# The War for the Public's Mind

## Theoretical Tools for the Media's Construction of Reality

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Modern media widely influences what the public considers reality and truth—but how? Empirical theories seek to show how the media can construct the reality in which the public mind lives. The theories of cultivation, cognitive learning, agenda setting, or framing explain how the audience's cognitive process can be altered; psychology can be manipulated with tactical media tools. The theory of the spiral of silence describes how the audience that does not agree with the predominant idea in the media tends not to express its position—a wild card used with dissenting voices.

### Cultivation theory

George Gerbner and his colleagues developed the cultivation theory by analyzing the content of various 1960s television channels, comparing them with what the audience had watched to evaluate the consequences of television consumption over long periods within an environment dominated by television content.[1] With the cultivation theory Gerbner tells us that the stories previously found in society are now artificial products spread through media marketing. US society in the 1970s had produced children who could be exposed to artificial stories for several hours a day, and those stories came from business conglomerates with something to sell. Gerbner suggested that the cultural world was already a product of marketing and that the old world state-church relationship had been replaced by the state-television relationship.[2] Television, for Gerbner, is the greatest source of shared images and messages, the greatest source of common symbolism to immerse children in, and where adults spend their entire lives— a centralized narrative system with access to all households.[3]

Gerbner believed that even as television channels multiplied, their messages were concentrated. This technological availability became one of the greatest factors to cultivate shared reality; all social classes had access to this mass exposure to the same patterns for long periods of time. People now are born in a synthetic environment where the greatest source of information is television: children are exposed to television and its synthetic reality years before learning to speak or write.[4] In an analogous way Gerbner draws a collective mentality, as Gustave Le Bon[5] suggested, a psychological reality where individuals abandoned themselves

to the tendencies that were marked by a sociological and vertical media propaganda. The longer a person is exposed to television, the more alienated his or her concept of social reality is.[6] In short, Gerbner offers a model of cognitive approach where the repetition of televised messages over time will cultivate a distorted vision of reality, dividing the perceived distortion of reality between mass television consumers and moderate television consumers. Gerbner showed that the violence depicted by the media was exponentially greater than the violence to which people were exposed in real life in the United States, also observing that mass television consumers were more likely to accept radical coercive measures and to support military action, as they believed the news they were consuming.[7]

The experience of war in the Persian Gulf has generated a collection of stories of instances of violence from across the globe. These types of stories deprive us of time for reflection, critical distancing, and access to other alternative information, Gerbner asserts. The theory of cultivation, in relation to violence, stipulates the poisoning of the collective mentality of the population.[8] Likewise, Gerbner states that a large part of society has grown up with the synthetic reality of television without having previously shared a national culture different from that exhibited by television.[9] Now it is television that provides people with shared beliefs: through repetition, television imposes myths, ideologies, facts, and causalities that define the world and legitimize the established order.[10]

## Social learning theory

Within this media-dominated landscape, Albert Bandura developed the theory of social learning. This theory explains psychosocial functioning in terms of triadic reciprocal causation. Three factors interact with each other: the self, society, and personal factors in the form of cognitive, affective, and biological events. According to Bandura, personality is formed through a network of socio-structural influences. He argued that learning is managed by observing behaviors and that to learn, one must be interested in observing. Learning by observation is reminiscent of Gabriel Tarde's laws of imitation.[11] For Bandura, the human capacity to learn through observation, not only through experience, allows expanded knowledge and skills through information; vicarious learning allowed learning from the observation of others and the resulting consequences. Vicarious learning explains how the audience will imitate a media character covered with specific ideological and aesthetic attributes to whom positive things happen. On the contrary, a character carrying those same values and attributes to whom negative things happen causes the audience to move away from those values. The mass media allows (and provokes) vicarious learning of a multitude of values, behaviors, thoughts, and so forth.[12] Television was for Bandura a modeled learning that made it possible to

easily capture the audience's attention while providing a range of symbolic patterns of behavior much greater than in the pre-media world, much greater than in people's direct daily experience.[13] Bandura had developed a cognitive learning model where individuals adopted models represented in the media through a process of mental conceptualization, in which television and movies had been agents modeling the behavior of children and adults in their emotional responses and in adopting new lifestyles—empirically proven in several previous experiments[14]. Bandura argued that media symbols dominate people's daily lives, resulting in the construction of the social reality of people's public consciousness occurring through electronic acculturation. Bandura also maintained that the influence of electronic media transforms the social system and is the vehicle for sociopolitical change.[15] The cultural transmission was no longer social but rather media driven. The social groups of past times had dissolved and left the task of transmitting information and knowledge to media groups that generate content for propaganda purposes for large corporations.

Specifically, Bandura believed that, with the proliferation of symbolic models in the media, other traditional educational agents would be less relevant as communication technology advanced. This due primarily to its modeling power of larger volumes of dispersed population.[16] The media exercised vicarious teaching to great effect, and as more symbolic models of real life appeared in the media, the more power they would have. The power of television as a learning agent lies in the willingness of the audience to sit in front of the television as it is often easier to transmit information visually than verbally.[17] The influence of television generates audiovisual and sensitive effects on behavior.[18] Bandura observed that with satellites and new electronic communication technologies, ideas, values, cultural exchanges, and role models were to be shaped on a global scale.[19] Along with Gerbner, Bandura believed that the concept of televised reality differed from reality itself. Televised reality was a reality with which people had no direct contact with social representations on television. Television was full of characters that distorted real-world learning.[20] In keeping with the theory of cultivation, Bandura maintained that social conceptions denoted a causality with exposure to media influences; empirically there are several experiments that show the convergence of viewers' beliefs with what is represented on television. The televised versions of reality could generate collective illusions about symbolic media stereotypes.[21]

## *Agenda setting*

Another theory within the cumulative effects of the media is agenda setting. Bernard Cohen said in 1963 that the press may not have been extraordinarily successful in telling people what to think, but what issues to think about. The Cohen

quote is said to be the basis of the study by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, who developed the agenda setting theory after analyzing various US electoral campaigns. They realized that when it comes to selecting and broadcasting news, media outlets outline the political reality; the audience is only aware of the news selected. The study found that what the media presented as important issues were considered important issues by the audience. The perception was independent of the political affinity of the public and the individual. The relationship between the importance of issues and the audience's perception of the importance of issues comes from their presence in the media. This differs diametrically from the proposal of selective exposure, opening the way to the investigation of cognitive manipulation through the theory developed by McCombs and Shaw.[22] They had empirically tested Walter Lippmann's thesis that the truncated versions of the outside world presented by the media are a primary source of citizens' perceptions of public affairs.[23] The agenda setting theory is based on the observation that news content among the different channels and formats does not differ much; the media in general report on the same issues, events, or people. The method of choosing news seems to be the same from one media outlet to another. This effect makes it impossible for a person to escape from an issue, as the theory of selective exposure assumes can be done.[24]

In the first effect of the agenda setting, the media chooses a few issues from among the many that exist, and the public accepts them as if they were the true public agenda. In the second effect, the correlation between the published attributes of these issues and the attributes perceived by the audience shows us how the way an issue is presented imprints on the audience.[25] This theory has shown how the media enforce issues that are of public importance and determines the importance that are given to them. A third effect of agenda setting involves the ability of the media to influence the cognitive map of the audience, inducing the mental map of attributes between different issues. Media not only influence what matters to think about and their importance, but they also influence the perceived relationship between the chosen topics—proving Walter Lippmann's theories regarding "the pictures in our heads."[26]

## Framing

Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman developed frame theory from the academic field of economics: "The psychological principles that govern the perception of decision problems and evaluation produce predictable changes of preference when the same problem is framed in different ways. . . . The dependence of preferences in the formulation of decision problems is an important concern for rational choice theory."[27] The frame plays the same role in media analysis as it does in

cognitive psychology; it is the organizing principle that takes a set of symbols and gives them coherence and meaning. While agenda setting tells us what issues to think about, framing tells us how to think about the issues.[28] Robert Entman tells us that framing is an omnipresent process in politics. Entman explains that framing consists of selecting a few aspects of perceived reality and connecting them in a narrative that promotes a concrete interpretation of reality. On the other hand, the frame serves to define a problem, specify its causes, make moral evaluations, and propose solutions. Previously, author Joseph Klapper had introduced the concept of the phenomenistic approach, which proposed that mass media in and of itself was not sufficient to influence the audience.[29] *Framing shapes and alters audience performances and preferences through priming.*[30] Priming is an effect by which the audience makes political evaluations; the effect takes place when the news in which the frame is applied suggests to the audience that specific issues must be used to evaluate the information received. [31] Priming is thus the objective of the frame strategy; highlights the importance of issues reflected in the frame. In this way, framing presents or amplifies the importance of some or other ideas, inducing the audience to express their opinions and behave in a specific way.[32] *In the media system there is a struggle of frames fighting to be the one that gives meaning to an issue by imposing its narrative; this struggle gives us a rhetorical interaction between the concept of deliberation and framing.*[33] The framing concept can be analyzed from different perspectives and different uses. For example, the communication frame is the frame exposed by the sender; the frame of understanding is cognitive of the individual. This last frame indicates what the individual perceives as important. The former is expected to affect the latter. Two basic models of framing are episodic frames and thematic frames. The former represents concrete and isolated issues; the second matters intertwined with each other. When analyzing both types of frames, Shanto Iyengar found that in political news, episodic frames predominate, revealing that the use of this type of frame draws attention away from the social responsibility of political leaders and institutions on problematic issues and focuses responsibility on the decisions of individuals, and thus shields those actually responsible .[34] Lance Bennet maintains in this regard that information fragmentation begins by emphasizing individual actors on the political contexts in which they operate. In this way, fragmentation is sustained with the use of dramatic formats that turn events into isolated events. In this way, the connection between issues cannot be seen, leaving the social power structure invisible.[35]

Thematic frames lead the audience to hold their institutional managers responsible for the issues.[36] Two major effects are equivalency-framing effect and emphasis-framing effect; the first would be to present the same information in positive or negative terms. For example, saying that a policy is good because it

generates 95 percent employment has a greater understanding effect (it influences the recipient more) than saying that a policy is good because it generates 5 percent unemployment. The second effect is the emphasis on specific issues which influence the receiver's perception, i.e. construction of their reality.[37] The communication frame can be defined according to the emphasis of the sender. Thus, there can be an economic frame, a human-interest frame, and a social frame. Depending on the emphasis, the effects on learning, understanding, and emotions can vary. Christine Otieno and colleagues found, through an experiment, that human-interest frames could influence an increase in both learning and negative emotions in relation to an idea. They also found that people under the influence of human-interest frame exposure were primed to be more reluctant to learn about issues that balanced out their preconception of this idea.[38] The heuristic effect of the use of emotions when making an evaluation is linked to another concept that affects the cognitive tendency of decision making: anchoring. It is a concept in many approaches like priming. Once the sender has chosen which elements make up the narrative, the elements that he places the most emphasis on will be those that guide the receiver's heuristic process; the decisions of the latter will revolve around the valuation of the elements exposed by the issuer.[39] If the element in emphasis is more emotional than informative, the anchoring effect will be more profound. Höijer Birgitta reports on climate change in the Swedish media system linked this climate effect with negative or positive emotions; for example, Swedish media use fear to link climate change with disease and hardship. Through images evoking emotions such as fear, an abstract concept becomes a concrete object to the audience.[40] The emotion of hope is used to provoke a social change that avoids climate change, showing how positive individual and collective actions are in that direction. The emotion of guilt is used to report actions seen as provoking climate change, mainly individual actions.[41] In another area, Eran Halperin and his team have found in experiments that regulating negative emotions can increase political tolerance of opposing groups.[42] In short, it is known that certain emotions lead to one cognitive process or another, and that certain emotions lead to a different behavior, a decision.[43] Likewise, it is known that the human-interest cut-off episodic frames are the ones that generate the most emotional persuasion, but in the end the effects depend on personal variables.[44] Applying high emotional content in the frame or the anchoring results in greater manipulative effects on the audience.

Emotions are essential elements to process the information offered by the media, just as we obtain outside the media. Psychology, and now neuroscience, have shown us the importance of emotions in processing messages.[45] The various public actors understand the importance of emotions to ensure that their message reaches the recipient efficiently. Emotions are known to influence memory, atten-

tion, and reasoning. The message delivered must move and it must do so in the expected terms.[46] People under the influence of negative emotions focus on the dangers of the message, while people under the influence of positive emotions focus on the rewards suggested in the message. Positive ideas are supposed to help you retain more information, think more globally, and connect more with your environment; that is why the media have to be attentive to the emotions they evoke in their messages.[47] Various studies show that the more emotional people they are, the more likely they are to believe the media piece to which they have been exposed,[48] and other studies indicate that under certain emotions the audience has a harder time distinguishing between fiction and reality.[49] In the field of political communication, Sjoerd Stolwijk, Andreas Schuck, and Claes H. de Vreese explained that the emotional frame with which a party is presented can affect the voting decision of the electorate.[50] The democratic decision of a country can be affected by the media representation of the opposing parties.

The media system is designed to affect the emotional state of the recipient, since if this were not the case, the media would be meaningless.[51] A movie character to whom nothing happens, a song that does not stimulate, or a piece of news that fails to move us is not interesting content for the public. Authors speak of an "emotional public sphere," and it makes sense when it is understood that shared emotions are the basis of a society, of a nation, a way to position yourself in front of issues and communities—thus media conglomerates tend to lead the audience to a shared emotional state about a specific issue, with the news providing an interpretive framework that allows subjective emotions to become public.[52]

## Spiral of silence

The spiral of silence is an important media theory that shows how an individual can join a group even without agreeing with them. The theory assumes that public opinion is the interaction between an individual and his environment—thus not being marginalized from that environment is more important than being right.[53] Researcher Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann explains how the formation of individual opinion is conditioned by the opinion of the majority. According to the spiral of silence theory, individuals form opinions by looking for references in the environment and observing how many opinions there are for and against, looking at the level of commitment to the opinion, the urgency of the opinion, and the chances of success or failure of the opinion. In this way, if individuals conclude that their opinions can prevail, they will promote the expression and defense of their opinions and be less fearful of marginalization. On the contrary, if individuals expect their opinion will not prevail, they will tend not to express their opinions.[54] Noelle-Neumann then suggests that public opinion can be expressed in public

without fear. According to the study, the mass media are basic sources of information individuals use to analyze their own opinions.[55] Noelle-Neumann suggests shame is an accurate indicator of fear of social marginalization. Because people have a social nature, shame would prevent them from exposing themselves to fear of marginalization when expressing personal opinions.[56] Thoroughly testing the theory of the spiral of silence, Noelle-Neumann tells us, requires a social situation in which an issue has a strong moral dimension, generates public controversy, and divides the population into opinion groups. The spiral of silence usually occurs when the mass media clearly positions itself in favor of one of the opinion groups in such a way that people with opinions different from that defended by the media are afraid of social marginalization.[57] The theory not only shows again the influence of emotions to guide the masses, but it also points to the media as a necessary tactical tool to induce emotions in the population.

## Considerations

Extensive scientific evidence shows how the media system influences the thoughts and behaviors of society. The synthetic reality of the media is assumed as a reality by a large part of the population. Once different power groups have direct access to manipulating the perception of reality of a large part of the population, articulating society under different parameters to the interests of the power groups is the ideal, if not utopian, outcome. Because the media system has no borders today, getting a society to revolt against its natural elites or against its own tradition and culture is worth its costs. Managing to generate revolts and discontent in the background of the political powers of states is such a simple task that some public relations companies already offer their services for such tasks. The media system and the power groups that manage them represent a dilemma in the exercise of power between traditional institutional powers and modern power groups.

Harold Lasswell defined the act of communication as, "Who says what? On what channel? To whom? and with what effect?" Lasswell regarded knowing the environment and the relationship of social elements with the environment as necessary variables in a communicative act. Lasswell saw communication as an organism and that for cognitive media manipulation theories to work, a basic element was needed: audience attention—with mass media as the means to direct the audience's attention to issues that provided a beneficial response only to the elites.[58] New techniques for manipulating the public mind are being developed right now, and not all of them come from the media. Analyzing the war for the public mind today forces us to seek perspectives that encompass all of humanity as a single living organism.  ❑

**Notes**

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