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**COMMUNICATION: LANGUAGES, REPRESENTATIONS,
INTERACTION**

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***NEW CONTENTS FOR AN OLD PARADIGM***
***Trends in Mass Communication Social Research***

## 1. H. D. Lasswell's paradigm and mass communication research

At the end of the forties, Harold D. Lasswell (1948) proposed his well-known
paradigm to highlight the fundamental demands to which mass communication
research should have to respond:

Who
Says what
In what channel
To whom
With what effect?

In that period, and over the entire span of the fifties, social research on mass
communications had experienced an outstanding development in the Unites
States, one marked, moreover, by the overlapping of conditions imposed *de facto*
by the companies to the cognitive requirements of more strictly scientific
character. Hence the spread of researches on circumscribed problems, relative not
to the relationship between media and public considered in its global form and
complexity, but rather to one or other of the components of such relationship, each
considered separately from all the others. Thus researches are conducted on the
media firms and operators *(who)*, on the contents *(says what)*, on the exposure to
the media, and on the modalities of fruition by the public *(to whom)*, and on the
influence on the public itself considered in terms of change of opinions, attitudes
and behaviours at individual level *(with what effect)*. More specifically, the
prevalence of research on the contents and on the effects of the media
corresponded to the need to collect information useful both for the realisation of

media products  capable of attracting the widest possible audience, and for the development of effective strategies of political communication and advertising.

On account of its characteristics, the communication research was, during these same years, an object of lively discussions. The controversy between Theodor W. Adorno and Paul F. Lazarsfeld  is emblematic in this respect, a controversy that sets the "critical" research against the  "administrative" research. The latter - the "administrative" research - was based on a conception of the media as neutral means, operating in a pluralistic context, and was targeted on upholding the media managers in the achievement of concrete goals defined according to corporation logic. The former - the "critical" research - was, instead, based on a conception of the media as instruments to infuse agreement with the dominant ideology and was targeted to reveal the strategies and aims of the project of manipulation and repression for which the media themselves were used.

In parallel to this discussion on the nature and aims of mass communication research, was that on the relationship between theory and empirical practice. This discussion concerned social research as a whole, but turned to be particularly lively when mass communication research was involved: many accused it of collecting fragmentary data, devoid of substantial sociological significance, in absence of adequate theoretical support. In this case also an emblematic example can be recalled, that is the severe criticism of Charles Wright Mills (1959) addressed to "abstracted empiricism" which he considered one of the negative trends of American sociology next to the "grand theory". The main accused were, in the first case, still Paul Lazarfeld and, in the second, Talcott Parsons. The accusation of "abstracted empiricism" that Mills directed to the mass communication research placed the emphasis on  setting the theoretical reflection in second level in comparison with the methodological practice.  The outcome of this was the frequent recourse to complex and refined methods of collection and analysis of the data which were, however, applied to the study of irrelevant, if not banal,  problems:  the "abstracted empiricists", detailed Mills, are "non-historical" and "non-comparative", they take into account  small areas and tend towards psycologism, they are not able to lead back their "microscopic" findings, to an overall and more general theoretical frame.

As a matter of fact, although not free from these limitations, traditional mass communication research has furnished results that - in the light of an *a posteriori* overall consideration -  are important and significant not only for the study of small problems, but also for a more general theoretical arrangement of the knowledge so far acquired on mass communications. Furthermore, these results contain some basic premises of the successive developments of  the scientific knowledge in this field. In fact, over the last fifty years, the process of acquiring a new knowledge about the media has occurred under the mark of a substantial

continuity with the past, renewing with new contents Lasswell's old paradigm and discovering again the fundamental point: the study of the relationship between media and public must be investigated considering all the various components in which it is articulated, with integrated research approaches able to gather the connections between editorial policy and functioning of the media, characteristics and contents of the media products, processes of reception by the public, effects of media consumption on the individual and effects of the media system on culture and society.

Referring, therefore, to Lasswell's paradigm, I shall try to outline several among those which I consider the most significant trends of social research on the media that have emerged or been consolidated over the last ten years. I shall also try to show how these trends attribute special importance to problems which in fact involve at the same time not only one but several points among those in which Lasswell's paradigm is based. The most obvious feature which unites these trends is, in my opinion, the attention for the public, considered no longer as the aggregate of single substantially passive recipients, but as a complex reality, differentiated within and consisting of subjects with an active role in their relationship with the media. This revaluation of the public is based on the recognition that the ever more pervasive presence of mass communications in everyone's daily experience, instead of increasing the dependence from the media, ends up with the progressive acquisition of ability and competence in the media consumption (Casetti, 1988); most of the members of the public learn to use them to support their own tastes and preferences and for satisfying their own needs.

## 2.   The media firms

The social research on the media firms ( *who*) was originally influenced by the sociology of the professions and by the sociology of work and organisations. In both cases, the prevalent approach of the research was essentially descriptive, in the tradition of "administrative" research. In an initial phase, the research on the media operators aimed at describing the social profile, the attitude towards the profession, the level of satisfaction for the work performed, and so on. The research on the media firms, instead, had as object of the investigation mainly the goals and the functioning of the organisational systems, the division of work within them, and the relationship between organisation and workers. Subsequently, starting from the seventies, the researchers' interest has shifted onto the productive processes, in particular as far as the information is concerned, with the launching of a fruitful line of investigations on newsmaking: attention is mainly focused on the criteria on the basis of which given events are selected and transformed into news, or on the factors which determine the newsworthiness of the events. At practical level, the researches on newsmaking are chiefly dedicated,

on the one hand, to the identification of the "news values" and, on the other, to the description of the productive routines which characterise them. The news values are those particularly features of the events which orient not only the selection, but also the treatment and presentation of the events themselves. As such, they constitute, in fact, a whole body of practical rules that explicitly and/or implicitly guide the work of the editorial staff (Golding, Elliot, 1979). As to the productive routines, they are such as to involve inevitably - and independently of an explicit strategy of the editors - a distortion of the events, which are reconstructed and represented according to the requirements, rhythms, formats and expressive modalities of the journalistic work (Altheide, 1976; Tuchman 1978). Similar considerations can be made regarding the routines that characterise the realisation of other media products, such as, for example, television series (Elliot, 1972).

More recently, the research on the media as sources seems to follow routes non longer circumscribed to the profession, to the organisation, and to the dynamics of the production: the eyes of the research are turned from the inside to the outside of the media system, questioning the relationship between the media as productive firms and the public as target of consumers. The line of investigation which seems to me of greater interest concerns the television and takes into account the strategies implemented by the broadcasters to seek the audience. These strategies are necessary, but not infallible: the broadcasters can arouse the desire to look at the television and endeavour to orient the choice of the viewers, but cannot control the audience obliging it to tune onto its own programmes.

The situation which is presented in this respect is similar to that which involves advertising; the advertising can - if it is effective - arouse consumers a propensity towards buying, but is not able to induce always and in any case a real behaviour to purchase. The advertisers are aware of this, and also the managers of the television networks, the latter constantly engaged in a struggle without sparing blows for winning the audience in a television system typified by ever keener competition. *Desperately Seeking the Audience* is the eloquent title of a book by Ien Ang (1991) on this matter. The audience, which is the essential condition not only for the economic survival, but also for the cultural legitimation of the television, is accordingly a constant source of uncertainty for the television itself.

Linked to this line of research, is that which aims at reconstructing the implicit representations of the audience of which the broadcasters are the holders, making reference not only to the strategies implemented in order to attract it, but also to the television programming. The objective is, in this case, that which is called "intended audience", or the model-public which the television builds and represents through its programmes, a model-public defined in analogy with the concept of model-reader formed in the context of textual semiotics.

A research conducted in Italy on this subject reaches the following conclusion, which can be referred to the level of the television statement: "the model-viewer of this television appears neither competent nor incompetent, but 'without quality'. And these for the simple fact that it seems to be unknown to who produces the programmes" (Pozzato, 1995, p. 197). From this conclusion it stems the evident importance that this particular type of research assumes for the television companies and, in general, for the media firms: how is it possible, in fact, "to capture" an audience which is unknown?

## 3. The media products

As to the media products (*says what*), for many years especially content-analysis researches have been conducted, researches which represent a line of consolidated investigation which still today produces important results in the United States and in Europe (Losito, 1996). Among these fairly numerous researches, not invariably characterised by the same methodological rigor, there are many that have accomplished important, and in any case not banal, results. On the basis of the indications provided by them, the representations of the social reality proposed by the various genres of the media (information, fiction, entertainment and so on), have gradually come to be delineated, with the description of the human profiles proposed in them, of the values and of the models of behaviour strengthened or, on the contrary, denied, of the prejudices and of the stereotypes relative to the social situations, events, persons, categories, classes, races, and ethnic groups. Thanks to them, we have available today a consistent empirical basis for a more fully informed, more realistic and less ideological  knowledge of the mass culture, often object by intellectuals of a preconceived and èlite-oriented refusal or, on the contrary, of a populist and unconditional acceptance. We can thus no longer consider the mass culture as a disordered and casual whole of diversified, and often contradictory, elements, but as a coherent cultural universe, with its recurrences and its potential uniformities.

With regard to the novelties of the social research on this field, one of these concerns the growing attention to the media genres. In Europe and in Italy in particular, there is considerable interest for the television genres and for the transformation in them caused by the advent of neo-television (Barlozzetti, 1988; Casetti, Villa, 1992; Caprettini, 1996).  This interest derives not only from a requirement of descriptive type, but also from the awareness that the genres represent the privileged site for the meeting between media texts and users. The genres, in fact, are systems of rules to which reference is made - in an explicit and/or implicit way - to achieve the communicative processes, and this reference occurs both from the viewpoint  of the production of the texts  and from the viewpoint of their reception. In fact, the genres act as models of production for the

senders and as systems of expectation for the receivers: their function is essentially that of establishing a "contract" in the text between the ones and the others (Wolf, 1988, p. 169-170). In the neo-television, the genres are no longer rigidly defined textual structures. The most conspicuous tendencies which characterise the transformation concern the introduction of new formats, the ever more frequent reference in some of them - in particular in the information and the fiction - to textual rules specific to other genres, the creation of new genres (such as the infotainment, the reality-show, the talk-show) stemming from the overlapping of traditional genres.

Linked to the television genres is the field of investigation represented by the evolution of the television language. The study of the television programming, comes to be merged with that of the television as a medium *(in what channel)* considered from the viewpoint of its peculiar expressive characteristics and also of its technical potential. Of outstanding interest is the research that investigates these problems in relation not with the routine of the television programming, but rather considering how the television proposes in live the media events, altogether extraordinary events which imply for the public levels of involvement and ways of reception, these also altogether extraordinary. The representation of these events occurs with productive and narrative modalities such as to form a television genre on its own, that the public can recognise and towards with which it activates specific expectations (Dayan, Katz, 1992).

Another important novelty in the research on the media products is represented by a greater attention to the problem of the quality, an attention which corresponds to a growing, even if belated, interest in the same subject by the sectors of the media system more readily open to innovation. In particular, this interest denotes a tendency towards the change in the television companies' policies, today based on the logic of customer satisfaction. Furthermore, the empirical researches on the quality offer turn out to be particularly complicated for various reasons. The most important consists in the extreme difficulty of the endeavour to define the concept of quality and to establish, on the basis of it, standards that can be effectively applied. This difficult holding good, the research has, in any case, provided a useful contribution to the study of this subject, in particular on the television quality from the broadcasters' viewpoint and from the that of the experts, and of the researchers (Blumler, Nossiter, Brynin, 1986; the Broadcast Research Unit, 1989; Wober, 1990; Blumler, 1991; Albers, 1992). An important quality indicator has been considered the diversity of the programming both of each national television systems as a whole, and of a television company, as well as of a network: a diversity relative to the contents (opinions represented, arguments dealt with, behaviour models and values proposed), to the genres, to the goals pursued, and to the audience, the whole marked by high levels of professionalism.

## 4. The public.

   The subject of television quality constitutes a novelty also in the research on the media audience (*to whom*), with investigations mainly conducted in Japan (Ishikawa, 1991) and in Europe (Gunter, Wober, 1992) on the so-called "perceived quality". An outstanding result of these researches is the confirmation, for the same programmes, on indices of perceived quality lower and more selective than appreciation indices; this result shows that the public has recourse to different evaluation criteria when it is called upon to judge the quality of a television programme and when, instead, it has to expressed its own appreciation with respect to it.  The appreciation, therefore, cannot be considered an indicator of perceived quality. In addition, the appreciation indices and the perceived quality indices do not necessarily correspond to the traditional television ratings: this means that the public can be exposed to programmes which it does not judge as of quality and which, in certain cases, it does not even appreciate, because of external factors, related to the situations of reception. This result introduces a further important problem taken into consideration, as from the eighties, of a particularly committed part of the research on the media, namely the problem regarding the modalities and the contexts - in particular the domestic one - of the reception, subject to investigation especially of the ethnographic approach to television consumption  (Morley, 1986, 1997; Lull, 1990; Moores, 1993; Casetti, 1995; Ang, 1996).

   It is precisely the research on the reception  that  highlights, more than the other lines of investigation, the active role of the user, taking the cue from research approaches - like the "uses and gratifications" research and the cultural studies - that already in the seventies had laid the grounds for a radical revision of the way of understanding the relationship between media and public. With the term "reception" is denominated the whole of all the various processes -  determined by both individual and social factors - which characterise the relationship of each receiver with the media texts, from exposure to the allocation of the attention, from the perception to the memorisation, from the comprehension to the interpretation, up to the acceptance or to the rejection of the message which they are supposed to propose.

   The research on the reception is characterised by the reference to theories and methodologies of diverse disciplinary spheres: psychology, social psychology, sociology, semiotics, the theories of the reception of literary texts (Ang, 1985; Katz, Liebes, 1987; Holub, 1989; Eco 1990; Livingstone, 1990, 1998b; Morley, 1992; Moores, 1993; Silverstone, 1994; de Rosa, Losito, 1996; Cadioli, 1998; Alasuutari, 1999). From the viewpoint of sociology, I believe that the process of reception can be studied in a new way, starting from a theory of social interaction

that sets in the foreground the processes of production of meaning activated in the interaction itself (from Weber's theory of social action up to the theories of the social construction of reality). And this because I maintain it may be possible to establish, hypothetically, an analogy between interaction with the media - or, better, with the media texts - and social interaction.

This hypothesis is based on the fact that, in both the cases, the processes of production of meaning spring from one and the same matrix and tend to assume similar modalities: in the interaction with the media texts each receiver necessarily involves his background of knowledge and of values. And this background is the same as that he draws from for attributing meaning to the social interaction, to himself as participant in it, to the others with which he interacts, to the reciprocal role expectations, to the situations in which the relationship takes form, and so on. It may obviously be objected, against this hypothesis, that the interaction with the media texts is only a partial relationship, devoid of the possibility of a direct feedback; yet it is necessary, nevertheless, to consider that it occurs in any case under the sign of reciprocity, being configured invariably as a negotiation between text and receiver. In fact, the reception process implies, on the one hand, an attribution of meaning to the media texts by the receiver suggested by the texts themselves; and, on the other, the production of the texts should make reference to the expectations of those to whom they are intended, and is, therefore, in its turn oriented by the receiver. The reception would not be possible without this reciprocity, without an implicit "pact" between producer and receiver, without which the one or the other making reference to shared competencies, rules and communicative expectations.

## 5. The effects

To conclude, here are some considerations regarding social research on the media effects. Up to end of the sixties, the prevalent investigation object had been the specific short-term effects on the opinions, on the attitudes and on the individual behaviours, in a perspective characterised by the hegemony of the theory of the "limited effects" developed in the forties by Paul F. Lazarsfeld et al. (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, Gaudet, 1948; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, McPhee,1954; Katz, Lazarsfeld, 1955). According to this theory, the influence of mass communications on each member of the public is not a direct influence, but, on the contrary, mediated by both individual and social factors; among the latter, the function of mediation is performed with particular efficacy by the personal influence and the opinion leaders. Starting from the first half of the seventies, the "limited effects" theory has been brought up for discussion again - with a parallel re-emergence of the powerful mass media hypothesis - essentially on account of three orders of factors. In the first place, reference was made to the ever greater extension, articulation and spread of mass communications, permeating the daily

life of most of the population. In the second place, the progressive crisis of the interpersonal relationship was stressed, in particular in the large urban agglomerations, with a resulting possible weakening of the mediation function performed by personal influence. In the third place, a shifting of interest from the short-term effects to the long-term effects was taking place in the sociology of mass communications, in particular those on the processes of socialisation, on the formation and change of common knowledge, and on the social construction of reality.

Precisely the long-term effects of the media on the processes of social construction of reality represent, at thirty years distance, a field of investigation still mainly unexplored on which the research should be applied in a more systematic way. With the exception of the "cultivation" theory and of the "agenda setting" theory, theories with an adequate empirical support have not been formulated on this argument. This delay in the research on the long-term effects depends essentially on the fact that this type of effects represents a much more problematic and difficult investigation subject compared with the short-term effects with which mass communication research is traditionally concerned.

It is hard, for example, to establish to what the long-term effects should be attributed, when they concern the single individuals: not to the media in general, and not even to this or that medium, but, if anything, to the media consumption routes which each one constructs daily, in relation to his own preferences, to his own desires, to his own needs. It is difficult, also, to establish on what these effects are manifest, since it is a question of common sense, of the representations of reality which are determined in each one not only by effect of the media, but also of many other sources of influence, different from individual to individual by number, contents and efficacy. As a result of this, in the case of the long-term effects it is harder to satisfy some basic conditions set by empirical social research: in the first place, to consider in the research design all the complex properties - in this case numerous - that may be important in relation to the research hypothesis; in the second place, to ensure the requirements of the validity and of the reliability for the operative definitions of these properties; in the third place, to establish in the analysis of the data the role of each variable related to the media with regard to those relative to other sources of influence, in the construction of multi-dimensional models of the relation between variables. How to define, for example, the concept of "representation", and how to transform it into a variable of the research? And how to consider a certain representation an effect of the media, extracting and isolating this effect from the complex network of influence that characterises the social experience of each one?

These methodological difficulties represent one of the possible causes of the re-emergence of the powerful mass media hypothesis regarding the long-term

effects, while a considerable number is made up of the solicitations coming from the other fields of research on the media  -  to which reference has so far been made - which, on the contrary, would seem to uphold the opposite hypothesis according to which the influence of the media is also in this respect a mediated one, namely an influence that springs from the complex processes of negotiation which have as protagonist two semi-powerful actors (Livingstone, 1990).

  I believe that the reference to the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961, 1984, 1989; Farr, Moscovici, 1984) can be a valid help in the attempt to give a response to these interrogatives, because of its capacity to safeguard two fundamental requirements, one theoretical and the other methodological.  The first concerns the need to attribute to the public a protagonist role in the relationship with the media: the formations of a social representations implies, on the one hand, an active role of the individual in the manifold communicative and social interactions,  and, on the other, its reference to the heritage of competencies and values it possesses and shares with others in a preconstituted social and cultural situation. Each individual selects, interprets, evaluates, reassumes, and classifies the items of information that come from the surrounding world, and, thus, also from the mass media, and he tries to reassemble them in the same universe with which he is familiar.  The second requirement concerns the need to investigate on an empirical basis the processes which we are dealing with: the social representations, also in their complexity, are an object of possible research for the social and psychological sciences, unlike what occurs for the other properties represented by concepts at such a level of abstraction ("conception of reality", "weltanschauung") as not, in any way, to be taken into consideration in a research design. The reference to the theory of social representations in the research on the long-term effects of the mass media can thus make it possible to bring back, in an explicit and systematic way, the dynamics and the possible objects of these same effects to a unitary notion, formulated at a level of abstraction, in any case, such as to allow the passage to concrete operations of empirical research.

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