The Media and the Configuration of "Mental Maps": Their Relation to Institutional Homogenization among University Students and Disciplina Entities

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Abstract

This study tests some 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" (Mc-Combs & Shaw, 1976). The four main objectives were: to elucidate the cognitive effects of the media in university graduates; to detect levels of manipulation and homogenization of their "mental maps"; to ascertain the personality factors that condition differential receptivity ("Filtering" of the news) (151 variables); to determine the degree of impact and incidence of the press in the public's mental patterns and in the university identities. The sample was made up of (N=516) graduates from Cuyo University (Argentina). Quanti-qualitative techniques were complemented: semi-structured survey and interviews). The incidence of psychology and education in the differential construction of "cognitive maps" was confirmed as well as the stronger incidence of the press as regards the impact caused by news and the mental homogenization.

Keywords: Media, Education, Psychology

1. Introduction

This study tests 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 primary objetives were:
1. To elucidate such effects in audiences with different levels of education,
2. To detect levels of manipulation and homogenization of the "mental maps" linked with the centralization of the "fourth power",
3. To ascertain personality factors which condition differential receptivity of the addressees ("filter" of the news) related to the socio-evaluative context.

Two lines interest us: the first emphasizes the effects of the media according to individual psychology, and the second, centered on different parameters linked with psychosocial characteristics of the youths and the messages.

Finally, the central hypotheses are offered, taking into account that forty nine were considered:
1. there would be a marked correlation between the order of importance assigned to the information by the *media* and that adopted by youths (high incidence of "mental construing"),
2. receptivity of the addressees would vary according to cognitive competence;
3. certain psychological characteristics would render the subject less impressionable to *media* influence.

2. Method

2.1 Sample

The sample was made up of graduates (N= 516) and drop-outs (N=2157) from eighteen careers in Cuyo University (Argentina) between 1980-1993; research work that has been carried out to date. The sampling was stratified and the start, random, confidence interval was taken at 95% and error margin at 4%.

2.2 Instruments

Quanti-qualitative techniques were complemented: semi structured survey, in-depth interviews, life stories and anecdote

accounts. Also, tests were applied in order to observe the behavior of certain psychosocial variables (such as control locus, stress, aggressiveness, self-esteem). Some of these tests (such as Rotter, CEP, Maudsley's Inventory have been validated here by the author. The analysis was made in two instances: products and *processes*.

2.3 Procedure

1. Survey of data in files over ten years old.
2. Implementation of the aforementioned techniques. Being a vertical assessment, the follow-up was carried out private addresses, as graduates and drop-outs were no longer in the educational system.
3. The survey of both agendas (those of the *media* and of the public), setting up of the time frame, took into account the models of the agenda/effect: awareness, relevance and priorities (Becker, Mc Coombs, Mc Leod). Graphic *media* was also used (six representative national newspapers, displaying different "ideologies"), as well as visual *media* (television newsreels). The comparison procedure for both agendas and analytical strategy are original.

The range of variables was very wide (N=151), covering psychological, base line, pedagogic/institutional, structural an communicational aspects. Finally, hypotheses and results were compared. The methodological options made it possible to analyze the psychological dimension related to the life stories and academic aptitude measurements. The effects of the intervening variables were recognized by means of discerning interpretation.

3. Results

1. Hypotheses concerning Social, Cognitive and Media Psychology were corroborated.
2. The agenda/effect is observed: youths consider relevant only whatever is so for the *media.* The remaining information is not recovered nor is able to access the "cognitive maps".
3. A high homogenization of thought in thus confirmed, as a result of the homogenization of news (incremented in quantity by of unified quality).
4. 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 and personality act as decisive filters. In addition, the different readings that can be done in the different programs reveal disciplinary and institutional identities. Results show different interpretations and levels of "filtering" in accordance with self-esteem, control locus, n-ach, fatalism, valuations, stress, apathy, prejudices, among other variables.

4. Conclusion

There is a common axis to the hypotheses on agendas "...*nous disent non pas qu'il faut penser, mais a quoi il faut penser"*, which impinges clearly on our "mental maps". This fact constitutes a source of concern if attention is paid to the uncritical dazzling which the new language prevailingly elicits.

This constitutes a challenge to those who must prepare for a responsible interpretation of images ("visual literacy"). For psychologists, the findings suggest a revision of the task for this, the era of the image.

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