



Epistemological Approaches to Media Communication and Analysis A Postmodern Reading of Intellectual Independence and Social Transformation

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Abstract: The epistemological knowledge on which the communicative phenomenon is based in modern societies has known many changes in terms of theorizing and intellectual premises, and it had cognitive repercussions that touched multiple aspects in the field of media and communication sciences. All the modern contextual foundations on it, as we will address in this article, the influence of communication and media studies on critical European approaches that view communication as a tool for social change, the colonial past and the political context in the 1960s reinforced these social transformations that want to be embodied as intellectual independence. In this article, we will also discuss the social transformations that have contributed to the birth of new media and multiple approaches to communication research.

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Introduction

As researchers in information and communication sciences, it can be intellectually stimulin societies to see how our object of study is approached in other geographical areas. It is in this spirit that this article is designed. Organized in three parts, it presents the conditions of emergence of approaches in the study of communication and mass media, based on a review of bibliographical sources on the epistemology of communication.

The first part is devoted to a discussion on the status of communication: is it a science, an inter/trans/discipline or a field? The second part returns to the epistemological approaches at the origin of communication studies and the reflections they have generated. Two claims characterize these reflections: that of theoretical independence and that of communication in the service of social transformation. Finally, the third part deals with mass media, the fragmentation of research on their subject and the epistemological gap between

research and journalistic practice. This course will allow us to conclude on the need to recover the critical dimension of media analysis and the teaching of journalism in order to respond to social challenges.

1- 1- Communication: an interdisciplinary Field :

Communication can designate a socio-cultural phenomenon, a profession and an academic field (Rizo, 2014). Despite its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary origins, it benefits from a high degree of institutionalization (Fuentes, 2010). However, its status is still debated. Starting from the existence of a certain number of theories and professions, as well as research and teaching practices around this object which is called communication but which is not always clearly defined, (Camposánchez, 2009), the question arose as to whether it corresponded to a science, a discipline or a field.

The researchers put the problem differently it is not the field of communication that is too young or lacking in rigor, the problem lies in the very definition of science, which is trapped in the frameworks of rationalism, empiricism, materialism and functionalism. As long as the positivist vision of science is the only valid one, communication will not be able to position itself as science (González, 2007; Múnera, 2010; Rizo, 2014). In the same way, a non-technical and non-dogmatic conception of methodology is necessary to overcome this positivist vision of science (Vasallo, 1999).

The problem with this question lies, as Múnera (2010) and Rizo (2014) point out, in the criteria used to answer it. In the West, in order to determine whether a field of knowledge is a science, researchers mobilize criteria once set out in the United States, in a context where the positivist paradigm legitimized only one way of producing knowledge. This paradigm was part of a worldview that reality is external to us and we only access it through empirical methods. Thus, since the work of Kuhn (1971, cited by Múnera, 2010, p. 12), science is only the field of knowledge that meets three conditions: a) the quest for universal truth, b) empirical verification of a theory with the real and natural world and c) the requirement of objectivity. Only the natural sciences fulfill these conditions and can claim the status of science (2010, p. 12).

Communication cannot aspire to the quest for universal truth, nor empirical verification, nor the demand for objectivity, asserts Múnera (2010). There is no theoretical core to address communication phenomena, but notions, concepts and methods that have their origins in various disciplines (Fuentes, 2010). Nor can communication aspire to the status of a scientific discipline which requires one or two of the criteria required for a science. Following this observation, In societies American authors posed the problem differently: it is not the field of communication which is too young or which lacks rigor, the problem lies in the very definition of science, which is trapped in the frameworks of rationalism, empiricism, materialism and functionalism. As long as the positivist vision of science is the only valid one, communication will not be able to position itself as science (González, 2007; Múnera, 2010; Rizo, 2014). In the same way, a non-technical and non-dogmatic conception of methodology is necessary to overcome this positivist vision of science (Vasallo, 1999).

Consequently, research, teaching and professional communication practices correspond more to what, following the work of Bourdieu, is called a field (Múnera, 2010; Rizo, 2014). this notion has the advantage of allowing "to understand, interpret and intervene at multiple levels on the processes of interaction and meaning through the creation, circulation and use media, technologies as well as symbolic forms [...] social, cultural, ethical, political, aesthetic and economic"² (Pereira, 2005, quoted by Rizo, 2014, p. 146).

Societies seem to have found a consensus on the status of connectivity as an interdisciplinary field. Among the set of cognitive references consulted, no one talks about discipline. Espinosa and Arellano, for their part, propose the development of the epistemology of cognology (a new science that can be translated as the science of communication). The latter will be the "interdisciplinary science that studies communication with its various means, techniques and systems" (2010, p. 290), while the concept of communication will be limited to the work of communication.

It is interesting to compare this positioning as a field of communication with the positioning of CIS in France where the latter are recognized as a multi/interdiscipline³. It should also be noted that the information/communication couple⁴, at the heart of French CIS, is not found in societies where the notion of information – encompassing in France the field of documentation (Walter, et. al. 2018, chap. 7) – is more concerned with librarianship and information theories (González, 2007).

Let us add to conclude a first part that the questioning of the positivist conception of science is accompanied by a discussion around the equally positivist vision of objectivity. This discussion will prove relevant in Part III

when we discuss media analysis and journalistic practice. Indeed, some researchers consider that the theories and knowledge produced in the field of communication result from reflexive processes. For this reason, objectivity in the humanities and social sciences (SHS) cannot be equated with that of the natural sciences. It is not a difference of degree, but of kind. In SHS, objectivity can only be a “socially legitimized intersubjective agreement”, a consensus reached on the basis of the most relevant arguments (Gómez, 2000, quoted by Múnera, 2010, p. 16). Knowledge, in SHS, can only be justified and validated within the community that shares and constructs it (Calero, et. al., 2006). Consequently, instead of seeking a universal truth, the field of communication should shift this concept of truth to that of validity. This requires the use of methods that are more a matter of reflective praxis (we will come back to this) which results in a social construction of knowledge (Múnera, 2010).

2- Epistemological reflections on communication:

According to Pineda (2009), functionalism and the critical approach stem not only from different methods or theoretical frameworks, but above all from an ideological attitude towards the media. This ideological factor will also be influenced by factors specific to the societies context. Díaz (2012) and Martín-Barbero (1992) recall, for example, the massive arrival of technological innovations accompanied by modernization projects, imposed by the United States, which were also part of a positivist and neocolonial vision of development. and progress, like the Alliance for Progress, for example. These projects have disrupted societies and impoverished a large part of the population. In this context, the Cuban Revolution of 1959 had a great impact on the continent, inspiring many revolutionary movements in societies and leading national elites, allied with the United States, to implement repressive measures and social control. (Maldonado, 2017).

On the academic level, British Cultural Studies have strongly influenced societies researchers. This new current challenged the functionalist approach and the Frankfurt School. A new way of seeing communication restored a place for the receiver in the communication process and offered a new ideological reading of the media (Hall, 2008). Furthermore, constructivism displaced positivism: reality was the result of a social construction. The media produced the social reality of which they spoke (Verón, 1981, 1997) and reproduced unequal social relations (Hall, 2008). Postmodernism also contributed to questioning the great methodological and theoretical certainties of positivism and revalued the place of the individual in communication processes (Martín-Barbero, 1992).

In this political, economic and academic context, the first researchers interested in mass communication and the media in societies willingly adopted, as in France, critical approaches (Frankfurt School for the Marxists and Cultural Studies for others) while using empirical methods, such as content analysis, despite its rather functionalist origin (Pineda, 2009). Although societies researchers very early argued for theoretical and epistemological independence from American influence, it should be noted that European influences are less decried. Moreover, several French authors (Bourdieu, Foucault, Serres) have inspired societies critical works. Some precursors of communication studies in societies, such as Verón and Martín-Barbero, trained and/or worked in France.

Two claims will guide epistemological reflections in societies: that of intellectual independence and that of the role of communication as a tool for social transformation responding to the daily problems encountered by the populations in societies and to the challenges imposed by modernity (Martín -Barbero, 1992; Calero, et. al., 2006; Sánchez, Campos, 2009; Vasallo, 1999). If these two claims are influenced by a reflection around the colonial past of societies, we can see to what extent the CIS (in France) and the field of communication (in AL) are marked at the origin by critical approaches . However, some authors regret that this critical function of theoretical tools tends to be distorted. Currently, the critical posture of researchers is mostly limited to unveiling, or even perhaps to denunciation, but very little to social transformation⁵, whereas it is this desire for transformation that we find in the first critical works. on both sides of the Atlantic (Sedda, 2017; Valencia, 2010).

How have demands for intellectual independence and social transformation materialized in societies?

3- The limits of postmodernism:

Without wanting to minimize the importance of Martín-Barbero's contribution to media studies, Espinosa and Arellano (2010) analyze the researcher's epistemological proposal in the light of one of his own influences, namely that of Serres. The two authors criticize Martín-Barbero for his postmodern reading of Serres, because it is, according to them, a source of epistemological fragmentation. Indeed, Martín-Barbero's interpretation of communication as a strictly social phenomenon is based on a vision of modernity marked by a division of the world into: a) knowledge specific to the natural sciences and b) knowledge specific to the SHS. Espinosa and Arellano consider that this conception prevents postmodernists from analyzing communication as a sociotechnical

phenomenon. For this reason, they prefer Serres' a modern approach; the latter takes into account the technical basis of the communication without considering it as determining. For Serres, the authors recall, the media are constructed by Man and therefore, in his communicational analysis, technology is not separated from Man (2010).

4- For the decolonization of the field of communication:

Returning to the colonial past societies, mentioned above, and in line with reflections aimed at the scientific independence of the field of communication, we find decolonialidad (a neologism that could be translated as decoloniality). Theorized by Torrico (2017), decoloniality consists in confronting this colonial past of societies in order to overcome it. This would amount to exercising epistemic and political disobedience. Decolonial communication would not devote itself to the traditional problems of the field of communication, but would seek to change the very terms of theoretical and political discussions. It is a question of thinking about communication in terms of otherness (Torrico, 2017).

The scientific independence defended by these societies' researchers also involves a claim concerning the specificity of methodological approaches more suited to the phenomena of human communication, such as hermeneutical epistemology (Múnera, 2010) and transmethodology (Maldonado, 2017). Both aim for a liberation of SHS from the positivist dogmas of classical science, assume subjectivity as a characteristic of the human condition and place reflexive and critical praxis at the center. More specifically, hermeneutical epistemology corresponds to a method linking philosophy and science that is based on subjectivity and translates a liberating intention of society (Múnera, 2010). Transmethodology, for its part, is based on hermeneutics and poses as a transformative alternative to academic neocolonialism (Maldonado, 2017). It is a question of going beyond the excessive positivist specialization to favor hermeneutic, dialectical, heuristic, argumentative, analytical methods and thus operate an epistemological inversion which would take the SHS out of their position of subordination in relation to the natural sciences (Maldonado, 2017). These methods seek the practice of research that responds to social issues without being constrained to use the empirical procedures of the natural sciences.

To conclude this second part, let us mention two examples that materialize proposals around communication as a tool for social change: alternative communication and communication for development.

5 -Communication for social transformation:

Alternative communication results from the paradigm shift mentioned above and is inspired by cultural studies. This change consists in conceiving communication no longer as an isolated verbal act but as a process in which there is no longer a distinct transmitting pole and a distinct receiving pole, since all the interlocutors are productive receivers (Matellart, Matellart, 1987). Through the creation of alternative media, operated by actors in this field, such as free and community radio stations, alternative communications are achieved. As content producers, these actors free themselves from the dominant influence of traditional media. However, A. Matellart and M. Matellart (1987) have already warned that if the public has the power to intervene, it is nonetheless determined by the objective conditions of social reality; The consumer is not independent of any other social determination. It should be noted that alternative media still play an important role as spaces of expression and visibility for social groups excluded from the dominant public spaces.

The second example of communication that responds to social issues is communication for development. In an article published in 2012, Diaz recounts how he became a development communicator by changing his conception of communication. Graduated in agronomy and after an unsuccessful experience as a farmer, he became one of the recognized intellectuals in the field of communications, he made a career in agricultural, national and international organizations in several societies' countries. Initially, he was tasked with designing communication materials for farmers with messages mandated by ministries and other political institutions. These messages are completely disconnected from reality on the lands of the recipients. In the 1960s, the ideas of the Brazilian professor Freire challenged his conception of communication. Communication, education and participation are indeed directly linked to development. Freire suggested training critical thinking as well as the ability to participate and transform reality through education (quoted from Diaz, 2012, p. 20). Concretely for Diaz, the paradigm shift was to integrate farmers into the diagnostic process, formulate solutions and implement them in communication. Farmers are no longer perceived as recipients of solutions imposed from above by national or international organizations, but rather as actors in their own development. Behind this awareness hides an important ideological and political commitment (Diaz, 2012).

5- Media analysis today:

The media, in the field of communication in societies, still occupy an important place. However, we found two issues. First of all, the media continue to be treated in a discrete way, despite epistemological ideas calling for favoring holistic approaches (Sánchez, Campos, 2009). Thus, within the In societies American Association of

Communication Researchers (ALAIIC) - the main university communication association in In societies America - , of the 19 existing thematic groups, there are three that directly concern the media: the communication groups politics and media, hospitality studies and journalism studies. This division indicates that while some devote their work to the analysis of media messages (as we do), others are concerned, for example, with examining media concentration or the work of large media conglomerates, while others devote their observations to the uses of the media by citizens. The same fragmentation can be observed in France if we follow the inventory drawn up by the Permanent Conference of Directors of Research Units in Information and Communication Sciences. With respect to the domain of media and journalism, they note five sub-domains, some of which are devoted to media messages, while others relate to the function of media or journalistic practice (Walter, et al. , 2018, chapter 1). It is understood that in terms of money, time or research protocols to establish, it can be expensive to conduct a study that analyzes both media messages, upstream media work and downstream reception; However, this seems regrettable to us in light of the epistemological claims in In societies America and the social problems we face.

Moreover, based on our work analyzing the news discourse of the media in Colombia, we have observed a discrepancy between what journalists (communication professionals) undertake to deliver (in the codes of ethics and style guides) and discourse products that are published. Journalists, especially those working in mainstream news media, seem to be trapped in the transitional model of communication based on the functional/positivist approach, while media analysts mostly adopt critical approaches. Journalists undertake to provide truthful and objective information; Scholars systematically expose and denounce the biased rhetoric of journalists and how they reproduce unequal social relations or render minority social sectors invisible. One explanation may lie in the teaching of journalism.

Attentive to the way communication was taught in Mexico, Fuentes (quoted by Rizo, 2009, p. 4) identified three teaching models to which Rizo (2009) added a fourth:

- a. The journalist training model, introduced in the 1950s and intended to train professionals capable of integrating the media industries. This model was part of an effective approach to communication that limited it to the simple transmission of messages.
- b. The model of the communicator as an intellectual. It appeared in the 1960s and saw communication as a tool for social and cultural transformation.
- c. The communicating model as a sociologist, which breaks with the effective formation of the first model to adopt a critical approach to communication. These professionals are trained to contribute to liberation and political liberation movements (Fuentes, 1996, citing Rizzo, 2009, p. 4).

A model of cultural approach to communication that trains professionals not to integrate the media, but rather to participate in the social practices through which communication processes take place (Rizzo, 2009, p. 5).

We identify in these models the influence of epistemological currents: functionalism/positivism for the first, Frankfurt School and cultural studies for the other three. However, our fifteen years of research indicate that mainstream media journalists prefer a positive approach to their work, but are unable to respond to social challenges. The notion of objectivity mobilized by Colombian journalists is consistent with the positivist vision of the term whose inadequacy Mineira has indicated for the purposes of the study by SHS (2010).

This example allows us to conclude with Rizo (2014) on the necessary reflection on the way communication (and thus journalism) is taught in colleges. Fragmentation of the communication field – also observed in France (Walter, et al., 2018) – and more specifically in media analysis is detrimental to the social function that in societies American researchers rightly claim. There is an urgent need to restore a critical sense of communication in In societies America so that it can contribute to political pluralism, the promotion of democracy, the defense and respect of human rights or even the protection of the environment (Valencia, 2010).

However, let us not forget that this urgency is not limited to In societies America. In Europe there is also a call to “restore the conflicting dimension of the system’s analytical tools, which is essential to understanding a society that has made communication one of its main tools and challenges as well as its main ideology” (Sedda, 2017, p. 10). Even in the context of Anglo-Saxon works, researchers call for studies to be redirected, particularly experimental studies. It is not a question of continuing to multiply these things, but above all of questioning their usefulness in order to direct them towards socially relevant ends (Donsbach, 2012).

Conclusion

We should think about the way communication (and thus journalism) is taught in colleges. The fragmentation of the field of communication - which has also been observed in several societies, and more specifically in media analysis is detrimental to the social function claimed by several researchers. There is also an urgent need to restore a critical sense of communication in all societies in order to advance scientific knowledge of the communicative phenomenon way forward.

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