

Who says what to whom. Need for a new communication theory

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Abstract

This paper systematizes the milestones in the studies on social communication and journalistic information of the past twenty-five years, during the transfer of (analogical) data transmission to (digital) production of transmedia contents. It reveals epistemological gaps in a context where communication is both private and public, widespread and storable, where a disruption of the usual schemes of measurement, representation and cultural control occur with a connivance of old and new hegemonies. The hypertext contrasts with the mass-mediation, necessary but not enough to understand that anyone with access to the technological production, reproduction and distribution tools is able to provide information, report and communicate. Exploring and describing is used to classify, hardly ever to theorize, define, model and argue. From where? Until when? Is it possible to develop unifying theories of information and communication regardless of the channels or means and, furthermore, legitimize them? The proposal for a new theory of communication is thus: to re-contextualize the contributions to the theory and the information and communication method; to synthesize universal principles and anthropological approaches; to delineate a theory of the causes of communication as a social process by means of categories and heterological and discursive genres; and to define the current mega-concepts of Social and Humanistic Sciences over which a social media theory could be constructed.

Keywords: Communication Theory. Communication epistemology. Languages. Media. Journalism.

Without theory there is no chance for practices to evolve (...)

Armand Mattelart, 2015

From critical theories to the manipulation of theories. Reappearances

Over the past 25 years, studies on social communication and media coverage have moved between dialogisms and autologies; between universalist pretensions and relativism; between theoretical anorexia, reluctance and fetishization of empirical data; between fundamentalisms, fragmentation and pseudo-interdisciplinary; between corporatist stances and assistentialist, expansionist, verticalist, simplifying subjunctive attitudes; between absolutizing or totalizing approaches and singularizing narratives. (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1999).

Precisely when there is a shift from the (analog) transmission of information towards transmedia (digital) content production, a strengthening of the cult to quantity and abstract simultaneity occurs. It is the pornography of information and communication that, for Baudrillard (1994, p.19), “is no longer the obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, obscure, but of what is visible, or more than visible, the obscenity of what is no longer secret.”. It takes place in a context in which communication is both private and public, widespread and storable, and with a disruption of the usual schemes of measurement, representation and cultural control, distinctive of the connivance of old and new hegemonies.

The hypertext –informative structure that organizes contents as a network based on nodes, links and navigation maps, marking the XXI century as the era of hypertextual communication– which contrasts with mass-mediation, needed but insufficient to understand that anyone with access to technological information tools of production, reproduction and distribution can, even without formal college education, inform and communicate. This also generates the ontological distrust of our professionals.

The aim of bi-directionality and analog hermeneutics has had a prescriptive-normative correlation: to explore, diagnose and describe in order to classify¹, a wealth of terms, too thick to designate aspects of knowledge whose epistemological horizons, sometimes still embryonic, are constantly blurred due to the overwhelming advance of technology and society.

They are rarely used to define, model, argue and theorize. From where? Until when? Is it possible to develop unifying theories of communication regardless of the channels or means, and furthermore, legitimize them from academia and praxis?

The dawn of what was defined as meta-discourse and concomitances (HABER GUERRA, 2007), possibly date back 115 years ago when Max Weber suggested a Sociology of Journalism, to delve into the, at the time, already perceived as unlimited functions of the press, which would allow studying the contents of newspapers.

The sociologist Paul Lazarsfeld was also one of its founding fathers, who recognized the General Theory of Information (GTI), in 1944, as the discipline of research on communication.

The disciplines coined by Foucault (1980) as illustrated and responsible for some area of human knowledge –Medicine, Psychology, Law– were neither Information nor Communication.

This proves the even-then failed attempt of Neurath (1973) to create a *universal jargon and a unified science*.

1 A test button. Online journalism; Electronic journalism; Digital journalism; Multimedia journalism; Cyber-journalism; communication in societies techno-integrated with wireless technologies; journalism in the era of blogs and social networks. (HABER GUERRA, 2005; SCOLARI, 2008; ORIHUELA, 2011; PORTO; FLORES, 2012; FACCHINETTI, 2015). Fallen pyramid, reverse horizontal pyramid (CANAVILHAS, 2007; FRANCO, 2008).

GTI has appropriated from the even today succored and resemanticized concept of gatekeeper (LOO VÁSQUEZ et al, 2016): gatekeeper, goalkeeper are terms coined and attributable to Field Theory, which was defined in Social Psychology by Kurt Lewin, also considered as founder of the GTI. Harold Lasswell, a political scientist, Carl Hovland, experimental psychologist, and Wilbur Schramm complete the quartet that baptizes them as scholars of the GTI.

At this point, one of the first and most notorious ruptures appears. Entman (1993, p.52) replaces gatekeeping by framing. “Framing essentially involves selection and salience. Framing means to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communication text, to promote a particular definition of a problem, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and/or a recommendation of how to deal with it.”

The theory of mass society of Kornhauser (1969, p.36-40) dates back to 1959. For this theory, minorities are accessible, and majorities are easily manipulated; and their correlation is mass communication. Mass, referred in this case to both new media and possible mass audiences; in literature its use turned it into one of the most blurred terms used. *Mass communications* became a cultism that, although not fashionable in the 1930s, gained special significance in the 50s of the past century in the form of Mass Communication Research, to answer the following classical questions of Lasswell (*vid supra*): Who says what, in which channel, to whom and with what effect?

Later on, Escarpit (1977, p.82-83 - Our translation) says that mass communication is:

Any form of communication, in which the expressions or statements are publicly provided (that is, without a limited or personally defined reception field), through technical diffusion means (media); indirectly (that is, between the communication partners there is spatial or temporal distance or spatial-temporal distance) and unilaterally (that is, no exchange between the speaker and the recipient) to a dispersed audience (that is, a non-homogeneous group, where the occurring relationships are not always precisely calculable).

On the other hand, public communication refers to: “Any communication that develops in the perceptual field of a third party between the poles of identification and deprivation... *it does not have to be designed or thought of with this third party. It does not have to be directed to him/her.*” (BETH; PROSS, 1989, p.68 – Our marking).

In both cases, the underlined statements belong to the author of this paper to mark another rupture and deduce that hypermedia communication, predominant in the current scenarios of post-media universality, would be neither mass nor public communication.

The spiral of silence (NOËLLE-NEUMANN, 1995), halfway notion, would validate the climate of opinion (space and time as the field concept of Kurt Lewin) on the public opinion of Rousseau. However, public opinion had long before been recognized as inexistent

(HABERMAS, 1981); there are but formed opinions, mobilized, and mobilized pressure groups around a system of interests explicitly formulated, provisions; something that can be discursively formulated with a certain pretense of coherence.²

This assertion has gained unusual strength from the so-called Arab spring, when social networks *on-line* have done nothing but framing, selecting perceived aspects of reality and accentuate them (PÉREZ-FUMERO et al, 2015). In addition to confirming the strength of the new languages, the journalistic tradition of relevance and prominence is reinforced, and the establishment of agendas.³

Minefield or lack of consensus

Our closest intellectual referents, Social and Humanistic Sciences, attached to the gnoseologic subject, have long fought in two apparently opposite directions: the former, for the message (social system), the latter, for the text and discourse (context). Both have ignored that messages are grouped into languages; the dilemma is visible, especially, in some longstanding methodologies such as Analysis of effects and Uses and gratifications, which rest upon Social Sciences; the Cultural Studies in humanistic tradition; the studies of Reception, in both, as well as Discourse Analysis in most of its forms (critical, ideological, cultural).

In the 70s and 80s, the term *reader* was widely used, evoking Cultural Studies, but also the Semiotics and Hermeneutics. When some exponents of Cultural Studies and Reception Analysis endorsed the term *pleasure*, it had already been legitimated by Barthes (1982) as he defended the pleasure of the text. He was ahead of his time when he referred to the text of the reader (BARTHES, 1980), the prosumer Internet surfers; by consuming while informing, they produce texts. He also refers to the user producer, the produser, pragmatically related in new semiotic processes of identity reconfiguration and anamorphosis as verbal and iconic transfiguration of the speaker: “they are people talking to people and creating links with people. They are people talking, listening and answering. Twitter is personal and is a community” (ORIHUELA, 2011, p.78).

To overcome the permeability of the concept of audience (ownership and empowerment of information is not reception) and the taxonomy of Maletzke (1965): interpreter, descrambler, decoder, destination, receiver, recipient, public, communicator, consumer, the role of the enunciator has been recognized (HABER GUERRA, 2010; 2014;

² Pierre Bourdieu, in the conference delivered in Norit, Arras, in January, 1972, and published in *Les temps modernes* of January, 1973, n.318. See, also: Bourdieu (1984).

³ Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw published in 1972 the article: The Agenda-Setting Functions of the Mass media, in which they presented the influence of informative media on the so-called public agenda. According to the authors, the theory of the agenda setting, the media establish what to talk about. The theory has advanced, obviously, overtime, and insists that the media not only decide what to talk about, but what and how to think about certain topics. Nowadays, McCombs advises a doctoral project of the Department of Journalism of Universidad de Oriente (MUÑIZ, 2015).

2015). The recipient of the message that at the same time states and gives sense. In this way, this work follows the ideas of Shannon and Weaver, who, within their *Mathematic Theory of Communication* (1949), emphasize not only on technology itself, as syntactical of information, but also in the semantic question: the meaning and the effectiveness with which information would reach its destination.

The fact that classical theorists of information advocated the active role of the audience is not to be ignored. The emitter-receiver relationship should be ruled by an interactivity (feedback) that would ensure smooth communication in both directions. This was the model that Schramm introduced in 1954, and the contribution DeFleur in 1966 to the communicational model of Shannon and Weaver, which avoided the excessive unidirectionality and unilaterality of the formula of Lasswell in 1948.

This was studied later on by Semiotics as structural relations –syntax– and functional relations –semantics– between signs; pragmatics was seen as the relations between the sign and the source: the use, the effect, and what has come to be translated (ABRIL; LOZANO; PEÑA-MARIN, 1984) as Semiotics and (of) Mass Communication. Others have talked about as Semiosis.

Semiosis is understood as an action, an influence that is or supposes a cooperation of three subjects, as, for example, a sign, an object and its interpreter; that is, a tri-relative influence that in no case can end in an action between pairs [...] Semiosis will find its essence in the three aspects that condition the value of all signs: the society, the individual and the system of the sign itself⁴.

Resignification, in conditions of communicational opulence and hyperinflation (empirical subjects communicating), is a continuous and endless process, of which, it is almost impossible to discern the beginning of the end: this is infinite semiosis (PEIRCE, 1987; VERÓN, 1987).

The grueling debate, sometimes more semantic than epistemological, could be shortened if the media were assumed (McLUHAN, 1996) as conduits, languages and environments (LAKOFF; JOHNSON, 1980).

A further study of this authors' works would lead to infer that: they are conduits, in terms of the *strictu sensu* content (construction of the referent); they are languages, for the grammar of textual production (construction of meaning) – the new hypermedia grammars would fit here, phenotexts that transgress the syntactic, morphological, spelling and punctuation laws, but being text after all, “are in the language (SHLEIRMACHER, apud. PALMER, 1968 p.67-71), and environment, as a scenario –here would fit the communication and information analyses in virtual environments, the possibility of recognition of a third

4 Peirce cited in the back cover and prologue of *Semiosis II - Our translation..*

environment or recommunicalization as new *habitus*, and the Internet as a means.

Face(book) to face(book). Technological Neodeterminism and philosophy of communication

Technologies, along with rhetoric (until the late XVII and early XVIII centuries, with Aristotle and his concept of persuasion), pre-scientifically ordered the field of information and communication. The rise of the so-called new information and communications technology have done nothing more than consolidating the ideas of Smith (1983): new technologies are extensions of the old ones. Every mental revolution produced in the age of a new technique (created by the interaction of old and new opportunities) is a sum to human experience. He recognized three milestones or revolutions: alphabetic writing, printing and the use of computers for information processing.

There is no need of distinguishing techniques from technologies; the former precede the latter, and are as old as infinite; that includes, for example, oral and written language. Such has been the cultural power and the symbolic value of the latter that have generated positions in our field, ranging from technophobic to technophile –interpersonal communication mediated (MARTÍN-BARBERO, 1987) by technologies– going through theorists of media technology, without a middle ground.

Electronic democracy, inaugurated by the first president of television (Kennedy), legitimated in 1960 as the main instrument of political discourse, and crowned by the first President 2.0 (Obama, who was succeeded at a dizzy pace up the tuplomacy ladder by renowned leaders of all geographies and tendencies, for all types of uses and discourses), and semiotic democracy, which legitimizes polysemic messages (FISKE, 1987), transfers responsibility over meanings, symbolic reproduction and social influence to recipients. That is, in the words of Benito (1976): the technification of social dialogue, which until now, has not had its anthropological peer. Technology, as optimal as it can be, does not determine interpretation. There might be ambiguity (semantic noise), if emitter and receiver are placed in different perspectives. Pragmatic noise can appear if the receiver interprets in a different manner what the emitter had intended, that is, pragmatic presuppositions (ECO, 1986).

In any case, this represents social entropy (PIERCE, 1962, p.302), accentuated by circumstances that establish speed as value in a connective context: mass contamination (you follow me, I follow you on social *on-line* networks; the response patterns *like me* on Facebook⁵, or social impact measurement through technical impact: access equals reading and acceptance); enchantments (use of social networks by sects); images of villains; perceived manipulation; social traps.

⁵ This paragraph explains why, among other reasons, does Facebook increased its proceeds by more than 25% in 2015. Available at: <http://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias/2016/01/160128_tecnologia_facebook>. Accessed on: January 16, 2016.

This results, at least, in three concatenated effects of marked philosophical nature: first, the *extension* of the senses; second, the changes that the media exert on perception, and thirdly, the transformation, not of the ways of representation but of the status of the reality built by the media through objectifying acts⁶. Perceptions are still infinite; communication continues to rest on the basis of egocentric words⁷ dependent on perception, and each one of its parts are present or co-present (to us) through an aspect or perspective⁸, which implies a certain cognitive level and co-presence of the other.

From a communication theory to a theory of media. Metacommunication, languages and combinational gnoseological modes

The use and discrimination of information requires intellectual skills very unevenly distributed in society and speed of data transmission is not directly proportional to the capacities of perception and discernment of human beings, nor to the reading and writing skills.

Re-examining does not always mean re-founding. Imprisoned in the printing world, the object of study has been confused with the place of study; anchored in politics, doxological and even economic extremes have been reached.

Modernity was constructed on the basis of great legitimating stories; postmodernity on the dissolution of those great stories, to the account of the mass media, which are also attributed to having turned society more chaotic.

The way out for communication is language games, which do not have universal rules. But in language games, as Wittgenstein (1988) prefers to call them, he/she who handles the game box, after a period of training, is able to rebuild its order and manipulate the various tools to build languages that are simple and respond to a specific pragmatic situation.

Between the aspiration of Otto Groth (1875-1965) of pure journalistic science (cf. BENITO, 1976) and the defense of Aguinaga (2001) of the scientific dimension of journalism, a philosophy of ournalism, like the horizon, gets farther away as much as we try to get closer to it. Journalism, as a profession, was only recognized by English and American researchers in the 1970s. News have been a blurred entity and the newspaper an institution in pursuit of legitimacy.

Pure journalistic science (*vid supra*), “requires respecting a series of requirements or characteristics, without which the journalistic function would not be accomplished” (BENITO, 1976, p.92).

6 (HUSSERL 1967, II, p.208). Precisely one of the snags currently faced by communication theory is that the modification of spatial-temporal experience: real time makes people believe that they are happening at the same time in multiple places; times and spaces represented in discourse condition the times and spaces of reception.

7 “The four main words of this kind are –precisely– ‘I’, ‘this’, ‘here’ and ‘now’.” Russell (1950, p.112), enumerates other egocentric words without which any kind of communication would be impossible, that is, close-far, past, present, future, was, will be.

8 “Perception is not unbiased; it comes but from a center; our perception world is (so to say it) a perspective view of the common world. What is close in time and space generally originates a memory or perception that is more vivid than that which is farther away” (ibid., p.120).

The *requirements* are:

Essentials: Topicality, Proximity and Universality.

Formals: Periodicity and Dissemination.

Journalism, to be called as such and provide a service to society, must not offer anything the public other than information that is the most outstanding part of the Universality, which is Topicality, by means of regular Dissemination and based on the Proximity that is always present between events and men. (BENITO, 1976, p.92).

Accessibility is a *sine qua non* condition of diffusion. The gaps, technological, of gender, linguistic, seriously limit accessibility. Tactility and journalism 3.0, dismantle both essential and formal requirements. Easily mutable phenomena, however, allow greater precision and agility in putting words into typing –writing– on the virtual keyboard, with respect to the physical keyboard, simulating note pads and stimulating vertical visualization, and with it, reading.

There is not, therefore, nor will be in the medium term, a pure journalistic science, even with the existent information overload and redundancy of the social field.

The meta-communicational axioms of GIT (WATZLAWICK; BEAVIN; JACKSON, 1985, p.49-71) warned that, first of all, we cannot not communicate and, second, each communication act has a content and a relation aspect. This happens in a way that the latter classifies the former and is, therefore, a metacommunication. Likewise, the nature of a relationship depends on the score of the communication sequences (HABERMAS, 1989) among actors; that humans communicate both digitally and analogically, and all communication exchanges are either symmetrical or complementary, depending on whether they are based on equality or difference. This does not point to a pure journalistic science either.

To reverse the canonic communication vulnerability, it is necessary to recognize the complexity (MORIN, 2004) as the structuring principle of all communicational knowledge. Reflexivity or second degree research, would organize knowledge and cognitive assumptions from which it originated; it would go beyond the obsolescence of the empirical object, division and fragmentation of its epistemological referents; it would turn it in not simply in a research object, but in a research crossroads, semiotic crossroads of cultural hybridizations and codetermination.

An open axiomatic system is necessary against the ontological monism: going from those axioms to a combinatorial conception that articulates unpredictability and language games, which builds theoretical bridges of cooperation and expansion on theoretical ghettos of confrontation. This paper, therefore subscribes to the objectively subversive potentialities of the electronic media (ENZENSBERGER, 1974), in their reversibility and

mobilizing power; that electronic media do not owe their irresistible power to any deceptive artifice, but to the elemental force of deep social needs and the possible emancipatory uses of technology.

The gnoseological ideal that must respect the principle of completion and cover the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic axes. In a notion of communication anchored to the concept of network and interface, it must intersect rather than abstract, separate or delineate. It must assume the (new) information production processes as an epistemological and methodological place, from transdisciplinarity articulating the levels of reality, logic of the third party included and complexity.

It is up to the universities to include this theory into the training of new professionals, based on a curriculum subordinated to the new scenarios where they will perform, and the new modes of action to be assumed: a synergetic system of knowledge of deep humanistic inspiration, where old and new competencies and skills are integrated, with an elective approach (HABER GUERRA, 2013).

To delineate a theory of the causes of communication as a social process, categories should be used instead of categories, as well as heterological and discursive genres.

To reach a philosophy of the media that is not a mere phenomenological process (GROYS, 2008), the first step is to systemize the contributions to the theory and the method of information and communication from and to all of the science. Universal principles and anthropological approaches should be synthesized (AYÚS, 2007). The current mega-concepts of the social and humanistic sciences should be found, upon which, a social theory of media could be built: legitimacy, conflict, citizenship, significance.

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