The Three Dimensional Spiral of Sense—Training for Cultural/Institutional Autonomy or Homogenization? A Study in the Light of the “Agenda-Setting” Theory and a New Paradigm

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This article is related to a new theory called “The Three Dimensional Spiral of Sense” or “Theory of the Three Interactive Levels.” This theory is the result of 30 years of research work of National Council of Scientific Research (CONICET) and it arises from findings in six disciplinary complimentary areas: Education, Health, Science, Media, International Relations, and Interculturality. It is basically a macro-micro-meso-macro approach which consists of a kind of sui generis Systemism which recovers interactions between individuals, organizations/institutions, and macro-contexts. Such interplay does not overlook the individuals or the contexts. It consists of a comprehensive, holistic approach of the complexity, even though it lays foundation for anthropology, and is different from the traditional ones. It is the first study in Latin America. Here, we focus on a study developed in the field of the media. We test hypotheses included in the psycho-socio-communicational paradigm, which emphasizes the long-term cognitive effects of the media and the role of the psychosocial subject as recipient: the hypothesis of “Agenda-Setting.” The methodology, on the one hand, is the one used within the context on the “Agenda-Setting” theory. The topics that are most relevant to the media and among university graduates are compared in order to detect the level of influence and homogenization of the “mind maps” of highly educated individuals who are exposed to media information. On the other hand, Dr. Aparicio’s approach, referred to above, involves an original qualitative analysis of the three levels in self-sustained interaction. The core objectives were: (a) Determining the degree of impact of the press in the mental patterns and detecting the levels of homogenization on university graduates; (b) Analyzing the relation between political-institutional ideology and the news selected by the graduates (institutional identities vs. personal identities); and (c) Ascertaining the personality and psychosocial factors that condition differential receptivity (“Filtering” of the news). The results, particularly the qualitative ones, show: 1. The rich interactions between the media agenda and individuals are mediated by institutional and personal variables; 2. The individuals are the active receiver who filter the news, yet not at the expected level for a university graduate; 3. The power of the institutional/ideological stamps in choosing what they consider to be “the news” (institutional identities vs. personal identities); and 4. The need for the universities to train is not only at the disciplinary level, but also as regards to other capacities/competences, such as critical thinking, decision-making, and innovation, rather than alignment (perpetuation of systems of institutional ideas and beliefs) within a context of abrupt macro-social changes.

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The Agenda Setting: Characterization

Let us highlight some relevant characteristics of this post-Lazarfeld paradigm.

Most trends base on the following principle: The agenda does not tell what we should think, but “a quoi” we should think. Shaw stated, “(as a consequence of the influence of the media)... the public is conscious about or ignores, pays attention or neglects, emphasizes or overlooks specific elements in public life.” “People tend to include or exclude from their knowledge—what the media tend to include or exclude from their own content” (Shaw, 1979, p. 96; Wolf, 1987, p. 163). His thesis may be summarized as follows, “... an important part of people’s understanding of social reality is modified by the media” (1979, p. 96 & p. 101).

Cohen refers to the topic in the terms used by Pasquier exactly thirty years later. In 1963, he stated, “Mass media main function is building ‘operational maps of the world’ for users” (p. 13). He focused on the media and their relation with the political sectors. This is called “policy agenda building.” The main point of analysis here is the combination of the media and the citizens’ agendas, together with that of the political decision-makers’, emphasizing the complexity of the three. Roberts (1972) looked at the problem from the point of view of the education and the manipulation, a central aspect of our research. In his words:

... as long as the addressee does not have the opportunity to check the accuracy of the representation of social reality, he ends up having a distorted, stereotyped, or manipulated conception of it. (p. 380; Wolf, 1987, p. 164)

Shaw (1979), in this regards, insisted said,

... the media contribute to an interpretation of reality, which the individual applies in a fairly conscious way. Thus, (the media) “... provide the public with something that goes beyond the strict limits of the news. They also provide them with the categories in which to include it in a significant manner.” (p. 103; Wolf, 1987, p. 165)

Patterson and McClure (1976) pointed out a different core aspect within our work: the role of individuals’ predisposition and its mediation in the exposition of programs (p. 28). Roberts also discovered the role of the “selective processes” (perception, memory, attention, etc.), and thus, on the active role of the recipient. He (1972) stated,

(the media) are efficient in building the image of reality that the subject structures in his mind. Such image—which is only a metaphor for all the information about the world that the subject has received, organized, and stored, can be conceived as a standard to which new information is compared so as to give it its meaning. Such standard includes the frame of reference, as well as the person’s needs, set of values, beliefs, and expectations which influence what he perceives from the communicative experience. (p. 366)

Therefore, the media agenda and the people’s agenda become more complex, and do not always keep the same structure in relation to different issues and problems. McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes (1974) showed important findings from the psychosocial point of view and, more specifically, from the role of interpersonal communication. They said, “... the agenda effect is stronger among those individuals who have discussed the issues than among those who have had no interpersonal communication” (Pasquier, 1994, p. 67). In this regards, McCombs and Shaw (1972) emphasized the “need for orientation,” underlying the importance of frameworks of reference. Finally, to make reference to the founding further only, Iyengar (1979) highlighted the role of

education as a filter for the news provided by the media.

As to educators and social and communication psychologists, this issue appears central in times when much of the knowledge is transmitted by the media in a globalized world with many large marginal populations with very few or no education at all. Imagine the influence of these concepts in underdeveloped contexts.

Summarizing, during the 1970s and 1980s, the role of the news receiver becomes more appreciated. Our work provides a different approach in view of a new paradigm in which not only the media operate and the individuals are “receiver,” even if they have an active role in filtering information through education, values, etc.. This is where the analysis came to an end, according to the so called “hypothesis of the Agenda-Setting.” Its major contribution was to recover the individual as “information receiver,” who had been overlooked by the prevailing paradigms for 50 years.

As we see, the process is not completed when the individual does the reading, more or less as the media of certain issues did.

Our studies reveal the influence of the socialization and internalization of institutional guidelines (universities, colleges, and disciplines) to university graduates, and mainly the way this socialization returns to the micro institutional system. As for the rest, the fact that our work has been carried out on several graduate cohorts of different disciplines helps us see how the feedback processes of cultural/institutional guidelines develop (values, interests, and ideology), thus, often causing a certain homogenization in the individuals’ thinking process and in their representations regarding the values, which is quite related to what was acquired at university. Within other institutional contexts, however, such cultural perpetuation does not prevail. But the process does not finish there: Those graduates who have internalized “private/institutional” cultural guidelines, later work as university professors, thus, re-transmitting their students, in their day-to-day activity, the cultural guidelines they learned themselves. These new students, in turn, process their reading along the same ideological-cultural/institutional lines. The push and pull of socialization processes that characterizes Aparicio’s theory appears clearly. Therefore, on the one hand, the relative aspects of the individuals—emotional and psychosocial aspects (values, beliefs, prejudices, and knowledge), together with the social and cultural background—help, to a certain extent, to filter the news. Nevertheless, what turns this matter more complex is institutional feedback. Individuals and contexts interplay within a spiral yet non-deterministic dialectics, which keeps away from hyper-functionalism and linear readings. That is the reason for the title of this article.

Objectives

Become aware, on the one hand, to what extent the media shape the “mind-maps” (cognitive charts), by means of which youngsters—inserted in institutions (meso-level) and macro-social contexts which have left them an imprint—filter the news and do their own reading of the world. In other words, be ware to what extent the cultural/institutional imprint homogenizes personal answers, or conversely, the individuals keep their autonomy in reading and selecting the news and apply their critical thinking, thus showing their decision-making ability and freedom.

More specifically, our goals: 1. Observe the exercise of the individuals’ critical role (here “filter” regarding information); 2. Should university education become a real filter together with other psychological characteristics and performances, it could be confirmed that the agenda effect does not always work, nor for

everyone, nor always in the same way; 3. Find out if the institutional affiliation (different faculties and/or study courses) has an impact on the “filter of the news” from the point of view of the prevailing ideology, beliefs, defining purposes, and priorities; and 4. Analyze the appearance of the individuals/contexts relation in their sustained interaction. This was possible thanks to the extensive time of our research in a changing structural framework and was carried out in several study courses (micro-organizations) of the National University of Cuyo (Aparicio, 2005; 2013; 2014).

Inadequacy means lack of studies on this issue in Argentina increased the interest in this first attempt of hypotheses arising from agenda setting model; as for the rest, this problem—which combines epistemological, methodological, and social point of view—in the field of the media, training (education) is momentous and several disciplines are interested in the processes public opinion maker. The manipulation and homogenization of the “mental maps” are linked with the centralization of the “fourth power.”

Hypothesis

Forty-nine hypotheses were tested based on international literature and English literature, especially. They include base, academic, educational, structural, and communicational variables. The main hypotheses were: 1. There would be a marked relation between the order of importance assigned to the information by the media and that adopted by youths (high incidence of “mental construing”); 2. Given the educational level (university), a high degree of news filtering is expected; 3. Receptivity of the addressees would vary according to cognitive competence and psychosocial factors; and 4. The institutional characteristics could impact on a different interpretation of the social reality, producing certain homogenization in the “mental map” of the individuals in them.

Methods and Materials

Sample

It was made up of graduates ($N = 516$) from eighteen careers in Cuyo University (Argentina) between 1980 and 1993. In a second instance, the research continued until 2014 (Aparicio, 2016c). The sampling was stratified and the start, random; confidence interval was taken at 95% and error margin at 4%.

Instruments

Quantity-qualitative techniques were complemented: semi-structured survey and in-depth interviews. The analysis was made in two instances: products and “processes.” In addition, we followed the “agenda-setting” model with a sample of the media and news: two local newspapers (Los Andes and Uno) were analyzed, as well as the major national newspapers, with different editorial orientations and ideology (La Prensa, La Nación, Clarín, Crónica, El CronistaComercial, Página 12, and Ámbito Financiero).

Procedure

(a) Implementation of the aforementioned techniques. Being a vertical assessment, the follow-up was carried out with private addresses, as graduates were no longer in the educational system; and (b) The survey of both agendas (those of the media and of the public), setting up of the time frame, and taking into account the models of the agenda/effect: awareness, relevance, and priorities (Becker, McCombs, & McLeod, 1975).

The comparison procedure for both agendas and analytical strategy are original. The media agenda was determined through the analysis of the content in the newspapers. A list was designed with the most relevant news during the period under consideration. The highest frequency observed in the options given for each item

relative to the news in a rank of the Likert Scale, determined the most relevant news for the public. Following international literature, the period was fifteen days for data gathering of the media and the public's agendas.

The range of variables was very wide ($N = 151$), covering psychological, base line, pedagogic/institutional, structural, and communicational aspects. Finally, hypotheses and results were compared. The methodological options made it possible to analyze the relation between institutional affiliation and the news selection made by the sample. For such purpose, an analysis was carried out of such selection according to faculties and study course, and we could observe the institutional effects on news reading, in addition to the mediation of other (psychosocial) variables that are out of our objective here.

Results and Discussion

Hypotheses concerning education/socialization and a social, cognitive, and media psychology were corroborated, so were those related to the influence on the training on the part of the institutions, leading to prioritize some specific news over other. As far as our interest goes, we could clearly see the relation to individual/institutional context, i.e., the relation and interaction between the micro- and meso- organizational levels, as well as the influence of socialization, on the basis of certain personal and institutional homogenization. This leads us to the presence of cultural-institutional "identities" which reappear in the individual "identities," getting feedback as time passes by, and the institutions, in a way, "perpetuate some of the characteristics that define them."

It is important to remember here that identity is the result of the construction between the contributions of the individual from his history/biography/career and the context—university faculties, which help perpetuating ideas or innovation (Aparicio, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Silva & Aparicio, 2015).

As regards the main stays of the previously mentioned theory, the non-linearity in communication, retrieved from the models that emphasize reception, breaks with the mechanicalness in the relation of producer-receiver but not with the effect itself.

1. The agenda/effect is observed: Youths consider relevant only whatever relevant to the media. The remaining information is not recovered nor is able to access the "cognitive maps."

2. A high homogenization of thought hereby is confirmed, as a result of the homogenization of news (incremented in quantity by means of unified quality). This reveals a lesser amount of exercise of critical thinking than the expected among university students. In fact, the graduates selected the most relevant pieces of news according to their field of studies, leaving the rest aside (local, national, and international news). Thus, political sciences graduates only focused on the news related to employment and poverty. Engineering graduates paid attention to those related to infrastructure works. Social or cultural issues were not considered. The reading of the results showed, what we called, the "cultural drugged." The field of their interest gets all the attention and the "rest of the world" does not matter in their relevant representations (more frequent and/or significant).

3. Nevertheless, it is interesting to point out that the strengthening of a certain image of reality is not found in the same for all, not every time, depending on the conjugation of different factors among which education act as decisive filters. In addition, the different readings that can be done in the different programs reveal disciplinary and institutional identities (Aparicio, 1995a, 2014, 2015c, 2016a, 2016b; Aparicio & Cros, 2015). Results show different interpretations and levels of "filtering" in accordance with the pertaining institution.

4. Finally, as far as we are concerned, there is clear institutional influence in the cosmovision young people have as regards the news selection they make within the offers made by the media according to their institutions. This shows that, although the media are influential, we should not perform deterministic or linear readings, since there are interwoven individuals and institutions, in addition to “macro social and economic contexts” which favor specific news, facts, and ideologies.

Summarizing, in the light of our findings, we coincide with Shaw, McCoombs, Iyengar, Roberts, and others. They emphasize the importance of filtering the news of inherent factors in the individuals, their training, and their interpersonal relations. However, we have complemented this interpretation with recovering of socio-cultural feedback circuits.

Conclusion

There is a common axis to the hypotheses on agendas “...nous disent non pas qu’il faut penser, mais à quoi il faut penser”¹ which impinges clearly on our “mental maps” (Pasquier, 1994). This fact constitutes a source of concern if attention is paid to the uncritical dazzling that the new language prevailingly elicits.

These findings represent, in addition, a challenge for university education for different reasons:

1. It remains enclosed within disciplinary knowledge without adequately developing other cognitive and psychosocial competences which are significant for being able to “choose” rather than becoming aligned with what the media and or the institutions impose;

2. It does not educate for autonomy, initiative, and innovation, as it claims to do. On the contrary, the graduates from some faculties reproduce the cultural guidelines, which have historically differentiated them.

Critical thinking seems diluted. The systemic interplay of “comings” and “goings” between the individual micro-level and the meso-institutional one appears evident, being socialization and culture core aspects. The results represent an institutional challenge to prepare for a responsible interpretation of images (“visual literacy”). It involves Identity, a kind of disciplinary identity that eventually takes over personal/professional identity and the indispensable professionalization or training in other competences, different from those historically provided, which allow for professional performance with critical thinking as an essential feature.

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¹ “...they do not tell us how to think, but what to think.”

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