

Mediation and reception. Some theoretical and methodological connections in Latin American communication studies*

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Abstract

The article is based on the current debate in Latin America and Brazil, of epistemological and methodological nature, regarding the concepts and processes of reception, mediation and mediatization included. It intends to peruse the paths of communication studies in the region, linking strong traditions of mediation and reception theories with emerging perspective of mediatization. We intend to analyze the various *methodological maps of mediations* that have been following the changes of the structural relationships between communication and society. We conclude that despite the central position today this theory in the field of communication in Latin America, it still should be taken to the international debate on theories of communication.

Keywords: Theories of communication, mediation, mediatization, empirical research, epistemology

STARTING POINTS

The objectives that guided this study tries to answer the proposal made by Stig Hjarvard for the panel *Sociological perspectives on mediatization theory: semiotics, reception, practice and institutions* (IAMCR, 2013):

In this panel we are inviting a dialogue between various strands of sociological and cultural theory engaging with mediatization theory that hitherto have developed without much intellectual exchange and (...) also wish to address differences, both in terms of intellectual traditions and empirical experiences.

The current state of communication research leads us to emphasize the distinctive contribution of the Latin-American theory of mediation for communication studies. This contribution is exactly an attempt to break with fragmented and simplified theoretical

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approaches to communication, establishing *mediation as an integrated theoretical perspective of the processes of production, product and audience for communication studies*. Communication has come to be seen as a privileged domain to the production of meaning of life, refuting the reproductivist conception and establishing that “*more than the media, communication today is a question of mediations*” (Martín-Barbero, 1989: 19). The result is a complex research design that involves the structure and the dynamic of the production of messages, the uses and appropriations of these messages and their textual composition. This theoretical perspective goes beyond the proposal that characterized major trends in reception studies because it embodied the binomial culture and politics with what people do with media in everyday life that was developed a strong trend for reception research.

The Modern Latin American Tradition of Reception Studies

Reception studies, in Latin America, constitute a framework which emerges as the point of confluence of other traditions (Jensen and Rosengreen, 1990), while they simultaneously maintain disagreements and critical differences. In addition, these approaches differentiate themselves in their theoretical presumptions, methodological choices and their concept of reception, and even stem from different disciplinary fields.

Latin American reception studies began to emerge in the end of the decade of 1980, inside a strong critical theoretical movement that sought to be an alternative reflection about communication and mass culture through the Gramscian perspective, as a counterpoint to the functional, semiotic and Frankfurtian analyses that were dominant until then.

Above all, it was due to the question of *popular cultures* that a complex and multifaceted reception theory began to be developed, having as a basic current of reflection the shift *from media to mediation* (Martín-Barbero, 1987)¹ and of the processes of *cultural hybridization* (García Canclini, 1989).

Today theoretical perspective of mediations and hybridization has a central presence in reception research throughout Latin America as demonstrated by research

¹The seminal work of Jesús Martín-Barbero, *De los Medios a las Mediaciones* ("From Media to Mediations") was first published in 1987 and translated into English as *Communication, Culture and Hegemony* in 1993.

teams in various Latin American countries (Jacks, 2011²). This tradition began with the precursor projects researching active reception in Chile (Fuenzalida, 1987); telenovela in México (González, 1991) and Colombia (Martín-Barbero and Munhoz, 1992); children and television in México (Orozco, 1991), until further examples regarding telenovela (Lopes et al., 2002), transmedia reception (Lopes, 2011), youth and television (Ronsini, 2012), media consumption (Baccega, 2008), television news (Gomes, 2013) in Brazil, among others. The central and common element of all these projects is the *methodological experiment* to advance technical procedures of empirical investigation in order to make them compatible with the complexity of the theoretical framework of mediations. Another general characteristic is the *global design* of the empirical research process, involving the structure and the dynamics of the production of messages, the uses and appropriations of these texts and the textual composition. This theoretical perspective goes far beyond a proposal for reception studies to reach a proper status of a proposal for communication studies.

Within the framework of these theoretical traditions and their renewal, the *cultural and political criticism*, which refers both to the tradition of *culture studies* in Latin America, appears to be retained, where the culture/politics duo is central to the Gramscian perspective and to the critical work by the initial *cultural studies* (Hoggart, Thompson and Williams) according to the reception practices that are articulated with power relations. Reception, therefore, is not a process that is reducible to psychological factors and to daily life, despite the fact that it is anchored in these spheres, but it is a profoundly cultural and political phenomenon. That is, reception process should be seen as integral part of cultural practices that articulate processes that are both subjective as well as objective, both micro (immediate environment controlled by subject) as well as macro (social structure which escapes this control) in nature. Reception is thus a complex and multidimensional context in which people live their daily lives and at the same time inscribe themselves in structural and historic power relations from which they extrapolate their everyday activities. This is the set of theoretical presumptions that inform a *comprehensive theory* of reception studies. The social production and reproduction of the meaning involved in this cultural process is not only a question of

² This book brings the current state of reception studies in 12 Latin American countries.

signification, but mainly, a question of power. It is the distinctive contribution of Latin America to the theory of mediation.

THE CONCEPT OF MEDIATION

Martín-Barbero theory of reception was initially seen as *an investigation perspective* and not a research field about one more of the components of the communication process; in this case, the audience. It consisted of an attempt to overcome the impasses that have led us to the fragmenting and reductive research of the communication process in autonomous fields of analysis: production, message, media and audience.

Ten years were necessary to make evident that what was really new in reception theory was a framework of the importance of mediation for the communication studies as a whole.

We highlight the integrative and comprehensive perspective of the reception study, once the *entire* communication process is articulated from *mediations*³. As Martín-Barbero (1992:20) affirmed:

Mediations are this “place” where it is possible to understand the interaction between the space of production and that of reception: what [a medium] produces does not respond singularly to the requirements of the industrial system and the commercial strategies, but also to the demands that come from the cultural framework and the ways of seeing.

Mediation can be thought as a type of structure encrusted in the social activities and in the daily life of people who, upon realizing themselves through these activities, transform them into *multiple mediations*.

The research strategy does not begin with the analysis of the space of production and reception, to then seek to understand their imbrications. It does begin from the *mediations*, that is, from the places from where arise the factors that “limit and configure the social materiality and the cultural expressivity of television” (Martín-Barbero, 1987: 233).

³ The common use of the term mediation has the plural form in Portuguese - mediations – which seems to have no parallel in English.

Through this conception, one can think of mediation as a kind of structure embedded in social practices of people, which by taking place through these practices, translate into multiple mediations.

According to Jesús Martín-Barbero (2009) “mediation” does not have one single definition . In order to understand such concept, it is best to start by thinking of it as a plural notion, that is, “mediations”. It is a synthesis concept that captures communication from its nexus, from places by which it become possible to identify the interaction between space of production and consumption of communication, in a way that the production itself is seen in dialogue with social demands, with new cultural experiences that emerge historically from social materiality. (Martín-Barbero, 1987). The media not only produces according to the expectations of the market and the strategies of the industrial system. What is produced by cultural industries also attends to the demands that emerge from cultural tissue and of new forms of perception and use.

Summing up, the approach to mediation is defined as renewing due to the fact that the notion of mediation in Martín-Barbero comes from a (re)integrating view of communication phenomena from the trinomial communication/culture/politics (in its own turn, also renewed), from which he criticizes the exclusivism and determinism of technological-informational, semiologic and ideological paradigms that have marked the history of communication studies in Latin America and Brazil. It is, thus, a perspective that seeks to integrate all domains of communication, not only production, but the product and its reception as well.

Therefore, for Jesús Martín-Barbero, the study of communication is much more than just the study of the media. The study of communication is a problem of *mediation*. We see this perspective very similar to the one that Roger Silverstone presented in his book *Why study the media?*, published in 1999⁴.

We should think of media as a process, a process of mediation. In order to do this, it's necessary to note that the media goes beyond the point of contact between media text and its readers or spectators. It's necessary to take into consideration that it involves the producers and consumers of media in a somewhat continuous activity of engagement and disengagement with meanings that have their source or focus on mediated texts, but that expand the experience and are evaluated in their light in an infinity of ways (2002:33).

⁴ Published in Portuguese as “Por que estudar a mídia?” (2002).

The definitive assumption is the priority not of the mediatic, but of the *communicational* that is transforming itself more and more into a stronger protagonist, reaffirming in other ways the *society of generalized communication* (Vattimo, 1989). Maybe we are at the core of specificity of the epistemology of communication, undoubtedly historical in nature (Bachelard, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1972) but that enables the freedom of many cultures and the many worldviews and refutes then the idealization of a “transparent” society brought up in the wake of the paradigm of the information society. It is the complexity of new forms of experience and existence that begin to inhabit our concrete daily life. Communication society, with its historical specificity entrenched in contemporaneity also resume critically the separation between seeing and knowing present in the allegory of the cave and the *question about technique* made by Heidegger, by which we passed through the time of the images of the world made by the image. Vattimo defines, symptomatically, current society not as *information society*, but as *communication society*, with specificity in sciences and technologies of production of the world as image. Technique, thus, is replacing the position of image not only in daily practice a in science as the image is no longer an obstacle, but part of a new way of knowing and of construction of knowledge.

METHODOLOGICAL MAPS OF MEDIATION: FROM CULTURAL MEDIATION OF COMMUNICATION TO COMMUNICATIVE MEDIATION OF CULTURE

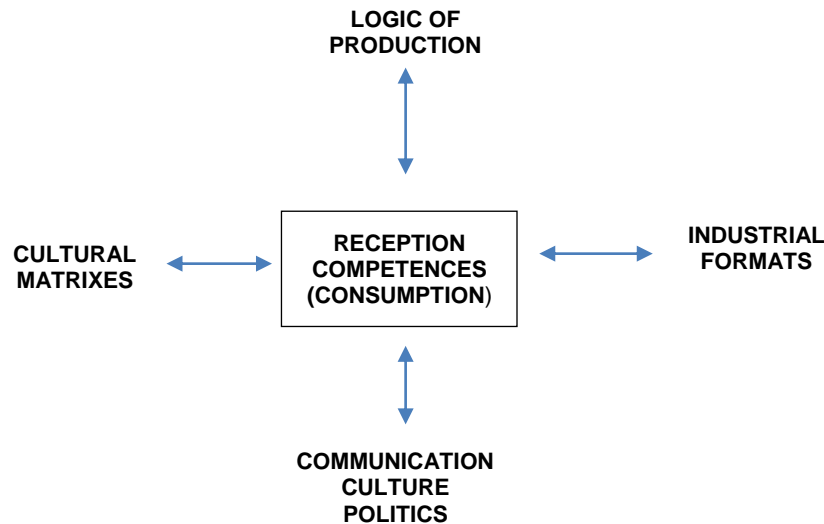
It is vital to follow the modifications that the mediation map present along the works of Barbero⁵. Due to this, there is no single definition of mediation, since it seems to be a moving notion, which permanently follows the mutation of society specifically in what concerns the role of communication.

Since contemporary society is a communication society, communicational processes as meaning operators and the market as value operator, that move, through their contradictions and ambivalences, the societal link among subjects.

⁵ Such tracking can be done throughout three introductions of different editions of the book *De los Medios a las Mediaciones*. So far, there are three introductions: 1987: first edition, by the publisher Gustavo Gili, Barcelona; 1998: fifth edition, by Convênio Andrés Bello, Bogotá; and 2010, by Anthropos Editorial, Barcelona.

From that comes the first methodological map in which Martín-Barbero proposes the epistemological focus of *communication from culture* or the study of *cultural mediation of communication*. It is represented here in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Martín-Barbero First Methodological Map of Mediation - 1987

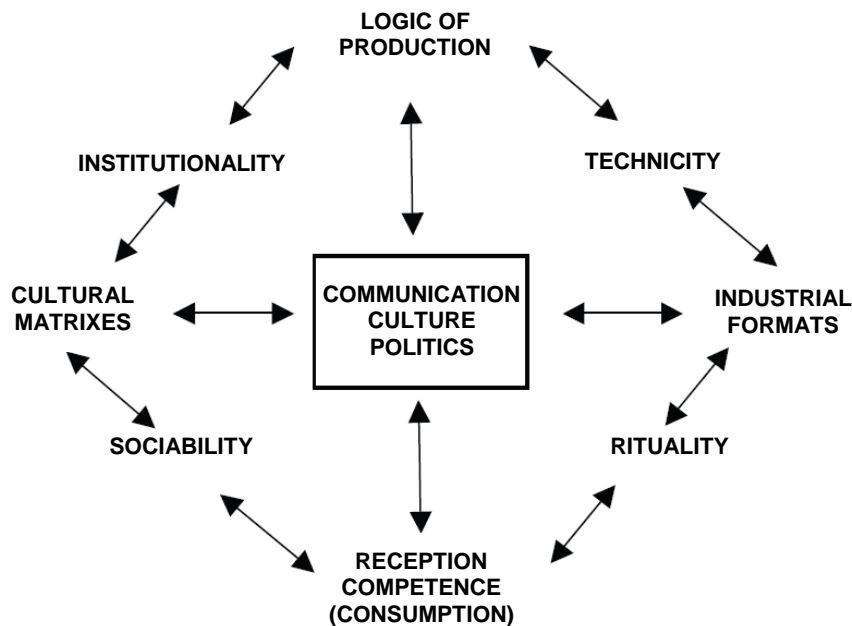


At the core of the map are the constitutive mediations: *communication*, *culture* and *politics* which articulate two axes: diachronic or historical, between *cultural matrixes* and *industrial formats*; and synchronic between *logic of production* and *reception competences* or cultural consumption.

The second map is from the late 1990s, when, as we mentioned above, it made evident that the theory of mediation went beyond the configuration of a theory of reception and reached the proposal of a theory of communication.

The map now has the objective to study culture starting from communication, displacing the study of cultural mediation of communication for that of *communicative mediation of culture*. The look is not reversed in the sense of going from mediations to media, but to go from culture to communication. It is the very notion of communication that is rethought. More epistemological density is given to the *momento* of knowing what comes from communication. This is what Figure 2 illustrates.

Figure 2. Martín-Barbero Second Methodological Map of Mediation – 1998 (2003)



Through this map, it is possible to operationalize the analysis of any social phenomena that relates communication, culture and politics, imposing itself as a dimension of articulation among producers, media, messages, receivers and culture.

Mediation must be understood as the structuring process that configures and reconfigures both the logic of production and the logic of the uses. It requires thinking about the space of production as well as the time of consumption, both articulated by daily life (uses/consumption/activities) and by the specificity of the technological and discursive devices of the media involved.

The need for the *decoupage* of the concept of mediation to make it methodologically manageable, leads us to affirm some principles as follows.

Mediation is a place between culture, communication and politics which puts logics of production and consumption, industrial formats and cultural matrixes in dialectical relationship. The scheme also moves on two axes: the diachronic, or historical long-term, between *cultural matrixes* and *industrial formats*; and synchronic, between *logic of production* and *reception competences*. The novelty is that these four basic dimensions of mediation are articulated by *multiple mediations*. The relationship between cultural matrixes and logic of production is mediated by different regimes of

institutionality, while the relationship between cultural matrixes and reception competences is mediated by various forms of *sociability*. Between logic of production and industrial formats mediates *technicity* and between the industrial formats and reception competences mediates distinctive *rituality*.

It does not seem to be an accident that, from a systemic point of view, the object of study of Martín-Barbero (first, mediation as tissue of processes and materialities of communication in a social and cultural environment) is in itself methodologically treated by a researcher from a mediation perspective (second, mediation as a “discovery” system of false polarities).

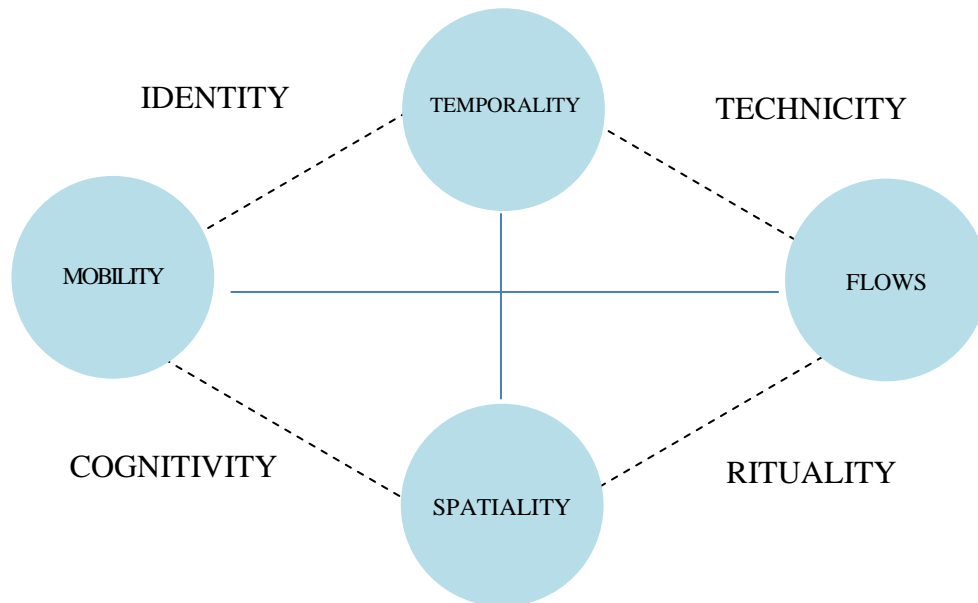
The importance of this map is in recognizing that communication is mediating all forms of cultural and political life in society. Therefore the view is not reversed in the sense of going from the media to the mediation nor from the mediation to the media, unless it is to see the complex web of multiple mediations. It was necessary to the author to rethink the very notion of communication, which goes beyond the paradigm of engineering and connects with *interfaces*, with the *nodes* of interaction, with communication-interaction, with communication inter-mediated⁶. And since language is increasingly more intermediated, the study has to be clearly interdisciplinary. That is, we are talking about an epistemology that threatens the very object of study. According to the author, what existed was an identity of communication that was found in the media and, nowadays, is not restricted to it. Communication happens in interaction that allows for the interface of all meanings, and therefore, is an intermediation, which is a concept to think of the hybridization of languages and media.

This is the situation that marks contemporary society which, with its “technological mutation has started to configure a new communicative ecosystem” (Martín-Barbero, 2010: 222).

This is what Figure 3 shows.

⁶ The displacement of research in communication for the research of mediation, in Latin America, is in a way analog to the displacement of the studies of information to the studies of signs in France, and from the studies of information to the studies of media in Germany (Bastos, 2012).

Figure 3. Martín-Barbero Third Methodological Map of Mediation – 2010



Merely sketching only the broader strokes, this map connects the previous ones to the investigation of contemporary cultural mutations, whose axes are the temporality forms of space and the mobility of flows which constitute the structuring mediation in the time of “from all to all”.

Contemporary temporality configures the threat of modern experience of time, which manifests in the profound transformation of the structure of *temporality*, in the cult of the present, in the debilitation of the historical relationship with the past and the confusion of the times that bind us to simultaneity of what is current. The *spatiality* that is split in multiple spaces: the inhabited space of territory made of proximity and belonging, the communicational space knit by electronic networks, the imagined space of the nation and its identity, the space of the modern city with subjectivity that emerges from the new relationship with the city, of the means of appropriation. The *mobility* of incessant traffic of migrations and the virtual navigation of the Internet users with the appearance of new figures of sensibility. And the *flows* that, like immigrants cause social and political disorder in cities, also the flow of virtual information, images, languages and writing destabilize the scholarly and alphabetized culture. Digital technology relocates the knowledge, modifying both the cognitive statute as institutional condition of knowing, creating a strong blurring of borders between reason

and imagination, knowledge and information, art and science, specialized knowledge and common knowledge.

As everybody knows, the first great summation regarding mediation was formulated in the book *De los Medios a las Mediaciones*, released in 1987. However, despite the notable repercussion of the work, some voices have incited the author to write another book that answered to the reversal of the title, that is, from mediation to media, in order to “rebalance”, in the binomial set, the weight of communication that would have been subsumed by culture. While we do not agree with the reductionism that underlies this proposal, the author may, in fact, have accepted such incitation, for we have noticed in the last few years a notable effort to offer clues to increasingly elucidate (“seeing between”, as he describes) the relationships between media and mediation.

This takes us to the current epistemological debate in Latin-American communication studies.

Due to the theoretical density growth given to the notion of *technicity*, it’s worth reflecting over its importance to the widening theoretical and methodological statute of communication research in Latin-American countries.

Through the notion of technicity, it is possible to understand the technique as constitutional, as immanent of an anthropological vision of communication. We take this expression not in the common meaning of accrediting this vision to the field of anthropology, but in the meaning of *elementally human* (Gramsci).

The need of the category of technicity is justified in that what happens in communication today is not give due consideration to the Greek notion of *techné* which was referred to dexterity, to capability of doing, but also to argue, express, create and communicate through material forms, a dexterity that updates itself based on new ways of dealing with language. Instead, we have moved towards the notion of technique as apparatus, objectivization of *techné* in machines or in products. Neither of these notions seem sufficient nowadays. That happens because in technique there are new ways of perceiving, seeing, listening, reading, learning, new languages, new modes of expression, of textuality and scriptures. The meaning of technicity is not related to the idea of mere technological apparatus, but to the competency in language (Martín-Barbero, 2004: 237), to the materialities in discourse that remit to the constitution of grammars giving rise to media formats and products. Technicity is not from the order of

the instrument, but the order of knowledge, of constitution of practices that produce discursive innovations and new modes of social perception. It stands away, thus, from the notion of technique as mere apparatus, recovering the original meaning of the Greek *techné*. There would be a sort of *inter-mediation as communicative experience*, that is, of many interfaces between the different media and of these in different communicative spaces of consumption and creation. What is implied there is the refusal of the instrumental meaning of technology so developed in the studies of communication.

We recognize the stature that *technicity* has today, no longer as an instrument, but deeply rooted in the structure of knowledge and daily life. We believe that here is a strong methodological clue that is given to us by Martín-Barbero.

It is possible to transpose this idea to the logic of society in a multiconnected network that brings, especially through the use of the computer and mobile phone, access to new digital media. New forms of action and new types of social relations emerged through the development of means of communication, enabling new means of interaction. Until recently, it was restricted to privileged socio-economic classes, and now this digital world reaches those with lower purchase power and creates mass for the consumption of these technologies. Among other factors, this is due very specifically to *technological competitiveness* and the uses of *technicity* (Martín-Barbero, 2003), which currently involves in great measure the capacity of innovating and creating. Because technicity is less a subject of apparatuses than of *perceptive operators* and *discursive dexterities*. It is a *cognitive* and *creative technicity* (Scolari, 2008), because to confuse communication with techniques and the media can result as deformer as thinking they are external and accessories to communication.

The incorporation of these notions in studies of communication gives origin to new methodological places. As the appropriation of the map by a researcher depends on the methodological strategy that adopts in an empirical research his choice could fall on certain mediation and not in others depending on the highlight that it is given in the analytical approach. Works show that studying certain industrial format (TV news, telenovela) the researcher can operate elements of television language while articulating values of production and/or reception. Within the methodological map of mediations this format presents articulated to the reception competencies through rituality or sociability and to the logic of production through technicity.

THE DEBATE ON MEDIATION AND MEDIATIZATION

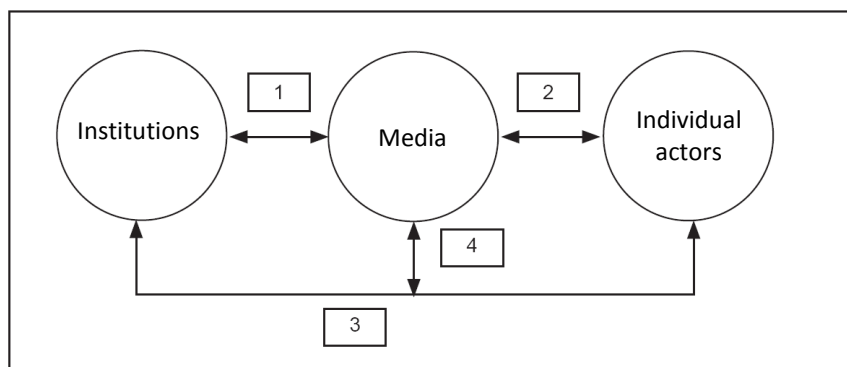
The growing importance of the communicational in contemporary society goes *pari passu* to its complexity and to the challenges it imposes to his knowledge. Regarding the current theoretical models and schemas of knowledge, the scientific debate of communication, like all scientific debate, is done within a field regulated by the logic of scientific authority and recognition (Bourdieu, 1976). If that is so, this debate is always made of controversies, oppositions and complementarities, both epistemic and political.

Thus, the current portrait of the field of communication in Latin America shows the predominance of the approach of mediations whose socio-cultural and political roots were based on reception studies of the 1980s.

Another school of theoretical importance in Latin America has been that of discourse studies, in its various strands in Europe and North America. Semiotic or semiological are constructed in the confront to these strands,. Its apogee was in the 1970s with the "linguistic turn". Today, in the Brazilian scene, this trend is being reaffirmed through the work on mediatization of the socio-semiotic Argentinian Eliseo Verón. His essay, *Scheme for the analysis of mediatization* (1997), is a methodological benchmark.

According to him, society is mediatized insofar as culture, logic and operations of the media spread through all social practices, albeit in specific ways. In this context called mediatized, the functioning of institutions and their practices are directly affected by the presence of the media. It is what appears in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Verón Conceptual Scheme of Mediatization - 1997



Given its socio-semiotic nature, the conceptual scheme of Verón brings the representation of the process of mediatization. It therein identifies four zones / sectors of production of “collectives” as constructions that occur in the heart of communication: (1) the media relationship with other institutions (not media) of society; (2) the relationship of media with individual actors; (3) the relationship of institutions with the actors; and (4) the way the media affects the relationship between institutions and actors. Issues that correspond to each of the four zones are given in examples. In zone 1 the relation between the media and the political system can be identified: between the media and school, the media and religion, etc. Zone 2 has to do with the strategies of individual actors in relation to media consumption. Sector 3 corresponds to the transformation of internal culture of organizations by the work of the media, while zone 4 evokes issues that involve the processes by which media affects the relationship of individual actors with institutions. Through this arrangement, “the term mediatization does not designate anything other than what is today social change in contemporary societies” (Verón, 1997: 68). Therefore the logic of the media imposes itself on society as a whole and becomes part of the societal tissue. Mediatic phenomena, and therefore mediatization, are just as important.

Ultimately, this is a sophisticated theory of the centrality of the media, adapted to the context of the communicative ecosystem of contemporary society.

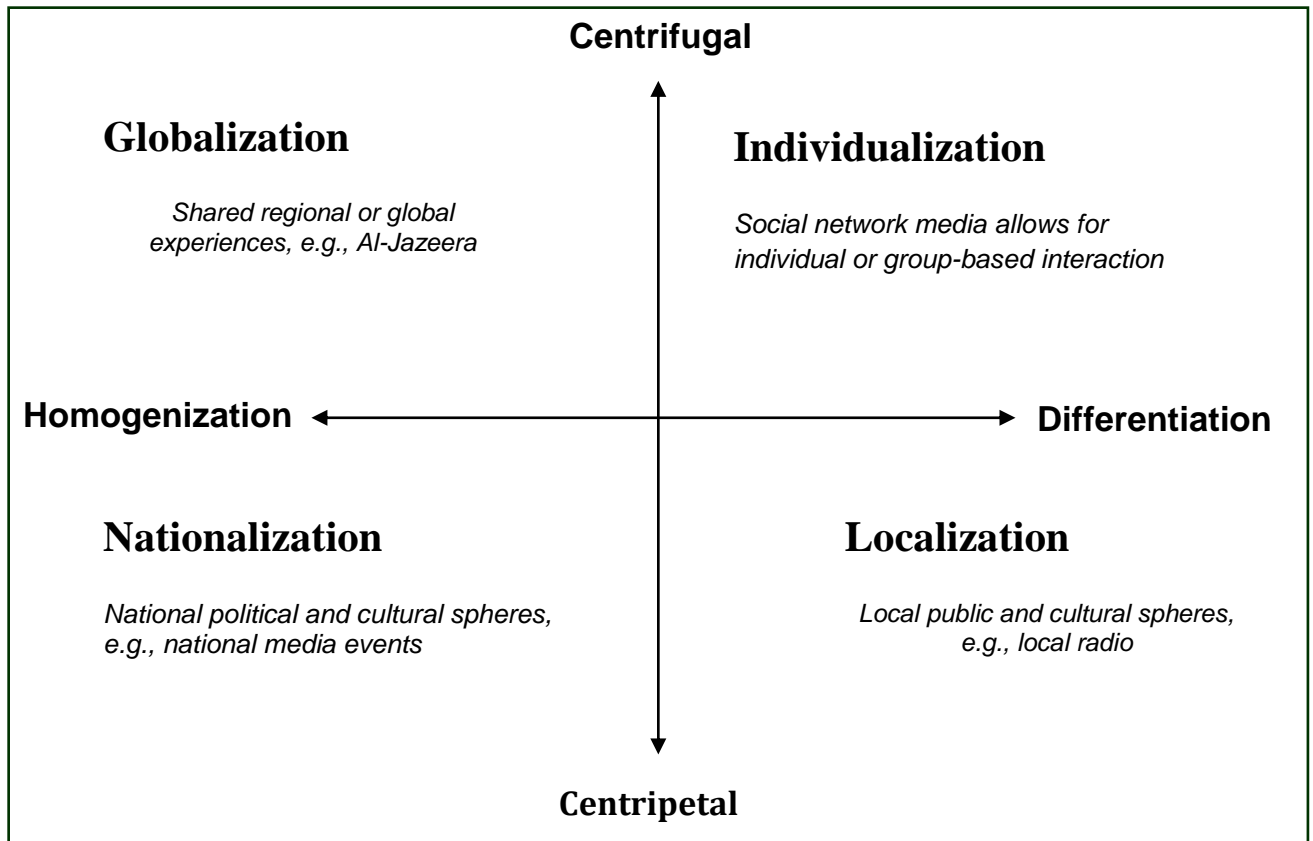
We witness today an intensification of international research networks, composed by researchers of various nationalities⁷, which is the result of injunctions of the internationalization process that has deepened institutionally in communication research, especially in Brazil. It is expected that there shall be an increase of mutual awareness and exchange of experiences in a more horizontal level than it has been until now.

In this scenario is ongoing the identification of research currents such as the case of the European studies on mediation and mediatization, like those of Silverstone (2002); Peraya (2005); Couldry (2008); Livingstone (2009); Hjarvard (2012, 2013), among others.

⁷ Such networks are being formed within agreements and cooperation programs between Brazilian and foreign universities, most notably with Latin America, United States, Canada, Portugal, Spain and France.

We believe it is relevant to raise the concept of mediatization by which Hjarvard (2012) presents a theory of the media as agent of cultural and social change. This is what is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Hjarvard Concept of Mediatization - 2012



An *institutional* approach to the mediatization process appears as a *double-sided* process in which the media have developed into a core *institution* in society that other institutions have to accommodate to. At the same time, media have become *integrated into the life-worlds* of other institutions like politics, family, work, and religion as more and more of the activities in these institutional domains are performed through the media. We see correspondence of this assertion with the four zones scheme of transmediation of Verón.

As indicated by the Author in *Figure 5*, mediatization can facilitate different societal tendencies on both micro and macro levels. These include globalization, individualization, nationalization and localization. Which tendency will predominate

will depend on the specific context, i.e., on the institution or social activity in question. In the end, media facilitates and structures *virtual spaces* for communication and action. As other authors pointed above, the more precise consequences of media intervention will, however, have to be explored empirically, through examination of the interplay of institutions and media in a historical and cultural context.

The main goal of this paper was to analyze how the perspective of mediation is imposing itself in the field of communication in Latin America. In this issue, we must explore and integrate a debate with the recent European trends on mediation and mediatization. We live in a mediatized culture that, and we hope to have proved, can be better understood from the *communicative mediation of culture*. In this conception of mediation is where we can see proximity to the idea of mediatization.

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