

# The event and its publics

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## ABSTRACT

From the intricate relationship between production and reception, I analyze the constitution of the media publics and others, by posing the question of how the arising of public events and corresponding news are not simply directed to the publics but also create them. To this end, I propose a reflection on the notion of public(s) and on the treatment of this notion by different authors. It is considered that publics are diverse and can organize themselves around objects, events, situations, actions, or around various experiences (a literary work, a newspaper report, the experience of a significant event, a catastrophe, a collective problem, a public cause, or an inquiry process). To lead this reflection, I discuss a hermeneutics of the publics to look at their activities in terms of their modalities and reception, interpretation and appropriation devices. I follow John Dewey's pragmatic orientation, who, in *The Public and its Problems* (1927), sustains that a group of people only becomes a public if certain conditions occur: that the public "becomes aware of itself" and identifies the specific circumstances at the basis of its origin.

## PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Public; communication; communities of interpretation; reception

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## 1. THE EVENT AND ITS PUBLICS

On the 11th September, 2001, televisions broadcast the collision of the planes into the Twin Towers, in New York<sup>1</sup>. In December 2004, we received the news of the tsunami in Southeast Asia. For some months in 2007, we followed the development of the Madeleine McCann case in the media. In January 2009, we watched the inauguration of Barack Obama as the President of the United States. In 2011, we faced information and images of destruction as a result of the earthquake followed by a tsunami in Northeast Japan. We followed television, radio, and newspapers reports on the rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. In 2012, Portuguese cities were unsettled by demonstrations of protest that occupied the public space of the media and were received by viewers who were not a mere audience, as they commented on the developments, joined the demonstrations, got emotionally committed to them, sympathized with, or repudiated them. Chains of calls, slogans, reactions, assessments were created in digital networks, or social networks.

Considering the more or less active dynamics of the reception of an event by a public, I intend to conduct a reflection on the reception of the event and the pragmatics of publics. The initial question that arises is to know what is meant by public, even though a pragmatics of publics does not start by giving a definition of "public", but rather by analyzing the activities and situations that underlie its origin.

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<sup>1</sup> This text was taken from the Aggregation Assessment in Communication Sciences at University of Minho (5th February 2013).

## 2. WHAT IS MEANT BY “PUBLIC”?

“Public” is defined as opposed to “private” or “personal” and may, as a noun, be understood as a concrete collective, collective receiver or actor, or as a category. As a concrete collective noun is, according to Esquenazi (2006: 86), “a group of people who have something in common”. We may consider it is a group of individuals linked by a wish, an interest, a conviction, a taste, an experience, or a common public action.

Gabriel Tarde, in *L'opinion et la foule* (1901), links the opinion with the emergence of a public constituted by press readers. There is a contextual and political dimension in the public that is formed due to the development of communications, the press, freedom of expression and association, and conversation. The author faces the possibility of belonging to several publics in the same temporal context, which is impossible in the case of crowds, and considers the specialization of publics (philosophical, scientific, literary, political, aesthetic).

The thinkers of the Chicago School, Robert Park and Charles Cooley, also see the press, or the news, as a basis for the formation of public opinion and publics. They consider that the place of the public is within dialogue, framed in the local community. This is John Dewey's understanding of the issue, in *The Public and its Problems* (1927). He sees communication as the condition previous to the participation and formation of publics, as underlying these latter are the common significations that are shared and establish the social bonds, and may convert a joint action into a community of interests. Dewey sustains the importance of conversation, cooperation, association, shared experience and believes that the public, in the true sense of the word, constitutes itself as an answer to a problem. The public is, essentially, a political and associative public. It is not given in advance, but emerges from the interactions between the people who become researchers, who mobilize themselves and participate<sup>2</sup>. The concept of inquiry (research, questioning) is a mainly naturalist notion and not a cognitive one, which is linked to the situation in the sense of the process that transforms an undetermined situation into a determined one.

According to Jürgen Habermas's deliberative model of public space (1986), the public is the collective subject of the public opinion correlative to the principle of publicity, formulated by Kant, which refers to the free use and public examination of reason, consisting in making opinions public, subjecting them to the appreciation of both aesthetic and political judgment. The emergence of the public as a superior instance of judgment is in the origin of the notion of public opinion that is, as Habermas sustains (1986: 105), the “true opinion regenerated by critical discussion in the public sphere”<sup>3</sup>. With the mass media, critical publicity lost ground to the publicity “of demonstration and manipulation”<sup>4</sup>, in the words of Habermas (op. cit.), and the public extended into

<sup>2</sup> “Communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion” and “*public opinion is a judgment* which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs” (Dewey, 1927: 177).

<sup>3</sup> My translation.

<sup>4</sup> My translation.

a huge anonymous, passive, and vassalized mass. Other authors have precisely argued that the public, as a result of surveys and opinion polls, has become an abstract entity. It is the case of Pierre Bourdieu (1983), who states that the public opinion in that sense “does not exist”<sup>5</sup>, it is an artifact and a fiction. It is assumed that surveys are reported to audiences and produce them.

However, if we consider a theatrical model that respects the public places where the actors play their role according to conventions and life rituals in public (Goffman, 1973), the public is to be seen in a scene, understood as a visibility scene in which things appear (conception which is close to Arendt’s phenomenal character of public space). In this scenic and dramaturgical perspective, in which the use of the notion of public space is related to the socio-anthropological study of public life and relations in public, the publics reveal themselves and have a performance.

The notion of public that conveys the act of being seen and has a performance is used by Daniel Dayan (2002, 2006) and supports the distinction between public and audience, though an audience may become a public and the public may dilute itself into an audience. Dayan (2006) highlights three characteristic features of the publics: unlike the audiences, which are reactive (in response to an offer), a public conveys not only the act of seeing but also of being seen, thus carrying a scenic dimension of a self-presentation (2002; 2006: 198). Another aspect to be considered is that the notion of audience is an exterior construction conceived in the third person, resulting from a speech of a specialist, while the public corresponds to the “we” of a collective subject endowed with reflexivity and deliberation. The public is also characterized by a dimension of compromise, defense of certain convictions, adherence to certain values, thus requiring choices and taking risks. According to the author, the public is neither the simple viewer, nor the sum of viewers, since it implies sociability, stability, involvement, and effectiveness. It is a coherent entity whose nature is collective.

The conception of the public as an active entity finds its parallel in Jacques Rancière (2008), in the declaration of emancipation of the viewer who knows what to think and what do in relation to what he sees. This statement of the emancipated viewer rehabilitates each one’s capacity of seeing and thinking. It is about affirming a viewer who acts because looking is an action. The viewer acts when he observes, selects, compares, interprets. Therefore, it is important to re-examine the assumptions that support the “equivalences between looking (*regard*) and passivity, externality and separation, mediation and simulacrum; the oppositions between collective and individual, image and living reality, activity and passivity, self-possession and alienation” (ibidem:13)<sup>6</sup>. Now, the classical frame of dichotomies individual/ environment, knowledge/ action, theory/ practice, activity/ receptivity had been rejected by Dewey in the first decades of the twentieth century, following North-American pragmatism. The viewer’s receptivity must not be misunderstood with passivity and inaction.

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<sup>5</sup> My translation.

<sup>6</sup> My translation.

From the moment we realize that “looking (*regarder*) is also an action”<sup>7</sup>, as Rancière sustains (2008: 19), and that the viewer sees, feels, acts, and links what he sees with other things he has seen in other locals and scenes, we understand that he is an “active interpreter”<sup>8</sup>. Rancière refers to translation and interpretation. The viewers are active interpreters who create their own translation so that they can appropriate themselves of the “story”<sup>9</sup>. As the author argues, “an emancipated community is a community of tellers and translators”<sup>10</sup> (ibidem: 29).

The viewer does not passively receive that what is created and whose creator wants him to receive, precisely because all reception is a production of meaning. Within reception there is interpretation and action. Seeing, listening, thinking, feeling are actions; speaking, self-informing, exploring the environment, acting are “situated activities”<sup>11</sup>; perception is situated and, as Dewey explains (1929), is in relation with the activity of an individual in an environment. Our first assumption is, precisely, that publics imply an activity of reception, i.e., perceptive, cognitive, emotional, commissive acts of meaning and, in greater or lesser degree, a commitment and a response.

The publics result from activities such as contemplation and aesthetic judgment, watching the news or a television series and the dialogues about them, conversations about current issues following the newspaper reading (as argued by Tarde), the exercise of conversation in places of sociability, the adherence and commitment to a cause or to a process of collective inquiry (as Dewey understands it), sharing a common situation or a fatality and the association as a result of an accident or a catastrophe, the commitment to regimes of public action (as sustained by Cefaï).

### 3. STUDYING PUBLICS REQUIRES TAKING INTO ACCOUNT A SET OF ASPECTS AND QUESTIONS

There are different degrees of activity and passivity, adherence and emotion between a public that is formed in response to an event of great impact in the life of a community, or in response to a problem or cause, and a public which is formed in response to a newspaper report, a television program, a film, a radio program, or a theatre play. Among those who watch or listen to a television or radio program and those who adhere and make comments, or are on the air and intervene, there are differences, and of one these latter takes place once the distinction between publics and audiences, or between a collective entity and an “imagined community”, is established. There are also differences between the publics who are readers of newspapers and magazines, radio listeners, television, cinema, festival, theatre, exhibitions, performances viewers, etc, though there are “floating” publics and juxtapositions, in the same way as the introduction of a new

<sup>7</sup> My translation.

<sup>8</sup> My translation.

<sup>9</sup> My translation.

<sup>10</sup> My translation.

<sup>11</sup> My translation.

media gathers publics from other media as well as new publics. There are different recipients and publics (from the media, art, sports, culture, politics) and diverse forms of composing a media – urban, cultural, or political public, for example. There are differences between publics formed within conversations and debates, in the sense of a “community of word”; publics that see, observe, contemplate, in the sense of a “community of looks”; plural and heterogeneous publics that, facing the same product, form “communities of interpretation”. A newspaper or a radio or television program may have several types of receivers (readers, listeners, viewers) who do not appropriate themselves of what they receive in the same way, but according to heterogeneous modes of interpretation and appropriation. There are publics polarized around a problem or a cause, publics who commit themselves, defend convictions and values and have a performance. There are competing publics who are defined in relation to other publics.

Questioning whether there are publics who are formed as a result of the reception of events by the media leads us to general questions such as: knowing the availability of the audiences to become publics; whether the publics emanate from already existing collectives; to what extent they are collectives and not a sum of individual behaviours; whether there are conditions and situations of reception necessary to the formation of publics or “publigenic” (*publigène*) circumstances (Dayan, 2002); and knowing, more specifically, to what extent the reception of events by the media enables the formation of publics.

We know there is higher probability of a public to be formed when in response to a problematic situation. But there are various modes of reception and collective elaboration of receptive experiences, from the most basic level of common understanding, agreement or opposition of interpretations, tastes and emotions, to the common definition of specific situations of reception with mutual adjustments, habits and rituals of reception, to the processes of inquiry and exploration, etc. There are situations of collective reception of co-presence characterized by the commitment of the participants who take the other as an activity partner such as, for example, the reception of important football matches, the reception of a music concert, or a theatre show.

Calbo (1999: 199) explains that “a collective style of reception is defined *in situ* by the investment of a place, by a process of temporal adjustment of the behaviours to the television event, and by gathering the appropriate interpretative and expressive resources”<sup>12</sup>. There are situations and practical and rhetorical forms of reception that turn a group of individuals into a public, with a “do together” (or a “see” or “listen to” together). According to the conceptions of authors such as Dewey and, recently, Dayan and Esquenazi, which we agree with, it is considered that there are conditions that favour the formation of publics; to define a public it is necessary to delimit the situation which has a public; the public is a collective entity (“to see is to see with”<sup>13</sup>, as Dayan reminds, 2006: 29); the publics are more or less active and formed by temporary communities; there is a diversity of readings, reactions, and identities and publics heterogeneity, in the plural.

In the following section we will discuss some considerations concerning the hermeneutics of reception in order to, afterwards, focus on the notion of experience and

<sup>12</sup> My translation.

<sup>13</sup> My translation.

in the activity of the publics, and, finally, on the communication and constitution of the collectives which are the publics.

#### 4. THE RECEPTION

The theories of reception understand that the publics are formed after a confrontation with the text or the work. We have widened this conception to the reception of the event, accepting that the event affects those who are involved in it and also challenge, in different degrees and ways, those who become aware of it, receive it as a “quasi-text”, integrate it in their field of experience, and, eventually, respond to it. The reception includes affection, interpretation, and reaction.

The one who is affected elaborates what he receives from the reception of that effect and, from the standpoint of the philosophical hermeneutics (Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer, Ricoeur), there is interpretation, understanding, appropriation, and application within the act of reception. The concept of reception involves the interpretation of texts, their appropriation, as it becomes a process against the distance between the text and the reader, and the application. The interpretation of the text mediates the understanding of the self by that one who interprets it and every interpretation ends with an appropriation and application of the text to the reader or receiver’s current situation. This is about incorporating the meaning of the text (or the report of the event) in the awareness the receiver may have of himself<sup>14</sup> and applying it to his experience and way of acting. The reception is a confrontation of the reader, viewer, or listener with the world of the text (words, images, sounds), during which he develops a relation with the text that affects him and reveals proposals of the world, with the others, and with his own identity. The studies of reception tend to introduce in the conception and production of the work the incompleteness of a performance whose product requires being received in a more or less active way. In the literary theory and the hermeneutics of narrative, authors such as Iser (1985), Jauss (1978) and Ricoeur (1969) advocate a “complex of mutual relations maintained by production and reception”<sup>15</sup> (Jauss, 1978: 39). The work is open and the dialectics between production and reception is framed within a “horizon of expectation” which helps understand how a contact with the work is privileged in each period, in accordance with the norms and usual ways of looking at artistic expressions.

In the sociology of the media and the publics, it is recognized the knowledge a public has about a literary, film, or television genre – drama, science fiction, comedy, mystery, documentary, musical, news, report, literary program, etc. – influences its reception. The work of genre creates a relation between producers and receivers according to recognized conventions and features that guide the public. The readers and the viewers acquire skills to read, listen to, and see and the processes of formation of publics are, largely, debtors of those same dispositions.

<sup>14</sup> Ricoeur explains: «Dès lors comprendre, c’est se comprendre devant le texte. Non point imposer au texte sa propre capacité finie de comprendre, mais s’exposer au texte et recevoir de lui un soi plus vaste» (1986 : 116-117).

<sup>15</sup> My translation.

Similarly, we can also consider that there are skills and frames of perception acquired by the media publics regarding the reception of the events transmitted by the media. The event creates its publics, but it is also true that these publics hold models or ways of perception and reception of media events. The modern event has found in the media its preferential place of publicizing and existing for larger publics – as Nora referred to, “it is a feature of the modern event to unfold around a scene which becomes immediately public”<sup>16</sup> (1974: 218) –, as there is availability of the readers of the written press and of the viewers of the audiovisuals to belong to the public of an event.

There is a plurality of readers or viewers<sup>17</sup> and the reception is a moment in which meanings are produced, being possible to find a coincidence (or not) of the meanings of the production and the reception or of the “encoding” and “decoding”. In media studies, there are references such as Hall’s encoding/decoding model (1980) and Veron’s semiotic approach (1998). Veron highlights the fact that the question is not “studying the reception”, as the fundamental issue is to understand “the articulation between the production and the reception of discourses”<sup>18</sup> (Veron, 1991: 167) and between grammars of production and grammars of recognition<sup>19</sup>.

But the readers of the written press or the viewers, contrarily to what the strictly semiotic analysis sustain (which is not the case of Hall’s studies within cultural studies), do not receive the event in a dyadic relation between the text and the reader. The media viewers, listeners, readers integrate contexts and situations of reception, while they receive the news of the event already drawn up, as it was object of an action of configuration by a community of interpretation, in this case, the journalists. Journalists are members of a community of interpretation that provides a framework for analysis of the journalistic discourse, as Zelizer argues (1993), and that is formed by shared discourses and collective interpretations of public events. The communities of interpretation are neither exclusive to the receivers nor to the news producers or the journalists that integrate communities with shared interpretations of reality, with models and conventions<sup>20</sup>. The news contains a point of view and editing devices, production, and emission that guide the receiver’s look.

<sup>16</sup> My translation.

<sup>17</sup> If semiotics places the “ideal reader” inscribed in the work – turning him into a virtual receiver, in accordance with the model of the “text-reader” – and the meaning is produced in the reception and the public is activated by the work, it is important, however, not to confuse the reader or the “ideal” viewer with the empirical reader who effectively reads the work, belongs to historical and cultural contexts, and holds interpretative resources different from other readers.

<sup>18</sup> My translation.

<sup>19</sup> “For some time now I felt the need to establish a distinction between two points of view that are irreducible as far as the processes of meaning production are concerned, opening space to the concepts of grammars of production and grammars of recognition [Veron, 1998]. (...) Against semiology (mainly European), it was necessary to affirm that a text is not analyzable ‘in itself’; it may be analyzed both in terms of its conditions of production and its conditions of recognition (...). Against pragmatics, it was necessary to insist on the fact that between production and recognition the meaning is not calculable.” (Veron, 2006: 114-115) (My translation).

<sup>20</sup> Though the question of production is not discussed in this text, it is important, however, not to ignore as different instances convoke communities of interpretation as if these were reduplicated. As B. Zelizer remarks (1993: 223): “While the idea of the interpretive community has been most avidly invoked in audience studies, where local understandings of given text are arrived at differently by different communities (Lindlof, 1987; Morley, 1980; Radway, 1984), communicators themselves can be examined as an interpretive community (Zelizer, 1992). (...) Journalists as an interpretive community are united through their collective interpretations of key public events. The shared discourse that they produce is thus a marker of how they see themselves as journalists”.

It is possible to say that the one who reads, listens to, or watches the news of the event finds himself in a relation with the medium (newspaper, radio, television, web; information, report) and with what he receives from it. Therefore, it is not only about receiving the part of the real that is reduplicated by mediation, but of relating with what the medium configures and transmits and with what is received within that relation with the medium itself. The type of relation we have with the environment (trust/distrust, gullibility, etc.; knowledge of the journalistic genre, etc.) interferes with what is received and in the way it is received. That is, we include in the reception the nature of the relation we have with the environment: we trust the written press and doubt television or vice-versa; we believe in the technological means and in the veracity of the images presented by television or, on the contrary, we question its power of edition; we trust or not in the legitimate interlocutors who participate in the radio or television debate; judgment becomes dependent on the relation we have with the environment and other viewers or on-line users, for example: appreciation becomes dependent on the comments or multiple Facebook “likes”, etc.

But the news of the event is always a point of view (as every narrative is, presided by the narrator’s point of view), dissociated of its original context to be placed in the universe of the news. The reception of the event in and by the media assumes that the culture of the media and the news is mastered, and that the receiver is able to identify framings, to decode the used language and conventions, i.e. the grammar of the written, radio, or audiovisual information.

There are “frames of reception”<sup>21</sup> (Esquenazi, 2006) and “frames of participation”<sup>22</sup> (Livingstone e Lunt, 1994). For Livingstone e Lunt, the reception of a determined program is related to the participative experience of the viewer and the frame of participation varies according to the people and emissions. As Esquenazi refers to, “a frame of reception is mobilized to associate the type of program that is appreciated by the viewer with the relation he maintains with it and the social context of this relation”<sup>23</sup>, “he is the interpreter of the situation and not only of the program” (Esquenazi, 2006: 87). The situation, in this case, is created by means of a reciprocal elaboration between the medium and the type of program, the frames and the resources or repertoires used by the receiver and the context of reception. There are television or radio programs that define frames of participation (live phone calls; the public in the *plateau*, etc.) in accordance with formats of production in which, as Cefai and Pasquier argue (2003), “the sense of commitment is to be played less in the production of content of particular programs than in the agency of the reception roles”<sup>24</sup>. The public is led to be related to frames of participation that attribute different places to the actors (entertainers, guests, public in the *plateau*, television viewers, etc.). The context and the reception conditions are many times created or provided

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<sup>21</sup> My translation.

<sup>22</sup> My translation.

<sup>23</sup> My translation.

<sup>24</sup> My translation.



by the production of the mass media, cinema, places of entertainment, etc. There are interaction frames, in the cases in which reception is a collective experience that is formed by interaction situations (in the performative arts, cinema festivals or cinema clubs, for example, the participation of the public in anticipated by the programming). There are frames of news, fiction, paintings, and, more specifically, “surrealist” work, etc., within which the operations of interpretation take place. The separation between the production and the reception is mitigated because not only the one who receives produces meanings, as the production establishes conditions for the reception.

In a more global perspective, we can say that we receive the news of the events and the information of the world in the context of an ecology of sounds and images. Sorlin (1997: 9) clarifies statistics suggest that after a decrease of radio listeners at the beginning of the 60’s, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the acquisition of TV sets increased, from the 80’s on, listening to the radio became a more frequent activity, making it possible to affirm that “listening and seeing coexist”<sup>25</sup>. We live in environments constituted by images and sounds, we listen to and/or watch television, internet, radio, newspapers, magazines, advertising posters and other screens (iPad, iPhone, mobile phone, etc.). In the domestic space, at the commercial centers, in public spaces we are immersed in a ecology of images and sounds with a multiplication of mediations, screens, and interfaces. It is a saturated environment of different language games, where there are overlappings: images that are juxtaposed, noise over noise, dialogues over dialogues. Those screens and mediations organize an environment and modes of reception and use more and more hybrid, plural, hypermediatic. The miscegenation and plurality of the environments deals with the discontinuity in terms of reception. We detain a natural statute of receivers, viewers, and public and, at the same time, consumers, digital networks users and producers. With the connection technologies we receive and send. In the cinema we watch a film projection, we receive and send messages by mobile or we check our email and we send messages by iPhone or iPad, we read the film synopsis, etc.

The pragmatics of publics faces the receptive experiences and the processes of communication and association of the viewers and is interested in the practices of reception and reaction of these latter and their actions and performances in the public arenas. To this extent, what matters is not what is received by a group of receivers, but what these do with what they receive and experience. They read, see, feel, interpret, assess, judge, are emotional, let themselves be affected, and can become a public that reacts to works (literary, visual, audiovisual, etc.) or to the consequences of an event due to a collective action. The actions performed by social actors who respond to an event, a case, or a problem, may be the origin of the formation of a public that is, in the words of Louis Quéré (2005), an “instance of action and emotion”<sup>26</sup>. We can then refer to publics who develop an activity in response to the affection they are targeted at and who become, thus, collective subjects involved in the plot of a case, thus recreating that which they respond to.

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<sup>25</sup> My translation.

<sup>26</sup> My translation.

This confrontation changes the one who acts in response to the event that affected him; which brings us into the discussion about passivity or activity of audiences and publics.

## 5. PASSIVITY AND ACTIVITY OF THE PUBLICS

The passivity of the audiences was a fact accepted by communication studies. According to the conception of the total effects of mass communication, in the scope of the functionalist paradigm, mainly focused in the study of contents and in the effects of mass media messages, it is expected for an isolated viewer to be passive. With the studies of Lazarsfeld, in *The People's Choice* (1948), and of Katz and Lazarsfeld, in *Personal Influence* (1955), about “two-step flow of communication”, the limited effects and the selectivity of the receiver are accepted. The importance of opinion makers and the influence of interpersonal communication and of the opinions which mediate and interfere in the reception of contents are recognized, though the problematic of the effects remains as the guiding axis of media studies. And, though a sociology of effects doesn't constitute itself as an approach to reception, the idea of an active viewer begins to make its entrance in communication studies. The “uses and gratifications research”, in the 60's and 70's, inverted the sense of the problematic of effects to the one of the uses. With the *Cultural Studies* (Stuart Hall, 1968; Hoggart, 1970), the English works about the publics began, paying attention to the socio-cultural context, the practices, and to the symbolic dimensions in which the reception occurs.

We can proceed in the sense of understanding that there is no inactive viewer and that all the act of reception requires affection, comprehension, and activity, which means that there are no passive publics, even the media ones and, more specifically, the television ones.

I introduce here Dewey's notions of “experience” and “interaction” (1929, 1997, 2010 a, 2010 b), as in these notions both the nature of the relation between the two entities and the entities themselves are affected. Experience is a biologic function of interaction between the organism and its environment<sup>27</sup>, both in terms of adaptation or adjustment and of transformation of the environment (natural, social, cultural), as the term “transaction”, later adopted by the author,<sup>28</sup> demonstrates. In every experience, receptivity supposes affection and activity. As clarified by Dewey: *receptivity is not passivity*<sup>29</sup>.

The experience proceeds into transaction with a context that can be designated by situation<sup>30</sup> and combines activity and receptivity, doing and affection. In the experience

<sup>27</sup> “An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment” (Dewey, 1997: 43).

<sup>28</sup> The notion of transaction is introduced in 1949, in *Knowing and the Known*, jointly written with A. F. Bentley.

<sup>29</sup> “Receptivity is not passivity. It, too, is a process consisting of a series of responsive acts that accumulate toward objective fulfillment (...). The undergoing phase of experience is receptive (...). When we are only passive to a scene, it overwhelms us and, for lack of answering activity, we do not perceive that which bears us down. We must summon energy and pitch it at a responsive key in order to take in” (1980: 52-53).

<sup>30</sup> “The situation is a field of activity defined by the interaction of an organism with its environment” (Garreta, 1999: 37) (My translation).

there is an association between interior and exterior, subject and object, acting and suffering. The effect of the environment over the organism is a consequence of one of its previous activities; the fact of bearing is a consequence of the fact of having acted. In the case of the viewer or the public, the triggered reaction (emotion, acclamation, debate, denounce, accusation) is the answer to the alteration of their situation resultant of the confrontation with the object of affection. There is a transforming interference between the interior and the exterior or between the subject and the object, and the experience is the place of that awareness and the connection between being affected, or bearing, and acting. During the transaction, the constituents of the interacting entities are themselves susceptible of suffering alteration.

Only the lines or conditions of the exterior environment or of the event, object, news, work of art that keep a relation with the individual are susceptible of affecting him. The answer to that affection will be variable, and can cause a reorientation of the behaviour, in the case of a more or less important event, film, television series, performance, or an exhibition. The experimentation of the event, or work, is integrated in the previous experiences and in the aimed or anticipated experiences. These consecutive experiences become object of one another and the action of the one who suffered the experience may guide itself into a new direction according to the occurred experience. The viewer's past experiences open a field of possibilities and serve as a basis to the organization of his future experiences and perceptions. In terms of the pragmatics of experience and the pragmatics of reception, the evaluation of an experience or its impact depends on the examination of its consequences in the future.

The two fundamental and inseparable principles in the constitution of experience are confirmed. On the one hand, the interaction or transaction which occurs between the individual and the objects, events, works, or other individuals, on the other hand, the principle of continuity of experience, which means that every experience is based in something existent in the previous experiences, just as it modifies, in some way, the subsequent ones. The condition of continuity is, precisely, the transformation of the objective conditions of the environment where other experiences will occur.<sup>31</sup> "Every experience" – argues Dewey – "should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of a deeper and more expansive quality" (1997: 28). The experience modifies the one who had it and this change affects the quality of the following experiences.

This clarifies how we integrate current events in a historical anthropological, social and cultural field of experience which serves as a cognitive, affective or emotional, practical and moral framing of the subsequent experiences. There is the knowledge of what happened and there is the possibility of interpreting and understanding that what is received integrating it in "frames" (in the sense of Goffman's notion of *frame* from the *frame analysis*, 1991) and these are simultaneously cognitive, normative, moral, and practical. The experience is also cognitive, emotional, and practical: a source of knowledge, emotions, discovery, exploitation, interpretations, both about the world and about the individual, and of appropriation.

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<sup>31</sup> "Every genuine experience has an active side which changes in some degree the objective conditions under which experiences are had" (Dewey, 1997: 39).

In his relation with the news, television program, the event conceived by the media, or with a literary work, the viewer experiments variable degrees of activity and passivity. He becomes the subject of experience and his identity as a viewer is built according to the way he is affected, the way he bears the experience of the event (and its indirect consequences)<sup>32</sup> and reacts to it, forming himself also in the actions of response that it may trigger. In case of the event which is received by a public of the media, the construction of this public's identity depends on the way the event is conceived in terms of its narrative in the media<sup>33</sup> and how the event is interpreted, evaluated, exploited, and appropriated by those who received it<sup>34</sup>, at the same time as one and the other alter themselves, in different degrees, with that experience. The one to whom the experience occurs suffers a probation and an alteration of himself, such as the viewers or the public who experience the event change their statute.

In general, the reader, viewer, listener, or receiver, find themselves in a relational dynamics with the object of reception. The act of reception supposes a relation with the object that implies a perspective about it and about the relation itself. Within communication studies, it can be argued that the type of relation the viewer maintains with the author film, the prized television series, the debate program whose commentators are respected, or the reputed radio program intervenes in reception.

It can be questioned if the newspaper reader, or the television viewer, incorporates the information provided by the media "as part of his own experience". Benjamin (2006: 108-109) assures that the press intention "is to isolate the events considering the domain in which they might interfere with the reader's experience"<sup>35</sup>. The regime of objectivity and the isolation of the event in the journalistic information operate, according to the author, the reduction of the experience, while the narrative of the storyteller integrates the event in the experience.

We can relate this non-integrated and fragmented experience to publics also fragmented or, using Dayan terminology (2000, 2006 b), "quasi-publics"<sup>36</sup>, that is the television publics. Within these, there are also levels, even minimum ones, of action and emotion, as the action of seeing and listening requires emotion, cognition, evaluation, i.e., an activity and a performance. D. Dayan (2006), following Austin's speech acts theory, mentions the "seeing acts" (*actes de regard*), introducing a performative dimension in the reception.

But, as we were saying, there is a certain consensus in the characterization of the media publics, specifically the television ones, as ephemeral, changeable, many times ludic and affective (in this case, formed from reality shows or teen series, for example), and more inconstant than the political or religious publics. In turn, in the interactive media

<sup>32</sup> In the experience of indirect consequences there is a definition of public.

<sup>33</sup> That is the moment of *mimésis 2* or narrative configuration, which Ricoeur refers to (1983, 1984, 1985), anteceded by the pre-figuration (*mimésis 1*) at the practical level of acting.

<sup>34</sup> Refiguration or *mimésis 3*.

<sup>35</sup> My translation.

<sup>36</sup> My translation.

or connection technologies, the viewer is not only affected as he is instigated to become producer, sender, reader-decider, creator, in a relation marked by a certain disaffection, inconstancy, ephemerality, volatility, constituting what has been designated by “fugitive communities”. In digital networks, users many times react as publics who respond to a cause (Facebook “likes” are reproduced), a petition, a mobilization, an adherence, but tend to be released from commitment, marked by the distance and absence of the other (his body and face). They are labile and volatile publics and the technologic mediation of experience carries a wider degree of non-integrated and fragmented experience.

In contrast with these ephemeral and inconstant publics, many debate programs, reports and television series last long periods (designated by seasons), with faithful or more or less constant publics, although from the producers and programmers’ point of view they can also be considered audiences and consumers subordinated to commercial strategies. The publics from television series and great debate programs share conversations, comments and opinions.

## 6. COMMUNICATION AND THE EMERGENCE OF PUBLICS

Communication or conversations are places of emergence of publics. In the theories of the first authors of the Chicago School, persists the idea that communication and the mass media enhance social bonding, participation, community, and democracy. The daily conversations that result from reading the newspaper, for example, are a place of formation of publics. For Dewey, and the American pragmatists, communication is a process of association, participation, is a condition for culture<sup>37</sup>.

This cultural point of view of communication sustains the ability of conversation to generate a free and democratic society<sup>38</sup>. Communication, public debate, and the broadcasting of news and the media are in the basis of the participation in public life, the formation of public opinion and democracy itself. Cooley argued that “communication, through the media, contributes to the maintenance of the community social bond”<sup>39</sup> (Subtil, 2006: 1082). He argued that the press, more particularly, promotes the exchange of ideas, conversations and the constitution of publics<sup>40</sup>. More recently, Sorlin (1997: 75) has argued that the information provided by local media favours social connections of those who live in the same community, city, or country, for example, to the extent that the news serve as a reference framework, allow to observe others and to understand the world we live in. Sorlin refers to a “cohesive function of the media in the modern world”<sup>41</sup> (idem, *ibid.*).

<sup>37</sup> “Men associate in many ways. But the only form of association that is truly human, and not a gregarious gathering for warmth and protection, or a mere device for efficiency in outer action, is the participation in meanings and goods that is effected by communication” (Dewey, 1980: 460).

<sup>38</sup> See Crick (2005: 152-153) and his analysis on this topic in Dewey.

<sup>39</sup> My translation.

<sup>40</sup> Reception studies consider both the conversations that amplify media’s influence (Noelle Neumann) and the ones that filter it (Katz).

<sup>41</sup> My translation.

However, publics cannot be reduced to communication exchanges and public debate, and cannot be reduced to its constitution around a medium, as the readers of a newspaper, for example. Also the formation of publics in reaction to events is preferably limited to local contexts, but can emerge in response to situations and problems with global character or occurrence elsewhere.

## 7. HOW DO THE PUBLICS – COLLECTIVES – CONSTITUTE THEMSELVES?

Both Cooley and Dewey root publics to democratic culture, in primary groups, in associative life formed by processes of interaction, cooperation, and communication. For Dewey, the conditions for the publics to leave their eclipse are the association, communication, opinions, and convictions that result from an effective and organized investigation. “Communication of the results of social inquiry is the same thing as the formation of public opinion”, ensures Dewey, “*public opinion is a judgment* which is formed and entertained by those who constitute the public and is about public affairs” (1927: 177). Publics do not pre-exist the situation that originates them and create themselves around the indirect consequences that affect the individuals. There lays, in the author’s opinion, the distinction between public and private: when the consequences of the actions extend themselves to others, we are in the public domain<sup>42</sup>. Similarly, we also consider that the publics of the events are constituted by people indirectly challenged by the consequences (undesirable) of a situation (problematic).

Seeing and listening are actions that are different from feeling, suffering, and being affected in the context of the environment an individual belongs to. The one who experiences the event, is directly affected by it, and suffers, does not constitute its public. The public of the event is constituted by those who are indirectly affected by the problem. They suffer the indirect consequences of social activities conducted by others and involve or engage themselves in a resolution, that is, as Dewey argues, explore the consequences of the problem in view of its treatment. The public emerges, thus, in the interactions between this group of people that constitute themselves as a collective of researchers. The necessary conditions for the formation of publics are, in Dewey’s words, that “they become aware of themselves” and identify the specific circumstances that originated them. Only a continuous, persistent inquiry, connected with the conditions of a situation allows the formation of an opinion on public affairs (1927)<sup>43</sup>.

This research, in articulation with the conditions of the situation that moves it, may lead to a durable public opinion. The political publics, for example, last more than the television or aesthetical ones, since, in most cases, public opinion is intermittent, may be more or less persistent or fleeting and capable of being reactivated by an event, news or a television program. The problematic situation can be configured and disseminated

<sup>42</sup> As Dewey states: “We take then our point of departure from the objective fact that human acts have consequences upon others, that some of these consequences are perceived, and that their perception leads to subsequent effort to control action so as to secure some consequences and avoid others. (...) the consequences are of two kinds, those which affect people directly engaged in a transaction, and those which affect others beyond those immediately concerned. In this distinction we find the germ of the distinction between the private and the public” (Dewey, 1927: 15-16).

<sup>43</sup>In that sense, the constitution of the “public” is inseparable from the “logic of research” and of the “work of experimentation”.

by the mass media and, to the extent that it poses questions, it requires examination or inquiry, enhances discussion, and favours the formation of a public or publics polarized around the issue. Thus, the public is not constituted by the sum of the individuals who compose it, but by those who adhere, mobilize, or organize themselves around a common agenda of situations that constitute a problem and are object of investigation. The events that rise in the public space and become a problem or constitute problematic situations favour the emergence and formation of the collective entity that is the public and that is committed in a regime of public action<sup>44</sup>. In turn, the public action is intended to publics, which means that a public is formed in the horizon of another public. It forms a community of inquirers, which can use the media to publicize a cause, complaint, petition, or an initiative. The processes of problematization (Gusfield, 1981) and publicizing are themselves favourable to exchanges of arguments, conversations, situations of communication, and to understand, evaluate, organize, associate, and cooperate. In other words, they favour the creation of collectives.

In any case, publics do not precede the reception, action, or performances that aim at them. They constitute themselves in response to the event or problem, they resent, reveal themselves, are aware of themselves, as well as of the conditions of their emergence. Each public is the subject of a collective experience, an opinion, or public judgment, a review, an approval or disapproval, or a performance.

## 8. CONCLUSION

In summary, publics are formed in the situations of reception. They may derive from feelings of belonging of those who constitute it: readers of the same newspaper, listeners of the same radio program or the same music genre, viewers of the same television debate program, etc. They may be formed by a commissive act and the awareness that people have of each other in that common action. They may form and polarize around an event or a problematic situation, through conversations, sharing emotions, opinions and judgments, jointly focusing their attention. In the public sphere there are various publics and each public is defined in relation to other publics. They are ephemeral or short-term publics in response to an event or a state of things. They are publics who show and exhibit themselves, as the publics in demonstrations, and have a performance for other publics; or they are faithful publics, as it is the case of political, sports, religious publics; or they are publics reactivated during a media event (concert, royal wedding, etc.). They are producers and receivers that are organized in social networks or the Internet and react to other publics and they can reactivate sociability networks. They are communities of taste and communities of interpretation and meaning, even if they are provisional because the process of signification and attribution of meanings is never complete. ✍

Translation of the author

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<sup>44</sup> As Cefai and Pasquier sustain, it is “formed by ‘individuals’ who commit themselves to regimes of public action” (2003) (My translation).

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