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ANALYZING COMMUNICATOR ACTION: CONTENT AND COMMUNICATION PROCESS

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Abstract

This contribution proposes a hybrid methodology to analyse a diachronic random journalistic corpus. The studied corpus includes mediatisation of actions, coproduced by institutions and journalists. The method adopted is based on communication theories and models and on content analysis. Mathematical information theory and agenda building studies allow a monitoring of mediatisation process, with its actors and with its original substance wrinkled from a source to a public. Semiotic and functionalist communication models allow the analysis of the significant materiality where mediatized action is framed.

Keywords: Mediatisation, Journalism, Content Analysis.

1 SECTION

This contribution started with researches and seminars conducted in the framework of communication lectures on media framing of action and actors, individuals and collectives, what was labelled as intermediality between media contents and the realities to whom it refers, and what can be called in other words the journalistic institution of action and identities. This institution by journalistic mediatisation is in tension between two poles. The first one concentrate the routines of corporate-media relationships or sources information and the other is made by the breaking off journalistic events with variable intensity, with the crisis communication as highest level.

In addition to the pedagogical anchorage, the scientific starting point and certainly the relevance of this proposition of a hybrid methodology to analyse journalistic corpuses is the interrogation about the process of mediatisation of journalistic messages and their crystallisation in contents where can be shaped factual events chains and lines, as well as institutions and corporates images. This mediatisation process articulates communication structures and functions, what we can finally call the social reasons of contents, precisely in their journalistic and social bipolarity.

1.1 Journalistic Contents as a Pragmatic Action

Retrospectively, the notion of content can be considered as a media production and can be compared to the actual notion of digital big data. It appeared as an undifferentiated ordinary and expanded textual continuum, generated by the mass media rising in the beginning of the last century, and was defined as the negative of the others textbooks, contained and confined by their own materiality, holder of authority and questioned by methods like hermeneutics or exegesis. But content can be also approached as a scientific paradigmatic concept, according to Michel Foucault definition of the new basis of scientific knowledge, grounded in:

The significative power of the perceived and its correlation with the language, in the original forms of the experience, the organization of subjectivity from sign values and the structure secretly linguistic of data.[1]

Content analysis used in its own specific and mixed manner methods from poetic, like metrics, semantics and stylistics, from rhetoric, like working on speeches and tracking their effects on audiences, from statistics with counting and correlating indicators related to variables, from linguistics and from semiotics. Its scientific ambition combined with the media contents proliferation produce reliable and accurate standardized methods. The aim of these methods was to be used simultaneously and longitudinally by different researchers, to obtain identic or, in less, comparative results, but also to be operated by computers and algorithms.

Charles Morris introduced the concept of intermediality, in an extension of the pragmatic dimension framed by the semiotic of Charles Sander Peirce. With this concept, Morris developed the continuum between cognition, communication and action in the interactionism behaviourist perspective, where stimuli can be actions issued from purposes or projects. In addition to the commutation or semiosis between signs and their objects and between signs themselves, Morris pointed the loading of chains and semiotic possibilities not only with languages and codes, but also by general instrumental significations of events, ideas or contents. In this viewpoint, cognition is defined as a semiosis generated by contact in presence with an object or a subject; communication is considered as the implementation of a semiosis by languages and codes where are embedded absent referents; and communicative action produces a semiosis stimulated by a “communicator” who uses the pragmatic operating of contents and messages dealing with the “biotic aspect of semiotic”, made up of the psychological, the biological and the sociological phenomenon produced with the functional interoperability typical of the use of signs. It is from this position that Morris defined the communication content as the process of materialization of signs and meaning spurred of by a “communicator” and updated by a “communicatee” or interpreter, as named by Peirce.

The user of signs who effects communication is the communicator and the organism in which the sign-process is aroused by the signs of the communicator is the communicatee. The communicatee may be the same organism in which is the communicator, as when one writes a note to oneself to be read at a later time. The signs used are the means of communication and the signification made common by these means is the content of communication.[2]

Bernard Berelson used this definition of content to formalize his model of content analysis.

In the communication process a central position is occupied by the content. By communication content is meant that body of meanings through symbols (verbal, musical, pictorial, plastic, gestural) which makes up the communication itself. (...) Since the content represents the means through which one person or group communicates with another, it is important for communication research that it be described with accuracy and interpreted with insight.[3]

This model was built in response to a social, political and economic demand for scientific description and measure of media contents. In its early works, Berelson adopted a qualitative definition of content analysis, based on Alfred Schutz proposal to consider its scope as a “description of human behavior, particularly linguistic”, which still dominant in its general uses, like in the study we conducted by questioning journalistic contents.

In a sense, of course, content analysis is as old as reading itself. Whenever someone reads a body of communication content and summarizes and interprets what is there, content analysis can be said to occur. (...)

Systematic content analysis attempts to define more casual descriptions of the content, so as to show objectively the nature and relative strength of the stimuli applied to the reader of listener.[3]

It is possible to argue that the latest “quantitative turn” taken finally by Berelson and other media discourses analysts was a specific response to this demand of scientific interventionist precision. If descriptions of phenomenon’s qualities concern what affects their essences and substances, quantities descriptions provide discontinuous countable pluralities and continuous measurable dimensions: in the two cases, we have a produced series and judgments about an order [4]. This Aristotelian statement reminds in Gaston Bachelard definition of measure as a description with a specific symbolization [5]. Written series are enumerations and listing with infinity of possible encoding, especially because there written characteristic. Writing allows to fixe listing of qualities and of quantities and to intervene on the fixed items. And the basis of linguistic content analysis is the description by the elaboration of categories system, inferred by first reading – spin-off – from the content itself or produced according to the analysis objectives. In the two cases, the analyst deals with semiotic isotope sequences where meaning is embedded in fables or wholes of redundant semantic categories. By extension Roland Barthes puts description on the basis of semiotic analysis of images, in a dynamic commutation between their linguistic, plastic and iconic dimensions, their denotation and connotation [6].

1.2 Journalism as Objective and Realistic Media Discourse

Journalistic contents have a strategic position in the process of social construction of reality. News as journalistic contents are the place where is materialised the discourse – objective and realistic – about the present and the real. As an objective and realistic discourse, news occupied a medial position in the continuum of knowledge configured by scientific discourse, legal or juridical discourse, testimony, description ... or accountability. For all these discourses, objectivity doesn’t mean an absolute knowledge, but is understood as a referential knowledge, marked by its degrees of faithfulness with its referent and of impersonality or stipulated distance with the subjectivity of its producers. Political and socioeconomic justification of journalism as a media phenomenon, anchored in modernity, inherent to modern social issues and in communication machines, is precisely located in its participation in a new economy of real and present. What makes journalism a modern mediation model, operating by coagulation of common present and real in the news as a visible materiality, and by the media configuration of a junction between interaction and diffusion, presence and absence, reality and imaginary [7].

This specificity of journalistic discourse makes it, by definition, different from fiction and from promotion and auto-promotion discourses, even if all of them can provide knowledge and can share the same media as vehicle and support. In the same time, this same specificity gives the journalistic discourse its social anchorage: journalism as institutions and as actors refers to social stakeholders among many others; it is not an overhanging social device but an economical structure dealing with the dissemination of news to large audiences. What makes journalistic contents a targeted place where to appear – or disappear – for other social stakeholders and an inscription space where societies configure the utterance of their “system of records” [8].

As a targeted place of visibility or invisibility, journalism discourse interconnects news agenda builders and readers, shaping public opinions and notorieties. According to Berger and Luckmann expression, it operates as an objective externalization of world reality, internalized by audiences, and as a gap between social structures and social interactions [9]. But even if this discourse failed in connecting readers, even if it remains as a gibberish monologue, it also operates by the simple fact of being “self-evident”, expressive by its own existence, more than by its information content [8]. Tweets and other posts give digital examples of public and ambitious soliloquies, even of “low expectation”, to be shared and distributed by journalists and their audiences. What shows that in digital media age, as in the classical one, journalistic discourse accumulates the double bias of communication, as defined by the Canadian economist Harold Innis.

A medium of communication has an important influence on the dissemination of knowledge over space and over time and it becomes necessary to study its characteristics in order to appraise its influence in its cultural setting. According to its characteristics it may be better suited to the dissemination of knowledge over time than over space, particularly if the medium is heavy and durable and not suited to transportation, or to the dissemination of knowledge over space than over time, particularly if the medium is light and easily transported. The relative emphasis on time or space will imply a bias of significance to the culture in which it is embedded. [10]

In our study, rather than effects of journalistic messages, the analyzed contents were expected to allow us to reconstruct a posteriori their project or purposes and its embodiment in a mediatisation process. So, from contents fable or algorithm and from their lexical disseminated redundancy or “isotopies” [11], our project was to go back to their referential system, which distinguishes journalism as realistic discourse from the free discourse of fiction and from the promotion discourse [12]. The studied diachronic random corpus includes articles from online and outline editions of daily and weekly press titles. It was the statement made about the difficulties of the students in building a category system to spread corpuses elements that lead to the introduction in the analysis of the mathematical theory of communication and the linguistic functional model built by Roman Jakobson [13].

In their well-known mathematical information theory, where they gave a modelling of communication process, Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver produced a summary of the mediatisation process grounded in the duality of codification, transmission and reception generated by the new media technologies of their time [14]. The distinction they made about the duality source/emitter, allows underlining the ventriloquism resulting from the interlocking of sources and emitters and in the same time to investigate the first actors and purposes where started mediatisation process. The hypothesis of the operability of the functions on the content as process and as materiality, and the agenda building theories provided categories ready to use in analysis and permitted the elaboration of typologies.

Our conclusions put in light two patterns for journalistic contents, produced by “representance” and caesura, according to their referential system and its identity with the reported facts in their configured realities or its contiguity with the same facts, produced by context elements like press titles positioning, their socioeconomic contexts and the social temporalities. What can be applied to articles as identic contents of their realities facts, or as contiguous contents of these realities; contiguity content is also a pertinent type to qualify the grounded logic of the pull-out supplements, the weekend editions and the casual occasional journalistic books.

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