

## Communicating through the ‘boundaries’ of a globalized world

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**Abstract:** The moment when an interpersonal encounter takes place through dialogue is followed by either consent or dissent, but also by the blunting (or in any case diminution) of complexity. The juxtaposition of global and local is a compromise that is ambiguous in itself. On one hand, globalization seems capable of influencing democratic potential and therefore the inter-group relations that would be enacted through ‘globalized’ and/or localized encounters. On the other hand, the dissolution of boundaries counters the increase of democratic potential with new forms of power distribution, whose ambiguity should be overcome by the increase in communication ability. Globalization seems to provide a chance for greater entitlement to speak and therefore more certain access to the ‘truth’ in democratic contexts where discussion is envisaged. The word is a ‘wager of civilisation’ and it goes unfulfilled when it becomes an instrument of power: due to the simple fact of being ‘taken’, it is capable of changing the order of things and, above all, of human realities. The second issue relates to the autobiographical explosion, the fact of telling about oneself brought about by social pressure; since this is not new, the notion of parrhesia by Foucault will be referred to. Finally, the polemic concerning the democraticity of the net relating to the conditions of truth and circulating knowledge (local rumours turning into net rumours; both the first and the latter are difficult to control, the latter with greater diffusion and virulence).

**Keywords:** globalized world, parrhesia, localized encounters, democratic contexts, autobiographical explosion.

### 1. Introduction

Much has been said about globalization in the last few decades, with two contrasting meanings assigned to the word: hope for responsible inclusion of all human beings, on the one hand; a forecast of the end of the tie of all that is private and local, on the other.

The lack of precise content of the word “globalization” makes it possible for the term to become a wide-ranging label, referring to the current state of the world and to the future. It is very difficult for the debate to emerge because the phenomenon of globalization and the effort required to understand it are real. It certainly is an aspect of mature modernity, the age that has developed and realized communications systems and “transport” systems (movement of money, people and goods) [1] that were simply unthinkable in previous centuries. In such mature modernity, two tightly intertwined levels may be found. The first one is of a structural type and has to do with the increasing integration of economic and financial systems: markets become globalized and free the economic forces from all constraints imposed by politics. The second level is of a subjective kind, and is conceptualized in terms of diversification and interconnection. It highlights a close link between the psychological and structural aspect, a link that globalization helped radicalize. Thus each individual belongs to a specific ensemble of social circles, leading him/her to individualization: this is precisely where problems arise in building a shared world. [2]

The complexity typifying contemporary society may be attributed to the upheaval of the traditional order, forcing individuals and institutions to redefine their identities and strategies. This, in turn, is reflected not only in innovation, but in social control as well. [3] Contemporary man is truly a “fractal subject”, he is fragmented into a multitude of selves, one similar to the others. Consequently, he is no longer alienated,

nor torn or isolated, because he/she is complete, he/she no longer needs others, and lives submerged by communication and information. [4]

In contemporaneity, the subject undergoes strong unfulfilling pressures and discovers new forms of subjectivity. The “new” notion of identity includes continuity on one hand, and the effort to preserve the self on the other, notwithstanding the inconstancy and multiplicity of states and of meaning, that are ever changing (Tessarolo, 1994). Culture in itself is culture of what is relative. It is open to exchanges and confrontations, to the sophistications of doubt. When it takes the way of traditional media, it resorts to an official – and therefore strong – language. Such language tends to deny the realities that are currently fading, as well as those that are in the process of being formed, in order to support well defined characters and stable identities.

## **2. Public opinion and individual information**

One of the problems connected with the search for “real truth”, or complete and unmanipulated information, would suggest on the one hand the sense of agreement or consistency with a given objective reality, and on the other hand the modes of production and distribution of information. The increased ability and possibility to access and to provide information seems to open up the possibility of greater “popular” control.

Television and newspapers rely on data and facts that are circulated by specialist agencies that, in turn, check the accuracy and honesty of their sources of information. [5] The information provided may be more or less correct, but its content cannot be doubted. For the subject, each reality has specific rules of its own: the subject reads them symbolically by deactivating his/her attention from other adjacent realities. Such other realities tend to enter the reality the subject is focusing on, but they must be kept out, or at least at the edge of the subject’s awareness. The Goffmanian subject interprets and appropriates the relationship that succeeds in conveying the best representation of the self. [6]

Contemporary man is “neutralized” precisely because he is surrounded by an unlimited supply of information. He may access a fragmented knowledge or a form of entertainment (infotainment). The taming of the public, in fact, always takes place by means of excess of information, not deprivation. [7]. The entities that are still hyper-codified and do not yet belong to shared codifications, fluctuate between convention and innovation, and only a slow and prudent process leads to their being authorized and recognized as rules by an institutionalized society.

One of the most interesting transformations in the “taming” process concerns the shaping of opinion. The difference between reason and opinion was known in ancient times. Plato regarded opinion as knowledge lacking truth/validity, and located it in an intermediate area between ignorance and knowledge. It was only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century [8] that opinion started to be considered as a set of judgements spread among the public and concerning current topics on which subjects express their opinion. By adhering to opinions that are spread, subjects express attitudes that may be evaluated on an objective scale. Consequently, shared opinions exist when a factor of uniformity among several individuals emerges in their repetitiveness, notwithstanding possible variables in attitude. The construction of public opinion, therefore, takes place by mechanisms that hide the reason for the subject’s opinion to the subject him/herself, while leaving the illusion of an autonomous decision.

The complexity of public opinion and possible agreement are identified and discussed by Habermas and Luhmann. Habermas notices that the simple fact of “agreeing” says nothing about the truth or goodness of that on which one agrees: in communicative action, the validity of “meaning connections” is ingenuously supposed in order to exchange information. For this reason, in discourse, complex expectations of validity become a theme, but there is no exchange of information. We should also bear in mind that social worlds are not entities with accurate, measurable and well defined contours, even though they impose their existence. The understanding between communicators is the major assumption

in communication; aspects that cannot be reconciled with such assumption must therefore be removed. According to Luhmann, communication derives from the synthesis of three contingent selections: information, transmission of messages and understanding. Understanding makes it possible to accept or reject communication as a premise of one's own behaviour. [9]

Public opinion starts from contextualized reality related to the individuals' cultural frames and needs, but it is then abnormally enlarged and made "common" by the media, so much so as to involve a wider public. [10]

### **2.1. Information on the net and the new information systems**

The net opened the way to the electronic newspaper, which was one of the most profound transformations in the modes of information. The electronic newspaper allows access to all daily news, and not only: also to previous news, related articles and articles that have never been published in print media due to lack of space. When *Daily Me* was created in the early Nineties, the thinking was that users would only read the news and topics that were considered important and consistent with their favourite readings, thus leading them to being impermeable to contact with different opinions and topics and pushing them towards desocialization, locking readers each in his/her own "niche". [11]

Journalism on the net represents a selection of the most significant facts, but also a useful means for finding all that a person needs. While we may speak of an "education" of the reader carried out by the printed newspapers, a veritable training place for participation, assisting the development of a form of informative democracy, that may have immense consequences of a social and political kind, the elimination of the filtering function, though not a guarantee of quality, facilitates access to the information stage for anyone who has ideas and contents to share. [12]

So we witness a crumbling of mediation forms and a weakening of mediators on the one hand; and a thickening of individual subjectivity on the other. The individual inside the logic of information flow is directly confronted with all of the meanings that continuously pour into the social space. [13] In the space of modernity there exist a very large number of legitimate mediators, occupying positions that are identifiable and that may be referred to different stages of the individual's life. Mediation and mediators construct the "possible worlds" to which individuals looking for information will adjust. [14]

Nowadays subjectivity is based on a principle of heterogeneity that constructs by way of reflection: it constructs the meaning and it makes the reader aware of the different planes of reality of the various experiences. Social experience is not only an absorbing sponge, it is a way of constructing the world. The filtering phase is the action of "making sense of experience" accomplished by the individual after using fragments that are more or less organized, and in any case useful for implementing new resources.

### **2.2 How the prosumer is born**

The change in conditions facilitating the relationship between media and culture is at the source of contemporary participatory cultures, catching the transforming elements in the modes of production, distribution and consumption of symbolic forms, where a discontinuity is evident in comparison with modern conditions and consolidated paradigms. [15] Such oscillations constitute the terminal point of the subject's transformation from spectator to producer.

The consumer of (political, but also commercial) information, besides taking the role of user, becomes buyer of goods and spreader of opinions on the same goods. [16]

When the Internet diversified, blogs, social networks etc. were created alongside portals. Users could express their opinions thanks to collaboration software (wiki), useful for updating and for accumulating posts and documents. On social sites and networks, every user can create his/her own page and offer his/her judgements, [17] connecting to other users. This is how the "prosumer" is born, with a word synthesizing producer and consumer.

The desire to actively participate in the production of information starts with man. A hint to rumours [18] is sufficient: they are connected with daily events that have not been checked yet, still they are going to be believed. Rumours are transmitted by word of mouth, without concrete data allowing their truthfulness to be verified. They try to convince and are based on improvised news, resulting from a process of collective discussion. The source of a rumour is a significant and/or ambiguous event. Rumours are created by putting the group's intellectual resources together in order to find a plausible interpretation of an event. [19] It is a process of information dispersal, and at the same time a process of interpretation and comment. But it is also a collective action aimed at making sense of facts that have not yet been explained. This means that information remains ambiguous, to a certain extent, but that the topic, the subject to which it is related, is important. Through rumours, hearsay and allegations, the group has an influence on what must "be thought", in other words: what the group itself "thinks". Rumours are also a vehicle for social cohesion, [20] all the discussions they generate are an expression of the opinion of the group with which the subject identifies him/herself: the speed of rumours depends on the vagueness of the news content.

It is an aim of social networks to share information, and this is generally "against official information", in which citizens have little confidence. More confidence, in fact, is attributed to an event or a way of thinking that comes from the members of our social network. [21] Such forms of transmission are based on contributions by individual subjects: a satisfied consumer is a good informer for a certain product. [22] This communication mode is characteristic and it perfectly expresses the current autobiographical explosion: the urge to tell about oneself, to document through photographs or other materials, comes from a social pressure that is not new. A reference to the notion of "parrhesia" examined by Foucault is useful. [23] In its literal meaning, parrhesia includes both the freedom to say everything that is deemed true, and an unrestrained frankness of expression. The meaning of the word, then, relates not only to the act of speaking in public, but also to the acknowledgement that all citizens are entitled to speak. [24] Perhaps for the first time in the history of information, all those who have access to a social network can express their thinking and take part in the discussion: the net, in fact, allows one to make his/her voice heard. Communication through the net is often of viral style; in any case, it means looking for an explanation that does not come from official sources. In times of trouble such as ours, groups willing to close themselves off in order to keep out those who could have a destabilizing effect on the situation find more supporters. The greatest impetus is for an increase in hateful content, racism, exclusion, fake news, exposing the fears through which it is easier to uncritically accept distorted information promising to reduce problems.

According to the theory of social identity, people strive to retain a positive identity by participating in groups where they feel more at ease, or where they can have a positive experience of belonging. People choose convergence or divergence in communication in order to signal a distinctive character of the group, to reinforce a social identity.

In the contemporary age, truth – perhaps better, post-truth [25] – is regarded as an issue of secondary importance. The Internet allows the spreading, in real time and with viral modes, of fake news, disinformation, hoax stories and propaganda. Post-truth circulates on the net and spreads to social networks, triggering a mechanism according to which the objectivity of facts exerts less and less influence on public opinion and is a limit to the exchange of opinions, that is an essential element in democracy. In politics, post-truth and hoax stories become an infinitely repeated monologue that replaces the dialogue between opposing parties. [26]

The tendency to reinforce pre-existing opinions did not go unnoticed on the net and personalized filters have been developed for the information technology diet: someone selects what could be interesting for us on the basis of specific accesses to the net. Anyone who has used Google even just once has access to previously selected information, a diet allowing the user to immediately find the information that is

deemed relevant, but in which the perspectives that differ from our way of thinking are disregarded – thus depriving us of discussion and exchange. Google introduced the “personalized search” as early as 2009, allowing users to be informed *ad hoc* on the topics deemed more relevant (such as, for example: reasons to say no to vaccinations for children, groups of new mothers and breastfeeding, pro-anorexia groups etc.). The sites presented by Google, in this case, are precisely the ones that confirm our expectations. The tendency to confirm previously-held opinions is also very strong in face-to-face communication. The exposure to contrary information is avoided and our convictions are confirmed and reinforced (confirmation bias). Taken to excess by technology, such pre-selection overrides discussion and exchange as ways to peacefully solve divergences among groups. Social networks are one of the most frequent ways of accessing information, and the social effects of the filters in use is evident [27]. On many platforms online, the default option is set for the “information bubble”; that, in turn, may generate “echo chambers” with consequent negative effects. Hence the need for an intervention on research platforms, i.e. search engines and social networks, in order to avoid mental shortcuts. This is technically possible by “regrooming”, that is, using a frame of reference that avoids reinforcing a notion thanks to discussion and explanation.

Globalization seems to provide a chance for greater entitlement to speak, and therefore more certain access to the “truth” in democratic contexts where discussion is envisaged. [28] The word should be a “wager of civilisation”, but it goes unfulfilled when it becomes an instrument of power: due to the simple fact of being “taken”, it is capable of changing the order of things and, above all, of human realities. [29] Even in exit polls, the occurrence of the “bandwagon effect” is not always confirmed. Neither is there any evidence for the theory that individuals or groups tend to give more credit and relevance to a given action or fact because it is strongly supported by the majority. For example, in the past there was a tendency to vote for those candidates who had a greater chance of succeeding, or who were sponsored by the media; this allowed electors to more likely find themselves on the side of the “winner” after the election.

A second effect determined by the loser’s supporters is the “underdog effect”. This used to be characteristic of those who had a strong ideology, motivating them not to abandon their party even if it was in minority. This effect is now visible in the protest vote exerted by those who recognize themselves in the forecast of election polls, but fear that the forecast victory could lean too much towards the winning option (in case of a referendum) or winning candidate (in an election). This is what happened with the startling final result of the Brexit vote. In contrast with the very clear victory forecast by the polls for the “Remain” option, the other option prevailed thanks to the many voters who supported the “losing” option while thinking that they were part of the protest minority, and unexpectedly generated the opposite effect.

## **Conclusion**

The words “culture” and “society” used to be regarded as coinciding terms. Every society featured a relatively homogeneous culture and every culture could live and reproduce itself in a given society. Today, the multiplicity of cultures is exponential and it challenges industrial production, the financial market, mobility and trade; nonetheless, a globally interconnected world is as remote a reality as a classless society. [30]

The plurality of worlds in which the individual lives is characteristic of contemporary society. The individual must reconstruct the sense of today’s world, a plural world, complex, fragmented and liquid; and in order to succeed, he/she needs to relate to different levels of reality, independent one from the other and sometimes opposed, even if confusedly entwined. The change in the levels of reality is mainly due to the use of communication technologies, leading to an emotional involvement with what happens in the world, and allowing instant communication with those who are connected to the net, thus eliminating physical distance and combining indistinctly direct and mediated experience. It therefore

becomes necessary to reconstruct our institutions, or to create new ones, because globalization is not an incident in our everyday lives but a change in the very conditions of our existence. [31] A similar reconstruction becomes necessary because the disorganization of the subjective experience, in the past, hit a limit when it converged with the institutional organization of one's own society; but with globalization, a new process takes place that questions the tie between individual and social organization. Living in a globalized world is the distinctive element of our age, in which there has been a transformation of space and time.

It certainly seems helpful to consider Koselleck's future-centric approach. [32] In his investigation on modernity, he introduces the relationship between the three temporal dimensions – past, present, future – in addition to the two major categories of “space of experience” and “horizon of expectation”. For centuries, the latter was conceived on the basis of the “space of experience”, therefore with an eye turned to the past. Koselleck suggests that it is useful to modify the way we comprehend the relationship between past and future, virtually taken for granted, so he creates the word *Sattelzeit*, an invitation to “ride” the time in which we live. “General” history and history of the individual unfold among the layers of time and the different states of mind that, all together, produce historical time. This is not devoid of content, but it changes over time; and such change could result from the modification of the combination of experience and expectation. [33]

The contemporary mediatized world will become increasingly difficult to understand, and to live in, for those who continue to relate themselves to knowledge by striving to differentiate between reality and imagination, nature and culture, truth and fiction. The markers of difference, i.e. the boundaries of those dichotomies, will be less and less available and believable. On the other hand, that world will be fascinating for those who will be able to develop learning processes with a sensitivity for the different hues in the countless representations that constitute it. [34]

Globalization is always an inextricable and reciprocally functional copresence of the *status quo* and transformation, of continuity and discontinuity. Furthermore, it has a second, additional positive aspect, revealing a philosophy of history based on what is universal, on unity and recomposition. It is the task of the social scholar to explore the instituting society (in the process of being formed) “inside” and most often “against” the instituted society, that is, against the interest of those who are in power, but also against the need for identity of individuals and collectivities. Only by using a mixture of common sense and extravagance may such a task be performed, and this brings to mind what Shakespeare has one of his characters exclaim: there is method in my madness (“Though this be madness, yet there is method in it”). [35]

### Reference and Notes:

- [1] In *The Philosophy of Money* (1900). Simmel examines money as the symbol of the modern age, in which the impersonality of human relations – increasingly cold and detached – prevails. The negative aspect of it comes from the ever greater spread of the monetary organization of society, resulting in a reduction of qualitative values as compared to quantitative values (Poggi, 1998).
- [2] Giaccardi, C. & Magatti, M. (2001). *La globalizzazione non è un destino*. Roma-Bari: Laterza, p. 16.
- [3] Tessarolo, M. (2003). *Il sistema delle comunicazioni*. Padova: Cleup.
- [4] Baudrillard, J. (1989). *Videosfera e soggetto frattale*, in AA.VV. *Videoculture di fine secolo*. (pp. 29-39), Napoli: Liguori.
- [5] News agencies or newswires provide news reports to various kinds of media – newspapers, magazines, radio and television broadcasters, online newspapers.
- [6] Goffman, E. (1967). *The interaction Ritual*. Chicago: U.P.

- [7] Baudrillard, J. (1989). *Videosfera e soggetto frattale*, in AA.VV. *Videoculture di fine secolo*. (pp. 29-39), Napoli: Liguori.
- [8] Following Plato, the juxtaposition between knowledge (*episteme*) and opinion (*doxa*) is maintained. Tarde (1901) observes that opinion is a set of judgements spread among the public concerning current issues, while in 1943 Stoeltzer defines scale assessment.
- [9] Tessarolo, M. (2003). *Il sistema delle comunicazioni*. Padova: Cleup.
- [10] Bourdieu, P. (1983). *La distinzione*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- [11] Tessarolo, M. (2003). *Il sistema delle comunicazioni*. Padova: Cleup.
- [12] Tessarolo, M. (2003). *Il sistema delle comunicazioni*. Padova: Cleup, p. 47.
- [13] Hannerz, U. (1996). *Transnational Connections. Culture, People, Places*. London: Routledge.
- [14] Semprini, A. (2003). *La società di flusso*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- [15] Boccia, A. G. (2012). *Stati di connessione*. Milano: FrancoAngeli.
- [16] The net's enlargement helped determine the sales of sponsored products on specialized sites in various ways.
- [17] A new media genre is born, in which contents are generated by the user (UGC).
- [18] The major study in this field was published by Allport and Postman in 1947.
- [19] Kapferer, J.-N. (1987). *Le voci che corrono*. Milano: Longanesi.
- [20] And such they remain, in their new guise, on social networks.
- [21] People rely on "webs of trust", within which friends are regarded as "strong ties" in comparison with others who are regarded as "weak ties".
- [22] With their studies, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) showed in their theory of flow that there are two moments when interpersonal influence has greater weight than mass communication in decision-making processes. They found that personal influencers were actually more exposed to mass communication than the people who were influenced, and that they were the ones capable of selecting "relevant" messages, an ability that made them become veritable opinion leaders.
- [23] Colombo, F. (2012). Controllo, identità, parrhesia. Un approccio foucaultiano al Web 2.0, in *Comunicazioni sociali*, 2, pp. 197-212.
- [24] Parrhesia may become an obstacle to the exercise of democracy if it is confused with rhetoric, which is a way of persuading people to embrace a stance they already have.
- [25] The word *post-truth*, chosen as Word of the Year 2016 by the Oxford Dictionary, relates to or denotes "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Besides referring to the time after a specified situation or event, the prefix *post* also means "belonging to a time in which the specified concept has become unimportant or irrelevant". In 2009 the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo wrote a book titled "A Farewell to Truth", where he notes that the consensus on a single choice is, first of all, an issue of collective interpretation, construction of shared or acknowledged paradigms, because truth is not encountered, it is constructed.
- [26] Moïsi, D. (2009). *Geopolitica delle emozioni*. Milano: Feltrinelli.
- [27] Information to be spread is chosen based on feelings (Veltri, Altanavasa, 2015) or on viral processes, in any case related to feelings (network gatekeeper) (Nahon, Hemsley, 2013).  
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0963662515613702>.
- [28] Bréton, P. (2012). *L'utopia della comunicazione*. Torino: UTET.
- [29] One such example is the lack of discussion underlying "preventive thinking", an approach based on imagined reality: thinking in terms of "the worst" encourages society to adopt fear as one of its basic principles, on the basis of which the public, its government and institutions should organize everybody's life. Insecurity becomes institutionalized, thus fostering an atmosphere of confusion and powerlessness (Furedi, 2012:31). On this issue, one can think of the "preventive war" fought in

Afghanistan (without a preceding, adequate, open discussion) and to the wars currently fought by ISIS. The violent acts that are often repeated in the course of history illustrate the greatest disproportion between the extreme violence meditated and enacted by the tyrants and the extreme powerlessness of the victims, who are acutely harmless (Cavarero, 2007).

[30] Geertz, C. (1999). *Mondo globale, mondi locali. Cultura politica alla fine del ventesimo secolo*. Bologna: Il Mulino, p. 59.

[31] Giddens, A. (1999). *Runaway World*. London: Profile Books, p. 30.

[32] Koselleck, R. (2009). *Futuro passato*. Genova: Marietti.

[33] According to the Italian philosopher Agamben, whose idea is just as original, contemporaneity allows those who live in it to see its dark spots, meaning the changes that will only be understood when there comes another contemporaneity.

[34] Tassarolo, M. (2003). *Il sistema delle comunicazioni*. Padova: Cleup, p. 236.

[35] A very good idea that I take from Milanaccio, 2005: 46. Milanaccio, A. (2005). L'istituzione della società globale. *Sociologia della comunicazione*, 37, pp. 41-46.

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<http://eu.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0745671284.html>. Online.
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