

# MALGORZATA LISOWSKA-MAGDZIARZ

## *Methodology of Media Studies – Trends, Concepts and New Challenges*

### **KEY WORDS**

epistemology, paradigm, model, new media

### **ABSTRACT**

The scope of research on media and mass communication consists of numerous research fields, among which different methodological paradigms can be used: phenomenological, psycho-sociological, socio-cultural, critical, rhetorical, cybernetic, economical, multicultural, participating. Media analysis is being done using behavioral, transmission, interaction and transactional approaches. Historians also point out that the development of media studies and social communication has always been connected with the progress of diverse paradigms in all of social sciences and humanities. Resolving the dilemma of what and how to research is always determined by *episteme* created by the media dominating in the experience of social communication in the given era. The article is dedicated to the analysis of relationships between media epistemology and the certainties accepted at different periods of development in media studies, most important problems of those periods and proposed methodological solutions.

Although mass media studies (or, broadly put, communication studies) as a field of academic studies are nearly a century and a half old, media research is still being conducted without the support of a grand theory. Communication studies are also methodologically unspecific. Contemporary media research draws freely from the methodological findings of an entire spectrum of humanities and social sciences, from aesthetics and art history, linguistics, psychology, social psychology, sociology, anthropology and political sciences, to economics and management studies. While the lack of both a grand theory and methodological distinctiveness can be treated as a deficiency, it may also certainly be viewed as a strength: it enables media scholars to move freely beyond the borders of different academic disciplines, it opens new questions and unconventional solutions, it makes interdisciplinary research projects possible and enables cooperation between representatives of different scholarly fields. A clear distinction between communication and media theory from other humanities, or enforcing clear methodological limitations could perhaps make it easier for some researchers to function within the structures of today's academic institutions, nevertheless it

would at the same time lead to an impoverishment of the discipline, diminishing its cognitive possibilities.

### **Media studies and the social commitment of a researcher**

The current social perception of media studies and the image of a social communication researcher demand that apart from declarative knowledge (propositional, *knowing-of*) concerning the content of media messages, their linguistic and visual content, influence and social consequences, interdependence of media in the cultural, technological and economic context – he is also expected to deliver propositional knowledge (*know-how*) – techniques, tools and instructions providing an answer on how to construct messages so that their influence is consistent with the intentions of the sender, be it political, social or marketing.

The findings of media scholars should support the efficient construction of informational, educational, aesthetic or persuasive messages distributed by means of communication media. This is reflected both in the field of institutional research, focused on the needs of diverse institutions and broadcast entities, as in the purely academic domain. Still consistent with the postulates of the enlightenment paradigm, cognitive aims are linked with ethical ones: social communication science has the aim of transforming social reality, researchers hold part of the responsibility for the short-term, but mostly the long-term outcome of the individual and collective influence of mass media. The *differentia specifica* of media and communication studies is therefore expressed not in its methodological distinctness, but in the way of defining problems and formulating research questions the media researcher attempts to answer, using methods and techniques common for many other human and social sciences. For many related disciplines, these questions and problems may have a complementary nature or their purpose may be only instrumental in relation to their own, differently stated cognitive issues; for media and communication studies they are inherent, paramount, and contribute to the very core of a research project.

### **Fields and range of media research**

The scope of media and communication research established in the 20<sup>th</sup> century consisted of at least six<sup>1</sup> or nine<sup>2</sup> research fields, within which important research questions for social communication studies and mass media were posed. Merging various approaches, developed in the last decades made it possible to distinguish many more. The basic potential research fields for today's media and social communication scholar are:

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<sup>1</sup> B. Gunter, *Media Research Methods: Measuring Audiences, Reactions, and Impact*, London 2000.

<sup>2</sup> S.W. Littlejohn, K.A. Foss, *Theories of Human Communication*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Belmont 1983.

- communicator/author/sender of media messages
- receiver/audience/public
- message/content of mass media
- conversation/relation/communication exchange between the sender and receiver or within sender and receiver groups
- understanding, attention, remembering media content
- modes of media use
- uses and gratifications associated with media use
- media influence: in the sphere of cognitive skills and affective media influence, in the individual and collective dimension
- behavioral effects of media use, in the individual and collective dimension
- media groups, organizations, and institutions
- communication technologies and media as a technological means of communication
- media management and economics
- place and role of media in culture and society.

Within the above areas of research, various methodological paradigms are nowadays used<sup>3</sup> – semiotic, phenomenological, socio-psychological, socio-cultural, critical, rhetorical, cybernetic, and also (not mentioned in the quoted work) economical and multicultural. Two or three decades ago the list of interests of media and communication studies was considerably shorter, and some of its elements were given less prominence. The emergence of so-called new media, especially “new new media”, based on the participatory model, undoubtedly called for a revision of the media scholar's list of interests. It was necessary to include, as an entire separate research field, the sphere of participation and user activity, user communication with one another and with media organizations. The author and content sender are no longer one and the same, since researching senders, one has to take into account both sender groups and institutions, and the individual media user, who has gained the right and possibilities to create, distribute and modify content. Today, content/message does not necessarily come from the broadcast institution – content research has to take into account messages generated by receivers, who are not so much receivers, but active co-users of the media sphere and the communication tools it provides. Therefore, after a few decades of less interest, research on the technological aspects of media and communication again seems

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 33–57.

relevant. Media studies have in a certain sense returned to the determinism of McLuhan and Innis, yet in the world of new media, their approach is much more nuanced and multidimensional.

### **Disputes and controversies**

From the very moment of crossing the popularization threshold by printed press in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the development of mass media had raised many controversies, which was reflected in early theory and media research methodological proposals. The prime controversies concerned the potential of media, their social functions and their possible collective influences; their effects on the knowledge, emotions, and attitudes of individuals; their impact on culture and on cultural tradition. Important questions were also asked as to the scope and strength of mutual determinism between media and communication technology, and between technology and society or people's individual lives. The relevant dilemma was (and still is) the very possibility to study the impact of mass media, given the enormous number of variables and modifying factors, the open and polysemic nature of communication and constantly changing nature of technology. The transformation of researcher's attitudes and convictions towards these issues went hand in hand with the evolution of technology and research methods, also in relation to their cognitive value. Not without meaning was the evolution of researcher's convictions on the potential and possibility of media influence: from optimism, seeing in mass media a force that could beneficially shape social life and help solve society's fundamental problems – through the stage of contempt, granting media merely the role of a background to people's daily lives – to pessimism, viewing mass communication as a source of social pitfalls and as a force negatively altering cognitive potential, attitudes and cultural habits of audiences.

### **Media research and paradigms in social sciences**

Historians of the method point out that the development of media and communication studies has always been linked with the development of diverse paradigms in social sciences and humanities as a whole. The three intellectual traditions deeply influencing media studies concepts and conceptualization of research problems have been: positivism (derived from Comte, Tarde, Durkheim), hermeneutics and the theory of interpretation (Weber, Dilthey), and critical theory (the Frankfurt School and its followers). As the classic study on the methodology of communication research indicates<sup>4</sup>, they would reflect – still today intersecting and in mutual dependancies – the two basic epistemological and ontological

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20 and next.

concepts concerning the role of the researcher and the nature of the research object<sup>5</sup>. In research on mass media and communication, we distinguish the empirical approach, based on the principle and existence of a distinct, empirically examinable and intersubjectively described reality in the media, analyzed using specific, clearly defined methods and research procedures. The other is the constructivist approach, focused on processes and ways of how the sender and receiver construct their worlds, create meaning, which can be described using various conceptualizations. A researcher can therefore use the nomothetic approach, searching for empirically observable general phenomena, laying down and verifying the hypotheses leading to overall laws. It is also possible to remain on the idiographic level of analysis; to strive to understand communication phenomena in concrete smaller groups, in specific communication situations and cultural, political and economical contexts.

According to theoreticians of the method<sup>6</sup>, a combination of ontological assumptions with the epistemological dimension would lead to four main approaches in media and communication studies: behaviorist, transmission, interactional and transactional. The first one views media and social communication research primarily as a problem of practical relationships between media and people's individual and group actions. The transmission approach focuses on processes of content transmission from the senders to the receivers. The interactional perspective is aimed at the analysis of content construction processes, its interpretations and re-interpretations, interactions and mutual influences between various communicating subjects. The transactional approach would find issues of various use, motivation and benefits connected with mass media as most important, emphasizing the process of communication exchange in and around the media.

### **The qualitative and quantitative dimensions of communication research**

None of these approaches excludes framing mass media and communication phenomena both in a quantitative and qualitative manner; both methods and techniques are used in media studies. Quantitative approaches, emerging from positivist and socio-empirical principles, focus on searching for general statistical laws and relations; they derive mostly from the traditions of mass communication theory in the USA. Quantitative techniques associated with ontological and epistemological principles of interpretative and critical theory are the heritage

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<sup>5</sup> J.A. Anderson, *Communication Theory. Epistemological Foundations*, New York 1996.

<sup>6</sup> B. Gunter, *Media Research...*, p. 3 and next.

of European media studies<sup>7</sup>. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a certain significant division will be outlined: the quantitative approach would become the domain of so-called institutional research, associated with communication and persuasive objectives of large economic and political bodies. This is understandable so far as quantitative research, carried-out with the nomothetic perspective in mind, is often credited with a significant prognostic aspect: it enables predicting audience behavior, hence aiding in creating efficient communication from the practical point of view of the aims of broadcast institutions – media companies, advertising agencies, political campaigners, social organizations. The role of qualitative research methods and techniques was for a long time perceived by those institutions as subsidiary. Therefore, qualitative research methodology was developed and refined in the realm of the academia, often with the critical dimension of media analysis in mind. Only recently have opinion-shaping and marketing institutions become interested in qualitative studies on communication and media. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have anthropology and consumer ethnography, semiological methods and the findings of rhetorical and discourse analysis become a field of interest of institutional media research.

#### **The four eras of media studies and epistemological media principles**

The historical conceptualization of media research proposed by Denis McQuail<sup>8</sup> is well known and often quoted. He writes about four stages of media research. Between early mass media and thoughts on social communication of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conducted within the frame of emerging positivism, and the interwar period, a strong belief in the power of media was supported; certain mythologization of their influence, depth and range of impact took place. Then, towards the midst of the century, media studies go through a phase of gradual demythologization of media importance, which led to another extreme: the minimal effects theory, undermining the influence of media or barely granting them a place among many different factors influencing people's individual and collective behavior. A re-discovery of media power takes place in the 1960s; it is expressed through the recognition and analysis of their long-term and indirect effects. The fourth stage is research on the polysemic nature of media messages and on their negotiated interpretation and influence. Contemporary communication philosophers<sup>9</sup> would literally refer to four eras in media and social

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<sup>7</sup> A.A. Berger, *Media and Communication Research Methods. An Introduction to Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, New York 2011.

<sup>8</sup> D. McQuail, *Teoria komunikowania masowego* [McQuail's Mass Communication Theory], Warszawa 2007.

<sup>9</sup> S.J. Baran, D.K. Davis, *Mass Communications Theory: Foundations, Ferment, and Future*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Belmont 2011, pp. 22–42.

communication theory: the era of Mass Society and Mass Culture, the Limited-Effects Perspective, the Critical and Cultural Theories, and the Active Audiences and Meaning Making era. It remains an open question whether, due to network communication and the multi-modality of media messages, we are perhaps entering a new research paradigm. It is worthwhile to reflect on how – despite many contradictory and divergent concepts as to the content, functions, and influence of media – communication research has always been related to the spirit of its time, first linked with the philosophical assumptions of the Modernity Project, then responding to the disillusionment in its efficiency, to finally reflect the postmodern concept of culture and of man's place in society. Media studies have also always been linked with the development of communication technology and with the emergence of different new media. This relationship with technology was neither caused solely by the increasing social impact of media nor only by its role as the extensions of man, as conceptualized by McLuhan. Resolving the dilemma of what, how and within what frame to research was strongly determined by the specific kind of *episteme* generated by the dominant media of the period. As Levinson<sup>10</sup> and Postman<sup>11</sup> convincingly (although one-sidedly) show, the long-term presence of media in an individual's life and their impact on communities create a particular kind of collective epistemology. Living in an environment dominated by a particular medium – print, television, internet – leads to a different user construct. People raised in the presence of certain communication media develop distinct ways of describing reality, arranging and prioritizing their knowledge of the world; they gain specific user competencies and communication styles; they would differ in their concepts of reality and fiction, in the level of importance they grant to different issues, and also – which is crucial – in their aesthetic preferences and cultural habits. In this sense, methodology and research techniques of media content, but also analyzing reception, influence and use are defined by the nature of the message, as by the cognitive attitudes and reception modes it creates. Epistemology created by print media is different than that created by television or interactive media.

### ***The Modernity Project: print epistemology and mass society***

Printed press reaches a mass distribution threshold in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with different pace depending on the level of economic development and advancement in available technology in

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<sup>10</sup> P. Levinson, *Miękkie ostrze, czyli Historia i przyszłość rewolucji informacyjnej* [The Soft Edge: A Natural History and Future of the Information Revolution], Warszawa 1999.

<sup>11</sup> N. Postman, *Zabawić się na śmierć. Dyskurs publiczny w epoce show-businesu* [Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business], Warszawa 2002.

various European countries and in America. The whole process is interlinked with the development of mass production and consumption, and highly dependent on the emergence of mass culture and society. The period of early “cabinet” social science thought, while not yet based on empirical research, is nevertheless being placed within the frame of the modernity project principles. Early thoughts on mass media are based on a belief in the huge potential of this new form of culture, on optimism as to its democratization and socially integrating role, but they are also associated with concern with their possible destructive individual and social influences. The origins of reflection on the social role of mass communication can be found in George Herbert Mead’s symbolic interactionism, Charles Horton Cooley’s social psychology, in Dewey’s theories and in the works of the Chicago School. Their works were devoted mainly to American society, but it is possible to extrapolate their reflection on the role of press in early democratic capitalist society in America onto early capitalist societies in general, as social processes associated with media in America preceded similar processes in Europe. Printed press was conceptualized as a device for individuals and groups to express their needs and opinions, to explore the needs and views of others, to gain an ability to understand social processes and shape one’s own attitudes towards “the Other”. The 19<sup>th</sup> century would create the concept of printed media as the “Fourth Estate”, formulating a theoretical justification for the control function of press over institutions of political power. Press would also be defined as “the voice of the people” – the area to voice public opinion and an instrument of political participation for emerging mass society, the *agora* for various groups and interests – part of what Jürgen Habermas would later call the public sphere. It may be instructive to set the idealist and optimistic views of the founding fathers of American sociology against the pessimist judgment of Gabriel Tarde and Gustave LeBon on the nature of the crowd and the possibilities of manipulating collective emotions and behavior by the means of rhetorical devices, hence also using mass media.

Empirical research developed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, according to the axiological and epistemological foundations of modernity, would be based on the optimistic premise as to the possibilities of knowing, describing, and analyzing media content, its social functions and influences. It was assumed that the truth about society – particularly about the functions and influence of the printed press, and the social influence and potential of other mass communication forms – is knowable with the aid of empirical methodology, possible to describe in its entirety, with its internal structures and dependencies. Primarily, it was believed that this knowledge is needed and useful to society. The Modernity Project is indeed characterized by an optimistic faith in the possibility to understand the truth about people and



their world by the means of scientific methods. It is also based on the strong conviction about the inter-dependency of cognitive and ethical progress, together with the belief in the possibility to use findings of social sciences to manage and cure various social plagues and to solve such issues of capitalist societies as poverty, crime, uneven access to education etc.

Printed press was the first mass medium subject to scientific observation and analysis. This is understandable, as during that period, press was the most important mass medium and along with other printed media (books) the one responsible for establishing the epistemological model of viewing the world and organizing knowledge and opinions. The epistemological assumptions of the early media and mass communication analyst were also shaped by the use of print. Therefore, theories formulated during that period, and the empirical projects undertaken up to WW II reflect the epistemological assumptions of the print era. It was then assumed that processes of content reception are consistent with the structure of that (printed) content – that they are linear, attentive, analytical, aimed at uncovering the relevant meaning devised by the sender. The task of the researcher was searching for that fixed, relevant meaning. While analyzing reception, the researcher was supposed to come up with the description of clear cause-effect relationships that could be generalized, thus allowing to predict, control, and evaluate (according to high ethical standards) processes taking place in a democratic capitalist society. It is important to emphasize that the epistemological assumptions of the print era were also the base for early research on non-print media – film, radio, photography. In contrast with the idealist ideas of Mead or Dewey, non-printed media were discredited, as they to a small degree reflected the high ethical and cognitive expectations created by print culture. Instead of seriously inform and explain the world, they provided sensation and entertainment; they were teaching the public to search for pleasure rather than for moral advice and instruction. The concept of all-mighty and powerful press and other media, supported by modern researchers in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century was therefore linked with a critical attitude. Concerns arose from the potential of media to shape individual and groups behavior, but also from their visible cultural influence, perceived as a vehicle to deconstruct cultural hierarchies and values, providing the unprepared viewers and listeners with substitutes of culture instead of solid and important values. It seems symptomatic indeed that the first Polish content analysis of popular press was entitled: *On the moral plague*<sup>12</sup>... The extremely critical views of Theodor Adorno and other Frankfurt School philosophers (with the exception of Walter Benjamin), raised on this

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<sup>12</sup> J.W. Dawid, *O zarazie moralnej. Studium psychologiczno-społeczne* [On the moral plague. A psychosociological study], Warszawa 1886.

concern, will for long establish a model of thinking about media as a menace to aesthetic tastes, cultural needs and morality, potentially undermining people's sense of responsibility and civic subjectivity.

These attitudes towards media and social commitments of a researcher resulted in specific theoretical constructs: conditioning and content transmission models of media influence were then constructed. The magic bullet or hypodermic needle metaphors would describe media content as directly, implicitly, and immediately triggering powerful reactions among receivers. Research techniques created at that time had no specific character: linguistic, psychological and sociological tools merged. The only analytical instrument created specifically for the purpose of media analysis was the quantitative content analysis of press proposed by Bernard Berelson towards the end of the period. Both his method (or as others prefer – merely a technique) and other social studies research techniques adapted at the time for the purposes of media and communication studies, combine the realization of scientific aims put forward by the Modernity Project and the structuralist view of reality. They were to be objective, inter-subjectively provable, and to lead to measurable conclusions that could be statistically generalized. They had to be cognitively relevant and respond to the practical needs of society and/or the needs of political or marketing institutions using mass media for their own purposes. It was therefore accepted that media content can be separated and conclusively interpreted, also axiologically. The sender is the “owner” of meaning, projecting certain ideas (or as the influential Frankfurt School put it, ideology) into content and there exist simple cause-and-effect relations between media content and human behavior, possible to find and examine. The receiver was perceived as more or less passive, simply subject to media influence. In a sense, audiences were denied both subjectivity and the ability to consciously judge and differentiate. These are, among others, the reasons why mass media research based on the spirit of mass society theories is viewed today as solely a historical phase in the development of media studies.

Meanwhile however, printed press ceased to be the only medium of mass distribution and reach; towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the interwar period, the use of new mass media such as photography, mechanical sound reproduction devices, film, and broadcasting, was becoming increasingly popular. Understandably, this had to lead to a revival of the concept of all-powerful media, directly and inevitably influencing audiences. By mid-century, unsuccessful attempts to empirically sustain the theory of media omnipotence had led to the denial of the media power. Media scholars would then embrace an equally radical concept – the minimal effects theory, granting media only fragmentary influence on certain human

behaviors, views, and attitudes. This influence would be indirect, mediated (hence the media influence models of that time – Katz and Lazarsfeld's two step flow model, Riley's sociological model, Lewin's topological theory, the selection model by Westley and MacLean). This theoretical position, as previous ones, would also later be deconstructed with the development of means of mass communication and them occupying a greater, fundamental role in the lives of Western societies, especially due to the popularization of television and recreating the social epistemology then created.

***Towards postmodernism: uncertainty and rediscovery of media power***

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, television had become the most important medium in the Western world (and with a slight delay, also behind the Iron Curtain). It proved to be extremely influential and engaging people's interests and emotions. Its domination translated into a decrease in the importance of the epistemological foundations laid-out by print culture. The prevailing mode of media use and reception had been altered, which was followed by a different idea of media studies methods and objectives. The nature of the television message is non-linear and multimodal<sup>13</sup> – it brings together text, image, human voice, natural sounds and music, it develops in time and it influences the receiver through rhythm and various intensity of stimuli. The television apparatus created a particular kind of receiver: a viewer, as an individual, interested primarily in the image, engaged in the process of synthesizing image and sound, impatient, thinking in a non-linear manner, using mental shortcuts, simplifications and primarily – searching for entertainment and pleasure, expressed through constant emotional stimulation. This mode was not limited to only television; it soon started to effect audience approach to other media. It was particularly the printed press that had to take into account the impatience, lack of concentration and hedonist attitude of audiences. It then became necessary for media researchers to analyze the audiovisual dimension of media content and to rethink the problem of viewer's attention span and cognitive processing abilities. The attempts to use analytical techniques focused on textual content (such as content or rhetorical analysis) for the analysis of television messages proved only partially satisfying. Some expectations were associated with semiology, yet fully independent research on the semiotics of media<sup>14</sup> would only start to develop as late as in the 1980s.

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<sup>13</sup> G. Kress, *Multimodality. A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*, New York 2010.

<sup>14</sup> *Semiotics of the Media. State of the Art, Projects, and Perspectives*, ed. by W. Nöth, Berlin–New York 1997.

And this was only the beginning of the problem – the most important medium of the century was still in its paleo-television<sup>15</sup> period. In the 1960s, 70s, and even 80s, despite the common use of the remote control and the popularization of distracted, non-linear viewing based on zapping, mass media still functioned based on the so-called pedagogical model. They addressed the viewer from a position of power, as the carriers of important social or political meanings, or as a cultural mission. Their functions were defined in terms of information, education, or ultimately as audience entertainment, yet without the possibility for them to respond, other than just turning off the television set or putting away the paper. Paleo-media texts and programmes were still relatively authorial and the division between different genres were clear and easy to see. Quality journalism, entertainment, and advertising were separate and easy to distinguish one from another, as they used different formal solutions and separate sender-receiver conventions. It was assumed that the viewer, despite the possibility of zapping, consumes publications and programs in their entirety, consciously looking for relevant content and extracting it from the entire predictable, logically structured and segmented media offer. One must admit that even if the changeable, multidimensional nature of media reality is difficult to grasp and describe as a whole, the methodical analysis of media content is feasible and purposeful, and can serve to uncover persuasive aims and ideological messages embedded in media texts. It is also possible to diagnose media influence on individuals and groups.

What methods and techniques can be used to research media reality? Postwar disillusionment in the foundations of the Modernity Project brings about new fears of the potential influence of media and concerns with their social functions. The unstable and hedonist nature of television – the most important medium of the century, but also the most difficult to research – also calls for serious analysis and assessment. At the same time though, the crisis of the Modernity Project undermines many certainties arising from the structuralist paradigm. In the entire social sciences, hence also in media and mass communication research, certainty declines as to the possibility of reaching an absolute truth about man, social processes, the nature of communication, hence the outcome of individual and collective influence of media. Accuracy and cognitive efficiency of many research procedures seemed increasingly questionable. Media studies ultimately abandoned the magic bullet theory and latent beliefs in the omnipotence of mass media, but similarly, the minimal effects theory

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<sup>15</sup> W. Godzic, “Telewizja – najważniejsze medium XX wieku” [Television – the most important medium of the 20<sup>th</sup> century], [in:] *Media audiowizualne* [Audiovisual Media], ed. by W. Godzic, A. Drzał-Sierocka, Warszawa 2010, p. 67 and next.

became rejected. Researching media content, reception and influence, communication scholars do not look for evidence of the immediate influence of certain media messages on the passive user, but rather for the indirect, long-term outcomes of prolonged contact with mass media content.

In many instances, this is the most fruitful period in the history of mass media research. Valuable qualitative methods and techniques were developed. Attempts were carried out to use structural semiology as a set of instruments for in-depth analysis of media messages. The philosophical and methodological foundations were laid out for Critical Discourse Analysis – an important corpus of verbal content analysis techniques. Research on reception led to the conceptualization of the uses and gratifications theory. The socializing and/or modeling functions of mass media were analyzed; an extremely important trend of research on the consequences of media violence is initiated. The social and political impact of media was described in terms of the cultivation, the agenda setting and the spiral of silence theories. The so-called second wave<sup>16</sup> of audience research was primarily aimed at describing the long-term impact of media content on people. What was established during that period has to be taken into consideration in nearly every media research project up to the present. The question of “what media do with people” seems a fundamental issue of this period. Not much time will pass however before it becomes more important to ask “what people do with media”.

The shift was associated with a transformation in the style and course of thinking about media, resulting from the works of British Cultural Studies<sup>17</sup>. Scholars focused around the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University since the 1960s began looking at relationships between media and popular culture, youth subcultures, fashion, consumerism. Beginning with neo-Marxist foundations, drawing from Gramsci’s concept of hegemony and using terminology developed by the Frankfurt School, culturalists insisted on treating popular culture as a fully-fledged subject of analysis instead of neglecting it. They proposed analyzing cultural products in their “natural” social environment, including knowledge on the systems of production and distribution of cultural goods. Understandably, mass media became the main object of their attention. Radically critical towards capitalist mass culture, BCC scholars pointed to its ideological dimension, looking for relationships between various representations of social classes, sex and gender, race, ethnic groups and

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<sup>16</sup> S.E. Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life. Living in a Media World*, New York–London 2003.

<sup>17</sup> G. Turner, *British Cultural Studies. An Introduction*, London–New York 2005. [http://webdelprofesor.ula.ve/humanidades/anderzon/materias/materiales/Turner2003\\_British\\_Cultural\\_Studies\\_3rdEd\\_An\\_Introduction.pdf](http://webdelprofesor.ula.ve/humanidades/anderzon/materias/materiales/Turner2003_British_Cultural_Studies_3rdEd_An_Introduction.pdf) [accessed: 19.04.2013].

nationality in media and other cultural texts, and for links between those representations and social beliefs, ideas, and attitudes. Their approach to media audiences was more receptive and understanding than the attitudes of any research school before them. They credited media users with subjectivity, cognitive autonomy, and the ability of independent judgment. More than in content transmission, they were interested in the processes of decoding and use. With their analysis of the process of construction, interpretation, and reinterpretation of media culture by different audiences in various economic and social contexts, they began the third wave in audience research.

***Post-modernity and neo-television: negotiable media influence, negotiable interpretations***

Lack of trust in academic knowledge, the crisis of faith in the continuity and coherence of human narratives on individual and social life, interest in the marginal and transgressive, the breakdown of a clear cultural hierarchy, epistemological and axiological relativism are all symptomatic of the postmodernism and poststructural paradigm, and were all reflected in the attitude of media scholars towards media content and its influence, and towards the nature and purpose of social communication. Media studies became interested in particularities and marginalia, local content and specific uses were analyzed. The very process of content construction, distribution and re-construction turned out to be more interesting than the analysis of the stable state of affairs.

It was a period of substantial evolution in electronic media, which in turn involved a shift of audience attitudes towards print. Computer networks entered people's lives, the development of media technology generated a vast and diverse offer, paleo-television was transformed into neo-television. Mass media had to abandon its ambition of maintaining the pedagogical model of a one-sided positive influence on the viewer and reader. Broadcast institutions needed to accept the fact that with the use of new media and the accessibility of relatively simple technological tools, the individual user obtained the possibility to create their own media repertoire, even in a careless and hedonist manner. The structure of media messages was no longer an ordered, relatively consistent whole<sup>18</sup>, but a stream of messages that receivers can fish out if they for some reason (or accidentally), momentarily catch their attention. Neo-television epistemology changed the principles of media research. Media content is unstable, amorphous, genre hybrid and vaguely defined. Principles regarding the influence of certain media messages and certain media on distinct receiver groups had to be verified. The influence of mass communication media became perceived as a cumulative

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<sup>18</sup> R. Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, London 1974.

phenomenon, assuming that the viewer is influenced not so much by the particular message as by recurring ideological constructs embedded in various configurations in the media stream. It is not the purpose and meaning of media content as projected by the sender that is the most important, but the open, creative reception of content, connected to everyday life, to the social experiences and needs of people. Processes described by Stuart Hall in terms of coding and decoding, the creative and open use and reinterpretation of sender-receiver conventions by the independent user appear to be most meaningful.

It was the BCC scholars who first asked the question of “what people do with media” – instead of “what media do to people”. Some of the findings of the Birmingham School researchers were in time revised, but it cannot be denied that they created the terminology and theoretical grounds allowing for the integration of many diverse disciplines and various media research traditions. Followers of the Birmingham School, also those in the USA and Australia, put less emphasis on social criticism, which was part of early BCC research principles. They instead focused on various liberating and creative aspects of people’s use of popular culture. Media as seen through the eye of new cultural studies, give users various pleasures and provide the structure for their individual and collective identities. It is almost taken for granted that audiences are creative and that the meaning of media messages arises in the process of active reception and interpretation. The attractiveness and subversive potential of media use is expressed through diversity, polyphony, discontinuing hierarchies and order, interest in what was individual, marginal, alternative. Pleasure became one of the central notions, defined as positive gratification associated not just with media use, but also with people’s own cognitive, social and esthetic activity connected with their texts. During this period, media studies enter a stable, fruitful interaction with post-modern consumption theory. At the same time, the foundations of the cultivation theory are being re-evaluated and modified, as is the uses and gratifications theory, and the assumptions as to the modeling and socializing influence of media.

At this stage, the groundbreaking principle becomes the call for an interdisciplinary nature of media research methodology, the demand to transgress borders of academic disciplines, to merge communication theory with sociology, anthropology, psychology, aesthetics, literary theory etc. Media studies finally acknowledge their own nature as methodologically non-specific. Multidisciplinarity and methodological openness begin to be perceived as a strength of media research, not its weakness. They take in a substantial heritage of different contemporary intellectual movements, such as psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, feminism, theory of consumption. This gives media

studies a more dynamic character and opens the possibility to try to understand the fundamental relations between popular culture and the sphere of its functioning: the sphere of social relations.

***What after postmodernism? Towards the new media***

The turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century brought the rise of the Internet and the set of significant communication and cultural phenomena associated with it, not without reason still deemed the third communication revolution. As a result of these new experiences of virtual reality brought about by media, such as disembodiment, cyborgization, non-territorial space etc., the post-modern understanding of media reality involves two varying interpretations. On the one hand, radical statements on the annihilation/simulacration of reality and its implosion with media – as Baudrillard claims<sup>19</sup>, we live in an age without consequences and in a theory without consequences, in a world where reality just does not exist. On the other hand – the conviction that we have now entered a new epistemological paradigm and a new form of culture, called cyberculture or (a broader term) technological culture. This paradigm changes the entire way of acquisition, transmission, and distribution of knowledge, as well as the mode of communication with others through media. The aims, methods and possibilities of researching social communication evolved. Cyberculture invalidates or ignores the categories of space/territory, and believes that symbolic communication, taking place in the non-territorial space of a computer network, is the most important human cultural activity. This communication, as technologically mediated, requires certain tools: the essence of technological culture is that content, quality, and complexity of communication and of cultural experience depend on the quality and complexity of technological tools. The *episteme* of technological culture is therefore built on the assumption that it is not textual or visual erudition that is most important, but the ability to search for information, generate new connections between various pieces of existing knowledge or efficiently communicate with the help of available technological tools. Discovery, description and structuring of the image of the world takes place by connecting, articulating, exchanging and interacting. The resulting knowledge is non-hierarchical, inclusive and universal. The question arises, naturally, how to research content and the impact of communication that is based on these principles. The content of contemporary media is resistant to objective measurement and is extremely difficult to describe with existing research tools, unless they are radically, but creatively revised.

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<sup>19</sup> J. Baudrillard, *Le crime parfait*, Paris 1995.



### **New terms, new perspectives**

The core and range of research in today's media studies methodology has not changed much: the main research fields are still the content of mass media, audience composition and characteristics, uses and gratifications, cognitive aspects of mass media use, their influence on individual and collective emotions and on the behavior of people, their relationship with the economic and political environment and with the technological context. In the last decades however, certain new research concepts appeared, new cognitive constructs, organizing the aims and designing research, choice and boundary of samples, of tools and entire epistemological principles and axiological research projects.

These concepts are: virtuality, visuality/multimodality, multi- and transmediality, interactivity, participation, technological and content convergence, multi- and transculturality, and mediatization.

The typographical and televisual epistemologies did not disappear – they currently overlap with cyberculture and Internet epistemology. Therefore, the contemporary social communication scholar, while researching the content of media messages, has to account for the specificity of using multimedia; this has to be taken in consideration while analyzing any media, not just Internet space. It is worth reminding that the computer network in itself grants access to various media material and opens vast technological possibilities of media research<sup>20</sup>. New media, increasingly dominating in the contemporary cultural landscape, influence the content structure of all means of mass communication and determine the ways of their reception and use, although the scope and the consequences of these influences are still waiting to be studied and described in a more detailed and comprehensive way. The researcher of media content and form undertakes the extremely complex task of describing, analyzing, and interpreting material of a multimodal nature, constructed from quickly alternating and changing images, written and spoken text, music, and natural sounds. This material is multifaceted, difficult to grasp in its entire complexity, has an unstable ontological status and relation to reality; we call it virtuality. While researching the reception and cognitive or psychological influence of this kind of media material, one has to take into account changes in the entire mode of media communication with the receiver, which is currently based on a polysensoric model. One has to remember the change in the sender-receiver relationships brought about by the influence of informatization. The participatory model of content reception proves to be increasingly more important. The

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<sup>20</sup> *International Handbook of Internet Research*, ed. by J. Hunsinger, L. Klastrup, M. Allen, Dordrecht–New York 2010.

viewer/listener/reader becomes a co-creator of the content, actively engaging in shaping, modifying, commenting and deconstructing media material. Researching audiences/public/users, the contemporary media scholar is forced to consider their autonomy – both in terms of content selection and interpretation, and also, their often high intertextual and technological competence.

This change must have a bearing on the use, gratifications, influence and impact of traditional media. Audience researchers, while not neglecting the quantitative dimension, are now interested in more detailed qualitative knowledge, not only about the ways of media use and interpretation, but also about user independent creation of media content and content related to it. The research tools and techniques devised by psychology, semiology and cognitive linguistics prove to be useful here. The place of media in people's daily lives is being considered and analyzed in an in-depth, qualitative sense – a separate branch of knowledge, termed media anthropology or ethnography has therefore been created. It became increasingly important to see the place of communication technology in culture and in people's daily communication practices, thus procedures and protocols of technology use are examined, as are the inter-dependencies between user technological competences and the content they read and generate.

As media protocols and procedures change, media research must take into account the process of technological convergence of contemporary media<sup>21</sup>. The divisions between various media become blurred, interconnectivity of media results in the migration of messages beyond their borders; content becomes hybrid and convergent; trans-media narratives appear. The hybridization and a gradual loss of distinction between different media genres call for a completely new approach to media genre analysis. An important research initiative is searching for new genre definitions in media, leading perhaps to abandoning the classical concept of genre and replacing it with another heuristic tool, more suitable for the contemporary analysis of media messages. Media analyses must manage the polysemy of multimodal, convergent messages, charged with inter-textual references. They must assume that contemporary communication has an intercultural dimension and takes place in a variable and diverse cultural context, between individuals and groups with different concepts, needs and traditions.

What, how and for what purpose to research? Are new media a new quality or a continuation? When researching media messages, should one renew existing, formerly

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<sup>21</sup> H. Jenkins, *Kultura konwergencji. Zderzenie starych i nowych mediów* [Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide], Warszawa 2007.

developed methods, techniques and tools, or search for an entirely new methodological approach, integrating various aspects of old and new communication? Analyzing media communication, should one look for unity and similarities in the international or global scale, or focus on differences and local specificity? Should media roles and functions be enclosed in terms of influence or negotiation? Should one speak of content or negotiable, receiver texts? Are entertainment and advertising currently the most important media functions, or should one look towards the education, information and opinion-shaping functions of mass communication? Today, the analysis of content, form, and function of mass media are carried out with the principle of vast, deep but basically indirect influence of media on socialization and enculturation processes, on political life and culture. All four basic approaches developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century— behaviorist, transmission, interactional and transactional – remain valid. Various methodological paradigms drawn from social studies and humanities can be used. Apart from that, there is little agreement in media research as to its epistemological principles and analytical tools. After more than a century of studying mass media and social communication, we are less sure of the possibility to construct a grand mass communication theory than we were at the outset. While chances for comprehensive nomothetical description seem to be decreasing, the idiographic dimension of media studies is becoming greatly attractive and intellectually provocative. The term binding different aspects of contemporary media research is mediatization. This is probably the only thing we can all be sure of: that mass media have become a crucial, fundamental part of living in a capitalist, liberal, consumer, postmodern society, and a foundation of our entire contemporary cultural experience<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> R. Silverstone, *Why Study the Media*, London 1999.