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# Critical Reading of Media: A Methodological Proposal

Lectura crítica de medios: una propuesta metodológica

## ABSTRACT

This work analyzes some aspects on which the development of critical thinking is based starting with the contributions of critical theory to the educommunicative perspective, as a bedrock for reflection on the media. This work reviews the characteristics of the critical subject and differentiates between critical reading and critical thinking. The former works as an analytic strategy that searches the re-reading of texts or audiovisual messages to identify categories attached to discussion and interpretation; the latter highlights ways to learn to think autonomously which leads to the proposal of interpretation strategies that target creative thinking. The objective of this article is to present orientations coming from Social Communication as an academic discipline that sustain Critical Readings conceived as educommunicative strategies. The methodology used to develop this study is the review of documents and content analysis. The result is a guide that proposes actions for critical media readings in the classroom. The conclusion is that the promotion of a critical attitude involves identifying the political personality of the cultural industry and the communicational process; it means constant questioning of the transparency of media messages, with the aim of creating independent, inquisitive and creative citizens.

## RESUMEN

El presente trabajo analiza algunos aspectos sobre los que se sustenta el desarrollo del pensamiento crítico. Se parte de los aportes que la Teoría Crítica brinda a la perspectiva educomunicativa, como base para la reflexión en torno a los medios. Este trabajo se justifica en la medida en que se reflexiona sobre algunas dimensiones del sujeto crítico, y que diferencia entre lectura crítica y pensamiento crítico. La primera funciona como estrategia de tipo analítico que busca la re-lectura de los textos o los mensajes audiovisuales, con el fin de identificar categorías sujetas a discusión e interpretación. El segundo apunta a una propuesta de aprender a pensar de manera autónoma, lo que conlleva el proponer estrategias de interpretación que apunten al pensamiento creativo. El objetivo del presente artículo es mostrar algunas orientaciones que, desde la comunicación social como disciplina, sustentan a las lecturas críticas concebidas como estrategias educomunicativas. La metodología utilizada en este estudio es la revisión documental y el análisis de contenido. El resultado final es una guía en la que se proponen acciones para realizar lecturas críticas de medios en el aula. Se concluye que promover la actitud crítica, implica identificar el carácter político de la industria cultural y del proceso comunicacional; supone sospechar de la transparencia de los mensajes mediáticos y apunta a conformar un ciudadano independiente, cuestionador y creativo.

## KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Educommunication, educational strategies, critical reading, critical perception, critical thought.  
Educomunicación, estrategias didácticas, lectura crítica, percepción crítica, pensamiento crítico.

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«What matters here, rather than teach things and transmit content, is that the individual learns to learn; to be capable of thinking for himself, to overcome verifications merely empirical and immediate findings of facts that surround it (naive consciousness) and develop its own capacity to reduce, to relate, elaborate synthesis (critical consciousness)» (Kaplún, 1998: 51).

### 1. Introit: An approach to critical theory

The first 30 years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were dominated by the print media and their capacity to generate opinion, as well as radio and cinema, instruments of disclosure of far-reaching and significant emotional impact that rectify the problems of access to information imposed mainly by legal culture. In this context, critical theory proposes new ways of approaching reality that differ from those used in other countries at that time, in order to produce through transdisciplinarity as a way of thought and action the tools necessary to respond to the equitable transformation of the world. The initial steps in critical communication theory were taken at the Frankfurt School, a name given to the group of researchers led by Max Horkheimer that generated studies in various fields of knowledge (aesthetics, arts, anthropology, sociology and philosophy), from the Institute for Social Research of the University of Frankfurt<sup>1</sup>, and comprised the so-called critical paradigm of communication.

Basically the Frankfurt outlook reacts to the leadership of research in American communication, with its functionalist character, whereby one of the functions of the media is to provide regulation and social equilibrium. The aspect that was strongly challenged by the Frankfurt school referred to the use of the media as instruments of political control and commercial domination.

The set of studies arising from the so-called North American school<sup>2</sup> fell within a double slope. The first were those that form part of the empirical and sociological paradigm of structural-functionalism and the Mathematical Theory of Information<sup>3</sup>. The second are the sociological studies from the Chicago school.

US investigations endorsed the media effect approach, represented chiefly by the Magic Bullet Theory or Needle Hypodermic<sup>4</sup>. This theory is based on the idea of the omnipotence of the media to influence an audience considered passive and therefore easily manipulable, and is based on studies by Ivan Pavlov and Burrhus Frederic Skinner's Social Behaviorism. The increased activity of the North American school is shown in «Work on Political Propaganda» funded by the Institute for Propaganda

Analysis, as well as the effects of radio and cinema on morality and culture, and studies on hearings linked essentially to advertising. The effects become the star research theme. «All the other elements of the communication process are considered as soon as they can contribute to improving the impact: the contents are analyzed to subsequently design more effective messages and the study of recipients interested in knowing how to influence attitudes and motivations» (Igartúa & Humanes, 2004: 113)

It was to identify how efficiently audiences are influenced in order to get at certain answers and shape public opinion that the studies generated by Harold Lasswell, especially the so-called «5 Ws» formula (Who says? What is said? What are the effects...?), were decisive for the analysis of the communication process., which considered control/property/issue, the content (technological channels, audiences and effects); and this is research line that is still in force.

In the research context, we recall the propaganda campaigns of the Second World War that sought to convince the population of the benefits they could obtain in the event of war, such as well as buying more bonds (Igartúa & Humanes, 2004). This is a clear example of how government sought to influence the audience with the aspiration of obtaining results through the use of strategies of persuasion that years later were still being used in advertising and politics, without ignoring other areas.

The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School object to the US researchers' epistemological principles, believing that the data that yield standardized surveys and other tools do not report relevant interpretations of the complex reality. The research should not be an instrument for achieving commercial purposes but a factor to ensure a society that is more just and balanced in all aspects. In this regard, Theodore Adorno writes: «It seems clear that civil society needs to go on enriching itself in critical terms. The attitude of the cultural critic, thanks to the difference or distance between them and evil and disorder, lets you override theoretically, although the critique often fails for being remote from them. What makes the critical attitude work is the articulation of the difference or distance within the same cultural device which aimed to overcome, and you need precisely that distance to take in culture» (Adorno, in Lucas & al., 2003: 187).

The Frankfurt School analyzes the cultural crisis of industrial societies from the Marxist episteme, and their topics of interest include focusing on political economy, the labor movement and the Marxist philosophy. The main postulate of the school is based on

so-called «negativity» as the critical impulse that moves the Enlightenment, emphasizing the critical aspect that motivates change and social transformation. This, therefore, ensures the exercise of a critical dialectic: a method of seeking the truth from the dialogue, in which a concept is confronted with its opposite (thesis and antithesis), to then achieve the synthesis.

Part of the investigative work of this school is psycho-sociological, the integration of the individual in society and the cultural impact of commercial life. The funny thing is that some of these studies, conducted by Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, were made under the aegis of North American capitalists, as the following quote testifies: «In 1937 (Lazarfeld) instructs Adorno in his research as part of the Princeton Radio Research Project (Columbia University) into music and its effect through radio broadcasting. It gives rise to the publication in 1938 of an article on the fetishistic nature of music and the regression of hearing. The public are subject to the criteria of commercial radio and the interests of record companies, individual musical taste regresses to infantilism. These ideas contradicted the interests of the industry (who financed the research), which sees in Adorno's ideas a certain ideological criticism» (Igartúa & Humanes, 2004: 121).

Following these studies, Horkheimer and Adorno coined the term «Cultural Industry» (1944; 1947)<sup>5</sup> to refer to all symbolic production that standardizes mass culture, provoking social disequilibrium.

Adorno and Horkheimer sustain that media production (films, radio and print media) aims to ideologize and homogenize content and preferences to cultivate tastes and necessities, and undermine the audience's ability to discern. This kind of cultural product was meant to be consumed quickly in a distracted way, limiting mental discernment and breeding domination patterns.

One of the fundamental aspects of this theoretical posture is to promote a critical attitude that deals with media culture and influences scientific production, in consonance with the Marxist proposal for the reorga-

nization of society. Much of the Frankfurt's School work is developed between World War I and II, which justifies the sense of its sociopolitical orientation.

According to the theories of the Frankfurt School, the cultural industry creates an economic system that is concentrated, identical and standardized, and consolidated by the so-called «technical rationality». This rationality leads to the manipulation and obliteration of the citizen's critical reflection that negotiates the cultural industry repertoires.

Igartúa and Humanes (2004) say that in technocratic societies, what is rational (formal rationality:

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adaptation of the media to the ends) dominates reason (substantive rationality: actions are performed taking into account a series of values). At the same time technical rationality offers more possibilities for control and creates a one-dimensional society (Marcuse, 1993) in which individuals are considered defenseless. Critical reflection thus transforms itself into the main tool used to survive market and mass culture impositions. This is precisely its main communicational strategy.

## 2. Critical nature and educommunication

It could be said that critical theory provides educommunication with perspectives, bases on which to reflect on the media, which materialize in a critical reading pattern. These are conceived as methodological tools of the critical subject dimension, according to the

categorization formulated by José Martínez de Toda (1998; 2002). Critical subjects question the representation of the media that confront their culture, values and meaning through cognitive strategies of critical thinking.

For the critical subject, «the media hide ideologies and try to impose them. The subject must go from being naïve towards the media and their myths, to being critical» (Martínez de Toda, 2002: 330). Critical reading and the exercise of deliberative thinking encourage demanding and autonomous reflection on

education ultimately aim to develop Critical Thinking: «All the programs share the same relevant objectives which consist of developing the student's critical thinking. Likewise this common objective leads us to consider diverse aspects that belong to this same study field such as experiences that appear to be different from each other, both in as much as what the object of study refers to and in its approach to teaching... according to this perspective, any research on media deserves to be published as long as it contributes to the development of critical thinking... to achieve develop-

ment in a coherent and autonomous way, media education must offer a clear and precise definition of the concept of critical thinking and suggest specific ways for making this concept operational in appropriate teaching patterns for different audiences and different school contexts» (paragraph 8 and following).

At first sight, it appears like any Educommunication action must include the promotion of Critical Thinking and the activation of critical readings. But

this is not always the case; a certain media criticism is practiced that only seeks to repeat determined and pre-established points of view, avoiding those that might be different, which is inconsistent with the proposal of critical autonomy proffered by Masterman (1993). We consider that media reading that lacks reflective thinking is an incomplete actions.

Kurland asserts that critical reading is an analytical strategy for re-reading texts or audiovisual messages with the purpose of identifying categories tied to discussion and interpretation, according to established guidelines. Critical thinking involves reflection on discoveries arising from critical reading: to value not only the results but also to propose strategies for reflection and, above all, to re-think the possibilities for change and transformation that lead to creative thinking.

Critical reading is based on the cultural competence of the reader, as he/she identifies/understands the message, relevant aspects of the text without them interfering with the reader's previous knowledge or points of view. It is a work based on the content just as they appear. It is common for readings that aim to be critical to be wrongly done, due to:

1) Absence/ lack of text, meaning there are elements that are missing from the text.

**The media programs mislead the critical spirit and the acquisition of knowledge. They propose that the student becomes implicitly more critical whenever he acquires the knowledge proposed by the program. But a fundamental question remains unanswered: what do we understand by critical thinking?**

the media. There are diverse modalities of media critical reading that have generated a series of controversies described by Buckingham (2005) and adapted to the Latin-American context:

- 1) It is believed that the only critic is oneself.
- 2) Only the left see the critic as an entity that is proposed and executed.
- 3) The emphasis is on aspects of ideology, not critical autonomy.

Consider «everything that goes against the system and, evidently not just revolutionary democrats such as Freire are against the system, but also neo-Nazis like Haider» (Aubert & al., 2004: 2)<sup>6</sup>.

In the Latin-American case, the relation between the different postures linked to Media Critical Readings has already been pointed out by Valderrama (2000). The author outlines what are considered to be, in general lines, the principal parameters of critical readings: 1) To unravel the ideological content of the messages; 2) To create mentally active habits; 3) To enable receptors to discover the elements that form the structure of the messages; 4) To teach how to decipher ideologies, guided by semiotic orientations, used as theoretical methodological referents.

Piette affirms that the different practices in media

2) The critic is aware that the texts lack certain aspects related to his/her wishes and needs, referring to what the reader thinks should exist in the text.

3) The reader confirms that there are ideas in the text that can only render limited and forced interpretations (Kurland, 2003).

Critical thinking refers to determined ideas and kinds of reflection, including metacognition, as a mechanism that leads to thinking about what is being thought, and is therefore an auto-reflective process. Critical thinking develops how to learn to think, to do so in an autonomous way without sticking to predetermined or restricted approaches.

Although critical reading has its specificities in the educational field it varies but inserts itself into the edu-communicative field, as expressed by Piette (1996): «The concept of critical thinking is far from having a clear definition; for the researchers of this study field... most of the time the concept is not even perceived in a conflictive way; the researchers consider the development of Critical Thinking as a «natural» result of the teaching that they develop in their programs. In this way, the rise of Critical Thinking would then be a «normal» and an «unavoidable» consequence of the acquisition of knowledge about the media, transmitted thanks to the development of content in their media programs. In this way, the student's critical thinking develops, needing no pedagogical intervention. Summarizing, the media programs mislead the critical spirit and the acquisition of knowledge. They propose that the student becomes implicitly more critical whenever he acquires the knowledge proposed by the program. But a fundamental question remains unanswered: what do we understand by critical thinking?» (Piette, 1996: 11 and following)

A clear example that verifies this reflection can be found in the Venezuelan context, in the recently promulgated Education Organic Law (2009) which proposes an integration of work with media and the education system, to expand critical thinking by means of «Training Units». According to the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of the law, «the public communication media, as a public service, are essential instruments for the development of the educational process and, as such, must perform informative, instructional and recreational functions that contribute to the creation of values and principles established in the Republic's Constitution and the present law. With knowledge, the development of critical thinking and attitudes to encourage coexistence among citizens, territoriality and nationality... The sub-system of the education system will incorporate «training units» to contribute to the knowledge, comprehension

and use of social communication media content and critical analysis of the same. The law and regulations will also regulate propaganda in defense of the mental and physical health of the population» (LOE, 2009: 8).

July 2011 saw the organization in the capital, Caracas, of so-called student brigades of the communication war command responsible for spreading messages of support for the Government communications policy in an «underground» style. With this action, the principles of otherness proposed by the Guerrilla of Communication<sup>7</sup> ceased to make sense along with the democratic practices of media readings.

Although all this is set in the Venezuelan context, instruction on and promotion of criticism have changed with the transformations of current society. It is increasingly easier to observe how actions research in other areas of the conflict of knowledge helps to avoid sterile criticism which in itself involves more creative and elaborated strategies.

To install or promote a critical attitude in the case of educommunication requires identifying the political approach of the cultural industry and the communication process; this requires constant questioning of the transparency of media messages and proposing the creation/ formation of the independent citizen who is inquisitive and creative. It is no coincidence that many educommunicative experiences in Latin America, especially those described by Mario Kaplun, were at one time or another performed clandestinely due to the military dictatorships prior to the 1980s.

Critical reading in educommunication reveals hidden messages behind the given messages, in which orders are dictated constantly, and prescriptions related to values, and in Venezuelan case proscriptions, given via the Public Media National System. An example is the use of stereotypes: descriptions of individual and/or social groups related to the social order. However from the media praxis, the audiovisual in particular, stereotypes have been simplified to produce standardized visions, which in most cases are biased outlines of gender, race, social condition, religion, political stance and sexual preferences.

Critical readings identify communication strategies that media present to the audience in hidden messages (effects); on the other hand, they recognize that behind the perceived message there is a market logic in the media industry that favors certain ideological positions (criticality); or, as is the case in our country, of certain political projects to the detriment of a critical and autonomous reading of media.

The media critic must satisfy three validity criteria:

1) Being objective, avoiding ideological proposals; 2) Taking into account the social, political and cultural influence that unnecessarily embraces the media; 3) The media must be settled in their context, environment, with values, demands and aspirations (Jansen, in Lucas & al, 2003: 191). We add references on critical readings from the literary discipline and which can enrich the interdisciplinary educommucative approach. Wolton (2000) indicates that critical readings require the reader possesses a series of intellectual skills that involve reading, decoding, analysis, perspective, expression and communication.

### 3. Critical reading of media in the classroom

Some educommunicative practices apply critical readings. However, it is uncommon to find procedures that make them explicit, so how should this kind of reading be performed? We present a useful procedure which is more a methodology than a recipe for carrying out media critical readings in the classroom, which can be adapted to the group's needs and the requirements of the subject and/or the study level. This can be applied in any formal teaching/ learning environment:

1) Select the media text or texts; this can be done by the teacher or the group before the activity. Visualize it (reading or listening to it, according to the case) as a starting point.

2) Identify values and views that the group possesses in terms of the media text. Consider emotional affinities: did you like it? What did you dislike? What aroused their curiosity? What were they indifferent to? Include: usage, habits and tastes regarding the media text. This step is the recognition of the characteristics they have as consumers of media, with habits, tastes and preferences.

3) Study the formal elements of the text: the deconstruction of the aspects that shape and link with the language and grammar in each media. In the case of television, for example, use of shots and angles, camera movements or composition. Include: description of a television genre, the structure of a magazine or a newscast.

4) Interpret the relationships that the issuer suggests by the deliberate construction of the message, taking into consideration formal aspects identified in the previous section; these are evidence of analysis. Specify the denotative, primary meaning (Saussure, 2005), according to related culture. In the case of audiovisual language, for example, it is easy to interpret a shot such as a «low shot» angle that demonstrates the superiority of the object represented.

5) Select a specific theme for discussion, as a motivational strategy. This leads to work with specific general problems and not certain individual viewpoints.

6) Contextualize the message or analyzed text, considering that it may occur in various formats. Nowadays, this involves technological intervention, conditioned interpretations and relationships established with audiovisual speech. Contextualize is to locate the texts in their socio-cultural context, i.e. it implies reflection on the references that help us to interpret/understand the issuer/author of the message, as well as the diegetic location (spatial and temporal) of the media text (when did it happen? where was it drawn up?).

7) Evaluate the text from the identification of the source: who is the issuer? (origin of the text). This allows us to evaluate the degree of confidence it has with respect to institutional mediation to infer the possible interests of the issuer. The issuer can be an artist, as in the case of a short film, a company that responds to the logic of the entertainment industry, as with soap operas, a public institution or health prevention campaign.

8) Identify the characteristics of the content from the genre, format and media from which it arises. Students should be encouraged to discriminate between facts, inferences and opinions, for example, in news programs or in the print media. This will allow them to understand the use of the language and grammar of media, its linkage with the theme and developed gender. If we look at a magazine we are unlikely to see sequencing with a descriptive intent or details of a level of usage that emphasize specific aspects of what is represented, because the logic of the discourse points to another type of plane, showing the scene of representation and dynamism, among other technical and semiotic aspects.

9) Inventory concepts and definitions that serve to establish relationships between them; from experiences and prior knowledge, depending on the review of its influence from the context in which it is immersed. It basically works from dialogue, discussion and joint account agreements. Here different social mediation and knowledge in reflective action are at play, from the constructivist perspective.

10) Discover the present in the text (Saussure, 2005), connotations, i.e. identify the subjective meanings, ambiguities and multiplicity of interpretations it offers. It is essential to assess the points of view of each reader/interpreter and above all, constructions from their references. This step can include the investigative

or intentional analysis of the author/sender of the message; recognize the means and ends used to build the message; make assumptions and conjectures that allow the reader to anticipate consequences. This procedure relates to the process of questioning.

11) With the information obtained so far, it is possible to build «premises of interpretation», which should be argued over and, above all, shared/negotiated with the group that participates in the process of critical reading. These premises, in turn, are directly linked to the topics that have been proposed to guide the discussion.

12) Second level of contextualization. That is, analysis of the aspects related to the industry/field in which the text occurs. A valuable exercise can be to take the news from the local press to analyze how information is presented: what are the business or political groups involved; the contradictions and overlap; the power relations that are referred to directly or indirectly, relations with society; the treatment given to the same information in various media, among other aspects.

13) Motivate rereadings of the media discourse, offer views on: what is added to the text to improve it? What can be suppressed? What would it change? What other issues/problems can be worked from the analysis? What would be changed in the program? Propose new readings or problems that can be treated while dealing with the same analyzed text.

14) Reflect on what has been analyzed, what they learned and understood. How did the exercise go? What could be changed or improved? How were the results obtained? What is acceptable in the process of interpretation? The student tries to explain and understand himself/herself: What is thought? How do you think? How do we think the student thinks? (Castellano, 2007).

These exercises are a starting point for the development of educative experiences, taking leave of tastes, exposition and preferences that come from the «Show-business Culture».

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Created by Felix Weil, its objectives included the study of social

life in its entirety, on the basis of the economy, the forms of power and ideology. With the advent of Nazism, the institute was forced to close and its main researchers emigrated to Switzerland, France and the United States.

<sup>2</sup> Even if the so-called American school appears as a trend of organic research or «unitary system of thought», within it there are varieties and dimensions of scattered studies with various theoretical lines (McQuail, in Lucas & al., 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Proposed by Claude E. Shannon, «A Mathematical Theory of Communication» (1948), provides a theoretical basis of communication technology and poses key concerns in relation to two of the components of the communication process: the media and the message.

<sup>4</sup> Term coined by Harold Lasswell in «Propaganda Techniques in the World War» (1927), in which he reflects on the impact (effects) of the media on public opinion.

**Critical readings identify communication strategies that media present to the audience in hidden messages (effects); on the other hand, they recognize that behind the perceived message there is a market logic in the media industry that favors certain ideological positions (criticality); or, as is the case in our country, of certain political projects to the detriment of a critical and autonomous reading of media.**

<sup>5</sup> First date corresponds to the writing of the text and the second to the year of publication.

<sup>6</sup> The quote refers to Jörg Haider (1950-2008), leader of the Party of the Right «Alliance for the future of Austria» (BZÖ). For his actions, Haider was listed as populist, xenophobic and filonazi.

<sup>7</sup> Communication guerrilla, a term coined in 1997 by group a.f.r.i.-c.a., of European origin in the publication *Handbuch der Kommunikationsguerilla* (Blisset and Brünzels). The work is based on codes of reworking the semantics and modification of media messages, which are supported in semiotics, as well as the following technical actions: estrangement; Collage and Assembly; Misrepresentation; Over-identification; Fake and Subversive Affirmation.

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