Original article

Media representations of environmental issues: From scientific to political discourse

Représentation des questions environnementales par les médias : du discours scientifique au discours politique

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction. – The media is considered to be a social agent that intervenes in the elaboration of social representations of environmental issues.
Objective. – This research analyses media representations of environmental issues and how they have been constructed and transformed from the Rio Summit in 1992 to 2006. The authors adopted a constructionist approach based on the theory of social representations (Moscovici, 1961/1976) to describe the generation of information by the mass media.
Method. – A sample of 1039 news articles from two Spanish newspapers (*La Vanguardia* and *El País*) was analysed. The period of study ranged from the Rio Earth Summit to several years after the Johannesburg Summit (1992–2006), and the study analyses both the content and form of the environmental news.
Results. – This longitudinal study shows not only an increase in environmental news during the period of analysis but also an increased variety of themes addressed and represented. The results evidence significant urban problems in recent years. The environment has shifted from being associated with nature to being predominately associated with the urban environment.
Conclusion. – The results suggest that there has been a movement from scientific to political discourse and a change towards greater reflection and social recognition of the relevance of environmental issues.

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R É S U M É

Introduction. – Les médias sont considérés comme un agent social qui intervient dans l'élaboration des représentations sociales des problèmes environnementaux.
Objectif. – Cette recherche analyse les représentations des questions environnementales dans les *mass media* et la façon dont ils ont été construits et transformés à partir du Sommet de Rio en 1992 jusqu'à 2006. Les auteurs ont utilisé une approche constructiviste fondée sur la théorie des représentations sociales (Moscovici, 1961/1976) pour décrire les informations que les *mass media* génèrent.
Méthode. – Un échantillon de 1039 articles de presse provenant de deux journaux espagnols (« La Vanguardia » et « El País ») a été analysé. La période d'étude, qui commence du Sommet de la Terre de Rio jusqu'au Sommet de Johannesburg (1992–2006), traite du fond et de la forme des sujets sur l'environnement.
Résultats. – L'étude longitudinale montre non seulement une augmentation du nombre d'articles de presse sur les questions environnementales au fil des ans, mais aussi une variation dans les sujets qui sont abordés et représentés. Les résultats montrent également une présence significative des problèmes urbains lors des dernières années. Précédemment lié à la nature, lénvironnement est maintenant associé à l'environnement urbain.

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Conclusions. – L'analyse montre le passage d'un discours scientifique vers un discours politique, un changement vers une grande réflexion et une reconnaissance sociale de la pertinence des questions environnementales.

1. Introduction

Currently, the environment is one of the most important issues for certain segments of the population. This fact is highlighted not only by the increasing amount of information regarding environmental issues given to the general public by the media (Gooch, 1996) but also by the growth in environmental organisations and the presence of environmental issues on international political agendas (Uzzell, 2000). In the existing literature on perceptions of global environmental problems, the consensus affirms that such problems are largely viewed as abstract and are subsequently difficult to comprehend on a personal level (Bonnes, Bonaiuto, Metastasio, Aiello, & Sensales, 1997; Pawlik, 1991). In fact, people depend on information that is essentially distributed through the media, such as through newspapers, television and radio, and the information that reaches the public is largely a constructed, media-based reality (Cabecinhas, Lázaro, & Carvalho, 2008; Hansen, 1991; Humphrys & Williams, 2005).

The influence of the mass media partly rests on its role as an intermediary actor between scientists and society. The media contributes to rendering science common sense as ideas pass from the world of scientists into broader society via the media's translation of scientific jargon into common language (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; Billig, 1993, 2008; Jovchelovitch, 2008; Moscovici, 1961/1976). Some authors attribute to the media a crucial responsibility in this role as long as "science is reconstructed and not merely mirrored in the media" (Carvalho, 2007; p. 223). Uzzell (2000) further clarifies this point: "By selecting, interpreting and emphasizing particular events, and by publishing people's reactions to those events, the mass media play a critical role in structuring and defining reality and the crucial issues of the day" (p. 307).

Understanding the media to be a social agent that intervenes in the process of elaborating social representations (Ibáñez, 1988; Rouquette, 1996; Sommer, 1998), we can now establish the general objective of this article: to analyse social representations of environmental issues that are present in newspapers. This research begins with the assumption that reality is not singular, all-encompassing and objective but is actually a socially constructed reality in which the mass media plays a fundamental role. Following the classification of Wagner (1998), this study has adopted a strong version of the social constructionist perspective. Our goal is to describe what this representation is, not merely in terms of a product or the elements that configure and characterise it but also in terms of the process or the manner in which this representation has been formed and transformed over time.

The article begins with an overview of social representation theory and summaries the reasons that this theory is relevant to the study of social representations of environmental issues in the media. The article then provides a brief literature review on this topic, emphasising the small number of longitudinal studies and the diversity of the variables analysed and approaches employed. Next, we present the methodology of the study, first by introducing the procedure that we followed to collect the data and then by discussing the variables and statistical analysis. Finally, the main results derived from the study are presented and discussed, and the article closes with the conclusions.

2. Theoretical background

The theory of social representation (TSR) (Moscovici, 1961/1976) proposes that individuals' knowledge of different social objects is developed through and as a result of social processes. The TSR emphasises the role of communication in forming social representations (SRs) and considers both interpersonal and mediated communication. Indeed, Moscovici developed the TSR from his study of the diffusion of the psychoanalysis concept among the French press in the 1960s. The theory emphasises that the mass media plays a key role that may be nuanced and/or reinforced by visual aids that accompany the written information (Moscovici, 2000; Sommer, 1998).

SRs are formed by the combined effect of two processes: objectification and anchoring (Abric, 1982; Ibáñez, 1988; Jodelet, 2008; Moscovici, 1961/1976). The former refers to the process through which unfamiliar objects or ideas acquire a near concrete reality, whereas the latter refers to integrating a new object into preexisting categories. As clearly explained by Rouquette (1996), objectification is the concretisation of the abstract, and anchoring refers to the incorporation of the new into the already known. We will briefly analyse these two processes to establish their link with the process of selecting and publishing news by the mass media.

According to Jodelet (2008), objectification can be dissected into three phases:

- "information selection", which refers to the selection of specific themes;
- "schematization", which refers to the simplification or ordering of themes;
- the "naturalization", or a projection of representational constructs as concrete entities in the life world. These three phases coincide with what some mass communication scholars have described as the process in which news is constructed: "the enormous volume of news forces three permanent options on journalism: include, exclude and organize content hierarchically. These options allow journalists to create their content, which responds not only to the interests of the public, but also to those of each particular media and various sectors of society" (Fontcuberta, 1998; p. 39).

Based on these arguments, some authors, such as Gomis (1991) and Van Dijk (1988), have claimed that journalism must be understood as an "interpretive method", as what is deemed interesting is chosen first, then interpreted and translated into language that is intelligible to the audience and ultimately explained in a manner in which it can be understood. Therefore, a certain parallelism between the news construction process and the processes of objectification can be observed. Moreover, iconic elements constitute key components in the objectification process: "images help people forge a less abstract vision of the represented object" (Ibáñez, 1988; p. 48).

With regard to the anchoring processes, Ibáñez (1988) noted that their "function consists in integrating information about an object within our thought process. . . more or less opening up established schemes so new information can be integrated" (p. 50). The integration of new information in previous meaning categories is