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## **Notes on a research project.**

### **How is inequality represented in Argentinean Media?**

María Graciela Rodríguez

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## **Notes on a research project. How is inequality represented in Argentinean Media?<sup>1</sup>**

María Graciela Rodríguez<sup>2</sup>

In this presentation I will introduce some findings of a research run by our team in Buenos Aires. The main aim of the research is exploring how Argentinean media has represented “otherness” in the last 20 years.

Methodologically the research is projected in three dimensions: textual analysis; ethnographic fieldwork;<sup>3</sup> and a final putting together of both outcomes. Many of the ethnographic studies are already done and many of them are still in progress. So, in this presentation I will put forward some findings drawn by the media representation analysis hoping to have the opportunity of presenting most advanced results in the future.

The whole research is based actually in two projects: one supported with funds by the Buenos Aires University (UBA), and the second one located in San Martín University (UNSAM) without funds.<sup>4</sup> Both undergraduate and Post-graduate students participate in the research teams. Besides, the two projects are very similar; however UNSAM’s research involves ethnographic fieldwork because the courses given there are Sociology and Anthropology, while at the UBA the course is on Communications.

### **Starting points**

As it has been said, one of the main focuses of the present research is media representation. In the research framework representations are understood, with Raymond

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<sup>1</sup> I’m very grateful to Philip Schlesinger, and in his name to the whole staff of the CCPR, for inviting me to give this Seminar in the frame of a Thalmann scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> Universidad de Buenos Aires (UBA). Professor (Adjunta). Undergraduate Course: Popular Culture and Mass Culture (Cultura Popular y Cultura Masiva). Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM). Professor (Asociada). Coordinator of the Master in Sociology of Culture (Sociología de la Cultura). Postgraduate Course: Popular Cultures (Culturas Populares). Undergraduate Course: Society, Culture and Power (Sociedad, Cultura y Poder).

<sup>3</sup> The fieldworks are undertaken with the same object-groups of those taken for the media representation analysis although it is not being easy to delimitate the analysis unit. We prefer doing fieldwork rather than focus groups for two related reasons: the first one is simply factual: focus groups need high funds to be run, funds that the local scientific organisms are reluctant to give; the second is theoretically grounded in the kind of questions that guide our research. In simple words, our interest is not how the actual programmes are interpreted by a specific consumers’ group but to assess the interface between media discourses and the everyday life interactions with institutions and with other groups.

<sup>4</sup> UBA research: “Contemporary forms of inequality legitimization. Subaltern’s images in the media” (Formas contemporáneas de legitimación de la desigualdad. Imágenes de la subalternidad en los medios de comunicación); UNSAM research: “Images and experiences of subaltern. Contemporary forms of inequality legitimization” (Imágenes y experiencias de la subalternidad. Formas contemporáneas de legitimación de la desigualdad).

Williams, not as reflections of reality but as productive forms having an active role in shaping society.

Our interest is, then, not to unravel the range of distortion between “reality” and representation, but to assess their productive capacity for delivering public versions of how a society imagines its own social relations (Grimson, 2011; Segato, 2007).

Headed by this interest, we have built a media corpus running from 1989 to 2009 which gathers television docu-drama and journalistic documentaries<sup>5</sup>; and graphic journalism. Urban chronicles and fictional films have been recently incorporated as well.

The period 1989-2009 has been chosen due to the media scenario that was drawn by the legal frame shaping media activity between those years.

The starting point is **1989** because that year the article 45 of the Law 22.285 - sanctioned in 1980 during the last dictatorship- was modified allowing economic media concentration (print and electronic ownership). The end point is **2009** when a new democratic law regulating audiovisual communication services in Argentina was sanctioned.<sup>6</sup>

Simultaneously, during these years Argentina, and in Latin America in general, was faced by appalling changes in the economic and social conditions. The rates of poverty, indigence, unemployment and under-employment increased dramatically between these two decades. It was not until 2003 that social conditions have begun to slowly being improved in Argentina. However, the media scenario is still exerting its impact on the cultural context and there are two reasons for that: on one hand, as Mastrini (2005) has pointed out, these years have witnessed an increasingly hyper commercialisation of the contents together with a carelessness for public interest; on the other hand, the application of the new law is being delayed by economic pressure groups, particularly the owners of the biggest multi-media.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> This sort of programmes intend to “show the reality” through a combination of information, fiction and entertainment (Vilches, 1995). In between documentary and fiction, this *neo-journalism* (Ciamberlani, 1997) is based on two main features: the *reading contract* (Verón, 1987) and the built-up realistic representations (Palma, 2008). This sort of formats use realistic conventions which main features are, following MacCabe (1981), the pretension of transparency and the framing of a meta-language that conceals authorship and enunciation position producing the intended effect of naturalisation.

<sup>6</sup> Law 26.522, called “Ley de Servicios de Comunicación Audiovisual” (*Audiovisual Communication Services*). It draws limits to economic concentration and designs the administration of licenses considering quotas to non lucrative organizations. Along with the new law it was created a Bank of Audiovisual Productions (BACUA) and Discrimination on Radio & TV Observatory (*Observatorio de la Discriminación en Radio y Televisión*) aiming to do a systematic visualization of the contents in order to assess if they reinforce stereotypes leading to discrimination and fall into the concepts of *media violence* or *symbolic violence* (Law N° 26.485 known as Integral Protection, devoted to prevent, sanction and eradicate violence against women in any field in which they carry out interpersonal relations; and Law N° 23.592 named Discriminatory Acts sanctioned in 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Many media companies merged in 1989 thanks to the modification of the article 45 of the dictatorship’s law. One of the most important merging was the popular and mass newspaper, *Clarín*, with the largest TV cable company, the both high rated TV Chanel 13 and Radio Mitre, and hundreds of relay TV and radio stations across the country. The *Clarín* Group became thus a main political and economical actor who has been resisting the application of the new law (26.522) and trying to influence the public against it since 2009. The group is also accused of have illegally acquired the majority of shares of

The combination of the poorer social conditions and the briefly described media scenario through 20 years, have provoked a progressively increasing visibility of the “others” staged as media spectacle. Processed by hyper commercial media logic, the “others” were shown either as exotic or as dangerous subjects as well.

Having put forward the political, law, cultural and social context, the starting questions that addressed the research were: how media represent *subaltern*<sup>8</sup> people / groups? Is inequality being reproduced / contested / re-elaborated by media? Could present media “give voice” to political claims? And if that’s the case, to what extent they could? Other questions which are framing our next steps are: how important is the own strength and political organization of the groups in this process? And do the new laws change how media represents them?<sup>9</sup>

Three groups / subjects were selected for presenting the results here:<sup>10</sup>

1. Regional migrants. Basically Bolivian, Paraguayan and Peruvian citizens (Andes and Amazonian ethnic groups).

2. Young / adolescent drugs’ consumers. Two sub-groups were found: lower class children and adolescents inhaling glue or taking “paco” (cocaine paste) and dwelling the streets and public spaces; and media and upper class adolescents taking ecstasy and other designer drugs in private parties (like Scream Fields).

3. Sexual / gender politically organized groups. We focused particularly in the last four LGTB Proud Parades that occurs every October 31<sup>st</sup>. The LGTB movement is strongly organised and even internally biased by political ideologies.<sup>11</sup>

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“Papel Prensa” (the monopolistic factory of paper for the press) during the last dictatorship including the kidnapping of one of the former owners and threatens on the life of his wife and daughter. The present owner of the group is suspected to have misappropriated a daughter and a son of a couple of “desaparecidos” in the ’80.

<sup>8</sup> Just for setting a common ground, in this presentation I will use “subaltern” in the simplified definition of “asymmetrically positioned groups / subjects”. We are very well aware of the complexity of the gramscian word “subaltern” and because of that the use of the concept itself is being discussed within the research team. However, we haven’t found any reason for not going on using it until now.

<sup>9</sup> (1) Ley de Migraciones (Immigration law) 25.871. May 2010. This law guarantees equal access for migrants and their families to protection and rights (public services, health, justice, education jobs, social security) as national citizens. These rights cannot be denied to any non-national person. (2) Ley de Menores (Minority Law) 26061. October 2005. As subjects of right, children and adolescents have the right to dignity and personal integrity, and to be subjected neither to violent, discriminatory or humiliating treatment, nor to economical or sexual exploitation, torture, abuse, traffic, or any cruel or denigration condition. (3) Ley de Matrimonio Civil (Civil Marriage Law) known as Egalitarian Marriage law (Matrimonio igualitario) 26.618, modification by the decree 1054. 2010. The marriage will have the same requisites and effects no matter the sex of the contracting parties. (4) Ley de identidad de género (Gender Identity Law) 26.743. July 2012. It allows rectifying sex, image and first name registered in documents when they don’t match the auto-perceived gender identity of a person.

<sup>10</sup> Other groups being studied are young women; indigenous groups; urban Chinese community.

## Inductive perspective & First Findings

- ▶ From observation to recollection of data
- ▶ From recollection of data to group discussions
- ▶ Group discussions devoted to:
  - comparing the observed issues
  - discussing if through comparison it is possible to find similar / contrasting issues
  - discussing if the findings could match any theory, specifically representation theory (Hall grounded, see 2010) and inequality theory (based on Tilly, 2000 and Reygadas, 2008).

Our first hypothesis is that media representations articulate difference and inequality in different ways and displace political issues by various modalities. It might depend on the political strength of each groups / subjects and this is a hypothesis to be tested as well.

What can be said until the moment is that in the context of 20 years of media concentration, inequality is concealed, in Argentinean media, through cultural difference. In other words, Argentinean media tends to over-represent cultural differences and under-represents class division leading to social inequality. In doing that, media representation also “produces” spatial segregation, particularly in Buenos Aires city. As Latin America is the most unequal region in the world, Argentinean media contribute to reproduce unequal social conditions.

This could be more dramatically seen in the street kids and migrant persons, although the latter are differently represented when showing their “culture”. In the case of sexual / gender political groups media representations only take notice of the festive moment dismissing the claims actions.

What have we seen?

The reconstruction of the analysis process presents five issues:

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<sup>11</sup> For instance the organization called “Putos Peronistas”, a group based on Peronism Party which also marks, from its very name (“putos”), a cultural and social difference. “Puto” means male homosexual but it’s a bad word used as an insult. They say: “we’re not gay: we’re putos”.

- ▶ Spaces / territories
- ▶ Exoticism / uses of “culture”
- ▶ Scenarios & colours
- ▶ The shown & the hidden
- ▶ Diversity & colourful images

## A. Spatiality (spaces / territories)

### Regional migrants



“Two worlds”, “Struggle between former Sendero Luminoso guerrilla fighters for drug control in the Capital”. *Clarín*, October, 29, 2006. (“Dos mundos”, “Pelea entre ex guerrilleros de Sendero Luminoso por el control de la droga en la Capital”, *Clarín*, 29 de octubre de 2006).

The 1-11-14 slums is not only one of the biggest “villa miseria” of Buenos Aires. It spreads horizontally and also grows vertically (some houses reaching four floors). Many regional migrants ended up living there.

The visual perspective of the picture depicts a slum “foregrounding over the city”: the slum is at the front of the page connoting danger, closeness and expansion; skyscrapers and other buildings at the back are metaphorically being invaded.

Graphically, in the page surface, the 1-11-14 villa miseria is at the bottom while “the city” is on the top thus representing the social hierarchy.

This visual device reinforces social frontiers.

Another way of representing spatial segregation is straight by maps of the city.



*La Liga*, “Discrimination”, Telefé (*La Liga*, “Discriminación”, Telefé).



There are also humorous pieces which stress the spatial segregation depicted in those maps. “GPSS” is a parody performed by Diego Capusotto, a popular comedian, in which a very racist character sells on TV a “new” GPS called GPSS (SS referring to the police corps of Hitler). The main feature of this “new” GPS is that it shows / warns the driver when entering a migrant, and because of that, dangerous zone.

For instance, the GPSS shows the symbol of a chipá seller ahead (chipá is a typical Paraguayan food and is sold in some streets of Buenos Aires); or warns the driver “A house occupied by immigrants, turn left”; or “Danger: young people from a bordering country!”

The final words of the salesman are: “So that you can live like in Europe without knowing you’re in Latin America!”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Ov5AQEhO5Q>

## **B. Exoticism / uses of “culture”**



## CELEBRATION

PRAYERS AND PROCESSIONS

FOOD

DANCING

ALCOHOL

“I’d like you taste a typical Bolivian sauce”.

*La Liga*, “Gasol fun” (Low-budget fun), Telefé (*La Liga*, “Diversión gasolera”, Telefé).

Culture: for the media, regional migrants’ culture is a repertoire (prayers, processions, food, dancing, alcohol). No political requests are involved, although they usually claim their rights, even during interviews they try to insert claims which are totally ignored by the reporters.

### C. Scenarios & colours

#### Drug consumers I

In the last two decades new types of drugs has spread in many cities of Argentina. Particularly relevant due to its harmful effects is Paco, a mixture made with cocaine waste processed with sulphur acid and kerosene, also called “brain robber”. It’s a very toxic drug and its effects are very short (between 10 and 15 minutes) and because of that it’s an extremely addictive substance. Due to its low price and the easy ways for obtaining in the streets the Paco has spread specially among the poorest social sectors.

Designer drugs have also landed in Argentina though associated with young people on nights-out. These not-so low prices drugs are specially consumed in private mass parties like Scream Fields which audience is middle and upper classes young persons.



The first consumers, those of Paco and Poxiran, are called “Kids of the street” / “street children” by the television discourse instead of “kid in a situation of street” as sociology recommends. The second ones are simply named “young people” or more plainly “youth” thus placing these kids as a metonymy for non-adults.

Given that, how does TV construct the scenarios while representing one or the other consumption activity?

The stages drawn when television represents what they call “children of the streets” are built in train and subway stations, public squares, perhaps abandoned factories and warehouses but in any case de-institutionalised environments (no schooling, no home, no family bonds, no indoors).



*Telenueve (2° edición) 04/05/06*

Another interesting feature is that the main colours used are sepia, brown or grey. And even the grey could merely blur to black and white.



The third interesting element shown in the images of Poxi-boys and Paco-boys is that are mostly close-ups of the bags and of the pipes.





All in all, these practices are strongly disapproved by television discourse and even more by associating them with prostitution or theft due to the needs of obtaining more drugs. Interesting is the uses of animal metaphors to anchor the meaning of some images. The most exemplary being one shot taken from above in which a bunch of kids are seen coming out of “nowhere” the moment a red light traffic made a car stop. The situation is at night in a centrally located street of Buenos Aires. In a few seconds the kids gather round the car and then go away leaving the car alone. The footer only says: “Piranhas”.<sup>12</sup>

## **Drug consumers II**

On the other hand, designer drugs’ consumers are set in very different scenarios driven to depicting the “youth” having fun. The visual construction is based on general views with no close-ups and multi-chromatic images.



Drug consumers are located in indoors scenarios of parties and dancing and the verbal information delivers connotations of fun, extreme happiness and, at the most, advices of drinking loads of still water. Not “kids” but young people (“jóvenes”) are thus protected from possible weekend excesses. The only close-ups given are of bottles of still water.

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<sup>12</sup> See further in Álvarez (2010).

The outlook set by television representations seem to be that of a middle-class minded person who takes for granted that designer drugs consumption is a part of the everyday life of “youth” and youth being a naturalised whole.

Although both (paco and designer drug) are the same –prohibited- practice done by the same range of non-adults persons, media representations are indulgent with one and relentlessly opposed to the other. One is even celebrated while the other is condemned.

<b>Paco and Poxi consumption</b>	<b>Design drug consumption</b>
Outdoors settings	Indoors settings
Street contexts	Party contexts
Sepia or brown colours	Bright colours
Street kids (“chicos de la calle”)	Youth (“jóvenes”)
Close-ups on faces and hands	No close-ups faces
Individual practices	Collective practices
Disapproval	Paternalism

#### **D. The shown & the hidden**

##### **LGTB groups: the political action in two-steps**



1. Plaza de Mayo: The festival



2. Plaza de los dos congresos: The political demonstration

The particularity of this movement is that they organised the parade in two moments, defined not only by two different spaces but also by different actions. We call this tandem the “Two squares” movement. Firstly, a Festival in Plaza de Mayo (the most important historical square) is held in the afternoon. A kind of fair is organised there, with memento stands, music

and the actual parade of disguised persons. Fancy dress, merry attitudes, provocative disguises can be seen in the Plaza de Mayo while music sounds. Secondly, they walk -against the traffic- along the road about 10 blocks to the Plaza de los dos Congresos, which the Parliament is.

While the first moment implies a funny and merry action the second one is addressed to put forward the community claims and requests. In the second moment, while the group marches to Plaza de los dos Congresos, fancy dress and festival attitudes are left behind yet not hidden at all. Anyway the media seem not to be interested in political action.

Two “plazas” (squares) I.

What is the focus of TV in the Plaza de Mayo festival?

Media journalism selects both provocative and shocking pictures to illustrate the coverage of the Plaza de Mayo festival.



Regarding the TV parade coverage the television discourse is the less principled one. The news programmes takes the coverage of the parade as a way for putting forward a biased set constructed on sexism and dirty words.



“I’m a dyke girl, eh”



“I’m a girl and she is a boy”



“Hairy and stowaways”

Argentinos por su nombre, “La marcha del orgullo gay”, Canal 13 (“Argentineans by their name, “The Gay Proud Parade”, Chanel 13)

Interestingly enough the captions show the participant’s sayings as a strategy of posting “transparency” and objective coverage.

Two “plazas” (squares) II: images of Plaza de los dos congresos political manifestation



As have already been said every year LGTB groups walk against the traffic heading to the square where the Parliament is to manifest their claims. For these groups the political action implies both moments: the festival and the walking. Both are, from their perspective, equally important to express themselves because both, fun and claims, take part of their identities.

Many political parties’ leaders, though not necessarily being a LGTB’s member, accompany the second moment of the walking. However, when this moment takes place, media have already gone from the place. Speeches seem not to be attractive. The images shown above have not taken from commercial media but from LGTB blogs.

Plaza de Mayo	Plaza de los dos congresos
Festival	Political manifestation
Exoticism	Speeches
Lavishly shown on media	Not shown on Media

### E. Diversity and colourfulness

#### Regional Migrants



“Bolivia in Buenos Aires”, Clarín online, October 16, 2009 (“Bolivia en Buenos Aires”, Clarín Digital, 16 de octubre de 2009).



Headlines: “Folklore. The Altiplano colourfulness was taken to the porteño downtown by the red, green and golden tones”, “Andian festival in Mayo Avenue”. Clarín, October 18, 2009 (“Folclore. Tonos rojos, amarillos, verdes y dorados llevaron al centro porteño el colorido del altiplano”, “Fiesta andina en la Avenida de Mayo”, Clarín, 18 de octubre de 2009).

Drug consumers



Proud Parade



Argentinos por su nombre, “La marcha del orgullo gay”, Canal 13. (Argentineans by their name, “The Gay Proud Parade”, Chanel 13).

Images are eloquent (“they speak for themselves”, as we usually say). The same colours are used by media in representing the three cases as long as they are in party or celebration situations. Even more interesting in the sharing of colours is that the same colours are used, as it can be seen in the last picture. It must be said that the flag of LGTB movements and the flag of the Bolivia pluri-national state are both composed with the same

seven colours. However, this is a tricky commentary because it could lead to make room for a kind of “realistic” argument. Bluntly, it could be said that media put on stage the colours of the symbols used by these groups rather than using these colours to produce the “effect” of connotation of party. This implies a counter-argument namely that leading to a refusal of the artificial character of media representations. But this is not true. Firstly, the Bolivian flag is scarcely shown in news coverage; secondly, the same colours are used in representing design drugs’ consumptions for enhancing the “party” atmosphere.

So, what can surely be said is that when media intend to represent happiness and party situations they use more or less the same colour. That is very clear in the case of sex / gendered political groups; it works in more subtle ways when showing migrants streets demonstrations; and in even more subtle ways for the design drugs’ consumers. And also it is interesting to note that in the latter the set of colours is inextricably linked to a comparison with paco and poxiran’s consumers shown in brown, sepia, grey or black and white coloured images.

What is undoubtedly true is that in all the cases colourfulness is used to connote “party”, “joy” and “happiness”; while brown, grey, sepia and black and white images are selected to signify gritty and poor surroundings.

## Conclusions

Between 1989 and 2009 the media scenario exhibited the following features, briefly resumed: strong economic convergence of media ownerships; increasing hyper commercialisation of the contents; carelessness of the public interest; weakening of the regulatory role of the state; concentration of monopolistic “voices”.

Simultaneously social conditions had dramatically worsened: poverty, even indigence, unemployment and under-employment rose to unexpected rates, particularly from the last years of 1990 to 2003 / 2004.

Although social conditions have begun to improve overall in the last years, the combination of the mentioned media scenario and the falling of standard social conditions brought about the media visibility of some “otherness” almost unseen on Argentinean media until that moment: street windshields cleaners; informal parking attendants; “cartoneros” (cardboard lifters); homeless children; drug consumers; sex and gender diversity groups; regional migrants; etc.



In that context we set out to explore media representations focusing on television doc-fiction and journalistic documentaries; and in print journalism, of several groups, three of which have been drawn attention in this presentation: regional migrants; drugs' consumers, and sexual / gender politically organized groups.

I've put forward some details highlighting some main findings. Overall, they suggest that, although there is a general biased setting in the representations of the three groups, there are also differences among them.

- Spaces: both for migrants and for drug consumers, the representations of the are driven to underline what are commonly considered “dangerous” neighbourhoods in the city. However, while in the example of paco and poxiran's consumers the places serve as staging for showing the main characters of a story, in the case of regional migrants the space is used to mark a map of dangerous zones.
- The shown and the hidden: both in the case of regional migrants as in the sexual / gendered groups, one thing that is concealed are the political claims. Even though, media do that in different ways: by over-representing “culture” –as a repertoire of exotic practices and / or goods- in the example of migrants, and by literally ignoring the claims in the second case.
- Interestingly, the media representations of the three cases share the use of colours (and even more interesting the same colours) for enhancing the “party” atmosphere: clearly in the case of migrants' streets demonstrations; in more subtle ways when showing sex / gendered political groups; and in even more subtle ways for the design drugs' consumers. And also in the latter the setting of colours are inextricably linked to a comparison with paco and poxiran's consumers. What it's undoubtedly true in all the cases is that colourfulness is used to connoting “party”, “joy” and “happiness”; while browns, greys and black and white images are selected to signify gritty and poor surroundings.

Surely there is more to say about the research. In many ways the research itself is in-progress, every day hosting new empirical cases to feed the whole goal. Nevertheless my aim today has been to bring out some specific cases that show how some asymmetrically positioned groups / subjects are represented by Argentinean media. As could be seen, although the analysis mainly draws on semiotics it has been also put in the economic and

regulatory context that frames media activity. We state that in this specific context media representations of the groups mentioned work on the basis of a biased common sense that overall serves to legitimize inequality rather than contest it.

Exploring the way Argentinean media contribute to the legitimization of inequality is a task that needs more than a textual analysis. It needs also to highlight the local history of regulatory frames, the comings and goings of local media as interested actors in the political and economic realm, and the ways that all this shapes or at least fosters the production of specific representations. So, neither textual analysis in itself nor political-economic media studies alone could take it all in. On the contrary, we are persuaded that not only it's possible to reconcile the tensions between political economic and cultural studies approaches but it's also necessary.

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