RHETORIC OF TETRAD MEDIA

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Abstract: In the digital age, the great development of the media means of communication require a method of analysis for the new technologies. Through a metatheoretical analysis we evaluate, from a methodological point of view, the theory of tetrad media. Based on four items (enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal), four laws concerning the impact and development of every form of communication can be discovered, formulated and analysed. We consider that tetrad media provides a simple theory of media effects that can be critically used to evaluate the ways in which a particular means changes the cultural processes in the societies that adopt it. Finally, we argue in favour of the tetrad media as a qualitative method of analysis in communication sciences.

Keywords: tetrad media, media ecology, Marshall McLuhan, communication theories, rhetorical theories, rhetorical criticism, methodology of communication, aphoristic strategy.

1. Technopoly and Media Ecology

The technology is often described as having a strong influence on society. Dominated by the internet, our contemporary society crosses the digital age. The digital age changes the electronic environment through the increasing power of personalization of the means of communication by the people. The new form of tribalisation is based on difference and it leads to a decentralization of power and control. Instead of a single electric unified tribe, now we have a plurality of digital tribes, a "global village" constituted according to the ideas, beliefs and shared interests of the members of the virtual communities.

We consider that the symbiosis between the development of the society and that of technology is questionable. Neil Postman, (1992, 71) in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, warns us about the danger that may arise if we let our innovations lead us blindly and uncritically: "Technopoly is a state of culture. It is also a state of mind. It consists in the deification of technology, which means that the culture seeks its authorization in technology, finds its satisfaction in technology, and takes its orders from technology."

The concept of "technopoly" aims precisely to emphasize that a society dominated by technology, a society where people no longer take moral decisions, but only practical ones, may turn into a technocratic totalitarianism, to the extent that technology eliminates alternatives and provides information that is no longer controlled.

To be able to assess the impact (positive, negative or neutral) of a new technology we need a theory and a proper analysis grid. We consider that the theory of media ecology and tetrad media are useful tools in the field of communication sciences, for anyone who wants to know our interaction with the means of communication and its influence on the individual and society.

Neil Postman (1992, 18), the leader of the New York school, has been the first to introduce the expression media ecology to emphasize that the new technologies do not affect a limited sphere of human activity, but the whole, whereas the technology modifies

the institutions, and these in their turn transform culture: "Technological change is neither additive nor subtractive. Is ecological. I mean «ecological» in the same sense as the word is used by environmental scientists. One significant change generates total change."

As theory in the field of communication, media ecology is "the study of different personal and social environments created by the use of different communication technologies" (Griffin 2012, 322). In other words media ecology is interested in the way in which the communication means affect perception, understanding, opinions and human values. In the case of means of communication the distinction between what we can do and what we cannot do with them is often implicit and informal, because we go from the presupposition that we don't have to deal with an "environment", but with a simple machine. The representatives of the media ecology (Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, Joshua Meyrowitz, Paul Levinson, etc.), regarded as the study of social environment, are trying to make explicit the premises of our relationship with the means of communication and to discover the "grid" by which they make us see, feel and behave.

The fundamental idea of media ecology is that the means of communication are not only simple technical tools or machines, but they create a specific social environment that affects the thinking, feelings, individual behaviour, education, economy or policy of the society. If ecology refers to a particular system whose elements interact, the broadening of the concept by its application to the media shows the interest not only in the study of the means of media, but especially in the way media interacts with people in the context of a social ecology.

2. Medium Message: the laws of the tetrad media

Probably the best known representative of media ecology or technological determinism is Marshall McLuhan. His famous aphorism "the medium is the message" actually wanted to emphasize that the means of communication affect the society not only through the content they deliver, but also by the characteristics of the means themselves and the new social environment they bring with them. The impact of means of communication deeply affect society, but it does not mean that for McLuhan, the content would not have any importance. In fact, there is no means of communication without content, and consequently no means to carry it. Which is the message of the means?

In a series of articles from the 1970s, such as "McLuhan's laws of the media" (1975) or "The laws of the media" (1977), but mostly in the book published in 1988 and written together with his son Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* are discovered, formulated and analysed the four laws related to the impact and development of any means of communication. In this last book, which aimed to be an updating of the work *Understanding Media* from 1964, McLuhan proposes a grid or a rigorous structure for the analysis of the means of communication.

Tetrad of media effects or laws of media examines the effects produced in the society by any technology or means by dividing the effects into four categories: enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal. The four categories, attributes or attribute effects respond to four fundamental questions (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 98-9).

Enhancement answers the question: "What increases, intensifies, or makes possible to accelerate the corresponding product?" Enhancement is closely related to Marshall McLuhan's conception that the means of communication are extensions of the senses,

body and mind that produce different effects on human perception and the structure of society. For example the radio amplifies the human voice on long distances up to a mass audience and television intensifies the visual element, but not in the sense in which individuals read an article in a newspaper, but in an "acoustic" sense simultaneously.

Obsolescence answers the question: "What was pushed aside or made to fall into disuse by the new means?" Overcoming or obsolescence is the reverse effect of amplification: when something new appears on the scene, something else moves to the periphery or leaves the scene. However, "obsolescence is not the end of anything, it's the beginning of aesthetics, the cradle of taste, of art, of eloquence and of slang" (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 100). The radio reduces the importance of the printing and eyesight and the television makes radio to become obsolete.

Retrieval answers the question: "What repetition or recovery of some actions or older services is simultaneously introduced into the scene by the new form?" Retrieval focuses on the past, and implies a certain metamorphosis between the means and the new background. The radio brings into prominence the world of speech and speaker, while the television recovers the visual factor as hybrid between the visuality of the printing, which the radio pushed in disuse, and the current electronic issues.

Reversal answers the question: "What exactly is the potential reversal of the new forms?" The reversal, which focuses on the future, is related to the principle, according to which the objects during their development appear under opposed forms as compared with their final shape. It is relatively easy now, when the effects occurred, to answer the question "what exactly reverses or flips the radio or television when they have followed or developed up to their maximum potential?" Radiophonic acoustic is converted into audio-visual, television and the TV screen is replaced by a personal computer screen and windows internet.

Ultimately the message of any means is the discovery and interpretation of the meanings of the four components of the tetrahedron. The four laws may have a different form of elaboration either simplified or complex depending on the object, i.e. the medium itself but also on the subject and the lenses of the person who questions or interprets. Each of the four elements of the tetrad shines as the different faces of a diamond. The meaning of famous McLuhan's aphorism "medium is message" is revealed in all its simplicity when it is viewed through the optics of the tetrahedron. Every means of communication is a message to be "heard" and explained.

3.   The Characteristics of the Tetrad

Enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal are the four component elements of laws of media. To be more specific we can draw a tetrahedron where the enhancement is on the left top, the obsolescence is on the left bottom, while the reversal is on the right top and the retrieval is on the right bottom:

Enhancement	Reversal
Obsolescence	Retrieval

Table 1. Laws of media

The laws of tetrad exist simultaneously, they do not appear successively or chronologically, they help us to clear up the "grammar language" media. The two faces on the left (enhancement and obsolescence) are actually positive qualities of the medium, they are most easily observed. The two faces on the right (retrieval and reversal) show the importance of the historical context in the analysis of means of communication, as they bring into prominence the technological past and future. The

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tetrad is a tool that allows the media ecologist to describe the medium as a whole, so that none of the categories is superior to the other three, all four aspects are complementary and inherent to each artefact from the beginning to the end. Any analysis of the means of communication has to take into account their simultaneous character, all these four elements make up the world of media. As an instrument of analysis we can say that the tetrad analysis provides a rapid way to identify the exerted properties and actions on people by a new technology.

The tetrad is a flexible tool of a general character which can be applied, in a systematic manner, to all artefacts or technological products, to inventions or human creations. The general and flexible character of the tetrad is revealed not only to the media whereas it is applicable to different things. For example, the hermeneutic tetrad (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 140), drawn up in a simple manner, shows us that the interpretation enhances the clarity and recovers the depth, it obsolesces the naiveté and it can turn into obscurity. Money has the following properties: it enhances transactions and the commercial uniformity and retrieves the exchange of tribal gifts, turned into extravagant consumption; it obsolesces the barter, truck and bargain and the lack of money may reverse in the form of credit. In addition, the tetrad keeps an ethical neutrality because "it makes no particular value judgment about the medium it characterizes" (Bogost 2010, 26).

The authors of the legislation agree that there may be alternative versions of the tetrad. This means that we are on the plan of the methodological relativism and not on that of a maximum scientific rigor. For instance, an application of the four laws to the Internet and the social network Facebook could be questioned and differently developed by another researcher. Applying the tetrad to the Internet we got the following results: it enhances or amplifies fast access to information, specialized services and interactions with several people simultaneously; it retrieves or recovers the acoustic space of the electronic alphabet, the word form of hypertext and the interaction and active participation of online virtual communities as well; it obsolesces or exceeds the global, centralized and passive village of the television voyeurs, it also governs images as main way of information, and it could turn into propaganda and control of information from a tyrannical regime or a 3D game that breaks the barriers between virtual and real.

We consider that Facebook network amplifies the yearbook, answering machine and journalistic character; it recovers global village, stroll, personal archive; it brings in disuse the past time and secret; it can reverse in college, high school or personality Facebook addiction disorder.

4. Tetrad Evaluation

How could the tetrad be evaluated to the extent that it claims to provide "«communication theory» fully mature, where, paradoxically, the «theory» is missing – precisely because it is based on observations and perceptions?" (McLuhan and Zingrone 1995/1997, 388). We consider that the tetrad proposes a theory, to the extent that it offers a systematic approach to the communication phenomenon which is based on induction and starts from the researcher's subjectivity.

Karl Weick (1979) considers that there is an inevitable compromise in the theoretical trade-offs in Theory Construction. No empirical theory about social behaviour is simultaneously general, simple and precise. If we apply this postulate to the tetrad media it is obvious that its weak point or theoretical compromise is due by the accuracy and precision of the results. On Weick's clock-face model (*apud* Griffin 1997, 476), we imagine a clock – face where 4 o'clock corresponds to accuracy, 8 o'clock corresponds

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to simplicity and 12 o'clock to the generality of the theory. On this clock-face the tetrad, finds its place between generality (at 12) and simplicity (at 8). The persuasive strategy the tetrad uses is an aphoristic strategy. It proposes or produces short assertions with an abstract character. (Moreover the tetrad can be a useful tool for analysing particular aphorisms through its four categories.) Therefore, we consider appropriate the positioning around 10 o'clock, which combines simplicity and relevance with the risk of errors or lack of evidence, since it combines memorable aphorisms and brilliant metaphors with intuition and feelings in a speculative theory with extensive applicability. The problem of McLuhan's theory is that it only suggests the objective, scientific character, (verification or falsification, testing and prediction), as it uses a subjective approach to support assertions with objective character. At most, we can assert that the results are acceptable if the community of specialists in the field agree with them.

The absence of intersubjective testability criterion determines us to consider the tetrad rather a contribution in the field of humanistic approaches than in the field of science. In terms of general approach (West and Turner, 2010: 44-65; Griffin 2012, 25-35) in the field of communication the theory of tetrad media is subsumed into an interpretative orientation and not into an empirical one, as apparently would seem, since it emphasizes the researcher's subjectivity and inventiveness. Considering that there is not a single tetrad of an artefact, then we can consider that the purpose of the tetrad is not to explain phenomena, but rather to examine the relativism of the world. The researcher is not separated or detached from the investigated artefact, on the contrary he is strongly involved because the laws of the tetrad adequate to that artefact are based on his personal observations and perceptions. Thus, the application of the four laws of media does not refer to generalization based on similar cases, but it aims to illuminate the particular case depending on the researcher's sensitivity.

Moreover, according to the philosophical assumptions that are unexplained as the foundation, the theory of the tetrad is subsumed into a critical-interpretative orientation. From the ontological point of view, although technology restricts some choices, generally the individual's choice is free. The law of inversion or rollover explicitly expresses that people can take an active role. Therefore we consider, alongside Paul Levinson (1999/2004, 201) that: "McLuhan sought to rouse us from our numbness at the effects of our media, surely that was because he thought that we might be in a position to continue the effects that we liked, and discontinue or at least diminish those that we did not, after our awakening." From the epistemological point of view the laws privilege the people's understanding, the creation of multiple realities and reform society. From the axiological point of view the tetrad aims to be a neutral tool. However, each researcher who applies the laws of media confesses and celebrates his own values.

Finally, based on these philosophical assumptions, we consider that the tool of the tetrad media can be "attached" to the rhetorical criticism. According to S. Foss (2009, 6) the rhetorical criticism is "a qualitative research method that is design for the systematic investigation and explanation of symbolic acts and artefacts for the purpose of understanding rhetorical processes." This definition includes three important aspects. Firstly, the systematic analysis is an act of criticism. The tetrad through its four laws presumes a systemic organization of the research, where the present time is privileged, without neglecting the past or future. Secondly, the artefacts or human creations are objects of criticism. The tetrad, due to its general character, can be applied to a very wide field of analysis, "apply to all human artefacts, whether hardware or software, whether bulldozers or buttons, or poetic styles or philosophical systems" (McLuhan and McLuhan 1988, 98). Thirdly, the understanding of the rhetorical processes is the aim of

criticism. The tetrad aims to provide a "media grammar", i.e. a tool which helps us to be aware, to better understand and to act according to our own interests.

The digital age we are crossing now needs critics of the new media. A rhetorical analysis of the content of the message sent may be supplemented by a tetradic analysis of the means of that message. It is important to recognize that each media has its own benefits and limitations, and this "requires recognition that the medium itself is a constraint" (Camppell 2015, 304).

5. Conclusions

We consider that a metatheoretical approach, which belongs to the philosophy of communication, is desirable in the field of communication theories to express explicitly the general approaches and philosophical presuppositions. The researchers need to know how to interpret the methodological possibilities in order to choose the most appropriate ones for their works.

The aphoristic strategy of the tetrad media gives researchers a systematic and general theory, a quick and simple tool for the analysis of the technologies and artefacts, but it makes a compromise in the face-clock of accuracy and precision. The fact that there is no criterion of an intersubjective testability theory leads us to consider media as part of the interpretative theories rather than of the scientific ones.

We suggest the integration of the tetrad model in the field of qualitative research that is called rhetorical criticism. The two fundamental assumptions of rhetorical criticism can be extended to tetrad media in the artefacts assessment: the objective reality is a symbolic or rhetorical creation, and the cognition of the artefact is only possible by the critic's personal interpretation.

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