Building communication policies with a public sense

Andrés Cañizález

As a starting point, we need briefly to address what is understood by public policies and their accompanying processes. Then, we will review specific experiences in the area of public communication policies.

According to Alejandro Oropeza (2008), when the State designs public policies, it seeks one of the following purposes: "a) tackle a public problem; b) satisfy a social need or preference; c) fulfil the purposes of the State; d) abide by a legal mandate, regardless of its hierarchy" (p. 2). The generation of public policies in any area can be caused by one or several of these elements set forth in terms of needs to be addressed, so the State must act.

For this author, there is a combination of factors particular to this process: on the one hand, the fundamentals of political action, summarized in the four items above and the search for social improvement-public utility, which should result in an alternate situation, i.e. change.

The State is not a lone actor in the creation of public policies and its actions do not occur in an empty space. William Dunn considers these policies the result of a process and highlights three components in permanent interaction: a) public policies per se; b) participant actors and/or decision makers, interesting for political results; and c) the political environment (Dunn in Oropeza, 2008: 13.)

As stated by Oropeza (2008), policy systems "are realities with particular characteristics, limits, and dynamics that result from decisionmaking processes with the ability to be recreated in its components" (p. 13.) In other words, when public policies are placed in the context of a process, they must not be seen as static decisions that remain intact over time.

On the contrary, their nature includes daily review and evaluation with the eventual readjustments that result from such analysis. On the other hand, public problems may have different readings and approaches; hence, the same event may be interpreted differently by different actors due to the multiple conceptions about human nature, government, and social opportunities (Dunn in Curcio, 2007: 64.) In connection therewith, public problems and, thus, public policies created in response to them "must be understood as systems;" hence, "they call for a holistic approach and must be treated as a whole". This leads to planning "a feasible government intervention from the legal, financial, administrative, and political point of view" (Curcio, 2007: 64.)

Grindle and Thomas (1991) consider the interaction among the different activities in a public policy creation model to be highly relevant, thus making it dynamic and changing over time. For these authors, this evaluation occurs with particular importance and plays a vital role in the development of the complete process.

On the other hand, recent literature on this subject places public policies in a broad conception of what must be understood as public, thus locating them within a framework of democratic decisionmaking, with consultations, handling dissent, and building social consensus.

This generation of public policies should have the participation of the involved sectors (Meentzen, 2007: 30) and even go further "because they were conceived from the logic of their integration with established social practices and their own cultural traditions" (Segal, 2006: 15.) To close this point, it would be naïve to consider that decisions on public policies only occur in socio-political contexts of broad and free deliberation. On the contrary, Latin American and Venezuelan history show a long record of arbitrary official decisions with broad impact in citizen life. Lindblom (1997) provides several examples on the forced acceptance of Stateissued policies appealing

to terror, authoritarianism, and/or imposition of "a government from the majority" (p. 241.)

Public communication policies from Latin America

In the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America, the promotion of National Communication Policies (PNC, for its Spanish initials, which was the name given to public communication policies in the region) became evident. In this period, different regional or national initiatives flourished, aiming to establish regulatory frameworks for the media sector, generate stateowned media, and promote communication for social development both in the urban and rural sectors, among other goals. International organizations, high level government officials, and academia agreed on the need to implement them.

For some years, when governments more oriented towards the market and the decrease of State participation prevailed in Latin America, the subject of public communication policies disappeared from the discussion agenda. In the 21st century, with the rise of highly populistic governments that question the role of the media, the debate on the nature of public communication policies has resurfaced. Therefore, it is critical to refer to the LatinAmerican tradition on the subject and enrich it with the democratic development which, though uneven, has occurred in the region in the last decades.

The idea that the arrival of the globalizing phenomenon and its daytoday insertion in many of the social interaction spaces meant the end of policy and, in consequence, of the State was insistently emphasized particularly in the 1990s. Converted into an ideology, a sole thought, globalization – a historical process – has become globalism, i.e. the imposition of the unification of markets and the reduction to the market of political discrepancies and cultural differences. When these two different scenarios are subordinated to a single vision of the economy, the political aspect distorts and the State seems almost unnecessary (García Canclini, 1999: 50.)

A promotion of the communicational aspect accompanied this process, both in corporate and global terms. Great corporate mergers took place with implications for different countries' economies, as well as the more common transnational diffusion of symbolic productions and the frequent use of localproduction "franchises", e.g. television, in addition to clear orientations about what countries should or should not do. From our perspective, actions have always remained political throughout this process, as both financial transactions and media diffusion imply political constructions because they are ways to intervene in the public sphere, in society. As stated by Martín-Barbero (2001), communication is not merely an object for a policy, it is a vital scenario for politics to find a space for symbolic development, as the media are vehicles to represent links between citizens.

The media have become vital to the configuration of public space and citizenship per se. It is crucial to point out that this phenomenon is not new, but it is intense and substantial both for the importance the media now have to gravitate towards defining public agendas and to establish the legitimacy of a given debate (León, 2002: 2.)

Given their significance in social life, the lack of fairly designed public policies in a space of relationship that has transformed our way of understanding politics would be incomprehensible from the State and citizen perspective. Meanwhile, in societies like Venezuela, these policies are required in order to build the State due to the significant social gaps also expressed in access to new information technologies.

Additionally, there are deficiencies in the legal framework, which could provide tools to exercise citizenship in cultural and communicational interaction. The building of such a State that facilitates and promotes citizen participation precisely results from politicaldemocratic activities. The idea is to insert the plurality and diversity that coexist at the social and media levels into Stateissued public policies.

In the past, National Communication Policies (PNCs) were harshly criticized by the private companies in the area and, in many cases, evidenced contradictions in the official sector due to a lack of political will and a lack of administrative

coordination in the structures of our States. Today, faced again with the need for public policies in the communication arena, it is vital to make a critical analysis of PNCs. As we have been faced with the need for a new point of view to analyse cultural processes from cultural industries, we also need new approaches to avoid repeating past errors and make room for the new realities of the present.

Three decades ago, Peter Schenkel (1981), who was then dedicated to studying this matter, pointed to the difficulty in defining a public policy in the communication field, particularly because communication is present in all areas: "It is equally in agriculture, in industry, as well as in all levels: in the executive, legislative, global, and local spheres, and it is expressed at the collective and individual level." The same author appeals to what is considered the classic definition contributed by Bolivian Luis Ramiro Beltrán, which defines PNCs as "an integrated, explicit, and longlasting set of communication policies harmonized in a coherent body of principles and regulations aimed at leading the behaviour of specialized institutions in handling the general communicative process in a country."

According to this perspective, PNCs are a sort of master guide of public policies, which should give rise to another set of plans, actions, and strategies. Authors in the 1970s prioritized the need to plan in order to "organize the communication system according to society's most important needs" (Schenkel, 1981:16.) The book "Planificación y Comunicación" by Bordenave and Carvalho in 1978 includes a sample of this orientation.

By way of conclusion: Return to Martín-Barbero

From our perspective, it is vital to review critically the LatinAmerican debate about public communication policies in previous decades, particularly because some governments in the region, including Venezuela, are currently appealing to – and in some ways distorting – concepts and proposals presented then without considering the different historical and political contexts. An article pub-

lished by Jesús Martín-Barbero (2001) will be particularly significant in this task, as it will function as our guide for the brief but necessary review of these policies considering current social dynamics.

To a large extent, in the experiences of generating public communication policies in Latin America, governments and specialists (from the official sphere as well as from academia and international networks, such as UNESCO) agreed. Although in a broader sense the proposals were aimed at guaranteeing the rights of the majorities in their relationship with the media, in practice governments identified this dynamic with an increased presence of the government in their communication space. These goals worked simultaneously and evidently weakened the objective of the proposals, as the governments were not able to understand that the goal should have been implementing a citizen space, not necessarily official, in the national mass media universe.

This relates to a second restrictive aspect: public communication policies in the 1970s and 1980s were limited to the State, to the government sphere, thus omitting the fact that State-building, for which we have struggled in the past, must start from an inclusive and plural logic. Upon reviewing those experiences, we can conclude that building public policies involves mixing factors such as State, citizens, market, institutions, political parties, and daytoday life.

When we analyse the context, the following must be highlighted: These matters should not be left to politicians and entrepreneurs because they involve basic human rights as well as communication and understanding among nations. They imply education as to the shapers of perceptions and the cultural policies where some patrimonies are selected and others excluded, discriminations are transmitted, or appreciation of diversity is promoted (García Canclini, 1999: 55.)

The generation of these proposals in the 1970s and the subsequent debate during the 1980s came from above, on many occasions from the highest hierarchy of the State, and it was believed that good intentions (in theory, guaranteeing citizens' rights) would be enough to generate citizen appropriation. This final aspect was crucial to the

longterm viability of the proposals (which basically remained on paper), particularly considering that PNCs were harshly criticized by private companies in the communication sector.

Finally, public communication policies from decades ago lacked precisely what they criticized. The conception of the national in these proposals went through seeing the nation as one from a cultural standpoint, thus leaving out what was different: otherness; that which also took part of the national despite being different. This vision repeated the cultural homogenization that was precisely and justifiably criticized due to the dominant presence on our screens of American audio-visual productions.

The review of the PNC proposal remains valid today, but when we discuss public policies, we must consider the possibility of inclusive practices where diverse representation is vital to the construction of national culture. In practice, the latter can be guaranteed by different levels of citizen participation in the process of conceiving, designing, and executing plans in the communication sector.

In the current context, a public policy cannot be reduced to guaranteeing diffusion and broadening reception; even though it were composed of messages conceived from different cultural points of view, they would be equally unilateral. For this reason, we agree with Martín-Barbero in stressing the need to pass through the phases of citizen experimentation, appropriation, and invention in the different social scenarios within a dialogue with the communicative universe, before which they have only been recipients up to this point.

This requires communication to be shifted from the media to social mediation and recognition; therefore, these public policies must consider that society includes the State, citizens, market, and political parties, and social movements and organizations. It is not a matter of merely involving institutions, but also of analysing daytoday life (Martín-Barbero, 2001.) ∎

Sources and references

Benedicto, J. (2002.) "La construcción comunicativa del espacio público". In: *Revista Foro,* No. 45. (pp. 27-37.) Bogota: Foro Nacional por Colombia Foundation.

Bisbal, M. (2006.) "El Estado-Comunicador y su especificidad". In: Comunicación: Estudios venezolanos de comunicación. No. 134. (pp. 60-73.) Caracas: Centro Gumilla Foundation.

Blesa, P. (2006.) "Medios de comunicación y democracia: ¿el poder de los medios o los medios al poder?" In: Sphera Pública. No. 6. (pp. 87-186.) Murcia: Universidad Católica San Antonio.

Bordenave, J. y Carvalho, H. (1978.) Planificación y Comunicación. Quito: CIESPAL.

Cañizález, A. (2008.) "Venezuela: El lejano servicio público". In: Albórnoz, M. and Cerbino, M. (Compilers): Comunicación, cultura y política. (pp. 67-78.) Quito: Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales.

Curcio, P. (2007) "Metodología para la evaluación de políticas públicas de salud". In: Politeia. No. 38. (pp. 59-85.) Caracas: Instituto de Estudios Políticos of Universidad Central de Venezuela.

Di Tella, T. (2004.) Diccionario de Ciencias Sociales y Políticas. Buenos Aires: Ariel.

García Canclini, N. (1999.) La Globalización Imaginada. Buenos Aires: Paidós Publishing House.

García Canclini, N. (2001.) "¿Por qué legislar sobre industrias culturales?" In: Nueva Sociedad. No. 175. (pp. 58-69.) Caracas: Nueva Sociedad.

Grindle, M. y Thomas, J. (1991.) Public Choices and Policy Change: The Political Economy of Reform in Developing Countries. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.

Habermas, J. (1981.) Historia y crítica de la opinión pública. Barcelona: Gustavo Gili Publishing House.

Hernández, G. (2007.) "Gubernamental TVES". In: *Comunicación: Estudios venezolanos de comunicación.* No. 139. (pp. 26-31.) Caracas: Centro Gumilla Foundation.

Lindblom, C. (1997.) "Cómo adecuar la política en el análisis de las políticas públicas". In: *Gestión y Política Pública.* Vol. VI, No. 2. (pp. 239-255.) Mexico: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas.

Martín-Barbero, J. (2001.) "De las políticas de comunicación a la reimaginación de las políticas". In: *Nueva Sociedad.* No. 175. (pp. 70-84.) Caracas: Nueva Sociedad.

Meentzen, A. (2007.) "Políticas públicas para los pueblos indígenas en América Latina". Date of access: January 21, 2010, at: http://www.kas.de/wf/doc/kas_11358-544-4-30.pdf

Oropeza, A. (2008.) "Economía de la cultura y proceso político". Unpublished doctorate dissertation. Caracas: Universidad Simón Bolívar.

Roth, A.N. (2009.) *Políticas públicas. Formulación, implementación y evaluación.* Bogota: Ediciones Aurora.

Schenkel, P. (1981.) *Políticas Nacionales de Comunicación.* Quito: CIESPAL.

Segal, A. (2006.) "Experiencias nacionales de políticas de provisión de materiales curriculares". Date of access: January 21, 2010 at: http://www.fundacioncepp.org.ar/pdfdocs/208_Materiales%20Educativos.pdf

Andrés Cañizález. Venezuelan. Doctor in Political Science at the Universidad Simón Bolívar. Researcher at the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello.