

On communicational *episteme*

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ABSTRACT

This text aims to discuss the ontological issue about communication processes, by questioning the theoretical foundations of its discourse. First of all we review the informational conception in which communication is understood as a transmission process by classic media studies and by sociological researches on the mass media field. Following this, we approach communication as a hermeneutics concerning the new ways of existing under the multimedia society. Finally we propose the cognitive autonomy of communication discourse by means of a threefold model.

Key words: communicology, epistemology, autonomy.

RESUMO

Este texto dispõe-se a levantar a questão ontológica sobre o fenômeno da comunicação, indagando sobre os fundamentos teóricos de seu discurso. Realiza-se primeiramente a crítica do patamar informacional em que se apóiam os já clássicos estudos de mídia ou as pesquisas sociológicas sobre o campo dos meios de comunicação. Depois, aborda-se a comunicação como uma hermenêutica das novas formas de existência sob a midiatização. E, finalmente, propõe-se a autonomia cognitiva do discurso comunicacional, com um modelo tripartite.

Palavras-chave: comunicação, epistemologia, autonomia.

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IT IS QUITE POSSIBLE THAT a reasonable part of future studies and discussions in communication follow an eminently “epistemological” line of thought. That is to include an internal criticism of principles, hypothesis and results, as the researchers in this field worry more about the theoretical weakness of the analysis they make – and with the *generatio aequivoca*, that Kant compared to the empirical genesis of concepts. To understand anything about the epistemological basis in which communication is being talked about is to certainly reinforce the cognitive systematization of the theoretical thinking and findings in researches.

It is true that by looking into the philosophy of deconstruction of traditional theoretical ground (Derrida), we will realize to be living in a time of “post-ontological vibrations”. But the epistemological enterprise rises questions of “ontological” order on the so called communication phenomenon: ontology – in the sense (also Kantian) of a system of concepts or principles of understanding related to our experience of objects (Kant, 1997), or in the sense (Heideggerian) of thinking about the authentic foundations of discourse. It is inevitable that in ontological questioning be raised the problem of determining a specific object to this theoretical field – whose autonomy is still challenged in the field of human sciences – so that it can actually be one more discipline in the context of social thinking.

Sure that, at least in Kantian sense, current studies are already being developed in a certain ontological level, one to support the “informational conception”, according to which communication is the process of transferring information from one pole to another. It is possible to improve this model theoretically - for example, by abandoning the functionalist perspective present in most of North American sociological works in favor of semiotic or anthropological alternatives – without actually leaving the ontological ground established by the common understanding of what is communication.

In fact, when someone intends to do sociology of (or in) communication, or even anthropology, psychology, economy, cultural studies, etc one remains inside the same perspective that makes the study of communication depend on a classical discipline of social thinking. Communication is taken for an instrument (radio, newspaper, magazine, television, Internet and others) that should be analyzed, or, in

another sense, as a mere excuse for solving a problem of the discipline itself, such as fulfilling an analytical lack to work on the growth of information dispositives in contemporary culture.

There is a problem that has already been identified by social anthropologists as Jeudy (1997:151), to whom “sociology continues to understand the media as a completely separated field of study, avoiding to consider the mediatization of society processes”. In other words, what is studied, on one side, is the institutional versions of social phenomena and, on the other side, the existence of the media ignoring that “the principle of mediatization guides *a priori* the representation and the interpretation of the phenomena”.

By mediatization we understand not the exhibition of events by means of communication (as there was, in the first place, the temporalized social fact and then after the mediatic one, somehow transtemporal), but we understand the combined functioning of traditional social institutions with the media. Mediatization does not clarify what is communication and, nevertheless, it is by excellence the object of a contemporary communication thinking, precisely because it supports the hypothesis of a social and cultural change focused on the present arrangement of communication technologies.

When we search for the sources of modern sociology, for example, we face sociohistoric theories from nineteenth century (Saint-Simon, Herbert Spencer, Proudhon and others) as much as works from specific research groups and administrative statistics, these ones properly empiric, which was the knowledge most desired by civil institutions or by the State in the aim to explain the social functions and to legitimate decisions.

What does a sociologist wishes for? In a broad perspective, he wishes to be able to answer a wide range of questions about the object that is conveniently summarized by the name of “social”, but this object actually varies as much as the multiplicity of types of society included in the same gregarious totality. Assuming as background the success of pure sciences since the nineteenth century, sociology aspires to a methodological strictness legitimating its speech pretense of scientificity. For this reason and to find answers it doesn't take positions *a priori*, but researches specific groups with the intention to make precise correlations among variables. Going on the side of these procedures, which strongly characterize North American empirical sociology and its followers from various countries, it is also being developed a sociological way of thinking that bounces between social philosophy and the concepts inherited from human sciences tradition.

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The same question posed on communication leads us to ancient rhetoric as a language political technique in the Greek *polis*, it leads also mediatization as a discourse technological practice under the aegis of the market in contemporaneity. The rhetorical dimension is immediate and visible because it regards elocution, language practices, socially circulating discourses. And we are aware that from rhetoric we can quickly get to hermeneutic, that meaning interpretation or explanation about the meaning of the discourses.

But the ancient Greek understood the speech act itself also as a hermeneutic procedure (the translation or interpretation of thoughts in words), as well shown in *Peri hermeneias*, an Aristotle book on the enunciated (*hermeneia*). In the same way as in hermeneutics, the term “communication” designates two processes: first, the one of reducing differences to a common ground through discourse, with or without the help of rhetoric (communicative process); second, the interpretation of the events resulted from technological spread of rhetoric, meaning the media in contemporary society (communicational process).

The questions about communicational processes which scholars seek to answer, since the first decade of the twentieth century, come mainly from media enterprises – thus private enterprises – such as newspapers, publicity agencies, necessity strategists and consumer research institutes. While the demands for sociological, anthropological and psychological knowledge come mainly from organisms directly or indirectly connected to the State (organisms for planning, administration of territories, control of behaviors and attitudes, etc), communicational knowledge tends to be privileged by the market. Naturally that there are exceptions as in the example of the studies and evaluations of foreign propaganda in North American territory during the Second World War and, as Wolton stresses,

numerous empirical studies, some of industrial tendency, other academic ones, have provided, between 1950 and 1965, analytical theoretical frames that are until today valuable on the positive and negative effects of the media, the image building, the theories of reception, the *two step flow*, the *gatekeeper*, the “selective attention”, of the “use and gratification theory”, of the “silence spiral” (Wolton, 2006:49)

These concepts – most of them from European social researchers and thinkers (Lazarsfeld, Katz, Berelson and many others) that have emigrated to the United States in the first half of the past century – are of great interest to media analysis, but they are far from the communication epistemological problem. It is just that, when studying the communicative process, the emphasis is given to the empirical findings, that are associated with an academic perspective (sociological or psychological, mainly) already socially legitimated. Even in the academic area there has always been silence about this matter: all of North American tradition in media studies is on the same track as mass communication research, itself being a chapter of sociology, meaning that it is only part of an interpretation system based on the old predicative (aristotelic) logic. It attributes subject-actors to fact-objects, implicated on a “thick” or “postponed” temporality (expression from Paul Virilio). The so called “temporality of the everyday life, which includes retroprojections in the past and future projections, the unsettling forms of memory and imaginary anticipation” (Jeudy, 1777: 152) is the same temporality nineteenth century born social sciences work with.

It so happens that advanced technologies of communication and the speed of information flows produce another temporality, which has being called “real time”. In fact, in a world set in a technical net, the common experience of time is profoundly modified: virtually connected to everybody, each individual can be reached in no time, without previous arrangement, by anyone. That is precisely what is “real time”, which means the end of deadlines, as well as the end of ocious times (the recycling of the ocious by the system of information) in favor of technical dispositives integrated in our daily environment.

In a world of such fluid temporality, where everything stable or enduring is in crisis, the periodization of existence itself is affected in many levels. One of these levels is the indistinction among periods of activity: working time can be the same as fun time or educational time. The steps or moments previously recognized as special ones are dissolved in the frenesi of a permanent presence in the net. As being is unstoppable, it is difficult to imagine “unplugged” activities or with activities with “duration”, meaning activities that are outside the technical managing of actions. Sometimes the act is mistaken for the click made by a user connected to the cybernetic net.

Taking information as included into this new timing – temporality condensed in the present, the everlasting present time - it tends to be analyzed by its own technical operativeness (speed of transmission) and by

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the aspects of is immediateness, ilimited space availability and low cost of the cybernetic net. Time at this point is “unreal”, as well observed by Stiegler (1996:147), in the sense that the ilimited production of events opens space to a immediateness that, making impossible to the mind represent the events inside a period of time (thus, inside a time thickness), extinguishes time effectively. The events are always ahead of the possibility of being interpreted by the individuals, just like the social flood of communication technologies is ahead of its interpretation by individual and collective forms of consciousness. The future overcomes technologically the present, and the present, by the use of the digital resources in images treatment appears to be equivalent to the past.

There is no time to go back, no “thickness” to think or speculate about. This is the “reality” communication has to deal with, while classical social sciences preserve a temporal status in which is possible to interpret and to know. For that reason it seems logical to make a sociology or anthropology of communication, since only by current forms of intelligibility it is possible to assure certain “discipline” advancement. On the other hand, as there is an empirical attraction in communicative events ruled by advanced technology we could think that a “science” of communication is impossible by the disperse and chaotic situation of the supposed object. It is preferred to talk about a “field” (“communication field”) understood as the encounter of theoretical lines without great epistemological unity.

Nevertheless, when we accept to define physics as the study of the laws that rule the functioning of the universe we are perfectly aware that the universe we study includes diversity and chaos. But the chaos of the object does not implicate chaos in the theory. That is what is in the horizon for communication: the multiplicity of communicative phenomena reflexively leads to the theoretical association of communication with the intersubjective “bond”. This is true be it in the level of discursive operations aiming the production of meaning, be it in the level of social formations dedicated to the control and management of the bond through discourse, as the ones developed in the environment of mediatization.

The mediatized society is a new type of “discourse society”, in Foucault’s expression designating groups instituted according a specific speech control. The author asks himself what is so dangerous in peoples speech, what is the danger in case the discourses multiply themselves indefinitely (Foucault, 1970). This concept is referring to specific groups

that make some procedures of exclusion institutional – that happens through systems of interdiction, rejection and will to truth – and are implicated in the discourse. These are the same groups which the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called “fields”, that is, structures build in a context of pressures as well as in a context of external and internal sanctions.

Now, otherwise, it is not a matter of mere internal logic of a professional field, nor the logic of one or other society that controls the discourse, but it is a matter of a discourse that rhetorically controls the society as a whole. It happens in such scale that the discourse has become itself a particular existential sphere, usually so abstract when it comes to the concrete territory and the real-historic time just like is abstract the system of the language in relation to the discourse. This is the society Deleuze (1990) named “society of control”, going deeper into the foucaultian argument on power relationships.

In spite of that, for us it is primarily a matter of taking into account a “will to power”, in the very nitschean sense of the expression, that is, not as a practice of domination, nor even a practice of desire – nothing that could be covered by the dialectics – but as a metaphysical strength allowing the expansion of life. The world’s virtual duplication provided by images, models and discourses shows itself to us as will to technological power, shows itself as pragmatism establishment of the hypothesis that technology, in its growth or expansion, can lead to the reformulation of the humanistic idea of a biological anthropocentrism.

This way, intending to see beyond the pure dimension of control or domination, we introduce the concept of *mediatic bios*, which is the communicative form of the general virtualization of existence. We start on *bioi* [U3] that structure the polis, described by Aristotle in *Ethics to Nicomaco* (apud Sodré, 2002). The new *bios* is the mediatized society, understand this society as an existential sphere able to influence on perceptions and on current representations of social life and able as well of neutralizing tensions in communitarian bond.

The communitarian matter, as it is described by Esposito (himself inspired by Heidegger) seems to us central for making more visible

(...) the originally singular and plural aspect – ecstatic really – of a shared existence: each one is an opening for everyone, not in spite of, but because of the fact it each one is singular, as a singular person. The opposite of the individual: the other can not be taken closer, absorbed, incorporated by the one – or vice versa – understanding that it is already “together with” the “one” and considering that there is no one without the other (Esposito, 200: 120).

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That is, we do not start from “I” or from “not-I”, but from the constitutive “with”.

It is the concept of community (and not any “communitarian” organization) which tells us that being-together is being-with. The preposition lets us see the distance or the difference that, nevertheless, relates us or bonds us to the others. The others are understood here not as build subjects, but as an exteriority towards which the being itself is originally open to. The establishment a bond requires that each one loses himself, the lack of entire control over subjectivity and identity is necessary in favor of opening to the other. The *communitas* to which Esposito refers to is not “the ‘between’ of the self, but the self as ‘between’”.

The question regarding communication, on its turn, starts from the relationship or bond implicated in “with”. It marks the distinction between a *munus*, a task or gift originally made by each one to the Other[U4]. Communicating is the action of always, indefinitely, settle the common in a community, not as an entity (for example, an association or group of subjects), but as bonding. That way as a constitutive nothing, for the bond has no physical or institutional substance, it is pure opening in language. The subject that communicates is the same self understood as in “between”, thus an interiority destined to an exteriority, the other.

When we abandon the informational concept of communication, in the search for a constitutive perspective (Paiva, 1998), we face in the first place the problem of what’s common and in the sequence the one of communication as an specific way of making intelligible the meaning and social discourse production process. That results in the analytical tactics of treating communication as a conceptual object which is able to unfold itself operatively into levels we name as relational, bonding and critical-cognitive.

The relational level is properly the informational one or the one where mediatic interaction takes place and in which subjects supposedly ready and complete in terms of social identity get in touch through technological dispositives of communication, and these ones electronically materialize rhetoric. At this point the semiotic operations of the mediatic *bios* become visible and are academically analyzed by researchers in many areas of social sciences. That is the common place of the so called “media studies”.

Bonding differs from relating by what is not defined as to “make contact”, as something put in “between” the beings, but defined as the

originary condition of the being, from that moment crossed by an exteriority that compels it to the outside of itself and breaks it apart. This is the social place of intersubjective interaction, over which have worked, strictly in the logical-linguistic ground, authors like Wittgenstein, Quine, Pierce, Davidson and, in the logical-discursive ground, the thinkers of the speech acts, from Austin to Searle.

But the critical-cognitive level, being properly a “science of communication”, is compelled to consider the imbrication of both relational and bonding levels. The result is the configuration of an idea of real necessarily trespassed by the technological virtualization of the world. In this state of things, in which the form progressively taken by the consciousness is the one of the technique, the concrete and real action of the subjects tends to be independent of the social context and of the cultural tradition. The responsibility of the individual increases in technological terms, from himself to himself.

That is why the ethical-political imperative, thus collective, of a critical cognitive formation, not only to increase the interpretation potential of the individual actors in the intellectual class (professors, writers, etc) but also to make possible a politically changing “intervention” as in initiative of the minorities and militant groups in the area of popular appropriation of the means of communication. An example of critical action is the exposure of the limits of social constructivism concepts. It shows us that social groups build in a discursive way the reality they acknowledge, but they can not distinguish the political boundaries of discourses.

The historical urge for this kind of action varies according to the economical and cultural diversity in each region of the world. This is crucial in Latin America where communication graduation courses have hugely increased since the 70’s, possibly an academic reaction to the fast development of information and communication electronic technologies and to the incensement of mass consume, and these, by its turn, effect of national plans of economical development or simply the import of cultural objects and services of modernizing tendency. Besides that, facing the worn out of traditional republican forms, new means of communication have always produced the emergence of new channels of contact between the masses and society’s decision instances, these instances being the State, big enterprises invested of real and symbolic power in the net of social relationships.

But the critical cognition we discuss is not sociology, anthropology, linguistic, discourse analysis or even philosophy *stricto-sensu*. It is a “research and thinking activity” that is taking place in the limits of those disciplines in a way Deleuze and Guattari (1997) would call “nomad science”, meaning the study of flows, circumstances, without theorems or constants. To personalize

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this model a good example is the one of Raymond Williams, considered to be the most important cultural critic in England after the war, in spite of the problems of applying the designation “critic” to him may bring. But as well observed by Eagleton (1991:[U5]),

none of the other conventional designations – sociologist, political scholar, social philosopher, cultural commentator – completely or exactly applies to his work. The trespassing of boundaries has been a recurrent metaphor in his texts, which have gone from the theater and linguistics, literature and politics, education and popular culture to cinema, ecology and political nationalism. [U6]

Since the end of the 70’s the theoretical basis of disciplines privileged by structuralism have been progressively converging to the communicational *episteme*. Structuralism was the scientific method that intervened in the field of human sciences willing to overcome the phenomenological philosophic descriptions of objects by building models to the groups of objects. Under the lenses of this method, “man” was replaced by the structures – linguistic, literary, psychoanalytic, anthropologic, economic – when explaining the social. Also in communication the speaking subject is replaced by the “code”, that is a structure independent of the subject and precious to the message understood in linguistic or in technological terms. French “poststructuralist” thinkers have approached directly or indirectly the communicational field.

In this frame, it is crucial to incorporate the contributions from Debord, Lyotard, Foucault, Baudrillard and other partners in this reflexive line of thought, *according to which it is possible to understand Communication as a hermeneutic of existence interposed by the mediatic bios*. [U7] The proximity to Williams is more intense in Baudrillard. His thoughts are close to the English author, whose non-fictional work “has a strong ‘imaginative’ appeal and a pure experimental emphasis, which allows him to trace, very easily, rhetoric and narrative”. (Eagleton, 1991: 100 [U8]). Without having the conceptual strictness of philosophy or the espectral relationship that sociology intends establish with social reality, Baudrillard’s work immerses in the visionarism of those who intend to produce themselves effects of reality, challenging the reader to adhere or refuse. Following Raymond William’s example, the limits between a “critical” or “creative” text have been equally blurred (Eagleton, idem, *ibidem*).

The expression “existence hermeneutics” certainly reminds us of Heidegger, but we want to emphasize the transversality aspect of the mediatization in order to make clear one difference, the idea of an existence deeply articulated with technological dispositives of virtualization or the replacement of classical world with images. Hermeneutics is not understood, in this sense, as a methodological intelligence or a doctrine of true interpretation – nor even as a universal “philosophy” of interpretation –, but as a path to intelligibility (a sharp “language”) applied to comprehension matters raised by technological awareness.

In order to make a better picture of the practice of this hermeneutic, let us compare it to anthropology as assumed by Claude Lévi-Strauss: the first level of the work is the description (ethnography) of a given culture; the second one is the logical arrangement (ethnology) and the third is the comparative analysis of human grouping, that being anthropology itself.

This tripod scheme is adequate to communication. In a media study (and not the study of problems related to the communitarian bond), it is possible to consider in the first level the multifunctional description of a communicative dispositive (for example, a television system); in the second level, we have the interpretation of economic, political and social relationships between the dispositive and the given society. In both levels is taken into account the knowledge of social thinking classical disciplines, as sociology, cultural anthropology, economy, political science, psychology and history, without making precise epistemological distinction towards the discourse of other social and human sciences.

The possibility of a critical perspective in these levels is not excluded, it is even acceptable the idea of a “critical empirical perspective” (Wolton, 2006:10), long included in the line of studies of mass-communication research and developed since Paul Lazarsfeld and H. Lasswell by authors like G. J. Blumler, J.P. Klapper, Elihu Katz, D. Mac Quail among others. Running on the side of this line of study, but in a different conceptual perspective, are included the researches and essays produced under the name of cultural studies, a knowingly vague or imprecise designation where the socio-anthropological filiation goes from English authors with evident analytic enlightenment (Stuart Hall and many others) and North Americans, that usually bring a mixture of culturalistic criticism and marxian formulations emptied of their political sense.

The third level is properly “communicational” (in a similar way to anthropology) and it implicates a “redescription” of existence considering the technological *bios* (the virtualization, the mediatization) which is guiding the way the subject is nowadays. Communication is dedicated to the clarification or the comprehension of new ways of being human in a world of totalizing

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technology. The actor of this knowledge process may be called “critical”, as long as the word is understood as a “synoptical” position, occupied by a subject (or even an object that “thinks” us, as Baudrillard would say) able to articulate in an argumentative and sensitive way different practices and systems that converge into the technological *bios*.

The institutional demands for the organization and presentation of market and academic researches are still guided by methodological precepts from the classical field of social analysis. There is always someone who can think that science is reinforced by remakes of what is already proved. That is not what we believe, but we consider that disciplinary studies are valid to the development of the communicational knowledge. We consider those that within their own theoretical specificity approach matters of the communicative field.

But we should take forward the hypothesis that communication science takes place in the current crisis of the social sciences paradigm and it happens as sort of an “event” result from a well placed “intervention” base on thinking and researching. It intervenes over a situation from inside the cultural changes in contemporary society questioning the circumstances of the imbrication or the tension between societal relationship and the communitarian bond.

Should that be enough to establish a theoretical unity to the field of communication? The answer can not be given only by the “logical” dimension of an epistemology. Power is the answer, in the bottom line, for the scientific autonomy of social thinking disciplines: it is social management and chairs in great universities in the case of sociology; administration of colonial territories and academic research in the case of anthropology; State and evaluation of behaviors in the case of psychology. The only thing missing is to determine the level of interest or uninterest of responsible institutions in the case of Communication. But the basic epistemological conditions are given.

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