

Theoretical Perspectives in Media-Communication Research: From Linear to Discursive Models

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Key words: media communication process, media effects, dialogical models, discursive approach

Abstract: This paper aims to provide an overview on traditional linear models vs. dialogical and discursive approaches to the study of mass media communication processes. The ways of conceiving the process of media-communication have changed along with the evolution of the theoretical paradigms of psychology and the social sciences. The main limits of these models which were first developed in the area of media studies derive, on the one hand, from the rigid alternating between source and receivers, and, on the other hand, from the lack of integration of the social variables in the conceptualization of the communication process. This paper will show how an increased focus on the interactive aspects of communication leads to the replacement of traditional linear models with more complex models implying a redefining of the concept of communication, as, for example, the dialogical models and the discursive approach. It is in this perspective that the media is seen to have a fundamental role in the processes of constructing/reconstructing reality, and the development of qualitative methodologies is especially needed.

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1. Introduction

The research tradition which can be summed up with the term *communication research* refers to a highly varied and heterogeneous group of conceptual models and methodological approaches. My aim is to provide an overview on traditional linear models vs. dialogical and discursive approaches to the mass media communication processes and to discuss some of their theoretical and methodological implications. [1]

The ways of conceiving the process of media communication and of media's role in society have changed along with the evolution of the theoretical paradigms of psychology and the social sciences¹. As Barrie GUNTER (2000) points out,

1 Positivist empirical research searches for objectivity in measurement and therefore tends to be quantitative in nature, using experiments, surveys and statistics. The interpretive approach is linked to hermeneutics and emphasizes a detailed reading of texts as a means of revealing people's subjective experience, feelings and motives. Researchers tend to use participant observation or field research. In media research data may comprise media texts or transcripts of conversations about media content. Critical social science is linked to Marxism and its aim is to analyze power structures and relationships within society. The media are identified as powerful sources of social control.

scrutiny of the range and variety of research methodologies used in a number of different media research contexts suggests that

"[d]ifferent perspectives on the study of the media have emerged historically in response not only to the findings of empirical enquiries, which changed ideas about the way people respond to the media, but more often and more significantly as a result of paradigm shifts within social science research more generally" (p.2). [2]

In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of such different research orientations, some consideration of the theoretical background of the different approaches to media analysis is needed. In my opinion, the shift from linear to dialogical and discursive models is of utmost importance both at a theoretical and methodological level. Traditional linear models are strictly connected to a theory of language and language use that posits language as a fundamentally problem-free and acontestual vehicle for the transmission of information. Widely employed in communication research, they largely imply the adoption of quantitative methods. The dialogical models and the discursive approach which derive from the meeting in the early 1980s of pragmatic linguistics, psycho-social sciences and the philosophy of language lead to the replacement of traditional linear models with more complex models of media communication process². The term "dialogical" refers here to some specific theoretical and analytic trends that emerged in France during the 1980s whose complex relations with discourse analysis still remain to be investigated in depth. The main point here is that in both perspectives (dialogical and discursive) language is regarded as a social practice and the media are seen to have a fundamental role in the processes of constructing/reconstructing reality. Here, the development of qualitative methodologies is especially needed. [3]

2. The Communication Process: Beyond the Transmission of Information

The perspective underlying many of the different research orientations used in a number of different media research contexts is characterized by the adoption—often implicit—of a simplified model of the communication process deriving from information theory (SHANNON & WEAVER 1949), which is one of the most widely known models. According to this model, the transmission of a message is a simple, linear and unidirectional process: there is a source which codifies information in the form of a signal and transmits it by means of a channel to the other end, where it is decodified. It is, then, a model in which communication is

2 The breaking point which marks in the field of social sciences the passage from "representationalist" epistemology to a "discursive" epistemology is represented by what has been defined as the "linguistic turn," which consisted of a widespread awareness of the role of language as the constituent mechanism of "reality," and therefore of the discovery of the nature discursively produced by each phenomenon presented as "real" or "natural." This revolutionary intuition marks a great step beyond the vision which characterized the preceding epistemological level and which was based mainly on the following two assumptions: 1) the existence of an external reality with regard to thinking subjects or one socially constructed by the same, in any case distinct from the language which describes it, in the role of "referent" of discourse; 2) the possibility for research to use language as a neutral language to construct increasingly believable and complete representations of phenomena and processes.

described as a transmission process from a transmitter to a receiver by means of codification and decodification of the information itself where subjects are considered as passive recipients of messages. Translated into a linguistic model (JACOBSON 1963), the communication process conceived in this way could include the following elements: transmitter, message, receiver, context, code and channel. According to GHIGLIONE (1988), the subjects are regarded here as *ideal, transparent* and *possessors* of a common communication code. These then are the necessary conditions for bringing about communication, which is understood as the transmission of information. [4]

Following this model, the first theories of mass communication all tended to see the public as an undifferentiated and substantially passive entity upon which it was possible to exert direct influence. As Elihu KATZ and Karl LAZARFELD (1955) noted,

"the image of the mass-communication process entertained by researchers had been, firstly, one of 'an atomistic mass' of millions of readers, listeners and movie-goers, prepared to receive the message; and, secondly (...) every message [was considered] as a direct and powerful stimulus to action that would elicit immediate response" (p.16). [5]

From this model, which recalls in certain ways the idea of the subject seen as a mere responder to stimuli emphasized in the psychological field by the "first" behaviorism, there emerged the model proposed by Harold LASSWELL (1927, 1935). Even if dated, it undoubtedly constitutes a point of reference in the area of mass-communication studies. The model of the so-called five W's of LASSWELL (Who says, What, to Whom, through Which channel, with What effect) went on to constitute a scheme widely shared in descriptions and analyses of the media communication process. [6]

In psychology, the experimental empirical approach progressively focused attention on the characteristics of each of the elements included in the 5-Ws model, and then went on to isolate, experimentally, the individual variables so as to analyze the way in which they can intervene in the persuasion process. The studies of HOVLAND and his research group at Yale University (HOVLAND 1954; HOVLAND LUMSDAINE & SHEFFIELD 1949; HOVLAND, JANIS & KELLEY 1953) represented the dominant paradigm for a long time³. They considered the

3 The research on the characteristics of sources, (credibility/attractiveness/power), that on the form and structure of messages (quantity of arguments, unilateral vs. bilateral structure), and that on the characteristics of recipients (motivations/attitudes) are particularly significant. With regard to research on sources, McGUIRE (1969) indicates three important characteristics which may have an effect on the effectiveness of messages: credibility, attractiveness and power to distribute payments or punishments. Early research found that a source must possess pertinent information and be considered competent in order to be considered credible (HOVLAND & WEISS 1951; HOVLAND, JANIS & KELLEY 1953; McGUIRE 1969). Besides the competence and level of expertise, sincerity and trust in the source also influence its credibility (EAGLY, WOOD & CHAIKEN 1978, 1981). As BROMBERG (1990) notes, the most recent studies on source credibility try to prove that the perception of credibility does not depend so much on the characteristics defined in "objective" terms, so much as on the processes of attributing and on the causal inferences made by the subject to whom the message is addressed with regard to the reasons that lead the sources to support their positions (EAGLY, WOOD & CHAIKEN 1978; EAGLY, CHAIKEN & WOOD 1981). According to the model developed by EAGLY, CHAIKEN

complexity of variables which come into play in the relationship between transmitter, recipient and message in the area of the study of persuasion (for example, the characteristics of sources, messages, recipients, the variables intervening between the transmission and the reception of the message and so on). The research of the Yale School contributed to a reworking of LASSWELL's model, which attributed to the media the more or less unlimited ability to influence public opinion, by emphasizing how the effectiveness of messages varies with the varying of certain characteristics of the recipients, and how the effects of mass communication depend essentially on the interaction of these factors. These results contributed to supporting the idea that the direct and intermediate effects of the means of mass communication on changing attitudes were very weak. The ideas of LASSWELL (1927; 1935) with regard to the direct effects of the means of mass information on the attitudes and behavior of the public were gradually abandoned because of an increasing interest in the variables which intervene in the relationship between the message and the behavioral response, e.g., selective perception, the role of the cognitive structures of the receiving subject and the social-demographical characteristics of the audience. [7]

The idea emerged that interpersonal relationships have a key role in the processes of influence exerted by the means of communication. In fact, KATZ (1959) presented the hypothesis that the communication process may be described in terms of a two-step flow of communication: the first step regards relatively well-informed individuals (opinion leaders) that, in the second step, not only spread information to those individuals who follow the media less assiduously, but who also supply an interpretation of the content of the message. In this sense, the opinion leaders and the interpersonal relationships have a mediating function of selection between the means of mass communication and the recipients of the messages transmitted by them. In short, the theories based on the concept of selective attention place between the two variables "stimulus" and "response" three other kinds of variables: individual differences, social-cultural categories and social relationships. [8]

This reworking of the model introduced a more complex view of media communication, but it did not lead to any paradigm shift: basically, communication is still regarded as a transmission process and research continues to be theoretically framed by a (neo)positivist approach to measurement. Recent development within mainstream social psychology seems to follow the same trend. [9]

and WOOD (1981), the subject constructs for himself a representation of the persuasive situation on the basis of the information that he possesses before being exposed to the message; this information regards both the characteristics of the source (internal attribution) and situational pressures (external attribution) which can act on the source itself and which can cause doubts with regard to its sincerity and objectivity. The effectiveness of the message will depend upon the congruency or incongruence with regard to the expectations of the subject without regard to the communicative behavior of the source. With regard to attractiveness, persuasive communication is mediated by a process of identification with the source. Research has shown that physical attractiveness influences positively on the effectiveness of the message whatever the sex of the source, that a pleasing source is more effective than an unpleasant one when it supports an undesirable position (EAGLY & CHAIKEN 1975) or when its arguments are weak. Other research has shown that perceived similarity between the subject and the source positively influences the attractiveness of the latter.

The link between the mass-communication processes and the characteristics of the social context within which these take place became central for the sociological empirical approach. Here, the audience is no longer considered as a passive receptor with no link to its social environment. In fact, it was emphasized that individuals are reached by the media through a filter of social bonds, i.e., of other meanings and groups which constitute a point of reference for social insertion and the development of identity. In this perspective, KLAPPER (1960) proposed what was called the model of minimal (or limited) effect: according to this approach, selectiveness is linked not so much to the individual's psychological processes, as it is to the network of social relationships which constitute the environment in which he lives and which form the groups to which he belongs. The audience began to be considered as a group of active persons which directs its attention to whatever it considers interesting, and reinterprets these messages in relation to pre-existing knowledge and attitudes. However, language is still regarded as a fundamentally problem-free and acontextual vehicle for the transmission of information. [10]

Attention to the role carried out by the media in the representation of reality began to emerge in the late 1960s in the area of media studies through research which combined the analysis of mass-media communication with ideas developed by the sociological theories and the sociology of knowledge. It is in this perspective that the media is given a fundamental role in the symbolic construction of reality by means of those processes of production, reproduction and distribution of knowledge which allow recipients to give meaning to the world and to model their perception of it (McQUAIL 1987). These ideas come together in present-day media studies which are characterized by the theory of dependence, the cultivation theory and by models of agenda setting and newsmaking.⁴ [11]

As MAZZOLENI and VENINI (1997) have noted,

4 The theory of dependence, developed by the ROKEACHs and assistants (BALL-ROKEACH, ROKEACH & GRUBE 1984; DEFLEUR & BALL-ROKEACH 1989), assumes that mass communication constitutes a system of relationships with other systems (individuals, groups, organizations, social systems and social sub-systems such as political, religious and education ones). The relationship between these various systems is described as relationships of reciprocal dependence. According to the cultivation theory, the main function of the means of mass communication is that of moulding the audience's perceptions, attitudes, values and behavior. In fact, GERBNER, GROSS, MORGAN and SIGNORIELLI (1980, 1984 and 1986) describe the effects of the media as being extremely pervasive. The agenda setting model can be inserted among those theories which, while rejecting the idea of a direct relationship between communication and behavior, hold that the information transmitted tends to influence the way in which the recipient organizes his own image of the environment. From the point of view of agenda setting, the media do not attempt to persuade, but instead they present the audience with a list of events considered of importance, thereby determining the understanding that individuals have about social reality. *Newsmaking* research deals with criteria and procedures by which events are selected and turned into news. Selection "implies that one recognises an occurrence as an event and not just as a random succession of things whose form and nature avoid recording" (TUCHMAN 1977, p.45). The selection criteria and ways of presenting events depend on those things considered as *news values*, and can be traced back not just to the importance and interest which an event has, but also to how well it fits in with the professional patterns and routines adopted by the news staff, as well as to the image of the audience which they have.

"This basic conviction that recent studies on the persuasive effects of the media have reached is not so much an affirmation of the limitations of its effects, so much as the awareness of how deeply rooted the communication processes are within the highly complex social fabric in which economic, sociological, psychological and psycho-social variables (one's group, social representations, social identity and processes of social interaction) interact incessantly. This means that the effectiveness of the media (...) derives, even more than from the content they transmit, from the characteristics of the surrounding social system, from the links among the individual components and the network of significant relationships of each subject and from the representations in play and shared" (p.217). [12]

These theories imply a redefining of the relationship between the audience and the media; however, the interactive nature of media communication and the recognizing of language as social practice still remain unquestioned. These elements are at the core of the dialogical models which were first developed at the beginning of the 1980s from the meeting of pragmatic linguistics, the psycho-social sciences and the philosophy of languages. These models appear to be very marginal in media communication research while they would open new theoretical, methodological and practical perspectives in that they imply a redefining of the concept of communication, the recognizing of the contractual nature of communication and the revising of the notion of interaction (GALIMBERTI 1992). [13]

The first aspect can be traced back to the definition of the concept of communication proposed by Francis JACQUES (1985) within a perspective which we may define as "strong interactionism": it goes beyond the linear and retroaction conceptions of interaction by introducing the idea of a circular communication regarded as an activity tied to the co-production and negotiation of meanings. The communication process turns into an "interlocutory relationship" which is characterized by a relationship of a psycho-social nature (GALIMBERTI 1992). [14]

An important contribution to defining the contractual nature of communication processes was developed by GHIGLIONE (1988). In his perspective to communicate means "the construction of a reality with the help of a system of signs, thereby accepting a certain number of principles which allow for exchange and a certain number of rules which regulate it" (GHIGLIONE 1986, p.102). The concept of "locutor" and that of "transmitter/receiver" are here substituted by the concept of "interlocutor/co-locutor" which refers to a conception of communication and discourse as an activity of co-construction of possible worlds. Communication, from this point of view, is considered as *what is at stake*:

"communicating is a game which sets the stakes which the interlocutors play for according to principles, rules and regulations, whose substratum can be found in the stability of the interlocutors with regard to a single aim: attempt to act upon the other according to the structure of a possible world" (GHIGLIONE 1988, p.53). [15]

The aim of communication consists in the sharing of a certain world order (or in the wanting to share it with another).

"Each time that the interlocutors stages a world by means of language, he constructs a simple world structure. This constructs a world structure on the basis of a few key notions (...). These notions are articulated according to a logic-creating programme (within a concern for the textual consistency to be translated, or to have someone believe in its cognitive consistency) which are staged for an argumentative programme to convince the other of the basis, of the reality, of the truth of a world as it is made to appear by a particular individual" (GHIGLIONE 1988, p.36). [16]

The principle of drawing up contracts is valued even when the two interlocutors are not present in person, as is the case of the relationship which is created between the media and the audience since the media replaces interlocutory validation which ensures the effectiveness of the communication contract with a range of discursive devices that leads one to believe that the latter actually exists. The strategies for reaching this aim are all based on the relationship between the real and the possible, between what is true and what appears to be true. In fact, as BROMBERG (1990) notes,

"Media language has reintroduced the logic of what appears to be true, since what it shows—even if it is accompanied by images—is not reality or the truth (...) what it shows is a function, which for this very reason is ambiguous since it is not the opposite of the truth, i.e. a lie, but it is verisimilar" (p.314). [17]

By considering the nature of the communication process in this way, there emerges the possibility of going beyond the simplified idea of the communication process which characterize traditional linear approaches. From this point of view, all those elements which intervene in the process (locutory, interlocutory, locution or expressed content, illocution or complete linguistic actions, for locution or effects sought by means of anticipating the interlocutory and his cognitive world, preparatory conditions and conditions of sincerity) are contextualized and understood in a wider framework of social interaction. In this perspective, the mass-media communication process can be seen as a specific production process supplying general interpretative frameworks which individual and collective subjects use to give meaning to the social reality. In this perspective, as CHARAUDEAU (1984) states, each means of communication "informs, of course, but, above all, it constructs significance and meanings" (p.64). According to him, the aims of "information" and "incitement" which characterize a media contract determine a frame for the treatment of discourse in which the media source has to: (a) give an account of the event in order to transform it into news (and to turn it into a reported event) by using descriptive and narrative operating procedures, sometimes objectifying (in order to be credible), sometimes dramatizing (in order to keep the attention of its audience); (b) explain the event (analysis or commentary) by using argumentative operating procedures; and (c) produce a new event by using operating procedures which encourage interaction (debates, talk shows, interviews). The places assigned to the partners in this contract determine a frame for the treatment of utterances in which the media source must

construct for itself the image of an uninvolved, distant and neutral speaker. It must also construct an image of the recipient who is supposed to be involved (in the name of citizenship), to be affected (in the name of human nature) and to be making attempts to understand (in the name of good will). (CHARAUDEAU 2002, p.310). [18]

3. Media Communication and Discourse

A fundamental contribution to the definition of the viewpoint within which to examine the problem of the conception of the mass-media-communication process can be traced back to the analysis of discourse. As VAN DIJK noted in the introduction to his book "Discourse and Communication: New Approaches to the Analysis of Mass Media and Communication" (1985, p.V): "There are two vast fields of research that, despite their common interest for text, talk and communication, seem to virtually ignore each other: the study of mass communication on the one hand and discourse analysis on the other hand." A change towards a growing interest between these two fields of research can now be stated—new theories about media discourse analysis have been developed and some major empirical studies using discourse analysis as a method to investigate complex communication events have been done. There is a broad range of definitions of discourse and discourse analysis which has led to a certain terminological flexibility of these terms. BELL and GARRETT's volume "Approaches to media discourse" (1997) presents and discusses different approaches to media discourse analysis showing similarities and differences between some of the most established approaches to discourse analysis by focusing on the various definitions of discourse, the methodical design and the aims of discourse analysis. [19]

I will discuss here two approaches that can be placed alongside but also partially in contrast: critical discourse analysis (CDA) and discursive psychology. According to FAIRCLOUGH (1992), critical approaches differ from non-critical ones in focusing on how discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies: studies of media discourse are characterized by the identification of grammatical categories and structures in order to show how their uses are shaped by ideological interests. On the contrary, following discursive psychology assumptions, analysis focuses on rhetoric:

"the relevance of wider explanatory and ideological context—press ownership, political economy and manipulation, legal frameworks guaranteeing and restraining press freedom, the press's normative, democratic role in conveying facts, serving public interests, mediating between government and public, and so on—arise for analysis to the extent that the press invokes, handles and manages them within the content of press coverage itself" (MAC MILLAN & EDWARDS 1999, pp.153-154). [20]

Within CDA framework, media are conceptualized as an institutional context which appropriates, organizes and constructs certain representations of the world according to its own logic and purposes. The concept of discourse points at the fact that media discursive practices actually constitute reality in the process of

communication (see FAIRCLOUGH 1995). Discourse is seen as the main instrument of production and reproduction of shared social knowledge, and it is studied not just as "form, meaning and mental process, but also as a complex, hierarchical structure of interaction, as social practice" (VAN DIJK 1997, p.7). In this sense it is not possible to think of individuals as generic, neutral locutors and interlocutors engaged in "abstract communicative interaction: the individuals who interact are always considered as "real" people, member of social categories, located within concretely defined situations. Thus, from a CDA point of view, the concept of the audience is unsatisfactory since it allows for a false identification with the average reader (or television viewer), a pure abstraction and artifact constructed by the media itself to reinforce its processes of influence. [21]

The considerations of VAN DIJK on the role of the means of mass communication can be linked to the more general aim of formulating a multidisciplinary theory of ideology, its expression and its reproduction through discourse. The theoretical framework adopted is based on the triangle formed by the concepts of cognition, society and discourse (with the processes of influence and bidirectional, multilevel dependence, both cognitive and social). From the point of view of social functions, ideologies support group interest, orient, legitimate and justify social actions by controlling the underlying social representation. From a cognitive point of view, ideologies organize and monitor attitudes that are shared socially; in other words it gives them an overall orientation, a consistency and organization. In this framework, the news transmitted by the press and television are to be considered as a particular type of discourse since they constitute a complex communicative event which must be analyzed not just with regard to its linguistic and textual components, but also with regard to the social practices and ideologies of newsmaking and to the institutional and macrosociological contexts of within which it is produced: "Textual dimensions account for the structures of discourse at various levels of description. Contextual dimensions relate these structural descriptions to various properties of context, such as cognitive processes and representations or sociocultural factors" (VAN DIJK 1988, p.25). [22]

Such an analysis should provide a qualitative alternative to traditional methods of content analysis. In the analytical approach developed by VAN DIJK, several levels of textual description are differentiated: a) microstructural description which include grammar (phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic descriptions) and pragmatics (speech acts); b) macrostructural descriptions which deal with whole parts of discourse, or entire discourses in their global semantic, syntactic and pragmatic aspects; c) style; d) rhetoric. Macrostructures are hierarchical organized sets of propositions governed by three major macrorules (deletion, generalization and construction) which guarantee the global coherence of discourse. This analysis shows, for instance, that news discourse exhibits a thematic structure that is basically top down, relevance controlled and cyclical. Moreover, the realization of topics in news discourse takes place by the application of specification rules: "High-level, abstract information is specified so that for overall events or actions, detailed descriptions are given as to the identity and properties of the participants, conditions, components and consequences of

the action, time, place, or manner of the events and various kind of circumstances. Specification takes place in cycles in news discourse" (VAN DIJK 1988, p.44). From this analysis a schematic superstructure of news discourse can be derived: it defines the possible forms in which themes may be ordered in actual texts. News style is constrained by various contextual factors and it is characterized by distance towards the implicitly present communicative partner (for instance, the reader), the tacit presupposition of a generally shared knowledge, institutional impersonality. In news rhetoric, strategic devices that enhance truthfulness, plausibility, correctness, precision and credibility are used:

"These devices include the remarkable use of numbers; a selective use of sources; specific modifications in relevance relations; ideologically coherent perspectives in the description of events; the uses of specific scripts or attitude schemata; the selective uses of reliable, official, well-known, and especially credible persons and institutions; the description of close, concrete details; the quotation of eyewitnesses or direct participants; and the reference or appeal to emotions" (VAN DIJK 1988, p.94). [23]

An outstanding example of this type of analysis is reported in "Racism and the Press" (1991) in which VAN DIJK analyses news articles on ethnic themes. Through an in-depth analysis of the semantic macrostructures—which consist of a conventional news scheme and a hierarchical organization of categories—VAN DIJK shows how ethnic minorities are depicted as problematic groups. Further applications, both analytical and critical, of this earlier work in the study of the structures, expression, and communication of ethnic prejudices in discourse, e.g., conversation, news in the press and social science textbooks are presented in "Elite Discourse and Racism" (1993) and "New(s) Racism" (2000). [24]

In the past fifteen years discursive psychology has introduced not only new ways of conceptualizing research questions and a new methodological approach to inquiry but also, as ANTAKI, BILLIG, EDWARDS and POTTER (2003) argue, new ways of understanding the aims of research itself. Over the last decade, a discursive approach to the study of media communication has been developed in parallel to more established research traditions. In this framework, discourse analysis deals with

"how factual descriptions are assembled and made factual through a range of rethorical devices; how various kind of stake, motive or interests are marshalled in ways that undermine factuality; and how factual descriptions and narratives routinely handle and manage the causality and accountability of actors in events, and of speakers/writers of texts" (MACMILLAN & EDWARDS 1999, p.153). [25]

It implies the adoption of an inductive approach where induction is "a normative analytic claim and principle (...) It amounts to avoiding the use of systemic coding categories or interpretative schemas, in favour of examining the details of texts as found, and tying analytic claims closely to those details" (MACMILLAN & EDWARDS 1999, p.153). [26]

Discourse analysis aims to explicating how texts work and should avoid dealing with *why* issues:

"Indeed we see the question why as bringing with it various interpretative problems, briefly summarized as follows: 1) Much effort at answering why in discourse studies of the mass media takes the form of general declarations. The empirical grounding remains the textual analysis itself, rather than any systematic study of social organizations (...) 3) much of what is collected under the issue *why* can be dealt with under *how*, by formulating the issue as not necessary external to, underlying, or explaining the text under analysis, but, in various ways, handled and managed in those texts (cf. Billig, 1992) and approachable as the discursive management of fact and accountability (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1994)" (MACMILLAN & EDWARDS 1999, p.154). [27]

For example, MACMILLAN and EDWARDS (1999) examined the British newspapers' coverage of the death of Princess Diana. This study is part of a large scale project which has daily monitored all British national newspapers and broadcast news content between October 1996 and September 1998. One focus is on how the press provides a self-commentary on its own adequacy which appears not only in specialized articles but as an implicit feature of press reporting in general. In this study their focus was on how the press dealt with the issue of their own involvement and responsibility as part of their reporting. Their analysis showed how the press deployed a series of interrelated categories distinctions and rhetorical oppositions (for instance, regular press vs. paparazzi, tabloid vs. broadsheet, British vs. foreign, supply vs. demand) in order to assign and avoid blame. Even if they focused on the rhetorical deployment of specific words and expressions, they did not regard formal linguistic categories and structures as the essential framework for explicating the "constructive, rhetorical and performative business of discourse" (p.171). It is the particular context of use of specific words that are relevant rather than the grammatical categories or syntactic structures they are part of. Interestingly, technical analytic categories are drawn not only from rhetoric and linguistics, but also from conversation analysis. [28]

4. Conclusions

We have seen how the first studies of the media went from a model of linear, unidirectional communication to more complex models in which communication is not understood as a mere passing of information but refers to a staging of a world co-constructed by the interlocutors. This conception involves a major shift from the conventional view of language as a tool of description and to a view of language as social practice. From the dialogical-discursive perspective "the transparency of language and the consistency of discourse are just illusion" (GHIGLIONE, MATALON & BACRI 1985, p.13). [29]

As a consequence of this shift, the adoption of quantitative vs. qualitative methodologies does not seem to be just a methodological problem, but also a theoretical and epistemological one. Indeed, the term "discourse analysis" does

not refer simply to an option of a strictly methodological kind which contrasts qualitative and quantitative approaches, but rather it refers to a group of theoretical perspectives that consider discourse as the object of research whereas the conceptualization of discourse points at the fact that media discursive practices actually constitute reality in the process of communication. [30]

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Citation

Colombo, Monica (2004). Theoretical Perspectives in Media-Communication Research: From Linear to Discursive Models [30 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 5(2), Art. 26, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0402261>.