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Mediatization(s) Studies

CIM 10th Anniversary

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**Mediatization(s) Studies:
Exploratory Notes on an
International Conversation**

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Introduction

This book is dedicated to the commemoration of CIM's 10th anniversary and is the result of the articulation of several researches by CIM's members and other colleagues from different international academic institutions with important contributions in Mediatization(s) Studies.

The purpose is to intensify a transnational academic conversation to contribute to consolidate this field of study that, being still new, already has a rich and important history.

The texts presented here raise concerns about different levels of the mediatization process and its connections with contemporary issues. As a team of researchers in Mediatization(s) Studies, we became interested in both understanding the contemporary modalities of construction of meaning and, simultaneously, if history is a guide, expand our genealogical knowledge into further results in future.

Researchers, as society as a whole, were not prepared for the Coronavirus pandemic in 2020; however, we were quickly able to deal with the situation by deepening previous links and generating new intellectual

and critical associations. In this way, among other activities, we held a virtual Colloquium at CIM with colleagues from different latitudes and published an E-book with the presentations, which is a sample of our first impressions on the pandemic.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic caused all universities to switch to remote work, new opportunities have been a concern. Although relying on electronic contacts can be a challenge, there are many reasons to strengthen our research motivation. What can we do as academics to face an age of rampant complexity? This book tries to be a contribution to shine light on present challenges.

Mediatization as a social, cultural and perceptual environment, whose weightiness is central in current societies, requires interdisciplinary and multiple approaches. Assuming the significant presence of this term in academic discourse, we are faced with the risk of turning it into a fuzzy notion. That is why this book proposes argued analytical perspectives that duly mark its semantic boundaries in the context of what is perceived as a blurred unlimited semiosis.

In this way, in several chapters of this book, delimitation of the different meanings of mediatization is proposed, from the empirical description and analysis of its different levels of operation-devices, intersubjective interactions, institutional spaces, memory representations, political imaginaries, community dimensions, etc.-, to theoretical, philosophical and epistemological developments.

The complexity of mediatization is approached from the consolidated corpus of semiotics which is continuously crossed by other theoretical perspectives that enrich the analysis. The impact of *circulation* in digital platforms and interfaces on the physiognomy of studies is noted, placing the level of interaction in a new way that is boarded from sociological, anthropological, ethnographic and culturalist perspectives, in interdependence with semiotics. In the same way, the mutations of the media and languages system are analyzed.

The presence of general approaches of an essayistic, metaphorical and philosophical tone also continues questioning the current way of being

in mediated society and culture. The resumption of classical authors, whose theories acquire new meanings in our context as significant interpretative keys, is remarkable.

Different perceptions about Artificial Intelligence, Big Data and Geodatication are a central part of the current academic debate, so the texts here include present the controversial variety of senses involved.

From reading this book arises, then, a singular and notable perception: not only Mediatizations Studies are interpellated by the complexity of the present, but also Communication Research itself, in its proper long history, is being retaken in renewed ways. The articulation between new and old theories in a hybrid ecosystem of academic enunciation is a loop that always acts *après coup*.

We trust, as always, on suspicious readings to deepen the controversial nature of the debate and thus be able to advance our own understanding of the growing complexity of mediatization.

Rosario, Argentina.

August 2021

What Is Transformed When There Is Mediatization?

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This article was originally published in 2014 as “What Is Transformed When There Is Mediatization?”, in Estado actual de las investigaciones sobre mediatizaciones, Rovetto, F. and Reviglio, M.C. (comps.), CIM (Center for Research on Mediatizations), UNR Editora, Rosario, pp.11-23; ISBN 978-987-702-072-4.

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This version is slightly modified and updated.

Abstract

Processes of mediatization can be described by observing and identifying the transformation processes involved in them. Depending on the notion of mediatization, it can be limited to descriptions of only one of its levels (technological, discursive or practical) or it can be extended to the complexity of the articulation among these three levels. The aim of this article is to re-open the discussion about the notion of mediatization and part of its scope by starting from this simple question: what is transformed when there is mediatization? Our hypothesis is that transformations occur over space, time and inter-subjective relations by different actants. Even though these types of transformations are neither homogeneous nor determined by only one of those levels, they can be described by observing the sense variations produced by an invariable item –the same technology, a specific set of texts or practices– over these dimensions, resulting in various effects on contact and memory operations.

Keywords

Mediatization, contact, memory, scales, inter-subjectivity

Observing Transformations

Depicting the process of mediatization is useful and meaningful insofar as the transformations involved can be both observed and characterized. Somehow, the hypothesis that mediatization is defined by transformations supports the most widespread definition used by scholars of contemporary European literature: Schulz, 2004; Krotz, 2007; Strömbäck, 2008; Couldry, 2008; Hjarvard, 2008; Hepp, Hjarvard, Lundby, 2010; Hepp, 2013; Hepp, Couldry, 2013; Krotz, 2017; Hjarvard, 2017.

However, the notion of transformation could be just restricted to the description of only one of the levels involved (technological, legal, economic, in relation to languages, etc.) or it could be extended to the complexity of their articulation. The description depends on whether mediatization is conceived as a logic external to society, or whether it is intrinsic to the latter.

Mediatization is here understood as *that which develops a process of sense transformation from a material organization forcing or requiring some displacements on different scales*. In other words, mediatization does not occur just as a result of the involvement of autonomous and persistent material media (Verón, 2013) but also because of the ‘gap’ circulation with scale alterations. This will be the point of our interest: *What is transformed when there is mediatization?* This question is formulated in an ambiguous way regarding what is mediatization (as it is understood) and what is not.

Thus, another aspect for consideration is the non-exteriority of the social with respect to these transformations. The social is the result of sense transformation, of ‘gap’ circulation (Verón, 1988). Or, as Luhmann (1995) suggests, the social emerges from communication.

‘Communication’ is not a linear data transfer: it implies at least two concatenated instances or processes of social production of meaning, called ‘production’ and ‘recognition’ by Verón (1988), and likewise, ‘utterance’ and ‘understanding’ by Luhmann (1995 [1998: 142/143]). Those two processes are produced thanks to a third element that materializes the sense-making process triggered there: ‘discourse’ in Verón; ‘information’

in Luhmann. The transformation of mediatization is what enables the circulation (production-and-recognition of meaning) to be produced thanks to spatial, temporal and inter-subjective leaps in scale, which would not have occurred otherwise.

Finally, if the social results from the (gap) circulation of meaning, and if mediatization is a generator of leaps in scale, then the social does not pre-exist mediatization transformations. On the contrary, the social would be that which is independent or in spite of the technological —something that remains ambiguous, to say the least, in theses about mediatization in European works: “‘mediatization’ refers more specifically to the role of particular media in emergent processes of socio-cultural change” (Coul-dry, Hepp, 2013: 197). Even the ‘primitive’, ‘cold’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1968) or ‘illiterate’ (Goody, 1985) societies involved forms of sense production with leaps in scale on autonomous and persistent material media, which cannot only be explained by their functionality: tattoos, decorations, altars, parietal pictures, etc.

As it is well known, Latour’s ANT (Action Network Theory) neo-pragmatist perspective (Latour, 2005) maintains that the social emerges from relations in transformation with material ground. And even though this is supposed to be based on a theory of meaning, the latter is not formulated or explained. This is why the hypothesis of this article is not only built upon Verón’s Mediatization Theory (2013) but also on his Theory on the Social Production of Meaning (Verón, 1988).

Mediatization: Material and Meaning Transformation

Mediatization involves both technical skills, such as gestures or memory (in the sense given by Leroi-Gourhan 1964; 1965; 1986: 287/289) as well as the degrees of complexity of contemporary technologies.

Before we move on to describe the aspects transformed by mediatization, we should emphasize that this conceptualization rejects a dilemma between technological determinism and the pre-eminence of the ‘social’ (or ‘cultural’). Hardly anyone would agree to hold this detachment, but

its mere denial or rejection is not enough: it is necessary to see how this relation should be considered.

Investigations that focus on the materialization by resources or objects called 'media', 'devices', 'technologies', among others, run the risk of reducing processes just to their technological dimension, by over-identifying social practices and their effects with the name of the technology in question: printing, photography, television, etc., or even worse, the Internet. That identification has two consequences:

- to assume that mediatization is only the function of a technological resource;
- grounded on the above, to assume that it is enough to know the device or medium involved, to calculate its effects.

As we know, a number and a variety of practices, regulations, markets, discursive textures, exceptions, breaks, etc. get clogged under such broad terms, sometimes even with no recognition at all. Thus, the technology involved in printing or photography, for instance, does not cover all signifying instances nor all cultural practices, which change over time and in accordance with social classes, communities, institutions, etc. (Martin, 1962, Chartier, 1994, Eisenstein, 2008 and Mollier, 2013 for printing press; Bourdieu, 1979, Sorlin, 2004 and Frizot, 2009 for photography). Probably, the understanding of the evolution of mediatization processes has much more to do with what (Jacob, 2005) calls –for biological sciences– historical epistemology than with conditioning epistemology –the former deals with the circumstances of the level of the singularity, given the number of factors intervening in its changes as well as in its continuities (extended to almost all human, micro- or macro-social interaction), and given the degree of heterogeneity of its nature (summarized in legal, economic, technological, semiotic or cultural issues). We thus find that, under generalizations, there are no unifying principles (neither technological nor social) guiding the evolution of mediatization processes. The description of their conditions is only just enough to outline the range of possibilities and restrictions operating in processes that have already occurred, but hardly of probabilities.

Then, starting from a technological invariant point seems to run the same risk as starting from a social invariant point, as in the inverse case: a social class, an institutional organization, even a single author. Any inattention or neglect regarding the technological dimension would make social or cultural processes appear as if they would have shown the same course and development with or without such material or signifying conditions, roughly speaking. The extreme formulation of this (humanist, cultural) point of view would be that the social is unaware of—or, at least, indifferent to—the technological (We could attempt to make a contrast between works developed from Cultural Studies: –Williams, 1975; Hall, 2005; Morley, 1996; Silverstone, 1996– as Fernández (2021) did). This conceptualization as reciprocal externality between the social and the technological entails that the former pre-exists the latter. But if the history and prehistory of cultures and the entire species have taught us something, it is that sociality itself is an effect or result –not mechanical nor univocal– of mediatization (Leroi-Gourhan, 1964; 1965; 1986).

As a first point, then, mediatization cannot be considered a more or less social process, or a more or less technological one. In any case, the materialization involved in mediatization fulfills the role of a necessary (although not sufficient) part in the transformation process. And it is social insofar as it also transforms at the meaning level; that is, it produces differences, it produces what has not been in process until then, it modifies what stood only as a stable situation.

From Intermediaries and Mediators to Mediatization

Latour (2005) has essayed a return to the social not as an a-priori condition, rather as something that emerges from the action of a mediator. Is there any consistency between this notion and mediatization as described in the present work? In Latour's opinion, a mediator has unpredictable behaviour, it generates uncertainty ("Mediators transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry", p.39), whereas an intermediary just operates causally: "An intermediary, in my vocabulary, is what transports meaning or force

without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs.” (p.39). Thus, it is worth raising the following question: in the transformation involved in a process of mediatization, do the media take part as mediators or as intermediaries?

To answer it, it is necessary to adopt an accurate epistemology: for whom is there unpredictability, that is, transformation by functioning differently from what is expected? Clearly, the breaking of expectation can only be seen as such from the point of view of production. Once this has happened, there is nothing more than determination, causalism: from the production point of view there are expectations, and from the recognition position, there are achievements. Meanwhile, for a second-order observing system (Luhmann, 2000) or ‘observer’ (Latour, 1995), it is not possible to perceive neither unpredictability nor causality: only the connection that triggered a social process is present. The mediating (or mediatizing) element is opaque to the expectations and intentions of interacting actants (Groys, 2008).

Therefore, interacting actants’ expectations and intentions are opaque to the observer: there is no way to decide on predictability or transformation, without considering the expectation-achievement tension, which is, by nature, psychological rather than material. On the sense-making field –as Latour himself announces but does not explain–, we know that if there is mediatization, there is transformation of meaning, because the meaning generated in the production instance of a message and the one generated in its recognition instance cannot be the same sign.¹ The distinction ‘mediator/intermediary’ seems not to be substantial enough to approach mediatization in terms of materialized meaning at a minimum. Or, in the best case, every ‘mediatizing’ element is a mediator as it produces or takes part in the transformation of meaning.²

1. As Peirce suggested in his Semiotic Theory, there is no way to differentiate two identical signs, and therefore these are the same and only sign.

2. It should also be added that, in Latour’s opinion, any object, including one produced by nature (and not by mankind), could be a mediator, if it behaves in an unpredictable – thus transforming– way, which further distances this notion from our characterization of mediatization. Peirce (1931-1935) himself has stated several times that an interpretant sign is a mediator (1931-1935, vol.1. §356, §378, §553) as thirdness is, too (1931-1935,

Understood in this way, the process of mediatization gives rise to the social, and it unfolds as transformation. It is time, then, to specify what kinds of transformations are triggered by each type of technology, from their conditions —affordances and restrictions. We shall find out that these aspects do not cover the variety of nuances —produced or possible—, but an outline of their range.

The Dimensions of Transformations

The operations by which human practices evolve and develop, can be described —from both a phenomenological and a semiotic point of view, at the level of collective and individual cognitive processing— across the three dimensions where materializations are located: Space (S), Time (T) and Inter-subjectivity (Is). In this regard, it is worth making a couple of technical clarifications. Even though it is impossible to give a definitive account —let alone an exhaustive one in the present work— of what the S and T dimensions consist of, it is certainly possible to assume them under well-known parameters, with intuitions that are enough for us. Firstly, the inter-subjective dimension (so called, on our part, following A. Culioli's Theory of Enunciative Operations (Culioli, 1990; 1999a; 1999b) refers to the hypothesis that there is no enunciative subjectivity outside an inter-subjectivity system. The procedural aspect that there is no constitution of a Self or Ego but as a complex and constitutive evolution of Alter (Danon-Boileau, 1994; 2006; 2007) gets intertwined here with the configuration of a system of referrals (relations between discourses) present at the meta-level of the materializations of meaning (discourses), which is understandable by individuals in enunciative terms. The *Is* dimension is approximately what Culioli develops, for language, as an enunciative dimension, and in some aspects it resembles what has been known as meta-communication after Bateson (1991). Also when Luhmann (1994; 1995) reflects on communication, he assumes a theory of the mind-of-the-other (alter as alter-ego) as a constitutive element

of one's own mind, whose emergent result is, understood this way, the society system.

Secondly, it is important to remember that the three dimensions make up a solidary system in its terms (Space [S], Time [T] and Inter-subjectivity [Is]), which is not symmetrical: nothing indicates that one of the dimensions has the same values or is perfectly translatable to the others –whether its formalization or the understanding of its nature is more or less concrete or abstract. Even with all the difficulties that may be found in an attempt to provide a definition, this system of parameters allows for an observation ordering for the transformation that is our matter of interest.

As we shall see, it involves applying these dimensions to the observation of communication processes, understood as the double instance of production and recognition of a signifying materiality (Verón, 1988), among which there may be contextualization (convergence in dimensions S, T, Is) or decontextualization (divergence in values of these dimensions: Time leaps, Spatial distances, multiplicities and Inter-subjective divergences). Precisely, the emergent transformation in any mediatization process would be that of decontextualization and / or recontextualization processes; that is to say, the break in some or all of these dimensions and / or their reestablishment.

Contact and Memory

If we order social transformations under the light of technological affordances and restrictions, we could see that in the modes and nuances of the intersection (approximations and divergences) of the three scales (S, T, Is), transformations are observed in two main types of operations that materialize social relationships: memory and contact (Debray, 1991).

When the social process is deferred in time; i.e., when there is a leap on the time scale between production and recognition, the device triggering it intervenes in the memory order. We understand *memory* as the result of the materialization of signs that construct timelines in enuncia-

tive displacement in relation to their production origin. Memory is not only a result of a data storage, but also of fragmentations, erasures and oversights, necessarily regulated –even though not regular for that reason (Derrida, 1997; Stiegler, 2001; Groys, 2008)– and whose main enunciative effect is to autonomize the original and circumstantial source of the material production of a message, from the indefinable instances of its recognition. This memory transformation has produced enormous consequences at different scales all along human history and over our cultural configurations.

On the other hand, when sense materialization devices articulate variations on the *Space* distance between the production and recognition of messages, transformations come about in the contact order. Space is the dimension where correlation modes occur among bodies; bodies are the emergent matter and act as an interface for sense processes (Verón, 1988: 140/150; Cingolani, 2018). Contact is the transforming operation if what travels through space are not bodies themselves but their emissions or substitutes emerging from mental states (Traversa, 2014). Therefore, we think of contact as the construction of signifying objects travelling through space, but also spaces themselves delimiting and establishing inter-subjective transitions (Meunier, 1999).

A digression on a historical curiosity: modern technological inventions, sign producers, which could be grouped, roughly, by their memory management, have been given the suffix *-graphy*: *photography*, *lithography*, *phonography*, *cinematography*, *ideography*, etc. alluding to their condition as *engravings*. It is simply a curiosity³ with a resemblance to a rule. It is indeed a general rule to observe that all these types of engraving differ in their productive origins (some are manual, others mechanical) and also for different perceptual (visual, sound, audiovisual) organizations. Curiosity is completed, on the other hand, with the fact that contact technologies have been given the prefix *tele-*: *telegraphy*, *telephony*, *teleradiophony*, *teletype* or *telex*, *television*, *telematics*, etc.

3. By way of example of why it would not be convenient to read this coincidence as an inevitable rule or plan/intent, we refer to Frizot's account (2009: 77/93) on the origin of the multiple denominative fixations and the unstable baptisms –for instance– of photography.

All of them share the capacity for contact management through the spatial dimension.⁴

Memory and contact, as can be read, are not too far from what Verón (2013) calls persistence and autonomy, such as the operations that characterize tools and signs, and consequently, any process of mediatization, possibly beginning 2.5 to 1.5 million years ago. Here we propose that, in addition to Space and Time, the Inter-subjective dimension be considered in co-operation with them.

Let's see: for instance, the identity of the subjects involved in production and recognition can coincide or differ. It is the 'coincidence' –more than any other inter-subjective situation– that is already consummated as a time gap, since writing –and after it, all memory devices– has made the reencounter with oneself possible, the external memory that renders my (or a) self-image, not in act (like in front of the mirror) but in the form of past.

It is clear that technical memory has had a profound impact on the basic construction of human –both individual and collective– cognition, for instance, on identity (Stiegler, 1998). As Luhmann (2000) has expressed in terms of his theory, “only what remains in the short or long-term memory is what ‘makes the difference’” (p. 29, quotes in the original).⁵ The materialization of lasting signs, insofar as it enables the inscription of an autonomous memory of individuals, allows the difference, tirelessly amassed by the passing of time, to be perceived or conceived, in the long run, as an identity.⁶ Identity and difference –which are insepara-

4. Another curious detail: the telegraph combines both denominations (tele-graph), precisely because it produces a signal that travels in space in a minimum unit of time, but –unlike the wisps of smoke or the intermittent light of the telegraph exercised by the Carthaginians–, it also gets materialized in an engraving

5. In chapter 5 of the same book, Luhmann (2000) –concerning the impact of mass mediatization on the configuration of memory– develops in greater detail his conceptualization about memory, and invariably links it to the identity / difference tension (Luhmann, 1992).

6. On this matter, Stiegler's (2001) critical reading of Husserl's phenomenology of time, and the appraisal of Adorno's and Horkheimer's technique, has led him to postulate that

ble— are emergent elements whose meaning and existence only occur on the T scale (when not, despite time), in conjunction with the Is axis (Inter-subjectivity).

Contact operations also give rise, in the *Is* dimension, to the conversion of the individual into the collective, from the personal into the impersonal or vice versa, from the public to the private, etc.: cases of enunciative or co-enunciative responsibility that is attributed to a collective body, beyond its making or reading by an individual (Anderson, 1983; Wolton, 1990). As a consequence, we find the enunciative sophistication of institutional or organizational interventions. On the other hand, in this age, more attention has been paid than ever to subjective transfigurations in terms of qualities or attributes (stereotyping, singularization, metaphORIZATION, fictionalization, etc.), operated in the multiple practices of this type in the online media (Papacharissi, 2002; Sibilia, 2008; Zhao, Grasmuck, Martin, 2008; Cossia, Cingolani, 2019).

One might say that these transformations in the *Is* dimension are as old and possible as the very behavior in society: it is, for example, what allowed Goffman (1959), researchers from Palo Alto themselves (Bateson, 1991; Watzlawick, Bavelas, Jackson, 1981; Winkin, 1987), or Benveniste (1966; 1974) for his part, to make a sociology, a communicational theory or a linguistics of immediate interactions, almost without the slightest attention to mediatization, only considering the type of situations of full convergence.

This *Is* dimension enables us to open a gap even in the same Space-Time context, for example, when someone transmutes into a sacred being just by being under the skin of a bear. Transformations on this axis increasingly manifest themselves in the era of mass mediatization, as was the case for the other two dimensions. The mass-scale or broadcasting mediatization, seen from the *Is* axis, elaborately invokes quantitative and qualitative questions. In quantitative terms, reaching ‘many’ potential consumers

technical memory is—at least in the case of temporary objects, like the cinematograph and the phonograph, but apparently without being much different from any recorded material in this respect, even if immobile— what enables the construction of the differential experience in front of an object identical to itself.

is not so much a matter of accomplishment but a sense of community: as Dayan (2000) said, in front of television, “watching is watching with”; that is to say, as recipients we imagine ourselves as part of a forum that supports us, that generates a sense of belonging or even “monitoring” (Cavell, 1982). Qualitatively speaking, mediatization makes an inevitably impersonalized and even supposedly institutional bond effective. In addition, it multiplies problems associated with identity and difference. All this shapes configurations that are not consummated only in a Space-Time dimension, but open instances that emerge from a dimension presenting a pole of strongly unified, immediate, existential subjects (face-to-face, body-to-body interactions); and on the other pole, precisely, one of the aspects showing the greatest transformation and complexity when there is mediatization (Busso, 2015; Fernández Constantinides, 2019): the multiplication of identity dimensions, the proliferation of groups, the intervention on corporeality.

What History Teaches Us

It was not until the consolidation of mass mediatization that social theories completely ignored⁷ the action –crucial, from any point of view– of communication technologies leading to the phenomenon of massiveness in industrial societies (Williams, 1975). Since then, History has taught us several things.

In the first place, the peculiar situation that in just a hundred years, perhaps less (if we consider that the telegraph and photography were invented in the 1830s; the television in the 1920s; and in the meantime, the cinema, the telephone, the gramophone, the radio, among others, and very shortly after,, the computer, in the 1940s, which is the last backbone of such series), almost all new devices from the era of massiveness were invented and culturally adopted, except for the earliest printing press. Beyond the name changes and some minor improvements, what was

7. Hjarvard (2008) and Verón (2013) agree on this point, even though later they take very different actions on the matter.

done during that century could be outlined as follows, taking into account the dimensions on which it operates:

Function: Signifying Materialities	Storage / Reproduction	Transmission
Linguistic Text	Printing Press (1437) Telegraphy (1832)	Telegraphy (1832) Telex, Telefax (1843)
Sound	Phonography (1888)	Telephone (1876) Radio (1906)
Still images	Lithography (1826) Photography (1834)	Radiophoto (1906)
Moving Images	Silent Cinematography (1895) Sound Cinematography (1920)	Television (1926)
Effects on:	Social Memory	Social Contact

Table 1: Classification of Technologies depending on their Signifying Materialities and their Functions and Social Effects. Dates are not but illustrative.

After that, there were three types of breakthroughs:

1. Features were improved: technical quality refining, size and operational capacity reduction or expansion, scope, economy, ease of access and / or usability;
2. They tended to combine and converge: today, almost a century later, the new crisis is that of full integration. If we look at this table, we still make good use of all these inventions, we even call some of them by their original names. Please note that we have left the computer aside, because it would be present (today even more so, the computer connected to the network) in all quadrants;

3. And, above all, they evolved in terms of their discursiveness and uses: their incorporation into cultural life was not –obviously– automatic, immediate and homogeneous, and in this sense, the forms that proliferated were no longer only on axes S and T, but also on the multiplication of enunciative practices and developments in the *Is* dimension (Traversa, 2014: 63/83; Raimondo Anselmino, 2012).

Now, only modernist or technocratic inertia would drag us to say that these technologies and media draw an evolutionary line towards an ‘improvement’ of communications. If we look at the chronology, the greatest leap was made a long time ago, in two steps, and it is outside the frame: it is the one that separates direct interaction, body to body, face to face from pictorial, proto-writing forms and handwriting, as the first instance, and from there to machine, printed, serial writing, completing this enormous leap. While in non-mediatized interaction there is a Spatial, Temporal and Inter-subjective concurrence among the instances of production and recognition, in printed writing there is a gap between both instances on the three dimensions, and not only on S and T as in handwriting, due to the total absence of the body as a trace.

With the printing press the possibility of becoming massive opens up, since the memory did not operate in the same terms as it did through handwriting: now the memory is produced with a cloned object, which is serially produced and collectively consumed. The print is not just memory as a trace coming from the past (in that respect, it is the same as any other script) but it becomes re-duplicated memory, or enunciated and enunciative memory: the copy brings to the present that which is referred to, but also the same memory is present in other spaces, for other individuals or groups: it is collectively present, it becomes *real*. The identity of the copy is the memory of something original or virtualized by all other identical copies, which sub-questions me as an individual, in the sense that other individuals will read exactly the same thing as me, in other spaces and perhaps in other times. The print then not only implies persistence, but also a change in autonomy at the discursive level: *contact* is altered (Traversa, 2005; Traversa, 2014: 19-35; Steimberg, Traversa, 1997; Valdetaro, Biselli, 2004).

What history also teaches us is that everything that was generated from that frenzy century of inventions, until today, is only a game of partial restitutions, with different nuances, of what was 'lost' by the breakdown of the three dimensions; something like a return (rather than a forward move) towards the pole of the original maximum convergence S-T-Is, after the greatest leap, corresponding to the printed writing, has taken place. Thus, *tele-* devices reduced or canceled the temporal gap established by spatial distance, *-graphy* ones operated on memory, and the reinstatement of the body (in photography, in phonography, and in all derived audiovisual systems) returned aspects of individuation as a measure to be regulated with enunciative nuances multiplying inter-subjective mediatized contacts.

In the case of operations that are inseparably cognitive or signifying, and dependent on material media, as shown by Verón (1988, 2014), it is possible to observe the transformations involved in mediatization through the categories of Peircean semiotics –*firstness*, *secondness*, and *thirdness*–, and their respective *iconic*, *indexical* and *symbolic* operations. In a similar way to that of Space / Time / Inter-subjects, this is also a system of solidary and asymmetric terms. Both are sensitive to transformations; that is to say, they allow for the analysis of values in which the operations involved in mediatization are projected.

From these semiotic categories, the phases of organization and cognitive maturation of the individual can be described from early childhood. This would begin with displacements and metonymic correlations (*indexical* operations), and after going through a phase of activation and articulation with substitutions by similarities (*iconic* operations, since the 'phase of the mirror' attributed to Lacan among others (González Requena, 2014), headway is made to the greater unfolding of the *symbolic* with the development of language, as Verón (1988: 140/150) explains in detail. Based on this, he points out:

It would be a mistake to think that the problem of articulation between the three orders of meaning is only relevant at the level of interpersonal exchanges between social actors. These three orders are those through which the entire semiosis unfolds. It might be said that the

emergence of culture and the constitution of the social bond is defined by the transfer of these three orders on autonomous material media, in relation to the signifying body: from prehistoric cave art to electronic mass media, the culture implies a process by which signifying materialities other than the body are invested with the three orders of meaning. (Verón, 1988: 148).

Verón himself draws a parallel with what happened in the history of mediatization at the collective level:

... the mechanisms of operation of firstness, secondness and thirdness are very different, and their effects too. On several occasions I made reference ... to the historical sequence of mediatization regarding these three registers: mediatization began with writing, the symbolic order of thirdness, and the other two regimes, the iconic and the indexical, were incorporated into the process through photography, radio and television. I characterized the latter as the mediatization of contact, which is, of indexicality, and insisted on the fact that this historical sequence is the inverse of the genetic sequence in the individual actor, which begins with contact, goes through the establishment of analogical operators and ends with the power of the symbolic through language. (Verón, 2001: 108/109).

Even if we review the evolution of writing systems as Leroi-Gourhan did (1965), we see that it begins with rhythms, in a mode which is highly dependent on contextual immediacy (index, in Peircean terms), it continues with the figurative (iconic), and finally it is based on the synthesis and abstraction of mimetic figuration transformed into –or combined with– abstract symbols, giving rise to alphabetic writing systems.

The idea that the evolution of mass mediatization has begun with the symbolic seems reasonable, since it is what more easily constructs conceptual discourse, about general, abstract objects, and invoking a general, stereotyped, anonymous interpretant —all pre-conditions of the mass media system. Our hypothesis is that only when this discursive regime had been established was it possible for the massification or broadcasting process of the iconic figuration constructed by indexical media (photography, phonography, radio, cinematography, television) to be in-

terpreted in generic terms, and not only in particular terms: press photography, for instance, is not only illustrative (iconic) or testimonial (indexical), but also stereotyped (symbolic) (Verón, 1994). For its part, through media like the radio and the television, contact was constituted in the massification of a 'quasi-psychotic' scene of dialogue between people and machines, which has remained in that regime until today, probably because it was established in a culture with a long history of interpellation on a massive basis. Curiously, what was aberrant about this was not the realistic use of iconic-indexical devices, nor was the fictional one, but rather that of ambivalence.

An arc can be observed between the pole of maximum contextualization (where exchanges take place in the same Time, Space and Inter-body convergence of subjects) and that of maximum decontextualization (in which the three dimensions maintain differences between the production of a message or sign and its reception or recognition). This arc is not, however, made up of a set of homogeneous variations in all its points. It should be noted that on the pole of maximum contextualization, indexical operations are dominant, because they are linked to immediacy. This tends to be reversed on the pole of greatest decontextualization: thus, the predominantly symbolic media of the written word resist with lower loss over time, spatial ubiquity and the construction of anonymous recipients. Iconicity, for its part, distributes its power, depending on how it articulates with one or the other.

Why do we find the entrance to mass mediatization –depending on whether it is established in relation to the appearance and spread of the printing press in the 15th century (Fernández, 2014) or its organization as an institutional system, typical of the late 19th century (Hjarvard, 2008)– and the current era –that of an important growth in mediatization processes where the massive is intertwined with practices of an inter-individual mediatization: the post-massive or 'post-broadcasting' (Fernández, 2014)– so interesting? Because they may share (generally speaking) common transformations in terms of the two main operations: *memory* and *contact*. As a matter of fact, what seems to be transformed by the density of the current process (media convergence plus network

circulation plus highly individual employment plus terminal mobility) can be clearly seen in these two operations: 1. The Network is, by far, the largest memory in human history, incessantly enlarging—at the same time—its own memory, not (only) as storage, but above all as a multiplier of feedback and information retrieval systems (Jeanneret, 2020); 2. Reaching so many individuals and organizations at planetary levels is not a quantitative limit—even despite all the inequalities and restrictions on connectivity and interactivity between different strata and political and social domains. These mediatized modes of contact have facilitated and enhanced the multiplication of identities as never before: a piece of evidence in this respect is that the great centers of power (corporations and governments) are incessantly seeking to control this expansion. The transformations of mediatization are open, there is still much to explore■

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Mediatization, Politics and the Question of the Publicness

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Abstract

This text reflects on the ‘mediatization of politics’. The following hypothesis is proposed: the problem of ‘mediatization’ in relation to ‘politics’ is not that of the influence of ‘the media’ on political actors and institutions; instead it should be read as a series of successive transformations in the production of the public as a space, as an environment, as a horizon for discourse reception. From this point of view, the widespread association between the ‘media’ and ‘mediatization’ is a historical contingency. Thus, at present, the ‘mediatization of politics’ cannot be considered without incorporating SNS-specific digital platforms as a main determinant. Moreover, platforms also transform the circumstances in which the media themselves (as institutions) are linked to ‘politics’ (other institutions) and to their own audiences. So the advent of the Internet has changed our own understanding of what the ‘media’ is. Ultimately, this paper is an attempt to present a number of reasons why it is necessary to move away from the term ‘mediatization of’ and to argue for the analytical productivity of the concept of ‘public-ness’ in examining the relations between communication technologies, political practices and the media.

Keywords

Publicness, politics, mediatization, digital platforms, media

Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the so-called ‘mediatization of politics’. Against some widespread definitions, which have accounted for or still account for this phenomenon as the growing influence of the media on the functioning of the institutions involved in the political system and on the actions of political actors (Mazzoleni 1999 and 2008, Couldry 2012, Strombäck 2008, Hjarvard 2008 and 2012, Lundby 2014), the hypothesis put forward here concerns the study of such phenomenon as the transformation of the way in which these institutions and actors must deal with the environment of ‘the public-ness’, as Craig Calhoun called it. This transformation, an ongoing and multi-causal historical phenomenon, cannot be explained without addressing the process of development and introduction of media technologies, their institutionalization in the form of media, or the structuring of contemporary digital platforms as media surfaces operating here and there on those media.

But then, where does the difference put forward here reside? In shifting the locus of the observer. By this I mean the following: generally speaking, studies on the mediatization of politics have been the analytical transposition of the discomfort of the political system itself (of its institutions and actors) in front of the media, in particular, the television. The standpoint of these studies was, and still is to a large extent, that of political actors themselves, who experienced the inconvenience of having to deal with this ‘mediatic reality’. Hence the effectiveness of the expression ‘*mediatization of*’: the aim was to show how the political practices that had remained steady in the second half of the twentieth century were modified by an external force –the media– whose functioning was governed by other ‘logics’. That standpoint of observation could only treat this phenomenon as a process of ‘disempowerment’ to the detriment of ‘politics’.

The perspective proposed here, on the other hand, implies a shift in the analytical stance of observation, a necessarily theoretical and methodological shift: it is a matter of studying the transformations of the public, that is, of that part of the functioning of ‘politics’ that involves the esta-

blishment of a link with the citizenry. As this order is mainly a 'by-product of the technological settings' (Calhoun 2013), the place of the 'media' (broadcasting) has been a central issue, but at the same time, the very progress of theoretical and applied reflection shows that the technological-institutional complex of the media is also subject to the transformations of the so-called mediatization, characterized in the last twenty years by the deployment of the Internet, and mainly by the expansion of life on platforms (Van Dijck 2016; Fernández 2021).

To speak of mediatization is hence to speak of the infrastructures of public life, of the unchosen conditions to which social actors must adjust their operations (not their 'logics') in order to enter and remain in the public space. As the communication devices making up the infrastructure of public-ness ubiquitously expand in the social fabric, and the programmed connectivity of digital platforms consolidates as the architecture of our everyday relations (beyond the instituted forms of mediatic actuality), mediatization becomes a constitutive dimension of the production of the social.

In order to develop this approach, this presentation shall be organized in three sections. Firstly, an introduction shall be made to the theoretical foundations for the perspective of mediatization from which I think and write. This is not 'my' perspective, but rather the conception which shaped my training. This step is important because it is a perspective that, for various reasons, is unknown or disregarded by the dominant European currents in this field (despite the fact that it is itself the result of academic work carried out mainly in Europe, though only recently published in English). Secondly, a thorough examination shall be made of what has been referred to as 'public order', or 'public environment' or 'public-ness'. It is in relation to this problem that the history of mediatization and politics, its transformations and its successive epochal manifestations must be studied. No originality can be claimed on this point either; there are authors who are part of the contemporary European reflection on the mediatization of politics, such as Marcinkowski (2014), who have proposed similar lines of analysis. Finally, some salient aspects shall be pointed out in relation to the configuration of a new institutional

landscape resulting from the functioning of public-ness in a post-broadcasting technological and cultural ecosystem.

1. The Theory of Mediatization in a Socio-semiotic Framework: The Conditions of Production of Social Discourses.

So, we have this term: *mediatization*. Beyond some cordial quarrels about its origin or its first introduction into social science reflection ((Hjarvard 2008; Livingstone 2009; Auerbeck-Lietz 2014), we can agree that in the first half of the 1980s it began to be used in some texts dealing with the relationship between the mass media and the functioning of political systems (Altheide & Snow 1979; Mazzoleni 1987) particularly in Europe¹. In the late 1990s, it seems to gain explanatory power (Mazzoleni y Schulz 1999), and from the early 2000s onwards the term is systematically conceptualized (Schulz 2004; Hjarvard 2008; Strömback 2008; Entman 2009). It is certainly debatable whether this conceptualization has borne fruit, whether it has succeeded in delimiting uses and applications. Less controversial is the evidence of a rather voluminous array of texts that, without a centrally coordinated effort, struggle to offer a relevant definition. Does this mean that there is a consensus on its scope, on the phenomena it encompasses, on the historical periodization it enables? No. But it is clear that more than three decades later, mediatization continues to be a useful term, around which a field of study has been constituted, research networks have been woven, undergraduate and post-graduate courses have been taught, university centers have been set up, books and articles have been written, and polemical counterpoints have been produced. All this, simultaneously, involving relations that have not been reciprocal so far, in many European and Latin American countries.

1. With regard to this point, Marcinkowski (2014) has written: 'Mediatization is also often understood as expressing a new supremacy of the media (...), which may explain why the concept has attracted significantly more attention within the European social sciences (...) than in the US'.

Even today, when we speak of ‘mediatization’, we refer, sometimes in an overlapping way, to a field of research, to a historical process (or a succession of processes), to a state of affairs (in a synchronic sense). The proliferation of definitions, the fact that each time someone takes the floor in the name of ‘mediatization’, they find it necessary to offer their own definition, or their own adaptation of a generic definition, this is a peculiar feature and a symptom of the way in which this field of research has developed.

The peculiar feature is that there is no theory of mediatization, nor a proper name to which it can be referred. The figure of a ‘sensitizing concept’ (Hepp 2018) might probably be adequate at this point. It is rather about the plural coexistence of perspectives, which share an interest in understanding social change by placing the emphasis of their analyses on media technologies and institutions. But there is also a symptom in this proliferation: although it is possible to find much redundancy in texts and definitions (this being understood as a positive quality) the concept acts, as other authors have detected, as an orientation or as a topic/theme irradiating center, but with a tendency towards dispersion when it comes to delimiting something like a conceptual order. Most notably, this can be detected in the fluctuations of the very notion of ‘media’ (in reference to modern mass media or broadcasting; Fernández 2016).

Unfortunately, this work will also contribute to this proliferation. But perhaps it is unavoidable, both as part of this collective work of thinking and research and as part of the effort of promoting a supranational dialogue as proposed by the book in which this paper is contained. So, even though this article is not a monograph on the term and its conceptual drift, a brief exercise in that sense becomes necessary. To that end, some of the questions raised by Deacon and Stanyer (2014 and 2015) which elicited a very interesting response from Hepp, Couldry and Hjarvard (2015) shall be used as triggers. In this first section, then, these questions will be put in order and answered from a perspective on mediatization that these authors seem to be unaware of, probably due to the tracking methodology they used. Nevertheless, this theoretical perspective has been notably influential in South America, particularly in Argentina and

Brazil (Ferreira et al 2020). The purpose here is not to come up with an overarching concept, but to clear the ground for the development of the specific objective of this article.

Deacon & Stanyer's critique is interesting because it comes from outside. These authors are not trying to nuance the concept, and they do not adopt a definition of their own. They do not speak out of mediatization. Rather, they speak against it. It is, strictly speaking, a lucid, uncompromising, radical challenge. In fact, beyond certain concessions, Deacon & Stanyer are categorical in their assertions: they maintain that, as a result of the way it has been used, the term is a 'concept-of-no-difference' and that 'indeed, the term's wide and casual evocation suggests its principal use is to hype up the field rather than develop theoretical clarity'. It is precisely the conclusive form of these assertions, with which I disagree, that I find most thought-provoking.

In their literature review, the authors identify two predominant definitions in the most widespread studies on the concept. In order to synthesize these definitions, they take up a distinction made by Hepp between 'institutionalist' and 'social-constructivist' perspectives. For the former, mediatization is a process by which non-mediatic social actors must adapt to the rules and logics of media production. For the social-constructivist perspective, mediatization is the process in which information and communication technologies generate changes in the forms of communication and culture in societies. 'The word media in mediatization, therefore, differs in each tradition, with the former emphasizing "big" media organizations and their centripetal power, and the latter "small" media and their centrifugal presence' (Deacon & Stanyer 2014: 1033).

Despite this seeming difference, Deacon & Stanyer detect a series of inadequacies common to both traditions. The axes of this critique can be arranged into three points:

- a. The conception of 'media' ('however defined') 'as causal historical agents'. They point out that there are lot of 'problematic assumptions that underpin this causal formula'. a) the agents of mediatization which trigger change tend to be too narrowly defined; b)

the agents of mediatization tend to be seen as innately powerful; c) all political actors have to adapt to, internalize and accommodate to the 'media logic' (Kepplinger 2006);

b. As the very semantic structure of the term implies 'historical change', another problem is the way in which these perspectives capture and explain 'change over time'. Here the critique focuses on the disproportion between the postulation of a historical change and the few diachronic studies. 'Much mediatization research depends on a presumption rather than a demonstration of historical change, projecting backwards from contemporary case studies rather than carefully designed temporal comparisons' (2014: 1014).

c. The conceptual framework: here the authors conclude that, given the way in which it has been worked, we are faced with a 'concept of no difference'. Here they take up Giovanni Sartori's idea that concepts are not 'labels but data containers'. The question, they say, is to determine whether the concept can exercise a 'discriminatory power', providing more than 'an allusive function'. For the authors, 'the imprecise application of the term 'mediatization' means that it resembles what Sartori calls a "universal concept of no difference"'.

As each of these critiques has been responded by some of the important references cited in the paper (namely, Hepp, Couldry and Hjarvard 2015), and as both the critiques and the responses are based on a corpus of literature written in English –which acts as a closed reading circuit– my intention here is to show how, simultaneously but in parallel, another way of conceptualizing the term and, as a result, another way of considering the historical processes involved had evolved, particularly in the work of the Argentinean author Eliseo Verón, which was originally published in French².

2. Just to mention some of those works: 'Le corps signifiant' (1978); 'Le séjour et ses doublés: architectures du petit écran' (1984; published in Spanish in the book *El cuerpo de las imágenes*, 2001); 'La mediatización' (1984; series of three lectures given at the University of Buenos Aires, and published as a book in 1986); 'Les Médias en réception: Les enjeux de la complexité' (1991); 'Médiatisation du politique. Stratégies, acteurs et construction des collectifs' (1995).

To begin with, for those of us who came to know the concept of mediatization through Verón's work, the term never entailed a causal imputation, in the sense of a colonisation of the 'political logic' by the 'media logic' (Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999: 250; Hjarvard 2008: 113; Entman 2009: 64). Rather, in his early formulations in the 1980s, Verón used the term as a macro-concept, to describe the passage from mediatic industrial societies to mediatized post-industrial ones. A mediatic society, he explained, 'is a society where communication technologies are progressively implanted in the social fabric'; such society is the effect of the setting-up of the printing press and the advent of photography, cinema, radio, television: 'increasingly complex technological tools have become socially available and have given birth to new forms of discourse production' (2001 [1984]: 13). The transition from mediatic societies to mediatized societies (a gradual process that picks up speed after the Second World War) 'actually expresses the adaptation of industrial democracies' institutions to the media, which become the unavoidable mediators of social management' (Verón 2004 [1991]: 225). Mediatized societies, then, would be those in which social practices (the modalities of institutional functioning, decision-making mechanisms, consumption habits, more or less ritualized behaviors) 'are transformed due to the existence of the media' (2001 [1984]: 41). Perhaps in this last sentence Verón comes close to the 'institutionalist' tradition, conceiving the media as 'moulding forces' over political practices. However, Verón himself always pointed out with an emphatic tone that the relationship between the 'media' and other spheres of social life was a problem of discourses productive conditions.

The mediatization hypothesis refers to the conditions of the production of meaning, of what is normally called social reality, in an advanced industrial society. What is fundamental here is the change of scale, which results from the technological mediums of communication. This social reality is not a single one but multiple and fragmentary, despite the unifying role that television tries to play. One might say that the

*media produce imaginary in various ways, and when this imaginary is invested with belief it is what people call 'real'*³

If there is a difference in nature between mediatic and mediatized societies, this difference refers to the emergence of what is known today as 'media reality'⁴: 'the industrial society mediatization explodes the frontier between the social reality and its representations. And there are grounds for suspicion that the media are not only devices for the reproduction of a 'real thing/aspect/side' which is copied more or less correctly, but rather devices for the production of meaning' (Verón 2001 [1984]: 14/15). As discursive machines, the media transform the social conditions of the production of meaning, that is, the modes in which the production, circulation and reception of discourses are linked and related in society, what Verón would later define as 'changes and ruptures of scale'.

So far, then, the mediatization perspective that Verón has been developing since the first half of the 1980s shares the historical timescale of the so-called 'institutionalist perspective', but offers an explanation that avoids the causal imputation to the media: unlike other authors, Verón's concept *does not describe the direction of an influence exerted by the media as coming from outside certain fields of practice* (cultural, political, educational, public and private).

The second focus of Deacon and Stanier's critique concerns the conceptualization of historical change. Two options become clear in this respect: either a historical explanation of change starting from the constitution of modern media in the 19th century or a systematic exploration of human history from the point of view of communication devices. Of course, these are not unexplored areas, quite the contrary. However,

3. The paragraph quoted comes from an interview given by Verón in 1985 to the Argentine magazine *Punto de Vista*, on the occasion of a series of lectures that the author gave that year at the University of Buenos Aires, under the title: 'Mediatization. Towards a theory of social discourses'

4. In Spanish, the term that Verón uses is 'actualidad', which allows us to combine the idea of 'current affairs' (and therefore include temporality as a dimension of media discourse) and the configuration of an ontological order other than that of 'non-mediatized social reality'.

what the notion of mediatization and the debates around it enabled, at the end of the 20th century, was a more systematic review of historical continuities and discontinuities following the thread of successive communication technologies and the way in which these were inserted into the everyday life of political institutions and actors, taking the role, function and incidence of media institutions in social life as the core area of intellectual interest.

The intellectual path pursued by Verón, who was also an attentive reader of Leroi-Gourahn's (1988) and Jack Goody's (1968, 1973) works, has involved a gradual shift from the first perspective ('the institutionalist') to the second (the cultural or 'social-constructivist'). This shift required an exercise of conceptual reinvention to detach the modern notion of 'medium' (news media) from the very concept of mediatization, and to propose instead another concept, that of 'mediatic phenomena'. In fact, it was this shift that provided him with the key to reading his most systematic formulation of the history of mediatization as a series of mediatic phenomena:

In this context, mediatization is just the name for the long historical sequence of mediatic phenomena being institutionalized in human societies, and its multiple consequences. The conceptual advantage of a long-term perspective is to remind us that what is happening in societies of late modernity began in fact long time ago. The initial stage of each crucial moment of mediatization can be dated, because it consists of a technical-communicational device that has appeared and stabilized itself in identifiable human communities, which means that it has been, in one way or another, 'adopted'. (...) (Verón 2014: 166)

This quotation corresponds to the only work on the conception of mediatization published by Verón in English. It corresponds, moreover, to the latest version of his theory, which he himself presents as 'semio-anthropological'⁵. This work will not delve into this hypothesis with the

5. As it is a very brief, synthetic text, Verón's attempt here bears no resemblance with the outline he provided in his last book: a more orderly, gradual, general but well-articulated journey through this 'history of mediatization', from the

purpose of testing whether it is viable or not (we believe it is), but rather aims to point out the following: it is possible to maintain the difference between mediatic societies and mediatized societies in the transition from the 19th to the 20th century (as Verón's perspective was first formulated) without this implying any lack of awareness of mediatization phenomena in societies without mass media. In this framework, it is perfectly compatible to affirm that mediatization, as a process, begins once humans, in order to communicate, implement external material vehicles beyond the inherent physical sources, what Williams called 'communication technologies' (Williams [1981] 1992: 185). In his latest book (which unfortunately has no English translation), Verón has attempted a diachronic reading, from the invention of the first writing systems to the appearance of the Internet, following his definition of mediatic phenomena. In this journey there are breaches, gaps to be filled, many clues to be explored, but also an extensive list of suggestions, bibliography and facts that can contribute to a better understanding of what we will continue to call 'mediatization'.

To sum up, examining processes of mediatization based on the concept of 'mediatic phenomena' instead of the 'media' has transcendental consequences for the research. One of them is the broadness of the delimitation of the historical process. If we stay attached to a conception of mediatization as the study of mediatic phenomena, we could think that it affects, in principle, only confined spheres of social practices –state accounting and legislation (Goody 1995); the production and accumulation of academic and literary knowledge (Chartier 1995); the circulation of news relating to circles of power (Darnton 2003) –and, throughout history, it expands as in concentric movements until it overlaps with the very limits of society, in such a way that, as is the case today, there is

invention of the first writing systems to the Internet. In the introductory text of the handbook in which the article was published, Knut Lundby includes Verón in the group of authors who think of mediatization 'as a cultural process ongoing throughout human history' (2014: 24), which is true, as is the fact that Verón made the intellectual effort to link together the successive eras on the basis of a hypothesis that can be tested.

almost no sphere of action, practices and relations that is not 'traversed' by a mediatic phenomenon.

The media acceleration of the 20th century, paradigmatically embodied in the 'mass media', in particular with the advance of electronics, accentuated the contrast of eras: it gave it an effect of rupture, as if continuities with the past could not be traced. This makes it necessary to review with extreme care the conceptions that (tacitly or explicitly) take for granted that mediatization begins with the emergence of television as the central mediatic device of the media system, at least in Western developed industrial societies.

As can be seen, one of the most important theoretical consequences of Verón's perspective is that mediatization is a constitutive aspect of human social life. On this point, his perspective differs from most of the works developed under European currents, conceiving of it as a phenomenon that is added 'from outside' social life. At least from the time of the emergence of the first writing systems, humankind has lived with these materializations of semiosis that insert, in inter-collective life, spatial, temporal and inter-corporal lags (Williams 1992; Cingolani 2014)⁶. Of course, this is only a starting point and not a definitive analytical solution; but this starting point is quite different, as, in principle, it allows us to avoid abrupt cuts in diachronic analysis.

If we think of this problem in relation to the 'mediatization of politics', it soon becomes clear that once the disruptive effects of 'the media' (and particularly television, and even more, cable television⁷) have been stated, it is necessary to ask ourselves what 'politics' was like before the media, and this question takes us back to the beginning of the 20th century,

6. On the importance of writing as a 'technology' (rather than as a 'means of communication') it is worth recalling here the words of Stiegler (1990): 'Alphabetic writing is already a technology of memory. We are inclined to forget it: we have made this technology, as Westerners, our second nature, while, on the other hand, we tend to see technology only where material apparatuses are visible'.

7. As Valdetarro (2007) summarized very clearly: 'television is the medium that, par excellence, manages to produce a fold in the mediatization process, making it omnipresent, ubiquitous and consonant'.

and then to the middle of the 19th century and after that, necessarily, at least until the first half of the 18th century, when there was no 'media', but there was a rich circulation of printed and manuscript texts, of books and libels, which, brought into an increasingly hectic urban life linked to the industrial revolution that was underway in some societies, gave shape to a uniquely modern and genetically mediatized phenomenon: 'public space' (Habermas 1962 [1990]; Taylor 1992; Calhoun 2013).

Next, I would like to cross-refer the problem of mediatization and politics to three aspects that I will try to sort in decreasing generality order): a) the production of the public as a mediatized order of interaction; b) the intermediations regulating this order; c) the relationship between individuals (as non-institutional social actors), and the different institutional assemblies or systems.

2. The Public-ness: Mediatization and the Infrastructure of Public Life

The kind of perspective adopted in the present work starts from the need to disengage the concept of mediatization from that of (mass) media. Accordingly, mediatization does not account for the direction of an influence exerted by the media from outside certain fields of practice (cultural, political, educational, religious). But to achieve this disengagement, it is necessary to extend the chain of concepts that are implied in the very notion of 'media'. These concepts are the ones that make it possible to put a historical reading together based on the concept of mediatization. They are concomitant concepts, but they must be differentiated: media phenomena, communication technologies, technical devices, media (modern mass media) and now (digital) platforms as well. Setting aside the concept of 'platforms', the others refer to phenomena which are, strictly speaking, 'historical', and which have been defined and worked on by other authors. Here I am interested in showing how the issue of the 'mediatization of politics' can be rethought when the

head-on encounter between 'media' and 'politics' ceases to be the axis of definitions.

At this point, the notion of mediatization that attracts my interest for the purpose of this work is linked to the now traditional problem of 'public space'. Whereas, in relation to 'politics', it seemed possible—at least for the early works of the 1980s and 1990s—to postulate that it was being mediatized, 'public space' is, in its modern sense, already a mediatized phenomenon. Indeed, if it is considered as a form of collective exchange, this 'space' or 'sphere' was, since its origin in the 18th century, a mediatized social practice: it was directly tied to the circulation of texts—pamphlets, libels, books, newspapers, magazines. But above all, it was marked by the emergence of the figure of the 'public' (a double figure: as a body, in urban life; as the horizon for discourse reception in media life), which, although it is the stylized reverse of class membership (Fraser 1997; Chartier 1995), a collective with exclusive attributes—endowed with a rationality, a morality, a style—cannot be merely reduced to that.

Precisely with regard to the slippery notion of 'public', some clarifications are necessary. On the one hand, instead of speaking of 'public space', we shall follow Craig Calhoun's (2013) suggestion, who proposes the concept of public-ness. This is a conceptual solution to the well-known problem of translations—into English, French and Spanish—of the German word used by Habermas in the work that made the concept popular: 'öffentlichkeit', translated as 'public sphere', 'public space' or, even worse, 'public opinion' (as in the 1990 Spanish edition). But 'öffentlichkeit' is an abstract noun, referring to the state and quality of public things. Even though the notions of 'space' or 'sphere' facilitate the descriptive work necessary to identify how and in what places this quality of 'public' is embodied in urban social life, they take the capacity for abstraction away from the original concept, since already in Habermas' sociological reconstruction the term referred to a dynamic network of relations that unfold in non-mediatized and mediatized situations.

Calhoun stresses the importance that the translation of Habermas' text had at the time (he says this for English, but the same is true for Spanish or French): 'Translation not only made this important work more widely

available, but also established “public sphere” as a key term in discussion’. However, he rightly points out that the German original, *öffentlichkeit*, could more literally have been rendered as ‘publicness’:

We need the word “publicness,” however awkward, to indicate a specific mode of relationship among people. If “publics” suggests a variety of collectivities, and “public sphere” a determinate space of engagement with public issues and the public good, it is important to complement them with a sense of how publicness works as a form of social integration or solidarity, how it works alongside identities such as nation or the functional integration of markets or even subjection to a common state to help constitute that notion of “the whole people.” This is crucial partly because it reminds us that the mode of activity and relationship, publicness, is integral to the constitution of publics and the public sphere, not just something done in them after they exist.

If we accept this renaming proposed by Calhoun, what could be done to integrate the problem of the configuration of public-ness into research efforts concerning mediatization? Firstly, on the basis of two features, those that offer the most direct connection between the question of ‘the media’ and that of ‘politics’: firstly, the problem of the infrastructure of public life, and secondly, that of the institutionalism that is being configured around it.

Regarding the first point, Calhoun (2013: 70) points out that the infrastructure of public life ‘turns the abstract normative potential of public communication into an immanent possibility’, as ‘it gives publics their contours. It shapes both who is a participant and who is connected to whom’. Public communication, he adds, ‘is organized not just by conscious choices of participants, but as a by-product of the organization of settings and media for communication’.

From this point of view –and here we raise the above-mentioned second point–, what we call ‘politics’ was affected by the configuration of this ‘public-ness’ at least since the end of the 18th century; that is, before the modern media were constituted, hence before schooling and literacy widely spread, before something similar to a ‘cultural market’

was constituted, before it was possible to speak of something like a ‘media system’. Even in those countries where ‘public life’ was restricted to a limited exchange between enlightened elites (as was the case in Argentina during most of the 19th century), the printed material was the medium for public discussion, for the struggle for political agendas, and for the ‘media system’. This work has no intention of offering a history, but rather attempts to suggest a possible thread for the analysis of pre-media mediatizations. Still it is important to point out that in relation to this public order, the media began to produce an intermediation from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries onwards (with different rhythms depending on the country). This structural interference in the relations between the political system and the citizenry generally occurs at the same time as they begin to intermediate in the mercantile logic, as almost the sole bearers of advertising discourse (Traversa 2011)⁸.

Having said that, I would like to focus here on a brief overview of the public-ness, in order to make it possible to establish a link with the metamorphosis of 20th century democracies (i.e. to the transformations of ‘politics’).

To begin with, we know that there was no such thing as a ‘public space’ (conceived as ‘public-ness’) before the eighteenth century, and this provides a useful starting point for our discussion. Of course, the historical leap between societies of the eighteenth century and societies of the second half of the twentieth century (when the term ‘mediatization’ began to be used more regularly) brings us face to face with the question of the nature of the temporal relationship between concepts and circumstances (Koselleck 2004: 30). As we shall not provide an answer to such a question, we may keep the certainty –which, in this case, is almost a methodological resource– that we have not stopped using the concept or the chain of concepts that shaped the reflection on the public matter in its modern sense, in particular ‘public’ and ‘public opinion’.

8. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to assume that the mediatization of politics must first and foremost be a *national history*, although it is logically possible to construct general, transnational models (such as those proposed by Hallin and Mancini in their now famous work, 2004).

What is it that enables us to continue talking about the semantics that unfolds around this phenomenon (including all the translation-related problems)? It is probably the fact that the public-ness emerges as a singular experience (Taylor 1992) only when urban sociability and mediated sociability intertwine, when that 'zone', in turn, becomes discernible to state power, even before anything resembling an institutionalized democratic system has settled, as a result of the fact that rulers (kings and emperors, enlightened elites, professional politicians) detect that there is something on the other side (outside the palace and the inner circles of power), something ('a collective gaze', Calhoun will say) whose reverberations cannot be fully controlled, something that, broadly speaking, can be called 'the opinion of a public' (Darnton 2003).

Luhmann (2000 and 2008) also refers to these historical grounds when he argues that the public-ness is an internal differentiation of the political system. It is worth noting that the German sociologist links this emergence with the spread of the written press: 'The press was used [at the end of the eighteenth century] to achieve a strongly ambitious public resonance in the political sphere', since what was written in it became public (Luhmann 2000: 150). The reasoning loop reveals the insolubility between this enlightened concept of 'public' and the written press, i.e. a problem of mediatization. In any case, as Baker points out, the means of access or contact with this abstract entity (which could not be clearly defined in sociological terms or reduced to 'a presupposed social reference between specific classes or groups') was, from its origin, 'the technology of the printed material' (Baker 1987: 44).

All this interweaving becomes even more significant in the course of the nineteenth century, with 'the advent of quantity', as Ferry (1989) has called it (not only in Europe): the democratic opening, the extension of political rights, the consolidation of party politics and social movements, and the expansion of the mass media. All this transforms the *structure of the public-ness*: the way in which this 'sphere' (zone, space, order) of the public is produced, its temporality, the status of those who participate, its relevance for those who hold power and run the State.

The public-ness has certainly not ceased to undergo transformations since the 19th century. And of course, there have been periods of more pronounced 'quantum leaps'. The introduction of television and cable television in particular, is one of them, and perhaps one of the most important, at least, without a doubt, before the Internet. It is so important that it is well worth considering that the 'mediatization' of politics apparently began with it.

However, this process cannot be analyzed without paying attention to other concurrent phenomena, at least as far as the functioning of political systems is concerned. Therefore, 'politics' (the network of institutions, practices and actors involved in the so-called 'political system') is not mediatized, but rather the transformation of the infrastructure of public-ness transforms, in turn, the conditions of public life, the conditions under which the political system itself must relate to the citizenry, the conditions under which the citizenry must relate to the political system, and the very role of those intermediary institutions known as the 'media'.

2.1. An Explanatory Case: Bernard Manin's 'Audience Democracy'.

Testing this hypothesis is a task that will not be undertaken here. However, an attempt will be made to illustrate them approach. To do so, it may be useful to revisit Bernard Manin's (1998) research on what he called 'the mutations of representative democracy', and particularly his description and analysis of what he called 'audience democracy'. Not coincidentally, this is a contemporary analysis of the original mediatization approaches, but without the assumption that 'politics' was being 'colonised' by 'the media'. In this sense, Manin's work can be of help to avoid the methodological error of many works on 'mediatization of politics', which consists of stabilizing one of the terms (politics) in order to be able to declare its transformation by the other (the media).

For Manin, the concept of ‘audience democracy’ described the consolidation of a new form of representative democracy, a metamorphosis of the so-called ‘party democracy’ (Manin 1995: 185/186). The figure of the ‘audience’ was not a pejorative expression of the supposedly passive behavior of the electorate but a metaphor used to describe the new operating conditions of political representation. The shift from party democracy to audience democracy was notably reflected in the functioning of two principles of representative government. Firstly, ‘the voting behavior varies according to the terms of the electoral choice: voters seem to respond (to each election’s particular terms), rather than just express (their social or cultural identities). [...] today, the reactive dimension of voting predominates’ (Manin 1995: 192). The ‘exogenous demand’ (from the citizenry on the political system) lost its power, which is why representatives were no longer ‘people who take the initiative in proposing a line of division’ but ‘try to identify divisions in the electorate and translate some of them into the public arena’. Thus, as Manin may say, ‘the metaphor of the stage and the audience is the most appropriate tool to represent this reality’ (1998: 276).

Secondly, audience democracy is a model that enables new forms of disintermediation: ‘candidates can once again communicate directly with their constituencies without the mediation of the party network’, as was the case at the end of the 19th century. If this facilitates new forms of ‘personalisation of the electoral offer’, it is not in the form of a unilateral or linear effect of media logics: ‘The nature and environment of modern government activity requires (...) discretionary powers, whose formal structure can be compared to the old notion of “prerogative” power. (...) If today’s circumstances demand some form of discretionary power, it makes sense for candidates to present their personal qualities and their ability to make good decisions rather than to have their own hands and feet tied with concrete promises’. (Manin 1998: 270)

There are three aspects of Manin’s analysis that should be underlined. First, the figure of the ‘audience’ is not a thesis on the future of citizenship (the ‘audience’ is not a political subject), but a complementary figure to that of the ‘stage’, and aims to highlight the growing importance of the

construction of public scenes of representation. Secondly, the creation of these scenes reveals new ways of making society visible, making fractions of it visible, exposing the bodies that make up the representative bond. Finally, personalisation is not a direct effect of 'media logics' but an emergent element of a complex process of disintermediation. Therefore, if the media as institutions acquire a leading role, it is rather the result of a functional adaptation than a malformation of the underlying nature of 'politics'.

As far as I understood, these ways of adaptation are what Marcinkowski stresses when he says that the concept of mediatization identifies one aspect of social change, 'the penetration of society by the logic of production of public attention produced by the media' (Marcinkowski 2014: 11). For the author, 'mediatization denotes a special type of performance relation, namely between the media system and other social systems, which try to gain access to the output of the media: publicity'. However, this should not lead one to think that it is the media that triggers the process of mediatization. Instead, he argues that the leaps in the process of mediatization throughout history are produced by the contingent needs of a given system for public attention combined with its inability to capture public attention with its own resources. Therefore, mediatization, rather than disrupting the logics of politics, of forcing it to operate unnaturally, it generates the conditions of possibility for politics under conditions of high complexity.

It is worth pointing out that if 'the media' offered the other systems a probable solution to the challenge of gaining public attention at a given historical moment, it is not because this aspect was definitively solved for them, but as a result of the fact that their institutionality is based on the administration of technological devices that produce the public-ness as an environment and connect with the public as a generic discourse recipient. As a result, the media are also afflicted by the presence of the public-ness as the ungraspable part of the environment. At the same time –and most importantly– the enormous technological leap that we synthesize under the label 'Internet' has transformed the infrastructure of the public and the institutionalism dominating it. Thus, the very media

is affected by this transformation in multiple ways. One of them is the dilution of its intermediary power in a new media ecosystem that Fernández (2021) calls ‘post-broadcasting’.

Indeed, the seminal works on mediatization of politics were written at a time in history when the macro-media ecosystem was broadcasting and, consequently, dominated by ‘the media’. Today we live in a world in which this ecosystem is mixed with a networking ecosystem. This co-existence is what Fernández calls post-broadcasting. Thus, ‘mass media’ coexist with networked exchanges, with other forms of media discursive production (for example, podcasts). In this overlapping of ecosystems, the conditions for the production of public attention are multiplied and disaggregated to a large extent by the sociality that emerges, stabilizes and then gains autonomy with platforms and applications.

Can we continue to think of this scenario as the ‘mediatization of politics’? Or rather, what can we do with this concept in a post-broadcasting ecosystem, the emergence of which has been a catalyst for ‘politics’ as for ‘the media’? To begin with, it is probably worth revisiting the research programs themselves. In a text written jointly in 2014, Esser and Strömback argued that the promise of mediatization was that it had ‘the potential to integrate different theoretical strands within one framework, linking micro-level, with meso- and macro-level processes and phenomena and thus contributing to understanding of the role of the media in the transformation of established democracies’ (2014: 17). Today it is clearer that for a research program based on the mediatization perspective, the problem is not the role of the media but the configuration of new institutional settings resulting from the interactions, into the publicness, of ‘politics’, ‘the media’, ‘platforms’, social collectives and individuals. To conclude this essay, we would like to offer some reflections on this configuration.

3. The Public-ness in a Post-Broadcasting Ecosystem

The sociological modelling of public space prior to digital social media shows a pattern of complex relationships that can be represented as follows: disordered at the bottom and ordered at the top. The ideal dynamic of a process of deliberation and public opinion formation was based on a vertical but non-hierarchical order: it began in informal public spaces, distributed throughout society, not necessarily connected to one another, and ideally not subject to functional pressures. Later, the direction of the process becomes vertically oriented, as it must be directed towards the logically few and pre-established spaces that can guide this debate towards the political system. The liminal studies on mediatization of politics worked within this model, paying particular attention to that zone of cohabitation that Ferry called 'political public space' in which the lead roles were played by 'the media' and 'politics'.

The vertical arrangement of this scheme presupposed a system of intermediate filtering of subject matter selection, the interpretation and dramatization of the social problems occurring underneath. In this respect, Habermas explained that the political public space functions as 'a system of notices with non-specialized sensors, but which deploy their perceptive capacity throughout the entire society' (2005: 439). To describe all this underground social life (with respect to the institutionalized political public space) Habermas used a remarkable expression: it was a 'wild complex', which was directed by the very institutional assemblage of civil society, first, and of the political system, later.

One of the effects of the era of digital platforms –and particularly those of the SNS type– is that all this fluid and polymorphous sociability (Weintraub 1997) suddenly found a surface for media and public inscription, autonomous from previous institutional filtering. By both enabling mediatization and ensuring public visibility, networks have generated two simultaneous effects:

- At the horizontal level, they broadened the scope for creating public scenes, which entail the capacity for collective political articulation as well as the production of spaces of appearance in Arendt's

thought. Social networks provide individuals and collectives with the necessary conditions for an interaction that presumes the presence (real or imagined) of the public as a relevant dimension of their own activity. This in no way cancels pre-existing asymmetries; in fact, the intermediation of media organizations is still necessary, but it does weaken the monopoly of public intermediation that the media held until five years ago.

■ At the vertical level, digital platforms and the interactions registered within them have become available to be observed by political and media organizations as *ad-hoc* variants of public opinion. It is true that the very media intervenes in the networks and is *de facto* involved in an interaction, in which actors whose social status is heterogeneous mingle, and they do so, among other reasons, out of necessity, as the consumption of information and entertainment itself has been reconfigured, affecting both the logics of production and the circulation of news. Digital platforms in this game of interactions have a twofold status. On the one hand, they operate as surfaces of sociability. On the other hand, once they have become suspicious routing devices for the traffic of news, this status has become unfolded: in relation to users, they have taken on the functions of a publisher; in relation to media companies, they have become competitors with the capacity for unilateral regulation⁹.

This whole scenario poses enormous challenges for research on mediatization and politics. Among them, a singularly difficult and interesting one is the relationship of mutual observation between ‘media’ and ‘networks’, and the public parade of the actions of individuals and new collectives.

Let us return briefly to our conceptualization of publicness. Luhmann said that, in this order, ‘the public’ –as a spectral political subject– finds

9. Proof of this is the change in the algorithm filtering and ranking posts on users’ walls, which was implemented by Facebook (Edge-rank) in January 2018, to prioritize content from family and friends to the detriment of that of media companies. See Tua (2018) and Ingram (2013).

its place in the social topography as an internal differentiation of the political system, but that ‘the public-ness’ expresses the difficulty to apprehend what is on the other side and to control the effects of the system’s operations on the environment. Strictly speaking, the limits of the system cannot be transgressed from the operational point of view, but each system reflects on that fact, that is, it reflects on the environment. When the system reflects that it is observed from outside, without being able to ascertain how and by whom, it apprehends itself as observable in the middle of the public-ness (Luhmann 2008:149).

This is easy to understand when thinking about the relationship between the political system and public opinion, or between the political system and the media system. Studies on the mediatization of politics insisted on a critical perspective on ‘the media’, underlining the negative transformations they implied for the functioning of ‘politics’. However, the media were also a solution: a politically effective, though statistically unrepresentative, variant of public opinion, and in this sense, a privileged prism of self-observation of the political system, because they return an external gaze that is also supposedly effective on individuals¹⁰. Thus, for the political system, the media could ‘solve’ two problems of observation: it was a communication made public that could be taken as a public opinion poll indicator because it presupposed the expression of public opinion.

Platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram (and others that may take over in the future) have disrupted this pattern, especially if we consider them in their task of circulating, or recirculating and redirecting, public information relevant to community life. For several reasons, one of them central: until now, despite the belief to the contrary, it was really opaque

10. On this game/scheme of assumed influences, Michael Schudson (1998) explained that ‘the strength of the media lies in the idea held by pundits and decision-makers that the general public is profoundly influenced by the media (...) The political appeal that the media possesses is based less on its ability to twist ideas than on its expertise in convincing elites that popular ideas can be twisted’ (1998: 334).

how other social systems (and, mainly, socio-individual systems) reacted to media discourses.

The SNS platforms return –in real time and with individualized expressions– a moment of the functioning of this ‘environment of the public’. Individuals observing individuals who in turn observe institutions and self-observe. Is there a system there, equivalent to what is called a ‘media system’? How to integrate, conceptually, the work of algorithmic governance of corporations, such as Facebook or Google, with the intense activity of thousands and millions of individuals, of very unequal and varied status, who daily constitute public spheres of unequal size and intensity?

In the digital platforms called ‘social networks’ (although it would be correct to say that it is on the platforms where these networks take place), the status arrangement of the actors involved is a problem of mediatization, as it involves classic institutional interactions, the emergence of new discursive operations to produce public attention, instances of communication that are unprecedented in the broadcasting era, but also mediatized systems of exchange between institutions and individuals and between individuals among themselves, which can be conditioning factors for political activity itself, as well as for the media. In this respect, life on platforms appears to us as the most complex materialization of the public as an environment of social systems (including socio-individual systems) that humankind has ever known.

Habermas once asserted that public space ‘cannot function except through the intermediary task of institutions capable of producing publicity potentially accessible to all members of the social body’ (2005: 346). Debates around the selectivity imposed by digital platforms refer back to this concern. If online connectivity is constrained by the algorithms governing the associations that users eventually form on the platforms, and that loop tends to produce closed worlds (local majorities, small-world communities) and if these worlds reproduce forms of actuality (local majorities, small-world communities, etc.), and if those ‘worlds’ reproduce parallel and segregated forms of news (or agendas), where else, outside

platforms, could these communities have access to a shared world of news? In addition, if the media, in order to insert itself into the circulation (conversation) within social networks, ends up using the very logic of the bubble filter as part of the conditions of its discourse production, this phenomenon ends up being reinforced.

So in the age of digital platforms, Habermas' statement on the necessity of the intermediary task of institutions comes back, but redoubled: it does not apply only to institutions that have traditionally operated as mediators between social actors and the political system, but also to platforms themselves, which have become, in this stage of mediatization, fundamental surfaces and administrators of public experience ■

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Tracing the Genealogy of the Concepts of Mediatization and Decalage in Eliseo Verón's Oeuvre

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“Ecrire parce que quelqu’un est mort est un genre. On appelle cela une nécrologie. Déjouer ce genre est réussir à produire une reprise.”

(Veron, 1982: 73)

Abstract

Focussing on the intrinsic amalgamation or interpenetration between the processes of mediatization, enunciation and *décalage* [semiotic gap or displacement, whereby meaning is produced by the fact that the very difference between the production and recognition/reception of any discourse is always out of joint], this paper argues that Eliseo Verón’s concept of mediatization attempts to account for a process of rupture in the ontological as well as the epistemological status of modern societies’ structuration. Its principal aim is to trace what is considered to be one of the major historic-theoretical theses that traverses Verón’s oeuvre, by means of exploring two genealogical lines of analysis: (a) on the one hand, mediatization as the condition of possibility for the emergence of a ternary way of thinking about language and meaning (i.e. the so-called ‘triadic models’ of the sign), and (b) conversely, the concept of *décalage* [semiotic lag or constitutive interval in meaning-making processes] between production and recognition—the constitutive kernel of meaning—is examined as the argumentative surface of emergence of Verón’s concept of ‘mediatization’. From a chronological viewpoint, however, the concept of *décalage* predates, in the course of his work, that of mediatization: the latter was, in effect, not elaborated as such until the 1980s and 1990s, whereas the former had been formulated, and further developed in the historical process of his thought, since at least the mid-1970s. The article argues that: (a) the concept of mediatization could only emerge from another concept (i.e. *décalage*) that was not only interdependent, but which also preceded it both logically and genealogically; and (b) Verón’s conception of language and meaning is also inseparable from that of mediatization.

Keywords

Mediatization, enunciation- social semiosis, Eliseo Verón , *décalage* [semiotic gap between production and recognition] , *écart* [distance, deviation]

'Homage' as genre: undoing it or turning sideways?

I would like to begin this essay with a reflection on 'homage' as a genre, a reflection that summons and recalls the tribute that Verón himself paid to Barthes on the occasion of the latter's death. His attempt to resist against writing a 'homage' text as the prescribed genre in such a context, and to undo its obituary game, as well as the impossibility of avoiding it, allows the Argentine semiologist to move away from the metalinguistic position of 'writing about', in order to be able to start a dialogue, a 'reprise' [resumption, restart, take up again]¹ of Barthes's discourse by means of re-elaborating what the latter's readings of the French semiologist had been able to produce in his own enunciation. This makes him reflect on the differential status of, on the one hand, (a) 'metalanguage' (i.e., the language of analysis and 'science') – that is, the analytical site where power is exercised over 'languages-object' [lenguajes objeto] – and on the other hand, (b) 'reprise/retoma' [resumption] as the discourse that resumes, reappropriates and recreates the discourse of the other (Barthes) that is taken up again by the subject (Verón) as knowledge (savoir, i.e. the site of writing [écriture]). Verón thus stands in the position of reader, and in this particular sense, in the position of interlocutor and disciple of Barthes: in Verón's 'homage', Barthes's texts are the opposite of a 'language-object' to be analysed from the viewpoint of a metalanguage. On the contrary, it is the power of Barthes's discourse, taken up by Verón, what is actualised or realised as knowledge in the 'homage'-discourse of his reader (Verón, 1982: 71-73).

The 'reprise' [resumption, reappropriation] is, ultimately, a recognition of the discourse of the other in what there is of the other in one's own

1. The French term *reprise*, used by Verón, refers to the resumption or recuperation of the other's discourse –the speech of another subject– in one's own discourse. In fact, Verón (1982) uses other expressions for actions linked to 'resume', for which he uses forms of the verb *reprendre* [take up again] that emphasize the dimensions of action rather than operation or effect of meaning: the present participle *en le discours prenant* (the discourse that takes up another, the discursive resumption and responsive reappropriation of the discourse of the other) and the past participle in *le discours repris* (the resumed or reappropriated speech).

discourse, an instance in which through reading, the more enunciatively marked the resumed discourse is, that is, the more of writing it has, the more likely it is to be realized as knowledge in one's (Verón's) own discourse. Homage is thus transformed from the obituary genre on the occasion of an interdiscursiveness that allows the death of a discursive instance (and its power) to be transformed into life through a certain knowledge inscribed in another subjectivity, in another enunciative instance: Verón then brings back to life a quote from 'Brecht as cited by Barthes: "*Il pensait dans d'autres têtes; et dans la sienne d'autres que lui pensaient*"' (Verón, 1982: 71). In this essay, I hope to be able to put into practice the effects that the singularity of the legacy that the reading of Verón, over the years, has made possible in my own enunciation, and this not only through the technical possibilities enabled in myself (the power of reading), but also, at the point in which the singularity that inhabits and at the same time exceeds reading itself as a technique: as in Brecht's phrase, that 'excess of reading' that names what of writing there is in knowledge- writing in knowledge or knowledge as writing- far from any metalinguistic operation (or any type of metalanguage).

It is then from stubborn reading and re-reading of Verón's work –with a systematicity comparable, I hope, to that which Verón (1982: 50/51) carried out on Barthes, Althusser or Lévi-Strauss– that the objective of this essay is to trace the master theoretical-historical thesis that runs through Verón's work, based on two genealogical lines: (a) on the one hand, mediatization –a socio-technological process– as a condition of possibility for the emergence of a non-binary thought on language and meaning, and (b) conversely, I postulate that the concept of 'decalage/ *desfase*' [semiotic lag or interval; meaning as radical out-of-jointness] between *production and recognition/reception* [*reconnaissance*]² –that

2. Traditional communication models sender/message/receiver, transmission/information/reception or encoding/message/decoding, have been re-elaborated by Verón as discourse production/circulation/ recognition. The receiving pole of the model (traditionally conceived as mere 'reception' of information) has been re-conceptualised as 'recognition' of other discourses in one's own ('*reconnaissance*' in his initial original work written in French; Verón 1987a), in order to avoid misconstruing it as mere passive, automatic reception of the meaning already encoded or as sheer consumption of a

is, the very constitutive kernel of meaning— operates as the emergent argumentative surface of Verón's concept of mediatization. In this second (b) reading hypothesis that I offer here, the semiotic notion of *décalage* operates as the argumentative-formal condition that made possible the formulation of the philosophical-technological and sociological concept of mediatization in the very discursive texture of his writings. Mediatization and engendering or production of meaning (*décalage*) must be read, then, as two inseparable conceptual processes (bound up by historical and theoretical solidarity) both in their genealogy within Verón's intellectual process—his oeuvre— and in the discursive places they occupy.

The *décalage* thesis as a socio-semiotic theory of discourse: a hinge between philosophy of language and media theory

A careful reading of Verón's work shows that one of his most original contributions to the field of ideas—conceived throughout his life since at least his texts from the 1970s—is his insistence that *the emergence of knowledge and forms of knowledge is the result of socio-technological processes and media discursive configurations that are never entirely external to them*. In a constant effort to always historicize the use and reworking of 'received', inherited concepts as well as the creation of his own (Verón 1979), this ubiquitous, implicit claim could be read as his general underpinning thesis whose insistence speaks deeply about the materialistic as well as 'formal' (though by no means immanent) nature of his work. In particular, in the case that concerns us in this essay, his texts seem to insist on the fact that technologies and their social configurations— the 'media'³— operate neither as **determining technologies** (te-

product, because in Verón's model '*recognition/reconnaissance*' suggests that there is always production of meaning in *both* poles of production *and* 'reception'/reading of concrete discourses. This takes us of course directly to the idea of '*repris*' [resumption or taking up the discourses of others' in one's own] discussed in this essay.

3. In its inseparable socio-technological sense of 'set consisting of a technology plus the social practices of production and appropriation of such technology'. (Verón 1994: 51); also see Verón (1988b).

chnological determinism) nor as ‘empirical contexts’ to which knowledge ‘is applied’ (and therefore it would be necessary to ‘adapt’ the theory as a response to those, in a sociological dialectic between technologies and knowledge). He maintains, on the contrary, that there is an inseparable amalgamation or intrinsic entanglement between technologies and knowledge. The different and diverse processes of mediatization that society goes through, far from being ‘technological facts’, empiricities or positivities, they are conditions of possibility, always already discursive, and therefore not primarily to do with perception, its phenomenologies and its sensoriums, but rather to do with knowledge. This epistemological-political order proper is that which, by encompassing the visible and the perceptible, makes the media and their technologies veritable epistemological machines that, beyond their ‘ideological blindness’, they actually shed light and bring to light. Finally, they operate as machines that, according to Deleuze, referring to the Foucauldian conception of power, even when they themselves are “mute and blind,” they nonetheless “let people see” and “make people talk” (Deleuze 1987: 64), that is, they “let know” [*hacen saber*] [let some kind of knowledge emerge, they produce knowledge]. The processes of mediatization, Verón seems to affirm, is already an epistemology, an epistemological condition of possibility and emergence not only of media theories but also, of the ways of thinking about language in modernity.

Décalage as a concept

It is possible to read in Verón’s work a genealogy of ‘*décalage*’ [semiotic lag] as a concept. Since the 1970s, Verón (1980 [1978]) has recurrently suggested that there be a gap, or lack of correspondence, between two realms: theories of language and meaning-making and socio-technological developments –the latter mediated by their respective imaginary or ‘ideological horizons’. In fact, Verón asks himself why it was necessary to have to wait for *almost an entire century between*, on the one hand, the supersession of the positivist theories of language (Verón 1987a: 11/86) –which in a certain philosophical tradition goes far back to the 19th cen-

ture in the writings of Frege and Peirce— and, on the other hand, the much later emergence of ternary thinking and conceptions about the sign, meaning and the construction of reality as a semiotic process. Why was it not until the late 1970s that Western and Westernised academia began to think about language and meaning beyond the two forms of idealism that had dominated thought (in the disciplinary areas of Semiotics, Linguistics and the Social Sciences), namely: on the one hand, the empiricist conception of meaning as represented in the use that American pragmatism made of Peirce (meaning as behaviour); on the other hand, a certain ‘binary’, abstracticizing, reifying and ahistorical Cartesianism practised by some variants of structuralism, or more precisely, certain structural-functionalist readings of Saussure. Why this ‘delay’ in (re) discovering, recognizing and elaborating on the Peircean interpretant or Frege’s *Sinn* [sense]? Why this delay in getting rid of the idealistic empiricism of the ‘referent’, that is, its confusion with the *operations* of referentiation and denotation? Why, in short, this time gap, this lag in the history of ideas, this interval in knowledge? Its temporal nature points, let us anticipate, to the (meta)historical process of mediatization.

Verón (1980: 27) offers an explanation in terms of ideology understood as the conditions of intelligibility of reality [‘lo real’; lit. ‘the real’]: it was the dominance, during most of the 20th century, of what he calls the “communicational ideology” [‘la ideología comunicacional’, ‘el comunicacionalismo’] proper to ‘mass democracies’ —affirms the Argentine semiotician— what made the “intellectual horizon” “historically incapable” of articulating, or even posing a ternary, non-linear question about language and meaning: “How are the operation-representation systems that construct reality [lit. ‘the real’] socially produced?” (Verón 1980: 27)— he asks himself. In Verón’s diagnosis, the main hurdle was an ideological one, that is to say, it was an obstacle of imaginary nature: namely a ‘communicationalist’ common sense was what obstructed the formulation of a ‘constructivist’ (instead of ‘representationalist’) and materialist (instead of empiricist) conception of language and meaning. Such ‘communicationalism’ ideology was also reflected, in the corresponding specialised academic fields by means of most of the structural-functionalist readings of Saussure through the lens of the concept of ‘code’ (Verón

1987a: 80). The difficulties of the passage from such a conception to a threshold of theoretical symbolization –to be acknowledged much later by the academic institution and the critical intellectual voices of the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ of the 1980s onwards– could only be overcome long after the writings of Frege and Peirce. It was only from the discursive, experiential and empirical confrontation with the new status of reality, which was made possible by media technologies, that said communicational-instrumental ideology –so characteristic of the ‘first foundation’ of Linguistics as well as the onset of semiology in the 20th century– could cease to be an ‘epistemological obstacle’ for the sciences of language.

So far, Verón’s sharp diagnosis; now his innovative thesis. This historical gap or delay was not the result of an internal academic evolution, of an ‘autonomous’ development of the sciences of language, but a question of technology and conditions of intelligibility. In other words, it was the result of transformations typical of the ‘technological development of mass-mediated discourses and forms of expression’ (Verón 1980). In this regard, Verón does not look for an answer in metaphysics, critical theory or “reality”. On the other hand, the Argentine semiologist offers us four pathways, four access routes to this new philosophy of language: (a) Latin American soap operas (Verón 1980 [1978]); (b) the public and private circulation of photographs (Verón 1994); (c) the printed press (Verón 1987a: 147/148; 1988b; 1999); and (d) the televisual interfaces between political discourse and the discourse of news information (Verón 1983, 1992, 1984, 2001). It is at the level of the ‘discursive functioning’ [*funcionamiento discursivo*] of these signifying media materialities that we can find the most revealing examples of this epistemological leap, this radical caesura in the conditions of intelligibility of social reality, and therefore, the conditions that make possible the emergence of modern conceptions and theories of language.

Décalage and mediatization

We can now ask ourselves, where did Verón’s concept of mediatization stem from within the intellectual trajectory of his work? I postulate that

‘mediatization’ was not just a result triggered by the empirical challenges of his research on the media, but a conceptual development of his previous concept of *décalage* [lag] or gap between technologies and knowledge –that is, the level of awareness that a society has of its own self-production, the theories that it is capable of giving itself and the debates that these generate. In this regard, I wish to argue that Verón’s notion of mediatization as a historical meta-process was already operating in his 1980s texts, even if not explicitly termed as ‘meta’.

Mediatization [*Mediatisierung*] conceived as a meta-process as well as a core analytical tool for media research within a systematic theory is a concept that emerged in Northern European countries around the mid-1990s onward (Krotz 2014, 2017a; Averbek-Lietz 2013, 2020; Livingstone 2009). It differs from another close concept – ‘complementary’ and sometimes partially superimposed but not identical (Averbek-Lietz 2013)– that acquired centrality in social and cultural theories of communication in Latin America, Spain, France and Great Britain since the 1980s: *mediation*. Verón’s concept of mediatization- transnationally produced between France and Latin America –thus emerges within a context *already established* in terms of ‘cultural and social mediation’ on both sides of the Atlantic. In such context dominated by the discourse on cultural mediation, Verón’s ‘mediatization’ introduces a key difference: namely, the dimension of ‘meta-process’ –according to which the very processes of social mediation –media or interpersonal, virtual or face-to-face– are always already subjected to ‘historical meta-processes of mediatization’ (Averbek-Lietz 2013: 188). Verón’s mediatization understood as ‘meta-process’ points to a notion whose genealogy should be sought in his early works from the mid-1960s. For instance, his notion of ‘media environment’ [*medioambiente mediático*] in his analysis of the Di Tella happenings revealed how such an environment deconstructs, makes collapse, or at least problematises, the commonsensical binary medium/context as a clear-cut opposition (Verón 1967). Those early analyses on Avant-garde artistic experimentation with the media already contained a concept of mediatization in the making, which was close to the one generally accepted in the 21st century: those ‘processes [...] of living with the media and communication through the media’, so that social worlds

—both social practices and their meanings— are ‘inseparably entangled’ with the media (Averbeck-Lietz 2013: 187).

Verón’s concept of mediatization was thus historically capable of opening up the socio-cultural debates on mediation to a dimension that exceeded them: by going beyond any dichotomy between nature and culture, ‘mediatization’ introduced a problem which was open to the environmental world of an ecology of communication. Verón’s mediatization is thus a category that points, ultimately, to a philosophy of technology — and not simply to a socio-anthropological approach within cultural studies (Martín Barbero, García Canclini). This opening up and consequential broadening of the concept of mediatization has been pointed out by Averbeck-Lietz (2013: 187) for its North European formulations. She lucidly identifies this crucial difference in scope as the Gordian knot of the fundamental separation and divergence between two concepts and academic traditions that otherwise would have much in common: that of ‘mediation’ within the Latin American and French traditions, and that of ‘mediatization’ as formulated by the academic discourse of the Northern European countries. Averbeck-Lietz does not acknowledge, however, an equivalent conceptual formulation in Verón’s mediatization. From my point of view, Verón’s ‘mediatization’ exceeds the narrower parameters of social constructivism typical of social mediation theories, and instead, is closer to Latour’s concept according to which human beings are inseparable from technologies, insofar as he emphasises ‘amalgamation’ and the ‘mutual saturation between technologies and social issues’ rather than their separability as presupposed in models based on forms of determination society/technologies, be them socio-constructionist or technologicistic (Latour 2000, cited by Averbeck-Lietz 2013: 182). It is necessary to clarify that this technological dimension is theorized as just an addition amongst the various aspects within the phenomena of socio-cultural mediation studied by Latin American cultural studies (i.e. popular culture genres, religious practices, art, etc.) in the new millennium, namely, the “[specifically] technological aspect” of mediation (Averbeck-Lietz 2013: 182/183).⁴ In Verón, on the contrary, mediatization is not

4. Averbeck-Lietz (2013: 182-183) translates as follows the element of mediatization

simply one aspect or additional dimension amongst others, but acquires an instituting status –simultaneously ontological and epistemological– of social reality: ‘*without mediatization* there would be no human societies’ (Verón 2013: 299). The media do not just represent and organize individual and social experience; most importantly, they also institute relationships and social worlds to the extent that they provide them with a reflexive –although not necessarily critical– awareness of their own (self) production.

‘Mediatization’ as *décalage* in Verón is, thus, not just yet another aspect, or surface manifestation, within deeper more encompassing processes of cultural mediation (e.g., mass-mediatized, or digitally mediatized texts as yet another manifestation of old, traditional popular culture genres, where the latter would provide form and content, that is, the deep cultural matrices of ‘*real* mediation’ defined only in the realm of culture)⁵. Approaching somewhat the notion of ‘social meta-process’ (Averbeck-Lietz 2013: 178/179; 187/188) quite interestingly akin to the North European sociological tradition, it points more precisely to a (constitutive) condition that is found at the very basis of meaning in its ontological dimension proper, that is, it is an operation that opens up the intellectual horizon of intelligibility by making *language* (or the *discursive*) opaque, or ‘visible’ and intelligible in its thirdness –and not only by shedding light upon the relationship between the media and society. This is because mediatization does not lead the analyst to ‘codes’ or a set of instituting rules, but rather to a network of embedded meaning-making practices and texts, and such radical embeddedness of intertextual meaning is what accounts for, but at the same time, makes evident *how* social

present in Latin American theories of mediation produced in the field of cultural studies in the last decade: ‘The medium is not simply a vehicle or translator of existing representations but an institution in its own right and way. For instance, the ritual and theatrical routines of politics are unthinkable without media’.

5. Please see my discussion on how the notion of medium/media as External materiality in mediatization introduces a new dimension to the traditional opposition form/content, as well as to the modern and post-modern privileging of (aesthetic, cultural) ‘form’ over ‘content’ (Olivera 2011).

meanings *are produced* as a result of operations that are detectable not at the level of abstract rules but at the level of always already mediatized 'discourses'. In fact, Verón, in the historical evolution of his work, rejected almost from the beginning the apparent opposition between the inherited notion of (virtual) 'codes' and that of (actual) contexts as something 'added' –this was his discussion with Linguistic Pragmatics– and already in the 1960s opted for that of 'message' as a starting point for the analysis of always authentic or attested corpuses. The study of 'messages' was, in this author, from the beginning of his research and even before the more sophisticated concept of 'discourse' emerged, an exploration of 'multiple inter-coded determinations' (Verón 1974a [1973]). Even before explicitly breaking with the concept of code, in "*Para una semiología de las operaciones translingüísticas*" (1974) [1973] Verón, inspired by Hjelmslev (Dalmasso 1994: 37, 40), Eco and Bakhtinian translinguistics via Kristeva, manages to depart from the 'received' informational-communicational notion of analogical and digital codes. As early as 1973, he placed the object of study of an 'operational' (opérateur, Culioli) semiology –understood at that point as 'Translinguistics'– at the level of 'social discourses' as 'signifying bundles' [*paquetes significantes*] or 'textual practices' (neither codes nor, strictly speaking, texts), that is to say, it had to do with operations in which a multiplicity of 'codes' intervene *simultaneously*, and defines them at the operational level, that is, at the level of the type of meaning-investing operations that they generate, and not at the level of units or abstract rules to be '*applied*', one by one as it were, for 'decoding' purposes. Recurrently throughout his career and in the most diverse texts throughout his oeuvre, Verón insists on this method of always starting from the concrete 'messages' (first) or from the 'discourses' (later) as heterogeneous 'signifying bundles', to then be able to arrive at *something else* to do with the operational order, that is to say, the ensemble of 'production grammars' –*historically constructed by concrete messages/discourses*⁶ (Verón 1994: 51) and not by abstract codes

6. Verón (1994: 51) has expressed this historicity of the operating rules, as well as their immanence in the messages / discourses, in an eloquent way: it is only the 'messages' that construct the operating rules 'in the course of time' [my translation].

to be 'reconstructed' by the analyst: this reconstruction has always been the main objective and interest of his socio-semiotics.

Verón (1994) himself reflects on this way of proceeding in his historicization of Semiotics as an academic discipline; this is particularly evident in his theoretical reconstruction of the history of Visual Semiotics, taking as exemplary cases Metz's epistemological developments in film semiotics and Barthes's work on photography. It is in the early Barthesian paradox of a 'message without a code' that *photography would lead the semiotic discipline* to become aware about the unproductiveness and futility of the deadlock-driven notion of code, whilst at the same time recognizing the need for a theory of discourse that accounts for photography's status as 'message': the paradox, as Verón (1994: 50) evaluates distancing himself somewhat from the first Barthes [1964] (Barthes 1972), is not actually a paradox as such. It is, on the contrary, only 'apparent', because 'messages' are never produced from codes, or in other words, codes, *do not actually exist* behind, underneath or before any 'message', in any discourse. This does not imply, however, that there are no operational rules (Verón's '*grammars*'), even at the existential-indexical level of photography: semiotic rules or 'grammars' for the production of meaning—that is, different irreducible levels of meaning albeit all functioning together as 'signifying bundles' inseparable from language and its operations of differentiation—rather than a silent phenomenological encounter between an embodied subject and an object. The photographic discourse would only make such *non-existence* (of the codes tout court), blatantly evident. There are always, however, even in photography, historical, formal and material conditions, that is, generative and recognition rules or, in other words, discourses: the Barthesian concepts of '*punctum*' and '*studium*' have been read by Verón, as we shall see, not as phenomenological, but rather as pointing to the very of production and recognition of photographic meaning, that is, taking us beyond themselves toward a theory of discourse: the meaning of the photographic punctum is established, enunciatively, in its reception.

Verón's 'mediatization' points, thus, to a (meta)process of *decalages* that connects and, at the same time, distances socio-technological and

epistemological developments (knowledge), which results in them being historically out of joint. This connection is inscribed and can be read at the level of the 'intellectually visible' or intelligible: that is, it is readable as a displacement in the horizon of intelligibility of a historical era, as those very peculiar clefts that technologies and the media are capable of opening up within, and beyond, what is visible and intelligible/thinkable in a particular era. In Foucauldian and Deleuzean terms, these moments of mediatization leaps or caesuras in the horizon of social 'reality' are readable as intellectual chasms, cracks and gaps opened up within the stratified orders of the visible, the sayable and the thinkable, albeit from without them because they do not but effectuate in themselves the non-stratified diagrams of power within a specific historical era (Deleuze 1987). That is to say, not only at the level of the sensible but also of the intelligible, of knowledge: the intellectually intelligible is inseparable here from the perceptible by the senses. Since the early 1960s, Verón seems to have been distancing himself from a certain 'phenomenological idealism' according to which the order of perception is extralinguistic, prelinguistic or 'silent', insofar as it reduces meaning to so-called 'phenomena of the lived body' and interprets language and meaning making *unilaterally* in the light of 'inter-corporal bodily communication' (Verón 1962: 30).

The *décalage* as a figure of speech: a 'discomfort from birth'

The term *décalage* runs through Verón's oeuvre not only as a concept but as a figure of great rhetorical force.⁷ Suggestive and hermeneutically productive trope, it is precisely a *décalage* [gap, mismatch], a fundamental lack of correspondence, that which 'inhabits', from its birth, the relationship between, on the one hand, semiotics (as a new autonomous discipline) and, on the other hand, its objects, as a kind of birth 'malaise' or discontent. Verón (1994: 46/47) identifies this in Barthes's semiotic

7. For a lucid and fine analyses of the importance and value of the use of tropes, particularly metaphors, in communication theories (ecological and mediatization approaches in Media Studies), see Carlón 2015.

works on photography as a disproportionate mismatch between title and text, between discipline and objects, or as a 'symptom' that becomes 'syndrome' in the 'semiology of the image', since it is especially verifiable in the latter. The *décalage* [a generalised mismatch] ceases to be just an abstract and empirically grounded concept within a theory, to become a figure, a symptom, or in other words, interpretable material in the very texture of Verón's argumentative discourse with all the rhetorical and critical force proper to the essayist, the critic and polemicist that undoubtedly inhabited his persona (with all due respect to his identity and work as social scientist).

The relationships and ties of the most diverse nature –between technological developments and the history of knowledge, between discipline and objects, between production and recognition of any given discourse, between enunciation and act of enunciation– are thus characterized as *décalage*, a kind of master meta-metaphor has its origin in a 'lag', that is, literally, in a *temporal mismatch*: 'the *décalage* [lag or interval] between production and recognition –Verón (1988a: 182/183) sums it up– expresses only the temporal dimension' [my translation].

The figure of the *décalage* [lag or interval] serves the purpose, in Verón's theoretical framework, of temporalizing the spatial notion of meaning as distance, and remind us of the historicity of its own conditions of formulation: the temporalizing figure of the *décalage* retrieves, in its inner core, mediatization as a historical 'meta-process'. Face to face interpersonal interactions eloquently demonstrate this: in the latter, it is precisely the time lag and the corresponding mismatch in meaning that gets elided or effaced –remains unnoticed or 'invisible' as the semiologist puts it (Verón 1987a: 147/148). It is this erasure of the temporal difference in the 'immediacy' of face-to-face communication what would explain the choice of the term *décalage* production/recognition – rather than *écart* [distance, deviation, interval] also used in some instances (Verón 1979)– to define mediatization, following thus a conceptual and rhetorical strategy that turns spatially ostensible its character as a (meta)process or 'meta-relationship' [*meta-rapport*] (Bateson cited by Verón 1988a: 180): it is precisely in its '*meta*' dimension where its

historicity and temporality lies. In the contemporary Northern European literature on mediatization, it is precisely this dimension of *metaprocess* what points to historical change and inter-media change and long-term tendencies as primary interests in mediatization research (Krotz 2014, 2017a, 2017b; Krotz, Despotovic & Kruse 2017), even though mediatization research had always been interested in social change (Schulz 2004). This historicity ingrained in the meta-processual nature of mediatization was absent in previous approaches that sought to account for the media as agents for social and cultural change, such as media logics and the social constructivist tradition (Krotz 2014; Hepp 2020: 7/12; 56/99).

In this context, the passage to mediatization is not neutral insofar as it implies (insurmountable) scale alterations that result in an immediately evident *rupture of scale* between conditions of production and conditions of recognition, because *in the same act that it breaks* the apparent sameness (in meaning) or alleged continuity between production and reception, *it makes it visible*. It is in this sense that such an ostensible emergence to consciousness of the rupture intrinsic to meaning is technological-political rather than merely sensory, ‘physical’ or phenomenological. The passage from media societies to mediatized societies in Verón’s work is therefore not just a change in the sensorium, but a veritable historical ‘*meta-process*’ at the level of power-knowledge: ‘Communication technologies may be characterized as *scale-breaking devices* (or scale alteration devices) within the configuration of the mental spaces of society’ (Verón 2001: 106/107).

Although Verón insists that ‘the third term’ (Peirce, Frege, Bateson) introduces the dimension of temporality and process in the social semiosis (Verón 1987a; 1988a), insofar as the former enables the latter to develop in time and in so doing, to attain historicity, in his model of *decalage/lag* the kernel of meaning is an *écart*, an insurmountable distance—even in so-called live, ‘real time’—between production and recognition, a spatially configured and conceived difference. Meaning is, in fact, understood as a ‘network [made up] of distances’ (Verón 1987a: 131/136). The notion of *écart* thus names, first and foremost, a distance, a spatial interval, a ‘deviation’ (Verón 1979), a dislodging between conditions, in-

stances or 'places' of meaning production, a fundamentally spatial mismatch: with *écart* what is emphasised is *distance*, understood as a sort of meta-*decalage* interposed 'between two [fatally irreducible] *decalages*' (production / recognition) (Verón 1988a: 180). Despite his theoretical statements that explicitly privilege the temporal and dynamic dimensions, the emphasis granted, at the time of his concrete analyses, to the spatial dimensions in the early formulations of his analytical model – conditions, positions of the discourses, centrality of the spatializing notions of 'object' and of 'observer' – may perhaps be read as an effect of some slightly deterministic aspects already inscribed in a model of production of meaning that will later be revised and reworked, as we shall see, by Verón himself.

Mediatization: scale alterations, time-space breaks and mental spaces

Already at the turn of the millennium, his conceptualization of 'mental spaces' (Verón 1999, 2001) is used to resituate and refine his spatial-temporal conception of meaning in mediatization as *decalage*/lag by introducing another spatial concept that emphasizes the idea of displacement and movement, rather than previous more static conceptualisations, such as, for instance, mediatization as mere collapse of differences through equating binary oppositions (Tabachnik 1993) and making their terms equivalent (e.g. his 'deconstruction' of reality/fiction in Verón 1980), or the construction of mediatized semiosis as a necessarily 'parallel' world that cuts off the individual/private from the collective/public, without any possible passage between individual experiences and the collective development of the public present constructed as 'current affairs' [*la actualidad publica*] (Verón 1987b [1981]). *Mental spaces*, instead, offers a more dynamic and articulatory perspective on this matter: they have to do with a 'segregation of worlds', which (historically) reconfigure or 're-group' mental spaces and their 'semiotic components'. Such a concept is perhaps closer and more akin to Norbert Elias's notion of '*figuration/s*', an analytical tool that has become so central and fruitful

to the current Northern European understanding of ‘mediatization’, particularly in the German academic context (Hepp 2020: 100/175; Hepp, Breiter and Hasebrink 2018; Averbeck-Lietz 2021; Hepp and Hasebrink 2014).

If *mediatization* had been defined from the very outset as an insurmountable ‘difference of scale’ (Verón 1987a: 147) in the production of meaning –determined by the technological conditions that interpose, as space-time breaks or gaps, between production and recognition– this process will be re-elaborated in the new millennium as a movement of displacement (from within the semiotic network): mental spaces will now be, for Verón, configurations of trajectories. By historicizing Verón’s conceptualization of mediatization, an important evolution can be noted: if in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it referred to a ‘disruption or derailment vector’ (Tabachnik 1993) that marked, either ‘deconstruction’ understood as mere overturning of oppositions between terms conceived as ‘equivalent’ or non-hierarchical through media de-contextualization (Verón 1980 [1978]; Olivera 2017) or a collapse of differences in a single space (Verón 1984), or as separation and impossibility of passage between two irreducible orders of experience (individual/collective) (Verón 1987b [1981]) –all these formulations reveal the aftertaste of a certain binarism– two decades later, the concept begins to acquire a more dynamic and effectively temporal meaning: *mediatization* as that operating process of displacements and ‘segregation’ of worlds (Verón 1999, 2001) that constantly ‘regroup’ both mental spaces and their semiotic components, in the Althusserian manner of topological (re)distribution, but without the need for a distanced, metalinguistic ‘observer’ perspective that only from the discourse of science as the privileged language game (Verón 1997, 1974b) can become aware and make sense of the non-linearity of the production of meaning in the course of time, that is, its constitutive temporality, unpredictability, uncertainty and indeterminacy (Verón 1999: 187/189).

The centrality of indexical semiosis operations to mediatization processes⁸ –one of Verón’s ‘discoveries’– is what leads to overcoming the one-

8. This has been researched and reflected upon in detail in terms of the media capture of

dimensional implications implicit in the traditional concept of ‘representation’ as mimesis, insofar as it presupposes a flattening or reduction of the social to the (bidimensional) status of the plane: that of analogy and firstness in semiotics; that of the semantic component, in linguistics and logics. It is precisely *indexicality* –i.e., enunciation and the dimension of the body ‘as operator’ (Verón 1978; 1987a: 137/150; 2013)– the dynamizing dimension that allows displacements and passages across different mental spaces, connections and (re)configurations of worlds. Such movements can only be grasped by making conceptually effective the temporal dimension of semiosis –its radical indeterminacy and uncertainty– once the emphasis is placed on the trajectories of meaning that are not necessarily anchored in a discourse that has been analytically posed in the relatively determining position of ‘object’. In this way, although it remains true that the scale alterations (or ‘ruptures of scale’) that have characterized mediatization since the 19th century, mass-scale printed press continues to render intelligible meaning-making processes as radical *décalages/gaps*, as the insurmountable distance between production and recognition of discourses. In short, it is the key indexical operations –enunciation and the gaze as the fundamental symbolic forces for the constitution and institution of collectives– what also allows us to think, towards the end of the 20th century, passages and connections in the processes of production of meaning, now that the latter can be understood as *both* displacements *and* insurmountable distances.

Décalage and enunciation: ‘the order of the body’ and indexicality

Why are indexicality, the body [*l’ordre du corps*] and the process of enunciation so central to Verón’s concept of mediatization? From the point of view of the emergence of the concept in his oeuvre, Verón (2001: 105) himself admits that the ‘conjunction of mediatization and corporeality’,

the real or ‘presentización’ by Carlón (2006), also commented upon by Valdettaro (2015).

far from being accidental, was initially posed and further elaborated throughout his work as a veritable twin challenge, or a single 'two-sided problem'. In fact, the concept of mediatization stems precisely from his studies on the 'signifying body' [*corps signifiant/cuerpo significante*] as a 'space-time scale break or rupture' (Verón 2001: 106). However, it was not a question to do with either the 'images of the body', the sensorial 'perceptions of the embodied subject' or the 'representations of the body' –that is, the iconic/analogical or phenomenological or semantic dimensions respectively– what enabled Verón to rework and elaborate on his concept of mediatization; it was rather the specifically indexical order of enunciation instead. '*Enunciation*' and '*body*' are thus at the very basis of Verón's concept of mediatization. There are both historical and semiotic reasons that explain this genealogy. These have to do with the nature of the 'signifying matter' [*materia/s significante/s*] in which the enunciation process is inscribed: it took decades well into the 20th century –Verón (2001: 67/86) reminds us– before enunciation could be understood and analysed by linguisticians in written texts. Even with the mediatization of the printed press since the beginning of the 19th century, 'enunciation' could not be conceived by Linguistics as a discipline. It was only once the other 'signifying registers (the image, the voice, the body)' had been mediatized (Verón 2001: 78) that the process of enunciation could achieve that opaque, readable visibility called 'evidence': this would be the lesson of enunciation theory, the fact that 'there is no production of meaning without staging [lit. *mise-en-scene*]' (Verón 2001: 77). Nevertheless, this process is not that simple, since the awareness of such staging and the visibility of the enunciation processes depend on complex belief mechanisms, in such a way that mediatization is defined, on the one hand, as the visibility of the processes through which enunciation gets staged, insofar as it opens up to the consciousness of the social actors involved by reaching the status of 'evidence'. On the other hand, and at the same time, it is also defined by of the accompanying disavowal of those very same staging processes in the name of a certain 'enunciative transparency'.⁹

9. I have analysed this double movement of visibility of the enunciative process (including

If the process of mediatization has primarily to do with conditions rather than with content, its field of historical emergence as well as theoretical and empirical analysis is played out at the level of enunciation (and not of statements), or in other words, in a dimension to do with '*the order of the body*' [*l'ordre du corps*] (*of images or texts*) rather than that of the images (of the body). Mediatization led Verón to face up squarely to a field of clearly indexical, enunciative and political problems that Verón (2001: 110) managed to succinctly articulate in the title of one of his books: *El cuerpo de las imágenes* ['The body of images']. The axis of a problem thus defined is situated not at the level of the representations of the body; rather, it has primarily to do with the 'non-linguistic enunciative conditions of mediatization'.

Although it is true that in (face-to-face) 'public enunciation', 'the act of enunciation (i.e., the locutionary act) and the act of reception coincide temporally', it is at the enunciation level that they always differ even when empirically ('in real time') both acts match. This difference between production and recognition –located within the (semiotic) process of enunciation and not in its (empirical) act¹⁰– is precisely what names the *decalage/lag* that produces meaning. Verón's distinction between enunciation and act of enunciation¹¹, that is, between discursive

a certain ostentation of its technological device) and the disavowal of this same device in the name of a certain 'sincerity' and 'unmediated' truthfulness of its statements, based on a corpus of the Argentine television of the early 1990s. My theorization was in terms of aporia between evidence and denial: between the ostentation of the enunciative-technological television device and its simultaneous denial in the order of discourse (in which journalists and presenters 'erase' its own enunciation, the staging and the technical mediation of the medium as a 'guarantee' of a certain transparency and authenticity of the communication). Cf. Olivera (1995-1996).

10. If the act of enunciation is empirical, the enunciation process can be characterized as semiotic insofar as it is a discursive process, that is, both *material* and *formal*.

11. Verón and Sigal (1986: 127/128) criticize the theory of language acts as an 'empiricist' insofar as, by not distinguishing between (a) enunciation as a "theoretical concept that defines a particular way of analysing mechanisms of discursive production" (through the construction of the discursive figures of the enunciator, the addressee and their enunciative relationships), and (b) the "act of enunciation" as the empirical event of producing a statement "in a given situation", use the term "enunciation" to refer to the latter type of acts.

enunciation and the locutionary acts that convey it (through the actual production of an utterance), is nothing but another way of referring to the *decalage* or mismatch in meaning, and it is at this point that Verón's (1987a: 153/225; 1983: 100/102) socio-semiotics differs fundamentally from the empiricism of both speech act theory and Linguistic Pragmatics (Austin, Searle, Grice) as well as from their French reception (cf. Ducrot) (Verón 1973: 261/265; Sigal y Verón 1986: 127/128). Notwithstanding their obvious differences in their respective underpinning theories of signification, one might claim that Verón's approach to enunciation through *decalage* is somewhat closer to the Derridian conception of meaning as *difference* [difference]. His project of a 'theory of the activity of language [*activité langagiere*, Culioli]' points, already in 1973 (Verón: 1973)¹² precisely to his distance from that empiricist idealism of speech act theory and Linguistic Pragmatics which consists in reductively conceiving the performative dimension –the action and power of discourse, its singular 'agency'– as, on the one hand, 'acts' conventionalized by ideal conditions and, on the other hand, as individual instances of a 'speech' where the social functions only as a convention extrapolated from non-attested corpuses, which have been invented by the analyst and interpreted according to the normative linguistic intuition imposed (onto those corpuses) by the linguist himself/herself (Verón 1973: 264).

Verón's socio-semiotic analyses of enunciation, by contrast, have always sought to study the performativity and power of discourses –i.e. the 'perlocutionary acts' according to ordinary language philosophy– as an intrinsic dimension of any language activity [*activité langagiere*] which has to do with meaning effects [*effets du sens*] that are always variable, situated, and distant or deferred¹³ as they manifest themselves

12. In the issue of the journal *Communications* that he himself coordinated in 1973 on 'Linguistics and Sociology', about the respective approaches, trajectories and common concerns on the part of each discipline and in relation to the growing relevance of the notion of 'discourse' in the social sciences.

13. The distance of the effects of meaning, foreshadowed but never entirely contained or 'conventionalized' in production, that is, the power of discourses that can only be realized and readable as distance, is one of the focuses of the analysis in *Perón o muerte* (Sigal and Verón 1986). In this study, meaning as spatial distance (and time lag) materialises

in effectively attested or authentic corpuses (that is, naturally occurring discourses studied in their real discursive and situational contexts). Language as an 'activity' thus alludes, in Verón's theory, to a game whose constitutive rules are, from the very beginning, *discursive*, and therefore *social*. Consequently, such 'discursive grammars' should not be treated as normative rules imposed by any innate intuition, consciousness or universal 'linguistic competence' that the analysts usually tend to impose on the so-called 'extralinguistic element' (when producing examples in order to demonstrate a hypothesis and build a theory).

Such a conceptualisation of 'enunciation' plays a central role in the process of mediatization inasmuch as it is the instance that *specifies* the logics of the *decalage*—that is, the process of mediatization *specifies* and historicizes the logics proper to meaning, the logics of meaning itself. Indeed, if 'the spaces of mediatization testify to the advance of enunciation over the *enonce* [enunciated statement]' (Verón 1984: 17 [cf. Verón 2001: 21]), it is precisely in this advance of the enunciation process that the passage from 'media societies' to 'mediatized societies' is realised and verified. However, this advance that brings enunciation to the foreground must be understood not as the contemporary obvious proliferation of (empirical) acts of enunciation offered by the media, since there

at the moment of circulation of the discourse: the obvious spatial distance between production and recognition (absence of body but strong discursive presence) that Perón's exile imposes on his discourse, and the multiple readings that such real distance determines within the Argentine political space. In the third part of the book, Sigal and Verón (1986) analyse these effects of meaning as the moment in which the distance of meaning is evidenced as an instance of difference and variation (from an enunciative economy defined by invariants) in a particular case of the recognition of the leader's speech: how the discursive strategies adopted by the Peronist Youth can be read as a particular and situated case of a set of possible meaning effects. The speeches of the JP are only legible as distance and difference: not being 'contained' in the leader's speech, they are at the same time unthinkable outside of the 'Peronist enunciation', that is to say within Peronism understood not as a doctrine (or set of statements or ideological contents) but as a 'discursive device' characterized by a set of enunciative invariants (operative regularities - such as, for example, the intransferability of the leader's word or its character as the only source of legitimacy of the justicialist discourse and of all Peronist enunciators including JP - analysed, 'in production', in the first part of the book).

have always been acts of enunciation (and media). On the contrary, the 'advance' or 'progress' that Verón speaks about has to do with displacements occurring on the referentiation operations, that is, at the level of the very regime of production of reality that we experience in the 'new' mediatized societies. It is about conceiving the referential meaning no longer as the result of syntactic-semantic operations –to which its pragmatic dimension would be added from without as a *further* determination of 'external contextual actualisation', but as an effect of meaning of a specifically discursive, enunciative operation called 'referentiation'. This leads to a fundamental rupture or caesura in the role played out by the enunciation process itself –i.e. the figures being constructed and (re)shaped in every discourse and not the empirical, merely actualizing act of production of an utterance– a rupture that ultimately stems from the *mediatization* processes: the referent becomes increasingly visible as just a mere effect of referentiation operations, within which the pacts of trust proper to reading contracts with the media (Verón 1987b, 1983, 2004; Escudero-Chauvel 1997) determine the social existence of such referents, or in other words, the conditions of connotation determine the denoted meaning (Verón 1982; Colon Zayas 2013) as a referenced object, which is ultimately founded on enunciative pacts. This is what leads Verón (1980: 27) to argue that, with mediatization, there is an increasing awareness that 'reality is nothing other than the discourse that enunciates it' and hence the need for enunciative pacts based on (intersubjective) relations of trust and belief between enunciators and recipients.

While retaining his focus on the problems of enunciation and mediatization, Verón (1999) would later criticize, however, his notion of *décalage* or lag (between production and recognition) as a point at which the inconsistency of his entire model would be expressed. The notion of *decalage*/lag had allowed him to study, of course, the production of meaning as displacement of the (dynamic) object through the semiotic network: meaning is thus conceived as 'spatial' movement of an object in the social semiosis. This was what he had formulated throughout the years in terms of 'relative indeterminacy of meaning' or '(partially determined) field of possible meaning effects' (Sigal y Verón 1986; Verón 1988a:

180): an analytical model achieved by means of a productive synthesis between, on the one hand, materialistic and socially grounded models, even if somehow deterministic (Marx), and on the other hand, the fundamental indeterminacy of meaning (Peirce, Bateson) that would only become visible 'with time' (Verón 1988a: 182/183). The resulting relative indeterminacy of meaning is due not only to the discursive *mismatch* between production and recognition, but also to the radical irreducibility and *non-passage* between the three different orders of semiosis (i.e. iconic, indexical, symbolic) (Verón 1987: 145/146). This productive synthesis would later be shown as a 'hybrid' and 'imprecise' model that proves insufficient to analyse discursive games other than scientific knowledge (Verón 1999). Thus, at the turn of the millennium, he formulates a new 'proto-theory' of the observer in which he recognizes that there is thirdness both in the viewpoint of the social actor and in that of the observer: in this 'proto-theoretical' revision, the equivalence or coincidence in thirdness depends, for the social actors themselves (the non-observers), on their belief [*la croyance*].

In an attempt to overcome his notion of *decalage*/lag –perhaps rather too determined by the object and by referentiation– Verón highlights the importance of *writing as 'reverse'* (something like the flipside of meta-language) that is not only constitutive but vital for the discourse of science itself. Thus, he admits having learnt from Barthes that it is not the metalinguistic or 'terrorist' position of science –if we follow the Barthesian hyperbole– but the site of writing what actually enabled Verón to occupy his epistemological position of observer: 'being out of the game', or the fact that 'one cannot, at the same time, play a game and watch it' (Verón 1997). It was also this 'turning sideways' that is so characteristic of the enunciative *reprise* [resumption], what made possible for him to fulfil his dream, throughout his life and work, of exploring it. This "being out of the game" –Barthes would have taught him– is not science: *it is writing [écriture]*.

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**Requiem for Simulacrum:
The Triumph of the Fetish in a
Hyper-Mediated Society**

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Abstract

Image and reality have always had a conflict-filled relation. They still chase each other within the contemporary imaginary although in ever new forms directly resulting from the current media ecosystem. Nevertheless, the realm of digital image is still apparently trapped in a well-defined position that this essay intends to clarify by overcoming the concept of *simulacrum* and probing a new interpretative hypothesis connected to what could be defined as a visual domain of the *fetish* in the hyper-mediated contemporary society.

In sum, this essay aims to relate the contemporary imagery to the domain of the fetish rather than to that of the simulacrum. The fetish prevails today, the visual paradigm of presentation, the fetishization of the visual experience: indexes prevail on icons, traces outdo signs, seduction inhibits interpretation, signifiers hide signifieds. It is the triumph of the fetish in the age of mediatization. We could say, once more, that the medium has obliterated the message and turned it into a fetish.

Keywords:

Hyper-mediated society, simulacrum, fetish, contemporary imagery



Image and reality have always had a conflict-filled relation. The conflict originates in the ancient debate about iconism, first introduced by Plato in *Republic and Cratilo*. Over the centuries, the entire philosophical tradition has conceived this issue as the opposition – presented *in nuce* by the Greek philosopher – between a faithful, icaistic, mimetic reflection of reality and a representation relying on abstractive, schematic, dissimulating, illusory processes. On one hand a mimetic/mirror-like relation, in itself analogical, *continuous* with reality, in an attempt to grab it as it unfolds. On the other hand, a reliance on theoretical models and abstractive schemes that create an illusion of reality, *another* reality, rebuilt, represented, modelled, digitalized, *discontinuous*, almost an estrangement from reality itself.

More recently, such double interpretation mode has been the object of an intense theoretical-speculative survey trying to clarify the need to define a new status of the image in the age of digital reproduction – an obvious paraphrase of Benjamin's celebrated expression. But apparently such status of image, although new, still has a score to settle with the age-old issue presented by Plato as well as with the more recent evolution of the media ecosystem, increasingly personal and social in character. Image and reality still chase each other within the contemporary imaginary although in ever new forms directly resulting from the evolution of the media. In spite of this, the status of the digital image is instead apparently trapped in a well-defined position that this essay intends to clarify, and indeed to amend and overcome. As a matter of fact, this essay aims to celebrate its requiem and at the same time propose an alternative interpretation.

But first things first. The two fronts of the ancient debate on iconism, or the above mentioned possibility of a double visual order, can be easily submitted to the classification proposed by Wassily Kandinsky in the early twentieth century. In his celebrated essay *Über die Formfrage*, Kandinsky defined two different formal modes of relating to the image: "great realism" and "great abstraction" (Kandinsky 1982: 242). The first

mode may be seen as an impulse for an immediate, faithful, mechanic or automatic expression, unfiltered and directly coinciding with reality – in many ways this can be related to the ancient tradition of *akheiropoiotes*, “not made by hands” images. The other mode refers to para-pictorial, manual, intentional reproduction, resulting from abstractive, schematic procedures, filters or simulations that mediate and interpret reality. Bolter and Grusin have similarly interpreted this double expressive mode as “the double logic of remediation” (Bolter and Grusin 1999: 3/15), two attitudes of contemporary material culture: one reflecting the need for immediacy and transparency, the other reflecting hyper-mediacy and opacity, both combined within various media environments.

To quote one of the pioneers of semiotic tradition, Charles S. Peirce, and the classic opposition defined in terms of index vs. icon (Peirce 1960), one could say that the former indicates the strong and exclusive relation with the referent, in the logic of trace, or footprint, or as is – a process devoid of codification, characterized by the presence of the *thing* as viewed by Roland Barthes (1980) –, while the latter performs a more refined interpretation, the process of reading, transforming and codifying that ultimately represents the semiotic approach’s main focus. From an aesthetic-anthropological perspective, Régis Debray wrote about this: “L’image-indice fascine. Elle en appelle presque au toucher. Elle a une valeur magique. L’image-icône n’inspire que du plaisir. Elle a une valeur artistique” (Debray 1992: 296). From the door opened by this quotation a whole range of other oppositions sneak into our argument: mechanical vs manual (or intentional); istic vs interpretation; immediacy vs hyper-mediacy; transparency vs opacity; icon vs index, or even optical order of presentation vs optical order of representation, deeply rooted in the Western visual culture.

At this point, the double approach I just described – roughly but accurately expressed by the presentation vs representation opposition – meets a further and double argumentative contingency according to which the domain of production, realization or creation of images (*poiesis*’ specific field) can be distinguished from that of consumption, reception or use

(*aisthesis*' own realm) of images; the idea is finding out where the two intersect within contemporary visual culture.

In terms of the production realm, the electronic, in particular TV, image has brought in the visual culture of the second half of the twentieth century the principles of abstraction, dissection, manipulation in many ways anticipated by the historical avant-gardes in painting, in particular by Seurat's Pointillism or Divisionism. In this same field the digital image has instead enhanced and made even more evident the features specifically connected to the modelization, the treatment in terms of information, the procedures of translation into a numeric code easily manipulated by increasingly powerful and refined IT devices.

An essential discriminant appears in the consumption realm – connected to *aisthesis* – which is entirely enclosed in how to interpret the new status of reality, or non-reality, or pseudo-reality apparently invoked by social media, and its possible meaning. In other words, I propose to treat the terms of the debate by recurring to a double argumentative option, which means comparing the *ideas of simulacrum and fetish*. Both hypotheses are rooted in the philosophical thought of the twentieth century, and of other ages, with substantial implications in the anthropological, epistemological, psycho-analytical, even socio-economical disciplines in the modern and contemporary ages. The implications of the two concepts appear wide-ranging enough to embrace the manifold hermeneutic approaches developed within media and visual studies.

The notion of simulacrum emerged as a powerful interpretation device particularly between the 1970s and the 1980s. Those were crucial years when, on one side, the electronic mass media reached a certain level of saturation in the social imagination. On the other hand, there were the first clear signs of a new technological cycle, the digital age of the so-called personal media in response to the mass media induced by the developments of micro-electronics and the global propagation of information technology and the telecommunication networks. At the same time, a new cultural and social sensibility was emerging as a by-product of Postmodernism. In fact, as early as the mid-1960s Daniel Boorstin and Guy Debord had introduced the idea of the spectacularization of reality

as a direct consequence of the supremacy of communication and the hyper-mediation of the images channelled through the mass media and, therefore, what Situationism introduced as the universally renowned *Société du spectacle* (Debord 1967). This view was otherwise influenced by the theoretical principles earlier proposed by Walter Benjamin in his celebrated essay about the technical reproduction of images (Benjamin 1955). And it is again during the 1960s that the idea of a replacement of the principle of reality by that of dissimulation emerged, again due to the vast success of the notion of simulacrum proposed by Pierre Klossowski (1963).

Debord's analyses on the society of the spectacle made it clear that there was a first detachment, a growing distance between reality and its image, the real referent and its representation, presentation and representation. This is a hypothetical axis that from Benjamin reaches Debord, and Klossowski, and finally Jean Baudrillard who, as the point where the circle closes, is led to theorize, with remarkable interpretative emphasis, an age of the "simulacres et simulation" (Baudrillard 1981), marked by a now unbridgeable distance between image and reality that fully reveals the frailty of the principle of reality. As soon as prototype and copy become independent and almost indistinguishable from one another, reality ceases to be distinguishable from appearance, as nothing is real at all, if not as a simulacrum or at most as something to be experienced as an oxymoron, according to another famous expression, thus "la génération par les modèles d'un réel sans origine ni réalité" (Baudrillard 1981: 10), that became part of this debate. Also, in his copious theoretical production Baudrillard missed no opportunity to reiterate the triumph of simulation – the "agonie des référentiels forts, l'agonie du réel" (Baudrillard 1981: 70) – which obliterates any strong reference to a *real reality* in favour of a simulated reality that, in his opinion, would generate an instant loss of the real; in other words, a process of *simulacrization*, or what Paul Virilio has defined as the "esthétique de la disparition" (Virilio 1980).

In the same period, Mario Perniola accurately analyzed the notion of simulacra and its cultural, political, philosophical and social implications. His analysis projected a scenario where reality and imaginary, model and

repetition in the mass media were divided by an unbridgeable distance, which led him to theorize an evident passage from the society of the spectacle to *The society of simulacra* (Perniola 1980). In this scenario the image seems to function according to the logic of the simulacrum, thus “The image produced by mass media *has no original*: it is an artificial construction, with no prototype” (Perniola 1980: 121). A dense corollary completes the portrait of the simulacral image: rejecting all connection of identity with a referential reality, it blends with it, dissolves the original and offers itself as “copy of a copy [...] an image that immediately reconnects to another image, and a prototype can never be found” (68), so that the simulacrum ends up being “the image of something that does not exist” (122). Simulacra’s independence, autonomy, tautological identity – as the refusal of all connection to a prototype – confirm the interpretation of the very notion of simulacrum as an artificial construction with no original that finds its ultimate expression in the image constructed by the mass-media, or “a reality entirely subjected to the image” (119); actually, the media “offer an image that is remarkably more complex and constructed than the one of any reality, although, in spite of that, it gains no prototypical character, no originality” (128). In its rejection of a prototype and lack of independent originality, the simulacrum – Perniola argued in the 1980s – offers itself as an image with no identity, a fiction that leaves its tools in plain view. The metaphysical idea of the media as mirror of reality unravels as they become rather conditions of experience in themselves where the simulacrum-image becomes an image per se, indeed with no referents according to the simulacral logic. Even more laconic is the definition stating that “the simulacrum is not a painterly image reproducing an outside prototype but a real image dissolving the original” (20).

The society of simulacra, compared to the huge influence of the intellectual contributions since the 1980s in particular by French authors such as Deleuze, Derrida, as well as Virilio and Baudrillard, to name just a few, makes it easy to understand why the expressive forms of the digital image have been so successfully integrated and rapidly assimilated in the logic of the simulacrum, and why this logic has penetrated the current

debate so fast. For those who particularly work in the field of media and visual studies there could not be a more inviting and at the same time appropriate example than that offered by the information technologies that in the crucial 1980s were beginning to dominate and influence the scene, also sharing it with the so-called theories of simulacra and simulation. In its alleged immateriality, the digital image has therefore emerged as the more appropriate destination for the simulacral ghosts earlier evoked by Klossowski.

The notion of fetish had a different fate and an opposite path. Although subjected to multiple semantic variables, the concept of fetish and its derivation of fetishism have instead been long rooted in the wide theological-religious domain and in the tradition of anthropological studies – starting from Charles de Brosses and having also acquired a full historical-philosophical dignity in the socio-economical and psychoanalytical fields, with Marx and Freud, respectively. On the other hand, the fetish cannot be said to have gained, in the wide domain of media and visual studies, the same privileges and theoretical-speculative attention historically and currently enjoyed by the notion of simulacrum. Yet, just like the simulacrum, the fetish is related to the same fake, artificial, deceptive reality that many authors see as encapsulated in the digital image. Its very etymological identity – in Portuguese *feitiço* and in Latin *facticius*, both translatable as “artificial” – makes it quite clear. And, just like the simulacrum, the notion of fetish can also be said to exist in an independent, tautological, self-referential identity. As Perniola himself has written about the mysterious fascination that Benjamin defined as *sex appeal of the inorganic* “the fetish does not represent and does not reproduce anything. It gives itself here and now in its being thing. [...] It is neither the symbol, nor the sign, nor the figure of something else, but is valid solely for itself, in its splendid independence and autonomy” (Perniola 2004: 53-54). That means that, while in the logic of simulacra – from Klossowski to Baudrillard – the image is offered as a denial of reality, by subtraction, difference, or exclusion – it is a ghost, a specter; it is *not* real – and, therefore, being detached from the world, dissolving the referential status on which the principle of reality is based, the fetish-image can

be perceived instead as a reality *per se*, by affERENCE, or inclusion – it is present, it *is* real.

Whereas the self-referentiality of the simulacrum proves it still functions in a logic of simulation, reference, codification of representation – as fake, fictional, unreal or virtual as it may be –, the self-referentiality of the fetish evokes instead a relation of replacement, or presentation. In other words, if the simulacrum tends to make the original disappear and dissolves the prototype, the fetish replaces the prototype and so is the original, *becomes* the prototype. In terms of *aesthesis* – the consumption of images in contemporary visual culture – the simulacrum-image is a mirror-image, a reflection, an illusion; the agony of the real as it becomes *hyperréel* (Baudrillard 1981: 10), an image that takes reality for its representation. The fetish-image is instead the result of a process of reification, a *thing*-image, a project and an experience of “thingness” (Perniola 2004: 109).

To further penetrate the nature of fetish/fetishism, we should follow the reasoning of Ugo Volli, who argued the concept of fetish in magical-religious rituals. Volli insists on how, rather than representing or evoking something else – a supernatural, magical entity in what is the logic of the idol, or the religious icon – a talisman or a relic operate by «*superposing* on the other’s space of sense, therefore becoming, literally, a *double*» (Volli 1997: 76). With this, the author implies the inherent possibility of interpreting fetish/fetishism as a relation of appropriation and belonging where the principle of the double – exchange and use value in the fetishism of commodities described by Marx – seems to induce a providential conceptual replacement: the alleged referential absence, the reference to a fictional, face, deceptive, simulacral reality is replaced by an intentional presence that can be expressed through a new game of seduction. As Volli explains: «Fetishes are independent from sense and referent, they are not subjected to what they refer to. Instead, they are affectively dependent on whoever believes in them» (Volli 1997: 79).

Starting from this sort of affective, or even seductive, dependence of the fetish, why not try to relate the realm of production and consumption of digital images to the domain of the fetish rather than to that of

the simulacrum? Why not recognize in the seduction game they play the affective charge that is capable of worth in itself, the attitude that is “dependent on whoever believes in it” typical of fetishism? Indeed celebrating a requiem for the so-called “age of simulacra” is precisely the goal of this essay – and amends its modes by introducing new interpretation hypotheses connected to what could emerge as a visual domain of the fetish, the epiphany of the fetish.

A tendency to presentation has already affected contemporary visual culture for some time. Rather than recurring to Baudrillard’s more radical arguments, this issue may be approached by using the same tools deployed by Marshall McLuhan when he cleverly explained the dynamics with which man, through the media, models the world – and himself within the world – by inducing significant alterations on the conditions of aesthetic experience *tout court*, thus “the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 1964: 8). In other words, the feedback effect argued by the Canadian philosopher in terms of an environmental alteration provoked by the media ecosystem unfolds by generating a new kind of experience, which in turns generates a new kind of reality. Far from offering itself as a fake experience, a surrogate or a derivation of *real* reality, this has instead been described as a *new reality* “that is not layered upon or between the subject and an alleged ‘other’ reality but rather becomes part of the subject’s environment and experience” (Colombo 1990: 57). Therefore, this *new reality* implies a process that overturns the de-realization of mundane reality so frequently invoked by the theories of simulacra. An ethics of *new reality* should therefore open itself to a real ecology of the image, according to which the speculative attitude considering the image as a sign of the world – hence the representation of an objective reality – might turn into an opposite attitude, aiming at supporting a new argumentative position, or a kind of image as object of the world, in every way belonging to its material, or physical, dimension; in this sense an independent presence acting by seduction rather than by representation.

A similar position was expressed by Mario Costa, who underlined, with a certain argumentative emphasis, the weakening of the image’s referential status, which has grown increasingly weaker as the techniques and

technologies of vision – from painting to information technology – have evolved in a process that has peaked in the so-called postmodern contemporary cultural scenario. Having gradually loosened its relations with the referent, and become increasingly independent and self-supporting, the image in the postmodern age is discarding its last traces of referential pregnancy and finally losing its very mimetic-representative identity. By dissolving in something else, projecting itself as an “epiphany portrayed in itself”, a new entity of the visible world, it clearly exists and functions as *aseity*, Costa suggests, an independent existential identity (Costa 2005: 108). In this context, the Italian scholar continues, the alleged effects of de-realization – heritage of the theories of simulacra – are replaced by the performing nature of the image that, therefore, “surrenders its own essence to the procedures of communication and disappears as such” (Costa 2005: 110). In accordance with this analysis, we can add that the status of the image dominating the digital world once again highlights the new object nature of the image – an object *per se* – rather than its nature as a sign; this means that the image seems to have completely freed itself from the message in order to emerge in every way as a *medium*.

The analyses developed by Andrew Darley about what he defined as the *Visual Digital Culture* may be of help in order to pursue such approach. In underlining the referential weakening of the image mentioned before, Darley describes it as a “poetics of surface play” (Darley 2000: 193), thus deriving from Fredric Jameson the definition of Postmodernism as the “age of the signifier” (Jameson 1990). Charm, seduction, the surface play through which the signifiers acquire a hegemonic role within the discourse of sense – by hiding the meaning – hint again at the often evoked self-referentiality of the image, defined by Darley with the powerful expression of intertextuality, or intertextual dimension of the media. The invention resulting from a continuous recombination is intertextual; a *pastiche*, a reworking of signifiers rather than signifieds. The current cultural attitude that “endorses form over content, the ephemeral and superficial over permanence and depth, and the image itself over the image as referent” is intertextual (Darley 2000: 81). In brief, this diagnosis

too – the presence of a poetics of surface play in the current visual culture – seems to confirm a decline of the logic of simulation in favour of a fully aesthetic logic, in the etymological sense, that Darley rightfully defines *sensitive*, and that can be explained as relying on the senses, playing with the senses by inducing a seduction, a perceptive excitement; the supremacy of aesthetics over noetics.

This further clarifies the double polarity that would amend the visual regime of simulacra by updating, or replacing it with the fetish. The noetic, representative and evocative nature of the simulacrum as sign finds its opponent in the aesthetic, seductive nature of the fetish as object, as *thingness*. And it is precisely this object nature that makes the digital image peculiar; not an idol (referring to something else) but a relic (*the thing*); not an icon but an index; not representation but replacement, real appropriation, or even embodiment. This is the same logic that revolutionized art in the twentieth century: the logic of the *readymade*. The visual power of the image as a thing – or as an object – is reflected in the materiality of the fetish.

Therefore, the double argumentative approach here developed, that conceives the paradigm of the image as simulacrum as opposed to that of the image as fetish, can rightfully find its place in the passage from the modernist visual legacy – logic of representation and simulation – to postmodernist visual culture. The very idea of replacing the principle of reality with the principle of simulation underlying the concept of simulacrum highlights all the ontological weaknesses and frailty affecting the ancient distinction between image and reality that lies at the base of the modern philosophical building. It is only natural, then, to recognize the insufficiency of the concept of simulacrum whereas the current visual context is more than clearly dominated by the specificity of the fetishist look – the process of fetishization that has forever been part of the aesthetic horizon in the relation between man and images.

The fetishist look – which defines the social media's visual experience – is equally expressed in the production and consumption of images; this is the double dimension of fetish images. On one hand, the thorough diffu-

sion of increasingly sophisticated and miniaturized devices that store, record and acquire live images – in particular the digital and video cameras in cell and smart phones and tablets – has transformed the image itself into an object that can be appropriated, stored, exhibited, shared. On the other hand, social media have multiplied the opportunities to share and exchange images and videos, used just like objects of common daily life, thus generating (object) visual archives of staggering size but above all largely accessible and shared. Together the two phenomena demonstrate the degree of seduction reached by the digital image in the current media scene. They prove how the optical domain of representation, simulation, interpretation of reality, is completely subjected, today, to the domain of presentation, or even *presentification* of mundane reality, that reaches out to the world trying to appropriate part of it. Similarly, the age of simulation as defined by Baudrillard seems to have given way to an age of recording, direct and immediate access, appropriation and replacement – all actions that closely relate to the fetishist attitude. Essentially, the advent of the digital images seems to have inaugurated an age of the fetish, the age of digital seduction, fetishist fascination. The digital world is not just a world of images; it is also a world of objects, of digital relics, whereas the images of this world seem to have rightfully acquired the status of *objet trouvé*.

But what are the mechanisms used by what I have called the optical domain of presentation? What is the value of the fetishist look and the function of image as *readymade or objet trouvé*? In 1996 Kevin Robins asked his readers this critical question: “Will images move us still?” (Robins 1996: 149). Well, looking at the phenomenon from this perspective, the digital image has certainly gained the role of object of desire; an object that can be charming, seductive, and, to reply Robins’ question, even moving. On the other hand, the phenomenon can be seen to exist in an almost tribal dimension; it is the result of the magical-aesthetic effect brought about by the fetish; it is a presence-effect, at the same time the result of an instinctive mechanism of appropriation. Unsurprisingly, the bloodiest and dramatic events on the international scene in 2000s – from the attack on the Twin Towers to the hanging of Saddam

Hussein, the *tsunami* in south-eastern Asia and the earthquake in Japan or hurricanes in United States, to name just a few – have generated their own media reflection precisely in the form I have just described, as image acquired live that becomes a possession in its dimension of object, of *thingness*, with its explosive emotional power, in spite of their being most often low-quality, low-definition images. Indeed, this is almost an axiom – the lowest the resolution, the highest the fetishist interest.

In the context we have just described, there is nothing left to do but celebrate the requiem for the image as simulacrum, the image as working representation according to the principle of the icon, “copy of a copy”. The fetish-image prevails today, the visual paradigm of presentation, the fetishization of the visual experience: indexes prevail on icons, traces outdo signs, seduction inhibits interpretation, signifiers hide signifieds. It is the epiphany of the fetish in the hyper-mediated society. We could say, once more, that the *medium* has shattered the message and turned it into a fetish.

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In Media(tization)

Studies we love metaphors

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Abstract

The long history of mass communication theories is full of metaphors, from Shannon and Weaver's 'transmission channel' to Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence'. The objective of the chapter is to give an overview of the use of metaphors and models in mediatized communication studies. Special attention is given to the metaphors that support the representations of digital and interactive communication practices; in this context, the chapter deals with the metaphors of the Internet, the World Wide Web and the new platforms, and introduces the main metaphors of media change. The chapter concludes with a series of reflections on the risks and benefits of metaphorical reasoning, and includes a call for 'metaphorical experimentation'.

Keywords:

Media, mediatization, theory, models, metaphors

The long history of mass communication theories (Rodrigo, 1995; McQuail and Deuze, 2020) is full of metaphors, from Shannon and Weaver's 'transmission channel' to Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence'. It could be said that behind any theoretical model of communication, there is a metaphor. Collateral disciplines like semiotics are no exception: from Roman Jakobson's initial incorporation of the informational model (his 'functions' of language were inspired by Shannon and Weaver's mathematical model of communication) to Verón's 'network' of social semiosis, or Eco's vision of the text as a 'battlefield' where two 'strategies' confront each other. The discipline that analyses sense production and interpretation processes has imported or developed powerful metaphors.

The objective of this chapter is to give an overview of the use of metaphors and models in mediatized communication studies, understood as a broad and transdisciplinary field or "intellectual trading zone" (Waisbord, 2019) where many disciplines – linguistic, semiotics, sociology, psychology, political economy, anthropology, design, engineering, etc. – take part in the theoretical conversations (Scolari, 2009). After an introduction to the use of metaphors in scientific discourses, which includes my personal experience working with these rhetorical devices (Section 1), the chapter looks at the tradition of mass communication models (Section 2). Special attention will be given to the metaphors that support the representations of digital and interactive communication practices. In this context, Section 3 focuses on the metaphors of the Internet, the World Wide Web and the new platforms. Finally, Section 4 introduces the main metaphors of media change. The chapter concludes with a series of reflections on the use of metaphors in media and mediatized communication studies.

As it is impossible to include all the metaphors applied in a century of research, the chapter will only focus on the most important ones. Although the chapter centres on the metaphors present in scientific discourses, sometimes their use goes beyond the academic circuit (especially in the conversations on new digital media). Both the tone of the chapter and the topics addressed are aimed at a young reader/researcher who is

starting out in media and mediatized communication research, and we conclude with an invitation to the new generation of researchers.

Now, at the end of this introductory section, we pose a question: Why is it so important to analyse the scientific construction and use of metaphors? According to Neil Postman,

...our best poets and scientists are those who have created the most vivid and enduring metaphors (in Gozzi, 2001: xvi).

If media and mediatized communication researchers want to improve their theoretical models, it is fundamental to know how to create and deal with metaphors.

1. Doing things with metaphors¹

If John L. Austin (1962) asked, What can we do with words? in his book *How to do things with words*, we could also ask, What can we do with metaphors? Once again Neil Postman comes to our aid:

...all language is metaphorical, and often in the subtlest ways. In the simplest sentence, sometimes in the simplest word, we do more than merely express ourselves. We construct reality along certain lines. We make the world according to our own imagery (in Gozzi, 2001: xv).

Speakers do not only express themselves using metaphors: as like any other language construction, they create realities through metaphors. The main objective of this chapter is to reflect on how media and mediatized communication researchers 'construct (theoretical) realities' using metaphors. From a linguistic-cognitive perspective, the metaphor has been defined as understanding one conceptual domain in terms of

1. This article is part of ongoing research on metaphors of media and mediatization processes. To show that we cannot do less than apply metaphors in our discourses, **throughout the text I have indicated the metaphors that I have used with 'quotation marks'**. It is very likely that many of them have gone unnoticed, even by the author.

another conceptual domain; for example, when speakers say: ‘life is a journey’. In this context, the metaphor consists of

...two conceptual domains, in which one domain is understood in terms of another. A conceptual domain is any coherent organization of experience. Thus, for example, we have coherently organized knowledge about journeys that we rely on in understanding life (Kövecses, 2010: 4).

The conceptual domain from which the speaker draws metaphorical expressions to understand another conceptual domain is called the ‘source’ domain, while the conceptual domain that is understood, is the ‘target’ domain. In the case of ‘life is a journey’, the source domain is ‘journey’ while the target domain is ‘life’. In their classic *Metaphors We Live By* Lakoff and Johnson (1980) presented many classic examples of metaphors in everyday conversations. Let’s look at one of them: if ‘an argument is war’, different linguistic expressions could be generated under the umbrella of this specific metaphor:

Your claims are *indefensible*.

He *attacked* every *weak point* in my argument.

His criticisms were *right on target*.

I *demolished* his argument.

I’ve never *won* an argument with him.

You disagree? Okay, *shoot*!

If you use that *strategy*, he’ll *wipe* you *out*.

He *shot down* all of my arguments.

According to Kövecses

...the linguistic expressions (i.e., ways of talking) make explicit, or are manifestations of, the conceptual metaphors (i.e., ways of thinking). To put the same thing differently, it is the metaphorical linguistic expressions that reveal the existence of the conceptual metaphors (Kövecses, 2010: 7).

One of the characteristics of these rhetorical ‘devices’ is that conceptual metaphors “typically employ a more abstract concept as target and a more concrete or physical concept as their source” (Kövecses, 2010: 7). If we want to understand an abstract concept (like ‘life’ or ‘argument’), it makes sense to connect it to a more concrete, physical, or tangible concept (‘journey’ or ‘war’, respectively). This relationship is not reversible: we do not understand a ‘journey as a life’ or a ‘war as an argument’. This is called the principle of unidirectionality: the metaphorical relation only goes from the concrete to the abstract.

Metaphors never come alone. If we ‘buy’ a metaphor it comes with a collateral set of expressions. If ‘life is a journey’, then we must include in the same pack the travellers, the vehicle, the distance covered, the obstacles, the destination and other components included in the act of travelling from one place to another. This systematic set of correspondences is known as ‘mapping’.

As it has been seen throughout the preceding paragraphs, it is almost impossible not to use metaphors. While explaining the fundamental principles of their functioning, I have applied several metaphors, from the metaphor as a ‘device’ to ‘buying’ metaphors. We think in metaphors and depend on metaphors to explain the world that surrounds us. In this context, scientific knowledge is not an exception. Let’s go back to Lakoff and Johnson (1980). These authors analysed the ‘construction of theories’ from a metaphorical perspective. If ‘theories are buildings’, then it is not so strange to hear expressions like:

Is that the *foundation* for your theory?

The theory needs more *support*.

We need to *construct* a *strong* argument for that.

We need to *buttress* the theory with *solid* arguments.

The theory will *stand* or *fall* on the *strength* of that argument.

So far we have *put together* only the *framework* of the theory.

Beyond the use of metaphors when we talk about ‘theory building’, these rhetorical ‘devices’ have been present in scientific discourses since their initial and hesitant beginnings more than twenty-five centuries ago, from classic philosophers (Plato’s ‘cavern’) to contemporary borderlands of science (i.e., ‘black holes’, ‘string’ theory, etc.). According to Gozzi (2001),

...when metaphors are used as bridges into the unknown, they gain power from showing us structural similarities, and suggesting paths to follow to discover new insights into the unknown domain (Gozzi, 2001: 57).

Researchers continuously create, recover, negotiate, discuss, refine and apply metaphors. This creation and acceptance of metaphors is never a neutral or frictionless process. But once the metaphor is ‘materialized’ in a theoretical model and accepted by the scientific community, it is not questioned for long. As Lizcano (2006) puts it,

Those metaphors, those negotiations of meaning, those power pulses that were at the origin of scientific concepts and theories, remain in the most absolute oblivion, lose their condition of ways of speaking and doing, to impose themselves as the only way of saying reality, as a mere discovery of facts that no one has done and that has always been out there, covered (Lizcano, 2006: 76).

The disappearance of the metaphorical ‘device’ could be considered as part of the process of ‘blackboxing’ identified by Latour (1999).² The analysis of how scientific objects are constructed, modeled and put into speech through metaphors is fundamental, not only for understanding the evolution of a single discipline, but also to comprehend the entire logic of scientific discourses.

2. For Latour *blackboxing* is “the way scientific and technical work is made invisible by its own success. When a machine runs efficiently, when a matter of fact is settled, one need focus only on its inputs and outputs and not on its internal complexity. Thus, paradoxically, the more science and technology succeed, the more opaque and obscure they become” (Latour, 1999:304).

1.1 Interfaces and metaphors

A very personal example could serve to frame the subject at hand better. The discourses around computers are full of metaphors, from the ‘virus’ that infects the digital machines to the ‘windows’ (or the ‘menus’) that are opened and closed with a single click on the ‘mouse’. When, twenty-five years ago, I began to research the universe of interfaces, one of the first things that surprised me was the wide variety of concepts that were used in the scientific and professional fields. This proliferation of conceptions led me to collect definitions and metaphors of the interface: the interface as an ‘instrument’, the interface as a ‘conversation’, the interface as a ‘surface’, the interface as a ‘space’, etc. That was the first step of my PhD research on the semiotics of human-computer interaction (Scolari, 2004).

Each metaphor of the interface ‘illuminates’ certain aspects of the human-computer relationship, privileging some of its properties while hiding the others. However, the simple summation of metaphors is not enough to fully illuminate a research object (in this case, the interaction between humans and computers): the different perspectives would never merge into a single and coherent construction. If we think that the interface is an ‘instrument’, we will never be able to consider it as an ‘environment’ of interaction, or a ‘conversation’.

The use of metaphors ‘condemns’ the researcher to an always limited and hypothetical knowledge that is never definitive. Like the lighting designer for a theatrical production, who plays with the lights until finding the appropriate angle for each situation, the researcher must ‘move the spotlight’ to ‘shed light on’ the object that is being described or explained in the best possible way. However, saying that each metaphor ‘illuminates’ some properties of the object does not mean that all metaphors are equally clear in their representation: there are metaphors that ‘illuminate’ more, or ‘hide less’, than the others. Paraphrasing Lakoff and Johnson (1980), it could be said that a theory of interfaces and interaction processes, like any other scientific field, must “be aware of its

metaphors”, know “what they hide” and be willing to sacrifice them for more appropriate “alternative metaphors”.

1.2 Metaphors: between the new and the old

The introduction of new metaphors into scientific discourses usually runs parallel to the emergence of new theoretical models³. For example, metaphors like ‘the atom is a miniature solar system’ oriented the first years of the research into sub-atomic particles. In the same line, if we consider that interfaces are ‘conversations’, then one of the researcher’s objectives will be to reconstruct the ‘grammar’ of the exchanges.

In other cases, the metaphor works as a ‘brake’ that ‘stops’ the development of new scientific perspectives. According to Maasen,

...from a macroperspective of scientific change, it becomes apparent that once a metaphor is part of a discourse and its mechanics, the capacity of scientists or even scientific communities to control them is limited (Maasen, 1995: 30).

However,

...scientists should not be afraid of metaphors since the innovative – which always means destabilizing – effect of metaphors is counterbalanced by a number of stabilizing factors (Maasen, 1995: 30).

After this short introduction to the world of metaphors and their use in scientific discourse, the time has come to focus on one of the topics of the chapter: the use of metaphors by the media and mediatized communication researchers.

3. For a short overview of the relationships between theoretical models and metaphors, see Rivadulla (2006).

2. Metaphors of mass communication

Metaphors appear every time a new media or technology emerges. The new thing “creates blank, unnamed regions in our linguistic and conceptual maps of experience” (Gozzi, 2001: 5) that require a known concept to explain them. When broadcasting emerged in the early 20th century, the first generation of media and mediatized communication researchers looked for a metaphor to understand it. As it is well-known, the first attempts to develop a model of media influence in the 1920s and 1930s were based on a simple and basic conception (media were supposed to have a direct ‘impact’ on audiences) that, later, was caricaturised by scholars in the ‘magic bullet’ and ‘hypodermic needle’ theories.

However, the best and most popular model would arrive at the end of the next decade: the idea that communication was a linear transmission of information from a ‘sender’ to a ‘receiver’ was part of both Lasswell’s (1948) and Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) models. Laswell popularized his five questions (who says what, in which channel, etc.), while Shannon and Weaver contributed to this metaphor with a simple and ‘viral’ graphic model of information ‘transmission’. In the following years, media and mediatized communication studies witnessed an explosion of theoretical models with a strong metaphorical imprint, for example Schramm’s ‘tuba’ (1954), Dance’s ‘spiral’ (1979), Noelle-Neumann’s ‘spiral of silence’ (1974), and the Palo Alto School’s model of the ‘orchestra’ as opposite to the ‘telegraph’ model (Winkin, 1981).

In a classic contribution, Pepper (1942) identified four ‘root metaphors’ that underlie the major philosophical systems in Western philosophy: *mechanism*, *organicism*, *contextualism* and *formism*. Similarly, we could also ask what the ‘deep’ metaphors in media and mediatized communication studies.⁴ Meyrowitz (1993) identified three underlying metaphors:

4. This chapter deals with models and metaphors of mediatized communication. For an overview of the deep metaphors in general communication studies, see Krippendorff (1993).

...that virtually all the specific questions and arguments about a particular medium, or media in general, can be linked to one of three underlying metaphors for what a medium is. Although various terms could be used to convey the general sense of these three metaphorical constructs, I summarize them here as media as ‘conduits’, media as ‘languages’, media as ‘environments’ (Meyrowitz, 1993: 57)

Most of the traditional models of mass communication were inspired by the metaphor of the ‘channel’ that ‘transmits’ a content. For Meyrowitz “this metaphor is so common because content is the first thing we react to when we use a medium” (57). Based on the metaphor of ‘language’, researchers have analysed the ‘grammar’ of each media, establishing a difference with respect to the previous metaphor:

Rather than viewing the medium as a relatively passive conduit, grammar analysts look at the plasticity of the medium in altering the presentation and meaning of content elements (...) While the conduit metaphor leads one to analyse content that crosses easily from medium to medium and from live interaction to medium and back, the language metaphor tends to focus attention on those variables that function only within a specific medium or within a particular type of media (Meyrowitz, 1993: 59).

I consider the third metaphor, media as ‘environments’, as one of the best possible metaphors to understand the transformations of the ‘mediasphere’. If this metaphor is the one that best ‘illuminates’ the research object (media) and its ‘mutations’, then it would be a wise decision to dedicate the next section to it.

2.1 Media as ‘environments’

According to this ‘ecological’ conception, each media creates an ‘environment’ that has “characteristics and effects that transcend variations in content and manipulations of production variables” (Meyrowitz, 1993: 61). This leads to what Meyrowitz calls “medium analysis”. Beyond the

medium's content or grammar, the environmental model focuses specifically on "advancing our understanding of the ways in which the differences among media make a difference" (61). Within medium analysis, the focus is on "those environmental features of the medium that are largely out of the control of users once the medium is in use" (62). According to Meyrowitz, researchers can study media by setting both the micro, single-situation level, and the macro, societal level. On the micro level, medium analyses "explore the implications of choosing one medium over another in a given situation"; on the macro level, "medium analysis deals with the larger social implications of the widespread use of a medium" (62).

Beyond the specific field of Media Ecology and Meyrowitz's medium theory, an approach rooted in the works of Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman (Scolari, 2015; Strate, 2017; Cali, 2017), many researchers have applied the 'media as environments' metaphor. For example, there is a strong connection between the European approach to mediatizations and Meyrowitz's medium theory (see Krotz, 2014). If medium theory states that media create 'environments' that affect and model subjects, mediatization researchers advocate that those media affect and model institutions (i.e., Hjarvard, 2014; Verón, 2014; Couldry and Hepp, 2017). The deepening of the dialogue between these two approaches (media ecology / medium theory and mediatization studies) has just begun and there is still a large territory to continue exploring and carrying out interdisciplinary exchanges.

Before ending this quick journey through metaphors of media, it could be useful to remember that Marshall McLuhan proposed considering media as both 'metaphors' and 'translators'. The Canadian scholar introduced this idea in *Understanding Media* (1964):

All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way (...) Words are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that

translate experience into our uttered or outered systems (McLuhan, 1964: 57).

Other members of the Media Ecology school have developed this idea. For example, Ong (1977) and Postman (1985) also considered that media can be internalized and function as ‘deep’ metaphors for the mind and knowledge:

A message denotes a specific, concrete statement about the world. But the forms of our media, including the symbols through which they permit conversation, do not make such statements. They are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, colour it, argue a case for what the world is like (Postman, 1985: 10).

Like any other research field, media and mediatized communication studies have used metaphors as a way of translating very complex processes into simplified theoretical models. At the same time, metaphors have been used to model the research objects and methodologies: if the media is a ‘cannon’ that shoots a ‘bullet’, then researchers will try to measure their ‘impact’; in the same way, if media are a ‘language’, then researchers will try to reconstruct their ‘grammars’. In other words, metaphors have translated a very complex domain (mediatized communication processes) into terms of a simpler domain (a tube, a transmission channel, a grammar). The metaphors were simultaneously solving a current problem (proposing a model for mediatized communication processes) and modelling future research (suggesting questions and methodologies based on the metaphor).

After this overview of the traditional metaphors of mass media and mediatized communication processes, the time has arrived to present the new metaphors of the media that have emerged in the last decades.

3. New metaphors for a new media

The ‘emergence’ of new digital media and technologies in the last thirty years generated an ‘explosion’ of metaphors. For example, it could be said that the ‘arrival’ of the World Wide ‘Web’ produced an ‘acceleration’ of the ‘mutations’ in the media ‘ecosystem’ and generated an ‘explosion’ of new media (Scolari, 2009, 2013, 2015; Scolari and Rapa, 2019). A recent article by Wyatt (2021) presented a good ‘map’ of this new ‘territory’. According to this researcher from Maastricht University

In the mid-1990s, when the Internet went public and the World Wide Web became available, many different metaphors were in use as people tried to make sense of the possibilities of this amazing new medium, capable of instantly transmitting data and information around the world (Wyatt, 2021:407).

Many researchers have ‘mapped’ the metaphorical ‘territory’ around the ‘emerging’ new media. The spatial metaphor (‘territory’) is not casual: many of the representations of the Internet are rooted in a ‘deep’ spatial metaphor (the ‘Internet as a place’). Stefik (1996) described the early metaphors of the Internet and organized them into four archetypes: library/keeper of knowledge, mail/communicator, markets/trader, and digital worlds/adventurer. Markham (2003), for her part, identified three distinctive and interrelated metaphors: the Internet as a ‘tool’ (‘container’, ‘conduit’, etc.), the Internet as a ‘place’ (‘frontier’, ‘cyberspace’), and the Internet as a ‘way of being’ (‘cyborg’, etc.). As it can be seen, many of the metaphors applied to the mass media (media as a ‘container’, media as a ‘conduit’, etc.) and interfaces (interface as a ‘tool’, interfaces as a ‘place’, etc.) have also been applied to the Internet. Many other researchers have analysed the emergence and uses of metaphors in digital society (i.e., Gozzi, 2001, Gómez Cruz, 2007; Markham and Tiidenberg, 2020). The following table presents some of the main metaphors of the Internet and the World Wide ‘Web’ developed in the last three decades (see Table 1). Obviously, as the Web is still developing, this table should be considered as a general overview that is open to new incorporations.

The Internet and the World Wide Web as a ...	
town hall	A collaborative / competitive place for political, cultural, social or economic exchanges.
agora	
market	
village square	
(virtual) community	
library	An open and potentially infinite repository of data, information and knowledge.
archive	
world brain	
frontier	A libertarian and free space to be explored (or surfed) and conquered by pioneers.
cyberspace	
sea	
highway of information	A public space for data traffic that could be regulated by the State.
drug	A media that creates addiction so users must detoxify.
dark (place)	A secret and clandestine space whose contents are not indexed by standard web search-engines.
deep (place)	
invisible (place)	
hidden (place)	

Table 1. The metaphors of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Based on Stefik (1996), Gozzi (2001), Gómez Cruz, (2007), Johnston (2009), Markham and Tiidenberg (2020), Wyatt (2021) and contributions of the author and colleagues.

Although this is an incomplete map of metaphors of the Internet and the World Wide ‘Web’, it is enough to begin reflecting on their main traits and dynamics. The first issue is the prevalence of spatial metaphors. This is not so strange: when the World Wide ‘Web’ appeared in the early 1990s the concept of ‘cyberspace’, introduced by William Gibson in his

cyberpunk romance *Neuromancer* (1984), was already very popular. The metaphor of the 'place' is easy to understand and can be modulated in different ways: it can be a human-created space (an 'agora', a 'village' or a 'library') or a natural environment (the web as a 'sea'). From a chronological perspective, it is evident that in the 1990s and 2000s the metaphors were optimistic (the Internet as a 'place' of freedom and open knowledge) while, in recent years, an increasingly pessimistic view has dominated the discourses, like the Internet and, more generally, digital technologies understood as a 'tool' for domination and control, or the 'Web' as a 'dark', 'deep' and potentially dangerous place.

The same path from optimism to pessimism can be found in the metaphors of new social networking sites. When the 'Web 2.0' arrived in the early 2000s (O'Reilly, 2005), it adopted many of the positive metaphors of the Internet and the World Wide 'Web': the new collaborative web as a 'place' for political, cultural, social or economic exchanges. More than a static online 'library', the new web promised the realization of Pierre Lévy's concept of 'collective intelligence' (1997). Fifteen years after the appearance of Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005) and Twitter (2006), the situation is quite the opposite: now social networking sites are under suspicion.

Today social networking sites, now renamed 'platforms', are still considered 'places', but very dangerous ones. On one hand, these 'places' are not open anymore: they are 'walled gardens' where users must be registered so that powerful hardware and software 'machines', managed by an 'artificial intelligence', can obtain information about the users' activities. In other words, the anarchic and freedom-centred representation of the early World Wide 'Web' has radically changed: now these platforms are 'territories' that are under control. In this sense, more than a 'place' the new metaphors promote the idea of a 'tool of control': concepts like 'Big Brother' or 'digital panopticon' are more and more present in scientific and popular conversations. This negative view of the platforms as 'surveillance and control devices' complements their representation as promoters of 'digital labour', 'digital capitalism', and 'data exploitation'. The title of popular books published by researchers like Nick Srnicek

(*Platform Capitalism*, 2016) and Shoshana Zuboff (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 2019) are good examples of these negative metaphorical constructions.

4. Beyond the 'media as a place': the time dimension

The use and abuse of spatial metaphors in media and mediatized communication studies has a clear limit: they may illuminate a set of actors and their relationships but, at the same time, *they may cancel out the time dimension*. How can we understand media change? There are different theories and models of media change, and obviously each of them is based on a metaphor. For some scholars, media change adopts the form of a 'line' (for example Neuman, 2010), where the different technologies are represented along a linear sequence (a 'timeline'). Like any other graphic representation, in this case the conception is also not neutral: as it can be seen in Figure 1, the image shows each new media as an 'arrow' towards the future.

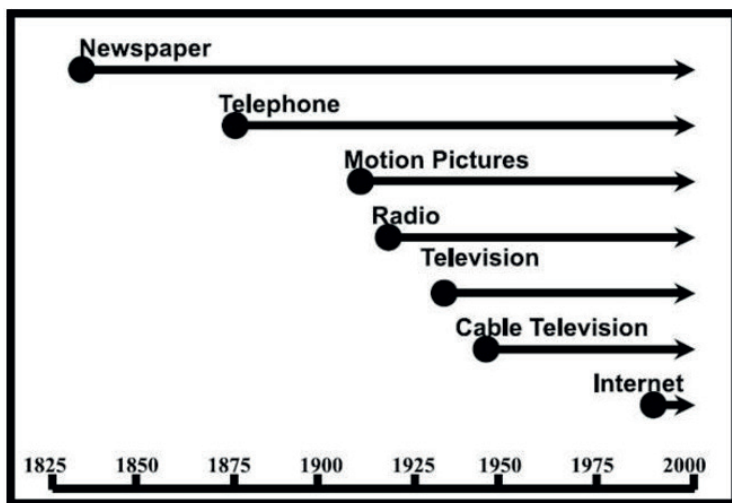


Figure 1. Timeline of American media. (Neuman, 2010, p. 3)

Figura 1. Timeline of American media (Neuman, 2010).

Other scholars prefer to talk about sequences of ‘explosive’ and ‘reflective’ periods. Ortoleva (1997) analysed media change in the last centuries as a succession of innovative moments (when multiple new media emerge) and reflective moments (when the innovation slows down and the diffusion of existing technologies is the main process). Ortoleva identified four ‘explosive’ moments in contemporary media history:

1830-40: telegraph, postage stamp, photography, steam printing machines, etc.

1875-95: linotype, stereoscope, typewriting, Kodak popular camera, phonograph, gramophone, kinoscope, cinematograph, telephone, radiotelegraph, etc.

1920-1935: roto-calc printing, telephotography, photocopy, iconoscope (proto-television), magnetophonon, talkies, colour cinema, etc.

1975-95: videorecorder, digital audio devices, personal computers, teletext, optic fibre networks, etc.

Although the book was published in 1997, Ortoleva did not include the World Wide ‘Web’ in the four explosions. Following his model, a fifth explosion could be identified between 2005 and 2020: smartphones, social media, augmented reality, platforms, etc. According to Ortoleva during these ‘explosive’ periods not only do technological innovations appear, but institutions and commercial beings are also transformed. In other words, “each time, the entire communications system is redefined in every aspect” (1997:43). Even if Ortoleva did not explicitly use these concepts, his model of media change fits perfectly into the metaphor of the ‘wave’, understood as a succession of technological ‘impacts’ and their expanding ‘effects’.

Another possible metaphor of media change comes from the ecological metaphor (see Section 2.1). In this context, media change could be approached as an ‘evolutionary’ process. First of all, it must be said that media ecology has always included a strong interest in the evolution of media. Beyond the classic contributions of scholars such as Innis (1950),

researchers like Levinson (1997) and Logan (2004) have developed valuable contributions for understanding the ‘evolution’ of the media ‘ecosystem’. In recent years, many scholars, even outside the tradition of media ecology, have been using the metaphor of media evolution in their theoretical and analytical discourses (i.e., Napoli, 2001; van Dijck, 2013; Manovich, 2013). If media ecology ‘thinks’ in space (synchronic plane), then media evolution ‘thinks’ in time (diachronic plane). However, although media historians have developed linear or waveform models, media evolution considers media change as a ‘network’ where any media can affect or take components from any other present or past media (Scolari, 2013, 2018, 2020; Scolari and Rapa, 2018).

Mediatization studies, like any other theoretical discourse, have applied different temporal and spatial metaphors. Beyond describing mediatization as a ‘radial’, ‘accumulative’, ‘non-linear’ process of change, Verón (2014) evidenced periodic ‘accelerations’ of historical time, for example when in the Upper Paleolithic the production of stone tools passed from twenty basic types to two hundred varieties, or when Gutenberg’s printing machine multiplied the number of books and changed European society profoundly in a couple of centuries. In the case of the Internet, the digital network has altered “the conditions of access to scientific knowledge more than these conditions have changed since the surge of modern scientific institutions during the seventeenth century” (Verón, 2014:168). Other researchers like Hjarvard (2008) have also highlighted the ‘acceleration’ of mediatization processes in late Modernity.

The metaphor of the ‘wave’ is also present in mediatization theories. For Couldry and Hepp (2017) “mediatization comes in waves – mechanization, electrification, digitalization – which each changed the whole media environment fundamentally” (2017: 53). But these ‘waves’ should not be confused with the ‘diffusion waves’ of one single dominant media: they must be understood as a “process of increasing deepening of technology-based interdependence” (53). The concept of ‘deep’ mediatization is now at the centre of the international scientific conversations on mediatization processes (Hepp, 2020). It is interesting to note that, at this

point, temporal and spatial metaphors converge in a single theoretical 'construction' where the concept of 'deepening' has two senses:

First, that over the past 600 years an acceleration of technological innovations in media has taken place; and second that, over the same period, media have become increasingly relevant to articulating the kind of cultures and societies we live in, because of media's changing role in the conditions of human interdependence (Couldry and Hepp, 2017: 53)

With this reference to mediatization studies we come to the end of this journey through the metaphors of media and mediatized communication processes. As already indicated, it is impossible to include all the metaphors developed in the last century in this specific area of scientific discourse production. However, this is enough to initiate a reflection on the production and use of metaphors in media and mediatized communication studies.

6. Risks and benefits of metaphorical reasoning

A series of conclusions can be 'extracted' from this brief overview of the metaphors of media and mediatized communication processes. More than 'closed' conclusions, the following are simply a series of issues that could 'orient' future research and 'conversations' on the use of metaphors in media and mediatized communication studies.

1. It seems to be impossible to think in media and mediatized communication processes without using metaphors. The list of metaphors used in scientific and non-scientific discourses in the last century is almost endless and, considering the transformations of the research object, we can assume that this list will continue to grow.
2. Like in any other scientific domain, in media and mediatized communication studies each metaphor 'illuminates' certain aspects of the research objects, privileging some of their properties, while 'hiding' the others. As it is very difficult to add and integrate metaphors be-

cause they are often incompatible with each other, there is a constant search for new, broader and more 'illuminating' metaphors.

3. In the case of traditional mass media, the metaphor of the 'conduit' dominated much of the 20th century and is still, unfortunately, in good health in the 21st century. Many journalists, publicists, politicians and media and communication students (and scholars!) still believe that communication is an 'arrow' that 'impacts' a 'target'. The arrival of new metaphors like the 'orchestra', or the 'environment', was attempts to break this linear and simplistic vision of mediatized communication.
4. The 'emergence' of the World Wide 'Web' in the early 1990s 'placed' spatial metaphors at the 'centre' of the discourses. Both the critical-apocalyptic and the integrated-optimistic approaches regard the Internet and the World Wide 'Web' as a 'place' or a 'space'. It could be said that the metaphors are *trans-ideological*: the same 'place' could be simultaneously considered as an emancipatory or hypercontrolled space.
5. The discourse of media and mediatized communication studies also talks about the transformations of media. Therefore, media change is also part of scientific conversations, especially due to the 'acceleration' of media 'mutations' in the last decades. Even in this case, different metaphors have been used to represent the transformations of media, from 'explosion' and 'waves' to 'movement' ('acceleration').
6. Scholars who analyse the processes of mediatization also work with metaphors, which are spatial ('deep' mediatization) or temporal ('acceleration' or even 'waves' of mediatization).

Metaphors are serious business. All researchers should reflect on the metaphors they apply and use in their scientific discourses:

Not only is it important for critical scholars of the Internet and digital media to analyse the metaphors of other social actors, we also need to be reflexive about our own use of language so that we do not unwittingly

tingly reinforce power structures that serve to exclude groups, organisations or regions, by promoting the inevitability of particular socio-technical configurations, for example (Wyatt, 2021:408).

As it can be seen in the preceding sections, I have made a strong commitment to eco-evolutionary models. I believe it is worth exploring these metaphors in order to understand the ‘mutations’ of the different actors that make up the media ‘ecosystem’. In this context, the eco-evolutionary metaphor offers the possibility to frame both long-term and short-term transformations, both in their micro and macro dimensions (Scolari, 2013, 2018, 2020; Scolari and Rapa, 2019).

It is important to remember that metaphors also ‘shape’ actions and technological developments:

The metaphors we use to frame our experiences (...) matter; in that they can construct both the enabling and limiting features of our technologies. These frames spread through everyday terminologies and visual imageries (Markham and Tiidenberg, 2020: 9).

Understanding media and mediated communication processes from an eco-evolutionary metaphor places at the centre of attention the consequences of those actions on the rest of the actors, whether individual, institutional, technological or biological. Finally, it should be remembered that metaphors never rest:

What we called ‘surfing’; we now call ‘sharing’. What was once ‘cyberspace’ and ‘The Net’ are now ‘platforms’. What we once called ‘online’ or ‘networked’ is now ‘IoT’ and ‘smart’. All of these are metaphors, but we might be less likely to notice them as such, because this is how dominant metaphors work (Markham and Tiidenberg, 2020: 9).

As Markham and Tiidenberg point out, metaphors are not fixed, they also ‘evolve’, expand their universes of meaning and ‘hybridize’ with other metaphors. Like a ‘virus’, metaphors contaminate not only our discourse but also our thinking. If metaphors make up an ‘ecosystem’ and ‘evolve’, then the eco-evolutionary approach could be considered as a

metaphorical meta-model for analysing other metaphors, their relationships and changes.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to make a call for ‘metaphorical experimentation’. This is an invitation addressed especially to doctoral students: you must not limit yourselves to reproducing theoretical models, but rather you should create new analytical frameworks. The development of new and creative metaphors is part of that process. As Wyatt put it, despite the pitfalls of metaphorical constructions,

...it is worth experimenting with our language. Metaphors, science fiction, speculation and imaginaries can reveal new thoughts or feelings to ourselves and to others and may open up new lines of theoretical enquiry, empirical investigation, technological design and political action (Wyatt, 2021: 413).

The choice, creation and testing of metaphors is an unpredictable process that could lead to new theoretical developments and, why not, improve the quality of our mediatized communication processes ■

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The Mediation of Responsibility in Mediatized Societies: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The perspectives of this article are historical and systematical. We use the German newspaper studies' focus of three early twentieth century scholars – namely Karl Bücher, Erich Everth and Ernest Manheim – to explore the development of mediation (*Vermittlung*) as a theoretical concept to understand public communication in a press dominated and, in this sense, a mediatized society. First, we outline the *idealistic* perspective of Karl Bücher who argued against the propaganda in World War I. Second we look upon the *functional* perspective of the 'mediator' role of journalism between diverse publics, which Erich Everth developed during Weimar Republic between 1919 and 1933. Third, we refer to the analytical, meta-moral perspective of Ernest Manheim on public opinion and media change in the first third of the 20th century. All three referred to mechanisms of *mediation* which integrate normative perspectives sustaining public resistance i.e. to accept oppositional meanings and plurality.

Keywords:

Communication history, communication ethics, public sphere theory, socio-technical mediation, mediatization

1. Introduction

‘Responsibility’ in mediatized societies is not a new topic, as it has accompanied the history of communication studies and sociology for a long time. This goes along with transnational journalism history (Daros 2021; Gellrich, Koenen & Auerbeck-Lietz 2020). We endeavor to show and discuss this aspect of public communication both retrospectively and prospectively: What can we learn from the past on how early modern social theory sketched public responsibility and deliberation? Our perspectives are historical *and* systematical. We explore the history of the concept of responsibility through the perspectives of three scholars concerning communication sociology and newspaper studies in the early decades of the twentieth century. Each of the three – Karl Bücher (1847-1930), Erich Everth (1878-1934) and Ernest Manheim (1900-2002) – represent different generational experiences from World War I till the break with democracy by the Nazi Regime in 1933. Their perspectives, which we show are:

1. Bücher’s idealistic perspective which he put against the propaganda in World War I.
2. Everth’s functionalist perspective of the mediator-role of journalism between diverse publics, which he developed during the ongoing clashes of political ideologies in German Weimar Republic.
3. Manheim’s meta-moral perspective by which he distinguished three ‘ideal types’ (in the sense of Max Weber) of a public sphere: (a) transcendental (the ‘pure’ Kantian¹ type of transparency and understanding), (b) pluralist-democratic (including polemics and persuasion) and (c) autocratic-totalitarian, which emerged with the Nazi-movement during the early 1930s.

1. We do not refer in this article on the recent discussion of Kant and racism. For understanding Manheim this plays no role as he uses Kant in an exclusively universalistic manner. Manheim himself in 1954 in his role of a scientific expert took part in the abolition of ethnic separation in US-American schools (Van Delinder 2005).

Two related concepts form the foundation of our argumentation: we examine both, *mediation* (*Vermittlung*) and *mediatization*. The dominant concept of the early twentieth century was *mediation* (see also the work of German Newspaper Scientist Otto Groth, 1875-1965, translated to Portuguese by Liriam Sponholz in 2011), it was not *mediatization*. One exception was Ernest Manheim who – as the first German sociologist to do so in 1932, explicitly used the term mediatization (“*Mediatisierung*”) in the sense of the structural change of interpersonal communication processes via the printing technology, the modern mass press and its impact on the formation of public opinion (Averbeck-Lietz 2014).

We emphasize that all three thinkers we present refer to concepts of mediation (*Vermittlung*) which integrate *normative* perspectives not least regarding the *legitimacy of a plurality of meanings* – oppositional meanings included – in a democratic society. The degree of analytical abstraction of the notion of mediation (*Vermittlung*) as a conceptual term increased from Bücher to Manheim. None of them understood media as neutral ‘channels’, but as *mediators of meaning* in the commercialized media environment of the mass press² and its actors ranging from politicians to journalists and their publics. Only some years later, the Nazis defined media as instruments of propaganda to strengthen the idea of a holistic *Volksgemeinschaft* and its topic of a uniform and uniformized public will beyond pluralistic forms of mediation (Averbeck 1999: 102-142, Jedraszczuk 2016).

One systematical background of our argumentation is the mediatization approach. We understand the notion of mediatization as describing an ongoing long-time process (Krotz 2012; Verón 2014) with an initial culmination in the early twentieth century in the area of the mass press

2. The economization of the “capitalist enterprise” press and its dysfunctional consequences for political discourse were a central research focus of Karl Bücher (Hardt 2001: 85-106; Koenen 2019: 392-412). Bücher claimed for a “press reform” and proposed to separate the information/journalism and the advertising/economic part of newspapers and to establish a community-controlled advertising press to be circulated free of charge for readers. This idea was grasped (at least without practical consequences) by Ferdinand Lassalle in 1863 (Hardt 2001: 97-98).

(Wilke 2004, 2011; Gentzel & Koenen 2012; Averbek-Lietz 2015). As a contemporary witness of accelerated mediatization processes introduced by the mass press, Ernest Manheim understood mediatization as a process which is deeply changing the public sphere. Public discussion, Manheim ([1933] 1979) argues, in an early 20th century setting has to be understood *as a newspaper mediated public discussion*. To conduct politics without taking into account the newspaper publics was no longer possible. However, the societal change was even deeper. Manheim ([1933] 1979: 24) used the notion of the mediatization of human inter-relationships (*“Mediatisierung menschlicher Unmittelbarbeziehungen”*) to refer to the change of public communication in the press-saturated European societies which were going ahead with *conflict and radicalization*, at least in Weimar Germany. Manheim made this point in particular regard to the emerging NSDAP-party, and its press and public communication via demonstrations and street violence.

To examine the relationships between society and press was neither completely new nor original in the period when newspaper studies evolved and the first German Institute for Newspaper Studies was established by Karl Bücher at the University of Leipzig in 1916. Bücher had been inspired by journalism courses at the Universities of Zurich and Chicago (Kutsch 2016: 91). Ernest Manheim’s academic teacher, the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) published his tome on public opinion (*“Kritik der öffentlichen Meinung”*) in 1922. Following Tönnies’ argument, the tensions in public opinion in the industrial era, were dependent on print technology (Hardt 2001: 107-127; Averbek-Lietz 2015: 51-101). The sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) formulated his extraordinary but never operationalized plan for press research as early as 1910 (Meyen & Löblich 2006: 145-160; Weischenberg 2012).

2. Voices from the Past: Bücher, Everth and Manheim – ideas of transparent and trustful communication

In this section, we will look at three thinkers who are quite good witnesses from different generations: The professor for economics, Karl Bücher,

who institutionalized “Zeitungskunde” (newspaper studies) at the University of Leipzig, his successor as the director of the Institute for Newspaper Science in Leipzig, Erich Everth, and the young Ernest Manheim, a former student of Ferdinand Tönnies at Kiel, working at the Institute for Sociology at Leipzig during the early 1930s and writing on his habilitation thesis concerned with press sociology and public opinion.³ Erich Everth as well as Ernest Manheim were forced to leave the University of Leipzig by the Nazis in 1933: Everth for political reasons, Manheim due to his Jewish origins. Everth died in 1934, Manheim went to England to join his famous cousin Karl Mannheim at the London School of Economics. After that, he went to the US where he became a sociologist, first in Chicago and during the late 1940s in Kansas City in the position of a full professor. Interestingly enough, Manheim’s work is inspiring until now; recently a laboratory in qualitative opinion research in Brazil took up his name and his approach at the “Ernest Manheim Public Opinion Lab”.⁴

What we will outline in the following is an intergenerational and may be universal(istic) idea which all three shared under different political circumstances: the idea of transparent and trustful communication as a basis for a just – and in this sense *resistant* – society. An ideal which emerged with the Enlightenment, not at least with Kant 1795 in his little book on “Perpetual Peace” (*Zum ewigen Frieden*). Kant argued that justice is based on transparency and publication, *not* on arcane politics and practices. He formulated a so called “transcendental formula of public right” (*transzendente Formel des öffentlichen Rechts*) with ethical implications and consequences for a concept of the public sphere: “All actions related to the rights and integrity of other persons have to be compatible to potential publication – or they are unjust” (*Alle auf das Recht anderer Menschen bezogene Handlungen, deren Maxime sich nicht mit der Publizität verträgt, sind unrecht*). Exactly this quote from Kant was

3. Concerning Karl Bücher’s work and biography in detail Koenen 2019: 392-437-390; Kutsch 2016; Wiedemann & Meyen 2016, concerning Everth: Auerbeck-Lietz 2001; Koenen 2019, concerning: Manheim Auerbeck 1999: 414-443; Welzig 1997; Baron, Smith & Reitz 2005.

4. <http://ernestmanheim.com.br/> (May, 15th, 2021); Calvacante & Hanke 2020.

taken by Ernest Manheim as a challenge (Kant cited in Manheim 1979 [1933]: 50). Also, Erich Everth (1928: 25-28) referred to Kantian ethics with regard to the duty of each individual to act morally and responsibly. Nowadays, Kantian thinking in communication sociology is represented by Jürgen Habermas ([1981] 1988) and his theory of communicative action.

All three – Bücher, Everth and Manheim shared a democratic-liberal attitude, more or less leftist in the cases of Bücher and Manheim, more or less conservative in the case of Everth. All three worked in the fruitful cultural-historical university milieu of Leipzig (Üner 2005) and all three dealt with the interrelations between the press and public opinion during their work life as academics – Bücher and Everth also as professional journalists (Wiedemann & Meyen 2016; Koenen 2016a, 2016b, 2019); Manheim in Kansas City as a commentator in the local press and via the organization of public events in and for civil society (Averbeck 1997). Their scientific views on public opinion were analytical, but inspired by political and idealistic views.

2.1. The critical idealist: Karl Bücher

Let us turn to the eldest of the three: The famous father of modern economics, Karl Bücher, who at the age of about 70 institutionalized newspaper studies at the University of Leipzig as an academic specialty, not least due to his ambition to professionalize journalism (Koenen 2019; Kutsch 2016). Bücher's understanding of a newspaper science was morally shaped and politically oriented. The following remarks are based on a short monography from 1915, "Our Aims and the Daily Press" (*Unsere Sache und die Tagespresse*; Bücher 1915a), dealing with propaganda during the Great War, and with Bücher's famous compilation "Collected Essays on Newspaper Studies" (*Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Zeitungskunde*) from 1926.⁵

5. Many articles in that reader date back before that.

In the secondary literature, we find a lot of hints on norms and values as the basic grounds of Karl Bücher's "critical" approach in press studies (Irmer & Raupp 2017; Koenen 2019) or – in his own words "ideals" (Bücher [1917] 1926: 388). By his contemporaries, Bücher was described as insisting on his convictions and moral standpoints while often neglecting analytical clearance and rigidity not least for *future* newspaper research in a changing media environment (Schöne 1928: 10, 229; Everth 1931a).

Which norms were stressed by Bücher and do they relate to problems of responsibility for and in public communication? They indeed do and in a very modern way regarding the role of the press in times of propaganda and war – here the First World War. Bücher developed some principles of responsibility and resistance, which very much relate to a kind of thinking that we all know today: ideas of responsibility in terms of *verity, veracity and respect* (Bücher 1915a: 3; Bücher [1917] 1926: 388). We may even recognize Habermas before Habermas in this. But this would be an over-interpretation. In Bücher's case, his vehement moral appeals and his analytical perspectives are *intermingled* (Irmer & Raupp 2017; Koenen 2019) and not – as in the case of Habermas – reflected from a meta-ethical standpoint. Bücher did not conceptualize communication ethics as a formal procedure to rationalize morality in the sense of Habermas.⁶ Bücher was clearly "unimpressed" of Max Weber's dictum of *Werturteilsfreiheit* (Koenen 2019: 417) and refused "to compromise his [own] position in newspaper ethics" (Hardt 2001: 86).

In 1915, Karl Bücher published a small book reflecting the role of the press during the First World War entitled "Our aim and the daily press" (*Unsere Sache und die Tagespresse*; Bücher 1915a). It provoked harsh negative public reactions in different circles of German editors and journalists: Bücher was accused of betraying the German interests of several German publisher and author organizations (Bücher [1917] 1926:

6. Concerning the differences of morals and ethics as a reflection on morals Rath 2014: 152, concerning Habermas' communication ethics: Brosda 2010; Averbek-Lietz 2015: 149-194.

328; Pöttker 2001: 218-219; Irmer & Raupp 2017: 56-58). Reading the incriminated passages today, we can see that this was only partly the case: Bücher ([1917] 1926) clearly mentioned German national interests. He even accused the British and the French press of being much more corrupt than the German one, namely partisan, hawky and propagandistic. Yet, Bücher's voice obviously was evaluated as too soft with regard to German interests by his contemporaries. When we look closer at Bücher's texts, we see that in general he strengthened a normative position to understand the press *as a tool for dialogue and moderate debate*. Beyond official censorship of war coverage (Bücher 1915a: 5), he accused the (world's) leading press – the German one included – of:

“hate” and “calumny” instead of “truth” und “veracity” (Bücher [1915b] 1926: 273, [1917] 1926: 388).

covert “advertising” for war bonds (Bücher [1917] 1926: 354)

corruption (Bücher [1915b] 1926: 303)

being a war party (Bücher [1917] 1926: 386)

Following Bücher, anonymous, non-signed journalism is still reinforcing such deprivations and clashing with journalistic integrity, accuracy and responsibility (Bücher [1917] 1926: 109-172; Hardt 2001: 99).

Against these points, Bücher held his “ideal” of the press as an incorruptible “lawyer”, monitoring interests and not acting as a supporter of restricted political interests (Bücher [1915b] 1926: 306). He stressed the journalistic control of the government and “temperance” (*Mäßigung*) in times of war as an expression of “public welfare” (*Gemeinwohl*; Bücher [1917] 1926: 340, 386; also Pöttker 2001: 218-219; Hardt 2001: 95-96; Irmer & Raupp 2017: 58).

Bücher highlighted (and Everth followed him in that) the necessity of a *reader's orientation* in journalism as well as in newspaper studies (see Bücher [1917] 1926: 317). Hardt (2001: 87) resumes this position: “He [Bücher] sees journalists as moderators and participants who serve leading functions in society in the process of social communication”. Nevertheless, Bücher did not reach the same theoretical level as Everth who

described *differentiated and diverse publics* in *one* society. At least, Bücher's thinking remained deeply anchored in conceptions of an amorphous and influenceable "mass" of readers (Hardt 2001: 93; Koenen 2019: 425-429). One reason for this conception might be Bücher's painful observations on press and propaganda during the Great War.

Furthermore, in Bücher's writings on press and war, we have to notice the ambivalence of his own largely non-reflected moral partisanship when denouncing the "War of lies" (*Lügenfeldzug*) of the British and French press, of the news agencies Reuters and Havas. He even spoke of the "degenerated" (*'entartete'*) English press (Bücher [1915b] 1926: 303, [1917] 1926: 386). Reading Karl Bücher, we have to take note of contemporary typical nationalistic stereotypes which were not only disrespectful, but highly discriminating (for example the Russian soldiers denounced by Bücher as "brutal hords" (*wilde Horden*) (Bücher 1915a: 12).

2.2. Erich Everth: The analysis of the mediation of publics

Besides the writings on Erich Everth by Hans Bohrmann and Arnulf Kutsch (1979), as well as by Ivan Lacasa (2012) we refer to our own research (Averbeck 2001; Koenen 2019) on Everth. Until now, Everth is a more or less ignored author of the history of the discipline of communication and media studies. An undeserved fate: Everth was the only professor of newspaper science at the end of the Weimar Republic who denounced Nazi press politics prominently and in public. Everth, Bücher's successor as the head of the Institute for Newspaper Studies in Leipzig, conceptualized ethics and responsibility in journalism in a way that they (should) stabilize *pluralist* democracy. For the former journalist⁷, who during his professional life changed from a conservative to a liberal, it was not only an analytical aim to understand press communication as a process of *public mediation* in the context of socially diversified modern societies. In Everth's thinking, the professional role of the journalist is characterized by the objective mediation of public interests, whereas the role of

7. In extenso concerning his journalistic writings see Koenen 2019 and the case study on his work for the *Vossische Zeitung* Koenen 2016b.

the readers and publics is to seek journalistic information and to reflect public opinion and political will in the light of public debate. We know such standpoints from after World War II political theory and sociology and reflections of the mediator role of the media between the political system and the publics (Gerhards & Neidhardt 1992). It might be not only a footnote of German political and journalistic history that Everth in his time – as well as Ernest Manheim, another early protagonist of liberal democracy and communication ethics (see below) – did not gain much attention for his ideas on public mediation neither by his contemporaries nor in the field of journalism nor the field of science.

Anchored in a rationalist worldview of democracy as the political will of a debating society and not of an authoritarian state, Everth's analytical aims had clear normative dimensions with consequences for his journalism theory: He highlighted the norm of **veracity** for professional journalistic mediation (Everth 1928: 27) as well as the **moral rightness** of the given information. Consequently, in his journalistic columns, he warned the German population of the Nazi-movement and its propagandistic communication as early as 1923 (Everth 1923). Ten years later, he joined the famous **Congress for Free Speech** at the Kroll Opera in Berlin in February 1933, which was stopped by the police. The manuscript of his speech on press freedom held at that congress is lost. The rare contemporary press coverage resumed Everth's speech as an argument against "juridical insecurity" by the acute danger for the press to survive under the new political circumstances, and **not** only the "radical" (communist) one. Everth stated that hindering free speech and free press "from above will destroy any public consent" (N.N. 1933a, b).

Everth shared his experiences at the last congress on free speech in Germany, sitting in the Kroll Opera at one table with Ferdinand Tönnies, Wolfgang Heine, the former social democratic Minister for Justice and Inner State Affairs in Prussia, with the writer, art curator and diplomat Harry Graf Kessler, the former police chief Hans Lange and the journalist and lawyer Rudolf Olden. Olden later became the head of the German Pen Club in Exile. There had been around one thousand other personalities with them to denounce the abolishment of press freedom, free speech

and – with Tönnies’ speech – free university teaching. After this event at the Berlin Kroll Opera, Everth lost his university position, the professor emeritus Tönnies his pension. The speech manuscript of Tönnies is known today, the one of Everth justifying the freedom of the press is lost. Famous supporters of the congress had been Albert Einstein, Heinrich and Thomas Mann and the communist editor Willy Münzenberg. In their manifesto of the initiative-committee of the congress they denounced the abolishment of the “age-old [!] basics of democracy” like “press freedom, freedom of assembly, freedom of university teaching and of speech” by the Nazis (Briegleb & Uka 1983: 219). Two hundred journalists from several countries had been accredited for the conference (more details concerning Everth’s and Tönnies’ roles at the congress Averbeck 2001: 31; Carstens 2005; Averbeck-Lietz 2015: 84-86; Koenen 2019: 564-580).

Following Everth’s interpretation, a “public sphere” means a sphere that is not definable without understanding the people as publics, which share an “open” space to discuss and negotiate public matters in a transparent manner without the need for secrecy (Averbeck 2001; Koenen 2019: 502-529). A free press should control the public sphere by publication based on the *autonomous decisions of journalists* regarding what and how to publish (Everth 1928). This claim for autonomy is crucial in journalism and his historical development and differentiation (Gellrich, Koenen & Averbeck-Lietz 2020). Following Everth, the “main function” of the journalist is “mediation”, namely between “subjective” and “objective” interests which may overlap or clash (Everth 1927: 18-22). Everth refused regulation by censorship (Everth 1928: 25-27) and highlighted regulation by *the public will*, by the readers and *their* power to read or to read not, to buy or to buy not. The *public itself*, not the state is and should be the legitimation for press publication (Everth 1928: 28). That means: Everth was pre-figuring communication ethics in a nowadays sense.

The subjective interests of publics are those which “subjects” actively claim. They may gain relevance as social, national or religious “motives” (Everth 1927: 21), based on affective and cognitive needs (Everth 1927:

11-12). Under these circumstances, reading the newspaper as well as coming to an opinion is a “social act” (Everth 1927: 22). The press is a “social form” and its “process” is “mediation” between the institutions of society on the one hand and the publics of the press on the other (Everth 1927). This ‘process-thinking’ of Everth has been largely inspired by Georg Simmel and his notion of social interaction (*Wechselwirkung*) (Averbeck 2001: 19-20; Koenen 2019: 464-502).

It was not only the factor of openness (“publicity”) which Everth described as necessary for public spheres but also the one of *comprehensibility* (“popularity”) or relatendness to the publics’ everyday life. Everth recognized the democratic element in popular culture with the example of a media star of the silent film area and the *public event* made of his sudden death: Rudolf Valentino’s (1885-1926) funeral was joined by 100,000 fans in New York City in August 1926– this was of huge interest to German readers too (Everth 1928: 4). Beyond the storytelling of Valentino’s death via the world’s press, Everth (1927: 18-20) observed another phenomenon which is also highlighted by contemporary mediatization theory (Verón 2014): the acceleration of the *tempo* of the social life by the *fast* publication rhythm of the mass press which reached their readers not only in a daily frequency, but especially in urban areas also as morning or evening press.

2.3. Ernest Manheim: Typology of the Public Sphere

Born in 1900 Ernest Manheim reached the age of 102. He died in 2002 after a rich life, not at least as a sociologist at the University of Kansas City, his home university for nearly forty years after the troubles of emigration. He came to the US after a second PhD at the London School of Economics (with Bronislaw Malinowski as his supervisor) and reached the University of Chicago in 1937 where he worked with Ernest W. Burgess before he got a Rockefeller Research Bourse, then an associated professorship and in 1948 a full professorship in sociology and anthropology at the University of Kansas City, Missouri (Welzig 1997: 274-275). In German communication studies and sociology Manheim has been largely

neglected. In the US, Frank Baron, David Norman Smith and Charles Reitz brought together a lot of interdisciplinary expertise on Manheim's work from US, Austrian, Hungarian and German scholars in honor of his 100th birthday in 2000. On this occasion, Manheim got the honorary doctoral degree by his old Alma Mater, the University of Leipzig.

Manheim's profound monograph on public opinion and press from 1933 has never been published in English, the language in which he wrote and taught for half a century. This book shared the fate of the one on public sphere and foreign politics by Everth (1931b), namely to be a nearly forgotten book, even if Manheim's book was re-published by Norbert Schindler in 1979. The Spanish translation from 1936 by Francisco Ayala (1906-2009) seems to get some interest recently and allows at least a transfer to the Spanish speaking hemisphere.⁸ Ayala, the translator, is more known by a broader public than Manheim today; he translated Thomas Mann and Rilke from German to Spanish and was a recognized author himself.⁹

The general aim of Manheim's book entitled "The carriers of public opinion. Studies on the sociology of the public" (*Die Träger der öffentlichen Meinung. Studien zur Soziologie der Öffentlichkeit*) was to understand the change from charismatic and/or traditional leadership to rationalization and political legitimization beyond feudalism – a typical Weberian topic. Manheim focused on the construction principles of public opinion in different types of societies, from feudalistic to democratic ones (Averbeck 2005; Averbeck-Lietz 2015: 125-148). Manheim shared a skeptical view upon the uprising liberal democracy as a fragile type of legitimation with the elder Erich Everth and Karl Bücher. Contrary to them, his argumentation was on a more abstract level, including general communication ethics beyond morals in journalism. Not by accident, Jürgen Habermas (1962) cited him several times in his book on the structural change

8. <http://ernestmanheim.com.br/index.php/ernest-manheim/publicacoes-de-ernest-manheim/> (May 15th, 2021).

http://agso.uni-graz.at/manheim/en/3_dtd/opinion.htm (May 15th, 2021).

9. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_Ayala_\(novelist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_Ayala_(novelist)) (May 15th, 2021).

<https://www.zeit.de/kultur/literatur/2009-11/ayala-tod> (May, 15th, 2021).

of the bourgeois public sphere, especially Manheim's contribution to the communication history of the Enlightenment magazine press in the up-raising bourgeois public (*moralische Wochenschriften*).

The writings of Tönnies and Weber have not been Manheim's only inspiration: Against his cousin Karl Mannheim, he argued that Mannheim's concept of the "social roots of thinking" (*Standortgebundenheiten des Denkens*) at the heart of his sociology of knowledge, of worldviews and of ideology has a blind spot by neglecting the *dynamics* of social communication: People *can* switch their political opinions and against former socializations – from the political right to the left and vice versa. And: opinion shifts have to be understood as relying on media as well as on interpersonal communication (Manheim [1972] 1998).

Manheim typified several potential structures of public communication, ideal types which empirically overlap (Manheim [1933] 1979, 1940; Averbeck 2005, 2015: 125-131; Beetz 2005: 156):

1. Democratic type (conflict oriented, partisanship but respecting counter-arguments)
2. Persuasive type (consensus by affirmation or: in its illegitimate form pseudo-consensus by propaganda and terror)
3. Discursive or "transcendental" type (balanced consensus regulated on a basis of mutual understanding and respect)

This means: In a press or media-saturated world we may find *different options to mediate meaning* and not at least: to mediate *transparency*. Manheim's qualitative type is more or less non-transparent and top-down-structured, in the worst case even dictatorial. The pluralistic type is interest-oriented and not transparent (but strategic) in each case. The transcendental type, which is coming close to Habermas' ideal type of comprehensive communication (*verständigungsorientierte Kommunikation*) *is the most transparent*. Manheim took the term "transcendental" from Kant's ideas upon *justice by publicity*. Claims for transparency under certain social circumstances are able to destabilize the 'closed shop' argumentations of the qualitative type (Averbeck-Lietz 2015: 133-142). Manheim's types are not mutually exclusive: pluralistic societies with

their comment and meaning-oriented, often polemic public communication need *transcendental elements like the respect for counter arguments* (Manheim [1933] 1979: 53). As far as we see, Ernest Manheim has been the first who established a generalizable concept of the public sphere relying on ethical as well as on empirical groundings in the German language (see also Schindler 1979).

3. What to learn from the past? Mediation in digitized, mediatized societies

There is an interesting quote by Knut Lundby (2009: 13) highlighting the fact that the English notion of mediation “comes close to the German term ‘Vermittlung’” between a sender and an addressee and that such mediations affect and are affected by the *relationship* between the two. This is what our predecessors Bücher, Everth and Manheim told us: mediation is not neutral, but related to interests, partisanship or bound to an ethics of communication which claims for a *just* mediation, namely the negotiation of meanings and interests in a free public sphere. Bücher with his plea against war propaganda, Everth with his speech on press freedom and against Nazism, Manheim with his conceptualization of a pluralistic public sphere based on the general acceptance of mutual recognition of diverging meanings stand for such a type of *just* mediation. Thus, mediation is a central normative concept in the sense that mediation *needs* the responsibility of involved actors and institutions. Unfortunately, all three thinkers, Bücher, Everth and Manheim do not tell us a lot on their concrete ideas about press regulation and rules needed for and in public mediation processes. Nevertheless, the three scholars are witnesses of our heritage of the Enlightenment: freedom of speech (Garton-Ash 2016) as a normative *basis* for responsible public reasoning.

But this basis is changing: What are the characteristics of the mediation of publics in times of codes and algorithms which stay “black boxes” (Bouillier 2016: 25)? It is no longer possible to look predominantly on the *contents* and *acts* of mediation like Bücher, Everth and Manheim did, but to rethink norms of mediation and resistance when *the infrastructures*

of mediation are becoming more and more in-transparent, not at least for 'ordinary' people and their private as well as their public communication on Social Media. Researchers observe mediation by machines (algorithms, social bots) and fundamental changes of the daily routines and regimes of reading, viewing, thinking, producing in digital media environments (Bouillier 2016; Couldry & Hepp 2016). New 'qualitative' (Manheim), anti-pluralistic commitments via populist and moral communication, including hate speech emerge.

We can argue with regard to Bücher, Everth and Manheim *that responsible and resistant public communication has to be aware of its underlying mediation processes* – not at least to understand what is going on in mediatized societies. Only to name here one obstacle: to understand the change from client-server to peer-to-peer architectures of online communication (Bouillier 2016: 9) and what that means for social communication between humans. The analytical challenge is to reflect "the double mediation of the social *and* the technical" (Jouët 2000: 497). Regarding the past of our own discipline we add some crucial future challenges, namely to analyze

1. The general *ethics of transparency*: Who (person/organization/collectivity) under which conditions is/should be responsible for transparent communication and mediation? How and by which rules under which constraints and guided by which values?
2. The *transparency of the mediator role*: Which person/role or which organization/actor/actant *is/are* social/technical mediators?
3. The *transparency of the rules of mediation*: Which technical/social rules and regulation does this organization/actor/actant follow or apply and why? How is this regulation applied? How is this regulation discussed and negotiated in (different) societies (Barbaresi & Pohlmann 2020)?
4. The mediation of the related background knowledge in terms of *digital literacy*: Who is educating whom and how, in which context and why with regard to online transparency?

The concrete and social relevance of such abstract questions we might understand by looking backwards on the traces of mediatization research via the writings of Bücher, Everth and Manheim ■

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Media and Cultural Studies in Umberto Eco perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the impact that three of Umberto Eco's crucial books – *Apocalyptic e integrate* (1964); *A Theory of Semiotic* (1975); and *Lector in Fabula* (1979) – have had on the subsequent development of early Cultural Studies and Semiotics as academic disciplines. Their respective conceptualization of the functioning of texts and the dynamics of interpretation has placed Eco at the heart of current issues such as transmedia and the culture of convergence. By extending the concept of *semiosis* to the processes of production of meaning, Eco has not only re-defined the place of the signification of cultural processes in the social sciences, but also opened a new territory of problems in the era of the cyber culture.

Keywords

Cultural Studies, semiosis, Umberto Eco, interpretation, transmedia

Introduction

Apocalittici e integrati. Comunicazioni di massa e teorie della Cultura di Massa (1964) now translated thirty years later as *Apocalypse Postponed* and edited in english by Robert Lumley (1994) was the first media theoretical book, which covers the period of the apogee of the broadcasting and their effects. Also extends itself to the present because his theory of the interpretation of texts and possible narrative worlds correspond to the kind of semiosis that the web is now posing to us. One of the first theoretical works on the sociology and esthetics of mass media, this book was also an antecedent to cultural studies¹.

Apocalypse Postponed: the anticipation of Cultural Studies.

Apocalypse belongs to Eco's 'programmatic' trilogy along with *Open Work* that is an anticipation to the aesthetics of the reception and *La Struttura assente* (1968)² which constitutes a continuation of a semiotic project understood as reading Modernity's social phenomena. I think it is important to point out that, in an epistemological reading the fate of the *founding books*, *Apocalittici* has performed the function of a cultural manifesto of the decade, a decade that saw Kennedy's period, the affirmation of Modernity in the era of broadcasting, the emergence of free time and the entrenchment of a culture of entertainment with happy endings.

1. The English translations that correspond to these references and quotations are: [1962] *Open Work* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989) Translation Anna Cancogni; [1964] *Apocalypse Postponed* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994a) Edited by Robert Lumley; [1975] *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976); [1979] *The Role of the Reader. Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984a); [1982] *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984b); [1983] *Sette anni di desiderio* (Milano: Bompiani). Partially translated in *Travels in Hyperreality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994b) Edited by Robert Lumley.

2. Eco, *La Struttura Assente* (Milano:Bompiani, 1968) is not translated in english.

In Latin America, the book has been translated in 1970, both into Portuguese and Spanish. At the same time, McLuhan, Barthes, Levi-Strauss, Pasolini were being translated and published. The critical reviews were immediate in recognizing that it was a book hinged between the existentialist post-war period and new times, those of the new visibility made possible by the audiovisual media. It was these new times, that which, in turn, require new tools and approaches, an era in which the civilization of television, is complementary to that of the book.³

Mass culture –which was also being described by French Theory with Edgar Morin and Roland Barthes– has a dynamic of its own that can be decoded, and the book was unanimously received as a reflection that opened a new cultural era in which other voices were integrated, such as those of Richard Hoggart (1958), Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Dwight Mac Donald (1962)⁴, thus showing, ultimately, how our culture had entered into entirely new times. Eco identifies and describes that precise moment in which the collective imaginary underwent a paradigm shift: there is a moment in which the unicorn –which had ruled from the Middle Ages onwards– disappears from the cultural imaginary, but paradoxically will always return, albeit in a resignified manner, with Disney and Pixar in the 20th and 21st centuries. Eco has always been aware that he was contributing to the creation of a cutting-edge theoretical Avant-garde, pointing to those issues that the community of semioticians and other social sciences researchers should discuss, if they were interested in the crucial problem of ‘signification’ in messages.

Apocalypse allowed, in Latin America, to situate mass culture within a dialectics between *elite culture* and *popular culture*. This was, in fact, an extremely controversial debate that carried on throughout the 1970s,

3. Eco wrote about the impact that this book had on the European debates in Eco, *Apocalypse*, 45ss.

4. See Roland Barthes [1957] *Mythologies* (New York: Hilland and Wang, 1972); Richard Hoggart, *The uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1957); Edgar Morin *Le Sprit du Temps* (Paris: Grasset, 1962); Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962); Dwight Mac Donald, *Against the American Grain* (New York: Random House, 1962).

insofar as defined cultural issues and policies, a debate which was to be continued later in Anglophone perspective⁵. Eco considered these three cultural phenomena –mid-brow, low-brow and popular– as typical products of bourgeois culture, once that the hegemony of the broadcasting paradigm was established.

The Latin American reading saw, by contrast, differences in the mode of production: popular culture would be a ‘counter-culture’, a culture of resistance, a marginal one that was trying to escape from mass culture’s compensatory matrix. Eco, who lucidly considered the role of the intellectual and the counterculture as a problem of ‘power’ wrote:

I was also very explicit in my use of the term ‘culture’: I used it in the sense in which it has been used by the human sciences for at least a hundred years, to refer to a body of knowledge, beliefs, moral codes, law, custom and any other ability and habitability man acquires as member of a society. If culture is understood in this way, there are organized and dominant cultures and that there are alternative, often peripheral cultural models (Eco 1994a: 121ss)

This utopian Latin American reading could not withstand the test of time, and the media produced an increasing cultural hegemony with its **long-time effect** in the re-shaping of the collective imaginary. What is curious about the book is that Eco discusses a number of cultural phenomena that took place mostly in the United States: comics in his reading of Steve Canyon, popular heroes such as Superman, repetition as their core cultural matrix, the fragmented narrative that was already anticipating his later theory of the lacunary text: in short, mass culture profits from

5. In Latin America, see Escudero Chauvel, Lucrecia “Umberto Eco, the Sixties and Cultural Studies”. In *Sites. The Journal of 20th-Century*. Vol.1. N°1. Spring. Edited by Roger Celestin. (University of Connecticut, Gordon and Breach Publishers, 1997) 233-245. See the debates that took place in the Argentine journal *Los Libros* directed by Hector Schmukler and anthropologist Néstor García Canclini’s work *Culturas Híbridas. Estrategias para entrar y salir de la modernidad* (México: Grijalbo, 1990). English translation by University of Minnesota Press; and for the same author: *Transforming modernity. Popular Culture* (Austin University Press, 1993). For the anglophone world see particularly Stuart Hall “Cultural Studies and its theoretical legacies”. In David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds) *Stuart Hall. Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996) 262ss.

its 19th century's narrative past by appropriating its feuilleton-like serial structure, but above all, it is a marker of a pattern of formal production, of a veritable language, which, due to its repetitiveness, has become a *formula* in contemporary times. And such a passage had originally been made by the American cultural industry.

Three operations devices

The first device in the construction of this new paradigm of cultural reading is that *Apocalypse* stronger contribute to discussions' modernization, not only in terms of authors but also in terms of the methodological tools used in the description, especially because these products appear for the first time as an object of critical and academic attention. Eco speaks of phenomena that were developing 'in another place', of which we were their periphery. This produces an effect of fascination in the readers, who are still blinded by the economic progress of the period, in that they feel part for the first time, of a global modernity. We are faced with the first culture in history that is not local, but shared by a broad swath of the planet, by means of creating homogenizing codes and producing stereotypes. Before the emergence of mass culture, one talked about French, English or Latin cultures. In this way, Eco's *ethos* begins to be delineated: being within mass culture but at the same time outside it. The irony is, without a doubt, an important meta-linguistic instrument in its very discursive, argumentative form.

The formula with which Eco faces this cultural dichotomy (*mass culture* vs *elite culture*) and that, in fact, provides the title of the volume, is well known: the *Apocalyptic* are those who cannot see in mass culture anything but the absolute evil, the *Integrated* are those who understand that the media have an extremely interesting structural complexity because it allows us to analyze the forms of contemporary narrative forms. On the other hand, the way in which the mass culture becomes our world, is interpretable, and accessible. 'Apocalyptic' criticism is essentially elitist and a-historical. The parallelism with the discussion about social media today seems obvious.

How to get out of Aesthetics to found an *aesthetic* in lower case, aesthetics that would deal with ephemeral objects, products to be consumed and die, objects without metaphysical pretensions? This is the operation of legitimization that *Apocalypse* fulfils: studying what happens, what fleetingly passes by, without knowing whether it will be forgotten or not. A theory that has to do with those representations that are recorded daily in the collective consciousness and that get sedimented in the social imaginary, only to reveal themselves *posteriori* as endowed with a strong vocation to perpetuity, as evidenced by the anniversaries of Mickey Mouse, *Superman* or *Star Wars*.

Apocalypse is built not only as a discussion around Mass Communications Theory, but as a genuine gesture of foundation: by placing the media in the *center* of the contemporary debate, it legitimizes them thanks to the method used. The first theoretical results of this gesture is to consider the media from a structural perspective –not only formal, but also historical; the media are thus plausible of a true genealogy of types and myths, a *theogony of strains*, something that is so well shown by sagas such as *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* or the video games that reproduce, albeit using different visual codes, the very same narrative devices of the wicked and the good, transposing them into the trans-media of our new culture of technological convergence.

It is also a strongly contextualized theoretical intervention: mass communications, if considered as a proliferating message within a culture, can be understood, above all, in anthropological and not only semiotic terms. The second operation: what is the method to be adopted for these ephemeral genres? What is the guarantee given by temporality? One seeks to discover whether there are rules and how they would operate. Eco's hypothesis is that the universe of the media is heavily repetitive; the narrative economy of the media proceeds by constructing 'small worlds' that the reader is called upon to actualize or realize based on a double condensation: *type* and *genre*. Through identifying the generating code, we will find the rule for sign production.

If there exists an object and a method, what would this new branch of Cultural Studies, that we could also call '*Semiotics' upper threshold*', consist of? The second theoretical result is thus an exploration of a territory of experimentation within the Social Sciences –a territory privileged by Anglo-American Media Sociology research– that is considered as an interdisciplinary space ⁶. Throughout all his books of the period but also in his later academic perspective, Eco has not ceased to explain how science is a set of crossed-over questions and answers. In his programmatic reading, we are dealing here with a vast and complex theoretical operation that, by choosing certain objects of major impact on mass society, they may be subjected to an anthropological, psychological, sociological or aesthetic reading. To sum up, a Semiotics of Culture⁷. These disciplines converge at the upper threshold of Semiotics, as it would subsequently be designed later in *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976).

A double innovation: *Apocalypse* carries the Cultural Studies germs, as they were later developed in the Anglo-American academic contexts. From the point of view of the subsequent development of Semiotics, this book is situated at the very origins of a Semiotics of Culture, including allusions to some phenomena of social forgery as arising from his famous definition of a sign as any element that can be used to lie (Eco,1986; 2008)⁸. With this book what is taking shape then is not only an ambitious research program but also one that is still valid today: (a) the formal analysis of mass communication messages, understood as the search for the constitutive rules of a code for sign production; (b) the different modes of media reception, which are strongly influenced by their political, economic and cultural contexts; (c) the proposal of a media aesthetics based on one of the classical, canonical relations in semiotic theory: the

6. See for example the perspective of John B. Thompson in *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

7. We can find this perspective in Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman "The Sign mechanism of Culture". *Semiotica* 12 (4) 301-305.

8. Eco *Travels in Hyperreality*.(New York: Harcourt. 1994b); *Turning back the clock: Hot Wars and Media Populism*.(Mariner Books. Random House, 2008). Translation Alistair McEwen.

semiotic function is the adequacy between form and content. In the media is the form which prevail.

Finally, the third operation concerns the definition of the role of the intellectual in a changing culture which has been proposed as a model for consensus *urbi et orbi*. If Western culture is spreading out as a hegemonic force at a global scale, the *homo mediaticus* should be prepared to read its texts, in a sort of global literacy. His position was, therefore, optimistic: this is the moment in which the critic becomes a cultural operator who is not only able to pinpoint social contradictions, but also ensure the transmission of certain values and intercultural tolerance (Eco 1994a:127).

Eco's theoretical horizon, a landscape that he would later develop with his articulated *model of reader* and that will give rise to a theory of interpretation understood as an inter-semiosis operation enhances the method, which must have theoretical coherence, in despite of the perishable nature of the message. His vision postulates that the media are central as hard core of a politic-cultural project. The truly question are how cultural values change with the media? This is Eco's central question and throughout his entire oeuvre the idea that prevails is that the media, in their *Enlightenment dimension*, are privileged spaces for global literacy, and that mediatization reshaped our world's interpretation.

The system of broadcasting of the sixties and seventies –which was centralized and state run, at least in Europe– represented a moment of homogenization of cultural and behavioral codes. These were times in which one could still cultivate the illusion of a certain capacity to operate within the system. What Eco postulates is to *understand the media logic* : it is necessary to study the representation device that built our symbolic imaginary. We can see now this global cultural homogenization with the dynamics of social media and the construction of public opinion.

A Theory of Semiotics: the project moment

A Theory of Semiotics was in its time a book for a strictly academic audience and a re-elaboration of his previous studies: *La Struttura Assente* (1968) with its two fundamental epistemological assumptions according to which culture must be studied as a communication phenomenon. Whilst, in turn, all the aspects of a culture can be studied as *communication contents*, because it is the dynamics of communications those that govern the laws of culture.

The place of Semiotics is the study of this process; *Le forme del contenuto* (1971) with his thesis on the forms of articulation of the signifying function (i.e., signification) and the conditions given by Hjelmslev formulation of the two planes –expression and content– in the production of semiosis as a process; *Il Segno* (1973) where he developed not only the philosophical history of the concept, but the very basis of his notion of *sign-function*. The latter is conceptualized as the establishment of relations between elements, based on a meaning-making intention that produces meaning through interpretation, the process of semiosis being thus an interpretative one.

The delimitation of the territory

Eco was outlining here an *synthesis* of the semiotic territory within the limits in which this discipline presented itself, and above all, what he considered then to be his particular contributions: the distinction between the processes of (physical) communication and (cultural) signification, the discussion around the place of the referent in this process, the incipient dissolution of the boundaries between semantics and pragmatics, but above all, his radical critique of the iconic concept. He criticized a semiotics centered in classifications of signs, and by doing this, he was privileging a Semiotics of production of meaning in which the influence of Charles S. Pierce's thought is notorious.

A Theory is the point of maximum accomplishment reached by a Semiotics that had been born out of the convergence of the structuralist

horizon –hence its classificatory and topological nature as well as its immediate and subsequent dislocation, whereby the problem is displaced from the notion of code to that of production of meaning and therefore it *interpretation*. This was a book that Eco considered to be less provisional than his previous ones, aware as he was of the breadth and richness within which the horizon of Semiotic Studies was being laid out.

Is a semiotics' general theory possible? Eco's answer is that it *is*: such a theory can explain every case of sign function in terms of underlying systems and in relation to specific codes. Aware that he was contributing to the foundation of modern Semiotics, in the 1980s we would find again this concern about the strict delimitation of the discipline's fields of action as evidenced in *Semiotics and Philosophy of Language* (1984b), with his key distinction between, on the one hand, a 'Specific Semiotics' that takes the form of a particular grammar of a sign system, and on the other hand, an 'Applied Semiotics', an area whose imprecise limits explains the fact that he prefers to refer to it as 'descriptive-interpretative practices', in which one could include those practices involved, for instance, in studies such as those identified as Semiotics of Advertising or Semiotics of Mass Communications in a broad sense. If each Specific Semiotics deals with one system of signs, General Semiotics has a philosophical nature. This slippage toward Philosophy as the primary and ultimate matrix as far as the reflection on the sign is concerned, would be emphasized in his subsequent investigations, in which Semiotics would feature as the most mature form that Philosophy of Language would take.

Undoubtedly, the epistemological horizon was strongly marked by Chomsky and the possibility of a general linguistic theory that was powerful enough to describe all the states and all the productions of a given language. It seems, however, important to emphasize how highly indebted to Peirce as opposed to the structuralist and Saussurean tradition Eco's Semiotics project is, particularly about the deep conception and constitution of such a project. The importance given to the notion of sign function from which most certainly his use of the concept of semiosis would derive and the emphasis put on an interpretative pragmatics demonstrate that the process of semiosis must do, above all, with an abs-

ence of object. The foundations of Eco's project are not, in any case, based on Linguistics. And therefore, we can read nowadays Eco's semiotics in terms of a theory of mediatization.

When Eco ([1979]2016 deSignis n°25) , in a pioneering essay attempted to outline a first *history of semiotics*, what he was interested in was in rendering apparent the methodological and theoretical possibilities of the relation of referring of a sign to another sign, that is to say, the very relation of *standing in for something else –aliquid stat pro aliquo*. This starting point marks the entire universe of signification and would represent the common thread that *traverses* Philosophy and that can be used to trace the birth of a semiotic way of thinking throughout different eras where the question of signification was presented.

Semiotics is part of the Human Sciences and shares elements in common with Philosophy and Aesthetics insofar as the latter two have addressed the problem of signification. Its history must therefore consider all the theories in which the relationship of standing in for something else –or a sign referring to another sign– is present as a problem. The history of Semiotics is thus, according to Eco, a branch of the history of Philosophy, in a similar manner as for Roland Barthes, Semiotics was a constituent part of Linguistics and for Saussure the latter was originally conceived as an integral part of Social Psychology. Is not extremely far from the posthumous reflections of Eliseo Veron (2013), where the semiosis process is inherent to human nature.

A step has, however, been taken between the 1970s Eco who considered Semiotics as a science that could, and should, study the whole culture as a communication phenomenon based on a process of signification, and this later Eco that would slide out of the territory of Cultural Anthropology into Philosophy. In these later developments, Eco considers Semiotics to be a discipline that would deal with, amongst other topics, falsification phenomena as meaning-making processes, and would thus develop a polemic theory in clear debate against the *vero-functional*ist trends represented by those conceptions of language maintained by the analytical philosophy.

The other interesting element is the institutional legitimatization of Semiotics: a field or a discipline? Roland Barthes had spoken about semiotic knowledge as a meta-science as a science of all the systems of signs, but above all, of the semiotic praxis as an 'adventure' in the sense of what came to it from the signified and not from the signifier and would point out the pre-eminence of the binary classification in the discourse of the human sciences.

Let me recall here the survival of the 1970s all-embracing optimism and its confidence in the development of the Human Sciences, that widespread *pansemioticism* that was so characteristic of the period. For instance, in the introduction to his *A Theory* Eco would include research areas such as medical semiology, the study of olfactory systems, kinesics and proxemics, or the study of musical systems and visual communications, precisely as the *political boundaries* of the emerging discipline, at the same time as Barthes was dealing with the heteroclit deployment of signifying phenomena. It is only at this point that the convergence with the Saussurean project seems to be symptomatic: a science that seeks to study *the role of signs as part of social life*, according to Ferdinand de Saussure's well-known expression.

The place of ideology in *A Theory of Semiotics*

Ideology as a theoretical concept does not belong to the semiotic tradition but to Political Philosophy. The insistence throughout the 1970s to include it as a mechanism of production of meaning shows a double impact on the studies of mass culture: on the one hand, the influence exerted by the post-war Marxist debate arising from the work of Louis Althusser (1969, 1971) and, on the other hand, the focus on the cultural industry which was developed in America and Europe⁹. In the first part of

9. Althusser, Louis *For Marx*. (London : Allen Lane 1969); «Ideological State Apparatuses». In *Lenin and Philosophy*. (London: New Left, 1971) 67-125. Cfr. The bibliography on the topic in the articles of Jorge Larrain and Lawrence Grossberg in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (eds) (1996), 69-70 and 171 – 173.

this article, we have seen what Eco's positioning within this debate was through his book *Apocalittici*. In fact, Eco introduces the term 'ideology' at the end of the Third Part of *A Theory of Semiotics*, as a way of integrating his Theory of Sign Production. The fact that ideology was treated as a system of hegemonic representations interpellates and challenges the semiotologist.

The concept of ideology was undoubtedly the climax that Semiotics had in common with the Cultural Studies. After dominating the debate in the Social Sciences, the topic literally disappears in the following three decades, and this paradoxical situation is what renders relevant to analyze now what Eco proposed then, particularly in his formulation in *A Theory of Semiotics*. The debates on the nature of ideological processes continued in Cultural Studies, during the 1980s (Stuart Hall, 1986,1996)¹⁰, but it is at this point where a frontier began to be built: two sets of disciplines initially engaged in the description of the production of social meaning would embark in an helicoidal journey that would increasingly take/bring them apart up to the point of totally ignoring one another.

Cultural Studies would incorporate some elements from Structural Semiotics, such as, for instance, the notion of code or the encoding and decoding processes (Stuart Hall 1973) at a time when Semiotics had already made the critique of the functionalist linear model of communication (Eco 1994a : 88-102 ; Fabbri1973). They would take as a model a notion of social discourse (Laclau 1977) that was extrapolated from the studies on Discourse Analysis available in that period (Veron 1971; Pêcheux 1975; Greimas 1988), and finally, they would belatedly incorporate the notion of textual processes (Morley & Chen 1996:16) after Eco

10. Hall wrote: "By ideology I mean the mind framework- the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and systems of representation- Which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works". In «The problem of Ideology. Marxism without guarantees». In Morley and Chen (1996) 26; «The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power». In *Modernity. An introduction to Modern Societies*, edited by Stuart Hall, David Held, Don Hubert and Kenneth Thompson. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996) 185-225. See particularly «What is a 'discourse'?', 201 and «Discourse and Ideology», 202.

had already extensively developed his concept of text as *lazy machine* and *expanded sememe* and especially the *Model Reader* hypothesis (Eco 1984a)¹¹.

I would like to briefly outline the contours of this debate at the time when *A Theory of Semiotics* is published. The debate is represented by the Marxist philosophical tradition, which Eco certainly does not ignore but neither does he belong to: a tradition that is dominated by the Althusserian interpretation and by French Theory's incursion into Discourse Analysis, which gives a final form to the problems of analysis 'beyond the phrase' through its very practice of working on the texts themselves.

I had initially thought that introducing the term *ideology* at the end of the volume was a concession that Eco was making to the spirit of the time, but Eco is not a modish man who would follow trends; rather, he is one of those who sets them, as we have seen with the revival of the medieval imaginary in *pop culture*. Therefore, it is crucial to confront the sophisticated solution that the Italian semiotician finds for the concept: ideology is a rhetorical *mechanism* of manipulation and persuasion, but –and here we may recognize the great *Ecoesque* themes– in relation to truth statements. It is a solution to one of the classical definitions as *false consciousness*: ideology stands as an orator's engine that simultaneously hides the world or makes it visible depending on the passionate effect that is sought: adhesion, belief, rejection. We do not know whether Nazism would have existed if there had been no Hitler, but certainly the former was strongly supported by the oratorical rhetoric of the latter. In

11. Hall, Stuart «Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse». (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1973). Now in Hall, S – Hobson, D; Lowe, A. & Willis, P (eds) *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980) 128-140; Fabbri, Paolo «La comunicazione di massa in Italia: sguardo semiotico. Malocchio della Sociologia». *Versus* n° 5, 1973, 57-109; Laclau, Ernesto *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*. (London: Verso, 1977); Veron, Eliseo «Ideology and Social Sciences: A Communicational Approach» in *Semiotica* III.1. 1971, 59-76; Pêcheux, Michael *Language, semantics and Ideology*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982, original in French 1975); *Analyse Automatique du Discourse*. (Paris: Dunod, 1969); Greimas, Algirdas Julien, *Maupassant: The Semiotics of Text*. (Amsterdam, Philadelphia: John Benjamin's Publishing Co, 1988, original in French 1976).

that sense we are not concerned with the judgment of truth or false but with the form of knowledge transmission (revealed or masked).

Some elements for discussion

In the years of the publication of *A Theory*, the debate over the concept of ideology was dominated by the strong political philosophy perspectives of Marx, Althusser and of course Antonio Gramsci. The complexity and hegemony of the debate reveals the ambivalence of the concept of ideology.

Described by Marx and Engels in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) and in *The German Ideology* (1845-1846) as 'false consciousness', the concept of ideology is placed in *A Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* with the famous topological metaphor, typical of the 19th century, consisting of two levels: the material base of social relations of production and the symbolic superstructure. For Marx and Engels, another distinctive feature of ideology is the action "of hiding" that evolved into Althusser's "ideological masking". Ideology is what prevents us from seeing and understanding the world as it appears in its raw material reality, as class struggle over the ownership of the means of production¹².

What matters to us here are *the semiotic components* of the concept, which could be at the level of what Peirce called *the final interpretant*. For instance, the identification of hegemonic ideas as habits of interpretation (*habitus*). Dominant ideas in a particular period, such as economic values; ideas that produce domination over others, as in the case of Nazism; ideas that would justify domination, such as radical Islam or the Christian conquest of the New World. In summary, it is system of shared representations that perfectly finds its place within a Semiotics of Culture.

12. Gramsci, Antonio (1971) *Selection for Prison Notebooks*. (New York: International Publishers, 1971); Marx, K. «Preface» to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. Selected Works in One volume*. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1970).

Throughout the 1970s and particularly around 1975 a set of themes and publications by authors from different disciplines such as history, philosophy, linguistics, literary criticism, anthropology and semiology, were crystalized and converged around a set of common questions: what are the relations between language and the social?¹³ What are the pre-discursive conditions of discourse? What is the materiality of ideology? A comprehensive and inclusive answer was found in Europe in the theory of social discourses, a Socio-Semiotics that would account for the social aspects of language. But in the epochal context, it meant the expulsion of the individual mechanisms of the enunciator. It seems clear that mass culture, because of its ability to produce homogeneity, effaces this frontier at an imaginary level. Everything is *social* in the circulation of messages and all discursive processes presuppose both the existence of imaginary formations and an anticipation of representations on the audiences' part, and it is on these anticipations that the sender bases their enunciative strategy. These two main mechanisms of transformation of the recipient –persuasion and manipulation– create a particular cultural complicity.

Foucault spoke of *discursive formation* (1972), Eliseo Veron (1971) and Michael Pêcheux (1975) of the *pre-built (preconstructed)*. Pêcheux, founder of Discourse Analysis as a trend within the French linguistics, wrote:

It is impossible to identify ideology and discourse, but the discursive aspect is one of the material aspects of ideological materiality, in short, the ideology is developed in a discursive space (Pêcheux.1975: 11).

The anticipation of what the other thought, everything seems to be constitutive of discourse [...] It is impossible to analyze a speech as text, that is as a linguistic sequence closed on itself, it is necessary to refer it to a set of possible speeches from a defined state of production conditions (Pêcheux.1969: 16)¹⁴.

13. Cfr. Ferruccio Rossi Landi, *Semiotica e ideologia*.(Milano: Bompiani, 1973) ; Luis Prieto, *Pertinence et pratique. Essais de Sémiologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1975).

14. Pêcheux died young (1938-1984) but his work had a great impact on the linguistic scene. He creates a pioneering current about discourse analysis at the *Centre d'Etudes*

Two rhetorical operations leave the sign in the production of meaning: the relation of *paraphrase* such is equivalent relations between two statements where one can be the reformulation of the other; and the *pre-built* -which are types of content- located halfway between Semantics and Pragmatics. Inscribed in the statements almost as *commonplace*, corresponding to relations already known, or to a collective voice, which is not affected either by negation or interrogation. It is an “*already said*” that, building a cultural complicity, produces the effect of evidence and of belonging to the same collective group. Close to the Barthesiana *connotation*, this concept will become central during the following decade with the consolidation of the analysis of the discursive strategies of the media.

An expression that characterized the period, is that of the “*conditions of production*”, which under the Chomsky influence, replaced the concept of “circumstances” or the Jakobsonian “context”. *Production* is understood here in the sense of producing an effect. A common thread that links these authors is the existence of stable semantic-rhetorical invariants, and the idea that all discursive formations depend on *specific conditions of production*.

In an example from the newspaper *Le Monde* published in the week of the attacks on the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* and the kosher supermarkets, the title ‘*Juifs de France: la tentation du départ*’ [‘Jews of France: the temptation to leave’] is built based on a common and specific pre-built to the French society: that of the collaborators who betrayed the French families of Jewish origin and this group’s exodus during the Second World War. The pre-built is simultaneously a semantic and pragmatic device that constructs a shared knowledge between the enunciator and the recipient, producing an effect of complicity, a causal relationship and a collective double identity: it is because the French

cognitives et du Langage at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS) that was interested in linguistics of enunciation. Contemporary of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, its proximity to the French Communist Party will determine many of their positions on relations language, speech, society.

See also Foucault, Michel *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. (London: Tavistock, 1972); *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of Prison*. (New York : Vintage, 1979).

themselves have betrayed each other during the Nazi occupation, that the collective “Jews of France” may be tempted to leave.

Jean Pierre Faye (1972), when he analyzes the phenomenon of Hitler and the narrative of the Second World War, argues that the sequence of events by itself cannot explain the process of Hitler’s rise, had it not been a prevalent way of telling German History, a framed directed narrative. Introducing the argument of the “narrative”, the boundary between narrative and history, that is so typical of French historiography, Faye notes the need for “a study of the conditions of production and circulation of narratives and their power” (1972:9). Faye analyzes the appearance, for the first time in a political speech, of the word *totalitarian* in Benito Mussolini’s speech of 22 June 1925, called ‘the *Augusteo*’, and the meaning that the Italian politicians gave to it as a “totalitarian will”¹⁵.



Image 1. *Storytelling in Le Nouvel Observateur 11 to 21/01/2015: a republican narrative constructed upon the collective imaginary of Eugène Delacroix *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple* (1830).* Courtesy of *Le Nouvel Observateur*.

Without analyzing the rich Foucauldian concept of “*discursive formation*” close to Althusser’s *ideological state apparatuses* we could say, for the purposes of this argument, that Foucault describes a semiosis centered on the transformation of the body but substantiated in different

15. Faye, Jean Pierre, *Langages Totalitaires* (Paris: Hermann,1972).

discourses. The body evolves from the *automata*-a tool that is docile to punishment- into that of a trained soldier's performing body. In this sense the ideological process reshapes the soldier by transforming his body into a machine which would not be possible without the surrounding discourses. Foucault describes a circular semiosis whereby the ideological processes condition the discourses, and in turn, the latter are conditioned themselves by the former (Foucault, 1979).

So, the particular mode in which an ideological instance operates is to *unite* a set of representations that are made to come and interact with each other. This transformation process of discursive forms is what occurred during Argentina's last military dictatorship, a process that culminated as a hegemonic narrative, during the Falklands War (Escudero Chauvel, 2014)¹⁶.

Ideology as form

We have seen that ideology is not a concept that comes from the semiotic paradigm but, at the same time, it is not a topic that is unfamiliar to semiotics. It is from Eco's Semiotics that comes the most radical critique of the concept developed in four directions:

(a) *the investment of the topological location of base / superstructure*, meaning is at the very basis of social reality, there is no social functioning without meaning.

(b) *ideology as representation*: it is not a competence of Semiotics to verify the validity of an ideology. Only a formal analysis may show that there are no representations in an abstract sense because they only arise from complex textual sets with a plurality of dimensions (i.e., visual/audiovisual; gestures/images; images/text).

(c) *ideology as content*: only discursive genres and rhetorical strategies exist, since there are no non-ideological contents as opposed

16. Escudero Chauvel, *Media Stories in Falklands-Malvinas War*. Preface by Umberto Eco.(Nottingham : CCCP, 2014).

to ideological ones, as the idea of opposing scientific discourse and political discourse would make us believe.

(d) *ideology as masking*: rather than a question of truth or falsehood, ideology has to do with producing an effect –a ‘belief effect’– by means of concealing certain elements and displaying other ones. Ideology is not a value judgment.

In a classic study of the relationship between literature and society, Eco devotes an analysis to Eugene de Sue and the serial novel of the 1900s. He correlates the ideological trajectory of the French writer, with the misery of the masses in the Paris of that period that see in crime their last resort as a way out, and finally, the logics of installments as the circulation dynamics of the work. Sue is the best example of *The Holy Family* by Marx and Engels (Eco, 1984a: 129). The analysis justifies the intervention of Semiotics in the description of the structures of Sue’s work. With a vocabulary that echoes the Russian Formalists’, Eco’s study is a methodological application to the dialectic work/author as well as an interpretation of the relations work/context on which he would return in *The Role of the Reader* (1979):

“We shall isolate three “series,” or “systems,” which play a part in the work: (i) the author’s ideology; (ii) the market conditions which determined or favored the conception, the writing, and the circulation of the book; and (iii) the narrative devices” (Eco 1984a: 126 -127)¹⁷.

Ideology as sign production

This long tour of the migration of a concept through different disciplines and authors allows us to situate and better understand the originality Eco’s position in *A Theory*: a moment of maturity of his semiotic thoughts and at the same time an opening text for the definitive incorporation of

17. Eco “Rhetoric and Ideology in Sue’s *Les Mysteres de Pari* “. In *International Social Sciences Journal* 14, no. 4 .

Now in Eco (1984a) 125 - 143. We could read his novel *The Prague Cemetery* as the implementation of its analysis on the feuilleton’s structure.

Peircean thought. Eco puts the ideological at the border, as the last limit of the process of sign production, between the lower threshold (stimuli) and the upper one (the symbolic), or as a *technique of interaction* of the discourse. The big difference with the authors quoted is that Eco works with the ideological mechanisms as sign production processes that the texts display as rhetorical devices in an early mediatization.

For Eco, an ideological position exists when there is a partial discourse, when the recipient does not possess the entirety of the variants in play from the sender, because the latter is either voluntarily or involuntarily concealing them. Analyzing the metaphorical and metonymic processes in the production of advertising messages on sugar substitutes—which simultaneously produce a positive value (reducing sugar) and a negative value (may cause cancer)—Eco singles out cases of *semic interdependence* when there is metonymic substitution (value carcinogenic) with the other part of reality (the dietary effect). But he realizes that the ideological mechanism cannot be reduced only to the substitution of the isotopic values of life/death with those which he calls *extra semiotic residues* because they depend on a catalyst agent for semiosis.

Eco noted that this rhetorical mechanism undoubtedly contributes to at the very basis of the diplomatic discourse. If we look at Vladimir Putin's speeches about Russia's recent interventions in Syria or the way in which the commemoration of World War II in Moscow's Red Square was staged, we find that this reading is still current. These rhetorical devices form the basis of the unsaid, the implicit or the threat, that is commonplace in diplomatic discourse.

The ideology depends on the belief system of the recipient which in the case of the Critical Theory tradition was a kind of cultural *pre-built*. Depends on that common knowledge shared by the sender and the recipient that allows for adhesion and complicity to be built. Therefore, Eco's question is about the structure of *semiotic* judgment, which presupposes a code that assigns one or more cultural values to a certain content. It is society that assigns to it an encyclopedic representation, but it is the encyclopedia the instance that establishes the correspondence expression-world. If one of the core characteristics of ideological processes is

their becoming-opaque for the subjects who suffer them, as Althusser maintained, the study of social intelligibility is simultaneously an object of study and a duty of Socio-Semiotics.

The short sketches of *Les Gignols de l'info*, an extremely popular program of humor in French television primetime representing main protagonists of current affairs through grotesque puppets, are an example of construction of humor based on the mechanism of aberrant hyper-codification. One of its shows staged the destruction of the Syrian cultural heritage as a case of *misinterpretation*: two jihadists are destroying with a hammer all the statues that they find, when a TV-interviewer interrupts by asking: "If [you] have never seen the true face of God, how could [you] know that what [you] are destroying is not a manifestation of Allah?" To which one of the two responds "Oh, God, we need to get some glue". From this scene we could derive that ideology as a semiotic category is a partial semantic system that, by concealing its premises, does not allow contrariety: it is an absolute discourse.

Eco describes the ideological mechanisms in the public space, in his reading of the different levels of *pop culture*, precisely in those extremely complex texts in which persuasion strategies are laid out. In this sense, advertising is an unlimited source of connotations and pre-built. And as such it is the genre that best condenses the ideological dimension as manipulation (the passionate) but above all, as persuasion (dispositio). The processes of *hyper-codification*, *aberrant decoding* and *hypo-codification* are central to the production of meaning in mass media reception.

Again, *Les Guignols de l'info*, in a parody of the popular Disney film *Frozen* entitled the *Queen of Jihad*, puts in motion the life changing experience of a French girl representing a Parisian suburbs stereotype in search of the Muslim lover whom she met on the Internet. As she goes through her journey, she discovers blind love in the Muslim faith and cheers through a song her submission to radical Islam precepts. Her submission is portrayed through initiation acts such as hiding her face, pleading guilty to adultery, being stoned for showing her hands, accepting to be sold and ultimately to be exploited in an anonymous terrorist attack. The seriocomic depicted here is an example, in the country of Voltaire,

of the aberrant decoding, the masking of the premises, and the partiality of the semantic space.

For Eco there is not such a thing as a semiotic theory of ideology, but only a technique capable of showing the relativity or the effectiveness of certain inferential trajectories of meaning and the pertinence of other ones. What the semiotician can do is to show the (cultural) relativity of certain concepts over other ones taken as semantic axes.

Conclusion

Rereading these texts, we could put forward the hypothesis that ideology is, for these authors, *a methodological condition* of the theory rather than an empirical result. And in this version of semiotics, ideology appears as a pre-Peircean problem. In fact, when Eco incorporates the concept of *semiosis*, ideology disappears as a theoretical problem and dissolves itself into a horizon of meanings. From there it can be reconstructed through watermarks in the books that compile Eco's contemporary chronicles and in his analysis of the cultural industries (Eco, 1994a, 2008). Most importantly, however, it reappears in the concept of *encyclopedia*.

The concept of *encyclopedia* is the most coordinated response to ideology as an interpretive framework for the operation of ideas. This operation, paradoxically, deprives ideology from its 'representational' component introduced by Critical Theory, to re-introduce it as semiosis' final logical interpretant.

It is in the following decade that, as Eco incorporates Peirce's work in his semiotic constructions, the dictionary-encyclopedia dichotomy reaches its full expansion. From a socio-semiotic point of view we are constantly manipulating partial encyclopedias of groups, class, constructing the concept of encyclopedia as a regulative hypothesis (Eco, 1984b).

Semiosis, the inter-discursive network of social production of meaning, ideological processes, all traverse discourses, and

[...] Therefore the process of unlimited semiosis shows us how signification, by means of continual shifting which refer a sign back to another sign or string of signs, circumscribes cultural units in an asymptotic fashion, without even allowing one to touch them directly, though making them accessible through other units. [...] Semiosis explains itself by itself: this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification and even allows communicational processes to use signs in order to mention things and states of the world (Eco, 1984a:198)

What roles do the ideological mechanisms of meaning-making play in the digital public sphere today? We could imagine a society with a sole, self-identical set of sense-making rules that could explain the meanings produced at all levels of social functioning: a society dominated by a single Grammar, a sole master Code. This society was described by Orwell, but we have lived through it in Argentina in the 1970s while Eco was writing *A Theory*. Today we see it delineated in the destruction of entire ancient cultures in the name of an idea. Nothing is further from the Eco's thought. A master is one who allows you to inhabit his language and continue to live in it ■

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Circulation:

Conceptual journeys

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Abstract

The concept of circulation had been “frozen” by the tradition of communication research as a forgotten issue, until pioneering studies by Eliseo Verón put it in the scientific agenda. For many years, Verón has been one of the protagonists in the development of research on circulation in Latin American and European contexts. This paper briefly examines the journey of the concept of circulation from four angles: *difference; articulations; appropriations* and *interfaces/couplings*. We highlight perspectives and condense moments from studies that have characterized research on circulation, at least since the end of the last century.

Keywords

Mediatization, circulation, couplings, contact zone

1. Introduction

Describing some aspects of how circulation works in the context of contemporary mediatic phenomena implies the resumption of references from Latin American research on mediatization. To a large extent, traces of circulation emerge in the configurations and dynamics of communication processes (from old to new media) studied since the end of the last century. That also involves the “access revolution”, with the appearance of the internet. We know studies on circulation date back, at least, to four decades of research, becoming objects of editorial products, academic theses, and congresses. Examples of the latter are academic events promoted by CISECO – Centro Internacional de Semiótica e Comunicação (International Center for Semiotics and Communication)¹, CIM – Centro de Investigaciones en Mediatizaciones (Research Center on Mediatizations), and other networks from different research centers.

Research at different levels draws attention to manifestations of new mechanisms of circulation of meanings. Particularly, contact transformations between political actors and society, hitherto mediated by mass-mediatic practices carried out directly as communication protocols of mediatic nature start to be handled directly by actors in charge of governments, parties, etc.

The context of the ongoing studies on mediatization is important to properly understand the current stage of research on circulation. From a seminal perspective, it is worth remembering the concept of circulation was first introduced in South America in 1986, at a pioneering seminar held at Universidad de Buenos Aires (Verón, 1986). We associate this fact with initiatives such as the appearance of LENGUAjes. This journal circulated in South America for decades, producing “answers” to the epistemological paradigms arriving in that continent. It offered not only the methods, but also problems to be investigated, as well as the Research Communication matrices inspired by functionalism. By making this observation, we do not aim to show the importance of those reflections

1. www.ciseco.org.br.

only as a “geo-academic issue”, but to draw attention to records that highlight how studies on such concepts have situated (relying on specific problems) the importance of research development on semiotics of mediatic processes in Latin America. We turned from the issue of deterministic-oriented research to another stage focused on the examination of more complex relations between media and social organization (e.g., studies on media effects along with diverse social practices) that have also surpassed specific institutionalist-centric angles. Typical phenomena related to the nature of the “mediatic society” were chosen. The latter resulted from

...the progressive insertion of communication technologies in the fabric of industrial societies (...) that emerged in the 19th century (...) with the progress of mass media written press, an evolution that has become more complex as a result of the advent of radio and television.
(Verón, 2004, p. 277)

That angle extended until the last years of the twentieth century, when we observed the outline of another period characterized by the intensification of technologies transformed into media, spreading over the organization and affecting all social practices in a strong and complex way. The passage from a period to another highlights a phenomenon that surpasses “the adaptation of industrial democracies institutions to the media, making the latter indispensable intermediaries for managing the social” (Verón, 2004, p. 278). Such issue points to the appearance of a “communicational architecture” that will later contemplate the internet. The so-called “access revolution”, caused by the latter, enables mutations in the interactional processes, until then, managed by operations of the social fields through transactions of meanings mediated by the mass media. Those activities have become dynamized in a complex way by new forms of production and management of circulation of meanings. The qualitative transformation of media functioning during the last years of the twentieth century (from 1970 to the beginning of the following decade) shows clearer contours on the new forms of relations of media culture with the functioning of the social organization. That aspect raised

the systematization of the first studies on mediatization and circulation (Verón, 1986).

According to Verón's approaches, the dynamics of mediatization are characterized by circuits of complex feedbacks (instead of linear processes of cause and effect) in the relations between mediatic and non-mediatic institutions. Media of varied nature are mixing with all the significant aspects of the social functioning.

By associating communication to the complexity of non-linear relations, the ideas formulated by semiotic reflections on mediatization introduce a kind of response to the "functionalist paradigm". Propositions made out of that conception inaugurate a long-established program of study as contemporary as the mediatization-in-process phenomena. The concept of circulation appears in that context insofar as its manifestations occur through complex non-linear flows of contacts between the broadest institutions, mediatic institutions and social actors. It also appears when drawing attention to the discontinuous character of communication. That hypothesis is more explicit in the veronian writings (Verón, 1985), not only alluded to the scope of interpersonal communication, but in all communication processes, including those mediated by technologies. Therefrom, the author proposes a hypothesis that associates more emphatically the mediatization functioning with a spectrum of a complex circulatory activity. I.e. "...before reinforcing social uniformity, the accelerated mediatization of industrial societies most likely leads us to increasingly complex significant operations" (Verón, 2004, p. 67). Those issues are taken up by cooperation networks of researchers whose reflections have deepened the understanding of mediatization as a phenomenon that engenders new research problems, such as the studies on circulation.

2. Circulation: going beyond borders

Reflections showing mediatization (and the dynamics of its processes) not standardizing nor homogenizing social relations and practices draw attention to mediatization as a source of another interactional model of

reference, by raising types of relations and circuits of messages between producers and receivers (Braga, 2012, 2017). Situating mediatization as a phenomenon to be observed beyond the transmissional models (based on linear feedbacks) implies both the refusal of subsidies from social action theory and the election of another model that would situate it from a complexity perspective. The hypothesis of a complex viewpoint proposes that the communicational process works in an open way, according to asymmetric and non-deterministic interchangeability (Culioli, 2010). That hypothesis would be valid both to describe the nature of interpersonal interaction and the one mediated by technologies. To qualify it better, the notion of “discontinuity” refers to showing something that can describe the “mismatch” in the discursive exchange between discourse producers/receivers. That would not be observed from a functional viewpoint, seeking for an answer that, somehow, would understand the mismatch only as an indicator that the reception is out of step with the dynamics of the meaning supply by the production. In that case, it refers to observing the nature of the dissociation between them as something more complex. It would be plausible to suppose that, in the context of a new mediatic ambience shaped by complex feedbacks, the relations between such poles would be configured around couplings that would generate non-deterministic interactions permeated by qualitatively different grammars and logics. That notion is associated with the concept of interpenetration (Luhmann, 2016) to explain the functioning of interactions between mediatic (institutional) systems and those involving social actors in the context of mediatization. From that approach, these poles contact each other in a dynamic of interfaces where a system (e.g., media system) would operate as the environment of another (that of social actors) and the latter would work as the environment for the former. That activity would put their complexities in contact based on an asymmetric nature (Verón, 2017). The concept of interpenetration, borrowed from systems theory, offers support to explain the complex configurations of interactions in a mediatized society. In the context of intertwining enunciations, production of meanings founded upon non-converging “bundles of relations” would take place. That activity would be carried out following specific characteristics of the logics and gram-

mars of each one of the operating poles. From these couplings would result, hence, the notion of communication distanced from the idea of balance.

One of the effects of mediatization-in-process is the fact that its manifestations raise questions and first hypotheses on such “architecture”. We refer, specifically, to perceptions pointing that circulation goes beyond a “zone of passage” or, just, an “intermediate link”, as understood by functionalist-oriented seminal studies. New perspectives draw attention to a circulation activity going beyond its own borders (Fausto Neto, 2010), as described below.

3. Contexts and moments of circulation

Research on circulation results from hypotheses that has already been proposed, at least, in the late 1970s and the beginning of the following decade. Some of them only highlighted indications about a mode of circulation functioning in terms of automation or naturalization, while others stressed invisible traces of its functioning, remaining as hypothesis the recognition of circulation as the difference of the discursive investment between discourse producers and receivers. In view of the impossibility of tracking circulation, it would remain to recognize that contact between these two poles would take place around intervals and other trajectories whose nature and manifestations specificities were ignored for a long time. Such ignorance was related to the association of the expectation generated by the communication process with effects-related issues. I. e., the messages transmitted by the sending instance would always have their intentions (calculated and predictable) confirmed by the receiving pole. At most, it was admitted that the “noises” were remedied by the own regulatory actions triggered by the “engineering” of the messages sending instance. In order to ensure that receivers (kept waiting) would be recognized in these “exchanges”, it would remain to implement maneuvers that could affect them, relying on cooperation triggered through mediational instances. For that purpose, another type

of model (alternative to those of transmissional nature) is conceived to deal with “noises” as a disorder, transforming the unidirectional transmission flow into two-stage flows. I. e., articulating two movements: (1) from a sender to (2) an intermediate agent and from this one to (3) a receiver. That design was still structured around transmissional logics since the interposed mediation (level 2) was originally subordinate to the logics of the sending pole. The latter maintained as a postulate its activity of control over the functioning of the unidirectional circuit. It was a model of “exchange” that ignored the complexity of circulation situated in a relational environment, such as something that would go far beyond its existence only as a “zone of passage”. Subsumed by the transmissional logic, in that case, circulation was a region understood from the actor’s viewpoint (in production) whose activity logics outlined presumed effects by the work of reception. For many years, the principles that guided the “diffusion of innovations” practices (Rogers, 1971) were inspired by that model, in which circulation would only be a zone of flow passage and message extension sent from one pole to another. The recognition of circulation as a more complex instance of work became evident when symptoms of “disarticulation” in the contact nature between the production and reception poles were captured through research. The latter, guided by models beyond the principles of social action theory and examined the interactional flows between agricultural institutions and rural workers (Freire, 1970). In the context of communication studies in Latin America, Freire has been one of the first formulators of critical reflections on that problem by introducing interactional matrices concerns whose indicative foundations on the work of circulation appeared as an issue beyond a perspective of sign-in-extension. Freire considered the importance of another model of interaction. However, other visions went further formulating hypotheses on the complexity of the relational matrix. Specifically, on the nature of the difference of logics on which the work of production of meanings would operate. According to that perspective, the production/reception dynamics would also be fueled by collateral factors that could emerge from other logics. It is in these conditions that “the interaction between parts of the mind is triggered by difference” (Bateson, 1986, p. 103). According to those hypotheses,

such difference would also be associated with different rules and grammars on which messages organized by the poles-in-interaction (following different modes) would be structured (Verón, 1979). The idea of the communicational process as relational (and not just transmissional) by nature is condensed around contributions from analytical models engendered outside the functionalist domain (in particular, social action theory). The same happens with the idea of meaning resulting from bundles of relations founded upon differences of elements that would constitute the nature and functioning of the poles (in terms of contact). Therefore, the existence of work between the poles has been recognized. That work would be sustained around an architecture that shows the existence of a “third element” that dynamizes its forms of interactions. In that case, two specific works stand out within a kind of “emerging interactional architecture”. The first refers to a relationship between the two poles based on difference and, as stated above, engendered from specificities of its logics and grammars tensioned according to co-enunciations, generating entanglements through circuits that would take them forward, and not to predictable scenarios. A second work refers to the activity of the “circulatory system” that makes the interactions of these poles take place around “bundles of relations” equidistant from convergences, certainties and predictability. Not being contained by the grammars borders of the poles-in-interaction, circulation would take care to activate them, but according to the articulation of interfaces that would raise (in addition to the manifestations of their singularities) their own differences. Thus resulting in contexts that would be constructed and left as clues to a complexifying activity to be unveiled. These questions appeared in reflections already at the beginning of the 21st century, in the context of the studies on media semiotics. Specifically, in 2016, CISECO enshrined its PENTÁLOGO VII as a moment to debate the theme “discursive circulation: between production and recognition”. One of its goals was to reflect on models that would give rise to the construction of a theory of circulation. This initiative was also intended “to value studies on reception in South America and Brazil, particularly, identifying both conceptual and institutional obstacles and promoting principles of fieldwork that articulate the two poles of discursive circulation (production and recogni-

tion)". Such objectives seem essential to ensure the relevance of Latin American media research in recent years, considering the explosion of the internet phenomenon that has precisely put into question the issue of the access conditions to mediatic discourses, i. e., and the issue of circulation².

4. On 4 notions

It is not the aim of this paper neither to outline a "state of the art" nor to reconstitute historical aspects about the concept of circulation. We just propose a discussion on some angles. Specifically, four (among others) which are present in the debates on circulation, named as: deviation, articulation, appropriation, and interpenetration, as discussed below.

4.1. Circulation as deviation (difference)

Even considering a communicational context characterized by the centrality of the media, in which circulation would work around two poles (production and reception), "trapped" in its dynamics, circulation appears situated in the midst of questions, beyond the perspectives that consider it as an "automatic zone". We start from the notion of difference and a conception of the communicative process as a relational activity. First hypotheses signaled that grammars nourished with differences as logics specifying them in production and recognition environments. Grammars were understood as "a complex set of rules describing operations (...) that allow defining the conditions of production or the results of a given reading. (...) {because} A grammar is always, in other words, the model of a discursive production process" (Verón, 2004, p. 51). The existence of two sets of grammars implies recognizing, first, that every communication process (from interpersonal communication to technology-mediated communication) is constituted around different autopoie-

2. Discursive circulation: between production and recognition. Pentálogo VII Propositive Document. Japaratinga, 2017.

sis (logics, rules, etc.) engendered in each one of the communication poles and put themselves in contact through interdiscursivities. In every area of communication there is a rupture expressing the “non-linearity of the circulation of meaning”. That issue was initially referred to as a lag, or, even, as a “deviation” attributed to difference due to the fact that “both circulation poles are operating according to qualitatively different logics” (Verón, 2013, p. 288). According to that perspective, the formulation of those differences was initially attributed to grammars (as rules) and their conditions as generators of a mismatch in the relations between production/reception. At the same time, marks of the existence of circulation could not be evidenced since it only stood out as a difference in the relationship between production and messages. Where would such a difference reside? It meant that meanings would be woven from references inherent to each of these instances. It is worth remembering, still in an allusive way, that the possibility to study that difference, in empirical terms, was manifested in the first and second generation of semiotics research, whose investigative interest was centered on the description of the functional aspects of grammars, but emphasizing the discursive production systems. The result did not go beyond the reconstitution of grammars, since we examined “the textual functioning to recover how the discourse intentionality would be structured at the level of grammars. (...) {also} how we could infer about the production of its effects on reception” (Fausto Neto, 2010, p. 7). In these conditions, circulation would still remain as a subordinate instance, in a way, to the assumptions of social action theory, projecting themselves into the field of semiological studies, since their analytical perspective was crossed by the “legs” of that theory. Especially in descriptions projecting, inferentially, the effects of meanings by reception, but according to operations of grammars-in-production that would come to appear in the sphere of texts. One of the first veronian hypotheses on the notion of circulation as a deviation/difference still remains challenged for a long time by the presence of the resonances of such injunctions, due to the absence of empirical-analytical instruments that could account for more complex studies and descriptions of these differences, from the clues of grammars. It is not a specific problem from communication studies, since, for

a long time, functionalism laid down its rules in language studies. Especially within the scope of discourse analysis. Such difficulties generate some mistakes manifested in perspectives that tried to understand the complexity of circulation only from a deductible approach. In spite of these limitations, articulation between these two poles would remain pointed out as an important issue when recognizing that, although circulation does not make visible the traces of its activity, it would lend its own dynamics to explain, in some way, the production of meanings. More than an “automatic zone”, or a space for the passage of signs from one place to another, circulation would stand out, in a tacit way, as an instance that would try to give conformity so that social discursivity would appear, trapped between two poles. It is within this complexity that the work of production of meanings would be done distanced from balance, not having as a horizon the functioning of the two poles from perspectives of symmetries. If, on the one hand, the notion of “difference” is important to situate the existence of circulation, the examination of the interactional activity between production and reception within the scope of the topography of communicational processes drew attention to other aspects that would involve the nature of the connections between them. Particularly, the notions of distance that would affect the levels and nature of contiguities generated from the dynamics on which the interactional work would be sustained. In this way, we point to the existence of other layers of elements within the scope of the communicational processes, drawing attention to the fact that these regions would not be so “inhospitable” and devoid of articulations, nor would it be just a “zone of passage”. It is in that ambience that goes beyond the constitution and functioning of two poles that the work of circulation stands out as an articulating dimension of the relations between production and reception. It is through an “approximation process” that empirical studies on circulation are emerging.

4.2. Zone of “articulation”

When thinking on circulation as a difference based on the effect of dissociation/distance of contact between grammars of production and recognition, we should not understand such aspects as directly associated with a disjunction and, to put it this way, a rupture. On the contrary, it is a matter of indicating a relational activity between message producers and receivers that takes place around non-linear dynamics, in the context in which the distances (intervals) between such poles and the specificities of their logics would give rise to a relational activity, but marked by strong mismatches, making the meanings-in-circulation subordinate to non-deterministic dynamics. However, such instabilities marking the communicational process would not cause the rupture in the interactional activity between these poles, since the production of meaning would be implicated in the structural reality of a dynamic between them. Such dynamics would be guided by patterns of interpenetrations, according to articulations, even if crossed by a high degree of unpredictability as a product of the nature of the different logics, etc. Understanding the implications of what was pointed out here as “mismatch” and “interval” thus involves examining the complexity of the components that generate a relationship. Otherwise, we would fall back into causalist concerns, insofar as we would look for the sources and causes of instability in one of these poles, or even, relying on specificities of the enunciated discourses by one or the other. From a different perspective, studying meaning-related phenomena would require taking into consideration “the articulation between discourse production and reception {as} a fundamental issue” (Verón, 2004, p. 274). The need to understand such articulation seems to be “a major challenge in terms of both theory and research” (Verón, 2004, p. 274). It is a new issue that distances us from epistemological traditions of “binary” nature. By putting the nature of articulation in this way, that perspective isolates the discursive activity from a relational perspective. And it would consider the initiatives and strategies of one of them unilaterally, that would be far from the expectations of the other pole. Therefore, without giving due attention to the examination of the relations between such poles, that fact would impede a more com-

plex understanding of the “processes of negotiation of meanings” that take place in that context. Observation points out many consequences when fixing on an orbit or examining the dynamics of strategies from the isolated perspective of one of the poles. One of those consequences is the crystallization of viewpoints that reinforce, among other things (and as we mentioned above) the prevalence of the actional and diffusionist perspective. In these conditions, and, in an attempt to study the complexity and challenge of this articulation based on discontinuous dynamics, we allude to aspects about research on “reading contracts” (Verón, 1983, 1985).

Recalling very briefly, studies show that one of the objectives of “reading contracts” is to describe the construction of connections between production/reception, considering the differences that constitute the specificities of these universes in the construction of an enunciative work, centered on postulates, differences or deviations within the scope of communicational action. “Contracts” would be understood as an instance of “complexity reduction”. Starting from the challenge of indeterminacy of meanings between producers and receivers, strategies are developed to keep them in “contact zones”, a kind of negotiation territory. In general, “contracts” are examined under injunctions of “production logics”, considering that, those who demand these forms of prospectations are generally institutions responsible for implementing strategies that require feedbacks on the effects of their activity of production/circulation of meanings. However, considering the importance of the articulatory dimension of the communicational process, observations are made in broader terms, as the strategies from the perspective of its users’ consumption are also examined. I. e., to what extent can the information captured from the receivers indicate clues about the modalities through which they would transform the supply, introducing postulates and logics of their own reality? These possibilities of articulation involving different logics have repercussions and bring another way of observing circulation. It ceases to be a concept associated with the lag and is now understood as an instance of articulation between discourse suppliers and users, based on the notions of space (distance)/temporalities, cir-

cumstances in which meanings are elaborated. Circulation would emerge as a new device when transformed into a space in which institutions and social actors meet around “complex enunciative games”. In these conditions, circulation would detach itself from a conceptual framework that would situate it as an interval (or even a mismatch) constituting a space in which operations of investments of meanings (involving various levels of discursivities) are processed (Verón, 1983, 1985).

The analysis of the production conditions of the connection between production/recognition is permeated by the epistemological motivation with the aim of deepening the understanding of these articulations. However, its results are, to a certain extent, problematic, as institutions concerned with interests related to immediate results are unable to develop cultures of evaluation capable of offering them angles about interactions from a complexity perspective that would go beyond a notion of interchangeability just founded upon the unilateral recognition of part of the grammars. In that case, those of production. In some way, that research context emphasizes concerns that go beyond the recognition of the mismatch as an issue crossing the scope of discourse supply and users. It recognizes the existence of two complexities articulated from logics and grammars that feed strategic objectives, equally different, that translate themselves into manifestations within the scope of communication strategies, according to different situations: those of the supply strategies, those involving heterogeneities of appropriation forms expressed and/or situated in the world of the actors. Mediatization-in-process complexifies that dynamic by raising the possibility that strategies, engendered according to media logics and operations, do not erase the nature of a complex circulatory activity that takes place in the dynamics of textures of these articulations. This issue signals new clashes that involve convergences/divergences of meanings. Another aspect that largely challenges the studies on “reading contracts”, concerns the objects generating studies that, within the circulation of meanings, manifest themselves in the contexts of the mediatized society, in real time. That variable imposes some challenges for research on “reading contracts”, as it involves methodologies that can ensure the description and observations on functioning levels of “enacted circulation”. I. e., in the context

in which the production/circulation of meanings processes are complexified, the boundaries of temporalities between supply strategies and discursive practices in reception would be practically non-existent. This fact would impose an empirical work invested with many new investigative protocols. One of the challenges posed by this dynamic, concerns the work of observation on the construction of meanings through connections drawn within extremely complex contexts.

4.3. Appropriations

The perspective previously described drew attention to the importance of the need for studies on “grammars” articulation levels that would manifest themselves through operations within the scope of discursive strategies. It also pointed to the uniqueness of the enunciative work that the subjects in reception would already be doing faced with the discursive supply. That aspect could be examined in the research on “reading contracts” functioning, whose clues would manifest them in the scope of an activity that would contemplate a certain interdiscursive dynamic. The latter characterized by tensions generated by the contacts between logics and grammars of the poles-in-interaction. That perspective is associated with the meaning supply appropriation issue, which proposes that “the real object [to be examined] is not the message itself (...) but the dynamic of production/recognition, whose message is nothing but the point of passage” (Verón, 2004, p. 237). A notion of appropriation would imply, on the one hand, the existence of the message in the context mentioned above, but also on discursive operations of two universes related through different logics and operations. On this dynamics, Verón reminds: “from a semiotic viewpoint, I see actually wrong what the ‘effect of meaning’ of a discourse could be, if it is not another discourse in which it manifests, reflects, and inscribes the effect of the former” (Verón, 2004, p. 237). However, it is not a matter of observing the issue of effects in a causalist way. As we know, “a given enunciation device never produces a single effect, but always several, depending on the receivers” (Verón, 2004, p. 238). That means to value how the discourses are worked in the scope of these “articulations”, mainly considering the

operation marks of the recognition grammars pointing out the appropriation of the discourse on offer. In this way, these considerations ratify the need to make explicit what could be understood by the notion of appropriations of discourses that would manifest themselves in the circulation environment. In the context we face, what would be under analysis is the interdiscursivity processed in the situations involving, therefore, the actual operations of supply/appropriation of meanings.

That observational process raises the need for a corpus of discursive materialities (Verón & Levasseur, 1989), which seems to be a central reference for understanding the operations of appropriations manifested in the circulation environment. Research on the relationship of visitors with products from a touristic exhibition was conducted. It sought to describe the route that people took following two questions. On the one hand,

...what is the nature of the act of exhibiting and how does that act affect the meaning of what is exposed? (...) It is not simply a matter of giving access to its own meaning; to expose is always, and inevitably, to propose what is shown, a particular meaning. (Verón & Levasseur, 1989, p. 21)

On the other hand, the second question concerns the relative weight of the visit motivation, and, more generally, the importance of an intentionality that would precede its realization *in situ*. Beside the act of exhibition configured in a logic defined by its promoter, possibly the most important aspect for research is “drawn”, in an open way. It concerns the behavior of visitors themselves as modalities of appropriation:

...because if exposing is always proposing (...) visiting an exhibition is composing, in a double meaning: the one that aims to produce accommodation and the other that seeks to (...) make a pact negotiate (...). I. e., its relationship with what is exposed, and with the one who is in charge of what is exposed. In that case, a kind of institutional enunciator of culture through whose knowledge the exhibition is interposed. (Verón & Levasseur, 1989, p. 21)

The research draws attention to the conceptual aspect developed when postulating that

...the visit behavior expresses the interval/distance (according to item 1 of this text) between production and recognition, which should be considered as the result of a negotiation that can only be understood as a (complex) notion between the properties of the proposed discourse and the appropriation strategies by the subject [visitor] (Verón & Levasseur, 1989, p. 32)

The circulatory dimension would be put on two levels: the interval between production and recognition, which “we can consider of the order of circulation of social discourses” (Verón & Levasseur, 1989, p. 30). But also, from the hypothesis according to which grammars, both in production and recognition, are constituted from the interpenetration of other discourses, as conditions of their production, generating a complex articulation of interdiscursivities. I. e., from manifestations originating in the dynamics of circulation. Semiological analysis provided the observation of the visitors’ behavior related to the exhibition, identifying four types of visitors and four types of relationships they established with the supply, along the way, in the context of their different appropriation strategies. Attention is drawn to four types of performances by the “visiting-body”, and the construction of this typology of appropriation shows that recognition is never “deductible” from a description of the “structure” of the discourse on offer, but of the complex result of an encounter between significant properties (singular grammar of the discourse on offer and the appropriation strategies (various grammars) of the discourses of subjects as visitors). Observation of research on appropriation processes takes into account the inseparability of the two levels, production and reception, and clarifies that its objective was not to create a typology of social actors (visitors), nor of their personalities, but to make the description of the visit strategies. The eye of the researcher is still situated, in a way, in a reception issue. But data collected there describe elements of the articulation and some clues about the functioning of logics and grammars in contact. That serves as hypotheses so that, later, research could be developed providing a more refined description of the functioning dynamics of logics and grammars within the scope of circulation interfaces. It was particularly concerned with the reception of scientific information from television broadcasts where appropriations were dee-

pened, observing logics on which interactions start from the notion of complementarity connections. I. e., according to dynamics woven from difference involving producers and receivers (Verón, 1985, 2013).

4.4. Interfaces/couplings

Understanding the perspective of this new context, in which circulation exercises a work of meaning coupling at the interfaces taking place in the context of the production/recognition poles, implies considering the existence of a new ambience no longer structured around a “mass mediatic” topography, but whose existence is formalized in the ongoing mediatization, according to three characteristics.

1) The growth of media operating through a new technical-communicational device [which] typically produces radial effects in all directions, affecting, in different ways and with different intensities, all levels of society” (...). 2) The radial and transversal nature of the produced effects is the result of their systemic nature, implying a huge network of feedback relationships (...). 3) The acceleration of historical time [caused by the two previous issues], drawing attention to the fact that, in the (...) last ten years, the internet has changed the access condition to scientific knowledge, data, institutions and people (...) (Verón, 2014, pp. 16-17)

These accesses and their circuits point to the existence of a web of interactions that, practically, remove control devices and other forms of regulation on the work of meaning production, since it organizes itself around multiple feedbacks distanced from notions of balance. We start from the hypothesis that the effects of technologies, transformed into media and affecting social practices, generate new interactional possibilities constructed beyond the actions, logics and grammars of the constituent poles of circulation, as it happened in the context of the mass media, bringing out not only an ambience, but other forms of circuits in which new conditions for the meaning production are structured.

The radial effects of mediatic phenomena generated in the society-in-mediatization draw attention to the nature of feedbacks that go beyond linear aspects, affecting the social organization itself through new flows and circuits. Their dynamics try to complexify the problem of divergence of meanings through articulations manifested following circulation dynamics made in the midst of indeterminations and that affect reciprocally both the systems and their environments. Observational processes showed recently that circulation would not leave visible traces of its functioning. But, it is possible to admit that, despite the immateriality of its logics, the internet gains certain corporeities as it already transforms itself, according to forecasts, into a new great battlefield (Verón, 2014) among discursive practices that move towards it. We do not mean there are overlaps between them. But, in this way, it refers to interpenetrations whose enunciation processes erase or dilute identity marks of these practices, giving rise to other references constituting circulation as its main “actor-character”. We agree with the hypothesis that the internet is still a source of generation of meanings constructed according to various complexity dynamics. I. e., when activated by different social practices, the internet would be a “receiver” of its logics and grammars, since the referred practices are installed discursively on the internet in order to produce and circulate meanings. In this way, the internet would be a source that generates another complexity, as it dynamizes, through its “way of being” as a technical object (Simondon, 1969), discourses that enter into it, generating meanings that bring marks of these articulations. It is not about a network that would move forward inertially what enters into it, but a construction device that takes other discursivities into it, as a condition for the production of a complex symbolic activity which can only be enunciated if also taking into account some “laws” of this complex “environment”. If, on the one hand, its configurations encourage the functioning of a tension characterized by coupling/interpenetration, on the other hand, something escapes from its protocol, giving rise to an incompleteness favored by bifurcation scenarios in which discourses get their destinations without both the logics of the social practices that enter the internet and the latter’s own logics being able to regulate, predict, in short, control the effect of what is engendered in these circuits.

If, on the one hand, the internet imposes itself following a dynamic that constitutes it as an “ambience”, on the other hand, it keeps levels of interactions with the broader social organization that would result in a kind of complexified inter-systemic activity; either by the specificity of each one of them or by their relations, and also by the effects generated by the inclusion of a diversity of social practices in it, whose effects are unforeseen by nature. In the context of circulatory dynamics of this new “communicational architecture”, Latin American research on circulation highlights several issues that show the quality of its debate, consistent with the bibliography presented here. We highlight studies on new interactions between institutional and consultants’ niches through “contact zones” (Sgorla & Fausto Neto, 2013), which try not only to ensure the access of individuals to the forms of knowledge engendered in the mediatizing context, but also to offer them the possibilities to constitute themselves as collectives that enunciate new forms of public conversation.

As we have seen, the most ancient hypothesis refers to the impossibility of identifying the traces of circulation, something that had a lot to do with the nature of the socio-technical design on which interactions were constructed, permeated by the logic of transferring a “one-to-many” message in the “mass-mediatic” context. However, in the current ambience of mediatization, clues point out that circulation gains certain “corporeality”, insofar as certain “contours” of its existence are named and described, allowing itself to be seen by the capture of observational processes. Entanglements between discourses are described as an activity that is increasingly being done at the inter-systemic level, mapping and describing operations related to the logics and grammars, something that, for us, raises the existence of a new empiricist, as it seeks to describe and categorize new forms of circulatory activity at the level of social discursivity.

5. Concluding note

Among the consequences of the complex feedbacks produced by the growing mediatization, we point out the transformation of the (techno-

discursive) structure of circulation complexifying the conditions of production (and circulation itself) of discourses and meanings. From the perspective of this proposition, circulation is conceived as a “region” in which the meanings not only transit, but are also woven. The effects of mediatization allow the way of observing circulation to recognize and conceptualize it as a complex phenomenon. It is also understood as a region that is not passive but endowed with an engendering status, at least for two reasons: because meanings produced in production and reception also suffer the injunctions of circulation, insofar as, once located in the articulation of the production and reception instances, it constitutes a “zone” that prepares them. And also, because meanings cannot transit there without interference, or immune to differences and logics of their productive niches. Circulation is not a zone of reception and transit of meanings, but a *locus* of engenderments of macro and micro interactional processes as it also has, as a reference, the transformations of socio-technical phenomena (such as the internet) as the main milestone of transversal functioning in the current stage of mediatization-in-process. Studies describe strategies and logics through which (social and individual) systems interpenetrate and affect each other within the scope of circulation, carrying out, in the midst of complexities and discontinuities, coupling processes on which new “contact zones”, producers of social discursivities, would rest.

We can affirm that contacts will result from the protagonism of circulation as organizer of new interactional processes. Those contacts will be complexified according to other dynamics still unknown. The “zone of passage” raises another type of articulation of asymmetrical nature, producing interactions between producers and receivers, always characterized by discontinuities. We highlight that, in these circumstances, clues and issues are indicated through which circulation, as a “contact zone”, is made explicit by pointing out hints of its complexity. Emerging as a new “platform” where socio-technical-discursive relations and complex feedbacks regimes are developed, circulation removes production/reception from a polar activity based on couplings that modifies them, transforming the conditions of their work of meaning production.

According to that perspective, circulation goes beyond a “zone of passage”, being the space of coupling of two sets of relations (production/recognition) put in contact according to manifestations of complex feedbacks, as a possibility of access to the rules of materialization of meanings. As a space of production and transit of discourses, where meanings are, at the same time, engendered and disputed, it is a source of complexity, as it shows crossings of various logics, whether those that point to regulations, but also those of potentialization of meanings. The observations summarized in the last item (interfaces and couplings) point out that circulation presents facets of other functioning dynamics. Perhaps, we do not need to wait so long to describe and unravel better the “laws” of their functioning, as occurred with studies that preceded us. Mediatization is a source of complexity, but it also exposes clues of its processuality. Certainly, since circulation is one of the operations of this journey, it is already arising as the central object of the emerging studies of mediatized communication ■

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**Circulation(s) on mediatic platforms:
another bridge on mediatizations
between Latin American and Europe?**

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Abstract

In several research centers in Latin America, theoretically influenced by Eliseo Verón's proposals, studies on media platforms have been focusing on the study of circulation as a different and central macro phenomenon than what happened in the mass media. Meanwhile, in the European field of studies on these phenomena, circulation goes almost unnoticed, even if it is mentioned. But a careful reading of central publications from both continents shows that neither the circulation studied in Latin America is a single and homogeneous process, nor that it is completely ignored in European studies. Firstly, the concept of circulation and others that sound like equivalents will be reviewed here. Then, some very different cases of circulation in the platform ecosystem will be presented. Finally, uses of the term will be compared and a meso way out will be proposed as a bridge of relations between both fields.

Keywords

Platforms, mediatizations, circulations, discursiveness

...our own being and can be withdrawn from circulation like any other technology if we decide that it is virulent. But amputation of such extensions of our physical being calls for as much knowledge and skill as are prerequisite to any other physical amputation.

(McLuhan 1964: 213-214)

1. Introduction. Circuits and bridges

This article pretends to be one more step in a joint work with several colleagues to build bridges between research circuits on mediatizations in Latin America (especially in Argentina and Brazil) and in Europe (mainly in the north of the continent).

Perhaps the origin of this convergence can be found in various publications in the middle of the second decade of this century, in which, at last, the fieldwork of mediatizations research began to cross the Atlantic Ocean. The uncertainty in front of the new mediatizations on platforms is perhaps part of the way.

The maturation of lines of research that came, at least, from the end of the 20th century, allowed the general review of the basic theories and the relationships between methodological trends. In our case, an article by Carlos Scolari and Joan-Ramón Rodríguez-Amat (2018) was the beginning that led us to edit and publish a book of convergences between European and Latin American studies on mediatization (Scolari, Fernández, Rodríguez-Amat 2021). There is a fairly complete overview of the current state of the area between the two theoretical shores of the Atlantic.

Taking another step, undoubtedly, the unequal importance of the topic of *circulation* is one of the main differences between Latin American and North European approaches to study mediatizations. While in Latin American it has become a central theme in studies influenced by Eliseo Verón, in European studies it is just mentioned as *another component* of mediatic communication.

In this paper, the strategy is to review whether this difference is due only to different theoretical traditions or to different ways of approaching mediatizations. In other words, how to build a new bridge around the issue of circulation? Is that possible?

The socio-semiotic theoretical model that supports this work affirms that mediatizations are discursive exchange systems made up of three series of phenomena: technical devices, generic-stylistic classifications and proposals for the use of exchanges. Methodologically, each series must be studied firstly individually at two levels: that of its historical development and its co-presence in the mediatized messages. A mediatization can be understood in its complexity, only after the application these procedures.

Into the study of new mediatizations different practices, have been converging. Among them, have been difficult to establish fields of coincidence. That conflict forces the advances to take into account other theoretical points of view and other ways of inserting themselves into the process of mediatization with which they intersect. When investigating media platforms, the presence of links is inevitable, for instance, with designers of user environments, or of interfaces and applications, with programmers as well as with theorists about the weight of software, and with results produced by platforms and their networks, such as those usually called by big-data.

As proof that the study of mediatizations in platforms forces convergences, we can make our own a methodological approach, focused more on economics than ours as:

We will offer an investigative perspective that pertains to the micro-level of single platforms, the meso-level of a platform ecosystem, all the way to the geopolitical macro-level of platform societies. That point of view should also be important to sophisticate also the relationships between discursive exchange systems and their uses in terms of big-data and algorithm generation within social lives supported on platforms and applications (van Dijck, Poell & de Waal 2018: 9).

In fact, discursive exchanges systems, crossing textual and ecological on micro, meso and macro level and the ways to combine their different theoretical traditions are at the center of our contributions to bridge building. All these terms appear in the common background of Latin American and European researchers, only the hierarchies and accentuations change. But, against what is often accepted as academically plausible, the complex is in the micro, and the macro, if is not controlled, is only the simplification of the micro, which usually protects the keys rebuilding of social life (Fernández 2021: 50). Like it or not, certain aspects that are considered typical of the great universe of media circulation appear as very close to the study of discursive exchanges on platforms.

The path that is proposed here begins with a review of the space occupied in both streams by the issue of circulation. Then, will be given examples of circulation present in Latin American studies on the subject. In a third stage, these observations will be related to comparable European studies. Finally, it will be discussed whether circulation is a general, homogeneous and consistent phenomenon and how it can be related to studies that do not use the term circulation but focus on comparable phenomena.

2. Circulation(s)

At first glance, while in Latin American research circulation is an important issue, in European studies, circulation is only part of the landscape. Even taking into account the late registered works, outside Latin America, circulation is a relatively undifferentiated process, following a mass media tradition:

Media communication has an irreducible symbolic dimension: it deals with the production, storage and circulation of materials meaningful to the individuals who produce and receive them (Thompson 1998: 26).

This should not be considered as a feature of simplification, but as a result of different points of view, even with the nuances between them.

That coexistence between media communication and symbolic dimension traverses extensive part of the European theory of mediatization be it in the authors within the sociology of communication, or among those more related to cultural studies:

The mediatized meanings circulate in primary and secondary texts, through endless intertextualities, in parody and pastiche, constant repetition and endless discourses, both on screen and off screen; in them we act and interact as producers and consumers, with the urgent intention of understanding the world, the media world, the mediatized world, the world of mediatization (Silverstone 2004: 32/33).

As can be seen, Silverstone's description of circulation is neither simple nor does it exclude a *semiotic* approach. Something similar occurs with the complexity that Stuart Hall attributes to the process of mediatization, in no way opposed in principle to Verón's proposals (Cingolani 2021).

This process thus requires, at the end of production, its material instruments - its "means" - as well as its own teams of social relations (of production) - the organization and combination of practices within the apparatus of the media mass communication, but it is in the discursive form that the circulation of the product takes place, as well as its distribution to the different audiences (Hall 2004: 204).

It can be said, then, that among the great European theoretical references on mediatization in the 90s of the 20th centuries there is a tension between the *external* focus of circulation as typical of the universe of signs and an *internal* focus in which different phenomena are observed within the mediatization.

It would be wrong to confuse that coexistence between the external and the internal with that of the *macro* and the *micro* approaches. Silverstone and Hall's internal approach should be referred to as *meso*. The micro approach would be to describe different modes of circulation.

A first review of the authors of the next generation of European researchers shows that they do not stop quoting Thompson, Silverstone and Hall, although, naturally, their own publications and those of colleagues from their respective universities are gaining space. But despite these

insistent references, that same first review shows that the external and macro focus of circulation is privileged as a general effect of the symbolic level (Hepp & Krotz 2014; Lundby 2014). And, when they write articles for dissemination or defense regarding the need to study mediatizations, circulation is an issue, or lateral, or missing (Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby 2015; Krotz 2017). Below, this statement will be clarified.

On the other side, for the Latin American researchers of mediatizations from the sociosemiotic approach, the Verón's notion of circulation clarified the previous theories of the effects of massive mediatizations on their audiences. They were based on the confidence that what happens between a text and its recipients can be understood, both by evaluating the media content and by asking recipients about what they remember and understood at their reception: it would be the same phenomenal field.

Verón broke with this common sense of studies on mass culture, and proposed considering circulation as a differential field between *production* and *recognition* (Verón 1987: 126/133). That is, circulation was outside the study of mediatizations and was only understood as the differential between production and recognition as different *moments* and *grammars*.

The progress of regional research on discursive exchanges on platforms and applications, especially in Argentina and Brazil, as always happens, are confirming certain hypotheses but forcing the generation of new ones.

Nowadays, studies on circulation are expanding among those who had been working with Verón, in the process of adapting that proposal to the new exchanges in mediatizations (Neto 2010; Traversa 2016; Carlón 2020; Cingolani 2017, 2020; Fernández 2017, 2021). From this point of view, circulation is proposed as a central phenomenon in the understanding of this stage of post-massive mediatizations.

In Verón's terms, the novelty importance of circulation in the universe of mediatization is supported by the dissolution of the distances between production and recognition, typical of the mass media:

When circulation ceases to be a problem of intervals between elements of a certain communication process, it becomes a central device, since the possibilities and quality of socio-discursive interactions are increasingly organized by the nature of their work in the configuration of the architecture of communicational processes. The logic of “contracts” is subsumed by “logic of interfaces” (Fausto Neto 2010: 12).

The transition from the *logic of reading contracts* to the *logic of interfaces* would be the great transformation of the architectures of communicational processes. It is also very important here, the strong emergence of the notion of socio-discursive interactions as the central nucleus of what should be described and explained.

However, to facilitate understanding of what will be discussed here: this differentiation will not be abandoned because

...each post on a Facebook, each tweet, each post on YouTube, can generate various recognitions, as well as any telephone, television or graphic message. The difference between previous and new mediatizations cannot be there, because both are inscribed in different discursive and cultural frameworks that generate different grammars of recognition (Fernández 2016, discussed in 2021: 104/107).

Just as the notion of distance between production and recognition should not be abandoned, the notion of *circuit* should also be preserved. José Luis Braga proposed and revised this notion that, as we will see, should be preserved (Braga 2012: 48/51).

The double tension to be explored here is that a broad concept as circulation is adapted to the very different cases studied and, conversely, that studies as complex as the European ones on mediatization do not need diverse and complex notions about circulation.

3. Circulation/s on platforms

Here will be reviewed different cases related with the problem of circulation studied into Latin America. They show several divergences that

illuminate various modes of manifestation of circulation. The review will be superficial but we have expanded more details in previous works (Fernández 2018; 2021).

Intra-screen circulation

The notion of the screen as a homogeneous space is questioned if the observation is focused on any specific case of platforms.

In the case presented in Figure 1, it is seen, firstly, that the circulation within the same posting of the same platform is different depending on whether it is presented on a computer or smartphone screen.

It can be seen in the figure that the exchange occupies a central place, but in competition with the whole of the Facebook screen. Scriptural posts are presented here with brief annotations extracted from the cited text.

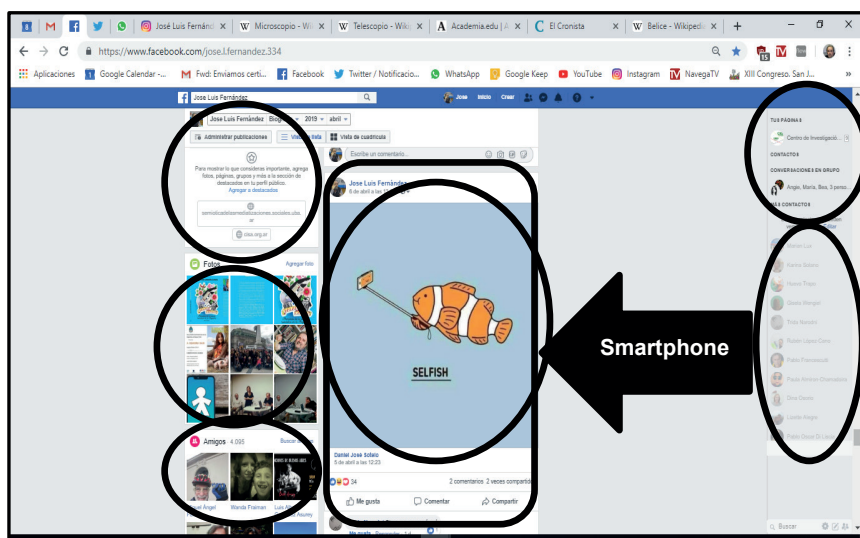


Figure 1. Screens and their complexities

Although the writing is not read, it is important to see the context/cotext in which the exchange takes place: on Facebook it is very difficult to sustain the transparency effect of mediatization.

To understand the different circulations within the screen, it will be necessary to take into account the longer of the sequence, requiring more or less control on its linearity or branching, the relationships with the entire timeline and other exchanges on the screen, a lot of references to the close social context and, finally, the necessary presuppositions for the exchange, firstly, exists and, later, to understand its conflictive framework.

That simple example is showing the coexistence between the contract logics and the interface logics.

Intra-platform circulation. Lists vs. status.

If intra-screen circulation could be considered a border case of circulation, no one would argue starting the route on circulation phenomena with a case of great theoretical interest, but relatively simple spatiality: the *comments* that happen to various types of posts.

Each posting on platforms (news or comments) can provoke several series of comments sometimes characterized by their violence. Perhaps with some exaggeration, it is seen as the empire of *haters*, users who tend to show their anger or acidity, both with respect to the original post and those of other subsequent commentators. The virulence of comments often forces administrators of traditional media sites to close the comment space, or to edit online. The procedure acquires greater relevance and difficulty in live blogs, in which both the journalist and the reader produce their speech in the present of enunciation. (Thompson and Walters 2013; Porto López 2014).

On the other hand, the study of comment sequences has coexisted with studies that attempt to reconstruct states of opinion. One case on which various types of studies are being published is the analysis of the set of publications that are tagged using a hashtag. The hashtag allows the convergence of different publications, maybe very different between them, but that address a topic.

Transmedia circulation

In the development of social life on platforms, its interaction with the mass media is a recognized phenomenon. Between both types of mediatization there are competitive, but also complementary, practices. Following several ways of research, we have been calling as *postbroadcasting* these relationships between the mass media and the life in mediatic platforms (Fernández 2014).

By the way, the relationships between mass media and various platforms cover fields ranging from political to commercial, from journalism to arts and entertainment. Of course, this single type of circulation is a very important and central chapter in circulation problems. But, at the same time, it becomes clear that it has aspects that relate and differentiate it from the others presented here.

For instance, the broad field of *recommendations* on musical or entertainment streaming platforms are sustained in multiple tensions and crossroads among *intra*, *inter* and *trans* platform exchanges. In addition, to understand them, it will also be necessary to take into account ethnographic aspects, in the qualitative approach, and the complex relationships between algorithms, artificial intelligence, big-data and geolocations apps. As if this were not enough, the mediatic recommendation system included human actions and proposals guided by algorithms designed by machine learning (Cingolani 2017: 40/44). So, the transmedia circulation also includes the route between different platforms in addition to relations with the mass media.

We are in front of a very complex phenomenon and even within musical platforms, takes these investigations to extra-platform territories. Apparently, Spotify applies three different recommendation models: *collaborative filtering*, like Netflix, but including requests for each topic; *Natural Language Processing* (NLP) models, selecting terms / tags that appear as pleasing in the tagged ones and, as the most innovative, through and *raw audio analysis models* (Raw Audio Models), which, under software such as face detectors, they would allow selecting sound profiles, apparently beyond the generic-stylistic. Leaving aside whether these are certainties or partial speculations, it shows that the production and circulation of re-

commendations is reaching a complexity that takes us out of the comfort of our work models.

Circulation in *transmedia* phases

In various cases we find circulation processes that are not just flow, as we have seen so far. Sometimes circulations are found in *phases*, or *stages* or *moments*. That is to say, space-time articulations of relationships between different mediatizations¹.

Mario Carlón has been paying detailed attention to the presence of *phases* in the relationships between mass media and mediatic platforms and their discursive exchanges. His propositions articulate a *temporality* of phases which, as usual, have *spatial* faces. It is another typical post-broadcasting effect, as he needs to articulate mass media with what he prefers to continue calling *social networks*². In a recent book, in which he addresses the challenging presence of the individual in networks, Carlón has recovered from previous works four temporal-spatial models to capture the various possibilities of circulation between mass media and networks: ascending, descending or horizontal (Carlón 2020: 13/14).

In the region, various works have been presented on how musical circuits are related with different types of mediatization. These relationships do not seem exclusive to the platform era but come from the early twentieth century, related with different genres and styles (Koldobsky 2016).

1. The concepts of phases, stages and moments are taken from Juan Samaja (2016) and we have commented and discussed them for their applications to various phenomena of mediatization, their periodizations and their investigations (Fernández 2021:177/179).

2. There has not been enough insistence on the presence of an idiomatic difference with respect to a good part of the new mediatizations. The expression *social media* in English is usually translated and accepted as *social network* in Spanish. While the idea of a network evokes the relationships between *nodes*, the idea of *media* forces us to pay attention to discursive exchanges. From our point of view, users, issuers and posers, or whatever they are called, only become aware of a good part of their activity on the networks, through their exchanges on platforms. Our society acts and exchanges, more on platforms than on networks.

Those different phases, if the conclusions are confirmed, would allow us to compare the processes of cultural development of today, with those of the broadcasting era. In fact, we are now having a tendency to see with network aspects and with platform approaches, relations of the mass media with each other and with the individual media (telephone and mail).

It has been found that the deployment of the tango song, for example, appears as *descending* from the media towards the mass social space (Jáuregui 2013). On the other hand, folklore has a long journey in the theaters of the railway networks until it is consolidated in the media (*ascending*) (Fernández 2021: 292).

But, in addition, which are found in circuits (again the term), such as fashion, specific sites such as specialized blogs (Gómez del Río 2017). Fashion blogs, perfectly stabilized, are working as a phase, when a new season or collection is launched, but they are *states* to understand how fashion works. This path is another that seems to diversify.

Circulation in transmedia-live performances phases

Finally, we are going to present important cases in the life of music, but not exclusive to them: many circuits of different genres are combining live performances with other mediated ones and, in both cases, communicating through specialized, or not, platforms. Similar phenomena we found in political mobilizations, of course, but also fashion shows, food places and events of various kinds.

When relationships between mediatizations and music were periodized, we were forced to include, for each period, the most important modalities of face-to-face performances (Fernández 2014: 36/40). Thus, the expansion of digital and musical platforms coexists with the Raves, massive parties around *electronic-music* while the great concerts with explosive audiovisual displays continued to be successful. But at the same time, alternative circuits of sustainable cultural centers are developed, with strong communication in platforms and they network³.

3. Cases of relations between public spaces and mediatizations in different cultural

As was said at the beginning, the notion of circuit is key to understanding the functioning of music according to genres or musical styles (Lapiente 2013). The circuits are built in specific ways, according to characteristics, both musical and sociocultural. Amparo Rocha Alonso thus describes the similarities and differences between the freestyle circuit and what she calls popular chamber music, which has its roots in the tradition of music critically considered as *folk* and Latin American roots:

The freestyle circuit goes from the harshness of the bodies acting in face-to-face interaction to the harshness of home recordings that are uploaded to the Internet. The circuit of popular concert music aims doubly for live music, under certain basic quality conditions (good sound, audience in a listening position, eventual artistic scenography) and recording, both in CD material format, and on platforms such as Bandcamp, Soundcloud, Vimeo or YouTube (Rocha Alonso 2016: 46).

Only with this first description, enriched with later observations by various researchers, have they allowed us to begin to understand the relationships between different types of live performances and their also very different circuits of mediatization.

4. Circulation(s) among European researchers

When we introduce ourselves in Latin American studies on circulation in mediatizations, this macro concept seems to dissolve before our non-exhaustive review of diverse micro emergencies. Only the recurrence at meso levels of the phenomena studied, such as postbroadcasting or circuits, seem to order the field, although a different level of complexity: without simplifying the macro but avoiding the complex peculiarities of the micro. There should be no doubt in affirming that this meso level is

and politics contexts have been described, for instance by Rubén López-Cano (2015); Alfredo Cid Jurado (2015) has described *flash mobs*, collective actions organized through platforms in public places, with numerous participants, who perform an unusual action and then quickly disappear when action finished, and Natalia Raimondo Anselmino, Cecilia Reviglio y Cecilia Echeopar (2018) have focused political mass mobilizations initially convened through social networking services.

related to ecosystem approaches, in a way that allows us to understand their evolution (Scolari 2020).

By highlighting the space given to circulation within European theory and research on mediatizations, it is possible that something similar occurs, in a partially inverse way⁴. For instance,

Technological mediatization is when tools of communication accumulate in everyday life; institutional mediatization concerns the growing size and influence of media enterprises; social mediatization is when everyday practices make increasing use of these technologies; textual mediatization is when mediated texts dominate the intersubjective circulation of ideas; and discursive mediatization is when dominant discourses explicitly give this media world a central position. They are clearly mutually interrelated, but may not always run in total parallel (Förnas 2014: 43).

The complexity of the mediatizations in Förnas and its relationships with different levels of social life, leave circulation lost as a specific phenomenon. Anyway, we can find there the possibility of articulating disciplines as in that methodological proposal that we took at the beginning from van Dijck, Poell & de Waal. Both, coming from different theoretical traditions, and not focused on the discursive, however, leave space for interaction with a socio-semiotics dedicated to discursive exchanges.

Leaving, at least partially, a generalist perspective about mediatization and focusing on a specific field such as tourism, the circulation also takes on an aspect of richness and complexity, and including the meso notion of circuit.

A good example is tourism, whose very existence largely rests upon the circulation of phantasmagorical media images, and where the sha-

4. Of course it is impossible to go through the entire bibliography on the subject, very abundant on the other hand. In addition to a general reading of the cited writings, a very simple method on the texts that appear in the references was applied: in the search engine we include circulation and its possible synonyms. That is not exhaustive but is quite approximate to understand the cotext of the terms and their places into the general arguments.

ring and storing of spatial representations via postcards, photos, and other media are essential parts of the experience... Mediatization implies that an expanding register of spatial experiences is premediated in a similar manner via various (trans)media circuits (Jansson 2014: 278/279).

This way of understanding circulation in its complexity is not exceptional in André Jansson's work. So very recently "Transmedia means that media content circulates across different devices and platforms and may be reworked, remixed and re-contextualized throughout these processes" (Jansson 2021: 143).

But, when changing the research context, it may not be appropriate to fix a concept as *circulation* as the only term related to this field of study. Indeed, as soon as we progress, we find a strong presence of the concept of *distribution* coexisting with circulation. Thus Nick Couldry, describing the institutional level of mediatization: "Media institutions are, at their most basic, mechanisms for the production and distribution of re-presentations of the world in which we live and are embedded" (Couldry 2014: 240). Or Andreas Breiter, speaking about media, institutions and education: "different media are used for different purposes (announcements, information distribution, exchange of teaching material, etc.) and with different stakeholders (teachers, students, administrators, parents)" (Breiter 2014: 289).

To understand that the situation is not defined, it should be noted that, Andreas Hepp (2020), in his recently book naming *deep mediatization* the progress of *internet of the things*, only mentions the term *circulation* a couple of times (once quoting Jansson) and replaces it with *distribution*. However, neither of them is indexed at the end of the book.

...of our social world, with pervasive media technologies can be referred to as deep mediatization", first, the number of media producers increased dramatically... second, digital media offer new social forms of distribution that have weakened large media organizations... third, as digital media pervade everyday life, new forms of production and distribution matter more for the social world... fourth, and finally, di-

gital technologies are not just media technologies, they are now built into all productive processes. (Hepp 2020: 24).

Are we facing a relevant theoretical choice? Or are we only focusing on lateral aspects to the really important issues that are resolved at the macro level?

This coexistence between circulation and distribution does not seem from to the need to resolve the distances between emission and reception as was suggested respect the relationships between Verón and Hall so that “the need to return to the notion of circulation framed within the Marxist conceptual scheme (production-distribution or circulation-consumption)” (Cingolani 2021: 152).

In an article that is of great interest to us due to its focus on the subject of music platform audiences, Jan-Hendrik Passoth, Tilmann Sutter and Josef Wehner talk about “mainstream distribution” or “music distribution”, so much as “circulation of technical or social innovation”, or about “information processing and circulation” (Passoth, Sutter and Wehner 2014: 271/273).

If the audiences, as a part of the discursive exchange system, become a focus to be studied, the tension between the macro of circulation and the micro of each exchange system is felt. It would be relevant to remember at this point in the journey that, when the called post-massive audiences and citizenships began to be studied, the term post-broadcasting was used (Prior 2007; Larrondo 2014).

Coexistence between circulation and distribution seems to be due, primarily, to indifference, to the lack of importance that circulation / distribution would have to understand different processes of mediatization. When that part of the media exchanges acquires importance, researchers redefine its complexity without renewing its theoretical status. A macro concept became, inevitably, in a meso concept.

5. Informal proposals for bridges: towards an ecological and meso approach

This synthesis can only be provisional because of the limited bibliographic route, but, at least, different types of approaches have been observed that face many of the key problems of the mediatizations today.

A flyover tour of the content of this article shows that circulation, and its coexistence with others such as distribution is an issue that will continue to be important. The discussion, if there is one, will be in any case whether all the phenomena described here should be included within the macro umbrella of circulation.

When advancing in the study of circulation phenomena, the same thing happens as when studying other social phenomena from a micro point of view: what is observed as coherent and integrated from a general, macro point of view, tends to dissolve its certainties against the appearance of novel features and by contributing to unexpected series from the field of study. And this is valid, both when we read works focused on the subject, such as those of the Latin Americans cited, as well as when we pay attention to European writings.

The doubt remains that, when a particular case is studied, one should start with these new general concepts or, instead, it should be derived through what is found on the path of observation and grid of investigations. The partial recovery of the notion of circuit shows that the path is not linear.

If a new section of the bridge is to be built for unite Latin American and European researchers, it will not be on the macro uses of concepts, coming from different traditions. The way seems to be the exchange between experiences of micro research on platforms and applications that allow the construction of shared meso concepts.

In this way, it will be inevitable to understand the circulation aspects, especially if we are focused on platforms, but it does not seem essential that circulation occupies the permanent center of the scene. A set of terms from media ecology seems to be, as Scolari would say, a suitable interface ■

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**Online press and types of readers.
Responses from the public and
recognition logics in comments to the
news of the Argentinian newspaper
La Nación**

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Abstract

This article examines, from a socio-semiotic perspective, the different response logics from readers to the enunciative strategy of an Argentine online newspaper –lanacion.com.ar, online edition of the daily La Nación–, through the investigation of recognition grammars present in the comments to the news media. As a result of the analysis of a total of 3578 comments from readers, constants were identified in responses from the audience to the enunciative strategy of lanacion.com.ar, and significant recurrences allowed inferring a set of recognition logics, namely, the discrimination of types of readers: Integrated faithful reader, excluded faithful reader, dissident reader, and critical reader.

Keywords

Discourse, press, reader, recognition logic, online newspapers, participation, mediatization.

Introduction

The study field known as *online journalism* exists for almost two decades and, as some authors point out (Masip, Díaz Noci, Domingo, Micó Sanz & Salaverria, 2010; Raimondo Anselmino, 2012b; Meso Ayerdi, 2013), one of the latest trends in it has been the increasing importance given to questions about the participation of the public in the press. The anniversary of the first decade of digital journalism production, back in the year 2005 became a key date for the diffusion of early work on web participation (Gillmor, 2004; Bowman & Willis, 2005; Martínez Rodríguez, 2005; Quadros, 2005; Varela, 2005), partly because of the growing proliferation of user generated content (UGC, in English), which was amplified significantly by then with the consolidation of the blog empire. Five years later, between late 2010 and early 2011, a new turn in reflections on public participation in the press began to unfold, motivated, in this case, due to the consolidation of the space that allows readers to comment on the content of the news, as well as by the force of the impact of the seism produced by social networks on the Internet (cf. Raimondo Anselmino, 2012a).

Today there is no doubt that if there is something that is clearly transforming, while the press changes, is the reader; therefore, it is urgent to lead investigations that engage in studying the production of meaning that takes place in the field of *online* newspaper reception. Nonetheless, it could be said that it is a field unstudied in a systematic way and that, it is worth mentioning, has been far more explored by consulting firms and media companies than by the own academic field of communication studies.

The relevance of the present paper rests, above all, in its intent to begin to fix the deficiency mentioned before, examining, from a socio semiotic perspective (fruitful when studying complex production of meaning phenomena, such as those that take place within the framework of mass media), the different logics of reader response to the enunciative strategies of an Argentinian *online* newspaper, (the *online* edition of the newspaper *La Nación*, lanacion.com.ar) by exploring speech recognition

grammar present in comments to news of said media. This work was carried out in the framework of a doctoral investigation that has as its objective to study the bond between newspaper/reader in the Argentinian *online* press, through the analysis of the areas of intervention and participation of the reader¹.

It should be noted that *La Nación* [*The Nation*] is one of the most traditional morning newspapers of general information with nationwide coverage in Argentina, and is considered part of the so-called key referent newspapers (Traversa & Steinberg, 1997), while also being among the most visited sites in the country (Alexa, 2013). This medium was also the second Argentinian daily to inhabit cyberspace (the first was the morning regional *Los Andes*), on December 17, 1995.

In short, this article intends to demonstrate that it is possible to use logics of recognition for analysis to identify a possible typology of readers of a digital newspaper from the study of responses of the public that crystallize in the news comments. Also, as we will see later, the construction of this typology, although pertinent to a particular analyzed medium, brings us closer to understanding the peculiar configuration that the public from *online* newspapers assumes today, frankly more hybrid than that of daily printed newspaper.

Accepting that newspaper headlines are relevant agents in constructing reading citizenry (Valdettaro, 2008) and, therefore, in the development of the public sphere (Habermas, 1999), the intention is to contribute to discussions that are presently taking place both about the current media system conditions and the relationship of it with the wider social and political context.

1. Doctoral thesis entitled “El vínculo diario/lector en los periódicos online. Análisis de los espacios de intervención y participación del lector en los diarios argentinos Clarín y La Nación” [“The relationship between newspaper/readers in online newspapers. Analysis of the areas of intervention and participation of the reader in the Argentine newspapers Clarín and La Nación”, presented and defended at the Doctorate in Social Communication at the Faculty of Political Science and International Relations, National University of Rosario (Argentina). This research was conducted with funding from two postgraduate scholarships granted by the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (Conicet) [National Council of Scientific and Technical Investigations].

Theoretical Framework

We begin this section by pointing out, as proposed by Valdetarro (2008), that the “transformations of different medial formats are not autonomous, but primarily derive from the key changes in the system understood as a totality” (p. 40). Adopting this point of view, from the end of the 20th century it has been possible to note, inside the mass media system, a series of modifications to the classical press methods concerning, above all, the way in which the relationship between the newspaper and the reader is built (Valdetarro, 2005; Becerra, Marino & Mastrini, 2012). From the point of view of the effects on the social bond, “the classical utopian ideal of critical and argumentative democracy” (Valdetarro, 2008, p. 42) of modern public opinion subject to reason, of which the press was held as a guarantor, is put into question. Such transformations – it must be clarified - were motivated first by the development of what Carlón (2004) defines as the device of live TV and, later on, by the new logics inherent to Internet that, as stated by Verón (2013), are profoundly altering “the relationship of the individual actors (...) with the media phenomena”(p. 279).

In this framework, one of the emerging phenomena in the field of studies on *online* press is given by the exponential development, in the course of a few years, that the discursive materiality assumed, even though it was already present in the newspapers for some time- after the publication of traditional letters to the editor or letters from readers – it did not, by no means, the place that it has today, in the interfaces of the digital newspapers, the *areas of intervention and participation of the reader* .

As proposed by Raimondo Anselmino (2012a), the denominated areas of intervention and participation of the reader are those instances of an *online* newspaper where the activity of the reader materializes. The *spaces of* intervention of the reader (on which this article will not stop) are those areas of the newspaper which in some way are operated or permeated by the activity of the reader, from any kind of action they do that leaves an imprint on the interface of the newspaper- with the exception of the production of statements: reading ranks, polls, vote on articles, etc. These differ from the spaces of participation, which are those where

the reader can manifest itself discursively producing statements, as for example in the letters from readers, forums, blogs, or- here is the central space for this article – news comments. The latter are defined, according to Sal Paz (2009), as “discursive medullary genre (...) since it organizes and re-signifies other genres when it is embedded inside”(p. 342).

The newsreaders' comments space became popular especially since the year 2007, moment in which it was incorporated by much of the world's most prestigious digital points. Subsequently, and very gradually, the first results of research that gave said participation tool deep thought began to be published. The same investigations, oddly enough, and despite coming from various academic fields and of studying newsreaders' comments in published news of newspapers from different countries, have a peculiarity in common: in the majority of the cases (García de Torres, Martínez, Cebrián, Rodríguez & Alhacar, 2009; Singer & Ashman, 2009; Ruiz, Masip, Mico, Díaz Noci & Domingo 2010; McCluskey & Hmielowski, 2012; Milioni, Vadratsikas & Papa, 2012; Navarro Zamora, 2013) they are works that exclusively use content analysis.

Unlike those investigations, the one outlined here does not focus on content level (the text level) but rather in the modalities of “telling” (level of enunciation). This is so because, as it has been anticipated in the introduction, this study relied on a particularly fertile semiotic perspective to address the complex production of consciousness phenomena, such as those that take place in the context of mass media, and that is usually referred to as socio-semiotics. It's the *theory of social discourses* (Verón, 1998), which in its articulation with the Luhmannian systemic theory promoted by Boudaud and Verón (2007) has stepped up its versatility to delve into the “relationality of relations” (Luhmann, 1998, p. 34) that occur between the system of mass communication (Luhmann, 2000) and the human environment or system of the actor (Boudaud & Verón 2007).

From this point of view, which conceives the discourse as an organized system of articulated meanings and shapers of social consciousness (Verón, 1998), a discourse analysis that inquires about the *modalities of enunciation* and *discourse strategies* of production of meanings is proposed. As for the latter, Verón (2004) defines the discursive strategies

as the “changes witnessed in the interior of a same type of speech” (p. 197) or of the same type of product. As it has been carefully analyzed in another work (Raimondo Anselmino, 2011), the strategy carried out by each newspaper helps construct its personality (which is differentially distinct from the one that other competitor newspapers assume) and, therefore, helps to shape the way in which the medium relates to their recipients. The notion of discursive strategy is linked to another term of equal value: *reading contract*. Both concepts are associated with the way in which each medium manages to build its uniqueness over its competitors. “The purpose of this contract (...) is to build and maintain the habit of consumption” (Verón, 2004, p. 223).

Also, in accordance with the perspective referred to socio-semiotics, “the analyst of the discourse can be interested either due to the conditions of generating a discourse or a type of discourse, either by the readings that the speech has undergone, meaning its effects” (Verón, 2004, p. 41). Asking oneself about the *recognition* of a specific speech requires trying to unravel what are the determinations that define the restrictions of its reception.

As already indicated in previous works (Raimondo Anselmino, 2010; 2012a), the onscreen display of the press - and with it, the emergence of the spaces from the reader’s discourse materializes in the newspaper - brought coupled new possibility of recognizing the recognition. The distinctive features of the significant materiality of the digital corpus *online* today allow recovering, at the same time and in the same space - the interface of the newspaper—, not just the speech grammar production generated by the newspaper, but also certain speech recognition grammar of themselves. This is possible thanks to the presence of signs of the reading activity - as *footprints* of the productive conditions - that are evident in the spaces that effectively allow the intervention, programming and participation of the reader to emerge. Although it is worth clarifying that, given that from this theoretical-methodological perspective the act of reading is inherently intractable, “the study of recognition *is more of a study of the reader than of the reading, based on the analysis of the reader’s discourse*” (Verón, 2004, p. 209; accentuated by the author).

On the other hand, the concrete analysis of newsreaders' comments to news published in *La Nación* is drawn from the perceptions about the discursive device of this newspaper that Biselli (2005) proposed in his study about the reading contract of the covers of print edition that, as it was widely analyzed by Sidicaro (1993, 2004), historically represented the liberal-conservative thought. This can certainly be useful to explain, later on, the relationship established between the field of significant effects available in production and the concrete effects that can be seen in recognition. Biselli (2005) says:

...the front page of *La Nación* imposes from the graphics an order, stability and cohesion that not only connotes an ideological position, but seeks to tame the always chaotic world of the newsworthy (...) and in a compatible space make dissimilar traditions of which the newspaper wants to be owner and defender and different images of itself that seek to consolidate and impose its readers from the very same cover. (p. 107)

According to the author, there are certain susceptible features of the printed version of this newspaper – such as the still preserved “sheet” format, the distinctive quality of the paper and printing, or the location of the main header - that associates it with what he calls the *tradition of book culture*, while at the same time, it gives a space to an inevitable *media tradition* - which manifests itself, for example, in the importance given on the cover to the photographs or in the publication of “any news for the general public” (Biselli, 2005, p. 111). Such tension, we will later see, is transferred to the comments of some readers of *lanacion.com. ar*, particularly from those who assert themselves as regular readers of the newspaper.

For its part, the digital edition of *La Nación* has tried, through their various redesigns, to translate to the web the quality that was so characteristic of it in its printed edition, no longer conforming to that “rigorous compliance to an unalterable design” (Biselli, 2005, p. 107) that characterized its paper circulation but, rather, adapting to the logics imposed by the Internet environment and thus relegating some share of the stability that embellished the brand (Valiente Noailles, 2010). The fact that to establish a distance with the paper edition it has modified its logo in the re-

design published in 2008 is just one example of this. However, and apart from the foregoing, lanacion.com.ar seems to remain, in the Argentine media ecosystem, “the newspaper (...) that tries the most to sustain the tradition of the serious journal (...), that most attempts to continue defining its role in line with a public sphere subjected to the argumentative reason” (Biselli, 2005, p. 113), proposing a contract from which the medium continues to try to position itself as a *forum for doctrine*² and a firm representative of an “intellectual reflection with explanatory vocation” (Sidicaro, 2004, p. 91).

As noted in Raimondo Anselmino (2012a), even though *La Nación* was the first Argentine newspaper of national reach to be *online*, it did it, at the beginning, without incorporating any participatory instance for more than one year- not even the traditional letters from readers. Even though little by little the newspaper was incorporating some spaces of intervention and participation of the reader, the first significant step in this regard was recently given with the 2001 redesign, when it began to develop the Participation section, and the quantitative and qualitative leap occurred in 2007, when the newspaper became – according to what they say- in the first medium of the world to open all their news to feedback from its users. From then on, the space for the reader’s comments became their style brand in terms of strategy of participation: around that instance all of its relationship politics with the more active audience sector is woven, drawn from other resources such as the arrangement of medals to distinguish participative readers, the users’ ranking or the highlighted comments. The users’ ranking- which was implemented in 2009 and is already discontinued- was a tool by which the newspaper distinguished five users who have reached the gold medal level. Moreover, the sector of Highlighted comments, still functioning, consists of a tab from which, in the interior of each article, the listing of the comments made by users who have silver and gold medals can be accessed.

2. “La Nación será una tribuna de doctrina” [“La Nación will be a forum for doctrine”] was the motto proposed, since its inception, by its founder Bartolomé Mitre, who, moreover, was the President of the Republic Argentina between 1862 and 1868.

Much of these resources are intended to control the communicative audience flow, since at this point it is known that the use the readers-users make of the comments' section tends to be far from what was initially expected initially by the medium (Raimondo Anselmino, 2012a).

One of the attempts of *La Nación* which took place in the middle of November, 2010 was the launch of the Users' qualification program, through which to "the best commentators" are awarded, distinguishing them with gold, silver or bronze medals, in accordance with the score each one of them gets, established through a calculation that takes into account different variables: the number of comments, the percentage of rejected posts, average responses and positive votes obtained and the percentage of relevant reports. Finally, in their struggle to achieve that the user would come out of their anonymity, lanacion.com.ar also resorted to *online* social networks, promoting the ability to relate the account of a user of the site to their Facebook profile. Thus, the comments from readers who opt for such alternative are also published in the personal wall of the popular social network.

Methodology

As previously noted, the analysis presented here set out to identify, characterize and classify the speech recognition grammars in the discourses of the readers-users that are materialized in the space of the news comments. As the purpose of this socio-semiotic research is not, at all, of a quantitative nature – not even the discrimination of logics of recognition intends to be exhaustive, given that, for example, those specific to readers who do not participate in the newspaper are not taken into account –when selecting the set of discourses to be studied, it was not considered necessary to build a *sample* that allows to infer properties of all of a population but rather, to form a *corpus*. This corpus, in this case, was composed of all the comments in a set of a dozen news articles (chosen at the rate of three per year, between early 2007 and late 2010, period in which the study was conducted) and in total amounting to 3578 posts/statements of readers.

On the other hand, as this analysis is part of a bigger research which aims to investigate the bond newspaper/ reader, for the formation of the corpus of readers' comments it was decided to select news that had the particularity of either announce changes or redesigns of the site, reflect on *online* press, or turn the participation of its readers in an issue. Thus, responses from the public that are crystallized in the news comments also have a peculiar characteristic: they converse about the newspaper and its processes or products, and can therefore be included within what Braga (2006) called *media criticism*. This is so because, to define the criteria of delimitation of the corpus, we considered it relevant pick up the proposed by Braga (2006) regarding to the *social response system*.

In his book *A sociedade enfrenta sua mídia* [Society faces its media], Braga (2006) describes a social system that is not normally perceived and whose uniqueness could not be subsumed neither by the producing subsystem or the reception subsystem; It is a third system inherent to media processes concentrating response activities, i.e., those audience-generated discourses starting from the "stimuli produced initially pela mídia [by the media]" (Braga, 2006, p. 28) and that, when making the social reactions flow around media processes and products, meet a specific systemic function of feedback. Within the framework of such a system, the author places a particular type of response from the audience, which he denominates media criticism:

... We can say that media criticism is explicit critical work on certain media productions based on observation of products, with organized objectives (expressed or implicit) determined by various socio-cultural motivations and facing the sharing, in society, of points of view, of interpretations and/or actions on the products themselves (or type of products), its production process and/or its use by society. (p. 71, author's translation)

The notion of *media criticism* then becomes, thus, central to understanding the delimitation criteria of the corpus of study: given the type of news selected, all of the readers' comments present in them can be identified as *responses* from the public that effectively returned to the

medium and have as a peculiarity that they are about the medium, their products or processes.

Listed below are the news chosen, specifying the dates of publication of each one, title and number of comments received (indicated in parentheses):

- 15/07/2007: *La Nación abre todas sus páginas a los lectores* [*La Nación opens all its pages to the readers*] (224)
- 10/10/2007: *Premian a La Nación por la creación de comunidades online* [*La Nación is awarded for the creation of online communities*] (4)
- 28/11/2007: *El futuro de la prensa está atado al futuro de Internet y a la innovación* [*The future of the press is tied to the future of Internet and to innovation*] (8)
- 28/06/2008: *El nuevo lanacion.com* [*The new lanacion. com*] (592)
- 06/07/2008: *Como aprovechar mejor el nuevo lanacion. com* [*How to better use the new lanacion.com*] (47)
- 23/11/2008: *Los lectores de lanacion.com rechazaron la estatización de las AFJP* [*Readers of lanacion.com rejected the nationalization of the AFJP*] (419)
- 15/08/2009: *El futuro de los diarios en Internet* [*The future of online newspapers*] (18)
- 23/09/2009: *Los usuarios de lanacion.com destacados de la semana* [*This week's leading users of lanacion.com*] (140)
- 27/12/2009: *La Nación estrenó su Redacción integrada* [*La Nación launched integrated writing*] (42)
- 23/04/2010: *Cumpleaños del supe en el país de Twitter* [*Birthday of the supplements in the country of Twitter*] (19)
- 29/04/2010: *La batalla cultural* [*The cultural battle*] (231)
- 18/11/2010: *Calificación de usuarios en lanacion.com* [*Lanacion. com users' ranking*] (1834)

Located in the methodological framework of socio-semiotics, this research focused in unraveling the relationships established between the field of possible meaning effects available in concrete production and the concrete effects that can be seen in recognition, since, as Boutaud and Verón (2007) explain: “on the one hand, each discourse product is a configuration of possible semiotic paths (...) [and] on the other hand, each speech recognition grammar can be characterized as a set of rules that trigger certain paths (...), to the detriment of others”(p. 5).

Regarding the analytical procedure, one need not add that studying said speech recognition grammars implies, inevitably, analyzing the enunciation of the reader – meaning carrying out a discourse analysis that devolves to the level of the enunciation, identifying those *regular enunciative operations*, i.e. Forms of speech whose operation is relatively constant “and that, consequently, give some stability to the support/ reader relationship” (Verón, 2004, p. 179). Again, in the words of Verón (2004): “semiological analysis aims to identify and describe the operations that (...) determine the position of speaker and, consequently, that of the recipient” (p. 179). Likewise, and in parallel to this work, as Verón says, the identification of operations can only come from variations. Given that discourse analysis is “essentially interested in the *differences* between speeches” (Verón, 2004, p. 49; noted by the author), our research fell on systematic disparities between speeches, thus outlining different *types* of readers. In short: “It is trying to describe, in a discursive set, all operations that define a systematic and regular difference with another discursive set, considering as a hypothesis that both are subjected to different productive conditions” (Verón, 2004, p. 53).

As a result of the analysis of speech recognition grammars of 3578 comments from readers of *La Nación*, certain constants and invariant disparities in the answers from the public to the enunciative strategy of lanacion.com.ar were identified. These recurrences allowed inferring a set of logics of recognition, i.e. the discrimination of types or categories of readers.

Results and Discussion: Comments to the news in *LA NACIÓN*³

From the analysis of the comments of readers of *lanacion.com.ar*, four different logics of recognition were distinguished which, as already stated, do not pretend to be thoroughgoing, and that we have decided to denominate in the following manner:

- Integrated faithful reader;
- Excluded faithful reader;
- Dissenting reader;
- Critical reader.

The **first and the second** logic stated are very close together, because both refer to a reader-participant that have an affinity with the editorial line of *La Nación* (already referred to in the theoretical framework) which is recognized as part of the “community of readers”, which usually is- or was – also a reader of the print version of the newspaper, and whose attachment to the medium is part of the inherited cultural consumption.

The strength of the bond that seems to have been established between certain readers and the newspaper may be materialized in explicit appeal to the community of readers that *La Nación* vigorously works to consolidate- at least on the discursive level-, within the framework of its reading contract and of its participation strategy. It is an allusion that could not be found in the comments of the enunciators who presented themselves as openly opposed to the editorial line of the newspaper.

That is to say, the first and second logic of recognition logic refer to a type of speaker for who the weight of tradition is as important as it is to the newspaper, which often materializes in the express mention of

3. Comments from readers are cited without any syntax and spelling correction, indicating the number assigned to it, as seen at *lanacion.com.ar*'s interface and then the date of the news to which it respond and the nickname of the user. The presence of the sign # before the number of comments demonstrates that it is one response to another comment. Some too extensive comments will be reproduced only in part, pointing out the trim with the indication: (...).

a “heritage” or “legacy” of reading that transcends generations and is perpetuated in time. For example:

(196- 06/28/2008) **mariano2010**: In my family we are the fourth generation who read *La Nación* (...)

(198- 06/28/2008) **pipiola**: (...) my father always read his newspaper and was truly a very faithful follower and here I am, following in his footsteps, in a different way (...)

Both types of readers also conceive the possibility of participating in the comments space as an extension of the “Republican” character of the newspaper that today, more than ever, they consider allows them to exercise their role of “citizens”. These readers who related to the proposal of the newspaper are those who vindicated the Republican roots of *La Nación* - that of a “tribune of doctrine” - and denote as “democratic”, “brave” and “inclusive” the initiative of the newspaper to allow them to comment on all the news. For example:

(21- 07/15/2007) **d_luzuriaga2007**: I join the praise of other readers to the initiative. With a bold use of new technologies this apparently “conservative” newspaper creates a forum for old fashioned opinion which is democratic and revolutionary. (...)

(40 - 07/15/2007) **idebchaco**: *La Nación*, unique guide of democracy, could not give a better example of what the participation of citizens in the thinking and action of the Republic means. No doubt, many officials will “suffer” because of this. (...)

What differentiates one from the other *faithful reader* is that the first- the integrated faithful reader- considers that changes that permanently alter lanacion.com.ar interface are part of an editorial project that works to provide the best to its users. For example:

(76- 07/15/2007) **dichter**: Without a doubt, an initiative that requires the unanimous approval of the usual readers of *La Nación* and which comes to confirm the reasons why we have chosen this medium when it comes to inform us. I infer that this derives from the involvement of *La Nación*

in the 60th Congress of the W.A.N., and shows that it is an innovative medium, attentive to the new trends and desires of its readers. (...)

For its part, the second type of faithful reader- excluded faithful reader- resists such innovations because it perceives them as alien to the tradition of the newspaper. This last category of reader says to feel continually expelled from the site, without recognizing itself in the values- defined as “popular”, “youthful”, “postmodern”- which, from their point of view, the above changes would promote. For example:

(162- 06/28/2008) **seagull14**: It is like all modern. Modern-ous. Or post-modern-ous, if you prefer. Just as one is getting used to managing and locating data, news and sections, Wham! EVERYTHING CHANGES. A kind of thousand steps retread. The Conservatives have no place in cyberspace. Already I’m afraid to open the newspaper tomorrow and see that it is different from today’s (...)

(28- 06/28/2008) **tomasvicchi**: (...) the design of the website at first glance doesn’t impress me well, it seems too similar to the most read morning daily... (...) I believe that the readers of *LN* would prefer something more in the line of foreign newspapers of the same segment rather than blend in with other local media...

These comments that perceive the change of design as a “loss of identity”- which even according to some readers would make the newspaper increasingly similar to *Clarín*, a local competitor that is not even allowed to be mentioned- are joined with expressions of rejection such as “it is just one more blog”, “it isn’t a newspaper”, “it is not my newspaper” or “it has lost style”.

Although since the end of the year 2008, within the discourses of readers that circulate in the comments space, the term “user forum”, which seems to appeal equally to any type of enunciator, who frequently label themselves as “readers” – self-categorized as “everyday”, “recurring”, “regulars”- it is frequent to find those manifesting a forthright affinity with the editorial line of the newspaper and whose bond with the medium seems to be based on the relation initiated once with the daily print newspaper, whose representation in the discourse of these readers

coincides with the image *La Nación* is trying to build (and which is enunciatively linked with the values of “quality”, “seriousness” and “objectivity”). For example:

(484 – 06/28/2008) **lilianacabezali**: I’ve always been a reader of *La Nación*, mainly for its seriousness and independence, objectivity and excellent journalists, as such and as people. Today, in the age of Cybernetics, I continue following those who inform me, from the computer, obviously, since they have never forgotten their principles (...)

There have been as well notorious opportunities where the discrepant enunciators, who are built as faithful to the editorial line of the medium, define themselves as open opponents of the current Government presided by Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, which somehow illustrates the adversative tone that in many cases present the discourses circulating in the space of newspaper comments. For example:

(127- 11/18/2010) **derosario**: I am totally anti k! But I did not go into even half an article to speak ill of Nestor when he had already died... (...)

It is worth clarifying that the term *adversative* used here is in the sense attributed by Verón (1987, p. 16). Although there is no intention in suggesting the inclusion of the readers’ comments into the political type of discourse, we do believe possible asserting that in many of the studied speeches one can see, clearly, a controversial dimension, of frank confrontation with the positions proposed by an “other” that is considered an enemy, adversary.

The **third logic** is, precisely, that of the *dissenting reader*, i.e. that reader-participant who openly expresses its lack of affinity with the editorial profile of the newspaper, and that although it considers itself a “forum-user”, it does not recognize itself as “reader” of *La Nación*, due to the negative values it would represent. Although an active participant of the comments’ space, it feels part of a “minority” within it. For example:

(150- 11/22/2008) **megustaunmonton**: You can’t expect something else from the readers of LA NACION. THEY LONG FOR THE GENOCIDAL DICTATORSHIP! WHAT DO YOU EXPECT? They care little about losing if argentina and the government lose.

However, it is clarified that, in fact, there are many readers who do not relate to the editorial line of *La Nación* and despite their opposition to the newspaper, are differentiated as participatory and assiduous readers who conform to the rules of the site. These enunciators use the collective “readers” to designate a “them” of which they do not feel part of, even when on several occasions the user profile from which the comments comes holds a medal (gold, silver or bronze), meaning that it is a frequent and participatory site user. However, it has been observed, during the analysis of the comments, that these discrepant dissidents are those who accumulate most votes in their comments.

This type of feedback, the dissident enunciator was found, especially, in the news concerning the nationalization of the AFJPS⁴ (November 23, 2008) and the system for user rating the newspaper undertook (November 18, 2010), or on the op-ed signed by Beatriz Sarlo (April 29, 2010). There it could be seen, in addition, that criticism of the newspaper and the disqualification of the “readers” of it unleashed on many occasions the response of those who fell defined by said collective, causing the exchange and controversy between the different types of readers. For example:

(3- 11/22/2008) **cdmaya**: I love the hysteria of the argentinian right, it really amuses me, what the readers of la nacion is irrelevant in the group of all the citizens and predictable as well.

(#2 3- 11/22/2008) **ejdevillegas**: If it is irrelevant what the readers of *La Nación* think why write in this forum. What a boring life you must have to be amused by the argentinian right and love their hysteria.

It must be noted that between the two first types of readers and the third, opinions, or appreciations often appear polarized: you are either in favor or against; it is “anti-k” (anti-Kirchner) or “pro-k” (pro-Kirchner). On one side and the other it is current the designation of the *counter-recipient* – a category that refers to the negative recipient of a controver-

4. Here reference is made to the Administradoras de Fondos de Jubilaciones y Pensiones (AFJP) [Administrators of Retirement and Pensions Funds] and the nationalization of the funds which took place in Argentina at the end of the year 2008, during the first term of the President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

sial speech, that is “excluded from the collective identification” (Verón, 1978, p. 17)-from completely derogatory and disqualifying appellations, such as “forum user K”, “ñoki”, “cyber kk”, “caveman”, “goriforista”, etc. Also, both “sides” accuse each other of using the *report abuse* as a tool to silence and censor the opposite view: (125 - 11/22/2008) **Laly34w**: chiquitines KK (because of the brain I say!) keep reporting my messages I will take the time to post it again as many times as it is necessary and if this not enough I will get a solicitation, but as I’m sure that I said nothing bad, or aggravating, (...)

(#1 125- 11/22/2008) **nachost_2**: I ran out of bullets, if not I would report you for idiot.

(#2 15- 09/23/2009) **strasbourg**: What happens is that there are people reporting others only by transmitting the nick. I have read comments reported or with many negative votes in which it is impossible to even vote (...)

The report is a tool that allows skilled users (i.e., those that hold any medal) report abuses of the standards in the comments’ space standards.

On both sides there is, also, a continuous criticism to the system of moderation proposed by the newspaper and the figure of the moderator is qualified with epithets like “that friend of purism which is always on the look-out”, “the Torquemadas of the newspaper”, or “Scissor hands friend”.

On the other hand, there are also rampant allegations of “inadequate” use of the comments’ space by “paid commentators” or “hired”, charges which can already be found early on since mid-2007, and which were multiplied with the passage of time until its moment of greatest exposure in 2010. Although, it is worth clarifying, the presumption of the existence of “paid commentators” is not a unique phenomenon of the Argentinian media arena (cf. Ruiz et al., 2010). For example:

(631- 11/18/2010) **Exterminator**: Mrs. of LNOL: did you not find out that very own Chief of cabinet has GANGS of paid guys dedicated to write in blogs and also in forums, especially of LNOL and PERFIL, including other

media which allows this practice? Did you find out that underneath the very own Pink House there are 60 guys that are dedicated to continuously monitor what is written and said in the different media?

The clash between both categories of readers – faithful readers, on the one hand, and dissident readers on the other- is so strong that the fact that they agree on anything calls, immediately, for attention. This happened, for example, with criticisms triggered by the Users' Rating System implemented by *La Nación* at the end of 2010, which was massively rejected by readers:

(#27 64- 11/18/2010) **algundia**: after today I am not going to comment any more 'cause they ruined the forum and I am not going to read the newspaper bcause I would read it in the Forum... but before I go I want to congratulate la nación for achieving the impossible... put us all in agreement... k and anti k agree this system is crap.

(445- 11/18/2010) **toquegolyfiesta**: The medals system is peculiar. They wanted to promote discord among the commentators, and it has backfired on them. For example, since the beginning of this system, I'm back to agreeing with a kirchenrista. That did not happen since the day in which Don Nestor Kirchner said that Dr. Carlos Menem was the best President in history. More so, I have agreed yet again with a duhaldista, even if my old mom is still waiting for the dollars that she deposited. E, unheard of, I have been in agreement with a radical. *La Nación*, going backwards!

Finally, **the fourth logic** announced as the *critical reader* was designed because it refers to that reader-participant that enunciates from a "middle position", which does not feel represented by the polarizing in which both the faithful reader and the dissenting reader incur. Its positions tend to be, in consequence, more moderate than the rest of the enunciators with a greater presence of evaluative opinions rather than emotional insights-. For example:

(38- 04/28/2010) **flecher**: I look at 678 sometimes and I also see tn and truthfully I do not see the difference regarding the bottom line, which is show reality in the way that best suits the bosses. The difference is in the

way, 678 is more direct and vulgar and TN (and the big media in general) are more subtle and hypocrites. Although they are losing the subtleties lately. I did not vote K in any election and shall not vote for them unless they reach a runoff with Macri, Reutemann's or De Narvaez. I think no medium is independent and to be more or less informed you have to listen to the two campaigns. For me, the K did some good things and in others they "boo" at them, bad. And I have no doubt that they are corrupt and hopefully someday they will be sent to prison.

(366- 11/18/2010) **Eduomca**: Taking into account that there is a major polarization (pro Government- anti-Government), whenever any "independent" as I think against or in favor of an action of the Government or an opponent, we receive negative votes of any of the two sides. Associate qualification of the user to its "popularity" seems quite unfair and the result, little serious.

As you can see, a reference is made here to the taxonomy proposed by Charaudeau (2003) to account for two types of modalities of reflective judgments: on one side, the *opinion* and, on the other, the *appreciation*. The first involves the calculation of probabilities and, therefore, is the "result of a hypothetical judgment upon a favorable/unfavorable position (...) it is a testament to the point of view of a subject about a knowledge" (p. 112). The second, on the contrary, comes from "a reaction of the subject against a fact (...) there is no calculation of probabilities but immediate reactive attitude" (p. 112). The latter then involves, therefore, the emotional universe: "against a fact the subject feels, identifies, expresses a positive or negative opinion, but in no case makes a calculation" (p. 112). Each of these reflective judgments involves a different type of linguistic activity, and Charaudeau (2003) clarifies, they "come from two inverse movements: the opinion about the fact as intellectual evaluation and appreciation from the fact as an affective reaction" (p. 113).

Conclusion

As explained at the beginning of this work, the analysis developed throughout the article fits into a general line of work that conceives the

headlines of newspapers as relevant actors in the development of the public sphere, highlighting the role the press played in the construction of reading citizenships. As a result, it is considered that the study of the changes made in the press not only updates our knowledge about the development of the contemporary cultural industries and their audiences, but also allows unraveling the potential impact of these mutations in the development of the political and social functions that this medium has historically met.

In this framework, the purpose of this paper has been to address a semiotics area in particular: the meaning in reception. We sought to reconstitute, from the discourse of readers present in the news comments of the digital edition of the newspaper *La Nación*, certain speech recognition grammars that, as Verón (2004) well says, they are “always several, since in a given device of enunciation a single effect is never produced, but always several, according to recipients” (p. 182). This resulted in a typology of readers that discriminates between integrated faithful reader, excluded faithful reader, dissenting reader and critical reader.

On the other hand, in general, and beyond this differentiation of logics of recognition, in the research carried out it was observed how, in many cases, the readers-users explained in the comments the reasons for their participation. In this way, readers valued the possibility provided by *La Nación* for:

- Getting to know points of view of other readers and expand the information provided by the newspaper;
- Share with others their own ideas;
- Or simply, have a catharsis.

These three aspects are summarized in the following two comments selected to illustrate the above:

(20- 07/15/2007) sweaterazul: the news as it appears in the media is the tip of the iceberg. Thank you to *La Nación* for allowing it to be seen and manifest the submerged part of the iceberg, which is the largest, which is the opinion of the readers. To some of us, it is useful as catharsis; to

others it illustrates the opinion of readers better informed and with greater clarity of thought. Thank you again for allowing it.

(85- 11/18/2010) arcoiristuc: normally I read the article and then some comments. If I can contribute, I do. Sometimes when I'm a bit with the blues, I amuse myself with the comments made. Now the ranking, I don't like. I think that people do not make the comments to win a prize but to exchange ideas, opinions, and sometimes anger that gears up to the situation in which we are immersed by misguided policies enforced from the State.

It is left to add that the physiognomy of the public constructed from the classification of the logic of recognition in these pages, coincides with the characterization made by Mancini (2011) of the so-called *hybrid audiences*. Meaning, we are effectively in front of a type of audience clearly more hybrid than the audience of the press newspaper, a group already formed not only by those who choose a certain newspaper *online* by affinity with the editorial line of the same, but also including those who arrive to the site forwarded by randomized algorithms of a search engine, by the suggestions of their affinity group, or by the added value provided by the medium in terms of participation.

Therefore, it seems possible to argue that one of the central contributions of this work is that it allows witnessing how the group of consumers who can be identified as an *online* newspaper public has acquired a different constitution to the one presented by the consumers of the press newspaper. In particular, the set of readers participating in a newspaper commenting on the news, in addition to have this newly designated hybrid quality, is characterized by forming a peculiar community that in certain moment assumes *—mutatis mutandis—* some of the singularities that Jenkins (2009, 2010) gives to media *fans*.

Even though this is one aspect that required to be addressed with greater in-depth in future research, it can be noted that readers involved in news comment spaces are part of a collective of media consumers who possess one greater degree of participation in the contents of the newspaper than the rest of the audience. They are readers that, also, sometimes tend to be qualified as "activists": as well as the *fans* who Jenkins

(2009; 2010) describes: they come together to protest the closure or the unexpected outcome of their favorite series. It was also noted during this investigation that the readers-users of the newspaper *online* are likely to question certain decisions of the medium- redesigns, changes, etc. – that they consider at odds with their respective tastes and interests. For example, many readers of the site- belonging to the different identified *types* - organized actions to express their disagreement regarding the program “User ranking of lanacion.com” from which the newspaper decided to award medals to “featured users”. Among the tactics of protest, three stood out: a “comments strike” that was held on November 23, 2010; concealment of the Medal awarded by the newspaper; and the repetition in each comment with the phrase “No CyR” (No to “calificación” [qualification] and rankings).

In summary, the foregoing reveals that, as Verón (2013, pp. 275-276) said, when studying some of the dimensions that media reception can assume today, we are confronted with phenomena of a greater complexity than the one often assumed by our theoretical models ■

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Mediatization of Politics on Instagram in Argentina

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse contemporary modes of mediatization of politics on Instagram in Argentina. It focuses on the publications posted on the accounts of President Alberto Fernández, former president Mauricio Macri, former president and current vice-president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and congresswoman Myriam Bregman. The focus is on the modes of enunciative construction and the ways in which political internet users are called upon. From the conceptualizations of the mediatization of politics, and using socio-semiotic tools, a comparative analysis is carried out in order to find variants and invariants in politicians and in the modes of mediatization of the body in the feed of the media platform.

Keywords

Mediatization, politics, Instagram, internet users, politicians

Introduction

In today's societies, there are new types of political discourses due to the ten-year-old crisis in the mass media hegemony (Verón, 2011 [2007], Carlón and Scolari, 2009), the appearance of a new media system based on the Internet and telephone networks and the relations between the two media systems: the traditional and the one of the social media (Carlón, 2015). Political Internet users can be found within a *post broadcasting* framework, where platforms coexist with *networking* and *broadcasting* (Fernández, 2018). In addition, there is also a new stage regarding the mediatization of politics, since over the last decades, political bonds got weaker, and the processes of political personalization and personalism were accentuated (Castells, 2009; Cheresky, 2006; D'Adamo and García Beaudoux, 2013; García Beaudoux, D'Adamo y Slavinsky, 2005; Manin, 1998; Slimovich, 2016).

A new phase started with the expansion of social media, which accentuated political and media processes from the last quarter of the century, and the appearance of new practices, social movements, political types, genres and discourses. Since contemporary politics is pierced by new ways of citizen participation, this kind of democracy is called "continuous" (Cheresky, 2015, 2019), because the legitimacy of the decisions made by politicians is permanently at stake. Contemporary democracies are characterized by a fluctuation regarding citizens' preferences and new ways of citizen participation: debate processes among peers, social movements on the Internet's public space, and a process of citizenship expansion.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed political, economic and social practices among others. In addition, the mandatory confinement that took place during February/March, and the regulation of social practices in different parts of the world, with different restrictions for the life within a community, have transformed the political communication all over the world.

In this article, we will analyze the discourses of the Argentine President, Alberto Fernández, former Argentine President Mauricio Macri, current

Vice President and former Argentine President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Congresswoman Myriam Bregman on their Instagram official accounts. We will take into consideration the discourses made during the years before the coronavirus pandemic – 2018 and 2019-, and those made in 2020 during the outbreak.

We aim at looking into the mediatization built from Instagram in the different accounts. On the one hand, this article will analyze the type of digital argument, the type of operation and the staging of the mixture between public and private. On the other hand, taking into account that the publications posted on Instagram come from a political Internet user, we will analyze the ways the citizen Internet user is called upon, as well as how institutional channels that are aimed at debating are constructed on Instagram.

On the first part of the article, we will state the methodological framework chosen for this work. Then, we will also analyze the historical features of the mediatization of politics on social media in Argentina. On the third section, we will reflect on the emergency political discourses on Instagram of other countries. Later, we will present the results of the analysis in politicians. In the sixth section we will outline the debates. And finally, we will make some final considerations.

Methodology

We made a sociosemiotic analysis of the Instagram accounts of Alberto Fernández, Mauricio Macri, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Myriam Bregman on the two years before the virus emerged, and the moments after the outbreak of coronavirus was declared a pandemic. Discourses are considered as space-time configurations of meaning, with a social anchor, which have restrictions on their creation and their reading (Verón, 1987a). We believe that this contemporary time is pierced by convergent and divergent relations in the world of politics.

As the objective of this research is linked to the analysis of political discourses located in a media platform, the traditional analysis of mass me-

dia semiotics (the analysis of enunciation, of the conditions of production and recognition, of devices and media) will be articulated with the theory of the mediatization of the political and the conceptualizations of social media and hypermedia circulation (Carlón, 2014, 2015; Couldry and Hepp, 2017; Fernández, J.L, 1994, 2018; Fernández, M., 2014; Hepp, 2020; Hjarvard, 2014; Mazzoleni y Schulz, 1999; Scolari, 2008, 2020; Steimberg, 1993; Strömbäck, 2008; Valdetaro, 2014; Verón, 1986, 1987a, 1987b, 1998[1995], 2001 [1984], 2013).

The analysis we made is related to the publications and stories on the Instagram accounts of the politicians between March and December 2018, and it is focused on the comparison between them. We considered those publications that had more amount of 'I Like' and the comments of every month, on every Instagram account. Among social media, Instagram has increased its users over the last years, and it has particularly concentrated political discourses from politicians, as well as unknown Internet users.

According to the survey of Cultural Consumption, in 2017, Instagram was already positioned as the second most used social network by Argentinians: the 27.3% had an Instagram account, whereas Facebook led the ranking with a 64.4%. In addition, other authors state that Instagram is the social network that receives the greatest number of Facebook migrants, and that has younger users (Amadeo, 2018). On the other hand, the election of Instagram for this work has to do with the fact that it is the social network that had more amount of political debates during the last two years, since not only leaders and politicians opened an account and use it as part of the political campaign, but also they make publications that are only streamed on this platform,-such as the Instagram Live used by President Macri in July 2018-.

Contemporary mediatization of politics

The mediatization-according to the Latin American perspective, as well as the one coming from European countries- is conceptualized as a process that has several stages, with a leap and acceleration during the last

quarter of the 20th century (Couldry, 2014; Hjarvard, 2008, 2014; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999; Strömbäck, 2008; Verón, 1986, 1987a, 1987b, 1987c, 1998[1995], 2001 [1984], 2013). This transformation also causes changes regarding political logics and media logics¹.

From Eliseo Verón's perspective (2001 [1984]), the era of mass media can be divided into two moments. First, when traditional media appeared, their function was to "influence" political practices. In effect, in this society, which he calls "media society", the television, the printed press, the films, the radio, creates a representation strategy. However, as of the 80s, there is a change in the process of mediatization of politics and a new type of society emerges, which Verón calls "mediatized society". Here, the media "constructs the reality". Political logics are organized according to the logics of traditional media. The politics no longer uses the media to be represented before the citizens (it is not about linking the two worlds); but it thinks itself as of the logics of mass media. This way, in an advanced audiovisual democracy "(...) an election campaign is not a process external to the media (it is a part of the political field), which the media would only reflect, reproduce, better or worse: an election campaign is every day more oriented, organized, regulated, according to the television" (Verón, 2001 [1984]: 15).

One of the aspects that involves the mediatization of politics is the management of the political collectives (Verón, 1987b), which have contact with political leaders and as well as journalists. Both manage the collectives, and therefore, the media discourse and the political discourse are mediators of the collective. In effect, Verón states that political and media collectives mix in a mediatized society.

1. The historical process of the mediatization of politics, and the specific issue of the relation between political and media, in the veronian theory and the conceptualizations from Nordic countries, surpass the objective of this article. An approximation, among others, can be found in "la mediatización de lo político" [the mediatization of politics] (Slimovich, 2016). It was also specified the relation between political and media logics, in the case of the Argentinian political party Cambiemos, in "El camino de Cambiemos en las redes sociales: entre las lógicas políticas y las mediáticas" [The path of Cambiemos in social media: between political and media logics] (Slimovich, 2020b).

At the time being, we follow Carlón (2015) who thinks we are living in a “hyper mediatized society”, pierced by relations between the system of mass media – in crisis – and the social media. From his point of view, collectives emerge from social media, which then ascend to mass media and can occupy public space, such as the Internet users on Twitter attached to a hashtag.

Approaching to the mediatization of politics, a historical process of imbrication of the political field in the mass media (Verón, 1984), is essential to understand the current moment, in which the political discourses are also in social media. Current democracies are characterized by installing new ways of political discourse and expansion processes of politicians, among which we can find different kinds of Internet users, who distinguish each other depending on the relation they have with the social network and the political field, as well as those who explicitly aim at manipulating the political conversation, such as trolls and bots.

The mass media keeps making some of the stories and the political arguments that are in the center of the social life; however, there are new *unintermediated voices from politicians themselves and citizens* in the public space, which are amplified thanks to social media (Slimovich, 2012).

As regards the press conferences, it is worth mentioning that since the establishment of the quarantine in the country – from March 19 until June, President Alberto Fernández held several press conferences, nationwide TV broadcast or announcements. We consider presidential press conferences as “political-media events” (Slimovich, 2011, 2016), quoting Dayan and Katz (1992), who consider “media event” as a television genre which attracts massive audiences, in real time (live and outside the studio). In another paper (Slimovich, 2016), we have combined the category of the authors: “media event” with the television broadcasting of political events, a presidential press conference, opening and closing of the political campaign (which are later reproduced by news programs, political opinion programs and entertainment shows), and we have called it “political-media event”:

It is a type of television broadcast, which has political logics (...) there are also other logics that come from the informative discourse in television, such as the type of shot, the fragment of the candidate's speech that replicates on stage, how it is summarized off-stage, how it is related and argued by the political specialist, how it is broadcasted, through which device, etc. (p.90).

In this case, they are "political-media events" that generate loads of information and repercussion, in social media and traditional media, and expectation from the citizens. In every one of these announcements, the authorities informed the new measures and the evolution of the quarantine, differentiating the particular situations in the provinces.

It is worth mentioning that live broadcasts were a highly used genre by former President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner. She used nationwide TV broadcasts – with multiple associated mediatized representatives (Fernández and Cingolani, 2019) – while she deployed in social media a "private ethos" (Gindin, 2018). And he deployed in public presentations a recirculation of power by avoiding the gaze of the camera (Valdettaro, 2014).

On the contrary, former President Mauricio Macri hardly used this type of broadcast, and he concentrated the spreading of his political communication in social media, like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram (Slimovich, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b ; Annunziata, Ariza and March, 2018).

In the present investigation, we consider that the contemporary phase of political mediatization supposes, on the one hand, unintermediated operations in the relation between political leaders and citizens, since politicians reach their recipients through social media, without journalists acting as intermediaries. On the other hand, there are interface operations of informative/journalistic and political discourses in the space of social media, and fragments of news programs, political opinion programs, and printed press surface again on the mediatized public space of the politicians in Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, and Snapchat.

At this point, it is worth mentioning that in the contemporary society, there are more political enunciators and political discourses, since there

is a *widening of public space*. It was demonstrated that the public that answer back on Internet, which is formed by political supporters or political-party members, has widened. "Citizens that had not had an active role in political campaigns that took place only in mass media have been incorporated to the public sphere" (Slimovich, 2014: 15), as well as *trolls* and *bots* were added in the scheme of contemporary political discourse -being impossible to determine previous effects of their intervention in political campaigns. In this sense, Internet users "have strengthen their capacity of production and informative consumption, questioning the traditional place of the mass media in the agenda setting" (Mitchelstein, Leiva Giuliano, Boczkowski, 2018: 169).

The process of mediatization of politics has caused, over the last decades, a passage from a political-party democracy to an audience democracy (Manin, 1998), since political-party bonds have weakened, there has been a process of political personalization and there has been a variation regarding citizens' electoral preferences (Castells, 2009; García Beaudoux, V., D'Adamo, O. and Slavinsky, G., 2005; Novaro, 1994). This weakening process of great party identities started in the 90s and the expansion of social media allowed a new *turn towards the accentuation of personalization and the process of political personalism*, which we will describe next.

In his studies about digital discourses in Spain, Dader (2003) glimpses a replicant democracy, since part of the public joins the political dialogue thanks to the possibility of questioning that allows the new media. That is to say, there is a multiplication of issuers of digital political content. On the other hand, Beas (2011) investigates Barack Obama's political campaign in the United States, and he affirms that the public sphere is renewed when the citizen is actively added to the political life through digital platforms. Thus, it is mentioned a co-construction of the political storytelling (D'Adamo and García Beaudoux, 2013) by political candidates and citizens.

The contemporary moment has been defined as one of "deep mediatization" (Hepp, 2020) as a product of digitalization. It is an advanced stage of the process in which all elements of the social world are intrinsically

linked to social media and their underlying infrastructures (Couldry and Hepp, 2017). In terms of the conceptualization of the new media ecology, it is “the multiplication of actors, texts, technologies, practices, and the relationships they maintain with each other” (Scolari: 2020: 3); in this sense, it is a more complex ecosystem in which the coronavirus can generate effects at different scales and levels.

One of the main characteristics of politics in the era of mediatized society (Verón, 1986) is the “**personalization** of the political campaign” within the media. That is, the centralization in the media coverage of the political life of certain leading figures or political leaders. For many years, there has been in western democracies the presence of charismatic personalities, who concentrate party loyalty; process that was called “the personalism of the political process” (Slimovich, 2016). During the time of contemporary politics, there is an acceleration of these two processes, as a consequence of the new digital spaces and the current strategies of politicians (Van Aelst, Scheafer y Stanyer, 2011).

Personalization of politics

Currently, the bond between representatives and voters is based on proximity, according to Annunziata (2012). We link this to the term “proximity legitimacy” by Rosanvallon (2009), which implies the attention to the individual/particular. The term assumes that citizens demand political leaders to consider and pay attention to their life experiences, their point of view and their requests. At this point, the author considers that nowadays there is a type of representative bond, “which is built over a base of anti-charismatic identification between representatives and voters, and is expressed by presenting the first ones as ‘common people’” (Annunziata, Ariza and March, 2018: 62). Politicians appear as men capable of sharing citizens’ common experiences, emerging from the mundane, from their capacity of “understanding their daily experiences, paying them attention and listening to their concerns and needs” (Annunziata, 2012: 73).

This method includes features from previous ones, such as the media-tization and the increasing role of party leaderships; however, it involves, at the same time, a rejection to those politicians who are not close to the citizens. Candidates are thus presented as “common men”, “who are positioned close to them”; therefore, they hide their representative difference. Annunziata et al (2018) analyses Facebook, Twitter and Instagram publications made by macristas² leaders in 2018, and she concludes that it predominates private content – “it is transmitted a message that shows leaders’ private life and their family” (p. 76); and the citizen – it is transmitted a message where common citizens have leading roles (idem) – over the institution – “it is transmitted management messages” (idem) – and over politics – “it is transmitted values or take a significant stand regarding the identity of the political space where leaders belong (idem)”³.

The following are some of the features of the historical modes of media-tization of politics on social media of the Macrista and Kirchnerist parties.

Macristas’ Social media

At the beginning, in Mauricio Macri’s social media, there was a mixture of *campaign slogan, balloons and good vibes* (Vommaro, Morresi, Belloti, 2015) and management description. The ludic component is present in Macri’s political discourse in social media from the very first. In this sense, there is a “dramatization of private life” (Slimovich, 2012): a staging of the subjectivity in his Facebook wall and Twitter, a process that enhances his role as a mundane man, according to the processes of personalization and personalism of contemporary politics. The materia-

2. **Macrista**: supporting Argentine former president Mauricio Macri, or his political beliefs.

3 Annunziata, Ariza and March (2018) state that this kind of strategies are shown in PRO’s* political campaigns since 2007, and that the content that predominates in the digital spaces of Macri and Maria Eugenia Vidal in 2017, is exactly proximity.

* **PRO**: *Propuesta Republicana* is a political party in Argentina. It is usually referred to by its abbreviation **PRO**.

lization of this operation is made through videos that show fragments of door-to-door surveys made by candidates/leaders, visits to the citizens' homes and shops, management events, telephone calls, stories about private life, "family album" photos, linguistic texts about political-media events, among others.

The passionate component is present in Macri's political discourse in social media from the beginning, during campaign moments, as well as governments' communication, and while he was Chief of Government of the City of Buenos Aires and while he was President of Argentina.

He aims at provoking emotions from Internet users, such as becoming emotional with his wife's pregnancy in 2011, or tenderness by posting in Facebook in 2015 the voice messages his daughter Antonia sent him through WhatsApp, telling him how much she loved him, days before the election were he was elected President. He also shared a picture in the kindergarten with his daughter in 2017, clarifying that it was Antonia who asked him to be there. He also aims at showing compassion for those citizens who went through hard times in their lives and shared them with the President inside their homes, by showing a fragment of a door-to-door survey in a video (Slimovich, 2017b: 5).

This type of publications where Macri tells his family story, or where he shares citizens' life stories through fragments of the door-to-door surveys and visits on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, summons a specific Internet user called "unstructured follower Internet user" (Slimovich, 2017a:35).

Macri also staged correlation media strategies on social media in 2011, which he then intensified on his 2015 campaign and as President between 2015 and 2019. They were publications on a social network that emulated media logics and which appropriated television, printed press or radio content. He also concentrated discourses linked to the private world and to the public/institutional, which involved passionate and rational arguments, in a brief way (Slimovich, 2012, 2016).

The process of presenting a candidate as a common man is a feature of contemporary politics; it is not just Macri or the mediatization of poli-

tics on social media. However, Argentine former president found specific ways of opening digital spaces, whereas the rest of the Argentine politicians only made discourses related to the public sphere.

Kirchneristas'⁴ Social Network

In the case of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, political discourses on Facebook and Twitter (as well as in traditional media), were characterized from the start by a “strong-although diverse- addition to Peronism, and a revaluation of political discussion” (Gindin, 2018:7). At this point, private and personal logics coexisted with the interpellations to political opponents, and consequently, there is a “party proximity” logic (idem).

On kirchneristas leaders’ social media, in general and particularly Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s, it is shown the existence of “logic micro-arguments” and also “passionate micro-arguments” (Slimovich. 2012: 152), which are discourses typical of social media, full of meaning, which go through different media and networks. As in the case of macristas politicians, they are registered since the digital space opened, until today.

One of the emergency modes of “micro-enthymemes” and “micro-examples” on Fernández de Kirchner’s networks is linked to operations that suppose political-informative interfaces. In societies where only existed mass media, the media and mediatized society, there were “political-informative interface” processes (Verón, 2001 [1984]): Argentinian political discourses were immersed in an informative macro-enunciation of the television-news programs or political opinion programs, among others- and printed press and radio-with a voice over, its music, its summary, the hosts’ opinions, etc. In current societies, there are new spaces of correlation between politicians and citizens, without journalists acting as intermediaries. Nonetheless, for the first time in the mediatization of politics, there are “political-informative interfaces” on social media (Slimovich, 2016). That is, political discourses on social media relate to the logics and contents of informative mass media.

4. *Kirchnerista*: supporters and members of the political movement led by Nestor Kirchner and his wife Cristina Fernández de Kirchner.

As in the case of Fernández de Kirchner, on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, there are interfaces in the publications and stories with “appropriation, intervention and staging” (Carlón, 2014), which reinstate operations from traditional media and art. These operations, in the case of Fernández de Kirchner, are concentrated in the reinstatement of the “motives linked to the public”, the institutional role-when she is President- and also as her position as opponent to the macrista administration between 2015 and 2019. On the 2017 campaign, the staging of politics is mixed with the intimate and private.

At the beginning of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner’s digital discourse, there is an operation of “emulation of the informative-journalistic discourse” (Slimovich, 2012). That is to say, the publications on Facebook and Twitter imitate a press release. In those publications, there are quotes of the participants of the news, numbers that support the statement, and finally, an essential feature of the journalistic style of the 20th century: the conformation of the enunciator as an *agent of information* (Steimberg, 1993a [1982]). There are also fragments that place the former President as a subject of the enunciation, without using the first person. This type of interface was typical of when political discourses started to appear on social media. This operation changes by the end of 2015, when she is no longer President and became part of the opposition. This operation is not shown in Macri’s social media in any time of his digital history.

Since we have analyzed the historical ways of mediatization of political discourses on Facebook and Twitter, in the next section we will describe the way of emergence of the political discourses on Instagram.

Politics on Instagram

Macri and Fernández de Kirchner’s Instagram accounts were opened in 2011 and 2013 respectively. However, the first political campaign where most of Argentinian candidates had an account on this social network was just in 2017, and it is since then that the platform holds an important position regarding the spreading of the discourses of leaders and

candidates. Both accounts have over a million followers; even though Macri used it a lot more often during his presidency than Fernández de Kirchner, she increased the number of Internet users that follow her since she became Vice President in December 2019. In the case of Alberto Fernández's Instagram account, it was opened in 2015, and has been used frequently since he became president of the nation in December 2019. Myriam Bregman opened her account in 2017 and has 112,000 followers, much less than the other three politicians.

In October 2010, a final version of Instagram is launched (a merge between Instant and Telegram), and soon after it "reached 10.000 users, more than 100.000 on the first week" (Gallardo and Enguix, 2016: 61). Facebook bought it in 2012. It is a social network where photographs predominate, and therefore, many of the studies about this platform have to do with how the pictures are related to the text, and the type of image that predominate.

On the one hand, one of the modes of mediatization of politics generated on the Instagram media platform is the combination of text-image with a predominance of text. These are images that contain only linguistic text within them.

On the other hand, photographs and videos are also predominant. As regards contemporary photograph, one of the most used is the *selfie*, either group or individual. As Carlón (2016) states, *selfies* have a modern feature, since they are the "register of a moment", and they are closer to "be there now", which is pierced by the doubt about the actual character of the picture, as stated before. As in the case of politicians, they can show a public event or something private and intimate that gives the politics a mundane feature.

Nonetheless, in this investigation, the hypothesis is that a *selfie* posted on a politician's Instagram account *stresses the distance between the enunciation of the political consultant and the politician*, which has characterized political discourses on social media since the beginning of the second decade of this century (Slimovich, 2016).

Manovich (2017) was one of the first ones who started studying photographs on Instagram, and he analyses current pictures of different Internet users all over the world, and he differentiates between amateur or casual: photograph on Instagram that “puts content over form” and “professional or competitive” photograph, which looks for quality and is aimed at gaining likes and followers. The author coins the term “Instagrammism” to refer to a contemporary cultural identity that favors the form and explains that unique profiles can be created on Instagram through photographs.

The specific studies about our subject of study, the use of politicians on Instagram, are incipient and they can be classified into four types.

On the first place, the ones who analyze the content of the publications the politicians post on Instagram during a specific period (electoral or not), and thus determine the way of communication of that leader on this social network. This is the case of the investigation made by Jung et al (2017) regarding the Instagram accounts of Singapore’s politicians. In some cases, they use monitoring and metrics tools, such as Social Elephant, and they study the “personal brand of a candidate”, such as the study of Verón and Pallarés (2017) about the Instagram profile of the leader of the Spanish political party Ciudadanos: Albert Rivera. At the same time, Lopez-Rabadán and Domenech-Frabregat (2018) analyzed the use of Spanish politicians on Instagram with ten indicators of spectacularization on their official accounts, at the most intense moment of the Cataluña independence process (2017-2018).

Second, those who try to capture the style of the politician on Instagram, but they analyze the content and add a qualitative analysis. That is the case of Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño (2017), who study the use of Instagram by Spanish congressmen, after the election in 2016. Thus, the theorists among this group tend to look into the level of humanization of the politician or the interaction of the accounts with the citizens through mentions, hashtags, among others. Within this kind of studies, we can find those who investigate the reception (Verón, 1987a) of the Instagram accounts of the politicians, and they focus on the repercussions on Internet users, and they tend to investigate the personalization and hu-

manization of the leader in this social network. That is the case of Olof Larsson (2019), who investigates if the content published by Norwegian politicians-and the parties- on Instagram, related to the personalization, is “successful in terms of reception, amount of ‘likes’ and ‘comments’ on the platform” (p. 1097).

In the third place, there are those who study the type of photographs used by the politician on the social network, and some also add the relation between the picture and the accompanying text, and they conclude there are “types of political pictures” on Instagram. That is the case of Quevedo-Redondo and Portales-Oliva (2017), who analyze -through content analysis and qualitative methods- the photographs and videos posted on Instagram by the candidates to the Spanish presidency in 2015 and their relation with the linguistic text. They confirm the humanization of the figure of the politicians on Instagram during the political campaign, and they identify “distinctive elements of the culture of the fame, which form the dichotomy between the extraordinary (the political activity) and the ordinary (private life)” (p. 917). Thus, there is a “process of *celebrificación* [related to celebrities] that intends to boost the empathy of a young target, with a lighter and more informal style, compared to that used on traditional media” (p. 918). This is also the case of Mohamed (2019), who concentrates in determining the political narrative construction in the photographs used by the Malaysia’s Prime Minister candidates in May 2018. He concluded that candidates alternated personal with “political” pictures. In this sense, he classifies six types of political stories narrated through pictures. On the one hand, campaign activities, the material produced for the election, and pictures of the politician working. These first three are the type of story “political-public”, and as regards Malaysia, candidates use more this type of photographs on Instagram. On the other hand, the author refers to private and personal stories: family pictures, personal activities and pictures “from the past, which represent certain memory or experience, relevant for the candidate’s current life” (p. 364).

Finally, there are those who compare the content of the politicians’ Instagram accounts, with the content produced for other social media or

traditional media, in the same campaign. They aim at determining the difference between the use of social media, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp -and also the political communication on traditional media. That is the case of Bosetta (2018), who makes a comparative analysis between the publications made during the 2016 American election campaign in 4 platforms: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat. He aims at demonstrating that the contemporary political strategy is influenced by algorithms and the own rules of each digital space.

On the contrary, in this investigation we will analyze politicians Instagram discourses during 2018, 2019 y 2020. We will analyze the enunciation and mediatization of these political discourses. Thus, as opposed to previous works, we will relate the discourse on Instagram with its conditions of production (Verón, 1987a), which also includes other social media and mass media, and the following communicational movements. We will consider the perspective of contemporary hypermedia circulation (Carlón, 2015).

Institutional/extra-institutional enunciation

Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño (2017) analyze Mariano Rajoy's Instagram account by the time he was the president of the Spanish government (2017), and they conclude that in the publications, it is usual to see him visiting public facilities, giving interviews to the media, or in the Congress, and that there are no pictures that support the humanization of the politician. However, there are pictures of the president that show private moments, such a video of him walking along Miño river. They conclude that "the point of view chosen by the camera, as well as the use of a static shot and the distance of the politician in the picture, are decisions that emphasize the professional character of the video" (p. 908). At this point, there is a "professional" point of view on Instagram.

On the other hand, in a study about the Instagram account of the president of the Spanish political party Ciudadanos, Albert Rivera, Verón and Pallarés (2017) determine that he aims at showing a more personal

image and closer to the citizens, through photographs that belong to a private space. As Rajoy, Rivera's pictures stage a *political consultant enunciator*, since one of the ways the pictures are presented is with a low-angle shot, which "is mainly used to exalt Rivera's image and strengthen the perception of the politician as party leader" (Verón and Pallares, 2017: 10).

In conclusion, it is possible to determine, after the analysis made, that this type of edition and resources applied to Rajoy and Rivera's pictures, even in those cases where the pictures refer to intimate and private moments of the politicians, put at the forefront the *political consultant enunciation*. In the analysis made on the publications of the Argentinian politicians in this work, we will aim at determining which enunciation predominates.

Results

The profile picture in Fernández de Kirchner's Instagram account is one of her smiling and behind her, former president Néstor Kirchner. She has the same picture on Facebook and Twitter since 2010 that is when he passed away. She has over a million followers; however, she only follows 85 users. Macri also has the same picture in other media, where he only shows his face. He has over a million followers too, and only follows 131 users⁵.

While analyzing Fernández de Kirchner's Instagram publications and stories on 2018, we can see "multimedia logic micro-arguments" (Slimovich, 2012: 152). Through photographs, videos and linguistic text, the current Vice President argue in a brief and concealed way, giving "logic evidence" (Barthes, 1985), about why Macri was governing in a way that jeopardized the citizens, increasing taxes unnecessarily, impoverishing the population, enriching certain allied businesses, and judicially harassing her, among others. The way she deploys the argumentation is through

5. The information collected from Alberto Fernández, Mauricio Macri, Myriam Bregman and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's Instagram accounts were gathered in May 2021.

linguistic text, an invariant in the stories of the senator during 2018, and it is, as we will describe next, one of the main differences with the presidential stories, which are mainly audiovisual stories.

One of the publications that we considered in this analysis, is the case of the eight stories published on July 3, 2018, where-in the series- a “micro-enthymeme” is built (Slimovich, 2012)- a comparison between current taxes, their price when Fernández de Kirchner was president-a lot less-, and the macrista story about the increase and the existence of subsidies (Fernández de Kirchner, 2018a).

Moreover, and according to the communication strategy deployed in other social media, there is a link to another social network-Facebook, in this case- where is all the argumentative evidence. In addition, they call upon a specific Internet user, which is called “supporter fan Internet user” (Slimovich, 2012); who is asked to join the campaign against tax increase with the hashtag #BastaDeTarifazos [#NoMoreTaxIncrease]. In other words, they want him to produce the political arguments in social media.

Other publications that were analyzed were those related to the motives (Segre, 1994) that led to Fernández de Kirchner’s summons. In the publications, there were comments in favor and against, forming a collective of “supporters Internet users” and “opponents Internet users” to kirchnerismo. In a story, the former president asked the “supporters Internet users” not to mobilize when she is summoned for questioning. She asked the supporters to stay at home and not mobilize as a sign of support. They are stories with no sound, and sometimes with no pictures, but predominates the emergency of linguistic text. There are micro-arguments aimed at linking the moments where the former president is summoned to Macri’s economic crisis and government adjustment. This way, the Internet user is expected to complete the argument by deducting that she is being summoned as a way of “distraction” from the economic crisis during Macri’s government.

Going back to the question of which are the theme motives that emerge -whether they are related to the private or public- in the publications made on Instagram in Fernández de Kirchner’s account in 2018, predo-

minate publications related to the public. None of the analyzed publications or stories shows “family”, “personal stuff” or “remembrance of personal experience”, as was the case of the Spanish politicians.

On the other hand, taking into consideration the point of view of the publications, we can conclude that there is an *institutional first-person enunciation*, as opposed to that first moment we described earlier in Facebook and Twitter. The point of view on which Instagram users are interpellated is her a senator: there are pictures and pieces of her participation in Congress, descriptions of her past as President, arguments that take macristas messages that circulate on mass media and social media, in order to refute them and make counter-arguments. The aim is call upon the “citizen Internet user, with no electoral choice”, someone who is neither macrista nor kirchnerista, who is given evidence on the failure that was Macri’s presidency, and the need for the kirchnerismo to return to the national government. There are also several pictures among the publications that show her with different Latin American presidents and former presidents.

Even when some fragments of her personal life are shown, they have a “political” point of view, instead of “human” or “woman”. That is the case of the series of stories published on September 15, where Fernández de Kirchner-using first-person- tells through linguistic text that she received a message from her cousin that moved her. She then shows her cousin’s message. In this sense, we can see how the arguments on Fernández de Kirchner’s Instagram stories are constructed on a digital convergence of meaning condensation and operations of media correlation (Fernández de Kirchner, 2018b). The message she shared tells the story of employees who work for a clothing brand and lose their jobs because the factory closes-under Macri’s government- and give her, as a present, a shirt of the brand with their last salary. Fernández de Kirchner shares a picture of the present, thank them, and promise them that “they will have a job, hopes and dreams again”.

As regards Macri’s Instagram account, it is worth mentioning that in that same time, the stories and publications have different enunciations. First, during 2018, there are publications that refer to theme motives related

to the public, as well as private, since Macri is shown in his role as President and in his normal life. Regarding the latter, there are “fragments of the private and intimate”, such as pictures of his wife Juliana Awada, or with his daughter Antonia. Indeed, this public-private scheme is shown in his official accounts on Facebook and Twitter from the beginning. On Instagram, there are also pictures from his “family album”, and other “official pictures”, some with other presidents, in national celebrations, in press conferences on television, etc. Therefore, in this social network, Macri is shown as a President and as a “common man”.

Thus, just like we mentioned about Macri’s Facebook in previous times -electoral or not- during 2018, there are also fragments that relate to the citizen’s intimate and private aspects, through fragments of door-to-door surveys and visit to people who sent a letter to the President.

As regards the stories and publications analyzed, we can find that those stories that show official events, as well as those that show the visit of the President to a citizen who sent him a letter, have “appropriation” and “intervention” operations. They are operations-allowed by the options that offers the social network- that highlight which day of the week was and the place where the activity took place. However, the way the presidential stories are published involves an operation of “imitating an amateur video”, a type of operation shown on Facebook with the telephone conversations between the President and the neighbors (Slimovich, 2016). Even though they are videos registered by the presidential staff, shots are made with a cellphone, and they do not seem to be edited.

After the uploading of the story on Instagram and, given its brief duration -it is online only 24 hours- the video was shared on the President’s Facebook, first as a story, and then on his Facebook wall. Unlike Instagram stories, the operation of appropriation of content on Instagram and its passage to Facebook implies a reduction, since videos uploaded on Facebook tend to be shorter, and moreover, they do not have redundant space-time texts. Therefore, they are less intervened videos compared to those on Instagram (Macri, 2018a, Macri, 2018b). In addition, there is an operation of media correlation and divergence of digital political dis-

courses, which flow within the different social media and media. Whereas Fernández de Kirchner emulated journalistic discourses on digital platforms and shared content from mass media, there are no content from mass media on Macri's Instagram account in 2018, but he does emulate traditional media logics.

It is worth mentioning the type of photograph that predominates in Macri's account. In the stories that show Macri's visits to the citizens' home -or businesses- predominate the photos showing the President with neighbors taking a *selfie* with their phones. In other words, there are "photos of *selfies* with the President", they are "photos of the *selfie*". There are no pictures where the President is the one who takes the photo. There are no *selfies* on Macri's account -nor on Fernández de Kirchner's. The absence of *selfies*, the existence of videos where Macri is not facing the camera -showing that there is another person filming- generates the effect of a professional point of view above the political point of view. That is, despite the existence of operations that emulate the common Internet user -such as the imitation of amateur videos- it predominates the *political consultant enunciation* over the *individual*.

In addition, unlike Fernández de Kirchner, Macri used the tool Instagram Live. He used it to talk over the phone with some neighbors, and to answer the enquiries the citizen Internet users left him on his Instagram account. One of the cases is the simultaneous transmission of a live event July 18. The day before, Macri held a press conference on television, where he answered questions from journalists, clearly showing a diversification strategy -journalists on television and citizens on social media. During the transmission of the Instagram Live on July 18, Macri answered some of the questions the citizens had previously made on this account -which he had on written paper. That transmission was characterized by the personal questions he answered, such as How did you meet Juliana? Which was your first car? What do you do on your spare time?, among other questions. The day before, he had answered questions more related to the public administration. While the Instagram Live was being transmitted, citizen Internet users, who used the social network, talked about political issues through comments, in the middle of emojis in the

cellphone screen (Slimovich, 2018b). It is worth mentioning that, due to the own configuration of the social network, users who watch the Instagram Live, can choose to see the comments other users make, where it can be found “supporters”, “opponents” and “undecided” (Slimovich, 2012), and private/intimate topics prevail over public/political issues.

It is also worth mentioning the construction of the presidential body on the Instagram Live. It is noticeable that Macri has bags under his eyes, and, at times, a tiresome way of speaking. Verón (1987c) conceptualize the presidential body as socialized and mediatized: it is constructed over annulments and prohibitions, and it implies a sufficiently distinguished exhibition in order to not see it. Indeed, what is exposed on the Instagram Live is a metabody. Building a presidential body on Instagram is not about being honest, but to demonstrate honesty, in another level. Citizens see the transmission, and maybe, for the first time in the history of mediatization, make political discourses that reach public space, in accordance with the transmission and at the same time it happens, through comments on the social network. Even though this kind of enunciation shows corporal aspects -such as the bags under his eyes or the weary aspect of the President when he talks- it refers to the political consultant enunciation, since it is someone else who is sharing and recording with the cellphone that presidential body, and not the President himself.

Moreover, there are also “logic micro-arguments” among Instagram publications. They are “micro-enthymemes” and “micro-examples”, which aim at showing that the government is going “on the right track”. The kirchnerismo appears as “counter-recipient”. Although the former president holds press conferences, and he is quoted and his speech reproduced on mass media; on Instagram, there are not content appropriation operations from the traditional media content. At this point, there is a difference with Fernández de Kirchner’s corpus, who does share content from the traditional media-many times to make “counter-arguments”.

Argentine left-wing on Instagram

Other candidate on the 2019 elections is Myriam Bregman, from the Frente de Izquierda y de los Trabajadores (FIT) [Workers' Left Front Unity]. This coalition, formed by the Partido de los Trabajadores Socialistas (PTS) [Socialist Workers' Party], el Partido Obrero (PO) [Workers' Party] and the Izquierda Socialista [Socialist Left], among others, was originated in 2011, and that same year gathered all the votes needed -and more, 1.5%- to reach, after the primary elections, the general elections thanks to a campaign that included a predominant and original way -especially since it is a Trotskyist group- of using social media, and which was called: "A miracle for Altamira" (Slimovich, 2016). By the end of 2018 and January 2019, according to the investigation made, the candidate showed a daily activity on Instagram, through stories and publications.

She is a human rights activist and supporter of gender movements, and for many years she has actively participated in the petition demanding the legalization of abortion in Argentina. A few years ago, "Argentine Trotskyism started to adapt to the media logic, from young people to classic leaders", like the campaign we mentioned before, which articulated mass media and social media asking for "help" and retweets, in order to gather the amount of votes needed to reach the general election, among other media actions that cross languages and media.

This redemption of the Argentine left-wing and Myriam Bregman, are replicated on her Instagram official account. In effect, her stories and publications always show her, through pictures or videos, in mobilizations, surrounded by women, asking for more women's right, and in mobilizations against public services' tax increase, a measure taken by the national government. One feature of the expository strategy on her Instagram, unlike others Argentine politicians, is that there are selfies. In other words, there is a political enunciation above other points of view.

On the other hand, in her account, we can constantly see the emergency of political-journalistic interfaces in her stories, which have appropriation operations of interviews she had on traditional mass media -which

are close to the government- mixed with appropriation operations of interviews on “La Izquierda diario”, a party press.

If we take into account the hypermedia circulation of the discourses, unlike Macri or Fernández de Kirchner, whose discourses originate on their Instagram accounts and “ascend the mass media”, who replicate their content; with Myriam Bregman’s Instagram is the other way around. It is a communication with descending circulation, because it is the traditional media -with its logic and discourses- who make the interview, and she then replicates the content on her Instagram account, through stories and publications. It is not the common Internet user who helps ascend the content and replicate it, but is the mass media who manages to impose the content, always considering that on Instagram, political enunciation predominates over informative/journalistic enunciation.

The mediatization of Alberto Fernández

During the first quarter of his administration-from December 2019 to February 2020- the presidential Instagram account showed “political-media events”, such as the meeting between Alberto Fernández and Pope Francis, and with Emmanuel Macron, among others. In March, with the establishment of the preventive and mandatory isolation in Argentina due to COVID-19 pandemic, it is shown a continuation of the dissemination of political-media events in his account; however, during the second quarter of 2020, he posted messages referring to his own television press conferences, where the main subject is the pandemic.

As regards his Twitter account, we notice the existence of different types of political/journalistic interfaces (Verón, 2001 [1984]; Slimovich, 2016) in the moment before the pandemic, which continued during the pandemic. We refer to operations where he replicates contents shown in journalistic media -whether they are opposing or allies- as well as the “imitation of their logics and genres” (Slimovich, 2016). These operations are replicated on his Instagram account in 2020 and 2021.

Thus, during the presidential press conferences broadcasted since March, with the establishment of the preventive and mandatory isolation in Argentina, the presidential Twitter account shows political-journalistic interfaces, which replicate media and journalistic content related to the conference. In a case we analyze in another paper (Slimovich, 2021), we can see that in the discourses broadcasted during the presidential press conference on May 8 and the days before, there are some retweets of the *TV Pública*, which are included to the president's political enunciation. They are tweets from the state television, which quoted the president's words, informing that the isolation would continue for 15 days, and that schools and shows involving large group of people would remain closed.

There are also presidential messages that retweet public figures, physicians, economists and even the opposition. In conclusion, Alberto Fernández's political communication about the pandemic in Twitter and Instagram "is made up of different voices from leaders, public servants, politicians, journalists, public figures, and therefore it creates a *choral political-media enunciation*" (Slimovich, 2021:9).

Discussion

The study about the Spanish congressmen on Instagram showed, like our investigation about the Argentine leaders, that politicians tend to include pictures taken by a third party instead of *selfies*. "Even in those publications where the politician is alone, only the 14.58% are *selfies*" (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017: 911).

In this sense, we can conclude that politicians tend to use much less *selfies* on Instagram, as compared to Instagrammers, influencers or common users of the social network. Nevertheless, whereas the Spanish theorists think the absence of *selfies* as a waste of the potentialities the social media offer, and link the *selfie* with the spontaneous rhetoric; we, on the contrary, conclude that a *selfie* implies the annulment of the political consultant enunciation and the staging of an individual enunciation, which is difficult to articulate with the "presidential enunciation".

The *selfie* implies a *politician's direct enunciation and its effect is powerful*. In the case of Macri, there are only two videos taken by the President himself in selfie mode, and therefore, one of his arms remains hidden the whole time. One of them was recorded on November 28, days before the G20 summit, which took place in the City of Buenos Aires, and where he acts as president of the World's Leaders Summit. The other one was recorded on August 3, 2018. This video shows him entering the Pink House, greeting the police officers and the visitors-children- that were there. That is to say, the *selfie* is taken in a political institution: the Government House and it resume political-themed motives. There are no *selfies* nor videos recorded by the president himself that replicate intimate or private content.

Taking into consideration the veronian theory about the mediatization of the presidential body, we can conclude that the presidential body is a metabody that does not work with beliefs but with the distance to the citizens. When the *selfie* is taken, the body of the politician and the citizen come close. In this case, although they are videos taken by the President, the enunciation, by definition, is institutional, and it produces distance.

The study about the Spanish congressmen showed a predominance in "showing the politician in the exercise of his political duties on Instagram" (Selva-Ruiz and Caro-Castaño, 2017: 913), in accordance with studies of other western democracies.

On the one hand, as in the case of the former president Fernández de Kirchner, there is clearly a construction of the exercise of his political duties as a senator through the stories. She can be seen in the Senate bench, on many publications of important debates that happened over the year. There are also publications on Instagram that are fragments of videos, which show her intervention in the Senate. Moreover, in accordance with the predominance of the digital political discourses and the way of communicating on social media, proper to Fernández de Kirchner, there are logic micro-arguments that aim at demonstrating the failure of Macri's administration, making a balance between present and past, when she and her husband, Néstor Kirchner, governed. In this sense, a macrista counter-recipient is shaped (typical of the political discourse),

and it calls upon the undecided Internet user through brief argumentations, emerging the descriptive and prescriptive component of the political discourse (Verón, 1987b). This type of enunciative positioning is replicated in the modes of mediatization of politics on Alberto Fernández's Instagram, although they are combined with polyphony of voices on social media, and different modes of political-journalistic-informative interfaces.

As regards Macri, there are pictures that show the President in his private and intimate life, with his daughter, pictures of her daughter alone, of him resting with his wife and family, etc., in tune with the public-private scheme that appears on the macristas social media since he opened the account. In this sense, he shows on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, aspects of the common man who inhabit the presidential body (Slimovich, 2017b). On the other hand, it is called upon a kirchnerista counter-recipient through brief argumentations in form of text shared in the publications. On Macri's Instagram account, in a non-electoral year, it can be seen a public-private mixture, which has characterized his social media - Facebook and Twitter- from the beginning.

Conclusions

After the analysis, we conclude there are different ways of constructing the political enunciation on the publications and stories on Instagram's political institution.

On the one hand, as in the case of Fernández de Kirchner, it is used the first-person in the stories and the publications; however, it is a "political/institutional enunciation". The subjects are related to the public, to her role as opponent and as senator, and to her past as former president. There are no *selfies* or features that recall an extra-institutional point of view in the videos. There is no staging of mundane aspects. The references that appear regarding her family, the private, the intimate, her condition as a "woman" are linked to the senator's public life, and her position as opponent to the national government. Besides, the pictures

she posts on her Instagram account are always taken by others, staging the *political consultant/professional enunciation*.

On the other hand, the analysis made on the type of discourse on the Instagram official account of the then Argentine President, showed a “political/institutional enunciation”, as happened with Fernández de Kirchner. Nevertheless, there are discourses that show the mundane part of the President, such as his role as husband, father, man, househusband, doer of morning exercises, someone tired of the long working hours, etc., all of which makes a difference. On Macri’s Instagram account there are traces of “individual/extra-institutional enunciation” -something that remains invariant, as opposed to Fernández de Kirchner’s account. However, these individual/extra-institutional marks are blurred by the appearance of another point of view, that of the political consultant/professional. Since it is a point of view from a third party (the one who holds the cellphone and takes the picture), even though he shows family pictures and tries to emulate a spontaneous and amateur picture, the enunciation conjugate the *political/institutional*, with the *individual*, and the *political consultant/government advisor* point of view.

Moreover, in Macri’s stories and publications on Instagram, as in other social media, he calls upon an Internet user “voyeur” of the intimate, of Macri’s personal life as well as the common citizen he visits. Since they are stories that are published in a daily basis and have a brief life on the web, he calls upon an Internet user who regularly visits the President’s social media.

Finally, it is worth pointing out the differences between the communicational movements. As regards Macri’s discourses on Instagram, the publications that generate ascending communicational movements (Carlón, 2015), that is, those that reach the mass media and continue with hypermedia leaps with the reactions of the citizen Internet users, are those that are related to important political-media events, or live transmissions on the social network. As it was mentioned before, these discourses involve an interaction of the institutional discourse on Instagram through the picture, discourses that are captured by the cellphones through the

function that allows to visualize comments on Instagram, and the operation of sharing, appropriating, intervening, etc. the viewer does.

On the contrary, the changes of the mediatization scale of Fernández de Kirchner's discourse tend to appear when, apart from the stories and publications on Instagram, there are articulations in the urban space in political events, and therefore, they are broadcasted on television and live on social media (Slimovich, 2020a).

In relation to the current president's account, we note that his Instagram account is also dominated by political-media events, initially through meetings with external leaders. Then, with the establishment of the pandemic and the health regulations and limitations on movement, what is evident is the political-media event linked to the presidential press conference or recorded announcement with communications on state regulations on the coronavirus. Likewise, it is also evident that his own discourse is combined with others: those of journalists, those of other politicians based on informative political-journalistic interfaces.

As regards Myriam Bregman's account, it is worth mentioning that, even though the three politicians receive several comments on their posts-following the veronian model, we refer as "recognition discourses"- Mauricio Macri, Alberto Fernández and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner have a lot more comments on Instagram than the left-wing representative.

Finally, as regards Bregman's official account on Instagram, we have mentioned that she follows a practice carried out by the Argentine left parties over the last years, which has to do with the production of messages that aim at calling upon the Marxist-Trotskyist Internet user, who shares the candidate's ideals and who also buys party press. She also aims at calling upon a "collective of citizen Internet users with no electoral choice", through the dissemination of contents on traditional media, addressing as well the "citizen supporter Internet user" who navigates the web ■

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Time, Written News and Digital Media: The Semiotics of Live Blogs

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Abstract

Live blogs, or *simultaneous reports*, are written texts emitted and received as the event they cover unfolds. This unique combination of materiality and communication situation in the field of journalism has brought about some major shifts in the way news is produced, structured, and consumed. From a semiotic and a media ecology standpoint, and building on previous work, this chapter describes the specificities of this web native journalistic genre by comparing it to newspaper articles and live news broadcasting. Afterwards, three defining traits of the discourse of live blogs are identified and briefly discussed: the inability to apply an endpoint perspective on the facts, the fragmentation of both the represented event and the text itself, and the transposition of scenographies that are distinctive of live broadcasting. Finally, we comment on some consequences this genre, which has been widely overlooked by social research, entails for the production and consumption of breaking news and for the way media construct reality.

Keywords

Digital platforms, journalistic discourse, live blogs, semiotics, writing

1. Introduction

The coverage of an ongoing event through a written text was, at the turn of this century, a novelty for the field of journalism as well as for the whole media ecosystem. Live blogs, or as they will be referred to here, *simultaneous reports*, introduced an unprecedented communication situation for written journalism, one in which the addresser contacts the addressee every few minutes, or as soon as new information becomes available. As for the role of the addressee, this news production modality creates the effect of an audience rather than that of a readership, since it sets up a communication channel that will remain open for hours – although, as we will see, this contact can only be discontinuous.

When simultaneous reports (SRs) are considered in the making, that is, as a series of enunciation acts (Benveniste, 2011) which materialize as a succession of posts ordered in a reversed chronology – with the most recent one placed at the top of the screen and *pushing down* previous ones –, they cannot but evoke the way blogs and social media work. However, it should be noted that *The Guardian* ran its first SR as early as 1999, a few years before the emergence of social media as a global phenomenon in the mid-2000s (Van Dijck, 2016). Moreover, although there is no denying the affinities between *blogs* and *live blogs*, the origins of the latter can be traced back to teletext and videotext (Sandvoss, 2004), and the uses that these technologies were given by sports television shows and news agencies.¹

In fact, we shall go (much) further back in time in order to better grasp what has changed in the field of written journalism with the rise of SRs. From a semiotic and an ecological perspective, we aim at identifying and describing the similarities and differences these texts have with regards

1. The English Press Association's sports score service became widely known since it first featured in BBC's *Grandstand*, a sports television show that aired from 1958 to 2007 (Gibson & Plunkett, 2006). Originally, *Grandstand* broadcast a live shot of the teleprinter (or teletype) as match results came in and appeared on a piece of paper that was read right away by the show's hosts (Deans, 2002). However, it must be noted that in this case the audience had access to the results through a television show and not through teletext itself.

to newspaper articles, on one hand, and live media broadcasting, on the other. In the next section, we begin by reconstructing, albeit in an impressionistic way, the historical process by which the gap between the occurrence of an event and the publication of its corresponding news item was progressively reduced, until reaching its paroxysm with SRs. Section 3 deals with the main changes that this new enunciative regime has brought about regarding the way ordinary news pieces structure the facts they refer to. The scope of these transformations is discussed in section 4, where we question whether SRs are in fact *live* transmissions, equal to radio and television broadcasts, as suggested by labels such as *live blogs* or *live text*. In section 5, we point out and briefly discuss three of the most salient features of SRs: i) their *temporal perspective*, which manifests chiefly in the way the event is presented as a developing story; ii) their *fragmentary character*, which is a consequence of their being an accumulation of discrete – and relatively autonomous – enunciation acts; and iii) their tendency to *transpose* some distinctive traits of live broadcasting, which in turn contributes to the sense of immediacy created by the genre. Finally, we lay out some of the consequences SRs entail for the production and consumption of breaking news and for the way media construct reality.

2. Technologies of the word: the acceleration of the press' editorial cycle

Iteration is a distinctive trait of *journalistic* discourse. In printed newspapers, the contact with the reader typically takes place once a day; in SRs, contact frequency increases to the point where information can be provided multiple times as an event unfolds. This can be considered as the point of arrival of a historical process in which written journalism strived to reduce the interval between two moments: that of the event and that of the publication of the news. In this sense, “technological development in the pursuit of timeliness continues to impel news coverage towards ‘present-ation’ – closing the gap between the event and its telling, with the goal of displaying events in ‘real-time’” (Bell, 1995: 306).

The printing press enabled the emergence of new materialities that deeply altered the relation between texts and social time, which became the first journalistic mediatizations in a modern sense. In the 17th century, pamphlets and newspapers – called *ephemeral bodies* by Verón, as opposed to books' and codices' *dense bodies* –, led to “the development of a short-term temporality and, therefore, of a form of unprecedented closeness between the production-enunciation of textual devices and their reception” (Verón, 2013: 241, author's translation). However, Verón concedes that these new materialities could only be referred to as *newspapers* – literally translated by him into Spanish as *papeles de noticias* –, neither *journals* nor *periodicals*, which would imply a frequency that these first publications did not have.

In the mid-19th century, the telegraph meant a revolution in terms of reducing the time lag between emission and reception. For the first time, the written word was dissociated from solid commodities such as stone, clay, papyrus, parchment, or paper, and finally “messages could travel faster than a messenger. Before this, “roads and the written word were closely interrelated” (McLuhan, 2005: 97). In fact, they were so closely related that the owner of the first American newspaper was the head of a local post office (Boczkowski, 2006). This new mobility of immaterial words was perfectly coupled with the press' inclination for immediacy:

With the expansion of the network and bandwidth, the time-lag between the occurrence of nonlocal news and its appearance in print dropped precipitously. (...) Reporters rendered the information they gathered in a form that maximized speedy relay. Newspapers receiving a dispatch geared their workflow to rapidly process a story, resorting to clever shortcuts for exceptionally pressing news. Once published, telegraphic news moved rapidly to readers through circulation channels that pushed transports to their limits (Kielbowicz, 2019: 206).

Nevertheless, even though messages began to travel at the speed of electricity, the telegraph did not alter the fact that words had to be printed and published in a new edition of the newspaper before they could be read by the public. Neither did the telephone overturn that situation

since it worked in the same direction as the telegraph to speed up the processing of the news prior to their publication.²

In the early 1980s, once computers had been adopted by many news media companies, the time finally came to experiment with some of the possibilities offered by the electronic distribution of written news, such as teletext or videotext (Boczkowski, 2006). Videotext had been developed by the British Post Office in the early 70s and involved the transmission of information over telephone lines to a personal computer or television set with a decoder. It was a closed subscription system with a plain text and graphics interface that, in addition to transmitting news and other information, enabled the user to send data to the server computer by means of an alphanumeric keyboard, which allowed in turn navigating through options, thus making it possible to shop or carry out banking transactions.³ The emergence and consolidation of the World Wide Web in the 90s created a new environment for newspapers' editions. At the beginning, these were updated daily, as the logic of the printed press was transferred into the digital domain (Scolari, 2004); but as platforms evolved, they began publishing the main stories of the day as information entered the newsroom.

2. However, there was a practice that, with all its limitations, anticipated, in a way, how SRs operate: people would congregate for hours outside newspaper offices to follow constantly updated telegraphic reports displayed on their walls (Kielbowicz, 2019). What started as messages on bulletin boards morphed, by the end of the 19th century, into blackboards covering several stories at once where dispatches were written as soon as they arrived. In 1910, for the occasion of the American heavyweight championship fight between Jim Jeffries and Jack Johnson, countless fans "gathered outside newspaper offices around the country to share the round-by-round bulletins, many wired from ringside" (Kielbowicz, 2019: 212).

3. In the UK, the BBC's Ceefax service operated between 1974 and 2012, offering general news and sports information. It was called Ceefax because it allowed readers to *see the facts*, but it also included weather forecasts, program guides and listings, recipes, games, and even book and film reviews ("Ceefax at 40," 2014; Smith, 2012). Similar experiences also existed in France, with the Minitel (Dupont-Calbo, 2012), and in the United States, in which several newspapers participated including the Columbus Dispatch, The New York Times, The Washington Post and Los Angeles Times (Boczkowski, 2006).

Written journalism's digitalization process brought about transformations on many levels, but there are two of them that shall not be overlooked: discourse materiality and publication frequency. Thus, the term *journal*, referring to a daily publication frequency, becomes again, as was the case in the 17th century, a misleading label. Only now the same happens with the term *newspaper*, since paper is no longer the main materiality of written journalism's texts. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that these transformations were far-reaching, the same underlying situation remained unchanged: the news continued to be written and published *ex post facto*. It is this state of affairs that is subverted by SRs. These are texts about something that, properly speaking, has not happened yet or, at least, has not achieved an unequivocal or clear meaning.

3. From chronology to the inverted pyramid and back again

Genette argued that the "narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading" (1983: 34). This is of course true about the written word's inability to mediatize duration. But, in another sense, this is no longer entirely accurate when considering digital texts such as SRs. For these are dynamic, gradually produced and received texts. While traditional news pieces reach the reader as finished, complete, and fixed texts, SRs are consumed as they are being produced, and as the event unfolds. This is a major shift in written news' production-consumption processes. In regular news, first the event must take place, afterwards the article is written – although these two stages can overlap –, then it is published (emitted) and, finally, read. As much as this process has been dramatically accelerated by digitalization, each stage still only begins once the previous one has already concluded. Instead, SRs involve a communication situation in which event, discourse production and discourse reception, all share the same time frame. This is one of the main reasons we prefer to call these texts *simultaneous* reports – another reason is that the term foregrounds the contrast with traditional newspaper articles, which are in turn *retrospective*.⁴

4. There is also a third reason that will be addressed in the next section.

This enunciative regime results in new ways of presenting the facts. When the coverage begins, the event is not construed as accomplished but as pure potentiality; this means SRs cannot be structured according to the *inverted pyramid* format, which has been dominant in newspapers for more than a century. After the telegraph was introduced as a journalistic tool in the second half of the 19th century, news gradually stopped presenting facts in chronological order. The reduction of the time gap between the moment the event happened and the moment the news was written and published, took place while news structure was being reshaped: “telegraph-enabled timeliness altered every stage of the news-production process, from reporter-source interactions to the delivery of stories to readers” (Kielbowicz, 2019: 200). The telegraph, by potentially allowing a continuous transmission of information, had the additional effect of breaking down the production of news pieces on current events into smaller and more frequent fragments (Boczkowski, 2006). Hence, this technology inaugurated “the period in which news and news work assumed its modern pattern – the pursuit of getting the story first and the ‘inverted pyramid’ format” (Bell, 1995: 306).

So, we may think that there is a causal link between this technological innovation and the correlated changes in news’ text structure. Scanlan (2000) suggests that, in the United States, costs associated with the use of the telegraph favored a concise writing style, far from elaborate descriptions.⁵ Other limitations imposed by the telegraph were not cost related but had to do with technical difficulties such as line failures and cuts (see E. Rogers and J. Dominick in Errico, 1998). This could have been a motivation to include the most relevant information at the beginning of the message, and to move on to the details only once the core of the story had been successfully transmitted. After the initial stages of the telegraph, “the inverted pyramid made sense for efficient editing (simply cut the bottom of a story)” (Kielbowicz, 2019: 211).

5. Since its first meetings, the Associated Press promoted a brief and objective style as the norm for cable writing (Scanlan, 2000). In fact, the inverted pyramid’s first paragraph came to be known as the *Associated Press lead*, as the agency demanded it should be used by all editors (Hornos Paz & Nacinovich, 1997: 28).

Others posit that the change in news structure, while it may have been introduced shortly after the invention of the telegraph, did not become popular in the United States until the early 1900s. This approach underlines the concurrence of economic, social, and cultural factors, among which were the democratization of higher education and the professionalization of journalism itself – including its insertion as an undergraduate course of studies (Errico, 1998). Without pretending to provide a definitive answer to this, we can nevertheless acknowledge, as the European mediatization theory does (see Hjarvard, 2016; Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018; Krotz, 2017; Livingstone & Lunt, 2014), that while media have the capability of simultaneously affecting all social areas – they are *transversal agents*, as Verón (2013) puts it –, other areas of society also influence the way media operate. Anyhow, what is indisputable is that newspapers, whether digital or on paper, structure the news in such a way as to prioritize the most relevant information, which means locating it at the beginning of the story. The base of the pyramid contains all the crucial information: it presents the facts that should answer the questions about *who, what, when, where, why* and *how*, known as the five W's and the H.

Some research suggests that actions are easier to understand when presented in chronological order (Bell, 1995), but there is also a substantial upside in a text that follows the inverted pyramid format. This can be explained by the notion of *conceptual network of action*. When Ricoeur (2006) analyzes the way in which time is prefigured in the practical world (*Mimesis I*), he distinguishes between the *meaningful (or intelligible) structures* of action, its *symbolic resources*, and its *temporal character*. The structure of the action refers to the subject's capability to understand or to use in a meaningful way a conceptual system that includes the action's ends, motives, agents, circumstances, and results. Evidently, this set is closely related to the one configured by the inverted pyramid at a textual level (*Mimesis II*). On the elements that make up the conceptual framework of action (motive, agent, circumstance, etc.), Ricoeur points out that "these or other related terms arise in answers to questions about the 'what', the 'why', the 'who', the 'how', the 'with' or the 'against whom' of the action" (2006: 110, author's translation). Mastering

the system as a whole and each element as belonging to an interrelated group presupposes a practical understanding of the action.

There is also a byproduct of the inverted pyramid format that arises in news reading habits or practices. The news *lead* displays the outcome of the action or situation at the beginning of the text. Therefore, the addressee can interrupt the reading process at any point beyond the first paragraph and still have acquired the story's essential information. In contrast, SRs demand the reader's continuous attention: the end of the story is never available at the beginning of the text – both for the addressee and the addresser – it marks just the starting point of the interaction.

Although SRs, like any other written text, are perfectly capable of generating complex temporal structures, they almost always present facts in a chronological order; at least those that have taken place after the coverage began (Porto López, 2018). This is not a necessary consequence of the way the technical device operates but rather an imperative of journalistic discourse. As we saw in the previous section, a governing principle of journalism is that information should be available to the public as soon as something has happened. And there is no reason that can justify SRs' nature as a permanently updatable, temporalized text, other than to remain attached to the episodic dimension. This capability enables it to satisfy journalism's desire for immediacy in a way no other newspaper genre could do before. For a written text, the only way to do this is by generating an additional post every time there is a new development concerning the event being covered, or each time fresh information becomes available.

Before SRs, it was not possible for written news to anticipate a moment using the future tense and, later on, *in that very same text*, refer to it in the present tense and, finally, in the past. This is achieved by an addresser that moves through time, coupled with the present time of both the event and the audience. It goes without saying that this involves a radical transformation of written journalism's communication situation, but can SRs be considered a *live* broadcast?

4. Live broadcasting, or the limits of simultaneous reports

To answer this question, it is necessary to turn first to the media that historically introduced live broadcasting and assess their main characteristics as technical devices. From a Peircean perspective, radio and television, either live or pre-recorded, create an indexical link between the sign they produce – the discourse – and the object – the phenomenon or event represented by it – (Carlón, 2006; Fernández, 1994, 2008, 2012), an indexicality that can be found as well in the output of several apparatuses invented during the 19th century, such as films, phonographic cylinders and records, or photographs – although in this last case there is no mediatization of the phenomenon's duration.

As a sign, the photograph is an index, or an iconic-index; this has been stated over and over. As Barthes (2014) puts it: the photograph presents a direct correspondence to a past reality. Photography is a technique that enables the automatic generation of images in a process where man is not directly involved either in capturing the reality or in its inscription on a material surface (Carlón, 2006). The *camera obscura*, used by many painters during the Renaissance, created an optical projection of reality which was automatic; but it was not until photography came along that the material inscription of that image was endowed, to use Verón's terms (2013), with permanence and autonomy, without the intervention of the artist.

These are two separate operations, even though in photography they both take place simultaneously. The operation that allows capturing reality follows the laws of optics. For instance, the smaller the hole of the *camera obscura* is, the sharper (and dimmer) the image becomes. However, beyond a specific threshold in the size of the opening, the image begins to be distorted due to diffraction, that is, because of the obstacles the light wave bumps into on its way from the source to the surface where it is projected. Instead, the operation of inscription is the result of the photosensitive material's reaction to the stimulus of light. Action and reaction introduce us in the realm of *secondness*, as it cannot otherwise be when considering the indexical properties of such devices.

Photography's distinctive trait does not lie in either one of these individual operations considered by itself, but in the way they both articulate in a single technical process (Carlón, 2006). On the one hand, photography shares the capability for automatic inscription with lithography or etching as well as with the printing press. On the other hand, its character as a pre-visualization apparatus is a trait that photography shares with the *camera obscura*. The novelty introduced by the indexical devices developed in the 19th and early 20th centuries was that they combined a capability to capture a sensorial dimension of a physical phenomenon with its inscription on a material surface – and they did this automatically, without the intervention of a human operator.

In contrast to photography, the discourse of radio and television is *temporalized*, in Aumont's (2013) sense of the term. That is, their technical devices combine automatic registration with the capability to capture and replicate the duration of the mediatized phenomenon. But this does not set radio apart from the phonograph or the gramophone, nor television from cinema. What distinguishes radio and television from previous mass media is the instant materialization and circulation of their discourse: they have an integrated transmission system that is also a distribution system working in real time. So, live broadcasting brings together the automatic registration of reality, the temporal dimension of phenomena and the present time of discourse production and reception.

During the third decade of the 20th century, Valéry (1960) drew attention to the fact that works of art were no longer confined to a single location; instead, they could be found wherever there was a person or a receiving apparatus. This was by no means limited to art. While marveling at this, Valéry avows not knowing if “if a philosopher has ever dreamed of a society in which Sensorial Reality was home delivered” (1960: 4, author's translation). Specifically referring to music distribution, he adds that it had become possible to “Listen to, in any point of the globe, at the same instant, a musical piece performed anywhere” (1960: 4, author's translation). What is being highlighted here (by Valéry) is the new technical capability to perceive some aspect of a distant reality at the very moment of its occurrence.

About half a century later, also Raymond Williams referred to both radio and television as means of distribution of reality:

Unlike all previous communications technologies, radio and television were systems primarily devised for transmission and reception as abstract processes, with little or no definition of preceding content. When the question of content was raised, it was resolved, in the main, parasitically. There were state occasions, public sporting events, theatres and so on, which would be communicatively distributed by these new technical means (Williams, 1975: 25).

When we consider SRs, it is clear their *transmissions* cannot be conceived in terms of a sensorial reality distribution, at least neither totally nor primarily. No matter how detailed and exhaustive a verbal account may be, whoever reads (or listens to) it can never have access to any perceptual qualities of the phenomena described in it. Clearly, SRs are not just written texts, they are multimodal texts (Pantic & Cvetkovic, 2018; Tereszkievicz, 2014; Thurman & Walters, 2013): besides words, they include photographs, audio files and videos. Yet, the bulk of the event's description rests always upon the verbal component. That is why there are SRs without images – and very often without any audiovisual content –, but there are no – there cannot be – SRs without words.

The word, classified as a symbol by Peirce, rules out any connection between sign and object other than a purely conventional one: representamen and object are linked only by virtue of a symbol-using mind. In contrast, the index is always physically connected with its object, and “the interpreting mind has nothing to do with this connection, except remarking it, after it is established” (Peirce, CP 2.299). The icon is a sign that does not involve an existential relation with its object, but instead has qualities that “resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness” (Peirce, CP 2.299). The symbol-using mind, understood as the embodiment of a habit or a social convention, establishes a connection with the object even though the representamen does not possess similar qualities – as does the icon – nor is it empirically connected to that object – as is the case with the index. No sensorial dimension of the object is accessible through a symbol:

Any ordinary word, as “give,” “bird,” “marriage,” is an example of a symbol. It is applicable to whatever may be found to realize the idea connected with the word; it does not, in itself, identify those things. It does not show us a bird, nor enact before our eyes a giving or a marriage, but supposes that we are able to imagine those things, and have associated the word with them⁶ (Peirce, CP 2.298).

If symbols are not dynamically connected to their objects, the guarantee that the referent of a SR is an actual event is not achieved through the technical device but is instead an effect of the discourse type these reports belong to, namely: journalism. A discourse type is associated, on the one hand, with institutional structures that are its organizational basis and, on the other, with “crystallized social relations of offers/expectations that are the correlates of those institutional structures” (Verón, 2005: 195, author’s translation). There are also some internal mechanisms that construe the journalistic discourse as trustworthy in the eyes of the audience. Indexical and iconic-indexical mediatizations such as photographs, audios, and videos, frequently incorporated to online news as well as to SRs, provide access to some of the sensorial qualities of the mediatized phenomenon, and at the same time, they work as proof of existence of the object being referred to by the written text.

For the sign to recreate some aspect of its object as a sensorial experience, the latter must be registered as an icon – as in photography or video – or consist in the presentation of the object itself, or some part of it – like the voice of an individual in an audio record. Only the automatic registration of indexical signs enables the duration of a phenomenon to be mediatized, and to do so without any time lag. The representamen of live broadcasts matches the object – in this case, a concrete referent – point by point through its temporal unfolding: they make up an organic

6. Uttered in certain circumstances and by the right person – a priest, a judge – words can consecrate a marriage or make a donation official. However, actual performatives (Austin, 1998; Searle, 2001) are structured around social conventions that provide the conditions for it to be a “happy” performative, and there is not a dynamic or existential connection between the utterance and what is being signified by it. That is why a speech act can, in certain circumstances, consecrate a marriage, but it cannot, as Peirce says, recreate a wedding or show us a bird.

pair deployed longitudinally in time, which is – and this is a key aspect – also the audience’s present time of experience (Carlón, 2006).

Writing precludes also the indexical inscription of the sound of words, depriving them of the rhythm or the tone of the voice. Ong states that writing “initiated what print and computers only continue, the reduction of dynamic sound to quiescent space, the separation of the word from the living present, where alone spoken words can exist” (2005: 80). However, it should be pointed out that SRs’ graphic interface is a non-entirely static space: every time the text is updated, the materialization of a new post in front of the user’s eyes can restore the word to that living present experience. Of course, this can only happen in a somewhat rudimentary and degraded way, detached from the duration of sound.

The spatialization of the word also sets SRs apart from live broadcasting in another way: all past enunciation acts are non-evanescent. That is to say, the text is updated without requiring that the previous posts disappear to make way for the new ones. While live broadcasts elapse in the permanent present time of the experience, they do this only by virtualizing the past, which passes by without leaving any trace. Instead, SRs combine succession in time with co-existence in space.⁷ As a result, SRs develop by a process that can be referred to as *discourse accumulation*: there is a progressive amplification of the text where enunciation acts follow each other in time but, having once been produced, all share the same space.

5. The discourse of simultaneous reports: point of view, fragmentation, transposition

Halfway between retrospective news and live broadcasts, SRs are a genre where there is certainly contamination and hybridization, but also novel-

7. This quality also sets SRs apart from that type of online written breaking news that consists in just a preview of the news to come – usually published when something noteworthy has just happened. Once this news is updated, the text is replaced in its entirety by a more complete, enlarged version.

ty and specificity. This combination of materiality and temporal character, unprecedented in the field of journalistic discourse, makes the SR, though a written text, one that is incapable of applying an *endpoint perspective* to the events it describes. The lack of an endpoint perspective, in the sense in which Ricoeur (2006) re-elaborates Kermode's notion, is not limited to the unpredictability of what will happen next, nor can it be reduced to the chronological ordering of the facts. In truth, these texts do not report on something while it happens, but as soon as they receive information. The simultaneity between text production and event may be missing – for example, in the case of the coverage of a natural disaster (such as an earthquake) or a terrorist attack, which will necessarily begin *immediately after* the events have occurred. What remains constant in SRs is the fact that they inform about an event whose perception mutates over time; here, different descriptions provided by a succession of posts create an ever-changing discourse object.

The simultaneity between production and reception – always at work in SRs –, combined with the journalistic imperative to inform as soon as new data becomes available, compels to break down the text in different enunciative acts and engage in a sustained and recurrent interaction with the audience. Each post that makes up the report is thus determined by its moment of production and will not be modified retroactively – except, occasionally, for some minor corrections. In this process, the passing of time is discursively encoded as a change in knowledge. In contrast to the inverted pyramid format, which tells a story by first introducing its ending – its final consequences –, each post displays a knowledge level that is bound to the moment in which it was published. In other words, it is dependent on the location in time of the subject of the enunciation. Conversely, the addressee will have access to the accumulated knowledge of the enunciator up to the moment the last post was published, but each one of the individual posts can only show what was known at the time of its production. This evolving knowledge level, tied to a mobile present, is precisely what creates the effect of an event in progress, even if the report is written after the event has taken place or read once it is finished.

We have suggested elsewhere (Porto López, 2018, in press) that SRs seize the object of discourse – i.e., the event – through what Fontanille (2001) calls a *cumulative strategy*. It is worth noting that in this case, in contrast with fiction, the strategy is not feigned but results from the fact that the amount of information the subject of enunciation has at the beginning of his discourse is not the same he will have at the end of it. Fontanille claims that a point of view is cumulative when the subject renounces to exercise an intense and single view upon the object and instead agrees to divide it into successive and additive views, which turn the object into a collection of parts.

The subject of the enunciation's mobility in time multiplies the acts of observation. This results in a proneness to *fragmentation* not only affecting the object of discourse but also discourse itself. Each post's status as an individual and discrete enunciation act grants it a certain autonomy with respect to the text as a whole. In this sense, posts reduce the use of anaphoric pronouns or demonstratives whose referents are located in a different post to a minimum; and if they do use demonstratives such as *this* or *that*, they typically add a lexical element to it in order to help interpretation. This may be explained by the discontinuous nature of the writing process, but also, and perhaps more significantly, by the discontinuous nature of its reading. The interpretation of a post should not be dependent on the information located in a previous one, since this previous post may have been read by the addressee too long ago to be able to restore the referent of the anaphora or, as a matter of fact, it may have not even been read at all.

Furthermore, the consumption of a SR is not only discontinuous but also non-sequential. Given that each new post appears at the top of the screen – which indicates the centrality the genre assigns to the present time of the enunciation –, the readers / users accessing the report at different times will start reading at different points of the text. Of course, nothing prevents them from going back to the first post and take an upward path from there. However, as these texts can be quite lengthy, full reads may be discouraged every time the coverage has not recently begun.

There is a variety of tools that offset this fragmentary character and aid the interpretation of an isolated post. Some of those are taken from traditional news pieces, as the headline and drophead; others are the genre's own creations, for instance, the *key events* list used by The Guardian.⁸ The interplay between a nucleus composed by a few central elements – headline, drophead, key events – and a large number of peripheral elements – the posts – is in line with the *superstructure* of newspaper articles as was laid out by van Dijk (1990). White (1998) called this an *orbital* text organization because of the relation that is established between a nucleus and its satellites. In the case of SRs, this structure seems to have been taken one step further, for these are texts that provide the reader with different starting points at different times, and thus, are not even expected to be read in a linear or sequential manner. The reader will thus be able to choose between different paths: he might tackle the text from the most recent post and set out from there in an anti-chronological trajectory; he could instead go back several posts – of even back to the point of departure – and start reading in chronological order; or he might as well alternate by repeatedly going back and forth from one post to another. Evidently, this does not mean posts are not interrelated. In fact, in most reports – or at the very least in some of their passages – individual posts are elements integrated in a descriptive sequence or episodes of a larger narrative sequence (Adam, 1987, 1993; van Dijk, 1981).

While some components of SRs are picked up from the news article – such as the headline or the drophead –, there are other elements that do not have their origins in written journalism but in live radio and television broadcasts (Porto López, 2010). Indeed, SRs transpose (Steimberg, 2013) or remediate (Bolter, 2002) different *discursive scenographies*⁹

8. Le Monde has its *éléments clés* but does not hyperlink each one of these items to a specific post as The Guardian does – this is because they provide a background to the report rather than list what has happened since the coverage began. El País, for its part, instead creating a list with the main events, resorts to the classic lead paragraph used by newspapers, and updates it several times throughout the coverage.

9. Maingueneau sets apart *scenography* from *enunciation scene* as follows: “the generic scene is part of the context; it is the very scene that the genre prescribes, whereas scenography is produced by the text. So, two texts belonging to the same generic scene may stage different scenographies. A preaching in a church, for instance, can be

(Maingueneau, 2002) from live broadcasting genres. An element that immediately stands out in this respect is the reports' opening and closing posts, where the audience is usually directly addressed. Expressions such as "we leave you" or "thanks for joining us," are not taken from face-to-face interactions but from the repertoire of radio and television shows. It goes without saying that they will not be found in newspaper articles, where the rule is to avoid all deictic references to the participants of the communication act. As Van Dijk points out, in journalistic discourse the reader can only be present indirectly and he is almost never explicitly addressed: "There is no 'you' in the news, except in quotations or sometimes in feature articles or editorials. There are no reader-addressed speech acts such as specific promises, threats, or accusations: If they do occur, they are addressed to third parties" (1988: 74).

Naturally, a periodically updated text should provide some clear indication that no extra publications are going to be produced; but this can be done in many ways, not necessarily through a post to wrap up the coverage. For instance, some SRs change the color of the headline section's background, or they remove the animated icon that denotes that it is a *live* transmission. What we are trying to convey here is that greeting the audience at the beginning and at the end of reports is by no means a necessity but the result of an enunciation strategy. This kind of strategy is also evident in those situations where the report is handed over to another journalist who will keep on updating the text from that moment on. This is sometimes made explicit, as in radio and television. In these cases, a program gives way to the next one by having their hosts exchange a few words in order to make a seamless transition. Although in the case of SRs this can have the opposite effect, that is, of making the transition, if anything, more noteworthy, it also exposes the invisible dynamics of the press redaction, something that is always there for radio and television audiences to hear or see. This can generate a sense that several people are working on the story, and that there is someone all the time ready to bring the latest news to the readers.

staged through a prophetic scenography, a conversational scenography, and so forth" (Maingueneau & Angermüller, 2007: 33).

There are also other, more complex scenographies in SRs. One feature many broadcasting genres have in common is that not just one, but many journalists are involved in the coverage *at the same time*, interacting with each other and assuming different roles – such as specialists in politics, business, football, or science. The journalist responsible for the SR is usually in charge of introducing the discourse of all the others. That is the role played by the anchor on television news, which Verón (1983, 2001) calls *meta-enunciator*, since he handles and dominates all discursive transitions. The fact that the intervening journalists share the present time of the enunciation makes it possible for SRs to transpose some of live broadcasting's interactions into a written exchange.

In this sense, an especially interesting scenography involves the *journalist in the studio* and the *foreign correspondent* or the *on-the-scene reporter* (Porto López, 2020). In the context of SRs, reporters and correspondents usually publish their contributions through social media platforms – mainly Twitter –, which are then embedded in one or many of the report's posts, with a customary introduction by the journalist acting as the presenter or host. Since in these cases the embedded tweets belong to another journalist from the same media outlet – rather than to a public figure such as a politician –, the interaction between platforms is a modulation within the journalistic voice and the tweets are not intended to be interpreted as regular quotations. Different spaces – the studio and the field – become thus intertwined as the result of a media coverage that shares the same time frame; this is a media-specific spatial configuration that was introduced by early radio sports broadcasts (Fernández, 2008). In this sense, SRs and Twitter – though other social media platforms could be used as well – perfectly complement each other: the first one consisting in an office practice (Thurman & Walters, 2013) and the second one being a tool for on-the-scene reporting (Vis, 2013). This kind of cooperation is possible due to the platforms' shared written materiality and their capability to operate in the present time of the enunciation.

6. Conclusion

Though the search for timeliness is inherent to journalism and has had many milestones in its history, SRs have brought about some major shifts in the way news is produced, structured, and consumed. Their constant updatability has given written journalism a seat at the table among live broadcasting media, as it has become capable of covering an event as it happens. The coincidence of discourse production, reception, and event is an unprecedented communication situation for the written press and has far reaching consequences in the way news is structured. These consequences have to do not only with moving away from the inverted pyramid format, but chiefly with the interdiction of an endpoint perspective. This is most evident perhaps in their inability to know how an event will conclude, but it affects everything that is being said, and how it is being said and interpreted throughout the coverage. The subject of the enunciation's knowledge level increases as time passes and discourse acts accumulate, granting the effect of a developing story. Also, all the elements taken and adapted from radio and television broadcasts contribute to this impression; the most noteworthy among them being the presence of multiple journalists, some of which can be located on the field to then send information repeatedly as the event unfolds.

It is unquestionable that SRs have inserted the present moment into written journalism, in its production, of course, but in its consumption as well. This is actually an experience not unfamiliar to newspaper readers, though it has now been taken to a new extreme. Tarde (1910) argued that yesterday's journal fails to interest anyone not because the facts in it have lost their inherent value or importance, but because of the feeling the addressee gets of being the only one to be reading it at that moment. The experience of a collective synchronic – or minute-by-minute – consumption brings the SR's readership closer to a radio or television audience. Also, this kind of shared consumption experience of a digital media text enables an extended user participation.¹⁰ They interact not

10. Evidently, user participation can be limited by the way media control this process, for instance, by selecting the questions they find worth answering (Marty et al., 2017), or

only with each other, but also with the journalists, by providing information or asking questions. The last one is not a usual practice for most newspapers – for instance, for The New York Times or El País –, but it is fairly common for Le Monde, which to such end has placed a comment-box at the top of the interface, thus allowing for messages to be easily sent even by non-registered users.

When the cooperation of multiple journalists is combined with a concurrent user participation, the result cannot but be an exceptionally polyphonic text (Bajtín, 2003; Ducrot, 1986). Such a vast array of voices, which is sometimes closer to interaction than it is to intertextuality, reinforces the text's fragmentary character. This fragmentary condition of SRs can be seen as the expression of an epochal style, a style that is embodied in numerous microcontent platforms, from Twitter to TikTok, which stimulate what Igarza (2009) calls *interstitial leisure*. However, two remarks should be made here. First, there is fragmentation as there is unity in SRs: while posts can be relatively autonomous, they also compose a single coherent text about a specific event. Secondly, fragmentation has historically been a trait of various media and media genres. The idea that newspaper articles make up a *mosaic* is already present in McLuhan (2005); also, radio and television shows consist of different and loosely bound blocks separated by commercial breaks.¹¹

Nevertheless, and contrasting with SRs, these are either texts that talk about different events and themes – television news programs – or different texts altogether – independent articles within a newspaper. In the case of SRs, it is in a single text that “the news is unfolded through quotes, comments, references to mainstream and social media, thus composing a specific, detailed and informative, but in a way fragmented picture

even by the users' lack of motivation to comment, ask questions or provide information (Pantic, 2020).

11. McLuhan also associates this trait of the modern press with the electrification of media introduced by the telegraph: “One way to grasp the change from the mechanical to the electric age is by noticing the difference between the layout of a literary and a telegraph press (...). It is the difference between columns representing points of view, and a mosaic of unrelated scraps in a field unified by a dateline.” (2005: 270)

of events” (Tereszkiewicz, 2014). Even though the degree and variety of sources depend on the type of event being covered, it can be stimulating to think of SRs as a curatorial practice that offers the reader the take of a certain media on some current issue. This, in a sense, entails the semiotization of the user’s reading practices, since the latter does not have to actively seek for information to have access to a wide variety of data and sources. Instead, he can sit back and wait for the media outlet to do just that for him. This kind of practice could also be conceived as a *mise-en-scène* of the journalistic inquiry: the texts include, sometimes with very little elaboration from the SR’s author, much of the information that arrives to the redaction but does not make it to regular news pieces – or at least not in a raw state. This is not that different from what live television news does when following a developing story. But as events unfold, the volume and variety of information contained in these texts can be immense, surpassing both written news articles and news programs. Here, once again, SRs take hold of a practice already present in previous news media genres, and by that very same gesture, add some new and distinctive features to it ■

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The Digital Helmsman: Semiosis, Disintermediation, and Artificial Intelligence

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“Most things are never meant.”

Philip Larkin (1972)

“Going, going”, *High Windows*.

Abstract

The article pinpoints differences and similarities between semiosis and mediation, articulates the concepts of mediation and intermediation, distinguishes among different types of disintermediation, remediation, and re-intermediation, and applies this conceptual grid to artificial intelligence. It reaches the conclusion that, depending on whether artificial intelligence disintermediates a previous mediation or a previous intermediation, it becomes the object of different perceptions of agency, some of which entail a rhetoric of unbiased automatism. Semiotics is perfectly placed to study them. The article concludes that the next frontier of these rhetorics will consist in coating artificial intelligence with hyper-realistic simulacra of the body, starting from the primary social interface, that is, the face.

Keywords

Semiosis, mediation, intermediation, disintermediation, artificial intelligence.

1. Introduction

On June 18, 2021, artificial intelligence boat Mayflower, planned to cross the Atlantic Ocean from Plymouth in UK to Plymouth in US, exactly as the human-led boat Mayflower had done four hundred years earlier with his crew of about one hundred pilgrims, had to interrupt its journey, meant to explore the opportunities of artificial intelligence for automatic navigation and for the collection of oceanographic samples, and return to the departure harbor. The vessel was equipped with six cameras endowed with artificial intelligence and with an ‘intelligent tongue’ able to sample and test organic materials from sea waters. Build by navigation company Promare, the new Mayflower was equipped with a radar and connected with an IBM-controlled web service of weather forecasting, providing constantly updating data for navigation. Project managers still have to find out what stopped the journey, since the boat is still on its way back home as this article is being written, but it was probably a minor mechanical failure that could not be repaired without human intervention. The nuisance had reduced the navigation speed at a level that human technicians monitoring the course of the Mayflower judged as dangerously low, given that the vessel was about to venture in open ocean and face stronger winds, the streams of Mexico gulf, and a couple of storms. Despite being much more technologically advanced than its predecessor of four hundred years earlier — a vessel that was made of wood, much heavier, much slower, and with a lot of passengers onboard — the new Mayflower did not make it.

This is just an episode in the epopee of artificial intelligence navigation, which is in its turn part of the even longer history of artificial intelligence transportation. Humans might rejoice at the idea that they are still necessary, and that the value of their stewardship is still unsurpassed, but it is perhaps just a matter of time before they are outsmarted by artificial intelligence. Or maybe not. In any case, many important insights can be drawn from episodes of this kind. Several disciplines are now focusing on artificial intelligence, which is at the center of global attention again, after having enjoyed much popularity at its birth (soon after the Second World War), in the 1960s (at the peak of the Cold War), and in the 1980s

(with the spreading of personal computing).¹ Global attention towards artificial intelligence seems to be linked with the development of warfare technology and to major changes in the market of computational machines. The present AI frenzy might not be an exception, being related to the development of new algorithms and neural networks as well as to cyberwarfare. But this is another story. What matters is that many scholars from different areas are now intensely keen on artificial intelligence, and semioticians are not an exception.²

Semiotics has important insights to offer about this matter, and indeed there is a long tradition of semiotic studies devoted to artificial intelligence. The rise of cybernetic theory, meant as the theorization on self-governing and self-regulating systems — including machines endowed with artificial intelligence — was intertwined since the very beginning of its genesis with a reflection on signs. Already in 1936, Romanian military scientist Ștefan Odobleja³ published “Phonoscopy and the Clinical Semiotics”, which was the first draft of a paper that he then presented in 1937, as he participated in the IX International Congress of Military Medicine. The paper, in French, was entitled “Demonstration de phonoscopie” and contained a prospectus announcing Odobleja’s future work, “Psychologie consonantiste”, laying the theoretical foundations of generalized cybernetics. The book was then published in Paris by Librairie Maloine (vol. I in 1938, and vol. II in 1939). But this was just the beginning. Since then, artificial intelligence has attracted the attention of semiotics regularly, although not always systematically. Semiotics indeed can offer many insights to the topic, and reflect on episodes like the one evoked at the beginning of the present article. In it, it is clear that, more and more, the subject of artificial intelligence and that of disintermediation are closely connected. Semiotics can contribute an interesting frame to unders-

1. On the subject, see, among the latest contributions, Harnish 2001; Husbands *et al.* 2008; and Nilsson 2010.

2. Among the most recent contributions, see Leone 2020; Alexander *et al.* 2021; Brier and Vidales 2021; García 2021; and Leone 2021.

3. Valea Izvorului, Mehedinți, 13 October 1902, — 4 September 1978; see Drăgănescu 1981.

tand the dialectics between these two elements, and this is exactly what the present paper is set to do.

2. Semiosis and mediation

First, a general semiotic definition of mediation, intermediation, and disintermediation will be provided. As a preliminary consideration, it should be underlined that semiotics is all about mediation. Semiosis itself, abstractedly considered, is the most general form of it. In Charles S. Peirce's model of the sign, semiosis precisely consists in the fact that the relation between the representamen and the object is not direct but mediated through a third element called "interpretant". The interpretant captures the relation between the object and its representamen through a certain respect or quality, which is dynamically prompted by a ground in the object but is not entirely determined by it. The ground of an object does not coincide with it, a dynamic object does not coincide with its ground, and a dynamic object does not coincide with the interpretant that it prompts. There is continuous mediation in semiosis, and continuous determinations that never amount to totality. If semiosis essentially is mediation, it has to be said that mediation too is essentially semiosis. Whatever form of mediation is envisaged, it necessarily entails the production and reception of signs that bridge the mediated entity and the mediating one.

This theoretical formulation is interesting but could lead to an excess: indeed, if every semiosis is mediation, and every mediation is semiosis, then it is not clear why the two terms should be distinguished. Nevertheless, although intimately related, "mediation" and "semiosis" do actually refer to distinct semantic areas. Whereas "semiosis" captures the functioning of signifying mediations from an abstract theoretical point of view, "mediation", which derives from the words "medium" and "media", conjugates the idea of semiosis with that of a technology that is devised by human beings so as to convey meaning. Thus, on the one hand, "mediation" could hardly be used to talk about semiosis in general, if this does not involve a technological element. There is certainly mediation

in human perception, yet semioticians usually talk about it in terms of semiosis; should human perception involve augmented reality glasses, however, then the word “mediation” would impose itself. At the same time, there is certainly semiosis in TV broadcasting, yet the technological dimension of it is so evident that it would be reductive to talk about it generally in terms of semiosis and it is much better to do it in terms of mediation. In a nutshell, semiosis is the word that captures the general dynamics of signifying mediation, whereas mediation is the word that refers to the technological instantiations of semiosis.

Yet, there is also a point in saying that every semiosis involves mediation and that every mediation involves semiosis. The first sentence affirms that there is not such a thing as a ‘natural semiosis’; seeing with one’s eyes seems to involve no technology, yet the ways in which we perceive reality through our own sight is decisively influenced by the technologies of vision that surround us, starting from images. Images are a technology of vision and, as such, a form of mediation. In a word where man-made images exist, ‘natural’ visual perception is no longer possible. Yet his second sentence, “every mediation involves semiosis” is important too. It reminds one that disintermediation is, in the terms of Franco-Lithuanian semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas, always an “*embrayage*” following a previous “*débrayage*”. For those who are not familiar with Greimas’ understanding of language, it should be reminded that, in it, the generation of meaning always entails an enunciation that projects a sort of semiotic theatre with specific spatial, temporal, and personal coordinates. It is only starting from this initial projection, which mediates between meaning and its communication, that a disintermediation can be simulated. A novel can start with a sentence like “Call me Ishmael”, but this is just an *embrayage*, a simulation of proximity between the text and its readers, a simulation that follows a necessarily previous *débrayage*, i.e., the projection of the theatre of meaning in which the novel takes place. This consideration is important in order to emphasize the concept that there is no disintermediation without a previous mediation or, to be more precise, without a previous “intermediation”.

3. Mediation, intermediation, and disintermediation

To this regard, the difference between “mediation” and “intermediation” should be pointed out. It is not a mere lexical nuance but a conceptual one. The suffix “inter-” adds a personal dimension to the concept of mediation. Mediation implicitly involves human agency, with its consequences of personality, subjectivity, and individuality; this involvement is, however, implicit, meaning that the word “mediation” tends to refer to processes of semiosis that imply communication technology in an impersonal way. That is even more evident when the correspondent verb is used: a content, it is frequently said, can be “mediated” or even “re-mediated”, meaning that it can be adapted for a certain communication technology (broadly conceived) and then readapted in case of further mediatic change. A human agency is clearly involved in all these processes, yet it stays in the background. The word “intermediation”, on the contrary, brings to the fore the human agency implied in mediation. Wherever a mediation is defined as intermediation, it is evident that it is an embodied mediation, involving all the plexus of corporeality and singularity that come together with the idea of a subject, an individual, and a person.

That must be underlined especially so as to understand the conceptual relevance of disintermediation. In disintermediation, human agency is not removed; it is simply displaced; or, to be more precise, as the notion of intermediation lays the rhetorical accent on the embodied dimension of mediation, so disintermediation erases this accent, and suggests an illusion of total disembodiment. As it is clear in many examples, however, the human agency and its corporeality is only moved elsewhere, hidden from the view but also from ideological scrutiny. For instance, the passage from a family doctor to an internet medical service endowed with artificial intelligence is certainly one of disintermediation. Whereas beforehand the doctor would incarnate the expert transmitting relevant medical knowledge and practices to patients, the internet service gives these patients the impression that they can self-diagnose and self-medicate. It is evident; however, that expert human agency has not disappeared from the scene. It has just been displaced far from it, and replaced by the invisible agency of ICT engineers and technicians. They are, indeed, the

new intermediators of medical consultation, devising the algorithms that will eventually determine which medical information will be retrieved, and how. The disintermediation of artificial intelligence in many cases works as a re-intermediation under different guise. Although this operation is accompanied by a rhetoric of transparency and immediateness, it actually surreptitiously conceals the real agency that moves the machine. That makes it even more interesting to semiotically reflect on artificial intelligence gone wrong, that is, on glitches, which should be dealt with in a dedicated article.

4. Artificial intelligence and disintermediation

The triad semiosis/mediation – intermediation – disintermediation must be conceptually articulated with the semantic and operational field of artificial intelligence. This is presently more extended than it was in the past, covering a variety of phenomena where the human cognition is replaced by the algorithmic functioning of a machine. In synthesis, yet, artificial intelligence takes place every time that a device with no apparent human agency manifests its own seemingly autonomous agency performing tasks that are normally carried out by human intelligence. The rhetorical force by which artificial intelligence intervenes in human life is not constant, but precisely depends on the agency context in which it operates. If that is one that traditionally entails only mediation, and not intermediation, then the conspicuity of artificial intelligence will be minimal. A typical example is that of content suggestions in media platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, or Spotify. In them, we are constantly recommended a movie, a series, or a song that we might like. The mechanism is not different from the artificial intelligence that permeates the entire web and actually guarantees the economic sustainability of web giants like Google or Facebook. Our digital footprint is constantly monitored, hopefully within the legal framework set by the state, and then analyzed through artificial intelligence so that, from the identification of patterns in these big data, tailored suggestions can be offered to the customers. In this case, artificial intelligence is applied to mediation

and not to intermediation, meaning that, before the advent of artificial intelligence, no equivalent service was offered about media contents. In the epoch of analogical television, presenters (they were often women; in Italy they were called “Signorine Buonasera”) would simply illustrate the palimpsest of the day, without recommending any program in particular. That would have been unfair towards the other programs, which the broadcaster — usually a state one — considered all worthy of being seen. What determined the emphasis on a program and its value was, on the contrary, its collocation in the palimpsest itself, with the most important events being placed in the time zones during which families would usually gather to watch television. With the advent of private TV broadcasting, channels would alternate commercials about sponsored products with commercials about their own TV programs, which were therefore presented too as “TV products to sell”. In any case, these recommendations followed the logic of “paleo-television”, as Umberto Eco defined it in opposition to “neo-television”, since they were not tailored to individual preferences but targeted the audience that it was believed would be in front of the screen at a given time (thus, cartoons were advertised at the time when children would presumably be in front of the screen, after school, watching other cartoons). Throughout the development of pre-digital popular culture, tailored suggestions were offered only by friends and relatives, who would know the personality of an individual and suggest to him or her TV programs, song albums, or books that he or she might like. This function was simply not available in pre-digital media. When it is featured by digital platforms, therefore, it is not received as an instance of dis-intermediation but as one of re-mediation (the good old TV commercials are now being repropounded in a bespoke form). The consequence is that we constantly receive suggestions from platforms but we never consider them as an expression of artificial intelligence, although they actually are one of the most essential instances of it.

In other cases, the rhetoric of artificial intelligence is more emphatic. Emphasis is at its maximum when artificial intelligence disintermediates starting not from simple mediation but from proper intermediation, that is, from a situation in which communication meets technology through

an explicit human agency. Examples are countless, but none of them is more striking than translation. Homes of scholars in their mid-forties like the author of the present paper are probably full of a kind of books that are presently never open and accumulate dust in some corner of the library. They are called “dictionaries”. The same destiny befalls encyclopedias, although some of them might still contain materials that are interesting but are not present in the web. Paper dictionaries, instead, are a pure relic of intermediation, when translation depended on the fact that someone, by birth or study, would master two or more languages and help other human beings to bridge them. I still remember how joyful I was when my parents would buy me a new dictionary that would help me in school: the Italian monolingual dictionary was the first one, then the Latin-Italian one, then the Greek-Italian one, then the German-Italian one, and then, when I started traveling throughout the world, many other dictionaries followed, that I acquired through my journeys and studies, from the many little English-Italian dictionaries to the most exotic and regional ones, which I bought more for the pleasure of collecting them than for the sake of utility. I can still remember, at the same time, how painful it was to spend long hours on one of these volumes, frantically flicking through pages, searching for words, pondering options. All this is now history. The internet is full of websites that offer translation services from the most known languages of the world to the most known ones, and their number and quality is constantly multiplying, as it is multiplying the number of translated languages, which now increasingly includes also minority and regional languages. Dictionaries are still necessary for specific languages, but it is undoubtedly impressive how artificial intelligence tools like Google Translator are constantly improving, systematically bettering their performance thanks to artificial intelligence and through access to an enormous amount of translation data. The service is still far from being flawless, especially if translating from and to languages others than English, yet progress is undisputable and rapid. An academic article in Italian written in plain language can now be almost flawlessly translated into English. In this disintermediation, the role of artificial intelligence in replacing human agency is evident, although the biases of its algorithms are not as conspicuous. In this case too, users

realize that an artificial intelligence, and not a natural one, is beyond the translation mainly from the imperfections that the former entails, and that the latter would spontaneously avoid. Some of them are quite funny, exactly because they reveal the automatism of the machine beyond the pretended intelligence of the interface. Yet, despite these glitches, the deeper biases of automatic translation, those which are rooted in the way the translating artificial intelligence is trained, are less visible and frequently go undetected. That is a general rule of the current reception of artificial intelligence, for non-specialists still see it more as the outcome of a programmed machine than as the output of a trained device. This implies two distortive effects: on the one hand, artificial intelligence might be seen as more deterministic than it actually is: its biases, therefore, are received as a consequence of how its algorithms are written. On the other hand, an important source of artificial intelligence's biases is overlooked, that is, the materials that neural networks are 'fed' so that they might develop intelligent behavior. It is as though, in assessing the prejudices of a human being, only its cognitive biases were looked at, and not those generated by education.

To recapitulate, if mediation always implies semiosis, and if semiosis constantly entails mediation, the latter usually involves a technological setting, whose socio-cultural reception varies according to epoch and context. In general, the more a human agency is perspicuous in mediation, the more it is received as intermediation, that is, as semiosis involving a technological device operated by a human being. It is in relation to this plexus of mediation, technology, and human agency, that a phenomenon and a rhetoric of disintermediation can take place, meant as the apparent elimination of human agency from the mediation itself. According to this rhetoric, mediation appears as self-regulated by technology, automated, and, consequently, unbiased. Following a deep-seated anthropological prejudice, since human agency systematically results in ideological biases, the apparent elimination of the former is interpreted as bringing about a consequent neutralization of the latter. In reality, any technological disintermediation should be interpreted as crypto-reintermediation, for human agency is never eliminated from mediation but merely displaced somewhere else, at a previous and more concea-

led stage of the production of mediation itself. From this point of view, artificial intelligence can introduce pernicious biases in human relations exactly because its outputs can be seen as unaffected by human agency and its ideologies. As it has been pointed out, the rhetoric of artificial intelligence is more or less striking depending on whether its pseudo-disintermediation applies itself to a domain of human signification that was previously either mediated or intermediated. In the first case, since the presence of human agency in technological semiosis was not emphasized, the rhetoric of artificial intelligence in disintermediating such domain will be less perceptible. Systems for the recommendation of media contents exemplify this typology quite well: artificial intelligence is now used to recommend tailored media contents to users, yet this is a new function of digital platforms, which was practically absent in analogic broadcasting of media contents. In this case, therefore, artificial intelligence does not appear as conspicuous in its functioning and, as a consequence, can work in a seemingly transparent but surreptitiously biased way. In the second case, instead, when artificial intelligence intervenes in a domain that was usually intermediated, the substitution of human agency is more conspicuous, yet the biases of artificial intelligence are always looked at in the frame of the human one, without an articulated knowledge of how artificial intelligence actually produces its outputs. Programming, for instance, is seen as the source of distortion, whereas training is usually neglected, exactly because it is an activity associated more with the upbringing of human agency (through education) than to the shaping of artificial intelligence. In a nutshell, AI applied to mediation produces hidden surreptitious biases, whereas AI applied to intermediation produces a suspicion that is often misplaced, targeting the surface of the problem and not its depth.

5. The system of artificial intelligent mediations

Given this articulation of semiosis, mediation, intermediation, and disintermediation, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dialectics between human and artificial intelligence, semiotics or, better said, a semiotically

oriented philosophy of communication can give an important contribution in studying the simulative artifacts of artificial intelligence, that is, the efforts to simulate human intelligent behaviors through non-organic and non-human devices. Such simulation can take place at the level of expression, at that of content, or at both.

At the level of expression, the focus is on the inorganic reproduction of signs that humans associate with intelligence. An excellent example is Disney-financed project “Gaze”, a robot that simulates human expressions and, moreover, emulates them in face-to-face interactions with humans.

In this technology, essentially inorganic matter is arranged, also through artificial intelligence, so as to convey an impression of understanding. Facial expressions are not only cognitive, but some are, and many are essential to communicate mutual intelligibility. *Gaze* is a robot developed by Walt Disney Imagineering with a team of researchers from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and the California Institute of Technology. It is the result of advanced research in the field of technology and presents an intriguing feature. It can reproduce certain specific expressions of the human face. For example, it is able to make small movements of the head or to blink the eyelids. The research group FACETS (Face Aesthetics in Contemporary E-Technological Societies), financed by the European Research Council, and led by the author of the present paper, is currently investigating the meaning of the face with particular emphasis on its transformations in the digital era. One of the central hypotheses of research, now condensed in the present paper, is that there is a strong connection between the development of artificial intelligence, the production of simulative artifacts, and the face. Indeed, as it has been seen supra, disintermediation through artificial intelligence entails a rhetoric, which emphasizes the passage from a human-mediated technological context of communication to a machine-centered one, in which all human agency and, as a consequence, all human biases are expelled. This rhetoric, as it has been pointed out, is particularly effective in the case of disintermediation starting from an intermediation that would conspicuously involve human agency (like in the case of machine-based linguistic translation, for instance). As the example of Gaze and many

others reveal, however, more and more the face is becoming one of the most central devices of digital re-intermediation through artificial intelligence. When artificial intelligence is coated with simulative artifacts that represent the human body, indeed, it gains an extraordinary communicative power, encouraging even more the spontaneous reception of the contents of artificial intelligence. People do not interact anymore with an algorithm and its cold numeric outputs and they do not simply see them projected on a screen. On the opposite, the elaborations of artificial intelligence are coated with artifacts that simulate the human body, as well as the connection between the human body and its internal cognitions, emotions, and intentions.

6. Conclusion

The process of re-intermediating artificial intelligence is progressing rapidly. It started with the human voice. Interacting with the artificial intelligence of personal assistants like Siri or Alexa has become common practice. On the one hand, users receive their behavior with a strong rhetoric of disintermediation. When “talking” to Siri and Alexa, for instance, one usually forgets that their responses have been trained in a way that conditions their ‘intelligent’ behaviors, and one tends to believe, on the contrary, that information received through these personal AI assistants is perfectly automatic. Glitches can manifest themselves in their behaviors too, and some of them can have particularly funny consequences; yet, they do nothing but reinforce the impression that what lies at the core of these devices and applications is a mechanism that is completely deprived of any human agency. When these same devices and applications are coated with a human-like interface, then, their outputs are received not only as automatic and, therefore, unbiased, but also as emotionally close and believable. The attribution of a voice already represents a significant step forward in this process. Receiving street directions from a human-like voice that speaks our own language with a tailored tone is different than seeing them projected on a screen. A further step forward in the re-intermediation of artificial intelligence

is represented precisely by the attribution of a human face, which can now come in the form of the photo-realistic digital picture or video of an artificial face, but also in the form of a three-dimensional face attached to a head and to a body, like in the case of holograms or anthropomorphic robots. The whole biological and socio-cultural heritage of the face, which is the central device of human interaction, is bestowed upon artificial intelligence so as to confer to interaction with it the smoothness and naturality of a face-to-face conversation, yet without losing the rhetorical effect of disintermediation. Disintermediation and re-intermediation, indeed, coexist, as if the development of intelligent algorithms and their being presented through the digital simulation of a body (whose creation too often involves artificial intelligence) was seeking to satisfy a deep-seated desire of humanity, that of begetting creatures that are at the same time perfectly controllable and perfectly human, like a creature that does not rebel against its creator.

Will the Mayflower of the future succeed in crossing the ocean without any human assistance? Will it be able to face the largely unpredictable nature of winds, waves, and currents in a proper manner? And transport safely human beings and goods across the world? It is probably just a matter of time before this result is achieved, and a profession as old as human civilization, that of the helmsman, is disintermediated by artificial intelligence. But readers of Melville, Conrad and Stevenson know that navigation is not only going from point A to point B, and that many revolutionary sea adventures and discoveries, including Columbus' voyage to the continent that we now call "America", were instances of serendipity, of the very human capacity of turning a glitch into an opportunity. The Mayflower of the future will probably be able to reach its destination, fast, safely, and autonomously. Nevertheless, it might still need training on how to profit from mistakes, which humans frequently transform into new occasions for creativity. We humans are training artificial intelligence to be much more perfect than we are. We shall then train it to become as imperfect as we are ■

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Interaction in University Spaces

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Abstract

This article is part of a doctoral research on the environmental and community dimensions of the public university in Argentina and the practices derived from inhabiting —being in and making use of— university. We focus the analysis of these dimensions by analysing the relationships between two institutional spaces that make universities up: the geographic-urban space and the mediatized-digital space. We consider the notion of interaction as the bridge concept between both spaces; recovering contributions from several disciplines in which this notion has been formulated: from media ecology to philosophy of dwelling, through micro sociology and the geography of everyday life. Based on the review of these different theoretical approaches, we develop a model that will allow us to study our research object.

In the course of the work and taking into account the current context, it is also proposed to provide knowledge about the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in public universities, which due to their large scale had to transfer their entire operation to the environment of media platforms.

Keywords

Interaction, space, university, mediatization, environment

In the social science realm, most of the research approaches to the environment are focused on the impacts of human actions on it: how it has been and will be damaged if we, as civilization, don't change our way of living and producing goods. Alerts have also been raised due to the social impacts of environmental crisis among vulnerable population around the globe.

Our approach intends to complement these lines of research, by focusing on a micro level: the individual-space relationship as part of the multiple conditions that determine human actions in the environment. The interest to study the environmental and community dimensions of the public university started by observing the lack of environmental awareness and good practices in the use of the university buildings. These initial observations led us to wonder why institutional community —lecturers, students, administrative workers— make an *extractivist* (Iazzetta 2001) use of the public university, as we designate the type of use or consumption of goods and services which implies enjoy their benefits, from an individual point of view, without attending to the care and conservation of these resources for future users.

In this way, we arrived at the hypothesis that beyond the various drivers that operate in individuals to carry out environmental practices, there is a common aspect that functions as a condition and encourages or discourages these practices: a set of naturalized social representations that support individuals' relationship with their *lived space*, their environment. Our research purpose is to know precisely which those naturalized representations are, since we conceive space as a constitutive dimension of humans, much more than a mere receptacle of social practices (Lussault 2015). "The (social) space is a (social) product," states Lefebvre (2013 [1974]: 90), who distinguishes a conceptual triad involved in the social production of space: the lived space, the perceived space and the conceived space. This conceptual granularity allows us to understand the complexity involved in human-space interaction. Even more, if we include in the analysis how this relationship is constantly transformed due to the existence of different mediatizations; both mediatized interactions between individual users and between them and social institutions (Mc

Luhan 2009; Verón 2013). As Di Felice (2012) suggests, inhabiting itself is a communicative practice.

How university is inhabited, how it is lived by its community implies conceiving university as an environment, an indoor environment, in terms of Biehler & Simon (2011) and also as an interface (Scolari 2018). Following Lefebvre (2013), university is a socially produced space. Studying the university as an environment implies analysing it as a lived space and the interactions that take place there. However, the physical is not the only institutional space in which university members' interactions take place. From the emergence of the current hypermediatized society (Carlón 2017), the phenomenon of expanded institutions (Sznaider & Tobi 2012) started to develop more and more. These institutions are not only found in its buildings located in the geographic space, but also in its platforms located on the digital space. From this point of view, the concept of interface as interaction space (Scolari 2018) allows us to describe how these two spaces are articulated in university community-building.

The omnipresence of digital devices in our daily lives shows us that boundaries between geographic and digital spaces are blurred, despite the fact that the material nature of each of these spaces is completely different. Smartphones allow users to live an *unfolded* experience: being at the same time in a geographic and in a digital space. Far from the critics to mobile phones stating that they disconnect users from “here and now”, we argue that this *unfolded* experience can be the root of a consistent community-building process, even more after the pandemic crisis that has pushed university and other social institutions to their mediatized digital spaces.

Spatial dimension of human-being

Being interaction the bridge concept that connects geographic and mediatized spaces, our first methodological step was building a theoretical framework that covers the different ways in which individuals interact with their geographic and digital *lived spaces*. To do this, we surveyed

different types of space-human interaction, studied by different disciplines, starting with biology.

The first and most ontological form of human-space interaction is breathing. It is the way in which any living entity materializes its reciprocal relationship of immersion with the world, as Emanuel Coccia (2017) has stated. He describes the relationship of any living being and its environment as a reciprocal projection:

If living is breathing (...) being-in-the-world means the experience of a transcendental immersion. Immersion (...) is defined as an inherence or a reciprocal imbrication. (...) To inhale is to make the world come to us (...) and to exhale is to project ourselves into the world we are in (Coccia 2017: 71)¹

The physiological act of breathing connects with the phenomenological approach to human-space interaction, clearly represented by Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* —which in English literally means *there-being*—, the situated human being. It implies that being itself is not an abstract concept, but the concrete fact of inhabiting some specific place in the world. In Heidegger words: “dwelling is the basic feature of being in keeping with which the mortals exist” (Heidegger 1951). As it can be seen, instead of considering rational and emotional, both internal dimensions of human being, Heidegger's approach focuses on how time y space are inevitably determinants of existence. Glen Sherman describes *Dasein* as “thrown into the world, which means that in some sense one is always a product of the time, place, and culture within which one is born, lives, and dies” (Sherman 2009: 1). There is an ecological mindset in Heidegger's philosophy that sets up a perfect general frame for the observation of human-space interaction; promoting the emergence of questions like: How humans affect the space they inhabit? To what extent *lived space* is product and at the same time producer of social processes? —following Lefebvre statement of the social production of space. From a similar approach, the French geographer Michel Lussault features the space issue as a blind spot for social sciences, since “they

1. This one and all the following quotes were translated from the Spanish version of the books, by this article's author, except those by Heidegger and Goffman.

have usually reduced space to a simple surface where phenomena are distributed” (Lussault 2015: 34). As a recent exception, Lussault mentions Peter Sloterdijk and his sphere theory, who considers that space is the foundation of coexistence. For Sloterdijk, each human being lives in a bubble or sphere which connects with other bubbles; as a consequence, foam emerges as a network of links among all spheres, “a fabric formed by hollow spaces and very subtle walls” (Sloterdijk in Lussault 2015: 36).

From being to doing: interactions in space

Once understood that space is a key dimension of human being, we continued our research looking into studies about how individuals interact in space among them, with objects and space itself. In this realm, there are two approaches we consider highly relevant for our research purpose: geography of everyday life (Lindon 2006) and symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1981). We are interested in borrowing analytical categories from them, which allow us to describe and classify individuals’ actions in space, since these actions are concrete external manifestations of their mindset regarding space. We consider that description and classification of human/space interaction will allow us to understand levels of environmental awareness and individual sense of belonging to specific places. According to what we have already commented about Lefebvre’s approach to the social production of space, we found geography of everyday life and symbolic interactionism are theoretical and methodological frameworks that will guide us to reveal how —through which procedures and actions— social actors actually produce their space.

Inside human geography, GVC² —as it’s known in Spanish— focuses on the study of the different ways in which space is used and incorporated in human’s daily life. As Alicia Lindon has stated,

GVC study space/society relationship of interaction situations. The interaction refers to people situated in space and time, in an intersubjec-

2. GVC is the acronym for Geografías de la Vida Cotidiana, which in English means geographies of everyday life.

tive context from which they give meaning to space and to the other, in a constant process of interpretation (resignification) and construction of living spaces (2006, 357).

This definition shows us that although territory is a common space where people interact and connect to each other, each person has a particular *spatial experience*, depending on “the external world apprehension by individual internal world, which produces as a consequence a type of bond with the place.” (Ibid: 357). This is the root of the concept of *lived space*, mentioned in the previous paragraph. This conceptual path inside geography of everyday life implicitly presents a semiotic approach to space. It is conceived as a text open to potential interpretations and thus, potential experiences. It implies that the same territory could be at the same time different *lived spaces* for different persons. This geographic approach has developed during the 20th Century, when human geography experienced a subjective turn, focusing on human perceptions and conceptions of space prior human spatial practices. In this context, representation has become an inevitable concept when analyzing *lived spaces*, since it frames and conditions *spatial experiences*:

The GVC integrates two large areas of study: one is the study of practices (...) and the other one includes social meanings and senses (...) Meanings refer to why people do what they do. This includes very deep reasons, of which the person is not aware, or it may be for banal and obvious reasons in a socio-cultural context (Lindon 2006: 369).

The other theoretical framework relevant for our research focuses on individual actions, the micro level where experiences of *lived space* are produced. Micro sociologist Erving Goffman (1981) studied face to face interaction in everyday life and described it as staging situations where each individual plays a part. Understanding interactions as performances illuminates the fact that actions are rooted in mindsets. Goffman’s *dramatic* approach considers the existence of an *expressive component* of social life that is a source of *impressions of Self*, given to others and received from others. These *Self impressions* determine the interactions between actor’s *facades*, which are likewise determined by the setting and the cultural values of the social establishments where they are (Goffman 1981: 256). *Settings* are a key element of interactions in Goffman’s

perspective, “involving furniture, decor, physical lay-out, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it” (Ibid: 34). Observation and description of how individuals play their part in settings and social establishments —like university is— take us to the empirical dimension where the core concepts of our hypothesis —“sense of belonging” and “appropriation of space”— are materialized in specific sets of actions. Symbolic interactionism framework gives us a set of categories to break down social interactions into their components, connecting each of them with shared social meanings, regarding the discussed topic, the mutual impressions or the setting itself. The relevance of Goffman’s perspective sits on its implicit understanding of social interaction as a communicative instance. In this way, there are two implications of his theory that we consider key to underline: perform implicates communicate; and this happens according to individual intentions and plans as well as spontaneously. Silence and stillness are also meaningful.

Public sphere as a communicative space

Concepts that we have presented in previous paragraphs: interaction as staging and *lived spaces*, clearly show to what extent representations —meanings— and practices —actions— are intertwined in social interaction —like two faces of a coin. As a consequence, semiotic questions regarding meanings and uses of public spaces become especially relevant in the current context of hyper media (Scolari 2008) and postbroadcasting (Fernández 2018). While Di Felice states that inhabiting is itself a communicative experience, he also recovers Mc Luhan’s perspective regarding the effects of the emergence of different media and their technological devices in social perceptions of space, time and the social relationships they allow.

Thinking about the relationship between individual and environment as a communicative relationship means thinking about the progressive process of electrification and computerization of the territory, which has increasingly transformed living into a practice of communicative

interaction. But it also means reflecting on how, over time, meanings attributed to this relationship have been altered by technological innovations that, by modifying our perception of space, have consequently altered our way of interacting with environment and nature (Di Felice 2012: 29).

Di Felice's approach works as cross-roads between the philosophical branch of space studies and the empirical branch of sociological and geographical research on space. Without mentioning it explicitly as Scolari does (2018), Di Felice brings to the discussion the fact that space —being it urban, rural or institutional— is an interface: an interaction place. The very notion of interface verifies that today we live in two simultaneous and connected spaces: geographic-urban space and the mediatized-digital space. In the same path, Belinskaya, Brantner and Rodriguez Amat (2019) developed an (urban) public sphere model of analysis that considers the existence of continuity between physical places and digital sites.

The urban communicative space must be studied as a conversation that extends beyond the specific devices, or the virtual / real distinction in the communicative activity so that it can integrate the interaction via mobile, or via social networks, with the conversation in the urban public spaces (Ibid 2019: 113).

These authors have developed a comprehensive model to analyze what they call **communicative space**: the social environment of interaction, conceived as an interface where physical places and online sites coexist—as mentioned in the quote. The model includes four ways in which communicative space is shaped: representations, structures, textures and connections. The four categories are divided in subcategories. We will focus only on some of them that are especially relevant for our research. Among representations, Belinskaya et al. (2019) differentiate three types: representations of territory, **representations of place** and representations of activity. While the first one includes maps and other representations that pretend to be objective and appear as the dominant or hegemonic way of representing a territory, the representations of place are more specific and contextualized; linked to individual experiences of a place which brings as a result the individual appropriation

of this place. Lastly, representations of activity refer—in terms of the authors—: “to the performative aspect of how and what for spaces are used” (Ibid 2019: 117).

There are two key elements that we would like to highlight regarding how Belinskaya, Brantner and Rodriguez Amat describe representations. First, the abstract notion of space is disassembled in two different types of concrete spaces: territories and places. Then, while representations of territory are more general and socially shared, representations of place could be even personal. This subtle distinction results very rich and ordering for our observations of university spaces.

In second place, we would like to point out that throughout the representations types’ description, especially when presenting the representations of activity, boundaries between notions of representation and practice are blurred and unclear. From our point of view, while we understand that both notions are deeply articulated simply because practices are supported by representations, we consider that their nature is very different. Following Peircean theory of sign, representations emerge from the connection between three entities: a sign or *representamen* is in the place of an object through the intervention of a third entity: the interpretant. Representations are interconnected in an infinite semiosis, which is a constitutive dimension of society: the meaning dimension (Verón 1987).

On the other hand, social practices and habits are actions performed by social actors, being them individual or collective. As we already said, practices are based on representations—mostly in a non-conscious way— but it is important to identify that practices imply always human bodies and/or institutional actors making actions that generate concrete subsequent results, while representations belong to the discursive realm.

From the other three categories Belinskaya et al. (2019) identify in their model of urban communicative space analysis: structures, textures and connections, we will focus on textures. *Textures of place*, for these authors, has to do with the symbolic value and communicative capital of a specific place: “Textures of place (...) show how places ‘join, include, omit and gather collective memory elements’” (Ibid: 121). In our unders-

tanding, notions of representations of place, representations of activity and textures of place are mutually implicated, due to the fact that symbolic value of a place is a result of the use of that space, contributing to the emergence of representations of it.

The mediatized side of public space

Connections between geographic-urban space and mediatized-digital space are also identified by Sandra Valdetaro (2012) when she states that there is interdependence between platforms and urban space: “Social networks and city, its streets and squares, work as links of a chain. They have an inter-dependent relationship, because both —social networks and streets— are live affect connectors” (Valdetaro 2012: 161). This spatial continuum urban-digital that Di Felice, Belinskaya et al. and Valdetaro present is the base line for our research about university spaces; and interaction is the concept that anchors in both places. Our concept of expanded institutions allows us to conceive university in its urban and digital existence, but not only from the institutional point of view, also considering students’ and lecturers’ experiences on the university digital space. In this sense, we follow Fernandez’s (2018) approach on the study of mediatization, who also describes the coexistence and articulation of face to face and mediatized exchanges. As it can be seen in Figure 1, both exchanges realms are overlapped in everyday experience. Just a simple example can show us to what extent this is empirically true: yards, corridors, halls and even classrooms of university building are full of students and lecturers checking their smartphones while interacting face to face with mates and colleagues.

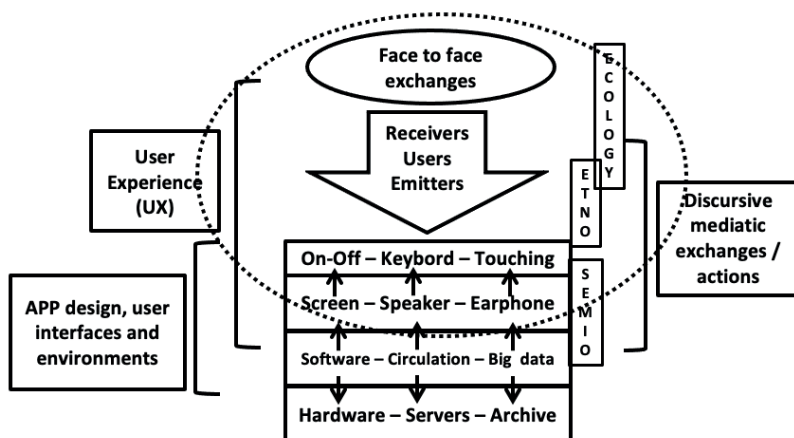


Figure 1: Media platforms and their discursive exchange and use systems (Fernández 2018)

The dotted circle signals the area where our object of study is located, and the example perfectly fits there. In terms of Fernández (2021) our study of the connections between university's urban and digital spaces is a case of "transmedia phases – face to face circulation", observed when "live performances coexist with intervention or media diffusion modes, through general or proprietary platforms" (Fernández 2021: 117). This author considers the need of interdisciplinary approaches to study current discursive-mediatic exchanges' systems. Fernandez methodological framework combines semiotics, ethnography and media ecology in order to fully understand the complexity that lays in the mediatized exchanges. While semiotics allows us to analyze modalities and procedures of meaning production, reception and circulation, ethnography brings the tools to observe and describe how users perform and interact in both urban and mediatized spaces. In this theoretical frame, media ecology provides a systematic and historical point of view on mediatization, contributing to understand how current mediatizations in fact are not entirely new. The historical take on mediatization is also present in Fernández work.

Precisely, he designed a mediatization series scheme to distinguish three types of phenomena that compound any mediatization: technological devices, discursive genres and styles and social practices. These three series are part of what Fernandez identifies as one of the instances for the study of mediatization: semiohistory.

We found Fernandez framework very useful for our research purpose, because while being focused on mediatization, it includes the connection with face-to-face interactions in urban space. This approach to mediatization has led him to elaborate the concept of *living on platforms*:

...acting and moving in life through platforms. Where we live interindividual, group and broadly social experiences; the productive, commercial or educational ones; affective bonding, entertainment and political discussion; informative, fictional and musical contents. And this is not an exhaustive list (Fernández 2018: 13).

Toward an analytical model of urban and digital spaces

Living on platforms implies then that *lived space* is a complex construction of both interfaces: the geographic-urban and the mediatized-digital. As a consequence, we consider a necessary first step in our research path to order and systematize a set of theoretical categories that will build our analytical framework.

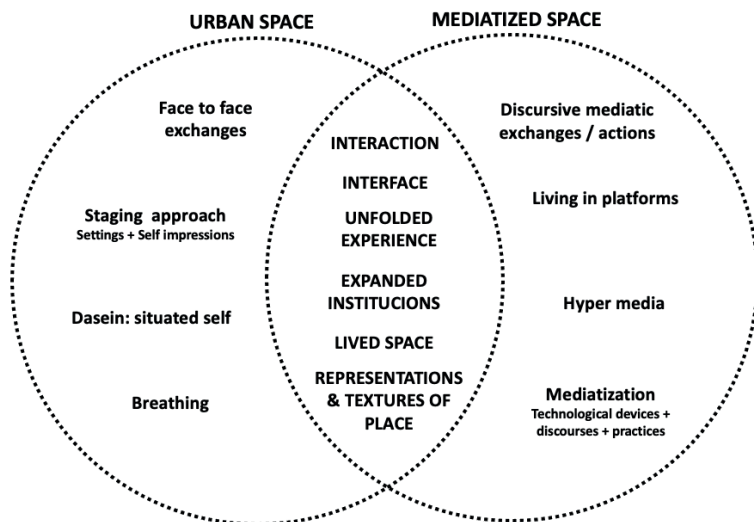


Figure 2: Unfolded spatial experience

From an analytical point of view, the dotted circle in Figure 1 can be divided in two overlapping circles, since urban and mediatized spaces coexist and are permanently articulated.

The analytical framework scheme in Figure 2 shows that interaction is the key phenomenon connecting both spaces, from which a set of notions —a conceptual family— are deployed: interface, unfolded experience, expanded institutions, lived spaces, representations of place and textures of place. These concepts will allow us to analyze the relationship of university community with their space of study or work, in order to understand their level of commitment, appropriation and belonging to university as a public and common good.

Since we began to study environmental and community issues, we have empirically confirmed that individual relationship with any geographical environment, whether urban or institutional space —as our case-study: the university—, is inevitably articulated with mediatized space, in many different ways, some of them are:

By representation: photographs, illustrations

By referencing: Facebook groups of institutions, forums or other online communities.

By previewing: map apps such as Google Street

By juxtaposition: walking down the street with the cell phone

These are only a few among the most typical points of connection between urban and digital spaces that have been there for a long time already, particularly representation of space. However, referencing, previewing and juxtaposition modes have experienced a growth explosion due to the pandemic. Lockdowns have generated the abrupt modification of the *lived space* and the consequent reconfiguration between mediatized space and geographic space.

The case of university is really interesting. At least in Argentina, universities used to work on a face-to-face exchange basis. Not only classes used to take place in classroom inside huge buildings around the city, but also most of paperwork included face to face instances. In 2020 the usual university operation had to suddenly move to the digital space. While in public sector this move was slower and more painful than in private sector, eventually students, lecturers and researchers were giving and taking classes or presenting papers and meeting with their teams through Meet's or Zoom's windows mosaic. This has been happening for one year and a half already, and whether most of the university community agrees about the wish to go back to face to face classrooms, it has been proved that several activities are better performed in the digital space. The most emblematic case are massive lectures, that students fully prefer to access asynchronously through videos that they can watch, stopping and playing when they want.

The pandemic forced this passage of university into mediatized space, being it a quite conservative type of institution in our country, where digitalization was sub exploited —considering public universities in particular. The academic community had to incorporate new knowledge and abilities, although it would have preferred to keep doing things as always. Digitization of teaching, e-learning and university operation was not at all

on the priority list of most Argentine public universities. The pandemic changed that list ■

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Epistemological, Theoretical and Critical Considerations on Big Data

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Abstract

This article explores a series of discourses regarding big data that are currently relevant both in the academic–scientific field and in the field of scientific communication. These discourses are examined from an epistemological, theoretical and critical perspective. The paper questions certain views that overestimate the predictive power of this technology and its value in regard to the production of knowledge. The author reflects on the role that big data plays in the so-called late capitalism, where the issues of control, surveillance and domination have acquired new characteristics.

Keywords

Big data, knowledge, datum, control, domination

1

During a conference that took place in Brazil in 1973, Michel Foucault asserted that there are two histories of truth. One is an internal truth that corrects itself through its own principles of regulation. The other is an external truth in which certain forms of subjectivity, object domains and types of knowledge are created (Foucault, 1978/2003: 15). Foucault was not as interested in questioning the epistemological value of that internal history—with its own operating rules, forms of production and technical and practical accomplishments—as he was in analyzing the historical configuration of certain subjects of knowledge and discursive and non-discursive practices which produced knowledge guided not by *the love of truth*, but rather by the will for power and domination. Nowadays, the tension between these two types of histories can be explored through the lens of a technology that acts almost as an interpreter of certain features that have characterized the interest in knowledge in these first two decades of the 21st century. That technology is big data.

This device makes it possible to visualize the rise of a whole new series of problems that range from epistemological and methodological questions to philosophical and political concerns about its social, cultural and subjective consequences. In this sense, big data often elicits at least two types of considerations in the academic and intellectual field. One type consists of those that present the phenomenon as both a challenge and an opportunity for social and human studies, that is, they subscribe to Foucault's concept of internal history of knowledge. The other type of considerations warns about the meaning of this technology that is evidently based on some kind of *mathesis universalis*, in which knowledge is associated with data, subjects are associated with manipulable numbers and truth is associated with control.

This article explores the phenomenon from both of these perspectives. On the one hand, it questions the epistemological premises of the different discourses present both in the scientific and intellectual field and in the Business and Communication field. On the other hand, it reflects upon the role that this technique plays in the context of the social pro-

cesses of present-day capitalism. Overall, the article does not examine what big data is, but rather the way in which it is presented in different areas of social life. In this context, big data does not merely express data and quantity, but rather a way of conceiving knowledge.

2

In the context of mediatization processes and their multiple dimensions, the promising potential of big data technology relies on its ability to access a universe of information that traditional models have never achieved and could never achieve. Big data emerges as great technical machinery for data collection and processing as well as a possible solution to the major obstacles encountered by the social sciences regarding their *weakness* when it comes to providing empirical evidence. There are, however, doubts and concerns from an internalist perspective regarding the ability of this device to obtain diverse data and the availability of these data for different social actors.

In addition to these concerns, which can be dealt with through technical means, there are two bigger issues that are repeatedly mentioned in most of the literature regarding this subject and are worth exploring. The first issue that should be addressed is the predictive power that is mentioned either implicitly or explicitly in considerations on big data. The utopian ambition of dominating the future is based on one of the basic features of this technical device that elicits great fascination, that is, the supposed ability to predict future phenomena. However, is it possible to predict social and human phenomena?

The second issue worth exploring is the epistemological problem that underlies this predictive discourse as a form of substantiation, that is, the consideration that data quantity is a fundamental value for the production of knowledge. While it cannot be denied that data production, accumulation and access are important elements in the construction of different types of knowledge, the main question that arises is what kind of knowledge is being constructed and what problems is it based on. Moreover, there are numerous questions regarding the proposition of

overcoming the classical paradigms and the non-explicit yet present idea of unity of science—along with the concomitant disappearance of the old feuds between quantitative and qualitative methodologies—in which data would matter more than theory.

3

In regard to the first question, certainly science without prediction as a goal should not be called science. As Horkheimer (1933/2008a) said, the possibility of prediction is the touchstone of any science (p. 43). It is true that natural sciences seem to be excluded from controversies regarding the validity of their predictions and the need for them; thus, the possibility of them making fairly reliable predictions is not questioned, regardless of the difficulties related to the specific field of application. It could be argued from a historical point of view that the access to a large quantity of data, powerful processing systems and sophisticated simulation programs functioning as mega experiments could generate better conditions for progress in terms of predictability in different areas of knowledge, for example, meteorology or astronomy. However, are the conditions in social and human areas the same?

Through the use of big data technology, Google was able to predict the spread of the H1N1 virus of 2009 in the United States with greater precision than public health authorities (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier, 2013). Retail chain Walmart detected in its database that, after hurricane alerts in certain areas of the United States, people would buy Pop-Tarts. This allowed them to place these snacks in strategic places in order to facilitate its consumption (Mayer-Schönberger & Cukier 2013; Magnani, 2017). Various journalistic outlets have mentioned successful cases in which the Chicago police have used an algorithm to predict crimes. In Argentina, a governor claimed that teenage pregnancy could be predicted with a high degree of precision and with years in advance, and public policies are being designed because of it (Defoix, 2018). There are countless articles in popular science magazines and newspapers offering examples of the promising applications of big data on different areas of social life. While these *successes* have been accompanied by failures, such as the subse-

quent failure to predict a second outbreak of the H1N1 flu by Google several years later, this is a promising field for big data philosophy.

However, a distinction should be made between the meaning of prediction as it is used in big data literature, that is, as a cluster of knowledge which enables the prediction of future actions, and the theoretical concept of prediction. From an epistemological viewpoint, *to predict* means to formulate a hypothesis through deductive or inductive processes. This hypothesis must be corroborated by experience, whether rational or empirical; thus, it can be based on future or past facts. Either way, it is evident that the interest in predicting the future has always been present in the different epistemological schools of thought among the social sciences.

Since the 19th century, the question of prediction has been connected to the considerations on social sciences in relation to natural sciences. It could be argued that the theoretical perspectives that sought the unity of science, from 19th century positivism to Popper and the Vienna Circle, have responded affirmatively to the possibility of predicting social and human phenomena, regardless of the differences in scope and methodology. Interpretive models, on the other hand, were more cautious or skeptical (González, 2005). It seems that there are not as many differences between understanding and explaining models regarding this particular topic as there are in regard to where they place the emphasis and how they substantiate their positions.

Comte's positivism is a good example. Based on a model of causal explanation, he considered that the *social physics* that he aspired to develop should imitate the Newtonian theoretical paradigm of space and time, based on the existence of symmetry between past and future. Thus, he famously claimed that the true positivist spirit consists, above all, in observing in order to predict, in studying what is in order to determine what will be, according to the general principle of invariability of the laws of nature (Comte, 1844/1999, p. 80). As his contemporary in the 19th century, Mill agreed that science had to be able to provide explanations and predictions; yet he considered this to be a difficult task due to the multiplicity of causal forces which interacted and counteracted each other

(as cited in González, 2005, p. 185). Mill considered the relation between human sciences and natural sciences to be complex, believing there to be many reasons why the moral sciences should remain inferior to the most perfect of the physical sciences. He claimed the laws of their most complicated phenomena could not be deciphered completely, nor could these phenomena be predicted with the same degree of assurance. But even if it was not possible to reach many truths, there was no reason to concede less reliance or a lesser scientific character to those truths that could be reached (as cited in López Martín, 1995, p. 199).

Conversely, the postpositivist authors of the Vienna Circle approached the subject with more formalist theoretical perspectives, coming from logic, physics and mathematics. They proposed the possibility of constructing universal laws and statistics in the social field, but considered that predictions were only feasible in terms of probability. Reichenbach (1967) thought it better to discuss probability laws instead of causal laws. The theory of probability provides the instrument of predictive knowledge and at the same time it offers the form of the laws of nature; its object of study constitutes the backbone of the scientific method (p. 242). In the search for a science that was rigorous and could contest metaphysics, during the first decades of the 20th century, the theorists of the Vienna Circle needed statements that could be empirically proven and that could thus predict what had not occurred yet as a fundamental means of verification or, in any case, of confirmation. As Neurath (1931/1965) asserted, all laws of unified science had to be able to connect with each other if they wanted to accomplish the task of predicting different individual processes or groups of processes with the highest frequency possible (p. 298).

While Popper subscribed to the perspective of methodological monism and did, in fact, advocate for the unity of scientific knowledge, he was cautious in regard to prediction in the social sciences. At times, he claimed that prediction was a part of the logical process of any theory and a condition of its falsifying character, while other times, he considered it a dubious operation, as human action is subjected to free will and it is not completely determined; hence, his criticism of Marxist historicism. He understood that prediction is a fundamental potential falsifier and that

the more predictive and explanatory power a theory has, the stronger it is, even though the requirement for a science to progress is precisely the possibility of being falsified or refuted. For Popper (1959/1980), those who are not willing to expose their ideas to refutation do not get to play the game of science (p. 261).

Interpretive and comprehensive models have a more wary and critical view of this predictive power. For positivist perspectives, the differences between natural sciences and social sciences are not significant and, therefore, the precision of the former is higher only by a matter of degrees, given the bigger complexity of the latter. Interpretive perspectives consider them to have different laws altogether. One of the authors that have tackled specifically the problem of prediction in the social sciences is Wittgensteinian philosopher, Peter Winch. From a philosophical hermeneutics approach, he claimed that even though human actions are governed by rules, there are variables, such as the intentions of the subjects and the decisions they make, that generate a heavy load of uncertainty. From a revision of the different predictive models, Winch (1958/1990) stated:

Mill thought of historical trends as analogous to scientific laws and Popper wished to modify that conception by pointing out that the statement of a trend, unlike that of a true law, involves a reference to a set of specific initial conditions. I now want to make a further modification: even given a specific set of initial conditions, one will still not be able to predict any determinate outcome to a historical trend because the continuation or breaking off of that trend involves human decisions which are not determined by their antecedent conditions in the context of which the sense of calling them 'decisions' lies. Two words of caution are necessary in connection with my last remark. I am not denying that it is sometimes possible to predict decisions; only that their relation to the evidence on which they are based is unlike that characteristic of scientific predictions. And I am not falling into the trap of saying that historical trends are consciously willed and intended by their participants; the point is that such trends are in part the *outcome* of intentions and decisions of their participants (p. 92/93).

On the other hand, the Frankfurtian critical perspective, loyal to its Marxist tradition—at least at some point in its history, highlighted the contradiction between historical laws and the subjective condition, as men are not true subjects but objects of these laws. Horkheimer (1933/2008a), for example, claimed that if predictions in the social sciences are so imperfect, it is not because social processes are in some way the product of human freedom, but because they are the natural result of the blind action of antagonistic forces (p. 48).

In summary, the problem of prediction in the social sciences has been a point of contention among perspectives that spawn from different theoretical and epistemological premises. However, in general, there is a historical trend to differentiate between the ability to make predictions in human sciences and in natural sciences, believing it is more difficult to successfully make predictions in the former. This trend does not seem to be taken into consideration by certain perspectives on big data which do not make a distinction between the different fields of knowledge and have a sometimes excessive trust in its predictions.

4

In broad terms, it is considered that the quantity of data, the ability to collect data and the processing speed with which data are collected have all led to a giant leap in the history of knowledge of humanity. As David McCandless (2010) stated during a TED talk, data are not the new oil of the 21st century, but the new soil. It is a fertile medium where knowledge, creativity and innovation can grow. There are no doubts about the unique character of the phenomenon, or its relevance in the development of knowledge in different areas. What should be challenged are two implicit ideas in grandiose and enthusiastic claims about big data, which are closer to the marketing field than the scientific field. The first one is the idea that **big** is a positive value in itself. The second is the idea that a datum is a piece of reality that is neutral and objective.

Can data quantity and constant measurement be considered a warranty of knowledge? This is certainly not the case for several scientific disci-

plines. For example, only a small blood sample is enough to perform a blood test. Physicians do not advise their patients to check their blood pressure constantly. The idea that data volume and processing speed to analyze data in real time are a positive value in themselves stems from a model that is based on a correlation of purely mathematical and computational criteria, instead of logical or statistical criteria, as is generally the rule used to take diverse types of measurements. This usually leads to what is known as spurious correlations: Data are matched in a purely inductive manner, without a hypothesis, with the goal of predicting their behavior, with no previous causal relation to explain it; hence, the resulting connections can be ludicrous. For example, data could show a correlation between a car color and the durability of the car's tires. This could lead to the conclusion that the tires of yellow cars have certain durability, without there being any logical relation between the color of the car and the durability of the tires. American statistics expert, Stephen Stigler, has used an interesting metaphor to illustrate the overestimation of data. He claims that Funes, the protagonist in Borges' *Funes the Memorious*, who could remember even the most insignificant details, was big data without statistics. Funes could store absolutely everything in his memory, but he was incapable of understanding. According to Borges, to think is to forget differences, to make generalizations, to make abstractions. In Funes' crowded world there was nothing but almost immediate details (Sosa Escudero, 2016).

Enthusiasm over the possibilities offered by this technology for predictive purposes has led some people to announce, in a provocative manner, the end of theory. As stated by Chris Anderson, Chief Editor of the prestigious *Wired* magazine:

This is a world where massive amounts of data and applied mathematics replace every other tool that might be brought to bear. Out with every theory of human behavior, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves (Anderson, 2008).

While this statement might sound excessive and even grotesque from the point of view of scientific tradition, it should not be taken lightly, since it expresses the mindset of the times, that is, the idea that knowledge should be backed by useful and pragmatic results, and that which involves *understanding* is precisely useless and *unproductive*.

On a related note, there is a misunderstanding on some observations on big data, that is, the premise that a piece of data is an autonomous entity, something in the realm of the *given*, free from human subjectivity. It is perhaps a pre-Kantian notion, in the sense that the subject of knowledge is merely a passive collector and a reflection of that autonomous and independent reality; hence, the lack of need for the theory. However, it is common knowledge that data are constructed and that this is done according to chosen variables. Moreover, the criteria used to construct the algorithms through which big data numbers are obtained are unknown.

In this regard, de la Garza Toledo (1987) noted that from a radical empiricist position, data appear as *pure data* that turn into ideas through the senses. However, every datum carries a series of *contaminations* that make it impure: 1) the datum for the indicator is influenced by the concept that is being measured, 2) the type of datum will depend on the *collection* technique, which is more about generation, and 3) it will depend on the external object. In other words, every datum suffers a triple influence which prevents it from being conceived as a simple product of the object. On the other hand, since the relation between data and concept, and technique and object is not mechanical nor is there a strict translation logic, the datum will always be questionable. In this sense, while the *clippings of the empirical* have an objective element, they are historically determined. The empirical, as an empirical datum, is not just the external, but a form of the subject–object relation where the observable has an important role but, at the same time, the datum is not pure observation, but an observation–concept every time (p. 286).

On the other hand, in response to different theoretical stances, from Marx, through Weber, to Durkheim, Pierre Bourdieu claimed that data are not given, but constructed in response to a particular problem. When these are applied to other situations, it can result in mistakes. As he ex-

plains, it is enough to have tried to perform a secondary analysis of a material collected in relation to another problem, as neutral as it may seem, to know that even the richest data could never completely and adequately answer questions to which and by which they have not been constructed. It is not about challenging on principle the validity of a second hand material, but of remembering the epistemological conditions of that work of retranslation, which always refers to—well or badly—constructed facts and not data (Bourdieu, Chamboredon & Passeron, 1968/2013, pp. 61–62).

In this landscape, the ways through which big data is legitimized showcase some debts with positivism, particularly with the empiricist model of the Vienna Circle, in regard to fundamental knowledge, although without the argumentative clarity and the theoretical foundation of those scientists from the early 20th century. This can be observed at least in two aspects: on the one hand, a principle of verification or confirmation based on a model of correspondence between statements and *reality* which appears in the form of numbers and, on the other hand, the attempt at a universal language that allows for the unity of science. The datum, *something given* in its etymological sense, translated by a mathematical logic language, is conceived as *reality* and, hence, anything that cannot be reduced to a number is, at least, suspicious. Based on a radical empiricism and a naive inductivism, some versions of big data even assert, as previously stated, that the data speak for themselves and they do so independently of theories.

5

It could be argued then that *reality*, from this point of view, runs the risk of being reduced to something given—the datum, blocking the analysis on the complexity of the social sphere. For the social and human sciences, and particularly for those who are interested in the problems of meaning, the use of *massive data* can be an important tool for the production of knowledge—depending of course on the given problem. However, this should not be a *sine qua non* condition to guarantee the

scientific nature of the disciplines that are dedicated to the study of *humans* and society. If that was the case, this technology would become a fetish.

Apart from these issues of epistemological nature, there are other questions that come up in different bibliographies in regard to the connection between big data and the issues of *domination* and *control*. These issues have been very relevant throughout the history of social and human sciences and it would be important to not ignore them today. This is particularly true considering one of the discussions regarding the use of massive data and the proliferation of algorithms on different spheres of social life is the change in regulations of surveillance systems and the implications of their intrusion in the private and intimate sphere as well as the blurring of the lines of the so-called public sphere. In other words, it would be convenient to explore certain observations that do not only focus on the relation of knowledge between *subject and object* in regard to a technology, big data in this case, but that also inquire about how this relation developed over time by exploring the historical processes of construction of subjectivity and subjectivation. As Horkheimer (1937/2008b) put it, the facts our senses offer us are socially preformed in two ways: by the historical character of the perceived object and by the historical character of the perceiving organ (p. 233). In this sense, as the Frankfurtian also said, technologies as productive forces are not just extensions of humans; our sensory organs are also extensions of technological tools. That is to say, against any technological determinism, it would be interesting to consider how these technologies express profound transformations of the social and political order, which are thus related to diverse power relations. In this respect, there is a whole intellectual tradition that keeps coming back: from Heidegger to the Frankfurtians, from Foucault to Han, going from a wide range of positions from diverse critical theories, like Deleuze, Lazzarato, Virno, Negri and Hardt. They have elaborated diverse hypotheses in relation to this problem, allowing the possibility to think about the status of knowledge in the present.

Big data involves an encounter between two fields of knowledge, that is, information technology and statistics, even though the latter has been somewhat relegated, as previously stated. Since its beginnings, statistics

has had the ambition of making predictions through numerical variables at a time when there was a need for a more polished knowledge for the management of modern nation states, which began to emerge between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century.

On this basis, it would be convenient to go over a history of the relation between knowledge, technology, power and subjectivity in order to provide a framework, despite its generalist character, to delve deeper into some aspects of the present. This periodization does not indicate discontinuities, but rather emphasizes different aspects of the processes in the context of historical continuities that date back to the beginning of the so-called modernity.

The first period is characterized by the development of disciplinary societies in the 18th century, studied by Foucault, where a wide range of technologies were developed with the purpose of surveillance through institutions that dominated space and time. Devices were created—the panopticon being the best-known example—for the production of certain types of subjectivities. Power was exercised over the *soul* with the goal of generating *docile bodies*, useful, oriented towards a mode of production governed by enclosure (Foucault, 1975/2014). As Deleuze (1990/2005) put it, the goal was to create a productive force within space–time whose effect would be superior to the sum of its essential forces (p. 115). Statistics, for that matter, played a prominent role in the creation and management of *populations*, fulfilling a core concept of the Enlightenment, at least from the perspective of Critical Theory, that is, the concept of knowledge as domination. Foucault (1978/2006) considers this discipline as another device of the sciences of examination, of a knowledge connected to the will for control as a condition of the *art of governing*. According to Rodríguez (2012), this explains how States began measuring everything as a form of control and domination: from the mines to the size of the soldiers' thoraxes; from the trade balance to the forests; from the right ratio of a jury to the birth rate. Making calculations on the annual wheat crops or counting how many grown men met the requirements to go to war determined the strength or the weakness of a state. The regularities exposed by statistics provided some sort of x-ray of

the states, as well as pointing out where the problems and the possible solutions were (p. 18). It was this mindset of the times that gave rise to the nomothetic social sciences of the 19th century.

The second period is characterized by societies of control, a term popularized by Deleuze. During this period, there was a *mutation*, a *crisis* or a weakening of the spaces of enclosure and the methods of *normalization* typical of disciplinary societies. Foucault (1978/2006) had also mentioned some type of change when he referred to apparatuses of security modifying the models of enclosure, but he did not focus on the shift that this entailed. The beginning of this *new era* is not very precise, but it is usually situated after World War II. With many ambivalences and contradictions, several authors have *contributed* to what Deleuze expressed succinctly on that famous text that originated this denomination. Hardt and Negri's work in *Imperio* [Empire] (2000/2002), Virno's (2001/2008) and Negri's takes on multitude, Lazzarato's perspective particularly in *Políticas del acontecimiento* [The Political Event] (2010) and even Bauman and Lyon's perspectives in *Vigilancia líquida* [Liquid Surveillance] (2013) offered considerations on the new conditions of the exercise of power, surveillance, the production of subjectivities and control in contemporary societies. In general, it seems that the characteristic technologies that came with these transformations stem from the fields of information technology and communications. As a discipline that turned subjects into information, statistics became a big protagonist throughout this process. With the leap of the *electronic revolution*, it gained special prominence and powerful tools of creation, management and individuation. There was a transition from the automatic calculating machines of the industrial revolution and its modes of organization to the emergence of electronic computers with their logical and arithmetic properties. Manacorda (1976/1982) stated that the acceleration of exchanges, the rise of international markets and the productive reconversion of World War I and of the postwar period created complex strategy problems. In order to tackle these problems, a statistical machine that offers *a posteriori* insight on a situation was no longer enough. There was a need for an instrument that could dynamically adapt the strategy to the fast-paced changes of market situations (p. 40). Wiener, the creator of

Cybernetics, claimed that his main contribution had been to merge two lines of investigation that up until that moment had remained separate, that is, statistical series and communications engineering (p. 38). From that moment on, surveillance required less and less devices of enclosure, in the sense that there seems to be no limits to achieve visibility through diverse media devices, generating what Bauman called *postpanopticon*.

It is also the transition from a subject shaped by a series of practices related to discipline, only possible through enclosure, in order to convert the *soul into a prison of the body*, to the modulation of the subjectivities in all spaces of life through flexible molds. In disciplinary societies the body is productive as long as it is docile, while in societies of control the body must be *virtuous* (Virno, 2008). Moreover, as Deleuze (1990/2005) claims, we are no longer faced with the pair mass–individual. Individuals have become *dividuals* and masses have become samples, data, markets or *banks* (p. 118). Along these lines, Rodríguez (2008) makes an interesting association between the society of control and the notion of information or media normalization: If information fulfills a fundamental role in societies of control, the reason is not to be found in the sequence that goes from science—cybernetics—, to technology—digital systems—, to society—information society—, but in a different sequence that places information at the core of prolonged social struggles. Even though Rodríguez places information in a long history, he pays special attention to how a scientific notion of information was developed between the 1940s and the 1950s to provide density to Deleuze’s position that disciplinary societies were energy extracting machines, whereas societies of control extracted information.

Finally, it is possible to sense a third period, with blurred lines in regard to the second, where the technologies of massive data and artificial intelligence would play a major role. These societies could be called, to use Han’s (2012/2013) metaphor, transparency societies. What differentiates these societies from Deleuze’s control societies? Even though there are clear continuities and overlays between these stages, it could

be argued that the radicalization of certain features of the societies of control has led to a change in the technologies of power and domination. It is not only about visualized and localized bodies anymore, it is also about mechanisms that act on the psyche. However, this is not meant in a dystopian sense, as a sort of manipulative monster that dominates the individual conscience as it pleases; rather these mechanisms express and channel individual desires in a stage of capitalism where social exclusion is one of the biggest fears. This explains how certain *subjectivities* that used to value intimacy and the private aspects of the *modern era* nowadays cannot *tolerate* anonymity and lack of exposure. As Bauman (as cited in Bauman and Lyon, 2013) explains, the possibility of a wider visibility, the perspective of being exposed to the eyes of everyone and to be seen by everyone fits with the most avid search for proof of social recognition and thus of valid existence. To have one's entire being, with the good and the bad, registered and accessible to the public seems to be the best prophylactic antidote to exclusion, and also a powerful route to prevent the possibility of expulsion (p. 32).

A *new* kind of man appeared, to paraphrase Melman's psychoanalytical perspective, a man *without gravity*, characterized by the shift from a psychic economy organized by repression to one organized by the exhibition of pleasure (Melman, 2005). Thus, the figure of the panopticon used by Foucault faded into another form of surveillance and control that Han (2012/2013) called *the digital panopticon*. The peculiarity of the digital panopticon is above all that its inhabitants themselves actively participate in its construction and preservation, as they exhibit and strip themselves naked. They expose themselves on the panoptical market. Pornographic exhibition and panoptic control complement each other. Exhibitionism and voyeurism feed the net as a digital panopticon (p. 89).

This form of psychopolitics—instead of biopolitics—is centered on the idea of achievement subjects—entrepreneurs of themselves—, where the focus does not lie on the *should* as a condition of their insertion in society, but on the *can*, on their own will; one cannot *not be able to*. In disciplinary societies, but also in control societies, negativity, that is, *no* as a surveillance figure, had a strong influence as it compelled the sub-

ject to behave or act in a certain way. Instead, in transparency societies, the mandate changed to *be able to*. For instance, if a person is unemployed it is not because the system produces millions of unemployed people, but because that person is incapable of getting a job. As Han (2012/2013) says, in disciplinary societies the *no* produced mad people and criminals, in current societies the *not be able to* produces depressives and losers.

Obviously when taken word for word, these representations leave a great amount of *holes* through which the characteristics of each period can be criticized, at least, in two senses. At a descriptive level, there are many examples that would invalidate the different representations of disciplinary, control and transparency societies. At a conceptual level, their totalizing character evokes something closed, without fissures and impenetrable. Regarding the descriptive level, it should be clarified that these are explanatory models that tend to showcase certain dominant features. As for the conceptual level, it has been sufficiently clarified that, beyond the emphasis on *domination* and *control*, these are not omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent systems.

6

As I have attempted to show, big data as a discourse of the times can be explored from two perspectives. On the one hand, when analyzed from an epistemological perspective, many of its assertions can turn out to be unfounded and exaggerated and, on some occasions, even conspire against the possibility of a rigorous knowledge of *reality*. Moreover, it is far removed from a whole intellectual tradition that, for over a century, has been attempting to contribute to the construction of a scientific knowledge of the social sphere. On the other hand, the question about the type of knowledge that it produces cannot be separated from the questions about the historical conditions of its emergence and the way in which it accompanies the transformations of social conditions in the so-called late capitalism, which are especially connected to its ambition of control and domination. In this sense, the question that arises is in re-

gard to how these technologies can be appropriated in a different sense from the dominant and fascinating idea of the mathematization of the world ■

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**Geodatification:
Epistemologies of a
Metahuman Presence**

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Abstract

This chapter is about geodata. This is a form of (meta)data that has changed our understanding of space; and that has grown a fascinating interest among scholars but also among organizations, political institutions, and government of sorts. The text here, explores the features and complex weights that wire internally and define the epistemological value of geodata, with the purpose of identifying-in its own understanding- the features that root it in the territory of the humanly constructed meanings.

After a first prologue that exemplifies a recent case of geodata research that raises more ethical concerns than actual scientific findings, this chapter is organised in three parts: the first one is an effort to break the geodata from its fundamental essence identifying three *splits* (geodata as witness, as heterotopic construct and as signature) opening a critical space for discussions about cultural in-betweenness and about *meaning lag*. The second part deals with the most common media-related scholarly concepts built around the study of geodata (geoweb, locative media, and geomedia); and by doing this, a discrete genealogy of the evolution of the field is also sketched. Finally, the third part revolves around power and space deriving towards the latest updates on the notion of public sphere that that incorporates the infrastructures of geodata by considering the communicative space as an assemblage that works as interface for the political interaction.

Keywords

Geomedia, locative media, geodata, public sphere, communicative spaces

Introduction: we know where you were (last summer)

Mobile phones in our pockets have made us into reporters of our unique life experience. These phones have contributed to taming us into feeling a permanent need to report our stories, and to return to those devices that trained us into attending, and into taking care of them. The needy pocket machines claim our attention constantly: check, activate, post, text, respond, tweet; with the mobile phone at hand we feel the urge to both make sure the world does not happen without us knowing, that dreaded *FOMO* feeling (Feeling Of Missing Out); and also the urge to report and to capture the world, to immortalise our experiences, and to share them with others in platforms designed to exhibit ourselves, to make ourselves noticed and visible. Checking the phone becomes a mundane thoughtless practice repeated a myriad of times every day by many people, producing gazillions of recorded digital material: a valuable, accessible, and transportable source for data extractivism (Couldry & Meijas 2020) and what constitutes a very personal geolocated footprint.

In October 2019, the Spanish newspapers *El País* (Maqueda, 28/10/19) published news about a Spanish government funded research project. It linked the public Spanish National Statistics Institute (INE) and the Spanish major private Internet and Mobile Providing Corporations (Movistar, Vodafone and Orange). The plan consisted of collecting all mobile generated geolocate data in the Spanish Territory during eight days between 2019 and 2020: 18th to 21st and 24th of November, 25th of December of 2019; and the 20th of July, and 15th of August of 2020. The research goal of that project was to capture individuals' mobility as it intended "to assess the opportunity of information about the geolocation of mobile phones as an alternative to the current methods, to provide mobility matrices". The project aimed at "adding this source of data to the regular use in the demographic statistics" (INE, 2019, the document does not appear in the English version of the site).

Of course, the article and official documentation insisted that the collected data would be anonymous; and that the whole project would be well integrated within the current regulation requirements including the

European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the protection of the privacy of the citizens. But the ethical intricacies of such a vast research project challenge the limits of whatever current regulatory frameworks, and trigger multiple strands of discussion that extend beyond the immediate debates about individual privacy or data ownership.

This case is a good example of how digital data research faces basic ethics principles related to the involuntary generation of data or to the lack of awareness of millions of *citizens-turned-into-data* by telecommunication companies. Asking the involved individuals for permission (this is, the millions of mobile phone users in the Spanish territory) would not yet solve the fundamental ethical issue either: the data has not been generated for the occasion, but it is an already existing recorded material presumably used by the privately owned telecoms firms, already.

This case immediately shows that the individual centred data protection regulations - or research ethics - are not sufficient and that the discussion about data (and the protection against its generation) must move further, deeper, and faster towards the consideration of a whole complex circuitry of devices, infrastructures, platforms, software, and storage spaces of such geodata that clearly merit and respond to their relevance.

As important as are the ethics debates involving data related research, this paper will remain a step before the ethical debates and underlying of the specific publicly funded research project (in the meantime, for ethics on data research, please check franzke, Bechmann, Zimmer &, Ess and AoIR 2020).

Instead, this chapter grows as a necessary antecedent before such research-applied use of geolocation data. The effort is to calibrate and to determine the uncertain weight and epistemological density of this idea of geodata that grows, expands, and sits as a field of knowledge, as material for research, and as tool for methodological exploration, and as source for conceptual heuristic challenges. This exploration must be understood as a starting point from which to further study and discuss the relative value of the digital footprint generated through our undiscussed

lives, together with the opportunities and pitfalls of turning socio-humanistic research into a digital data-driven area of knowledge.

1. Mobiles that wire a new spatial regime

The notion of *digital footprint* is handy. The two components of the paraphrase involve the *digital* prefix and the substance of the *footprint*. The idea of digital seems to nuance the concept of print by stealing its weight and somehow even its materiality; and the word footprint sends immediately to an idea of foot and of land, and of inhabited territory, and of visited place.

Footprint also connects to the idea of path and of itinerary: an alignment of prints forming threads that can be interpreted, invoking the *Baudelairian* romantic *flâneur* grown in the shadow of the Haussmann urban-architectural developments of the nineteenth-century Paris (Benjamin 2006). This early *cosmopolitan and urban* image immediately grows to connect the footprint with the psychogeographic experiences that connected meaning to walks, and with them a remote sense of purpose emerging from banal and disoriented wanderings.

Precisely, these links to psychogeography and to the Flâneur have populated the literature and the early artistic experiences with geolocation data, and the constellation of devices that collect and store it. The myth of the wanderer sketches a basic foundational moment for what is slowly taking the shape of an emerging field of research with an early genealogy on locative media (Zeffiro 2012) and with a forthcoming special issue about the histories of geomedias currently in compilation by Karen Fast (Karlstadt, Sweden) and Pablo Abend (Siegen, Germany). However, “the conglomerate of texts articulated in digital, collective, and GPS-enabled map productions (...) gives rise to problems of definition both as field of practice and as field of understanding” (Rodriguez-Amat & Brantner 2016).

This text explores later some of the features of that terminological spread that populate the current research trends in the field; but before that, it is necessary to pay attention to the nature of geodata itself. After all,

geodata is a form of data; and as such, it deserves a deconstructive discussion that opens its most intimate features. This chapter is structured around three main areas: first, a discussion about geo-data as a form of data defined at least by three forms of disjunction: three splits that open spaces for reflection and that identify critical assumptions inherent in the geo-data thinking; the second area discusses the terminological spread of concepts that name a growing field of scholarly interest; and the third section brings the debate about geodata towards the research tradition about public sphere and mentions some of the latest works that update the concept by incorporating the possibilities of geodata-related research and its implications. The conclusions come later to invite further critical explorations and applied research.

The fundamental dis-location of (geo)data

It is never enough said: Geo-data is a form of data; and in times of datafication (Van Dijck 2014; Lycett 2013) and of myths and metaphors about big data (see Puschmann & Burgess, 2014; and Taffel, 2021). Indeed, the ecosystem of devices and the geographic thinking has increased the presence of data with geographic reference. Lauriault has characterized spatial data as “any data (quantitative and qualitative) which have a location (e.g. spatially referenced with coordinates) or topology” (2017: 95). The presence of topological reference within the data is increasing to the point that all data are (becoming) geodata; but this does not mean that all geodata are equal: from textual references to locations to numeric metadata, the spatial data can have many different natures, and it is necessary to identify the specific epistemological fundamental condition of (geo)-data, before we explore their conceptual and research possibilities.

Indeed, many debates point at how (big) data seems to expel humans from their role at designing and interpreting it: “‘Big data’ is cast as the inevitable consequence of a technological juggernaut with a life of its own entirely outside the social. We are but bystanders” (Zuboff 2015: 75). This machinery of excluding human intervention takes multiple shapes. Among others, the obedience and concerns and fears about the

power of automated interpretation through algorithms; or the uncertainties related to its technicality and the lack of literacy, its mundanity and its lack of relevance, its evasive nature that makes it difficult to regulate properly. Indeed, the technological discourses that surround the geodata with a constellation of virtual, coded, algorithmic, and invisible or inaccessible traces build a black box of invisibility around the data. This form of technologically formed invisibility has activated an academic discussion according to which some authors prefer to abstain from considering the relevance of geodata as a field for social and cultural analysis as it hides behind the form of pre-discursive event.

This chapter works in the opposite direction. Cracking the nut of the assumptions that forge the ecosystem of geodata helps to open spaces of reflection and to illuminate the gaps of interpretive room filled by *taken for granted* and culturally constructed patterns. This chapter tries to expand the complex liminal space that emerges from the triple split between the data and the phenomenon (first), between the territory and the experience (second) and between the register and the event third). As it is shown below, the triple liminal space grows as a theoretical opportunity for critical reflection and it allows, ultimately to re-incorporate the human dimension to the notion of geo-data, so that it can be discussed again as an environment in transformation, as a culturally defined practice, and as an interpretively constructed product.

First split: data are not the phenomenon

Like any form of data, digital and geolocation data are the product of at least one split: the one that separates the phenomenon and its registration. It is necessary to remember this fundamental condition because only from this starting point, it is possible to distinguish the features and conditions of the creation of data as something else than the phenomenon; and only from here the features of its interpretation can be discussed.

This first split connects directly to the modern object of scientific exploration described by Bruno Latour as a form of silent witness.

“We witness the intervention of a new actor recognized by the new Constitution, inert bodies, incapable of will and bias but capable of showing, signing, writing, and scribbling on laboratory instruments before trustworthy witnesses. These nonhumans, lacking souls but endowed with meaning, are even more reliable than ordinary mortals, to whom will is attributed but who lack the capacity to indicate phenomena in a reliable way. According to the Constitution, in case of doubt, humans are better off appealing to nonhumans”. (Latour 1993:23).

This split between the phenomenon and the register is a constant across any form of (scientific) data; and it is a fundamental issue that penetrates all scientific knowledge as an inherent condition. In the case of geodata, this happens too: Geodata are hybrids that quantify and connect the frame contextual geographic space with the experience, by substituting the experience; that is what makes the data a silent witnesses. This distinction between the experience and its geolocated register is a key to understand that geodata requires at least a level of interpretation that fills the separation between the experience and the register in form of data. The phenomenon is contextualised in space, and registered as a geolocated experience; but it is not the experience itself.

Second split: the frame and the experience

In the specific case of geodata, there is at least a second split. This is the distinction between a required contextualising geographic frame, and the specific point that identifies the experience: the background and the shape, the landscape and the spot, the map and the location.

To explain such a distinction, the Foucauldian sixth principle of heterotopia is very useful:

Heterotopia refers to the organization of terrestrial space. It works between two opposite poles, creating both a space of illusion formed by “real” everyday messy spaces and another other meticulous and perfect space. This is a space of compensation: the second projected order against the messy, ill-constructed, and confused space in which life happens (1967) (Rodriguez-Amat & Brantner 2016).

The split between the “real” experiential and the “messy” geography of registered geodata is projected onto the “meticulous and perfect space” of the map. Such distinction is a fundamental condition inherent in geodata. As much as maps are constructed representations (Rodriguez-Amat & Brantner 2016), the register of activity turned geodata needs both to connect and to distinguish from them, generating a tension of interpretive politics: the projective features of the map need to coincide-and compensate- with the geolocation references embedded in the data; and the messy confused context-less line of points registered as data only gain a form of reference if they fit a background of a constructed and projected map. Among the debates that this split illuminates are the so-called “mapping wars” (van Rees 2013) that a decade ago had the technology giants Apple and Google fighting for the navigational software and maps on the mobile devices. Those corporate owned backgrounds, *obviously* can only be used with the due corporate owned geolocating software: identifying this space between the background-the map- and the experience-the geodata- opens possibilities to critically discuss the features that shape that data such as ownership, compatibility, and consistency; and all of them have to do with human decisions that can be made, and the incorporation of the human-social and political- activity in a process that presents itself as automatic.

The combination of the Latourian witness and the Foucauldian heterotopian conditions inherent in the geodata fit the Derridean notion of signature. That opens as a third split that defines geodata.

Third split: presence and absence

By definition, a written signature implies the actual or empirical non-presence of the signer. But, it will be said, it also marks and retains his having-been present in a past now, which will remain a future now, and therefore in a now in general, in the transcendental form of newness (maintenance). This general maintenance is somehow inscribed, stapled to present punctuality, always evident and always singular, in the form of the signature. This is the enigmatic originality of every paragraph. For the attachment to the source to occur, the absolute singularity of an event of the signature and of a form of the signature must be retained: the pure reproducibility of a pure event (Derrida 1971, 1982: 328).

The combination of the silent witness of data against an established landscape of a map works as a signature: geodata certifies a “having-been” in that spot that remains in a future now. These forms of non-presence and certification crossing the fundamental condition of geodata opens the next split for interpretation and for dislocation that-following Derrida’s analogy- becomes a form of writing: geodata is a form of “writing” space.

This triple split does two things: 1) it opens a series of intersectional, liminal spaces between them as forms that assimilate to Homi Bhabha’s notion of *third space*. The several forms of in-betweenness that emerge from critically considering the data as an interstitial space that opens as a series of splits acknowledges a series of void-spaces that can only be filled with interpretation. In-between the phenomenon and the register, in-between the map and the experience, and in-between the timeline connecting the having been there and the not-being there anymore, there is a space that needs filling. Those fillings are provided by cultural meanings that are taken for granted. These spaces in-between work as untold culturally imposed and as politically intended operations.

The writings by Homi Bhabha can bring some light here to explain how the tensions opening in those uncertain spaces of *dis*-location (of culture) work:

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'inbetween' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (Bhabha 2012: 2).

The third space, for Bhabha, refers to the interstices between colliding cultures, a liminal space “which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation” (Bhabha 2012: 211). In this “in-between” space, new cultural identities are formed, reformed, and constantly in a state of becoming. Artists at work in “the third space” speak of a creative edge that derives from the condition of being in a place that simultaneously is and is not one’s home. Historically the work by Bhabha has been considered to explain the dislocation of identity for human migrants; but the idea of *third-space* has also been used for education and for locative mobile data (Kearney, M., Schuck, S. & Burden, K. 2010).

It is still possible to critically explore how the culturally driven filling of the in-between spaces of these described splits, can be understood as a political gesture: maps are culturally defined and very political, and so are the machineries that generate, register, store, and analytically attribute meaning to the geolocation data: sensors, software, devices, infrastructures, satellites.

Here is where this triple split does a second thing: 2) the split bares the spaces open to interpretation (not their existence, but the invisible effort to fill them with meaning, as an operation of significance that differs from the initially assumed one-to-one vision as a fixed form of meaning that is usually embedded in the notion of code (Verón 2004: 22/38).

Far from it, Verón suggested the notion of circulation to explain the revealed non-unique nature of the meaning. He adapted the Marxian categories of production-circulation-consumption. (Cingolani 2020) to show that circulation is what enables something to be interpreted in one way in its production, and in another way in its (or their) instances of reception or subsequent uses. “This difference is what, in his theory, Verón ([1979] 2004: 39/59) calls the *meaning lag*: to the extent that the meaning produced for a message is not replicated under the same conditions in its reception (“Recognition”), there is a gap that is not alien but constitutive of what we call communication” (Gindin, Cingolani, Rodriguez-Amat, in press).

Indeed, the Veronian notion of *meaning lag* takes the shape of the three splits described above, and builds on a fundamental epistemological but also convenient distinction between two moments: the moment of the data generation-as a form of intended production or of registration- and the moments of interpretation of data as forms of recognition that require the circumstantial connections the phenomenon (witness), to the frame (maps), and to the moment (having been). In that sense, the three splits describe the space that helps dismantling-*a la* Verón- the ternary and dynamic process by pointing out that there is a need for an interpreter to articulate the geodata with whatever it may represent.

Even if the Veronian gaze has been displaced to the south of the international academic circuits (Scolari & Rodriguez-Amat 2018; Averbek-Lietz 2015), his conceptual contribution is useful here to rescue and uplift the old debates about the situation of the text, or about the identification of the traces of its production. Geo-data, thus, needs to be considered against the conditions of its own creation: the conditions of production (including the map, the register, and the signature...), and the conditions of its recognition (including the witness, and the interstitial space-or the subsequent condition of space emerging from the exploration of the data).

These three splits and the two interpretive opportunities that they generate help to effectively liberate the geodata from any form of objective determinism raising the relevance of the conditions within which that data is generated, combined, or interpreted. Somewhere in the in-betweenness of Bhabha's liminality, the Veronian conditions of production, the Derridean signature, the Latourian witness, and the Foucaultian heterotopy, geodata (a type of metadata), certifies, translates, mediates, and dislocates the human presence on the world with a game of truth, and appearance, of substance, and trace.

2. Data with a geo flavour

Beyond these fundamental conditions that inform geodata, the vast constellation of media related devices with geographical inscriptions has activated the intellectual attention of researchers from multiple disciplines. The disciplinary mess, too often built and growing away from critically splitting the conditions of geodata, has arrived with an unsolved terminological chaos. The academic exploration forms a dispersion of discipline-siloed conversations that have simultaneously taken place in the last two (and a half) decades. This section maps, broadly, the most relevant available approaches.

Some of the newly formed concepts that approach the constellation of devices and mediated geodata point towards the methodological opportunities. Examples of these are notions like *digital geolocation methods* (with engineering approaches such as Li, Pahlavan, Latva-aho & Ylianttila 2000, September) distinguishing *indoor geolocation methods* or more socio-discursive methods that identify location from text or platform-based data (Luo, Qiao, Li, Ma & Liu 2020). Merging both but still on the methods front, there are some successful experiences of research creatively merging digital data and (n)ethnographic methods (Voilmy, Smoreda & Ziemlicki 2008). Moving beyond the human led interaction and focusing more on the softwarized new forms of spatialities, Dodge and Kitchin write about *Code/space* (2004) or about *spatial media* (Kitchin, Lauriault & Wilson 2017); with very interesting applications involving

epistemological changes in the understandings of space and knowledge politics as described by Elwood and Leszczynski (2013).

The flourishing of new concepts is also related to a series of paradigmatic and epistemological “turns” that insist upon the relevance of the disciplinary connections between geography, spatial mobility, and communication. Some scholars explored the notion of *Neogeography* (Goodchild 2009). Others have written about the new mobility paradigm, or “mobility turn” (Sheller & Urry 2006). And about the spatial turn (for instance in the case of Withers 2009) but also mentioned within the field of communication research by Jansson and Falkheimer (2006). Classically, too, Eric Gordon and Adriana de Souza e Silva talked about Net-Locality and *Why Location Matters in a Networked World* (2011). All those turns and new field openings are closely related to the development of mobile devices and mobile media communication.

The intention of this section is far from mapping the full extension of these concepts, or even further from trying to claim rights from wrongs, appropriate from inappropriate, emerging from fading. Instead, it is useful to identify some of the factors and actors that intervene in the understanding of the relevance of the “geo” in the data. In this case, the section dedicates itself to the notions of *Geoweb*, of *locative media* and of *geomedia* as the most consolidated concepts. While this lexicon is elaborated, it is also worth to lift the flag to show that this is yet another swampy territory of what Waisbord could call an interdisciplinary trading zone (2019).

Geoweb

Despite the space-less myths that have insistently populated the digital networks since the early beginnings with the adoption of the sci-fi concept “cyberspace” (Gibson 1997) and its own declaration of independence (Barlow 1996), the internet has grown as a strongly geolocated environment. It has been written that it was the very early work by Herring (1994) for the USA Department of Defence, where he recommended an index that worked as a cyber-spatial reference. This index would combi-

ne both Internet Addressing and Hierarchical Spatial Addressing to solve the problem of defining the physical location in a computer or cyber-infrastructure, providing appropriate fidelity and real time.

Not long after, in May 2000, the Clinton executive implemented the measure to discontinue the GPS selective availability (GPS 2000) that introduced a 'safety error' to the GPS data. That measure increased dramatically the quality of the satellite geolocation data and made it more accessible to all. The increase in precision combined with the launch of a new generation of satellites GPS III, already incapable of selective availability (September 2007), liberated once and for all the access to the exact satellite driven location coordinates. These political measures coincided with the explosion of mobile phone devices capable of accessing the internet (notably, the first iPhone was released in June 2007) spined a process that made the internet both ubiquitous and very precisely geolocated.

Papadimitriou (2010) draws a very precise picture of the emerging ecosystem:

The rapid expansion of new geospatial technologies (global navigational satellite systems, or GNSS, such as the global positioning system or GPS, geographical information systems or GIS and satellite imagery combined) over the last two years and the ubiquitous information and communication technologies or ICTs (such as mobile telephony and the Internet) have revolutionised the way people interact with available geographical data. (...) From these interactions has stemmed what is now termed the "Geospatial Web", this being the spatially enabled World Wide Web, allowing, inter alia, for new forms of geographical education to develop.

The double condition of the original internet consisting of free availability and of geospatially tagged data, made some valuable resource for the development of geographic studies as, for instance, the valuable work described by Abernathy (2011, and more recently 2016; or Papadimitriou 2010).

Locative Media

What has typically been considered the ur-text on locative media is Russell's 1999 "Headmap Manifesto": "The headmap manifesto is a sequence of text fragments dealing with the social and cultural implications of location aware devices" (1999: 5). The text described a new world composed of

...location aware, networked mobile devices make possible invisible notes attached to spaces, places, people and things... computer games move outside and get subversive. Sex and even love are easier to find. Real space can be marked and demarcated invisibly (1999: 3).

This cultural approach to the new technological capacities was understood to be seminal to some consensual understanding: the first use of the term locative media was in an artistic exhibition in an abandoned Soviet era military base in Karosta, Latvia from July 16th to 26th, 2003 by Karlis Kalnins. The event was called 'Locative Media Workshop: Mapping the Zone'.

According to McGarrigle, "Locative media"

...was originally employed to distinguish between the questioning artistic uses of location-aware technologies from their instrumentalized commercial and military uses. The proposition was that locative technologies, which had at this point only recently become widely available for civilian use, represented a fundamental, perhaps even paradigmatic, shift in the perception and understanding of geographic location. A central concept of Locative Media was a recognition that the artistic uses of these technologies had an important role to play in the opening up of the possibilities of these media to everyone (2014: 178).

In this sense, this concept embodied "a response to the decorporealized, screen-based experience of net art, claiming the world beyond either gallery or computer screen as its territory" (Tuters & Varnelis 2006: 357).

McCullough (2006) also used locative media to open the discussion about the tension between the placeless assumption of “cyberspace” and the situatedness of the media activity and the implications for culture and for the sense of place; and did this by showing some concern about the methodologies and implications for privacy, surveillance and control.

Nevertheless, we can, and must, temper universal information technology design with more helpful attitudes about place. The contextual design of information technologies must now reach beyond the scale of individual tasks to embrace architecture, urbanism, and cultural geography. No methodology exists for this difficult role, but this has already become a problem that is costly to ignore. Since place and culture are intertwined, it follows that more place-centred interaction design becomes a more culturally valuable endeavour. There is no escaping the fact that the world around us is being layered with digital systems. There is no denying our dismay at surveillance, saturation marketing, autonomous annoyances, and relentless entertainment. Whatever our desire for a “sense of place,” we seem destined to get “places with sense” (McCullough 2006: 29).

More recently, locative media has grown within the writings among others of Jason Farman, who have incorporated some materiality and the awareness of the role of infrastructures and interfaces to build a “mobile interface theory” (Farman 2012 and its second edition and update from 2020).

Geomedia

Geomedia is a concept also used in geochemistry (Jenne 1998); but in the media and communication field, the notion is growing in use and in adoption. One of the initial media-related uses of the concept was in a paper about visual studies authored by Francesco Lapenta:

It is my argument that new geomedia imaging technologies are responsible for a new epistemological shift that is redefining the perceptual and symbolic relation between mediated representations and the real objects of reference (Lapenta 2009, 2011).

In the last decade, the concept of geomedia has seen a fundamental boost with a network of growing activity: an edited Routledge book by Fast, Jansson, Tesfahuney, Bengtsson and Lindell (2017); a significant monograph by Scott McQuire (2017) that aligned a decade of work consisting of revisiting the culture and politics of a technologically wired and redefined urban space. And the regular organisation since 2018, of the Geomedia Conference by the Graduate School Locating Media and the CRC Media of Cooperation at the Department of Media Research, University of Siegen, Germany (Geomedia 2021). The event counts now with the participation of the Geomedia Group at Karlstadt University, Sweden (active since 2012) (Geomedia Group 2021).

3. Conquering the geolocated space: geodata is political

As it has been insinuated in the references all along this text, the dispersion, fascination and efforts to “tame” the geolocation data academic fields are not independent from the political efforts to control and own the geodata. Indeed, there is a strong homogenizing drive, that intends to extenuate the “market competition for digital mapping and the control of GPS-enabled devices, triggering debates in the political economy of locative media” (Barreneche 2012)” (Brantner, Rodriguez-Amat & Belinskaya 2021). These factors alter the nature of the politicized space.

Precisely the progressive “enclosure” of the Internet (already described by Andrejevic 2007 under the forms of the surveillance regime) connects with the dynamics of platformization (Van Dijck, Poell & De Waal 2018) and with the effort of appropriation in private hands of the mapping and geolocation features: Zook and Graham among others, have described some of these aspects while talking about Digiplace (2007 + 2007b); Leszczynski (2012) also explored the political economy of the geoweb.

The initial idea of a foot-imprinted (digital) space has been studied as a source for social inequalities. Geodata is about power. Their features are defined by power-based relationships and generate trajectories of influence and of interactive action. Furthermore, geodata alters the notion of space itself not only affecting the shapes of space, or its perceptions; but also the practices that are enabled within that space. Saskia Sassen (2018) has shown this by critically approaching and describing the power of geographies and how frontier areas work as mechanisms of geographic exclusion. Also, Sassen's understanding of space revolves around it as a practice of power (not only as the stage for other power struggles but as power in itself). Such an approach is echoed also in the work by Tonkiss (2005) and her review of Lefebvre's writings. Space exists in relation to power, not as its aprioristic objective condition: space is a social construct. The symbolic value of space imposes meanings onto the practices; space and place matter for the social practices (Brantner & Rodriguez-Amat 2016). This is also how any spatial transgression such as occupying the streets for protests becomes a particularly relevant power challenge.

The public sphere is still a useful notion, but it comes with a caveat. Lost in translation, the idea in German of *Öffentlichkeit* (used extensively by Hannah Arendt already in 1950—compiled in Arendt & Ludz 1993), and then adopted and popularized by Habermas originally in German published in 1962 (1971) refers to the condition of publicness. That notion was fittingly translated into Spanish, as *publicidad* in 1981 (2006); but the later translation in English particularly in the compiled volume by Craig Calhoun (1992), the concept adopted and consolidated the idea of public *sphere*.

The geometric metaphor of a “sphere” has typically projected a problematic idea of a *space* that drags the mathematical features as an homogeneous, continuous, neutral, and objective environment that embeds a rational (fair and idealised) negotiation among equal speakers or participants not conditioned by the spatial context. Similarly, the new space sewn with the activity of ubiquitous geolocated devices with access to networks that have led to an unprecedented amount of location-based

data has emerged as an objectively articulated environment that assumed that aspects such as access, skills, literacy, and availability were the same for all the *netizens* participating in it.

But the public sphere is not a neutral sphere; and the new form of space developed thanks and in combination with the geodata is not neutral either. Instead, the participatory “projects [that] amalgamate media content, data overlays and real-time location data with the aim of re-politicizing urban space and uncovering the hidden, layered subjectivity of urban spaces” (Jethani & Leorke 2013: 488). Are being more and more pushed behind a system of passwords and codes (Adams & Jansson 2012) that conditions access and participation. That inaccessible and selective participator space, however, is not private or concealed: the platformized public space has become transparent and monitored: “CCTV circuits and surveillance cameras hold public space under siege, mobile devices are traceable, and users routinely checking in on social media enable permanent forms of corporate-, peer-, and self-surveillance (Humphreys 2011)” (Rodriguez-Amat & Brantner 2021); and this condition has added complexity to any understanding of the public sphere: the initial Greek-infused distinctions between public, private, needs now to incorporate the transparent spaces to set a new regime of publicness. The public sphere assimilates now to “a form of disowned tax-free publicness systematically ring-fenced by an expansive corporate gesture of platformization (Van Dijck et al. 2018)” (Ibid).

The spearhead of an extended manifestation of research efforts tries to scholarly grasp the new *liquid* complexity of a space that expands, merges online and offline generating complex interactive environments. Symptomatically, Kitchin, Lauriault and Wilson wrote “Spatial media are transforming the production of space and the nature of spatiality” (2017); which aligns with Evans and Perng writing that “knowledge of spaces becomes a complex interdependent process where presence, practices of use, software and data are all intricately linked in producing knowledge and understanding” (2017). As noted by Fernandez (2021) a lot of the interest has turned around the city and the urban life; and the

forms of mobility assisted by digitally enabled devices has challenged old definitions and has required new ones.

In this direction, there have been some recent efforts to update the academic tradition approaching the concept of *public sphere* as an integrative environment of individual, political and social activity, of technologically mediated interactions that needs to be connected again with the territory. Among others, this is what happens with the notion of communicative space: “Democracy has to be grounded on a notion of open and accessible communicative spaces that enable debate, negotiation, struggle, and (dis)agreement.” (Schlesinger 1999); similarly Sarikakis (2015) has used the form *communicative spaces*, but only later Rodriguez and Brantner (2016) among others have extended the notion to consider the online geomediated activity. Among the more recent conceptual efforts, Chadwick (2017 and Chadwick & James 2017) refers to a *hybrid space* that involves the Deleuzian notion of assemblage and describes the space that combines the journalistic work and the platform based online activity. That similar notion of assemblage-particularly in the considerations by DeLanda (2016)- merges with the possibilities of the concept of interface as expanded by Scolari (2021) to inspire the recent work on governance of the communicative spaces that theoretically and methodologically updates the concept of the public sphere. The public sphere can now be understood and researched as the constellation of practices and infrastructures, space, and platformized data as an assemblage that works as an interface for politically shaped social interaction (Brantner, Rodriguez-Amat, Belinskaya 2021).

Research on geodata is expanding and the work does not end with these latest approaches. There is room still for further discussion on what Scolari (2012) called a double-double opportunity: First, geodata is a (new) object of study emerging and living in the social space with amounts of available material and extended possibilities of processing it: critically exploring its limitations, creatively expanding the toolkit for its methodologies, and opening new debates about data representation, data visualization, and data analysis to make it understandable. And second, geodata expands like an interdisciplinary opportunity: geographic and

urban sciences are clearly exploring possibilities of expanding their work towards approaches such as cultural and social media analytics, computing communication studies is a fast-growing field that demands a literate critical discussion about the tensions between the datafied processing of life and its social, cultural and political complexity. From the perspectives of the extension of semiotics of the media and of space as much as other disciplines, there are sound contributions to make, too. The concerns about surveillance, the dream of absolute data-control, and even certain *imperialism* of data-knowledge are not there to be denied; but to be challenged, exposed, and confronted with some heteromatic (Ekbja & Nardi 2017) human presence that reveals the darkened corners of a form of knowledge that hides its own vulnerability behind technological slang and oversized myths: this chapter tries to open, some of them, bare; and to invite to bring the critical debate further.

4. Nowhere to hide: opening strands for further debates

This paper started with a Spanish project that showed how the use of a geodata generated by mobile devices in our pockets and without the users consent but still owned and stored by the big internet providing corporations is ethically problematic. And yet, there is something fascinating about having the opportunity to work with such an amount of geographic data; it might be the love of maps, or the visual and aesthetic possibilities. Data matters, and data with a geographic twist matters more: the data seems to leave us with no place to hide, is it a regime of geolocative data?

Indeed, our daily phone enabled activity generates yottabytes of geolocated data grown from the combined connection with the satellite (GPS) with other devices (Bluetooth) with networks (wi-fi or 4G) or by ourselves just talking about where we are and what we do!

Such an amount of permanently generated information needs to be considered with care: it is vital that we distinguish whatever generated data from the complex and nuanced experiences of what, and where, we live.

This paper starts with a triple distinction that opens spaces for reflection of what and how geodata is made. Within those spaces opening in the splitting distinction, there is an opportunity to identify an interpretive gesture that highlights how geodata has ultimately a constructed nature: geodata is defined by three forms of split: the witness that distinguishes between the phenomenon and its register; the connection and separation between frame and experience (map and point); and the signature that splits the timeline between the being there and the having been there.

The triple split opens two critical lines of interpretive opportunity: first, it shows that those in-between spaces are filled with a constructed and deeply cultural connection-which must be critically explored; and because of that, second, the triple crag also makes visible a circulatory maladjustment between the conditions of production (and of recognition) of the Veronian *meaning lag* embedded within geodata.

These are stimulating opportunities for further critical discussion and this is an open invitation for dedicated empirical analytical research that explores cases of how those spaces are filled in every case: this paper has left the bones of the nature of geodata at plain sight, and the work can now be taken from there.

The following section of this chapter has dealt with the conceptual diversity of the research on media and geodata; mentioning some of the most relevant concepts and focusing specifically on the three most popular: geoweb, locative media, and geomedia. These three concepts connect the main trends in the research involving geolocation data and media; but the exploration of the trading zone must also be taken as an opportunity for further research that maps the concepts and the nuances of their research; and probably that extends in time-backwards with an archaeological or an evolutionary approach that looks into the merging of interfaces, codes and languages combined with their social and cultural adoption and political implementation and regulation.

Finally, this paper has considered power and space; and there it has identified the latest updates on debates about the public sphere that incorporate the new ecosystem of the geodata constellation by treating it as an assemblage of infrastructures, practices, interactions, and devices that build an interface for the political and social-symbolic debate.

There is still work to be done. The early conditions of the geospatial web of the late nineties have dramatically changed with an internet infrastructure occupied by global data corporations; commercial software and privately owned platforms have turned the political debates into posh and tight ring-fenced pool parties served and amused by bots and censored by conservative social media moderation principles; and the datafied and platformised societies combine their leisure-like features with extractivist and colonial understandings of the world. Between the bright-coloured three-centimetre mowed grass mansions and the suburbs of formless favelas of cramped unheard-of users, the debates about the fundamentally cultural nature of data, and the need to break the transparent bullet-proof wall are displaced from the centre of scandalized gazes. Geodata is a form of data, it is a growing field for innovative research, and it is-how very much- politically shaped from its core to its uses.

This chapter has not yet talked about ownership, or about infrastructures of processing and of storage of data; it has not described the geographies of the data extractivism, or the ethical limitations and counterweights of its consideration. This chapter has not explored the costs -environmental, economic, cultural- associated to the processing of geodata. All those belong to the debates about its epistemology, and they all insist on the geodata regime of permanent presence, and of permanent location: the mobile phones did not set us free, they kept us leashed in a constantly visible geography; and it is necessary to keep these debates open to explore it further. This chapter has only shown some of the bare bones of its wiring; it will take some more little hitting if we want-at the end- the crystal window to finally shatter in a thousand pieces ■

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Big Data in the Spotlight: echoes of an uncertain transition

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Abstract

Social science research is increasingly permeated by the use of big data in the construction of objects of study and their resulting theoretical-methodological approach. Now then, what senses are involved when addressing large amounts of data and what is their impact in the design of a new research project? This article proposes an answer to such questions by explaining the main problems in relation to social science research on objects of study that entail the use of big data. In addition, some considerations are shared with respect to the updated discussions on objectivity and truth which come into play with the use of said materials, with emphasis on aspects that are considered inescapable, such as those associated with the very generation of such data. Finally, the main dilemmas derived from said materials' safekeeping and retention are presented, implying new decisions in relation to the management of digital files.

Keywords

Big data, social sciences, research, file, discourse

1. Introduction

Utopias, desires and realities around big data and their use in social sciences have occupied much space in both academic and journalistic considerations. The assumption that all data on the Internet, as a result of its purported easy and free access, is available for everyone who is interested in its compilation and approach must, at the very least, be placed in the spotlight. Just as the arrival of the Internet brought about new concerns and modified the modes of approaching our objects of study, social sciences are still going through a stage in which caution in the use of macrodata¹ should be the rule, rather than the exception. If we consider, along with Verón (2013), that the importance of WWW does not lie in the last W ('web') but in the first two ('world wide'), it may then be understood that "the emergent element is then the scope, the field of application, rather than the concept" (p. 278, authors' translation). Thus if a revolution in the access unfolds, we should ask ourselves: access to what and access by whom?

This article aims to account for the main insights into the epistemological and methodological problems that stem from the approach to objects of study entailing the use of big data.

This exploration shall involve questioning the assumption that all current social research, in order to be considered relevant, must *necessarily* work with large amounts of data, whether to describe, explain or predict a certain phenomenon. On the other hand, and for research projects that effectively require big data for their conduct, we shall recover the theoretical advances on the area, to account for certain problems associated with these works. Veracity, objectivity, neutrality, representativeness and ethical dilemmas (Meneses Rocha 2018) are presented as axes to explore.

Quandaries in relation to the qualitative and quantitative aspect reappear when accounting for these problems, in what not only seems to be an update of such discussion but also the manifestation of the very

1. The term "macrodata" shall be used as a synonym of "big data".

power of truth attributed to the amount of data. Actually, the “scientific common sense”, if we may say, seems to assume that these data—which are *per se* neutral—, guarantee great success in research, leaving inescapable aspects aside: the actual generation of data, the relations established between one another, the context in which they are produced, among other variables.

Finally, keeping such a huge amount of digital material, specially that which is pulled out from social media sites on the Internet, leads to the configuration of a new archive form that deserves to be studied. Is it a mere aggregation of confusing information or, on the contrary, a collection of materials that require the deployment of particular strategies and operations of accessibility and safekeeping? Are we thus living an era in which metadata are configured as its new archive and therefore constitute a legacy to future generations? We shall delve into these questions throughout this article.

2. Big data, senses and associated problems

We shall begin by explaining what we mean when we talk about big data. A possible path to move toward this question is determined by the definition of “data” itself. Puschmann & Burguess (2014a) carried out an interesting exploration of the various senses of this term in order to understand how it emerges, and a certain notion of big data gets stabilized. In the first place, “data” refers to “something given” (in Spanish, *‘algo dado’*). With the advent of the 40’s, this meaning is supplemented with the advance in digitalization and employed to describe any kind of information used and stored in the computing environment. In contrast with the term “data”, which emerged essentially linked to the field of math and theology, big data develops in its early days in the sphere of business. The new technical infrastructure and the capacity of interrogating large volumes of data in order to make predictions characterized the 60’s: “Big data marked a suggested shift from relational database management systems to platforms that offered long-term performance advantages over traditional solutions” (Puschmann & Burguess, 2014a,

p. 1694). This idea of prediction still flies over scientific discourse, in a sort of utopian longing. As Diviani (2018) suggests, this longing “is based on one of the basic aspects of the technical device that arouses great fascination: the alleged faculty of predicting future phenomena. However, is it possible to predict social and human phenomena?” (p. 14, authors’ translation).

A very different case is, for instance, that of those studies which, from the use of big data and driven in real time, mark the evolution of a phenomenon like the worldwide spread of COVID-19², carried out by Johns Hopkins Center for Systems Science and Engineering. The map was publicly shared by mid-January 2020, and developed with the purpose of providing investigators, journalists, government agencies, and citizens in general a reliable and up-to-date data source in real time at world level. All data have been made available free of charge through a GitHub repository, and its code can be accessed for shared use on different platforms. The map is both automatically and manually updated and verified with official reports disclosed by the health authority of every country.

The change is far from minor: phenomena that seemed to be immeasurable so far begin to unfold at least as possible objects of study. It is clear that the use of big data as a methodology of analysis is necessary and useful insofar as it is in line with the research questions and objectives that guide a certain study. In any case, as Diviani (2018) posits,

...what should be evaluated, actually, are two ideas that accompany grandiloquent and enthusiastic assertions, which are closer to marketing than to the scientific field: the idea of the Big, which is a positive value by itself, and the piece of data is a portion of the neutral and objective ‘reality’ (Diviani 2018: 20/21, authors’ translation).

We shall come back to the idea of neutrality and objectivity later in this document.

In this sense, several authors agree on characterizing big data based on “3 Vs”: volume, velocity and variety. Tascón (2013) suggests, on his part, a fourth V: visualization, as an important part in connection to big data is

2. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html> (last visit: March 13, 2020)

related to the way in which such data can be seen. Besides, Sosa Escudero (2019) contributes with a fourth one: veracity, “a term that refers to the fact that the noisy and spontaneous nature of big data pieces of data is in contrast with that of traditional survey or bureaucratic data, usually subject to strict validation exercises” (p. 32, authors’ translation). That said, limiting ourselves to the specific sphere of social sciences, at least two data typologies may be distinguished: on the one hand, as shown by Manovich (2012), *surface data* and *deep data*; on the other hand, various authors (Boyd and Crawford, 2012, Kitchin & Lauriault, 2015; Meneses Rocha, 2018) also differentiate between *big data* and *small data*.

In the first case, data are linked to different spheres of knowledge. Surface data is associated with quantitative methodologies that allow for data access over many; whereas deep data is closely related to qualitative methodologies that have made it possible to get to know particular problems but with a higher degree of specificity. As regards the second distinction, the *small data* capture “occurs in a controlled manner and responds to a deliberate statistical and conceptual design” (Meneses Rocha 2018: 422). The “three Vs” exhibit vast differences in both cases. In *small data*, volume and variety are limited, and velocity is slow. In the case of *big data*, on the contrary, volume is practically unlimited, velocity is high and constant, and variety is wide.

Just as we highlighted the importance of the possibility of accessing a large amount of data for both sciences in general and social sciences in particular, we should also observe the economic and political value these huge amounts of data have. It is clear that this is due to the fact that data –unlike those obtained from completing a survey– are “anarchic and spontaneous” (Sosa Escudero 2019: 31). Turning the cellphone GPS on in order to get to a certain location, taking a photo with geolocation or opening an *app* inevitably generates a set of data that were originally produced with the only purpose of getting somewhere on time or taking a picture of something interesting. In connection with this, problems and disputes over data privacy arise. Data mostly belong to technology companies –most of them located in the United States: Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple and Microsoft– and their obtainment for the purpose of

knowledge production becomes a difficult task, if not impossible³. Regarding privacy, the Cambridge Analytica scandal that became known in 2018 unveiled the arguable ploys for data use with political purposes, with no user consent. In addition, it should be noted that logging into any social network requires the acceptance of a set of terms and conditions that, either due to their extension or technicality –almost obscurantist–, very few users are able to understand. Thus, data “are not pulled out from us automatically, but through social relations to which at some point, though retrospectively, we have supposedly consented” (Mejías & Couldry 2019: 89, authors’ translation). In this sense, a sort of mousetrap is generated: the acceptance of such terms and conditions becomes the necessary condition for platform access.

After this brief overview, we may define big data following boyd and Crawford (2012) as a cultural, technological and academic phenomenon, based on the interaction of:

(1) Technology: maximizing computation power and algorithmic accuracy to gather, analyze, link, and compare large data sets. (2) Analysis: drawing on large data sets to identify patterns in order to make economic, social, technical, and legal claims. (3) Mythology: the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy (boyd and Crawford 2012: 663).

A technological, analytical and mythological aspect is deduced from the *supra* definition given, which would generate, as the authors express, an aura of truth, objectivity and precision. This is, above all, what seems to revive the discussion about quantitative and qualitative approaches; or what may be named, after specialized literature on the matter, a new form of empiricism: the pre-eminence of data over theory. This kind of “return” to data puts a double strain: on the one hand, on the type of data collected; on the other hand, on the way they are interpreted. We

3. Twitter has recently announced changes in its data access policy regarding public conversations for investigators. Please see https://blog.twitter.com/es_la/topics/product/2021/haciendo-posible-futura-investigacion-academica-twitter-api.html (visit date: February 02, 2021)

agree that, as Tagnin (2019) states, the questions posed in social sciences after the arrival of big data “revive historical debates on the criteria used to explain the domains of legitimate objects in scientific discourse” (n/p, authors’ translation). The actual possibility of relying on substantial amounts of data, replicating relations at various levels, could be understood as a new stage in which resorting to them makes it possible to find *evidence* of social life⁴.

Now, we shall focus on the senses associated with big data. As we have already said, data seem to exhibit, *per se*, a significant share of truth, objectivity and neutrality. At first, it is necessary to take into account that every piece of data is not equivalent to an extracted portion, with no mediation, of reality. On the contrary, data used to conduct scientific research are social constructs, representations of certain phenomena that “do not exist outside of ideas, instruments, practices and the context framing their creation and interpretation” (Meneses Rocha 2018: 424, authors’ translation). The investigators’ critical and thoughtful view is still as necessary as the data nourishing works. Besides, another crucial aspect is related to the representativeness of the extracted data based on the phenomenon under analysis, the research questions and the objectives of each study. As stated in a previous work (Gindin and Busso 2018), the warning about this representativeness results “not only from the enormous amounts of information which are potentially unmanageable based on qualitative analysis, but also from dealing with an ever-expanding data universe whose frontiers are unknown” (p. 32, authors’ translation). Hence, the convenient question posed by Cingolani and Fernández (2018): “which criterion should be applied to build representativeness if we do not know where the universe hits bottom?” (p. 160, authors’ translation). For instance, in the case of Twitter, Gaffney & Puschmann (2014) warn about under- or overvaluing the extracted data from accounts on this social network with respect to the general population. This is, how representative are Twitter users in relation to the society as a whole? And, apart from that, if we formulate hypotheses in relation to the population of Twitter users, how shall we measure users

4. For instance, sociology and the use of surveys to explain certain types of social behavior.

who only post a tweet occasionally with respect to those who do it all the time?

Within this frame of big data-associated senses, Puschamn & Burgues (2014a) analyze two metaphors used in the press⁵ which enable us to consider the effects of a set of socially-circulating ideas. The first suggests that big data should be understood as a *natural force that should be under control*: a homogeneous mass where essential, valuable, hard-to-control and ubiquitous data coexist. Besides, the link with water implies attaching a neutral value: water is insipid and colorless. Now, the possibility of drowning in such data torrent is also an imminent and constant danger. The second metaphor presents big data as a *food or fuel to be consumed*, and in this regard authors point out two possible paths. On the one hand, the idea that big data is an indispensable fuel for survival; on the other hand –and on the opposite side of the same coin– big data appears as a fuel that feeds companies, for example. As authors assert, “both food and fuel must be consumed to exist and to move forward rather than being consciously used” (p. 1700).

The arrival and consolidation of big data has also led to the shaping of new disciplinary fields, such as digital humanities, computer social sciences and data sciences⁶, among others, in some way blurring disciplinary boundaries. Therefore, we can easily see the need for some imbrication between “traditional” approaches and knowledge linked to computer sciences; an imbrication that also expects social scientists to “understand realistically and critically the transformation of data into useful knowledge for society” (Meneses Rocha 2018: 416, authors’ translation). Machine learning methods, located in the frontier between statistics and computer studies, seem to tackle –at least for now– the challenge of

5. Examples have been taken from *The Wall Street Journal*, *Forbes*, and *Business Insider*, *Wired* and *Computerworld*, *The Chronicle Herald*, *USA Today*, *World Future Society*, and *Booz & Company*.

6. For the specific case of Twitter, we suggest reading Gaffney & Puschmann (2014), who describe the various tools which are currently available to collect data, showing their capacities and their limitations. In order to learn other techniques used that are not necessarily related to Twitter, we recommend reading Arcila-Calderón, Barbosa-Caro and Cabezuelo-Lorenzo (2016).

handling these data volumes: a computer process is supposed to learn automatically, on the basis of any predefined criterion. To an increasing extent, an inter-disciplinary approach is becoming a mandatory passage point for the conduct of serious works which do not disregard the limitations that have been pointed out along these pages.

3. Memory and archive in the era of Big Data

The presence of big data, both as work input and as a theoretical-methodological dilemma, confronts social analysts with the problems mentioned above, but not just that. Apart from the questions associated with building analysis corpora and the expertise needed to manage them, the existence of large volumes of information on tastes, consumptions, opinions, commutes, from considerable numbers of persons, make it imperative to reflect on the *temporality* of such contents; or rather, on how they make up an *archive*, in the sense of an activity log of Internet users.

As mentioned above (Gindin y Busso 2018), social scientists who decide to undertake research by using big data are forced to solve delicate issues regarding their access, as well as their gathering and systematization processes. Such operations also impose the acknowledgment of a particular temporal dimension update: not just because of involving content which is inevitably produced in the more or less recent past, or more or less remote past, but also because this access entails certain omissions, gaps or *oversights*.

It is not a case of selective lack of memory, but a technical impossibility: even though there is a sort of extended certainty that it is possible to access every material present on the Internet, in practice many times it is impossible to retrieve the material produced thoroughly. By way of example, the case of Twitter can be mentioned, in which the platform itself, even though enabling the collection of tweets posted there, only allows access to part of them⁷.

7. As Gaffney & Puschmann (2014) point out, one of the greatest difficulties in studies

Certainly, the material collected –including its omissions– is still substantial, even immeasurable. But the recognition of these discontinuities enables us to emphasize the complexities of a role that, maybe involuntarily but compulsorily, must be taken on by those who use this kind of materials: a kind of new archivist, a person who is co-responsible for managing the *memory* of digital spaces.

We understand the archive as a construct created by the investigator, showing specific arrangement logics and safekeeping mechanisms: both define the need for a precise reading order, which is closely related to the space and the time in which it is brought into play. Thus, the archive “is neither the reflection of the event nor its proof or evidence. It must always be worked on by constantly cutting and mounting it with other files” (Didi-Huberman 2007: 7, authors’ translation). What is challenged here with these assertions is that the presence of large amounts of data, which are often capable of providing hyper-detailed and thorough information about actions and behaviors, does not necessarily imply an exhaustive reservoir of *everything* that happens.

In fact, what is preserved and protected results from different operations: some are more automatic, involving data retrieval, and others are rather intentional, such as the decision on what to retrieve and then what should be kept. In an increasingly mediatized society (Verón 2013), in which the pace of social life is directly related with media presence –as well as its associated technologies–, the recognition of that archival activity is not banal, as it implies making intelligible those huge amounts of preserved information (Freire 2009), where multiple negligible and everyday voices displayed in different Internet spaces also emerge, and may thus get a precarious guarantee of protection... or at least that is entailed.

As a matter of fact, in mediatized societies just as we have known them so far, it has mainly been ‘traditional’ mass media that have been descri-

based on data from Twitter results from the technical infrastructure of the platform itself. There is currently no way to know how thorough is the retrieval of a data set based on what has been originally posted: “without firehose access, researchers rely entirely on Twitter to provide a representative sample of what is there” (p. 65)

bed as vehicles of the human experience memory, suggesting recollections and interpretations of a shared past which involves the individual memory (Lavabre 2007). It is a *memory culture* (Huyssen 2002), whose other side is great fear of oblivion and amnesia (Guasch 2005). Nowadays, however, we may venture that it is big data that has been considered the depository of that memory, though mixing up the mere storage of information and the accessibility and synthesis activities it requires, and making omissions and discontinuities invisible in the information as accounted for earlier.

With these safeguards in place, we may state that big data is in effect a powerful scope of archive for contemporary memory, allowing us to preserve an amount of information with a degree of thoroughness which was inconceivable until recently. However, acknowledging this does not mean closing other safekeeping spheres where the voices of those who do not participate in the digital exchange show up; it is true that this number is becoming increasingly smaller, but it is still consistent: if we take the data retrieved from the Internet as an example, we discover that by January 2021, 59.5% of the global population was online⁸. Along with this, the nuances, the contextual and sense-related resending, as well as certain dialogues involving several significant materialities, which cannot be retrieved in that huge data memory.

In addition, as it has been anticipated earlier, the presence of this large amount of data and its storage does not imply that adequate safekeeping and intelligibility policies are in place. Firstly, the substantial character of the stored information requires large physical spaces (the so-called *data centers*) to keep servers and hard disks for data storage, in an *in crescendo* fashion that requires increasingly new material capacities⁹. Secondly, and retaking Foucault's concept of *archeology*, we can understand that there exist specific practices around big data that give them an order, an

8. Source: *Digital 2021*. 'We Are Social' Annual Report, available on <https://wearesocial.com/digital-2021> (last visit: February 2, 2021).

9. For instance, see <https://www.ibm.com/blogs/systems/donde-esta-el-almacenamiento-de-datos-con-big-data/> and <https://fractaliasystems.com/2016/08/03/big-data-donde-se-almacena/> (last visit: March 20, 2020)

organization, an internal distribution: “splitting it up in levels, establishing series, distinguishing what is relevant from what is not, pointing out elements, defining units, describing relations and producing discourses” (Guasch 2005: 160, authors’ translation). That part of the archive that is made visible and apprehensible is then the result of operations which, in terms of social research, are linked to the definition of an object of study, the work hypotheses in relation to them, and the systematization and analysis techniques put into play. That is to say, a voluntary and even systematic operation is needed to *make* such great amount of available information *say* something.

Probably, at this point, we can state that with big data we are facing a new change in the forms of recognition and interpretation of the world. We believe that it not only involves outlining the construction of sensitive experiences in relation to that *being with others*, but also defining which topics are worthy of attention, becoming an exceptional instrument of knowledge about this common being. Ultimately, by paraphrasing Sorlin (2004), we may say that these dilemmas will shape the debate on what characterizes modern society, by preserving or leaving out *data* about it, which shall be accessed by future generations.

4. Conclusions

To give this last section of the work the name “conclusions”, based on the foregoing, is indeed a contradiction. The possible scenarios that open up around the use of big data are, to say the least, vast, and branch out in various spheres. Social sciences, economy, politics, sociology and communication sciences, among others, are probably witnessing a deep and irreversible change with respect to the very definition of their objects of study and the methodological strategies designed for such purpose.

However, and to sum up, we know that big data (and their corresponding *small data*, *deep data*, etc.) is not a mere neutral aggregate of available information for everyone, but rather a complex cultural, technological and academic phenomenon which requires the investigator taking clear epistemological positions, and not just that. Although it is true that many national states and governments consider it as an increasingly vital in-

put when it comes to weighing public policies, and that even political representation mechanisms –for that matter– seem to be modified by the possibility of collecting and using large amounts of data in relation to the most insignificant behaviors of citizens, an open-eyed reflection is also crucial here.

In this sense, the enthusiasm for what is understood as a great opportunity to learn about citizens' behaviors and values, based on the tracks left on different digital spaces where they participate, is clearly noteworthy. Besides, these tracks social media users, for example, leave on their way quickly become an object of consumption; data are sold and purchased giving shape to a business ecosystem (Puschmann & Burguess 2014b). This –true– possibility should not hide its opaque character to some extent: as mentioned above, neither do data speak for themselves nor are they unconnected to research or politics' interests; and going further, data do not even have the power to account for the whole social world.

What is left out, either due to the temporal ellipses of the gathering activity itself or because they are activities with no track on the digital world, should also be understood as part of the discursiveness of an era, even though it is not taken into consideration when discussing macrodata and related items. Metaphors used to refer to big data (like the one which presents it as a force of nature and the other which compares it with a fuel to be consumed) enable us to think about the nuances of that concept, in spite of their failure to encompass precisely what falls outside of them.

To reflect on the social scientist's task in this context requires us not to elude these disputes. It may probably be an exaggeration to say that we are facing a major change of era just because of the presence of big data, but we are certainly able to assert that its implications constitute a point of no return in the scopes intended for science... and for the political task associated with it. Examples are numerous, such as the possibility of predicting the route of virus spread (as it has been explored to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic) based on the macrodata collected on population commuting and contact between persons; or the proposal to recognize the social (bad) mood in the face of a given public-interest argument.

However, we should not forget that not *everyone* can make such predictions and not *everything* is included there. Again, the availability of such data is not the only required condition: technical and cognitive skills are also critical to apply them, and the material and economic availability might as well be necessary for the purpose.

There is no doubt that big data will not be the only one telling about us in the future, but also these discussions, acting as echos of a scenario in uncertain transformation ■

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