

Innovation, Public Agenda and Journalism

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Innovation, Public Agenda and Journalism

When we consider journalism we usually think of media, not about audiences and their perception processes. What does innovation mean to the public? How is innovation positioned in the public agenda?

Innovation is not a primary priority for the mass media, which pay more attention to drama, everyday tragedies and sensationalism.

Audience research is vital. We study audiences from a multidisciplinary viewpoint because we need over-all understanding of complex communications, how audiences process messages about innovation and use them to build a public agenda.

1 The Active Audience

Viewing audiences from a multidisciplinary perspective based on different paradigms allows a holistic approach to those audiences' role in communication processes involving Journalism. In a complex social science like communication, the epistemological viewpoints must complement each other. Only then can we perceive reality more realistically. I start from the Thayer-Bacon¹ position that knowledge is socially constructed. The scientific community exchanges knowledge, develops ideas and understands the meaning of experiences.

Today the mass media are one of the most important sources for societal knowledge and understanding. The social representations of media reproduce the context from which meanings emerge. They legitimize and anchor their contents based on the social prestige of their messages.

Media representations do not have an automatic impact on audiences. Consider a person with broad experience in everyday life, far beyond mass media exposure. In other words, representations evolve not only via message content according to their presentation, but via internalization by individual audience members, linked to multidimensional stimuli.

For years even specialists used the 'hypodermic-needle' paradigm, viewing individuals as passive instruments of media, or 'receivers,' based on active audiences processing information. Audience members have infinite ways to analyze, synthesize and interpret reality, linked with the characteristics of their highly developed stimulus-processing system.

Today we acquire multidimensional realities via permanent relationships with the media (*vide* McLuhan's classic theory of media as extensions of the human senses). But representations of social actors in media messages are not mirrored automatically by audiences. Everyone experiences quotidian life beyond specific media exposure. In other words, representations are decided not only by the media content but via internal processing and multidimensional contextual stimulation. Perceptual processes of media consumers

¹ THAYER-BACON, Barbara, "Navigating epistemologic territories". *Inn Yearbook* 95, Philosophy of Education Society, 1996

http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/95_docs/thayerbacon.html

depend on the situation, the “audience’s social and cultural positioning, and their social and personal histories” (Gogin, p. 176)². This means interdependence between media and audience, presupposing the decoding of social scenarios. Message codes from the media interact with individual codes, building two levels of meaning: producers and perceives, or, if you will, transmitters and receivers.

I am trying to explain it from the Sense-Making theory³ (Figure 1). According to this, there are gaps in reality perception. In one construct, people complete the perception of reality by filling the gaps and making sense of the reality when perceived as media content. In this process we see the introduction of personal qualities to perception, explaining the different interpretations every individual gives to received messages,

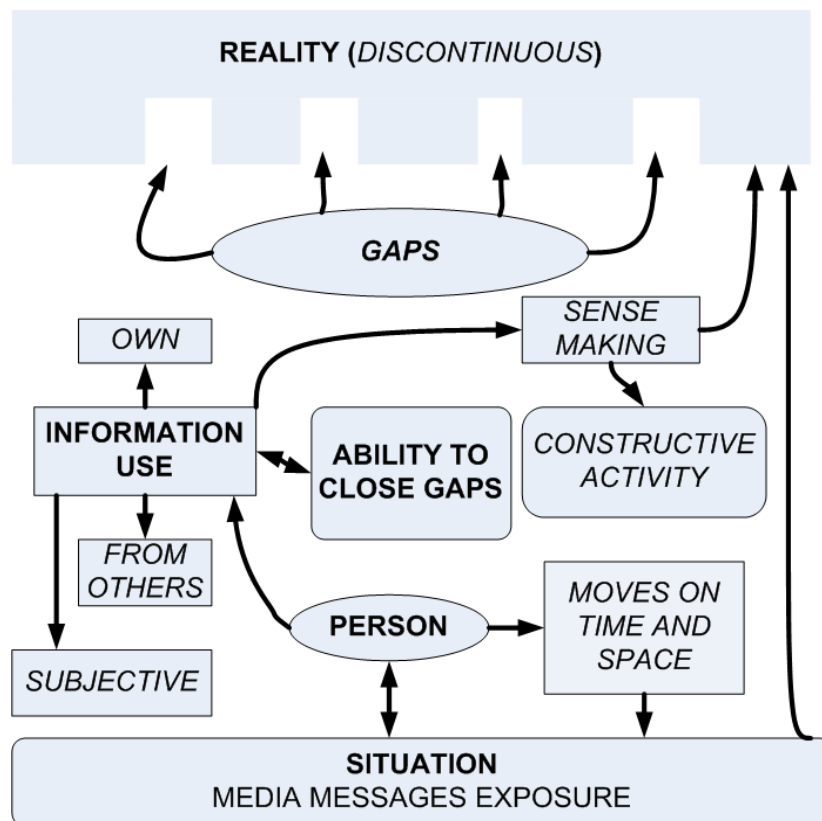


Figure 1. Sense- making theory: perception of media messages

² Gogin, G. De los distintos modos de hacer radio en el Perú. In Alfaro, R., Téllez, R., Pinilla, H. y Gogin, G. *Cultura de masas y cultura popular en la radio peruana* Lima: Calandria /Tarea, pp. 161-214 (1990)

³Ferreira, S. Estudo de necessidades de informação: Dos paradigmas tradicionais à abordagem Sense-Making. Sao Paulo: Escola de Comunicações e Artes USP. On line paper (1997)

<http://www.eca.usp.br/nucleos/sense/textos/sumar.htm>

Everyone introduces multiple meanings, depending on their everyday interactions and the socio-cultural conditions of their lives. Our viewpoints and the particular meanings of the society, of ourselves and of others are linked with the messages that we choose voluntarily or involuntarily. In any case, we are actively involved.

I adapted the dual-coding theory (Figure 2), that allows understanding of media-message processing from a different perspective. According to Paivio⁴, two cognitive systems are used to process and store information from reality. They worked independently, but in the perception process they work together through associative cross-code links, providing a holistic approach to reality emerging from the specific features of each medium.

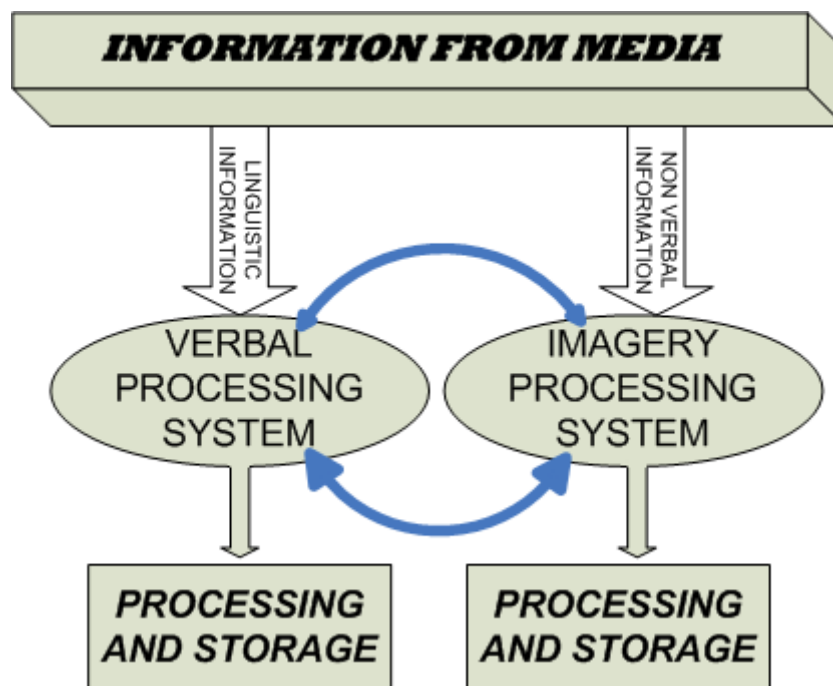


Figure 2. *Dual coding theory*

2 Agenda Setting and Innovation

A personal experience: 10 years ago, Peru for some months experienced a hostage crisis when a terrorist attacked the Japanese Ambassador's residence. News appeared daily on the front page of Peruvian newspapers. I had been working in Ayacucho, an Andean town in central Peru. I was having coffee in a restaurant when I heard the following conversation between two peasants near me. One asked the other: "Why didn't you go to the party?" Answer: "My wife took me hostage!" The everyday reference was closely linked with one media issue, one theme of the agenda, explaining the theoretical basis of the agenda-setting

⁴ Paivio, A. *Mental Representations*. New York: Oxford University Press (1986)

theory. The hostage crisis was an important issue in the media agenda and everybody discussed it and incorporated it into their daily routines, as the peasants in the restaurant did.

According to the agenda-setting theory, the public agenda depends largely on media content, perhaps because people identify the frequency issues repetition with relevance. Audiences may only be passive instruments for the media, but every audience member always processes and filters the information input.

Psychological research has proven the important role of selective exposition, selective attention and selective retention in perception process, which are strong elements in message effectiveness.

Lifestyles research, cultural studies, and other investigations showed a different landscape for perception, depending on cultural and other social variables. Five years ago, *Smart Mobs* of Howard Rheingold⁵ pointed out the role of mobile devices in public opinion construction and activation. I agree with him that there is another way to share with others the moment of life, a communication exchange of a different form than the others.

Agenda setting is not automatic because of the interaction between public opinion and mass media; media present themes based on problems or situations in the public agenda.

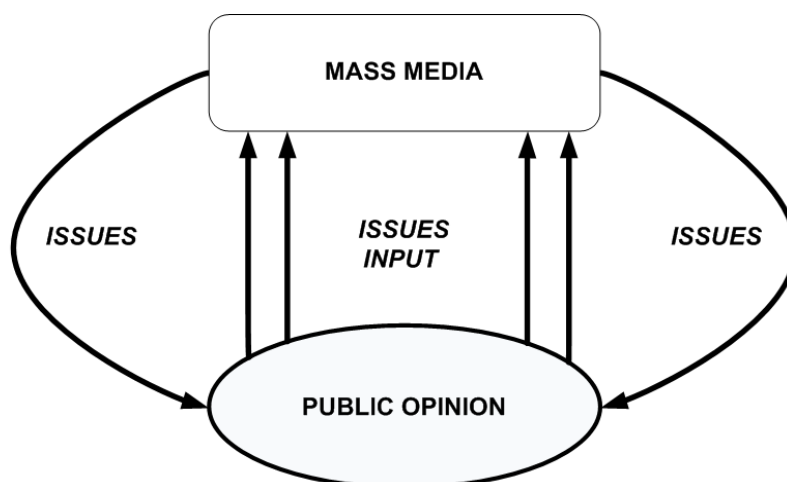


Figure 3. *Interaction between mass media and public opinion in the agenda setting*

Consider the viewpoint of Acevedo⁶: He thinks that media agendas are not the same as public agendas, the first building the second. Not only the media share in the process: there are other social, public and space factors working in a complex process (Figure 4).

From the agenda-setting viewpoint, the contemporary possibilities of information access gives citizens enough public information to be aware of public-agenda topics. For the same reason, journalists have information from which they can build and frame societal issues. Today, in the Information society, audiences have many options. Building a public agenda comes from more complex sources than in the past. This is not better for innovation: research shows that most people look at the Internet or other media only for entertainment.

⁵ Rheingold, H. *Multitudes inteligentes: La próxima revolución social*. Barcelona: Editorial Gedisa (2004)

⁶ Acevedo, J. *Periodismo y Opinión Pública* Lima: Escuela de Periodismo Jaime Bausate y Meza (2005)

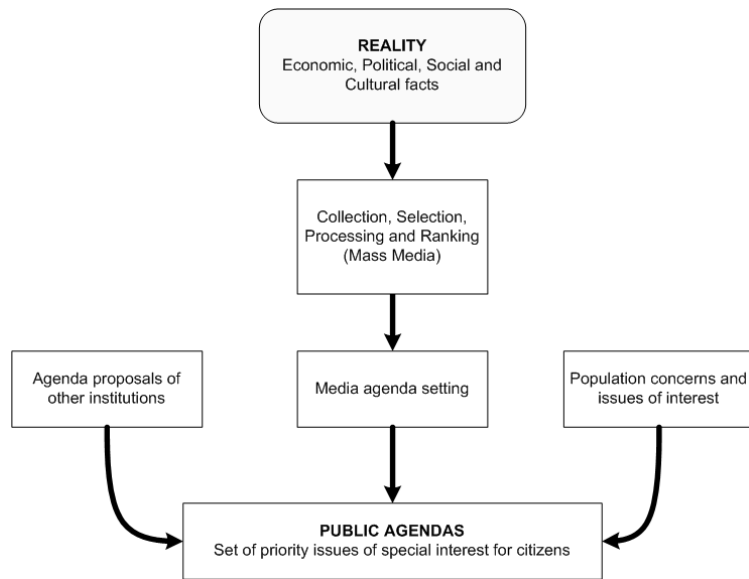


Figure 4. *Public Agenda is not Media Agenda*

This concept agrees with Dader⁷ who thinks that agenda setting is not an automatic process. On the contrary depends on a set of factors of circumstantial nature, acting from different levels: The audience, the topic and the media:

LEVEL	FACTOR
AUDIENCE	<input type="checkbox"/> Duration and range of exposure to current affairs <input type="checkbox"/> Degree of individual or collective susceptibility <input type="checkbox"/> Personal contact with the issue <input type="checkbox"/> Response potential
TOPIC	<input type="checkbox"/> Geographical or psychological nearness of topic <input type="checkbox"/> Interpersonal contacts related with the issue <input type="checkbox"/> Nature of Topic
MEDIA	<input type="checkbox"/> Homogeneity and heterogeneity in the different medias agenda <input type="checkbox"/> Source credibility

Table 1. *Circumstantial factors and agenda setting*

3 Challenges for Innovation Journalism

In Peru, as in other countries, when we discussed Scientific Journalism in the past, many perceived a bored radio presentation. I recall one of the origins. Thirty years ago, Peruvian law demanded that every radio station had to present at least 20% educational or cultural programs. Some broadcasters chose low-cost programs, a speaker reading a long statement about industrial production, human biology and so on; without adaptation to the radio

⁷ Dader, J. La canalización o fijación de la «agenda» por los medios. En Muñoz, A.; Monzón, C.; Rospir, J. y Dader, J. (Eds.) *Opinión pública y comunicación política* Madrid: EUEDEMA, pp. 294-318 (1990)

language. Listeners change stations and broadcasters reinforce the idea that “the audience does not like science or culture.” Paradoxically, the media owners were myth building. As Luis Ramiro Beltrán said 30 years ago: “Is not what people like, is what the media taught the people to like.”

Innovation Journalism is not Scientific Journalism but demands more attention because traditional working models of information processing at most media do not prioritize science, technology and research. Media pay no attention to them. The media focus on a scandal or other problems linked with it. News about scientific discoveries or innovations on the front pages of newspapers are discussed on news programs on radio and television worldwide. As two examples: stem cells and the efforts to discover a vaccine against AIDS.

But one issue provides an important indicator for Innovation Journalism. Twenty years ago typical newspaper economic sections were only one page. After the 80s economic crisis, social interest in economic themes increased. Not only were more pages dedicated to economic issues but one newspaper, *Gestión* (Management) focused on the economy, regularly reporting on enterprise activities and innovations. Recently, *El Comercio*⁸, Peru’s most important newspaper, purchased *Gestión*.

‘Innovation Journalism’ was coined by David Nordfors in 2003⁹ as a new scientific field. It studies technical, business, legal and political aspects of innovations and innovation systems. For me, the recent approach of Innovation Journalism is interesting in the broad sense of Kauhanen & Noppari¹⁰ (2007) discussed in the past. From their perspective the discipline covers:

- New scientific knowledge
- New technology knowledge and know-how
- New economy knowledge
- Innovation knowledge

In science, as in the Innovation Journalism, paradigms guide investigation, from observation to analysis to interpretation. For Derrida, each paradigm can seem like a theoretical position involving a specific viewpoint. From their own paradigms, scientists see reality from their own viewpoints based on their specialization. There is a close relationship between the reality and the scientific knowledge as we used to know it; in practice, science starts from and comes to society to enable solutions to problems (Figure 5).

Research is an essential part of routine journalism, demanding permanent decision-making in the data processing, to give audiences a product that reflects reality. In this perspective I think that information objectivity is essential in Innovation Journalism.

⁸ Following the tendencies at the international level *El Comercio* is now a holding owner of print media, radio stations, journals, TV channels, a book publishing house, Internet services and other enterprises.

⁹ D. Nordfors. “The Concept of Innovation Journalism and a Programme for Developing it”, *Innovation Journalism*, Vol. 1 No. 1, May 2004. <http://www.innovationjournalism.org/archive/INJO-1-1.pdf>

¹⁰ Kauhanen, E. & Noppari, E. (2007) *Innovation, Journalism and Future: Final Report of the research project Innovation*, Helsinki: Journalism in Finland, University of Tampere/Tekes,

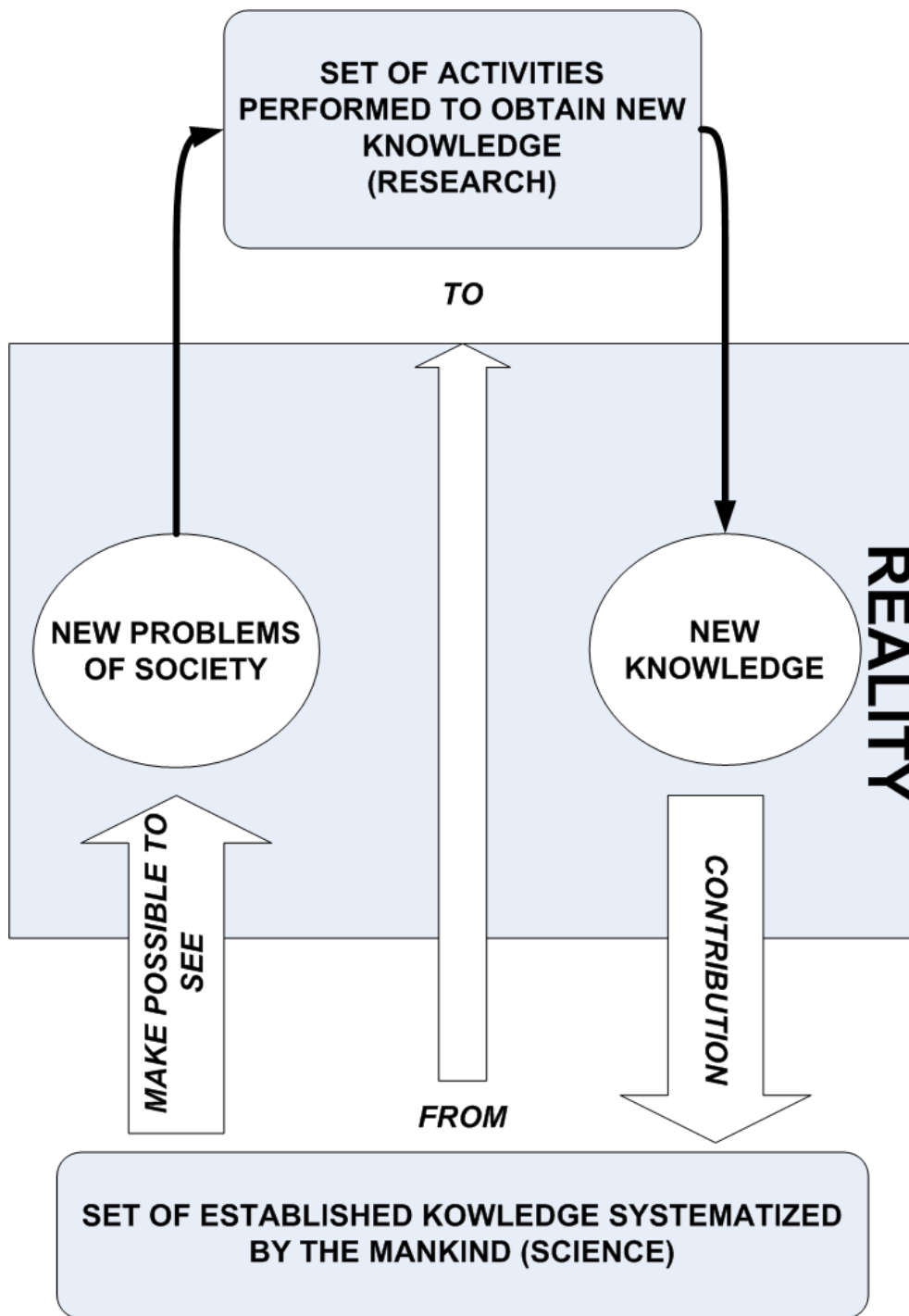


Figure 5. *Reality and scientific knowledge*

Innovation Journalism is an important opportunity for professional Journalism and for social development, but takes special effort. I see challenges for Innovation Journalism in underdeveloped societies.

- Creation of a qualified team. We think in terms of one team in which “everybody plays for all.” It presumes lengthy maturation but only with better components—necessarily big staffs, professionally qualified;
- Multidisciplinary perspective: crossing disciplinary borders is hard—we are usually in disciplinary territory with a unique paradigm, methods, theory and language. Innovation Journalism demands a multidisciplinary approach, though there is no everyday viewpoint in science and Journalism, but is a tendency in science;
- The Innovation Journalism approach is multidisciplinary, but what can we do with newspaper thinking in the best in only one person with a limited budget only?
- Long work time: Innovative journalism demands research, creativity and time to analyze. The media do not always understand this. 25 years ago it seemed utopian to have a Research Unit in a Latin American newspaper but this now is reality in most big media. I do not think that this process takes a long time in Innovation Journalism; I am thinking now in the weak signals focused by Turo Uskali¹¹ that I can see;
- Expensive budget: It is possible but results count. Close contacts with enterprises are mandatory for Innovation Journalism. Information access is not a problem because usually enterprises need to spread information about their achievements and innovations. Media coverage is a free instrument that does not need a Public Relations activity. Thus top companies in many cases support research or publications.
- Use of journalism methodology for those coming from different disciplines, from technology and science. Innovation Journalism must process a lot of information.
- Handing new language: Zerfass¹² says that Innovation Journalism means opportunity and challenge for communications managers, because they need to translate complex innovations in an accessible code to any person.
- Characteristics of each media: For some years I have been training journalists all over Peru. There is no balance between the work of the colleagues. Different levels of income, staff, duties and responsibilities depending on the size of the medium, the budget, their professional relationship (employee or dealer) and so on.
- Training: In the journalists’ labor market we see general tendencies: rapid changes in posts, some vanishing, vs. work functions in which two or more persons can and must participate. In this sense journalists need permanent training.

The news concept guides the newsroom. Of course, we have many opportunities to make news with the innovation processes. As an example, a National Geographic documentary

¹¹ Uskali, T. Paying Attention to Weak Signals – The Key Concept for Innovation Journalism The Second Conference of Innovation Journalism Conference Papers Stanford University, pp 33-50 (2005)

¹² Zefass, A: Innovation Readiness: A Framework for Enhancing Corporations and Regions by Innovation Communication. In Innovation Journalism, Vol. 2 (2005), No. 8, May 23

took on the case of Cubatão, once called the “the most polluted place on earth,” near São Paulo (the most important Brazilian industrial center). Now it is an example at international level, of applying innovative processes in many industries to achieve an ecological success. Stories like this are illustrative and important lessons for the future.

We are privileged today because we can interact here with some of the historical beginners of Innovation Journalism. We are building a new discipline. The first steps are always hard, but the seed is growing.

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