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Mass Media and Urban Tribes, Analysis of Their Relations by Stafford Beer's Viable System Model

Lautaro Guerra Genskowsky*, Hector Ricardo Acevedo Almonacid*, Claudio M. Gamero Henríquez*

Abstract
This paper discusses the relations between mass media and urban tribes, by Stafford Beer’s viable system model (VSM). During 1950-2010, the influence of media and advertising over individual decision-making processes has deepened of age range to which have targeted advertising and expanded for Western world, leading the culture diversity, naturally given, toward only one standardized culture prevailing nowadays. In the 1960s they were the women, then the young people during 1970s, and then children in the 1980s and during the 1990s over early childhood, when we learnt to speak (3 years old), achieving brand loyalty among very young children and the brands of products for this age group. From this perspective, urban tribes have taken control of the lives of young people, offering a false freedom, at the moment of choosing “How to be yourself” from options given in the market as a “catalogue of predesigned identities”. A phenomenon is so complex, so it requires a holistic framework able to make explicit its components and relations between them and the relationship with internal and external environment. In particular, the VSM provides a way to analyze communication’s problems thus clarifying: how, when and where, repair and controlling into the organization, identifying strategies to improve decision-making. Given the recursive nature of the VSM, it is possible to navigate within the phenomenon, through different recursions’ levels. It will help to define more assertive and effective policies by health authorities, education and government in general, and also help someone among young people to see themselves inside of a dynamic consumption and thus can leave the domain and enter into a meta-domain, with more wisdom and consciousness.

Keywords
Urban tribes, holistic paradigm, viable system model (VSM), transfer of control, strategy and decision-making

In the context of the knowledge society and with attention to put in the present but seeking in the future, we can make evident: how developing countries in particular and all nations in global view, are exposed and suffering nowadays “a great loss in human capital among our young population” (UNICEF 2011). Facing one complex phenomenon, we must use a new manner to understand it. Thus, with the system as a framework, we can have an explanatory and objective language plus other tools for analysis and organizational diagnosis. In our case we shall use the VSM (viable system model) of Stafford Beer (Beer 1972), because this VSM allows analysing a complex phenomenon that we want to study.

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For Beer, this model has three relevant parts:

1. The operation likes all the human activity’s system capable of self-manage with enough resources to do the activity that gives it sense to be;

2. The metasystem likes the unit of control over operation, i.e., a whole (S1); the coordination (S2); the management’s operation (S3); the development of plans and strategies (S4); and finally the identity of the system (S5). In this system there is a framework used as a base of decision-making process;

3. The environment is where all things are happening now. This has an infinite variety, being the source of all.

They are united by recursive link, giving shape to one distinguishable system, able of self-management and kept doing the operation that gives it sense to be.

These three elements are connected by a special link, which must be a recursive link (Bradford 1987) like an accounting entry into a double-entry bookkeeping. In our case, one recursive link by twice counterpart is the operation with metasystem and with the environment.

The situation that we focus on to apply the model is: “a great loss in human capital among our young population” (UNICEF 2011).

Only in the last 20 years (1990-2010), we have witnessed that how advertising has been directing its efforts toward a public increasingly helpless of resisting the suggestion of advertising, transforming them into the new triggers in purchasing decisions. In the 1960s they were the women, then the young people during 1970s, and then children in the 1980s and during the 1990s over early childhood, when we learnt to speak (3 years old) (Linn 2005), achieving brand loyalty among very young children and the brands of products for this age group. From this perspective, urban tribes (Maffesoli 2004) have taken control of the lives of young people, offering a false freedom, at the moment of choosing “How to be yourself” from options given in the market as a “catalogue of predesigned identities” (Toffler 1998).

The short-term vision and characteristics among adolescents make imperceptible to them, the various strategies of compulsion to consume that the mass media is using on them. Isolated into a vision of short term, the adolescents are prisoners in a system of beliefs (Kuhn 2006) predesigned by advertisers in response to emotional shortcomings and/or psychological present in our society, which beats most strongly among adolescents making them highly dependent on the urban tribe than they belong to.

In summary, through last decades, the media were gaining relevance and control over the population once more young until childhood (Linn 2005). As we need to narrow our scope of analysis, we shall concentrate only over a particular group among youth, some urban tribes, and her inner dynamic. For this we shall do only generalisations about the own dynamic that belongs to some urban tribes, always in general, because of the brevity of this paper.

Our purpose is, through Beer’s VSM, clarifying the relationship between media and the own dynamic to some urban tribes. We start analysing over one generalisation an urban tribe in general.

**EMERGENCE OF THE URBAN TRIBE**

Firstly the urban tribe emerged as a self-organization in biology:

In biological systems self-organisation is a process in which pattern at the global level of a system emerges solely from numerous interactions among the lower-level components of the system. Moreover, the rules specifying interactions among the systems components are executed using only local information, without reference to the global pattern. (Camazine et al. 2003)

Thus any urban tribe start normally self-organized, and really the young people only follow their impulses and the signals advertised by media of course, such as “Follow the yellow road” in *Alice in the marvel’s land*. 
AUTONOMY AND EMPOWERMENT

Then “in ascending the recursions of viable system the context of each autonomous metasystem enlarges and acquires more variety. Where there is a system (operation) and metasystem (control) such as one particular language and one metalanguage” (Beer 1975) (see Figure 1). Hence, based on a variety of laws (Ashby 1971), the autonomy depends on the range of variety, thus the new members or less capable members because of their minor varieties only will do the major number of activities (operations), whilst the most older members or those who have more knowledge and domain over metalanguage, will take leadership’s positions into metasystem controlling over operation whole. Hence who have minor varieties will be into operation and who have more varieties about tribe’s own metalanguage will be in control position into metasystem. Then, although there is autonomy and self-management supported by its members into urban tribe, a variety of laws again separate a domain of meta-domain, resulting in the urban tribe (as a whole), and the operation that’s sub-ordinates to the society (as a whole), and that will be the metasystem over our generalization of urban tribe. For Luhmann, “the elements of a social system are self-producing communications, i.e., communication produces further communications and hence a social system can reproduce itself as long as there is dynamic communication” (Luhmann 1990), and the variety of metalanguage would be the limit and frontier to next recursion’s level.

THE VSM ON ANY MEMBER INSIDE ANY URBAN TRIBE

From this perspective, firstly it emerged self-organized, only with local information and without references to global patterns or higher recursion’s level. The VSM on some members inside some urban tribes is as follows (see Figure 2 and Table 1):

(1) System 1
The operation will do by the new members or less capable members about metalanguage of the tribe;

(2) System 2
The coordination into urban tribe will be for the members with more empathy with the new members, and will coordinate all different activities of the tribe;

(3) System 3
The delivery will do by the leader of tribe, or a small group decision-maker belonging to metasystem and hence with more knowledge about tribe’s metalanguage;

(4) System 4
The development of plans and strategies will be brought by the leader only, always because of more knowledge about metalanguage and trend in the environment;

(5) System 3
The identity will be brought for all members of tribe in continued comparison with trend given by their referents, such as rock-star or other similar referents.

Thus S4 and S5 are connected with the environment acting like a sensor led in co-evolution according to environment changes. This link with a small range of trend’s supplier, must be recursive link, like a double-entry bookkeeping. Hence the urban tribe gives obedience following the rule’s trendy of their tribe, which is delivered by their referents through media. On the other hand, the tribe receives from these suppliers, acceptation and affect.

Until here the urban tribe is autonomous, but beyond their suppliers of trendy content where is another level of recursion and hence of control.

At a global level of recursion and the urban tribe as a whole, we are always doing generalisation on average young people that belong to any urban tribe. At this level of recursion, the self-organization and autonomy constrained by a variety of laws that define the frontiers separating the operation with her metasystem.
This way—self-organization in biology shows its dependence to the referents: “In biological systems..., the rules specifying interactions among the systems components are executed using only local information, without reference to the global pattern” (Camazine et al. 2003).

And about autonomy “in ascending the recursions of viable system the context of each autonomous metasystem enlarges and acquires more variety. Where there is a system (operation) and metasystem (control) such as one particular language and one metalanguage” (Beer 1975), thus a urban tribe, like operation, has minor varieties than the society that finally is who will do the management system or metasystem over these urban tribes. In this way, the urban tribes (S1) will be sub-ordinated to the society, being autonomous until its variety allows it, and then begin dependence of a metasystem, such as society in general.

THE VSM OVER ANY URBAN TRIBE INSIDE SOCIETY

From this perspective, the VSM over some urban tribes inside society is as follows (see Figure 2 and Table 1):

(1) System 1

The operation will be all particular tribe’s activities and enough resources than self-management itself, keeping interchanges with the environment and limited by its variety;

(2) System 2

The coordination is: this system attempts to achieve that tribe’s activities are realised with minor friction on left society, and that the common people accept the different tribe’s fashion and attitudes. Here all different actors such as social workers, parents, government, do coordination through media, by news or social TV programs, even through reality show. Teaching to the public to respect the tribe’s fashion and with this gives stability to the society and acceptance for the tribe’s members;

(3) System 3

The delivery is: in general it is into family where is all structural support for tribe’s member. All spend caused by tribe’s fashion is covered by family’s income. Eventually some tribe’s members could gain some income, achieved the legal way or not legal too;

(4) System 3*

The audit is: this system is comparing the realised result with the expected result or planned. We think that this function occurs when urban tribe’s members re-enforces his/her “doing how it does a tribe’s member”, such as his/her fashion and attitudes based
Figure 2. The Viable System Model (VSM).

Table 1. Description and Details for Each Other Observation Level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VSM level</th>
<th>General description</th>
<th>Urban tribe/members</th>
<th>Media/urban tribe</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>System 1 Operation</td>
<td>The entire collection of interacting operational units</td>
<td>All tribes’ activities do by new members</td>
<td>Media as coordinator between urban tribe and society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System 2 Coordination</td>
<td>The system responsible for stability/resolving conflict between operational units</td>
<td>Someone experimented tribes’ member with more variety and knowledge about metalanguage</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System 3 Delivery</td>
<td>The systems responsible for optimisation/generating synergy between operational units</td>
<td>The tribes’ leader or small decision-makers group</td>
<td>In general the family give all support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System 3* Audit</td>
<td>Controlling and reduce variety to going up information to metasystem level</td>
<td>Tribes’ member, belong to small group decision-making</td>
<td>Social worker, teachers at school, and similar other, who are a bridge between families and public politics of government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System 4 Planning</td>
<td>Future plans and strategies, adaptation to a changing environment</td>
<td>The tribes’ leader only</td>
<td>Because it is next recursion level, will do it the government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>System 5 Identity/Policy</td>
<td>Identity and policy</td>
<td>Agenda setting by media</td>
<td>Agenda setting by media over all actors society’s</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
on his/her referents, such as rock star and any other kinds of them. The solely references of the environment are given by media again. "The cognitive orientation view assumes that human are limited in the amount of incoming information that they can process, and hence form stereotypes as one way to reduce the cognitive burden of dealing with a complex world" (Zanna and Olson 1994);

(5) System 4

Development and planning for long-terms are: the families keep limited by a variety of laws, thus the next level of recursion is managed by a more complex system. The government will do plan about health, education, employ and control over all citizens in general, but in particular in our case’s study on “youth belong to some urban tribe”.

The young individual is perceived as positioned at the centre of a complex system of actors, who all impact on his/her behaviour in positive or negative ways. Thus, the actors most heavily influencing the environment of young people—ranging from parents, teachers, the police and social workers to staff of municipal authorities and national ministries—are activated as partners and target groups of the planned violence prevention measure. (UNICEF 2011)

(6) System 5: Policy

It’s the framework that leads all strategic decisions and the most important is that it has the identity. In our case’s study, the identity (S5) is realised indirectly by media, because media finds all “local information” and “references” for the massive public.

Through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important issues of the day. This ability to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda has come to be called the agenda setting role of the news media. (McCombs 2004)

On this last concept,

The agenda-setting function has multiple components:

1. Media agenda are issues discussed in the media, such as newspapers, television, and radio;
2. Public agenda are issues discussed among members of the public;
3. Policy agenda are issues that policy makers consider important. Such as legislators;
4. Corporate agenda are issues that big corporations consider important.

These four agendas are interrelated. The two basic assumptions that underlie most research on agenda-setting are that the press and the media do not reflect reality, they filter and shape it, and the media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues.¹

CONCLUSIONS

Through VSM it is possible to clarify how media can control a group of persons that share a set of common interest, in this case, the urban tribes. The notion of autonomy related with a variety of laws gives support to separate operation of metasystem, where the operation is sub-ordinated to the metasystem, on the other hand, self-organization in biology helps to explain how these urban tribes emerge and which are dynamic. Thus it is possible to demonstrate the loss human capital among young population because of an agenda-setting. With all, we think that it could be possible to be applied to another places, beyond the young people only.

Note

¹. Wikipedia English, about functions of agenda-setting.

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