

Comments on Richeri

Autor(en): **Sorice, Michele**

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MICHELE SORICE*

COMMENTS ON RICHERI

The media are nowadays situated in a complex scenario which comes from the crossing of technological innovation and economic dynamics, social differences and hybrid identities, power relations and cultural movements. The media, in other words, can be studied at the same time as social frames, vehicles of culture, economic structures, definers of social identities: a cultural position quite different from first-generation media theory, usually associated with its technological determinism (sometimes connected with research only interested in investigating media “contents”). On this subject, in 1994 (73), Joshua Meyrowitz wrote: “(...) *medium theory is most helpful when it is used not to supplant content concerns but to add another dimension to our understanding of the media environment. What is needed is a better integration of medium theory with other perspectives*”.

Giuseppe Richeri is right when he writes that media are not easy to study because they are made of contents but they are also the architecture the contents live in. His article is founded upon the *Political Economy of Communication* approach, not only in the traditional way in which political economists of communication have found their inspiration (Golding & Murdock 1997) but in a larger frame which manages to keep together Political Economy and Cultural Studies, two approaches traditionally considered rivals (“*Much labor within critical communication and cultural studies has been devoted to pondering, provoking, and prolonging the rivalry between critical approaches of political economy and cultural studies*”, Maxwell 2001: 116). In effect, political economists stress the power of owners over the production process and over consumers, while market liberals tend to emphasize the presumed benefits of markets. Both pay little attention to the audience’s role in communication processes.

* University of Lugano and University of Rome “la Sapienza”,
michele.sorice@lu.unisi.ch

On the opposite side, Giuseppe Richeri considers the audiences as important social actors in the media production and consumption processes.

On this subject, Richeri's analysis of the unequal distribution of the possibilities of media access (and consequently of the present risks of "knowledge gaps", no less dangerous than those defined by Tichenor et al. in 1970) has an extraordinary theoretical importance, above all for scholars in the field of Audience Studies.

Richeri argues (and I agree with him) that the importance of the State as agent of regulation (but not of political control) of the media system does still appear unavoidable. The words of Raymond Williams (1966: 129) were prophetically then and now, after forty years, they are still convincing: "*The institutions necessary to guarantee these freedoms must clearly be of a public-service kind, but it is very important that the idea of public service should not be used as a cover for a paternal or even authoritarian system. The idea of public service must be detached from the idea of public monopoly, yet remain public service in the true sense. The only way of achieving this is to create new kinds of institution*".

Given this, it is not surprising that different research approaches, such as the *Political Economy of Communication*, the *Cultural Studies* (particularly in the research methods coming from British tradition of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham), and *Social Semiotics* have merged and mixed with one another. In my perspective, it is very important to consider the richness of this "melting pot". British Cultural Studies, for example, broke with the passive and undifferentiated conceptions of the audience in favour of a detailed examination of the variety of ways messages (and texts) are decoded by members of the audience with different social and political orientations; in other words, the Birmingham Centre broke with the notion of mass culture as an undifferentiated phenomenon, to initially adopt a view of the media as social frames. British Cultural Studies insist that culture must be studied within the social relations and systems through which culture is produced and consumed, and that the study of culture is intimately bound up with the study of society, politics and economics. From this point of view the "holistic" perspective of media research proposed by Richeri has a strategic strength not only for the universities but also for the democratic society.

There is, in fact, another point of interest in Richeri's reflections that I wish to underline: the question of "power". In the tradition of Cultural Studies, power is conceptualized as a force by which individuals or

groups are able to achieve their aims or interests over and against the will of others: the construction of representation is necessarily a matter of power since any representation involves the selection and organization of signs and meanings. In the 1990s, some “optimistic” research in the fields of *Political Economy of Communication* and of *New Media Studies* had conceptualized the overcoming of the “question of power”, because technology and an increased supply of media products and channels seemed to give more opportunities and freedom to the people. In the same years many scholars had an oversimplified idea of the “active audience”. A deeper theoretical approach to the audience was elaborated in 1998 by Nick Abercrombie and Brian Longhurst. In their approach the new form of media experience is contextualized by social processes characteristic of contemporary societies: a) people spend increasing amounts of time in media consumption, sometimes without paying attention; b) this consumption is increasingly woven into the fabric of everyday life; c) western societies are becoming more performative in a broader sense; d) increasing spectacularization of the social world is constituting people as narcissistic. In this context, individuals activate personal processes of signification in dealing with media content but also with self-perception. So audience members can use the media to create and restructure their identities. The new *diffused audiences* must be investigated their interactions with everyday life, active consumption and processes of identity definition.

However the perspective offered by Abercrombie and Loghurst also seems, in some ways, optimistic, perhaps because it does not take account of the difficulty of distinguishing the role of the audience and the role of the media industry. The audience may seem to be *performing* now: but is this always the case? As Nick Couldry (2005: 193) argues “*we should be careful about assuming that such changes in ‘media culture’ (to use Alasuutari’s term) are happening everywhere in the same way*”. Effectively we can easily experience the “media access divide”. And the key question, as Couldry says, “*is whether the dispersal and pervasiveness of the experience of belonging to an audience means, necessarily that the ‘symbolic power’ of media institutions has been reduced*” (Id: 196). For these reasons and also using the suggestions coming from the *Political Economy of Communication* in the “Richeri way”, many scholars have proposed that we consider also the questions of power in the theoretical approach to active (yes, by the way “active”) audiences. The notion of *extended audience* has been used (Couldry 2005; Sorice 2005, 2007) to define the con-

temporary experience of being an audience in the media culture of nowadays. *“The notion of ‘extended’ audience requires us to examine the whole spectrum of talk, action and thought that draws on media, or is oriented towards media. In this way, we can broaden our understanding of the relationship between media and media audiences as part of our understanding of contemporary media culture”* (Couldry 2005: 196).

I think that under this light, Giuseppe Richeri has correctly interpreted and defined the new challenges for media research. It now has the task of cooperating in the democratic development of the new global/glocal world, also breaking the frames of deterministic perspectives. It is time to adopt an holistic perspective in media research and the merging of different research traditions, such as happens in the university departments of media studies, is a good opportunity to face the challenge. And, maybe, to win.

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