

Fame, the media and public opinion

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Abstract

The general hypothesis of the work is that fame generated by media plays a part in creating opinion by legitimising anthropomorphic icons which, as models, assist in structuring the present day's social hierarchies.

Based on a field study about television news and on a case study of Operación Triunfo, the article concludes that media fame, which plays a decisive role in the formation of public opinion, express the nature of the media. as creators of a virtual reality and synthesisers of actual reality.

Keywords

Fame, reality, media, public opinion, news, Operación Triunfo

Resum

L'autora parteix de la hipòtesi que la fama que es genera mitjançant l'acció dels mitjans de comunicació intervé en la creació d'opinió legitimant icones antropomorfes que actuen com a models i ajuden a estructurar les jerarquies socials del present.

Basant-se en un treball de camp sobre els teletinformatius i en una anàlisi de cas del programa Operación Triunfo, l'article conclou que la fama mediàtica, que té un valor decisiu en la formació d'opinió pública, expressa la naturalesa dels mitjans de comunicació com a creadors d'una realitat virtual i sintetitzadors de la realitat real.

Paraules clau

Fama, realitat, mitjans de comunicació, opinió pública, informatius, Operación Triunfo.

1. Origin and starting point: from the individual to the personality

During my long journalistic career, no less than forty years, I have wondered why an individual becomes a personality when they appear in the media. Why does appearing in the media have consequences such as fame, celebrity and recognition for those appearing? This was the question, filled with other questions such as the legitimisation and authority of public opinion, that had to be clarified, studied and resolved. And that's why it's necessary to contextualise this within its historical context and in the light of the various and wide-ranging studies available, without ignoring other decisive aspects in the chain of human knowledge. There was also a last question: by pulling on the thread of personalities, will we understand better the decisive force and social role of the media in general?

My generation remembers the first day we saw television and could see that, included among other, no lesser talents, it was a celebrity factory. Ours is a privileged generation that has experienced the accelerated change undergone by Spanish and Catalan society, especially regarding media transformations. This dual perspective from which the research is tackled has an advantage: as a journalist, I have direct insider knowledge of the habits and functioning of the media, and as a Spaniard and Catalan I've had the chance to experience the acceleration of changes that, in other societies, occur much more slowly.

A third perspective, that of sociology and its methods of analysis, were vital for me to clarify these questions, as Spain is well provided with studies on communication but we, including the Catalans, are rather limited in terms of a sociological view of communication phenomena. When I read what Émile Durkheim had written, in *Les formes elementals de la vida religiosa*, that "sociology is the science (that clarifies and studies) of opinion", I did not doubt at all the usefulness of the sociological perspective to support my own observations, taking from the reality of the communication fabric.

It's an invaluable experience to observe, within the media field, the opacity of the media; how they become social referees and carry out a process that goes from contributing (in certain cases) to the advent of democracy, to evolving in line with the overall capitalist trend. The Spanish media go quickly from being a counter-power to becoming an established power, capable of intervening in democracy and of establishing a monopoly of the new "media reality" in which they act as key actors and dictate the rules of play. The exclusion of those who do not follow these rules is evident.

This introduction has already put forward the dilemma of whether the media reproduce reality or recreate it producing a new "media reality", which opens up a whole range of questions, among which there is that of the fantasy-reality relationship through journalistic narrative. Also, how this situation relates to the change experienced by individuals through

media fame and the creation of public opinion. That the media are now an industry of fame leads to an investigation of how this system affects, directly or indirectly, the lives of contemporaries through creating opinion.

This is the general hypothesis of the work: when the media contribute to creating or modifying opinion, ideas, beliefs or social rituals, the manufacture of fame in this way plays a part in creating opinion by legitimising anthropomorphic icons which, as models, assist in structuring the present day's social hierarchies.

As a corollary, it is deduced that the religious structure *per se* of the current media system largely results from the media construction of fame, i.e. from the profane consecration of fame.

The aim below was to place this work within a theoretical context in sociological, historic and communication terms and to carry out the corresponding checks through four cases, selected from many different possibilities, which shine a light on the question posed. The cases chosen (see section 3) were two referring to the daily press and two from television, given that, obviously, the culture of image is directly related to the creation of personalities and celebrities, something which is also carried out by the press through photography and by valuing an issue's graphic appeal. These cases, as well as the whole research, are located in Catalonia, which does not mean we cannot generalise a phenomenon that, a long time ago, crossed all borders and territories and of which we have been speedy and privileged apprentices.

2. The social role of fame

A study of fame, understood as a communicative construct produced by human and social interrelation, must consider three levels of analysis: individual, social and media. The first two, in short, focus on the construction of fame on the part of each individual with their closest and most direct environment through face to face contact. My work focuses on the role of fame at the intermediated or media level.

Today, actual reality and media reality go to make up two parallel structures that compete for the hegemony to form opinions and ideas. Intermediated reality supposes a different kind of social activity that entails the production, transmission and reception of symbolic forms (Thompson).

This new media reality produces another kind of experience thanks to a revolution in the dimensions of time and space that affects actual reality. What moves this media reality is a communicative utopia (Breton) made reality, which promises to make man into a god, immersed in a world created for him, something which, of course, is not usually within the scope of actual reality. Contemporary media opulence (Mattelart) generates communicative misery whose main feature is a lack of communication but the delirium is also produced (Bourdieu) of homogenising, in communication terms, the whole planet in accordance with rules generated by the media system itself.

Given the essentially moral nature of society (Weber), this media reality functions and is organised in accordance with the model already tried out by religions, as described by Émile Durkheim, based on their being able to transform society. As a reflection of society, communication becomes sacred (gives meaning to the world) and is organised around beliefs and rituals. Fame is one of these media facts capable of symbolising, expressing and transmitting values via media rituals.

The legend-god-hero-celebrity sequence has a common thread that explains how religions operate in society as creators of beliefs and customs. This process celebrates the authority of social and also moral opinion that today symbolises public opinion (Lippmann). This situation is perceptible through the social fact that is fame: when fame intervenes, men are seen differently. Fame is, in this context, an experience full of social interrelation.

By means of fame, individuals become their representation, a fact related to prestige, reputation and the social concept of excellence. And also closely linked to the concepts of elites, of authority and social hierarchy (Mills, Bourdieu). It is a vital instrument in order to understand the dynamics of those socially excellent individuals who, today, compete in the market of public interest (Mills) created by the media reality.

There are certain decisive transformations in history that place the origins of the reality of the concept of fame, as we know it today, in the Renaissance. Individualism, competition/rivalry and appearance run through the history of this search for social excellence that is fame, as a prize and public recognition (Gracián). The way of charisma (Weber, Giner) is accompanied in the evolution of the concept by the way of merit (Young) to achieve excellence. The way of merit states that individuals are capable, by their own efforts, to access fame and social excellence. The next step in the concept's historical evolution is a model of communicative leadership, which I call the "Hamelin syndrome", capable of dragging along alien opinions and wills, that orientates the progressive transformation of society. It can be seen throughout history that what is consecrated as excellent in each era has survived and has served as a subsequent reference model, that's why our museums are full of "famous individuals from history".

The combination of bourgeois and capitalist society, industrialisation and extraordinary technical advances in the field of communications has progressively amplified this historical reality up to the contemporary era (Mattelart). A child of capitalism and bourgeoisie, grandchild of aristocracy and religion, at the beginning of the 20th century fame started to be an endless race: through celebrity, people believe they can obtain in this world what, in other times, was offered to them by legends, heroes and saints; a power that, in making itself felt among a large number of humans, seems to guarantee immortality. The hegemony of a communication industry will decide the future of fame as an essential requisite for the media business.

These new technical, economic and communicative conditions go to make up transformations that directly affect the sense of

existence of human beings (Meyer, Eco). The work of manufacturing fame and its media exploitation reinforces an evolution working in favour of homogeneity, compared with the actual plurality of society. Media reality today is configured as a new space in which visualisation, image and fame are the norm, transforming individuals into actors or spectators of a fascinating spectacle that operates independently from what is real.

3. Summary of two field studies related to television: news programmes and *Operación Triunfo*

3.1. Hell and paradise in TV news

- I see the TV scenario as a space in which advertising is the leit motiv and the programmes of all kinds, including the news, interrupt this advertising *continuum* that also links with other aspects of everyday media life.

- I observe that, in general, television news belong to what we might call the "black genre". The accumulation of bad news, horror and perpetual conflict express the undeniable fact only too well: actual reality is hell. On the other hand, advertising presents a creative, interesting, fun and accessible universe: the advertising paradise is the context that contrasts with the hell of what is real.

The reality of bad news is a primordial rule of today's media system as a whole and responds to the intention, in the case of television, of nailing viewers to their seats. The aim is to catch the attention of the audience, to which end fear, horror and the spectacle of evil seem to be vital, although this is still a convention that is self-imposed by the media system.

The horror of reality and the paradise of advertising/consumption are a context and a permanent structural system concerning the use of television according to the North American model. This system is universal and belongs to a global structure of the current use of television (which could be used in many different ways).

The consequence of this first approach is that a moral structure is formed for using the medium. Reality is a hell: consumption is paradise. That's how simple the general TV context is for any television news programme.

- Evidence: 14 TV news items. 400 advertisements. The content of the midday TV news programmes was analysed for one week from TVE and Antena 3 TV. It was observed how, at the time of the analysis (December 2003), the structure and themes were perfectly cloned and interchangeable. The reality of the sinking of the *Prestige* was narrated as a horror story, which a government, assailed by the catastrophe, was taking on with epic bravery. The treatment of images and the thematic hierarchy was very similar; themes were valued according to the interests of each medium at that time. These facts were verified in an extensive analysis of content (Jansen) and timings applied both to the information and to the advertising, in which we could observe an optimism and joy absent from the news analysed, as well as an undeniable tendency towards the

imperative and towards giving all kinds of instructions to viewers (including how to think).

Evident contagion can be observed in the advertising narrative treatment (impactful images and narration that presents the situation, develops it and then presents an outcome) and news narration. Formally, therefore (not in the intention, as I have mentioned) advertising images and news images tend to resemble each other and are therefore easier to understand and more direct.

- The protagonists. All characters that said something in all the news items were analysed. Political and football themes predominate; female characters hardly exist. We discovered three main types of protagonist. "Powerful" people (identified with positive or negative heroes, preferably politicians and male), "victims" (an excellent counterpoint for the protagonism of power) and "extras" (anonymous people who "humanise" the information, performing the function of a theatre set and including "experts"). These prototypes, which symbolise success and failure, complement each other and, repeated day after day, transmit a clear moral message to the millions of people watching the news.

- In conclusion:

1. Hell and paradise exist as a basic structure in television. Hell = reality / paradise = consumption.
2. Both form part of the world of spectacle, an effective platform from which their messages are issued.
3. This structure transmits a moral message that serves to guide the behaviour of audiences.
4. News and advertising share a common language in how they treat texts, images and narrative intent: coincidentally, the aim is sensory "impact" and a homogeneous public.
5. Information becomes an impactful "story" which leads to the falsification of reality.
6. The "saints" of television are its protagonists: heroes and victims symbolise success/failure. Who is good and who is bad. The contemporary nature and relevance of appearing in media reality bestows a degree of exemplarity on these protagonists.

3.2. Fame as a profession: the case of *Operación Triunfo*

- General points. Access to fame is the equivalent of a professional career, facilitated and controlled by the great industry of the media. A wealth of auxiliary industries (from stylists to heads of the press) goes to make up the context in which the phenomenon of media celebrity is developed.

In media terms, fame is understood as the merit of being able to attract audiences and the consequent benefits this brings. And it has only been a small step from this point to the media (and particularly television) setting themselves the none too small objective of creating professional celebrities: it's a question of the industrial production of "charisma".

The existence of this industry of fame is as real as the existence of a market of notoriety, embodied by icons (from sports people to singers, including writers, actors and politicians)

capable of becoming known through the media. There is a demand for and supply of famous people and the media make money from it. I therefore see famous people nowadays as employees - or hostages - of the media system, which they need to survive.

- The case of *Operación Triunfo* is paradigmatic of this reality moved by media fame. In my analysis we have observed the first three series of OT and data have been provided by the production company Gestmusic, which provided this analyst with direct insight into how the programme is made.

The programme is the centre of a complex set-up that takes place before (casting, academy known as a "high performance centre") and after (post-production and post-academy). A large number of industrial specialities are involved in this approach: technical, employment, stylistic, marketing and promotion, advertising, communication, logistical, merchandising, record production, among others. In the industrial organisation of this approach, Gestmusic has led the field in Spain and has managed to sell the OT format to more than thirty countries, with hundreds of millions of viewers. The profits far exceed the costs of organising the programme.

OT is a family show that can compete perfectly well at a global level and, right from the first series, had significant support from the Internet and the main contact channels with young people. The presentation of 100,000 young people at the casting sessions of the second series gives an idea of the social importance of the phenomenon: television can attract as much as a university degree. The programme has one singularity: it shows the audience the practices and customs required to become famous and teaches about the effort required in order to achieve this.

- In conclusion:

1. Fame here is a project for life, a school of competition that confirms the idea that anonymity is a punishment, rewarding the social recognition of individuality.
2. The real and accessible professionalisation of fame is a historic novelty that goes to make up an industry that is absolutely essential in the competition for audience ratings, to which assembly line celebrities are offered up.
3. The globalisation of the system / fame is confirmed and the singular fact that fame feeds on itself and is seen as an elite professional career.
4. Once again a clear moral message can be seen: fame is the reward for individualism, competition, communicative capacity. Anonymity is a punishment.

4. Main conclusions (brief summary)

- Fame plays a decisive role in the formation of public opinion. Media personalities, transformed into icons and celebrities, act as a symbol, ambassadors of values and social models and creators of opinion in all fields (from aesthetic to ethical). They also drive social change.

- Fame sets up a context/sign of identity that identifies a celebrity as an individual "product" about to be consumed (with all its symbolic load on top). Professionalisation and the industry of fame support this evolution and transformation of any individual into a brand / product.

- The phenomenon and dynamics of media fame express the nature of the media. These are creators of a virtual reality and synthesisers of actual reality: they therefore work with reality and fiction, with the risk of confusing these often (the tendency to convert famous people into "media saints" equivalent to a commercial brand is a good example of this), particularly when actual reality is used for a commercial purpose. The "forgotten" social function of the media seems evident.

- This media approach (similar to that of a religion in which celebrities are the new "saints" or icons) affects democracy. Are we moving towards a media democracy (Meyer)? In my opinion, this does not seem to be the case, due to the current structure of communication groups and their tendency to concentrate both finance and decision-making powers. Neither is the Internet any guarantee against sociological or hierarchical processes emerging that are similar to those we have seen in other historical eras.

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