The Social Theory of Communication: its viability to study the relationship between the political and the public communication systems in the USA

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Abstract
Introduction. Based on a theoretical discussion this article seeks to validate the viability of the Social theory of communication to understand the interdependence between the political and public communication systems in the United States of America. **Method.** The study is based on theoretical research methods, bibliographic research and the content analysis of a sample of 215 academic journals, governmental documents and research reports. **Results.** The models that explain the relationship between the political system and the media were critically analysed and the Social theory of communication was applied to examine the interrelation between the political and public communication systems of the USA. **Discussion.** Although the Social Theory of Communication is valid to analyse that interdependence, we anticipate the need for a more in-depth scientific evaluation of this category. **Conclusions.** The most important aspect of this theory is that it gives an active role to the media and treats other components such as parties, power groups, political-legal norms, cultural values and ideological processes that have a regulatory function in society as part of the political system.

Keywords: political system, public communication system, interdependence, social theory of communication.

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1. Introduction

The analysis of the relationship between the political system and the public communication system of the United States of America (USA) is of great importance and relevance because this country has been extremely successful in promoting itself as the paradigm of the freedom of the press. However, it is known that the mainstream media, in its role as conditioning and participant factor in the formulation of the USA policy, is one of the basic channels through which the circles of power carry out the construction and execution of that policy.

Therefore, the way in which the American public communication and political systems are interrelated has been the subject of multiple studies. The classical studies that have dealt with this subject the most at the international level include those developed by Noam Chosmky (1988), Edward Herman (1988), Michael Parenti (1993) and Shoemaker and Reese (1996). However, there is a key limitation that is evident in the work of these authors, even when they support the so-called consent manufacturing paradigm in its two versions: the passive character they give to the media's role. Piers Robinson (1999, 2000 and 2001) has overcome this limitation through the application of his media and politics interaction model, but only has applied this model in studies on foreign policy and, in particular, in cases of 'humanitarian interventions'.

However, nothing has been written from the perspective of the Social theory of communication, which examines the links between the historical changes of societies and the modalities of public communication that have appeared and disappeared (from community communication to communication via information and communication networks); identifies the possible and probable uses of the current technologies; and describes the resulting historical scenarios that can be expected. This theory has also decisively contributed to making the field of communication a part of the social sciences, since it carries out important heuristic, methodological and research work.

This theory was proposed by Spanish Professor Manuel Martín Serrano in the second half of the 20th century (1993). However, the work of Martín Serrano has been limited to the study of television as a medium, of Spain as a country and of the monopoly capitalism as a socio-economic formation. Cuban researcher Julio García Luis (2004) applied the theory to the case of Cuba, to legitimise the need for a press model capable of fitting the characteristics of Cuba's political system and in this case the use of the theory was valid. The relevance of this theory to study the interdependence between the American public communication and political systems in the context of the transnational and denationalising imperialism that characterised the first decade of the 21st century was also validated in Cuba (Gonzalez Martín, 2013).

Thus, the objectives of this study are to systematise the main theoretical assumptions about the operation of the public communication systems in Western societies; to validate the relevance of the

Social theory of communication to understand the way in which the interdependence between the public communication system and the political system occurs in the USA; and to confirm the need and the possibility for theoretical studies in the field of social communication, particularly with regards to the press and its operation, which can validate, enrich or improve the theories formulated in the pursuit of the science demanded by this area of knowledge within the framework of the social sciences and humanities.

Our research premise is that the Social theory of communication can currently be considered the best theoretical tool to understand the interdependence between the American political and public communication systems.

2. Method

Muñoz Razo (1998: 9) considers that theoretical research is that whose:

> "(…) research method focuses solely on the collection of data that exist in documentary form, whether in books, texts or any other type of documents; its sole purpose is to obtain background information to examine in-depth theories and findings related to the topic or subject matter in order to complement them, refute them or, where appropriate, to derive new knowledge. In particular, [theoretical research] are those studies whose data collection is based only on documents that provide background information on the object of study".

Therefore, in this study we used theoretical research methods and, within these, the hypothetical deductive, systemic and the dialectic methods. The first method allows us to make and test assertions in the form of hypotheses and to draw, together with accumulated knowledge, conclusions that are confronted with new facts and data. The systemic method aims to model the objects through the study of their components and the relations between them. We study their structure and development. The dialectic method rests on the dynamic approach of the phenomena and their interrelationships, and studies the facts jointly, not separately. This method contends that we must also take into account the background, genesis and history of the phenomena under study.

2.1. Methodological strategies

The methodological strategy used in this study is characteristic of theoretical studies, which deal with a theoretical subject and are:

> "(…) research studies whose purpose, development and conclusion are focused on the analysis of a single subject, topic or problems framed in a purely theoretical environment. In the study of these issues, conclusions are difficult to reach by means of a practical mechanism. Strictly speaking this type of theses does not belong to the empirical studies category, as it has an exclusively documentary character (...)" (Muñoz Razo, 1998: 11).

2.2. Population and sample

The study that served as the basis for this article (González Martín, 2013) is based on a sample of 215 documents: 135 issues of academic journals indexed in the science networks of Europe, Latin

America and North America; 31 official publications of the American government; 34 research reports produced by centres specialised in the study of the American media; and 15 research results reports issued by institutions such as the University of La Havana and study centres like the old Centre for Studies on America, the Centre of Information Studies for the Defence, Cuba's Higher Institute of International Relations, the Centre for Studies on the Hemisphere and the USA, and the Research Centre on International Politics Studies of the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Relations.

2.3. Data collection instruments

Bibliographic research and content analysis were used in this study. On the one hand, bibliographic research consists of the search for documents, understood in a broad sense as any physical object that contains knowledge of laws, regulations, characteristics and conceptualisations around a previously defined topic (Saladrigas and Alonso, 2001). On the other hand, the content analysis allows us to directly extract the necessary information from a text with the objective of transforming it into data and analysis for the study.

For Piñuel Raigada (2002: 7), content analysis is:

"(…) the set of interpretive procedures of communicative products (messages, texts or speeches) that come from unique, previously registered, processes of communication and that, based on quantitative and qualitative measurement techniques (statistics based on the counting of units and techniques based on the combination of categories, respectively), aim to produce and process relevant data about the conditions in which those texts have been produced, or about the conditions that may occur in their subsequent use (...)."

The analysis technique used in this study is the triangulation of sources which, according to Piñuel Raigada (2002: 14):

"(…) is based on the contrasting of the description, explanation, and evaluation of the contents analysed in a research study, with the descriptions, explanations and assessments made by other independent research studies focused on the same object, or made within the same research on the same object, with a combination of techniques, including content analysis, as a means of validating external data (...)".

2.4. Procedure

Through bibliographical research we conducted a dialectical analysis of the American society and the relationship that exists between base and superstructure; and defined, based on systems theory, the relationship that exists in society between different subsystems which include the relationship between the social system and the communicative system. Finally, we critically used the general theory proposed by Martín Serrano for the analysis of the relationship between the social and communicative systems, which does not explicitly conceive the existence of a political subsystem which is the one with which the communicative system has higher levels of interdependence.
Through content analysis, we characterised the historical, political, economic and social context of the USA from the first half of the 20th century to the first decade of the 21st century; valued the

trends of American journalism and the way in which the levels of dependence of the public communication system on the political system is manifested.

3. Results

In order to develop our research premise we organised the main theoretical assumptions around the operation of the public communication systems in Western societies and explained the way in which the interdependence between the communication public system and the political system has materialised in the USA through the implementation of the assumptions of the Social theory of communication.

3.1. Models that explain the relationship between the political system and the mainstream press and its limitations

The first of these models is the Consent Manufacturing Paradigm (Chomsky & Herman, 1988) and its two versions: executive and elite. This model considers that the media are directly influenced by the government and that the media do not influence government policy. The executive version of the model -which was widely developed by Chomsky and Herman (1988), with their famous propaganda model, and other authors such as Klaehn (2002); Corner, (2003); and Herring and Robinson (2003)- emphasises the level of relation that exists between the media content and the agendas and reference frameworks of the government officials, understood these as members of the executive power. Since there is such a level of consent from the media regarding the government's executive policy, they former lose the possibility of influencing the executive policies of the latter.

The elites version of the model -developed primarily by Hallin (1989) and Bennett (1990)- argues that the media coverage of the various events serves the interests of the political elites that are part of the executive and legislative powers or any other important political position in society. Hallin (1989) developed what is known as the three spheres: consensus, legitimate controversy and deviance.

According to Hallin (1989), the media almost never offer coverage within the sphere of deviance, but instead reflect the consensus of the elite around a topic or their legitimate controversy. Bennet (1990) examined these issues based on the idea that the media coverage is determined by the governmental debate. When the media coverage emphasises a failure or problem of the executive policies it does not mean that they are being critical of them, but instead that the journalist is fulfilling his/her professional responsibility to highlight the conflicts and struggles that are relevant within the centres of power.

Therefore, the fact that the media cover controversies and discussions in the elites of power gives them certain capacity to influence the debate when there are inter-elite conflicts around a particular issue. This is the fundamental difference from the executive version of the paradigm. The main limitation that is attributed to this proposal is that, despite everything, it does not explore the media's capacity of influence and, like in the executive version, the media continue to be depicted as playing a passive role.

Based on the limitations perceived in the consent manufacturing paradigm, Piers Robinson (1999, 2000 and 2001) formulated another proposal which has come to be known as the policy-media interaction model. For this model, when there is consensus in the political elites the media only reflect it and do not contribute much to the debate. When there is dissent the media also reflect it and there is the possibility that their coverage will be more favourable towards one group than another because, consciously or unconsciously, journalists become promoters of one of the groups that make up the elite. However, when there is dissent or uncertainty in relation to how to deal with a given phenomenon or policy and when there is pressure from the media with negative coverage, which may affect the image of the elites in society, the media become actors that directly influence the decision-making process.

The most relevant aspect of this model is that it does not underestimate the role of the media in society because, as Gomis (1991) points out, communication is currently the largest instrument of socialisation, and socialisation is the main agent of social change. Hence, authors such as Javier Esteinou (in García Luis, 2004: 49) consider the media as the new 'peaks of hegemony', above the school, because they are the actors that create the social reality and in doing so become a socially legitimate institution whose production contributes to the construction of social reality as public reality [1].

While these models can help us to understand the relationship between the media and power, the best model seems to be the one developed by Piers Robinson (2000) because it recognises that the media have an active role in society. However, this model has focused on studying the relationships between the media and the political elites in foreign policy matters and, in particular, in the case of "humanitarian intervention". Still, the model is useful to support the proposal of this article, which is based in the Social theory of communication which best explains this interdependence. We are referring to the proposal of Martín Serrano, which as Fuentes Navarro (2011: 107-108) points out:

> "*The social production of Communication* contains and exposes the Social theory of communication (...) which is based on the assumption that there are interdependencies between the transformation of public communication and change in society" (...). The importance condensed in the central axiom of this theory cannot be stressed enough: "Mass communication, as any other form of public communication, is marked by the signs of identity that allow us to recognise it in the society that uses it. Likewise, in the organisation and performance of each society, one can recognise the imprint left by the mode of producing and distributing public information".

However, before continuing with this model it is crucial to make some conceptual precisions.

There are various approaches and proposals in the social sciences that support the so-called general systems theory, which has been described by Ludwig von Bertalanffy as a profound change in the categories of thought as a result of the imminent need to begin to approach phenomena as totalities embedded in a broader context or as systems. This concept of system acquires remarkable scientific relevance and grater development during the second decade of the 20th century. However, long before Karl Marx and Federico Engels had already approached the world as a single system, a related whole.

If the relationships between the components of the system are stable, the system is static; if they change, then the system is dynamic. A system can also be open or closed. An open system is that which, while maintaining its internal interrelation, relates actively with the environment. Social systems are open systems; they are ''(...) a structured and coordinated set of social interactions that act as an entity (...) where (...) any society, group, community, or group forms a set of interactions" (Duverger in Duharte, 2006: 6).

For their part, the components of the system can develop several types of implications in relation to it: compulsory (when its disappearance causes the disappearance of the system) and optional (when the replacement of one component by another will not make the system to stop). The selection of these elements indicates the degrees of flexibility that the organisation of the system may have. If all components are compulsory the system is rigid; if all of them are optional we are dealing with an elastic system (several authors, 2005).

Moreover, the components of a system are interrelated and those dependencies are expressed in different ways. They are supportive when the change of a component implies changes of one or other components, and vice versa. They are causal when that relationship occurs only in one direction, not vice versa. They are specific when the change of a component can cause changes in one or more components, although not necessarily.

As noted by García Luis (2004: 31):

> "(…) systems may have different degrees of complexity. The most complex subsystems, in turn, belong to a wider supra-system, with which they interact. They operate, also at different levels, so their interactions overlap and result in complex networks".

Systems analysis is useful to study the Social theory of communication proposed by Manuel Martín Serrano (in several authors, 2005) because it deals with those communication systems that exist or may exist. Communication, at the level of reality, exhibits features that are required from systems: first, the practice of communication presupposes the participation of more than one component in the process; second, these components are organised; and, third, each communication system implies the existence of certain components that are necessary for it to fulfil its functions.

3.2. Martín Serrano's model: scope and limitations

Public communication is an activity that aims to provide information to a community for its reproduction. It is a social mode of communication that requires its own institutions; it is a:

> "(...) social form of communication in which information is produced and distributed, through the use of a Communication system specialised in the management of information that concerns the community as a whole" (Martín Serrano, 1993: 72).

Based on this specialisation, public information is institutionally organised and the systematic way of acquiring, processing and distributing news is recognised as legitimate. Thus, an institutional public communication system emerges as:

> "(…) an organisation specialised in obtaining, processing, and distribution of communication, which is assigned certain material and human resources, and whose characteristics and performance are explicitly legitimised and regulated" (Martín Serrano, 1993: 74).

Public communication, on the other hand, establishes levels of interdependence with the social system.

> "(…) the presupposition that there are mutual impacts compels us to accept that public communication is an autonomous System (...). The organisation and the use of Communication Systems would have to be explained with their own structural and functional laws, which are different from those that explain the configuration and the change of the Social System (...). The autonomy of both systems would suffice to consider the possibility of a Social theory of communication" (Martín Serrano, 1993: 50).

In its proposal about the (Systemic) Dialectical Model of Communication, Martín Serrano overcomes the limitations of the behaviourist, functionalist, mathematic-informational and structuralist models that explain the process of media communication, and creates his own model based on the material basis of social life, the determination of the political and social structure over the whole of society's spiritual life, the need for correspondence between the components of the whole social structure, the ideological function of culture in the hands of the hegemonic classes, and the alienation that it causes between the dominated classes (several authors, 2005).

Martín Serrano includes as the components inherently involved in the communicative system: the communication actors (individuals, groups or entities that communicate), the instruments (biological or technological elements that serve to move and, in some cases, transmit or receive signals), the expressions (substances, objects or parts of the human body in which the communicative message can be imprinted and perceived), and the representations (a set of organised signals, which constitutes a deliberate model of meaning) (Martín Serrano in several authors, 2005).

This Communication System (CS) is not fully autonomous and is open to the external influences of other non-communicative systems. The influence of these non-communicative systems, in turn, intervenes in the operation of the communication system. At the same time, the system of communication affects the functioning of the other systems with which it is related. The Social System (SS) is the other system in relation to which the most important relations of interdependence are established. Likewise, the references system (RS) is added to the set of relationships external to the CS. The RS is understood as the system that constitutes the content of the communication. By definition, the object of the communication does not belong to the communicative system and cannot be found in the Actors or Instruments, the Expressions or Representations. There is no communication without an object of reference.

The penetration of the objects of reference (RS) in the communication system (CS) occurs through the mediation of the reference data. From the perspective of communication, reference data appear as a set of expressions associated with a set of representations.

The relations between the CS and the other systems are based on the technological infrastructure of society, its structures of social relations at the level of production, culture and power, with the

institutions that serve those relationships, and the ideological superstructure of society with its norms, values, and ideas (various authors, 2005). The technological infrastructure allows the production of communication. The media are analysed as communication production tools. This criterion leads us to consider the effect of the technological progress of the media to point out the way they affect the communicative product, and the communication producers and consumers.

The superstructure is identified with the communicative products. It refers to the contents which the media deals with and the way in which they are treated. This analysis allows the assessment of the cultural effects of communication and the role of the media in the reproduction of the worldview proposed by their owners. It allows us to consider the communicative products as components of the ideological superstructure of the social system.

The power relations that underlie the use of communication are identified through the analysis of the structure, which is usually done at the level of the social classes that enter into relation through communication. Also at this level it is important to clarify who are the real owners of the communicative infrastructure. The analysis aims to establish the effects of the social division between the real owners of the media and the media's workers, as well as the use of the media. This analysis will result deficient if the study of the numerous mediations that exist between the owners and users of the media is neglected. The mediations of the communicative work are very important when evaluating the resulting product.

The communication system is open to the influence of the different areas or components of the Social System and, at the same time, affects the various components of the SS. There are various forms and degrees of influence among the components of both systems. There is no mechanical unit or automatic interaction. There are homologies between the public communication and the social organisation. Both systems include cognitive, organisational and material components; that is, we can find an infrastructure, a structure and a superstructure in both of them. However, the coexistence and homology between the CS and the SS should not be confused with the identity between both systems. The difference is that the respective components that are found at each level are not the same (Martín Serrano, 2005).

The impacts between equivalent levels occur when changes in the structure of a system are sometimes produced by changes in the structure of the other system. Moreover, the modification in the superstructure of a system sometimes has correspondence with variation in the superstructure of the other. The effects between non-equivalent levels are those that involve, simultaneously or alternatively, different levels in each system. Thus, certain changes that occur at the level of the infrastructure of the CS can be related to different observable changes at the level of the structure and superstructure of the SS (Martín Serrano, 2005).

However, despite its achievements, some authors have seen some limitations in the model of Martín Serrano. It has been pointed out that Martín Serrano does not only argues that the SS and the CS are open to the influence of each other but also that they are interrelated with other systems that would have to be part of the supra-system that integrates them. And it is here where the author uses the system of human needs, placed outside and above the SS itself. As noted by García Luis (2004: 36):

"(…) This human needs system category seems to be extracted from the structural-functionalist theories of the *uses and gratifications* which (...) tend to emphasise the role of an *audience* as a set of individuals separated from the social environment, without acknowledging enough that individuals and their demands are determined by their socio-cultural framework and by the *whole* system to which they belong (...). We appreciate the dialectical search, but do not agree with the idea that the relationships between the social system, communication system, and the references system *lack internal determination* (...)".

Anther criticism made by García Luis (2004: 36) to the model is that the SS should not be seen as direct interlocutor of the CS, because:

"(…) the reality is that the link is established through *multiple complex mediation*, which involves all components of the social system -the economic system, culture, ideology, the psychological-individual aspects, the biological elements, the environmental features, science and technology- and in which, the more direct and critical relationship corresponds to a central subsystem of the social system, insofar as it holds the main attributions of power, which is the *political and legal system"*.

However, we can affirm that although we agree with the criticisms made by García Luis (2004) to the model of Martín Serrano (1993), the relevance of a dialectical model to analyse and explain the public communication system has its merits. That is why within the social system we see the political system as being the most influential over the public communication system.

3.3. Relationship between the mainstream media and the American political system in the first decade of the 21st century

In order to implement the assumptions of the Social theory of communication to the case of the USA, and be able to explain the way in which the public communication system and the political system have become interrelated, it was necessary to analyse the way in which the media operate in that country.

To understand this we must take into account the political system, understood not as a set of political relationships existing in the frames of a society representative of a real historical-concrete formation, or as the complex group of ideas (principles, laws, doctrinal stands, etc.) that complement a form of government, but instead as a set of organisations, agencies and political institutions, political relations (relations within the political organisation and of it with society as a whole), regulatory elements of the system (political and legal norms, the constitution and laws of a particular country) and the culture, ideology and political socialisation processes (which are subjective and aim to strengthen, develop and maintain a given social system). Seen in this way, the political system exceeds or extends the notion of government system and includes other components such as political parties, power groups, political-legal norms, as well as cultural values and ideological processes that, in turn, have a regulatory function in society.

The concept political regime should be added to the concept of political system as a set of procedures and methods to exercise state power that can promote and stimulate the incorporation of the people

in the exercise of power or can prevent it at all costs. If it stimulates the exercise of power by the people, we have a democratic regime. If it prevents it, it is a dictatorship.

However, democracy is a form of class domination and subordination. It is democracy for the ruling class, and domination and subordination for the rest of society. Democracy is based on the alleged equal participation of all members of the ruling class in the adoption of the decisions that govern the functioning of the State, but when in a developing-state and the subsequent decline of society, the ruling class stratifies, and it becomes a democracy only for the members of the ruling class who have more power.

In the case of the USA, it is particularly important to clarify that despite the exacerbation of the 'cult of democracy' that exists in the country, none of its foundational documents, i.e., the Declaration of independence of 1776 and the Constitution of 1787, contain this word. When the policymakers in the USA use the term democracy they refer to what Robert Dahl called 'polyarchy', i.e. a system of government in which power is exercised by a small group and the participation of the masses in the decision-making process is limited to selecting their leaders in elections that are carefully manipulated by the competing elites.

Polyarchy is seen as the best means to resolve conflicts between the dominant elites in a society. Hence it is said that, in terms of their interests, the relationship between democracy and stability is so important. The American elite has succeeded in making the USA to enjoy relative stability in little more than two centuries of existence and this is the result of the capacity of the political system to seek solutions to intra-elite conflicts through compromise and accommodation between the dominant elites that hold the power in that society.

However, polyarchy is also the preferable way to face, or at least control, the popular sectors and their demands within the framework of an unjust social system. Thus, as Robinson (1995: 26) points out: "(...) Based on what Gramsci calls the ideological hegemony, consensual arrangements are made for the solution of disputes in accordance with the parameters of a given social order".

Hence, the challenge for the USA policymakers is to deal with people who are challenging the social order. There are only two ways to achieve this: the imposition by force or authoritarian arrangements and, second, the promotion of democracy. In the long term the most effective way is the second one, even for their foreign policy interests. Therefore, the ornaments that cover the democratic procedures (elections, the reign of justice, etc.) in a polyarchy political system are essential for the elites to be able to dissipate the social tensions that could affect the much-desired stability.

Moreover, polyarchy has proven to be the longest-lasting means to achieve social control since the promotion of democracy, as the elites of this country have planned, is not only aimed at guaranteeing and assuring polyarchy but also to make the USA, as a nation, and the local elites to penetrate fully the State and the civil society to guarantee control over popular mobilisation and mass movements.

This is achieved, at the level of foreign policy, through coercive and public diplomacy mechanisms that are currently articulated through the application of the so-called smart power. At the level of internal politics, this is achieved through consensual non-coercive mechanisms in which an important role is

played by, for example, the so-called American's creed and its articulation with the values of this country, seen from the perspective of the *American way of life,* and sold as the American dream.

It is here where the media come to play their role as (re)producers of the system. To talk about this it is important to understand the concept of the "American's creed" as defined in the 1940s by Myrdal, who explains that, despite all the differences, rivalries and conflicts that could exist among Americans, they shared a set of values that incorporated concepts such as *fair play* (compliance with rules) and equal opportunities for all (Roberts and Klibanoff, 2006: 4).

Furthermore, added to this set of ideas were the notions of freedom which, as advertised on television in the 1980s, was not limited to only having options, but also to having the opportunity to take risks, succeed in life, fail, and do not depend on the government (Parenti, 1993: 75), thus legitimising values such as idealism, individualism, the defence of private property, which are part of the social imaginary of the American people, who attributed to their experiences values and ideas, like exceptionalism and universalism, which made them feel unique.

Thus, we can say that even though these elements that make up the so-called American's creed are maintained as a constant that is transmitted from generation to generation through school and, above all, through the media in general, there is another group of subjects (among others) that have remained a constant which has contributed to the legitimisation of the agenda of the elites both in domestic and foreign politics. We are talking about, among others, the following values: American virtue and 'anti-Americanism'; absence of imperialism; democracy vs. totalitarianism; market economy vs. planned economy.

All of these values are socialised through what authors like Hachten (1999: 16) have considered political concepts of the press. For Hachten,

> «The different perceptions of nature and the role of journalism and mass media have their origin in the different political systems and historical traditions. This is widely reflected in five political types of press that currently exist in the world: (1) authoritarian, (2) Western, (3) Communist, (4) revolutionary, and (5) developing [...]».

In essence, the main distinctive features of these concepts lie in the way in which the media operate in different countries. According to Hachten (1999), the oldest press model was the authoritarian one, and two new models emerged in the 20th century: the communist and the developing press models. For its part, the Western model emerged with the development of democracies in Europe and North America and is the fundamental alternative to the authoritarian press system and its respective amendments. In addition, the Western model has something in common with the revolutionary model as both try to operate outside the government's control.

The Western model (bourgeois theorists consider the USA as its paradigm) represents the values that oppose authoritarianism since this type of press must not be under the government's control, and should enjoy the freedom to operate freely to report, comment and criticise their own government, without fearing reprisals from those in power. This is what the Western tradition has called 'the right to talk politics' (and to participate in politics).

In order for this model to fully develop, Hachten (1999) sets out a series of political and social elements that must distinguish those countries in which this model manifests itself, namely: a legal system that protects individual civil liberties and property rights, high levels of per capita income, education and literacy, a government with a parliamentary constitutional democracy or at least any legitimate political opposition, market economy and a strong tradition of independent journalism.

This concept also feeds on the elements of the political liberalism of the 18th century and defends the idea of the so-called 'marketplace of ideas' that enables audiences to determine what to read and what to believe because no authority, either spiritual or temporal, has the monopoly on the truth. In the case of the USA in particular, these libertarian views are based on certain values that are considered inherent in a free media system. These values are: the press makes democracy possible when collecting public information and watching over the government; a press without restrictions ensures that the public receives diversity of opinions and news; a system of free expression allows individuals to live freely and productively and, in turn, allows an independent press to be attentive to abuses of power by the government.

The principles of the theory of social responsibility also underlie this concept. That is why the media cannot set aside its obligations to society in terms of the service it provides to it. Therefore, the media must be truthful, accurate, fair, objective and relevant, and also provide a forum for ideas. However, it is important to point out that for American journalists the concept of objectivity, for example, means expressing in the most balanced manner possible the position of each party involved in a political dispute, while for most of the European journalists objectivity refers to the coverage of the events that really define the political dispute beyond the statements of those involved in the event.

However, what Hachten (1999) defines as a Western political concept is not more than the operation of the media in a developed capitalist society, whose ideal conditions would be those of the so-called Welfare State that proliferated in some countries of Northern Europe after World War II, which was the climax of the bourgeois democratic system in which the reproduction of capital was compatible with a relatively high social redistribution of wealth, and a relatively high assimilation of social demands by the media and their social mediations (political parties and social organisations) -a situation that is obviously very far from the social reality of the USA.

However, the USA has, and with some success, promoted itself as the paradigm par excellence of the Western model of the press. An important contribution to this success was the tradition of American investigative journalism and its success in the late 19th century and the first decade of the 20th century, in which it reached national relevance and experienced a significant boom.

With World War I and the triumph of the Revolution of October 1917 ended the glory years of the investigative journalism in the USA and began the hardest stages of its history. This was due to the fact that the reforms made during the first decade of the 20th century improved the living conditions of the population and, therefore, provoked a reduction of the need for this type of services, a decrease of the progressive movement (many of these journalists were part of it) **[2]**, the consolidation of certain respect or deference towards the authorities, and a shift of attention to foreign policy issues.

In the years of World War II, investigative journalism flourished again and featured names like Edward R. Murrow, who publicly scrutinised Senator McCarthy and contributed to the end of McCarthyism in the USA. Also outstanding in this regard were the works published by *The Nation* magazine, which revealed the problems that existed in that country at the federal level, in the FBI, the prisons system, and the funeral 'industry'. However, it is known that journalists did not focus on topics of great importance that could shake the world, such as the nuclear crisis and the anti-poverty programs, but instead on events that victimised people (Angwin, 1996).

Furthermore, as Feldstein (2006) points out, these journalists who gave a new impetus to the investigative journalism were, like those from the 19th century, middle-class urban professionals who had some level of education and believed in the importance of telling the truth, as well as in individualism and meritocracy. However, these journalists differed from their predecessors in that the new journalists paid more attention to the excesses of the government than to the problem of the corporations. On the other hand, the new journalists were less passionate in the tone of their work, showed less interest in the political turmoil, were less radical, and had a more limited and less systemic view of society.

After these years the American society became right wing which resulted in a decrease in this type of journalistic work and shifted the attention from home to foreign affairs, which lasted until the outbreak of the global economic crisis that affected the USA in the last decade. In addition, we cannot ignore the impact that the global war against terrorism has had on the mutual impacts between the political system and the public communication system in the first decade of the 21st century.

Most of the studies developed in Europe, North America and Latin America (González Martín, 2013) have showed that a direct relationship between the superstructure of the media and the political system has prevailed historically, and that this has become evident in the manifest correspondence between the views of events proposed by the media and the regulatory elements of the political system and the political culture and ideology oriented towards the strengthening, development and maintenance of the prevailing social system in the USA.

However, we cannot ignore the fact that the media have been able to produce communication products that have led to government agencies, both federal and local, to enact laws and to take measures at the state-level to prevent the abuse of power and corruption, both in Congress and the so-called corporate America. However, the media's ability to influence the political system became more evident in the early years of monopoly capitalism. Although in the age of transnational monopoly capitalism there emerged certain organisations and laws that benefitted the development of investigative journalism, the impact that this type of journalism had on the political system was not as strong as it was during the period of monopoly capitalism.

With regards to the equivalent influences at the structural level, it must be pointed out that, historically, the relationship has occurred only in one direction. At a moment of historical development the political system creates its own institutional communication structure that operates hand in hand and interacts with the structure of the major media. Since the time of the monopoly capitalism we can observe the emergence and development of communicative structures and practices that transcended the journalistic production, both in the mainstream media and the political

system. Thus, there were actions of propaganda, advertising, marketing and public relations which have contributed to the globalisation of the *American way of life* at the level of public diplomacy.

The equivalent influences at the infrastructure level manifested after the crisis experienced by American journalism in the second half of the 20th century albeit much more markedly in the first decade of the 21st century. The crisis affected the levels of information and, thus, the participation of the human resources necessary for the maintenance of the structure. On the other hand, the fact that the media's coverage has historically privileged military sources in military conflicts also puts in evidence the relations between equivalent levels, i.e. the infrastructure of the media and the infrastructure of the political system.

The influences between non-equivalent levels became evident with the impact that the changes that have occurred at the infrastructure level of the mainstream media have on the observable changes at the structure level of the political system. For example: the fact that the television networks that constitute the mainstream media (ABC, CBS, NBC, *Fox*, CNN) do not transmit their news programmes in primetime, but in timeslots in which almost nobody watches TV (6:30 pm Eastern time), and that the written press has reduced its staff (by removing news correspondents from the state congresses) and no longer invests in investigative journalism, has as a consequence that USA citizens do not have an active participation in the decision-making process.

In addition, the links of the American media with the so-called World Domination Group have made the mainstream press to become disinterested in covering the process of political decision-making at the level of states which is the level that has more impact on the daily life of the average American citizen. This change at the infrastructure level of the mainstream media has an impact on the structure of the political system which, under the conditions of the transnational capitalism, sees the State as bound to serve the interests of the monopolistic elite, which is no longer interested in the interests of the nation, and only looks after itself.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Martín Serrano limits its work to the study of television as a medium, of Spain as a country and of monopoly capitalism as a Socio-Economic Formation. However, we consider that his proposal is valid to analyse the concept of interdependence between the American political and public communication systems, since the mutual influence is noticed in multiple dimensions, at the super-structural, structural and infrastructural levels. However, we anticipate the need for a more in-depth scientific evaluation of this category and the theory that underlies it in a context of transnational and denationalising imperialism not mediated by the war against terrorism as a key element that marked the relationship between the media and politics in the last decade.

On the other hand, the Social theory of communication establishes that mass communication, as any other form of public communication, is marked by the signs of identity that allows us not only to recognise in it the society that uses it, but it also to recognise the imprint left by the mode of producing and distributing public information.

Moreover, the most important aspect of this theory, if we compare it with the models previously discussed, is that it does not only gives an active role to the media, but also includes other

components such as political parties, power groups, political-legal norms, as well as cultural values and ideological processes that, in turn, have a regulatory function in society as part of the political system.

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6. Notes

1. There is a third model that will not be developed in this article because, in spite of its contributions, is not compatible with the American society and it has been explained in contexts that are completely different to the American contexts. We are talking about the "political contest" model formulated by Gadi Wolfsfeld. This model is similar to Robinson's in the fact that both give the media a more active role in society than the Consent Manufacturing paradigm does. Wolsfeld focuses its model on the relationship between the media, the social groups that seek to challenge the

authorities to achieve political change. The idea defended by this author is that although the media reflect and even mobilise support in favour of the dominant views in society, there are certain moments in which the media serve the interests of the marginalised groups. According to him, this happens when the authorities lose control over the political environment due to dissimilar reasons. His famous case is the analysis of the Palestinian Intifada of 1987. However, this model focuses only on when and how those that challenged the authority impose their agenda. Therefore, the model is limited to reflect the relationship between the sources and the news and does not explain the relationship between the media coverage of an issue and results or actual impact that the coverage can have on the policy-making process.

2. The progressive movement was characterised by the reforms that took place between 1900 and 1917 in the USA. Their representatives worried about the government regulation of the economy, the "purification" of politics, the reduction of tariffs, the ban on manufacture and sale of alcoholic beverages, women's suffrage, the municipal reform, the improvement of working conditions, child labour, housing, public health, poverty, crime and the conservation of natural resources.

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