. Framework: The Agenda Setting, Main Trends and Relevant Ones

Let us analyze the trends where the agenda-setting theory and our hypothesis system are inserted.

Most trends are based on the following principal: *The agenda does not tell as what we should think, but "a quoi" we should think*. Shaw states "(as a consequence of the influence of the media). . . *the public is conscious about or ignores, pays attention or neglects, emphasizes or overlooks specific elements in public life. People tend to include or exclude from their knowledge what the media tend to include or exclude from their own content. They tend, as well, to confer facts, problems and people the importance that the media has given them*" (1979: 96. Also Wolf, 1987: 163). Cohen refers to the topic in the terms used by Pasquier exactly thirty years later: "(if it is true that the press). . . *can not always tell people what to think,*

it is amazingly capable of telling the readers about what topics they should think something.” (Cohen, 1963: 13. Referred to by Wolf, 1987: 163).

This is the primary and most global hypothesis. As Shaw expresses, the fundamental assumption is that “. . . *an important part of people’s understanding of social reality is modified by the media.*” (1979: 96 and 101).

The perspective of the media has certainly changed: they no longer aim at persuading people, but at providing them with a “list of things one must have an opinion about or should discuss.”

The agenda-setting theory has been influenced by the following trends for over twenty years.

The first one is politics-oriented, rooted in Cohens works (1963) and based on agendas from the ruling elite from foreign political sectors. Cobb and Elder (1972) label it *policy agenda building*. The main point of analysis here is the combination of the media and the citizens’ agendas, together with that of the political decision-makers’, emphasizing the complexity of the three. Nevertheless, the relevance of the issue goes beyond our purpose.

The second hypotheses deals with the agenda relationship of the subjects’ media/agenda (micro level / méso level / macro level – political sectors).

Born in 1972 with Mc Combs and Shaw, further studies are carried out by Funkhouser for a period of ten years. At about the same time, Roberts looks at the problem from the point of view of the manipulation, a central aspect of our research. In his words: “*as long as the addressee does not have the opportunity to check the accuracy of the representation of social reality, he ends up having a distorted, stereotyped or manipulated conception of it.*” (1972: 380. Also Wolf, 1987: 164).

As Shaw points out, emphasizing certain aspects and setting others aside, the media contribute to an interpretation of reality, which the individual applies in a fairly conscious way. Thus, (the media) “. . . *provide the public with something that goes beyond the strict limits of the news. They also provide them with the categories in which to include it in a significant manner.*” (Shaw, 1979: 103; Wolf, 1987: 165).

The research carried out by the author –as well as Mc Combs– shows that the ranking of facts in the public is similar to that given by the media, considered in the long term and with an “accumulative” effect. Such effect, which obviously ratifies what has been stated about “long term” effects, implies – as Wolf has pointed out – a serious methodological problem. How can one be certain about them? How can they be observed? Which is the most appropriate technique? The empirical proof finds a serious difficulty in this respect.

The above-mentioned works (Shaw and Mc Clure-Patterson) confirm another paradigm presented by Klapper and col. about the role of *predisposition* and its mediation in the exposition of programs. Mc Clure (1976) expresses that “*the agenda setting is probably an indirect effect arising from previous disposition of the public receiving the message*” (1976: 28). Shaw, states that, for the one part, “*voters’ psychological and social characteristics*” play an important role in the use of the media for political purposes. For another, that interpersonal relationships influence the agenda effect, thus explaining –when they are poor, their most significant effects.

Making emphasis on the *selective processes* (perception, memory, attention, etc.) and thus, on the active role of the recipient, Roberts states: “(the media) *are efficient in building the image of reality that the subject structures in his mind. Such image –which is only a metaphor for all the information about the world that the subject has received, organized and stored, can be conceived as a standard to which new information is compared so as to give it its meaning. Such standard includes the frame of reference, as well as the person’s needs, set of values, believes and expectations which influence what he perceives from the communicative experience.*” (Roberts, 1972: 366). Considering the influence of all these factors, as Wolf points out, the public’s agenda becomes something far more complex than the mere structuring of the media’s order of the day, which comprises different issues and problems.

Siune and Borre (1975) once again confirms the influence of the media in the priority that the public gives to certain issues. They corroborated that the importance given to the issue of the economy or of fiscal policy increased as did the importance given to this topics by the media. Rather the opposite happened with topics like education, culture and social problems,

virtually neglected by the media. The co-existence, then, of psychological and sociological factors in the agenda effect – already mentioned in the Lazarfeldian paradigms – represents an important field for research.

McLeod, Becker and Byrnes (1974) made an important contribution from the psychosocial point of view. They demonstrated that ". . . *the agenda effect is stronger among those individuals who have discussed the issues than among those who have had no interpersonal communication*" (Pasquier, 1994: 67). Lazarfeld's old paradigm re appears connected to the hypothesis of the agenda setting.

The results become relevant from our perspective, since we attempt to recover the importance of the public's critical role ("filter"), so as to oppose the absolute power sometimes given to the media when building the "cognitive maps".

Mc Combs, in time, emphasizes the "need for orientation": ". . . *when the topic is very important and the individual's knowledge is poor, he will turn to the media "pour parfaire sa maitrisi du sujet"*. A higher exposition to the media will, in turn, strengthen the agenda effect." (Pasquier, 1994: 67) t. n.).

Going even further, Zucker (1978) and Eyal (1979) express that ". . . *the more the topic refers to an issue of which individuals have no direct social experience, the greater the media effect*" (Pasquier, 1994: 68; Zucker, 1978; 227; Wolf, 1987: 175).

The finding becomes even more relevant in a globalized world, where most of our knowledge comes from the media, situation which fosters individuals' defenselessness. In other words: the growing cognitive public dependence on the media reduces the filtering expected from the audience. Gross says: "(there are) *bits of reality that subjects do not experience directly or define interacting in every day life, but which they "live" through the symbolic mediation of the mass media*" (Gross 1883; 225, cit. by Wolf, 1987: 165).

Iyengar (1979 and 1980) indirectly associates the media and education and concludes: ". . . the least skillful individuals and the least willing to contradict the information given are the most likely to be influenced by the agenda effect, due to close relation between the way in which the information is presented and the agenda effect". Imagine the influence of these concepts in underdeveloped contexts. . .

Our research included several tests to measure aptitude (labor, academic, etc.). Being graduate students, the individuals showed, in addition, a conscious criterion for criticism, which was above the level of the general public's.

In sum: despite the existence of works dated back in the 70's and in the 80's, an integration of theories has not yet been achieved, and plausible answers have not yet been found as to how social information is construed; information which is more and more standardized in globalized contexts where the dividing line for such information is drawn in terms of the "info-rich" vs. the "info-poor".

Consequently, the information presented so far gives an idea of the complexity of the hypotheses and the extent of the issue. After a period of over two decades, many problems remain unsolved and several "cognitive" gaps are still to be bridged.

Finally, if we admit that what the subject reads has already been in the papers and on TV, and that he reads it bearing in mind a set of values, beliefs, prejudices and knowledge, we are led to assume that he is not defenseless before the media. His reading is subject to a conceptual, semiotic, psychological (in a broad sense), emotional, cultural and social background, which surrounds and influences him.

The Hypothesis

Forty nine central hypotheses were considered, which include base, academic, educational, structural and communicational variables in a strict sense.

There would be a marked correlation between the degree of importance assigned to the information by the media and that assigned by youth (high incidence of "mental construing"),

-receptivity of the addressees would vary according to cognitive competence;

-certain psychological characteristics would render the subject less susceptible to media influence (micro and méso/macro level).

III. Method

Sample

The sample was made up of graduates (N= 516) and drop-outs (N=2157) from eighteen careers in Cuyo University (Argentina) between 1980-1993. The study was extended to the present (2014). The sampling was stratified and the start, random. The confidence interval was taken at 95% and error margin at 4, 4%.

Regarding the subjects, data were gathered from institutional files and through personal interviews. Due to the special characteristics of the research, there was, in addition, a sample of the media and news.

Concerning the media, some work was done based on recorded national and international TV news reports and, especially, on the written press, since this is the main source for the agenda setting (Mc Combs, 1976: 6). Two local newspapers (Los Andes and Uno) were analyzed, as well as the major national newspapers, with different editorial orientations (La Prensa, La Nación, Clarín, Crónica, El Cronista Comercial, Página 12 and Ámbito Financiero). We assumed that such variety of material would provide us with some insight into the differences between the ideologies of the news. Likewise, some relationship might be found between the media and pedagogical-institutional (universities and courses of studies) variables, basic variables (sex, age, social background, etc.) and psychological-social variables (prejudices, anonymity, pessimism of perspective, rejection of existing structures, etc.). The meso/micro interplay becomes evident. The similarities or coincidences and the differences found among the graduates in different courses of studies show the impact of the immediate context from the media, but also from the socio-economic-political macro level, since the media are often manipulated by the central political powers in order to sell a homogenized reality often times distorted.

As regards the different study-courses graduates' representations, we found sort of "caricatures", which really called our attention if we think that Universities are privileged areas that shape critical thinking. On the contrary, we found sort of "culturally drugged" individuals. Thus, engineers paid full, or even exclusive attention to the news related to their disciplinary area, graduates in Social Work just read news about employment, health, etc. The rest of the world of news was out of their worlds.

This revealed the meso/micro/meso relation, since the individuals internalize what the institutional system taught them to consider important, and then, they revert such image upon the same system with feedback.

On the other hand, news ideology arose from the analysis carried out with different newspapers (some traditional and some more progressive). The perspective each of them showed about, for example, a specific problem in the country, was absolutely different. It was also observed in the newspaper choice graduates made: those belonging to more stylistic studies chose traditional papers, those belonging to more progressive groups, who recruit themselves into study courses related to social, medical needs, chose more progressive papers.

The meso/micro interplay became evident. This remark – one of the mainstays of Dr. Aparicio's theory present on the first analyses – is confirmed in the latest cohorts.

The same was observed in other complementary studies, that is why this theory, based on 30-year empirical research at CONICET (National Council of Scientific Research), would be announced in 2005 a, 2007 a and b, and in every publication until its release in 2015, applied to 6 complementary disciplinary areas, even though it used to be called similar names (1994^a and b; 2005 a and b, 2014 d).

Being the samples –and corresponding proceedings– of such different nature, the techniques are presented in two distinct moments.

Instruments

Quanti-qualitative techniques were complemented: semi-structured survey, in-depth interviews, life stories and anecdote accounts. Also, tests were applied in order to observe the behavior of certain psychosocial variables (such as control locus, stress, aggressiveness). The analysis was made in two instances: products and processes. The convergent (theoretical and methodological) was adopted.

Let us analyze now the techniques applied to determine the *agenda effect*.

The design and analysis was based on two given agenda models (McCombs & Shaw, D. (1972). The highest frequency observed in the options given for each piece of news in a rank of the Lickert type determined the most relevant news for the public. The media agenda was determined through the analysis of the content in the television networks (morning and evening news), and through the nine local and national aforementioned newspapers.

Following international literature, the time frame was fifteen days for data gathering of the media and the public's agendas. Being research aiming at determining the accumulative, long-term agenda effect, the decision about the time frame was crucial. The period for determining the agenda comprised only one week, during a political campaign, the decision based on methodological reasons which historically justify such choice.

Procedure

Survey of data covers a period of more than ten years.

Implementation of the aforementioned techniques. Being a lineal study, the follow-up was carried at homes, as graduates and drop-outs were no longer in the educational system.

The survey of both agendas (those of the *media* and of the public), setting up of the time frame, took into account the models of the agenda/effect: awareness, relevance and priorities (Becker, Mc Coombs, Mc Leod).

Graphic *media* was also used (six representative national newspapers, displaying different "ideologies"), as well as visual *media* (television newsreels). The comparison procedure for both agendas and analytical strategy are original.

The range of variables was very wide (N=151), covering psychological, base line, pedagogic/institutional, structural and communicational aspects.

Finally, hypotheses and results were compared.

The methodological options made it possible to analyze, on the one hand, the psychological dimension related to the life stories and academic aptitude measurements. The effects of the intervening variables were recognized by means of discerning interpretation of news; on the other hand, it was possible to compare the difference between the impact caused by news from the press and from television.

IV. Results

Hypotheses concerning Social, Cognitive and Media Psychology were corroborated.

The theory held for other contexts is confirmed: the press has a greater impact in the construction of "operational maps of the world" (macro/mésó level – micro level).

It was observed that the agenda/effect is present: youths consider relevant only whatever is so for the media (micro level). The remaining information is not recovered nor is able to access the "cognitive maps".

A high homogenization of thought is thus confirmed, as a result of the homogenization of news (incremented in quantity but of unified quality)

Nevertheless, it is interesting to point out that the strengthening of a certain image of reality is not found in the same way, nor every time, depending on the conjugation of different factors among which education and personality act as decisive filters. Results show different interpretations and levels of "filtering" in accordance with n-ach, fatalism, stress, prejudices, among other variables.

The topic, then, is a complex one: the subject's role is neither passive at the cognitive level, nor it is at the psychosocial level. He actually "filters" information. Yet, the question is: to what extent is he really active? How much of the information he receives is he actually able to "sift", when the vast majority of it is acquired "via media", with no further parameters to evaluate the situation?

Discussion

Three axes and some degree of concern account for the analysis: mind homogenization and mass identity vs. individual identity. The results make evident a close inter-relation which, more often than not, is ignored. The media are machineries, organizations, and often politicized entities.

What are, then, the steps to be followed in a more and more globalized world? Resorting to an anti-media campaign or preparing people for conscious selection and responsible management of the new technology at every social level, through education, a critical mind and respect for the national values? Fostering access to new technologies or giving the existing tools their place back as simple instruments in the service of "human" development? How can "upward equality" be achieved without standardization or lack of individual identity, keeping, at the same time, cultural diversity? How can independence and pluralism be achieved in the media without jeopardizing the cultural patrimony of future generations or, even worse, that of the weakest groups and peoples?

As F. Mayor Zaragoza expressed: "The current globalization, irretrievable, is incompatible with each one's kingdom at home". In this frame, the results obtained are an invitation to reconsider the role of the media as cultural pillars, in an attempt to achieve "equality" without weakening the personal identity. This is, keeping the psycho-social identity or the identification with the several social elements, without misinterpreting the existing psychosocial representations of the different immigrant groups, so as to encourage mutual growth and tolerance. Keeping a sense of identity within one's own group is fundamental to understand that sense of identity in other groups, for endo-group and exo-group are complementary categories.

Protecting self-identity means becoming "less mass", rescuing the psychological individualism, and avoiding homogeneity, "trimming" of the personal and social psychology, and any kind of manipulation, from the social and cognitive one, to the bureaucratic (*unconscious manipulation* or unwitting bias from organizations in favor of the news). Uniformity appears as inevitable. The micro/meso interplay is evident; i. e. , personal identities getting feedback from institutional identities (Aparicio, 1995 b, 2005 b and c). The macro political-communicational context also comes into play.

The results obtained from the research (done with university students on the bases that they were better "prepared" to "sift" information) show that the social-cognitive dependence generated by the media is significant. To what extent are then exposed those in underdeveloped contexts, with no real possibilities for education or psychological development? The challenge thus claims mainly for us, professionals of Trans-cultural Psychology and working for National Development.

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