



# Comunication Theory

Francisco López Cantos

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# COMMUNICATION THEORY

Francisco López Cantos

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# Summary





The text at hand presents an introductory view of the various theories of communication that have been developed until today, and that are useful for students of the first years of Audiovisual Communication, Journalism, and Advertising studies. First, we review the basic aspects of interpersonal communication, next we address the characteristics and complexity of media communication. We introduce, thus, the historical role that mass media have had in contemporary culture and later analyze in detail the different theoretical paradigms about media communication that have been developed until the present time. This way, we carry out a review of the different theories of communication from a historical and contrastive perspective to finally analyze the different aspects related to the production, circulation and reception of communicative contents in the framework of the current multimedia and contemporary digital environment.



# 1. Introduction



Communication is a complex object of study and it brings together different research disciplines which initiate their analyses from various perspectives such as philosophy and the science of knowledge, biology, psychology, sociology and history, as well as from political science, economics, or engineering, among others.

As a scientific discipline, communication is a relatively young and constantly evolving area of research, and from a few decades ago up until now it is seen as a fundamental object of analysis in the study of any area of knowledge given its relevance and centrality in all human and social processes.

In a very synthetic way, we as humans could define ourselves as eminently social beings who, for our daily existence, have needs and carry out biological and social activities such as, among others, eating or sleeping and, in a wide and diverse sense, to communicate.

In Gifreu's words (1991, cf. Rodrigo Alsina 2001, 46), human communication can be defined as «a historical, symbolic and interactive process by which social reality is produced, shared, preserved, controlled and transformed.».

- a) Communication is a *process* in which, as such, one can distinguish a beginning, a development and an end, although sometimes this episodic structure is not linear and has diffuse or discontinuous limits and may be difficult to delimit.
- b) It is also a *historical* process, that is to say, the characteristics of the communication processes can only be understood in the context in which they are registered because they are determined, evolve over time and within a specific society and culture.
- c) It is also a process that is necessarily *interactive*, whereas the communicative processes are only possible when it is put in relation to different social subjects who are able to act using their biological capacities such as speech, or using any other technological means, to establish an exchange between them.
- d) Communication is also, and especially, a *symbolic* process through which people interact using a set of signs that are structured in a discursive way to be transmitted and interpreted as a specific language.
- e) Thanks to the communication process, as Gifreu very accurately defines, the social reality is *produced*, i.e. the historical set of norms and relational guidelines that make up the foundations on which any particular society and culture are the result and are determined by the communication processes.
- f) In that sense, too, the social reality is *shared*, because without the relational social processes it would not be possible to establish common links

between different subjects and, therefore, to constitute aggregations of social subjects in the different forms of social grouping.

- g) In addition, communication processes allow social realities to be *preserved* and *controlled*, making it easier for promoting ideologies and value systems by the institutions that sustain them (politics, religion, etc.).
- h) Finally, the social realities are also *transformed* by communicative processes, as a part of the constant change inherent to the social dynamics itself, although it is complex and the outcome of multiple factors.

In any case, and even considering that the power of communication is enormous, communication processes maintain a dual relationship with social systems and individuals themselves. Both people and society itself are the result of communication processes, but also the communicative processes are the product of our own human characteristics and the historical and social context in which we live.

According to this perspective, which can be described as *constructivist*, communication and language are part of all our activities as a fundamental social process. Our world, in this sense, is defined as a function of conversational activities that are co-built and only have meaning in a given historical context and in which personal identities are the result of the continuous processes of social interaction.

If, in addition, we approach communication from a complementary perspective that we can call *functionalist*, the communicative processes can be characterized in relation to the role they exert in our daily social activities. In this regard, we find that communication facilitates:

- a) Firstly, the *contact* between people, i.e., it has a primary phatic function that allows us to establish and maintain relationships as the social subjects which we are;
- b) When communicating not only packets of information are transferred, but, above all, communication is a process of content exchange that allows the *negotiation and resolution* of specific situations that we face each day.
- c) Fourth and no less important, communication promotes the participation of individuals in the development of events and in the issues that affect them and also allow them to build their own *social relational world*.
- d) And finally, communication can *influence* people's decisions and collaborate to determine the future of social events.

In sum, the communication processes are fundamental in our daily activities as social subjects that we are continually interacting in different ways with the environment and with ourselves. The communicating processes, in this respect, are given at different levels, and we can distinguish between:

- a) *intrapersonal* communication, that is the one which we have with ourselves as we are continually immersed in activities destined to psycho-physiological self-control that derives of we can call reflexive thinking. This internal communication can be more or less automated and we can

distinguish between two types of cognition: the one that has been named *fast think*, which is very intuitive and executive and which allows us to carry out the daily activities learned or inherent (such as when we have learned to go by bike); and another called *slow think*, in which analytical and relational processes are carried out much more costly in time and resources (typical, for example, of learning processes) that differentiates us from many other living beings, we are able to think about what we think, i.e., perform a cognitive activity that we can call *metareflective*.

- b) *Interpersonal* communication, namely, the one that allows us to interact with our environment and makes us social beings in function of the relational system in which we develop our daily activities. This is a type of communication in which, more than the oral and linguistic capacity inherent in us, we also use technological means that allow us to transcend the space-temporal limitations that impose our biological human limitations. As a result of the interpersonal communication processes we carry out aggregations of individuals, that is to say, we form groups that also exert a central role in our daily life as the social individuals that we are.
- c) The diverse social groups in which the individuals interact and create their own relationships, building their personal world mix and compete with others in social discourses to exert their influence on the individual and the collective imaginary in order to be relevant to the whole society. This type of communication named *intergroup* is given to many levels and between groupings of very different characteristics which, inevitably, maintain areas of contact and, in constant dynamism, establish social dialogues with a discursive level that transcends the individual. In this type of communication, we can find, for example, the dialogues between languages, cultures, ideologies, religions, artistic currents or scientific paradigms.
- d) We can also distinguish a type of communication of a group what we call *organizational*, which we can define as one that is given within the organizations themselves and we can understand in a similar way to the intrapersonal communication, approaching organizations as entities which whose communication process is addressed to internal and external control and interaction.
- e) Finally, we can distinguish a type of communication that is very characteristic of our contemporary societies and different from the previous that we call *media communication* and which is defined this way because it is the media who, as a social actor, play a significant role and exert a relevant power to determine social discourses with communicative practices that are specific and different from those of individuals or social groups.

These different approaches to a so polyhedral object of study shows a wide and heterogeneous myriad of visions about it that, without doubt, enrich and allow to understand their characteristics. But, at the same time, the definition attempt of the object of study became a complex task and not exempt of the difficulties that some theorists like Denis McQuail (1983) even qualify as insurmountable.

In this way, communication can be studied with the perspective of medical and biological sciences, for example and especially, from the field of neuropsychology and cognitive sciences.

But also, we can analyze the historical and the sociocultural dimension of communication from the areas of human and social sciences, for example, from philosophy in terms of its epistemological definition, from ethics and the law sciences in relation to their normative aspects. Also, of course, communication can be approached from technical disciplines such as engineering, for example, telecommunications, and its close links to the technological development, or analyze its industrial or socio-cultural relevance from an economic approach or determine its effects on societies and its role for the arts, innovation, education and scientific knowledge.

In a different way, the study of communication can also be addressed according to its purposes and its forms of production and reception in each culture and can, therefore, be depending of their focus on particular forms of communication, such as speech, the media, communication by Internet, mobile, etc.

And we can carry out its analysis from larger research perspectives such as the *cross-cultural* and the *international* perspective for:

- a) making a comparison of the forms of interpersonal and group communication between cultures or subcultures within the same cultural system, for example, establishing the differences between the way in which young people communicate comparing with adults in a certain culture; or analyzing, for example, how beauty is dealt with in an advertising campaign that a certain global brand sets up globally.
- b) studying the strategies of communication that public or private institutions or any other type of organizations deploy, including the countries themselves, for example, studying the global impact of the «Spanish brand».
- c) We can also compare the particular handling of the same event in different countries, cultures, etc., for example, in the face of an economic crisis or a certain political dispute, or the different ways of dealing with climate change.

Communication, in any case, is a quality and a capacity we have as human beings, and our emotions are learned in the context of the beliefs, norms and expectations of a determined culture so that, at the end, our own existence is associated with communication processes.

We will speak about all that more deeply throughout the text, stopping at the different traditions and academic currents that have been taking care of the study of communication since the beginnings of early theoretical approaches until today.

However, as it is characteristic of any area of dynamic and constantly developing knowledge, even if we make a synthesis effort in this book and it may seem that



we follow a historical trajectory, our narrative should not be read as a linear succession of theories in which the last substitutes the previous.

Throughout the text we will be studying the theories of communication in many cases according to their order of appearance but, although we mention the moment when they were proposed and began to be relevant to the study of communication, some do not replace others or are the overcoming of the previous, and all made genuine contributions to the field of study and coexist with more or less fortune to some extent at the present

We begin with the study of daily communication, that is to say, the oral level that people commonly communicate with intuitively, which does not mean that we know how it works or will be less complex than other forms of communication.



## 2. Everyday Communication. Speech and Conversation



Before addressing the way we use speech, we will establish, in a generic way, the notion of a *communicative event* as a basic unit for the analysis of any situation of communication that is constituted by a series of *communicative acts*. The concept derives from *speech acts* formulated by the philosopher of language John L. Austin as a fundamental pragmatic unit of enunciation. But, unlike these, the communicative acts represent a wider concept that refers to any form of communication, including speech.

The fundamental idea that Austin –who was later followed by his disciple John Searle– develops in his book of 1962, *How to do things with words*, is that using the speech we perform an action in the world. His work focused especially on analyzing this power of the language to do what are called *illocutionary speech acts*, that is to say, those who, once issued in the daily practice of speech, effectively affect the situations or previous concepts where we live.

For example, when a speaker says «Today is a good day», he is making a statement about a particular situation, and so the more or less objective assertions or simple claims of beliefs are considered *representative speech acts* that determine how the world is perceived through language. On other occasions, for instance, you try to intervene in the listener through speech by giving orders, challenging, making warnings, or simply making requests or questions that push him to act in a certain sense, and these acts of speech are called *directives*.

There are other types of *illocutionary speech acts* such as the *commissives*, in which the speaker undertakes to carry out a future action, i.e. when we make a promise or a threat. There are *expressive* speech acts, with which we manifest a certain psychological state, such as when we acknowledge someone with our words or congratulate. Finally, there are others that are considered *declarative*, such as when you pronounce certain words to declare a war or to perform a certain ritual, i.e. when a person gets married or baptized, thus provoking, as in any illocutionary speech act an immediate change in the situation and the previous state.

To sum up, based on this theoretical premise that has its origins in the pragmatic linguistics, but beyond orality and speech, we understand that any *communicative event* is formed by a series of *communicative acts*, namely *illocutionary speech acts*. And the speech acts are the product of the subjective, intentional and symbolic interaction of participants and changes their previous state.

If we take a structuralist perspective, any communicative event can be analyzed both in itself and in its constituent elements. In this sense, it can be understood

from the functional relationship the participants have, and by taking into account the communicative situation in which the communicative event develops.

From this point of view, the communicative speech events are susceptible to be studied as a particular set of communicative acts whose defining characteristic is orality and that occur in communicative situations in which the functional relationships between the participants are established in a certain way.

In this regard, we can distinguish different communicative events of speech such as:

- a) The *everyday conversation*, which we could understand as *natural* and whose characteristics and rules we learned for years to recognize them immediately and to take care about in the best way possible to perform depending of the kind of activities that we are involved in daily, for instance, we use different words and communicative gestures in formalized environments or informal situations,
- b) The *colloquium*, similar to everyday conversation in some respect, but whose main characteristic is that the communication focuses on a thematically restricted object, sometimes as in media programs such as talk-shows the participants' speeches are moderated by a chairperson,
- c) The *dialogue* that is aimed to seem natural as everyday conversations using dramatizations with cinematographic, scenic, etc. purposes but has some degree of prior elaboration and its construction is artificial,
- d) The *debate* or *discussion*: similar to the colloquium, but strongly focused on arguing about the different points of view on a specific topic,
- e) Finally, we can distinguish the *interview* as a communicative event of oral speech, in which a specialization of roles is produced in a way that is developed within the context of an interviewer and an interviewee.

As for the everyday conversation, we are facing a specific type of communicative event that has been studied to a great deal for a few decades now, especially from the so-called *ethnography of communication*, which deals with the study of speech in situations of everyday use. Also, from other complementary theoretical approaches which, in a synthetic way, we can group around what has been called the Palo Alto Group and *Symbolic Interactionism*, a term coined by Herbert Blumer in 1939 which proposes to understand our societies as systems of shared meanings. On this we will return later in more depth, but for the moment it is interesting to review one of the most significant representatives of this current –although there are certain divergences about it–, Erving Goffman, who in his book published in 1956, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, relates the mundane activities of everyday life that we carry out every day more or less consciously with the characteristics of scenic representation.

Goffman understands that everyday life is a theatrical representation in which the actor is presented in public on a routine basis in which the conversational interaction develops according to the following premises:

- a) The activity of the different actors is integrated in a more or less conscious and coherent way in the pre-established social order, whose global aims transcend the individuals;
- b) It is a legitimate expectation that each actor contributes and collaborates in the communicative interaction and, thus, allows the rest of the participants to foresee the development of the communicative event,
- c) That contribution must be adequate and will be valued consistently in the course of the conversation with positive or negative sanctions;
- d) Any social manifestation of the participants occurs in a wider social context of which they are part;
- e) Therefore, it is necessary to respect the general and specific rules governing each conversational exchange and, if there are no established rules, then it is a risky communicative event in which participants will not know how to behave or know what they can expect from the others;
- f) Who violates the rules is designated as deviated and will be warned about it, and if he or she continues with the wrong attitude will be punished;
- g) When someone violates the rules, the offender should be rerouted to restore the threatened order, and therefore he or she must feel guilty for his or her action which is contrary to established rules,
- h) On many occasions some participants will use strategies and maneuvers to achieve, without violating the rules of social order, their own ends without being warned and, in consequence, sanctioned.

To analyze and characterize this kind of communicative act, i.e. the everyday conversation, we can approach it from the pragmatic analysis or, more specifically, the proposals resulting from what in linguistics has developed as a specific research area around the so-called *conversational analysis*. And from this perspective, as Gallardo-Pauls (1994) explains, everyday conversation has the following distinctive features:

- a) The relationship between the participants is dynamic and dialogic, and the roles of speaker and listener during the interaction are not successive but simultaneous;
- b) The interventions of each participant are regulated following an interactive process of *taking turns* in which at each moment it is determined who acts as a speaker and who as a listener;
- c) The development of the communicative exchange is elaborated continuously step by step at every moment during the communicative event and each participant not only acts orally but also with gestures, etc.

In opposite to the other kinds of communicative speech acts, in the everyday conversation:

- a) The speakers are alternating and taking turns freely, there is no rule that establishes distinctions or priorities between speakers in this respect, and if the turn is not maintained this alternation is produced by direct selection or self-selection of another participant.

- b) The starting turn is especially subject to regular routines (greetings, etc.) that continues with petitions or the offering of goods, information or social responses and sometimes expressive monologues., At the beginning, and throughout all the interaction, someone can make escape turns to evade interaction.
- c) Shifts may go on by continuing with previous or initiating new topics but, in any case, neither the content nor the duration of each is predetermined.
- d) Neither is the total duration of the communicative event pre-established, nor the number of participants, which can be variable throughout its development,
- e) The fundamental principle governing conversational exchange is cooperation between speakers and, in addition, rules of courtesy should be respected, especially at the beginning, at the outset, and to enable interaction or abandonment, which finally facilitates that the exchange will be beneficial for all, in order to allow in any case that all participants preserve their social image.

Following these ideas of Goffman and the specific analysis of everyday conversation, we can go further by transcending individuality and addressing social processes from the centrality of language and social constructionism and game theories, and then, as Pearce pointed out (cf. Rodrigo Alsina 1991, 178):

- a) The social world consists of joint conversational activities, whose design is similar to games.
- b) As human beings we have an innate ability to being part of it and participate in this type of games.
- c) These activities, such as games, are structured according to certain rules about what we should and should not do.
- d) In our daily activities we do not join a single game and we are always in several games at the same time.

In short, everyday conversation forms part as a substantive element of our subjective world of the fundamental processes on which social reality is built. Although we should rather talk about *social realities*, because the reality commonly understood in relation to objectivity presents many epistemological problems and, without going deeper into it because it is not the subject of study of this text, it might be enough to say that, in any case, reality is impregnated with subjectivity.

In the times in which we live, mobile and network communication, as is well known, have been imposed very quickly on all areas, and in our day-to-day life we alternate *offline* and *online* communication mediated by technologies, which tend to more and more production and private consumption of multimedia content.



## 3. Media Communication



In this manual we understand media communication, in general and as we have already defined it in precedent chapters, as a type of communication in which the mass communication media system (television, radio, press, etc.) intervenes in the shaping of social discourse.

The development of media technologies and mass communication media system has produced an important transformation of our –now globalized– societies as a result of multiple socioeconomic factors and ideological and cultural currents that converge historically in constant dynamism and permanent struggle to impose itself on our societies.

The origins of technological mediation in social communications can be found in the birth of the cultures in ancient Mesopotamia and the first clay tablets on which the people began to register with cuneiform writing their economic and legal affairs as well as their philosophical reflections and literary creations.

The written culture received an important impulse from the 15th century on with the invention of the movable-type printing-press, but it was especially from the 17th century onwards with the progressive industrialization and the boom of the trade that the written press began to expand and was about to form, as a result of all that, a new bourgeois society around the cities.

Simultaneously, and especially promoted since the Enlightenment, the idea that exchange and communication are creators of social and economic values began to consolidate as fundamental. Thus, modernity brought also with it the release of the communicative flows, i.e., the promotion of the freedom of thought and opinion, and additionally, it brought

liberalism, considered as necessary to build a new free world. The new economic and cultural development strategy implied the impulse of the engineering of roads, channels and ports to facilitate trade exchange and, in addition, the promotion of freedom of communication to facilitate the mobility of people and goods.

The main promoters of liberalism, first Adam Smith with his book *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776, and later John Stuart Mill with the publication of *On Liberty* in 1859, began to establish the economic principles of trade which, according to their proposals, would allow the development of nations. These principles –without going too much into detail– could be summarized by the shaping of a global market that facilitates the free movement of capital flows and people promoting high productivity thanks to the division of labor, the abolition of taxes on knowledge

to facilitate the generation of new ideas, increasing creativity and innovation. In order to build a possibly more efficient system of growth, the international standardization of measures, timetables, exchange rates, etc. was also necessary, as well as the development of commercial infrastructures and communication networks.

From the seventeenth century on, from these premises and with great intensity since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a society has been shaping around communication technologies and communicative flows that, in terms coined by Armand Mattelart, could be characterized by the acronym *PPII*, referring to a *Planetary* society in *Permanent* communication that makes use of *Immaterial* signs available *Immediately*.

We will deal with the current theories of network communication in later chapters, but examples of the influence nowadays of communication technologies in all areas, from the most common and private to social and public affairs, and there are many others, but it is clear that what is most characteristic of our contemporary society is the fact that it is constituted around communication and technology.

In any case, we can identify the twentieth century with the emergence of media communication and with a period in which mass media have exerted enormous influence on the shaping of our contemporary society. That is why the analysis of media communication played a central role in the theories of communication that were proposed throughout the last century.

In this sense, media communication developed a particular communicative interaction that has specific elements and processes associated which, according to Thompson (cf. Igartua and Humanes 2004, 37-38), are characterized as follows:

- a) The issuer is a technical and institutional organization of production and diffusion, which is called *media organization*. We can study the nature of media organization, technical conditions of fixation and transmission of contents and the forms of reproduction and consumption that determines the technology used,
- b) The mediation of these institutions in the communication process imposes the structural rupture between production and consumption of the symbolic contents. The communicative aspects related to this separation of emitters and receivers are the result of the channels of transmission or diffusion used, the mechanisms of indetermination and the nature and extension of the feedback that the channels allow,
- c) One of the main differences between media communication and other types of communicative interaction (interpersonal, for example) is their ability to make the symbolic content available to individuals without the limitations imposed by the space and/or the time. The elimination of co-presence of emitter and receiver comprises three dimensions of analysis: the nature and extension of the space-temporal distance, the durability

of the technical medium and the social and technical conditions of the reception,

- d) The symbolic content is disseminated publicly, a characteristic that leads to wonder about the composition and scope of the audience, the modes of appropriation and the forms of regulation and control of the activity of the media.

In this regard, media communication is the type of communicative interaction resulting from what we call the media system that, according to Saperas (2012, 16), implies:

- a) An organization (company, public institution) that creates, produces, develops and disseminates messages,
- b) specific professions (a professionalism),
- c) a technological structure that allows the diffusion
- d) and reception of contents,
- e) a legal regulation, and a receiving public or audience.

Throughout the following chapters we will study the different theoretical approaches that have been proposed to analyze the processes of media communication, but before it is advisable to distinguish the different types of knowledge that can be addressed the communication and the areas of study in which the theoretical research on communication is carried out.

When we study media we can find different types of knowledge that interact in a complex way to make up the polyhedral understanding that can be obtained in relation to media communication. As Igartua and Humanes (2004, 24) point out, we can talk about various types of knowledge about the media:

- a) Firstly, a knowledge that has a *professional and operative* nature, i.e., the type to know internalized by the professionals of the medium and oriented to the practice,
- b) There is also, secondly, a type of theoretical discourse around the media system in society that we can call *normative*, namely, centered on the role that the media must have and its rules of operation related with its important role in the development of public affairs,
- c) Thirdly, there is also a type of knowledge about media that would be linked to common sense and which any individuals possess as a result of their lifelong learning and their day-to-day communicative interactions, not only in in personal interaction but also as a result of media communication. This type of knowledge allows audiences, for example, to immediately recognize and distinguish the fictional or informative gender of a television program and, consequently, to make use of their own cognitive frameworks for their interpretation.
- d) Finally, we can develop a type of scientific knowledge that is the result of the use of the scientific research methodology to systematically analyze the nature of mechanism, process and effects of media communication on society.

As we have already mentioned before, communication is an object of study that develops in an epistemological framework characterized by being dynamic, historical and cultural, and the theories of communication that are elaborated to address it are characterized precisely by the same premises and, thus, they are the result of a concrete historical and cultural moment and are in continuous transformation.

However, at the general level, we can identify the fields of research from which the theories of communication develop, sometimes focusing on one or several of them in order to formulate their different proposals, and which are the following:

- a) The study of *emitters*, communicators and/or lobbies around the ownership of the media and the socioeconomic and technological characteristics that define them as media organizations,
- b) The *analysis of the contents* that the different media disseminate from different perspectives, both the contents related to a specific program and the programming strategy and the editorial lines that media organizations unfold,
- c) The study of the *media system* and the institutions involved in a specific socio-political and techno-economical context, as well as the communication standards that determine the particular structure of the media system,
- d) The study of the *audience* and the effects of the communication, that is to say, the analysis of the public of the media from a psycho-social point of view as well as of the effects resulting from the media communication process. This scope covers both studies on the composition of audiences and the influence on them by different media or specific communication products,
- e) Finally, and transversely to the areas of analysis reviewed, in the research in communication, as in any scientific discipline, different research methodologies are used, and whose efficacy is analyzed and tested continuously to adapt the research strategies to the requirements of the object study and the purposes of the specific research program.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day, a set of proposals for the study of communication has been developed that, without excluding each other, we can differentiate both by its historical context of appearance and by their particular aspect of media communication on which they focus their analyses. From these perspectives, we can study the different approaches to our object of study, the mass media communication, that have been proposed from a particular point of view about mass communication in relation to the historical context in which the different media were developed. The result is a set of theories and theoretical research currents that has been consolidated over the last century around the academic discipline named Communication Sciences.

## 4. Researching Mass Communication at the Early Twentieth Century





Throughout the last decades of the nineteenth century it became clear that the socioeconomic development resulting from the Industrial Revolution and the new migration of the population to the cities was shaping a model of a new society that some scholars started to call *mass society*.

These new citizens who were the crowd around the manufacturing activity in the cities also began to be consumers of all kinds of products produced by the new industries and the object of desire created by advertising which simultaneously began to develop very quickly. With the invention of the phonograph and the cinematograph and –over the next decades– the radio and television systems, entertainment became a consumer product for these new citizens, and the media, along with advertising, acquired a central role in this new mass society that was forming those years at full speed.

In general, as Mattelart and Mattelart (1997, 20) stated, towards the end of the nineteenth century a form of biologization was imposed on the study of social phenomena impregnated with positivism and some ideas coming from Darwinian theories of evolution, and, as a result, it was understood that the communication systems were agents of development and civilization. However, the crowd, the mass, began to be perceived as a problem for society, understood as a cluster of individuals with a particular collective psychology being susceptible to contagion, suggestion and hallucination and difficult to control and easily manipulated by mass communication and propaganda campaigns.

In the late nineteenth century, the social psychologist and criminologist Gabriel Tarde said about that era that the crowds belonged to the past and society entered the *age of the publics*, in which the contact and social people affairs people were not only physical but also the result of the means of transport and dissemination. In this regard, as Carrera (2008, 138) points out, the social psychology of Tarde is the first one that deals with the everyday in the communication and its connection with the public opinion and the media, and already understands the relevant mediating role that the opinion leader has and that hypothesis is at the core of later communication theories that we will study throughout the next chapters as the hypothesis of *agenda-setting*.

In the period immediately preceding the First World War, and as a result of the new socioeconomic system, the social processes that gave rise to the emerging mass society were renewing the relations between the different economic and political actors and breaking the traditional personal ties and social structures. Economic and cultural elites saw their power threatened by these new masses that were provoking this profound social transformation but, above all, feared

the difficulty to manage the masses and their potential power that they considered as dangerous.

The fundamental ideas that define the quality of the so-called *man-mass* are related to the isolation and the alienation that the rupture of the traditional bonds (family, community, etc.) around the new industrial districts provokes in the individuals, and for being the antithesis of the humanist promoted since Enlightenment and not to have reflective and critical capacity by themselves, and to be only concerned about their welfare and at the mercy of the mass media and consumerism.

In his book published in 1930, *The Revolt of the Masses*, Ortega y Gasset, describes the *man-mass* as an anthropological species that runs through all the social classes and bases his role in technical specialization. The important thing in these masses is that each individual feel like the whole world and is not anguished when recognizing himself identical to others, What is even more troubling is that a social union is not based on the personality of its members but it is primitive and irrational. In other words, the *mass society* is a homogeneous aggregation of individuals dominated by shared unique and simple ideas, and the masses are considered potentially dangerous, manipulatable and capable of destroying everything that is different, singular and qualified.

The *man-mass* that Ortega y Gasset deploys, as synthesized by Igartua and Humanes (2004, 106), would be characterized by:

- a) Intellectual or moral mediocrity,
- b) conformity or identification with the majority and the ignorance of the own coarseness,
- c) vulgarity or lack of spirit of perfection,
- d) absence and contempt of tradition,
- e) domination of the majority leaving minorities in ostracism,
- f) self-satisfaction, that implies that the *man-mass* has a multitude of ideas about the world and how it should be organized and is convinced of what is right; an attitude that the superior man will never afford to have,
- g) thus, the *man-mass* is a primitive man who appears in the bosom of a civilized world, and at the end is characterized by his
- h) barbarism.

More studies from this perspective have soon appeared simultaneously throughout these years in relation to the role and the effects of the media in this new mass society that emerges fully at the beginning of the twentieth century. As C. Wright Mills asserts (*Power, Politics and People*, 1963, cf. Wolf, 1985, 27), the first theories of communication assume the premise that each individual of that mass society is considered an «isolated atom that reacts separately to orders and suggestions from monopolized mass media». From this point of view, the early approaches to the theory of communication can be grouped around what is commonly called *hypodermic* or *bullet theory*, according to which, and as Wolf (1987, 63) argues, each

member of that mass society «is personally and directly attacked by the message of the media and advertising propaganda». And it is enough that the messages reach these isolated and alienated men, so that they can easily be manipulated and the ideas that are intended to promote inoculated. Namely, being the passive and manipulative audience is enough so that the message arrives to its target, therefore this theory is also known as the *Magic Bullet Theory*, thus this communication theory meets accordingly the intentions of the communicators with their interest to be successful in the public sphere.

It should be remarked that at the same moment these theoretical approaches to communication were developed, both sociological and psychological studies were still practically incipient areas of research and, in any case, this intend to offer explanations to the social and cognitive processes is the result of the existing scientific knowledge in that particular historical context that constituted the beginning of the twentieth century.

The *Bullet Theory*, in this respect, was the result of a previous theory of society as we mentioned but is additionally based on a previous psychological and very influential theory at the early twentieth century known as *behaviorism*, formulated by John Watson on the adaptation of the organism's behavior to the environment.

To explain human behavior, classical *behavioral* psychology establishes a direct relationship between the stimulus, i.e. the impact of the environment on the individual, and the response, i.e. the reaction of the environment, giving a determining role to the effect of reinforcement. The well-known experiment the Russian Ivan Pavlov did with his dog, published around 1897, to show that his behavior could be manipulated by gradually associating food with a sound stimulus, a bell, to get the dog to drool when listening to the bell since it was thinking it would get food without having it already.

Translating this simple model about the animal behavior to humans in order to explain the whole social behavior in a mass society, then the mass communication media, as Katz-Lazarsfeld stated, was understood as «a kind of simple nervous system that extends to every eye and every ear, in a society characterized by the scarcity of personal relationships and by an amorphous social organization». At the time of these theories, the decade of the thirties of the twentieth century, the entire world was in a pre-war context before World War II, and the media and propaganda exerted a relevant influence, not only from the point of view of commercial advertising and consumption but also, and above all, as a political tool for the management of public opinion. The fear that aroused the propaganda and the art of influencing masses that can be controlled, manipulated and induced to act, continued very present throughout the following decades impelled by authors like Tchakhotine in his work *Le viol des Foules par la propagande politique* of 1939, translated into English as *The rape of the masses*.

In short, and to summarize, the early approaches to the theory of communication which we frame around what we call *Hypodermic* or *Bullet Theory*, are

developed in a pre-war context and are built on a theory of the mass society that operates in conjunction with a previous simple psychological theory of behavior, and focusing priority attention on the dangers of manipulation and propaganda.

# 5. Researching Mass Communication Effects and Media Criticism



According to Saperas (2012), the beginnings of the academic research of social communication can be dated back to October 10, 1910, with the inauguration ceremony of the first academic School of Journalism, at the Columbia University, founded by a well-known editor at time, Joseph Pulitzer, who is still world famous for the award named in his honour. It was intended, thus, for the university to be put at the service of «the construction of new media and commercial advertising to help planning the new American culture and its new political imaginary through the written press, the agencies of information, film and publicity» (Saperas 2012, 108).

Simultaneously in Europe, at a conference only a month later, the German sociologist Max Weber, also a columnist of the press, proposed a new academic discipline named *Journalism as Science of Public Communication*, which was the answer from the University to the questions that the new reality brought up, generated by the impact of the media and publicity on the society. According to Igartua and Humanes (2004), Weber wondered early about the press mechanisms for influencing the formation of the subjective character of the then called *modern man*. This was not only of interest in the context of the press but also for the issues related to the professional training that journalists should go through, the way in which those contents were received and the effects, both individual and social, that they provoked.

However, Weber's proposals did not materialize in specific studies until the end of World War I, and the first analyzes and theoretical proposals on social communication were developed by Walter Lippmann and Robert Park. Both were members of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago and had been students of the German sociologist Georg Simmel in Berlin, a colleague of Max Weber. Simmel always maintained a strong opposition to Weber's social theories. In contrast, he adopted a sociological approach that was more focused on micro-sociology and away from the search for large sociological categories, and Simmel dealt with specific phenomena of modernity such as the aesthetics of fashion or everyday changes that the new society provoked in the spirituality of individuals or in the ways of life in the city.

Walter Lippmann, Simmel's student, was a political journalist and presidential advisor for War Affairs, and he was interested in the study of the political behavior of citizens and the role of the media, with the ultimate aim of promoting the use of social sciences by governments in order to form and advise decision-making to avoid barbarism and wars for which, the passions and the emotion of the masses posed a great danger for society. as the general sentiment of that era dictated and as it was expressed in the *hypodermic theory*.

Lippmann considered as urgent the analysis of the media due to the enormous influence they were having on the creation of a new popular culture of consumption and because of their political potential to implement a model of a democratic society that was able to respond to the challenges of modernity. In his best-known work *Public Opinion*, published in 1922, he exposed his theory of the influence of the media, i.e. their mediating role to create the individual and the social reality in which the existence of journalism and well exercised professionalism of the journalists guarantee freedom in democratic societies (Igartua and Humanes 2004, 110).

Robert Park, Lippmann's partner and also part of the so-called Chicago School (Mattelart and Mattelart 1997, 28), adopted a more ecological perspective and studied the mechanisms by which the forms of human organization and social equilibrium are maintained by the communication media system from the analysis of the forms of integration of immigrants and ethnic communities in the American society. The Chicago School was formed by Harold Lasswell, and throughout the following decades it was also developed by Erving Goffman, promoter of the symbolic interactionism whom we have already mentioned in preceding chapters.

Lasswell, professor at the University of Chicago, published the book *Propaganda Techniques in the World War* in 1927, in which he analyzes the use of propaganda in World War I (1914-1918) and its relationship with violence and democracy in the mass society from an instrumental approach. That is to say, he understands that propaganda as an instrument is effective to govern and is more economical than violence, corruption or other techniques, and in itself it is neither good nor bad although it can be used with better or worse ends.

For Lasswell, in accordance with the way of understanding communication and the mass society, the audiences were considered an amorphous aggregation of individuals who were targeted by communication, and once reached by the message obeyed in a blind way to the indications of propaganda following the behavioral stimulus-response scheme. It was him who coined the term «hypodermic needle» to explain this way of understanding communication and audiences, which is at the base of the so-called *Hypodermic Theory*, as a way of understanding communication and mass society as we explained in the previous chapter.

Lasswell's perspective, in this regard, assumes the theoretical budgets typical of the hypodermic theory and it develops in the golden period of these theories, the interwar period. However, in subsequent years Lasswell introduced new proposals to understand the media from a functionalist perspective that, as we will see later, would end up consolidating as a set of theoretical proposals around the structural-functionalist theories of media communication. In 1948, already surpassed the Second World War, Lasswell proposed what is considered the first model to describe an act of media communication from the following question: Who says what, through which channel, to whom and with what effect? According to Wolf (1987, 30), the Lasswellian model to address the study of the media is developed from the following fundamental premises:



- a) Mass communication processes are exclusively asymmetric, that is to say, there is an emitter that is active and produces the stimulus and a passive mass of recipients that is attacked and, following the attack, reacts..
- c) Communication is intentional and tends to a goal, namely, it aims to obtain some kind of effect on the recipients' behavior..
- c) The purpose and the effects that are pursued are reached through the message and, therefore, the analysis of the contents of it has to be the object of priority research in communication in order to investigate the effects that it provokes on the masses, which must be observable and measurable.
- d) The roles of the communicator and the recipient in this model are isolated and atomized from social and cultural relations because –although the audience was already understood as an aggregation of individuals who had families, friends, etc. and could be grouped by age, sex, social layer, etc.– the relations and the social context were not considered relevant in this approach to mass communication analysis.

In this way, the first explanatory model of media communication identified the fundamental elements for the analysis of the communicative process delineating, thus, the future of the research in communication and giving priority to the analysis of the effects and the content from a perspective that would allow an objective, systematic and quantitative description of them.

Lasswell, in addition, identified three basic functions of social communication and the media within the society, which would later be extended by other authors, as we will see, and which are:

- a) Monitoring the environment, revealing and making public what could threaten or affect the social system of values in order to be treated and corrected,.
- b) transmission of information, to put in relation the components of a society and to be able to give a joint answer to environmentally problematic situations,
- c) transmission of social and cultural heritage.

As a result, during the early years of the twentieth century Lasswell inaugurated what would gradually constitute the field of study and the scientific discipline around the investigation of the media.

In these early days, media research was focused on the analysis of the content of the communication, the message, and the resistances that the recipients offered to the stimuli that, according to the behavioral Pavlovian model already commented, would end up being inoculated after a conditioning process for psychological manipulation.

With this explanatory Lasswellian model, which was part of the hypodermic theory, the political agencies and the advertising commercial industry invested large amounts of economic resources to launch piles of studies on the message to determine the effects and the effectiveness of the propaganda on the behavior of the public. But soon it was revealed that these social masses were untreatable, and on

the one hand it was becoming increasingly known how audiences were, while on the other hand, empirical knowledge accumulated on the fact that the consumption of individuals was not undifferentiated and the same for all of them but individual and selective. Step by step the attention shifted from the message to the audience to try to understand the subjects themselves and the social context in which they were integrated to receive the media contents.

In this way, the postulates proposed by the hypodermic theory were slowly reviewed in new academic works that addressed the psychological and sociological aspects of audiences, developing new lines of research and theoretical proposals and hypotheses about the factors involved in mediating mass communication between the individuals and society.

These new proposals, which we will see below, can be grouped around three major streams of communication research that are distinguished by being based on *empirical-experimental* studies carried out in a psychological laboratory, in *empirical-field* research from sociological approach, and in the analysis of mass communication from the *structural-functionalist* theory.

These new proposals focused on the United States and were heavily financed by the administration in order to not expect anything other than to obtain results of research at the service for public administration or private political-economic institutions to persuade or influence citizens with propaganda strategies. For this reason, the theoretical approaches to mass media communication are also called *administrative theories*, as opposed to other more critical theories that we will see later.

## 5.1. Researching the Psychology of Audiences

As Wolf explains (1987, 36), the communications studies from psychology in the fourth decade of the twentieth century begin to take care of the subjective aspects that intervene in the processes of communication. Although they were fragmentary and isolated studies, this analysis stream inaugurates a long tradition that constitutes a fruitful current of studies that, thereafter, would influence all areas of research in communication. And this new research program supposed the first overcoming of the *hypodermic theory* by putting in evidence the complexity of relationships between the emitter, the message, and the receiver.

Research on the psychological factors involved in the reception of communication were developed by launching empirical and experimental studies in the laboratory that are fundamentally of two types which are complementary:

- a) Those which are concerned with analyzing the psychological characteristics of the audiences to better adapt the communicative strategy, and
- b) those that address the form of organization of messages to improve their communicative effectiveness.

In this way, researchers try to know the optimal way to organize the messages to make them effective and to achieve the effects pursued in the communication and, finally, the objectives of emitters as public or private organizations.

In this theoretical current, research programs try to improve the strategies of *persuasion*, thus allowing a certain capacity of active interpretation of the messages by the receivers as well as their role in communication. In this way, the audiences were understood a bit differently to the hypodermic theory which assumed that recipients could be manipulated. That is to say, psychological studies showed that the personality of the members of the public intervened in the process of communication. But, however, their capacity of interpretation or rejection of the communication contents was minimal, and rather it was considered that by adapting and organizing the message in an optimal way anyone in the public could be persuaded to anything emitters wanted. It was only a matter of knowing sufficiently the psychological characteristics of the public in order to adapt the messages to the individual differences between their members.

Carl Hovland, from Yale University, was one the most relevant researchers of this theoretical current of communicative studies and he studied the effects of propaganda campaigns carried out with the media, both political-electoral and advertising, a common subject of study at that time, as we have already commented. This type of psychological research, as well as the sociological ones that we will see later, were financed by political and economic institutions and, in general, made available to the researchers huge quantities of resources destined to improve the results of propaganda campaigns from the adequacy of messages to the characteristics of the publics. That is, they departed from the fundamental premise that the arguments and products could be sold to the public using strategies of persuasion and both the public and the success of the propaganda campaigns could be measured and valued. In short, they only wanted to overcome the resistance of the public to communication by adapting the message to their psychological characteristics in order to optimize the persuasive effectiveness of propaganda campaigns.

The most significant findings of these investigations were in terms of psychological characteristics that determine the form of audience performance and can be divided into those relating to recipients and those related to the message.

Firstly, and regarding to how recipients relate to media communication, recipients show diverse interests in acquiring information, and we have to distinguish between those who are informed of those who are not: for those who are not previously informed about the subject of communication it is much more difficult to reach a certain level of knowledge about it.

Not being previously informed about the topic can be caused by the difficulty to access information, and also by the simple lack of interest and motivation regarding these issues or a general apathetic attitude in relation to social information. In this respect, the reason why there are those who are previously more informed about a particular topic is because they have shown greater interest in the issue

and, therefore, by receiving more information their motivation to know more increases. However, for those who have not been exposed to information for the reasons outlined, it is more difficult to find motivation. Consequently, the problem of any communicative strategy is not to address the previously more informed audiences but to promote the interest to be informed among those who have not been exposed to the subject of the communication.

Secondly, in continuation of the previous, the recipients of the communication that make up the media audiences are exposed to communication in a selective way and, above all, the way in which they perceive and memorize the message of media communication it is also selective. As Wolf (1983, 41) points out, individuals tend to expose themselves to the media according to their own interests and attitudes and tend to avoid other content, and, in addition, they only perceive and memorize well the messages which are suitable for them. If they are not they interpret the content in an aberrant way and also forget it easily.

In this respect, the work of Frederic Bartlett in the decade of the 1930s on the processes of selective memorization is recognized nowadays, who showed the so-called *Bartlett effect* that indicates that individuals perceive and memorize the elements which are meaningful to them more easily than those unknown, showing scarce interest or motivation for them. Carl Hovland also identified the so-called *latent effect* or *sleepers effect*, which indicates that although initially the negative attitude of the audience results in a barrier for persuasive communication, the mere exposure to those messages over time goes progressively, thereby increasing its influence and facilitating subsequent communicative and persuasive strategies.

Regarding the way in which the message is received it is related to its content and its organization as well as the form of communication and, of course, with the particular cognitive strategies that, as we have explained, the individuals expose selectively to them to perceive, interpret and memorize.

In this individual process addressed to validate the usefulness of messages the credibility of the communicator is, first of all, one of the decisive factors that determine the effectiveness of the communication, in which both the reliability of the message and the source from which it comes are fundamental elements for its easy acceptance.

Second, research on the order of elaboration of the arguments in developing the communicative strategies determined that there were two different types of effects called *primacy* and *recency*, depending on whether the initial or the final arguments were more effective. In general, the results indicated that when the recipients do not have any knowledge on the subject there is a *primacy* effect but if, on the contrary, they are already familiar with it and know the subject, it produces a *recency* effect and the final arguments are more efficient.

Also, the research showed that presenting the arguments in an exhaustive way and showing the different opinions in relation to a topic is more effective in convinc-

ing the audience if they did not have a clear opinion or had a seemingly contrary opinion to the exposed subject. Also, if the target audience has a high level of training in relation to the subject it is also more effective to present different perspectives about it but, however, this is not so good with low-trained people who prefer non-complex and clear arguments in favor of the single option you want to convince them. Less-informed individuals, as these studies conclude, make up the audience group for whom communication has greater efficacy problems.

And finally, with regards to the degree of explicitness of the conclusions: when elaborating content from arguments there is usually a relationship between the familiarity and the degree of involvement of the subjects with the issues, and then it is better to leave the conclusions implicit but, however, when the audience doesn't have previous knowledge about the topic it is better to make them clear and explicit.

In sum, the experimental research on the psychological characteristics of the recipients of communication shows specific results regarding the most optimal way of elaborating the messages and the communicative strategies to achieve that the propaganda content meet your goals.

In this respect, these studies are concerned with analyzing the best strategies of persuasion of the public which, in any case, are understood less naive and manipulatable than they seemed.

However, from this theoretical approach it is still considered that to improve the success of propaganda campaigns only communicators need to understand how the individuals resist persuasive strategies and, thus, by improving these strategies it is possible to achieve the final objectives and convince the audiences to act in the direction that the communicator wants.

## **5.2. Sociological Investigation and the Early Communication Research**

In general, and as we said before, during the development of the first investigations and communication theories, special emphasis was put on the analysis of media effects on the audiences. There was a special interest in increasing the effectiveness of propaganda campaigns developed from public and private spheres and political-economic institutions and, as a result, huge economic resources were allocated to develop research programs in order to improve the results in that way.

The research of the famous sociologist of the Chicago School, Harold Lasswell, and the first studies about radio listeners by the professor of the Columbia University, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, as mentioned in the previous chapter, are grouped around the denomination of *administrative* investigations, because their funding came from public and private institutions, among the most active was, for example, the Rockefeller Foundation.

It is necessary to remember that at that time, at the beginning of the 1930s, in the United States the elected President Roosevelt launched the Welfare State programs to get out of the crisis of 1929 which meant the collapse of the New York Stock Exchange. Furthermore, studies containing public opinion polls were also promoted by Gallup and other agencies, which in 1936 would successfully predict who would be the president, in that case it was Roosevelt himself, who was re-elected and who a few years later decided that the United States joined World War II after suffering the Pearl Harbor attack in 1941. In those previous years to the war, in 1937, the *Public Opinion Quarterly*, the first university journal on Mass Communications was created.

At the end of the decade of the 1930s, sociologist Paul L. Lazarsfeld, in continuation of Lasswell's work, was working to analyze the different types of audiences and their relationship with the various radio programs to try to determine the motives that led them to select one program or another for listening. As a result of his research, he determined the different complementary approaches that should be taken into account in order to analyze the attractiveness that the programs had for the public. As Wolf (1983, 52) pointed out, we can distinguish between:

- a) the analysis of the content of the communication, i.e. the study of the programs themselves,
- b) the study of the characteristics of the public, so that one can differentiate between the different target groups according to their psychological and sociological traits and, also and especially,
- c) the research on the rewards that programs have for people, so that the views of the audiences themselves would be of great interest as a starting point to better determine the attractiveness of the programs, in correlation with the psychologically and sociologically stratified studies.

From sociology Lazarsfeld anticipated the theoretical studies that later would be referred to as *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, which we will deal with later. Since the beginning of research in social communication, it was also determined that it was appropriate to combine quantitative and qualitative methods in research, and also to measure the participation of audiences. To do this, Lazarsfeld and others started using surveys and similar tools that allow to know not only who the targets of the communication are in relation to their psychosocial characteristics but what they think and how they relate with media and also the way they receive media communication campaigns.

In this way, the researchers understood that such media effects were the result of the dominant social forces operating in a given context and historical period. Thus, for this research the inherent complexity in communication processes goes much further than the simple direct correspondence between the intentions of the communicator, the content of the message and the results it provokes within the targets. That is to say, they stress the importance of the mediation process and consider that the audiences of mass communication cannot be *manipulated* by the media competition in an as simple way as it was intended and also feared. In sum,

the propaganda use of the communication and the mere existence and use of the social media exerted an evident influence on the social dynamics, but also interacting in a complex way with the individuals themselves and with the specific social and historical context in which they live.

One of the most interesting contributions of the sociological theories of the communication is the identification of the *opinion leader* as an important social actor and the determination of the relevant role that he or she exerts in all the communicative processes. In the analysis of the political campaigns carried out, research determined that there were some individuals who were the most active part of the target and had the capacity to influence the decisions of the whole of the audience. Furthermore, research identified three stages by which the public can move before an election process: activation, reinforcement and conversion. That is to say: the political campaign could result in the transformation of an latent intention of vote into the effective vote, its *activation*; it could *reinforce* a decision previously taken; or, in some cases, provoke the *conversion* of a previous decision of vote into another. This last group of voters, among whom we can include both those belonging to other ideologies than that of the promoter of the propaganda campaign and those who have no interest in elections or in politics, is the one who finally decides the result of the elections and, in all this process of activation, reinforcement or conversion, opinion leaders play a fundamental role.

As Lazarsfeld defines the opinion leaders, nowadays called *influencers* in our contemporary technological societies, those individuals are very involved and with great knowledge on the subject matter of communication as active participants in the communicative process who exert the role of reliable and informed mediators with the rest of the less involved and interested publics.

As a result, and to summarize, the great contribution of the first sociological theories of communication is that they reveal the complexity of the communication processes and, complementary to psychological studies, facilitate the overcoming of the old idea about mass society as amorphous aggregation of isolated and easily movable individuals.

First, in the *hypodermic* theory, it was said that individuals could be easily manipulated with the infinite power that propaganda and mass media were supposed to exert on them. Later, with the development of psychological studies about audiences, researchers began to consider that all that could be done with the audiences of communication was to try to *persuade* them to act in one direction or another, and to achieve that the content of communication could be optimized and organized to be more effective in order to overcome the *resistance* that individuals opposed to propaganda campaigns. Finally, researching communication from sociology, the results started to show that social communication in its mediating role is only one influence on the behavior of individuals which, in any case, is determined by their own psychological characteristics and the social context they inhabit. For that reason, these sociological theories are called theories on the *limited effects* of communication, overcoming completely the hypodermic theory

with which we started the historical review of the early theories in communication in this manual.

Furthermore, the group of studies that address communication from psychology and sociology use research methodologies to treat the field of study as a scientific discipline. In other words, they are not speculative theories about how society is or should be, as was the case with the postulates derived around the hypodermic theory that were more or less intuitive and successful proposals. The theories of *limited effects* tried to support research conclusions with empirical studies that allowed to validate the relevance of their contributions.

Sociological research used field studies, i.e. *empirical field studies* using consumer panels, while psychological tests were conducted through laboratory experiments and, for this, are also known as *empirical-experimental* studies.

The difference between both research methods is that in the field studies the sample of population for the analysis and the conditions in which the research is developed are not as controlled as in the laboratory research. They also both differ because in the psychological studies in the laboratory certain isolated variables are selected and analyzed for which researchers want to check their variation in controlled conditions, being their unique focus of study, whereas in sociological field research the multiplicity of concurrent variables cannot be controlled and analyzed. What is attempted by this method is only to try to comprehend from their opinions the deeper rooted attitudes in the subjects.

These two complementary currents of study on the processes of media communication, nowadays already considered classics in the sciences of the communication, have influenced later and in a cyclic way the theories on the mass communications, and are especially influential in the periods in which the study of the effects of the media and publicity and propaganda on the population is considered important. The greatest momentum for these studies on the effects was in the pre-war period and the early post-war years after World War II and, also, at the end of the decade of the 1970s when there were strong global political-economic tensions.

Simultaneously to both research approaches, and as part of the sociological studies of media communication, also a theoretical model began to develop that has been applied to the study of social communication and is being called *structural-functional*, which, as we will see below, was one of the roots of sociological research of media communication.

Anyhow, in short, with this set of research work that developed in the first part of the twentieth century a discipline of scientific and autonomous research began to consolidated that was gathering around what is nowadays constituted as a specific research area on Communication Sciences.



### 5.3. Functionalism and Mass Communication Research

The above mentioned Lazarsfeld, an Austrian who emigrated to the United States, had founded the *Bureau of Applied Social Research* at the Columbia University in 1941, and together with his colleague Robert K. Merton promoted a very distinct view of Chicago School members to that a decade before, in the 1930s. They sought to convert sociology into an instrument in the service of the institutions that would allow politics and citizens to retrace the big economic crisis of the 1930s and to improve the democratic system at that time.

For Lazarsfeld social studies were neutral and did not have to have any commitment to the state and institutions and should be independent and autonomous, although, paradoxically, his research, as we have said before, was highly founded by public administrations or private institutions. But there were other social researchers, such as Talcott Parsons of the Harvard University, who had a similar vision and understanding that sociology should be professionalized and not serving other than science and knowledge but unlike Lazarsfeld, to develop their investigations stayed deliberately away, from being financed by the public and private administrations and institutions.

Anyhow, since the 1940s, they all began to address social theory from a new perspective that was called *functionalist*. Further to studying the particular and short-term effects similarly to the way of the researchers at the Chicago School, they began to propose an explanatory model that defines the role, the *function*, that the media exert in the society.

As Mattelart explains (Mattelart and Mattelart 1997, 48), functionalism has its origins in the work of the biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy, *Modern Theories of Development*, published in 1933, in which the first use of the term *function* related to the vital or organic processes that contribute to the maintenance of the organism, but applied to the study of society as an organic system appeared. From this view, the organism, the whole, is more important than its component parts, which relate to each other according to their role.

*Functionalist* theories, in brief, address the role of the media in social dynamics with a new perspective that overcome the study of the immediate effects of media communication. In this way, these scholars focus on the analysis of the social processes from which it is called the problem of *point of equilibrium* and the *social conflict*.

Namely, the social system is perceived as an organism whose different parts perform functions of integration and maintenance of the system itself. In this sense, through social action individuals adhere to the internalized and institutionalized social values that are at the service of the *equilibrium* and *stability* of the system and are the product of the functional relationships of the individuals who are active inside integrated subsystems.

Regarding the research on communication, the *functionalist* approach facilitates a slow conceptual displacement from the study of the effects to the analysis of the role and the functions of the media in the society. According to Wolf (1983, 69), it drives research from studying the intentional effects of campaigns and specific radio programs to the analysis of the communicative situations in which the messages of the mass media are normally and habitually produced and distributed in the society as part of itself. Therefore, it starts from a research perspective on the immediate and short-term effects of media communication to approach the mass media system from a wider perspective that would develop over the following decades with various theoretical currents as we will see later, thereby addressing the long-term effects and the role of social communication as an integral and defining part of society itself.

In short, the most important insight from this theoretical perspective is that the system is not at the service of individuals. It is just the opposite, as are the requirements of the system that are placed above the interests of its members who are only there to achieve the system's own global goals. According to this theoretical current, the typical functional imperatives of any social system to which their members are subjugated are the following:

- a) The *conservation* of the model, as every system tends to perpetuate itself,
- b) the *adaptation* to the environment, that is, every system which is dynamic must integrate processes that allow some flexibility to facilitate its survival,
- c) The *pursuit of the purpose* as a defining characteristic of each particular system and which can be multiple but which, in any case, is the ultimate objective to which its members are owed, prior to their individualities,
- d) The *integration and control of tensions*, that is to say, any system must establish mechanisms that allow the control of dysfunctions and facilitate the integration of its members with the minimum number of frictions, and to facilitate their perpetuation and to avoid that the system establishes socialization processes that are internalized by their members and determine their proper form of action,

Any social system, in short, tends to minimize the internal tensions and the processes of change resulting from the social dynamics itself and tends to perpetuate its own model and, therefore, it must articulate mechanisms that allow the control of the dysfunctional processes. In this respect, the system promotes norms and values to determine the social action of the individuals with the aim that they contribute to the satisfaction of the necessities of the system itself and the accomplishment of its own global goals. When a subsystem –or an individual– behaves in a dysfunctional manner, mechanisms are deployed to facilitate its transformation and functional integration into the system and, if this is not possible, that dysfunctionality is considered anti-system and is pushed to be situated at the system margins to minimize its transforming effects due to considering it a threat to the system itself or it is expelled from the system, often in a violent way.

In short, and according to this functionalist perspective, the social systems are constantly readjusted in search of the *equilibrium point* and in order to avoid any possible social conflict. The media is a fundamental subsystem in any contemporary social system at the service of their functional imperatives.

Towards 1959, on the occasion of the IV World Congress of Sociology held in Milan, Charles R. Wright presented with these theoretical proposals a work entitled *Functional Analysis and Mass Communication* in which he carried out an inventory in functionalistic terms, collecting other researchers' work such as the one of Harold Lasswell, mentioned in previous chapters, on the complex relations between the media and society.

Wright considers that the information distributed by social media serves two basic functions for society:

- a) Alerting citizens to threats and dangers, and
- a) facilitating the accomplishment of basic daily activities

In relation to the individuals, the mere existence of the media fulfils three basic functions:

- a) The attribution of status and prestige to the individuals and groups that are the subject of attention and are followed by the media, thereby creating celebrities in a circular process of progressive legitimation of people, groups and tendencies that are selected and supported by the media itself.
- b) The strengthening of prestige for those citizens who are well-informed about using the media, because to be informed is a quality considered of social value.
- c) Strengthening social norms, that is to say, the media reaffirm the values and ethical norms of socially accepted individuals, allowing the censure and punishment of deviant or contrary attitudes to them.

With regard to the dysfunctions of the system, the media would be responsible for regulating the dissemination of those information flows whose free circulation can be a threat to the stability and balance of the social system and this way, for example, avoid panic reactions in critical situations. Dysfunctions in this respect are, for example, , the dissemination of alarming news or the excess of information on certain issues that may lead to a withdrawal of individuals into the sphere of the private or lead them to a process of narcotization in relation to the issues that require high public attention.

This catalogue of functions and dysfunctions, however, has some methodological problems in demonstrating the effective role of the media communication in society with specific research studies, approaching of it from a theoretical approach with a perspective both particular and debatable that understands society as an ecological organism.

Nevertheless, the *functionalism* paradigm has shaped the dominant theories in communication research and it is at the base of theoretical currents of the study of media communication also at the present, as we will explain later.

A significant role of media communication, as some researchers argue, is to contribute to the conformity for the maintenance of the system itself to justify the low cultural and aesthetic quality of the products they distribute and their negative effects on society by responding to media criticism.

Now, as opposed to these currents of research that are developed at the American universities where generally the traditional foundations of the so-called *administrative research* of the communication can be found, we will study the theoretical currents that develop during those decades from the European cultural tradition and against it which we can group around the so-called *critical* theories of communication.

#### **5.4. Mass Communication and Critical Theory**

In 1923, in the Germany of the Weimar Republic, the *Institute of Social Research* was founded at the University of Frankfurt with the participation of intellectuals from different fields of research, among which were the philosopher Max Horkheimer and the economist Friedrich Pollock, both with an openly Marxist orientation.

Early they focused their work on the capitalist economy and the history of the workers' movement but opposed the economic determinism that characterized the historical materialism as proposed by Marx that inevitably led to the inequality of classes. In contrast, they understood that other relevant aspects of social life had been ignored and Marx' followers had mistakenly interpreted his written works. They agreed on the central historic importance of the economy in shaping the social structure. This way in Europe other theoretical approaches began to develop in the so-called *Frankfurt School* from a radically different perspective as the study that was developed at the same time in the United States of the role of media communication from functional analysis.

As Igartua and Humanes (2004, 121) explain, the analyses of the *Institute of Social Research* deal with the same object of study but with a radically different perspective and, instead of addressing the media as a regulatory agent whose function is to maintain social equilibrium, to take a critical position and to consider the media as an instrument of social and institutional power. That is to say, the role of the media, according to this perspective, is not to maintain the systemic balance of society and to be at its service, but the media are used as an instrument of power by a few people and organizations to perpetuate the structures and historical social dynamics which precisely Marxism directed its criticisms to for considering them the origin of social inequality.

Towards 1930 Horkheimer was named director of the Institute, which was then already famous and known as the Frankfurt School. But due to the increasing power of Hitler and the rise of the Nazism the Center had to close its doors and its members were fired, because it was funded by Jewish businessmen and most of researchers in the institute were Jewish as well, so all of them were forced to exile.

As Mattelart explains (Mattelart and Mattelart 1997, 56), the Institute's provisional headquarters were created in Geneva, London and Paris but, finally, the only stable headquarters for exiled researchers was found in 1938 at the Columbia University, where Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, another prominent philosopher of the Frankfurt School, were situated at the end. Lazarsfeld, as we were describing before. Had worked there for years, and he was the one who facilitated their admission to Columbia University with the conviction that the perspective from the European critics would contribute to Social Theory to enrich the American empirical research.

However, there was an immediate confrontation between the two theoretical currents due to the strong opposition that Horkheimer and especially Adorno showed to accept the methodological premises of American empirical research by denying its value since they considered it to be at the service of the interests of the media, the institutional authorities and private corporations. Confrontation and resentments between the representatives of both theoretical currents would never go away until their death, and the disputes between both paradigms remained unsolvable over the following decades and still remain to date.

The origin of the confrontation was a study financed by the Rockefeller Foundation on the radio for which Lazarsfeld requested the collaboration of Adorno, trusting that his contributions would revitalize the empirical and administrative investigation that had been taking place. However, the sponsor's claim to get responses to a catalogue of research questions aimed to get a better understanding of the new model of broadcasting and the forms of consumption of the radio musical programs immediately found the opposition of Adorno who was more interested in the question of how the industry imposed and marketed these new musical styles.

The German philosopher soon concluded, as Enric Saperas (2012, 137) relates, that the music consumption had undergone a technical evolution that implied a regression of the musical tastes preventing the free commercialization of music because the record company industry imposed its commercial formulas that were underpinning, fundamentally, in the increase of the pace and its simplification of musical design to best commercialize it for increasing the audiences. Adorno understood that, as a result, radio music led to a process of infantilization of radio audiences because the public only consumed the already known that was repeated over and over again and ruled out any different musical forms that require an attentive and focused listening.

With this perspective, in contrast to the psychological and sociological *administrative* theories the so-called *Critical Theory* was officially inaugurated which, in synthesis, as explained by Wolf (1985, 90), has become the devil's advocate of much of the research that develops in communication and has been representing the *pars destruens* of the type of knowledge that was elaborated with hard efforts in administrative studies.

As Horkheimer & Adorno explains in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1974), the American tradition of empirical studies to the present day has a fundamental epistemological problem and the need to limit itself to certain and secure data. As a consequence, this type of research discredits all metaphysics on the essence of the phenomena and is very restrictive to impose some methods of investigation that do not allow more than a very partial analysis of the phenomena in themselves, namely: it does not allow us to know *what*, *how* and *why*. From this point of view, the *critical* perspective approaches society as a whole from the analysis of both the phenomena it investigates and the social forces that determine it, thereby avoiding and denying the validity of others studies considered biased and interested such as *administrative* research.

But above all, since the Marxist origins of the Frankfurt School, its originality lies in its efforts oriented towards the elaboration of a policy proposal of rational social organizations as a result of the critical analysis of Science and Culture to overcome the historical inequalities and the *crisis of the reason* of modernity. That is, the *critical* theory of society goes beyond the study of the media and is carried out from political theory and Marxist ideology. Therefore, and according to this theoretical spirit of approaching the whole of society, its authors deny the validity of specialized research disciplines because they understand that they only provide data about facts as the result of biased approaches. In any case, they address both science and culture as the product of a concrete socio-economic and scientific-technical ideology that tends to perpetuate social structures and historical inequalities.

In this respect, and in a consistent manner with the Marxist ideology on which it is based, the Critical Theory tries to penetrate in the meaning that the structural phenomena have in the industrialized society and contemporary capitalism. Therefore, their analyses are oriented towards the political economy and the dialectic critique of the society denouncing the separation between individuals and society as a historical result of the separation of classes facing the disciplines that present such separation as a natural fact.

In brief, as Herbert Marcuse summed up in 1936 , another prominent member of the Frankfurt School exiled in the United States and hosted by the University of San Diego in California: «The specific purposes of Critical Theory are the organization of life in a way which the fate of the individuals depends not on the chance and the blind need of uncontrolled economic relations, but on the programmed realization of the human possibilities» (cf. Wolf 1985, 93). From this perspective, any social science reduced to a mere technique of collection, classification and

analysis of objective data denies any possibility of truth by ignoring programmatically social relations and, consequently, is inadequate to collaborate in the full realization of the individual as a human being.

In short, *Critical Theory* differs and contrasts other research streams in communication by promoting a critical approach to social theory from a Marxist ideology and putting special emphasis on how relationships are inherited and economic and social inequalities are perpetuated.

From this perspective, the analysis of culture began to be considered a priority and, thus, the complex and multiform thinking that the members of the Frankfurt School were developing soon moved towards the *critique of culture*.

The fundamental critique that the Frankfurt School made to the cultural model that was developing in mass society was that instead of facilitating cultural progress it proved to be the opposite as a result of the industrial process and capitalist economy. Namely, although it seems that a new culture and form of popular art was emerging spontaneously and from the masses, what was actually happening, according to critical analysis, was that the culture had become the product of a new industry which they called *cultural* whose production and reproduction mechanisms were identical to those of any other industry within the capitalist system.

The term *cultural industry* was coined by Horkheimer towards 1942 and appears published for the first time in 1947 in its work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in which he clearly opted to speak of a cultural industry rather than a culture of masses, to show that the culture was part of an industrial process and it was not at all a new form of popular culture that emerged from the mass society in a spontaneous way.

In this sense, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School understood that the media system was part of an industrial conglomerate destined to obtain maximum profitability as in any business sector and was, therefore, establishing guidelines of content production in order to achieve its commercial purposes. In this industrial dynamic, culture as a form of human and social progress as it was understood until then became instrumentalized as a part of the capitalist economic system, and due to being inside the system, it is following its functional imperatives, thereby contributing to its own perpetuation.

The criticisms were directed mainly to the imposition of productive and organizational processes destined to the standardization of the contents and to the diffusion of stereotypes and a low quality cultural model, as we said before: cultural industry instead of serving the individual and social progress is only at the service of commercial profitability and the promotion of consumption.

From this point of view, and according to critics, the cultural system always offers the same products which are industrially standardized and of low quality but masked in different packaging to perpetuate a cultural industry that is productive

and profitable as a fundamental part of the capitalist economy. And to contribute to these goals the critical theorists warned that the system's own professionals intend to justify the stratification and standardization of the contents and their low aesthetic quality and social commitment based on rationality and technical progress.

In this respect, and as Horkheimer and Adorno came from the Kantian philosophical tradition, they intuitively anticipated what was consciously done only by Hollywood: «The images are censored in advance, in the same act of their production, in conformity with the models of the intellect according to which they shall be contemplated» (cf. Wolf 1985, 95). In other words, the critical theorists assert that the industrial system in which the cultural model of the mass society is produced and disseminated does not allow individual and collective progress because itself is designed to maximize the profitability of the content distributed to the mass media and, to this goal, it is essential to standardize contents and to produce low quality to, finally, obtain the greatest possible benefit by improving the productivity and extending the consumption.

And in this contemporary social dynamic, in which the cultural industry already played such a decisive role as the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School noted, the individual would lose all autonomy to make decisions for himself and instead of being a social subject able to choose freely it would have become an object of consumption itself. That is, the claimed release of the individuals who facilitate the cultural industry by increasing their possibilities of choice by means of technique, as its promoters argue, would be having the opposite effect and impoverish them by limiting their possibilities of development.

In this context, individuals became simple consumers with no choice to adhere the imposed cultural values in a critical way and to obviate the conflicts of conscience that they might have about it because the cultural industry prevents the questioning of the system using various strategies.

First, the mechanism through which the cultural industry operates to exert its functional role in the capitalist system converted the leisure time of individuals into a productive sector that would become as programmed and standardized as work time and would be a continuation of it of which the individual could not escape.

This way, the reproductive machinery of the values of capitalism would have its best ally for the psychological control of society in the cultural industry. In this sense, the liberation by means of culture promised to the individuals would not be possible and would only lead to the denial of their own thoughts as a result of the ubiquity, repeatability and standardization that the cultural industry in the mass society promotes, and the individual would become an object of consumption. The enormous disproportion between the strength of the media and the social system in relation to individuals would end up destroying any resistance that they opposed to finally achieve its uncritical adhesion to that model of society. In addition, social and cultural pressure would provoke a bad conscience in individuals, so they



would attempt to exert their fate but end up altering their own individuality, which would be similar to, as Wolf (1985, 97) says, «the prisoner who yields to torture and ends up confessing anything.»

Secondly, in respect to the content distributed by the media, according to Frankfurt School theorists, it would be the industrially designed products that forbid mental activity by being built to show up very quickly before the spectator's eyes and not allowing reflective processes and critique. That is to say, the contents of the cultural industry would promote a distracted and uncommitted consumption and would be reproducing in their own design the logic of power and dominance because, in essence, they prescribe the reactions that the viewer must have when consuming them so that he should not do anything but follow the moral indications and feel the emotions that are imposed on him.

The effects of the media on individuals and society, in this respect, would not be explicit and direct as they constantly put the spectator in a position to assimilate orders and to follow the media prescriptions in a long term, and this would happen without the viewers being able to realize it. This occurs because the media contents are built following a multilayered semiotic strategy, that is to say, to make such prescriptions and orders difficult to prove if you do not approach them from a thoughtful and critical perspective which, on the other hand, the contents themselves are designed to not to allow.

The culmination of these tactics would be, thirdly, the creation of cultural stereotypes that are adequate and functional for the capitalist system and which, as essential cognitive elements so that individuals can organize and anticipate the experiences of the social reality, would consolidate the domination of the capitalist society through the cultural industry. The genres (cinematography, information, television, radio, etc.) would be the logical consequence of this dynamic of progressive stereotyping of the media contents. As the critical theorists affirmed, this would lead to the development of rigid formulas of production that, although they would be very profitable for the media industry, would be harmful for individuals when exposed to a set of pre-established protocols, stereotyped contents and genres and the programming of the media, which produce a stagnation of their thinking and weaken their life experience to become a pseudo-individual.

In short, as we have seen, the Critical Theory promoted by the members of the Frankfurt School is part of the European philosophical tradition and the political economy that Marxism proposed, and it is entirely opposed to the theories which were developing until then in the United States.

To conclude, we will summarize the most significant differences between the two theoretical paradigms, the one resulting from administrative research and the one proposed by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School:

- a) Critical theory denounces the separation between the individual and the society as a historical product of the division of classes and develops its analysis

and interpretation by opposing the disciplines which represent this opposition as a natural data, such as the American research on administration .

- b) Similarly, critical theorists understand that the fragmentation of knowledge in disciplines and areas of scientific specialization is not adequate because such as it is promoted by American empirical researchers, it relies on mere data on the conditions present at a particular period or campaign, thereby avoiding uncomfortable questions and deeper and longer-term analyses of the dynamics and objectives of the socio-economic system.
- c) Finally, for critical theorists, the media are instruments of the economic and social apparatus that allow the reproduction of their power in contemporary mass societies whereas for American theorists they are mere instruments to service of certain purposes, for example, to sell goods or to disseminate government campaigns that ultimately allow a better understanding of the policy that results in improvements in the democratic quality of the society.

Lazarsfeld, as we have told, initially pretended to facilitate a rapprochement between the two research traditions in which the premises of Critical Theory would serve to develop Administrative Studies. He understood that the European tradition could provide a better theory by analyzing the background trends and the specific phenomena that lead to a promotional culture and strengthen the dominant tendencies, as well as the way in which its effects would manifest itself in the personality of individuals.

It was also intended that, in this approach, other possible communicative alternatives could be considered but only within the limits of the American socio-economic system, i.e. capitalism, and that meant the irremediable confrontation with Adorno and Horkheimer that we have already explained and that, ever since and until today, has made them both irreconcilable paradigms.

In short, until today the main differences between the two theoretical paradigms lie in the ideology with which they approach the mass society in terms of whether it is more integral or partial, more speculative or empirical, and also whether they contemplate a more historical and long-term approach or are focused on short-term objectives.

## 6. Theoretical Models on Mass Communication Research Developments



As we have been describing until now, throughout the first decades of the twentieth century researchers began to investigate social communication from different disciplines and methodological approaches and to develop the theoretical currents that make up the classical theoretical paradigms.

Since the decade of fifties of the twentieth century, and already after the traumatic first years of the post-war period, a new impulse was imprinted on the studies of communication which from the development of the knowledge accumulated until then proposed new theoretical models in order to address more appropriately social communication to the resulting post-war society. The socio-economic context had changed completely in relation to the moment in which the concept of mass society had been formulated and the form of approaching and investigating social processes also began to change and to adapt to a new post-industrial and technological modernity, quite different from the one that had been at the origins of the formation of mass society.

On the one hand, the early research on social communication had begun to accumulate knowledge that allowed to know much more about the effects of communication on publics. On the other hand, the new modernity that would be implanted since the end of the Second World War was already –and from then onwards– strongly determined by technology, and it would be precisely a result of the scientific-technical advances that had been produced during the confrontation period. During those years, telecommunications systems and computer equipment had been rapidly developed to improve the distribution and analysis of information systems which, in the war context, were crucial in determining the results of the global competition.

As for the research on media communication, for years it had gradually been focusing on the analysis of the social function they fulfilled, and the study about the effects was increasingly giving greater importance to the role of the psycho-social context in which audiences received the media contents that were massively distributed. The analysis of the effects produced by the media, on the one hand, had gradually noted that the fear of the manipulation power of propaganda was oversized, and that its power of persuasion and the social influence they exerted was not infinite and the effects of social communication had their limits. On the other hand, it became clear that the media were a functional element of enormous importance to the social system as powerful mediators in public affairs and that they were responsible for the transmission of cultural values.

As a result of this knowledge accumulated for years, during the decades after the Second World War and until the end of the twentieth century new theoretical

currents in communication were developed which, without losing sight of the two great classical paradigms in conflict, the administrative and the critical, offer new approaches to the analysis of social communication.

These new theoretical and research approaches have been very influential until today and can be classified around five major axes: First, *semiotic-informational* theories, which address communication from mathematics and cybernetics and from structural linguistics and textual analysis. Second, the approaches to the study of media communication from the perspective of the *theory of culture*, with special emphasis on its relevance and decisive role in shaping cultural models. In the third and fourth place, research that examines *the uses and gratifications* of consumers in the context of media content and the *long-term effects* of communication by taking a perspective that allows, to a great extent, to overcome the studies on the limited effects of communication, legacy of the administrative theories from the thirties of the last century. In the fifth and last place, the new approaches to the study of communication from the analysis of *innovation* and *technological determinism* that focus on the relevant role of technologies and media in contemporary society.

## 6.1. Semiotic-informational Communication Models

Since the beginning of the 1930s and especially in the 1940s, and with military applications, the information transmission systems through telecommunications began to develop very quickly, which had evolved technically for decades from the early twentieth century in which a global system of submarine cable communication networks had been created to link the financial centers of London and New York with the colonies and Australia.

During the World War confrontation, a renewed impulse was given to the technologies of communication and also the first computers with electronic engineering began to develop as useful tools, e.g. to collaborate in the decryption of war messages. The most famous of the computers at time was the Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer (ENIAC), which was presented in the Ballistic Research Laboratory of the United States Army in 1946 for military usages, but it was a milestone for the electronic engineering that turned out to be the beginning of the computer age.

Starting in the midst of the war, computers and decryption were worked from the labs of Bell telephone where the mathematician Claude Elwood Shannon worked with the engineer Warren Weaver who in 1948 proposed a model to explain the processes of communication that later was called the *Shannon-Weaver model of communication*.

As experts in telecommunications and computing the problem they encountered in communication was the question whether the contents which were transmitted reached their destination in an appropriate way and exactly as they were emitted.

The problem of communication for them was, in this respect, that the information was supposed to arrive intact from one point to another and, with this perspective, they developed a mathematical model that would allow to effectively address the possible loss of information that could be produced from the point of view of the telecommunication engineer in order to transmit effectively the contents between two points. From this premise, they elaborated a general model of the communication that sought to explain the fundamental elements of the chain of transmission of information from one point to another.

This model is known as *informational* and it was the first attempt to establish the functioning model of any communication system in a synthetic way. As such, it had great influence on the theories of social communication and its assumptions are still part of some theoretical research, even in spite of its obvious limitations and of being more than surpassed nowadays, as we will see a little later.

Shannon and Weaver, as Igartua and Humanes (2004, 199) state, extended their model beyond the mere transmission of information between two technically equipped points to broadcast and reception and pretended that this model also served for communication in general that they defined as «the set of procedures by which one mind can affect another.» According to this conception, the communication processes present three different levels:

- a) technical, in which it is to be determined with what precision the symbols are transmitted,
- b) interpretative, in which the content is to be obtained with no problems of symbol interpretation between the transmitter and the receiver, and
- c) the level of the effects which the transmission of information causes in the receiver's behavior.

This model, however, and despite this stratification of the communication process on several levels to make the importance of the interpretative processes explicit, is a model that aims to develop a set of mathematical functions to address inherent problems in the transmission related to the loss of information to make the communication system more effective.

In the Shannon-Weaver model, the communication process starts when a source produces a message that encodes and transmits through a certain medium or channel until it reaches its receiver who decodes it at arriving to its destination in an identical way to the one in which it was originally produced.

The biggest inherent problem of the communication process, in this respect, is to control the unwanted noise that the transmission can cause for the message to be aberrant and, therefore, it does not allow the reception of the contents with fidelity. The process is also based on a linear transmission system in which each of the elements is a potential introducer of successive noises that might be multiplied throughout the entire transmission chain, ultimately making the content unintelligible and therefore not decodable.

Then, and according to the model proposed by Shannon and Weaver, the mathematical solution to the problem of noise in the communication process is to find the best way to minimize it with mathematical functions that allow its control throughout the transmission chain. In this regard, they were concerned with designing systems to solve the noise problem with the redundant transmission to avoid losses of information that could be produced during the communication process.

This mathematical model of information is characterized, first and foremost, by understanding communication as a linear process in which symbolic content is transmitted through a channel linking one point to another; and, second, the use of statistical functions to minimize the problems that may occur during the process with noise-control techniques and redundancy-increasing methods that are efficient from the point of view of the transmission of information.

With this approach to the communication process information transmission systems could be designed as they are today, but this model does not serve as a general model of communication, let alone of human beings, because it neither contemplates at all the communicative intention of the emitter nor the form of attribution of meaning to the content of the communication made by the receiver. Regarding this last part, Shannon and Weaver's information theory of communication has been completely overcome by other models that better explain the way in which the communication processes work, as we will see later, although the models of informational and cybernetic are still very present in the premises of some studies on communication until now.

Towards the end of nineteen-fifties Norbert Wiener, who was a professor of Shannon and who today is considered the father of cybernetics, would go a little further and would treat the inherent noise of any transmission process as a matter of greater extent that would encompass all areas of nature, focusing in the so-called problem of *entropy*, i.e., the trend that all systems have to their degradation and dispersion, to disorder. Following with his proposals those of the functionalist and systemic theories with which both social and biological systems were addressed, Wiener understood, according to Mattelart (Mattelart and Mattelart 1997, 48), that the advancement of entropy, of disorder, was proportional to the regression of progress. That is to say, the informational processes laid in the foundations of the functional nucleus of any system, and for Wiener the communication process was not linear but circular to feed back the system, and from his point of view its proper management and control were essential for any model of society which wanted to progress.

Anyhow and beyond the ambitions of the informational or cybernetics models of communication, in their own conception they present important shortcomings that do not make them valid as general models to explain the processes of communication and, at best, they are useful for the efficient design of technical and automated information transmission systems.



It is important to stress in this sense the difference between the processes of transmission of information and the communicative processes, which are much more complex. Researchers soon after put in evidence this complexity by approaching the communication process from very different and far away areas of knowledge such as linguistics and literary analysis and, also, from the aforementioned *symbolic interactionism* that departed from the so-called Palo Alto School.

Since the late 1930s, the term *structure* to address language analysis and its rules of operation began to be used by Jakobson in linguistics, although the formulation of *structuralism* as a social theory would develop a few years later, in a complementary way to the *functionalism* developed by French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who emigrated to the United States and worked at New York's New School of Social Research during the war years.

For decades, language in linguistics has been addressed as a social institution in which ideas are expressed through a system of signs that serve to communicate. And those signs, as the Swiss Ferdinand de Saussure understood since the beginning of the twentieth century, were part of a structure that was the language. Saussure is regarded as the father of structuralism in linguistics. In each sign he distinguished between its reference and its meaning, i.e. in the case of speech he distinguished between the sound of a word and the concept it represents. The astronomer and mathematician Charles S. Peirce, a contemporary of Saussure and professor at Harvard, went a little further and distinguished between three types of signs: *index*, *icons* and *symbols*, according to the more or less narrow relation that they maintained with their real reference and their degree of abstraction. In this way, for example, an index sign would be a road map that looks like reality but is schematic or a photograph that although it seems realistic is a representation of the real; an icon sign would be a traffic sign or an *emoticon*, which is related to the reference but more indirect; and finally, for example, most language terms would be symbols as there is no relation between the pronunciation of a word and its meaning.

As Mattelart and Mattelart argue, Saussure had dreamed of a science of all languages and, as he wrote, could «conceive a science that studies the life of the signs in the bosom of life social... the Semiology (from the Greek word, sign), that would teach us what the signs consist of, what laws govern them». Decades later, this linguistic semiotics would be collected in all its extension by Roland Barthes who, in 1964, would establish «any system of signs, whatever its substance, whatever its limits: the images, gestures, melodic sounds, objects and complexes of these substances found in rites, protocols or spectacles constitute, if not 'languages', at least systems of signification» as the object of study of Semiology (cf. Mattelart and Mattelart 1997, 64).

Thus Barthes, who in his work of 1957 *Mythologies* had already highlighted previously the importance of the publicity, the press, the radio and the communicative

rites in general for the survival of the cultural myths, extended the structural and semiotic analysis to the analysis of the whole language of media.

With this perspective, and with special emphasis on the distinction between *denotation* and *connotation*, by making the ideological content of communication fall onto the latter, a semiotics theory was developed in which the survival of contemporary myths would be the product of both natural language and social media, as both are connotational languages whose processes of signification included the ideologies as *natural* with their underlying values, which would be located beyond the appearances of the denotation language.

In France the Centre d'Études des Communications de Masse (CECMAS) was created around 1960 by initiative of the sociologist Georges Friedmann following the wake of American functionalism and with the aim of analyzing the functional relations of the communications of the masses in the society. Roland Barthes joined it, as well as Edgar Morin, about whom we will speak later as the promoter of the research in communication from the perspective of the sociology of culture.

Barthes' semiology for the study of media communication would have its immediate continuation in the works of the Italians Umberto Eco and Paolo Fabbri, who in the mid-1960 would particularly affect the difference between communication and information that was, and still are, provoking a great terminological confusion. In Eco's words (cf. Wolf 1985, 134), the way in which communication was understood tended to incline more towards the mere *transfer* of information between two poles as it was understood in the informational models, than to understand communication as the *transformation* of one system into another. According to Eco, one could only understand communication from a general semiotic theory rather than focusing only on the physical signal, as intended from the informational model with sophisticated and efficient statistical procedures to eliminate noise and entropy. For Eco's semiotics perspective there was a component in the process of communication that was mathematically incomprehensible: the sense that each person gave to the content of the message which without doubt could be interpreted in the most varied forms and was beyond the physical signal that was transmitted.

In this regard, in his work of 1979, *Lector in Fabula*, Eco moved his analysis that he had made until then on the interpretation of literary works toward the entire contents and processes of communication and, thus, was able to understand any process of interpretation of a message as the result of the cooperative reading that any reader establishes with its significant content so that, ultimately, the attribution of meaning is the product of that semiotic process of negotiation between the writer, the content and every reader. That is to say, the author of the literary text writes the content of his work with an intention, and the reader, each reader, interprets it in a particular way and both perform this work of attribution of meaning around the message according to their own personal particularities.

Namely, the process of communication from the semiotic theory would be based on a process of negotiation between emitter and receiver about the meaning of the content of the message. In other words, during the process of codification and decoding of the message, the set of particular and specific sub-codes of the emitter and those of the receiver with which each one of them would establish a specific relationship with the message would be entered into play, so that the same content would lead to a particular attribution of meaning to each one of them and to interpret it differently.

Therefore, the *semiotic-informational* model was focused on the processes of attribution of meaning in the phases of codification and decoding of the message but soon would go one step further to extend its analysis to social communication and mass media communication in their full extent.

It was soon understood that a more global approach was needed to the mechanisms of attribution of sense within society, and to address the process of communication in isolation and focusing only on the code and sub-code with which the individual made the interpretation of the messages was a simplification. It was found that:

- a) audiences of messages do not receive particular and isolated content if there are no textual assemblages that can only be recognized and interpreted in more spacious semiotic frames,
- b) these textual sets are distributed socially, thereby depending on textual practices that are socially internalized, and the analysis of their structure and the rules with which they operate can be addressed with metalinguistic strategies, and furthermore,
- c) individuals never receive a single isolated message but are constantly receiving many textual sets simultaneously, both synchronous and diachronic, and as a result of specific textual practices.

That is to say, there is an important displacement from the analysis of the message and the content of the communication to address the processes and media of social communication from the textual analysis that, without extending to it and in a synthetic way, understands that the contents and communicative practices at a given historical moment result in a set of different and dynamic social discourses that are in constant confrontation, fusion and reprocessing that, finally, provide the interpretative frameworks with which individuals attribute meaning to these discursive social content.

In a further phase of theoretical development of semiotics since the decade of the 1990s, some researchers such as Rodrigo Alsina speak about *social semiotics*, by seeking the interconnection of the social action of the daily life with the production, circulation and consumption of communicative content. According to this model, which is intended as a synthesis, on the side of the *production*, the communicative industries would develop within the framework of specific political-economic conditions and, thereafter, establish a specific productive and organizational model that would allow the elaboration of communicative products from the development

of a discursive strategy with specific technical features. The *circulation* of these communicative products would be carried out within the framework of a particular communicative and technological ecosystem and, finally, they would be received for *consumption* and interpreted in the context of the situation in which the reception occurs, finally causing effects on audiences and consequential reactions.

## 6.2. Mass Communication and Cultural Theory

Contemporaneously to the development of the communication models aforementioned, also in the sixties of the last century and with some relation to the critical analyses of the Frankfurt School, Europe, especially in France and the United Kingdom, some studies begin to develop which approach the society from the perspective of culture criticism.

In France around 1962, Edgar Morin, a researcher who as we mentioned before was part of the *Centre d'Études des Communications de Masse* (CECMAS), published the book *L'esprit du temps* in which he approached the study of the mass society from an anthropological perspective trying to put the consumer and the object of consumption in relation to the contemporary culture that was forming and which he defined as the *culture of masses* and understood as a cluster of culture, civilization and history.

Morin, as Wolf (1985, 113) states, wanted to overcome the reductionism with which the sociology of mass communication by then approached the contemporary study of society and the media., To do so, he proposed an approach that moved away from the search for sectoral and partial data and analyses similar to the attitude of the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School with respect to administrative investigations. In this respect, Morin proposed to stop the dedication to partial analyses and to approach the culture of masses like a set of symbols, values, myths and images referring to both the practical life and the collective imaginary.

In this regard, and following the footsteps of Roland Barthes' proposals, Morin approached the study of society from cultural anthropology by adopting a textual and discursive perspective in which he considered that there is a proper mass culture typical for the contemporary which can be analyzed systematically with empirical research and be differentiated from other historical cultures. Namely, although the culture of masses is, according to Morin, the new culture of the twentieth century, is not autonomous or isolated from other cultural forms and is part of a social discourse that is imbued with other speeches. The most characteristic of the mass culture would be, according to his perspective, to be closely linked to its industrial character and its rhythm of daily consumption, as denounced by the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School.

For Morin, the contemporary mass culture derives from a set of contradictions that, continuing within the critical tradition, confronts society and the individual

by mediation of productive-bureaucratic and technical bonds that, according to Wolf (1985, 114), has the following characteristics:

- a) There is an insoluble tension between the productive requirements and techniques of cultural standardization to maximize the benefit and the individualized and innovative nature of consumption, thus pretending to develop a supposed diversity of contents in the framework of a tendency towards its homogenization in a dialectical and dynamic process which perpetuates this tension between the cultural production system and the cultural needs of consumers.
- b) The mass culture as such constitutes the only ground in which the communicative exchanges of the emerging classes can be produced and, as a consequence, creates a new type of public that identifies itself with the values of consumption that promote the mass culture in which the only law that governs is the dialectic between production and consumption in a market structure.
- c) The cultural mass, and the market and consumption of it, is promoted as a modern way of earthly salvation that covers all the material and affective needs of individuals. This way its expansion is easily produced but the cultural mass itself also contains the limits to its own development because although it indicates the path that every consumer society must continue it is vulnerable and inefficient to control collective movements carrying individual demands.
- d) The mass culture establishes a system of fictional production to cover all those areas pertaining to the private sphere of individual needs so that the experience of life of the citizens is sweetened, which is also affirmed by the critical theorists, and this substitution of real and immediate experience through fiction makes individuals experience in a vicarial way of life by projecting their spirit into a multiplicity of imaginary universes which, ultimately, are those and only those that are profitable for the cultural industry.
- e) Finally, the mass culture, as denounced decades ago by thinkers such as Ortega y Gasset of whom we have already spoken in former chapters, produces also a progressive weakening of the social intermediate structures, from the family to the social class, to form a mass of individuals at the service of the social machinery.

In short, these proposals with origins in cultural anthropology that propose a new approach to society and the mass communication process from the sociology of the culture to the mass society, gather the critical tradition originating already decades ago and take a discursive perspective according to the new semiotic-textual models that were being developed simultaneously in the decade of the 1960s.

This French tradition that was created around *structuralism* and *social anthropology* with some ideas provided by the Frankfurt School, ended up to develop the so-called *Cultural Theory*, which implied the overcoming of the classic distinction by Ortega y Gasset between the *high culture*, while serving the aesthetic quality

and the elaborate and cultivated thought, and the *popular* or *mass-culture*, which was intended to be simple and of low quality when generated by industrial and standardized products. In sum, thinkers of the *theory of culture* understand that culture and cultural discourses are a substantial part for themselves in any society, and that the contemporary society is determined by a particular culture that can be called *mass culture*.

Among the most recurrent criticisms this theoretical approach to mass communication and society has received, as Wolf (1985, 118) pointed out, is the critique that this is an approach that intends to be constructed as a global sociology of contemporary culture but which, however, suffers from a lack of analysis and systematicity in constructing its theoretical model which is based on generalist and vague proposals lacking scientific foundation and which, in short, is more of a speculative proposal than the systematic study of the processes of social communication and society.

Simultaneously to the French Theory, on the other side of the English Channel, in the United Kingdom, proposals were beginning to develop which also addressed the analysis of culture from a theory that is known as *Cultural Studies*, also developed in the 1960s and 1970s around the *Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies* of Birmingham.

As Mattelart (Mattelart and Mattelart 1997, 75) explains, towards 1935, the University of Cambridge republished an English text from the nineteenth century in which Matthew Andrew carried out a threefold division of the different types of culture, thereby distinguishing between the *refined*, the *mediocre* and the *brute*. Both Oxford and Cambridge were then, as in part today, the bastions of the aristocracy and British conservatism that had promoted industrial capitalism for centuries. However, there were also those who in the decade of the 1930s opposed the hierarchy of culture and understood that the model of economic development promoted by industrial capitalism and consumption had to be analyzed in depth, in a similar manner to the proposals of the Frankfurt School, with the ultimate aim of allowing individuals to survive the alienating work they were doomed in a consumer society dominated by a mass media which brutalized and enslaved them.

Thus, from the mid-1930s to the 1960s, and from an educational and moral perspective that almost took the form of cultural crusade in favor of the most disadvantaged classes, some researchers, starting from textual analysis and literature in a similar way that semiotics proposed, began to analyze different forms of cultural production and attribution of meaning to socio-cultural values. This tradition would ultimately result in a pedagogical movement involving teachers who came from modest economies and who wanted to put in value the cultural tastes and ways of life of the working class, thereby overcoming elitist theories and the hierarchy of social classes.

To this end, journals and essays on the pedagogical renovation were created, i.e. the work of Richard Hoggart published in 1957 about *The Uses of Literacy*

or the analysis *Culture and Society* by Raymond Williams, published in 1958, in which he made a historical review of the shaping of the culture and the division of classes vindicating the working culture and the estrangement between culture and society by being considered only as belonging to aristocracy and the elites.

When the *Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies* was founded at the University of Birmingham in 1964, it was powered by this approach to analyze the so-called *poor culture*. The Centre would acquire even more momentum when Stuart Hall, in 1968, accessed the post of the director, an outstanding researcher for his analysis of the ideological role of the media who had been previously working attached to the Director-General of UNESCO.

The center was also influenced by relevant Marxist researchers such as the Hungarian Georg Lukács, the Russian theorist of literature Mikhail Bakhtin or the German philosopher Walter Benjamin, as well as the Italian Antonio Gramsci, who died in a Fascist prison, or the aforementioned Barthes. From this perspective, the Center's critical attachment to analyze the model of society proposed by the elites and industrial capitalism enhanced.

At the Birmingham School researchers also assumed the conceptual framework proposed by the Chicago School about *symbolic interactionism*, about which we have already spoken in previous chapters, and they approached the study of society from an ethnographic perspective to analyze the contemporary cultural values which were socially established and the mechanisms of interpretation and attribution of meaning in the different social groups and, above all, the way in which they behaved in front of the dominant culture.

In this respect, for Stuart Hall culture cannot be considered a practice neither the simple description of a sum of habits and customs, but it includes all the social practices and the set of interactions that occur within the society. That is to say, culture comprises society in its entirety and researchers had to overcome the partial vision, also criticized by the French culture theorists aforementioned, and it is not enough to differentiate some types of culture as high culture or low culture but to approach culture in the society as a whole. Specifically, and quoting Wolf (1985, 121), «in the concept of culture, the meanings and values that arise and are disseminated among the social classes, such as the practices effectively carried out through which they are expressed and in which they are contained, can be found.» The media would exert a relevant function in society by acting as active elements in the cultural production.

Thus, the Cultural Studies consider that the role of culture is not merely reflective or residual in relation to the economic sphere and, on the contrary and following the Critical Theory, for the analysis of culture it is necessary to address the dialectics produced between the social and the cultural system and the mechanisms of domination and social control.

From this perspective, the research carried out at the Birmingham School focused on the study of the structural and functional processes which institutions and mass communication media operate in order to manage social and cultural stability to perpetuate and reproduce a particular model of society. With these objectives two different specific but complementary lines of research were developed, as Wolf explains (1985, 123):

- a) The analysis of the forms of media content production as a complex system of determining practices for the elaboration of culture and the image of social reality, and
- b) the studies on the consumption of mass communication as a place of negotiation between extremely differentiated communicative practices.

Stuart Hall worked in this last area of specialization of studies on the reception who, as Mattelart and Mattelart (1997, 78) show, distinguished different phases in the process of media communication of discursive contents, in a similar way as it later would be proposed, as we have seen before, by Rodrigo Alsina's socio-semiotic model of production, circulation, distribution/consumption and reproduction. According to Stuart Hall's conception, the decoding that the audiences would make of these contents could happen in three ways:

- a) dominant, in which the hegemonic views appear as natural, legitimate and inevitable as part of the social order,
- b) opposition, in which the contents are interpreted from a framework of reference that addresses them from a opposite and confronted conception of the world,
- c) negotiated, in which the decoding process during reception would be the result of a mixture of the previous two in which the dominant cultural values are partly subscribed but are interpreted from particular experiences to be nuanced or refuted.

In short, the *Cultural Studies* of the Birmingham School's approached the analysis of structural complexity of the cultural system from the specific practices that, following the tradition of British ethnography and the pedagogical proposals of the renovators (a tradition that, by the way, also gave rise to the contemporary feminist movement), addressing social theory and communicative processes from a bottom-up perspective. Namely, from the way that individuals attribute meaning to cultural values and give meaning to their life experiences and, as social actors which they are, behave before the other social actors and the dominant culture.

### **6.3. Researching Media Communication and Consumers' Uses and Gratifications**

As we have been describing above, the results of the studies that had been developing since the 1930s on mass media found certain patterns of action and the



characteristics of publics, so the conclusion was that the audiences were complex and untreatable and the media communication effects were difficult to predict.

As a result, the idea that communication was an immediate generator of influence based on a unidirectional and behavioral communicative model –as in the classical approaches which we have discussed before–, would focus the attention on the psychological characteristics of the target and the context in which social interactions occur.

In Katz's words (Wolf 1985, 78), little by little there is a transformation of the research perspective which is based on the assertion that «even the most powerful of the media can't normally influence an individual without serving him in the socio-social and psychological context he lives» (*Mass Communication Research and the Study of Popular Culture*, 2, cf. Wolf 1985, 78). As a result, researchers are changing from analyzing *what does media communication do to people?* to wonder *what do people do with media communication?*

The origins of this change of perspective root in the functionalism paradigm and in the work that Lazarsfeld's research group developed on the radio in the late 1930s, of which we have already spoken. The conclusion of his studies was quite clear: audiences expressed preferences for certain content that they actively sought and selected depending on if they were satisfied with it.

As Igartua and Humanes (2004, 315) explain, the research on the *Uses and Gratifications* model –although it still does not have the official recognition of that denomination– started towards 1944 with the development of a research program, directed by Herta Herzog, a former pupil of Lazarsfeld, on the characteristics of listeners of radio programs and the reasons that housewives alleged to justify their consumption.

In this study, by adopting methods of quantitative and qualitative analysis from a psychological perspective, about 5,000 women were interviewed, and as a result three *uses and gratifications* categories derived from the radio consumption were identified: the *release or emotional discharge*, the *search for illusions* and the *advice* to confront the problems of everyday life.

As Wolf (1985, 80) explains, there are some previous other functionalist studies, i.e. the one of Bernard Berelson, published in 1949, on the reactions of the press readers during a strike of journalists that occurred in those years in New York which he concludes with a catalogue of functions that the press had in the society, among others:

- a) to inform and to offer interpretations of the events,
- b) to constitute an essential element for interaction and social exchange,
- c) to be a source of relaxation,
- d) to be an important part of everyday rituals, and
- e) to attribute social prestige.

From this approach to media functions, which is complementary to those already commented by Lazarsfeld and Wright, a few decades later, from the beginning of the 1970s and mainly by Katz with Blumler and Gurevitch, the research area of the media uses and gratifications would be officially developed to address a new way of analysis about the consumption of media communication.

In their research they identify five types of needs that the media communication meet:

- a) *cognitive needs*, i.e., acquisition and reinforcement of knowledge and understanding,
- b) *affective-aesthetics needs*, which allow the experience of emotions,
- c) *integration needs*, contributing on a personal and social level to provide security, emotional stability and increasing credibility and status and reinforce interpersonal contacts and, finally,
- d) *escape needs*, to facilitate the relaxation of tensions and conflicts.

From this perspective, the publics of media communication, more than being a passive receiver susceptible to being manipulated, persuaded or at least influenced, are active consumers of media communication according to the rewards that they experience by using it. Thus, they move from being passive receptors of the communication process to being participants as active as the emitter itself and, as a result, become communicative subjects of full right. In other words, this research perspective gives the communicative context and individuals' subjectivity the importance it has, at the same time that it contributes to definitively abandon and surpass the informational model based on the transfer of contents from one point to another.

It is possible to establish a correlation between the kinds of needs that the media can meet to favor its consumption according to five modalities:

- a) As in the social dynamics problems arise continuously that require public attention they can be addressed by using media.
- b) As social interaction produces conflicts and tensions the consumption of the media attenuates them.
- c) Because the social situation offers few real opportunities to satisfy certain primary needs they can be experienced in a delegated manner through the consumption of media.
- d) Reaffirmation of social values and norms is also facilitated by the media, and
- e) sharing contents of social discourse promote the sustenance and membership of social groups and, ultimately, the socialization of individuals.

Anyhow, these *uses and gratifications* studies conclude that the effects of the media are only effective if the receiver attaches importance to the contents of the communication and it is the receiver who ultimately allows to be influenced as

compensation to the gratification of the needs he experiences himself. However, and researchers commented on this stream of analysis, the media compete with other sources of satisfaction for individual needs and the bonus they provide with the consumption of media is only one source among other functional alternatives to be considered.

For all these reasons, this research perspective, along with other theoretical approaches, is included in the set of studies that have come to demonstrate the limited effects of communication to take the first step towards their overcoming and the analysis of the long-term effects that other subsequent streams called agenda-setting and news-making would develop in recent years, which we will see further below.

Some of the most relevant later developments in this research stream, as Igartua and Humanes (2004, 321) explain, have taken care of analyzing the individual's *implication* in media contents as an emotional state that reflects the importance perceived by the subject in relation to the information contained in a persuasive message as essential to define their audience as active. In this vein, and citing the work of Perse at the beginning of the decade of the 1990s, research identifies some kind of *affective* involvement using media content, i.e. the derivative of the emotions experienced by the individuals as a result of their identification with the program contents and the characters that drive it; and also another type of *cognitive* implication that occurs from paying attention to media content by subjects and activating mentally reflective and relational processes to categorize and memorize these contents.

In sum, the studies about *uses and gratifications* are relevant as a theoretical approach to the analysis of the media communication because, even within the theoretical functionalist paradigm they involve the overcoming of the unidirectional communication models and, together with the analysis of the cultural discourses from semiotics and the sociology of the culture that we have seen before, assigns the place to the receiver of the communication that effectively corresponds to him as an active and full-fledged communicative subject in the communication process.

## **6.4. Researching Long-Term Effects of Media.**

### **The *Agenda-Setting* Hypothesis**

Since the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, simultaneously to the studies on the *uses and gratifications* of media and the overcoming of transfer, some research started to approach the informational and unidirectional communication model with a new research perspective on communication effects that was concerned, above all, about long-term effects that the media provoked on the publics.

Until then, the social functioning of the communication processes was understood from a set of basic premises that, little by little, fell into crisis and was falling be-

hind the new theoretical perspectives and the methods of investigation that were developing. According to Wolf (1984, 157), for a long time the study of the effects was linked to the following premises:

- a) Communicative processes were considered asymmetric, although as we have seen both textual semiotics and theories of culture as well as the study of uses and gratifications showed that this approach was not adequate.
- b) Communication was understood as an individual process, which meant that it concerned each individual, and to study the effects research had to address each of the isolate individuals, a premise that was very nuanced by successive investigations which put emphasis on the importance of the context in which the reception occurred.
- c) It was also considered that communication was an intentional process, according to which the emitters designed communicative products in order to produce certain effects on the audience, thereby understanding that there exists some direct relationship, also a very nuanced principle as we have seen before, and finally
- d) communicative processes were considered to be episodic, that is, they were limited in time and had separable and independent effects which, therefore, were measurable and controllable.

And this last premise was put in crisis by the new research in social communication developed since the 1970s and boosted the definitive overcoming of older ways of understanding of the processes of communication which was considered obsolete after the adoption of a new perspective on the study of the media communication effects on the public which, instead of pretending to analyze the effectiveness of the messages and particular communicative campaigns and short-term effects, focuses on the effects media provoke in individuals as social subjects in the long run.

The first change of perspective focuses on the type of effect that is being studied, so that, instead of analyzing the attitudes, values, and the behaviors it provokes in the audiences, it deals with studying the *cognitive* effect of media communication processes. Thus, researchers start to study the effects media content have on the systems of knowledge and meaning attribution to reality which a social subject assumes as a result of the media consumption. Research begins, in this regard, by approaching communication from the perspective of the *sociology of knowledge*.

Namely, it is no longer considered that the effects of communication are timely and limited in time, but it is understood that communication processes have effects on individuals which are *cumulative* and *sedimented* over time. These effects are the result of the *omnipresence* of the media and the permanent *visibility* and *availability* of media content which through constant *repeatability* end up making that the inevitable exposure of individuals provokes long-term effects on publics.

The reorientation of the object of study from this new premise that occurs since the decade of the 1970s, which, as we said, implies the transfer of the study of

the effects from the temporal and immediate to the long-term analysis of them and, furthermore, the development of new investigations that focus on the way in which the knowledge of social reality is elaborated as a result of the discursive media competition.

In order to do this, studies are starting to be oriented towards the analysis of informative programs and news production methods to determine the cognitive and long-term effects the informative content distributed by the media system has and the way individuals give meaning to reality when using it.

The central hypothesis of these investigations is oriented, as Wolf points out (1985, 163) referring Shaw's books published in 1979, *Agenda-Setting and Mass Communication Theory*, in which this hypothesis it is formulated for the first time, thereby understanding that «people tend to exclude from or include into their knowledge of the social reality and their own knowledge of the world the content that the media system itself includes or excludes in the content it distributes». That is, it is not the assumption anymore that the media persuade the public to consume a particular product or adhere to a certain idea, but what the media do is to make available to the public everything around what they should think. Therefore, what the media decide is what the social subjects can opionate, and act accordingly, so that ultimately the understanding of the reality that individuals have is largely limited to the list of topics the media present as knowable.

In this respect, the *agenda-setting* hypothesis is based on a conception of the individual as a social subject to whom the omnipresence of the processes of media communication does not allow to be able to control the representation of the reality by himself and he can only exert it from a standard offered by the media. Consequently, his representation of reality ends up being distorted, stereotyped and manipulated.

That is to say, for this theoretical perspective, there is a great divergence between, on the one hand, the amount of information, knowledge and interpretations that the media offer about social reality in relation to social subjects to learn with their mediation in relation to, on the other hand, what they can learn for themselves from their personal and direct experience without the resource of media communication.

At least in its beginnings, researchers who ascribed to this analysis stream, what they were doing rather than developing concrete studies that sustain this central hypothesis was to make a set of observations and partial proposals which even today does not have a high degree of integration and theoretical elaboration. However, this set of observations resulted in some interesting concepts with origins in the analysis of the press and informative programs, such as the *productive routine* and the *newsworthy* factor, which are very useful to address the form of construction of reality through media.

It is considered that those who exercise the industrialized and professionalized activity form part of the productive structure of a media system, and social communication generates commonly a series of habits and routines, which in the case of journalists determine the procedures for the selection of events for its presentation as *news* to the public. That is to say, when an event occurs in any area of reality is to be newsworthy it must be adequate in the perception of the professionals of information, the journalists, and thus they will give the event this value and status to make it publicly visible. This adequacy happens when the fact noticeably fits into the interpretive frame that has been implemented in these mass communication media in the form of the productive routine, which is also related to the typical informative routines of the rest of the system of media communication.

In this regard, the media provide an interpretation of reality at two levels to promote the *cognitive dependence* of social subjects to the media of communication by selecting and organizing the reality events into a hierarchy.

First, there is a selection process about what they consider appropriate among the myriads of possibilities they have to offer content from reality events. So, a set of topic news items is developed to build the think-about agenda the media consider socially relevant for the population. The decision on the issues that finally make up that agenda is determined by the informative routines of each medium and the media communication system as a whole and depends on the industrial production patterns of journalistic enterprises and professionals.

At the second level of interpretation media provide a hierarchization of these previously selected contents. Namely, they not only provide a selection of facts that they consider newsworthy but also present them in a particular order and assign them a certain space (duration on television, a number of columns in the press, etc.), depending on the perception they have about their public relevance or, in practice, about the commercial interests of each media and the adequacy with regard to their ideological goals.

Since the initial formulation of the agenda-setting hypothesis and over the last decades many studies have been carried out on the different contents distributed by the media, i.e. the information they cover during the political campaigns in electoral periods, thereby corroborating that this strategy of selection and hierarchization of contents is common to all the media as part of their own productive routines. And these investigations, too, have made it possible to draw some interesting conclusions about media contents, such as the following:

- a) Different media have different capacities to establish agenda-setting in the public sphere, i. e. television is less influential than the press.
- b) As a general rule, the issues privileged by the media and presented in the form of controversies, competition and folkloric or spectacular ways overlap and reduce relevancy of other significant and important information which is therefore relegated by the public.
- c) Using continuous repetition of the same issues or people is the best to ex-

ert media power to build the thematic agenda of a society and thereby to establish the way in which the content they distribute will be valued and at the end all that results in their social normalization. That is, this kind of media power is exerted as a strategy, in Wolf's words (1985, 175) of «persuasion tempered by the persistence», in which the personal attitudes of the individuals seem to act in the sense of integrating their own subjective agenda with the media proposals, and

- d) the less direct experience people have about a particular subject area, the more they depend on the media to obtain their interpretative framework.

In short, as we are exposed from the cradle on to the power of media, our learning process from childhood until now develops in this close circular dependence on the media system, so that when someone learns something new his cognitive process will be done within this previously mediated interpretative system which until now has been built by the media system itself. In sum, the subject's dependence on media is reinforced throughout his whole life by being integrated in cognitive processes so deeply that they end up being unnoticed.

This research about agenda-setting is complemented by a set of analyses focused on the way in which the media organize their *productive structures* that are the ones which finally determine the processes of selection of the topics of public interest, i.e. in journalistic terminology the so-called *newsworthy* events that we have commented on before. Precisely these studies, focus primarily on the analysis of the press production routines and the news content information, and for this reason this type of communication research is grouped around the so-called *news-making* investigation.

In this respect, these investigations are concerned with analyzing the characteristics of the emitters and the processes and routines of the news production which are implemented and are habitual in the professional practice of media. From this researchers develop a concept that is also very useful to understand the functioning and the role of the media in our times: the *gatekeeper*, namely, the individuals, groups, or institutions that have the function of regulating the information flow and who, in the journalistic practice, decide what news must be made public and what news will not be published.

To make this decision, as Igartua and Humanes (2005, 247) pointed out, a series of fundamental criteria is contemplated in relation to the value given to information depending on its *novelty*, *topicality*, *proximity* to audiences and, very significantly, its degree of *deviation* and *negativity*: as investigations have demonstrated, in this regard, the more anomalous and negative events tend to be the most privileged by the media, and those are the events people pay more attention to. Likewise, it is also very relevant to attach importance to information due to its *narrative* value, that is to say, its ability to deploy a serial and relational succession of information or topics that allow its follow-up episode and favor their dramatization and spectacularization.

Since Kurt Lewin elaborated the concept of the *gatekeeper* in an investigation in 1947 and until now, there have been many studies in relation to the way in which the professionalized environment of journalism determines the procedures for the selection and elaboration of information in the media (cf. Wolf 1985, 204). For example, when journalists were asked by the researchers about the way the news was decided to appear they all responded that these processes were influenced by colleagues in the working group, and they argued that it was common practice to take decisions about the public relevance of the facts, which is valued by referring to the importance they would have for the public or the citizens. However, the systematic studies carried out on this decision-making process revealed a much more complex reality and the influence that the professional, organizational and bureaucratic context in which each journalist worked had – beyond the colleagues.

In this regard, Warren Breed's study on the social control that is exercised in the newsrooms of newspapers (1955) is a classic in which he enumerated the main reasons for the perpetuation of the editorial line of the journalistic company through journalists, who often were not aware that they were working for a press ideology. That is the case because the routines and habits are imposed during their early process of socialization and integration in the company, and these practices are seen as *normal* and learned by «*osmosis*» by the new ones who begin to work for the company.

Breed said about journalists –and that is the case for any other professional– that they end up in compliance with the editorial orientation of the newspaper obviating their own opinions due to:

- a) the worry about the institutional authority and of their sanctions in the event that someone shows a contrary position to it, which may lead to the expulsion from the company,
- b) the feelings of obligation and respect towards the superiors which many employees develop showing certain forms of fidelity to the employer which are useful to minimize clashes,
- c) aspirations for professional mobility and job improvement, so as not to jeopardize expectations in this regard,
- d) the absence of opposing group allegiances, since in general in any organization the opposition to the main ideological group is sanctioned and the survival of opposite positions is limited and minimized,
- e) the work environment and the emotional stability provided by the membership in the professional group,
- f) and also to work in a prestigious professional area to manage valuable information for society.

In conclusion, therefore, the editorial companies are promoting a specific professional culture for journalists and for each particular communication media, as it happens in any other sector and organization or productive company, by imposing their ideology, whatever kind, as well as transferring and imposing practices that



are learned and assumed almost unconsciously and, at the end, they become *normal, natural and indisputable*.

## 6.5. Researching Globalization, Technology and Society

In the decades of the 1960s and 1970s, and simultaneously to the renewal that was developing in the studies which addressed the processes of social communication, also significant changes were produced in society that were driven, until our days, by the industrial and technical innovation and by the development of communication technologies.

From then on the classic terms to label society and culture as masses begin to be replaced by new ones that could be used to explain the profound and rapid transformations that were occurring with the new communication and information systems. A new world order in which, in the words of Mattelart and Mattelart (1997, 90), the technical imperative begins to direct social change in a very explicit way and results in the creation of the so-called *Information Society*, as the official reports in the big industrialized countries about the future of society progressively confirm. One of the most relevant reports about new technological societies was the one which Simon Nora and Alain Minc proposed in 1978, to use new technologies of computers and telematics to overcome the deep political and economic crisis at that time which was qualified as the *crisis of civilization*.

In this respect, new perspectives about technological societies followed the myth of the social future that the philosopher Jacques Ellul had anticipated in the 1950s in which «the technique went from being an instrument to the service of the society to be the creator of an artificial medium that became itself in a system different from the previous ones thanks to the inter-technical connection enabled by the informatics» (Mattelart and Mattelart 1997, 92).

In this regard, as Saperas (2012, 170) explains, in the mid-1950s Ellul himself already delimited the central features of the so-called *technological determinism* in a set of proposals which can be summarized as follows:

- a) Technology determines an autonomous and own logic that is imposed on the society in which it is implemented.
- b) Technology imposes positive and negative consequences that are socially independent of their social uses.
- c) It is not that the political decisions and their form of implantation are prior to technology, but it is the technology itself that determines those decisions and its implementation. This is also the main thesis of technological determinism; and at last,
- d) contemporary technology, according to Ellul, gives rise to a certain social system and a specific cultural system that enforce productive, cultural, social and institutional relations and are, as a consequence, subjugating humanity.

Later, in the early 1960s, the Canadian researcher Marshall McLuhan coined the term *Global Village* to refer to the new contemporary society, becoming a celebrated public figure at the time and a reference thinker from his chair at the University of Toronto and his work as a guest professor at Columbia University in the United States.

McLuhan is considered the inspiration of most of the ideas that are currently addressed in the field of technology and its uses, and his work is key to understand the perspective of research in communication that would later be called *technological determinism* although, as well as observed by Saperas (2012), his work is influenced by a radical conservatism akin to the American Way of Life.

In this regard, the research proposals of the Toronto School, led by McLuhan, are still very influential and followed by other interesting researchers such as Joshua Meyrowitz and Neil Postman, about whom we will talk later.

Among the most significant claims resulting of McLuhan and the Toronto School, according to Saperas (2012, 153), we can find the following:

- a) The history of mankind can be defined from the technical artifices through which the human being extends beyond his body and creates culture,
- b) technology allows forms and processes of communication and social relationship and is an element prior to the elaboration of symbolic contents, the transmission of ideas and the understanding of the world,
- c) technology is, therefore, the element that allows to extend the five senses of the human being and dominate nature, and the stage of civilization of a society can be defined from the ways in which this culture and forms of social communication develop, and
- d) each technological medium implies a particular form of extension of the senses and every period of humanity can be distinguished by the dominant prolongation of one of the senses with concrete technological means, so that, for example, clothes would be the extension of the skin, the hammer of the fist, the fridge of the stomach, etc. And the era of the printing called *Galaxy Gutenberg* would be an earlier stage of civilization of the electronic age in which it would evolve towards a *Global Village*.

In short, and according to this conception, the content of the social speeches in each of the historical moments would be irrelevant in relation to the importance of the stadium of technological development and the technical medium, the channel, by which it is distributed. This way, the technological medium would be what determines the cultural contents and the stage of civilization of a society, and hence the famous assertion that sums up McLuhan's thinking: *The medium is the message*, which corresponds to the title of his book, published in 1967.

A few decades later, following McLuhan's work as his student, Neil Postman would address the role of technology and the media from a similar technocratic logic as previously Ellul and the Toronto School had proposed but incorporat-

ing significant elements of the Critical Theory coming from the Frankfurt School which impinged in the centrality of culture and also, now, the technology.

The technological determinism would be explained from the so-called *Frankenstein syndrome* proposed by Postman in *The Disappearance of Childhood* (1983, 23): «One creates a machine for a particular and limited purpose. But once the machine is built we discover, always to our surprise –that it has ideas its own; that it is quite capable not only of changing our habits but... of changing our habits of mind» (cf. Saperas 2012, 171).

Those theses would be reinforced by the subsequent analyses that other authors, e.g. Joshua Meyrowitz, would elaborate about the transformations that television introduced in the daily life of the individuals as well as of the society, and that technology:

- a) had broken the space-temporal dimensions to be able to contact facts of which we do not have a direct experience,
- b) thus, the result is a culture without sense of social space,
- c) and, therefore, the social roles have changed since then; when social networks change, social identities do it to the same extent.

In short, with these studies on technology and society, which were developed as a complement to the aforementioned research paradigms over several decades since the end of World War II, the investigation of the processes of communication adopts new perspectives that respond to the profound changes that are occurring in society during that period and which are extending to the present.



# 7. New Trends on Communication Research. Latest News



As we have described before, towards the end of the 1970s, the research and theoretical proposals with which the processes and the media are understood have developed from the simplicity of informational models and the study of the limits of media effects to approaches that show the complexity of the discursive processes within contemporary technological cultures, and the relevance and influence of the media system and its long-term effects on the ways to give meaning to reality.

This new contemporary conception to analyze communication processes is based on a theoretical model that addresses social research from a functionalist perspective in which individual and social processes are the result of a dialectic and dynamic tension established between the individual and the political and socio-economic structure which the individual himself inhabits and is part of.

In this regard, different approaches are currently displayed to address the research in communication from the thought paradigms that have been developed throughout the twentieth century, and which we can summarize in the following way:

- a) Researchers begin to understand the society from a new paradigm, the *System Theory*, inheritance of classical functionalism which assumes some of the previous proposals about the cognitive effects of the media and the form of construction of reality in order to explain the contemporary social complexity as a whole.
- b) Researchers deal with the analysis of the processes of social interaction from the *theory of communicative action*, i.e. from a critical attitude, but by distancing themselves from the Marxist model of the Frankfurt School, in order to try to explain the basis of social life, starting from a perspective similar to *Symbolic Interactionism* developed by the Palo Alto School in the 1940s, as we explained before, which seems to obtain renewed attention among latest investigations.
- c) The inherited currents of Critical Theory are maintained, with a greater or lesser degree of radicalism, to confront the role of the media and technology in shaping socioeconomic models and contemporary culture.
- d) Updated versions of classical theories of reception and effects are still proposing, especially related to uses and gratifications, while new theoretical approaches and concepts are being developed, such as the *Framing Theory* or the *Meme* concept, heirs in part of the research streams which we have been tackling throughout the text and, finally,
- e) New perspectives are being developed that update how to address communication processes in network societies, while new contemporary myths are being created around communication and management technology, i.e. around large collections of data and the so-called Big-Data Era.

In relation to the *System Theory*, the significant changes that were occurring in the late twentieth century required new approaches to explain the complexity, so social theory focused on the relevant and transforming role of Information and Network Technology. From the 1930s on, what is now known as *System Theory* developed from its formulation in an essay by the biologist Bertalanffy entitled *Modern Theories of Development*, which, as explained by Mattelart and Mattelart (1997, 48), addressed the understanding of the vital processes of biological organisms based on the functionalism and in relation to its form of contribution to the maintenance of any organism itself.

This biological systemic model began to extend to other social disciplines and to be used in the political analysis in two conceptions: as functional and organic structured system that auto-regulates with the participation of its members and as well as information processes which circulate and relate to the environment from inputs and outputs to which organisms must respond to adapt to it.

Years later, in the decade of the 1960s, Abraham Moles, starting from the classic informational model of Shannon and Weaver but with special emphasis on the importance of the processes of feedback of information initially formulated by Wiener, developed the concept of *communication ecology* in which he defined communication as «the action of involving an organism or a system located at a point R of the experiences and stimuli of the environment of another individual or system located in another place and time, using the elements of knowledge that they have in common» (cf. Mattelart and Mattelart , 1997, 50). Soon after, the attempt to formalize a *general theory of society* was carried out that, according to these historical premises, dealt with its complexity and allowed its analysis as a system that integrates other subsystems which relate to each other and with other systems.

Already in the decade of the 1990s, Niklas Luhmann proposed that the mass media, as pointed out by Igartua and Humanes (2004, 156), should be considered as a system that operates within the modern social system because, like other systems, it has the characteristics of *differentiation*, *operational closure*, and *autopoietic autonomy*. Namely, in any organic structure or system we could recognize its limits and differentiate it from the rest, and in itself it is autonomous and operates according to its own internal rules in order to reproduce and perpetuate itself, thereby overcoming the changing processes of an environment that represents other systems and with which it is related, as for example the socio-educational, the scientific-technical, the politico-economic system, etc.

In this respect, Luhmann proposed to analyze the media as a system, and as we saw on the agenda-setting hypothesis, also the way in which topicalizing the social speeches to end up constituting the imaginary and the social agenda as functional agents that oblige citizens to remain in constant alert against public affairs and, ultimately, condition the individual cognitive processes.



At the same historical moment, researchers around the so-called *Palo Alto School*, also identified as the *Invisible College*, which had been inspired by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson and named after the small town close to San Francisco, began to propose the aforementioned System Theory and, as we have already told at the beginning of this text, also developed a set of research and theoretical proposals that tried to explain the functioning of the communicative processes. Bateson formed a network of researchers from very diverse backgrounds who, as Mattelart and Mattelart (1997, 52) explained, by taking in concepts and models of functionalism and systems theory but also from linguistics and logics tried to understand already very early in time –how interaction occurs in a communicative situation from a vision of circular communication in which the receiver plays an as relevant role as the emitter, thus, they were early overcoming the informational model Shannon and Weaver promoted.

On the basis of communicative interaction as a fundamental element in social relations, towards 1939 Herbert Blumer initiated the theoretical current called *Symbolic Interactionism* to which we have already referred in the first chapters of this text. It was founded on three premises, as Mattelart and Mattelart point out (1997, 97):

- a) Humans act toward things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things.
- b) The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with others and the society.
- c) The Meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he/she encounters.

As we already briefly mentioned at the beginning of this text, the approach to the social world rather than the focus on institutions or power structures, etc., analyzes the experience of the individuals. This way of dealing with social theory, this *ethnomethodological* approach, started in the 1940s from works of the Austrian Sociologist exiled in New York Alfred Schutz, whose research was dedicated to the study of the bases of knowledge in daily life. Symbolic Interactionism is also, and significantly, influenced by the works of the philosophers J. L. Austin and John Searle on the theory of *speech acts*, explained at the beginning of this text, although their proposals have been criticized by showing little interest for complex social organizations and for developing a reductionist approach to communication processes.

Another recent approach to communication which in part assumes some precepts of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School is represented in the works of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas who he developed his *Theory of Communicative Action* starting from the decade of the 1980s. Habermas considers that social processes are the result of patterns of symbolic exchanges and contexts of language in which, from their critical perspective, mass media constitute the privileged means.

As Mattelart and Mattelart recount (1997, 101), there was a notorious controversy between Habermas and Luhmann in the early 1970s about this particular vision,

facing two opposing ideas about the role of media in contemporary societies. Luhmann considered that the problems of social communication were due to rigidities and the resistance to change was inherent in any system, while for Habermas these problems were the result of the dominant ideology and the confrontation of the system's own interests against the experience of individuals. For Luhmann, communication has no goal itself, but according to Habermas' conception of the communication process it does fulfil the function of integration and maintenance of the social system, i.e. communication has a main role in the system's autopoiesis.

A more radical version from a critical perspective on the complexity of contemporary society developed in the latter part of the twentieth century around the concept of *Postmodernity*. As pointed out by Igartua and Humanes (2004, 169), postmodernity is a new reality that affirms the failure of the postulates that propelled modernity. That is to say, modernity seeking to improve the living conditions of humanity rejects the great values on which they were based, such as the universalization of welfare or the extension of knowledge for the fulfillment of the *utopia* to reach a better world.

The term *postmodern* was coined by Lyotard in 1979 in his work *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir* in which he recognizes the disappearance of the great social, historical, and also scientific stories which pretend to explain the reality and its substitution for new ones. But this new society is far from being a mass-society of atomized and isolated individuals yet they are located in a network of communications in which individuals and society interact with a lot of diverse social discourses.

Other authors are also associated to this paradigm, like Guy Debord, who talked about the *Society of the Spectacle*, or Michel Foucault, who dealt with the role of scientific knowledge as a disciplinary mechanism of modern societies by reducing people to objects of research.

In sum, the hypotheses of *postmodernism* with which this authors approached social theory and communication processes were the following (Igartua and Humanes, 2005, 172),:

- a) Communication is simultaneously possible and impossible, stable and unstable, because the dominant groups are vulnerable to alternative speeches, and, vice versa, marginal groups permanently resist the dominant practices.
- b) Communication is always political and is related to different positions of social power depending on where the social actor is located.
- c) Communication serves both the social construction and its deconstruction, that is, it builds social structures and speeches that can be deconstructed.
- d) Communication is, finally, an intentional practice mitigated by the context of the subjects and the reality which lies in the system's complexity built from articulated speeches in which the individual is located.

In recent years, other theoretical approaches and research methodologies that have a long history in the study of social communication are being revitalized, especially with regard to their effects on consumers from the perspective of the *Uses and Gratifications Theory* in an updated version and nuanced by the concept of implication. In this regard, new methodologies of analysis and new theoretical proposals such as the so-called *Cultivation Theory*, which, as stated by Igartua and Humanes (2004, 270), tries to determine empirically, especially by studying television, the influence of content on the audience's perception of the world. Thus, the new perspective of the *uses and gratifications theory*, according to Igartua and Humanes (2004, 327), is based on the empirical demonstration that there is no relation between implication and cultivation. That is to say, the effect of cultivation is produced because the subjects carefully reflect on the contents of television and end up accepting them but the effect is produced, likewise, when the subjects do not pay attention to the contents nor reflect on them because *the mere exposure influences them over time*.

Also, some other researchers updated versions of some of the precepts of classical paradigms, such as for example Goffman's *Framing Theory* of which we have already spoken before. The *Framing Theory* starts from the proposals of the *symbolic interactionism* and the hypothesis of the identified *agenda-setting* but, beyond the simple determination of those selected contents about which the public should think, it tries to identify the media effects in relation to the way the consumers must think about media contents, i.e., how they elaborate the cognitive framework from which they interpret the contents.

In the 1990s, following this perspective, many investigations were developed on those issues by focusing on the media news and the influence they have in their reception, and they were concluding, as Igartua and Humanes (2004, 261) explain, that the framing of the reality by media occurs in two successive phases, through a process called *frame-setting* that serves as a media channel:

- a) first, it builds the way in which limited contents have to be elaborated to influence the cognitive responses of the public (the *what-about to think*), and then
- b) it activates the processes of attribution of responsibility to the individuals, by using a cognitive strategy based on problem-solving it identifies what these problems and their causes are and who is responsible for their solution, thus determines, as has been demonstrated, these individuals' way of thinking about the world (the *how-about to think*).

Another interesting concept that achieved considerable success and has become very popular, although it has also been very criticized, is the derivative of the theoretical work on the cultural diffusion that Richard Dawkins made in his book of 1976, *The Selfish Gene*. Dawkins coined the term *meme* from the contraction of memory and mimesis to explain the form of diffusion of ideas in contemporary society from the evolutionary theory of biology.

Following some of the principles of systems theory and genetics, Dawkins suggested that, similar to genes, the ideas or memes are grouped by cultural affinity competing with others in a communicative universe that evolves according to their own features. So, the ideas, by analogy with the chromosomes, according to their fecundity, longevity and their form of replication, can be more or less faithfully expanding through the discursive universe and the collective imaginary, making use of communication networks and being more or less successful.

In any case, and apart from the latest theoretical approaches and more or less ingenious occurrences derived from contemporary thinking and the history of the theories of social communication that we have been describing throughout the text, what is absolutely true is that our contemporary society is the product of new communication technologies. As Miquel de Moragas pointed out, this has two immediate consequences (cf. Rodrigo Alsina 2001, 24):

- a) The increase of the possibilities of interaction not only between individuals themselves, but also of individuals through computers, and
- b) the transformation of the reception spaces not only in direction of the transnationalization, but also, at the same time, in the technological mediation of individual and local processes.

As Rodrigo Alsina observes regarding the deep transformations on communication systems during the last years, we can identify some clear trends such as:

- a) the processes of transnationalization of media content continues, with wide presence of North American products at the global level, and following the same dynamic for decades
- b) advances in the integration of different technologies of communication around digital media and communication networks, and simultaneously,
- c) multiplying the media in the communicative ecosystem, but without making improvements in the plurality of speeches. To understand this new contemporary multimedia and networking society the work of Manuel Castells, *The Information Age*, published in the late 1990s as a monumental trilogy, is especially interesting. According to Castells, as Rodrigo Alsina points out (2001, 26), in our contemporary society we are faced with a new informational paradigm with the following systemic characteristics:

- a) The raw material is the information.
- b) New technologies directly affect our individual existence.
- c) The logic of the system is increasing their interactional complexity.
- d) This is a flexible system with a high capacity of reordering of its components.
- e) The progressive convergence of different technologies is being produced in a highly integrated system.

In this new context, the spatial-temporal coordinates must be understood from a new concept that refers to the *space of flows* and in which at least three layers are combined:

- a) a material support that is electronic,
- b) a complex functional structure of nodes and axes, and
- c) a management organization with which the management elites articulate this *space of flows*.

Herewith following Castells (cf. Rodrigo Alsina 2001, 29), we are developing, a multimedia sociocultural model that has the following characteristics:

- a) It deepens in social and cultural differentiation from the segmentation of audiences,
- b) a growing social stratification is generated between two differential poles: those who can freely select their communicative circuits and ways of interacting and those who only have a limited set of pre-packaged options to do so
- c) the new technological system tends to the integration of all the messages in a common cognitive model, the multimedia, with universal vocation, and finally, and most important,
- d) the new sociocultural model contains in itself and captures in its domains any expression of cultural diversity so that the lines of separation between media and communicative content are diluted.

As we can see, Castells' approach to the complexity of our contemporariness collects many of the ideas that have been developed over decades of research on social communication but is updated to our current technological environment. As has been suggested in the research currents and theoretical paradigms that we have been trying to present throughout this text, to come to terms with them, we can adopt a similar posture to the one shown by Umberto Eco in his famous book of 1964, *Apocalypse postponed*. Or, according to Castells, the shapes that social subjects integrate and identify with the new times passing by can be of three types, depending on the degree of criticism with which they identify in order to confront the system:

- a) A *legitimizing* identity, namely, assuming the rules that the institutions that exercise power in society propose and rationalize their domination as inevitable for the other social actors,
- b) An identity of *resistance*, which those who are in devalued and stigmatized positions by the logic of institutional power hold to vindicate themselves as social actors of full right,
- c) A *project* identity, in which social actors build a new identity from the cultural materials they have to not only redefine their position in society but also to transform it.

In short, and to conclude, new times require new ways of dealing with social communication processes. As we have seen throughout this text, *Communication Science* is a research area that is over a century old but still relatively young and always in constant evolution, and communication is essential for any area of knowledge given its relevance for and its centrality in all human and social processes.

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