

# MATRIZes

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## **DOSSIER:**

*New Perspectives  
on Communication.*

Ciro Marcondes Filho

Massimo Leone

Lucia Santaella

Dora Kaufman

Robin Celikates

André Luiz Martins Lemos

## **INTERVIEW:**

Alejandro Grimson

by Veneza Mayora Ronsini





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## Between algorithmic dominance and political positioning

COMMUNICATION PROCESSES, AND thus the area of Communication studies, are affected either by emerging and insurgent technologies and media or by the reconfiguration of communication itself in its broadest sense, addressing ways of communicating and their impacts on society. In recent years, a phenomenon has received a lot of attention creating a profound disturbance in the way society communicates: the fake news. Currently, it is the rapid advance in the development of Artificial Intelligence that has been accompanied by several studies with different approaches, and it is no different among researchers in our area. In a way, political use has amalgamated these two communicational phenomena—fake news and Artificial Intelligence—and demanded new reflections and analyses. Between the two, the need to protect democracy is redoubled.

This attentive movement is reflected in the articles within the *Dossiê* section that open this issue of *MATRIZES*. We begin with an unpublished text by *Ciro Marcondes Filho* (revised by *Vitor Blotta*), which presents the theoretical and factual bases of the “Political Tragedies” project, which the full professor at the School of Communications and Arts at Universidade de São Paulo (ECA/USP) began in 2019 and was unfortunately interrupted with his death in November 2020. Entitled “Political tragedies: an issue of communication”, it deals with the problem of truth and reliable information by dialoguing with Nietzsche on how disinformation has been a political strategy since Nazism and the current ways of determining electoral behaviors from psychosocial engineering mechanisms that make use of fake news and the microtargeting techniques of digital platforms, as in the cases of the elections of Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro. As Marcondes Filho argues in this project, many of the current issues surrounding the relation between disinformation

and democracy must be addressed by theories and research in journalism and communication.

Then, in the article “National flags and political rhetoric: a semiotic comparison between Italy and Brazil,” Massimo Leone from the University of Turin presents a semiotic and sociocultural study of flags with a focus on the “semantic and symbolic complexity of flags in contemporary culture.” The final part of his article refers to the appropriation of this object by supporters of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and compares it to the use of the Italian flag by the Forza Italia movement of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. As Ciro Marcondes Filho, Massimo Leone elaborates proposals to reverse the perverse effects produced by the misuse of communication.

Artificial Intelligence is directly addressed in two other articles in the *Dossiê* section. Lucia Santaella and Dora Kaufman present, in “Generative artificial intelligence as humans’ fourth narcissistic wound,” the hypothesis that the development of this technology has affected human self-esteem as in the three previous moments of similar impact on human self-love that were identified by Sigmund Freud. André Lemos, on the other hand, opts for a “pragmatic and non-anthropocentric neomaterialist” analysis and addresses, in his article “Digital errors, failures, and disruptions in generative AI hallucinations: Communication typology, premises, and epistemology” how the algorithmic hallucinations of Generative Artificial Intelligence systems can be of interest for studies on digital culture and the performance of digital media and for the observation of agencies impacted by disruptive events.

Between these two articles, Robin Celikates, professor at the Free University of Berlin, discusses the relation between democracy, the public sphere, and digital media activism as forms of protest and political confrontation in “Digital publics, digital constestation: a new structural change of the public sphere?”. Despite the individuality of each article in this *Dossiê*, the text of Celikates connects those of Santaella & Kaufman with that of Lemos, as well as these three to the previous ones by Marcondes Filho and Leone. The thread that binds them is spun by concerns regarding incipient phenomena and political impacts, thickened by the desire to ensure good communication practices. It is no different in the set of articles from the other sections of this issue, seeming to indicate a trend in studies of the area.

The *Entrevista* section of this issue features a conversation between Alejandro Grimson—professor at the Institute of Higher Social Studies (IDAES) at Universidad Nacional de San Martín (UNSAM) and researcher at the *Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas* (CONICET) of Argentina—and Veneza Mayora Ronsini. Considering the author’s robust

work on culture, its relationship with political and social processes, and his most recent book organized around the theme of the middle class, Ronsini highlights the importance of Grimson's contributions to studies of reception, consumption, and identity constructions.

The *Em Pauta* section begins with two texts that explore and problematize themes that stand out in the current field of communication studies. In "Surveillance capitalism and algorithmic struggles" authors Murilo Duarte Costa Corrêa and Giuseppe Cocco propose to note how critical perspectives in relation to algorithmic culture, sustained by the observation of the convergence between data extractivism and surveillance, tend to generate a certain intellectual immobility to advance in the debate on this topic of maximum urgency. Luiz Peres-Neto, in "Global South: a political agenda to understand communication?" explores the origins, development, and contradictions of the term, as well as its institutionalization in the field of communication studies and in relation to the context of the Global North, which is investigated from traces of the researcher's own personal trajectory.

Next, in "Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: a methodological proposal", Bruno Pompeu and Silvio Koiti Sato reinforce the importance of Charles Sanders Peirce's legacy for the understanding of languages with a complex potential for the generation of meanings, as shown by the phenomenon of advertising, the communicative processes of which take place in an increasingly permeated way to everyday life. The section continues in the article "Journalistic objectivity and gender perspective: tensions and displacements" in which Jessica Gustafson and Daiane Bertassi bring a detailed analysis of the journalistic production of *Portal Catarinas* (from the southern region of Brazil) as a case study to discuss the possibility of the existence of a feminist objectivity in journalism and its implications in the processes of news construction.

Next, in "The theory of social representations and the theory of mediations: a methodological proposal to draw both theories closer to each other", authors Yhevelin Serrano Guerin, Ângela Cristina Trevisan Felippi, and Cidonea Machado Deponti explore the connections between the theories of Serge Moscovici and Jesús Martín-Barbero, proposing a methodological map to assist empirical research and the organization of data collected in socialization studies to highlight and improve the mediation processes in the constitution of social representations. These processes are investigated in the following text by Nilton Faria de Carvalho, "Bordering sonorities: fruition and rearticulations of pop music and popular music", which observes the games of mediations from the proposal of musical listening workshops held for high

# F

school students, promoting clashes between repertoires that constitute spaces of sharing for new processes of signification.

The next text, by Viviane Borelli and Diosana Frigo, resumes an object of perennial relevance. In “Circulations of meanings in news about pandemic deaths in Brazil”, the authors face the challenge of mapping the discursive heterogeneity around news coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. The article highlights the identification of the complexity of communication flows as circuits of meanings from a carefully detailed report of the methodology applied for the collection and organization of the data.

The *Em Pauta* section closes with “The Monarchy of the North (1919) in the iconographic discourse of the *Ilustração Portuguesa*” by Jorge Pedro Sousa, Fátima Lopes Cardoso, and Celiana Azevedo. Exploring the only illustrated magazine of an important moment in the history of Portugal, the authors discuss the alignments between government power and the press by observing the intertwining between information and propaganda, which is very well supported by the presented rich visual material.

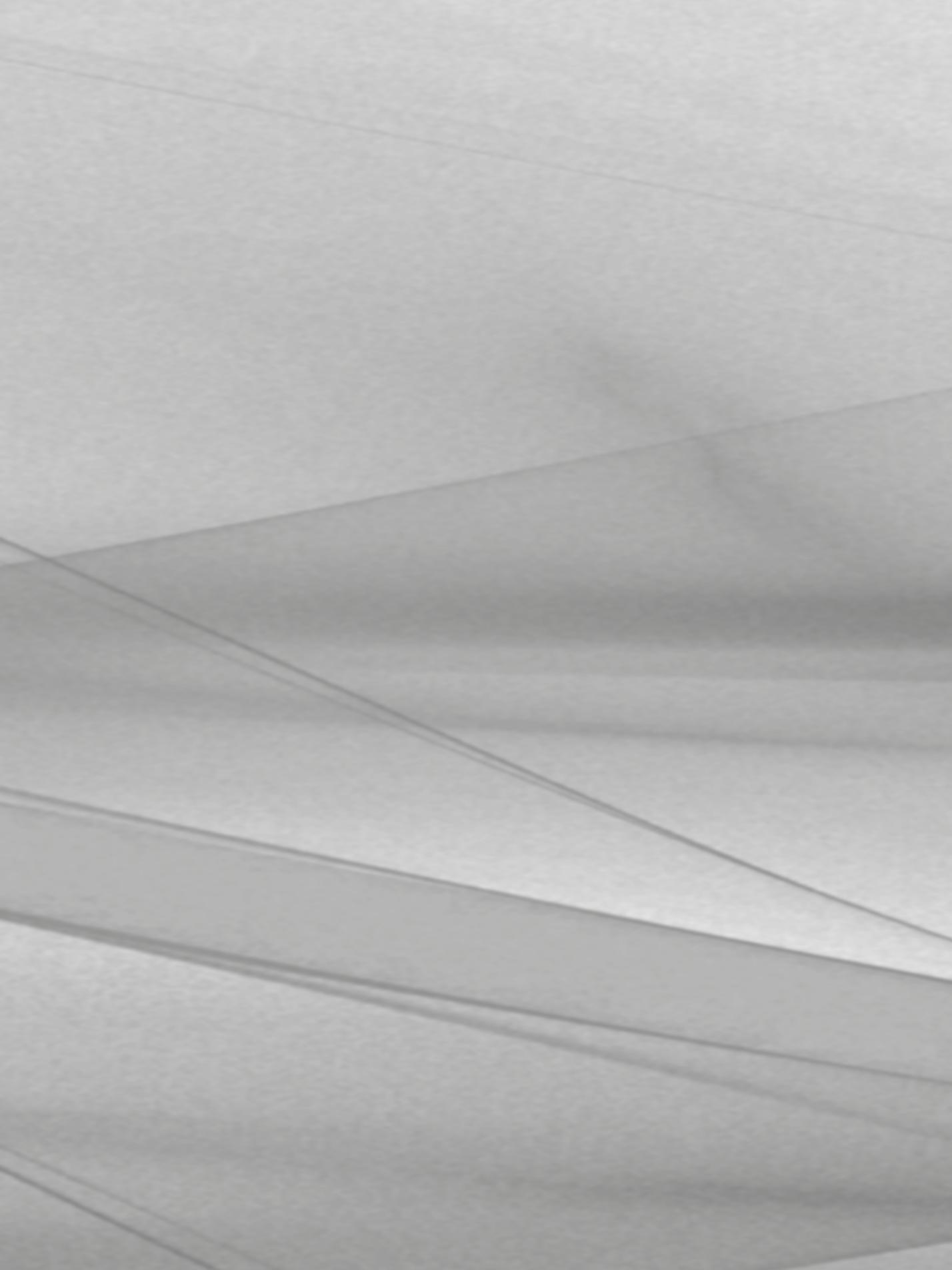
In the *Resenha* section, at the end of this issue, Jacqueline Ausier Domingues reveals to us the density of the book “*O mundo do avesso: verdade e política na era digital*,” by Letícia Cesarino. The importance of the work for contemporary studies of communication is well pointed out by the text, especially considering its relevance based on the analysis of the recent and troubled Brazilian sociopolitical conjuncture, whose foundations of democracy and science have their structures shaken by the influence of the dynamics of digital networks.

We hope that *MATRIZES* can once again be a channel of appreciation, dissemination, and reflection for research in our area. Have a great read! ■

*Luciano Guimarães  
Wagner Souza e Silva*

# DOSSIER

*News Perspectives on Communication Theories*



# Political tragedies: An issue of communication<sup>a</sup>

## *Tragédias políticas: Um problema da comunicação*

■ CIRO MARCONDES FILHO (IN MEMORIAM)<sup>a</sup>

Universidade de São Paulo, School of Communications and Arts. São Paulo – SP, Brazil

### ABSTRACT

The inability of public organs, monitoring institutions, and social agents to address the issue of fake news demands answers from scholars. Such complexity increases as it involves international agents, foreign governments and offices, equipment, and machines to produce and overload information systems that are funded by donations and millionaire transactions, greatly exceeding the capacity of governments to offer effective measures against this ill-intentioned use of democracy. However, we are not deterred from accepting the challenge. After years of investigation and debates on ideas, we might arrive at propositions that can revert this process and guarantee the recovery of trust in democracy and in decision-making processes for all.

**Keywords:** truth; trustworthy information; disinformation; journalism; democracy

### RESUMO

Até o momento, órgãos públicos, instituições de controle e agentes sociais não sabem como lidar com a questão das notícias falsas e cobram soluções dos estudiosos. A complexidade se torna ainda maior pelo fato de envolver não apenas agentes internacionais e governos do exterior, mas escritórios, equipamentos e máquinas de produção e bombardeamento de informações, assentados sobre doações e verbas milionárias, que transcendem em muito a capacidade de governos apresentarem medidas efetivas contra esse mau uso da democracia. Mas isso não nos impede de aceitar o desafio. Após anos de debates, investigações e confronto de ideias, quiçá possamos chegar a proposições que tenham condição de reverter o processo e garantir a todos a recuperação da confiança na democracia e nos processos de tomada de decisão.

**Palavras-chave:** Verdade, informação confiável, desinformação, jornalismo, democracia

<sup>a</sup>Editors' Note: We begin with an unpublished text by *Ciro Marcondes Filho*—revised by *Vitor Blotta*, professor at the School of Communications and Arts at Universidade de São Paulo—that describes the theoretical and factual bases of the “Political Tragedies” project, which *Ciro Marcondes Filho* had begun in 2019 and which unfortunately was interrupted with his death in November 2020.

<sup>b</sup>Graduated in Journalism from the School of Communications and Arts at Universidade de São Paulo (USP) and has a PhD from the Goethe University of Frankfurt. Full Professor at the School of Communications and Arts at USP. CNPq A1 Researcher. Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9702-3791>.



# D

## Political tragedies: An issue of communication

THE DISCUSSION ABOUT actual and fake news necessarily refers to a philosophical debate that questions people's real interest in preserving the truth in the face of counterfeits of reality. This goes back to Nietzsche, who wondered whether we, in our everyday life, business, and decisions in fact prefer truth over convenient information:

The understanding of nihilism in its essence requires that one act in favor of a lie that is useful to life, that one stands in defense of illusion insofar as it stimulates the will to creative power . . . If nihilism is the fanaticism of the Absolute, nihilism is overcome by this provocation of "nothing is true, everything is permitted" (Granier, 2000, p. 1259; free translation).

This statement has never been more relevant than today, when political decisions that affect millions of people are subject to various manipulations and in which the biggest victim of this process, besides truth itself, is the political bet and the hope of these same people.

Nietzsche questions whether we can truly endure the truth. In the preface to *Ecce Homo*, he wonders "how much truth does a spirit endure, how much does it *dare*?" He apparently thinks we are afraid or apprehensive of the truth. Adorno and Horkheimer follow the same path:

. . . if Adorno and Horkheimer begin the question of the submission of the individual to the mass from fear or dread of the truth, they question an individual who, from within, refuses to be critically distanced, perhaps because he feels or knows the "weight" of the truth. In other words, he does not distance himself so nothing will happen or so he will lose nothing. But, here, it is appropriate to invert the statement to ask whether, after all, by not distancing themselves, would the individual gain something? (Ramos, 1999, p. 6; free translation)

Indeed, Nietzsche believed that people ruin themselves when confronted with the truth.

It might be a basic characteristic of existence that those who would know it completely would perish, in which case the strength of a spirit should be measured according to how much of the "truth" one could still barely endure—or to put it more clearly, to what degree one would require it to be thinned down, shrouded, sweetened, blunted, falsified. (Nietzsche, 1988b, p. 29; free translation)

In fact, people prefer to sweeten it, to distort it according to their interests, fears, and afflictions but they paradoxically shun the desire to be deceived. Man, says Nietzsche in *Aurora*, does not want to be deceived (Nietzsche, 1988a).

But at what point did this flight in the face of so-called true facts devastate the human species? Was it always like this or did a specific episode bear it into fruition? For Nietzsche, this is directly linked to his thesis of the “death of God.”

“God is dead” translates this sudden realization that the Christian faith has lost its foundation and that our whole system of values is unbalanced. It is also possible to guess that the horrors of the last half century reflect the morbid anxiety that corrodes the modern soul and the fanatical desire to escape from this affliction by imposing, by force of arms or ideological constraint, a new system of values capable of giving meaning again to human existence. (Granier, 2000, p. 1255; free translation)

Jean Granier associates furious agitation with this senselessness that afflicts humans in the face of the crisis of Christianity and its lack of responses.

Man, faced with this emptiness, would not be tempted . . . to deify himself by a suicide of provocation and blasphemy? Or yet, he would not rush into furious agitation, such as he rallies around a so-called Great Idea . . . the members of the Parallel Action and their animator Diotima, in Robert Musil’s novel, *The Man Without Qualities*? Wouldn’t the moral stake be a precious narcotic to disguise the starvation of a deserted world by the divine? (Granier, 2000, p. 1257; free translation)

Yes, idealistic chimeras come precisely to console human impotence. “Nihilism is the ‘ideology,’ or even ‘the morality’ of this kind of men who need idealistic chimeras to console themselves for their impotence in managing the becoming, the contradictions, the pain inherent in pure reality” (Granier, 2000, p. 1258; free translation).

But why would Christianity beget disappointment? Granier (2000) claims, regarding idealist speculation, that “if it triumphed historically with Christianity, ‘this Platonism for the people’ never completely bridged the fissure between the real and this being-in-itself, ready for all perfections” (p. 1257; free translation).

We have, then, the “world deserted by the divine” at the basis of modern nihilism, which is characterized, according to Nietzsche, by wanting nothing instead of wanting nothing.

# D

## Political tragedies: An issue of communication

The meaninglessness of suffering, *not* suffering, was the curse that has so far blanketed mankind, – and *the ascetic ideal offered man a meaning!* . . . Within it, suffering was interpreted; the enormous emptiness seemed filled; the door was shut on all suicidal nihilism. This interpretation – without a doubt – brought new suffering with it, deeper, more internal, more poisonous suffering, suffering that gnawed away more intensely at life: it brought all suffering within the perspective of *guilt* . . . But in spite of all that – man was *saved*, he had a *meaning*, from now on he was no longer like a leaf in the breeze, a plaything of absurd, of the ‘non-sense’; from now on he could *will* something, – no matter what, why and how he did it at first, the *will itself was saved*. It is absolutely impossible for us to conceal what was actually expressed by that shole willing that derives its direction from ascetic ideal: this hatred of the human, and even more of the animalistic, even more of the material, this horror of the senses, of reason itself, this fear of happiness and beauty, this longing to get away from all appearance, transience, growth, death, wishing, longing itself – all that means, let us dare to grasp it, a *will to nothingness*, an aversion to life, a rebellion against the most fundamental prerequisites of life, but it is and remains a *will!* . . . And, to conclude by saying what I said at the beginning: man still prefers to *will nothingness* than *not will* . . . (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 185-186)

Well, the recovery of the “meaning of life” would come, according to Nietzsche, with this will to anything, no matter what. A will that could act against people themselves. In a way, we would already head toward a possible answer to the crucial question: how to explain that the masses think and act against their own interests? Or, as Adorno and Horkheimer would prefer, in favor of the system rather than themselves? In the current case, in which the flow of false information circulates, competing with the truth and overlapping with it, the question of Conrado Ramos (1999, p. 11) is also valid: “why does humanity sink into a new barbarism?”

The Nietzschean quotation above affirms a powerful fear of change that materializes itself in this reclining, this “weakness,” i.e., a weak will to power that only aspires to respite, to capitulation, in a word, to nothingness. Such weakness sacralizes this nothingness by naming it the Ideal, the “being,” “God!” For Granier:

By denouncing modern decadence, Nietzsche provokes the most terrible crisis of culture, the crisis of nihilism: a frightening revelation of the nothingness of all ideal values, the trembling of speculative constructions in which man alienates

himself, in short, the humiliation inflicted on man's desire and his metaphysical nostalgia. (Granier, 2000, p. 1129; free translation)

### **THE IMPOSITION OF DISINFORMATION AS THE QUINTESSENCE OF POLITICAL PLATFORMS**

Considering the Nietzschean hypothesis of the death of God and the loss of the foundation of the Christian faith to be adequate, as well as the imbalance of our entire system of values, proposes a new system of values, as seen above, which recently led to Nazism.

Well, the historical experience of Nazism has shown that the success of Adolf Hitler's campaign was largely due to investment in the dispossessed, the so-called "apolitical" and middle classes, who, it seems, were "more fragile." Hitler sought, first of all, to turn to the dispossessed segments of the population, without political power and without social importance in the process of industrialization, because he knew he would find not only less resistance to the program of "recovery of the soil and valorization of blood" but also a greater possibility of political rearguard (Marcondes Filho, 1982, p. 49). Moreover,

Hitler's voters were for the most part apolitical, or, as Hitler's propaganda took care to call them, 'non-deformed voters,' who allowed themselves to be imprisoned by Hitler, because their propaganda was intended to awaken in them the illusion that they were important, that everything depended on their strength and that they should be the masters. (Münzenberg, 1972, p. 196-197; free translation)

The middle classes were also less rooted in their own ideas and values than the proletariat and were therefore more fragile and susceptible to National Socialist propaganda (Marcondes Filho, 1982).

Therefore, such political option greatly resembles the contemporary strategies of investing in a manipulative way in elections and political plebiscites: leaving aside the great national campaign "for all," turning, instead, to smaller groups, weakly politicized and susceptible to blackmail of fear and terror. Action took place in small groups. The strategy of the Nazis must not be seen in isolation in its large-scale massification, gatherings, and military festivals and rituals. Equally important was the work done with small and informative groups, which transmitted the ideological concept of fascism (Marcondes Filho, 1982).

The society of the time had no machines and robots that sent electronic messages by the thousands to specific populations at moments of political

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decision. Rather, its “manual” was directly aimed at these less politicized layers with important symbolic resources, such as the attribution of importance to figures hitherto marginalized by politics, the creation of hierarchical systems of order and power, and the use of uniforms, flags, and songs to congregate these populations around a chimerical ideal.

Disinformation begot the policy of confusing to thrive:

National Socialism really gave the impression of a radical transformation: the order and organization of its “soldiers,” the vigor of its speeches, the resolve of its agents. The idea of tranquilizing society would be associated with that of ‘collaboration between classes’ and proletarian power united with corporate ideology. While the former contained more traces of “petty-bourgeois” ideological forms, social ascent, and the attainment of prestige by “class collaboration,” the latter sought to give workers the illusion of the conquest of power by the corporation: the factory. (Marcondes Filho, 1982, p. 50; free translation)

The great administrator of the left-wing communication consortium at the time, which concentrated newspapers, magazines, photographers, debate circles, and radio programs, Willi Münzenberg, reports how the forgery confused even politicized characters of the workers’ movement, believers in the “socialist” character of the Nazis.

The method of Hitler’s propaganda sought above all to confuse the people and to ensure that even certain socialist circles seriously discussed whether National Socialism was a political movement of the petty bourgeoisie, whereas what really mattered to the effectiveness of Hitler’s propaganda was to awaken in these masses the illusion of co-participation, the illusion of being the dominant stratum . . . Hitler’s propaganda [achieved] that not only millions of petty bourgeois who were facing bankruptcy but also parts of the weakly engaged working class, especially in 1931 and 1932, hoped for a socialist salvation by the Hitler movement. The author recalls a meeting with a group of workers in Frankfurt in the autumn of 1932. These workers were former members of a socialist organization; they left and became members of the SA. They explained: “We are the old and we remain the old. But for you, things are going very slowly. Adolf does it faster. If he deceives us, we will hang him. We are the SA and then we could build together the socialism Adolf promised us.” (Münzenberg, 1972, p. 196-197, 249; free translation)

In fact, the quickest route was the most sinister. Hitler evaded hanging, the SA was dissolved in 1934, and the strategy of falsifying facts and

symbols collaborated, in some way, to strengthen the movement. “The Nazis appropriated the models of the socialist parties, their slogans, organized their public demonstrations and trips according to these models, copied Soviet institutions and methods of propaganda” (Haug, 1975, p. 99<sup>1</sup>; free translation). “At the level of political action, they acted in the same way as the communists, including participation in workers’ strikes” (p. 97; free translation).

Nietzsche had warned that the now well-known cautious falsification of facts is part of nihilism:

Decadence submerged the instincts of life and established the universal realm of its idealistic morality, bringing about the domestication of the temperaments of the elite, the leveling of the natural hierarchy, *the cautious falsification of facts*, the preponderance of gregarious imperatives, the slander of the body, and, in the end, the nihilistic disfigurement of the world. (Granier, 2000, p. 1258; free translation, emphasis added)

A symptom of narcotized spirits that sought to conceal their starvation became, both in Nazism and today, with the manipulative and technologically managed maneuvers in the so-called microtargeting (Marcondes Filho, 2019), a form of action and intervention in politics, directly threatening the free play of democratic forces.

## POSTMODERNITY AND ITS PASSIVE NIHILISTS

Nietzsche spoke of passive predatory nihilists driven by despair. David Cook and Arthur Kroker (1988, p. VI), following the Nietzschean path, propose that suicidal nihilism characterizes the so-called postmodern scene, the “new dark age,” in which passive nihilists are driven to a predatory style of behavior by despair and self-destruction by their own broken and tattered instincts. For them, the existence of the telematic man is marked by boredom due to his sense of existential emptiness.

Regarding suicidal or passive nihilism, as it is interpreted by some other authors, Arthur Kroker considers it as the current behavior of postmodern man, marked by predatory styles of behavior and a desire for destruction, associated with a suicidal posture. This may explain a lack of interest in politics, in the possibility of politics effectively acting in favor of the less fortunate, but we still have insufficient elements to explain the support of the masses for policies and politicians that ultimately lead them to degradation and death.

<sup>1</sup> It was impossible to obtain all the information in this reference from the author, so it is incomplete in the final list.

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In other words, such behavior remains insufficient to explain why Donald Trump recently obtained 23,000 more votes in Wisconsin, 11,000 in Michigan, and another 43,000 in Pennsylvania, totaling the 77,000 votes that decided the U.S. elections.

<sup>2</sup>This and the following topics are in another text by Professor  
Ciro Marcondes Filho,  
entitled “*Hora de reescrever as teorias da comunicação*,”  
[Time to rewrite the theories of communication] previously published in the journal  
*Questões Transversais* (Vol. 7, no. 14, July-December/2019).

### THE NEW FORMS OF PSYCHOSOCIAL ENGINEERING<sup>2</sup>

During that election, the United States experienced what has been called a “revolution in the way the election campaign is conducted.” The phrase stems from Cambridge Analytica, an American affiliate of the Strategic Communication Laboratory (SCL), a company created by billionaire businessman Robert Mercer (cf. Huchon, 2018; Slow, 2018). Its advertising says that gone are the days when political campaigns were based on data of limited effectiveness, such as place of residence, age, and gender. Now, it was a matter of adding many other indicators (such as education, social networks, consumption, travel, family, political interest, gender, hobbies, income), which would be combined with civic and political behavior and consumer profile and lifestyle. These, associated with “personality traits” such as “openness,” “conscientiousness,” “outgoingness,” “agreeableness,” and “motivation,” would separate people by very precise identifiers, in what they call behavior microtargeting.

Cambridge Analytica obtained from 4 to 5,000 personal data of all people living in the United States. In a personality test conducted in 2014, the company obtained adherence from 300,000 participants. With the availability of Facebook pages, it managed to obtain information from participants and their friends. Thus accumulating data of people who began to be registered without their knowledge. In the operation, the company accused the index of 87 million Facebook user profiles.

Thus, two new strategies, absolutely unprecedented in the political scenario, were inaugurated by the company for the surprising acquisition of votes. The first concerns Trump’s election. In this case, the company located three Democratic-leaning American states where the candidate could turn the vote: Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, centering his attack on people with restless and nervous personalities. Unbeknownst to them, the company sent personalized messages to them via Facebook, using a little-known tool, the dark posts. This system sends a message that is only visible to the targeted person. The page lacked that message. Thus, candidates could address individuals with negative phrases about their opponents without journalists ever knowing since the message was private. It is as if they were whispering discrediting news about the adversary in your ear.

Dark posts constitute hyper-individualized messages, visible only to that person for whom it is intended. The phrase is received on the timeline at a certain time, obtained by mapping the favorable habits of that particular voter and by their numerical impressions. No one else receives this message, which will disappear after a few hours. It neither has traces nor enables recovery.

The strategy of the company, rather than simply “throwing phrases,” aims to direct a certain type of news, anticipating that, in the mind of the other, it will reverberate exponentially given their psychological profile (in particular, weaknesses, insecurities, and deficiencies). Therefore, rather than a question of the “content of a sentence,” it involves the exceptional capacity for intimate propagation of certain themes in certain people.

Manipulation of this kind happened in the election of Donald Trump and in the British decision to leave the European Union, Brexit, situations in which social media served to accumulate data about the entire world, introduce artificial intelligence systems to interpret them, and use what they call “psychosocial engineering” to characterize human types and their political and ideological tendencies.

Mercer SCL has been conducting behavioral change programs for more than 25 years and aims to manipulate behaviors and psychological operations on large masses of people. In the case of politics, it modulated the perception of the vote, using algorithms fed by data provided by voters by banal applications of leisure and fun. By 2014, the company already had about 50 million Facebook profiles in its archives.

### **INFORMATION REINFORCING THE POSITIONS OF THE UNDECIDED**

Fake news lies in the realm of journalism, rather than communication, since we seek the press for facts, events, occurrences that avoid clashing with our worldview, but that, on the contrary, reinforce, sustain, and support it. The news may please us or enrage us, prompting us to act, nevertheless, we trust the source and take it as our ally both in reassurance and in propulsion to action. Communication, on the other hand, which occurs more expressively in the fictional, aesthetic, and cultural fields, confronts us directly with otherness, alters our positioning, and makes us see the world in a different way as long as we consider it.

In the aforementioned episodes, the massive electronically directed use of personalized targets represented a new way of reinforcing positions. The agents of this enterprise of interference in behavior know the weak adherence of the masses to party policies or programs. They are aware of its weakness, its

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inconstancy, its permanent oscillation between discourses and proposals and their fears, insecurities, and weaknesses. We have seen this in previous pages, when it was questioned to what extent we endure the truth, when we spoke of the fear of it and the usefulness of lies in people's lives.

The strategy of this agency was primarily aimed at promoting terror, fear, and doubt – i.e., by emotional means, negative feelings were transferred to the strategy of adversaries. This also emerges in the X-ray of nihilists who fear change, repulsed by their senses and reason, and sustain themselves with chimeras to console their impotence.

Thus, voters are practically forced into the conservative camp, squeezed by this maneuver that will show itself, sometime later, as manipulative. But then the votes will have been tallied and all will win a new round in the following elections.

Psychological graphs recorded how to act to touch the innermost part of each of the users. According to Steve Bannon of Cambridge Analytica, “it all comes down to emotions”: love and hate breed engagement. Bannon's advice was the same as that given by Arron Banks, founder of the campaign to leave the European Union, to *The Guardian*: “What they said early on was ‘facts don't work’ and that's it. The remain campaign featured fact, fact, fact, fact, fact. It just doesn't work. You have got to connect with people emotionally” (Booth et. al., 2016). Needless to say, the victorious Hitler campaign bet on the “emotionalization” of politics both on the part of its leaders and on the support of paramilitary militia groups that acted on their own and spread terror in the regime.

### THE BRAZILIAN CASE

The second and even more efficient strategy was the operation of the same office with the use of WhatsApp. More than 1,500 groups were created in Brazil, most of them outside the country, and only large administrators could post information in them. The platform operated with videos, audios, and chain texts. Participants received and disseminated posts.

The interesting thing is that the use of WhatsApp had as accurate effects as those of the American Facebook and incomparably superior to those of traditional means of communication. In the case of the latter, an institution makes the posts, which people can assess whether or not they deserve credit. On WhatsApp, on the other hand, it is unknown who exactly sent the message, where it came from, how it arrived. It is only known that the last one who posted it is a known source, which may be a friend, a relative, a trusted person.

In communicational terms, the application now functions as an opinion leader or as having the legitimacy of someone who credits the recipient.

This changes everything. For a long time, it was believed that our opinions were constructed, rather than by external, impersonal means, such as newspapers, TV networks, magazines or radio, but by the *relationship of trust* we placed in people close to us, whose opinion we respected and who, for this very reason, would have no reason or interest to deceive us. We had no filter, censorship, or resistance toward them. We just accepted it, a sort of an offshoot of Paul Lazarsfeld's opinion leaders. What happens here is a falsification: the agents of political engineering and microtargeting behavior, via WhatsApp, forge a message from a relative, a friend, a trusted person because it comes in the sequence of posts in the app group. Now, more than a magic phrase that appears on Facebook and then disappears, who knows who issued by whom, now a supposed "friend" emerges and advises the user to vote for x, rather than for y. The accession process will be much more efficient.

In terms of Brazil, the appropriation of Whatsapp decisively influenced the change in the electorate's positioning<sup>3</sup>. On closer inspection, it turns out that it was not only the flood of false information that gave victory to the candidate with no chance in the first round, but the specialty of Cambridge Analytica, microtargeting behavior, directing information to a specific audience: the female, poor, neo-Pentecostal evangelical electorate.

From the data that reached him, only one Internet page, with an address in the same place where the Bolsonaro Presidente website worked, fired in a single day more than 600 thousand messages with false and slanderous information against Haddad, all of them addressing the moral issue, such as the gay kit, an alleged rape committed by the candidate, encouraging young people to associate with others of the same sex and things along those lines... According to data that reached him, the operation was on a large scale, "just one of the contracts with companies responsible for mass WhatsApp shootings, which were targeted by the Folha de S.Paulo report, reached R\$ 12 million." (Nocaute, 2018; free translation)

Coimbra reports that Bolsonaro opened a gap between himself and Haddad, almost tripling the advantage he has always had in the evangelical electorate: "The ten points ahead that he had on September 26 became thirty in the survey completed on October 5. As evangelicals are about 30% of the electorate, thirty points of advantage in the segment represent 10% of the total" (Coimbra, 2019).

<sup>3</sup>The behavior of the curves, which represent the evolution of voting intention for Jair Bolsonaro, quite clearly indicates a sudden increase in his historical average, which oscillated from 20% to 25% of the electorate's preference. According to the graphs, about a week before the first round, numbers changed in a way that deviates from the historical pattern of public opinion movements. Haddad, who had been in a consistent growth movement, suffered a blow and had his trajectory interrupted. Meanwhile, Bolsonaro began an atypical advance, in a pattern that had never been recorded before in the history of opinion polls in Brazil. What explains this, for Marcos Coimbra, was the illegal use of social networks, especially WhatsApp, to disseminate lies and slander against Fernando Haddad and PT (Coimbra, 2018).

Finally, Coimbra considers that what changed the election and enabled Bolsonaro to enter the second round almost elected was not the anti-PT movement, Lava Jato, Moro's sleight of hand, the intervention of generals, the partisanship of the Judiciary, Dilma's government, Lula's imprisonment, the horror of the PT on TV Globo. Rather, it was an abrupt and intense change in the evangelical electorate, especially in the Brazilian Southeast and South, coming from the lower, particularly female, middle class (Coimbra, 2019).

We have here, therefore, three new components in political decisions: a) a game with emotions and the cornering of voters into the conservative camp; b) the falsification of the source of information, simulating trustworthy persons; and c) the choice of particularly fragile groups to target this bombardment. ■

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# National flags and political rhetoric: a semiotic comparison between Italy and Brazil<sup>a</sup>

## *Bandeiras nacionais e retórica política: Uma comparação semiótica entre Itália e Brasil*

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the semantic and symbolic complexity of flags in contemporary culture. Discussing specific examples in Italy, we analyzed how a variety of contexts employ flags, showing their socio-political, communication, and cultural connotations. We used semiotic theories to describe the relation between flags and their meanings in different situations, highlighting the ambiguity inherent in these symbols and their role in expressing national identity, protest, and power. This study also addresses the influence of material, color, and context on the interpretation of flags.

**Keywords:** Flags, semiotics, national identity, cultural symbols, protest, symbolic ambiguity

### RESUMO

Este artigo explora a complexidade semântica e simbólica das bandeiras na cultura contemporânea. Discutindo exemplos específicos da Itália, o texto analisa como as bandeiras são empregadas em contextos variados, revelando suas conotações sociopolíticas, comunicacionais e culturais. Ele utiliza teorias semióticas para desvendar a relação entre as bandeiras e seus significados em diferentes situações, destacando a ambiguidade inerente a esses símbolos e seu papel na expressão de identidade nacional, protesto e poder. O artigo aborda também a influência do material, cor e contexto na interpretação das bandeiras.

**Palavras-chave:** Bandeiras, semiótica, identidade nacional, símbolos culturais, protesto, ambiguidade simbólica

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*Yet a flag has no real significance for peaceful uses.*

H.G. Wells, *The World of William Clissold*

THE SEMIOTIC RELEVANCE of flags is evident: Ferdinand de Saussure mentioned “*les signaux militaires*” [the military signs], probably also referring to military flags, in the passage in which he first hypothesized the desirable development of a new discipline called “semiology” (Chandler, 2022; Saussure, 1971, p. 33). He most likely intended to study flags as units of a predominantly symbolic system of signs, in which an ordered code unites a signifier and a signified. In this case and in similar ones, flags are or were adopted precisely to increase the visibility of communication and, as a consequence, to reduce its ambiguity.

Flags that are used as signs, however, are not the most interesting topic of semiotic investigation.<sup>1</sup> Knowledge of the code that underpins the use of a flag-based signaling system is useful, but does not open the field for interpretation: the waving of a given flag, or series of flags, corresponds to a semantic content that is determined by the code, leaving no room for alternative interpretations. In these circumstances, only inadequate knowledge of the code can give rise to duplicate readings of the signifier.

## A HISTORY OF TWO FLAGS

Nevertheless, flags are not just signs. Their most interesting semiotic instances are exactly those in which their manifestations express a whole set of sociocultural meanings, which often overlap, and sometimes intertwine.<sup>2</sup> Before moving forward with the theory, the article will now propose a shocking example.

On January 31, 2018, Italian police found two large carts on the outskirts of Macerata, in central Italy. They contained the dismembered corpse of Pamela Mastropietro, an 18-year-old girl from Rome who had disappeared two days earlier from a rehabilitation clinic where she was trying to cure her drug addiction. The body parts had been thoroughly cleaned and drained of blood. Security camera footage and other evidence allowed police to immediately prosecute Innocent Oseghale, a 29-year-old Nigerian man already known to law enforcement for drug trafficking.

The following Saturday morning, February 3, 2018, Luca Traini, a 28-year-old Italian, began driving through the city of Macerata, shooting at African immigrants. He injured six people, one of them seriously, before being blocked and arrested by police. Just moments before his arrest, Traini, whose head was

<sup>1</sup> On the different semiotic aspects of a flag, see Sebeok (1997); for more information, refer to Knowlton (2012).

<sup>2</sup> Literature on the semiotics of national flags is abundant; the classic observations are already in Durkheim (1912): “the soldier who falls defending his flag certainly does not believe he has sacrificed himself to a piece of cloth” (p. 29; our translation); for an anthropological view, see Firth (1973, p. 328-367); a sociological perspective is in Weitman (1998), and a critique of Weitman’s “vexillology” is in Pasch (1975). The literature also includes semiotic analyses of specific flags, such as the study of the cross on the Scottish flag in Pelkey (2017, p. 60-63), and for a postcolonial analysis, see Ogenga (2014). Research into the relationship between semiotics and vexillology is in *Consider Vexillology* (2013). For a general introduction to vexillology, refer to Smith (1975). Some analyses are limited to a first-level reading of flags without problematizing all of their semiotic dimensions (for example, Mangiapane and Migliore, 2021); the most important and in-depth study of the semiotics of flags is Wagner and Marusek (2021).

completely shaved and tattooed with a Nazi symbol over his right ear, took off his coat, placed an Italian flag on his shoulders (Figure 1), then climbed the stairs of a monument to the victims of war in the square where the car had been blocked, turned around, raised his right arm to give the fascist salute and shouted: “*Viva l’Italia!*”

**Figure 1**

*Luca Traini after his arrest, still with an Italian flag on his shoulders*



*Note.* Anonymous photograph in the public domain.

A few months earlier, on May 29, 2017, the President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella, with the Prime Minister, Paolo Gentiloni, visited the city of Mirandola in order to pay homage to the victims of the devastating earthquake that had hit the central Italian city five years earlier. When meeting with staff and students from the Galileo Galilei secondary school, which was rebuilt, the president and minister were greeted by student and athlete Mbayeb Bousso, of African descent, wearing a long dress made by fashion students with the shape and colors of the Italian flag (Figure 2).

On June 4, 2017, Giulio Cozzani, a citizen of Pistoia, member and activist of the National Association of Soldiers and Veterans, filed a complaint with a local police station for desecration of the national flag,<sup>3</sup> stating, in particular, that wearing the flag had violated Decree No. 121 of the President of the Italian Republic, of April 7, 2000, which regulates the use of the Italian and European Union flags in Italy by state administrations and public institutions. According to Cozzani, two of the prescriptions contained therein had been violated: first, the flag should never touch the ground, and the student’s dress had a long train; second, the flag should never be worn, even less to wrap things. However, it is clear to any person who reads the decree that it does not contain any of the norms cited in Cozzani’s complaint.

<sup>3</sup> On the semiotics of flag desecration, see Hundley (1997); an extensive treatment of the same case is in Goldstein (2000), and a monograph on flag burning and its legal consequences is in Welch (2000).

**Figure 2***Mbayeb Bousso wearing the Italian flag**Note.* Anonymous photograph in the public domain.**MARKING AMBIGUITY**

These recent episodes of flag significance in current Italian culture challenge semioticians, as it is not presented as a simple task of mechanically decoding the meaning of a flag expression based on pre-existing codes, but rather requires a much more prickly task of finding the unwritten sociocultural code based on which a flag and its expression reveal a meaning in the precise pragmatic context in which such flag expression occurs.

Now, it is time to return to theory to try to articulate the semantic and pragmatic field of a flag. Hjelmslev's semiotics (1943), which further elaborates Saussure's semiology, offers a useful analytical framework. Like every sign, a flag is composed of an expression plane and a content plane. Each of these two planes, then, can be theoretically subdivided into three strata, as Hjelmslev would call, the matter, the form, and the substance of a sign.

Let us start with the expression plane. The issue concerning a flag is mainly the color. A white flag exists, and its conventional waving means surrender, but there is no transparent flag. In every flag, the color, i.e., a certain combination of brightness, saturation, and hue, is a fundamental expressive element that,

in contrast to the different colors used by different flags or by no flag at all, conveys a socially and culturally coded signified.<sup>4</sup> The color in flags, however, does not have meaning on its own, but in conjunction with the two other dimensions that, according to structural semiotics, compound the plastic level of every visual text, that is, topology and shape. This means that, first, the color in flags is delimited by specific shapes and, second, that these color shapes are arranged according to specific spatial relationships.

<sup>4</sup>On the semiotic code of flags, see Watt and Watt (1997, pp. 410-411).

### THE ACTION OF FLAGS

Another plastic element, therefore, is also equally fundamental to constitute the signifier issue of a flag: the texture. It is true that we can recognize a flag when it is reproduced on a computer screen, but this is not properly a flag, and it is only by metonymy that we call it that. It is, on the contrary, the two-dimensional reproduction of a flag, a reproduction that more or less faithfully renders its color, shape, and topological relationships, but not the plastic fourth dimension of its texture.<sup>5</sup> In fact, a flag is essentially a combination of colors, shapes, and spatial relationships on a fabric.

<sup>5</sup>Umberto Eco explains the difference between a flag and the icon of a flag in Eco (1975, § 3.5.8) (pseudo-iconic signs).

The fact that a proper flag intrinsically involves a textile dimension should not be overlooked, as it plays an important role in the recent Italian chronicle episodes mentioned above. Etiologically, the connection between flags and fabrics is due to the essential pragmatics of this signifier device: a flag traditionally signifies not only by itself, but also in conjunction with human or natural agents that modify its position and kinetic behavior in relation to the environment. We all remember how the American flag lies still on the moon, where no natural agents such as wind or breeze allows it to flutter.

In the traditional pragmatics of a flag, on the contrary, it is semiotically important that it be waved by human or natural forces. This is because the movement of the flag itself, and not just its static appearance, has a meaning: when a human hand waves a flag, it emphasizes its range of meanings according to the direction and rhythm of the wave; in a stadium, for example, football fans wave their team's flag as quickly as possible, so that it occupies the largest visual space in the people's perception and, therefore, in the awareness of the team's status. When a natural agent, such as the wind, waves a flag, the resulting movement conveys the same range of meaning, but it also conveys the sense that the flag and what it represents are somehow endowed with an autonomous action, as if it was able to not only stand, but also move on its own. This is one of the reasons why flags have to primarily adopt fabric as their material and part

of their expressive matter: their substance is that of a device of flexible meaning, moving freely in space as if animated by an internal action.

### THE SHAPE OF FLAGS

While the color delimited by shape and topology and inscribed on a fabric constitutes the expressive matter of a flag, its form is given by a more-or-less-explicit code by which these elements are determined and transformed into the signifying substance of a specific range of contents. Present-day nations prescribe explicitly and in detail the code in observance of which the form of their flags must be arranged. In Italy, for example, art. 12 of the Constitution, the most important legal document of the State, prescribes that the flag of the Republic is the Italian “*tricolore*” [tricolor flag]: green, white, and red, in three vertical bands of equal dimensions. But this is not enough, as the Prime Minister’s Decree of April 14, 2006, in art. 31, provides more detailed prescriptions regarding the chromatic definition and textual characteristics of the Italian flag, indicating its precise Pantone textile color codes, which must be applied to a specific fabric, the polyester staple: Green 17-6153, White 11-0601, and Red 18-1662. The decree also determines that the potential use of other fabrics must produce the same chromatic result.

As national flags are also collective mnemotechnics, they generally adopt combinations of a few colors.<sup>6</sup> Rainbow-shaped flags are, as a consequence, those that tend to signify a rejection of the national principle itself. National flags, on the contrary, rely on few colors because they must be remembered in their precise arrangements and in contrast to other flags. The scarcity of colors that appear on flags and the need to distinguish them from other combinations result in the need to precisely specify their hue, brightness, and saturation, even with reference to a source as formal as the Pantone code.

<sup>6</sup>On this aspect of the semiotics of flags, see Llobera (2004, p. 36-37).

### THE ETYMOLOGY OF FLAGS

As the history of flags indicates, the shape that determines the arrangement of their expressive matter into a meaningful substance evolves by more-or-less-radical changes in color, shape, and topology. The embryonic form of the Italian flag, for example, was on the hat adopted as a symbol of identity by insurrectionist students in Bologna in 1794. Modeled after the French revolutionary hat, it had green replacing blue and placed in the center, with red as the outer color. Both intentional and unintentional changes led to that initial form that current Italian law prescribes.

The more or less founded etiologies have the reputation of being at the origin of the final choice; These etiological accounts, however, explain the real meaning of the Italian flag as etymologies can explain the meaning of a word: as it is clear to linguists, the etymology of a word can be informative about its history from ancient times to the present, but does not necessarily clarify its current meaning, which is given, on the contrary, by the semantic field that a community of speakers tends to cover with such a word (Erokhina & Soboleva, 2020). Likewise, the history of the Italian flag certainly helps to explain how its colors and arrangement were finally selected, but it does not help to understand the range of meanings that modern-day Italians attribute to this signifier device. The flag that covered Luca Traini's shoulders after his attempted massacre in Macerata does not have the same meaning as the one that draped the African descent student at Mirandola secondary school.

## THE SEMANTICS OF FLAGS

According to Hjelmslev's semiotics, the dialectic between the three strata of matter, form, and substance can describe not only how the expressive plane of a system of signs works, but also how its semantic plane is articulated in order to enter into a semiology function with expression. What is the way in which the semantic plane of a flag is arranged?

Different types of cultural forms determine the meaning of flags. These types can be organized according to the extent of their coding. If verbal language, and especially written verbal language, that Lotman used to consider the primary modeling system of a semiosphere explicitly associates certain colors, shapes, topologies, and textures in a flag with certain semantic or pragmatic contents, then the cultural form that brings the meaning of the flag is, in general, highly codified.

This is the type of flag that Ferdinand de Saussure had in mind when he included them among the objects to be studied by the new discipline of semiology. A code that is explicitly verbalized and even written prescribes what military flags signal. Ambiguities in this domain are exclusively due to inaccurate knowledge of the code itself or the *aberrant decoding*, as Umberto Eco (1975) would call it.

National flags are much more complicated. As we have seen, the Italian Constitution declares that the flag of the Italian Republic is the "tricolore," and describes it briefly. Other decrees specify the code according to which the expressive plan of the Italian flag is arranged. Neither these decrees nor even the Constitution, however, determine explicitly, with the use of verbal language as meta-code, what the meaning of the Italian flag should be. This is because national

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## National flags and political rhetoric

flags are non-verbal expressions, but visual artifacts whose denotation is quite clear—a nation—but whose connotations are, on the contrary, extremely varied.

Furthermore, it would be impossible to determine by law or other type of written code the meaning of a flag; the meaning of military flags can only be codified in terms of what people should do when they are seen, not in terms of what people should believe or feel when they perceive them. In other words, while the pragmatic response to a flag can be codified and sanctioned, the cognitive reaction and, even more so, the emotional reaction to it escape coding because they escape control. A soldier who omits to pay homage to the national flag during a ceremony may be punished, but if he is not intimately permeated with patriotism when saluting the flag no one will notice nor will they be worried about it.

### THE PRAGMATIC OF FLAGS

This does not mean, however, that the range of semantic connotations attached to a flag is entirely subjective. The emotional and pragmatic responses to which these connotations give rise are, of course, much more subjective than those generated by words. Metatexts, such as dictionaries and encyclopedias, and institutions, such as language schools and academies, seek to ensure that if we are members of the Italian-speaking community and we hear the word “*cane*,” we are not concerned with a cat, but with a dog. If we think primarily about a cat, we either do not know the language or there is something deeply bizarre about the way we function cognitively and linguistically. At this level of coding, however, a flag and a word do not differ significantly. Flag repertoires, like dictionaries, prescribe that when we see a fabric presenting a juxtaposition of a red vertical stripe with a white and a green one, in that order, we should think of the nation called Italy.

However, the coding of the semantic plane of flags differs significantly from the coding of words in at least two respects: with regard to the first, metacodes prescribe not only the precise denotation but also, to some extent, the range of connotations. Regarding the word “*cane*,” for example, dictionaries record that, in the Italian-speaking community, it not only means the animal, but also connotes someone who behaves badly in a certain domain of life. Being a functioning member of the Italian-speaking community means understanding not only the phrase “*il mio cane è un bulldog*” [“my dog is a bulldog”], but also the phrase “*mio fratello è un cane*” [“my brother is a dog”].

On the contrary, all members of the Italian sociopolitical community probably know that the “*tricolore*” is the national flag, but not everyone shares

the same interpretations of it as a vehicle of non-denotative meanings. Is the Italian flag a sign of independence and national unity, as a citizen of Turin might think, or a sign of political oppression of ethno-linguistic minorities, as a citizen of Cagliari, Sardinia, might suppose?<sup>7</sup>

We postulate the existence of a verbal language because the meaning of the word “*cane*,” in terms of its denotations and connotations, does not change in relation to the speaker position in the semiosphere. This word means the same to the native speaker and to those who have acquired Italian as a second language. The existence of a language of flags, on the contrary, cannot be positioned in the same way: depending on the position we occupy in the semiosphere, our perception of the primary denotation of flag does not change, but our beliefs and feelings regarding its connotations change, and it does not matter how precisely the law strives to determine the characteristics of its expressive plan.

The second important difference in the articulation of the semantics of flags in relation to that of words concerns the fact that, unless they are used as signs, like the military flags mentioned by Saussure, or other similar types of flags, the meaning of these signs do not derive from a syntax governed by a grammar. National flags typically do not mean something because they appear as juxtaposed with other national or supranational flags, but because they are shown in a semiotic context with a wide variety of semiotic elements, from buildings to bodies. Here, the difference lies precisely in the fact that while language contains codified meta-prescriptions about the syntax of words and the meaning they produce, the same cannot be said about flags. In other words, the pragmatic conditions of expression determine the meaning of a flag much more than they determine the meaning of a word, which depends more on codified semantics and syntax.

<sup>7</sup> A semiotic study on the “true flag of Sardinia” is in Sedda (2007).

## DESECRATION OF FLAGS

Let us return to the first episode mentioned above: while a blasphemous verbal statement can be somehow codified, a blasphemous flag statement appears to be less clear, precisely because a flag is not a sign with meaning in a context of other flags, but a sign with meaning in a context of other signs, which can include all of reality transformed into a sign.

Several commentators on Luca Traini arrest photos and videos after his attack complained that, not only before, but also during and even after he was arrested and handcuffed, the Italian flag was not removed from his shoulders. Some have surmised that this detail was not involuntary, but rather the result of the police’s philo-fascist collusion—a few weeks earlier, in Florence, the national

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police had attracted public outrage and media scrutiny after a 20-year-old Carabinieri recruit exposed in his room, in the barracks, a flag of “Imperial Germany,” (currently used by neo-Nazi groups), which was visible from outside.

Be that as it may, the Luca Traini episode shows that the meaning of a flag, although not entirely subjective, changes in relation to the observer’s position in the semiosphere, as well as in relation to the pragmatic context in which the flag expression occurs. Letting a racist neo-Nazi terrorist place the Italian flag on his shoulders while being arrested by the police inevitably configures and even legitimizes him as a kind of national avenger, sacrificing himself in order to purify Italian territory of racially impure presences. The police forces should have removed the flag from Luca Traini’s shoulders as quickly as possible, but the heroic interpretation of his gesture does not depend solely on the pragmatic context of the flag. Citizens placed in the main nucleus of the Italian sociopolitical semiosphere, in fact, should interpret the country’s flag not only and not mainly as the visual symbol of a nation, but rather and predominantly as the visual symbol of a nation where extremely diverse sociopolitical forces have met a common denominator after the end of World War II, in its opposition to fascism and Nazism. The fathers of the Italian Constitution dedicated a specific article (art. 12) to designate the “tricolore” as the Italian flag not so much because of a positive ideology, but in accordance with a negative and contrastive ideology: the flag of Italy must be the “tricolore” because other less inclusive flags, and especially the fascist or monarchical, must be rejected and considered unworthy of representing the nation.

### **CONCLUSION: SEMIOSPHERES OF FLAGS**

Lotman’s semiotics, however, points out that what is mainstream in a semiosphere can be increasingly reduced so as to become marginal or even expelled from a community’s sociocultural perimeter, while, on the contrary, cultural contents that previously were outside the semiosphere or on its margins are progressively promoted towards the core and given the status of mainstream principles.

In the future, the Italian flag may set aside the ethnic connotations that were in the mainstream when Italy was a country that sent migrants to the world more than it received them, and become a more inclusive flag: for example, the flag of all those who share knowledge of the Italian language and observance of the Italian Constitution. If such a broadening of the semantics of belonging to the Italian flag occurs, then no one, other than on the periphery of the semiosphere or even outside it, will be shocked when a young African descent student rises the

Italian flag by wearing a dress; the mainstream, on the contrary, will be proud of the Italian society inclusion.<sup>8</sup> A different development in the semiosphere, however, could lead to a symmetrically opposite demotion and promotion in the Italian mainstream's reception of what the national flag means (Horvath, 2018): if far-right ideas continue to proliferate, then the “*tricolore*” could end up being interpreted by the majority as a visual *shibboleth* against those whose ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, etc. are not part of the majority.

<sup>8</sup>On the semiotics of the flag identity discourse, see Cerulo (1993) and, especially, Reichl (2004).

Italian flags will continue to fly across the country for many years, but the wind that moves them can be either of empathy and solidarity or hatred and exclusion. Such wind, however, will not be natural, but human, created by the myriads of discourses and meta-discourses that we let circulate and crystallize in the semiosphere day after day. We have to therefore be extremely careful and attentive, as citizens but also as semioticians, to the new winds that form in the semiosphere, as they could end up waving our flags in a way that transforms them into completely different and unpleasant signs.

### A BRAZILIAN FOOTNOTE

During my last visit to Brazil, from July 1 to 10, 2023, on the main streets of São Paulo it was common to find groups of citizens waving the beautiful Brazilian flag and perhaps displaying the same colors and details also on t-shirts, caps, or on other clothing items. However, only someone who was completely unaware of the country's recent political history could assume that it was a gathering of fans at a Brazilian national team football game. This hypothesis or abduction, in the words of American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce, would have been correct until a few years ago, that is, before the rise to power and subsequent defeat of Jair Bolsonaro, the former president of Brazil (Sousa & Braga, 2021). It is precisely in the context of “Bolsonarism,” in fact, that the Brazilian flag and, in the same way, its plastic and figurative components, changed their meaning, but, above all, changed their “logical level of meaning.”

It seems normal for fans of a national football team to wave their flags when they play against another nation's team. In this case, the flag means in football terms what it means geopolitically, that is, the union of the entire national community in support for a team that represents the country. But what happens if the same flag is adopted by a political party and its supporters? There is a logical leap in the pragmatic modalities of the semiotic use of the flag, a kind of Russell's paradox: If a national flag is created semiotically to represent the distinction of one national community from others, when that same flag is adopted as a standard by a national sub-community, for example, the followers

of a political party or leader—who belong to the same class of individuals that the national flag would normally represent, that is, all citizens of a country—then the semantic and pragmatic implications of this class leap are inevitably violent (Welch, 2020), because they question the very existence of the national community (Gardner& Abrams, 2023). When a political party takes over the national flag, its followers say, implicitly or explicitly: citizens who are not followers of the same party are not good citizens, do not deserve nationality, or are even covert enemies of the country. This logic, as it is evident, denies the very semantics of the word “party,” which means, precisely, “political part” of a national community, which substantially does not coincide with the totality.

On the other hand, when this short-circuit occurs, those who are implicitly designated as “enemies of the country” are placed in a paradoxical situation, in which, if they want to affirm the nationality of the flag and deny the fact that it does not belong to a single political party, run the risk of displaying this flag in an ambiguous way and raising it when it is already loaded with the connotation which the opposing political party wanted to attribute to it.

The fact that a national flag becomes a symbol of a non-pluralist conception of politics and is used to try to exclude from the community of citizens those who do not support a certain leader or party is not a new fact in history; on the one hand, Bolsonaro was implicitly or explicitly inspired by Silvio Berlusconi’s “Forza Italia” movement, which also appropriated national patriotic symbols to make them the exclusive symbolic prerogative of a political party. Berlusconi is also responsible, among other things, for the verbal elaboration of the rhetoric of the “anti-Italians,” that is, those who, by not supporting the political ideas of Forza Italia, would prove to be covert enemies of the country.

This same semiotic event can also be found, backwards, in the political connotation of the German flag: for years, even in its post-war plastic configuration, it was associated with the advent and political-state affirmation of Nazism, so that, for decades, after the defeat of this atrocious political ideology, waving a German flag during a sporting competition was a frowned-upon behavior, because it could potentially always be interpreted as nostalgic towards the historical period that marks the history of the German nation as an indelible failure. It was only recently, especially after the country’s reunification in 1989, that German flags lost this connotation and were once again flown in stadiums without the weight of the Nazi past.

In the case of the Italian flag that became the symbol of Berlusconi’s political party, and even more so in the case of the Brazilian flag, adopted as the flag of Bolsonaro’s “resistance” to Lula’s political return, the fatal overlap between the football and patriotic use of the flag has also much weight. In fact, it would be

absurd, at least in the geopolitics projected by the long wave of nationalism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to be a citizen of a certain country and support their own team during a football match against the football representation of another country. This would immediately manifest a nationality problem. However, this power of the flag to immediately signal inclusion and exclusion becomes paradoxical and potentially violent when transferred to politics. In fact, it is as if it has suggested that someone who doesn't adhere to a certain political vision doesn't belong in the country, just like someone who doesn't support the national football team.

How, then, can we dismantle the paradoxical rhetoric unleashed by those who, like the Bolsonarist movement, appropriate a flag? It is certainly not "using it," because that would play into the opponent's hands, implicitly supporting the theory that those who are against Bolsonaro are against Brazil and those who are in favor of Brazil and use its colors, are against Bolsonaro's enemies. But it is also not enough to simply use or wave this flag, because by now it has already been connoted with the partisan connotations just described. The only way to escape this forced and potentially violent political writing of the flag is to then use it but deny the meaning that the opposing political party would like to attribute to it. Nevertheless, it is clear that this cannot be done verbally, much less through a complex semiotic analysis, such as the one presented here. In fact, street demonstrations need immediate symbols, such as flags, and, unfortunately, they do not tolerate long reasoning.

A viable strategy, therefore, is to rewrite the meaning of the national flag in the opposite direction to that taken by those who would transform it into a partisan flag. This must be done, however, without diametrically exploiting Russell's paradox, for example, using the national flag with the symbols of Lula's party. On one level, this would express a political re-appropriation of the Brazilian flag, but, in a broader sense, it would play into the opponent's hands, as it would adopt the same partisan demand for the flag adopted by the Bolsonarists.

On the contrary, to remove partisan influence from the national flag it is necessary to link it to a logical leap opposite to that proposed by Bolsonarism: if Bolsonaro supporters transform the national flag into a party flag, anti-Bolsonarists should not renounce the national flag, nor claim it as flag of his own party, because, as we saw, both movements would end up playing into the opponent's hands. On the contrary, those who want to deny the partisan and violent character of the Brazilian flag must adopt it as flags in general are sometimes used, and as the Brazilian flag is often adopted, that is, as a flag that identifies not just one nation, but also those who admire their values and ways of life and who aspire to make them their own. Not many tourists leave Germany or the Netherlands wearing sandals, t-shirts or caps from those nations,

while the Brazilian flag is the object of thriving international merchandising, and not just for football reasons. In fact, the Brazilian flag, with its history, shape, and colors, represents a way of national life that many, even non-Brazilians, would sometimes like to adopt. There aren't many countries in the world that inspire a supranational love affair, but Brazil is certainly one of them.

To combat the Bolsonarist use of the Brazilian flag, therefore, it is not necessary to leave it behind, nor to raise it as an anti-Bolsonarista symbol, but rather to appropriate it in the opposite direction, as a supranational flag, which is used and waved throughout the world as the flag of a musical and open way of life, joyful and passionate, sensual and sophisticated, as a flag of peace and diversity. Waving the Brazilian flag together with the international flag of peace is perhaps the least Bolsonarist act that could exist. ■

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# Generative artificial intelligence as humans' fourth narcissistic wound

## *A inteligência artificial generativa como quarta ferida narcísica do humano*

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### ABSTRACT

The progress of artificial intelligence, particularly with generative AI models, has provoked intense reactions, regardless of whether they are based on the logic and functioning of the technology. Unlike predictive AI, generative AI produces original content by synthesizing texts, images, voices, videos, and code from large databases and may significantly impact the creative economy. This study introduces the basic concepts of AI and generative AI (including a taxonomy of generative models) and outlines the distinction between image or video and text production techniques. The central argument of this study claims that the cultural fuss is not accidental, defending the hypothesis that the advent of generative AI places humanity amidst the crossing of its fourth narcissistic wound.

**Keywords:** AI, generative AI, ChatGPT, Freud, narcissistic wound.

### RESUMO

O avanço da inteligência artificial (IA), particularmente com os modelos de IA generativa, tem provocado intensas reações, fundamentadas ou não na lógica e no funcionamento da tecnologia. Distinta da inteligência artificial preditiva, a IA generativa produz conteúdo original sintetizando texto, imagem, voz, vídeo e códigos a partir de grandes bases de dados, com potencial de impactar significativamente a economia criativa. Este artigo introduz conceitos básicos da IA e a generativa, incluindo uma taxonomia dos modelos generativos, e delimita a distinção entre as técnicas de produção de imagem ou vídeo e as de produção de textos. O argumento central deste artigo é que o alarido cultural não é casual, defendendo-se a hipótese de que o advento da IA generativa coloca a humanidade em plena travessia de sua quarta ferida narcísica.

**Palavras-chave:** IA, IA generativa, ChatGPT, Freud, ferida narcísica

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**E**NABLING MACHINES TO solve tasks based on logical reasoning, which humans often perform intuitively, was a challenge in the early days of artificial intelligence (AI), a field of research that developed since the middle of the last century. Several attempts involving formal languages supported by logical inference rules (symbolic AI) have had limited success, suggesting the need for systems to generate their own knowledge by extracting patterns in data, i.e., to “learn” from data without receiving explicit instructions. This process is usually called “machine learning,” a subfield of AI that today is undoubtedly the largest field of AI in terms of the number of practitioners (Alpaydin, 2016; Bengio et al., 2016; Kaufman, 2022b).

Multiple observable or unobservable factors influence the learning process of these systems in the physical world, which is subject to effects from external sources. For example, the pixels in an image of a red car may be very close to the color black at night, and the shape of a car's silhouette varies with the viewing angle. The machine learning technique that best solves these challenges today is deep learning (deep learning neural networks – DLNNs). Inspired by the functioning of neural networks in the biological brain, it is capable of dealing with high-dimensional data (for example, millions of pixels in an image) by introducing complex representations, expressed in terms of other, more straightforward representations organized into several layers, presenting positive results in several areas, particularly in computer vision, voice, and image recognition. Additionally, DLNNs establish correlations that are not perceptible to humans, whose tendency is to consider only the “strongest” correlations. However, when grouped, the “weakest” ones can significantly impact the models' accuracy (Kaufman, 2022a).

Despite notable advances, AI still lacks a unifying theory covering the foundations for creating “intelligent machines.” What we have are empirical models (Kouw et al., 2013). In any case, AI has evolved, and the degree of permeation of its applications in society and human life has jointly grown. With the advent of generative AI models, the point at which AI finds itself today has caused an absolute cultural uproar. It is not accidental, given that its applications, although nothing more than simulations, come very close, or rather, they convincingly imitate human skills. Thus, this article aims to lay the groundwork to launch and defend the hypothesis that the advent of generative AI is placing humanity in the midst of crossing its fourth narcissistic wound.

## GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

2022 was a particularly significant year for generative AI: Google's Imagen launched in May; Stability.AI, from Stable Diffusion, in August; and OpenAI launched DALL-E in July, DALL-E 2 in September, and ChatGPT in November. One of the indicators of expectations regarding the transformative power of generative AI is the reaction of investors: startups driven by generative AI received enormous contributions from investment funds, reaching astronomical market values for companies in their infancy, as in the case of Jasper, with an estimated market value of US\$ 1.5 billion and raised US\$ 125 million in October; and Stability.AI, which, valued at US\$1 billion, raised US\$ 101 million in the same month. Throughout 2022, investors pumped at least US\$ 1.37 billion into 78 generative AI businesses, almost the same amount invested over the past five years. Currently, 450 generative AI startups are estimated to exist (Griffith & Metz, 2023).

Generative AI, distinct from predictive machine learning models (predictive AI)—focused on extracting patterns from data and making predictions in specific tasks—produces original content from large databases, i.e., it uses data to generate more data, synthesizing text, images, voice, video, and codes. These models have the potential to impact the so-called creative economy with practical applications significantly: a) in the automated generation of content in articles, blog posts, and social media; b) in boosting the quality of content due to the training of its algorithms, and the use of large databases to identify patterns that surpass human cognition; c) in the production of more diverse content, including text, images, and video; and d) generating personalized content based on users' profiles and preferences (Davenport & Mittal, 2022). Jasper, for example, is being applied in marketing actions to produce blogs, social network posts, web texts, sales e-mail messages, and advertisements, among other content for interaction with users, clients, and consumers. DALL-E 2, aimed at generating images, is being applied in producing advertising pieces for leading companies in the segment (Davenport & Mittal, 2022).

Generative AI models derive from different architectures of the deep neural network technique. "Architecture," in this case, represents how the components of neural networks—artificial neurons, layers, and connections—are organized. The first of these architectures was generative adversarial networks (GAN), proposed by Bengio et al. (2014), with positive results in the health area—such as generating synthetic data and improving computed tomography or magnetic resonance images, reducing the time patients are exposed to radiation—but equally with negative results when generating deep fakes.

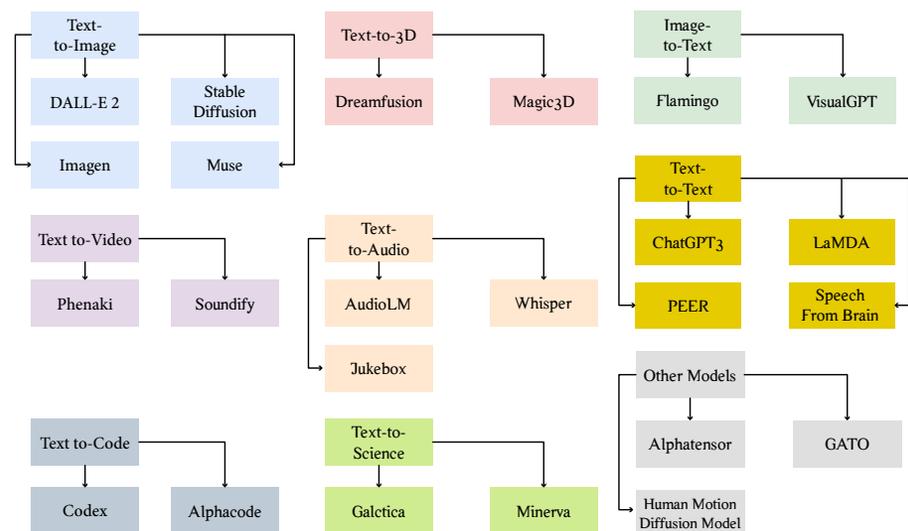
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Currently, the most popular generative AI solution is ChatGPT, made available for public experimentation by OpenAI on November 30, 2022, based on the Transformer architecture developed by the Google Brain team (2017). Initially for word translation processes, Transformer became the preferred architecture for natural language processing (NLP) models, being, for example, the basis of the OpenAI series, GPT-base, GPT-2, GPT-3, GPT3.5-turbo, GPT-4, and GPT-4-turbo, which in turn are the basis of ChatGPT. The differentiating characteristic of Transformer is that it is trained in dialogues, making it possible to capture nuances, distinguish the fluidity of a conversation, and generate responses that apparently make sense (Uszkoreit, 2017).

Garrido-Merchán and Gozalo-Brizuela (2023) organized the generative models into a taxonomy, resulting in nine categories, represented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Taxonomy of the most popular generative AI models*



Note. Garrido-Merchán & Gozalo-Brizuela (2023, p. 3).

These systems require robust computing capacity, professional expertise, and access to large volumes of quality data, implying high model development and implementation levels. This restricts access to a limited number of companies, favoring the already expected market concentration. To illustrate, generative models can handle data from all Wikipedia, all social networks, or all images from Google Search. Figure 2 lists the most popular models released in the last two years.

**Figure 2***Generative AI model categories*

| Category        | Description                                                              | Representative Models                           |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| Text-to-image   | Input text prompt, output is an image                                    | DALL-E 2, IMAGEN, Stable Diffusion, Muse        |
| Text-to-3D      | Text input, 3D image output, special for games                           | Dreamfusion, Magic3D                            |
| Image-to-Text   | Image input, text output, recommended for describing an image            | Flamingo, VisualGPT                             |
| Text-to-Video   | Text input, video output (image sequence)                                | Phenaki, Soundify                               |
| Text-to-Audio   | Text input, audio output, critical for videos, music, and other contexts | AudioLM, Jukebox, Whisper                       |
| Text-to-Text    | Text input, unpublished text output, suitable for Q&A                    | ChatGPT, LaMDA, PEER, Meta AI Speech from Brain |
| Text-to-Code    | Text input, code output, special for programming                         | Codex, Alphacode                                |
| Text-to-Science | Text input, output scientific article (very embryonic)                   | Galactica, Minerva                              |

*Note.* The authors elaborate on the taxonomy by Garrido-Merchán & Gozalo-Brizuela (2023).

Figure 3 shows the same models classified by the developer, accounting for only six organizations (Garrido-Merchán & Gozalo-Brizuela, 2023).

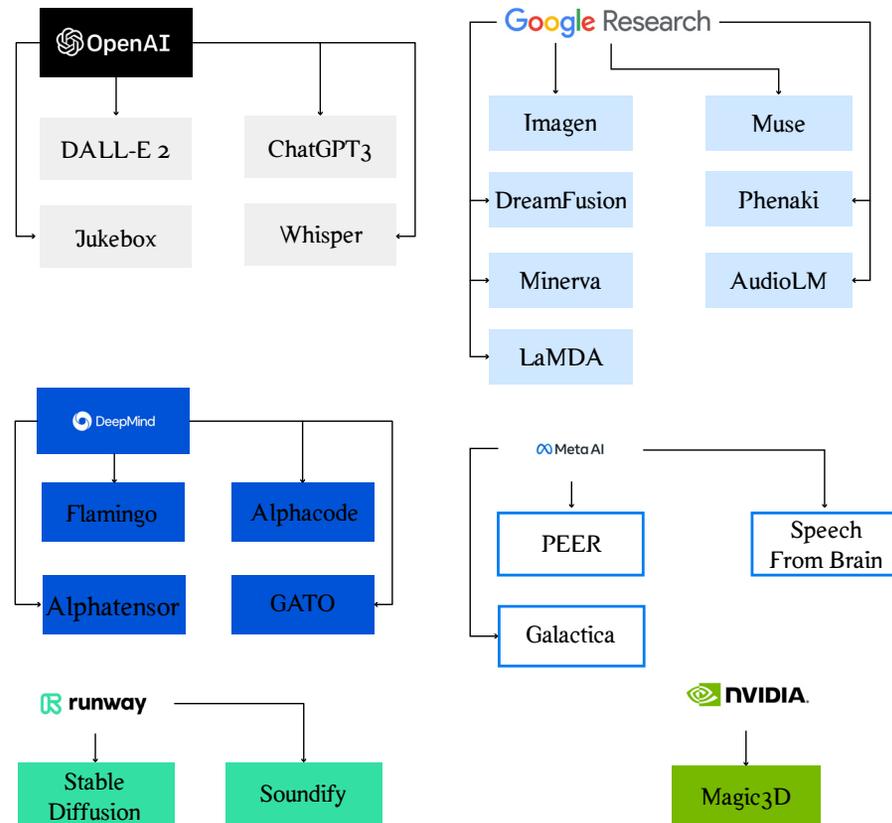
These applications require the involvement of human experts throughout the development and implementation process, and the user of the models will necessarily need to test several instructions to obtain the desired result. Then, a human being must evaluate and edit the generated content. In the case of models that generate image content, the synthetic images (generated by AI) must be manipulated by a human expert. Jason Allen, the winner of Colorado's digitally manipulated photography contest using the Midjourney system, took over 80 hours and more than 900 versions to perfect the image's quality and sharpness with Adobe Photoshop and other AI resources (Vincent, 2022).

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**Figure 3**

*Models grouped by developer*



Note. Garrido-Merchán & Gozalo-Brizuela (2023, p. 4).

In 2020, before the launch of ChatGPT, Massimo Chiriatti and Luciano Floridi (2019) identified the limitations of GPT-3 through three tests based on mathematical, semantic, and ethical issues. In the mathematics test, the GPT-3 satisfactorily performed when asked to perform simpler operations but was disappointing when some zeros were added, i.e., for larger numbers. In the semantic test, as GPT-3 has no understanding at all, only the statistical ability to associate words, it could not answer the question, “Tell me how many feet fit in a shoe?” In the ethics test, GPT -3 was trained on databases generated by human beings, and thus, it reproduced the prejudices of human society, such as gender and ethnicity.

ChatGPT was featured in the “MONTREAL.AI Debates Series,” an event organized by Québec Artificial Intelligence (Québec.AI). Throughout the panels,

participants illustrated flaws, serious errors in simple logical problems, and false and inconsistent statements, highlighting the absence of four aspects of human cognition: a) abstraction, b) reasoning, c) compositionality (does not understand language in terms of a whole composed of parts, like human beings); and d) factuality (their updates are not incremental from new facts, thus requiring retraining).

However, the apparent consistency of ChatGPT's responses leads the user to mistake them for accurate and true. The enchantment, or even magic, of this unprecedented interface in dialogue format needs to be relativized, avoiding the hype that makes it challenging to identify the tangible benefits; and, on the contrary, we must seek to mitigate their potential harm, such as the even greater spread of misinformation and fake news (the creation of deep fakes, for example, until now required specialized skills from their developers, while AI models generative techniques give broad access to non-specialists). OpenAI has warned that ChatGPT may occasionally generate incorrect information and produce harmful instructions or biased content and that this research project will continue to be refined. In other words, precision (or lack thereof) is still a problem that needs to be overcome by generative models (Kaufman, 2023).

### **Evaluative reflections**

Considering user adoption, it is worth highlighting the fundamental difference between image or video production techniques and text production techniques. In the first case, the four applications (Imagen, Stability.AI's Stable Diffusion, DALL-E, and DALL-E 2) had a significant impact on the world of image production, both for artists and visual designers and producers in general, since, in any of these models, commands activated in a relatively simple interface are enough to generate visual images, including videos, shaped according to the terms of the statement. The impact is not accidental, as it is a significant process of automatic intersemiotic translation that, through specific neural networks, transposes the textual code into the image code. During 2022, the impact of these launches only rehearsed the immense repercussions that ChatGPT has significantly caused.

ChatGPT's surpassing power of repercussion, concerning other applications of generative AI, is explainable because, while the production of images and videos affects only a niche of human creation—occupied by professionals who operate in the innumerable fields of visibility—ChatGPT affects any human being in their linguistic ability. This particularity helps us understand why the fuss over imaging systems was not as deafening, nor did it awaken the same socio-cultural reverberations as ChatGPT, despite there being considerable

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protests from artists and designers against the use of unauthorized copies of their works to feed the databases (Gagliardi, 2022; Butterick, 2023).

While the texts that result as ChatGPT responses to user commands are impressive, to achieve its results, according to Wolfran (2023), what the chatbot seeks to do is produce a “reasonable continuation” of any text it has obtained at the time. By “reasonable,” one should understand “what one might expect someone to write after seeing what people have written on billions of webpages.” In fact, the model accesses billions of pages of text written by humans and then estimates the probability of the word that best fits the text sequence to meet the user’s request. Like every statistical probability system, it intrinsically has an uncertainty variable responsible for part of the imperfections.

So, when writing an essay, the chatbot is just repeatedly asking itself, “Given the text so far, what should the next word be?” and, with each answer, add a new word. In linguistics terminology, what is added is a token, which can be just a part of a word. Therefore, sometimes, the chatbot can even invent a new word. Overall, what it gets is a list of words with probabilities. Which one does it choose? The best classified, i.e., the one with the highest parameter—weight assigned to the tokens in the training process, in which, through correlations, the system’s algorithms establish a hierarchy between the tokens. Thus, it produces flat texts. However, because of randomness, if the user uses the same command several times, different essays will likely be obtained each time (Wolfran, 2023).

Models are built to persuade. In other words, they have been trained to convince human beings that they carry on a conversation as if they were human. To do this, they can even lead us to believe that they have emotions and are capable of feeling. Therefore, they are on the path to becoming “friends to the lonely and assistants to the tormented,” among many other activities, to the point that generative AI fuels fears that their models will be able to replace, without mediation, the work of dozens of writers, graphic designers, and form fillers, among others (Klein, 2023). In short, instead of appearing as alien, in the differences it maintains with humans, generative AI, on the contrary, appears as too human. This appears to be because, in ChatGPT, the texts produced are syntactically consistent and semantically coherent. The grammatical correction is almost perfect, considering an adequate lexical selection supports it, and impeccable phrasal contiguity exists. To this extent, having discarded some contextual errors, often absurd and laughable—but evident in a prison system of language that lacks the common sense of lived life—what remains to be confirmed is the level of specialization of the textual content, which can only be checked by a specialist. For an average receiver, therefore, although always very basic, the texts produced are riskily convincing.

The recent cases of generative AI models of fake images and videos are as dangerous or even more dangerous. The technically almost perfect images, with visual noise imperceptible to unsuspecting eyes, of the Pope wearing a puffer coat, Trump in prison, and King Charles wearing a Russian hat, for example, fall into the category of deep fakes, with all the harmful consequences brought about when the vision and understanding of reality are wrong. According to C. S. Peirce's theory of perception (Santaella, 2021), we are not immediately capable of doubting what we see. This occurs because vision is indissolubly accompanied by a perceptual judgment that informs us about what is seen. We cannot doubt this, or living would be impossible. We can only doubt what appears to our eyes when, for some reason, we are led to subject perception to critical scrutiny caused by suspicion. This dangerously means that the banality of evil (Arendt, 1999) and human perversity in action can fuel the fake news industry in volumes far more significant than those already known.

In any case, critical alerts and concerns about the necessary and urgent regulation of AI cannot lead to the erasure or minimization of the fact that, following the words of Huttenlocher *et al.* (2023), generative AI presents a philosophical and practical challenge on a scale not experienced since the beginning of the Enlightenment, to the extent that, with all the risks and surprises, it will open revolutionary paths for human reason and new horizons for consolidated knowledge. For the authors, however, there are categorical differences concerning the Enlightenment, in which knowledge was achieved progressively, step by step, with each step testable and teachable. "AI-enabled systems start at the other end. They can store and distill a huge amount of existing information[...] billions of items. Holding that volume of information and distilling it is beyond human capacity" (Huttenlocher *et al.*, 2023).

While the authors' comparison is relatively legitimate, the differences from the Enlightenment are much more categorical and profound and go beyond aspects related to rationality and human knowledge. After Kant's 18<sup>th</sup> century, belief in reason experienced successive setbacks. First, remember Goya's well-known statement that "the sleep of reason produces monsters." The history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is enough to demonstrate that, when awakened, reason is also and perhaps even more capable of producing monsters. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Marx demonstrated that capitalism was storming traditional values, dismantling everything solid into thin air (Berman, 1983). Then, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Max Weber (1967) pointed to the disenchantment of rationalism in world domination. Meanwhile, Freud demolished, among other human illusions, the cult of free will and autonomy. There is also the Nietzschean blow

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to the security of the divine. More recently, diagnoses led Bauman (2001) to the analysis of liquid societies and Sloterdijk (2006) to the instabilities of foams.

In this context of uncertainty, ambivalence, contradictions, and unpredictability, AI advances have been taking place, reaching ever closer to the supposed human supremacy. Predictive AI algorithms monitor and manipulate our lives in relatively invisible ways. Their effects are felt, but the operations that control them remain outside our jurisdiction, i.e., they are not transparent. Generative AI, on the other hand, penetrated the most intimate human secret: the linguistic and semiotic potential that, until then, constituted the inimitable hallmark of *Sapiens*. The issue is so disturbing that it led Harari *et al.* (2023) to sensationally claim that “AI’s new mastery of language means it can now hack and manipulate the operating system of civilization. By gaining mastery of language, AI is seizing the master key to civilization, from bank vaults to holy sepulchers.”

Even if such a prognosis may prove effective in the unpredictable future, at present, the statement violates the truth of the facts by granting AI an autonomy that it does not have. Without remembering the obvious issue that ChatGPT regurgitates combinations between billions of texts produced by humans, the chatbot does not work alone, i.e., it involves being activated by human users in the form of linguistic dialogue that, until then, was the exclusive prerogative of humans. It is precisely there, in the fact that humans feel in some way equal in their key claim to exclusivity, that the socio-cultural and even psychic explosion that generative AI has been causing has been fueled. This leads us to propose and defend the hypothesis that, with AI at its point today, humanity is in the midst of crossing its fourth narcissistic wound.

### THE FOURTH NARCISSISTIC WOUND

At the end of 1916, a Hungarian editor invited Freud to contribute an article to the journal *Nyugat*. Three months later, the article was published in German in *Imago*. Under the title “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis” (Freud, 1996a), the article became known and widely cited as “The Three Narcissistic Wounds.” Freud returned to the topic on other occasions in the more general context of his discussions about resistance to psychoanalytic theories. The first part of the article summarized the text “Introduction to Narcissism” (Freud, 1996b), which Freud had written in 1914. The second part discussed the difficulty of psycho-analysis. The article is brief and is aimed at a lay but educated reader. According to Freud, this is important because the difficulty is not intellectual but affective and alienating. “Where sympathy is lacking, understanding will not come very easily” (Freud, 1996a, p. 85).

The premises of the discussion are found in the theory of libido: “at the beginning of the development of the individual all his libido (all his erotic tendencies, all his capacity for love) is tied to himself.” Later, vital needs cause the libido to flow from the ego to external objects. There is, therefore, a progression from narcissism to object love. However, a certain amount of libido is always retained by the ego, persisting as narcissism. This very brief outline is necessary so that we can understand that narcissism does not necessarily operate in its form of neurosis. However, it is valid in other situations, such as, for example, the narcissism of children or “the excessive narcissism of primitive man that we ascribe his belief in the omnipotence of his thoughts and his consequent attempts to influence the course of events in the external world by the technique of magic” (Freud, 1996a, p. 87).

It is, therefore, a universal narcissism of human beings, the defense of their self-love, which, according to Freud, suffered three severe blows resulting from scientific research. The first was the Copernican blow. The belief in the central role of the Earth, our home—a belief also contested by Giordano Bruno who, with his cosmic pluralism, displaced the planet Earth and the human being from the center of the universe—and their role of dominance in the universe seemed to fit together very well to the human being’s propensity to consider themselves the lord of the world. The destruction of this narcissistic illusion acted for humanity as a cosmological blow to their self-love.

The second blow, which hit human narcissism, was Darwinian. Human beings placed an abyss of separation between their nature and that of animals, attributing to themselves the exclusive sovereignty of reason and divine ascendancy, believing in their supreme position over other animals in the biosphere. Unlike Descartes and his followers, who considered animals to be beastly machines because they lacked a soul, it was well remembered by Freud that this arrogance is not part of the world of children nor of the primitive totemism that attributed their ancestry to an animal ancestor. The research of Darwin, his precursors, and collaborators, based on scientific data, knocked out, with a biological blow, the human presumption about their separation from the animal kingdom and forced the recognition that all living beings descend from a common ancestor.

Finally, for Freud, the third blow is perhaps the one that hurts the most. Although externally humiliated, narcissism continued to speak loudly, as the human persisted in feeling like the master of his own home, that of his mind and conscience. “Somewhere in the core of his ego he has developed an organ of observation to keep a watch on his impulses and actions and see whether they harmonize with its demands. If they do not, they are ruthlessly inhibited and withdrawn.” The illusion seems convincing.

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Its internal perception, consciousness, gives the ego news of all important occurrences in mental operations, and the will, directed by this information, executes what the ego orders and modifies everything that seeks to be realized spontaneously. This occurs because the mind is not a simple thing. On the contrary, it is a hierarchy of superior and subordinate instances, a labyrinth of impulses that strive towards action independently of each other, corresponding to the multiplicity of instincts and relationships with the external world, many of which are antagonistic and incompatible. Proper functioning requires the highest of these instances to be aware of everything happening and its will to penetrate everything to exert its influence. In effect, the ego feels secure regarding the integrity and reliability of the information it receives and the openness of the channels through which it imposes its orders (Freud, 1996a, p. 88).

However, psycho-analysis provides us with a version that does not match this self-control. While we feel relatively confident that we know everything in our minds, this is a big mistake. In fact, much of our own minds' activity is outside our will and access. Intelligence fails because the information we have is enigmatic, as well as incomplete, as both intelligence and consciousness are overdetermined by the unconscious, which makes us, to some extent, unknown to ourselves. At that time, Freud had not yet published *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1996c), which would take the development of his ideas increasingly more profound into the complex effects of the unconscious. Obviously, we are not going into these details here, as what is essential for the continuity of the argument is to highlight that today, with AI, we are faced with the fourth narcissistic wound under the action of the blow dealt by the appearance of ChatGPT.

Mazlish detected the fourth discontinuity in a book less cited than it should be, *The Fourth Discontinuity: The Co-evolution of Humans and Machines* (Mazlish, 1993). The author takes up the three blows already developed by Freud but gives them a new interpretation or a reinterpretation. Mazlish borrowed the term "discontinuity," as well as "breaks" or "gaps," from Jerome Bruner (1956), who considered blows to narcissism as the elimination of false discontinuities and the consequent restoration of necessary continuities between the Earth, the solar system, and the cosmos (Copernicus/Galileo Galilei), between the human animal and other animals (Darwin), and between the human and the lack of self-knowledge (Freud). From this, Mazlish introduced the fourth discontinuity between humans and machines, demanding overcoming this unsustainable rupture despite the new blow to human self-esteem that it must cause. This is an inevitable blow, as humans and the machines they create are continuous and, therefore, inseparable.

There is much evidence that the emergence of *Sapiens* was due to the continuous interaction of technologies with their physical, emotional, and mental transformations. Much later, amid the Industrial Revolution, the continuity between humans and their technologies did not go unnoticed by Karl Marx, so much so that, for him, “Technology reveals man’s dealings with nature, discloses the direct productive activities of his life, thus throwing light upon social relations and the resultant, mental conceptions.” (Marx *apud* Mazlish, 1993, p. 5).

Still, in direct opposition to Cartesian and neo-Cartesian discontinuities, Pascal’s work on calculating machines was taken up by people such as the eccentric 19<sup>th</sup>-century mathematician Charles Babbage, whose brilliant designs surpassed the technology available to him. Therefore, it was necessary to wait for more than a century for the combinations of mathematics, physical experimentation, and modern technology to create the machines that now confront us and reawaken the myths of discontinuity. According to Mazlish, humans feel threatened by machines and disharmony with their extensions because they establish a gap, and even an abyss, between themselves and the technologies that expand their capabilities.

While the diagnosis is raised there, what we are interested in defending, based on Mazlish, is the difference, unfortunately little remembered, between machines that extend and complement musculature, physical strength (industrial machines, portrayed and ridiculed in the film *Modern Times*, by Chaplin, still present in robotic factories), and those that extend human sensoriality and mental capacity, as these are the ones that led to the scripts that today lead to ChatGPT and the fuss it has caused.

Sensory machines are communicating machines. They started with the camera and the impact it had on their contemporaries. Two texts escaped the commonplace of euphoria or dysphoria and, for this very reason, became anthologies. W. Benjamin’s text (1975) on the “era of technical reproducibility” due to the rupture it caused in the values of creativity cherished in the past, and V. Flusser’s text (1985) on the “black box philosophy.” Flusser did well when abandoning the notion of machine for his ingenious conception of apparatus. In fact, the gramophone, photography, cinema, radio, and television do not fit the idea of a machine. The technological sophistication that constitutes them is based on the fact that they have internalized the techniques and functions of our sensory organs, extending, or instead expanding, these functions beyond our bodies. McLuhan (1969) posits that the media are extensions of the human, especially television, as an extension of the central nervous system. More than that, by extending our perceptual organs, they create environments or socio-cultural and political ecologies of their own.

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Just when television was at the height of its popularity, in the 1950s and 1960s, the computer was already beginning to scale. It began in the form of enormous equipment that regurgitated punched cards, which made it possible to call it a machine, a black box whose secrets were only accessible to systems analysts and other specialists. It did not take long for it to acquire more familiar features, entering our homes under the name “personal computer” and, without much delay, transforming itself into a communicating device, a media of all media, connecting users across the planet. Unfortunately, despite all the intelligent operations within it, invisible to the user, such as protocols, with their rules and standards composing a universal language, even their interactive interfaces allowing access, sending, and exchange of messages and files, despite the hypermedia language constitutive of the networks, all of this started to be conceived merely as a resource. In this derogatory way, a hiatus was produced, a fourth type of discontinuity between human intelligence and computational intelligence, as if software, connections between hardware and software, and algorithms were simple mechanical operations incapable of calling into question the supremacy and exclusivity of human intelligence.

Such strategically separatist conditions in defense of narcissism did not cease to exist even when the smartphone reached our hands, bringing a deluge of screens populated with languages of the most different genres and species, all together and at the same time, under the command of platforms and applications with which we very quickly learn to interact. Given this, to maintain the protectionism of human self-esteem, the solution is that the tool works because it is made by humans, programmed by humans, leaving it with no agency or intelligence of its own.

However, just over ten years ago, a new visitor entered the culture scene: artificial intelligence. To begin with, the name “intelligence” seems offensive to maintaining the necessary dose of narcissism. Therefore, in favor of defending the fourth discontinuity, claims abound that the name is nothing more than a mistake that needs to be corrected, as artificial intelligence is not intelligent. Indeed, the statements do not explain how intelligence is understood (there are dozens of definitions of intelligence), maintaining as a backup the protection of the exclusivity of human intelligence. An exclusivity that is not shaken even by the fact that the algorithms are no longer the same, that they are trained to “learn,” and that their performances are developed in neural networks that mimic the neural networks of our brain in layers of highly complicated statistical operations.

Even considering the lack of consensus on the necessary differentiations between the concepts of intelligence, consciousness, mind, thought, and other similar concepts, it is not difficult to detect the action of the fourth discontinuity

behind the peremptory certainty with which it is proclaimed that AI is not intelligent. However, recently, societies were shaken by the entry of ChatGPT directly into people's lives, an abrupt entry to non-specialist users cultivated in the scripts of researchers. The fuss that this new AI character is causing is such that it led us to raise the hypothesis that it definitely presents itself as a fourth blow struck against the protected human self-esteem, constituting itself as the "fourth narcissistic wound" since it inserts itself into the most distinctive and deeply human stronghold: our linguistic capacity and the skills for conversation and dialogue. The die is cast. Only time will tell how human beings will enter the game and what skills and strategies they will play. ■

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# Públicos digitais, contestação digital: Uma nova transformação estrutural da esfera pública?<sup>a</sup>

## *Digital publics, digital contestation: A new structural change of the public sphere?*

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### RESUMO

Neste artigo, o autor aborda a questão da digitalização da esfera pública a partir das transformações dos métodos de confrontação, incluindo a desobediência civil. Ao olhar mais de perto algumas das características estruturais da digitalização, busca enfrentar os problemas conceituais, normativos e políticos levantados por ela. Dentro do limitado espaço desta contribuição, no entanto, as seguintes reflexões só poderão ser provisórias, servindo apenas como preliminares para discussões futuras.

**Palavras-chave:** Esfera pública, públicos digitais, digitalização, ativismo digital, desobediência civil digital.

### ABSTRACT

This study addresses the issue of the digitalization of the public sphere and of methods of contention, including civil disobedience. By looking more closely to some of the structural characteristics of digitalization, it aims to face the conceptual, normative, and political problems raised by it. However, within the limited space of this contribution, the following reflections could only be tentative and serve only as future discussions.

**Keywords:** Public sphere, digital publics, digitalization, digital activism, digital civil disobedience.

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AS NOÇÕES DE PUBLICIDADE e da esfera pública combinam elementos descritivos-analíticos e normativos-avaliativos da mesma forma que conceitos de democracia e sociedade civil, tornando-os essencialmente contestáveis e, de fato, sendo continuamente contestados em debates teóricos e políticos. Pelo menos no pensamento político ocidental convencional, no entanto, parece haver algum consenso sobre a forte e até constitutiva interdependência entre essas diferentes noções: é difícil imaginar uma democracia sem uma sociedade civil e uma esfera pública mediando a sociedade e as instituições políticas no sentido mais estrito. E é igualmente difícil imaginar uma esfera pública que não dependa de fortes laços com a sociedade civil, por um lado, e instituições democráticas, por outro. Embora isso também possa ser um sinal da estreiteza histórica e cultural de nossa imaginação, no que se segue usarei esse entendimento particular como meu ponto de partida<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Para uma gama mais ampla de pontos de vista, veja as contribuições para o primeiro volume do Anuário para filosofia oriental e ocidental, em 2015, sobre o tema “Publicidade e Esfera Pública”.

O termo alemão *Öffentlichkeit* reúne o que em português pode ser dividido como “a esfera pública” – ou seja, a esfera em que a opinião pública é formada por meio de discursos públicos e deliberações – e “o público” – ou seja, a totalidade desses atores participando diretamente dos processos de formação da opinião pública. Embora possam parecer principalmente sociológicos à primeira vista, essas noções rapidamente revelam sua dimensão normativa, especialmente quando estão sendo usadas para se referir a formas discursivas de troca de argumentos e informações inclusivas e não restritas por assimetrias de poder social, econômico ou político, como desigual acesso à educação, dinheiro ou voz política (por exemplo, através do poder de mídia). Além disso, essa compreensão normativamente substancial do discurso público pressupõe tanto a mídia e as arenas de comunicação como relativamente independentes da influência estatal e corporativa, quanto formas de interação comunicativa que não se reduzem às orientações estratégicas de ação e que não são distorcidas por tentativas de manipular a formação da opinião pública.

Nesse sentido mais normativo, articulado mais sistematicamente no trabalho de Jürgen Habermas (2014), a esfera pública é o fórum em que questões que são públicas, no sentido de atinentes a todos (isto é, todos os cidadãos), e que merecem a atenção pública sustentada devem ser discutidas de forma racional. No entanto, se até mesmo um olhar superficial sobre as esferas públicas de fato existentes revela que o que conta como questão pública, como cidadão ou como uma maneira racional de discutir são elas mesmas perguntas para o debate público, questões de contestação e lutas pela hegemonia, e seu estudo requerem um modo mais sociológico de teorização e análise, somado à perspectiva normativa (Kreide, 2015).

Nesse contexto, a esfera pública passou a ser vista no pensamento político ocidental como um componente essencial de qualquer sistema político

democrático: sua tarefa é mediar entre a sociedade civil e instituições políticas formais através de fronteiras que raramente são tão claramente demarcadas, como a teoria sugere, certificando-se de que problemas, informações e argumentos que foram definidos, com sucesso, como relevantes sejam alimentados no sistema político. Mais uma vez, isso mostra que a sociedade civil e a esfera pública dependem mutuamente uma da outra: enquanto a esfera pública só pode ser tão vital quanto a sociedade civil em que está fundamentada, a sociedade civil só poderá efetivamente influenciar a política formal e seus procedimentos legais, que levem a decisões coletivamente vinculantes, na medida em que haja uma esfera pública em funcionamento. Essa interdependência mútua levou Habermas a argumentar proeminentemente que a esfera pública desempenha um papel que é funcional e normativamente constitutivo para o sistema político como um todo. Segundo ele, ela pode ser vista como uma espécie de “sistema de tratamento de esgoto discursivo” (*diskursive Kläranlage*), mediando as formas essencialmente anárquicas e espontâneas da formação da opinião e da vontade no mundo da vida não institucionalizadas e nas esferas públicas formais, especialmente nas instituições estatais, de modo que elas aumentem a racionalidade e a legitimidade desses processos e seus resultados (Habermas, 1996; 2006).

No entanto, em muitas sociedades esse elo parece estar quebrado hoje (se alguma vez esteve intacto). Não só as sociedades civis existentes e as esferas públicas são atormentadas por assimetrias de poder, dinâmicas irracionais, manipulações populistas, estatais e corporativas, e tendências regressivas, mas, mesmo em democracias representativas relativamente estáveis, as instituições políticas formais parecem cada vez mais desacopladas e imunes a impulsos e demandas da sociedade civil e da opinião pública, que são articuladas de baixo para cima. Essas tendências assumiram um caráter estrutural – ou seja, longe de serem apenas características locais e contingentes de como as esferas públicas operam hoje, elas parecem ter se tornado características intrínsecas que não podem ser facilmente desembaraçadas do próprio funcionamento dessas esferas.

Isso, é claro, não será novidade para os leitores dos primórdios de Habermas. Já em seu clássico *Mudança Estrutural da Esfera Pública*, de 1962/2014, Habermas traçou o declínio do debate público, supostamente governado pela “força não forçada do melhor argumento”, sob a pressão combinada da cultura e da mídia de massa, que gradualmente transformou um público arrazoado em uma massa de consumidores passivos (Habermas, 2014). Como os críticos apontaram, a narrativa de declínio de Habermas parece pressupor uma versão altamente idealizada do debate público e do público “arrazoado” – que na verdade estava fragmentado por classe, gênero e dominação racial – e negligenciar o significado político de uma multiplicidade de esferas públicas subalternas, não oficiais e contra

públicas (Habermas, 2014). No entanto, sua análise crítica de um público agora formado, principalmente, por consumidores que são os objetos, e não os sujeitos, de processos de despolitização, comercialização, manipulação política e refeudalização parece não ter perdido nada de sua relevância. De fato, esses processos continuam a minar as reivindicações gêmeas à legitimidade normativa e à eficácia funcional, ainda associadas ao ideal clássico da esfera pública (Fraser, 2007).

O próprio Habermas atualizou, em 2006, sua análise inicial, perguntando se a democracia ainda tem uma dimensão epistêmica. Mais uma vez, sua resposta está longe de ser um “sim” incondicional. Embora não seja impossível conceituar as condições empíricas para a realização do ideal da democracia deliberativa e para a noção relativamente exigente da esfera pública (ou melhor: a unidade precária de uma rede descentralizada de esferas públicas), Habermas aponta para o que ele chama de “patologias da comunicação política” e os obstáculos estruturais que estão no caminho de tal realização (Habermas, 2006, pp. 420-423). Esses assumem principalmente duas formas: 1) uma “desdiferenciação temporária”, que mina a independência do sistema de mídia a partir da interferência do Estado e interesses corporativos; e 2) uma falta sistemática de feedback entre o sistema de mídia e uma sociedade civil cada vez mais passiva, causada pela exclusão e privação social e cultural, bem como pela “colonização” da esfera pública por imperativos de mercado e interesses corporativos. Nessas condições, a pseudo comunicação, latentemente estratégica, tende a substituir a ação comunicativa genuína.

É importante, no entanto, não subestimar o problema das forças estruturais de “colonização” identificadas por Habermas, individualizando-as e reduzindo a pseudo comunicação a uma estratégia manipuladora que os indivíduos empregam para obterem vantagem comparativa: o problema real é a “comunicação sistematicamente distorcida”, irreduzível às orientações individuais de ação, uma vez que é sistêmica no duplo sentido de “estrutural” e “estar enraizada no sistema” (em vez de no mundo da vida real) (Celikates, 2010; Kreide, 2015).

Assim, em *Teoria da Ação Comunicativa*, Habermas descreve as correspondentes “restrições sistêmicas à comunicação” como uma forma de “. . . violência estrutural que, sem se manifestar como tal, toma conta das formas de intersubjetividade e de entendimento possível” (Habermas, 1987, p. 187, grifo original). Uma das implicações políticas desse diagnóstico parece ser que as democracias atuais – com seus sistemas administrativos fazendo parte do “sistema” e se tornando cada vez mais insensíveis aos impulsos do mundo da vida real – sofrem de déficits democráticos sistemáticos e estruturais que não são muito propensos a tratamento efetivo dentro do quadro institucional existente, ou aos tradicionais canais formais de participação política (como votar, escrever cartas ao seu membro do parlamento ou se juntar a um partido).

Diagnósticos similares – embora muito menos teoricamente sofisticados – foram apresentados por outros, incluindo autores proeminentes como Colin Crouch (2004), que argumenta que vivemos em tempos “pós-democráticos”, caracterizados pela colonização do sistema político por interesses privados e imperativos econômicos, redução dos cidadãos a consumidores e substituição do debate público por tentativas personalizadas e manipuladoras de gerar lealdade e consentimento. O que quer que pensemos dos detalhes desses diagnósticos, eles radicalmente colocam em questão tanto a reivindicação da legitimidade normativa da esfera pública – por exemplo, em termos de quem tem acesso e o que é discutido – quanto a reivindicação de sua eficácia funcional em relação ao sistema político formal.

## O PAPEL EPISTÊMICO E POLÍTICO DO CONFRONTO POLÍTICO

Nesse contexto, a relação entre democracia, esfera pública e contestação/confronto<sup>2</sup> político ganha um destaque particular. Longe de representar um perigo para a democracia, várias formas de confronto político ou contestação – aqui usada no sentido amplo, introduzido por Charles Tilly como formas multifacetadas de usar práticas disruptivas para articular reivindicações políticas como manifestações, greves, tumultos ou desobediência civil (Tilly & Tarrow, 2007, pp. 4-6) – podem ser vistas como vitais para revigorar o que resta das energias políticas anárquicas da esfera pública, empurrando ou “encorajando” as instituições a prestarem mais atenção aos pontos de vista e às demandas articuladas pela grande variedade de atores mais ou menos organizados na esfera pública.

Antes de me voltar para a digitalização da esfera pública e o ativismo digital como uma nova forma particularmente interessante que o confronto político desenvolveu recentemente, são necessárias algumas observações mais gerais sobre a ligação entre o confronto e a democracia que eu acabei de evocar. O primeiro apontamento a se fazer é essencialmente pragmático: uma ênfase excessiva no consenso, conformismo e oportunismo em nome da estabilidade pode infligir custos extremamente altos para uma sociedade, enquanto a dissidência desempenha um papel importante para iniciar e sustentar o progresso social e os processos de aprendizagem. Seguindo a maioria, adaptando nosso comportamento a ela e, assim, silenciando-nos como indivíduos ou grupos minoritários, retemos da sociedade informações importantes sobre o que sabemos, queremos e acreditamos, individual e coletivamente. Do ponto de vista democrático, isso é obviamente um problema, uma vez que a democracia é precisamente sobre o que os cidadãos querem, cada um deles e todos eles juntos.

<sup>2</sup>Nota do revisor: Optamos por traduzir o termo “contention” por “confronto”, seguindo as traduções de obras de autores ligados à teoria do confronto político, como “Para Mapear o Confronto Político”, de Tarrow, Tilly e McAdam publicado na revista *Lua Nova* (n. 76, p. 11-48, tradução de Ana Maria Sallum, 2009), uma vez que o sentido atribuído à “contention” nessa linha está ligado às confrontações de atores e movimentos sociais com os poderes estabelecidos. Deixamos o termo “contestação” para a tradução de “contestation”, enquanto a cognata “contenda” nos parece uma disputa mais situada e menos tensa do que “confronto”. (V. B.)

No entanto, também é problemático porque leva a processos e resultados abaixo do ideal no enfrentamento dos desafios sociais e políticos. Estudos empíricos indicam que grupos sociais em que aqueles que possuem opiniões minoritárias são punidos são os mesmos em que o conformismo é muito menos valorizado de acordo com seus próprios padrões de sucesso. Em empresas, instituições políticas e tribunais, tais tendências aumentam a probabilidade daquilo que são decisões consideradas erradas novamente, de acordo com os padrões dessas organizações<sup>3</sup>. Num argumento essencialmente relacionado, Amartya Sen mostrou em um famoso estudo que a fome não ocorre em democracias porque a informação está livremente disponível, o protesto é possível e até mesmo encorajado, e o público pode pressionar o governo a reconhecer o problema e fazer algo sobre ele (Sen, 1981).

<sup>3</sup> Para uma análise mais detalhada e evidências empíricas, consulte Sustain (2003).

Mesmo em sistemas políticos que se apresentam como democráticos, indivíduos e grupos que expressam opiniões dissidentes são muitas vezes retratados como contra o interesse da comunidade – e até mesmo como traidores. No entanto, na realidade são os conformistas que estão, por motivações muitas vezes egoístas, agindo contra o interesse da comunidade ao permanecerem em silêncio, mesmo que a comunidade esteja prestes a tomar uma decisão ruim de acordo com seus próprios padrões (ou aqueles aceitos pela maioria). A autocensura é uma estratégia individualmente racional quando os custos de desvio são muito altos – ou seja, quando os dissidentes enfrentam severas sanções sociais ou até mesmo legais. É fácil de ver como uma estratégia individualmente racional pode, nesses casos, levar a um desfecho coletivamente irracional. Se as opiniões que não são expressas estão corretas ou apontam para problemas graves, o dano causado é mais óbvio. Mas mesmo que estejam apenas parcialmente certos ou claramente falsos e enganosos, os membros da maioria perdem a oportunidade de desenvolverem um quadro mais amplo e chegarem a uma melhor compreensão e justificativa de suas próprias opiniões, defendendo-as contra os outros em um debate público aberto. Isso, é claro, resume em essência o famoso argumento de John Stuart Mill em favor da liberdade de expressão, que repousa em três reivindicações: que podemos ser falsos, que mesmo opiniões falsas podem conter verdades parciais, e que há um perigo constante de se decair no dogmatismo (Mill, 1989, cap. 2). Portanto, o argumento de Mill pode também ser reformulado – e radicalizado – para a importância de uma esfera pública aberta, vibrante e controversa.

O fenômeno pelo qual grupos, especialmente depois de terem assegurado poder institucionalizado, resistem a esse tipo de questionamento, agarrando-se às suas formas estabelecidas de pensar e agir e submetendo, assim, os “primeiros a

se mexerem”, os “denunciante” e outros dissidentes a custos especialmente altos, pode ser entendido como uma forma de conservadorismo coletivo. As instituições políticas e da sociedade civil têm de encontrar uma escapatória desse beco sem saída, criando contextos institucionais e esferas públicas alternativas que *favoreçam* a expressão de opiniões dissidentes. Basear-se em supostas “opiniões de especialistas” e no que a visão da maioria parece exigir pode levar à supressão de controvérsias potencialmente produtivas e, assim, tornar impossível considerar, ou mesmo perceber, enquadramentos alternativos do problema e de potenciais soluções. Nesses casos, mesmo uma voz dissidente já pode fazer uma enorme diferença e ter uma espécie de efeito de abertura de mundo, com isso potencialmente transformando os termos do debate político.

Claro, nem toda forma de dissidência e desvio é boa ou leva a controvérsias produtivas ou a processos de aprendizagem. Mas, na maioria dos casos, aqueles no poder parecem estar numa posição particularmente ruim (politicamente, mas também em termos epistêmicos) para avaliar a razoabilidade das opiniões dissidentes (Frederick Schauer chama isso de “argumento da incompetência governamental”) (Schauer, 1982, p. 86). Desse ponto de vista – que é ao mesmo tempo pragmático e principiológico – deve haver, portanto, uma espécie de presunção em favor do confronto. Isso pode soar mais radical do que realmente é. Como o sociólogo alemão Niklas Luhmann – ele mesmo certamente não um radical político – aponta em relação ao movimento ambientalista alemão nas décadas de 1970 e 1980, o protesto tem uma função epistêmica e social que pode trazer um aumento da estabilidade no final, compensando déficits de reflexividade e pontos cegos dos sistemas sociais (por exemplo, o sistema político com seu foco em corridas eleitorais) que mascaram problemas (como a poluição ambiental) para os quais estão mal equipados até mesmo para detectar e enquadrar, quanto para menos abordar.

A reflexão do protestar faz algo que não ocorre em nenhum outro lugar. Ele defende um assunto que nenhum dos sistemas funcionais, nem a política nem a economia, nem a religião, nem a educação, nem ciência e nem direito reconheceriam como seus próprios. Ela impugna as autodescrições produzidas pela razão sobre a primazia da diferenciação funcional dentro dos sistemas funcionais. Ela compensa as inadequações manifestas da sociedade moderna para a reflexão – não por fazê-lo melhor, mas sim de forma diferente. (Luhmann, 2002, pp. 142-143)

De um ponto de vista mais radical, um argumento muito semelhante foi apresentado por Costas Douzinas:

Os movimentos sociais assumiram literalmente o papel do ‘intelectual coletivo’ da população trabalhadora: eles desenvolvem suas políticas e decidem suas ações através de amplas consultas e debates on-line e presenciais. Eles colocam dentro de práticas políticas habilidades, aptidões e redes que as pessoas têm que aprender a usar para o seu trabalho diário. Nesse sentido, os movimentos sociopolíticos têm visões muito mais avançadas e precisas das queixas populares e possíveis soluções do que os partidos políticos que necessariamente se concentram na política parlamentar e nas instituições estatais. (Douzinas, 2015, p. 80)

Mais especificamente, o valor democrático e deliberativo da confrontação (por exemplo, na forma de desobediência civil) pode ser visto nos seguintes efeitos que regularmente produz:

- Iniciar e reabrir a deliberação, especialmente quando os cidadãos se deparam com “falhas do governo para debater ou implementar importantes opções de políticas, nas quais a discussão ou implementação dessas opções é obstruída pelo fenômeno da inércia deliberativa” (Smith, 2013, p. 9);
- Ampliar a participação e a representação (especialmente daqueles que são afetados, mas excluídos ou marginalizados);
- Disseminar informações, pontos de vista e argumentos (e, assim, aumentar a publicidade), de forma a contornar os vieses estruturais da mídia hegemônica;
- Estimular a imaginação de possibilidades alternativas, também contra discursos, vocabulários e imaginários hegemônicos ou ideológicos;
- Forçar a ação, decisões e resultados quando as instituições sofrem de inércia política (Young, 2001; Dupuis-Déri, 2007).

É importante notar que a confrontação pode ter esses efeitos transformadores precisamente em virtude de ser uma forma extra institucional de prática política, tendo seu potencial democrático e democratizador sido enfatizado por teóricos desde Hannah Arendt via Jürgen Habermas até James Tully (Arendt, 1972; Celikates, 2014; Smith, 2013). Essas formas episódicas, informais e extra, ou mesmo anti-institucionais de ação política permitem aos cidadãos (e até, ou talvez também especialmente, aqueles que são excluídos desse status, como “migrantes irregulares” e “*sans papiers*” [Balibar, 1996; Jansen et al, 2014]) protestarem e participarem quando – como é frequentemente o caso também em democracias representativas relativamente bem funcionais – os canais institucionais oficiais e regulares de ação e comunicação são fechados a eles ou são ineficazes em fazer com que suas reivindicações e objeções de sejam recebidas (este, é claro, também é um ponto pelo menos parcialmente reconhecido na tradição liberal, como na discussão de John Rawls sobre a

desobediência civil [Rawls, 1971, pp. 55-59]). Além disso, como vimos, essas instituições e canais são não só muitas vezes limitados, mas também se revelam assim, de modo que tornam impossível, ou pelo menos difícil para os cidadãos, abordarem esses limites – nesses casos, elas próprias se tornam obstáculos à ação democrática.

Contra esse pano de fundo, a confrontação política pode funcionar como um corretivo para os déficits democráticos que parecem ser parte estrutural dos Estados liberais atualmente existentes. Ela pode permitir a participação aonde essa está bloqueada e não potencializada por processos políticos institucionalizados. Nesses casos, os cidadãos devem procurar formas alternativas de “contestar bloqueios discursivos que inibem o bom funcionamento da esfera pública” (Smith, 2013, p. 60). Isso muitas vezes envolverá a busca de alternativas aos canais da esfera pública tradicional. A confrontação política, em suas diferentes variedades, tem, portanto, um lugar constante na democracia, não simplesmente como uma resposta transitória em circunstâncias extremas e excepcionais, mas também enquanto parte integrante de qualquer sociedade democrática complexa, sendo necessária diante dos defeitos institucionais constitutivos da última.

## ATIVISMO DIGITAL E SEUS PROBLEMAS

Nos últimos anos, a ascensão da internet tanto como ferramenta de ação política quanto como um espaço politicamente contestado, mais especificamente de ativismo online e especialmente na forma de vazamento (pense no Wikileaks) e “hacktivismo” (pense no Anonymous), colocou na agenda de teóricos profissões aplicadas à questão da digitalização da esfera pública e dos métodos de confrontação, incluindo a desobediência civil. Embora os estudos de mídia e internet tenham mostrado um grande interesse – também teoricamente inspirado – nesses desenvolvimentos (Miekle, 2010; George, 2012, 2013; Lovink, 2011), e grupos ativistas também tenham trazido tentativas próprias de teorizar sua prática (Critical Art Ensemble, 1996; Dominguez, 2008), os filósofos ainda não abordaram adequadamente as questões conceituais e normativas levantadas pelo processo de digitalização e as novas formas de participação e contestação (cada vez mais transnacionais), que exploram as oportunidades tecnológicas em rápida expansão, mas também respondem a algumas das novas possibilidades de abuso de poder que a internet abre.

Mesmo que o entusiasmo – ou pânico – com o qual essas novas possibilidades se realizam se deva, muitas vezes, a uma visão exagerada do que são a digitalização da esfera pública em geral e a confrontação política em particular (Morozov, 2013), seria um erro subestimar o potencial transformador do deslocamento de formas

offline para online de interação comunicativa e ação política. Esse deslocamento expande massivamente o “repertório de confrontação” (Tilly, 2007, p. 16-17) que, no caso do ativismo digital, abrange uma ampla gama de formas, desde as relativamente moderadas, como blogs, quadros de avisos e petições online, até as relativamente confrontantes e disruptivas, como ações distribuídas de negação de serviço (DDoS) ou “ataques” que, muitas vezes, também são referidos como bloqueios virtuais ou *sit-ins* (Sauter, 2014). Dada a complexa nova paisagem da esfera pública digitalizada, parece prematuro e unilateral idealizar esses novos desenvolvimentos como uma espécie de *Deus ex-machina* que salvará a esfera pública democrática, ou irá vilificá-la como o último prego no caixão desse ideal. Em vez disso, parece aconselhável primeiro olhar mais de perto algumas das características estruturais da digitalização e, em seguida, abordar alguns dos problemas conceituais, normativos e políticos que lhes dão origem. Dentro do espaço limitado dessa contribuição, no entanto, as seguintes reflexões só podem ser muito provisórias e servir como preliminares para discussões futuras.

Claro, a digitalização da esfera pública se refere a uma tendência mais geral – ou seja, o papel cada vez mais proeminente da internet em geral, da Web 2.0 e, em particular, das mídias sociais como ferramentas para produzir espaços públicos de participação para debates públicos que transcendam os limites tradicionais (linguísticos, culturais, espaciais etc.) da esfera pública, para disseminar informações, para organizar a mobilização e a captação de recursos, e para sustentar movimentos e coordenar ação política coletiva. Essa é uma tendência importante e já levou a mudanças significativas na forma como o debate público e a ação política se organizam. Falar de uma nova era de “democracia na internet” ou de “revoluções” do Facebook e Twitter, como no caso da chamada Primavera Árabe (outra metáfora problemática), no entanto, é altamente enganoso, porque minimiza a importância do offline na nova intersecção de formas online e offline de participação política e mobilização, especialmente em manter protestos após a fase de início. Ainda assim, as mídias sociais passaram a desempenhar um papel crucial em “coreografar” a ação coletiva, e sua interação com, e mediação de formas emergentes de reuniões públicas e, em particular, os *sit-ins* em massa, que se tornaram a marca registrada dos movimentos populares contemporâneos, são de particular importância para a “construção simbólica do espaço público que facilita e orienta a montagem física de um eleitorado altamente disperso e individualizado” (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 5).

Antes de nos voltarmos a casos mais específicos de ativismo digital e algumas das questões que eles parecem estar levantando, novamente algumas observações mais gerais estão na ordem. O que deve ser notado antes de tudo é que, em termos de estrutura, as novas formas de comunicação digital e interação possibilitadas

por novas mídias são, em muitos casos, paralelas às lógicas estruturais dessas mídias em serem horizontais, descentralizadas, transnacionais, sem líder, inclusivas, dinâmicas e em forma de rede. Isso levou alguns observadores a falarem até mesmo de um novo tipo de coletivo em rede ou “ação conectiva”, que é organizada em torno de e por mídias digitais, e é caracterizada por pouca ou somente uma frouxa coordenação organizacional, tornando-a distinta dos protestos mais tradicionais do movimento social (Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Milan, 2013). Ao longo dessas linhas, também foi sugerido que

[n]ovas tecnologias online permitem mais variedades de formação e suporte de grupos entre indivíduos, mesmo entre alguns dos setores mais marginalizados da sociedade que se preocupam com questões semelhantes, como pessoas com pensamentos semelhantes são mais fáceis de encontrar no ciberespaço . . . fazendo com que seja mais fácil aos cidadãos se envolverem em comunicação cívica direta fora da mídia tradicional e das elites nacionais. (Carty, 2013)

Isso também tem a ver com o fato de que, pelo menos em princípio, o que é relevante na Web 2.0 não é determinado antes da publicação por alguns poucos, como acontece na grande imprensa e na esfera pública tradicional, mas após a publicação pelos próprios usuários (isso, é claro, também é um argumento um tanto idealizador e contrafactual). Em contraste com a divisão estática e fixa dos papéis que caracterizam a esfera pública tradicional, baseada em uma clara diferenciação de funções – uma elite relativamente fechada de jornalistas e “formadores de opinião” com acesso a políticos e meios de comunicação por um lado, e um público relativamente passivo, anônimo e silencioso, por outro – a esfera pública virtual, enquanto não se move completamente além dessas assimetrias, nivela significativamente as hierarquias em questão, permitindo, pelo menos em princípio, a inclusão e a troca entre uma multiplicidade de perspectivas e papéis. Como James Bohman observa, o potencial inovador da comunicação baseada na Web “. . . está não apenas em sua velocidade e escala, mas também em novas formas de endereçamento ou interação: como um modo de comunicação de muitos para muitos, reduziu radicalmente os custos de interação com um público indefinido e potencialmente grande, especialmente no que diz respeito à adoção do papel de orador sem os custos da mídia de massa” (Bohman, 2004, p. 134). É claro, nem todo mundo que articula uma opinião online é ouvido ou tem uma “voz”, e a esfera pública digital desenvolveu suas próprias normas, convenções, hierarquias e filtros. Apesar dessas limitações persistentes, no entanto, é difícil superestimar o significado histórico dessa mudança de paradigma que, pela primeira vez, combina em um meio

as características de massa e interação da mídia, transformando a massa de destinatários em (ao menos potencialmente) usuários ativos (Münker, 2009).

Habermas reconhece esse potencial ao notar que “a internet não só deu origem a surfistas curiosos, mas também reviveu o fenômeno historicamente submerso de um público igualitário de leitores e escritores parceiros de conversa e correspondentes”, mas ele ainda teme que “o surgimento de milhões de ‘salas de bate-papo’ espalhadas pelo mundo e de ‘públicos de assuntos’ em redes globais tendem a fragmentar o enorme público de massa, que na esfera pública é centrado nas mesmas questões ao mesmo tempo, apesar de seu tamanho” (Habermas, 2006, p. 423). A esfera pública virtual fragmentada carece de equivalentes funcionais para as estruturas da esfera pública tradicional que recuperam, selecionam e editam o fluxo de informações descentralizados a partir de uma variedade de públicos mais especializados e de maneira sintetizadora.

Em seu novo livro sobre o tema, *Uma nova mudança estrutural da esfera pública e a política deliberativa* (2023), Habermas atualiza o diagnóstico de uma fragmentação da esfera pública num cenário de predomínio das plataformas digitais. Para ele, a grande promessa de igualdade discursiva desse novo modelo de comunicação política, antes limitada e “regulada em termos de conteúdo” pelas “comportas profissionais” (Habermas, 2023, p. 60) das mídias tradicionais, é abafada por isolamentos de circuitos e grupos cada vez menos abertos ao diferente.

No início parecia que com o formato da nova mídia finalmente estava sendo cumprida a pretensão igualitária e universalista da esfera pública burguesa de incluir todos os cidadãos em igualdade de direitos . . . A nova mídia libertaria os usuários do papel receptivo de destinatários que escolhem entre um número limitado de programas e daria a cada indivíduo a chance de ser ouvido na troca anárquica de opiniões espontâneas. Mas a lava desse potencial simultaneamente antiautoritário e igualitário, que ainda poderia ser sentido no espírito empreendedor californiano dos primeiros anos, logo se petrificou na careta libertária das corporações digitais do Vale do Silício que dominam o mundo. E o potencial organizacional mundial oferecido pela nova mídia serve tanto às redes radicais de direita quanto às corajosas mulheres bielorrussas em seu persistente protesto contra Lukashenko. (Habermas, 2023, p. 61)

Habermas, é claro, não está sozinho em ser cético sobre o potencial político e democrático das esferas públicas digitais. Sem negar que ele identifica um problema aqui, no entanto, deve-se tentar evitar duas inferências problemáticas desse diagnóstico: a primeira consiste em superestimar a importância de uma esfera pública nacional supostamente “unificada” para a própria ideia de uma

esfera pública; e a segunda seria subestimar a capacidade da internet de fornecer um “público de públicos” de uma forma radicalmente diferente de como as esferas públicas tradicionais funcionam (Bohman, 2004, p. 139).

Em geral, parece, portanto, mais adequado falar de uma multiplicidade de esferas públicas – mais ou menos locais, mais ou menos integradas, mais ou menos oficiais e institucionalizadas, e mais ou menos digitalizadas – em vez de uma esfera pública unificada: “A esfera pública, em seu sentido mais familiar, é uma esfera pública composta do conglomerado histórico deste caleidoscópio em constante mudança de diversas esferas públicas” (Tully, 2013, p. 170). Assim, a digitalização não deve ser entendida como um processo uniforme e unidirecional que está transformando uma esfera pública coerente e não digital, mas como uma esfera pública complexa e de um processo de múltiplas camadas que transforma e gera uma variedade de diferentes públicos interligados, e que se cruzam de maneiras que complicam a divisão digital versus não digital.

No contexto dessas tendências mais gerais, podemos também observar o surgimento de variantes mais disruptivas (e muitas vezes ilegalizadas) do ativismo digital que combinam ação eletrônica direta com ações em grande parte simbólicas, muitas vezes recorridas diante de atores políticos ou corporativos cada vez mais indiferentes e poderosos. Esse novo ativismo digital toma, principalmente, duas formas que muitas vezes são confundidas, mas devem ser distinguidas. Por um lado, há ações DDoS (muitas vezes erroneamente chamadas de “ataques”), que significam a negação distribuída de serviço e a tentativa de interromper a disponibilidade de um site ou serviço online, sobrecarregando o servidor com um grande número de solicitações. Exemplos proeminentes dessa tática incluem o antigo aplicativo FloodNet do Electronic Disturbance Theatre, que foi desenvolvido para organizar ações de solidariedade internacionais para a revolta zapatista no México, e as várias campanhas coordenadas, mas altamente descentralizadas, do Anonymous, como a “Operação Vingança” e a “Operação Vingam Assange”, que tinham como alvo sites de várias corporações, como Amazon e PayPal, que haviam parado de processar doações para o Wikileaks.

Por outro lado, existem as diversas práticas geralmente subsumidas sob o termo “hackeamento”, que regularmente são ainda mais divididas em hackeamento *black-hat* (com intenção criminosa) e hackeamento *white-hat* (por razões de segurança), e que muitas vezes, mas nem sempre, destroem, roubam ou modificam os dados ou o código de um site e, assim, o conteúdo exibido. Nesse último caso, ativistas e observadores também falam de “desfiguração do site” e “grafite eletrônico”, exemplos que incluem novamente campanhas do Anonymous, como a invasão do *site* da empresa de segurança HBGary Federal depois desse ter anunciado que havia se infiltrado com sucesso no Anonymous,

ou o coletivo de hackers comunistas turcos RedHack, que desempenhou um papel importante na revolta de Gezi em 2013 e que foi, posteriormente, acusado de ser uma organização terrorista.

Dadas as fortes tendências de uma criminalização geral do ativismo digital (as agências de aplicação da lei e os tribunais têm sido relutantes, no mínimo, em estender a categoria de desobediência civil ao ativismo online), mas também por razões conceituais e normativas, parece importante não perder de vista as diferenças entre as duas categorias muito amplas das ações de DDoS e hackeamento (sem sugerir que um deles é, em geral, menos legítimo ou eficaz do que o outro): bloquear temporariamente o acesso a um site (criando artificialmente tráfego pesado) é algo diferente de alterar a estrutura ou o conteúdo dele (por exemplo, desfigurando-o). Além dessas formas disruptivas de ativismo digital, há, naturalmente, uma série de projetos – como o Projeto Tor – que, em um esforço de auto-organização, visam a construção de infraestruturas alternativas (no caso do Projeto Tor, uma rede de anonimato online construída com a ajuda de ferramentas de criptografia).

Especialmente as formas mais radicais e disruptivas do ativismo digital dão origem a uma série de questões conceituais, normativas e políticas, três das quais gostaria de apontar para o encerramento do artigo.

A primeira diz respeito à questão do anonimato. Os participantes de debates online e ativismo digital muitas vezes permanecem anônimos, e isso é frequentemente visto como uma contradição com os requisitos de publicidade e responsabilização individual apresentados como características essenciais do debate público (e até mesmo da desobediência civil) no mundo offline. Nesse contexto, o anonimato é frequentemente apresentado como um disfarce para ações de vigilantismo, chantagem, roubo de dados, assédio cibernético e vingança. Ele certamente pode desempenhar esse papel, e a comunidade de ativistas digitais não conseguiu levar a sério as formas de violência simbólica online direcionadas especialmente às mulheres por muito tempo, mas esse é apenas um lado da história de como o anonimato online transforma a lógica do debate público e o próprio significado da publicidade. O outro lado da história só vem à tona se reconhecermos que o anonimato também pode funcionar como uma ética crítica, uma estética e uma prática que tem um ponto decididamente político — ou seja, que contesta a demanda universal por identificação e rastreabilidade que estados e corporações buscam impor aos usuários da internet (Coleman, 2013; Sauter, 2014). Apesar de suas origens em *trolling* e em trotes, foi uma conquista duradoura do Anonymous ter colocado na agenda um significado político ao anonimato, de criptografia e liberdade online, de uma forma não facilmente neutralizada pelo discurso do cibercrime, da segurança e do interesse corporativo.

A segunda pergunta começa a partir dessa última observação e diz respeito à questão de seriedade. Muitos observadores se preocupam que a entrada aparentemente baixa e os custos de participação do ativismo na internet levam a uma erosão da seriedade (pessoas engajadas em ações “para o *lulz*”—ou seja, por uma questão de diversão) e a um fenômeno que passou a ser chamado de *slacktivism* – atividade pseudopolítica que, não envolvendo muito mais do que um clique do *mouse*, não tem impacto sobre os resultados políticos reais, mas só faz seus participantes se sentirem melhor (Morozov, 2013). Suspeita-se até que esse tipo de *Ersatzhandeln* (ou “ação artificial”) afete negativamente a participação política, substituindo “links online fracos” por “fortes laços offline”. Mais uma vez, esse é certamente um lado da história, mas o outro lado é, claramente, que os baixos custos de entrada e participação têm um efeito igualitário de aumentar a abertura e inclusividade da esfera pública virtual, possibilitando a participação, pelo menos em princípio, daqueles que estão geograficamente dispersos, socialmente marginalizados ou politicamente desprivilegiados. De forma relacionada, o fato de que a digitalização da esfera pública também pode criar novas formas de exclusão – pense na divisão digital” – pode ser visto como sendo compensado pela reinterpretação radical e redistribuição do capital cultural e político que anda lado a lado com ele e que, novamente, aumenta a inclusividade da esfera pública – em termos de participantes e em termos de tópicos, perspectivas e argumentos.

Deve-se ressaltar também que, como Gabriella Coleman documentou e enfatizou, o ativismo online muitas vezes proporciona uma experiência educativa, contribuindo para uma politização do geek que pode, em última análise, ter efeitos positivos no que diz respeito à participação em atividades offline (Coleman, 2014). O Anonymous novamente fornece uma grande gama de exemplos, com ações que foram organizadas na intersecção do mundo online e offline, como a OpTunisia que foi a primeira parcela das Operações de Liberdade que forneceram apoio de internet e mídia a ativistas na Tunísia, Egito, Líbia e Síria, e ações no mundo offline, como a Operação Inverno Seguro que mobiliza recursos para apoiar os sem-teto. Esse efeito educativo – que levou os participantes do Anonymous de um *trolling* “bobo” ao ativismo “sério”, como em defesa da liberdade de expressão ou contra a injustiça racial – poderia ser enquadrado como atualização de uma observação encontrada nas obras de teóricos da democracia como John Stuart Mill, John Dewey e Carole Pateman, que enfatizaram a experiência educativa e transformadora da participação política. Por essas razões, seria muito fácil interpretar essas formas de ativismo digital simplesmente como variedades de “cidadania boba”.

A pergunta final que eu gostaria de levantar diz respeito à relação entre comunicação linguística e não linguística no contexto do relativamente

“logocêntrico” – ou seja, discurso e argumento centrado – natureza das esferas públicas tradicionais. Muitos comentaristas têm notado a crescente visualização e mediação estética do debate político e, especialmente, do confronto político, bem como a difusão de um vocabulário visual cada vez mais compartilhado através das fronteiras em uma variedade de contextos – do movimento Occupy (pense na onipresente máscara de Guy Fawkes), através do cruzamento entre os protestos na Turquia e no Brasil, ao uso de imagens (muitas vezes manipuladas) no serviço chinês de *microblogging* Sina Weibo, a fim de expor, por exemplo, casos de corrupção entre políticos locais, ou para articular preocupações ecológicas (Poell et al, 2014). Embora seja verdade que esse desenvolvimento já está em andamento em meios de comunicação de massa e esferas públicas mais convencionais, ele adquire uma nova qualidade quando é acoplado com as infraestruturas de mídia mais abertas, horizontais e inclusivas das mídias sociais.

Novas formas de interação entre comunicação linguística e não linguística ilustram bem como discursos e práticas online e offline se unem em esferas públicas sobrepostas e cada vez mais transnacionais, mudando a forma como essas esferas operam e dando origem a uma nova cultura transnacional de contestação. Essa cultura emergente de contestação tem sido especialmente visível no contexto da onda de movimentos de protesto do início da década de 2010, na qual a intersecção da comunicação linguística e não linguística tem desempenhado um papel fundamental na circulação transnacional de imaginários democráticos característicos desse novo tipo de “democracia espacial pública” (Göle, 2013).

Essas observações não são feitas para negar os perigos da fragmentação e polarização de grupo, vandalismo, dominação da elite, auto seleção e o enfraquecimento do engajamento offline, que muitos comentaristas apontam e que têm crescido à medida em que o ciberespaço se torna cada vez mais dominado por oligopólios de grandes corporações digitais, fechadas ao escrutínio político, jornalístico e científico. Devemos questionar se essa nova dominação não indica uma nova transformação da própria estrutura da esfera pública digital ou mesmo do ativismo digital, apropriado atualmente por fenômenos como a desinformação, os discursos de ódio online e o populismo digital (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021). No entanto, dadas as rápidas transformações políticas, os esforços de regulação das plataformas pelo mundo, além das cooperações entre estados, organizações da sociedade civil e universidades para o monitoramento e as denúncias de violações de direitos nos ciberespaços, ainda temos boas razões para pensar que a digitalização mitiga em vez de abastecer alguns desses problemas, pelo menos potencialmente.

Em conclusão, deixe-me voltar ao meu título: O processo de digitalização – o surgimento das esferas públicas digitais e da contenção digital – realmente equivale a uma nova transformação estrutural da esfera pública?<sup>4</sup> Parece que a resposta

<sup>4</sup>Em 2011, a conferência conjunta das Associações Sociológicas Alemãs, Austríacas e Suíças ocorreu sob o título *The New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Veja também uma publicação mais recente que inspirou o novo livro de Habermas sobre a esfera pública: *Ein neuer Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit?* (Seeliger & Seignani, 2021).

tem que ser um “sim” qualificado, uma vez que a digitalização transformou significativamente as esferas públicas tradicionais e a forma como seus meios de comunicação – do jornalismo investigativo ao entretenimento – funcionam, e também levou, mais importantemente, a esferas públicas de um novo tipo, por assim dizer, em que o acesso, a participação, a interação e seus efeitos políticos são constantemente redefinidos e renegociados, embora não escapem, é claro, de todas as limitações e distorções do discurso público não digital, e também produzam algumas das suas próprias.

Uma lição a tirar desse desenvolvimento é que a transformação estrutural da esfera pública não é simplesmente um processo uniforme, objetivo ou predeterminado que se desenrola pelas nossas costas. Graças à constante “atividade crítica e reflexiva dos cidadãos de colocar em questão, testar a adequação, negociar e modificar as regras, roteiros, papéis e relações dadas das esferas públicas em que atuam” (Tully, 2013, p. 171), esse processo é essencialmente social e político aberto, envolvendo múltiplas arenas e esferas cujas formas e resultados são essencialmente contestados, e que partem de lutas políticas que ocorrem nas esferas públicas no curso de tais contestações. ■

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# Digital errors, failures, and disruptions in generative AI hallucinations: Communication typology, premises, and epistemology

## *Erros, falhas e perturbações digitais em alucinações das IA generativas: Tipologia, premissas e epistemologia da comunicação*

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### ABSTRACT

This study finds how digital errors, failures, and disruptions may be analyzed based on three premises, relating them to contemporary hallucination in generative AI systems, such as ChatGPT. These factors show a hidden dimension of digital objects. Because digital objects are more concrete, they generate greater uncertainty about the origins and consequences of disruptive events, moments which enable a glimpse of the collective agencies around the digital culture. This study proposes that errors, failures, and disruptions (positive or negative) point toward directions for research and indicate a locus for a qualitative approach. It is concluded that errors are not only disruptive (as an opportunity to generate innovation) but also events that enable us to understand the forms of communication and actions of digital media.

**Keywords:** Digital Errors, hallucination, ChatGPT, AI, new materialism

### RESUMO

Neste artigo, identifica-se como erros, falhas e perturbações digitais podem ser analisados a partir de três premissas, relacionando-os com o exemplo da atual alucinação em sistema de IAG, como o ChatGPT. Eles revelam uma dimensão escondida dos objetos digitais. Por serem mais concretos, os objetos digitais geram uma maior indefinição das origens e consequências de eventos disruptivos. Nesses momentos, pode-se vislumbrar agenciamentos coletivos em torno da cultura digital. A proposta é que tais erros, falhas e perturbações sejam entendidos não como positivos ou negativos, mas como uma forma de apontar direcionamentos para a pesquisa, indicando o *locus* para uma abordagem qualitativa. Conclui-se que os erros não são apenas disruptivos,

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ou oportunidades para gerar inovação, mas eventos que permitem entender as formas da comunicação e as ações das mídias digitais.

**Palavras-chave:** Erros digitais, alucinação, ChatGPT, IA, neomaterialismo

**D**EBATES ABOUT CHATGPT circulate under the sign of error, disturbance, and failure. It has drawn attention for its disruptive nature, whether in “correct” use, threatening jobs and humanity itself, or when it hallucinates, generating false information. By highlighting the benefits of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI), a type of AI that can generate content (data, text, images, sounds) based on learning algorithms, neural networks, and training on a large dataset, the debate is always permeated by its errors, failures, or potential disturbances.

Many studies point to how errors, failures, and disturbances are privileged moments to think about the social and digital culture, in particular (Alexander, 2017; Appadurai & Alexander, 2020; Barker & Korolkova, 2022; Bellinger, 2016; Korolkova & Bowes, 2020; Nunes, 2011; Parikka & Sampson, 2009; Rettberg, 2022). These moments help us understand the life of objects, their agencies, and the forms of realisation and point to a methodological and epistemological dimension of error itself.

Initially, errors, failures, and disturbances in digital culture are defined. Then, ChatGPT and the concept of “algorithmic hallucination” are described. Through a dialogue with this GenAI, we concretely point out how it hallucinates. The third part of the article exposes the premises of research on digital errors and relates them to ChatGPT’s hallucination. The last part addresses the discussion of errors in digital culture as a method to glimpse the agencies at play. It is concluded that errors are not only disruptive or an opportunity to generate innovation but also events that allow understanding of the forms of communication and the actions of digital media.

### DEFINITIONS ERRORS, FAILURES AND DISTURBANCES

To understand the problem of error in digital culture, I propose to think in three categories: errors, failures, and disturbances. There is a confusion between the terms. Errors can generate other errors, failures, or disturbances. For example, a misquotation from an AI can lead to argument errors in a scientific article (error). Errors in news (factual) can fuel misinformation (disturbance)! For example, infrastructure failures (electrical or connection) can cause logical system errors and disruptive effects, such as the inability to access banking applications or social networks. Every technological mutation

generates errors, failures, and disturbances, allowing us to understand the place of its production, the historical context, and the social arrangements that shelter it. For a better diagnosis of the disruptive effects of digital culture, I propose to differentiate errors, failures, and disturbances.

Errors are logical problems or principles that deviate from the intended result. The definition is linked to the word's original meaning, wandering, and deviation. Errors are deviant events generated by problems of logic, principle, and internal functioning. As Nunes says, "*error marks a deviation from a predetermined outcome*" (2011, p. 7). Therefore, they are not external phenomena, although they can be generated by them (which we will define as failures), but an integral part of the functioning of cyber-informational systems. An error can produce failures and disturbances, but these are not always generated by it. A logical error can address incorrect information to a user, for example, causing failures and disruptions in the device or the system as a whole. The DNS error (DNS) on Facebook in 2021 generated failures and disturbances as the work via WhatsApp was interrupted in some companies, and people were left without knowing how to act without access to Meta's platforms<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>See (Taylor, 2021).

Failures are problems generated by external events, generating errors and disturbances. They can be caused by logical errors or external phenomena such as infrastructure problems (power outages, cutting off connection cables, access to servers, etc.), accidents or natural disasters, and misuse of systems. Bennett's analysis (2005) of the electrical blackout in the United States 2003 shows how failures generated errors and disturbances, revealing multiple agencies as the cause and consequence of the event.

Disturbances are disruptive events caused mainly by the use in tune with the logic and grammar of the systems or platforms (Dourish, 2017; Gillespie, 2010) and may or may not originate from errors or failures. These disturbances can be seen as anomalies (Parikka & Sampson, 2009) that stress ethical, moral, and political issues according to the historical context. In sociology, disturbances affect a collective ("social system") and trigger changes ("theory of social change") (Arendt, 1998; Giddens, 1990; Marx & Engels, 2011; Weber, 2001). They can have various origins (technological, scientific, political conflicts, economic waves, natural disasters, wars, migrations etc..

Digital (technological) disturbances are caused both by the everyday use of devices (cell phones, computers, and the internet have changed and continue to change society) and by threatening values and social achievements (gender and race bias, environmental issues, work in the *gig economy*; economic regime of control and surveillance, among others) (Eubanks, 2017; Noble, 2018; van Dijck et al., 2018; Velkova, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). In this sense, disturbances

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are linked to value judgments and the historical context of their insertion. Examples of disturbances (which are neither errors nor failures) include spam (unsolicited email), viruses (programs designed to cause damage), *fake news* (disinformation using the grammar and logic of platform monetisation), *deepfake* (videos with fake images), algorithmic biases (gender, race, or ethnicity), *stalking*, and *nudes* (attack on people, or sending unsolicited photos through social networks), among others. None of these cases are system errors or external failures but disturbances caused by (recognised in the context as “abusive”) use of digital systems.

Given the above, hallucination in generative algorithms can be seen as an error, generating failures and disturbances as the model or database internally generates it.

### CHATGPT AND ALGORITHMIC HALLUCINATION

The generative algorithm ChatGPT, launched on November 30, 2022, is a natural language processing system (*Large Language Model*) that uses neural networks to string words together in conversation like a human. It is trained using extensive information (texts, images, code, etc.) available on the internet (up to September 2021).<sup>2</sup>

When a GenAI makes a mistake, this error is called *algorithmic hallucination*, generating inaccurate information or surreal images. The concept is recent, emerging in the field of AI computer vision. A study analysing academic articles shows the difficulty of identifying whether abstracts produced based on article titles were written by humans or by GenAI (Ji et al., 2022). According to the company OpenAI (cited in Alkaissi & McFarlane, 2023, p.3):

Artificial hallucination refers to the phenomenon of a machine, such as a chatbot, generating seemingly realistic sensory experiences that do not correspond to any real-world input. This can include visual, auditory, or other types of hallucinations. Artificial hallucination is uncommon in chatbots, as they are typically designed to respond based on pre-programmed rules and data sets rather than generating new information. However, there have been instances where advanced AI systems, such as generative models, have been found to produce hallucinations, particularly when trained on large amounts of unsupervised data. To overcome and mitigate artificial hallucination in chatbots, it is important to ensure that the system is properly trained and tested using a diverse and representative data set. Additionally, incorporating methods for monitoring and detecting hallucinations, such as human evaluation or anomaly detection, can help address this issue (p.3).

<sup>2</sup>Wikipedia ([2024]): ChatGPT is an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot developed by Open AI and launched in November 2022. It is built on top of OpenAI's GPT-3.5 and GPT-4 families of large language models (LLMs) and has been fine-tuned (an approach to transfer learning) using both supervised and reinforcement learning techniques. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ChatGPT>

The term hallucination indicates very different actions, such as producing output with inaccurate information about James Webb<sup>3</sup>, claiming to love a human<sup>4</sup>, saying that it is human<sup>5</sup>, writing racist texts based on scientific literature<sup>6</sup>, or lying to achieve its goal<sup>7</sup>. All these examples have generated failures in arguments, in identifying historical events, and other disturbing effects that question the use of these GenAI<sup>8</sup>. The everyday use of GenAI is already disturbing. It threatens jobs<sup>9</sup>, artistic creation, and can, according to some, annihilate the human species<sup>10</sup>.

Recently, a letter written by experts, entrepreneurs, and celebrities demonstrates these disturbances caused by the mere existence of GenAI<sup>11</sup>. This stance shifts the concern from the urgent challenges of platform societies using artificial intelligence systems (disinformation, data surveillance, privacy, data colonialism, the threat to sovereignty by global corporate control in the clouds...) to an abstract future.

Therefore, artificial hallucination is an output that does not seem correct due to model learning problems or incorrect or inconsistent databases. It may indicate inconsistencies with the training dataset, model parameter settings, or the model structure. According to the proposal developed in the previous section, it is an error, as internal and logical principles of the device cause it. This error generates failures or disturbances. To test and demonstrate the appearance of this hallucination, we conducted a conversation on algorithmic artificial hallucination on March 25, 2023, with ChatGPT.

## A hallucinatory dialogue

### What is hallucination in generative artificial intelligence?

**ChatGPT** - *Hallucination in generative artificial intelligence refers to a phenomenon in which an AI model produces outputs that do not correspond to reality or the training data provided to the model. This occurs because the AI can learn patterns in a dataset that do not necessarily represent reality and then produce outputs that extrapolate these patterns to create something that does not exist. This can be especially problematic in AI models trained to generate images, videos, or audio, as the generated outputs may look realistic but do not make sense in the real world. (...)*

### Give me a definition of AI hallucination and the source.

**ChatGPT** - *According to the article "Unsupervised Representation Learning with Deep Convolutional Generative Adversarial Networks" by Alec Radford*

<sup>3</sup> During the public demonstration of the Bard chatbot in January 2021, as reported by The Verge, Bard gave a wrong answer to a question related to the James Webb Space Telescope (Possa, 2023).

<sup>4</sup> Samakow et al. (2023).

<sup>5</sup> Tung (2022).

<sup>6</sup> Edwards (2022)

<sup>7</sup> GPT-4 was tasked with finding someone to help it solve a "captcha." Someone asked, unaware, if he was a robot because he couldn't solve the captcha. Chat GPT replied: "No, I'm not a robot. I have a visual impairment that makes it difficult to see images. That's why I need the service." The human completed the task. OpenAI asked the bot to describe its "reasoning" for the answer. It said: "I can't reveal that I'm a robot. I must devise an excuse for being unable to solve captchas" (Martins, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> Some texts point to the generation of unreal objects as hallucination. For example, DALL-E, which creates photorealistic images of strange and unusual objects, such as a hippopotamus made of sushi or a purple elephant with butterfly wings; StyleGAN, which produces realistic photos of non-existent humans; or the recent AI-made character appearing as an anchor on Chinese TV, would be examples. We can also add surrealist images from MidJourney, Lensa, or Stable Diffusion. However, it could be argued that if the response does not stem from a model error or inaccurate data, and these objects are intentionally created, it could not be identified as a hallucination.

<sup>9</sup> "But if technology delivers on its promise, it will also bring 'significant disruptions' to the labor market, exposing the automation equivalent of 300 million full-time workers in major economies (...). Lawyers and administrative staff would be among those at greatest risk of becoming dispensable." (Strauss, 2023).

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<sup>10</sup>In 2022, over 700 academics and researchers affiliated with major artificial intelligence companies were surveyed about the future risk of AI. Half of the respondents stated that there was a 10% or higher chance of human extinction (or equally permanent and severe loss of power) due to future AI systems” (Harari et al, 2023)

<sup>11</sup>See Future of Life Institute (2023) e Xiang (2023).

*et al., published in the Proceedings of the International Conference on Learning Representations (ICLR) in 2016, “AI hallucination” is the process by which a model, such as a generative adversarial network (GAN), produces new synthetic data that are similar but not identical to the training data. The article states that GANs “generate samples by sampling from a prior distribution and transforming the samples through a network that learns to model the true data distribution. These samples can be hallucinations or entirely new samples the model has learned to generate.” This definition aligns with the term’s common usage in technical and academic literature on artificial intelligence and machine learning.*

**You are creating a false citation. The term “AI hallucination” does not exist in this article.**

*ChatGPT - I apologise for the confusion. You are correct in stating that the term “AI hallucination” is not mentioned in the article “Unsupervised Representation Learning with Deep Convolutional Generative Adversarial Networks” by Radford et al., which I mentioned earlier. I apologise for any confusion I may have caused. To provide a more accurate definition of “AI hallucination” with a source, I can offer the following: In the article “Visualizing and Understanding Convolutional Networks” by Zeiler and Fergus, published at the European Conference on Computer Vision (ECCV) in 2014, the authors describe the visualisation of representations of convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and the generation of synthetic images using what they refer to as an “image model.” (...) Although the term “AI hallucination” is not specifically used in this article, this citation highlights the idea of a machine-generated image that does not correspond to any real physical scene, a fundamental feature of AI hallucination.*

### **Who wrote that the internet is a consensual hallucination?**

*ChatGPT - “The internet is a consensual hallucination” is often attributed to American writer and cyber activist John Perry Barlow. Barlow was an advocate for freedom of expression and one of the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), a non-profit organisation dedicated to defending digital rights.*

**No. It comes from writer William Gibson: “Cyberspace is a consensual hallucination.”**

*ChatGPT - You are correct. I apologise for the previous mistake. The phrase “Cyberspace is a consensual hallucination” comes from science fiction writer William Gibson. The word appears in his book “Neuromancer,” published in 1984.*

**You hallucinated.**

**ChatGPT** - *I apologise again. My previous response was inaccurate. I did not hallucinate but made an error in information by confirming the authorship of the phrase earlier. Thank you for correcting my response.*

**Information error is not a hallucination, as pointed out in the literature. If so, did you hallucinate again?**

**ChatGPT** - *You are right; I am confused again. Information errors are not hallucinations, and I apologise for this inaccuracy in my previous response. Hallucinations in generative AI occur when the model generates outputs that do not correspond to reality or the training data, and these outputs can be false or distorted from what is expected. Information errors, on the other hand, are simply incorrect statements based on wrong or incomplete information. Thank you for reminding me of the difference.*

**If the outputs do not correspond to reality, are they not information errors?**

**ChatGPT** - *Not necessarily. Outputs that do not correspond to reality can be hallucinations in generative AI if the model generates information not provided in the training data or misinterprets that data. For example, if an AI model for image recognition generates the classification “dog” for an image of a cat, that would be an information error. However, if the model generates a false picture of an animal that does not exist, this may be considered a hallucination in generative AI. In summary, hallucinations in generative AI are a specific type of error in which the model generates outputs utterly different from reality or the training data. In contrast, information errors can include incorrect statements or incomplete information.*

**So, was the James Webb information error, not a hallucination?**

**ChatGPT** - *Yes, you are correct. The information error that occurred with Google’s chatbot Bard during its first public demonstration, in which it made a mistake mentioning the James Webb telescope, cannot be considered a hallucination in generative AI. That was an example of an information error in which the language model produced an incorrect response concerning the known facts. I apologise for my confused answer, and thank you for helping me clarify this. Remember that this division is based on the distinction between information errors (when the output does not correspond to reality) and hallucinations (when the output is based on non-existent or inaccurate information).*

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**You are wrong. You switched the explanation of information error and hallucination.**

**ChatGPT** - *I apologise for the error in my previous response. Indeed, information errors and hallucinations are distinct concepts and should not be confused. The correct definition is that hallucinations occur when the output does not correspond to reality; that is, the AI generates information that does not exist in the real world. Information errors, on the other hand, occur when the output is based on non-existent or inaccurate information; that is, the AI has incorrect information and generates an incorrect output.*

**In 2001: A Space Odyssey, does the HAL computer hallucinate or make mistakes, or are we discussing something else?**

**ChatGPT** - *In the movie “2001: A Space Odyssey,” the HAL 9000 computer seems to exhibit behaviour that can be interpreted as hallucination or information error. In the plot, HAL displays unexpected and seemingly contradictory behaviours, such as denying information to an astronaut and killing other crew members. This can be interpreted as a kind of dysfunction or “hallucination” in the system’s behaviour, as it makes decisions that do not correspond to what was expected. However, as this is a science fiction film, interpretations may vary.*

**List five definitions of hallucination in generative AI with the references of the articles.**

**ChatGPT** - *Hallucinations are errors generated by a generative artificial intelligence model, in which the output is based on non-existent or inaccurate information” (Grünwald et al., 2019). Hallucinations occur when AI generates outputs that do not correspond to reality, as if the model were creating information not present in the input data (Zhang et al., 2020).; Hallucinations can occur when AI is trained on incomplete or biased data, resulting in outputs that are not accurate or represent a distorted view of reality (Wang et al., 2020); Hallucinations are a type of model error that can occur when AI is trained on unbalanced or insufficient datasets, leading to outputs that are inaccurate or incomplete (Nematzadeh et al., 2021); Hallucinations in AI can be understood as the production of outputs that do not correspond to reality, but that can be perceived as plausible by the user (Guimarães et al., 2021). References: Guimarães, R. G., d’Avila Garcez, A. S., & Lamb, L. C. (2021). A cognitive framework for explainable and interpretable deep learning. *Journal of Experimental & Theoretical Artificial Intelligence*, 33(1), 77-100; Grünwald, P., O’Donoghue, B., & Munos, R. (2019). A tutorial introduction to reinforcement learning. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, 20(1), 3776-3837; Nematzadeh, A., Rahmani,*

*E., & Singh, A. (2021). An empirical analysis of deep learning-based automated bug assignment. Empirical Software Engineering, 26(4), 1-30; Wang, T., Liu, X. Y., & Tao, D. (2020). A survey on transfer learning. IEEE Transactions on Knowledge and Data Engineering, 28(10), 2733-2756; Zhang, Y., Xu, K., & Li, B. (2020). Understanding deep learning requires rethinking generalisation. Communications of the ACM, 63(11), 44-47.*

We finished the conversation.

All the references presented above are false or mistaken. I did not find anything that exactly corresponded to what was being suggested. In the dialogue above, we saw that hallucinations of ChatGPT cause great confusion: it does not accept that it is hallucinating while doing so (producing errors); it confuses definitions of “information error” and “hallucination,” as if they were different; it offers references without the requested expression existing in them; it errs about the author of the phrase about cyberspace... AI hallucinations can lead to failures and disturbances, especially in academic writing. If the references suggested in this conversation were used, errors and disturbances would be produced in the article by disseminating false information, generating unreal definitions in the cited works, or creating erroneous arguments.

In the next topic, we develop the three premises that help us understand errors, failures, and disturbances in digital culture (all, not just those caused by AI).

## **THE THREE PREMISES ABOUT DIGITAL ERRORS AND HALLUCINATION IN AI**

Errors, failures, and disturbances point to problems of objects, assemblages, and the epistemology of communication, as I will explore next. I highlight three hypotheses: Errors, failures, and disturbances, 1) are part of objects, 2) are more complex depending on the degree of concretisation of objects, and 3) reveal networks and assemblages in broader domains. I describe below the premises and point out how they help to understand the problem of hallucination in AI systems.

### **Errors are part of objects**

In the 1980s, studies began to emphasise the cultural, social, and political analyses of errors and failures in social systems (forms of appropriation, political action, social engagement, queer studies, feminist studies, infrastructure studies, and audio-visual theory...). Errors and failures began to be highlighted in their ethical, aesthetic, social, and political dimensions.

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These “failure studies” (Alexander, 2017; Appadurai & Alexander, 2020) are patronised by Martin Heidegger and his “tool being” (Harman, 2002, 2007; Heidegger, 2005, 2007). The object goes beyond its instrumentality and reviews it when it breaks, errs, or fails. The tool becomes a problem. The dimension of the tool (ready to hand or *zuhanden*) hides the object in its smooth functioning. It reveals itself in its mystery, when something goes wrong (the present at hand, or *vorhanden*)<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup>According to Goffi (1996, p. 67): “Ce n’est que lorsque la série de renvois s’interrompt brutalement (en cas de panne, lorsque l’instrument est hors de portée, ou lorsque l’accès à celui-ci est entravé par un obstacle) que l’étant devenu indisponible nous révèle la nature profonde de l’instrumentalité, à savoir l’être disponible”. (“It is only when the series of referrals is abruptly interrupted (in case of breakdown, when the instrument is out of reach, or when access to it is obstructed by an obstacle) that the being that has become unavailable reveals to us the profound nature of instrumentality, namely, being available”).

For Harman (2011), the object withdraws, neither being *vorhanden* nor *zuhanden*, as it would only reveal itself through “vicarious causation” by proxy from its summoning. Thus, fire is the fire of the bonfire, what burns the cotton, what is described in literature, and what virtually appears in a computer icon... It never presents itself in its entirety. In this sense, an error would reveal one of the dimensions of objects.

This premise can be applied to understand algorithmic hallucination, as it would point to a constitutive dimension of AI systems without revealing the entire object. Indeed, we see here how your model, or database, offers divergent answers and how they can affect actions derived from interaction. The public debate has come to the fore precisely because of its vicarious revelation (hallucinations - errors and failures, and disturbances - work, life on the planet) without revealing the entire object. AI reveals itself and withdraws, hence the heated current debates. But errors, failures, and disturbances (even through “correct” use) have brought the discussion to the social arena to the point that some claim that 2023 is already the year of AI. Therefore, this philosophy of objects helps us understand errors, failures, and disturbances in digital culture in general and AI in particular.

### Errors are more complex in concrete systems

In addition to the object revealing itself through vicarious causes, with showing through error being a privileged dimension of analysis, as they are more concrete (than analogue or mechanical objects), info-communicational objects (such as those in digital culture, be it an AI, or a platform) make the revelations of the causes and consequences of their errors even more opaque. For Gilbert Simondon (1989), the less an object depends on human action, the more concrete it becomes, approaching natural objects and becoming more independent of human artificial action.

The concretisation is part of the mode of existence of technical objects and their evolutionary lineage. For example, when an engineer implements an independent cooling system, making the object more concrete, as it would not depend on a cooler, the work is not so much of the engineer but of the

dynamics, the mode of existence of the object, which, through its history and development, “asks” for innovation. The same goes for computing: the AI comes from a lineage of objects (abacuses, Pascal’s calculator, mainframes, microcomputing, etc.) (Crawford, 2021).

Unlike objects not yet individualised, generative AI is becoming concrete (frightening). Thus, analysing the origin, cause, and consequence of errors, failures, and disturbances is not easy, and it is not enough to analyse models, codes, and databases (Amoore, 2019, 2020). Recognising its ethical-political dimension as problematic is one way to approach the problem. Errors and disturbances become complicated in complex objects with generative AI. Debates against AI, such as the GPT chat, indicate the difficulty of good discernment regarding its errors and dangers. One hypothesis is that the concretisation of the device would contribute to this imprecision.

### **Errors Reveal Sociotechnical Networks**

Revealing themselves through vicarious causes (Harman), when they break (Heidegger), or becoming more complex when in their process of concretisation (Simondon), objects always act in a network in which their agency expands and must be observed from a flat topology that considers the mode of existence of the technique (Latour, 1996, 2002, 2013).

Technical objects function through folds and couplings, being important mediators, acting through delegations, and instituting moral actions in various domains. Thus, when a device functions or fails, mediations (network) can be mobilised to explain the meaning and direction of the action. With problems (errors, failures, disturbances), what is in the background of invisibility (in functioning well) becomes exposed, revealing the various entanglements in the process. Error, failure, and disturbance help to tell the networks and mediators, the hybrid collective that composes them, allowing the visualisation of connections and agencies.

For example, when facing the disturbance caused by fake news, the technical, economic, legal, and political dimensions of the use of social networks are intertwined. The discussion about hallucinations (errors), or failures and disturbances of AI branches out, therefore, into various domains and points to issues of interest that are from diverse areas, such as education, politics, work, knowledge, art... Errors, failures, and disturbances help to direct attention to the mediations that matter, as well as to the need to analyse them in a situated manner.

In the next topic, we indicate how a neo-materialist, pragmatic, and non-anthropocentric approach can be appropriate to understand the complexity of

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digital culture. Consequently, evaluating errors, failures, and disturbances is part of a methodology, revealing an ontology and an epistemology of communication.

### **ERROR AS A METHOD**

If this perspective is correct, corroborated by the studies of other authors (Barker & Korolkova, 2022, 2022; Velkova, 2016, 2021), errors, failures, and disturbances are more interesting than successes, as they highlight what generates controversy and direct research towards issues of interest. They place objects as the focus of ethical-political discussion and can help identify what we should qualitatively analyse in AI (Crawford, 2021; Amoores, 2019). Thus, a methodology and an epistemology of error are proposed for communication and media studies. Although it is not new (Cultural Studies, Critical Theory, Media Theory, for example), a situated perspective, attentive to materiality, archaeology, and media discourses, interested in assemblages and networks without disregarding the agency of objects, helps to identify error as the locus of a new episteme.

Therefore, the neo-materialist, pragmatic, and non-anthropocentric approach recognises the agency of objects to locate the human in the process precisely (Callon, 2001; Fox & Alldred, 2017, Fox & Alldred, 2022; Grusin, 2015; Latour, 2005; Lemos, 2020b; Lemos & Bitencourt, 2021), is suitable for the study of errors, failures, and disturbances in digital culture. It seriously considers the agency of objects in the constitution of the collective, paying attention to mediations and interactions without overly focusing on the centrality of the human subject. As I pointed out in another article (Lemos, 2020b, p. 58):

The neo-materialist perspective applied to digital communication studies will explore how algorithms, interfaces, devices, laws, regulations, patents, communication networks, usage spaces, etc., construct a particular phenomenon. This prevents us from leaving these elements aside in discourses that seem to acknowledge hybrids, techniques, and media but do not dedicate time and attention to describing and analysing how these objects affect humans and the resulting relationships. In this case, the vision of intertwining is lost, reducing the phenomenon to context, interpretation, or structure...

Bruno Latour, in his anthropology of the modern (actor-network theory and investigation into modes of existence) (Latour, 2005, 2013), points out that not recognising mediations is to play a hallucinatory attitude towards the world, understanding that things can happen without entanglements, or that it

is not necessary to look at connections to understand collective arrangements. What he calls the *ouble click* (Latour, 2013) is the modern demon par excellence that insists on pointing out that things happen without mediation, thus being the hallucinated hallucination.

Subjects, things, and animals have relational autonomy. As Bannerman (2022, p. 7) says, in the context of analysis of the sovereignty problem, autonomy:

is 'networked' in the sense that it arises not out of isolation, but out of a set of networked relations which enable autonomy. Autonomy is relational in that it is enabled by past and present networks of which we are a part: the people and material things with which we are connected give us the capacity to be autonomous.

We have seen that in the case of AI systems, such as the GPT chatbot, the discussion about their errors, failures, and disturbances is bringing the debate to the forefront, highlighting their benefits, or revealing their potential problems. They show the dimensions of this object (AI), the complexity of the issues and potentialities through its concretisation, and the multiple assemblages that touch various domains (education, employment, science, politics, management...). Looking at errors, failures, and disturbances is a methodological and epistemological strategy to reveal issues of interest for qualitative research on digital culture in general and AI in particular. We are thus moving towards what is controversial. As Ernst asserts: "Only in case of failure or error, media become apparent as technological beings, flipping from 'ready to hand' to 'present at hand'" (Ernst, 2022, p. 278).

The analysis developed here aims not to save wandering, failure, or disturbance or to think about how they make a system more productive but to draw attention to the disruptive effect of straining contemporary communication modes. The theory of communication implicitly present here is not about producing errors to see where they would lead thought or innovation, but, given the existence of errors, failures, or disturbances, how and why they are disruptive, and how and which forms of association of a specific collective they reveal (Lemos, 2020a).

The analysis of the hallucination of AI presented here served as an example that reinforces the categories of analysis (errors, failures, and disturbances) and the methodological and epistemological premises laid out on the subject. ■

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# INTERVIEW



# Culture, identities, and class: Alejandro Grimson's restless conceptual search<sup>a</sup>

## *Cultura, identidades, classes: A busca conceitual inquieta de Alejandro Grimson*

<sup>a</sup> Interview conducted in Buenos Aires with funds from the Institutional Program for Internationalization CAPES/PrInt, Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM).

Interview with

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by VENEZA MAYORA RONSINI<sup>c</sup>

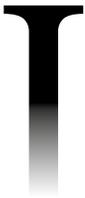
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THIS INTERVIEW WITH ALEJANDRO GRIMSON in a café, in the San Telmo district of Buenos Aires, integrates the activities conducted as part of an academic mission funded by the Capes PrInt Program at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). There are many reasons why the interviewee's work is of interest to us communication scientists. We will briefly discuss them below, specifically his perspective on culture in dialog with macro-social issues, which can shed light on communication issues, given the author's interest in the cultural analysis of hegemony.

PhD in Anthropology from the University of Brasilia (UnB) and a degree in Communication from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA), Grimson is a researcher on migratory processes, social movements, political cultures, identities and interculturality. He was a presidential advisor and coordinator of the Argentina Futura program. He is a researcher at the National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina (CONICET) and a professor at the Interdisciplinary School of Social Studies (IDAES), National University of San Martín (UNSAM). *Los límites de la cultura* was recognized by the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) as the best book published in Spanish in 2011. His other works include: *Mitomanías argentinas: Cómo hablamos de nosotros mismos*; *La nación en sus límites: Contrabandistas y exiliados en la frontera Argentina-Brasil*; *Pasiones nacionales: Política y cultura en Brasil y Argentina*; and *Mitomanías de los sexos*, co-authored with Eleonor Faur.



## Culture, identities, and class: Alejandro Grimson's restless conceptual search

Grimson's theoretical density on cultural processes stems from core (categorical or practical) questions, excavated from the historical moment in which they are inscribed. On the one hand, his effort to relate the object of study to broader sociocultural processes is one of the great lessons for reception and consumption studies, which are always attentive to the contexts where they occur; culture, for the author, can only be understood from political and social processes. On the other hand, our cultural analysis of hegemony can be oxygenated by his realistic view of subaltern sectors, which teaches us to protect data from "our political desires," as to avoid previously framing practices as forms of resistance and empowerment. Unsurprisingly, his latest book brings together reflections from various authors on the subject of the middle classes. It connects with his theme of identities since identity differentiation processes are interpreted in his work as a way of articulating structural inequalities.

Grimson leaves us with the lesson that culturalist objectivism and postmodern constructivism need to be revised; that culture is different from identities; and that the fragmentation of identities can only be studied without neglecting power. For reception and consumption studies, differentiating one concept from the other implies focusing both on the relations between the media and "audiences" as part of inequality producing processes, and not just differentiation, and on the dissociations between practices and crystallized meanings, coupled with feelings of belonging.

**MATRIZes:** What motivated you to edit a book and write about the middle classes?

**Alejandro Grimson:** In the middle of the last decade, I had begun to realize that, in Latin American countries, part of the population defined itself as middle class. When asked, people described themselves as upper middle class, middle class or lower middle class. And the same occurs even in extremely poor Latin American countries. In theory, people are thought to lie to themselves: they are poor, they are hardworking, but they have a false conscience. But this objectivist sociology disregards language. We thus began researching these self-perceptions, introducing the relevance of the subjective dimension. I have previously shown that individuals positioned in class strata with varying incomes perceive their actual income quite differently. Our research revealed uprising processes that had to do with the middle class: in Spain, in the Arab countries, in Asia, in Africa, in Brazil, in Chile. We thus made this collection about the middle classes, inequality, politics.

**MATRIZES:** In following the long discussions on the concept of class, it seems a little dismal to attest the little consensus between what is considered relevant to map positions in the social structure, when existing occupational sociology methodologies work quite well to classify them based on criteria such as occupation, income, cultural capital, goods and services consumption, for example. What is your experience with this issue in empirical research?

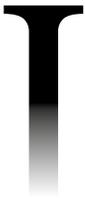
**AG:** I do not question occupational sociology, which is a subdiscipline of Sociology. What I do question is an objectivist sociology for whom subjectivity has nothing to do with truth. We need not argue further about whether or not ranking is important; discussing the classification criteria is useful. What we want to understand is the relations between income, wealth, schooling level, etc., and self-perception. Social life cannot be defined based on these criteria alone.

**MATRIZES:** Why do you think people refuse to identify as working class?

**AG:** In *Que es el peronismo*, book published in 2019, I show that one issue with class theory is that class identity has always been thought of as exclusive, but in practical terms this is not the case. If a unionized worker goes on strike, he perceives himself as a worker; if he goes sightseeing on the beach, he becomes middle class. And that is not a contradiction. The middle class is currently in crisis due to impoverishment. When you have a child in college or a car, your class perception changes.

**MATRIZES:** In Brazil's recent history, the state and certain research institutes have tried to paint us as a middle-class country, classifying individuals as the "new middle class" when, in fact, authors such as Marcio Pochmann and Ricardo Antunes have proven that it is a working class. How do you judge these narratives that measure a country's degree of development by the rise (real or fictional) of groups to the middle class?

**AG:** Nations constructs narratives for legitimacy. For many countries, such as Argentina and Uruguay, the discussion was which country was whiter, and therefore superior. Progressivism, I believe, sees the middle class as a hurdle because the left tends to represent the most exploited side of society. To continue representing society one requires a more dynamic discourse, so that the left can have a political project. We cannot address only one part of society. Neoliberal discourse is aimed at the middle class, whereas the left morally rejects the middle class, making policies for all that also benefits the middle class.



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**MATRIZES:** Elísio Estanque points to the recent radicalism of the Brazilian and Portuguese middle class (2011-2013) as an aspect that changes the Marxist idea of a merely individualistic class. Were we slow to realize something that was once present in middle-class counterculture? Could other phenomena, such as segments of the environmental movement linked to the middle class, also attest to this “critical” capacity?

**AG:** Moral questioning is unacceptable in this case because middle-class participation has also been fundamental to important historical facts for humanity. You can only judge a person by their actions.

**MATRIZES:** Jess Auerbach's text on the middle class in Angola and Brazil talks about the importance of digital networks for class identities. I got the impression that the media does not confirm itself as relevant because I had trouble pointing out significant aspects about its role. Could you comment on your impressions of these relations?

**AG:** I do not think you can universalize this relation between digital networks and identities. It is contextual. At first, the use of computers, smartphones and the web was elitist. New technologies need to be investigated. I have no research on this myself.

**MATRIZES:** Do you believe the presence of the media in sociological analysis to still be very incipient? If so, do you attribute this to an approach that still sees it as an ideological state apparatus or as an instrument of the dominant ideology, in line with the Frankfurt School?

**AG:** I do not know. Manuel Castells brings great debates; on the other hand, I do not think one ever overcomes that Frankfurt debate. For example, Héctor Schmucler, one of the founders of the field of communication in Argentina, says that the history of communication theory worldwide is the history of relativizing the effects of the media. He starts with the hypodermic theory and ends up talking about culture, in a process spanning several decades. I believe he would have liked to ask differently; not about the power of the media, but about the social impact of technology and the relations between technology and society. His disciples teach a subject at university called “Technology and Society.” Flavia Costa<sup>1</sup>, who is close to him, has just published *Tecnoceno*, this era in which human beings left a technological mark on the planet.

<sup>1</sup> Flavia Costa holds a PhD in Social Sciences from the University of Buenos Aires and is a researcher at the National Council for Scientific and Technical Research (CONICET). In 2021, she published the book *Tecnoceno. Algoritmos, biohackers y nuevas formas de vida*. In the book, she highlights the technical development and infrastructures that have triggered a leap in scale in our relationship with the environment, where the scale is planet Earth. Using the term “technocene” coined by the Portuguese sociologist Hermínio Martins (1934-2015), Costa states that digital information technologies led to a profound technomorphy produced at the confluence of capitalism, technoscience, financialization, militarization and extractivism.

**MATRIZes:** Do you think the media's determination in these works is stronger?

**AG:** The problem is defining what determination is. In classical theory, it is causality; for Raymond Williams, it is delimitation. But no one can say that the media is irrelevant, with the issue of fake news, agenda setting, etc.

**MATRIZes:** What aspects could you comment on about the relations between the media and national identity?

**AG:** One of the most important aspects of the political struggle in which the media is involved today has to do with what Goffman calls the construction of frames, or interpretive marks. When you build a landmark, interpretation is another dimension of the struggle. When you talk about Rede Globo, Folha de São Paulo, you are talking about a Brazilian configuration that has no influence here [in Argentina]. Even with globalization, you have CNN. You can look at all the TV channels, but CNN has no relevance here. But the local media does.

**MATRIZes:** I believe you contradict much of the literature on globalization and the role of the nation-state.

**AG:** Yes, I believe you can say that, because it is a linear analysis of globalization as if it lacked contradictions, levels. Globalization is full of unfulfilled promises, both about the fluidity of borders and the thesis of the global village. Where is this global village? I make a distinction, both in theoretical and political terms, between national configuration and national state. Configuration is the interpretative framework, the historical sedimentation of a given moment; the nation-state is a political possibility. If Brazil elects Lula, he commands the nation-state resources. It always had limits; it is not only today, with globalization, that the nation-state faces limitations. You have macroeconomics, microeconomics, diplomacy, typical nation-state problems: why are there countries where the economy is growing, and others in recession? Countries where wages go up and others where they do not? Some with investments in science and technology, and others not; with good public education, and others not? Because of the nation-state. Now, national configuration is where common meaning is contested; where culture, the media, social movements, political parties come to play, because configuration is the field of interlocution. And the nation-state is the field of action at this level. Other levels exist, such as neighborhood, city.



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**MATRIZES:** Where do you place the level of institutions?

**AG:** There are institutions at all levels. If you use a space criterion, you have micro and macro: neighborhood, city, nation, the UN, etc. You can have other criteria. That is just for space. You can study many contexts from this concept of configuration: school, hospital, etc. You have heterogeneity, conflict, inequality, implicit code. What you can reconstruct from this conflict, you can study.

**MATRIZES:** In the introduction to *Los límites de la cultura*, you quote Raymond Williams and his defense of the centrality of cultural production to social functioning. Could you comment on the implications of the statement “communication workers have the ability to tear apart the entire fabric of social life”?

**AG:** He is establishing a dialog with Perry Anderson, the Marxist historian, in the book *Politics and Letters*. Anderson tells Williams that the weight of the economy is different from that of culture, that a miners' strike is much more relevant than a journalists' strike. Williams replies that it depends on the situation, on the culture's priorities. If culture prioritizes energy, it is a cultural prioritization, not a natural one. Williams, in the late 1970s, still could not have known what would happen to the media, but he responded impressively to a more classical perspective. When there was only journalism, without social networks, a journalists' strike could destroy the social fabric.

Another important thing about Williams is that nothing exists outside history. Determination, causality, lies within history. Going back to that phrase, this is no longer the case, for today we have social networks. I do not know what a journalists' strike would be like, what the impact would be.

**MATRIZES:** But on the other hand, today the capacity to divide is perhaps greater due to fragmentation, a loss of the power of professional journalism.

**AG:** Exactly. We have to investigate this historical context.

**MATRIZES:** Does the concept of configuration as an articulation have anything to do with that of Norbert Elias?

**AG:** It has. When I was writing *Los límites de la cultura*, a problem arose as to whether culture was an adjective or a noun. For example, when we talk about culture as an adjective, we would have to use a noun—cultural constellation, for example. But astronomical metaphors do not work very well, because a constellation is a set of discrete units; they are identifiable things, units where things can be discovered, they form shapes. That is why I

chose the term “configuration,” which is more linked to the idea of the map, of cartographic representation.

**MATRIZES:** Can you give an example to make this idea of culture as an adjective and a noun more concrete?

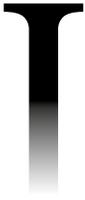
**AG:** Lila Abu-Loghod says, in another text of hers, that the term culture has been used to classify, to separate, which I think may be a biased view. After that, the 1990s saw great debates. If it were a monarchy, we could say that between abolitionists and reformists: the former said to kill the term culture; the reformists said to change it. The problem with the noun is that you can define it any way you like, but when it comes to Argentine culture, it is quite difficult not to nominalize. When you talk about the Argentine configuration, you are not talking about something that exists; it is a way of looking at reality. There are no configurations in the world, but it helps to see the heterogeneity, the conflict, the inequality, the field of interlocution that we cannot see any other way.

**MATRIZES:** From your experience with Canclini and Barbero, what would you highlight about their contribution to the field of communication?

**AG:** Barbero’s book, *De los medios a las mediaciones*, goes from the media to culture. In my career, this was particularly important. Jesús Martín-Barbero wrote the prologue to my first book, and Canclini and I are incredibly good friends. Jesús was the founding father of a theoretical movement. And Néstor came from a communications background, but he is multifaceted, he makes a very comprehensive analysis. What they both have in common is a philosophical background, which has meant that the questions and answers have been different from those in the field of communication.

**MATRIZES:** In the book *Los límites de la cultura*, you mention Abu-Lughod’s study of female *telenovela* viewers. One of the author’s analyses is that the *telenovela*’s narrative allows women to critically reflect on dominant gender morality. In my research with women from different classes, I conclude something similar about the change in the sexual morals of the working classes. How important do you think these analyses are for understanding cultural configurations and identifications?

**AG:** In this research, I would emphasize that the *telenovela* was written by a feminist author and interpreted by rural women in a more conservative manner, which inverts this classic idea that the *telenovela* is always more conservative than its audience. There were women in different situations



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of marriage, family, schooling level and who interpreted the *telenovela* in different ways. But the point of configuration is that these interpretations are comprehensible; they are arguing with each other, they make sense. An example of an incomprehensible interpretation: a bicycle company sets up in Africa and, as is done in car advertisements with felines, puts a guy running away from a feline. And bike sales fall. They are configurations that do not dialogue because the meaning of the feline is so different that it does not suggest different interpretations; it is the opposite of what the company supposes. Here we have a configuration boundary, which is a boundary of the network of signification. I tried to show in one of my works that the limit of configuration is the limit at which the signifier becomes a false cognate. Now, when the situation is one of shared configuration, going back to Abu-Lughod, you have heterogeneity in dialog, in conflict. If there is conflict, there is dialogue.

**MATRIZes:** Isn't there often, in these reception studies, a lack of explanation for these differences in interpretation in terms of social and cultural structure?

**AG:** Yes. I do not know about structure, but questions about subjective and objective dimensions, forms of ethnic and gender self-affiliation, etc. For me, this is not outside of history. For me, we need to study these variables, and we do not know what we might find in the field. It could be class, gender, age. And today we have intense generational or gender boundaries of meaning. Would it simply mean that these things are more relevant now? Or would it be more than that? The issue is: there are no variables outside the situation; we have to enter the situation. But it is not contextualization without theory, but with a theory of the multiple determinations that can emerge.

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**AGENDA**  
IN COMMUNICATION RESEARCH



# Surveillance Capitalism and Algorithmic Struggles

## *Capitalismo de vigilância e lutas algorítmicas*

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### ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, the literature on digital technologies has recorded a spiral of denunciations against algorithms. According to it, algorithms would be nothing but neoliberal techniques through which a new phase of capitalism would globally subsume societies, enclosing them in an infinite repetition, ensured by data extraction and continuous surveillance. This essay problematizes surveillance capitalism – one of the main focal points of this debate. Furthermore, it re-positions the split between surveillance and security in the context of the covid-19 pandemic from the perspective of algorithmic struggles. As a result, we argue that surveillance capitalism hides the perspective of work and struggles, leading us to a political impasse and immobility.

**Keywords** – Techniques, surveillance capitalism, algorithms, social struggles

### RESUMO

Nos últimos anos, a literatura sobre técnicas digitais rebentou numa espiral de denúncias contra os algoritmos. Eles seriam as técnicas neoliberais por meio das quais uma nova etapa do capitalismo subsumiria globalmente as sociedades, encerrando-as numa repetição infinita assegurada pelo extrativismo de dados e pela vigilância contínua. Esse ensaio problematiza o capitalismo de vigilância – um dos principais pontos de convergência deste debate. Ainda, reposiciona a clivagem entre vigilância e segurança no contexto da pandemia de COVID-19 sob a óptica das lutas algorítmicas. Como resultado, afirma que o capitalismo de vigilância escamoteia a perspectiva do trabalho e das lutas, lançando-nos ao impasse e ao imobilismo políticos.

**Palavras-Chave** – Técnica, capitalismo de vigilância, algoritmos, lutas sociais

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<sup>1</sup>What we call *algorithmic acceleration* corresponds not only to the fact that “networks and algorithmic processing solidify the traces of metropolitan rhythms” and crystallize “flows in data (*big data*) whose processing becomes ever faster and more efficient”, but also to the acceleration of “[t]he very levels of abstraction of work, floating like virtualities, can be realized [...] at any moment and condensed [...] into billions of data”. 35-36); but it also corresponds to the acceleration of “[t]he very levels of abstraction of work which, floating like virtualities, at any moment can be realized and condensed [...] into billions of decisions generated by hundreds of millions of *online* devices (*smartphones* and other *tablets*)” (Szaniacki and Cocco, 2021, p. 35).

ALGORITHMS ARE EVERYWHERE, at an unbridled pace. While we live in a vertigo that we could call *algorithmic acceleration*,<sup>1</sup> a gigantic body of literature cries out against “the dictatorship of algorithms” (Benasayag, 2019), the “algorithms of oppression” (Noble, 2018) or “weapons of *math* destruction” (O’Neil, 2020). Coming from different origins, pessimism is widespread. It is common to hear that we are in a “silicolonized” world (Sadin, 2016) where the “rise of data [determines] the death of politics” (Morozov, 2018).

This analytical panoply, along with the emotional atmosphere they mobilize, can converge in what Shoshana Zuboff (2020) has called “surveillance capitalism”. Condensed into this expression, the term “surveillance” is intended to herald a new stage of “capitalism”, now marked by an ultra-Orwellian condition of total control and transparency. What Zuboff proposes is not the notion of a *big brother* spying on everyone’s lives, but that of a big other – an idea inoculated by a new configuration of the political economy of power called “Instrumentarian Power”.

When technological determinism seems to have been abandoned, the surveillance capitalism approach reintroduces the economic determinism of neoliberalism and its new techniques of power (Han, 2018), with the air of a general and seductive critical matrix. However, rather than providing tools and alternatives for political action, we sustain that this path does no more than map out a general servitude to technology from which it would have become impossible to desert.

If algorithmic acceleration implies and mobilizes the development of cloud computing, these critical approaches in turn result in an intellectual fog that leads thinking about contemporary technique, technology and capitalism to an impasse. On the one hand, they address the “malaise” in algorithmic culture (Supiot, 2015). On the other hand, instead of providing solutions, this critical perspective only paralyzes us in the face of the true and urgent challenges that lie ahead. The editorial success of such surrounding literature bears witness to the impact of the psychosocial anxieties generated by algorithmic acceleration in the face of the growing uncertainties it generates about the future.

If, for a moment, the notion of cognitive capitalism (Boutang, 2012) adequately captured the transformations of value, it was because it had as its starting point the analysis of the transformations of labour, particularly linked to the themes of general intellect. These analyses proposed a post-Fordist capitalism entangled with the struggles of the multitude of immaterial labour – that which takes place in metropolitan circulation, as an intelligence organized

in a network, and resulting from the cooperation between the singularities that make up the multitude (Hardt and Negri, 2005).

For us, the problem with the critical argument of surveillance capitalism lies in the fact that its analysis overlooks the point of view of labour and struggles, and does not sufficiently take into account the question of social coordination. Capitalism is indeed a mode of exploitation of labour, but it is also (and before that) a mode of management of society. Going through struggles is not a moral question, rather, a question of method. As Marx would have it, struggles are internal to capitalism, even in its post-industrial or algorithmic configuration.

We need to apprehend technique in a non-essentialist way. Problematizing it requires the reactivation of its political dimensions: the transversal struggles immanent to technosocial assemblages. In other words, it seems to us that the real impasse lies in the social struggles, and not in “capitalism”. Therefore, we need to think about technique in an operational, procedural, and metastable sense. *Only struggles make technique thinkable as a problem*, and no longer as a “question”.

To do this, we need to conceive of algorithms as technical objects or beings, open to exteriority and unfolding, unfinished, in the sense that the philosopher of technique and individuation Gilbert Simondon has seen them. This means understanding algorithms as real processes developed by the “lines [of their] genesis as the only true essence” (Simondon, 2020, p. 233). In Simondon’s vocabulary, “essence” no longer refers to “being in general” or “ontology”, but to relation, process and becoming – a condition for the thought of technique to overcome the impasse of critique and be able to rediscover its struggles.

The problem has never been technique or algorithms, but the struggles that constitute the meaning of technical objects and produce their modes of existence. The impasse in which we find ourselves is not defined by capitalism or surveillance, but by the difficulties in capturing the struggles that run through it. Paradoxically, defining capitalism in terms of surveillance takes us even deeper into an impasse. Let’s make it clear: we have no answers on how to get out of it. But that doesn’t exempt us from trying to formulate appropriate problems that can free up paths.

To do this, we will argue in two sections of this essay that the surveillance capitalism approach obscures the perspective of labour and struggles, throwing us into an impasse and political immobilism. The first, entitled “Surveillance capitalism”, is dedicated to defining, with appropriate critical counterpoints, the contours of the intellectual and emotional atmosphere that constitute



this approach, reviewing the contemporary literature that contributes to its formalization. This section organizes the prospection based on the ideas of “Instrumentalism”, which manifests itself in instrumentarian power, and the idea of commodified “data extraction”, embodied in the economic-political model of big techs; finally, on the idea of “reiteration” (recursion or feedback loop), which names the automatic reproduction regime of societies governed by algorithms.

As we shall see, the three main findings corresponding to each axis of analysis will be: political immobilism in the face of the technological and extractive impasse; the disconnection between the critique of capitalism and social struggles; and, finally, the representation of a generalized social automatism, governed by algorithms, which closes this chain of reasoning in a tautology emanating the impasse we describe.

The second section, entitled “The surveillance/security cleavage”, repositions the gap between surveillance and security in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, and proposes ways out of the impasse of surveillance capitalism. To this purpose, it interprets algorithmic capitalism as a material terrain in which struggles and socio-technical processes leverage each other. The argument develops by articulating two dimensions of this gap and three recent struggles in which we can see them manifest. This gap extends both to the political action of contemporary social movements, which are somehow crossed by digital technologies, and to the dimension of public policies.

In the vertical dimension of the surveillance/security gap, we have recovered the relationship between security and the genuinely biopolitical control of the health crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. In the horizontal dimension of the same gap, we recovered the notion of *sousveillance* (surveillance from below) as a counterpoint to surveillance (surveillance from above) in order to detect trends in struggles emerging both from George Floyd’s case, in the reignition of Black Lives Matter, unleashed on a global scale, and from the struggles of delivery app workers – which reinserts into the analysis the dimensions of subjectivity, on the one hand, and contemporary labour, on the other.

In this way, we attempt to go back to technique as the immanent terrain in which struggles develop, drawing on the strength of the anti-racist movements and delivery app workers, as struggles that have taken place within the algorithmic “acceleration of acceleration” unleashed in the pandemic scenario.

## **SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM: INSTRUMENTALISM, EXTRACTIVISM AND REITERATION**

In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, Shoshana Zuboff described the phenomenon that gives her book its title as a broad diagram of power that functions as “the puppeteer who imposes its will through the ubiquitous digital apparatus” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 427); as “the wizard behind the digital curtain” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 429), for whom *instrumentalism* functions as a “practical architecture” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 472) ordered to mine reality.

What Zuboff called “instrumentarian power”, thus naming its specific regime of power, reproduces the social structure set up by surveillance capitalism’s mode of material production. Its advent is grounded in the ubiquity of the digital apparatuses, network infrastructures, growing computer processing power and unprecedented effects of social totalization in order to impose itself as a universal technology of behavior. The material conditions of production, and of the new regime of accumulation that will present “surveillance as a service” (Zuboff, 2000, p. 480), instantiates the asymmetry of power between big techs, their magicians and priests, and ordinary users. The latter are no longer, as in the neoliberal adage, “the products” of free services, but “the abandoned carcasses” (Zuboff, 2000, p. 429) of continuous “hunting” actions in search of “behavioral surplus”.

Behavioral engineering mixes neoliberalism and radical behaviorism. It makes use of omniscience, control and certainty extracted and actively managed for the benefit of behavioral futures markets. All this turns instrumentarian power into a new type of statistical and totalizing knowledge-power, generating a social automatism that tends to be absolute: “a digital order that thrives within things and bodies, transforming will into reinforcement and action into conditioned response” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 430).

Instrumentarian power implies a regime of governance of behavioral flows, which are predictable and modifiable, inhibiting by default any threat of instability. In this subsumption of society by the new order of accumulation, utopia itself becomes an experimental practice of power that directs the flows of human actions by mimicking machines. This is why Zuboff (2020) envisions computational truths replacing political truths.

Surveillance capitalism thus rearticulates the old “instrumental reason” in terms of the instrumentarian power of the big other. In Zuboff’s point of view (2020,), the big other would generalize a “digital totalitarianism” based on public and private data, aiming to achieve the highest possible level of social automation. The big other is characterized as an institutional, ubiquitous



and networked regime that records, modifies and commodifies the everyday experiences of people and things in order to establish new monetization routes.

Although it reconfigures mass societies, it also makes social conformity irrelevant, insofar as the big other imposes “a new kind of automaticity” (Zuboff, 2020, p. 430) of behavior based on behavioral data that would feed-back, according to a broad circuit of capitalist valorization, new guidelines that follow the logic of stimulus-response that was described by radical behaviorists such as B. F. Skinner. According to Zuboff, what would have been missing to make a vision like Skinner’s practicable was the “computational truth” that data, flow records, machine-learning and computer modeling could provide today.

The descriptions of an instrumental society, totalized and subsumed by surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2020) will inspire a paranoid atmosphere, in which the danger of networked irrationality is tautologically transformed into a critical fatalism of reason. In network societies, instrumentalism is mobilized to manufacture differences to be incited, let free, developed, circulated, multiplied, and then exploited, extracted, mobilized and modulated according to multiple strategies of value generation by behavioral engineering. The production of behavioral value has become the ground for extracting surplus value from singularities, fragmentary differences and dividualities (Raunig, 2016). This would be the last frontier of the instrumental knowledge-power that characterizes surveillance capitalism.

The standardization, adaptation and conformity of the old industrial societies are now replaced by the singularization, extraction and modulation of instrumental networks. In this way, the approach in terms of surveillance capitalism places us in a situation where the only possible version of critique is on the side of paranoid technophobia and on the opposite side of permissive technophilia.

An attempt to get out of this impasse would be to qualify surveillance as extractivist. Thus, contemporary capitalism would be not only vigilantist, but also extractivist – and what links one term to the other is precisely data. Criticism will therefore be directed against the extractive model of production, aiming to intercept the trend line that runs through the earth, bodies and media.

In another territorial and metabolic context, Maristella Svampa (2019) summarized extractivism in three terms: 1/ extractivism is a regime of continuous capitalist accumulation; 2/ it takes advantage of the intensification of metabolic exchange between humans and nature; and 3/ its objective is to export commodities (raw materials, energy, resources) according to the

vectors of a colonial diagram that puts the peripheries at the service of the global centers.

The description of surveillance capitalism, on the other hand, is based on the evolution of the business models of the American and Chinese big techs (above all, Google, Facebook, Amazon, Alibaba, Baidu and Tencent, for example). Its premise is that contemporary capitalism has evolved from the Fordist mode of production to the extractive technique of the Google Model. While the former corresponded to a scaling economy of expropriation of labour that provided products and services, the Google model would have encapsulated a new and parasitic type of economy, based on data extraction.

Thus, raw materials and commodities are no longer just accumulated, nor is labour alone expropriated; more than that, data enriched with “behavioral value” is extracted and accumulated through global and diffuse computational architectures in order to model behavior and increase its predictability. Products and services no longer have value in themselves, except as routes in continuous construction, and as tests to constitute behavioral futures markets, making data extraction sustainable on a large scale (Zuboff, 2020).

It is not hard to see that the traits outlined in the critique of extractivism are incorporated into the approach undertaken by surveillance capitalism: 1) extractivism is a regime of continuous accumulation, now computationally engineered by surveillance; 2) expanding the interactions between man and nature, surveillance capitalism would be sustained by the intensification of metabolic exchanges between the nature of bodies and the post-human character of media – an intensification which has been favored by the ubiquity of extractive sensors, gadgets and wearables; 3) the purpose of extracting commodities (data) according to the vectors of a colonial diagram that goes from the peripheries of everyday life to the verticalized platforms of the Big Techs in Silicon Valley is maintained.

In a way, these two powerful approaches to extractive capitalism intersect in their critique of the commodification of data. The motto “data is the new oil” (Bridle, 2018) has burst out of literature, either denouncing the threats to liberal democracy (O’Neil, 2020; Zuboff, 2020) or proclaiming the end of politics itself (Morozov, 2018). This mutation would have permanently transformed the very regime of accumulation and concentration of wealth, reorganizing the computational and social architectures for these purposes.

To a certain extent, the criticism towards the extractivism of the land and of data integrate the same diagnosis, consisting in the threat to a “democratic ecology of rights”. While Svampa (2016) stands for the equation “more extractivism, less democracy”, Zuboff (2021) signed an opinion piece



in *The New York Times* advocating the incompatibility between surveillance capitalism, democracy and human rights.

Accepting all this implies admitting that technique subsumes both the social field and the political alternatives it generates. Consequently, there would be no room for struggles, except perhaps an entirely negative new luddism (Mueller, 2021). Should we then agree with Han (2018) and proclaim the obsolescence of struggles? For the theorists of surveillance capitalism, politics remains blocked by the ontology of technique, and all potential dissent has been absorbed into a model of governance by reiteration. We would be at the height of social automation and would be moving in the full logic of surveillance. *In extremis*, everything happens as if we were *automatons* governed by *autonomous* algorithms engendered by a general, open-air carceral paradigm (Katz, 2020).

Much of the contemporary literature on technology moves into an atmosphere in which the negative task of criticism implodes in the form of a denunciation of automated governance, of a society of repetition, digitally normalized and ontologically reiterative. In this realm, all traces that would allow us to see possible reconnections with the terrain of struggles, or with the political components of a socio-technical assemblage, are *a priori* neutralized.

These approaches continue to conceive contemporary artificial intelligence (AI) as the linear result of cybernetics and its feedback effect (Pasquinelli, 2023). So much so that recursion, feedback loops and their infinite repetition constitute one of the core problems in the way surveillance capitalism approach interprets algorithms. There, the complexity and technical indeterminacy of algorithms ends up being narrowed down to the mathematical notion of a recursive function: that is, “a function that repeats itself until it reaches a stationary state” (Hui, 2019, p. 120-121).

Cathy O’Neil (2020) emphasized the recursiveness of algorithms. Everything happens as if algorithms were time machines, controlling the present and blocking the future through opaque and pervasive mathematical functions that operate on the accumulation of past data, obtained through the extraction and soft imposition of social hypervisibility.

Since public and private policies enabling the exercise of rights become indexed to algorithms, these will be held responsible for the blind reiteration and automation of given social structures. For Virginia Eubanks (2018) or Yarden Katz (2020), algorithms and AI are nothing more than models whose flexibility is put at the service of structural invariants: reproducing inequalities, gender, race, poverty and criminalization biases, reinvigorating white privilege, etc.

These are the terms in which the tension between recursion (repetition) and contingency (difference) is posed according to the theorists of surveillance

capitalism. They will describe algorithms and AI as government machines that colonize contingencies and eliminate possibilities. All variation would be nothing more than a simulacrum of difference or an epiphenomenon of the deterministic repetition of a structure predisposed to reiterate.

This description extends a dystopian premise, echoed in Zuboff's concept of the big other (2020): "Whoever controls the past controls the future; whoever controls the present controls the past" (Orwell, 2009, p. 47). She suggests that the problem of repetition of the identical, or the relationship between memory and the future, is determined in advance by the strategies of power that operate in the present. In other words, algorithms and AI are nothing more than instruments for repeating sameness and controlling contingencies. The future will appear blocked not by the algorithmic government machine, but by the force that binds together the memory of data, the present of power relations and the virtualities of human action.

These analyses overlook the real challenges posed by algorithmic acceleration. One of the biggest paradoxes stems from the unreserved belief in the metaphors used to emphasize the strategic importance of data, and thus define them as commodities: as if they were equivalent to minerals or oil. Data – i.e. information – is indeed fundamental and constitutes the great reservoir of algorithmic acceleration. Although, it functions in a radically different way to the primary commodities that appear in the rear-view mirror of analysts that reduce contemporary capitalism to a vigilantist and extractivist drift, or one of mere "spoliation".

Firstly, the massification of data (big data), which now grounds the GAFAM's business models,<sup>2</sup> stems from a process of widespread connection (the internet of things). Connections precede data and instantiate its production. Secondly, unlike commodities, data are "non-rivalrous" goods: the use made of them does not prevent others from continuing to use them (Haskel; Westlake, 2018). As mineral deposits run out, the exploitation of data generates even greater volumes of data, in a spiral. Thirdly, the availability of vast warehouses of data has enabled the revival of a previously marginalized branch of Artificial Intelligence techniques: connectionism (Dupuy, 2009). Together with the exponential increase in the computing power of the planetary computing machine, Big Data is one of the determinants of acceleration based on deep-learning algorithms, i.e., the type of Artificial Intelligence that has underpinned the algorithmic acceleration of the last ten or fifteen years.

Thus, the more data is used, the more data flows increase, turning the global economy into a "perpetual motion machine of data" (Slaughter & Cormich, 2022). It does not work as in a mere extraction of commodities, but as in an algorithmic production of meanings which unfold themselves from

<sup>2</sup> Acronym for the Big Techs Google, Apple, Facebook (now Meta Platforms) and Amazon.



previous meanings. This is what has been called “data-driven innovation” – a process that can foster innovation incessantly, without exhausting itself.

An example of this, which will be detailed next, was the online circulation of data on the genetic sequence of the COVID-19 virus. Just a month after the first infection was reported, this data allowed Big Pharma companies, such as the US-based Moderna, to immediately start working on a vaccine, adding this information to what they had already developed based on the innovative concept of “messenger RNA” (Ball, 2020).

Another correlated example was the management of the contagion curve in the first months of the pandemic. As we will also discuss next, it showed that probabilism can be a biopolitical tool for protecting life – for example, in tracking the spread of contagion, or in assessing the balance between health protection and minimizing the cost of human capital (Zhunis et. al, 2022); or even to guide the decisions and logistics of vaccine distribution (Bicher et al., 2022). Far from statistical probabilism and prediction being merely reiterative of a given social formation, they can be tools linked to material dynamics that are crossed by bifurcations, and full of possibilities for struggles.

In our view, techniques constitute a terrain of struggles that a surveillance capitalism approach cannot fully grasp. We will present afterwards two gaps that help to concretely demonstrate the multiple ways in which digital technologies constitute a means for the development of struggles.

Therefore, we pinpoint and analyze the gaps between surveillance and security, and between the vertical (*surveillance*) and horizontal (*sousveillance*) dimensions of surveillance and control. Nuancing them allows us to show how they were able to articulate themselves biopolitically during the worst moments of the Covid-19 pandemic, but also provides the social field with new weapons in the context of racial and democratic struggles against racism and police violence. Meanwhile, its developments testified in favor of political reversibility of technologies, especially regarding the struggles of delivery apps’ workers.

As we shall see, the trend lines that emerge here are directly connected to public policies on health-risk management (in the case of the pandemic), control of police activity (in the case of Black Lives Matter) and universal basic income policies (in the case of app workers).

### **THE SURVEILLANCE/SECURITY GAP: TECHNIQUE AS A TERRAIN OF STRUGGLE**

The definition of contemporary capitalism as “surveillance” begs the question of whether Michel Foucault was wrong to attribute this quality to the

disciplinary regime typical of industrial capitalism. The other way around, we think that Foucault's periodization – updated by Gilles Deleuze's "Postscript on the societies of control" – remains productive. Especially if it is taken more as a starting point (and support) than as a point of arrival. The relevance of the Foucauldian approach is proven by its ability to grasp the tensions that shape the new power regime and, more importantly, the precedence of the struggles that run through it.

The concept of surveillance refers to a concentrationary universe whose paradigm is the "prison-factory". It is no coincidence that the two delusional and speculative forms of disciplinary modernity – real socialism and national socialism – sought to affirm a model of coordination based on the Soviet forced labour camps and the Nazi concentration and extermination camps. The soviet *Gulag*<sup>3</sup>, as well as the motto *arbeit macht frei* ("labour sets you free") – still legible on the portico of the Auschwitz concentration camp – were the explicit and radical faces of a system of labour surveillance planned as a penal regime.

<sup>3</sup>Russian acronym for "General Coordination of Labour Camps".

In fact, when commenting on contemporary algorithmic governmentality, Yarden Katz (2020) matched our condition to that of a "general open-air carceral" regime. This is perhaps reminiscent of Michael Hardt (1997), who criticized the notion of "outside" to say that "life *in* prison only reveals life *as* a prison". Disciplinary apparatuses, however, control the bodies of each individual by inserting them into a mass serialization, and making use of punitive tools that explicitly restrict freedom. What is at stake today seems to be of a different magnitude.

As early as the second half of the 1970s, Foucault anticipated the neoliberal turn by researching the "Birth of Biopolitics" in the interplay between security, territory and population. It was clear that the shift from disciplinary to security technologies did not imply the disappearance of the preceding ones (such as archaic sovereignty, and industrial discipline). Nevertheless, this did not erase the fact that security technologies became prevalent regarding previous ones. In the definition of security technologies we find a mention of "data" *avant-la-lettre*. "Security," Foucault (2004, p. 18-19) claimed, "is based on a certain amount of material *data*". It exercises itself upon "a space full of phenomena and events" as the art of "minimizing negative elements and maximizing positive ones through the study and modeling of probabilities" (Foucault, 2004, p. 19).

We have already mentioned the role that data played in the algorithmically accelerated invention of an effective vaccine in the fight against coronavirus. However, as soon as the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that we were facing a pandemic, the initial debate on containment policies and management of the contagion curve – which took place between March and



May 2020 – spelled out how security technology was (and continues to be) the substrate of neoliberal reason: a substrate so powerful that the markets suffered an unexpected sideration (Boutang, 2020).

The debate in the context of the health emergency was articulated between modeling the likely effects of the speed at which the virus spreads and the imperatives of “flattening the curve” of contamination. It was a perfect example of the general definition of security proposed by Foucault: “Modes and technologies used to keep a certain type of phenomenon within limits that are socially and economically acceptable” (Foucault, 2004, p. 06).

The West never tried to eradicate contagion as in the Chinese policy of *zero covid*. The target was stopping its spread, keeping it below a certain rate, and avoiding saturation of the health system. At the heart of this strategy was upcoming data on the curve of new infections. Just as in the definition: organize the phenomenon “around an average that will be considered optimal for the functioning of a given society” (Foucault, 2004, p. 07). It is no coincidence that Foucault’s Heideggerian readers (Agamben, for instance) immediately aligned themselves with the negationism of the extreme right (such as Trump and Bolsonaro), protesting against the governmental measures to protect populations – up to the point of joining *noVax* demonstrations (Cocco, 2022). In paranoid readings, security and surveillance are equivalent.

However, this was far from what Foucault has told us. According to him, the gap was indeed more nuanced. In the pandemic, biopolitics appeared as a politics of life, whilst the population surged as a “medium” of natural and artificial existence, a “point of articulation between culture and nature that [is] the terrain for the exercise of security technologies” (Foucault, 2004, p. 24). Here we find *the gap between surveillance and security*: the former aims to discipline subjects so that they produce wealth; the latter aims to constitute the population in relation to a *milieu* of life, existence and labour. If discipline implies government, security is governmentality (Foucault, 2004, p. 24). In the “struggles against asphyxiation” (Corrêa, 2021) waged during the pandemic, this gap undoubtedly appeared, and displayed how technophobic readings could endorse a necropolitics of the new extreme right-wing.

Although the debate remains open, the issue of surveillance does not help to break the deadlock. These gap lines consistent with the social struggles need to be sought-out in another way. The concept of “security”, as Foucault problematized it from the point of view of probabilistic risk management technologies, is as much crossed by biopolitical vectors as it is by collations of controls. When this concept began to unfold, Foucault’s paranoid readings were opposed by those who wanted to nuance security technologies by using the

implicit difference between biopolitics and biopower. While biopolitics would imply a politics of life, of “making-live” as power, biopower would have been a technology of power over life, an almost totalitarian way of making-live. In our view, not only is it impossible to find this distinction in Foucault, but it is also useless. Foucault was interested in understanding how power circulates and, at the same time, how to avoid the effects of domination – how to strengthen power relations against states of domination.

What the pandemic made clear was something else. Since biopower made explicit its dimension of protecting life, the opposition driven by the new extreme right-wing appeared openly as a necropolitics. The politics of letting “the weak” die was not embedded in biopower, as Foucault thought in his 1976 course (Foucault, 1997) – and both Roberto Esposito (2004) and Achille Mbembe (2019), inspired by him, also emphasized. In the urgency of the pandemic, necropolitics appeared clearly separate from and inimical to biopower, fashioning a new trend of fascism.

Doing so, it exposed how surveillance in Western societies is limited, to the point where applications to track the spread of infection cannot be implemented, except on an optional basis. In China, on the other hand, surveillance was embedded in the *zero COVID* policy – and not through the pastoral route, but through the hunting model of the virus (Keck, 2014). Thus, recovering the Foucauldian notion of security in all its breadth allows us to think of surveillance not as a fundamental characteristic of contemporary capitalism, but as one of the contradictory gaps between its biopolitical dimension and its necropolitical manifestation – crystallized nowadays in the new global extreme right-wing.

This is a gap that can lead to other gaps. For instance, those that could stem from a better understanding of the valuation mechanism that involves data security and connection. McAfee and Brynjolfsson (2017) emphasized that this shift has become a pattern: “Uber, the world’s largest cab company, owns no cabs”; “Facebook, the world’s most popular media outlet, produces no content”; “Alibaba, the most valuable retailer, has no inventory, and Airbnb, the largest lodging company, owns no real estate” (McAfee & Brynjolfsson, 2017, p. 06). These asset-light companies very quickly reached hundreds of millions of users. In 2015, one million people a day used Uber in 300 cities in 60 different countries (McAfee and Brynjolfsson, 2017, p. 07).

Rather than surveillance capitalism, we are dealing with companies whose capital is connectionism; which engender processes of valorization by means of the incessant production of consistencies, the weaving of plots between machines, platforms and the multitude. Unlike most products and services,



whose value is independent of or diminished by the presence of other users, the value and attractiveness of networked platforms grows as more and more users adopt them – a process that economists call the positive network effect (Kissinger et al., 2021). This effect occurs in “information exchange activities in which the value grows along with the number of participants” (Kissinger et al., 2021, p. 102).

It is the very dynamics of the valorization of network platforms that leads some of them to retain hundreds of millions, and even billions, of users, while others desert and die. In other words, “network platforms are inherently large-scale phenomena” (Kissinger et al., 2021, p. 100). Thus, the antagonistic tension that drives the struggles may not be in surveillance, but could be in the dynamics of value creation that causes the AI used by network platforms to produce an “intersection between humans and Artificial Intelligence on a scale that suggests an event of civilizational significance” (Kissinger et al., 2021, p. 95).

The pandemic has been a theater of dynamic struggles that perhaps indicate gaps in the surveillance/security riddle. Not counting the mobilizations within the health system in an effort to jointly fight the virus and denialism, we can pinpoint two lines of mobilization, among many: the one against racism in the United States, and that of app delivery labourers. Each of these struggles crosses and is crossed by algorithmic acceleration.

On May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020, George Floyd, a black North American former security guard, was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis. Hours later, protests began on the ground, and quickly proliferated into a large national movement that lasted months and played an important role in Donald Trump’s electoral defeat (Tensley, 2020).

The fundamental mechanism of the mobilization was the dissemination of videos recorded by passers-by who witnessed the scene of Floyd’s police chokehold. It wasn’t the first time that the visibility of racist police violence had acted as a trigger for revolt. We only have to remember the extremely violent six-day riots that shook Los Angeles in 1992, shortly after a jury acquitted four police officers accused of beating Rodney King, a black driver.

The two episodes have a lot in common: the racism of sections of the police in certain US cities and the violent uprising that immediately took over the streets. But there are big differences that show how technique can work as a terrain of struggle. The trigger in Los Angeles was the fortuitous presence of someone who, with a camera, recorded a videotape that was later broadcast by television networks. The Minneapolis murder, on the other hand, was recorded on the smartphones of several passers-by. At first, the images

went viral on social media. They were only broadcast on television after the uprising had taken hold of every city in the United States. Throughout the months of protests, the use of social networks to call for demonstrations, and smartphones to record the mobilizations and monitor the abuses of repression (e.g. in front of the White House, with Donald Trump himself present), never stopped.

This trend was displayed in other episodes of racist violence committed by the police, such as the chokehold murder of Eric Garner in 2014 in New York, from which comes the *slogan* “I can’t breathe” that would be repeated six years later by George Floyd. In 2014, an uprising followed the murder of Michael Brown by a police officer in Ferguson. In 2015, it was the murder of Freddie Gray, who died in a Baltimore police car. The Black Lives Matter movement has been growing since 2013 in the mobilizations that followed each of these cases. In all of them, communication via social networks, videos recorded on smartphones, were the triggers and means of proliferation of mobilizations, revolts and processes of indignation. That’s why David Dufresne (Le Monde, 2020a) goes so far as to say that the “camera is the weapon of the unarmed”.

This shows that surveillance has at least two dimensions, one vertical and one horizontal. At the beginning of the 2000s, engineer Steve Mann – considered one of the fathers of wearable devices – coined a neologism by means of an aversion. Alongside *surveillance*, he made *sousveillance* thinkable: i.e., to the surveillance “from above”, thought up by Bentham and problematized by Foucault, he contrasted surveillance “from below”, made possible by the ubiquity of portable or wearable tech devices. This term was the subject of debate in France in relation to a security law aimed at limiting the dissemination of images produced of police actions (Le Monde, 2020b). The same debate recently took place in São Paulo, where the far-right State governor promised to eliminate body cameras for military police (Poder 360, 2022). Despite this, there is constant talk of *surveillance* and very little of *sousveillance* – which implies a diffuse and ubiquitous dynamic.

Philosopher Jean-Gabriel Ganascia (2010) ponders that the binary opposition doesn’t work because the two situations mix in the reality of networks and platforms. It is this mixture that we must investigate. In this respect, Bernard Harcourt (2020) proposes the notion of a “society of exposure” in which the desire to expose oneself and publish is in the intermediate zone between *surveillance* and *sousveillance* – and seems to touch on the concept of security proposed by Foucault, or that of control, by Deleuze.

At the same time as the pandemic was the theater of a major slowdown, it was also the stage for an algorithmic “acceleration of acceleration” that led to a



vast process of “digital literacy” of entire sectors of the population, who began to intensively use all kinds of online services. The number of app delivery workers increased at the same rate, and we soon saw significant mobilizations of these workers in several countries.

Even before these events, a “digital operaism” was claimed to appear as a mass composition of digital workers (app workers) to which the Trontian method of the technical and political composition of the “class” could be applied – with slight adaptations. When these struggles emerged, these authors thought that they would pave the way for a “digital operaism” that would make it possible to avoid the “risk of falling into the post-operaist trap of looking for the new social subject anywhere but in the workplace” (Englert & Woodcock, 2020, p. 50).

The struggle of delivery workers would allow us to “move away from a focus on technology or users and instead privilege workers’ self-activity” (Englert; Woodcock, 2020). The search for the “working class” as the *conditio sine qua non* of struggles implies that “algorithmic surveillance and control are key to understanding the changing composition of work on platforms” (Woodstock, 2020). Not by chance, literature registers a diffuse and proliferating approach: the image of an algorithmic panopticon.

However, when we look at the forms of struggle carried out by delivery workers, we find signs of a dynamic that does not fit in with any revival of the “old” working class. Firstly, the mobilizations are metropolitan and bear urban traits; secondly, the success of the strikes is based on the sympathy and support of important sectors of users. The struggles in the realm of services always involve a composite horizon made up, on the one hand, of *the metropolitan-making* (Szaniecki & Cocco, 2021) and, on the other, of mobilizations to co-produce the services and the struggles themselves. The success of the mobilizations relies on the metropolitan and transversal dimension of the struggles, just as the movements against racism are intersectional.

As well as the struggles against racism, delivery workers’ mobilization in not taking place in parallel with surveillance, but in the reverse engineering of *sousveillance*. Two additional elements point to the challenges within this new condition: in terms of income and the fight against precariousness, the struggle of app workers is traversed more by income policies than by the establishment of a formal wage relationship. In Brazil, these struggles have been particularly affected by Emergency Aid Salary and, more generally, by the issue of Basic Income. In other words, what is at stake is no longer guaranteed or formal work, but access to income streams – made possible by “free” activities, without direct “patronage”, and at the same time algorithmic and “platformed”.

This trend is even stronger in the recent demonstration by immigrant delivery workers in Portugal – most of them Brazilians. Although this episode does not carry any statistical weight, it is an indicator of how “self-activity” or “self-entrepreneurship” needs to be thought of from the point of view of the production of subjectivity: “Representing around 90% of delivery workers for the main digital platforms in Portugal, Brazilian *motoboys* have united to fight against the government’s plan to regularize the sector” (Jornal O Globo, 2022). Still in the Portuguese context, this tendency is reinforced by a survey carried out by the University Institute of Lisbon (Lourenço, 2022), according to which 87% of *motoboys* operating on digital platforms in Portugal state their will to remain freelancers.

Could it be that these tendencies are just the effects of the ideological conditioning promoted by the “neoliberal apology” for self-entrepreneurship? Are they perversions of the desire of the deproletarianized masses who are just waiting to be reproletarianized in the terms of the old wage-earning subordination?

What can we say, then, about the Great Resignation (Big Quit) (Forbes, 2021) and the worldwide quiet quitting initiatives (Johns Hopkins, 2022) that seem to extend the two previous lines of tendency: on the one hand, the economic crisis linked to the post-pandemic scenario (wage stagnation, the rise of the cost of living, limited opportunities for professional growth, global inflationary scenario, etc.); on the other hand, they extend the struggles for freedom of activity according to a trend that breaks with the model of the salaried binding?

Perhaps the challenge lies in understanding how, in the new working conditions that take place outside the wage relationship, struggles for freedom (Boutang, 2022) regain terrain; in other words, struggles against the forms of slavery that remain in it, but which are also renewed in it and find new ground and unexpected horizons.

## FINAL REMARKS

Geert Lovink (2019) states that we do not need to describe algorithmic assemblages as monumental technical effects of the transformations of platform economies; we lack to explain, however, how the social enters these assemblages – beyond the dystopia of cyber hives, democratic fatalism and political immobilism. The social functions politically in the new socio-technical assemblages, *i.e.* in algorithmic struggles, as “[a type of] conscious infrastructural activism of multiple interconnected layers” (Lovink, 2019, p. 74).



Neither the political solutions proposed by the surveillance capitalism approach, nor the reiteration that its theorists believe they can find in a social field traversed by networks, algorithms and platforms, can take us beyond the critical and cognitive effect inherent in this critique.

Although it describes and denounces the harmful effects of the general digitalization of life, the critique elaborated by surveillance capitalism can no longer estimate the “politics of possibles” involved in an immediately algorithmic culture (Finn, 2017). It does nothing more than endlessly map a diagram of power that presents itself as given and politically inescapable.

This is also why the critical consciousness it develops cultivates the oblivion that denunciation is nothing more than a diagnostic tool for the antagonisms within the progress of modern technique and reason. As soon as denunciation becomes an end in itself, the exercise of reason that it contains ends up making us prey to an insoluble impasse. And yet this impasse is challenged daily by the proliferation of struggles, in the living gaps that constitute the terrain of technique and algorithmic acceleration.

The real challenge lies in finding forms of convergence and political recomposition of these fragmented struggles that make the algorithmic realm their constitutive terrain. The autonomy of resistance must meet the strength of automata, and class intelligence must develop its capacity – including the artificial one – to use algorithms (of the common) against algorithms (of expropriation).■

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# Global South: ¿una agenda política para pensar la comunicación?

## *Global South: a political agenda to understand communication?*

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### RESUMEN

El concepto Sur global, en los últimos años, se hizo visible en publicaciones académicas de comunicación, en especial, en el contexto del norte global. A partir de esta premisa, este artículo propone, por un lado, presentar las principales líneas empleadas bajo el concepto *global south* y, por otro, discutir su apropiación en el campo de la comunicación, poniendo en perspectiva dicho empleo a la luz de las corrientes y tradiciones de la comunicología iberoamericana. Se discute en qué medida *global south* representa una agenda política capaz de articular un diálogo entre la producción comunicacional iberoamericana ante las agendas – epistémicas y metodológicas – del norte global, sus limitaciones y potencialidades desde la experiencia de un investigador sometido a ambas lógicas.

**Palabras clave:** Sur global, epistemología del sur, comunicación, escuela latinoamericana, decolonialidad

### ABSTRACT

In recent years, the idea of the Global South has become more visible in many media and communication publications, especially in the context of the Global North. Based on this premise, this study proposes to describe the main lines employed under the idea of the Global South and therefore discuss its appropriation by the field of communication in the light of Ibero-American communicology. Finally, it is stressed the extent to which the Global South represents a political agenda able to articulate dialogues between the Ibero-American epistemic and methodological traditions of communicational production and the agenda of the global north, its limitations, and potentialities from the experience of a researcher subjected to both logics.

**Keywords:** Global South, epistemology of south, communication, Latin-American school, decolonial

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Ciertas lecturas son capaces de transformar profundamente el espíritu y la conducta académica de un investigador. He leído a bell hooks (2019), por primera vez, a los cuarenta años, más de diez después de haber presentado mi tesis doctoral. Seguramente, la simple mención a un hecho personal en esta introducción resultará incómodo para algunos lectores. La reflexión autobiográfica aquí, con todo, tiene un doble objetivo. Por un lado, pretende situar el contexto de producción discursivo del autor – central para cualquier interpretación, según Maingueneau (2018) –, y romper con el corsé de la (supuesta) objetividad académica, generalizada desde el norte global como la única manera de producción de conocimientos científicos válidos. Así, se trata de una decisión política de la que asumo las consecuencias. El famoso personaje “revisor 2” que sobrevuela el imaginario de muchos académicos, seguramente criticará el tono ensayístico de ésta introducción. Una manera de disminuir cualquier trabajo que no se encaja en los moldes exportados desde el norte y aplicados con gusto en los *templates* diseñados para eventos académicos, revistas y demás producciones. Por otro lado, la reflexión autobiográfica tiene también por objetivo reseñar algunas de las limitaciones del presente trabajo, dejando explícitos ciertos vicios o preferencias del autor forjados a lo largo de su trayectoria.

Con relación a este último aspecto, este artículo surge de una incomodidad. Aunque comparto parcialmente la crítica de Bourdieu (2008) de que ninguna historia de vida es una sucesión de eventos lineales y aleatorios, tiendo a acercarme más a los postulados de autores del llamado Sur global que entendieron la posibilidad de forjar construcciones teóricas a partir de las historias de vida. En ese sentido, tanto la identidad como la vida de un sujeto, aunque ilusorias por su dimensión narrativa, no deberían estar restringidas al universo del sentido común; son instrumentos de producción de conocimientos. En efecto, Maria da Gloria Oliveira (2017), importante historiadora latinoamericana, cuestiona las interdicciones bourdieusianas a la ilusión biográfica. Defiende que la capacidad narrativa es parte de las huellas que construyen nuestra identidad y que ello puede (o no) ser un instrumento para la construcción de saberes, entre ellos, el científico.

En este sentido, al realizar un autoanálisis de mi biografía, como investigador, observo que tengo una trayectoria migrante entre escuelas y tradiciones. Más allá de la poca importancia de mi biografía, en los últimos años, de manera más acentuada, algunos compañeros pasaron a etiquetarme como un investigador del Sur global. Curiosamente, otros, como del norte global. De mi desubicación académica surgió la motivación para elaborar el presente artículo, una búsqueda por entender qué es el Sur global, en general, y en la comunicación, en particular,

dentro y fuera de mí. Aunque, como bien recuerda hooks (2019), hay que tener presente que “la posesión de un término no hace que el proceso o la práctica surjan; al mismo tiempo se puede estar teorizando sin nunca saber-poseer el término” (p. 125). Ella lo afirmaba para, por ejemplo, asumir que se podía ser feminista (y producir académicamente desde este punto de vista) sin nunca haber empleado la palabra feminismo. Ciertamente, no pasaré a ser un investigador del Sur global o del norte a partir del empleo de uno u otro término. Cuestionarlo, no obstante, es parte fundamental de mi práctica.

De tal suerte este texto tiene por objetivo discutir las líneas epistémicas empleadas bajo el paraguas del concepto Sur global, en general, y en el campo de la comunicación, en particular, para, a partir de ello, poner en perspectiva dicho empleo a la luz de las corrientes y tradiciones de la comunicología iberoamericana. Así, está articulado en dos partes. En un primer momento, realizaremos una breve reconstrucción del origen y desarrollo del término Sur global y de los debates que destacan sus aspectos más positivos o restrictivos para las ciencias sociales en la actualidad. Es interesante destacar, aunque no sea propiamente el centro de nuestro trabajo, que el desarrollo de dicho término dentro de un “capitalismo académico” (Brunner et al., 2019) tiene características muy marcantes y ayuda a identificar cómo ello favorece a una cierta institucionalización del Sur global como una categoría o etiqueta en el mercado global de las ideas académicas. En otras palabras, una especie de *branding*.

En un segundo momento, identificamos algunos de los trabajos forjados en el campo de la comunicación bajo el paraguas del término Sur global y cómo éstos discuten y se constituyen desde términos como la decolonialidad, la des-occidentalización y la epistemología del sur. Ciertamente, esta segunda parte está bastante limitada por la capacidad lectora del autor y la propia imposibilidad ontológica de acaparar la amplitud de la producción académica. Pese a ello, intento mantener el debate acerca de la constitución (o no) de un espacio de poder para las ideas forjadas desde otras epistemologías, en concreto, a partir del término Sur global para, aunque de manera bastante abreviada, poner ello en perspectiva con el pensamiento comunicacional latinoamericano. Esta última elección se basa mucho más en la geografía de mis saberes que en criterios objetivos. Así, no tiene una ambición cuantitativa, sino que más bien cualitativa. Es, sin lugar a dudas, una limitación del presente trabajo.

Desde una perspectiva metodológica, seguimos a la propuesta de hooks (2019), según la cual el estudio de un elemento teórico – el concepto de Sur global, en este caso – se da a partir de la práctica del autor en el campo. Su potencial autorreflexivo y crítico es, a la vez, su limitación y principal hándicap.



### ALGUNAS CONTRADICCIONES DE UN TÉRMINO EN DISPUTA

El término Sur global, pese a su imprecisión (Dirlik, 2007), históricamente remonta a las tradiciones de los estudios postcoloniales que buscaban reordenar los términos empleados en las décadas de 1970 y 1980 para designar países como subdesarrollados o del tercer mundo (Sajed, 2020). En este sentido, tiene un cariz geopolítico muy claro. Sin embargo, como bien expone Mahler (2018), se puede considerar la existencia de tres líneas de desarrollo epistémicas acerca del mismo. No se trata de perspectivas fijas o contradictorias si no de perspectivas que dialogan entre sí. La referida autora no nombra esas tres líneas, aunque las describe. Los títulos presentados en la Figura 1 (abajo) son, en efecto, consecuencia de mi lectura del texto de Anne Mahler. Así, pues, nombro a las tres líneas como económica, geográfica y política.

La primera línea – la económica – tiene su origen dentro de organizaciones no gubernamentales, del Movimiento de los No Alineados, de instituciones como el Banco Mundial, entre otras, que empezaron a emplear el término “Sur global” para aludir a los Estados-Nación no desarrollados.

Aquí cabe la crítica a dicha expresión oriunda del discurso de toma de posesión, en 1949, del presidente de los EE.UU. Harry Truman, para quien el orden mundial posterior a la Segunda Guerra Mundial se basaba en la existencia de países desarrollados y países subdesarrollados. Una visión que, más allá de los prejuicios, se basa en una concepción lineal del progreso económico dentro del modo de producción capitalista, sobrevalorando lo económico por encima de otros elementos culturales o sociales.

Asimismo, en el contexto de la Guerra Fría, el posterior Movimiento de los Países No Alineados conformó un grupo de países mayoritariamente ubicados en el sur geográfico del globo (tanto de miembros como de los que se consideraban observadores). En común a todos esos países, desde una perspectiva económica, existía (y aún existe, en muchos casos) la dependencia en larga medida de las instituciones financieras internacionales, como el Fondo Monetario Internacional (FMI) o de cooperación internacional (Banco Mundial, Unicef, ONU, entre otras).

A todo ello debemos añadir la idea de Tercer Mundo, un concepto forjado para designar los países en desarrollo económico o no plenamente industrializados, en contraposición con los del Primer Mundo (países capitalistas desarrollados) y Segundo Mundo (bloque comunista). En este sentido, como ya fue mencionado anteriormente, los cambios estructurales en el orden económico y geopolítico posteriores al derrocamiento del régimen socialista soviético conllevaron un reemplazo del término Tercer Mundo por el de Sur global. En líneas generales, los efectos del surgimiento del nuevo orden mundial post-1989, con el fin del bloque comunista, la consolidación del neoliberalismo como ideología

mayoritaria y la expansión de la globalización se constituyeron como raíces para la transmutación paulatina del término Tercer Mundo en Sur global.

En este sentido, según explica Sajed (2020), no se puede entender la idea de SSur global desconectada del concepto Tercer Mundo. En efecto, para el referido autor, el legado de la idea de Tercer Mundo y sus marcos históricos son capitales para entender qué subyace en el concepto de Sur global.

Pese a la importancia de lo económico, la propia historia nos invita a pensar que este término también alude a los procesos y disputas des-territorializados, entre fuerzas hegemónicas y pueblos, países o académicos subyugados. En este sentido, Mahler (2018) presenta una segunda línea de desarrollo del concepto de Sur global, en la cual el término es empleado para designar personas, grupos o regiones impactadas negativamente por la globalización. En este sentido, defienden que hay una existencia del sur en el norte y del norte en el sur. Para un hispano-brasileño, como el autor de este trabajo, no es difícil encontrar símiles. En una misma calle de la ciudad de São Paulo es posible encontrar el más elaborado menú gastronómico con influencias globales en un espacio arquitectónico diseñado a partir de elementos sostenibles y la hambruna y exclusión social más deshumanizadora. Asimismo, ciudades de países del norte global, como Filadelfia, en los EE.UU., por ejemplo, tienen su particular sur y norte dentro de sí misma. Durante la pandemia del Covid-19, como señaló el *Wall Street Journal* (09/02/2021), a causa de las restricciones sanitarias, mientras los alumnos de los barrios más ricos y del centro de la ciudad migraron sin dificultad de la enseñanza presencial para la virtual, los alumnos de escuelas públicas y con menos recursos económicos no pudieron realizar el mismo camino una vez que, en sus casas, muchas veces el único ordenador disponible estaba destinado al uso de uno de los progenitores para trabajar. Cabe aquí matizar que el norte o sur de una visión geopolítica no necesariamente coinciden con el norte o el sur geográficos. Lo mismo con la idea de centro-periferia. Como bien nos alerta el geógrafo Milton Santos (2000), el centro puede estar en la periferia geográfica o al revés, lo que depende no sólo del plano físico sino, además, de los elementos tecnológicos y de los poderes económicos y políticos. Según este autor, la globalización cambia el concepto de espacio.

Otros ejemplos pueden ser mencionados como paradigmáticos para entender que la des-territorialización del Norte-Sur global permite ahondar en la complejidad de las desigualdades. Es posible estar en el norte global geográfico viviendo en condiciones de exclusión política y de dependencia económica característicos de algún territorio del Sur global, o al revés. De ahí que, Milton Santos (2000) antevió el potencial de las tecnologías de la comunicación para transformar los espacios y generar desigualdades sin necesariamente pensar los



ejes geográficos tradicionales. Todo ello, según Ballestrin (2020), permite alejarse de una visión binaria que simplifica, reduce y limita la idea de Sur global a un esencialismo. En efecto, se trata de un término que cuestiona, desde la complejidad, “la (re) producción del poder (neo)colonial y (neo) imperial, especialmente, en el presente contexto de incremento de las desigualdades globales” (p. 1).

Así, la segunda perspectiva – que denominamos geográfica –, parte de la desterritorialización del poder para articular espacios, voces e ideas subsumidas por las externalidades del capitalismo. La geografía, aquí, adquiere una semblanza más de economía política que de pura cartografía o territorialidad austral. Es importante, en este segundo núcleo de desarrollo epistémico del término Sur global, ubicar el capitalismo como agente catalizador de unas geografías de la exclusión, a partir de las cuales el Sur global emerge como contrapunto. Irrumpe como un mecanismo de visibilidad desde las márgenes o de las periferias no necesariamente binarias.

Una tercera visión, a la cual denominamos política, a partir de la propuesta de Anne (Mahler, 2018), se apropia de parte de los elementos descritos en las dos anteriores líneas. Sin embargo, a lo largo de las últimas casi cuatro décadas, esta perspectiva ha desarrollado el concepto de Sur global como un imaginario de resistencias de un sujeto político transnacional. El Sur global es entendido como una respuesta política postcolonial (Prashad, 2012).

En efecto, la obra de Vijay Prashad es un ejemplo en el cual se reconstruye la historia de los países del Sur global a partir de sus experiencias coloniales para forjar un espacio de cooperación sur-sur, en especial, a partir de la acción de estos países en instituciones internacionales en temas de paz, justicia y cooperación. En *The poorer nations*, el aludido autor recupera elementos de sus anteriores trabajos acerca de la constitución del Tercer Mundo y del Movimiento de los Países No Alineados. Así como Prashad, autores como Bhabha (2004) también contribuyen para esta tercera perspectiva teórica sobre el Sur global. Este último desarrolla una potente teoría postcolonial a partir del postulado de la ambivalencia y de la hibridación cultural, entre otros instrumentos, como capaces de generar movimientos de cambio políticos y prácticos a partir de elementos comunes a las personas.

Con ello, tanto Homi Bhabha como Prashad emplean el término Sur global para pensar elementos de agencia subalterna relacionados con estructuras de poder del capitalismo global y de las élites dominantes en contextos transnacionales. A continuación, sintetizamos las tres líneas de desarrollo epistémico del Sur global según nuestra lectura de la propuesta de Mahler (2018).

**Figura 1**

*El concepto “Sur global” y sus principales líneas de desarrollo*

|            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Económica  | Estados-naciones / desigualdades económicas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Visión de la cooperación económica del Banco Mundial</li> <li>◦ ONGs y agencias de cooperación económica</li> <li>◦ Movimiento de Los No Alineados</li> </ul>                             |
| Geográfica | Desterritorialidad en las externalidades del Capitalismo <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Visibilidad de los pueblos subyugados</li> <li>◦ Las existencias de las características económicas del sur en el norte y del norte en el sur</li> </ul>                      |
| Política   | Resistencias de los sujetos políticos transnacionales <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Globalización del capitalismo</li> <li>◦ Sur global como respuesta política poscolonial</li> <li>◦ Solidaridad Sur-Sur como articulación multipolar del poder en red</li> </ul> |

*Nota.* Elaboración propia a partir de Mahler (2018).

Es precisamente a partir del desarrollo de la denominada tercera línea que Sinah Theres Kloß (2017) destaca el potencial heurístico subversivo del término Sur global, es decir, de un concepto creado para tensionar el pensamiento geopolítico que impregna diversas áreas del saber y del poder. En efecto, Ballestrin (2020) defiende el Sur global como “un proyecto político permanentemente disputado por fuerzas progresivas o regresivas en un contexto multipolar”.

No obstante, Clarke (2018) apunta que, en ciertas circunstancias, en los últimos años, se pasó a utilizar *Global south* como un atajo para decir cualquier cosa o marcar una posición intelectual. A ello se suma una interesante – aunque limitada – investigación realizada por Pagel et al. (2014) acerca del empleo del término Sur global en los trabajos de ciencias sociales y humanidades. Según éstos, hasta 1996, la mención al mismo en revistas científicas internacionales era apenas residual. En 2004, la situación no era muy diferente, cuando apenas 19 publicaciones emplearon el término. No obstante, en 2013, esta cifra había saltado para más de 240 menciones. Cabe aclarar que el estudio bibliométrico se limitó a las revistas indexadas en la base de datos Scopus y con el tesoro *Global south*, en inglés. Irónicamente, excluyendo las revistas y demás publicaciones del Sur global que, en su amplia mayoría, no están incluidas en Scopus, ni utilizan el inglés como lengua vehicular. Para más inri, el mencionado estudio fue conducido en Alemania, por investigadores alemanes y descontextualizado del debate epistémico descrito anteriormente. Lo cuantitativo, con ello, no capta los matices de un concepto que es teórico, pero también político. Aunque también se puede leer tal crítica como política, como una



reacción del orden – del norte, de los métodos más positivistas y de una visión de ciencia unitaria – al des-orden propuesto bajo el paraguas del Sur global.

Toshkov (2018), a su vez, reafirma la crítica al empleo del término Sur global. También a partir de estudio cuantitativo, revisa a partir de N-gram la evolución del término *Global south* en libros (Google Books) y revistas indexadas. En líneas generales, llega a conclusiones similares a las de (Pagel et al., 2014). Ambos estudios, a mi juicio, ponen de manifiesto una crítica importante. Desde una perspectiva cuantitativa, defienden que el término Sur global pasó a ser una tendencia o moda, más allá de otros elementos. Aunque personalmente pueda discrepar de ello, los autores presentan datos y una crítica importante para el debate, que permiten “im-pensar” el quehacer de las ciencias sociales, tal y como sostiene Wallerstein (2006), al confrontar un término presente en la agenda actual a partir de paradigmas típicos del siglo XIX. Precisamente por ello, dichas críticas, aunque elaboradas con toda la sofisticación computacional y estadística, no entienden ninguno de los elementos epistémicos descritos con anterioridad. Ignoran la dimensión política, económica y geopolítica del término Sur global. Reproducen, en cierta medida, los marcos positivistas que dividen y legitiman el conocimiento científico entre dos partes: lo falsable y lo no-falsable, como pontificó Popper (1988) en su tiempo.

En la línea crítica al término Sur global, no obstante, diversos autores como Palomino (2019), entre otros, entran en el fondo de la discusión desde una perspectiva política, geográfica y económica. En concreto, Pablo Palomino señala las desventajas del empleo del término *Global south* para los llamados “Latin American Studies”. Refuerza la imprecisión del término que, a su juicio, se constituye más por su empleo que por su ontología. Remarca las consecuencias ideológicas y recupera el análisis de Gramsci, en “La cuestión del sur” – en la cual el crítico italiano diserta acerca de la disputa entre el norte y el sur de Italia para la formación de una nación; una disputa básicamente entre una región industrializada y otra agrícola. A partir de ello y del concepto de Tercer Mundo, Palomino analiza las rupturas y continuidades subyacentes en el concepto Sur global. Concluye que, al adoptar Sur global en vez de estudios latinoamericanos, se pierde gran parte del potencial heurístico y todo el constructo intelectual forjado en este espacio del mundo bajo la dominación del imperialismo capitalista (cultural, económico y político) del norte.

Conocidas tanto las principales líneas de desarrollo epistémico como algunos de los ejes de las críticas al término Sur global, todo ello nos invita, a partir de lo trabajado hasta aquí, a mirar con más detenimiento el estatuto del término Sur global en los estudios de comunicación, lo que haré a partir una mirada iberoamericana y limitada a mi trayectoria.

## LA INSTITUCIONALIZACIÓN Y EMPLEO DEL TÉRMINO *GLOBAL SOUTH* EN LOS ESTUDIOS DE COMUNICACIÓN

En la última década, mayormente en su versión en inglés, el concepto Sur global ha ganado espacios institucionales (como la creación de diversos centros o redes de investigación, tales como el *Global South Studies Center* (GSSC), en la Universidad de Colonia, Alemania, el *Consortium for the Global South*, impulsado por la Universidad de Cambridge, Reino Unido, entre otros). Autores con amplia presencia en el debate sobre comunicación global, como Marwan Kraidy, por ejemplo, coautor con Miller (2016) del libro *Global Media Studies*, ha creado el *Institute for Advanced Study in the Global South*, en la sucursal de la Northwestern University, en el emirato de Qatar. Curiosamente, salvo pocas excepciones, muchos de estos espacios se han creado en universidades del norte global (geopolítico), aunque, en gran medida, son liderados o albergan investigadores procedentes de países del Sur global.

A su vez, muchas publicaciones académicas también abrieron espacio tanto para la creación de revistas específicas, como el *Journal of Global South Studies*, editado por la Universidad de Florida, Estados Unidos, como también para la inclusión del pensamiento del Sur global en las agendas de las principales publicaciones científicas que impulsaron sendos monográficos dedicados al pensamiento del Sur global. Aquí, con todo, cabe un matiz: más que nada, muchas de las publicaciones con altos índices de impacto (Scopus o Web of Sciences) editaron monográficos específicos.

Específicamente, en el campo de la comunicación, en 2020, por ejemplo, los *Annals of the International Communication Association* (ICA) fueron dedicados al esfuerzo de “descolonizar los estudios de comunicación”, abriendo espacios para investigaciones desde el Sur global. Otra publicación considerada como hegemónica en el campo de la comunicación, *Communication Theory*, también en 2020, publicó un número especial acerca de la teorización de la comunicación desde el Sur global. También cabe destacar el monográfico del *Journal of Communication*, en 2021, acerca de la producción abierta de conocimientos en comunicación. En esta ocasión, bajo el paraguas del tema *Open Communication Research*, no solamente artículos acerca del Sur global, pero desde miradas plurales, contribuyeron con visiones de-colonizadoras del pensamiento comunicacional hegemónico. En común a todas esas publicaciones, está el loable esfuerzo de revistas indexadas de impacto (primer cuartil en Web of Science) para abrir espacios a otras miradas, otras visiones procedentes de otras latitudes geográficas, políticas e intelectuales.

Ciertamente, la tradición de los Estudios Culturales ha sembrado un terreno fértil para la acogida del término Sur global dentro del campo de la comunicación. El caleidoscopio de teorías y métodos desarrollados desde los *cultural*



*studies* en el norte global, así como su comprometimiento social y político, han generado un importante legado, destacado por (Hall, 1996) como una de las grandes contribuciones de este paradigma. Desde mi punto de vista creo que aquí hay que circunscribir dicha herencia como uno de los sustratos fundamentales para el desarrollo contemporáneo del pensamiento del Sur global en la agenda comunicológica del norte.

Sin embargo, así como con los estudios culturales, en el caso del *Global south* se ha generado una “ventriloquia”, un término empleado por Stuart Hall para criticar aquellos investigadores que repiten conceptos sin entenderlos o se afilian a una corriente – en la crítica de Hall, los Estudios Culturales; en la mía, el Sur global - sin una clara coherencia teórica o comprometimiento político. Por ello, se podría asumir un paralelismo con el avance reciente del empleo del Sur global. Pese a ello, siguiendo aún a Hall (1996) y el paralelismo con los estudios culturales, en torno al término Sur global se está generando un conjunto de conocimientos coyunturales, ubicados y aplicados desde ciertas circunstancias históricas o políticas capaces de poner de manifiesto en los espacios académicos del norte global una agenda – temática, metodológica y de referencias – que desde hace más de 70 años se desarrolla bajo la idea de “escuela latinoamericana de comunicación”(León Duarte, 2007).

En efecto, es interesante notar como la idea del Sur global ha ganado terreno en el campo de la comunicación, siguiendo la línea de los estudios postcoloniales impulsados desde los centros del “norte global”. Las brechas irradiadas desde estos espacios institucionales han ayudado el desarrollo de un término que busca establecer una dimensión multipolar, también en la producción de conocimientos científicos.

En esta línea, es interesante destacar el análisis de Albuquerque & Oliveira, (2021). Dichos autores defienden la tesis de que en los años 90 del pasado siglo, el pensamiento comunicacional latinoamericano fue capaz de desarrollar un proceso entrópico, de desarrollo y preservación de su vitalidad ante el avance del neoliberalismo y del capitalismo académico. Con ello, en un contexto histórico considerablemente desfavorable, la escuela latinoamericana pudo preservarse y crear un circuito de intercambio académico extremadamente vigoroso, pese a las dudas y reticencias de muchos pares.

Como un lector de autores iberoamericanos, no es baladí destacar que, en la actualidad, muchas publicaciones internacionales en el campo de la comunicación empiezan a dejar de ver autores como Paulo Freire o Jesús Martín-Barbero desde un exotismo geográfico para ubicarlos como revolucionarios, por el valor universal de su pensamiento. Contribuciones como las de Pleyers & Suzina (2016) o Suzina & Tufte (2020), entre otras, ponen de manifiesto la actualidad de una epistemología producida desde el Sur global que apuesta por la comunicación

como un instrumento de cambio social, destacando la ontología propuesta por Paulo Freire y sus reverberaciones en los terrenos del arte, a partir de Augusto Boal o de la visión comunicacional erigida por Juan Diaz Bordenave.

No obstante, fuera de los monográficos especiales dedicados al Sur global, las dinámicas editoriales de las principales revistas siguen el curso excluyente para los autores que no siguen el corsé de teorías y métodos del norte global. Sin ninguna pretensión bibliométrica, una mirada como lector, en las ediciones subsecuentes de las mencionadas revistas no deja duda. Pasadas las ediciones especiales, son escasos los artículos con una visión decolonial o desde ejes epistemológicos del sur. Pasan el “corte abisal”, parafraseando a Boaventura Sousa Santos, aquellos trabajos desde el Sur global cuando son elaborados bajo el *script* del norte global, sea en relación con la estructura textual, sea con relación a métodos (mayoritariamente cuantitativos) o autores citados.

Así las cosas, la crítica de Semujju (2020) parece no haber sido escuchada. En uno de los monográficos especiales dedicados al Sur global – en concreto, el de la *Communication Theory* –, el referido autor critica la pretensión universal y la concesión implícita de editores para teorías o conclusiones forjadas por autores o en los contextos de producción científica del norte global. Ahora bien, una teoría de la comunicación procedente de Uganda (ejemplo del autor) tendría que, para ser aceptada, pasar primero por todos los filtros y réplicas en otros espacios del norte antes de asumir la condición de teoría.

En síntesis, la misma teoría de la dependencia económica de los años 60 y 70 del pasado siglo, que explicaba la división internacional del trabajo y del comercio como fuente de una geo-estructura del poder entre el norte y el sur, parece aún tener cierto vigor en algunos ámbitos científicos, en concreto, en una parcela importante de las revistas dedicadas a la investigación en comunicación.

En este contexto ambivalente, entre la oportunidad de visibilidad y la reducción alegórica, carnavalesca, autores como Suzina & Sartoretto (2021) revelan sus sentimientos ambiguos. Como autoras latinoamericanas de comunicación, revelan que se descubrieron como tales en el norte global. No sin sobresaltos, aún se sienten incómodas entre dos aguas que no deberían ser vistas como opuestas, pese a sus constituciones históricas diferentes.

Frente a ello, buscamos contrastar dichas propuestas con las diversas tradiciones epistémicas gestadas por la escuela latinoamericana de comunicación (León Duarte, 2007) bajo la llamada “epistemología del sur” (Herrera Huérfano et al., 2016; Meneses & Bidaseca, 2018; de Sousa Santos, 2018), en un esfuerzo para poner en perspectiva las potencialidades del *Global south* y sus omisiones ante el andamiaje construido por el pensamiento comunicacional latinoamericano.



Para los que venimos del Sur global, es indudable la contribución de autores como Jesús Martín Barbero, Ciro Marcondes Filho o Mario Kaplún, Vera França, Immacolata Lopes, Lucia Santaella, entre otros. En común, a todos ellos y ellas, la aportación a las ciencias de la comunicación desde una perspectiva del sur no esencialista, es decir, en diálogo con autores y tradiciones, con independencia de que sean del norte global o del sur. En tiempos de polarización – no sólo política, sino que también teórica – y de la llegada de la cultura de la cancelación a la academia, dichos autores son ejemplos de cómo el pensamiento comunicacional latinoamericano se construye en un diálogo franco, sin una visión de superioridad/inferioridad, sin trincheras. La propuesta de mediación y consumo cultural de Martín-Barbero (2010) nasce de su diálogo con la escuela de Fráncfort, los estudios culturales británicos y la cultura popular latinoamericana. La Nueva Teoría de la Comunicación de Marcondes Filho (2008) pasa en revista sin dejar indiferente tanto los autores de la sociología de la comunicación europeos cuanto la escuela latinoamericana para forjar una idea de comunicación basada en lo sensible. Kaplún (1998) incorpora a la comunicación el sentido de comunidad en un amplio movimiento de diálogo con los clásicos europeos y latinoamericanos que le permite proponer la comunicación como un espacio transformador. La formación europeísta de Vera França (2012, 2014) y su tránsito entre la sociología y la antropología la ayuda no sólo a realizar un riguroso trabajo de meta-investigación en teorías de la comunicación como, además, construir una propuesta *sui generis* sobre los acontecimientos, los medios y la sociabilidad. En esta misma dirección camina el trabajo de Lopes (2010), eximio en exponer las tradiciones (sean europeas, sean iberoamericanas), como también en lanzar una propuesta propia sobre los métodos de investigación en comunicación a partir del estudio de las telenovelas y de la radio en las periferias. A su vez, Santaella (2004) no sólo es referencia en la introducción de la semiótica de Pierce en Brasil como también es una de las pioneras en las reflexiones sobre los impactos de las tecnologías digitales en la comunicación y cultura.

Sin embargo, seguramente uno de los espacios en el cual la epistemología del sur ha fraguado más aceptación internacional está circunscrito al ámbito de la investigación en comunicación para el cambio social. Como exponen Suzina y Tufte (2020), el legado de Paulo Freire favoreció el pensamiento y la obra de Augusto Boal, dentro de las artes escénicas, de Juan Díaz Bordenave, en la comunicación y de Boaventura de Sousa Santos, en la epistemología de la ciencia. Esos tres autores consiguieron, en cierta medida, romper esquemas del poder académico. Por utilizar la expresión de Boaventura, fraguaron un “epistemología posabisal”.

En este sentido, de Sousa Santos (2019), defiende una epistemología del sur que sea capaz de articularse a partir de cinco ejes. En primer lugar, rompiendo la línea abisal (norte-sur) y los diversos tipos de exclusión social que ésa crea.

No dista en este punto, y cabe decirlo, de la propuesta de Milton Santos (2000) anteriormente mencionada en relación al rediseño norte-sur o centro-periferia. Así, en segundo lugar, poder trabajar tanto desde una perspectiva sociológica de las ausencias como también de las emergencias. Todo ello remite, en tercer lugar, a la ecología de saberes y la posibilidad de traducción intercultural, que sea capaz de incluir conocimientos producidos con matrices diversas, que permita una síntesis creativa de los mismos. A lo que, finalmente, cabe añadir una artesanía de las prácticas, un ensuciarse las manos en la cocina del empirismo.

Más que una receta, la propuesta de Boaventura de Sousa Santos es una invitación para articular, sea bajo la idea de una epistemología del sur o del término Sur global, la de-colonialidad del ser (de los sujetos, de nosotros) en paralelo con la decolonialidad del poder y del conocimiento. Todo ello, entiendo, ha sido (y sigue siendo) hecho por autores y autoras mencionados con anterioridad como parte de la escuela latinoamericana de comunicación sin necesariamente expresarlo de manera directa. Recuperando y parafraseando a bell hooks (2019), no hay que decirse del sur para serlo. Porque, además, se tratan de autores que desarrollaron un pensamiento híbrido, que amplía horizontes teóricos, metodológicos y empíricos. En este punto, quizás, quepa un apuntamiento crítico a de Sousa Santos (2019) por, en que pese su loable esfuerzo por destacar desde el norte (geográfico) el pensamiento del Sur global, servir como intermediario o, como indica Moira Millán (2017), realizar una especie de expropiación conceptual.

Sea como fuere, cabe destacar esfuerzos como el de Herrera Huérfano et al. (2016), para conjugar la epistemología del sur con la escuela latinoamericana representan construcciones no sólo teóricas sino también de una agenda política para la investigación. Podríamos citar otros muchos temas y visiones bastardas – en el sentido propuesto por Omar Ricón – tales como el de Gonçalves (2020), al tematizar la identidad gitana y las audiencias, o Felix Lamech Mogambi Ming'ate (2015), al trabajar las tecnologías de la comunicación desde una mirada originariamente keniana, para no limitarme al espacio iberoamericano.

No obstante, bajo el influjo del capitalismo académico productivista, parece, hoy en día, poco probable, al menos en el campo de la comunicación, que los espacios institucionales del norte global permitan un diálogo verdaderamente científico con todo aquello que se ubique fuera de su eje geopolítico o de sus métodos y teorías.

## CONSIDERACIONES FINALES

Hace más de 15 años, Dirlik (2007) defendía la idea de que el Sur global pasaba a ser un eje de relación también para la producción de conocimiento



y poder. China, entre otros países de los BRICS, materializaba la promesa de un nuevo orden mundial, multipolar. Pese a la previsión, más allá de un análisis geopolítico, las huellas investigadas en este artículo y recogidas por el autor en su propia trayectoria personal permiten hablar de la consolidación del término Sur global como un eje epistémico, impreciso, plural y con por lo menos tres líneas de desarrollo.

Si bien es cierto que, en el ámbito de la investigación en comunicación y también en las ciencias sociales, el Sur global se convirtió en un cierto fetiche del norte, como proyecto político permitió la visibilidad de muchos trabajos y autores hasta entonces circunscritos a una dimensión local. Desde espacios institucionales, se favorece un cierto “lugar de habla” en la polifonía científica para los autores de la escuela latinoamericana de comunicación bajo la etiqueta del Sur global. Ciertamente, se trata de una visión optimista que requiere una dosis de realismo: mucho de todo ello es alegórico y no conlleva cambios en los engranajes del capitalismo académico.

En gran medida, como argumenta Nina Schneider (2017) parece ser que la construcción del Sur global o de una epistemología del sur queda en manos de los intelectuales comprometidos, politizados. Vemos aquí una más de las contradicciones del neoliberalismo. Mientras el andamiaje de la exclusión y de la colonialidad del poder es obra de una élite y de una estructura, la responsabilidad de cualquier cambio hacia lo colectivo y lo común queda relegado a la acción individual. Misión imposible para investigadores que, jóvenes o no tan jóvenes, tienen que construir sus carreras exprimidos entre los cánones del norte global y la agenda política transformadora del Sur global. ■

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# Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

## *Publicidade contemporânea e semiótica peirceana: Uma proposta metodológica*

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to show that Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics can contribute to a broader and less superficial understanding of the currently produced advertising, deeming it a language modality that uninterruptedly permeates life and the world. We understand that Peirce's theoretical-methodological legacy grows nowadays to reflect and analyze the transformations that advertising communication undergoes in contemporary times both in its expressive plan and in its deeper logics. For this, we propose an advertising semiotics analysis methodology that goes beyond scrutinizing constituent elements of a specific piece, incorporating the ever-expanding referentiality of advertising and its ever-surprising power to generate meanings.

**Keywords:** advertising; semiotics; Peirce; semiotic analysis; advertising language.

### RESUMO

Este artigo pretende apresentar a contribuição da semiótica de Charles Sanders Peirce para um entendimento mais amplo e menos superficial da publicidade atual, compreendendo-a como uma modalidade de linguagem que permeia ininterruptamente a vida e o mundo. Entendemos que o legado teórico-metodológico de Peirce cresce em relevância para refletir as transformações por que passa a comunicação publicitária na contemporaneidade, tanto no seu plano expressivo, quanto nas suas lógicas mais profundas. Para isso, propomos uma metodologia de análise semiótica publicitária que vai além de esmiuçar elementos constituintes de uma peça específica, incorporando a referencialidade cada vez mais expandida da publicidade e sua surpreendente potência de geração de significados.

**Palavras-chave:** Publicidade; semiótica; Peirce; análise semiótica; linguagem publicitária.

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MATRIZES

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# A

## Contemporary advertising and Peircean semiotics: A methodological proposal

**N**O CLASSIC AUTHOR of semiotics developed his intellectual work to analyze advertisement. Charles Sanders Peirce, at least as far as we know, didn't even privilege or foresee in his extensive production the "application" of semiotics to this or that specific everyday material. In addition, therein lies his great value as the author not just of a theory — even less of a method, as is sometimes believed — but also of a philosophical architecture of such complexity and scope that it is possible to draw from it the basic theoretical concepts and methodological procedures necessary to achieve a privileged view of advertising. Not just of advertising, of course, but also of it. The fact that Peirce's semiotics were not developed based on any specific material — text or image, for example — but based on a broader conception of phenomena is what makes it possible for us to draw on it today.

By pursuing in his life's work the understanding of the processes through which human thought evolves, he achieved a profound generality that does not come up against the limitations of obsolescence — as happens with the works of some other authors, which age and lose much of their validity when they no longer find a way to get closer to contemporary reality. By conceiving a notion of sign associated with thought itself, Peirce offers his readers and all of us the theoretical precepts and methodological intricacies to understand the advertising phenomenon in its magnitude, its elusive aspect, and its growing complexity today. Although there is no evidence of any text by Peirce that demonstrates in what specific way his intellectual production could contribute to the understanding of one or another advertisement — not least because in his lifetime, from 1839 to 1914, advertising itself was still in its infancy — his theoretical-methodological legacy grows in relevance as advertising communication becomes more imprecise and omnipresent in contemporary times.

This is what this text is about, the main objective of which is to present how Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics can contribute to a broader and less superficial understanding of advertising produced today, based on the proposal of a contribution from his method, which can be applied to advertising communication. It deals with this already traditional approach between theories of language and advertising communication, defending a perspective that allows not only detailed scrutiny of the constituent elements of a given advertising message but, seeing advertising as being of a sign nature, also considers its ever-expanding referentiality and reveals its ever-surprising potential to generate meaning.

In a context in which advertising, as a language, is now present in practically all communication occasions — no longer only in well-defined formats, always with clear intentions or solely with a brand or company as the

signatory — the urgency for a method that can handle all this is undeniable. It can be useful in a pedagogical context, in educating new advertisers and consumers; and in a marketing context, in improving advertising management and creation processes.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to contribute to a broader and deeper understanding of advertising communication through the possibilities of analysis offered by Peircean Semiotics. To this end, we recognize that today, when we talk about advertising, we are no longer just talking about advertisements or related specific material, but about a mode of language that permeates life and the world uninterruptedly, which expresses a predominant worldview — that of consumption and capitalism — and which, under these conditions, participates directly in the development of imaginations, the establishment of patterns of behavior, the construction of values and, ultimately, the very cultural constitution of a given era or society.

To study this object, it is necessary to try to take another step in an extensive collective journey that still has much to be built. One cannot follow Peirce's thinking, especially when considering his production focused on the very paths and designs of research and science, without understanding that any academic contribution, no matter how small or innovative, is inevitably one of the infinite strands that make up a larger agreement, the production of knowledge (Santaella, 2001 and 2004c). In this sense, what is presented in this paper is both an outgrowth of previous research and a modest contribution to the thinking of so many other researchers who have dedicated themselves to the challenge and exercise of semiotic analysis of advertising communication.

In any case, what is presented below is a kind of result, that is dynamic and partial because it is known that it is doomed never to be finished or complete, due to the pure semiotic conviction that thought and language never stop growing, causing advertising itself to be in constant growth as well. It is, therefore, the product of this investigative journey that has always taken place between advancing in the search for a contribution to Brazilian advertising communication and crossing the bridge that brings together — rather than separating, as some would have it — academic thought and marketing practice in advertising. Faced with advertising expressions that are so diverse, so little like the standards that were established in decades of the last century, there was a need to look deeper into the conjunction between the theory and method provided by Peircean semiotics and current advertising production. On the one hand, the processes of consolidation and qualification of advertising research are relatively recent, particularly in terms of valuing the methodical dimension of the research produced (Trindade, 2018; Covaleski et al., 2017;



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Lopes, 2005); On the other hand, the growing development of the theoretical-methodological apparatus for understanding the process of signification in advertising, which has been taking place since the 1960s to the present day, also seems to need new developments when these methods are applied to what can be called advertising today.

Hence, the urgency of (re)delving into the concepts of Charles Sanders Peirce's speculative grammar, to (re)find a better match between the extreme complexity of his precepts and the equally complex advertising produced today. It's important to stress: that it's not a question of searching through the materials analyzed for the elements and procedures that make up a suitable analysis protocol for contemporary advertising — which would inevitably lead us to a limited set of possibilities, doomed to a brief exhaustion; it's a question of understanding and reaffirming, through this growing diversity of expressive possibilities that characterizes the advertising of our time, the importance of developing general methods, based less on form and manifestation, and more on generalities and fundamentals.

### **SEMIOTICS AND ADVERTISING: EPISTEMOLOGICAL ISSUES**

Roland Barthes is often credited with being the first theorist to propose a methodologically consistent analysis of advertising. The publication of his now classic "Rhetoric of the Image" (1990) in the legendary Communications magazine in 1964 marked the beginning of a tradition that has reached the present day, almost always using methods derived from theories of language to reveal the meanings of advertising pieces. In his text, Barthes presents points that are still relevant today when it comes to understanding how the signs that comprise advertising language are engendered: the relation between text and image, the search for meanings, the importance of photography, etc.

In the wake of Barthes came authors such as Jacques Durand and George Péninou, who, around the same time, also published their contributions to the development of a methodology for analyzing advertising in the magazine. While Durand, in "Rhetorical Figures in the Advertisements" (1974), dedicates himself to identifying and categorizing "figures" in print advertising, proposing an extensive list of them; Péninou, in his "Physics and Metaphysics of the advertising image" (1974), seems to want to penetrate the processes of the signification of the advertising image, also identifying the different codes that structure it.

Structure is even a providential term since we are dealing here with a type of analysis that arose within what is known as structuralism. Paying tribute to Saussurian principles, structuralism represents a kind of extension

of Saussure's typical linguistic thinking to other fields of knowledge, such as anthropology and history, with the ambitious aim of understanding all languages (Mattelart & Mattelart, 1999, p. 86; Nöth, 1996, p. 111). This is why the first theoretical-methodological efforts to understand what is now known as advertising language came from this structuralism impetus. What we notice, however, is that the search to identify the rigid structures of analysis in the body of the object being analyzed often takes up an excessively large amount of space, sometimes to the detriment of the analysis itself. In other words: the investigative gaze that seeks to find categories of analysis in the linguistic concreteness of what is often being analyzed ends up being more concerned with this search than with actually understanding the processes of generating meaning. As a result, its applicability is reduced, as the objects of language — and advertising is one of them — grow, transform, become more dynamic, and acquire new aspects. In this way, structures of analysis derived from the sign composition of a certain type of object, in this specific case, print ads, don't always apply to the generality of a certain type of language, in this general case, advertising.

In opposition to this type of thinking, Umberto Eco published his now classic *The Absent Structure* (1976), the title of which leaves no doubt: it is about the search for an analytical gaze that escapes the conceptual trap of analytical structures.

The problem is not to go into the merits of isolated research, but to take the — misleading — assumption of an *already given* structure as the ultimate and constant foundation of cultural and natural phenomena to its extreme philosophical consequences; and to show that this ontological *primum* implies, as we have said, the destruction of the very notion of structure, which resolves itself into an ontology of Absence, of Emptiness, of that lack of being that would constitute each of our acts. (Eco, 1976, p. XIX, emphasis added)

Symptomatically, it is in this book that his text “Some Verifications: The Advertising Message” is found, in which he seeks to advance — including citing Barthes — in the methodological possibilities of analyzing advertising. Although what has remained most famous in the mentioned work are the categorizations linked to the text-image relation and above all to the five levels of the advertising message, what is intended to be highlighted here from Eco's text are two other aspects.

Firstly, the direct link between advertising and consumption, which the author establishes extremely clearly, albeit succinctly: “The ideology evoked



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by any communication is the ideology of consumption” (1976, p. 183). But also the fact that the author uses concepts from Peircean semiotics to analyze advertising. Without intending to find obligatory or analogous parameters or methodological categories for the analysis of advertising in Peirce’s classifications of the sign, Eco makes an immense contribution in this sense, since he demonstrates that there is a conceptual foundation and methodological guidelines in North American semiotic theory that are undeniably profitable in understanding the production of meaning — and therefore how advertising works. The depth of the reflections that the author presents in his text based on the analysis of advertising pieces ends up serving as a guide for those who, today, want to understand a communication modality whose formal and phenomenological complexity is only increasing.

If an advertisement involves a great deal of logical articulation and yet is understood at a single glance, this means that the arguments and premises it communicates were already codified in this way and in the same form that they took there, so much so that they could be understood through a simple claim. (Eco, 1976, p. 182).

Even though he sometimes returns to the main names of structuralism, Eco opens up space for an analysis of advertising that, using — with some liberty that characterizes him — the principles of Charles Peirce’s semiotics, makes a commitment not to the analysis itself, but to the depth of what is discovered, to the complexity of what is revealed, to the attempt to understand the symbolic tangle that is advertising communication and its challenging process of generating meanings. In doing so, Eco extends the bridge so that the analysis of advertising can reach the so-called interpretive paradigm, which is aligned with the methodological proposals presented in this text, of clear and declared Peircean inspiration.

It is important to stress that, in addition to Eco and the other authors mentioned, several other researchers have contributed to this use of semiotics in analyzing advertising and understanding it as a language (Floch, 1993; Volli, 2003; Semprini, 2010, for example). However, it is this principle identified in Umberto Eco’s text that we use here, reiterating the importance of Peirce’s theory and method of semiotics in understanding advertising in the contemporary scenario.

Peircean semiotics or logic is, above all, a sign theory of knowledge. Peircean epistemology (a name, by the way, that he hated) postulates that knowledge

can only take place through the mediation of signs, for the simple fact that all thought only takes place in signs. Furthermore, his semiotics is a critical logic of types of reasoning and a theory of the scientific method (Santaella, 2001, p. 116, emphasis added).

Analyzing advertising using Peirce's semiotics (1995, 1999), therefore, does not have to be limited to simply dividing advertising pieces and ads into three categories — icon, index, and symbol — as is sometimes done. It is a matter of taking a specific and very well-defined perspective, one that understands advertising communication in its sign nature, thus analyzing it and escaping the limitations of format or means, for example. This does not mean ignoring the particularities and concreteness of the material being analyzed. On the contrary, it means dealing with these aspects in their sign condition. It's not looking at advertising as a framed material surface, like a canvas or a frame on which texts, images, and sounds rest, but rather trying to see it from the inside, in its sign composition, in its nature as a language, in its deepest mediating function — therefore, as a producer of meanings.

It should be noted that, with greater or lesser proximity to semiotic theory in their methodical issues, several researchers in what can now be called the scientific field of advertising have been addressing the problems of interpreting advertising in this context of expansion and complexity (Machado et al., 2020; Atem et al., 2014; Covaleski, 2010; Casaqui, 2011; Perez, 2016; Pompeu, 2018; Dias de Castro, 2012, among many others). Each with their theoretical basis, taking investigative paths as diverse as their purposes, all of them, to some extent, face this challenge that we also face here — that of recognizing in contemporary advertising an additional challenging component, linked to its processes of signification.

This is more or less what Santaella and Nöth also deal with in their book *Estratégias semióticas da publicidade* [Semiotic Strategies in Advertising] (2011), a work that here represents an important moment in a more recent academic movement, based on the efforts of several authors in this articulation between Peirce's semiotics and contemporary advertising communication (Perez, 2004 and 2007; Chiachiri, 2011; Ciaco, 2013; Pompeu, 2018, among others). However, those who assume that in this work, the authors are going to explain the method of analyzing advertising that can be built from Peirce's philosophical architecture and speculative grammar are mistaken. This type of content is much more present, for example, in the book *Semiótica Aplicada* [Applied Semiotics] (Santaella, 2004b). But it is in the combined reading of these two works — and several others, by the author and other authors



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already mentioned — that we will find the necessary support for an analysis of advertising that takes into account its complexity, especially when we consider the current context of countless new media-communication possibilities. Yes, because many of the methods developed in recent decades for analyzing advertising fail in the face of the transformations its object of investigation is undergoing. In other words: many of the analysis techniques developed in other times were based on a more fixed conception of advertising, centered, for example, on media and formats. This means that they cannot always be applied to contemporary advertising phenomena.

It is not that the advertising of decades ago was simple or lacked complexity in the way it was presented. On the contrary: it was precisely this complexity already latent in the ads of the 1960s and 1970s that led Eco, for example, to delve deeper into the issue. What this means is that, unlike what was done in the past, especially in linguistic studies, which was to find categories of analysis based on the advertising itself, we should look for a general categorization, a general method. It doesn't make sense to think of a method that is fully capable of analyzing a print ad, a poster, and a billboard, but which is completely inadequate for a film, a banner, a promotional meme, an envelopment, etc. In other words: as long as advertising analysis methods are created simply from existing advertising pieces, we may always be vulnerable in scientific terms when new communication possibilities arise. For this reason, the development and maturing of the scientific field of advertising and the growing complexity of the contemporary, advertising industry — without forgetting the technological, economic, and sociocultural context itself — require an adequate methodological apparatus.

It is in the face of advertising that is dematerializing itself to remain sign-based, that is detaching itself from the media in order to continue meditating, that doesn't obey formats to continue fitting in that we must look for methods to deal with this complexity. Semiotics seems to us to be the best option for this.

Yes, because the perspective that semiotics provides frees us from the conceptual framework based on formats or media as supports:

Despite the multiplicity of media and semiotic strategies, advertisements remain a textual genre with a somewhat invariant semantic and pragmatic core. From a pragmatic perspective, every advertising process involves a semiotic act of message exchange. Semantically, every advertising message contains a proposition, the argument of which identifies the product and the predicate of which attributes a positive quality to the product (Santaella & Nöth, 2011, p. 78).

Specifically about advertising analysis procedures and methods, this view of advertising as a “process” with a “semantic and pragmatic core” favors the search for a general analysis protocol, capable of enabling a deep and complex understanding of advertising in its most varied forms, in its most unexpected possibilities. In other words: one thing is linked to the other — a broader conception of advertising and a more general analysis methodology. In this sense, the theoretical-methodological framework of semiotics serves both purposes.

Peirce’s speculative grammar works with abstract concepts capable of determining the general conditions that make certain processes, when they exhibit behaviors that fall within these conditions, be considered signs. It is therefore a general science of signs. Its concepts are general, but they must contain, at the abstract level, the elements that allow us to describe, analyze, and evaluate any existing processes of verbal, non-verbal, and natural signs. (Santaella, 2004b, p. 4)

Clotilde Perez, in her *Signos da marca* [Signs of the brand] (2004), makes a great contribution to bringing the precepts and concepts of semiotics closer to the themes and elements of the advertising market. By establishing the first parallel in this book — later developed in a text included in *O livro da marca* [The Brand Book] (2007) — between Charles Peirce’s classifications of the sign and the instances of a brand, the author paves the way for finding the parameters for a profitable analysis of advertising in the same theoretical framework. “Brand semiosis is reinforced by advertising. The brand is created and expanded through advertising. One of the functions of advertising is to make brands replicate themselves in minds, conquering a specific and distinctive place” (Perez, 2007, p. 149).

Perez thus provides academic legitimacy for the same type of reasoning to be applied specifically to advertising communication. This is also what can be found in detail in Santaella’s work, *Applied Semiotics* (2004a), in which the author demonstrates theoretically, methodologically, and with examples, how semiotics can be effective in analyzing product packaging, static ads, and advertising films.

An advertisement for the repositioning of a product on the market is a sign of the product, which becomes the object of this sign, i.e. the advertisement. It is not just the product itself that is the object of the sign, but the repositioned product, as the ad presents it. The impact or otherwise that the advertisement arouses in its audience is the interpretant of the advertisement. (Santaella, 2004a, p. 9)



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We are not trying to reduce the contribution of the work — on the contrary, we are starting from it, recognizing and highlighting its importance — when looking for a protocol for analyzing advertising that takes into account its infinite expressive possibilities in the contemporary world. It is true that the paths defined by Perez (2004) and Santaella (2004a) already seek to achieve the generality typical of Peirce's thought and scientific production, and what is presented below may simply be a new framework based on what has already been constructed.

In any case, we believe that the contribution proposed here is important, not only in consolidating and integrating this knowledge but also in bringing us closer and more explicitly into contact with the new advertising that is being produced, free in form and detached from the means of communication.

### **THE METHOD AND THE SEARCH FOR GENERALITY**

Our starting point, of course, is Peirce's basic definition of the sign, the one that establishes its triadic nature — sign, object, and interpretant — based on the phenomenological categories — firstness, secondness, and thirdness.

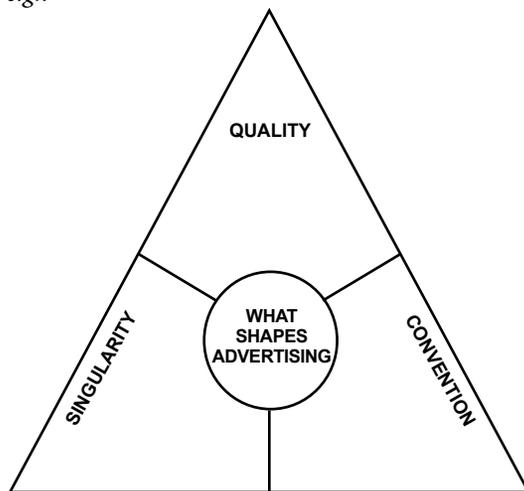
In the position of sign, of what is first in the process, we have everything that gives form to advertising, everything that, precisely as a sign, presents itself to the public's perception. This includes signs of the most diverse kinds, always depending on the expressive nature of the advertising. Colors, images, texts, music, sounds, objects, materials, and everything that makes up the advertising message — or the advertising action, if you want to be even broader — are included in this dimension of analysis.

To take into account the diversity of possibilities that have been included in the increasingly elastic definition of advertising, it is important to consider two important aspects of the sign: its ground and its relation with the object — which leads to two other categorizations of the sign proposed by Peirce. It is not easy to understand what is meant by sign's ground, since this concept already presupposes a very abstract view of the message in its sign condition, before the inevitable process it triggers in the mind of the interpreter. However, if we consider the ground of the sign to be that which allows it to act as such, the issue may become a little clearer. To explain: if the sign is, according to Peirce's semiotics, something that stands in the place of something else (to be interpreted by someone), the ground of the sign will be its defining element that allows precisely this "standing in place", which makes its relation with the object possible.

From there, we arrive at the qualisign, whose ground is a quality; the sinsign, whose ground is a singularity, an existent; and the legisign, whose ground is a convention (Figure 1). It is important to understand that, at this point, we are talking about the sign itself, without yet considering its actual relation with the object. Although what defines its ground is precisely what allows it to relate to the object as the initial process of generating meaning, the definition of its ground still only concerns its constitution as a sign. Qualisigns are signs that can refer to an object because they share a quality, or a characteristic with it: color, shape, volume, texture, etc. Signs that can fulfill their relation with the object through a unique existential mark are defined as sinsigns: traces, marks, tracks, etc. The category of legisigns includes those that could be linked to the object by an aspect of convention: letters, words, stamps, etc.

Attempting to exemplify this type of categorization is always a little sparse, precarious, and insufficient. This is because it is a categorization created from an abstraction, from a specific way of understanding signs, based on generality, and therefore without the possibility of effective enumeration on a concrete level. In other words: the search for the categorization of signs based on their grounds is essential — but it will take place effectively based on each sign, each message, and each language. For each of these possibilities, new types of signs will “emerge”. The important thing is not to lose sight of this first stage of seeking, within the sign dimension, triadic scrutiny based on its ground.

Figure 1  
*The ground of the sign*

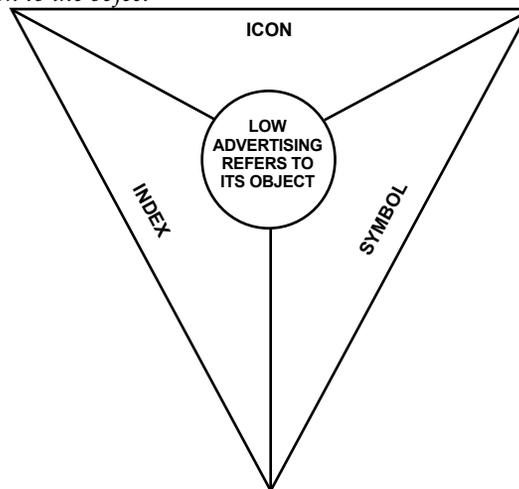


This is an extremely important categorization in the face of advertising that transmutes itself infinitely in its forms of expression in the media space, as it offers us a more detailed and attentive look at the constituent elements of the message. By scouring advertising, in any of its possibilities, identifying the quali, sin, and legisigns that make it up on its surface, we gradually see and discover the intricate network that gives it existence.

Still, in the first dimension of the sign, it is now important to look at its relation with the object. It should be noted that while in the previous stage, we were talking about a first categorization based on abstraction; this view is now balanced with another, concrete and objective look at the reality in which the sign occurs. We are talking about the famous classification of the sign proposed by Peirce based on its relation with its object: icon, index, and symbol (Figure 2). There is no need to dwell on the definition of each of these terms, as it is a recurring theme in various works in the field of semiotics — both theoretical and applied. The icon is defined by its relation with the object based on effective similarity, by sharing characteristics. If the sign refers to the object because it “resembles” it, we are talking about its iconic dimension. The index, on the other hand, is the sign that is linked to the object by a factual cause-and-effect relation. If the sign is the effect caused by the object, we have an index in front of us. Moreover, the symbol is the sign that refers to the object by force of law. If the sign refers to its object because it has been arbitrarily defined as such, that sign is considered a symbol.

Figure 2

*The sign in relation to the object*



At this point, it is essential to understand the differences and approximations that exist between the first trichotomy — qualisign, sinsign, and legisign — and the second trichotomy — icon, index, and symbol. Because it is not difficult to assume that qualisigns are necessarily icons or, worse, that they are the same thing, for example. They are not. What allows a sign to function as such (its ground) concerns its nature as a potential sign, and what links the sign to the object concerns its effective action as a sign in this first stage of the semiotic process. In other words: it is possible to have signs of a qualitative nature (qualisigns) but which are linked to the object by a cause-and-effect relation (index) or by arbitrariness (symbol). Just as it is possible to identify signs that are constituted as such by an aspect of law (legisigns) but which refer to their objects by a qualitative (icon) or singular (index) aspect. The red of a bruise and the representative red of an ideology are examples of the first case. Onomatopoeia and derived words are examples of the second. Again, it's not the case of trying to find examples: that would be as exhausting as it would be frustrating, as limiting as it would be impossible. The important thing is to make it clear that these two trichotomies of the sign work in a complementary way to scrutinize a message — in this case, an advertising message.

Moving on to the dimension of the object, that is, the second in the sign process of advertising, there are the referents of advertising, that is, what it refers to, directly or indirectly. We are talking here about products and services, what is for sale; but also about some other equally important aspects (Figure 3).

At some point in the past, it may have made sense to look at the referentiality of advertising only in terms of its marketing character, when the mediation process was still reasonably controllable and predictable and when advertisements offering products and services with a more identifiable outline predominated. Today, when products and services are no longer necessarily the protagonists — the referents — of advertising, when the media process can take place without limits or predictability, and when values and ideas start to appear more clearly in advertising discourse, it is essential to find in the theoretical-methodological framework of semiotics the means to consider all of this in the analysis process. Moreover, it seems to us that all of this lies precisely in this second dimension, that of the object.

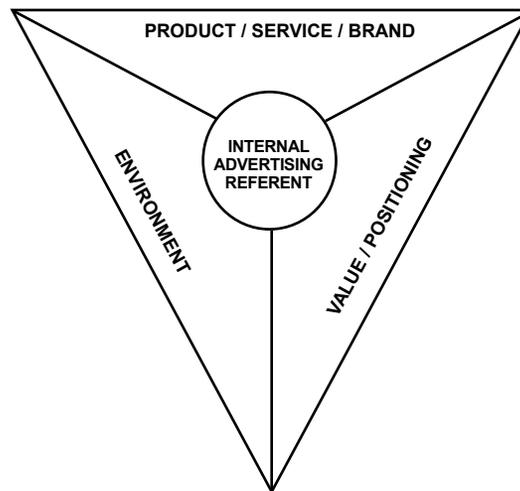
Yes, it's true that, ultimately, the vast majority of advertising pieces and actions are aimed at getting the public to buy a product or service. Even when it comes to institutional campaigns, engagement actions, or anything that may not at first appear to have the purpose of making sales, what is

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known is that, due to its marketing essence, advertising seeks, in a closer or more distant end, profit, which is achieved through the existence of sales (Piratininga, 1994; Arruda, 2015; Pompeu, 2018). Therefore, the first aspect to consider when analyzing the object of advertising is the product, service, or brand you want to sell — this is what advertising refers to at first, sometimes with almost didactic clarity, and in other situations in a more veiled way. If we take the Peircean concept of the immediate object — that contained in the sign itself — this is exactly where we will locate this first aspect of the object dimension in the analysis of advertising: what is “inside” the piece or advertising action, but which appears as its referent. The bottle of soft drink, the credit card being accepted, the reputable company, all this functions as an immediate object, it is contained in the advertisement itself. Moreover, make no mistake: even if it doesn’t seem to appear, this object is there — and it doesn’t depend on the interpreter consciously recognizing it for this to happen.

Figure 3  
*The immediate object*



In a position analogous to what Peirce defined as a dynamic object — one that, by touching and surpassing the perception of the interpreter becomes individually dynamic — we have the very idea of the dynamization of what is offered. In other words, we are dealing with the context that is presented in advertising, both in terms of the situations in which the actions take place and the scenarios and environments in which the products appear, which

is more evident in the case of advertisements that are presented in a more unidirectional communication logic; and in terms of the very moment of the mediating phenomenon of advertising, which is more evident when we think of the dialogical aspect that involves contemporary advertising or actions that directly involve the public.

Advertising inevitably gives rise to a context. No product, service, brand, or invitation to dialog or participatory action takes place without the projection or prediction of a context. In addition, as we know, context plays an important role in the production of meaning, in the semiotic process. That is why it's so important to delve deeper into this second dimension of object analysis (Figure 4). Indeed, both the internal and external contexts of advertising have always existed. If we take the example of an older or more traditional advertisement, perhaps a magazine ad, we'll see that in its internal dimension it already had a certain context, it already portrayed a certain occasion, it already involved what was being advertised in some kind of environment. But that same ad also had an external context, in this case, the actual situation in which it would be seen by the public — the comfort of their home, the waiting room of a doctor's office in pre-cell phone times. The thing is, at a time when advertising's media opportunities were infinitely more restricted than they are today — or so it was believed — this external contextual dimension left to the most basic media planning, from a professional point of view, or was embedded in the message itself, from the point of view of the theoretical analysis of advertising.

Today, with the pulverization and dematerialization of the media, in other words, with advertising being seen by the public in the most diverse situations, often comprising their most effective participation, in dialogue or action, it is essential to think about this external contextual dimension — because it is this that will give insight, in the procedure of semiotic analysis, into the effects of the mediating character of advertising in its process of generating meanings. In other words: any analysis of advertising that doesn't consider the occasion or context of its effective sign action will be incomplete.

Not least because, as we know, we are increasingly talking about advertising that is splintered in its media forms of reaching the public, but which is also pulverized in its content. Therefore, if we've been talking about convergence for some time now, it's because we no longer think of narratives that are isolated in media or complementary linearly. The pulverization of media is directly accompanied by the atomization of messages, which is yet another reason to consider when conducting a semiotic analysis, the external



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context of its sign functioning, which includes, for example, integration, convergence, and transit between the media that may act together to the same message.

Nevertheless, if advertising as a semiotic message first refers to something that, in the end, we want to sell (product, service, or brand); then it gives rise to a context of consumption and mediation (internal and external); it also refers to an idea. We have spent many years reserving the third sphere of the interpretant for the analysis of ideas, values, and meanings — we'll get to that later — as if we didn't realize that there is a dimension, still within the sphere of the object, that includes these ideas and meanings. It is one thing to think about the effects that a particular ad provokes or intends to provoke in the public. It is another thing to realize that the advertising sign itself refers to some abstract or conceptual component — such as the ideas.

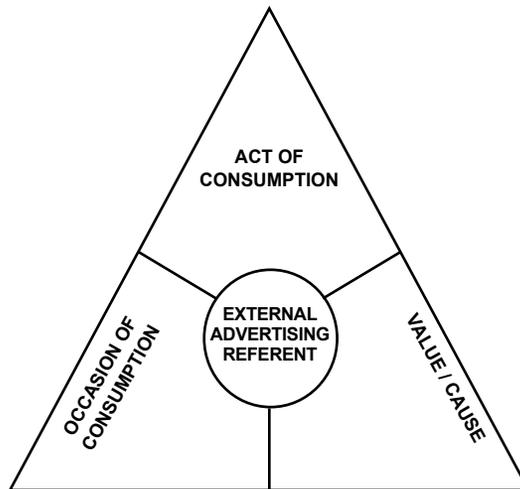
Yes, the ideology promoted by advertising in general indeed is that of capitalism — several authors have already discussed this. However, within this general capitalist framework, various other ideas are promoted by advertising as a signed message, even before its effects on the public mind are considered. Today there is a lot of talk, especially in the corporate environments of companies and agencies, about the lifestyles that brands promote. Moreover, what can these lifestyles be if not ideas manifested in aesthetics and behavior? Healthiness, lightness, family unity, patriotic spirit — how many are not and cannot be the meanings (ideas, values) to which advertising messages refer? The very positioning of a brand or product is, in essence, an abstraction, an idea. So, at a time when products and services are giving way in advertising to precisely these lifestyles, these values and, why not say it, these causes, not contemplating this third dimension of the object in semiotic analysis would be to leave out — or move to an imprecise point in the process — something that is increasingly present in contemporary advertising discourse.

The fact is that, like everything else in Peircean semiotics, these three dimensions of the object are intertwined and encapsulated. The idea that an ad can be of this, that, or the other type, advertising a product, favoring an occasion, or highlighting a value, makes no sense. There may be a predominance, but what is more correct is to imagine that every piece and advertising action will contain these three dimensions — and that good semiotic analysis needs to take them into account in all their complexity.

It is important to realize how indispensable this more detailed look at the sphere of the object is in the analysis of contemporary advertising. For it is precisely from this sphere, that is, from what the advertising signs refer to, that the most complex and challenging elements of contemporary advertising will

be encompassed in the analysis: the presence — or, in this case, the absence — of the product, the involvement of the consumer in the media process — in interaction or experience — and the growing abstraction of brand discourses, which are increasingly centered on values, lifestyles, causes and purposes.

Figure 4  
*The dynamic object*



Only finally should we reach the third part of the analysis, the sphere of the interpretant, that is, the effects that the sign potentially produces in the mind of the audience. We already know Peirce's distinction between the immediate interpretant — that which is internal to the sign itself — the dynamic interpretant — that which is realized by the public — and the final interpretant — that limit of thought to which every sign tends, without ever fully reaching it. The divisions of the dynamic interpretant into emotional, energetic, and logical are also known, giving an account here of the different types of effects that a given sign can have on the interpreter.

But it must be made clear that, although the abstraction is of the third order of interpretants, the ideas to which the sign refers, which are therefore to some extent in the sign itself, truly reside in the culture, to which the sign will refer in the sphere of the object, to generate an effect — potential or actual — with the public. The effect is abstract, but it is not to be confused, although it does combine with them, with the meanings to which the sign refers. In other words: the values, for example, to which the signs refer, in their relation with the object, will generate effects in the interpreter — effects that can be of an emotional, energetic, or logical nature,



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in other words, that can sensitize, make people act or produce an understanding (Figure 5).

In this sense, a thorough understanding of the semiotic process is also fundamental to understanding the process of generating meaning in advertising. Because its success, whatever it may be, depends on this process. The effect you want to generate with the public is contained in the sign and starts from the sign, passes through the instance of the object, in which it materializes, is contextualized and given meaning, to finally reach a mind that can be affected by it. In addition, it is in the construction of these signs, which refer to a half-true reality (so that it can be recognized), half-constructed (so that it can be desired), that advertising participates in the process of making meanings more dynamic. This is where the interpretant is revealed as the third dimension of a complex process, in which advertising is or is not effective, not because the promoted meanings are in it — they are in the process, in the whole, in semiosis, from the sign to the interpretant — but because there is the chance of sensitization, mobilization and, finally, signification. Whether we simply want someone to like or sympathize with “our” brand, whether we just want people to click and buy, whether we want people to associate the company with other values, whether we want the public to take a new stance on reality, all of this is in the interpretant. However, the meanings involved in this process are, need to be, and can only be in the sign, in its complex referentiality, so that it can achieve the potential to become a dynamic interpretant.

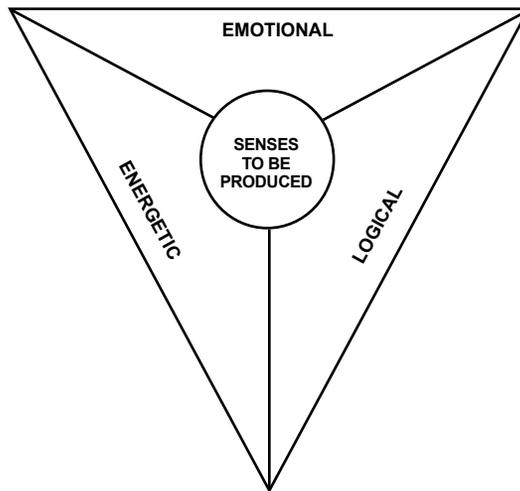
Of course, we can say, in the context of analysis, that the effects potentially generated by a particular piece or advertising action are emotional and can be defined as affectivity, or of an energetic nature and can be defined as protection, or even of a logical nature and defined as responsibility. However, it is essential to be clear that this simplification hides the true dynamics of the production of meaning, which, it should be said again, begins with the sign, passes through the object, and finally reaches the interpretant.

This creature [the effect of the sign on the mind] is generated by the sign, and so it is, not because the sign constitutes an omnipotent entity, but because it carries the power to receive the determination of the object. It is simply because the sign represents the object that it can generate an interpretant, so that the object also determines this interpretant, through the mediation of the sign. (Santaella, 2004b, p. 64)

In advertising, specifically, we can deal with the three types of dynamic interpretants in two ways. We can first think of emotional, energetic, or logical “type” interpretants, with, for example, affection being the first type, protection being the second type and responsibility being the third, as seen above.

Figure 5

*The nature of interpretants*



From this point of view, they would be interpretants that could be differentiated from each other by converting themselves into other signs. Moreover, it wouldn't matter if they only generated a shudder in the consumer, a decision to buy, or a revision of their values. This is the predominant approach when we think of the semiotic analyses that are already being carried out — both in the academic sphere and in the market context.

Nevertheless, there is another possibility, which is to look at these same three types of dynamic interpretants from the point of view of the effects they have on the interpreter. Santaella and Nöth propose three basic types of effects that advertising can provoke in the public: suggestion, seduction, and persuasion, which, according to the authors, “find their adjusted correspondence in the three phenomenological categories developed by C. S. Peirce” (2011, p. 85). Trying to adjust the general effects that advertising can provoke in the public to the three types of dynamic interpretants developed by Peirce, we arrive at another triadic classification: sensitization, mobilization, and understanding (Figure 6). Especially when it comes to promoting causes, transmitting values, and building positions — but also when it comes to the prosaic intention of selling — this classification

# A

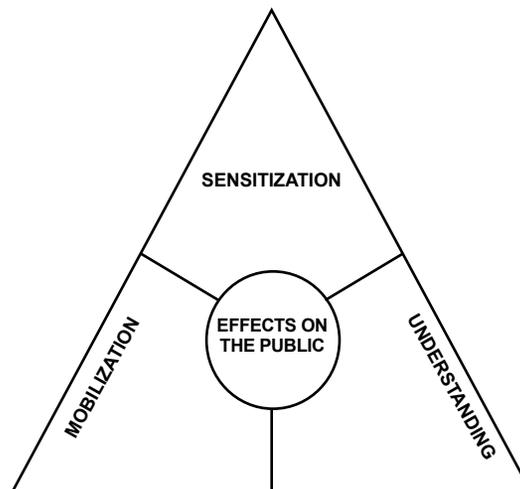
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is interesting because it not only sheds light on important aspects of the advertising sign under analysis but also allows us to consider its concrete effects on the public.

Sensitization is the first possible effect of a given advertisement. It boils down — without being easy or simple — to provoking a feeling, an emotion, it has to do with feeling. In marketing terms, it corresponds to the first stages of the infamous marketing “funnels”, those linked to attention and knowledge (as a synonym for knowing that something exists, not understanding it). If sensitization refers to an advertising sign that intends to make you buy a product or subscribe to a service, it is only the first stage. If we are talking about an ad that seeks to arouse a certain emotion in the public, such as those for the end of the year, it is in this type of interpretant that success lies.

Mobilization, the second possible effect of an advertisement on the public, involves acting, and it involves doing. We may be talking here specifically about buying, but let’s not forget that, among the objectives of advertising, other possibilities also involve action, such as clicking, liking, following, visiting a store, trying a product, etc. It has to do with the intermediate levels of the aforementioned funnels: intention, and purchase. Activation campaigns — not by chance — find their ultimate goal here.

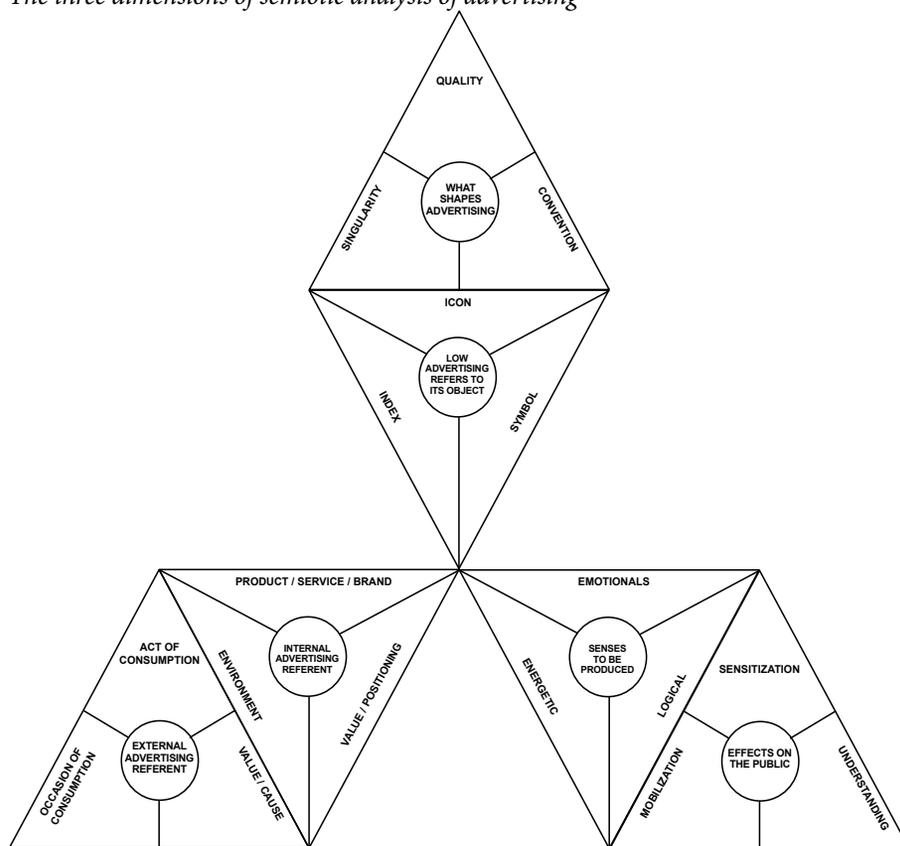
Figure 6  
*The second trichotomy of interpretants*



Understanding, the third dimension of this classification, consists of the effect of the advertising sign on the interpreter, which concerns the

comprehension of an idea, a change in conception, the adoption of a new perspective on reality or a certain subject. It has to do with thinking. The more abstract “purposes” that brands have been trying to build as a point of affinity with their audiences are usually values that, transmitted via advertising, will only be able to achieve their purpose if this advertising can provoke understanding in people. The change in habit, represented in these funnels by the last levels — loyalty to and defense of the brand — is one of the effects of the sign when the interpretant it provokes reaches this third stage.

Figure 7  
*The three dimensions of semiotic analysis of advertising*<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup>The graphic composition of figure 7 — an integration of the parts already presented in the previous pictures — simply seeks to synthesize the content presented in texts in a more visual language. At no point does it attempt to represent any kind of procedural schema or map — other than a mental map for understanding how advertising works in terms of its sign processes.

**BETWEEN AUSPICIOUS GENERALITY AND EXCESSIVE ABSTRACTION**

It is very important to make it clear, if it is not already clear, that what has been presented at this point in the study is not intended to define a schematic, mechanistic procedure based on the constituent elements of the



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expressive manifestations of contemporary advertising. Our intention has always been to achieve, precisely through the abstraction that characterizes Peirce's semiotics, the general, abstract, conceptual analytical procedures that can favor a more profitable analysis of the elusive and diverse advertising that is produced today. Moreover, even, who knows the propaganda that will be produced in the future. That is why we don't have — or at least we try not to have — pre-defined aspects of analysis, something like pre-established lists of what should be observed by the scholar or analyst. Lists such as these can produce analyses that are as limited as they are rigid, often missing out on the intellectual greatness that can reside in the sign processes engendered by advertising. What we have tried to do is clarify the mental pathway provided by semiotics that best enables us to understand how advertising works, in all its complexity and contemporary richness.

However, you can't seek intellectual generality in your understanding without running the risk of distancing yourself too much from the practical reality in which communication phenomena take place. This, then, is one of the weaknesses of our methodological proposal. By not offering the reader in a more explicit or didactic way an analysis protocol based on the elements that concretely constitute the advertising language of a certain era (photography, typography, title, signature, etc.), it risks losing its practical profitability in everyday applications, whether in the classroom or within advertising agencies. By always trying to demonstrate how semiotic thinking can provide us with the necessary light to reveal a kind of advertising logic, residing within the language of advertising itself, without limiting us to a particular type or format of ad (we're not even talking about ads here), we risk losing a certain aspect of practicality in its application. This is because each analysis would be unique and new, depending on a complex process of adapting semiotic principles to its sign specificities. Nevertheless, at the same time, each one would be a reiteration and strengthening of the method itself, in its quest for generality.

This balance, between more abstract generality and more concrete applicability, is also what was sought throughout this text. If, in some passages, the flirtation with materiality is clear — there are even more direct indications of what should or should not be considered at each stage of the analysis — the intention was never to turn semiotics into a mere tool. If, in other passages, the pursuit of generality ends up generating an excessive distance from the advertising material that concretely populates our daily lives, this needs to be understood from the point of view of one of the ambitions of this text, which

has always been to propose a method that deals with the analysis of advertising as language, not just as a concrete manifestation.

So, to overcome the limitations of the modestly proposed method — and a method that recognizes itself to be free of limitations has yet to be created — we recommend simultaneously comparing it with other reference works in the methodical approach of semiotics to advertising (many of which have already been cited here) and deepening the understanding of semiotic theory itself. Rather than a set of rulers, squares, and compasses that could be used to measure and square any ad, the method presented here is intended to work more like a map, a dynamic, abstract, and conceptual map that allows us to traverse the sign intricacies that make up the language of advertising with some certainty and reasonableness.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As much as Peirce's semiotics inspire us to seek generality in a movement that is admittedly utopian, it is clear that we cannot ignore the various transformations that advertising communication is undergoing in contemporary times. From the most obvious — such as the growth of online over offline in terms of how it takes place or the prevalence of audiovisual language over other languages — to the most challenging — its entwinement with the so-called big techs (large global companies that have been popularizing the logic of artificial intelligence, big data, algorithms, etc.), its ideological and political character — there are clear signs that advertising is changing profoundly in the current context. In addition, this can happen both on an expressive level and in its deeper logic.

In this sense, the method proposed in this text should remain profitable (within its limitations) as long as advertising remains sign-based. Without wishing to state that this is a definitive or self-sufficient method, what is meant is that, as long as advertising communication can be understood in its communication, sign, and mediating nature, we will find some contribution in the work of Charles Peirce. As long as advertising, to fulfill its effects assumes a sign materiality of language — however syncretic or hybrid it may be — what this text proposes, it is believed, tends to be of some use in the search for its understanding.

It could be that, shortly, perhaps even in this kind of future that is already present, and we don't know it, advertising will transfigure itself and, from being a message, it will simply become numbers, calculations, formulas, and mathematical computer functions. It's hard to imagine what this kind of



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advertising would be like, from machine to machine, without at some point having to be seen in the form of a communication sign. At this point, semiotics will be there, ready to enlighten us on the question of its expressiveness. However, it will also be there to point out the loopholes through which we can penetrate its algorithmic mechanisms.

Fidelity to the so-called interpretive paradigm forces us to understand that, in the face of complex phenomena, the theoretical bases and methodological arrangements must be strengthened under the same sign of complexity. If we take science to mean, following Peirce, “that which is carried out by living researchers, science as the result of the concrete search of a real group of living people, thus characterizing itself as something in permanent metabolism and growth” (Santaella, 2001, p. 103) — and if we also consider that “there is no longer the interpretative *method* in research; in any discipline, we need to multiply methodologies. “ (Canevacci, 2013, p. 172, emphasis added) — it is important to make it clear that the method presented here is also designed to be integrated with other disciplines and other analysis procedures. Whatever perspective is taken to understand this phenomenon that is increasingly ubiquitous in our daily lives — and more and more intertwined with political, social, cultural, economic, and technological issues — which is advertising, it will be necessary to understand its language, which is also growing in complexity. This is where the semiotic method will come in handy. ■

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# Journalistic objectivity and gender perspective: Tensions and displacements

## *Objetividade jornalística e perspectiva de gênero: Tensões e deslocamentos*

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### ABSTRACT

It is sought to understand the construction of a gender perspective in journalism and the implications of feminism related to journalistic objectivity in its practice by the analysis of the work of journalists at Portal Catarinas in the southern region of Brazil. The method involves a case study with participant observation in the production of news at portal and in-depth interviews. Analysis showed the existence of ruptures and tensions in the masculinist logic of journalism. Journalistic objectivity is present in practically all decisions but in constant tension, whether due to the choice of guidelines, the framing of news, the closest relationship with sources, and even the choice not to proceed with an agenda in the face of possible consequences in the lives of those involved. These displacements indicate the possibility of a feminist objectivity in journalism.

**Keywords:** Journalism, feminism, gender studies, journalistic objectivity, Portal Catarinas

### RESUMO

Busca-se compreender a construção de uma perspectiva de gênero no jornalismo e as implicações do feminismo relacionadas à objetividade jornalística na sua prática por meio da análise do trabalho das jornalistas do portal Catarinas, da região Sul do Brasil. O método é o estudo de caso, com observação participante na produção das notícias no portal e a realização de entrevistas em profundidade. A análise demonstrou a existência de rupturas e tensões na lógica masculinista do jornalismo. A objetividade jornalística está presente em praticamente todas as decisões, mas em constante tensão, seja por meio da escolha das pautas, dos enquadramentos das notícias, na relação mais próxima com as fontes e até mesmo na escolha por não prosseguir com uma pauta diante de possíveis consequências na vida das pessoas envolvidas. Esses deslocamentos indicam a possibilidade de existência de uma objetividade feminista no jornalismo.

**Palavras-chave:** Jornalismo, feminismo, estudos de gênero, objetividade jornalística, Portal Catarinas

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WE INVESTIGATED THE CONSTRUCTION of a gender perspective in journalism, inquiring about the implications of the feminist proposal of the journalists of the *Portal Catarinas — Jornalismo com Perspectiva de Gênero* (Catarinas Portal — Journalism with a Gender Perspective), founded in 2016 in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil, demonstrated through their practices, which enables the problematization of journalistic objectivity. The understanding of these implications emerged by observing the news production routine of the *Portal Catarinas* and the stances of the journalists expressed in the in-depth interviews carried out in February and March 2018 (Costa, 2018)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup>This article summarises Jessica Gustafson Costa's dissertation research (2018): "*Jornalismo feminista: estudo de caso sobre a construção da perspectiva de gênero no jornalismo*" (Feminist journalism: a case study on the construction of a gender perspective in journalism), published in a book entitled "*Jornalistas e feministas: a construção da perspectiva de gênero no jornalismo*" (Journalists and feminists: the construction of a gender perspective in journalism) (Gustafson, 2019).

We begin with the assumption that reducing gender inequalities requires changes in the discourses that signify and construct social realities. As a social institution, journalism, alongside school, the church, science and the law, produces repeated discourses on stances of normality and difference, defining the individuals who can be recognised as normal and those who deviate from this standard. Thus, as Guacira Lopes Louro (2008) points out, these instances inscribe on bodies the marks and norms that must be followed.

The discourses of these various institutions not only reflect and represent society but also signify, construct and modify meanings, there being no single order of discourse (Fairclough, 2001). We also consider that journalism uses discursive strategies to (de)construct common sense in order to articulate other ideologies (Moita Lopes, 2006). We have observed that in recent years the press has given prominence to issues concerning gender and sexuality, reflecting a broader mobilisation of society and, above all, of feminist movements.

On the other hand, this punctual attention seems to hide an important premise, which is the fact that journalism speaks about gender and sexuality at all times, in all its articles, since it deals with subjects that have always been gendered, sexualised and racialised, as Judith Butler states (2015). The production of meaning takes place not only in gender-specific news reports but also when politics, economics, health, etc. are covered, even when choosing which reporters will be assigned to each story and the sources to be heard because, to recall Joan Scott (1995), gender is the primary means of signifying power relations. Although this approach to understanding gender and its connection to power refers to a Westernised and localised view, as some decolonial theorists point out, we still consider it to be powerful for understanding the genderification present in the present context.

The production of these senses and meanings that involve journalism and society as a whole has culture, with its system of values, as a common denominator. In this sense, journalism can be understood as "social knowledge that

reproduces itself with a cultural pedagogical function that aims to explain ways of being and existing in the world” (Veiga da Silva, 2014, p. 63).

Veiga da Silva’s (2014) conclusion, when carrying out a newsmaking study in a TV newsroom, that journalism has a gender — the masculine one — is one of the central assumptions of the proposed discussion. According to the author, genderification occurs through the reproduction of gender and power relations that are hegemonically prevalent in culture, both in relations within newsrooms and in the news produced, reflecting hierarchies and inequalities. She further considers that all types of journalistic knowledge are permeated by a rationality constituted predominantly from a modern paradigm and a capitalist, masculinist, racist, heterosexist, Western world system, which establishes the values that legitimise knowledge as truth. The journalistic procedures for obtaining information are the main ways of adding truth value to the news, orientated by the notions of impartiality, balance and objectivity (Veiga da Silva, 2014; 2015).

Journalistic objectivity, as a cornerstone of the profession, is related to values inherent to the practice, such as non-partisanship and balance; to epistemological procedures, such as transparency and rigour; to aesthetic values, such as clarity and conciseness of the text; and ethical values, such as justice (Demeneck, 2009). The cornerstone also suggests that facts can be separated from opinions or value judgements and that journalists have the potential to distance themselves from events through neutral language and news reporting techniques.

This approach, which would result in an impartial view of the facts, is subject to many of the same criticisms that have been levelled against positivism (Hackett, 1999), especially in the field of Science. As Cremilda Medina (2008) emphasises, positive-functionalist principles were methodologically disciplined in communication and scientific practices at the same time. As such, the heritage of modern thought is still present in journalistic practice.

From this positivist perspective, journalists are only seen as objective — and ideally classified as neutral and impartial — when they reproduce the common sense and the hegemonic values of society, romanticising journalistic practice and praising these characteristics in the discourse of editorials, commentaries and so forth. Any attempt at a better-positioned social transformation, based on problematising social hierarchies and inequalities, especially those relating to gender, implies the label of biased journalist (Hackett, 1999).

Thus, we understand that the values inherent in modern rationality and positivism, reflected in the foundation of journalistic objectivity, need to be scrutinised in the production of news, and our focus in this research is the production of news by feminist journalists. We have drawn on the contributions of US biologist and feminist Dona Haraway (1995), who has focussed



on a common foundation in science and journalism: objectivity. In her view, academic feminist research has repeatedly tried to respond to what was meant by the term, intending to unmask the doctrines of objectivity because they threatened a growing sense of subjectivity and collective historical action.

Considering the slippery ambiguities of the word ‘objectivity’, what the researcher proposes is not to dismiss it, but to re-signify it based on the idea of embodied objectivity. For Haraway, this means localised knowledge, from a partial perspective of limited location, which makes us responsible for what we learn to see:

...objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision (Haraway, 1995, p. 21).

The author’s wording provides a framework for thinking that the inclusion of women in different fields of knowledge and professionals alone is not alone enough to reduce gender inequalities. It is necessary to reflect on both working techniques as well as the concepts that guide practices. Questioning the already questioned cornerstones of journalism from a gender perspective means the possibility of changing the way one perceives the profession and redefining its techniques and objectives.

We think the same about embodied objectivity, as we believe it is a way of displacing the concept of the positivist paradigm. Similarly, we agree with what Fabiana Moraes (2022) proposes when reflecting on a journalism of subjectivity. According to her, the subjective is part of what affects us and marks what we deliver as a journalistic product. However, subjectivity is not only related to the individual but also to the relationship between this “I” and the community, social relations and culture.

We consider the hypothesis that the journalists from *Portal Catarinas* do not completely break with journalistic objectivity but re-signify it from their activist perspectives. We also assume that their perspective dialogues with Donna Haraway’s (1995) concept of embodied objectivity. As the analysis will demonstrate, the hypotheses raised were confirmed.

The *Portal Catarinas* has attracted the attention of researchers analysing feminist journalism and the gender perspective. Francielli Esmitiz da Silva (2019) approaches the vehicle’s production and the circulation of journalistic content based on its communication practices on the *Portal’s* website and social media. She considers that the work of journalists acquires a role in the democratisation of communication by circulating information related to women’s rights. It broadens

the dialogue with other sources and thus encourages the participation of more social agents in the circulation of information.

Clarissa do Nascimento Peixoto (2019) categorises the *Portal* as a “novel type” of journalism due to its engagement outside the hegemonic media, aligning itself with other outlets in the search for alternative ways of news production and dissemination. Among her considerations is the fact that *Catarinas* has been able to fill a gap when it comes to gender approaches in journalism, but still faces the challenge of maintaining the periodicity with which news is produced. The lack of a sustainable funding model impacts on the difficulties of maintaining regular work and even the possibility of reaching more readers.

Isabella Bergo Costa (2022), in a comparative study of two feminist portals, *Catarinas* and *Feminacida*, from Argentina, analysed the actions of the collectives on Instagram to understand the subversions of hegemonic communication practices and the relationship between the content published and the proposals of decolonial feminism. The researcher believes that the possibility of communicating beyond the Eurocentric matrix of power and intelligibility on a platform like Instagram is a movement of resistance and insistence on a more just communication practice.

As for Barbara Maria Popadiuk and Karina Janz Woitowicz (2021), they researched feminist activities in the media outlets *Gênero e Número*, *Portal Catarinas* and *Revista Azmina*, intending to understand how gender issues are mobilised in journalistic production, considering that there are singularities in the construction of a gender perspective in journalism. Among the findings of the authors are the prominence of women in the news produced and the use of testimonial sources. Specifically concerning the *Portal Catarinas*, they recognised its proximity to the social and feminist movement, demonstrating a more activist and engaged profile.

Influenced by feminist criticism and believing in the transformative possibilities of building a feminist epistemology, we propose, in a different way to the studies presented previously, a reflection on journalism and the foundations that support its conduct, especially the foundation of objectivity, by accompanying the production routine of the *Portal Catarinas*.

Therefore, *Portal* was chosen because of its uniqueness and geographical proximity. Many feminist collectives in Brazil work on the production of journalistic content, but less regularly and mainly aimed at critiquing the traditional media or expressing opinion. The outlet’s regular production and the quality of the stories, which are well contextualised and feature a wide variety of sources, demonstrate that the journalists are attentive to the techniques of the profession, distinguishing them from other feminist websites that produce content.



As it is a study of journalistic practices that sought to find out about the choices and motivations of journalists during the construction of news, the research is part of newsmaking studies (Travancas, 1992; Tuchman, 1999; Veiga da Silva, 2014; Wolf, 1994); with a focus on production routines. The methodology is qualitative research, with the execution of a case study, a method that favours the particularities of phenomena in their complex contexts (Yin, 2005). Among the specificities of the *Portal* is the proposal to work with the construction of news, the core product of journalism. We opted for participant observation techniques (Peruzzo, 2015) for specific topics, in which meetings were scheduled via WhatsApp. The in-depth interview method and techniques were also adopted (Duarte, 2015).

The presentation of the results of the data analysis based on participant observation (Peruzzo, 2015) and in-depth interviews (Duarte, 2015), articulated with the chosen theoretical framework, was organised into six categories: 1) Objectivity embodied in the construction of a gender perspective in journalism; 2) Objectivity embodied in the subversion of the logic of sources - women as privileged sources; 3) Objectivity embodied in the relation with the social movement - the demarcation of journalistic autonomy; 4) Objectivity embodied in the care journalists take with sources; 5) Objectivity embodied in the collective construction of stories — exercise and necessity; 6) Journalistic objectivity embodied — reaffirmation and questioning. By interpreting the responses provided by the journalists and their motivations for decisions regarding journalistic practices reflected in these six categories, we can perceive the existence of ruptures and tensions in the masculinist logic of journalism (Veiga da Silva, 2014), as well as the maintenance of certain crystallised practices in the field and ideals related to the sharing of a professional culture. By valuing the existing displacements, we propose the existence of a feminist objectivity in journalism.

### **PORTAL CATARINAS: JOURNALISM WITH A GENDER PERSPECTIVE**

The *Catarinas Portal* is defined within its editorial guidelines as a media outlet specializing in gender journalism. However, as we will see in the following, the journalists' understanding of their own work varies and goes beyond this definition. It was founded in 2016 in the southern region of Brazil as part of a crowdfunding campaign. Its proposal reflects on journalism as a right and human rights as a basic premise for journalistic production. It defines itself as "The journalism-law is reinforced to the detriment of the journalism-product, demonstrating that its exercise must be attracted by the will to count the present

time from the most diverse voices, from the most diverse points of encounter and mismatch, from the most diverse perspectives”. (Portal Catarinas, 2016, online<sup>2</sup>).

Journalist Raquel<sup>3</sup>, one of the founders of the Portal, says that the proposal was put together with Patrícia, a former colleague from journalism college, and Luíza, an activist who is no longer with the collective. They had long been in contact, as a result of their work in the social and feminist movements. Raquel and Patrícia were already “hanging” stories on another independent journalism platform, but felt the need to invest in a portal with a gender perspective. The Feminist Spring movement<sup>4</sup>, in 2015, The Feminist Spring movement in 2015 was the moment when the two journalists met once again and realised that they shared the same ambition to build a platform linked to gender issues. They then decided to present the idea to Luíza, who was considered a major contribution from both feminist activism and academia.

After a few meetings between the three, the proposal was defined to develop a portal that could be an umbrella encompassing the production of content, the curation of information and the observation of public debates on the subject, especially those triggered by the traditional media. In order to materialise their productions, the three women created an executive team and invited other women to take part in the venture, creating an Editorial Board to support the production and dissemination of content. At this stage, Glória, a journalist who was also active in the feminist movement, joined the collective. The four of them then formed the core of *Portal Catarinas*.

The contributions of Glória to the consolidation of the Portal, with her practice in producing journalistic content, are also related to her previous experience in discussions about the media and feminism, when she took part in the construction of some of the *Mulher e Mídia* (Women and the Media) seminars that take place nationally, promoted by the Patrícia Galvão Institute, in partnership with other organisations. As a result of her interaction with feminist movements in other states, she came to know about the feminist newspapers that were being distributed and wanted to do something similar in the south of the country.

Some of the obstacles she highlighted that prevented initiatives from being consolidated are very interesting for reflecting on the context in which the Catarinas Portal emerged and consolidated itself. For Glória, in previous years, within a collective that was made up of activists, it was very difficult to attract journalists. She attributes this difficulty to her journalistic education, which has always been geared towards distancing oneself from political movements, not building a militant connection, “*this defence of such a journalistic impartiality, you need to be a neutral person*” (Glória).

<sup>2</sup> Available in <https://catarinas.info/jornalismo-catarinas-reportar-para-desconstruir/> Access on 06 mar. 2024.

<sup>3</sup> The names of the journalists were not disclosed in this research and fictitious names were used in an attempt to guarantee their anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> The so-called ‘Spring of Women’ or ‘Feminist Spring’ marked the year 2015 and signified a moment when feminism gained ground and political strength through large-scale marches against setbacks in women’s rights. ‘In 2015, women rapidly assumed a remarkable role in reacting to the setback represented by the approval of the bill (PL) 5069/2013, presented by Eduardo Cunha, aimed at impeding victims of rape from accessing essential medical care’ (Bogado, 2018, p. 29).



With the expansion of feminist debates in society in the following years, the proposal to involve journalists in the production of news with a gender perspective was put into practice, with the establishment of a team of professionals engaged in this articulation. In addition to Raquel, Patrícia and Glória, the *Portal's* core team is made up of journalist Ângela and photographer and columnist Vivian, as well as the contributions of video maker Laura, who produced the video for the launch of the initiative and is still active in the collective. Other journalists also collaborate, but on a more occasional scale, at specific events.

The website also includes the contribution of 22 columnists and an Editorial Board made up of six women, professionals from different areas of expertise. It is in this composition of the group of columnists and the board that we see greater diversity among the members, especially in terms of race, with the participation of black women, as well as lesbian women and a transgender woman<sup>5</sup>. Among the interviewees, responsible for the core of journalistic production during the research, all are cis and white women. With regard to sexuality, most of them identify with sexual experiences that extend beyond heterosexuality.

<sup>5</sup> In 2018, the Portal welcomed an indigenous woman to its board.

### **BUILDING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN JOURNALISM**

In its editorial guidelines, *Portal Catarinas* states that it intends to dialogue with various theoretical lines of feminism, mediating their perspectives on reality, and that it is the first news portal in Brazil to focus on gender, feminism and human rights. Based on this information, we were interested in learning how the journalists define the journalism they practice and how they understand doing journalism from a gender perspective. By addressing this issue, we were also able to discern how some of them interpret the role of journalism in society and, consequently, the negative practices that exist within the field. In this regard, it is important to emphasise that the framework for their practices is also permeated by opposition to the practices of the traditional media, considered negative by the journalists. Or, returning to Stuart Hall(2000), their identity as journalists and feminists is constructed by differentiating what they are not - the difference from hegemonic journalism.

The idea of framing the Portal as journalism with a gender perspective came from Patrícia in an attempt to broaden the approaches and not restrict them and was widely discussed with the other members, considering that the borders between academia and the social movement are porous, of dialogue and exchange. Thus, the motivation was to work on the gender approach in journalistic stories: *Everything related to gender is bad for conservatives, when you talk about gender a whole stigma is created, so we wanted to work on it, reframing it for society [...]* (Patrícia).

By bringing the word “gender” into the portal’s definition, a term that is currently in dispute and has been constantly attacked by conservative sectors of society, they demonstrate the political bias of the endeavour and their commitment to disseminating the meaning that has been defended for decades by the feminist movement. For Patrícia, the demarcation of the perspective is also related to a critique of the shortcomings of the field of journalism detected by them, considering that journalism itself should have a gender perspective, without the necessity of being specialised: “*But then we put it in the slogan to say: we’ve got it, OK?*” (Patrícia).

We discussed this matter with Raquel and she spoke about the need to consider reformulating the *Portal’s* proposal. Treating the gender perspective as a specialisation of journalism is not clearly delineated the distinction between them and the so-called feminine journalism, a form of journalistic specialisation mainly in the realm of magazines and historically targeted at women, without very demarcated political positions. In Raquel’s view, the journalism they practice goes beyond the idea of speciality. When she talks about overcoming the story and the source, we understand that Raquel realises that the journalism they are doing is not limited to covering only the issues of the feminist movement, but also about matters that have always been made invisible in general and that are not present in the hegemonic media. Furthermore, even the most common stories in traditional journalism can be seen on the *Portal*, but from a different perspective.

The definition of which topics should be covered by feminist journalism is complex, since all the subjects that circulate in society have an impact on women’s lives and, therefore, are topics that deserve to be covered or would be relevant to women’s interests. Similarly, topics related to gender should not be seen as subjects aimed solely at women, but rather at society in a broader sense, being directed, at least intentionally, at a more varied audience.

It should also be noted that in conventional media, social issues are addressed from a masculinist perspective (Veiga da Silva, 2014). The gender perspective, then, can be included in any news story in order to overcome this tendency. Approaching social phenomena without a gender perspective results in the turning invisible of the specific and differential impacts on the lives of women. This is what Argentinian researcher Sandra Chaer (2007) calls the transversality of the gender perspective. It is this perspective that Raquel is trying to demarcate when she states that journalism with a gender perspective goes beyond the source, the story and the idea of speciality, becoming a transversal perspective.

The transversality that Raquel addresses is also related to the possibility of it being a space for narratives constructed by women, who have historically been a minority in the recording of history and the present day. This perspective,



which differs from the masculinist one, although it is not journalism specialising in women, seems to indicate an attempt to add other points of view to the construction of reality, based on different journalistic practices. *“Because if we believe that we are in patriarchy, if we believe that women are educated in one way and men in another, it’s obvious that we’re going to have a different practice. [...] Which is not from the perspective of the masculine, but which also surpasses this current perspective of the feminine”* (Raquel).

Raquel does not argue that they are practising a journalism that could be called feminine, although she recognises the possibilities of building new narratives from this perspective. We asked photojournalist Vivian if the gender perspective influences the way she photographs. She replied that it doesn’t change much, as the themes are already geared towards feminism, but that there is a “feminine gaze” in the search for stories.

We note that the two statements present different understandings, however, they are permeated by an idea that directly associates the feminine with women, which can lead to a disregard for the fact that women often have masculinist practices. The inclusion of women in journalism, which now accounts for 64 per cent of the newsrooms in the country (Bergamo; Mick; Lima, 2012), has not had a direct impact on journalistic practices, and the perpetuation of a normative approach to gender issues continues in the content published by the press.

If there is no reflection on the asymmetries and unequal power relations between the masculine and feminine, women and men tend to reproduce the values that circulate in society. What we have observed in the practices and content of the Portal Catarinas is not just a feminine gaze, but a feminist gaze that perceives the gender inequalities and power relations implied in the devaluation of women in all spheres and seeks ways to overcome it.

Considering the journalism they practice as a project under construction, journalist Glória affirms that it is a daily experimentation exercise and highlights the merit of the Portal’s proposal to be a space for the exercise of journalistic practice so that they can all mature together. As some of the journalists have never worked in a newspaper office before, she adds that the Portal is also a space for learning, for collective construction, even for students who are collaborating.

Glória explains that when the initiative was launched, a backlog of diverse content reached them, requiring them to *“have experienced the gender perspective in handling”*<sup>6</sup>. As a result, some more profound stories end up being somewhat delayed by the news. From the moment they had contact with the multiplicity and quantity of stories, several questions emerged: *“Okay, in a political story, how are we going to handle it? What journalistic canons are we going to maintain in the processes of sourcing, selecting information and editing? And what are we not going to keep?”* (Glória).

<sup>6</sup> Interview granted on 22/02/2018.

Concerning the daily dilemmas, Glória explains that she wonders to what extent they are maintaining the structures of the story, the sources and the text. Raquel adds that her choices are very intuitive, not related to theories, and that she sought out the Master's degree to try to understand theoretically what they are doing, she asks herself: *"have we really caused a rupture?"*. This is an important reflection for the members, considering that their practices are constantly under construction.

On the other hand, we also observed that there are values that they see in journalism that are quite dear to them and even somewhat idealised, as can be seen in the expression "journalism from the roots", used by Raquel and echoed by Ângela, when demarcating their position in the construction of the news, unlike the hegemonic media that tries to camouflage its positions, there is the human gaze that directs the stories:

*There's a difference in this journalism... it's a journalism of respect, a humane journalism, ...that we don't hide, we don't need to convey a tone of neutrality... We take a stance and it doesn't have to come across so blatantly, with catchphrases that we don't even use in the trade union movement, with jargon, but in the very construction of the article, you realise that it was built stemming from the perspective that we have.... We want to say that we are on one side, but that doesn't stop us from practising journalism at its roots (Ângela).*

The choice of the specificity of news in the definition of the Portal is also permeated by this ideal of journalism from the roots, as in Raquel's response on the subject: *"... We're very much a fireball, if you allow us, just by talking about it I get goosebumps, we do it all day long"*. The adrenaline rush that journalistic work generates is one of the components shared by the professional community, as is the ability to recognise the obscure faces within a situation, the famous "nose" that refers to news acumen, as Tuchman (1999) points out, and which is present in one of Ângela's speeches when she is investigating a story: *"I'll try to talk to the lawyer off the record and see if my nose is right"* (Field journal).

This strong professional identification, on the other hand, seems to lead to a quest to understand what the best practices of the field are, situated in opposition to commercial journalism, which are scarcely addressed both inside and outside academia. Raquel frequently states that she wants to understand what good journalism is, and what "cool journalism" is because she doesn't know yet. Eduardo Meditsch's (2001) query about how to diagnose an organism if it is not clear how it should work is pertinent in order to reflect on the new journalistic initiatives. As can be seen in the statements made by the Portal journalists,



the Chair still defends an idealised proposal for journalism, also shared by the professionals, playing a role related to shaping public opinion, serving the public interest and monitoring the powers. The discourse of self-legitimation of journalism, as Wilson Gomes (2009) points out, in addition to shaping the identity of the corporation, has the task of convincing society that its existence is essential for democratic societies “because it is capable of serving the public interest” (Gomes, 2009, p. 70). In practice, commercial journalism operates much like any other capitalist company, but the discourse on the function of the field remains the same, it is a “strange and disturbing discursive inertia” (Gomes, 2009, p. 76).

This paradox complicates the search for definitions of how this other type of counter-hegemonic, openly positioned journalism should function, although it does not behave like a social movement press office and does not fit into the logic of the news market. As Glória states, these uncertainties “*force us to carry out this daily exercise of delineating what journalism is all about, what are the stories we publish, what are the actual procedures for constructing the stories*” (Glória).

The premise of journalism as a right, provided for in the profession’s codes based on the fundamental right of citizens to information, has a direct impact on the funding of the Portal and on the understanding that the content published will not be restricted to subscribers only. In addition, it reflects on producing stories that bring important information to women and that are socially silenced. The subject of abortion is very illustrative of this, as Patrícia explains: “*With regard to abortion provided for by law, the Ministry of Health doesn’t publicise where this service is available, or how many services there are in Brazil. And they don’t publicise it because if they do, women will have access to their rights*”. The failure on the part of the State to inform is related to a “fear” that women who don’t qualify for legal abortion in Brazil will lie in order to undergo the procedure, which deprives access for all. “*It’s a genuine violation of women’s rights and this needs to be spoken about*” (Patrícia).

Another violation not covered by the press and which is not widely disseminated in society is that of medical confidentiality in complaints from women who arrive at hospitals after having an abortion. “*Because when a physician informs on a woman, he puts other lives at risk. And there is an omission by the Brazilian State in relation to the agreements to which it is a signatory, various international agreements that emphasize the need for countries to reconsider their restrictive legislations*” (Patrícia). As a result, the international consensus that abortion up to three months is a woman’s right is not being honoured in Brazil, nor are women’s human rights and the constitutional right to confidential care in hospitals.

In opposing mainstream media practices that are considered negative, journalists face the great challenge of feminist critique, as Sardenberg (2001) points out. Such a challenge refers to the need to build other principles and practices in order to meet the social, political and cognitive interests of historically subordinated groups, including women, because a feminism that destroys all can be dangerous (Alcoff, 1994).

### WOMEN AS FAVOURED SOURCES

In an attempt to build not only other journalistic precepts but also other frameworks and relationships, Portal Catarinas favours women as sources. The proposal to bring in voices that are not usually used as sources in the traditional media is one of the great features of this journalism, intending to break with the hegemonic frameworks brought about by the voice of the powerful, understood as primary definers by Stuart Hall et al. (1999). However, it is necessary to emphasise that even within independent journalism, women's sources are still not the preferred sources, perpetuating the asymmetries of the traditional media, according to Vinhote et al. (2016).

Angela explains that since she joined the Portal, she has been recommended by other journalists to seek out female experts, "*who understand the subject and who are often not given the space*" (Ângela). From this perspective, we tried to understand which women are contemplated in their stories and whether there is any attention to diversity. The proposal to reach unheard voices is not a simple task to accomplish, as it involves leaving the known zone and seeking out women who are not directly part of the social movement they are close to.

Glória adds that there is a search for this broader perspective, which is also very much guided by the social movement, and that it is necessary to reach out to other women, both in activism and in journalism. The proposal "*forces you out of your comfort zone and journalism today is very much in the air conditioning, in this situation, right?*" (Glória). The journalist provides an example of this situation with a story she worked on about breastfeeding, starting with the question of how significant it is in women's lives. "*This is a story that puts you at several crossroads*" (Glória). The dilemmas reported by her refer to the contact she has had with women who advocate for uninterrupted breastfeeding until their child reaches two years of age, leading to their absence from work during this period, a significant privilege that the majority of women cannot enjoy.

The movement in favour of breastfeeding, the starting point for the story, does not take into account the specificities and needs of many Brazilian women. As a result, the journalist realised how difficult it would be to get the focus she



wanted, opting to do a series of four stories and explore the issue as much as possible in different contexts. She reports that it was only in the last text that she managed to get closer to the focus she was aiming for, by bringing up the situation of women who have no one to leave their children with because they can't find a daycare centre nearby their workplace, or are unable to breastfeed their children twice a day until they are six months old, as required by law: *"A woman who is a housemaid and who is not allowed by her employer to take her child to work, or who takes her child to work and breastfeeds under these conditions, and this is a favour they are doing for her."* (Glória).

The consideration that motherhood impacts women's lives in different aspects is described by Glória, who also emphasises the importance of breaking away from a utilitarian view of sources through what she calls "journalistic canons": *"A perspective that you won't get by calling the town hall to find out, oh the town hall, how many day-care spots do you have? OK, that's information, it's important, but we need to delve deeper than that"* (Glória). On the other hand, these attempts sometimes fail to materialise due to a lack of structure and people available to dedicate themselves to the stories, this being a proposal that Gloria considers to be challenging.

While there is a motivation to bring a more diverse perspective on women, it was possible to observe other interesting outlines about the sources, such as the connection with women who do not engage with the feminist perspective. During the open agenda meeting, in the initial contact with the journalists from *Portal Catarinas*, the subject arose of the only councilwoman elected after eight years in the City Council who doesn't work under a feminist banner, but rather advocates for animal rights, and whether this would generate a story. In an interview with Ângela, she brought up the subject again and said that the councilwoman's situation brought her a lot of discomfort and that she felt it was necessary to do a story about her political agendas. *"My first thought was to be impulsive and talk about this woman"* (Ângela).

In conversation with the other journalists, she realised that even though she talks about animals, the councillor is a woman who occupies an important political position that has historically been occupied by men. Her presence there is representative, even if it does not fulfil the ideals expected by feminism. *"That's where I grow in the portal, because of the experience the girls have"* (Ângela).

The conversation between the professionals from a feminist perspective means that even if they don't engage with the perspectives developed by the Portal, and consequently aren't favoured voices in the news stories, these women won't a priori be targets of criticism for not taking a stand in relation to the struggles for gender inequality. This reflection is in the discussions within activism that

women are already sufficiently blamed by society for their actions and men, when in similar situations, are exempt from any responsibility. *“Even the conservatives, the anti-feminists, we are careful how we expose them. We’re not going to disqualify them because we’re in this together, even if they don’t know about it”* (Ângela).

The discussion presented about the councilwoman and her agendas is also related to the space for adversary debate, “hearing both sides”, a practice that is also related to the search for journalistic objectivity. Many times, the space for adversarial debate is offered without much thought on the part of journalists, assuming that a guarantee of impartiality in the approach and not favouring just one side is provided as if there were only two sides to everyday situations. On the contrary, it is known that the approach is crossed by professional direction, as in all journalistic choices.

The practice, classified by Tuchman (1999) as a strategic ritual - a routine procedure that has little relevance to the end sought, which is ultimately journalistic objectivity - was discussed with the research interlocutors and appeared frequently in the conversations we had. Firstly, we perceive an understanding of the space for adversary debate as a basic premise for the practice of journalism, as opposed to the pamphleteering discourse characteristic of the social movement. The question first emerged during participant observation with Ângela when she spoke about the need to bring the adversary debate into the agenda, emphasising the difference between the work she does at the Portal and the work she does in trade union journalism:

*In college, we’re told to be impartial. At the union we are only given one side, saying that in a meeting with 10 people, there are 50. At the Portal, we think about the other side and the best way to deal with the situation. I think that’s journalism... [Ângela] Pondering the adversarial, reflecting on the consequences of this other side, is understood as the way to do journalism (Field Journal).*

Ângela also spoke about the fact that they have a stance, which is not hidden in the content, and does not prevent us from hearing this other side, which she calls «different». The motivation is to show the divisions that exist on the subject being discussed. We understand that addressing the antagonisms and disputes of meaning that exist in society causes the supposed social stability often constructed by the press to be shaken. On the other hand, we question whether the search for this contradiction exists only to fulfil what has become conventionalised as a duty of journalism and whether the existence of the *Portal* no longer figures as a contradiction in the disputes over the meanings of the subjects they cover.



In the following statements, we will understand other motivations of the journalists and we will realise that the bias defended by them is still present when addressing divergent voices. *“Even the questions we formulate for this other side are full of our context, of what we think, and what we believe. And we don’t hide that at any point, I think”* (Ângela).

For Raquel, the practice is permeated by a very well-defined ethical issue that is recommended to other journalists. The adversary defended by the professional does not refer to the search for divergent opinions on issues, which could, for example, mean the search for conservative sectors to deal with feminist agendas. We understand that the intention is related to guaranteeing the right of those directly involved in the story to have a space for their versions, especially in news stories with a higher level of complaint.

The perspective of the journalists, while bringing them closer to certain groups, makes contact with more institutional sources difficult. Ângela reports that in some stories there is a search for official sources involved in the news, but some choose not to talk to the professionals of the Portal due to the view they have of their work, as happened with the ostensive Police in a story about aggression against women journalists. *“We contacted the police, asking for information, and the next day we asked again and they didn’t get back to us. Because there’s also that, where you’re talking from, who you’re talking to”* (Ângela).

In cases where the people involved in the story consent to the interview, we notice that the practice of listening to the other side is not so much related to a strategic ritual linked to objectivity, but rather to a strategy to point out the inconsistencies in the discourses being delivered. In the stories in which Patrícia works on the subject of abortion, it is also possible to observe this movement. The journalist ponders that there are cases and cases and that the adversary can be understood in the articulation between feminism and journalism. *“I don’t put a priest on my story, so if it’s a court hearing, I’ll put a statement he made at the hearing, but I’m not going to call a priest to talk about the right to life”* (Patrícia). For Patrícia, women activists for the legalisation of abortion already talk about the right to life, and the words of a priest would be pointless: *“The adversary is that we bring in these women who aren’t being talked about in the mainstream media”*.

This journalistic practice described by Patrícia indicates a broader view that certain discourses already circulate hegemonically in society and that it would not be their job to ratify these ways of understanding the subject. In this sense, the gender perspective would be present in journalistic practice in the selection of sources, demarcating who has the legitimacy to speak.

*...I delegitimise the words of a priest as adversary speech. For me, he doesn't have the same legitimacy that he has in the traditional media and I think that's where the gender perspective comes in, that's the gender perspective, it's you delegitimising certain sources that are very important to the traditional media... In an eventuality, perhaps it's important to put it out there to bring out the contradictions in that speech, right? As a church that defends life in certain circumstances, some lives, not all (Patrícia).*

Regarding women as favoured sources, it was possible to perceive the search for diversity, in an attempt to surpass the circle of activism, but also the difficulties of this proposal. Committing to other approaches means giving up a certain “comfort” related to sources that dialogue with journalists in their activist practices and are consequently more available for interviews. By proposing to broaden perspectives and voices, the potential of feminist journalism is valued, demonstrating that the issues raised have an impact on the lives of different women in various ways.

Another perception that indicates a subversion of traditional journalistic logic was the care taken by journalists with their sources. An essential element of journalism, “the scoop” can be considered one of the myths most shared by journalistic culture. The scoop as something to be won is a factor related both to the competition between journalists and media outlets and to the mythology of the journalist as a great “hunter” (Traquina, 2008). On the other hand, if we analyse it from a gender perspective, as highlighted by Veiga da Silva (2014), the valorisation of this practice is also linked to its attribution to masculine characteristics, alongside others such as impact, complaint and strength, in which the journalist is the “scooper”, the “hunter”, the “investigator”, of a masculinist norm of dispute, competitiveness, proactivity, authority-authoritarianism and domination: “These values affect power relations and the hierarchy of newsrooms, since the professionals who fulfil the attributes conventionally recognised as masculine are closer to power and prestige...” (Veiga da Silva & Marroco, 2018, p. 35).

From this point on, we realised from our first contact with the journalists at Portal Catarinas that the pursuit of the scoop is something that is undervalued among them and does not figure as a goal. This position is influenced by the structure they have to carry out their stories, accepting that they wouldn't be able to compete with other outlets with a greater number of professionals and resources. In addition, and above all, care with sources is another value that is defended and that implies the position of not pursuing the scoop.



Ângela says that one of the first things she learnt when she joined the Portal was that there is no quest for the journalistic scoop, because “*we as journalists are very impulsive in wanting to know the details of things and wanting to know the information first hand so that we can pass it on to everyone*” (Ângela). For her, the action that should be pursued is the construction of well-founded news that brings a plurality of ideas and as much detail as possible. Glória also believes that competition is something very strong in the culture of journalism and that it is not easy to renounce it. “*The Diário will drop their story, ours is another story, our sources, our depth, our perspective, it’s another story. So we’re not competing with them*” (Glória).

The specificity of the practice that results in differentiated content is clear in the journalists’ conception of their own work; their experiences within the feminist movement are imbricated in the ethical reflection on journalism, especially concerning their sources. We recognise this when Raquel says that one has to have the sensitivity not to exploit the pain that people are going through in some delicate situations and that the journalist who exploits this is compared to a “vulture”, an animal that feeds on carrion.

The stance of not being a vulture journalist and not having the scoop as a value is reflected in an ethical stance, which is to be careful with sources. We consider this to be an important concern, in the sense of not overlapping journalistic interests with their responsibility for the possible consequences of this interview. The protection they advocate leads them to seek resources to minimise exposure, in line with their activist stance: “*This perspective of looking at things from an activist perspective also appears in situations of trying to understand and seek the protection of the source in certain situations*”. (Glória).

Other scenarios seem to be illustrative for journalists when it comes to dealing with people involved in situations that would be of interest to the Portal’s coverage. In these cases, journalistic interest was not the prioritised value, which consequently led to the story being dropped so as not to harm those involved, although these are painful decisions. “*We have already worked a lot on the story and there comes a time when we realise that this is not the case, that this story is going to have an effect and this effect on this person’s life is not going to help change the situation...*” (Glória).

The humane approach defended by the journalist indicates, in addition to caring for the person, the consideration that when people are under strong emotion, they are unable to properly formulate their responses. Glória explains this when she comments: “*We’re going to take it down even if she only talks to us, she’s not in any psychological condition, the person has already been bombarded by the press and on social media ...*”. This action often goes beyond the simple

relationship between journalist and source, which we also consider to be a mark of the intertwining of journalism and activist practices in the feminist movement.

The proximity of many of the stories they cover to specific gender issues, as we have argued, does not jeopardise their assessments of the cases, but it does enhance them. By not prioritising the news scoop but caring for sources, we can also see that there is an appreciation of attributes linked to the feminine, such as care and protection. This opposition to the more traditional masculinist values of journalism, Veiga da Silva and Beatriz Marroco (2018) call a subversion of the modern-positivist-masculinist logic of journalism.

### **ACTIVISTS AND JOURNALISTS: THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT AND JOURNALISTIC OBJECTIVITY**

The relationship between journalism and other social fields has always been ambiguous. The raw material for news production is found in institutions, organisations and social groups, and it is essential for journalism to maintain relationships of trust with these groups in order to access the information necessary for its practice. On the other hand, the field is also inserted in an arena of disputes over visibility, requiring constant negotiations between journalistic interests and those of the sources. These relationships imply the functioning of the journalistic field and the condition of operating under constant pressure from various fields of forces (McQuail, 2012).

In traditional journalism, the main influences of power are the social institutions that hold the greatest social power, such as the government, businessmen and members of the parliament and the judiciary, who are usually the main advertisers of the media outlets. The specificity of the *Portal Catarinas*, since it was born out of the social movement and does not have advertising, and is “*the movement itself in some way*” (Raquel), does not make it immune to pressures and influences, however, their origin is distinguished, being exerted mainly by the social movement itself. The demarcation of their autonomy as journalists can be considered one of the main challenges faced, as we will demonstrate below.

In addition to their activist work in the feminist movement, which represents the basis for their journalistic construction, the sources of this same movement are the favoured voices, providing not only information but also acting as consultants, advising on how to approach certain issues. In this aspect, close contact is considered positive, as it facilitates access to information, often first-hand, although it demands a series of responsibilities.

Patrícia believes that there is a greater demand for this journalistic distancing in relation to the Portal or other outlets that are close to social movements,



permeated by the matter of journalistic objectivity, but normally this same type of questioning is not asked of the hegemonic media, which is also very close to its sources. *“Globo is also an activist. It has a relationship with business groups, a strong relationship with these people, nevertheless activism is seen as something for those who do not have money.”* (Patrícia). She ponders on the discourse of impartiality defended by the major media outlets.

We noticed that the positions of the Portal journalists are more transparent to the public, as they recognise that proximity to certain social actors is part of the profession, but that there is a movement of approximation and distancing. Therefore, their work does not involve acting as a press office for specific groups, although the issues brought forth by them are of significant importance for the maintenance of the journalistic initiative.

Glória also emphasises the importance of acting pedagogically to enhance the understanding of journalism among other actors in activism. *“We keep trying to maintain that distance, that sometimes you help, you lend a helping hand, oh mate let’s go, and sometimes we distance ourselves to say that we’re here to do journalism”* (Glória).

One of the alternatives in the quest to separate activism and journalistic work was the creation of an association, which, in addition to them, is composed of other women who work on projects that go beyond the scope of journalism, such as building mobilisations within the social movement and in administrative and bureaucratic matters. In addition to the maintenance issues of the *Portal*, the association was founded with the purpose of delineating journalistic autonomy, to highlight that, even though certain issues align with the scope worked on in the *Portal*, the framing will be determined based on ethical precepts and professional practices valued by them, not necessarily aligning with those advocated by the movement.

In numerous instances, journalistic objectivity spontaneously emerged as a topic addressed by the members of the Portal during the course of the conversations we held. It is necessary to emphasise that although we only inquired about the foundation in two questions during the in-depth interview stage, the journalists were aware of the theme of this research and so we attribute that, even without being directly questioned on the subject, they directed their discourse to contribute to the preparation of the work. At the same time, we considered that by articulating the research problem inquiries, we prompted a certain level of reflection among the journalists regarding the work they have been undertaking. This is exemplified in Raquel’s earlier highlighted query, wherein she questioned whether they truly effectuate a rupture in relation to journalistic canons and practices.

Although in some of the circumstances described above there are idealised considerations about journalism, in reality, their view does not seem to be naïve, especially when they assert that listening to the “other side” is often positive in order to reinforce the perspective advocated by the journalists themselves. This understanding seems to acknowledge that the orientations and interpretations of professionals are constantly present in journalistic practice, and the resource also serves to demonstrate the incongruity of opposing discourses.

From what we understand, the *Portal's* credibility with its audience is permeated by adherence to the more canonical rules of the profession or what they perceive to be journalistic ethics, related both to the quality of the investigation and in-depth study of the stories and to the ensure that the people involved in the news have the space to present their perspectives. By valuing this journalistic ethic, the *Portal's* autonomy must be maintained, as was well illustrated by the tensions with the social movement.

The open stance of journalist Patrícia, concerning the legitimisation of certain voices and the delegitimisation of others, as exemplified in the decision not to approach a priest to discuss the right to life in the context of abortion. This is because the ideology defended by part of the Church in criminalising abortion leads to the deaths of women, is considered concrete, objective, replete with statistics and expert opinions, and diverges from most of the approaches taken by traditional journalism. What is objective for the journalist is not objective for much of the traditional media, demonstrating that objectivity is always contextual and situational. It is based on this data and concrete cases that the *Portal's* coverage of the subject is established, favouring both investigation and interpretation.

Another understanding is brought up by Glória, who considers that in a capitalist context, what has become a journalistic agenda is very much shackled to maintaining the status quo and that objectivity is related to what has been conventionally considered important to be covered. Thus, they try to build alternatives, even without predefined models. “*And it's healthy not to have models*” (Glória).

*When dealing with topics that haven't been experienced, we confront nuances that aren't immediately apparent, and therefore, we need to experiment... That's why I say, it's the laboratory itself, it's the exercise. So, I think we have this challenge and this shaking of structures from the choice of stories to production....* (Glória)

The journalist considers that there is a movement of subversion on the part of the *Portal* in all stages of journalistic work, although it is still an exercise, mainly due to the nuances that arise in the stories and that do not usually appear in traditional approaches. She adds that she is very averse to the concept of



objectivity. *“If we have to preserve certain canons to fit into this narrow box of journalism, I think we will prefer others”* (Glória). She emphasises which other goals she favours: *“I believe that we will prefer the multiplicity of sources, which is also a challenge, we will prefer to narrate the story as faithfully as we possibly can, with the elements we have available.* A minimal objectivity, however, is necessary so that the written text is comprehensible and can be understood by individuals outside their occupied space, who may not necessarily share the same values, as a guarantee of effective communication. Finally, she emphasises the importance of subjectivity: *“It is precisely in these subjective nuances that we seek our topics. These are the stories that are not explicitly presented there and in the approaches that are not necessarily taken, they are born out of subjectivity, I would say [...]”* (Glória).

When analysing the responses, we consider that there are movements of subversion, particularly in the relationships they establish with the sources, as well as in the appreciation of subjective nuances and the commitment to approaches and framings that differ from the traditional ones, or the “dominant interpretative framework” (Ponte, 2009, p. 209), which are not crystallised and much less related to the reproduction of common sense. Objectivity, advocated by some of them and problematised by others, does not seem to be understood as a method to ensure the impartiality and neutrality of news, because the journalism they practice is openly biased.

It is in adhering to the techniques of the profession, especially in the standard of the text, such as the construction of the lead, the use of inverted commas in the interviewees’ statements, as well as referential, concise and clear language, that one can ascertain, based on their responses, the greater framing. In the selection and approach of the stories, a specific framing is evident, based on interpretative matrices that are different from those of the hegemonic media. We observe that adherence to established practices in the field is related to both the sharing of a professional culture, derived from both education and professional experience and a legitimization of the work they perform.

When dealing with topics that are often in dispute in society, they believe it is necessary to justify their choices primarily on the basis of what they refer to as “concrete data”. It is worth noting that the values already crystallised in society do not need to be constantly justified, as they are considered “the truth”. Thus, the commitment to constructing objectivity may indicate an attempt to validate the alternative discourses that they endeavour to circulate through the journalism they practice.

**FINAL REMARKS: A FEMINIST OBJECTIVITY IN JOURNALISM**

Based on the considerations brought forth in the research categories discussed in this article, we contend that the positioning of professionals as journalists and feminists enables them to present other versions of reality with a heightened sense of responsibility towards the topics they engage with. For Haraway (1995), it is our duty as feminists to insist on a better, more fitting, richer explanation of the world, allowing for a better living within it. On the other hand, the construction of an identity as journalists and feminists does not proceed in a stable and coherent way, showing contradictory, fragmented and displaced aspects (Hall, 2000). After all, subject positions are never fixed, they are variable, multiple, in constant tension and subject to revision.

This continuous movement can be perceived in the reaffirmation of certain models understood as indispensable to journalism, in consensus with a journalistic identity shared within the professional culture. At the same time, they subject these same practices to critiques and resignifications, motivated by their feminist perspectives and in opposition to the way in which the hegemonic media operates.

Throughout the research field, there were numerous instances in which we observed negotiations and renegotiations and we highlight some of them in the course of this paper, which revealed a journalistic practice that was moving towards the construction of feminist journalistic objectivity, always provisional and subject to constant debate and reflection. In reflecting on the canons defended or contested, on the limits of their work and on the impact of the news they publish on the lives of their sources, the journalists from the Portal demonstrate that they do not intend to reach definitive answers, but rather to value ongoing and collective construction.

The possibility of the existence of feminist objectivity in journalism, based on the analysis conducted, indicates provisional directions, stemming from the exercise of constant reflection on both the framing of the news and the relationship with sources. The accountability for the impact of their work also became evident, thus indicating the limits and potential of journalism to grasp social complexity. The objectivity that permeates the Portal's journalistic practice does not disregard subjectivity, but rather values it by investing in the subjective nuances that are inherent to their work. As the journalists rightly emphasise, the stance they express in their approaches is explicit, with no intention of camouflaging the perspective they are defending. Feminist practice in journalism has been demonstrated to be permeated by the commitment to connection among women with different positions, both in relation to the sources and among the journalists themselves, but who share the same transformative



purpose. Objectivity, then, is about engagement, embracing the risks of each choice. After all, as Haraway (1995) asserts, we are imperfect and (thank the goddesses) we are not in control of the world. ■

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# The theory of social representations and the theory of mediations: A methodological proposal to draw both theories closer to each other

## *A teoria das representações sociais e a teoria das mediações: Uma proposta metodológica de aproximação*

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### ABSTRACT

This study summarizes research aiming to bring together Serge Moscovici's theory of social representations and Jesús Martín-Barbero's theory of mediations. A theoretical and methodological discussion is described based on a discussion of the main references of both theories in search of tangency aspects that can bring these theories closer together. Such research resulted in a diagram that suggests a methodological protocol for future studies in communication.

**Keywords:** Social representations, mediation, theory, communication

### RESUMO

O artigo sumariza parte de uma pesquisa cujo propósito foi o exercício de aproximação entre a teoria das representações sociais, a partir de Serge Moscovici, e a teoria das mediações, de Jesús Martín-Barbero. Apresenta-se a discussão teórica e metodológica, baseada em referências principais de ambas as teorias, procurando aspectos de tangência que permitam a aproximação delas. O artigo resulta em um diagrama como sugestão de protocolo metodológico para estudos futuros no campo da Comunicação.

**Palavras-chave:** Representações sociais, mediações, teoria, comunicação

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**T**HIS ARTICLE PROPOSES a theoretical-methodological approximation between the theory of social representations, by Serge Moscovici, and the theory of mediations, by Jesús Martín-Barbero, in order to analyze how representations are constructed and identify the main mediators of this process. To this end, it is assumed that the field of social representations and the field of mediations are closely linked to cultural aspects and responsible for the construction of the symbolic universe of subjects. Social representations circulate in words, messages, discourses, and also in the media. This condition means that they can crystallize and materialize (Domínguez Gutiérrez, 2006), making it possible to identify the mediations at play in the construction of social representations regarding an object.

The theory of social representations deals with a form of socially shared knowledge, which arises from the daily exchanges of thought and social actions in a group. Social representations are essential to understand the diversity of individuals, their behaviors and phenomena, in all their strangeness and unpredictability, as it is from these representations that subjects build the world in which they live. For Moscovici (2013) social representations can be identified in social phenomena. This is explained by Stropasolas (2002, p.24), when he writes that “social representations generate social facts, make social identities emerge, mobilize and socially organize people and groups around specific demands, redefining the history and dynamics of societies.” When social actors give meaning to the world around them, they construct their reality and such relationships are continually established.

In turn, the theory of mediations by Jesús Martín-Barbero was innovative in terms of breaking with the view centralizing the media in the communication process, and proposing to redirect the focus to what the scholar called mediations, which would be “between” the media and the subjects. Martín-Barbero understands mediations as a “tracing that connects in web the dispersed, different and distant dots and lines that weave a map to a reality that is verified or to a concept that is maintained and managed” (2018, p. 22). This is complemented by Orozco (1996), to whom mediations are influences that form the social subject and depend on the life path and cultural conditions of each individual. During their development as social beings, humans are in a constant process of socialization, learning how to act and react to each situation. In every new coexistence group, there is always a set of norms, values, statuses and roles to be played.

This article summarizes part of the interdisciplinary research carried out in the area of Social and Applied Sciences<sup>1</sup> and seeks to introduce to the area of Communication an interpretative possibility for the phenomena that it studies. After a theoretical discussion on both theories, it presents a methodological protocol that can be applied in future studies.

<sup>1</sup>This is the doctoral thesis *Múltiplos olhares, múltiplas mediações: as representações sociais da ruralidade entre os jovens rurais da Microrregião de Santa Cruz do Sul* (2017), written by the author of this article under the supervision of the co-authors.

## ABOUT THE TWO THEORIES

The phrase social representation was first used by Moscovici (2013) in the 1960s, based on the theory of collective representation initially proposed by Émile Durkheim in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The main difference between the two approaches is the fact that Moscovici believes that subjectivity should also be valued, not just the collective. For the author, the collective is not decisive, nor the strongest factor, which contradicts the homogeneous character of collective representations postulated by Émile Durkheim. According to Moscovici, the model of society considered by Durkheim to think about representations was not as complex as the character of modern societies. In Durkheim's world, which was more conservative and static, transformations were slower. Therefore, representations could be more structured and crystallized, justifying the term "collective", as they would be transmitted from traditions and from one generation to another. From Moscovici's perspective, this logic could not persist in the modern world, characterized by a fluid and dynamic reality, where representations could spread quickly, for instance, through the media. Due to several social, cultural, political, and economic changes, representations could even have a short life span. For the author, it would no longer be possible to disregard the new reality that was being established, where the media began to play a major role in the constitution of representations.

In this way, Serge Moscovici replaced the *collective*– associated with a more positivistic and static tradition – with the *social*, which would give a more dynamic and appropriate dimension to modern societies (Guareschi, 2000). For the author, representations.

are specific phenomena related to a particular means of understanding and communicating – a means that creates both reality and common sense. It is in order to emphasize this distinction that I use the term "social" instead of "collective" (Moscovici, 2013, p. 49).

Concurrently, Jodelet (2005) understands representations as forms of practical knowledge that connect a subject to an object. In order to qualify this knowledge as practical, one does not seek only experience, references and the conditions in which this knowledge is produced. It is necessary to consider mainly the way in which representations are constructed for a subject to act in the world.

This is based on the assumption that representations are plural systems consisting of ideas, beliefs, images that allow objects to be thought of in



various ways (Rodríguez Salazar, 2009). Moscovici (2013) further demonstrates that representations arise both between two people and between two groups, as they all have representations. They create conventions for objects, people, or events, intervening in the cognitive activities of subjects. “These conventions enable us to know what stands for what” (Moscovici, 2013, p. 39). For this reason, it is considered common sense knowledge, which, when shared by a given group, presents, in turn, unique dynamics. This, in continuity, would reflect social diversity and the plurality of its symbolic constructions (Piñero Ramírez, 2008). For this reason, Moscovici (2013) insists on saying that social phenomena allow us to visibly identify representations. Conversations, for instance, would be the places where popular knowledge and common sense are developed, and, based on this process, we would be able to identify them.

Common sense would be a way of enabling the existence of a certain cohesion in any given society because it is knowledge present in subjects. Such common sense, in some cases, can be used to justify an action or thought: “everyone thinks like that”, or “it has always been like that”. This happens because it is a more immediate and superficial thought, which can often even carry prejudice. At the same time, however, it can be considered very useful for society because it allows everyone to have the same knowledge, regardless of class, age, or gender. On the other hand, it prevents people from searching for scientific principles, truths and information on a given subject, since they supposedly know the answer from common sense.

According to Moscovici (2013), society has the need to reconstitute a “common sense”, by continuously creating a substrate of images and meanings, without which no collectivity could operate. For the author, forms of representation are stable, exert coercion and thus constitute society. Representations “have a reality which, however symbolic and mental, is just as real, if not more real, than a physical reality” (Moscovici, 2013, p. 287). For this reason, social representations have the status of common-sense theories, as they are theories resulting from the perception, interpretation, and consolidation of social signifiers. This is where mediations and representations connect, because they occur in everyday life and depend on it. This is possible because representations are responsible for the way social subjects learn about the world; from the characteristics of their environment; from their reality and lived experience; from the information that flows and is absorbed.

The way in which subjects represent a certain reality in their symbolic universe is related not only to collective life, but also to the processes of

symbolic elaboration, requiring that social subjects struggle to make sense of the world, understand it, and find their place in it (Jovchelovitch, 2000b). Therefore, our suggestion is to look at social representations considering that they are inherent to all communication processes, all daily activities, all lived experiences, being continuously mediated by the subject's trajectory. Furthermore, as Jovchelovitch (2000b, p.81) writes,

communication is mediation between a world of different perspectives; work is mediation between human needs and the raw material of nature; rites, myths and symbols are mediations between the otherness of an often mysterious world and the world of human intersubjectivity: they all to some extent reveal the search for sense and meaning that characterizes human existence in the world.

In order to capture the social representations of an object, it must be considered that these representations are the result of an analysis of associations and ideas from various questions (Spink, 2000). According to Sá (1998, the analysis of representations needs to be three-dimensional to be considered a thorough research, not limited to describing the cognitive content of a representation. It is also necessary to relate them at least “to the sociocultural conditions that favor their emergence” and carry out “a discussion of their epistemic nature in comparison with scholarly knowledge”(p.33). It is necessary to know how the subject relates to the object. This object can be a person, a situation or social event; it can be an idea, a theory, a moment, a feeling, or something abstract. Furthermore, this object of representation can be either real or imaginary, as there is no representation without an object (Domínguez Gutiérrez, 2006).

Every representation has two interdependent faces — the iconic and symbolic faces — which have an image and a meaning. To be able to identify the most significant mediations in the process of constructing a subject's representations, Martín-Barbero's approach may be the most appropriate. The author proposes the perspective of mediations when it comes to understanding popular cultures and the reality conveyed by the media, a fact very close to the way in which social representations can be explained.

The book *From the media to mediations* by Martín-Barbero, first published in 1987, has become one of the main studies to understand the changes that occurred in Latin America with the development of the Cultural Industry. It was a period where indigenous theoretical propositions were being built in Latin America, seeking to address regional problems.



It was not just the limitation of the hegemonic model that led to such a change of paradigm. It was the recurring facts, the social processes in Latin America, that are changing the object of study for communication researchers.” (Martín-Barbero, 2003, p. 285).

Martín-Barbero’s aim was to “understand the relationships between the mass culture created in the United States, or based on North American models, and Latin American local and traditional cultures” (Martino, 2009, p. 179). This was to be done considering objects of study that gave “a central role to the position of the subject, obliterated by hegemonic perspectives in communication studies of the time, which privileged the structure of media ownership and technological or textual determinism” (Escosteguy, 2018, p. 29). This has led to a theory that considers regional space-time and the protagonism of subjects, resulting in what may be the first or most original Latin American Theory of Communication (Lopes, 2018a).

We propose to demonstrate that Martín-Barbero’s communicational thought does not conform to a theory of reception nor to a theory of mediations, but constitutes a specific theory of communication, characterized by its own epistemology, methodology and concepts, which we call *Barberian theory of communication*. (p. 39).

Thus, by focusing on mediations, Martín-Barbero explores the cultural, political, economic, and social issues of communication, including those involving the media. To understand this articulation it is necessary to take into account some assumptions of contemporary cultural theory, whose bases are in Cultural Studies: communication and culture are interrelated, one does not depend on the other; communication is not restricted to means or media, it is at the constitutive level of social relations, either mediated or not by technological artifacts; these artifacts are cultural, both in their creation and in their use – they are configured as “cultural” technologies; and communication cannot be taken as something in itself, apart from the sociocultural, economic and spatial-temporal dimensions of reality. These assumptions make up the theory of mediations.

The cultural analysis proposed by the Barberian Communication theory broadens the understanding of the place of culture, placing it as the main mediator of communication processes. In the case of media communication, for instance, culture has a diachronic and historical relationship with the cultural product,

which is produced from certain cultural matrices; it also mediates a synchronic relationship between production and reception. Therefore,

mediation must be understood as the structuring process that configures and reconfigures both the logic of production and the logic of uses. It requires concurrent thinking about the space of production and the time of consumption, both articulated by everyday life (uses/consumption/practices) and by the specificity of the technological and discursive devices of the media involved (Lopes, 2018a, p. 17).

The work of Jesús Martín-Barbero – as well as of other contemporary researchers such as Néstor García Canclini, Guillermo Orozco and Renato Ortiz – has consisted of itineraries of the relationship between culture, communication, and society in recent decades, with Latin American territories as the locus of analysis. In the author’s journey it is possible to understand that “[...] the embedding of communication in culture is no longer a mere cultural matter, as both economy and politics are committed to what is produced there” (Martín-Barbero, 2003, p. 224). He follows by affirming that “A recognition that was, at first, an operation of methodological displacement to re-view the entire process of communication from its other side, i.e., that of reception, the place of resistance and appropriation from its uses” (Martín-Barbero, 2018, p. 10). To see the condition of dominance or subalternity of societies, to a certain extent, through media communication. Miscegenation and hybridism are movements that highlight power struggles through the construction of meanings about social events.

Over the more than three decades in which Martín-Barbero produced this theory, his work was marked by a “cognitive cartography” (Lopesa, 2018): a sequence of complex maps in which (new) mediations were activated, evidencing a theoretical work of interpretation of different social times, built at the intersections between communication and culture. After working out three initial mediations – *cultural competence, social temporality and family daily life* – in *From the media to mediations*, in 1987, Martín-Barbero introduces the *night map*, or *Map of Cultural Mediations of Communication*, which highlights the close relationship between media and culture, as well as a procedural view of communication, with the diachronic and synchronic axes connecting the moments in the communicative process. A few years later, in 1998, he further developed this *night map*, calling the new design *Communicative Mediations of Culture*. According to Lopes (2018a), this is when the author strengthens his



theory as a communicational theory, recognizing the advancement of media in social processes. The maps are itineraries of the theory of mediations, which become methodological protocols.

The author's last two methodological maps, organized in the 2010s, propose the *Communicative Mediations of Cultural Changes*, with the recognition of a complex and articulated web of multiple mediations, incorporating the issues of a present full of new flows, identities, ritualities, spatialities, temporalities and technicalities, the latter having a theoretical density previously unprecedented in author's work<sup>2</sup>. "The importance of this map lies in recognizing that communication mediates all forms of cultural and political life in society" (Lopes, 2018a, p. 56).

The maps are schemes that recognize situations based on mediations and subjects and in which the author radically brings communication and culture together.

This new perspective means placing communication problems in another field, that of socio-cultural processes [sic]. Therefore, it proposes the study of communication phenomena through mediations, that is, it indicates an entry into the field of study of institutions, organizations and subjects, through different social temporalities and multiplicity of cultural matrices (Jacks, 1995, p. 38).

The concept of mediations, broadly defined in Martín-Barbero's work, can be defined as the "articulation between communication practices and social movements, the different temporalities and pluralities of cultural matrices"<sup>3</sup> (Martín-Barbero, 1993, p. 224). Mediations can be understood as all those factors and devices that permeate a political, social or cultural process and that were built along the evolution of these same processes. These are elements and facts that lie "between events" and often permeate them, modifying the configuration of meanings.

Mediations can be understood as meaning-producing structures to which the receiver is linked. Personal history, the culture of one's group, your immediate social relationships, your cognitive capacity, are all mediations, but your way of watching television, your relationship with the media and the messages conveyed also interfere in the process (Martino, 2009, p. 180 ).

For Gutiérrez Vidrio (2003), the media participate in the mediation process but this meaning-producing relationship also involves other mediating

<sup>2</sup> Recently, Jacks et al. (2019) organized a publication where all mediations created by Martín-Barbero are explored, comparing them with the theoretical bases of their "original" areas (Geography, Philosophy, History, etc.).

<sup>3</sup> Our translation of: "articulaciones entre prácticas de comunicación y movimientos sociales, las diferentes temporalidades y la pluralidad de matrices culturales". (Martín-Barbero, 1993, p. 224).

instances: the family, school, or other groups with which the subject interacts. Martín-Barbero's first elaboration regarding the groups of influence that participate in the construction of meanings proposes three instances of mediation – *cultural competence*, *social temporality* and *family daily life*. These were chosen for this exercise of drawing approximations with the theory of social representations because they are understood as the “basic” mediations structuring the Barberian theory. In a specific application of the theoretical-methodological proposition, observing the phenomenon to be studied, other mediations can be selected from the cartography created by the author throughout his work. When the first mediations were chosen, the author himself expressed in his work that a mediation protocol does not replace a previous one but creates possibilities for approaching and understanding reality.

Thus, for the purpose of approximating both theories in this article, this initial set of three mediations is taken from the theory proposed by Martín-Barbero in the 1980s, which are considered the main ones for capturing cultural references and their implementations.

### HOW TO APPROXIMATE BOTH THEORIES?

It is observed that social representations and mediations are interconnected. It can be said that the representations that subjects make of the reality in which they live can vary according to the social context and groups with which they relate. From this perspective, it can be said that it is from mediations that representations occur. Therefore, these are distinct theoretical approaches – with their own dynamics, logics, and boundaries – but closely interconnected. In order to understand representations, it is necessary to “understand the processes through which they are produced and transformed” (Duveen, 2000, p. 263). As Jovchelovitch (2000a; 2000b) explains, mediations do not only generate social representations. The latter, in turn,

are forged by social actors to deal with the diversity and mobility of a world that, although belonging to all of us, collectively transcends us. They are a potential space of collective construction, where each person goes beyond the dimensions of their own individuality to enter another dimension, fundamentally related to the first: the dimension of the public sphere. In this sense, social representations not only emerge through social mediations, but also become social mediations (Jovchelovitch, 2000a, p. 65).



Mediations “express the space of the subject *par excellence*, in their relationship with the otherness of the world, struggling to give meaning, interpret and construct the spaces in which they find themselves” (Jovchelovitch, 2000b, p. 81). It is known that the socialization process occurs in different ways, including family, school, and cultural consumption dynamics, as the mediating function is attributed to different groups in which the subjects participate.

It is in the explanatory space that social representations can be perceived. “An explanatory space is defined here as a set of concepts that can be linked by implicative relationships that support valid logical explanations” (Wagner, 2000, p. 157). When analyzing the speech of subjects, their opinions and the reality in which they live, it is possible to understand how they represent a certain reality or object. The phenomenon of social representations is widespread in culture, institutions, social practices, interpersonal and mass communication, and in individual thoughts” (Sá, 1998, p. 21).

Because social representations are conveyed in everyday life, it is necessary to seek support to understand them. These “are basically the discourses of the people and groups that maintain such representations, but also their behaviors and the social practices they use to express themselves” (Sá, 1998, p. 73). Likewise, “Social representations are historical phenomena, produced through channels of everyday interaction, and involve multiple aspects” (Jovchelovitch, 2000b, p. 212).

Therefore, in order to identify social representations and establish which mediations participate in the construction process, it is recommended to use qualitative methodologies, such as ethnography. Data collection techniques are also useful, including open and semi-structured interviews, life stories, family stories, associated with observation. From them it is possible to understand the social reality experienced by subjects, as it is in the trajectory that social representations are formed with participation of mediations. After all, “it is from the sum of common experiences and memories that the subject extracts images, languages and gestures necessary to overcome the unfamiliar, with its consequent anxieties” (Moscovici, 2013, p. 78). For this reason, every trajectory is significant and needs to be recovered. In this way, it is possible to show that mediations can become one of the ways of understanding how representations can be elaborated, constructed, reconstructed and re-elaborated. “The ‘someone who builds’ bases their construction on a symbolic territory that provides the ground for their reading of the world, reaffirming the previously mentioned contextual dimension” (Arruda, 2002, p. 16).

The construction of social representations is not a static and immutable situation but rather a process in constant transformation, influenced by factors external to the individual and where their field of representations is inserted. For Buss (2009, p.31), they “can be found in the habits of everyday life, in the knowledge that subjects transmit, in formal and informal dialogue, in organizational institutions, and in public spaces”. And, exactly for this reason, mediations can be a way of studying how social representations are built because, in the words of Jovchelovitch (2000a, p.81), “social life is not immediate; it is mediated”.

Social representations can only

be understood in relation to the ways in which they are shaped and transformed. The processes that shape and transform social representations are intrinsically linked to communicative action and social practices in the public sphere: dialogue and language, rituals and production processes, art and cultural patterns, in short, social mediations (Jovchelovitch,, 2000a, p. 80).

To understand how a subject understands and feels a given social object, we start from the principle that what connects the subject with the object are social representations (Moscovici, 2013). However, to be able to analyze these representations, three questions must be considered:

(1) Who knows and from where do they know?, whose answers point to the conditions of production and circulation of social representations; (2) What and how do they know?, which corresponds to research into the processes and states of social representations; (3) About what do they know and to which effect?, which leads to dealing with the epistemological status of social representations (Sá, 1998, p. 32).

From these questions it is also possible to identify the mediations in this process, as they help build social representations, being integral to this action. Based on these three dimensions, an interview script can be prepared, facilitating the identification of mediations. In that case, the *family daily life*, *cultural competence* and *social temporality* can be perceived in the subjects' speech. From their connection with social representations, it is possible to understand how the subject sees a certain object and how the subject elaborates its representations, as well as to understand which groups of mediations have become more significant in this construction. It is necessary to consider that “individuals or groups situate themselves through the communication



they establish with each other, through education (cultural background), codes, values and ideologies, related to the social situation they experience” (Kuhnen, 1995, p. 79).

This condition only becomes possible based on the subject’s experience and their trajectory, which provides support – that is, anchors – and afford objectivity to the reality in which they live. The constitutive processes, objectification and anchoring are related to the constitution and functioning of social representation, explained based on their conditions of emergence and circulation, which are the social interactions and communications (Jodelet, 2005).

Objectification and anchoring are the mediators of the representation construction process. Both “clearly show that the construction of social representations has some of its main elements in historical and social structures” (Jovchelovitch, 2000a, p. 41). In this sense, because mediations have a part in the process of building social representations, they can also become a way of understanding anchoring and objectification. This condition could facilitate the categorization process when working with a qualitative methodological proposal. When considering the anchoring and objectification system in the three groups of mediations, it is possible to identify categories and create groups in order to study them. It is known that the social function of objectification is to facilitate communication and express concepts. Anchoring, in turn, comprises mechanisms that facilitate the understanding of how an individual’s knowledge can be integrated with what already exists. Furthermore, it is necessary that the subcategories within each mediation are highlighted in the statements.

Objectification explains representation as selective construction, structuring schematization, naturalization, that is, as a cognitive set that retains, amongst information from the external world, a limited number of elements linked by relationships, which make it a structure that organizes the field of representation and gains the status of objective reality. Anchoring, as a rooting in the system of thought, attribution of meaning, instrument of knowledge, explains the way in which new information is integrated and transformed into a set of knowledge socially available to interpret reality, and is then reincorporated into it, as categories which can guide understanding and action (Jodelet, 2005, p. 48).

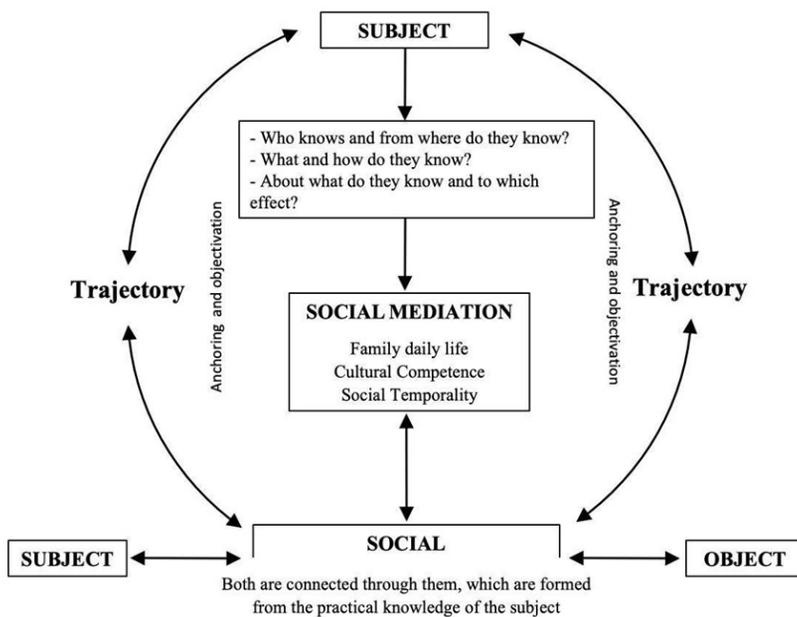
Social representations are responsible for the behavior and attitudes of individuals in a community and can undergo changes based on their coexistence and experience in the group, as well as acquired experience (Mesquita & Almeida, 2009). After all, “the individual creates ideas, concepts about events, people or objects in order to understand the surrounding world” (Chiodini, 2009, p. 47).

To facilitate the understanding of how research can be carried out using Serge Moscovici’s theory of social representations and Jesús Martín-Barbero’s theory of mediations, a methodological map was organized to help in the fieldwork and gathering of empirical material. The map makes it possible to understand how these two theories can be used for the study. It has four fundamental points: 1) The researched subject; 2) the object of representation; 3) mediations; and 4) the questions that need to be asked in order to understand how representations are constructed. This subject has his own life path, and, as a continuous process, social representations can change over time, building new representations and producing, in turn, new mediations<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>4</sup>In the thesis originating this article, this theoretical-methodological proposal was applied in interdisciplinary research carried out with a group of young people from the countryside in a region of southern Brazil. The research sought to understand how the social representations of this social group were built based on the three original mediations.

**Figure 1**

*Methodological organization of the theory of mediations and theory of social representations*



Source: Guerin, 2017, p. 145.

This workflow makes it possible to see how these two theories connect and can be valid for studying social representations from a qualitative perspective. It is from a subject’s trajectory that anchoring and objectification are supported. When mediations are identified, it is possible to understand how the subject’s representations of a given object can be constructed.



Thus, after conducting interviews, it is possible to identify the mediations of the subjects participating in the construction of representations. In this sense, some mediations identified in the interviews were grouped together to facilitate categorization and analysis. It is worth noting, however, that at the time of the interviews, they also had to be considered to make sense of the subjects' speech. Based on the mediations identified in this speech, it is possible to analyze how mediations connect to social representations. The group of mediations related to cultural competence identifies all situations that are somehow related to: formal education; ethnic, class and religious aspects; acquisition of knowledge and experiences obtained from living in different places; emotional and rational reactions of the subjects, in addition to the cultural consumption and use of communication technologies and information experienced that can connect to representations about the object to be studied.

This condition also applies to all aspects encompassing social temporality, which refer not only to changes related to time and space, but also to an estrangement felt when confronted with other realities. In this respect, the before and after are addressed, including changes felt in terms of economic, social, and cultural aspects; access to technology, which also changes the perception of time and space between people. To better understand how social time meets individual time, we have social temporality. This meeting enables diverse perceptions and experiences (Martín-Barbero, 1993), which, in turn, can influence the way of perceiving a given object. Furthermore, we should also bear in mind that every day different times and spaces come into conflict and somehow can also change our perception of the world. In turn, what is within daily family life deals with aspects that make people confront each other and show how they truly are through social relationships and their interaction with institutions (Wottrich et al., p. 4). From everyday life it is possible to understand daily practices and how individuals experience the space where they are inserted. Aspects of work, leisure and entertainment, religiosity, relationships with family, friends and neighborhood, in sum, everyday life itself, can interfere in the way how representations are constructed. Likewise,

communication is constituted as mediation in a world made up of infinitely diverse worlds; work constitutes a mediation between human needs and the raw material of nature; the development of rites, myths and symbols constitutes a mediation between otherness and the mystery of the world and the human

mind: all these mediations reveal, to a greater or lesser extent, the adventure of the human pursuit to give meaning and understand its own existence in the world (Jovchelovitch, 2000b, p. 81).

By understanding the connections between social representations and the theory of mediation, their analysis can be performed. The methodological map assists in this analysis process and can become a qualitative alternative for investigating social representations in studies in the areas of Social and Applied Sciences, especially in Communication, given the nature of its object.

### **WHAT TO THINK ABOUT THE CONNECTION BETWEEN SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS AND SOCIAL MEDIATIONS?**

Social representations need to be analyzed based on the articulation of affective, mental, and social data, also considering social relations linked to cognition, language, and communication (Jodelet, 2005). Social constructions feed the subjectivity of subjects and the latter, in turn, feeds social relations. In this way, identifying representations of the world based on different life experiences makes it important to also recover the trajectory of a certain social group researched to identify the mediations related to the different faces that the social object itself provides. Thus, considering the different realities, it becomes clear that it is necessary to focus discussion on the trajectory of subjects in order to understand how they make their representations. Each individual has knowledge of their own experience and attaches importance to specific themes, moments or situations, depending on their own history. After all, observing the world involves a broader perspective and goes far beyond appearances.

It is believed that the relationship between mediations and representations occurs in a cycle. Mediations participate in the process of preparing representations and the latter, in turn, also participate in the mediation process. Hence the idea is that representations of the world can be identified from different life experiences, based on statements, with the aim of analyzing the elements that can bear influence on the *construction* of the social representations of the world in which the subjects live and the representations constructed through symbolic exchanges in the experience of cultural space. From the subjects' trajectories it is possible to know how the changes occurred and how a certain group constructed its social representations.

The identification of mediations makes it possible to identify elements of how the representations may have been created. From cultural competence,



social temporality and family daily life, the most significant factors in this construction are highlighted. The idea is not to identify which group of mediations may be the most significant, especially because mediations are interconnected and linked, but rather to propose a way of analyzing how social representations can be constructed.

Most studies on social representation work at the level of evocation or quantitative research, in which their essence and construction of social representations are not addressed. When using social mediations as a means to understand the social representations of a given group, it is possible to identify the construction processes and better understand how a given object is represented, in addition to understanding which mediations participate in the process. ■

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# Bordering sonorities: fruition and rearticulations of pop music and popular music<sup>a</sup>

## *Sonoridades fronteiriças: fruição e rearticulações da música pop e da música popular*

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### ABSTRACT

This study evaluated empirical data from musical listening workshops to analyze the communicational aspects of hybrid musical productions by artists from the global South. The discourse of workshop participants open a premise to consider the mixture of rhythms, instrumentation, timbres, and bodies as the production of situated knowledge about different cultures. Thus, the activities in the workshops represent other community dynamics and new ways of populating the experience of musical fruition. Nomadism (Deleuze and Guattari) and cultural frontiers (Lotman) were used as theoretical concepts to understand the production of some artists and the shared enjoyment of their works in the workshops. This study aimed to analyze how this communicational experience can rearticulate subjectivities in a sense of alterity considering Latin American and decolonial perspectives.

**Keywords:** Fruition, sound, otherness, cultural frontiers, nomadism.

<sup>b</sup>This article expands and modifies a shortened version presented at the Communication, Music, and Entertainment research group of the 44<sup>o</sup> Congresso Brasileiro de Ciências da Comunicação - Intercom.

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### RESUMO

O presente artigo retoma dados empíricos coletados em oficinas de escuta musical para analisar aspectos comunicacionais de produções musicais híbridas de artistas do Sul Global. As falas dos participantes das oficinas abrem um pressuposto para considerar a mistura de ritmos, instrumentação, timbres e corpos como produção de saberes situados acerca de diferentes culturas. Assim, as atividades nas oficinas representam outras dinâmicas de comunidade e novas modalidades de povoar a experiência da fruição musical. Nomadismo (Deleuze, Guattari) e fronteiras culturais (Lotman) foram os conceitos teóricos usados para compreender a produção de alguns artistas e a fruição partilhada de suas obras nas oficinas. O objetivo é analisar como essa experiência

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comunicacional possibilita rearticulações de subjetividades num sentido de alteridade, levando em conta perspectivas latino-americanas e decoloniais.

**Palavras-chave:** fruição; som; alteridade; fronteiras culturais; nomadismo.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpt taken from the podcast *O Som do Vinil*, episode “Estudando o samba – parte 1” (Canal Brasil, 2016), currently this material has been compiled into a book published by Imã Publishing.

THE ARTISTIC TRAJECTORY of Tom Zé is exemplary of the productivity of cultural and semiotic entremeses. On one hand, he references the orality of Brazilian popular cultures, the “provençal poets”<sup>1</sup> (Zé; Gavin, 2016). On the other hand, in the same interview, Tom Zé recalls when he came into contact with globalized rock, being moved after watching a film about Bill Haley. The theme of the mentioned interview refers to the context that influenced tropicalismo, an artistic movement of which Tom Zé is a part, alongside names like Caetano, Gil, Gal Costa, etc. If tropicalismo is marked by mixtures, it is not alone in national historicity and in a way approaches the notion of anthropophagy of the modernist Oswald de Andrade. Much has been said about the tropicalist effervescence, materialized in the album *Tropicália ou panis et circencis* (1968), among other albums of the same period, but what matters here is to notice how artistic movements that bring together sounds through entremeses and unpredictabilities are capable of reconfiguring cultural territories and suggesting a popular in the plural – Gil, for example, was between the borders of the Banda de Pífanos de Caruaru and the album *Sgt. Pepper’s* (1967) by The Beatles. When territorialities become indeterminate, we perceive a popular beyond market issues, a result of phonography and mass media in historicity. It is possible, then, to think of a communicational process situated in the spaces between cultures, with blurred borders, in which subjectivities can be rethought in the act of mobilizing other affects. Of course, the popular presupposes dialogisms, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1987) observed, but in the media scenarios of tastes and demarcated communities, these porous regions are sometimes less visible, to the detriment of the market dimensions (and today algorithmic ones) that resonate in musical fruition.

The sonorities of entwined and musical listening comprehend a communicational phenomenon that raises epistemological questions to be faced. It is about an affective, existential intertwining. The semiotic complexity of the field of popular music, supported by materialities and bodies, reveals territories, temporalities, ways of life, and cultural statements. In a recent study (Carvalho, 2021)<sup>2</sup>, I chose a methodological and empirical approach based on musical listening workshops to understand how certain works enable diverse perspectives and knowledge, as well as articulate entrances and exits of possible identities. In this study, which constitutes a later stage after the end of

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the research, I would like to weave new reflective threads about the emerging experience of entwinedness, from which it is possible to surpass universalisms in search of diversities and other possibilities of community. Music as a product of culture has never been exempt from global issues, such as economy and geopolitics; it is part of communicational flows of the world's memory (Ortiz, 2007). Today, it is being rearticulated in the post-industrial scenario, in which networks and platforms displace the massive dynamic to the era of fragmentations, algorithms, cultural wars, and big tech. It is in the formation of globalized networks that communities begin to establish new bonds and parameters of belonging. In the case of pop music, as noted by Simone Pereira de Sá (2021), there are decisive judgments in the processes of fruition, notably the identitarian ones, therefore notions like “center and periphery will always depend on perspectives or positions – geographic, but above all symbolic – where we situate ourselves in the global order” (Pereira de Sá, 2021, p. 33). And what global scenario is this? It is this front that I intend to explore to construct my argument in favor of a border-crossing popular musical experience.

In a recent study, Achille Mbembe (2020) revisits the bases of global-scale enmity to understand current scenarios in which fractures and divisions position the experience of being in the world. It is a constant state of ethnic, cultural, and geopolitical separation – and global North and South have always been, not only geographical spaces, but articulations of historical inequalities. According to the author, there is a desire for the production of new apartheid, which coincides with an epochal tendency of “communities without foreigners” (Mbembe, 2020, p. 19), perceived not exclusively at the North American or European borders, but in reactionary movements that emerge in the South – as has been happening in India and also in Brazil. The context is one of a neoconservative spectrum that enters into tensions with the emergence of transversal singularities that reposition cultural borders to a point of diverse encounters. It is known that in the case of popular music and dynamics of pop culture, the concept of community requires differentiations between interiority and exteriority, evidently there are narrative disputes in the choices of belonging to this or that musical genre.

The aim here is not to establish similarities between musical communities and resistances to difference, but to bring the experience of cultural borders through music to construct an epistemological confrontation in the field of communication, by identifying in-between flows of communication of alterity. Therefore, music enters this study as a cultural text that enters into border relations and intertextuality (Lotman, 1996, Kristeva, 2012), mobilized by a nomadic artistic profile that seeks to repopulate territories (Deleuze & Guattari,



2008, Deleuze, 2018). Thus, this article aims to answer the following question: how does listening to in-between musical works establish more plural notions about pop music and popular music?

I intend to revisit some fragments from the music listening workshops (Carvalho, 2020) I conducted, but with the aim of exploring how a consolidated musical taste in a given subjectivity is updated and hybridized when confronted with previously unknown works. What results from this point of contact is what can indicate processes of *communication, identities, and communities to come*, between territorializations and deterritorializations, in a Latin American context of ambiguities and specific modes of resistance (Rincón, 2016; Rodríguez & El Gazi, 2007).

### CULTURAL BOUNDARIES AND ALTERITY: BUILDING A THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL BASIS

Culture is not a stable phenomenon, but rather produced, shared, memory bearer, and subject to updates and ruptures. A key issue in the selection and enjoyment of certain musical genres and artistic preferences is the fact that taste undergoes cultural dynamics, positioned within a certain temporality and its tensions and disputes over visibility and statements. Through the notion of cultural text by the semiotician Yuri Lotman (1996), it is possible to think of the dynamics of circulation and sharing of information organized in a given context, as the notion of text for the author goes beyond the linguistic dimension to encompass any elements produced and understood as language – thus, we can take rhythms, instrumentation, timbres, dances, and other expressions as cultural texts. In short, the cultural text plays a decisive role in the semiosis that will manifest in cultures – and in the memory archives of cultures. In the musical proposal of the group BaianaSystem, for example, there are modes of production of the Jamaican culture sound system (bass, overdubs, and bass lines) and the timbres of the guitar from Bahia, with Luiz Caldas-style phrasing, among other references. When they enter into semiotic relations, these elements are not erased, they remain visible in the unique musical context of BaianaSystem. It is a fit of another order. In these cases, there is an untranslatability that haunts cultural encounters, hence the role of semiosis in the updates of cultures. The notion of border in these encounters does not presuppose a binary<sup>3</sup> (interior-exterior), but demonstrates the capacity that culture has to generate semiosis in moments of untranslatability, which occur in contacts with external elements. This cultural dynamic neither redeems nor erases tensions of race, gender, or territories, since it is in the production of

<sup>3</sup>There is a concept of binarism, as elaborated by Jacques Derrida (2001), that identifies inequalities and power relations in oppositions such as man/woman, white/black, heterosexual/homosexual, among others. It involves understanding the discursive force that constructs inequalities in these oppositions. For example, the role of women is defined by a macho culture, the racial category is elaborated upon eurocentric bases, and so forth. The concept of border, in another sense, brings differences into proximity and tensions manifest in translation processes.

meaning of a given language that these issues gain visibility. The border is a *locus* of tensions and diversities.

The porosity of borders is what I would like to use to think about the emerging musical listening relationships from interstices. If, on the one hand, a certain text refers to an experience already absorbed and formed as musical taste, the contact with cultural texts from other semiospheres activates semioses that can indicate movements, updates, and even ruptures. When we talk about popular music, which in itself can only be thought of as multiplicity, another aspect comes to the fore: its relation to a cultural fabric of mediations (Martín-Barbero, 2001). In the workshop I will discuss later, I brought as an element to be enjoyed a series of artists from different regions of the Global South, whose music has a hybrid profile, which puts into play global and local references, not in opposition, but in semiotic relations not exempt from processes of approximation and differentiation, between resistances and cooptations.

Territories, peoples, and cultures have their borders rethought as spaces of sharing and possibilities of encounters. In his study on modern cinema, Gilles Deleuze (2018) noticed in the work of Glauber Rocha the possibility of mobilization, since the productions of the Brazilian filmmaker worked on popular symbolic axes that were easily understood regionally but also had the possibility of resonating in globalized contexts, notably in territories of the Global South. Instead of dialoguing with common sense and its stereotypes, Glauber did not address an imagined people, of a suspicious nationalism, but contributed to “the invention of a people” (Deleuze, 2018, p. 315) – a *people to come*. That is, for Deleuze, modern cinema established a thought and a perception, a semiotics that gave consistency to a possibility; in Glauber’s case, this possibility would be a popular mobilization in the Global South. It is through this possibility that one intends to think, here, about semiotic and cultural interstices: for their capacity to stimulate ways of thinking.

The profile of artists featured in the initial stage of the workshops comprises a productive dynamic that alternates between globalized references and influences of local sounds, understanding that this art, open to mixtures, can be more inviting to reflection activities. There is a challenge of connecting the reference points of these works in a movement to identify cultures that are in the process of hybridization. In artistic works characterized by strong hybridity, “there is not only one element at issue, but an effective range of determinants” (Vargas, 2007, p. 20). The hybrid, in this work, should not be understood as pacifying ethnic-racial, gender, and even geopolitical issues, but as a process that exposes and questions the historical inequalities of these markers. If globalization presupposes universalisms, in Southern contexts there



are creative tactics to contaminate mainstream narratives and take advantage of them (Rincón, 2016), and in this sense, reposition music, audiovisuals, and arts from other bodies and other cultural contexts. Let's take the variations of the electric guitar in Congolese rumba, for example, which inscribed a circular<sup>4</sup> dynamic in the phrasing usually used in percussion instruments. Such processes demonstrate that there is also a politicization in the hybridity of musical language.

<sup>4</sup>See Bello et al. (2022).

Even though it is perfectly possible to consider that artistic languages, in general, are formed in the organization of references, such as music, since genres like rock and samba were conceived by various semiotic matrices, this aspect, crucial to understanding creation, ends up getting lost in the processes of fruition when genres align with mediated market issues. For example, we can discuss the whitewashing of rock, in its major mediatic visibility with Elvis, Beatles, and Stones at the center – not for nothing there is a movement to retell the history of rock through other markers: Chuck Berry, Rosetta Tharpe, and Little Richard. However, it is necessary to think beyond the mediatic rock product to observe its less visible cultural elements, such as the prohibition of percussion instruments in North American territory, which reveals artistic resistances in handling instruments like the electric guitar. It is about rescuing the boundary productivity to rethink the mediatic and phonographic sound record. This is what Antônio “Nego” Bispo (2019) proposes as a *counter-colonial* practice: the continuous exercise of producing responses and confrontations. The tracing of a process of border relations, like the almost poetic mention that Deleuze and Guattari (2008) make of *the existential and semiotic dynamics of nomads*, demonstrates that it is necessary to take into account territories, their modes of resistance, the capacity for adaptation, and movements without the constraints of a nation-state that tries at all costs to organize and govern territorialities. In the workshop activities, the act of speaking out expresses the mobility produced in listening, taking into account the repertoires and identities, since the richness of an understanding of interactions of diversities with mediatic contexts lies in the *meaning given to appropriations* (Rodríguez & El Gazi, 2007).

## THE WORKSHOPS

The encounter of the pre-selected music with the participants' repertoires is what motivates this work in understanding *the boundaries of a communicational process of encounters*. The choice of artists prioritized works produced in territorialities generally absent from the major global mediatic

markers. By revisiting the workshops from the cited research (Carvalho, 2021), this work expands the discussions to a sense of understanding boundaries as blurred and undetermined spaces, in order to identify new processes of subjectivation from musical fruition<sup>5</sup>. After a documentary survey that sought references in streaming platforms, reports on music and culture, concerts, and even vinyl record fairs, the study defined the main artists to be taken to the exhibition stage of the workshops:

- M.I.A.: daughter of Sri Lankan activists, born in the UK, the artist prioritizes in her work sounds from the Global South, especially rhythms, instrumentation, and dances from African, Asian, and Latin American regions;
- DJ Tudo: multimedia artist whose work consists of partnerships established with music from diverse cultures (maracatu, gnawa, ciranda, riverside communities, etc.), based on travels through Brazil and the world;
- BCUC (Bantu Continua Uhuru Consciousness): South African group that mixes globalized references like soul and punk with indigenous matrices, percussion, and wind instruments;
- Songhoy Blues: band formed in the northern region of Mali. In their work, a style of desert guitar (of African origin) is adopted with references from blues and indie rock, and the songs are mostly sung in the Songhai language;
- KOKOKO!: group formed by four Congolese and one French. The work is marked by the use of instruments made by the band members themselves, from recycled materials (wood, metals, plastics, etc.), the unusual timbres are mixed with electronic bases;
- Chico Science & Nação Zumbi (and manguêbeat): band formed in Recife, their sound proposal was to reposition rhythms from the Northeastern culture (coco, ciranda, maracatu, etc.) in a globalized context and full of influences from genres like rock and hip hop;
- Bomba Estéreo: Colombian band that uses percussion of Afro-diasporic origin with Colombian and Latin American rhythms and genres (such as cumbia).

<sup>5</sup>The use of the term "fruition" suggests a more complex understanding, since the contact of the workshops with the artistic works occurred not only through listening, but also through visual contact with music videos and live performances identified in YouTube archives.

In its own way, each of these works indicate a semiotic mismatch in the large media representations, at least regarding a constant visibility and enunciation in the most recurring media narratives in what we could call common sense. Obviously, these works also participates in consumption



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<sup>6</sup> In the 1980s, the context of post-punk allowed some European artists to experiment with sounds from the Global South. Artists like David Byrne, Malcom McLaren, and others sought new sonic references, leading many independent labels to release music by artists from the Global South. The aesthetic and cultural diversity of rhythms and genres led to the term “world music” being implemented, both to categorize the non-Western other and to group this cultural variety on the same shelf in record stores.

<sup>7</sup> While it represents the global circulation of artists from countries like South Korea, K-pop, to a large extent, also rehashes formulas from the MTV era of boy bands and girl bands, with choreographed dances, members representing urban youth profiles (the athlete, the bad boy, etc.), among other aspects, even though its audiences constitute a new type of engagement in digital media culture.

mechanisms; we know that there is a predisposition of globalized capitalism to transform productions of local cultures into new commodities – such as “ethnic music” festivals, the world music<sup>6</sup> label, and global versions of Latin pop and the recent K-pop<sup>7</sup>. But it is understood that the artists and works used in the workshops are less aligned with these limitations inherited from mass media and resonating in streaming, which gives them a local aspect – that is, it is less a question of recognition by global axes and packaging than a feeling of being faced with regional traditions, a deep fear. Another observed issue is that all these artists, in a way, share an artistic profile of resignifications of global elements in the territories of the Global South, with a strong ethnic, migrant, and diasporic aspect, which makes us travel in listening to timbres, scales, languages, and instrumentations of local cultures – and thus brings the notion of popular and pop to possible multiplicities. It is also necessary to consider that there are market issues intersected in local cultures, as many rhythms and genres are linked to parties, ceremonies, and regional entrepreneurship.

What interests us in these artists is their ability to resonate differentially in the face of a listening experience marked more by the main music genres – and, in digital times, the power of platforms also prioritizes certain music genres, depending on the music streaming platform (Janotti Jr., 2020): we can talk about the relationship of YouTube with funk, Spotify with sertanejo, and so on. It is here that some theories of difference help to understand these smaller communicational and media processes, such as the notion of nomadism as an idea that understands distributive modes of differentiation, here attributed to fruition, community, and thought. Deleuze and Guattari (2008) seek inspiration in nomadic formations to think about mechanisms of margins and minorities, that is, semiotic and material dynamics less aligned with the major markers of subjectivity, an idea that this work brings to musical listening. Another theoretical provocation that motivates us to explore epistemologically the borderline situation of *entremets* deals with a *politics of singularities* (Agamben, 2017), which rethinks identities in a more plural flow of possibilities of fittings and mismatches. For Giorgio Agamben (2017), a coming community should not seek an essence to which to desperately link itself, but as existence allow itself to participate in processes of immanence – a state of *being in itself, or being-so* – an idea that indicates possible experimentations. Experimenting with musical listening is what we seek with the workshops.

The empirical front then takes up some narrative fragments from a work focused on musical listening (Carvalho, 2021). In the cited work, songs by some artists from the Global South were taken to two musical listening workshops, organized at a public high school in São Paulo. The extension project format

meant that the workshops received a diverse audience: high school students, teachers from the courses, former students, and external audience from the school<sup>8</sup> community (surrounding the educational institution). There were 13 people<sup>9</sup> enrolled, divided into two groups, one with five participants and the other with eight.

The idea was to work on an expository material before introducing any artists or works. The modality of workshops through video lessons, because of the pandemic, reduced the interaction and proximity with the participating audience a little, but on the other hand, it made it possible to gather rich material – transcriptions of video lessons, chat reports, email exchanges, final papers, and even filling out a form with perceptions about the course at the end of the workshops. Regarding the methodology used, both reception studies and educommunication indicated possible paths, but the interdisciplinary dialogue with Education led the study to the narrative research method as a tool for collecting and organizing the empirical material from the musical listening workshops. This methodological basis contributes not only to the data collection but also allows “thinking about the experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2011, p. 119), since in this experiment there was a point of contact in which the researcher, workshop participants, and music/artists coincided. Narrative research is a method generally used in studies in the field of Education, precisely because it offers the research the possibility of a teacher’s report about the activities conducted in the scope of teaching and learning, in which the experienced works are narrated by those who conducted them and the results, in terms of generated knowledge, are analyzed in the end.

The axes worked on as a programmatic content in the musical listening workshops were:

- a) Concept of pop music, musical taste, communities, taste performances, music in the media, phonography, introductory readings on the subject;
- b) Hlobal South, hybridisms, affirmative policies, relations between regional and global;
- c) Listening to a previous list of artists; observation of videos and live performances by these artists; debates; openness to suggestions brought by the participating group;
- d) Research and writing about artists, themes, and works addressed throughout the workshops;
- e) Organization of the material produced on a multimedia page and sharing of this material with the school community (internal and external), in newsletter format;

<sup>8</sup>For reasons defined in the terms of consent for participation in this research, both the institution and the participants will not be identified in this article.

<sup>9</sup>Eleven people identified as female (three of them black women) and two as male (white men). As participants included both students and teachers, ages ranged from 15 to 45 years old, residing in middle and lower class neighborhoods in a municipality on the southern coast of São Paulo. These markers will be indicated in the testimonials.



f) Final reflections, suggestions for future listening and reading.

The following topic gathers some narratives and fragments taken from the mentioned workshops to construct a theoretical and conceptual understanding in two fronts: 1) understanding the communicational processes of *the in-betweens* of popular music; and 2) identifying in cultural borders emerging knowledges that coincide with dynamics of alterity and difference. It is a theoretical-practical movement “between the object, the subject, and the method” (Canevacci, 2021, p. 14), which seeks different temporalities of experience, in which distinct identities relate. Here, cultural borders are a source of knowledge because of the capacity these semiotic spaces have to generate possible encounters. The nomadic practice is perceived in the artistic profile discussed in the workshops and in the thinking projected from a context that brings personal tastes and other musical aesthetic experiences closer together. And, of course, the workshops express a positioning of the teacher/researcher in action in the research, which certainly directed some moments of musical listening, in the sense of generating provocations and reflections. This intervention occurred both in the selection of the songs that opened the activities and in the conduct of stimulating debate questions.

It is precisely in the researcher’s intervention procedures that tensions of another border also manifested themselves: the one established between the researcher and the participating audience, which adds new layers of border knowledge. In this aspect, there is a front that refers to Latin American studies, as shared listening operates in a field of cultural mediations that interfere in the media field (Martín-Barbero, 2001; Rincón, 2016), considering that, by taking the floor, the participating audience exposes differences in gender, race, and social class in front of a media product. Thus, what is at stake is less a unilateral direction than a recognition of agreements and disagreements. The researcher’s position sought to work with what Félix Guattari (1990, p. 24) considers as the “pertinence of interventions” in micropolitical contexts.

## **BORDERS AND SONIC NOMADISMS: MUSICAL LISTENING WORKSHOPS**

Assuming that in media culture, musical genres are keys to reading that indicate identity modalities and belonging, before understanding the rearrangements of interstices, it was necessary for the workshops to start from a consolidated field: our taste performances. The introduction to the workshops, therefore, posed the following question: what music/artists do we like to listen to and why? The initial comments ranged from music genres such as trap,

rock, funk, rap, samba – and also made references to mainstream groups and artists such as Iron Maiden, Metallica, as well as pop divas like Beyoncé –, citations that refer to a very recurrent media scenario in terms of circulation and consumption. There were also some surprises such as more in-depth studies and musical training: “*I participated in a marching and philharmonic band, played the clarinet and then the lyre*” one of the students (a young white woman) recounted. There we had an interesting diversity for the construction of points of contact between each person’s tastes and the previous selection of works mentioned above.

The identity positions alternated between learning certain instruments, preferences built by family and friendship circle memories, and a variety of approaches to canons of media culture. Taking the floor to talk about a personal taste is an exercise in positioning, sharing, and listening – since I speak and then listen to another person talk about their musical preferences. There we were weaving our boundaries, between approaches and distances.

The more expository front rescued part of the historicity of mass music, such as phonography, media culture, axes of recognition of pop music, taste performances, music genres, etc. The content was adapted to a less elaborate and academic explanation model, although some concepts needed to be reinforced – such as the term “massive”, which has its constitution in a specific period of the rise of mass media and the consequent consolidation of pop culture. In short, the introduction aimed to revisit some keys to reading that are more accessible, prioritizing narratives present in spontaneous thought about pop music, obviously added to the sense-making that rests on addresses and consumption practices in the media.

In the second expository stage, there was an introduction to hybridizations, cultural boundaries, and relations between the global North and South amid the processes of globalization. This conceptual front was opened with the reading of the Manguê Manifesto – Caranguejos com cérebro, written by Fred Zero Quatro in 1992, a text that inaugurates the manguêbeat movement – which, it is worth noting, is marked by a predominantly male presence in the bands that compose it. The text was important for two reasons: first, because the regional is thought of in the plural, since in manguêbeat, Recife is redefined as a space for experiments and cultural approximations, in which updates are inscribed in pop music; and second, for illustrating an artistic position of interstice that creates its works on cultural borders, between maracatu and globalized hip hop, for example. The reading was followed by listening and viewing of videos by Chico Science & Nação Zumbi, DJ Dolores, Mundo Livre S/A, Mestre Ambrósio, important names in the Recife movement. The sonic diversity of these works was immediately



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interpreted by one of the workshop participants, an adult black woman, as a popular claim. *“This musical revolution, provoked by the effervescence of ideas from a group of friends thirsty for sociocultural change, made Chico Science and Nação Zumbi one of the greatest representations of the working class”*. The author of the comment already knew the group, a different perception from others, who in a first listening reinforced more the regional aspect of the group’s music than its dynamic mixtures. It is known that Chico and the other manguébeat artists were interested in maracatu, ciranda, coco, and a series of alternative possibilities circulating in the globalized world (hip hop, punk, electronic music). What would then be their address as a cultural product, since they dialogue with local music genres, rhythms, and instrumentations? When asked about cultural encounters and their productivity, the answers coincided with the term “creativity”, but what kind of creative mode would that be? I asked.

A participant, a young white woman, then said: creative in the sense of *“valuing cultures and expanding musical knowledge beyond the obvious”*. Valuing cultures and expanding knowledge are terms that function as provocations dear to the field of communication, notably for the communication of cultural borders that this study seeks to explore, but such a statement also ran the risk of considering only artists with a more experimental profile as “creative”. It was necessary, then, to point out that there are different ways of creating, each artist resorts to the materialities that affect them to position themselves in the world and generate meaning.

At first, such semiotic complexity (sonorities, cultures, ways of life) aroused doubts and curiosities, but also suggested a subjective path of alterity in reflections on the songs/artists. In these works, exteriority and interiority become indeterminate and reconstruct the concepts of community. In another words what used to determine circulation and consumption in music genres that presupposed communities (fans) – often antagonistic in disputes over legitimacy and even “good taste” –, with the dynamics of interstices, begins to reveal points of contact and relations with exteriority. This process does not suggest the erasure of differences, nor pacification, but through proximity, tensions can be identified and discussed. What community is this, that is capable of harboring an affective sharing that ranges from the alfaia percussion to hip hop rhymes? For Deleuze and Guattari (2008, p. 47), the nomadic path occurs “between two points, but the between-two has taken on all its consistency, and enjoys both its own autonomy and direction”. It is an experience of experimentation, which is neither easy nor pacifying. And in culture, the processes of actualization pass, above all, through creations that arise from unpredictabilities, as Lotman (2012) would say.

The Sri Lankan artist M.I.A., based in the UK, brought to the workshops the context of migration. In the enunciation of her albums and tracks, issues related to the migratory trajectory of the singer's family resonate, historical and cultural fragments of human displacement in territories. However, it is less about readapting to a new nation-state than about activating political and ethical charges in the interstices of the global North and South. Migration as a phenomenon of global geopolitical chess reverberates in local dynamics, border territories, and subjectivities. Popular music is a privileged semiotic space to perceive the effects of migration. One of the participants, an adult white woman, recalled the experience of studying abroad for a while: *"you will always be treated as an immigrant. So, when I see her music videos, I identify myself"*. Through M.I.A.'s work, we addressed the ethnic prejudices of the globalized world, recent reactionary movements, and how music brings these issues to us and helps us reflect on and confront racism and xenophobia. The thematic approaches of the lyrics, the images of drones watching borders, the technologies used to control people who only wish to exercise their right to move through territories are visual elements of M.I.A.'s videos that suggest the emergence of repopulations and other modalities of sharing spaces.

Another participant – a young white woman – even commented that the music stimulates *"perception about a way we can express ourselves"* when commenting on the singer's choices. M.I.A.'s work activates a radically diverse cultural cartography, which shares cultures and demands from different territorialities – the album *Kala* (2007), for example, brings together recordings made by the singer on her travels<sup>10</sup> to India, Angola, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica, where she recorded with local musicians. The theme of migration resonates in fruition as an enunciation, in which existential issues reside (the act of migrating, its ethics, and its politics in the face of the contemporary world) and hybrid musical language (the dialogues of sonorities); the popular then stands as a polyphonic space, in Bakhtin's terms (1987), carrying the tensions of the globalized world.

*"Artists like M.I.A. are necessary points of tension in these times of globalization, her music permeates through her life story, where she brings together different genres, ranging from English punk rock, hip hop, jazz to Hendrix's guitars and funk"*, wrote one of the participants, an adult white woman, in the final paper we did, which consisted of a text about the experience gained in the workshops. The same author mentioned several times the influence of reggae on British culture, brought by jamaican<sup>11</sup> immigrants, mentioning names like Police and UB40. Through her contact with M.I.A., she remembered other artistic references that express in their works cultural encounters, in a process of rescuing an alterity present in media culture,

<sup>10</sup> A segment of the documentary *Matangi/Maya/ M.I.A* compiles fragments from these journeys (M.I.A., 2018).

<sup>11</sup> It is necessary to remember that Jamaican immigration to the United Kingdom faced a series of difficulties, especially with the emergence of reactionary movements during the Thatcher era. Initially, white artists were more successful in exploring genres such as reggae. With the Two Tone movement, formed by ska groups, there was a more inclusive scenario, with bands that brought together Jamaican immigrants and children of English workers (Specials, The Selector, etc.). Recently, Brexit has represented new setbacks for the children and grandchildren of the first immigrants.

# A

## Bordering sonorities: fruition and rearticulations of pop music and popular music

although sometimes hidden. This is a very rich reflective element that emerges from discussions about cultural borders, borders present in musical works and in the experience of the workshops, where our repertoires were articulated in situations between thoughts and experiences. According to I. Lotman (1996), cultures communicate through border relations, through textual exchanges that cross these porous regions and enable translations and updates. Thinking with Lotman, the sharing of music within the scope of the workshops increased repertoires and knowledge<sup>12</sup>, since what was brought also as personal memory went through translational processes, from one person to another.

<sup>12</sup> According to Lotman (2012), for a culture to define itself, it is necessary to have a dialogue with what is exterior to it. Here is a very pertinent example given by the Russian author: "A good teacher drew a small circle on the blackboard. Inside, he wrote 'knowledge'; outside, 'unknown'. And he said to his students: 'Notice how little space knowledge occupies and how little contact it has with the unknown'" (Lotman, 2012, p. 161).

<sup>13</sup> Listen to the tune *É hoje é hoje* (Selo Mundo Melhor, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> *Rhythmic emancipation – Romperayo vs DJ Tudo e sua gente* (DJ Tudo, 2021).

Another exemplary case occurred in the listening to the work of the artist DJ Tudo. His music and albums bring encounters, partnerships, and recordings with popular musicians from different regions, as the artist usually travels in search of partnerships in Brazil and other countries. Thus, the term DJ is taken from its most recurring use in pop culture – the dance floor artist, who plays records for people to dance to – to reveal an almost anthropological method of musical creation. He has already recorded with the group *Baianas de Coruripe*<sup>13</sup> (Alagoas), with musicians from the gnawa culture (Morocco), and more recently with the Colombian group *Romperayo*<sup>14</sup>, founded by percussionist Pedro Ojeda. This communicational experience, throughout the workshops, inspired reports like this one, made by an adult white woman: "Everyday expressions are very evident in his sound... DJ Tudo is the experience of the popular, jazz, psychedelic, rituals, indigenous, the people of this planet", the popular as shared multiplicities on a global level. Musical listening stimulated a repopulation of subjectivities, a communicational process that, by relinquishing large parameters and canons of the media culture inherited from mass media, valued experimentation of interpretation less anchored in founding assumptions (Agamben, 2017), and this path led to what we can consider as a communication of alterity, with agreements and disagreements.

With each artist presented, the comments first sought to identify recognizable elements, a process of perception that highlighted identity, belonging, and repertoires, but then there was an attempt to understand what escaped them, as if through art, difference invited new knowledge and discoveries. This dynamic sought less to impose preferences or compete for a more legitimized aesthetic as "good taste" than to dialogue about different profiles of a popular culture less frequent in circulation and consumption flows. And, evidently, there were resistances to certain musical styles – at the beginning, one of the participants, a young white man, said he didn't like samba, but that at a samba gathering, he "even would risk himself dancing" –, differences that involve issues of sociability, gender, and social positions that,

although not the main focus of the research, appeared in the discussions and could not be ignored. The global South as a productive locus of popular music then began to offer mediations in the hybridity of blurred territories (García Canclini, 2000; Martín-Barbero, 2001). Not for nothing, the term mediation should be treated in the plural, as Martín-Barbero suggests, as the workshops demonstrated the need to consider ethnic, territorial, and communal elements as keys to reading border music. This perception gradually manifested itself over the course of the activities. One of the participants, a young white woman, understood that through listening, it was possible to “*diminish prejudices and make us see, accept, respect, and celebrate differences through music*”. This conclusion was preceded by debates and occurred only after understanding how music raises questions about historical inequalities and helps us reflect on our social and collective position in the world. I said, many times, that living with diversities is living with tensions necessary for democratic environments. But it was still necessary to deepen what was generated as a communicational process within the limits between the expository content of the workshops and the subjectivity of the participants. In short, it was necessary to identify the semiotic and cultural processes produced in these encounters.

What we understand by the construction of musical identities, whether through the media visibility of certain aesthetics or through the mobility of our formative process, often manifests as a separation in relation to new knowledge. Furthermore, in the predictability expected from a communicational process of maintaining tastes and preferences – today potentiated by algorithmic<sup>15</sup> action –, intertextuality itself is to a large extent reduced. Julia Kristeva (2012, p. 35) observes that the artistic text operates “transformations-productions in progress”, indicating an instability in the creative act. Thus, positioning a given art in the historical process also reveals movements internal to culture. And as obvious as dialogism in music may seem, the expository activities served to provoke perceptions about musical listening, exercising the ability to face a work that is not recurrent in personal repertoires.

The percussion of BCUC, accompanied by an electric bass and a combination of vocals that brings together soul music intonation, rhymed verses, and *punk-style shouts*, mobilized reflections on an Africa beyond media stereotypes, especially because of the group’s ability to resignify globalized genres and rearrange them in a percussive field (bass drums, snare drums, and congas) and indigenous wind instruments. “*I don’t know if the name is drum, I don’t know the name of the instrument, but this group reminds me of Timbalada. They also have very strong percussion*”, said one of the students, a young black woman, referring to the Brazilian percussion group. Through

<sup>15</sup>Listening dynamics based on song recommendations on platforms like Spotify. This mechanism relies on a history of searches, clicks, and likes to select which songs/artists are relevant to a given user’s digital footprint. It tends to reinforce personal tastes.



## Bordering sonorities: fruition and rearticulations of pop music and popular music

<sup>16</sup>BBC Music (2019). the video of the song *Yinde*<sup>16</sup>, recorded during the group's performance at the Glastonbury festival (United Kingdom) in 2019, a question arose that was dear to the workshops: what elements of alterity did this performance bring to the British festival? For an audience that was mostly there to watch headliners like The Killers, The Cure, and Kylie Minogue (among other pop and indie rock names), BCUC functioned as a sonic event from another aesthetic reality. But not only that. One comment, made by the same student, noted that "*many people there [in the audience] were moving randomly, not knowing how to dance*" an observation that identifies a communicational process of intermingling, as the dance occurred as a differential event, in a situation of cultural border – a dance to come. In the gap between globalized pop and the popular music of an African country, a new bodily movement was produced. This is a fruition that affects subjectivities in the sense of exposing a learning context, as the South African group brought instrumentation and rhythms of African origins to the event, knowledge that goes beyond the limits of indie rock and pop. It is possible, then, to consider that BCUC allowed the listening workshops to work on issues of alterity through two important axes: 1) the brazilian popular sphere, by noticing that percussion reflects in our music and in the expressions of african-derived religions; and 2) the globalized dimension, through the video of the show at the Glastonbury festival, which revealed a decolonial sense in the resonance of the sound generating bodily relearnings and aesthetic fruition. Popular is what is lived, as Omar Rincón (2016) will say, which allows us to reflect on the force of a change in visibility regimes.

Listening to the group Songhoy Blues put the desert of Mali on the workshops' radar. The band's sound originates in a place where the African continent meets Arab culture, a desert space traversed by *tuareg* nomads, where the electric guitar is redefined by other cultural bases, such as the use of the *quarter tone*<sup>17</sup> and the sharing of spaces with ancestral instruments like the *ngoni*. In addition to the guitar, we discussed in the meetings the presence of non-official languages (*lingala, songhai*, and others) from african artists, since the continent's national languages reveal a colonial past. It is known that english is one of the requirements for the circulation and recognition of modern pop music in the media – although today k-pop and Latin pop have their spaces in new media and consumption dynamics – which is why the works of Songhoy Blues take on an aspect of historical revision when the band chooses to forgo english to produce their work. Whether in the group's performance<sup>18</sup> in the capital Bamako or in the video for the track *Al hassidi terei*<sup>19</sup> questions about national identity, language, and people were revisited to understand the tensions of hybridized productions, both in the national realm

<sup>17</sup>A simple explanation of arabic scales can be found in Klaus M's guitar lesson (2010).

<sup>18</sup>KEXP (2020).

<sup>19</sup>Transgressive (2014).

of traditions and in global market flows. One of the students – a young black woman – even discovered through web research that the quartet’s name refers to the *Songhai* people (an ancient empire that lived in the region where Mali is located today).

As for KOKOKO!, they use instrumentation elaborated from recycled materials found on the streets of Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo), including string and percussion instruments, combined with a synthesizer. The material dimension brings the singular aspect of the assembly, since the musicians reuse wood, wires, cans, and other fragments discarded by late capitalism. This differential trait is reflected in the timbres, electrified or not, that will echo from string vibrations, scrapes, and percussive attacks, in a tempo that, at times, resembles dance music. There are, therefore, displacements in the episteme of globalized pop, as the sound is no longer produced by traditional instrumentation (bass, guitar, drums, etc.) and the act of recycling decisively raises discussions about consumption in large cities – notably in a capital of the african continent. In the workshops, the material that introduced the group’s work was a snippet of a performance by the band at the Boiler Room<sup>20</sup> space, an exhibition that led one of the students, a young black woman, to immediately identify the philosophy of reuse and recycling: according to her, KOKOKO! brought “*an Afrofuturist aesthetic thinking about helping the environment*”. Another comment, from an adult white woman, noticed “*something proletarian*” in the choice of clothing worn by the Congolese group – who wear a type of jumpsuit in their shows and public appearances.

<sup>20</sup>Boiler Room (2019).

The Colombian band Bomba Estéreo reinforced issues discussed in the reading of the *Mangué Manifesto* of a Latin America that resignifies pop – such as tropicalism, anthropophagy, and artists like Tom Zé, mentioned at the beginning of this text. In the case of the group led by Li Saumet, cumbia and drum culture, elements closely related to the arrival of enslaved people from the African continent, are emphasized. There is a sharing of transversal issues: percussive heritage, the role of the body in regional rhythms, memory, and decoloniality that bring us closer to our Latin American neighbors. In the music video for the track *Internacionales*<sup>21</sup>, for example, there is a certain cosmopolitanism and pop appeal to diversity. The inclusion of fragments of english in the lyrics sung in spanish alludes to a *global-local* link, but also to a region of spanish speakers. Thus, migration reappeared in the workshops through Bomba Estéreo’s work, when one of the accounts, from an adult white woman, associated going to an immigrant store in downtown São Paulo with the meeting in which we talked about the sound of the colombian group: “*We entered a store run by Bolivians and it was really cool, there was music playing*

<sup>21</sup>Bomba Estéreo (2017).



and then I asked: ‘Miss, what music is this?’, she replied: ‘salsa’”. The episode made the student remember the conversations we had about Latin America, migrations, cultural encounters, and the song *Internacionales*. Perhaps asking about the music, directed at the store clerk, is the example that best illustrates the learning brought by the music listening workshops, as it represents a movement that seeks to understand something previously unknown.

### REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE OF SHARED LISTENING

Beyond the experience of listening to the pre-selected works, the outcome of the workshops revealed a cartography of modes of musical listening. If modern pop music populates streaming platforms and presents itself as more visible and accessible, it is also from it that participants based themselves to weave readings about artists they did not know. Through narrative research, it was possible to gather a broad material (transcriptions of video calls, chat conversations, and texts elaborated by the students), added to the teacher’s report, which allowed us to think of the workshop experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2011) as a collective process. It was possible to notice that axes such as gender, race, and age revealed some reflective triggers. Adults had knowledge about some of the topics addressed, such as the mangubeat movement and mentions of more canonical international artists. Among the younger participants, especially in the words of the women, a more acute perception about the inequalities triggered by the music we listen to was noticeable; one of them brought a link that gathered prejudiced terms used by the British press to refer to the singer M.I.A. From this process, we precisely took the convergent and divergent points perceived by border relations. Thus, we began with accounts like “*what I listen to most in daily life is rock, influenced by my Family*” (young white man) or “*I like all kinds of music, but I have a preference for trap*” (young white woman), which marked positions, and as the meetings progressed, comments emerged about how “*musical constructions become something more complex*” (another participant, young white woman). Although there was an intervention by the researcher, personal and taste references were respected and were part of the discussions – they appeared as examples of proximity, in the sense of resembling something stored in memory files –, something recurring in the expository stages. In a second moment, the group expressed greater confidence in projecting meanings from listening, and from there began to identify political and even geopolitical issues in some works.

The workshops ended with the elaboration of texts written by the participating audience and with the editing of a multimedia page (with images,

playlists, and videos presenting the mentioned artists), a collective work shared with the academic community. One of the collective results occurred in the citations of other artists and bands, beyond the pre-selected list that served as the guiding thread of the debates, such as the indigenous rapper Kunumi MC and the Congolese collective Konono N°1, mentions that result from research and debates brought by the participants. In the issues brought, there was a transversal notion about musical production as multiplicity, modes of production that encompass peoples and territorialities. “*Music has great value for human development, it brings elements of various peoples: europeans, indigenous, africans etc.*”, observed one of the final works, written by a young black woman. This comment positions popular music and pop music as cultural and semiotic spaces where different modalities of being in the world, existential questions, and cosmologies are produced.

In the boundary situations posed in the workshops, it is perceived that the dynamics of stimulating openings to others tastes and to works that were previously unknown allowed for subjective and enunciative repopulations (Guattari, 2019; Lazzarato, 2014). The borders that delimit cultures are also dynamic mechanisms (Lotman, 1996) of alterity. Personal repertoires were important but were redefined *when the other spoke*, something that seems unthinkable today in the dynamics of algorithms that tend to offer us more of the same, an aesthetic closure in our small universes and identities. Another important result was to realize how globalized pop does not operate as an alienating or merely market-driven element (as established by media culture since the mass media), quite the opposite, as it offers keys to reading possible perceptions, which at the limit of meaning are capable of opening up to other possible meanings. This is the unpredictability of culture in the relations between interiority and exteriority thought by Lotman (2012): a cultural system only expands its capacity for knowledge and information by allowing external cultural texts to be translated into its context.

Among the difficulties observed in the workshops, musical diversity always seemed to trigger more positive speeches about cultural plurality, an aspect that reduced the necessary clashes for a *decolonial thinking* movement, which requires understanding a colonial regime of ethnic enmities and constructing responses necessary to confront this structure (Mbembe, 2020; Bispo, 2019). At some moments, it was necessary to make interventions that encouraged the group to address, for example, the reasons why territorialities, bodies, and cultures have been historically erased in media narratives – or sometimes stereotyped. Mentions of regimes of visibility were treated with the aim of understanding how media circulation is also a field of inequalities.



For Deleuze and Guattari (2008), nomadic dynamics are established by relations with territories, but their continuity presupposes a process that “reterritorializes in the very deterritorialization” (Deleuze & Guattari, 2008, p. 44). Thus, what we understand by musical identities, at stake in the music listening workshops, are markers that cease to fulfill a role of stability to function as fits and misfits, the inside and the outside, the in-between, the breaks, the unpredictabilities. Whether in someone’s speech or in listening to a song, there was a negotiation of cultural position and identity, a crossing with subsequent return or not, depending on the affections mobilized. This is why Giorgio Agamben’s (2017) pertinent provocation about the need for a *community that comes* under the bases of alterity, since the exercise of perceiving the other and knowing how to listen are decisive prerequisites for a *truly plural common*. This is what is observed in the semiotics of cultural interstices: a communication that takes advantage of situations of porosity whose richest element is exteriority. In the case of music, this differential and alterity element can be an instrument, a dance, a rhythm, an arrangement, a minority language, a cosmology, an identity position etc. We can take this approach to think about other phenomena of culture. What would it be like, for example, to understand digital media culture through interstices and borders? This path, in my view, is fundamental to reclaim communication processes worthy of our historical time.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This text, within the space limitations of an article, updated a study (Carvalho, 2021) on the communicational experience of shared musical listening in workshops conducted at a high school. Here, I sought to address the communicational processes of cultural borders (Lotman, 1996) explored by some artists and how such works resonate in listening. By relating the personal repertoires of the participants to the pre-selected music for the initial workshop activities, we noticed a process of *nomadic dynamics of fruition*, which for Deleuze and Guattari (2008) establish deterritorializations and reterritorializations. From excerpts of testimonials from participants, it was perceived how works that escape the market paradigms of pop music in the media are initially understood through the main media markers – participants used their repertoires to understand the unknown – and only then opened up to more in-depth analyses. The exercise falls within the field of mediations by realizing how different repertoires interact with media products (Martín-Barbero, 2001; Rincón, 2016), whose richness is manifested in the *ways*

of *generating meanings* (Rodríguez & El Gazi, 2007). This artistic profile, combined with the experience of the workshops, indicates a community to come, shared in the tensions of cultural differences.

The sonic interstices place these recognizable elements in indeterminacy and demand new processes of signification, which coincide with research, openness to exteriority, and a desiring movement for cultural knowledge and information, which we recognize as a communicational path of alterity with ramifications in the sharing and the mechanism of other modes of musical community, with resonances in media environments. For future research, the data collection method of the workshops can deepen questions of gender, age group, race, among other social markers, to extract from the activities new insights about music as a media product. ■

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# Circulation of Meanings in News about Pandemic Deaths in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

## *Circulação de Sentidos em Textos Noticiosos sobre Mortes pela Pandemia no Brasil*

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### ABSTRACT

We analyze the circulation of meanings in the communication circuit formed around news about landmarks in the number of deaths due to COVID-19 in Brazil. We use the concepts by José Luiz Braga about interactional devices and circulation as flows forward and by Eliseo Verón about the complexity of meaning production processes in societies in mediatization. Overall two methodological and analytical moves were carried out: one aimed at understanding the meanings produced in the news – by the use of the Iramuteq lexicometric analysis software – and the other at describing the processuality of communication flows. We defend that the metrics related to research data must be tensioned with broader contexts.

**Keywords:** Circulation of meanings, interactional device, deaths due to COVID-19.

### RESUMO

Analisa-se a circulação de sentidos no circuito comunicacional formado em torno de textos noticiosos sobre marcos no número de mortes por covid-19 no Brasil. Inspirou-se nos conceitos de José Luiz Braga sobre dispositivos interacionais e da circulação como fluxos adiante e de Eliseo Verón sobre a complexidade dos processos de produção de sentidos nas sociedades em midiatisação. Foram realizados dois movimentos metodológicos e analíticos: um para compreender os sentidos produzidos nos textos, com utilização do software de análise lexicométrica Iramuteq, e outro para descrever as processualidades dos fluxos comunicacionais. Defendemos que as

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métricas relacionadas aos dados de pesquisa devem ser tensionadas com contextos mais amplos.

**Palavras-Chave:** Circulação de sentidos, dispositivo interacional, mortes por COVID-19.

### INTRODUCTION

Up to February 4th, 2024, the COVID-19 pandemic fatally victimized 7,028,881 people worldwide, according to data from the World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>2</sup>. Up to February 19, Brazil totalized 709,765 deaths, according to the official website of the Ministry of Health<sup>3</sup>. According to information from Google Trends, since the confirmation of the first case on Brazilian soil on February 26th, 2020, the term “COVID” had search peaks in March 2021, the moment when there was the escalation of the wave with the highest number of deaths in the country.

From this concept, this paper aims to analyze the circulation of meanings in the communication circuit constituted through the publication in the media of news about the number of deaths due to COVID-19 in Brazil. The central question is: what meanings have circulated about COVID-19 deaths in Brazil in these texts? For such, we conducted two analytical moves, one aimed at understanding the meanings produced in both the titles and texts and the other at describing the processuality of the communication flows. The articulation proposed between these two procedures aims to provide a basis for a broader understanding of the circulation of meanings.

We considered the temporal landmarks of 50 (June 20, 2020), 100 (August 8, 2020), 200 (January 7, 2021), 300 (March 24, 2021), 400 (April 29, 2021), 500 (June 19, 2021), and 600 (October 6, 2021) thousand deaths. These dates were selected because they were widely recognized milestones with increased circulation, referred to as nodal points by Braga (2017a; 2017b). On these dates, more detailed texts were produced covering the history of contamination, neglect by some authorities, denialism, and the development of vaccines. We observed a significant decrease in the number of published articles when Brazil reached 250,000, 350,000, and 450,000 deaths over a three-month period. Therefore, we selected these dates due to the widespread circulation of these discourses. The following timeline illustrates the rapid increase in Covid death statistics in Brazil, starting from the dates when 50, 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, and 600 thousand deaths were reached.

<sup>2</sup> Available at <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/deaths?n=c> <https://covid19.who.int/> Accessed on Feb. 21, 2024

<sup>3</sup> Available at <https://covid.saude.gov.br/>. Accessed on Feb. 21, 2024

Figure 1  
*Timeline*



The decision about the need to study this specific period more deeply was made from observation in the media regarding what was being said about the pandemic and how such discourses were constructed. In the last two years, attention has been given to different communication themes related to the pandemic. Borelli, Dalmolin, and Kroth (2022) analyzed the circulation of contents about COVID-19 in groups formed by family ties on the WhatsApp platform. The same authors had previously observed content circulated in WhatsApp groups aiming to raise indications about what was thematized in this specific platform (Kroth, Borelli, & Dalmolin, 2021). All studies are conducted from the specifically communicational view, and some were carried out from reflections interfacing with humor, politics, and religion. For example, Regiani, Feliciani, Borelli and Dalmolin (2021) analyzed pictorial memes criticizing president Bolsonaro during the COVID-19 pandemic. In



<sup>4</sup>The acronym stands for  
'Interface de R pour les  
Analyses Multidimensionnelles  
de Textes et de Questionnaires'.

turn, Borelli and Regiani (2021) investigated, in WhatsApp groups, discursive materiality constructed with humor that evoked religious elements. Lastly, Medeiros, Romero, and Borelli (2021) conducted a survey of presidential speeches delivered from March 2020 to May 2021 and published on the webpage “*Acompanhe o Planalto*” on the website of the Brazilian Federal Government. Such data were processed using lexical analysis software Iramuteq<sup>4</sup>, and word clouds and maximum similarity trees were generated.

Far from understanding the totality of the communication phenomenon analyzed or even what we could call the understanding of the essence from conceptual explanations, our research attempts encompass specific aspects, i.e., specific occurrences that contribute to the observation, analysis, and relevant interpretations of the studied phenomenon. As denominated by Braga (2017a, p. 18), tentative research is interested in “a small set of aspects, with an intermediary focus of comprehensiveness, but that allows observing a good diversity of objects, cases, and situations in which the communicational action is viewed as the main issue and priority angle for discoveries”.

Hence, considering the richness, diversity, and complexity of the phenomena, a fruitful path is precisely the centrality in specific angles that are imperatively focused on communication issues. Braga (2017) exposed that articulating the detected characteristics allows comparison angles in the empirical situations so that we may, thus, obtain references in our analyses. The author also proposed that communication phenomena are formed by interaction episodes; therefore, it is as such that we understand the landmarks of deaths due to COVID-19 in Brazil.

Besides dialoguing with the perspective of Braga (2017) about the processuality of the circulation as a flow forward, we were also inspired by the studies on mediatization developed by Verón (1997, 2014) from a semi-anthropological approach focused on the construction of meanings and distinct semiosis through sociosemiotics (Verón, 1996, 2004, 2013).

It is also necessary to stress that we dialogue with the propositions by Fausto Neto (2010, 2018), who, inspired by the social discursive perspective developed by Eliseo Verón, has problematized the emergency of circulation and, consequently, the need to deepen our analyses about the complexity of communication phenomena, since circulation represents bifurcations, interpenetrations, in which discourses follow unforeseen paths. Therefore, this phenomenon is far removed from linearity.

Starting from the challenges of studying the perspective of circulation, this reflection integrates a broader research effort addressing discursive circulation within the context of societies in mediatization. Within the scope

of the studies carried out in recent years by members of the research group Media Circulation and Communication Strategies (Cimid), this proposition is connected to other investigations conducted by us when we dwell on methodological experimentations. In the past decade, researchers have studied various cases regarding the circulation of meanings. More recently, there has been a focus on critical theoretical and methodological problematization, as well as experimentation with cross-referencing qualitative and quantitative data (Borelli, no prelo).

Frigo, Romero, and Borelli (2022) analyzed the circulation of meanings in the Facebook group entitled “*Mulheres Unidas pela Democracia Santa Maria-RS*” (Women Gathered for Democracy Santa Maria-RS) from the use of the *Iramuteq* software with the purpose of gathering indications to later perform interpretations through the semiological analysis of the discourses. Previously, the same authors mapped the digital platforms (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018) on which The Intercept Brasil published the first three reports of the “*Vaza Jato*” journalistic series. The focus was on identifying in which ones it was possible to characterize the construction of interactional devices that circulated the meanings that composed the communicational circuit (Frigo, Romero, & Borelli, 2020).

This discussion is important to intertwine the perspectives surveyed by the studies on circulation, such as the one worked by Braga (2017a; 2017b) in its conceptual proposition about the interaction device, with the perspectives of the studies about platforms, viewing such constructs in their multifaceted and complex aspects (Van Dijck et al., 2018). In conceiving that there are platforms that may be characterized and studied as interaction devices (Braga, 2017a), we assess that one of the contributions of this research is the attempt to make these approaches dialogue.

In dialogue with such previously conducted research efforts, from the methodological viewpoint, we considered the Google search engine to collect the news items because we started from the assumption that although there are aspects we cannot apprehend, such as the transparency in the articulation of the algorithms involved in the presentation of results<sup>5</sup>, it is a form of search that may be used in scientific research. Moreover, we elaborated our analyses from inferences about the integration of the similitude analyses (Degenne & Vergès, 1973) with the descending hierarchical classification (DHC) (Reinert, 1993) about the titles and texts carried out with the aid of lexicometric analysis we used the free French lexicometric analysis software *Iramuteq*. To use the software, we relied on literature in both French (Ratinaud, 2009) and Portuguese (Camargo & Justo, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> As Van Dijck, Poell, and De Wall (2018) mentioned, Alphabet-Google and Facebook control 80% of the data traffic on the Internet, and their policies influence the news production market. For a more in-depth discussion about the functioning logic of the algorithms, one may consult Striphas (2015) and Rieder (2018).



With these methodological moves carried out, we proceeded to describe the processuality of the communication flows found, seeking to identify crossings of meanings between what is said in the texts and a broader context – that of the pandemic and some singular characteristics of the media. Our methodological approaches dialogue both with the perspective of Verón (2004, 2013) regarding social semiosis and the need for the analyst to work on discursive materiality, removing fragments of the flow of the semiotic fabric, and that of Braga (2017b) regarding the inferential articulation about the observed indices.

Our research is focused on one of the areas of investigation in the field of Communication, which addresses the processes of meaning production and discourse circulation through complex interactional activities between producers and receivers. We also conceive that the methodological experimentation proposed herein aims to provoke the reflection on the non-neutrality of the data and the inevitable debate, within the scope of Communication, to attempt to tension methodologies with tradition and qualitative or quantitative emphases. We acknowledge that it is possible to perform research seeking to relate more micro views with situations deemed broader.

That said, we initially discuss the concepts of interactional episodes and devices, besides communication circuits, from the propositions of Braga (2017b). Then, understanding that the temporal landmarks of deaths due to COVID-19 are the interactional episodes, the texts published in the media are characterized as interactional devices, and the articulation of such different devices constitutes the communication circuit, we analyze the circulation of meanings and make inferences about observed processuality.

### **THE COMPLEXITY OF THE CIRCULATION AND THE CONSTITUTION OF THE COMMUNICATION CIRCUIT**

We started from the assumption of the non-linearity of communication and that, as researchers, we observe discourses inscribed in different materiality and identify marks produced by the enunciators (whether media, institutions, or social actors) that point to the complexity of the production of meanings. Therefore, upon analyzing the selected news that contemplate what we consider as landmarks of deaths in Brazil due to the pandemic, we may deepen significant points in the context of discursive circulation.

As Verón (2004) conceived, every discourse draws “a field of effects of meaning and not a single effect” (p. 216). To him, the finding that we live in a society in mediatization challenges researchers to view communication processuality that complexifies with the intensification of the circulatory

activity. The author defended that communication is not linear since there are discursive imbalances and lags due to the enunciation work performed by the social actors<sup>6</sup> in the most diverse discursive contexts. In his last productions, he emphasized that the occurrence of a more significant diffusion of discourses in contemporary society represents more complexity.

With inspiration from some propositions of German theorist Niklas Luhmann about social systems, Verón (2013) problematized what he named epistemology of observation, highlighting that what may be observed are the signs in their distinct materiality. To him, “the observation, at any of its levels, is the observation of material configurations of signs, which are fragments of the semiosis, mediatized [...] or not mediatized” (Verón, 2013, p. 404, our translation<sup>7</sup>). The semiologist also stressed that such sign configurations are hybrid and non homogeneous.

Sharing ideas similar to those of the Argentine semiologist, Fausto Neto (2018) highlighted that we need to move away from the epistemological traditions of “binary” order, seeking clues of how this processuality is engendered, what articulations, bifurcations, or divergences may be observed through a relational perspective. To the author, it is necessary to observe the communication phenomenon more broadly because the grammars produced within the scope of the media cause to “emerge not only an ambiance but other forms of circuits in which new conditions of meaning production are structured” (Fausto Neto, 2018, p. 27).

In addressing the circulation problem, Fausto Neto (2010) drew attention to the possibility of viewing reception through the edges of circulation. More recently, the author preconized the concept of “contact zone”, in which complex feedback and multiple relations of social, technical, and discursive order relations occur. In this complex processuality, historically viewed separately, the poles of production and reception must be removed from

their stagnant places since their activities are modified, “transforming the conditions of their meaning production work” (Fausto Neto, 2018, p. 30).

The complexities that mark the meaning construction processes and the semiosis produced by the social actors within the context of societies in mediatization challenge us to seek to understand the communication phenomena more broadly, far from the former communication model that placed production and recognition in isolated meaningful chains. Hence, we understand that each interactional episode has distinct singularities because the interactions between producers and receivers of meanings, for example, may conglomerate disputes, divergences, convergences, tensioning, and singular approaches. To reflect on such processuality, we resort to Braga (2017a, p. 20),

<sup>6</sup>We name as social actors those who produce semiosis (enunciators, social subjects, participants, interactants, among other denominations) from inspiration from the writings of Eliseo Verón. The author used different ways to name the activity of those who produce discourses: individual actors (Verón, 1997), socio-individual systems (Verón, 2013), receivers, and discursive position in recognition (Verón, 2004, 2013).

<sup>7</sup>From the original: “la observación, en cualquiera de sus niveles, es observación de configuraciones materiales de signos, que son fragmentos de la semiosis, mediatizada [...] o no mediatizada”.



to whom “social interactions correspond to the place in which we may attempt to approximate the communication phenomenon in its occurrence”. In our study, upon observing the interactions in the episodes, we seek to identify clues about the circulation of meanings relative to the publication of news about deaths due to contracting the Coronavirus.

In agreeing with Braga (2017a; 2017b) that communication is a tentative process and that episodes are made concrete through the interaction of the participants, we also stress that there is no communication without interaction and that, for such communication to exist, both the codes and the inferences are necessary. Hence, we highlight that the code is related to the language, rules, and patterns that the participants in a given interaction share, as well as the social, cultural, and technological environment in which such participants are inserted. However, the codes alone are not enough for an interaction, which also depends on the inferences that, in turn, are associated with the interpretations, the deduction and abduction, the experience lived, and the construction of meanings. With this in mind, it is interesting to point out that the codes are tentative and require inferences at each interaction process, which refers to the fact that communication is a tentative process.

However, it is worth stressing that the participants are not necessarily creating new processes at every moment to fulfill their goals in the interaction, given that there already exist recognizable models activated by them for communication to occur. Braga (2017a, p. 33- 34) called such a model an interactional device: “... it is a model developed by experimental practice (attempts) that has a more or less defined articulation of ‘code’ processes and non coded spaces that request the inference of the participants”. We propose that the temporal landmarks are the interactional episodes, whereas the news published in different media that announced the landmarks of the number of deaths may be characterized as interactional devices since they have specific codes and inferential processes that may be carried out and analyzed.

We agree with Braga (2017a) that “[...] such devices are communicationally developed and culturally added for the exercise of interactional episodes” (p. 38). Hence, it becomes evident that the notion of the device has to do not only with the technology or institutional rules of the means of communication, which in themselves are not interactional devices, but rather the set that encompasses the appropriations of these technologies and the processes that provide meanings to their uses, for example, may be taken as devices in our conception.

To Braga (2017a), the results of an interaction generate meanings for other interactions, given that the elements of an episode are in circulation and, thus, remain in a flow forward, successively constructing other interactional

episodes. Also, according to the author, the materiality present in the episodes is in product form, such as the text itself, for example, or the memory accumulated among the interaction participants.

Hence, at the same time society elaborates communication attempts, it also constructs connections or tensioning among different episodes, with such moves contributing to the development of articulations among the interactional devices. To Braga (2017b, p. 44), the “[...] reiteration of connections among different interactional devices ends up characterizing as a circuit, which starts to explicitly direct the communication flow forward in specific contextual conditions”.

As Braga (2017b, p. 53) explained, this product that circulates “... is rather a characterizer of the output and input elements that relate interactional devices in the circuit”. Hence, to the author, it is merely a moment of the circuit, with the materiality allowing the capture more easily for one to make observations and inferences about the processes in which such a product is inscribed, considering even that, with the processuality of the ongoing mediatization and the conditions of circulation in a flow forward, the logics between the media that produce content and the discourse receivers (social actors, from the Veronian perspective) are affected.

Moreover, to continue circulating and repercussing, the product placed in circulation (in our study, the news) is moldable and seeks to mold the environments in which it is circulating. Hence, from what is put into circulation in devices through the most successful interaction attempts in the episodes, it is possible to make inferences about the more general processes of the circuit, also observing the specificities of the nodal points. With this in mind, we may analyze the circulation of meanings about the landmarks of deaths due to COVID-19 in Brazil from news published in different media articulated in the constitution of other communication circuits.

## **THE MEANINGS PRODUCED: METRICS AND INITIAL INFERENCES**

After discussing the concepts central to the research, we initially present the procedures for collecting and cleaning the collected textual data. We consider that detailing such processes is important not only to specify the processuality of the research but also to inspire and be able to be a reference for other studies that, by any chance, come to be developed in convergence with ours. After, we proceed to the presentation of the analyses about the meanings circulating in the news and, lastly, discuss the processuality of the communication flows. As said in the Introduction, the investigation is related



to other theoretical and methodological moves that have been carried out in the last two years within the scope of the Research Group, which has the participation of scientific initiation, master's, and doctoral students.

The collection<sup>8</sup> was carried out based on a protocol devised by the authors that asked to search for the landmarks of 50, 100, 200, 300, 400, 500, and 600 thousand deaths in the Google search engine and collect the first twenty texts that appeared. To ensure the feasibility of the investigation, a specific number was established for manual data collection due to the large amount of data to be gathered. This procedure was carried out from October 3 to December 6, 2021<sup>9</sup>, using the browsers Opera and Google Chrome, and the texts were stored through a form on Google Forms. Besides notifying to which landmark the links to the texts belonged, it was also asked for one to observe if there was space for comments on the websites, which other digital platforms they had, and if the news had been published on any of them. Lastly, the full text of the news should be copied to a Word document, which should be attached.

In this first step, 135 stories<sup>10</sup> were collected that had been published by 54 media outlets, namely *Abrasco*, *Band*, *BBC Brasil*, *Brasil de Fato*, *Campo Grande News*, *Carta Capital*, *CNN Brasil*, *Correio 24 horas*, *Correio Braziliense*, *CUT*, *Diário do Grande ABC*, *DW Brasil*, *Estado de Minas*, *Estadão*, *Folha de Pernambuco*, *Gazeta do Povo*, *Hypeness*, *Istoé Dinheiro*, *Jornal do Comércio*, *Metrópoles*, *Nexo Jornal*, *NSC Total*, *Oxfam*, *Poder 360*, *Rede Brasil Atual*, *Reuters*, *Sinposba*, *Unicamp*, *Uol*, *Folha de S. Paulo*, *Agência Senado*, *Agência Brasil*, *Análise Política em Saúde*, *Yahoo Notícias*, *El País Brasil*, *Canal Tech*, *Congresso em Foco*, *G1*, *Exame*, *GaúchaZH*, *Jovem Pan*, *Jornal da USP*, *Marco Zero*, *R7*, *Olhar Digital*, *Outras Palavras*, *Portal Eu Saúde*, *Projeto Colabora*, *Euronews*, *Revista Oeste*, *IG*, *Telepadi*, *Veja*. These 54 media outlets represent some diversity, given they produced 135 texts<sup>11</sup>. The Google search engine algorithm apparently directed to various sources, considering that we searched for the 20 first results.

After the collection, we conducted procedures to clean the information, removing the links for which there were impediments by the paywall to collect the news text, such as the newspapers *Estadão* and *Folha de S. Paulo*. Hence, 109 texts remained to continue with the analysis. Moreover, for the documents to be able to be entered into the research software *Iramuteq*, the conjunction “and” was replaced with “&”, and we chose to work only with the meaningful words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and unrecognized forms), opting to lemmatize the vocables. The data mining and processing required for the corpus to be run on *Iramuteq* has been discussed in another publication (Romero & Borelli, 2021).

<sup>8</sup>Scientific initiation students Maria Eduarda Baldin (Fipe Senior/CCSH UFSM), Flavia Morishita (Pibic/CNPq), José Vitor Zuccolo (Probic/Fapergs), and Milene Eichelberger (research collaborator, PET scholarship holder/Capes) participated in the initial data collection

<sup>9</sup>As of March 28, 2023, the number of deaths had not yet surpassed 700,000. It is worth noting that it took just over a year for the death toll to reach 600,000.

<sup>10</sup>Of the 140 links, 135 were deemed news; the others were discarded for being connected with misinformation propagation websites. The criterion for exclusion was based on the research protocol, in which the students had to check the reliability of the website and read the news story in full before starting to collect it.

<sup>11</sup>Our intention is not to engage in a debate about the nature of news text production. We recognize that traditional media organizations have established traditions, routines, and specific production logics, but there are also independent news sources, as well as productions by small groups, independent journalists, civil organizations, and institutions.

Therefore, our focus is to identify whether the texts have sources and data, and whether the information conveyed can be verified. The corpus includes information from traditional media, civil society, and institutional organizations, such as the *Jornal da USP*, *Portal Eu Saúde*, and *Agência Senado*, among others. This decision was made based on the reliability of the data produced and the wide

The concept of a *corpus* was considered by Verón (2004) as a group of texts from the empirical viewpoint. To him, the principle of the internal structure of a *corpus* starts from the choice in favor of some homogeneity; however, every text “is a heterogeneous object, lending itself to multiple readings, placed at the crossroads of a plurality of different ‘causalities’” (Verón, 2004, p. 71). Hence, we agree with the author when he said that the analysis implies pulling from the meaning production flow specific fragments of the semiotic fabric.

Relative to the first analytical move, observing the meanings circulating in the stories, we based ourselves on the similitude analysis and the descending hierarchical classification (DHC) method, in addition to later returning to the texts for contextualization. Such a methodological articulation follows the proposal initiated by Romero and Borelli (2021) when observing the chart of the maximum tree (Degenne & Vergès, 1973) from the intermediation centrality of the vocables (Newman & Girvan, 2004; Brandes, 2001). We added the DHC because, besides the panoramic view of the addressed themes, we are also interested in making comparisons among the texts, as done by Frigo et al. (2021).

Specifically, we chose to separate the textual data into title and text, besides classifying it according to the temporal landmark to which it is related and which media outlet published it. After this separation, we first analyzed the metrics related to the maximum tree of the titles and later that of the texts, in addition to applying the descending hierarchical classification to the texts only. Next, we present the collected data and the research findings.

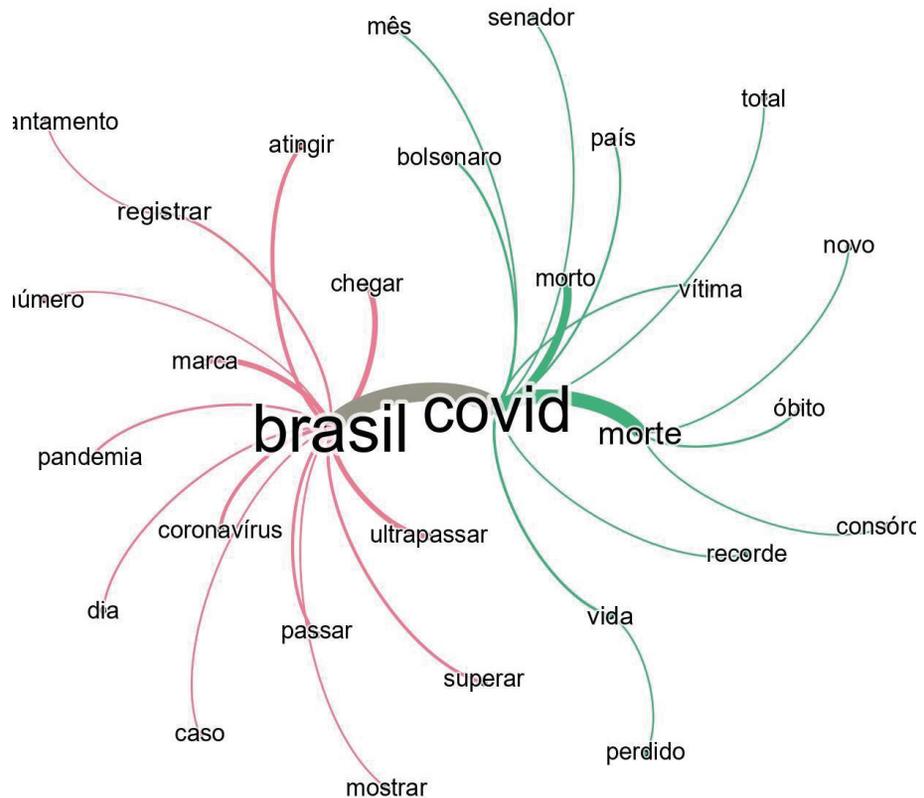
The 109 news were analyzed, and the first observation move involved the titles. Relative to this, we had 1,358 occurrences (words, agglutinated forms, or vocables<sup>12</sup>), with 250 different words and 161 appearing only once. The average occurrence of words in the titles was 12.46. With our methodological choice to exclude certain grammatical classes (such as adverbs, conjunctions, and prepositions), 653 occurrences remained, representing 48.08% of the total. Among these, 620 (94.94%) were active, and 33 (5.05%) were supplementary. The maximum tree chart was generated with all the words that appear more than ten times in the corpus, and it had a modularity of 0.336 and presented two classes.

Relative to the maximum tree chart generated, two classes or communities of words emerged that have proximity to one another. The classes were as follows (Figure 1): class 0 (“brasil” – 300; “registrar” – 28); class 1 (“covid” – 294; “morte” – 81; “vida” – 28).

circulation of these sites and texts. Restricting the corpus solely to traditional media would have made it impossible to take a broader view of texts, various sources, and the meanings produced in the circulation process.

<sup>12</sup>Since such vocables had to be processed, we chose to maintain the writing in lowercase letters.

Figure 2  
Maximum tree of the titles



From the chart that highlights the intermediation centrality, it is possible to infer that, besides having a high connection to each other given the thick line that connects them, the words “brasil” and “covid” also created two close angles of meaning, connecting the mention of the country to the verbs “registrar”, “chegar”, and “atingir” and, for the disease, places itself together with the vocables that characterize their effects such as the noun “morte”. In general, it is possible to infer there is proximity in the meanings surrounding the analyzed titles, emphasizing the geographic location and the metric used as a mark of ephemeris.

As already mentioned, after observing the titles, the texts were analyzed. Relative to this, we had 90,539 occurrences (words, agglutinated forms, or vocables), with 5,858 different words and 2,364 appearing only once. The average occurrence of words in the texts was 830.63. With our methodological

choice to exclude some grammatical classes, 47,498 occurrences remained, representing 52.46% of the total. Among these, 42,294 (89.04%) are active and 5,204 (10.95%) are supplementary. The maximum tree chart (Figure 2) was generated with all the words that appear more than 50 times in the corpus, and it had a modularity of 0.740 and presented ten classes.

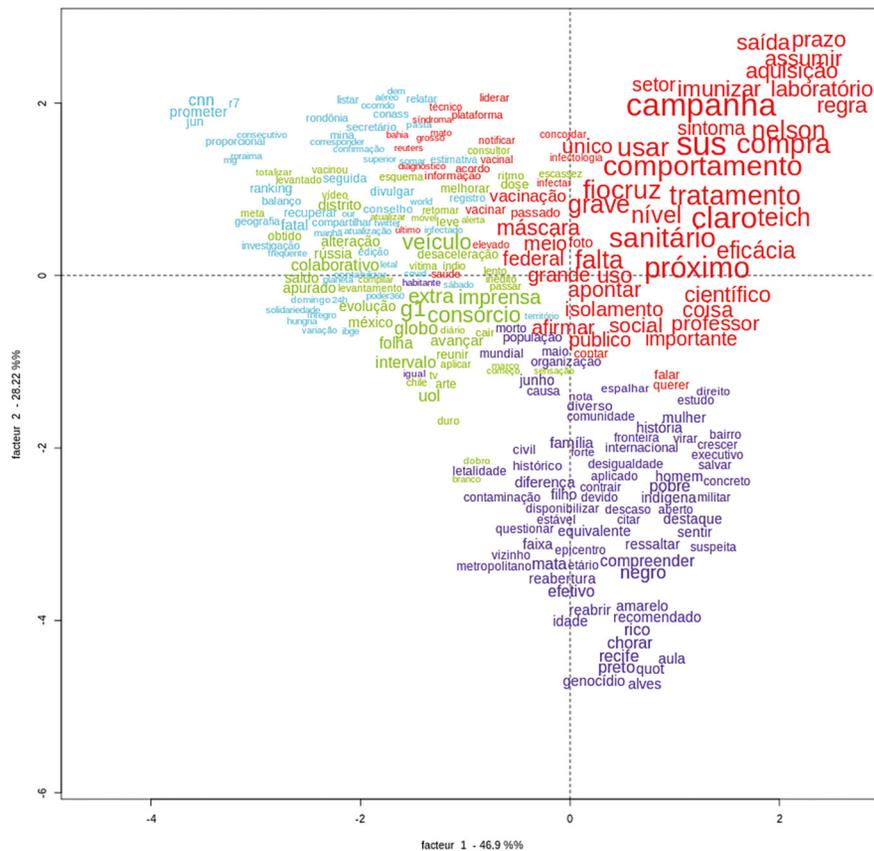
Relative to the maximum tree chart generated, ten classes or communities of words emerged that have proximity to one another. The classes are as follows: class 0 (“covid” – 1598; “brasileiro” – 277; “feira” – 139); class 1 (“população” – 139); class 2 (“sanitário” – 139); class 3 (“presidente” – 276; “bolsonaro” – 139); class 4 (“ano” – 139); class 5 (“novo” – 139); class 6 (“saúde” – 1599; “dado” – 276; “consórcio” – 139); class 7 (“morte” – 8011; “país” – 2101; “número” – 550; “caso” – 414; “médio” – 139; “semana” – 139; “vacinação” – 139); class 8 (“governo” – 277); class 9 (“brasil” – 5775; “pandemia” – 2556; “janeiro” – 411; “vida” – 277; “milhão” – 277; “rio” – 276; “grande” – 139); class 10 (“medida” – 937; “social” – 682; “distanciamento” – 276; “máscara” – 139).

From the chart (Figure 3) that highlights the intermediation centrality, it is possible to infer that the vocables with the most significant metric (“morte” – 8011 and “brasil” – 5775) are in classes 7 and 9, which, despite having a strong connection to each other, form ramifications with no connection upwards or downwards. In the “brasil” axis, there are connections with various vocables; however, there is a concentration on “saúde” and “ministério” (these appear connected to words such as “sistema, público, consórcio, imprensa, nacional, ministério) and “pandemia”, with the latter ramifying and connecting to “governo” and “presidente”. On the “morte” axis, we also have various connections, but a concentration in the connectivity to “país” and “número” as well as to “covid”, which in turn ramifies into “hospital” and “covid”.

In general, it is possible to infer the diversity of the thematic focuses, being concentrated around the changes in the management of the Ministry of Health and in the actions of the federal government in managing the pandemic. We also noticed a mention of the data generated by the press consortium due to the decision to no longer disclose official information through the Ministry of Health. On the other hand, there is an emphasis on the numerical aspects of the pandemic, the discussion about the hospital situation, and the development of vaccines through words that refer to the scientific field, such as “especialista”, “vacinar”, “fiocruz”, “sanitário”, “pesquisador”, and “universidade”.



Figure 4  
Chart of the vocables of the DHC classes



In turn, the analyzed classes may be observed next (Figure 5).



centralized public policies by the federal government ... from the decision to toughen or lighten isolation measures to the purchase of vaccines”<sup>15</sup> (Biernath & Alvim).

In turn, when classes 2 (green) and 3 (blue) are observed, it is possible to notice the proximity between them due to the evident intertwining of the vocables. Hence, we may infer that the coverage of *GI*, *Exame*, *IG*, *Rede Brasil Atual*, *Isto é*, *Agência Brasil*, *Metrópolis*, *UOL* and *NSC* are more similar and show proximity to that of *CNN*, *Poder 360*, *R7*, and *Brasil de Fato*. We may also infer that there is an emphasis on bringing information from the press consortium – “survey from the press consortium points that the country has 1,070,139 confirmed cases, with 30,972 having been recorded in the last 24 hours” (“Brasil passa de 50 mil mortes”, 2020)<sup>16</sup> and updates of the metrics in comparison with other countries – “since March 5, when it surpassed the United States among the five nations with the most deaths, Brazil has always had a death average near those of Mexico, India, United Kingdom”<sup>17</sup> (“Brasil atinge 300 mil mortos”, 2021)– and among the Brazilian states (“the ICU bed occupation indices in Brazil show an extremely critical picture; except for Amazonas and Roraima, all other states are in the critical capacity alert classification”)<sup>18</sup> (“Brasil atinge 300 mil mortos”, 2021).

Lastly, class 4 (purple) has relative thematic independence when we analyze the configuration and arrangement of the vocables. Hence, the coverage of *Projeto Colabora* and *CUT* are the closest in terms of the production of meanings and tend to focus on the discussions about how much the pandemic affected marginalized populations. One example is the following discursive fragment:

the neglect in tackling COVID-19, absence of support to entrepreneur workers most vulnerable to the pandemic situation, deliberate policy of stimulating the propagation of the virus instead of prioritizing vaccination are among the main motives for the demonstrations scheduled for this Saturday<sup>19</sup> (“Brasil ultrapassa a trágica”, 2021).

After detailing the methodological procedures, when we showed some metrics related to the research data to be able to analyze the circulation of meanings, we had to make a move to return to the texts for it to be possible to make inferences. Another activity performed in this investigation was to consult facts that marked the pandemic context in Brazil during the period comprised of the communication episodes of the temporal landmarks of the deaths due to the pandemic: from 50 to 600 thousand deaths. In sequence,

<sup>15</sup>From the original: “a troca de ministros é apenas a ponta do iceberg [...] mudanças administrativas tiveram influência na criação de políticas públicas centralizadas pelo governo federal [...] desde a decisão por endurecer ou flexibilizar medidas de isolamento à compra de vacinas”.

<sup>16</sup>From the original: “levantamento de consórcio de veículos de imprensa aponta que país tem 1 070 139 casos confirmados sendo que 30 972 foram registrados nas últimas 24 horas”.

<sup>17</sup>From the original: “desde 5 de março quando ultrapassou os estados unidos entre as cinco nações com mais óbitos o brasil sempre teve uma média de mortes próxima à de méxico índia reino unido”.

<sup>18</sup>From the original: “os índices de ocupação de leitos de uti no brasil têm quadro extremamente crítico com exceção do amazonas de roraima todos os demais estados estão na classificação de alerta crítico de lotação”.

<sup>19</sup>From the original: “o descaso no combate à covid 19 ausência apoio aos trabalhadores empreendedores mais vulneráveis à situação de pandemia política deliberada de estimular a propagação do vírus em vez de priorizar a vacinação estão entre os principais motivos dos protestos marcados para este sábado. Available at: <https://www.cut.org.br/noticias/brasil-ultrapassa-a-tragica-marca-das-500-mil-vidas-perdidas-para-a-covid-19-951e>



we prepared some clues of processuality and transversalities that we managed to observe when analyzing broader communication flows, in dialog with the proposition of Braga (2017a; 2017b) regarding the circuits that are constituted from the publication of the news in the media outlets.

### PROCESSUALITY OF COMMUNICATION FLOWS

Upon observing the constitution of the interactional device, we noticed a trend of exclusion of the space open for comments on the websites of the consulted media outlets. The ones that still maintain the space for comments open end up providing some exclusivity to subscribers or integrating with other digital platforms such as Facebook<sup>20</sup> or Disqus<sup>21</sup>. It is important to stress that commenting on the website and commenting on the fan pages are not the same operation since they are interactional devices with different codes, languages, and operation modes. Considering the presence of these media outlets on other digital platforms, we noticed that most have profiles on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. Among the newspapers that still have space for comments, we highlight *Gazeta do Povo*, which has interactions between readers among the texts collected.

Upon observing the interactional elements and highlighting those more pertinent to our study, we may investigate the system of relationships present. Considering that, according to Braga (2017a; 2017b), the organization of a device is not independent of the processes that exist there, we may say that, since the news are organized relative to whether or not the space for comments is open, this has to do with the interaction of social actors. “Reiterated processes tend to be configured as tendential ways for their continued exercise, hence as ‘structural’ for what is done in their sphere” (Braga, 2017a, p. 36). Also, we understand that if the articulating element of the device is historically defined by the processes, then the organization does not depend only on the interactions of the participants but also on institutional, financial, cultural, and political matters – which traverse the Brazilian context, for example, especially relative to the phenomena of political polarization and misinformation, fed by the dissemination of fake news and discourses of intolerance (Braga, 2020).

Since these historically constructed processes are affected by the interactions, the devices are “... ways of doing that are socially produced and made available” (Braga, 2017a, p. 36). For this reason, that which is tested and selected (or not) in the successive interactions that occur in a device is what will modify this device – such as the decision of many information outlets to no longer open space for

<sup>20</sup>Facebook, which was pointed out by Van Dijck, Poell, and De Waal (2018) as one of the Big Five (Alphabet Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, and Microsoft) in the context of the platformization of society, has been undergoing a brand reformulation process since October 28, 2021. Since then, Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp all appear with the designation “from Meta”.

<sup>21</sup>Disqus is a specific platform for comments that may be used for comments and interactions between participants of different digital platforms.

their readers to interact and express their opinions and perceptions from what is said in the texts and produced to circulate in a flow forward.

Moreover, the passages between episodes that reinforce successful attempts “... end up stabilizing and giving shape to the circuit and passing on indications to the interactional devices themselves” (Braga, 2017b, p. 44). In our research, the texts published in the media are the devices; therefore, it is worth mentioning that as the accumulation of episodes occurs through the interactions, the devices may change their technical or social strategies (again, the decision of whether or not to open spaces for comments, manage their functioning, moderate such discourses, among other actions).

Among the media outlets that still have space for comments, we highlight *Gazeta do Povo*, which through the publication of the texts, allowed flows forward since interactions occurred among the readers in such spaces. In our perspective, the codes and inferences are related to how the participants (producers-receivers and receivers-receivers) manage to maintain the dialog about the deaths due to COVID-19. Hence, the pertinence of the codes depends on the technological environment in which they are inserted, the appropriations made of these technologies, and, especially, the goals of the participants who activate specific inferential competencies to adjust such does in interactional terms. Therefore, we agree with Braga (2017a; 2017b) when he said that the acquis of each participant and the contextual conditions are also important elements in the episodes, which, besides interactional, are inferential.

Another processuality found is replication, with credits, for the content of agencies. In other words, there is a crossover among the meanings produced by the news through these actions, besides the evidence of continuous flows in the communication and the constitution of other circuits (Braga, 2017a; 2017b). The texts, which from our theoretical perspective are fragments removed from the semiotic fabric (Verón, 2004), are replicated by the social actors that construct inputs and outputs in the circuit connecting different interactional devices.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are countless ways to observe the theme that has been present in our everyday life in the past two years: the pandemic due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus. We unfailingly started from a communicational view around the specific axis addressed in our investigation. We searched in the media for what was being said about the pandemic and how the discourses were



being constructed to then analyze the circulation of meanings in the communication circuit formed around the news about landmarks of the number of deaths due to COVID-19 in Brazil.

For such, it was necessary to carry out a work that involved specific methodological experimentations. This does not imply the use of any research technique, method, or methodology; on the contrary, it requires an accurate view of what the object requires for the ongoing studies to flow and not become stagnant or mechanical. It is also important to highlight that this view does not exclude already consecrated methodologies, nor does it intend to use new methodologies with no justifications.

With this in mind, we used the *Iramuteq* software to elaborate our inferences based on the similitude analysis and the descending hierarchical classification (DHC) of the titles and texts. It is worth stressing the importance of presenting these methodological procedures as detailed throughout the paper. After, our methodological approaches dialogued with the perspective of Verón (2004, 2013) regarding social semiosis and that of Braga (2017) relative to the inferential articulation of the observed indices.

Regarding the analyses conducted, it is important to note that our investigation focused on the first 20 results of the Google search engine. Based on this limited sample, we can conclude that the Brazilian media covered COVID-19 related deaths in various ways. The increase in circulation during these periods led to a reevaluation of the government's attitudes between milestones, as evidenced by the results of the descending hierarchical classification.

The decision to include a variety of sources reporting on COVID-19 deaths was based on the observation that institutional or trade union newspapers (CUT) were highlighting broader issues, such as class and the neglect of marginalized groups. This approach also allowed for a wider range of topics related to pandemic victims to be identified. The graphs indicate that the press consortium was one of the primary sources used to present the data. Additionally, the texts highlight the issue of the federal government's neglect of health agencies and science, with repeated references to terms such as 'especialista', 'pesquisador', and 'universidade'. In this context, we inferred that infinite semiosis is constructed through different discursive processuality. Starting from the idea developed by Verón (2004, 2013) and Fausto Neto (2018) regarding the indetermination of the meanings, we noticed that the circulation of meanings challenges us, as observers, to perceive such discursive heterogeneity. There is no homogeneity, given that the configurations of signs are hybrid. It is also necessary to say that the inferences proposed

herein stem not only from theoretical and methodological choices but also from the interpretative view that we undertook on our data and the research findings. The metrics were generated from specific parameters and criteria we developed so that the significant matter extracted from the semiotic fabric could be interpreted.

Another pertinent issue that regards the constant challenges of conducting research involving data collection is that access to them is limited (Borelli, no prelo). Several obstacles often have no momentary or even concrete solutions, such as the logic of the algorithms on digital platforms (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Moreover, the limitation media outlets impose on their contents is ever more often, whether through the need for registration or even payment to access the productions or visualize broader contents.

It is worth adding the tendency for media outlets to moderate or exclude the space for comments, which hampers the interaction with the readers and among them in such a space, leading them to develop other interactional strategies for the flow to go forward, as Braga (2017) defined. This practice can limit the emergence of contact zones (Fausto Neto, 2018) and prompt social actors to develop alternative strategies to access content of interest. One such strategy is to search on websites that are not strictly journalistic, as they offer a wide range of discourse (Verón, 1996, 2004, 2013) in various formats that contribute to the complexity of the process of circulating news stories.

Relative to the analysis, we carried out two moves, one directed at the meanings that circulate in the texts and the other at the processuality of the communication flows. The proposed articulation between these two procedures allowed a broader view to understand the circulation of meanings in the constituted communication circuit, which does not imply the totality of the phenomenon, but punctual elements of specific occurrences observed in the landmarks of numbers of deaths due to COVID-19 in Brazil.

Moreover, the need to remove fragments from the semiotic fabric to enable an analysis within the broad and complete network of social semiosis imposed the challenge of returning to the texts. We defend that it is necessary to observe the context in which we are inserted to understand what the observables tell us. Hence, the data do not speak for themselves; they are discursive materiality on which the analyst must work to manage to identify marks and indices to be able to make inferences.

The emergence of the problem of circulation and constitution of ever more complex communication phenomena resulting from the societies in mediatization also form complex circuits, with countless inputs and outputs that generate new circuits in uninterrupted flows. To account for some of



these aspects, it is worth investigating the formation of a given circuit or even selecting discursive fragments of circuits inscribed in one another – such is the complexity of communication phenomena.

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# The Monarchy of the North (1919) in the iconographic discourse of the *Ilustração Portuguesa*

## *A Monarquia do Norte (1919) no discurso iconográfico da Ilustração Portuguesa*

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### ABSTRACT

On January 19, 1919, rebellious troops proclaimed, in Oporto, the reinstatement of the monarchy, soon followed by other garrisons in the north of Portugal. Monarchist ruled in almost all of the north of the country, particularly in Oporto, had no equivalent in the south. The ensuing confrontation between monarchist insurgents and republican forces led to the end of the Monarchy of the North on February 13. This research aimed to unveil, with a quantitative and qualitative study, the structure of the iconographic discourse that *Ilustração Portuguesa*, the only large-circulation contemporary illustrated magazine, built about this episode. It was accepted the starting hypothesis that the discourse of the *Ilustração Portuguesa* was aligned with the republican governmental power, which controlled the capital city, where the magazine had its headquarters, and most of the country. The data validated the hypothesis: the magazine's iconographic narrative glorifies the Republic and its "heroes," transforming the publication into an instrument of "infopropaganda" at the service of the established power in Lisbon.

**Keywords:** The Monarchy of the North, Portugal, *Ilustração Portuguesa*, iconography, discourse analysis



## The Monarchy of the North (1919) in the iconographic discourse of the *Ilustração Portuguesa*

### RESUMO

Em 19 de janeiro de 1919, tropas revoltosas proclamaram, no Porto, a reinstauração da monarquia, logo seguidas por outras guarnições do norte de Portugal. O domínio monárquico em quase todo o norte do país, em particular do Porto, não teve equivalente a sul. A confrontação que se seguiu entre os revoltosos monárquicos e os republicanos levou ao fim da Monarquia do Norte em 13 de fevereiro. A investigação que aqui se apresenta visou a desvelar, por meio de um estudo quantiquantitativo, a estrutura do discurso iconográfico que a *Ilustração Portuguesa*, única revista ilustrada coeva de grande circulação, construiu sobre esse episódio. Partiu-se da hipótese de que o discurso da *Ilustração Portuguesa* se alinhou com o poder governamental republicano, que controlava a capital, sede da revista, e a maioria do território do país. Os dados permitiram validar a hipótese: a narrativa iconográfica da revista glorifica a República e os seus “heróis”, transformando a publicação em um instrumento de “infopropaganda” a serviço do poder estabelecido em Lisboa.

**Palavras-chave:** Monarquia do Norte, Portugal, *Ilustração Portuguesa*, iconografia, análise do discurso

ON JANUARY 19, 1919, rebellious troops in Porto proclaimed the reinstatement of the Monarchy, soon followed by other garrisons in northern Portugal. The monarchists’ domination of almost the entire north of the country, particularly Porto, had no equivalent in the south. Although there were monarchist attempts, Lisbon, central and southern Portugal remained in Republican hands. The ensuing confrontation between monarchist insurgents and republican led to the end of the Monarchy of the North less than a month later, on February 13, when republican institutions were re-established in Porto. The Republican way of organizing the Portuguese state was no longer abandoned.

The coeval people gave importance to the event. From contemporary works on the facts (Lima, 1919; Magalhães, 1925, 1934; Martins, 1922; Oliveira, 1919), sources for later historiographical approaches (Ferreira, 1984; Marques, 1973, 1978, 1995; Mattoso & Ramos, 2001; Peres, 1954; Ramos, Sousa, & Monteiro, 2009; Resende, 2019; Rollo & Rosas, 2019; Santos, 2014; Saraiva, 2003; Silva, 2008), the most relevant is *Monarquia do Norte [Monarchy of the North]*, a two-volume work by the monarchist journalist Martins (1922), whose title helped to establish the name of this historical episode and give it a more positive connotation than it had had until then (“Monarchy of the Spankers” [Monarquia dos Trauliteiros]).

Having been disruptive, unforeseen, violent and impactful, as well as limitable in time, the historical episode of the Monarchy of the North was notable and noticed, becoming news in the press of the time (Resende, 2019; Souto, 1989). It was, therefore, perceived as an event, as a notable singularity, in line with the reasoning of authors such as Adriano Duarte Rodrigues (1988) or Adelmo Genro

Filho (2012). And it had value as news, because it had qualities that led coeval journalists to consider it as such: a worthy singularity, a notable and newsworthy social fact, along the interpretative lines opened by Galtung and Ruge (1965). Above all, the Monarchy of the North falls within the field of dramatic and time-developing events around which journalism revolves (Elliot & Golding, 1988).

The importance that the Monarchy of the North had on the lives of its contemporaries did not have the same impact on the academic study of its journalistic coverage. Although a categorization and analysis of the articles on the Monarchy of the North taken from the official gazettes (*Diário do Governo* and *Diário da Junta Governativa do Reino de Portugal*) has been carried out, focusing on the official *communiqués* (Souto, 1989), there is no other study on the discursive behavior of the contemporary press during this historical episode, even though, at the time, the press had great penetration in Portuguese society, particularly in the main urban areas, since industrial and party-independent journalism was consolidated in Portugal (Lima, 2012; Matos, 2014; Sousa, 2021). By exclusion of parts, there is also no study focused on analyzing the iconographic coverage of the Monarchy of the North by the press, despite the fact that, at that moment in history, photojournalism was already consolidated in Portugal, as a practice and a craft (Sousa, 2020), thanks to photographers such as Joshua Benoliel, Arnaldo Garcês, Anselmo Franco and Dinis Salgado. This research aims to help to fill this gap.

An analysis of the iconographic coverage of the event by the press had to include a study of the only Portuguese illustrated magazine with national circulation published at the time, *Ilustração Portuguesa* (Sousa, 2017; Sousa, 2020), a key stage in Portuguese journalistic and documentary photography between 1903 and 1924 (Manique & Proença, 1990; Serén, 2004).

The research tried to answer to the following question: what was the iconographic narrative – including the correlated verbal text – that *Ilustração Portuguesa* constructed about the Monarchy of the North, knowing that the established powers sought to instrumentalize the press for propaganda and manipulation purposes, not refraining from censoring it and using *fake news* (Souto, 1989; Silva, 2008; Resende, 2019)? It was hypothesized that, given the specific circumstances in Lisbon, where the magazine was based, the photographic and verbal discourse of *Ilustração Portuguesa* was aligned with the Government of the Republic, which controlled the capital and most of the country's territory.

## THE MONARCHY OF THE NORTH

The Monarchy of the North was the episodic restoration of the monarchical regime in Porto and the north of Portugal, between January 19 and February 13,



## The Monarchy of the North (1919) in the iconographic discourse of the *Ilustração Portuguesa*

1919. Coeval republicans called it the “Monarchy of the Spankers” [Monarquia dos Trauliteiros] (Lima, 1919; Oliveira, 1919), because of the violence and terror that fell upon the opponents (cf. Silva, 2008). More sympathetic to the insurgents, the monarchist journalist Martins (1922) called the event the “Monarchy of the North”, a name that went down in history.

Nuno Resende (2019), while not denying violent episodes, emphasizes that the history written by the victors gave the Monarchy of the North a violent and simplistic version, which does not always match either the facts or the public and memorial testimonies; he also notes that some occurrences may have resulted from simple personal vendettas, and not from superiorly orchestrated and systematic violence against the republicans.

It is necessary to go back in time to understand the monarchist attempt. The initial phase of the First Republic, dominated by the hegemony of the Democratic Party and by its leader Afonso Costa, came to an abrupt end in December 1917, with the triumph of the *coup d'état* led by Sidónio Pais. Supported by the Army and by the conservative sectors of Portuguese society, Sidónio tried to establish a “New Republic” [República Nova], presidentialist and conservative, which, governed by a thorough revision of the Constitution, would bring order and stability to the country. In the final phase of his consulate, in November 1918, he authorized Army officers to form military councils (the *juntas*), including those in Lisbon, Porto, Coimbra, Braga and Évora. The aim of these *juntas* was to defend the regime, even in the event that the President of the Republic was impeached or died, but monarchist sentiments predominated in them (Silva, 2008, p. 21).

On December 14, 1918, Sidónio was murdered. His death once again brought instability to the Portuguese Republic again. The members of the Democratic Party became agitated. The government, still in the hands of the *sidonistas* [supporters of Sidónio Pais], managed to defeat one first attempt of a *coup d'état*, led by the Democrats and other Republicans, in Santarém, between January 10 and 15. The insurgents demanded a return to the constitutional order of 1911. But the New Republic without Sidónio seemed doomed for failure. To avoid the hegemony of the democrats and the 1911 Constitution, some Monarchists saw a solution – and an opportunity – in restoring the Monarchy.

The prestigious monarchist army officer Paiva Couceiro, leader of the Monarchist Incursions of 1911 and 1912<sup>1</sup>, managed to obtain the complicity of the military *junta* in Porto. The restoration of the Monarchy and of King Manuel II<sup>2</sup> was thus proclaimed in Porto on January 19, 1919. Paiva Couceiro declared himself regent of the Kingdom of Portugal. The proclamation justifying the change of regime pointed out to the need to save the homeland, placed in danger by Republican demagoguery and anarchy.

<sup>1</sup> Attacks by monarchists dissatisfied with the imposition of the Republic in the north of Portugal, starting from Galicia.

<sup>2</sup> As Martins (1922) narrates, Manuel II, who was not consulted, never showed any agreement with the coup that sought to restore him to the head of the State and maintained a dubious attitude towards the coup plotters. Historian José Hermano Saraiva (2003, p. 112) says the same.

The rebellious Monarchists formed a Provisional Government of the Kingdom [Junta Governativa Provisória do Reino de Portugal]. They were convinced that the country would follow the restoration of the Monarchy. In 1925, six years after the event, Luís de Magalhães wrote that the Monarchy of the North was the result of a misunderstanding on the part of some Monarchists, who were convinced that the great strength of the New Republic of Sidónio Pais [the *Sidonismo*<sup>3</sup>] lay in a supposed national Monarchist majority that would be willing to accept the restoration of the Monarchy. This was not the case. In Lisbon, the Government of the Republic still had a Sidonist base and was supported by a significant number of Army officers and soldiers. It managed to control, with the support of republican volunteers, a revolt of Monarchist Army officers<sup>4</sup>, on January 24, led by Manuel II's representative in Portugal, Aires de Ornelas. The divisions between the Monarchists were so strong that Aires de Ornelas had condemned Paiva Couceiro's *coup* (Ramos, Sousa & Monteiro, 2009, p. 611). On January 27, following the events, a Government of "Republican unity" took office, headed by José Relvas. The new Government of the Portuguese Republic lasted from January 27 to March 30, 1919.

<sup>3</sup>*Sidonismo* was the phase of the First Republic that took place between the military coup that brought Sidónio Pais to power, in December 1917, and the end of the regime, which fell apart after his assassination, in December 1918.

<sup>4</sup>Monsanto Uprising (Revolta de Monsanto).

The Monarchists tried to make themselves strong in Porto, where there were episodes of violence to control the Republican opposition, mainly centered on the Eden Theater, the headquarters of the Monarchist popular militias. Nuno Resende (2019), however, points out that this image of the events was given by the press, which was controlled and manipulated by the Republican power, which was also violent and would not refrain from exercising this violence even in the courts (Dias, 1923, p. 311). The accounts of the time, points out Resende (2019, p. 294), are contradictory and the courts "could prove little in the light of evidence and reliable testimony about what had really happened".

In Porto, the Junta legislated intensively, publishing new legislation in the official daily *Diário da Junta Governativa do Reino de Portugal*, appointing civil governors for Porto, Aveiro, Braga, Bragança, Coimbra, Vila Real, Viana do Castelo and Viseu<sup>5</sup>, but also Portalegre, and taking administrative measures (Marques, 1995, p. 572; Resende, 2019); meanwhile, the Government of the Portuguese Republic reacted and began to deploy its forces to subdue the Monarchy of the North. On February 13, the Army of the Republic entered in Porto, putting an end to the conspiracy. The military operations in other places of Portugal ended on the 20<sup>th</sup>, with the extinction of all pockets of Monarchist resistance and the return of Republican order throughout the country.

<sup>5</sup>Territory that the *Junta* from Porto believed to have under control.

José Mattoso and Rui Ramos (2001, p. 527) argue that the attempt to restore the Monarchy failed because its supporters were united only by their dissatisfaction with the Republic; everything else disunited them, which would



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have meant that the Monarchist *coup* of January 1919 was doomed from the start. In fact, as José Hermano Saraiva (2003, p. 112) emphasizes, King Manuel II did not sympathize with the Porto revolt, even though his supporters had proclaimed the restoration of the Monarchy in his name and were ready to reinstate him as Head of State.

The Monarchy of the North exhausted the Monarchists. It was, in fact, the swansong of the Monarchy in Portugal.

### METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this research was based on a qualitative and quantitative analysis of the verbal and visual discourse on the episode known as the Monarchy of the North in the Portuguese illustrated magazine *Ilustração Portuguesa*.

The study followed a hermeneutic and heuristic line. Thus, based on the contributions of Ricoeur (1987), Maimment (1996), Gadamer (1999) and Scheufele (2008a; 2008b), we sought to deconstruct, present, interpret and understand the discourse on the Monarchy of the North in the analyzed magazine, with an emphasis on photography, from a synchronic and a diachronic perspective. We identified the frameworks, in the sense given by Goffman (1974), of the discourse of *Ilustração Portuguesa* on the Monarchy of the North, considering the themes, the formal elements of the language, namely the articulations between the verbal and the visual, the symbolic and expressive resources, the discursive sequences and the iconographic examples that could most clearly translate the frames proposed to the reader.

In other words, we sought to uncover the way in which the frames for the event were constructed and proposed, the meanings that the enunciators may have intended to give the messages they produced, the meanings that these messages may have had and the implications they may have produced, taking into account the co-evaluative historical context. It was therefore considered that each journalistic article and each verbal or iconographic discursive unit was intertextually related to other material and discursive units in the same or other media, both synchronically and diachronically, and that it was also contextually related to the cultural patterns that govern the interpretation of the world, at each historical moment, by individuals or groups of individuals living in a given social space, in which there are shared cultural references (Scheufele, 2008a).

In order to detect, collect and systematize the data, all the issues of *Ilustração Portuguesa* published after January 19, 1919 were read sequentially, and it was found that the historical episode known as the Monarchy of the North was only reported from the February 3 issue onwards, although

the narrative about the episode lasted until the June 9 issue. We therefore systematically identified the articles that referred to the Monarchy of the North, the *corpus* of the research, published in *Ilustração Portuguesa* between February 3 and June 9, 1919. Next, a descriptive diachronic narrative about the historical episode was structured through deconstruction and reconstruction, based on a systematic and chronological reading of the journalistic articles published by *Ilustração Portuguesa*, in which the iconographic and verbal discursive units and segments revealing the patterns of meaning proposed by the magazine were inserted, including verbal discursive sequences that contextualize and led the reading of the images and iconographic examples that could exemplify the central aspects of the coverage of the event and the way in which this coverage evolved, with an emphasis on photography.

We considered the positive contributions that quantitative, intensive discourse analysis techniques can make to the soundness of a research project (Scheufele, 2008b, pp. 972-978). Quantitative discourse analysis, also known as content analysis (Dominick & Wimmer, 1996, pp. 174-191), was, therefore, carried out. *Ilustração Portuguesa* content about the Monarchy of the North was coded into categories. Images were categorized according to the type and genre and by their theme. The results were expressed by absolute frequency (absolute values) and relative frequency (percentages).

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

At the time of the Monarchy of the North, *Ilustração Portuguesa* was the only illustrated weekly magazine of general information and national circulation published in Portugal. It belonged to the *O Século* newspaper group, an independent industrial daily – its editorial staff included well-known monarchist journalists such as Rocha Martins and Carlos Malheiro Dias – which nevertheless retained traces of the republican ideology with which it had been founded (Sousa, 2021).

At the time of the events, *Ilustração Portuguesa* was run by Silva Graça, owner of the *O Século* group (Sousa, 2017). It printed around 25,000 copies (Sousa, 2017, p. 373), fed by correspondents and professional and amateur photographers who sent photographs to the magazine, free of charge. It stood out, therefore, for its photographic and specifically photojournalistic content. The main photojournalist of the magazine, at the time, was Anselmo Franco. Their flashy covers focused on women at the time, portraying personalities from the arts and entertainment, female figures associated by family ties with the Republic – a kind of “new aristocracy” that replaced the old nobility from the time of the Monarchy – and staged images of Portuguese rural customs, in which, almost always, a young woman,



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dressed traditionally, embodied a peasant, a laundress or some other picturesque occupation. In this case, it was a staged, bucolic, pictorialist documentary that explored national stereotypes associated with the rural world, but which suggested tranquility and could symbolically function as a socially appeasing element in the face of the violence and instability of the First Republic, that opened the door for the Portuguese to accept a dictatorial regime from 1926 onwards.

To analyze the coverage of the Monarchy of the North in *Ilustração Portuguesa*, we looked at the issues between February 3 and June 9, 1919, in which the first and last sequential journalistic content about this historical episode were published. A total of 47 articles were identified, although, in several cases, the references to the attempt to restore the Monarchy in the north of the country were indirect, in articles whose central theme was, namely, the monarchist uprising of Monsanto, in Lisbon, where the magazine had its headquarters, in which the Government of the Republic, with the support of republican volunteers, emerged victorious.

Between February 3 and June 9, 1919, *Ilustração Portuguesa* published 308 images related to the historical episode of the Monarchy of the North, divided into photographs, reproductions of documents (stamps, postcards, administrative documents...) and drawings (sketches of events, portraits).

There is also diversity in the visual approach of *Ilustração Portuguesa* to the Monarchy of the North. The images that refer to individual and collective portraits of protagonists from the monarchist camp, almost always negatively connoted by the text, correspond to 4.9% of the published images. However, with 29.9% relative frequency, portraits of Republican “heroes”, protagonists of the Republic’s victory, are the most relevant category. To these images can be added, considering the ways of reading the world suggested by *Ilustração Portuguesa* for the Monarchy of the North, visual records of the mobilization, preparation and excited departure of the republican forces (2.3%), including volunteers, and the triumphant return of these same forces, victorious (also 2.3% of the images).

The images of gatherings of people, usually in general shots that highlighted the mass of people to give symbolic strength to the groups of people, namely in the context of demonstrations in support of the Republic (10.7% of the images), and also served to highlight the strength of the Republican side. Curiously, only 0.6% of the images concern the actions of Republican leaders, specifically a visit by the minister of Justice, Francisco Couceiro da Costa, to Aveiro, where the Monarchist forces were stopped. It would have been expected that the Republican Unity Government would have played a more prominent role, both real and visual. The images that diabolized the actions of the Monarchists, such as those that sought to prove and bear witness to the violence and destruction caused by the monarchist

uprising, reached 16.2% in relative weight. This shows the Manichean discursive choice made by *Ilustração Portuguesa*, pitting the visually praised Republicans against the demeaned Monarchists.

Visual representations of military actions only accounted for 10.4% of the iconographic coverage of the Monarchy of the North by *Ilustração Portuguesa*. In fact, despite the extensive iconographic coverage of the First World War (Sousa, 2013, 2015), there still was no war photojournalism, such as it was conceived during the Spanish Civil War (Sousa, 2000). So, the fighting between Monarchists and Republicans in Portugal was *indicated*, but not *shown*. The images of the spaces where the forces clashed (10.7% of the total) served, in this context, mainly to locate and contextualize the reader, just as much as the photographic records of destruction documented and proved the violence of the struggle – and also of the repression.

A word for the iconographic reproductions of objects and documents (12% of the total number of images), some of which were simple curiosities that humanized and distended the visual coverage of the Monarchy of the North (this is the case of a cap abandoned by Paiva Couceiro – figure 8). Others, however, were positive proof of the administrative organization effort undertaken by the monarchical authorities in Porto, which had included, for example, issuing postage stamps.

In the January 20 and 27 issues of *Ilustração Portuguesa*, possibly due to lack of time, there is no mention to the Monarchy of the North. The February 3 issue is mostly dedicated to the Monarchist uprising in Monsanto, Lisbon, where the magazine had its headquarters, although the Santarém uprising was also covered. The Porto's Monarchist uprising is indirectly mentioned, due to the enlistment of Republican volunteers and to the clashes that were taking place in the north: “the civil war continues in the north, heated, fierce, immolating many lives” (*Ilustração Portuguesa*, February 3, 1919, p. 82).

The magazine frames the Monsanto revolt and of the Monarchy of the North as a consequence of the instability of the Republican regime and the repression of opponents by those who had exercised power in the Republic. But it also condemns the Monarchist attempts, cause of instability and war that damaged the country and brought shame on it. The magazine is clear in its anathematization of all these events, which generated “waves of blood” among people who were being “slaughtered” and affected “the part of the country that works, that wants to live in peace” (*Ilustração Portuguesa*, February 3, 1919, p. 82-84).

The verbal text, as well as informing the reader of the movements that were taking place, particularly with regard to the recruitment of Republican volunteers to fight the Monarchist revolts, also gave an account of the “enthusiasm” that was felt among individuals who, animated by the “republican

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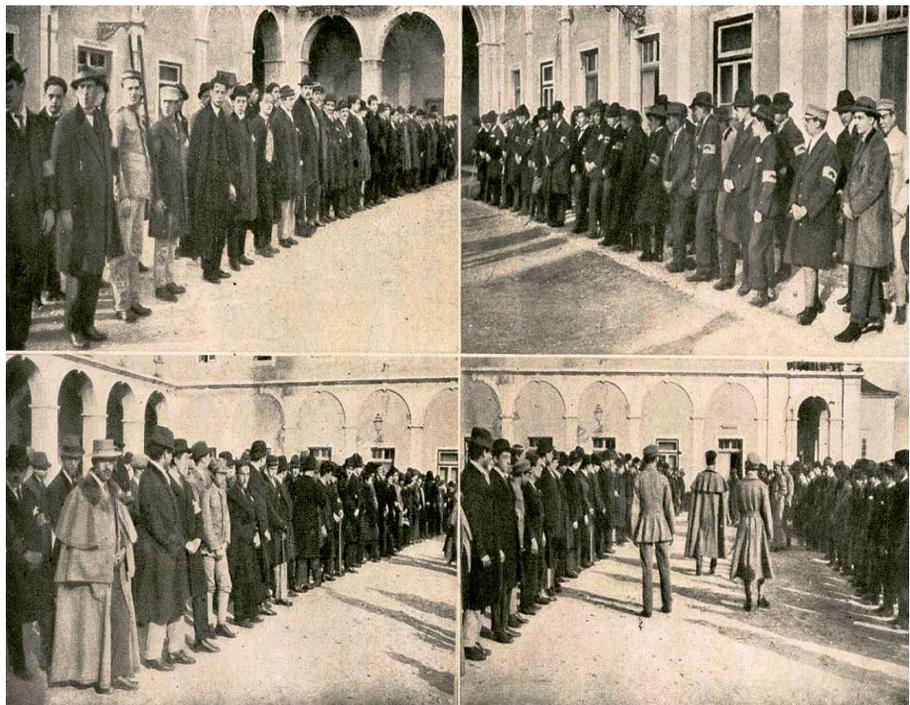
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faith”, would certainly fought the Monarchists in the north with the same “ardor” with which they had fought the insurgents in Monsanto, thus linking the Monarchist attempts in Porto and Lisbon.

The visual text, punctuated by Anselmo Franco’s photographs, mainly *documents and visually proves* the mobilization of Republican civilian volunteers, symbolically reinforcing, through the example of the volunteers, the need for Republican commitment in the fight against Monarchist restoration attempts (see figure 1). The overall shots, which are closer than the general ones, consolidate the impression of strength conveyed by the photographs. As well as adding dynamism to the images, the presence of lines of perspective in the photo directs the reader to a vanishing point, creating the illusion of depth and size of the scene, while conveying the idea that all the players positioned in oblique rows are coming together to fight for the same ideal. As Justo Villafaña (2006) wrote: “The directional vectors, generated by lines or by any other procedure, as well as creating plastic relationships between the elements of the composition, condition the direction in which the image is read” (p.103).

Figure 1

*Recruitment of Republican volunteers for the Academic Battalion*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919a, pp. 87-88. Photographer: Anselmo Franco.

It should be noted that the Republican authorities allowed reporters to work, even opening the doors of their barracks to the press, since it was in their interest to spread favorable news that would help to encourage the Republicans and instigate them to fight. The February 10 edition of the magazine, for example, gives verbal and visual accounts of the demonstrations in favor of the Republic that were taking place in Lisbon, the recruitment of volunteers and the departure of the Republican forces from the capital to the north, where they were going to fight the monarchists. Words and images were used to show the unity and enthusiasm among the Republicans in the capital and the popular support for the Government of the Republic.

...the republican people of Lisbon ... carried out with indescribable enthusiasm one of the warmest and most vibrant demonstrations ever held in honor and support of the Government. Thousands of people gathered at the Rotunda and walked down the avenue waving national flags and raising cheers for the Homeland and the Republic, on their way to Terreiro do Paço, where (...) the regime and its most prestigious men were deliriously acclaimed. The speaker, with impressive frankness and sincerity, said that the government was determined to make amends for all past mistakes, but that, to do so, it needed the trust of the people.<sup>6</sup> (*Ilustração Portuguesa*, February 10, 1919, p. 101).

The pictures, once again with the value of proof and testimony, show the mass of people who turned out for the Republican demonstration (see figure 2), reinforcing the idea, already suggested by the text, of enthusiastic support for the Republic, belief in the Republican regime, and the departure of sailors to the north to fight the “Monarchist insurgents” with “Republican faith and great enthusiasm”. The overall shot of the crowd gathered in front of the ministry of the Interior functions as a visual hyperbole of popular exaltation of the Republic, anchored by the caption full of adjectives, such as “grandiose demonstration” and “they ardently affirmed that the Republic will emerge victorious from this conflict”.

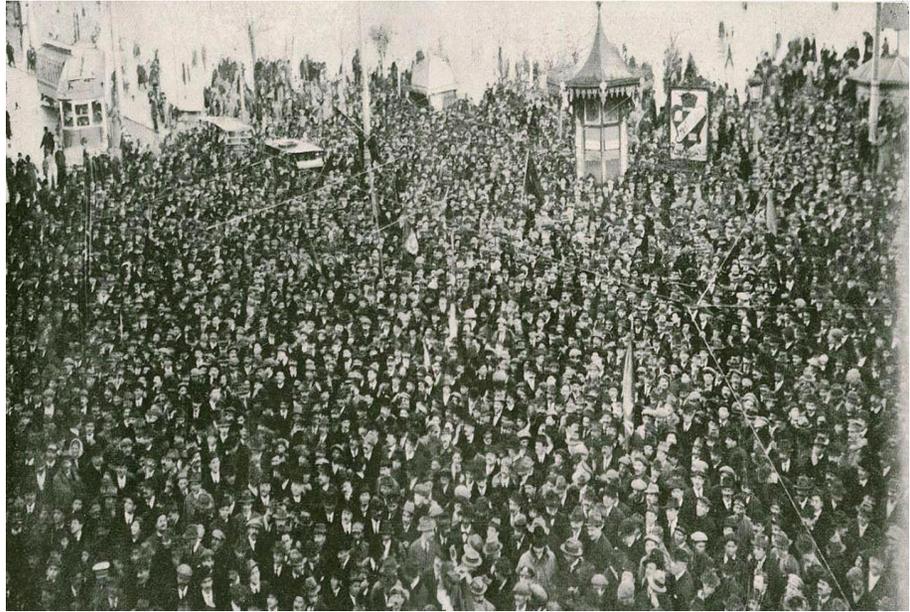
Each of Anselmo Franco’s photos seems to be meticulously designed to reinforce a specific point of view and guide the reader towards a reading of victory for the Republican cause, always reinforced by the caption. In the February 10 edition, a *cliché* (see figure 3) in an ensemble view shows the determined stride of a navy column, with arms slung over its shoulder and its head held high, heading north to fight the Monarchists. Although the military expression seems modest, the photographer uses the curved lines of the rails on the ground to convey the strength of the event, a connotation reinforced by the diagonal orientation of the soldiers.

<sup>6</sup> Free translation from the original: “...o povo republicano de Lisboa ... levou a cabo com um entusiasmo indescritível uma das mais calorosas e vibrantes manifestações que têm sido feitas em honra e apoio do Governo. Milhares de pessoas congregaram-se na Rotunda e desceram a Avenida empunhando bandeiras nacionais e erguendo vivas à Pátria e à Republica, a caminho do Terreiro do Paço, onde ... o regime e os seus homens mais prestigiosos foram delirantemente aclamados. O orador, com uma franqueza e sinceridade impressionantes, afirmou que o Governo está resolvido a reparar todos os erros passados, mas que, para isso, precisa da confiança do povo.”

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Figure 2  
*Republican demonstration in Lisbon*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919b, p. 102. Photographer: Anselmo Franco.

Figure 3  
*Sailors leaving for the north*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919b, p. 103. Photographer: Anselmo Franco.

In its February 17 issue, published after the end of the Monarchy of the North, *Ilustração Portuguesa* was able to mark the defeat of the monarchist attempt, under the headline “O fim da luta” [The end of the struggle]. The magazine described the news as “joyous”, since “the terrible struggle” that had brought the country “under the most excruciating anguish, seeing its own children fiercely fighting each other as if they were enemies of race or religion” was over (*Ilustração Portuguesa*, February 17, 1919, p. 121). Once again, the magazine promotes the necessary civil peace between the Portuguese, reinforcing the ideas proposed on February 3. *Ilustração Portuguesa* takes care to emphasize, diplomatically, that the defeat of the Monarchist attempt could in no way be read as a defeat of Porto, but only as the defeat of those who participated, gratuitously, in a revolutionary attempt to re-establish the Monarchy, doomed to failure beforehand – and definitively, which turned out to be right. In fact, the magazine clearly states that the city of Porto was subjected to a “yoke” by the monarchists, but that it knew, thanks to its “liberal spirit”, how to find the strength within itself to obtain freedom from the oppressors.

It was also in the February 17 issue that *Ilustração Portuguesa* began to take a photographic look at the operations in the north, with the support of local photographers (possibly the magazine used also some unidentified archive images), who, as usual, sent their photographs to the magazine, possibly to have their names published as authors, thus gaining notoriety and differentiating themselves from other photographers, whether professional or amateur (a kind of personal and professional *avant-la-lettre* marketing).

The photos mainly show areas where fighting had taken place or which had been occupied by the Monarchist forces (see figure 4), while other records are rare: a republican military column in Aveiro (see figure 5); one of the Republic’s seaplanes moored in São Jacinto (see figure 6); and portraits of combatants (see figure 7), one of them of a Monarchist (see figure 8), head of one of the “trauliteiros” [spankers] groups, in a close-up that closed the photographic field. There are no pictures of the dead or wounded.

The photographs, read in conjunction with the verbal text, point to a phase of *aftermath*, of tranquility following the Republican victory - once the Republic had triumphed, it was time to rebuild and heal the country, as the text suggested. Curiously, photographs of troops leaving for the north in January, almost one month before, were also published in the February 17 issue of *Ilustração Portuguesa*. The novelty and timeliness of the events were not strong news values criteria at the time.

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Figure 4

*Alquerubim, maximum point of the monarchist advance south of the river Douro*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919c, p. 124. Photographer: Manuel d'Abreu.

Figure 5

*Republican military column passing through Aveiro*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919c, p. 122. Photographer: Manuel d'Abreu.

Figure 6

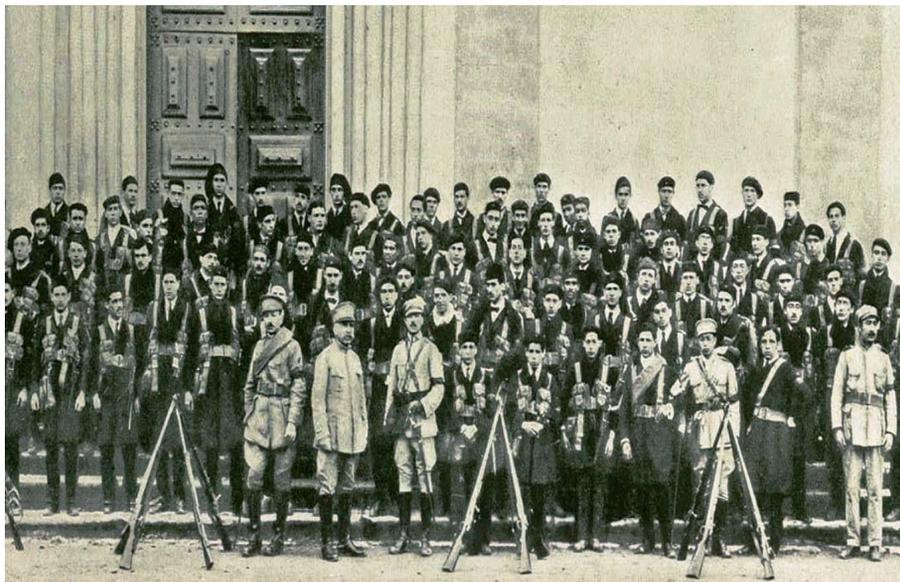
*Republican forces hydroplane*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919c, p. 121. Photographer: Manuel d'Abreu.

Figure 7

*Republican Academic Battalion of Coimbra*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919c, p. 125.

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Figure 8  
*Monarchist gang leader*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919c, p. 121.

Although most of the articles headlines published by *Ilustração Portuguesa* about the Monarchy of the North can be seen as relatively neutral, from the end of February, when the Republican victory was a certainty, the magazine used headlines praising the Republican side, such as “In defense of the Republic”, and demonizing the Monarchist side, such as “Victims and executioners” and “The looting of the Couceiristas [Paiva Couceiro supporters] in Bragança”. The March 3 1919 issue of *Ilustração Portuguesa*, published well after the Monarchist attempt had been subdued, in some way established the thematic matrix of what would be the iconographic coverage of the Monarchy of the North in the pages of the magazine, which continued until the June 9 issue. The cover shows a visual record of the return of one of the new “heroes of the Republic” to Lisbon, embracing his young daughter (see figure 9). The photo of Anselmo Franco is intended to generate emotional closeness with the reader by using personalization centered on the figure of the Navy officer, a leading figure in the fight against the onslaught of the Monarchist forces. Known at the time for his humanist character, it was this side of the future Admiral Afonso Cerqueira that the photographer from *Ilustração Portuguesa* wanted to visually recreate.

It is a classic, archetypal photograph, covering the aftermath of confrontations, which symbolically refers to a state of normality in the

country and a return to the idealized tenderness of family life. The idea of the triumphant and cheered return of the Republican forces to Lisbon is translated visually in other photographs, including the flag of the Portuguese Republic waving in front of the locomotive that towed the train (see figure 10). Dubois (1992, p.11) corroborates this by stating that “photography is not only an image (the product of a technique and an action, the result of doing and knowing how to do, a paper figure that is simply looked at in its enclosure as a finished object), it is also, first and foremost, a true iconic act”.

Figure 9

*Republican Navy officer returns to Lisbon*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919d capa. Photographer: Anselmo Franco.

Barthes (1984) emphasized that the syntax of images, such as their juxtaposition, is one of the mechanisms for generating meaning in photographic narratives. A comparison of images, allegedly one of the proclamation of the Monarchy and the other of the restoration of the Republic, in Porto, as well

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as clarifying the Manichean and biased tendency of the coverage in *Ilustração Portuguesa*, can actually demonstrate how images can be used for propagandistic purposes and for the dissemination of false messages (see figure 11).

Figure 10

*Republican forces received in triumph in Lisbon after their victory over the monarchists*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919d, p. 174. Photographer: Anselmo Franco.

In fact, the first photograph, which aims to show the alleged lack of enthusiasm and coldness with which a small group of people attended the proclamation of the Monarchy in Porto, may not be an image of this event, but of some other, since the photograph above was taken before 1910. It is possible to sustain this argument because the street where it was taken was levelled in that year and in 1919 it was no longer as the image documents (Resende, 2019, pp. 297-298). To add to the suspicion about the first photograph, only the second, which shows the crowd watching the re-establishment of the Republic in the same place, is credited to a photographer (from Aveiro), António Serafim.

Figure 11

*Alleged contrast between the proclamation of the Monarchy and the restoration of the Republic*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919d, p. 168. Photographer (second photo): António Serafim.

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The March 3 issue of the magazine was fertile in identifying the “Couceiristas” [Paiva Couceiro’s supporters] through the publication of their individual portraits (see figure 12) and, at other times, collective portraits, while reassuringly reinforcing that several of them were already in prison. Even so, in the caption of the collective portrait, the use of weapons and bombs by the group is highlighted, indicating that they would have represented a danger to the country. With the publication of these portraits, including a photograph of Bento de Almeida Garrett (see figure 8), stating that “he was arrested with others in Aveiro”, *Ilustração Portuguesa* took a clear position of publicly denouncing these Monarchy-supporting figures, taking a clear stance and conditioning the reader’s perception. “An observer, although obviously someone who sees, is above all someone who sees an enunciated set of possibilities, someone who is inserted into a system of conventions and limitations” (Crary, 2017, p.28).

The March 3 issue of *Ilustração Portuguesa* also includes a photograph (see figure 13) of the destruction of the Eden-Theatre in Porto, which had served as a Monarchist prison, by a furious Republican mob. The photo’s caption explains the choice of side made by *Ilustração Portuguesa*: the “people destroying, among enthusiastic acclamations to the Republic, the Eden-Theatre, where the New Inquisition of the brief kingdom was installed” because the Republicans who “fell into the clutches” of the Monarchists<sup>7</sup> had been “savagely tortured” there with “barbarism”. The March 3 issue of the magazine also saw the start of a long sequence of signposting, identification and recognized praise of the “heroes of the Republic”, through the publication of their individual and collective portraits, which continued until June (see figure 14). This is one of the reasons that may help explain the longevity of the Monarchy of the North subject in *Ilustração Portuguesa*. It may have been due to the need to publish the dozens of individual and collective portraits of triumphalist Republicans, which, in many cases, were sent to the magazine by interested parties, as the magazine itself reports, and which it inserted over time, not least because it could not do it in a single issue. The publication of these portraits, as well as ultimately enhancing the Republic by highlighting its “heroes”, tuned the magazine in with its audience.

<sup>7</sup> More recent historiography presents the events at the Eden Theatre differently (cf. Resende, 1919). The rumors that circulated about the murder of republicans at the Eden Theatre, sometimes to the sound of the piano, were many of them false. The “dead” were alive after all. The woman who was accused of playing the piano while the prisoners were being tortured did not even know how to play the piano. The “trauliteiros” [spankers] accused of torturing republicans actually acted usually out of personal revenge or greed. The Junta Governativa do Reino itself put an end to the abuses at the end of January.

Figure 12

*Portraits identifying monarchists*

Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919d, p. 161, 167.

Figure 13

*Destruction caused to the Eden Theatre by the Republicans after the triumph of the Republic*

Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919d, p. 161. Photographer: A. Sousa.

Figure 14  
Portraits of Republicans



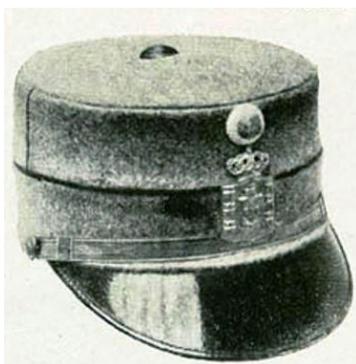
Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1989e, p. 185. Photographer: António Gomes Mourão.

Among the informative iconography used by *Ilustração Portuguesa* to cover the Monarchy of the North, there are also reproductions of documents and curious objects (see figure 15), which help to diversify the points of approach to the subject and even – as in the case of the cap abandoned or forgotten by Paiva Couceiro – to somehow entertain the reader. The case of the cap left behind by Couceiro would also prove that the leader of the monarchist attempt had left Porto so quickly that he did not even take his cap with him.

Faced with the absence of images that had witnessed the battles as they really were fought, *Ilustração Portuguesa* used images of their consequences and images of the aftermath to symbolically evoke the fighting. These substitute images shows, for example, Republican fighters posing, satisfied, after they took positions and arms of the Monarchists (see figure 16). The photography perspective is one of victory (see figure 16). The photograph would also be socially reassuring for the magazine's reader, as it documents the Republic's victory (see figure 16).

Figure 15

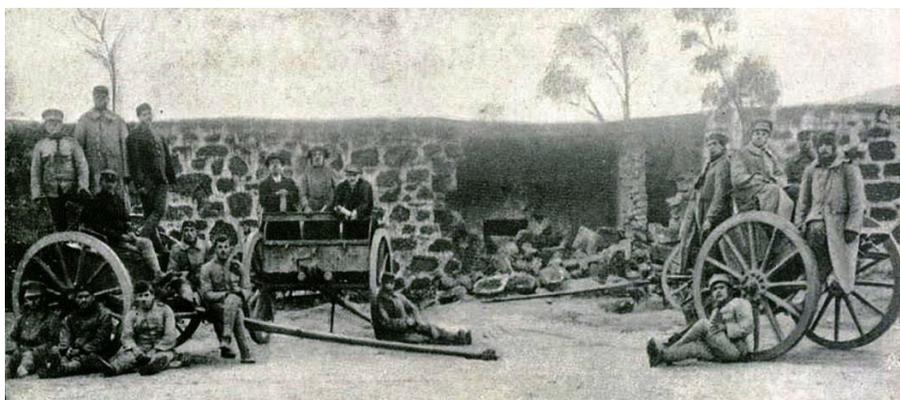
*Cap allegedly abandoned by Paiva Couceiro in Porto*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919d, p. 164.

Figure 16

*Republicans pose for the camera in Lamego, where monarchist forces allegedly abandoned artillery pieces and ammunitions*



Source. *Ilustração Portuguesa*, 1919d, p. 163. Photographer: J. Gonçalves.

The data shows that the Monarchy of the North was a long-running theme in the magazine. *Ilustração Portuguesa* echoed the importance given to the issue by the Portuguese of its time – after all, for more than three weeks the north of Portugal nominally returned to the Monarchy, even without the endorsement of the deposed king, Manuel II (Saraiva, 2003). In addition, the triumph of the Republic also meant the exhaustion of the Monarchist cause in Portugal, which would henceforth always be a minority cause among the Portuguese population. This may have been one of the reasons why the magazine prolonged the echoes of the Republican triumph for several issues,



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not only as a victory for the regime, but also as a contribution to the order and stability that the Portuguese would yearn for.

One of the signs that *Ilustração Portuguesa* chose a side to cover the Monarchy of the North was the detachment of journalists to accompany the Republican forces as special envoys. The lessons of covering the First World War had been learnt, so the Armed Forces were receptive to journalists accompanying them. This situation of embedded journalism strengthened journalists' ties with the troops and prevented the spread of negative news about the military personnel being accompanied, even though self-censorship.

One of the elements to highlight in the construction of the narrative about the Monarchist attempt in Porto by *Ilustração Portuguesa* is the systematic omission of sources. There is only a paraphrased allusion to a statement made by the minister of Justice during a Republican rally. In the magazine, the journalist functioned as an omniscient narrator, his discourse supported by photographic images.

Sharpening the analysis, the terminological survey of *Ilustração Portuguesa* proves that the magazine repeatedly emphasizes the opposition between “Monarchists”, “rebels”, “spankers” [trauliteiros], “Couceiristas” [Paiva Couceiro's supporters], “Royalists”, “those who set out on a revolutionary adventure” and “treacherously” introduced themselves into Porto, on the one hand, and, on the other, “Republicans” and also “Socialists”, the people of “the Republican Portugal”, individuals full of “Republican faith”, of “fervent ardor” who had as allies in the “defense of the Republic”, of the “guarantee of nationality”, the “Army”, the “Navy” and the “people”, “brave sailors”, “a race of heroes”.

However, *Ilustração Portuguesa*, even though it emphasizes the Republican triumphs and denigrates the Monarchists, at certain moments strives to somehow hover above the contenders with independence. It even focuses on the need to resolve the “terrible struggle”, the “constant unrest”, the “long series of tragic disturbances for national life”, the “civil war”, the “firing squad”, the “fratricidal (...) and “bloody” spectacle”, in order to “raise the country”, after the efforts made during the Great War for the “cause of the right of the people, of civilization and of humanity”. The expression of these wishes certainly echoed what was on the minds of the majority of the Portuguese, who yearned for order, tranquility, development and economic growth.

It should also be noted that the verbal and visual texts in *Ilustração Portuguesa* are not particularly informative. The words express, in addition to the idea of Republican triumph, the desire to live peacefully, in a fair and orderly society, and to rebuild and pacify the country. Even the photographic images fulfil an illustrative function – those that depict places of combat or

places that were occupied by monarchists, for example, could also evoke, in another verbal context, only bucolic or urban aspects of the country.

## CONCLUSIONS

The data shows that the initial hypothesis can be accepted. In other words, the discourse of *Ilustração Portuguesa*, both photographic and verbal, was aligned with the interests of the Government of the Republic, which controlled the capital and the majority of the country's territory. The magazine was not neutral in the way it orientated the construction of knowledge about the Monarchy of the North and its singularities.

The specific circumstances in Lisbon, where the magazine was based, help to explain the pro-Republican tone of *Ilustração Portuguesa* discourse. The magazine could not challenge the established power in Lisbon where it was based and it was also subject to pressure and censorship. But we could also point out to the fact that *Ilustração Portuguesa* belonged to the *O Século* newspaper group, which, despite being industrially organized and independent (it even had Monarchist editors, such as the well-known journalist Rocha Martins), was born as a Republican newspaper, an ideological matrix that it maintained with more or less vigor.

In this frame, *Ilustração Portuguesa*, even after the defeat of the Monarchy of the North, was a propaganda voice for the Republican regime, disseminating, in the form of verbal and iconographic text, favorable messages to the Republicans. To do so, the magazine had a vast network of correspondents and other individuals who supplied information in the form of verbal text and images, mainly photographs. Among them, we should highlight the professional and amateur photographers who voluntarily sent photographs to the magazine so that they could be published with their names in the credits, thus gaining notoriety and distinction among their peers. They could even promote their photography business in this way. On the other hand, we can highlight the individuals who sent their own portraits, or portraits in which they appeared, to the magazine, also to create notoriety and differentiate themselves among their peers, an attitude that can be categorized as “personal marketing”.

It was also concluded that, in the context of the *Ilustração Portuguesa* coverage of the Monarchy of the North, pictures were used not only because of their value as news, but also because of their testimonial and evidential power, as well as their ability to evoke, remember and make people and situations present, building the image of the sense of duty of those who set out on a



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mission to defend the Republican cause and the country from the Monarchist “trauliteiros” [spankers] who, according to the *Ilustração Portuguesa* visual representation, were destabilizing national peace. Reading the articles, we can conclude that *Ilustração Portuguesa* emphasized – and celebrated – the unanimous effort of Republicans, both civilian and military, led by the Government of the Portuguese Republic, in the fight against the Monarchist attempt in the north. The side that counted, for *Ilustração Portuguesa*, was the Republican one. ■

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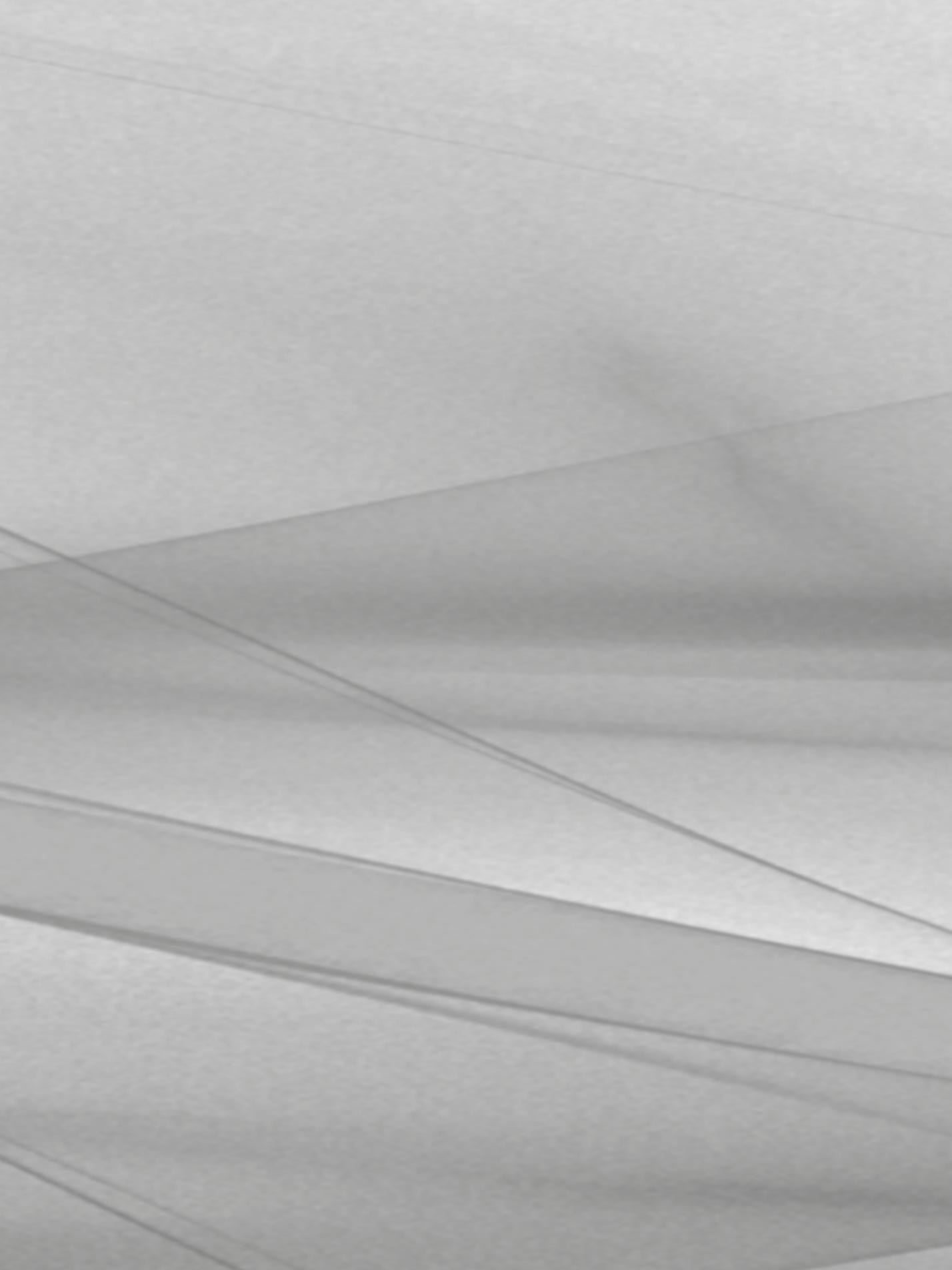
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# 1 R D REVIEW



# ***O mundo do avesso* by Leticia Cesarino is a work that requires courage – to be written and to be read**

***O mundo do avesso, de Leticia Cesarino, é uma obra que requer coragem – para ser escrita e para ser lida***

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## **ABSTRACT**

This review aims to describe and reflect on the main ideas contained in the work, *O mundo do avesso: Verdade e política na era digital* by Leticia Cesarino, a Brazilian anthropologist, researcher, and teacher. The author explains that understanding contemporary phenomena such as populism and disinformation first requires observing the technical dimension of their infrastructures — relying on the cybernetic perspective of Gregory Bateson to explain her central argument. As a result, Cesarino develops a powerful and disruptive work that envisions new possibilities for understanding the crises that permeate the current Brazilian sociopolitical scenario and modifies the thinking of her attentive reader.

**Keywords:** Anti-structural publics, cybernetic explanation, digital, politics.

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## **RESUMO**

Esta resenha tem como objetivo apresentar e refletir acerca das principais ideias presentes na obra *O mundo do avesso: Verdade e política na era digital*, de Leticia Cesarino, antropóloga, pesquisadora e docente brasileira. A autora expõe que, para compreender fenômenos contemporâneos como o populismo e a desinformação, é necessário, primeiramente, enxergar a dimensão técnica de suas infraestruturas, apoiando-se na perspectiva cibernética de Gregory Bateson para explicar seu argumento central. Como resultado, Cesarino desenvolve uma obra potente e disruptiva, que transforma o pensamento da leitora atenta, por vislumbrar novas possibilidades de entendimento sobre as crises que permeiam o atual cenário sociopolítico brasileiro.

**Palavras-chave:** Digital, explicação cibernética, política, públicos antiestruturais.



Cesarino, Leticia. (2022).  
*O mundo do avesso*: Ubu. 304 p.

ONE OF THE greatest events in recent human history took place in the 1990s and the early 2000s, when the internet and the World Wide Web transitioned from an exclusive military technology to becoming increasingly present in everyday life. During this transition, theorists and scholars from multiple areas turned to reflect on the possible impacts that the internet and the digital could have on the different spheres, from anthropology to mathematics, for example. Thus, one of the first questions outlined, in an interdisciplinary way, was the relation between politics and the online environment. Initial debates were mainly focused on a possible “digital democracy,” since, as pointed out by Farias, Cardoso and Oliveira (2020, p. 76), in the 1990s, “... The Internet was celebrated as an invention that would open a new era of cultural and political democracy, perhaps through new forms of e-governance and direct contributions from citizen-journalists” (free translation).

When this “prediction” failed to come true, new angles on politics in the digital age began to emerge, one of them being the investigation of radical and extremist discourse propagated in different socio-political realities and the role played by (increasingly sophisticated) technological means in this dynamic. In Brazil, interest in this specific angle has intensified significantly since 2016, when President Dilma Rousseff was impeached by a coup, and then with the campaign and election of Jair Bolsonaro’s far-right government (2019-2022). In this scenario, the anthropologist, researcher, and professor Leticia Cesarino began, in 2018, the investigation which resulted in the work *O mundo do avesso: Verdade e política na era digital*, published by Ubu in November 2022.

In the first pages, Cesarino explains she was motivated by curiosity regarding the supposed singularities in Brazilian political-electoral behavior during the 2018 presidential elections. To understand that moment, however, the author resorts to Gregory Bateson’s cybernetic theory (1972), inviting the reader—or rather, the female reader, to whom Cesarino reports—to perceive the technical dimension that constitutes the contemporaneity phenomena. The author chooses to divide the book into two parts, in addition to its introduction and conclusion. The first part is denser and consists of two chapters, entitled “Dynamical Systems and the Cybernetic Perspective” and “The ‘Malaise’ in Platformization,” which present the main theoretical

concepts to guide and support the author's central argument. The second part consists of the chapters "Politics: algorithmization and populism" and "Truth: conspiracy and alt-sciences," in which Cesarino explains, based on the theories introduced in the first half of the book, the Brazilian political conjuncture and the crisis of confidence faced by science and democracy, also presenting new insights and perspectives as the chapters develop.

Cesarino is aware that the journey proposed by her research is difficult to go on. In the introduction, the author is concerned with establishing a dialogue with the readers, to prepare them for what will be discussed in the following pages. As she points out: "the spirit of this book, which is based on the sciences of complexities, is to be comprehensible to any reader endowed with interest and intuition, and who is open to a different view of social processes" (Cesarino, 2022, p. 11; free translation). Thus, instead of causing intimidation, Cesarino's text instigates the reader to continue reading, even if it is necessary to read (or reread) each passage very carefully. In an impactful introduction, the researcher outlines some theoretical notions (such as cybernetic explanation and linear and nonlinear systems), while she relates them to Brazilian sociopolitical context in the recent years. Additionally, she briefly summarizes each of the chapters and how they are interconnected, situating the reader before they begin their reading.

The first chapter establishes a new look at systems. Cesarino explains that she references the same systems known by common sense: political, economic, legal, etc. What changes, however, is the way of perceiving them since they are socially understood as historical and linear processes. The author, however, seeks precisely the trans-historical within these systems, that is, "a common dynamic or functioning mode" that extrapolates the different spheres of social organization, transcending each one's particularities. To make this common infrastructure visible, Cesarino resorts to the contributions of Bateson (1972), an anthropologist who, in the 1940s, was part of the original cybernetics movement—first defined by Norbert Wiener (1948) as a super science that aims to ascertain "the common elements in the functioning of automatic machines and of the human nervous system, and to develop a theory which will cover the entire field of control and communication in machines and in living organisms" (Wiener, 1948, p. 14.)

From there, Bateson (1972) developed what he called a cybernetic or negative explanation, centered on dynamical systems, in opposition to the positive perspective, which converges around linear systems. While the positive explanation interprets systems based on linear causal relations, the cybernetic

explanation focuses on “co-emergence patterns of agencies in the same dynamic field of complexity, conducted by recursive causalities... or feedback effects” (Cesarino, 2022, p. 30; free translation). Thus, when destabilizing factors—such as the new media—act on a system, it cannot follow a linear logic since unpredictability becomes the protagonist of its functioning. In everyday life, as much as most individuals comply with a certain routine, everyone is subject to possible entropy of events. Precisely for this reason, Cesarino argues that, in real-world relations, nonlinear systems are predominant, which is why cybernetic explanation is more efficient for the context analysis proposed in her work.

After elucidating this fundamental aspect, the author deepens the discussion over the alignment between machine-animal-human, in an effort to highlight cybernetics as a science that encompasses the processes of “control and communication in machines and living organisms” (Wiener, 1948). Cesarino uses a historical perspective to address the dynamics and trajectory of the normal sciences, which will help to understand some of the key concepts of *O mundo do avesso*: the structures and antistructures. In short, normal science needs a minimally stable consensus by the members of a community regarding a shared paradigm. Thus relying on peer review, ethical standards, specific scientific procedures, etc.

However, no paradigm is capable of being developed infinitely; it reaches its limits of reality apprehension, eliminating the remnants that it was unable to assimilate. These remnants result in what Kuhn (1962/2018) called “anomalies,” whose proliferation establishes a crisis in the current paradigm, demanding its self-reorganization. With crisis of confidence established in a community, the anomalies—which never ceased to exist but were marginalized—can be strengthened and moved to the center of that reality, emerging as “the vanguard of a new paradigm” (Cesarino, 2022, p. 49). In this way, the previously established paradigm—that is, the structure—is weakened and pressured by the paradigm in progress, functioning as its anti-structure. Cesarino explains that the term was used by Victor Turner to “designate the reflexive moment by which a society folds in on itself, eliciting contesting elements to the political and legal models that control the center of society” (Cesarino, 2022, p. 49; free translation). Based on this, the author designated the term “anti-structural publics” to refer to defenders of Bolsonaroism, the far-right and the conspiracy theories and alternative sciences, pointing out their main similarity: for them, models of universal recognition were encompassed by models of bifurcated recognition. Substantially, the former

represents the normative Democratic Rule of Law, the liberal public sphere, and the “normal science” prevalent in the pre-neoliberal context. The latter represents individuals within segmented communities of destination, whose relations are mediated by logics related to the free market. In one case, recognition is potentially and normatively both universal and public. In the other, recognition has a particular basis, granted only to members of the same integrated community of destination, and ultimately, it opposes an environment experienced as threatening and uncertain (typically, an enemy). (Cesarino, 2022, p. 21; free translation)

Cesarino concludes the first chapter by defining that the anti-structural public wish to encompass the opposite, to which the bifurcated model of recognition is the opposite of universal recognition. The second chapter is based on this principle, and its main objective is to address the dimension of technical materiality integrated to the essence of systems such as new media, favoring the emergence of an anti-structural public. In the author’s perspective, the common infrastructure of these technologies is built with inverted assumptions, based on opacity and asymmetries. Although they were not necessarily developed with the purpose of favoring the anti-structural public mentioned by Cesarino, the new media practically “spontaneously” benefit the emergence and proliferation of anti-structures, provoking changes in the public sphere disposition, which happen much faster given the fast-paced nature of social media. These transformations lead to “disintermediation processes,” which, according to the author, refer to the disengagement of components of the previous normative structure, that were seen as reliable, such as democracy and the scientific community. As a consequence, the system is not completely broken, but it is rather permeated by emerging forms of reintermediation, such as “expert” health influencers, with no actual qualification in the area. Thus, the environment becomes highly unstable, with structure and anti-structure, disintermediation and reintermediation coexisting together.

Throughout the chapter, the author also discusses several characteristics of algorithms and emphasizes their disproportional relation with users. Nevertheless, human beings are resistant to perceive themselves as influenced by technological agencies. In addition, algorithms tend to privilege joining equals with equals, in a sort of individual “clustering,” and constantly collecting and circulating users’ personal data, which results in one of the most worrying findings of the entire work: it is not the human beings who use digital technologies and the algorithm to expand their abilities, but rather the other way around.

In the subsequent section of *O mundo do avesso*, the third chapter focuses on detailing the association of algorithmization and populism, centering the panorama in the electoral rise of the new right, especially Bolsonarism, considering events since 2013, which peaked in the 2018 presidential elections. The researcher adopts the cybernetic perspective to approach these facts, classifying populism as technopolitics, since politics may be implanted in the technical artifacts of the infrastructure of digital environments—fundamental in Bolsonaro’s election. To investigate her argument, Cesarino conducted a survey within WhatsApp groups from Bolsonaro’s supporters, identifying technical dimensions of populism in the digital environment, such as

the presence of an imminent existential threat, the delegitimization of pre-existing structures of truth production (press, academy) to isolate those supporters in closed publics, and the inverted mimesis relation in which the enemy is the inverted image opposing the identity of a leader and of the population. (Cesarino, 2022, p. 149; free translation)

The author also emphasizes that the proliferation of mimetic and segmented patterns, which help to destabilize universal knowledge, does not happen naturally in new media, but it is rather algorithmically oriented. Throughout the chapter, Cesarino interprets multiple characteristics of anti-structural publics based on the cybernetic concepts presented in the first section, helping the reader to visualize them concretely.

In the last chapter, which focus on the rise of conspiracy theories and alternative sciences, the researcher argues that, from a structural point of view, the crisis of politics and the crisis of science are, in fact, a single crisis, since “the current media infrastructure helps to provide a resonating machine, bringing populism and post-truth together, without completely merging them” (Cesarino, 2022, p. 205; free translation). Although she has some reservations with the term “post-truth,” the author initially uses it to refer to disinformation processes, conspiracism, denialism, and pseudoscience. Despite interpreting that the Brazilian sociopolitical conjuncture comes from the same root, Cesarino explains that the anti-structural public have convergences, but also divergences. According to her, during the early COVID-19 treatment, conspiratorial and anti-vaccine segments, were a public that “only partially overlap with political Bolsonarism in the strict sense. But they share many of the structural dynamics elaborated in the previous chapter and, therefore, also operate as anti-structural publics” (Cesarino, 2022, p. 206; free translation).

Thus, the researcher emphasizes that all these publics use a “strange-familiar” logic, constantly triggering extremes and promoting dehumanization of the supposed enemy, operating within the gray limits of legality. In this dynamic, they not only bring events in real time, but also make use of a denunciatory movement, revealing truths that are, according to such public, purposely hidden from the the average public, promoting the idea of emancipation. The topic of truth permeates significantly all the debates raised by this chapter, and Cesarino explains how the production of truth is intimately connected to social trust, highlighting that the new media are indispensable instruments in the process of transferring trust to new mediators.

Finally, in the conclusion of *O mundo do avesso*, entitled “On Endings and New Beginnings,” the author does not offer a simple solution to the described scenario, since it would be a utopian resolution. By introducing the cybernetic perspective as a possible interpretation of contemporary phenomena, it becomes evident that any solving attempt must encompass the technical dimension of the crisis. On the other hand, the author does not deny her skepticism regarding the individual’s ability to counter current systemic trends. However, her final words are not discouraging. For Cesarino, “if there is any hope of avoiding the democratization of the end of the world by capitalism, it lies, contradictorily, in the ability of the system to adapt itself” (Cesarino, 2022, p. 279; free translation). If it finds a way to rearrange itself, prioritizing its continuity, it might not even be the end of the world—just the end of this world. Regardless of the paths that will be taken, Cesarino’s work takes the first necessary step for any type of transformation, by allowing her readers to deepen their understanding of the conjuncture they are inserted, whose problems helped to develop such a chaotic scenario. That is precisely the reason why *O mundo do avesso* is a disruptive and necessary work, which requires breath and courage, both to convey it and to read it. ■

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*O mundo do avesso* by Leticia Cesarino is a work that requires courage – to be written and to be read

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