

RECEPTION ANALYSIS SEEN FROM THE MULTIPLE MEDIATION MODEL: some issues for the debat

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RESUMO

This paper is an application of the "Multiple Mediation" Model, as it has been developing by the author during the last 10 years. The model is used as a way to substantiate a reconceptualization of different aspects of the television reception process. As understood by Orozco, it is continually under construction, and emerges from analysis made by different thinkers. Its formulation has been and will continue to be the outcome of much reflexivity between existing theoretical and epistemological assumptions (within the Cultural Studies and Critical Audience Research traditions) and empirical, mostly qualitative, data.

Palavras-chave: Multiple Mediation. Television reception process. Televisioning. Social rules. Perception.

1 INTRODUCTION

In this presentation, I would like to raise a few issues concerning media reception which I consider to be especially critical for the future development of this field of research. They are issues, I believe, which need to be discussed at different levels, but in particular at an epistemological one. Having worked as a qualitative researcher in this field for more than a decade, I feel that at the same time that reception analysis has substantially contributed to produce a distinctive understanding on media and audiences - and to a great extent to a much more fruitful understanding of communication and society in general - this contribution runs the risk of not going far enough, among other reasons, because of a lack of discussion of some of its main implicit assumptions.

It is not that we have not discussed reception. Of course we have. The point, seems to me, is one about the right level of the discussion, on the one hand, and on the other, is one of not-included issues, like "the length and sites" of the reception process, and the "various qualities of the contact between audience and television", and, of course, their consequences for the appropriate empirical evidence.

In this context, then, my expectation here is rather modest, since I do not pretend to present a refined and complete argument -- in the manner Klaus B. [Jensen](#) have masterfully done in his last book (1995) - but, inspired by James Lull's concern for the right empirical evidence in Cultural Studies, to question again a couple of assumptions that in spite of the international ongoing work (e.g. [Morley](#), 1992; [Lull](#), 1995; [Silverstone](#), 1994) and the current debate (Lull, 1997; [Tufte](#), 1997) still need to be discussed.

I attempt to do this questioning by drawing on what I perhaps presumptuously have called the "Multiple Mediation" Model--which I have been developing during the last 10 years (see [Orozco](#), 1987; 1995) and which I will use here partially only --. I

specifically use this model as a framework from which to see the and also as a way to substantiate a reconceptualization of different aspects of the television reception process in particular.

I consider the Model to continually be in the construction process, as I have benefited from its concrete applications from which I have foreseen some reformulations of reception and new possibilities for its analysis. What I most like about this Model is the fact that its formulation has been and will continue to be the outcome of much reflexivity between existing theoretical and epistemological assumptions (within the Cultural Studies and Critical Audience Research traditions) and empirical, mostly qualitative, data.

By raising some issues and questions, what I also hope to do here, is to connect some of the implications for what counts, or what should count as research evidence in reception analysis. I am convinced that the crucial connection in developing knowledge, from the empirical level, (e.g. in doing research) is not epistemology with theory, but epistemology with METHOD, and thus with the EVIDENCE each method enables to collect.

I also think that at this moment of the communication research state in general and that of the media reception analysis in particular, it is worth while to do a revision of what we have developed and of the modes of that development. A revision which need to be accomplished by the concurrence of many, and which for obvious reasons I do not pretend to do here. I endorse the idea put forward by the sponsors of the International Communication Association Conference of 1996, when they planned an entire day before the main meeting sessions for a multidisciplinary discussion of key issues in communication with the aim of "making sense" at the theoretical, methodological and technical levels. In any case, making sense of this passionate field of research for myself and for Latin America's "comunicologos" has been always a challenge for me, and is one of my major research motivations.

"Reception" came to mean many things at the same time, and thus not too much any more.

To start with, I think that the very name: reception, has become uncomfortable, to say the least. In one way or another, this has been acknowledged by almost every author in the field, and especially by those within the Cultural Studies tradition (Lull, 1997). "What do we mean by reception", has come to be an obligatory issue to be dealt with in each piece of research.

Reception as a concept, while getting differentiated and meaningful, little by little became insufficient to account for what it supposedly had to, and it came to be a non self evident concept.

That is also what has happened with other related and basic terms in this field, like "Television", which have become so rich and comprehensive that they paradoxically have lost their self understanding value. For instance: What television do we refer to, or what do we have in mind when we mention the word television? Broadcast TV, satellite TV, cable TV, VCR TV and interactive TV? Which quality of television is the one we mean when we refer to it? Television as a medium, as a technology, as an institution?

Reception likewise, became synonymous with several things like: receiving, interaction, perception, appropriation, decoding, consumption, negotiation, viewing, and more ... or at least the term has been preceded by qualifications like active-passive (reception), critical-conformist (reception), mediated non-mediated (reception), process or activity of (reception), etc.

I myself have used the term differently throughout my research studies, and similarly to others, I have found myself in the situation of giving a necessary explanation of the specific meaning ascribed to the word reception. Furthermore, even discontent with explicitly identifying reception with a process, I have emphasized reception as a long, complex, necessarily mediated, but contradictory process of multiple interactions whose results are not predictable.

I like this definition, but it has almost nothing to do with the dictionary definition of reception, and little to do with other authors definitions. It is of course, a working definition which has come out of a reflexivity process involving concepts and empirical evidence. I will come back to this definition later.

The point I want to stress for the moment is that in spite of some theoretically well supported definitions of reception -- and of reception analysis, and of audiences as well -- many popular understandings of reception seem to me to be different only at (a first?) one level of analysis; perhaps at the theoretical (rhetorical?) level.

This is so, because in most cases, what changes in the variety of definitions of reception is the emphasis on the qualities of reception, but not its premises. For one, TV reception, even when the emphasis is put on reception as process, rather than as a moment, it usually continues to be understood as an activity passing around the TV screen. That means a process which involves the TV mainly as a medium.

If we understand that TV is not only a medium, but also a technology and an institution, simultaneously, then there must be more conceptualization behind this

assumption in order to make it intelligible. Otherwise, what we would have at hand is a reductionist view of TV and consequently, of the reception process related.

And if we agree that each understanding has different implications, we will also agree that a process of this type, obviously, is a process going on most of the time WITHIN the household, --as our colleague Thomas Tufte, (1997) has sharply noted when critically discussing a work of Silverstone, (1994).

Then, when television reception is a process circumscribed to the household and developed around the TV screen, the pertinent research evidence would have to do, --as we have witnessed in most reception analyses-- perhaps not only, but mainly, with that viewing situation and context (in the living room), and with those possible social interactions between the TV screen, the viewers, and the others (the family) taking place in that specific spot (household).

In such case, also, it is implicitly assumed, that the reception process starts when the TV set gets on, or when the viewer is in front of it, and the process ends when it is off or when the viewer goes away from the TV screen.

In sum, a living room, a family, a TV set, a TV content, and of course, viewers and a household would be the main items from which the researcher has to collect empirical evidence.

Then, it must be clear, that in a case like this, the implicit assumption is: "TV reception takes place at (1) a specific spot (2) at a time and (3) --most importantly for my purposes here-- is fixed by the length (the beginning and the end) of the viewers, audiovisual-physical contact with the TV screen.

Again, this is not wrong, but it is incomplete.

Television reception: a flashing, mediated, never ended-process of multiple interactions taking place at diverse scenarios.

In order to discuss the above mentioned assumption, I would like to start by proposing a different concept to name television reception. A name which captures at the same time the specificity of this particular medium --which by no means should be taken only in rhetorical ways, as I will argue latter-- and be fresh enough to be substantiated in a more integral manner since its very introduction into this research field terminology. This name is "televisioning".

By composing this term out from the medium involved, I want to stress my perception that interactions with media are MEDIUM SPECIFIC, (without being reduced to the medium components) if we see them from a critical communication perspective, and thus, these interactions have to be investigated in a distinctive manner.

To this point I have emphatically argued many times elsewhere, that we do not "read" television or the televised texts, --although some time we do listen to TV as if it were a radio--. more over, I also think that even using terms --more eye related and less TV related"- like "watching TV" or "TV viewing-as we have done-' we would not differentiate enough the specificity of television-viewers- interaction from those other interactions taking place in reference to other media. Fi-Im being a good example in as much as it also implies viewing or watching.

The point is that each medium MEDIATES in a distinctive way the communication process and does play an important role in defining the possible interactions which go along with it. Consequently, this should be, not only explicitly acknowledged, but also seriously taken into account when collecting empirical evidence during the research process.

For instance, in the case of news televisioning, besides collecting information about audience's televisioning strategies and-or superthemes, it would be necessary to collect medium, genre and news program evidence --perhaps even evidence from specific news items transmitted-- in order to find out about the TV strategies (in the same way and of the same type as that collected from the audience) (Jensen, 1998 forthcoming). Something we at least partially did in the News of the World Project. Not one, but many scenarios in each televisioning (process).

In order to see the @difficulties with accepting that the process of televisioning takes place at one single spot, and is only a one time process, I want to refer to a children-s audience interacting with the TV.

Here, a first site of the televisioning certainly is that in front of the TV screen while children are usually at home, in their living rooms. At this site, which I prefer to call "SCENARIO" or TELEVISIONING SCENARIO to be more precise, also a first perception of the TV develops among children and a first meaning production is accomplished. This accomplishment could involve either a simple appropriation, a negotiation of meanings and be a critical appropriation of TV, or an innovative meaning production after a resistance to the meaning offered by the TV.

The point I want to stress here is not about the degree to which the negotiated appropriation can be critical to the original, - which could be an issue for TV education- but the fact that the appropriation is not final. Could ever a medium appropriation be final?

It is not final, because once the TV set is off children go to their room or to the front yard, wherever, and start talking about, or even playing what they watched on

the TV. Then, rooms and front yards become televisioning scenarios too, in as much as other appropriations or re-appropriations of the TV are taking place there.

More over, the next day, children go to school and usually talk with their peers about what they have watched on the TV the day before. In doing so, TV is "brought" into the school, making the school just another televisioning scenario, or more than one scenario, when re-appropriations take place in both, within and outside the teaching room.

The number of scenarios by itself is not so important. What matters is that in each scenario there might be different conditions, involving different social actors, and would take place diverse interactions. Each scenario includes limitations and possibilities for the process of televisioning.

For example, in the case of a children-s TV audience, the school scenario brings their peers, their teachers, and the school as institution INTO THE TELEVISIONING PROCESS. And if we want to complicate the picture even more, we could add still another scenario: the neighborhood. So that other children's friends, and other adults, other SOCIAL RULES, routines, negotiations, and the own institutionality of neighborhood also ENTER INTO the children-s televisioning.

What I want to stress here is that televisioning needs to be explored as a big process encompassing other mini-processes and crossing along different scenarios. To what extent a scenario shapes the televisioning and defines the type of possible interactions between an audience and the TV, is always an empirical question and is always audience specific too.

For instance, the neighborhood scenario would be more relevant for the audience in certain areas than in others, and their importance also varies according to other criteria of space, cultural orientations and socioeconomic status of the audiences. In the same way any other scenario would become more meaningful for some audiences.

Each scenario poses a challenge to the researchers in terms of the evidence that has to be collected. This challenge -- it seems to me-- is mainly methodological. However, the rationale behind is not technical, but epistemological, since the point at hand is not one of having the right research skills to find the right evidence, but the fact that the decisions about what and how much evidence must be included are not only a matter of researchers- preferences or particular choices. They are epistemological decisions in the first place, since they have to do with the specific way in which a researcher is able to formulate and conceive of his-her object of study.

In my conception of televisioning, there are obviously several assumptions too. For one, that the contact with the TV or, rather, the audiovisual contact between the TV and the audience is maintained along the process.

This does not mean to say that the TV set "goes" with the audience in its journey throughout its usual scenarios. What it means is, in the first place, that this contact is not circumscribed to the eye contact with the screen. It could not be that way, in so far as audiences have prefigurations and memories of their perceptions from the TV screen.

The limit between what is on in the TV set and "what is on" in the mind of each member of the audience is not clear. Which image is actually more real, the one on the screen or the one in the mind? or let me ask the question the other way around: Which image would be less distorted, the one in the TV screen or the one in the audience mind? Or which image would not be a representation of something else? The difficulty in answering, these questions exemplifies the problem we have in differentiating between TV images and mind images.

In the second place, the contact between audience and TV IS multiple: rational, emotional, symbolic, physical, esthetical. So that it is not only based on audiovisual perception components. The contact is also based on other type of perception involving feelings, previous knowledge, and ideas or stereotypes. If our contact with the TV were based only on images and sounds, we would have to accept that reality exists by itself, independently of the person who is trying to apprehend it, since images and sounds in nature do not necessarily depend upon human will or interventions to exist and be reproduced. At least I do not believe that TV reality exists naturally. My guess is that this is not the case, although we must recognize that there are different positions about this point.

And in the third place, we have to accept that the contact span between TV and its audience, cannot be reduced to a direct corporal type contact either. If we came to love and like a TV character, we do not need to have him-her on all the time to keep our feeling, in the same way that we do not need to be looking at or listening a loved one to keep our feeling of love.

Audience members regularly retrieve what I call the "TV REFERENCE" rather than the message. TV audiences carry this references with them, in the same way as they carry other sociocultural references. And references can be memories, ideas, pieces of information, feelings, sensations, images of course, etc. In so far as the audience is able to talk about a TV reference, to transmit somehow its feeling, to share it with others, to negotiate it, or to work on it, the audience is carrying the TV reference with

it, and thus its contact with the TV is maintained. If it were otherwise, we would be extremely limited in our research on televisioning.

This point about the audience's type of contact with TV seems to me of special importance beyond the acknowledgement of being a multiple contact. It is important because we cannot continue implicitly assuming --as we have done in most reception research, even qualitative-- that the main task of this type of research is to explore the audience vis a vis a TV content, whereby content is understood in rational terms. So the contact implies thinking or rationality only.

If we really accept the multiple dimension of this audience-TV contact, then we need to develop other methodological techniques to account for the emotions involved, or for the aesthetic perceptions. To account finally for other "knowing rationalities" which are involved in, and also give sense to the audience-TV interactions.

Based on my research experience, which can be distorted, I guess that both, audience's contact and audience's further' interaction with TV are primarily --and frequently too-- mainly emotional. It is also my guess that the research methods we use: in depth and open-ended interviews, participatory observation, questionnaires and the like, capture the more rational, verbalized dimension of the contact and oblige audiences to translate into a verbal dimension what they mainly experience in other dimensions and languages.

In trying to expand the research possibilities a Mexican colleague of mine ([Cornejo](#), 1993) and myself have tried the Psychodrama technique to explore the affective dimension of audiences- TV interaction. After doing some initial experiments in this particular directions, I unfortunately have abandoned this path, partly because of lack of skills in this particular techniques, partly because of lack of financial resources, but partly because of lack of interested colleagues with whom to discuss this type of concerns. Nevertheless, I still think that a more creative and differentiated combination of methodologies is needed to advance our understanding of audience and its multiple interaction with TV.

Another assumption within the Multiple Mediation Model is that Televisioning is a process in which AUDIENCES DO NOT LOSE OTHER IDENTITIES.

A father does not stop being a father by watching TV. In fact, this assumption should not be taken as distinctive to this' Model. In one way by another, qualitative researchers (especially) within the Cultural Studies and-or the Critical Audience Research traditions have acknowledged the fact that audiences do not interact with media with a "blank mind". The concept of "supertheme" developed by Klaus Jensen seems to me to be just but one example of this recognition.

However, the methodological implication of fully assuming the audience not only as audience, but as a regular segment of social subjects in a televisioning process, is that besides collecting evidence about their specificity as audience, and about the context of its televisioning, evidence about "what else they are", must be collected too, to understand their being an audience. For example evidence about an audience's other social practices.

The picture coming out from data collected from the audience in one scenario, even might vary from one scenario to another and can be different from that picture emerging after exploring several scenarios. Not because the picture can be larger, but qualitatively different. Here applies the old principle that the total is not the same as the simple mathematical sum of its parts, but something very different.

In this way, televisioning is not only a long process going on along various scenarios, but --I argue-- a necessarily mediated process. (6)

Mediation and sources of mediation. From mediation to practices, and through Televisioning research to different logics of discovery.

I have been using "mediation" as an analytical concept to account for the structuring and re-structuring of the televisioning process (Orozco, 1995) . The word mediation, at least in Spanish and in English, does not necessarily imply media. Mediation as a word and as a concept exists independently of mass or communication media.

This linguistic root is important to point out, so that it would be easier to understand that not only media, or in this case the Television medium, is a source of mediation. There are various sources of mediation-, television as such just being one among them.

Not one, but many mediations and sources of mediation in the televisioning . Each scenario involved in televisioning is a source of mediation, as well as each institution which plays a role in them, in so far as these are signifying social action. Other mediations come from the others, some from the culture itself.' Language could be considered here a source of mediation, as well as identity, authority, power(s), religion, level of education, type of work or place of residence.

In the Multiple Mediation Model, I wanted to put together different types of mediation without the intention of exhausting the possibilities. In this sense, mediation is more an analytical category to make sense of specific televisioning processes with specific audiences. As I wrote elsewhere, mediation cannot be seen. It is something that only can be inferred (Orozco, 1995).

To facilitate the understanding of this, somehow invisible quality of mediation, let me use a concrete example: the case of the "preconceptions" about news that Mexican TV viewers had, when they were interviewed for the "news of the worldly, project".

In this case, the source of the mediation can be said to be the cumulative viewers' experience with TV news. We further could classify this mediation as personal or individual mediation, and be put in the same category with age, gender, race, personal history or cognitive and emotional mediations.

Other types of mediations are institutional, situational, contextual and technological. But again, we could add or subtract both types of mediation and particular mediations. The point is to acknowledge their POTENTIAL EXISTENCE and their influence in shaping and reshaping the televisioning process.

The mediations we could find and how would they be manifested -would depend upon each audience and its context. While a researcher could anticipate that such and such mediation might be present in an audience, the way in which these mediations appear and their actual importance for the televisioning are always empirical questions, something that cannot be fully determined in advance, but something important to take into consideration for the type of evidence needed.

Assuming that each mediation manifests itself along specific mechanisms, such mechanisms have to be explored and eventually be made evident, also because they are not isolated, but part of a audience's practice. ([Martin Barbero, 1991](#))

If we take the case of TV news, and want to account for the technological mediation -- referred in this case to the intrinsic possibilities of TV as an electronic device-- we will direct our attention to the type of visual and other discourse-supporting elements involved in the news presentation, to the importance given by the TV company to specific news items --as measured by the ranking and the time given to them -- and to the way news addresses the audience or implies the TV viewer.

Yet another different example of making mediations evident in the research process is the "school socializing influence, taken as institutional mediation in children's televisioning. Here, researchers will look for the specific disciplinary mechanisms-practices (dialogical or authoritarian) used by the teacher to keep children quiet, the pedagogical methodology (e.g. deduction or induction oriented), the position the teacher has vis a vis television, the position the school as an institution has too, vis a vis television's role in children's education, etc.

2 NO ONE, BUT MANY MEANING COMMUNITIES IN TELEVISIONING PROCESSES.

The mere existence of various scenarios leads us to consider the existence of various meaning communities as well, in so far as there is a meaning negotiation process taking place in the scenarios. For analytical purposes, within the Multiple Mediation model I have distinguished between several types of meaning communities and between meaning communities and the interpretive community too. This last community considered as the total synthesis of the interplay of all other communities involved.

In the "front of the screen-scenario" there is at least one community: the viewing community. This however, is neither the same as the interpretive community nor necessarily or not always, the most relevant appropriation community. In this sense, the viewing community might serve as the default community. Usually, the viewing community is just one among other meaning communities along televisioning. In each community an appropriation or a re-appropriation of meanings takes place- This is also why I have called all these "appropriation communities", too.

The importance of differentiating among several communities is that of locating where the production of meaning is performed, and where and how this meaning can be transformed. Martin Barbero's (1986) original definition of mediation is precisely "the place where the meaning is given in the communication process"

This understanding implies that in any scenario of the televisioning, more than one meaning community might interplay. This is manifested in the negotiation process that takes place there. Along the same linen within the Multiple Mediation Model, it is assumed that some communities can be in opposition to each other and produce a kind of "neutralizing effect" in the meaning production. This has been the case in one of my research studies.

In this case, there were at least four meaning communities mutually interacting: the family, the school, the television and the viewing community. Some times, in the household scenario, the schools influence would be the most important source of mediation for children's production of meaning. Some other times, however, the family would maintain its prevalent influence beyond the household boundaries, and be the stronger mediation in children's televisioning in the end.

The implication of this interplay of communities for research is that empirical evidence from each of these communities has to be collected.

In my own research I have done that by exploring the COMMUNITIES' REPERTOIRES and their specific mediation on children's SCRIPTS for social action (agency in terms of Giddens theorization).

By repertoires I have understood the cultural orientation towards which meaning is produced. Scripts have been used as analytical categories to account for the conjunction of meaning and action, i.e. meaningful agency .

3 TOWARDS A NEW LOGIC OF DISCOVERY THROUGH TELEVISIONING RESEARCH.

This brief presentation could not be conclude without a word on the paradigm informing the development of new knowledge. The Multiple Mediation Model could not ever be developed within a mainstream perspective of science. A perspective in which quantitative methodology is used and demonstrations or statistical generalizations are the primary goal of research.

I am convinced that televisioning research not only has to be developed through a qualitative methodology, but most' importantly, I think that the required knowledge should be developed from a different "scientific" perspective. My guess here is that we need something of what Jensen (1995) proposes as abduction. He distinguishes abductions from indications and deductions, in that abductions consist "of a first premise which is particular and factual, a second premise that is general and hypothetical, and a conclusion which is particular and hypothetical. (1995: 160)

In the same line of this proposal, I have been using a different perspective which can be called ASSOCIATIVE and which can be distinguished from other perspectives used in development "serious" knowledge.

This perspective shares much of the interpretative, heuristic paradigm, in as much as the general aim is also to arrive to an understanding, not to develop an explanation or to fulfill a prediction. Yet this associative perspective differs from most common ways of interpretation processes in that the researcher INTEGRATES elements which apparently are not or cannot be involved, making NEW CONNECTIONS --which cannot be seen, only inferred-- upon which the construction of the object of study is accomplished, as I have done with "Televisioning".

Without being an expert on epistemology of science, I have developed a comparison between what I consider to be FOUR major interests or orientations in doing research .

The first one is what we all know as the positivistic (scientific) paradigm. A paradigm which privileges quantitative methodologies, and is focussed on predictions. For instance, this would be the orientation behind doing research to design instructional programs whereby the production of some specific learning in the

audience would be the result of a successful prediction. Predictions, in this case, would be based on a specific combination of learning inputs.

Another paradigm is what is known as realistic. Here what is expected is to develop explanations rather than predictions. For some, this realistic effort is just a variable of the scientific paradigm. However, followers of this effort would say that predictions are not exactly explanations but only substantiations of why something occurred or came to be the case. Within a Realistic perspective, the context of an event is very important to account for its explanation.

Both, the positivistic and the realistic paradigms share an emphasis on demonstration, that is, on positive knowledge.

It is my bet that the communication field needs knowledge of the four types mentioned. However, I think that televisioning research in particular needs to be explored mostly from the associative perspective, as interaction with media are every time more, a basic, perhaps vital, multiple process in the daily lives of members of the audiences.

For instance, just by doing research within this associative effort we could see how and why schools and teachers, friends and neighbors become part of the children's televisioning. And at the same time this way of exploring televisioning makes room for intervention from the school or from the household, and perhaps even emancipatory transformation by and for the audiences.

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