Television and Culture: theories and research methods

Giovambattista Fatelli *

*Department of Communication and Social Research, Sapienza University in Rome, Via Salaria 113, Rome 00198, Italy

Abstract

Many scholars consider the television industry as a compartment, a means of communication, like many others, dedicated to churning out cultural products and events in order to be sold into the market. Not paying so much attention to the contents (whose very often differ only for costs, durability and performance in terms of advertising), in this context the phenomenon is analyzed mainly as an engine of development.

But while a new holistic paradigm appears now, both in media and in television studies, this dispersion of the television in the jungle of immaterial sphere and everyday-life could delay the benefits of the change of style and even lose altogether.

It is important now to escape from the anxiousness of an analysis that lingers on the individuals or small groups. An analysis that puts its focus on target, niches and output, behavior and personality, trying instead to address social actions, communities, holes opened into the social fabric and civic culture as well as in the enjoyment of rights and participation.

It is therefore time to roll up our sleeves and to do it quickly, before the irresistible rise of new media and social networks will put out of the way the mainstream TV and, with it, an important part of our work.

© 2014 European Journal of Research on Education by IASSR.

Keywords: Media effects, Media influence, Communication research, Television, Complexity.

After ninety years of Social Research and Mass Media studies, we can confirm with a good level of confidence the great importance of mainstream mass media in our contemporary society. More specifically, among media, Television seems to perform the main role in the last fifty years. Nevertheless, it seems to me that our certainties do not scrutinize enough the problem, laying in an surface of unanimous convergence.

After a period of turbulence, mainly due to their frenetic nature, now media seems more focused on their “phatic function” than on the others, and International Media Research looks today jagged, uncertain and weak. All the scholars seems to complain about this, but I’m now convinced that this has become the most authentic picture of a factual situation. A situation in which media research seems mired in its historical faults, and where it is no longer able to get out due to it’s overestimated confidence in it’s own abilities.

In order to light up this picture, we must also admit that Communication research have also achieved remarkable goals: it has reached academic a good dignity, consolidating noticeable traditions of research; it has assumed a fairly accurate appearance, though multiform; it has gained a considerable level of visibility and importance, although…. In addition, during the years, many scholars gave readings of great interest about the television phenomenon in it’s

* E-mail address: giovambattista.fatelli@uniroma1.it
wholeness, covering all the different angles (James Carey, Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, Joshua Meyrowitz, Elihu Katz, etc.). Last but not least, Research doesn’t appear “unarmed” in front of the epochal transition we are going through, analyzing media structures that seems able to undermine the centrality of Television as we know it (Manuel Castell, Henry Jenkins, etc.).

However, trying to draw an evaluation without chauvinism, the elements of perplexity and depression seem to prevail over the comforting ones. First of all, the landscape of theoretical development as a whole seems a bit static, struggled between the aging of technologies and the “chase of the news” that often brings to confusion or bias. Secondarily, the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach (waiting for a “strong” core) is not revealing it self as a winning move; if, in one hand, it enriches the range of analysis, on the other it often prevents to establish a solid chain of research, saving the guidelines from their constitutional “liquidity”. In the end, the social mandate entrusted to communication studies, and specifically to television, contains many ambiguities; these ambiguities seems to be both a “double edge sword” and an insurmountable obstacle for the real progress of knowledge in this field, and more specifically, for the social meaning of the television phenomenon.

Many scholars consider the television industry as a compartment, a means of communication, like many others, dedicated to churning out cultural products and events in order to be sold into the market. Not paying so much attention to the contents (whose very often differ only for costs, durability and performance in terms of advertising), in this context the phenomenon is analyzed mainly as an engine of development. An engine with with trespassing on the political and legal standpoint, as many forces as the TV is considered a precious resource, in order to fierce battles for its control. Other scholars imagine television as a powerful technological hammer, capable of shaping the development of human culture, deploying such a profound influence on the same substrate anthropological history of civilization. On a wavelength philosophically still à la page, cryptic scholars have imagined, in the more rarefied spheres of thought, epic battles between epistemic structures and semiotic spheres which almost always resolved in a threat of colonization for the miserable real life.

Still others see it as a “conative” tool, an extension of the technical possibilities of spreading knowledge and fun at the wider layers of the population, a machine devised to induce conformity or persuasion, which is essential to disassemble and reassemble the pieces to fully understanding the mechanisms and mastering operation, without ever questioning on the difference between a piece of soap and a candidate in the general election.

On the one hand, we have therefore too deep structures, earthquakes irresistible but sometimes improbable, where empirical research is not very useful; on the other, a lack of instrument of cultural reproduction, control and simplification of language and mind, a peaceful tool around which the research instead thickens but always putting down at the foot of ethics, politics, or worse, the burden judgment on the use made of it.

On the other hand, a very dangerous hydra is sprawling, able to suck your brain to do with it without even noticing, the other a gentle giant that care must be taken only to put the big feet in the right place. Then we inherit from the past a preliminary background divided between acceptance and rejection, which in turn comes from an epistemological break hard to make: that between an “abstract moralism” that has never ceased to regret a small ancient world to the shelter of vulgarity and never abdicated its duty to “save” the masses that no longer exist, on one side, and a “value-free technicality” that did not hesitate to cripple the signs of Max Weber in order to hide behind the embrace of modernity the disarticulation of the scientific knowledge and its partial subservience to the establishment.

But we must note, at this point, that many elements that inspired the framework and constituted so markedly bipolar have long been in crisis and are close to the end, on the political as on the cultural and epistemological side. The end of the Cold War reshaped the geo-political balance and, along with the Berlin Wall, saw discard instances of propaganda. A phenomenon that inevitably underline ideological manifestos, certifying the eclipse of the “grand narratives” on a macro cultural level. At present, communication does not seem more interested in fighting for the subjugation of the masses or for their redemption: the promises of a “released” communication all over have left the place for the new fetish “total” idolatry: the market, within a sad counter-utopia in which communication seems increasingly the driving force of the global economy and less and less an instrument of brotherhood among peoples.

On the epistemological level, is very gradual instead indicate landslides that much promise in terms of happiness heuristics and greater understanding of complex phenomena, but also takes a long time to have effect on empirical
research. The rationalist and reductionist paradigm that has dominated and that is dominating the “exact” sciences is slowly losing his iron grip and even the proud appeal that it has exercised on the social sciences throughout the twentieth century, and so far we do not know if this is a healthy movement of emancipation or the abandonment by the hard sciences of a kind of knowledge considered little more than a burden. Meanwhile, it is settling a favorable appreciation of communication as eminently cultural phenomenon, a consequence perhaps of a vague hegemony socio-anthropological offering, also in the analysis of television, the most interesting hypothesis and lines of research, attended to by cultural studies and focus on the concept of “gender” and the idea of “intersubjective construction” of meaning and social reality.

While a new holistic paradigm appears now, this dispersion of the television in the jungle of immaterial sphere and everyday-life - that challenges the scholars not on what television “is in itself”, but on what it “is for others” (Pirandello) - could delay the benefits of the change of style and even lose altogether. It is certainly useful, and perhaps necessary, agree on the vision of TV as an important hub among the gestation of the collective habits, the symbolic exchange and the unbelievable instability of identities and social relations; but the condition that personally I would place to avoid the return to macro-naturalistic interpretation (even tempered by nebulous qualitative tools and “mentalistic” patterns - is the complete recovery of the socio-historical analysis, the only one able to return to television (and other communication phenomena of contemporary life) its dimension of Durkheim’s external “social fact”, the only one able to recover a socio-economic dimension that focuses strategies and voluntary choices of cultural policy, the only able to oppose the inexorable slide in private and in the domestication medial a shred of public sphere communication, even if only to bear witness to the agony or death.

Many progresses has been made in the study of media and television, many steps have been addressed. The research output from one dimension strictly and dryly quantitative and is open to a broader understanding of the complex cultural phenomena; from the notion of short-term effects, focused on the behavior of individuals, we moved to an expanded conception, conscious of the long-term, the stickiness of social anchors, the discordance of the referents. Less brilliant is the path to autonomy and the significance of this knowledge, too often still lingered to serve in workshops where they prepare the most brilliant political careers or make unpopular measures milder or simply repackage polls, glorify companies or clone new format. It is important now to escape from the anxiousness of an analysis that lingers on the individuals or small groups. An analysis that puts its focus on target, niches and output, behavior and personality, and that is instead increasingly listlessly in addressing social actions, communities, holes opened into the social fabric and civic culture as well as in the enjoyment of rights and participation.

It is therefore time to roll up our sleeves and to do it quickly, before the irresistible rise of new media and social networks will put out of the way the generalist TV and with it an important part of our work.

References