Postmodern Openings

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Knowledge, Public Communication and “Post-Truth”: What is Left of Truth in a Time of Pandemic?

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Abstract: The pandemic seems to have reversed the relationship between Knowledge and Communication: communication prevails and determines the significance and meaning of events, just as it happened in premodern times. Public knowledge is being eroded. Post-modern scientific knowledge, already unfathomably complex and technical, is both evolving and becoming obsolete at such great speed that it unveils, paradoxically, the vulnerability and relativity of the truth it claims to grasp. Alongside truth-correspondence and truth-coherence, the older truth-significance also makes itself known. Amplified by the resonance chamber of new media and social networks, the latter can emerge as the “post-truth” and “fake-news” that transform Public Communication into Public Relations.

Keywords: *Pandemic, Public Knowledge, Public Communication, Public Relations, Truth-Correspondence, Truth-Coherence, Truth-Significance, “New New Media”, social media, “post-truth”, “fake-news”.*

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1. The pandemic has put the relationship between Knowledge and Communication to the test

Much has been communicated about general disease outbreaks in initial human groups or about epidemics and pandemics ravaging larger populations. We know it from history and, when it comes to historical times for which we have no data, we can infer it by analogy. Messages – a communicational mix of imaginary representations and information, phantasmagorical rumours and true facts, superstitious anxieties and well-founded fears – have been circulating almost as much as disease-carrying microbial agents, bacteria and viruses. There have been serious epidemics since the end of the century and the last millennium, even though they did not directly concern us: AIDS, the Avian Flu, SARS, MERS, Ebola, and Zika. Moreover, it is very likely that we will have to get used to epidemics in the future, for at least two reasons. We are travelling faster and more frequently, and Phylloxera, the grapevine pest, for example, sprung up in Europe when steam engines replaced ships, allowing the pathogenic germ to travel faster, rather than perish along the journey. The second reason is that our civilization, which is one of total communication, not only dissolves the distance between people, but also erases the distance between us and other species, blurring the lines between distinct ecological domains. Perhaps, indeed, the enhancing of limitless communication is bringing everything too close together.

In modernity, due to the development of medical research, it was possible for communication to be infused with knowledge, so the truth could be, more or less, disseminated correctly. However, in modernity, despite the globalization of media communication, the balance between them was tilted in favour of knowledge rather than communication. This, of course, could not stop the spread of rumours from human to human, directly, by word of mouth, just like it could not immediately put an end to the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918. This makes the ongoing coronavirus pandemic a very good test for the relationship between knowledge and communication, in the more detailed form of the relationship between knowledge, public communication and public relations, i.e., between knowledge and communication in their undeveloped, somewhat raw, state.

In the world we live in – a world variably described as one of late modernity, postmodernity or trans-modernity – the situation has changed. Although much has been said about a knowledge-focused society, in the spirit of modernity, even at the highest levels of the European Community

(in European political speeches setting directives over the past few years), the reality is that we are actually living in a society of communication, with all the consequences attendant on it, be they good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant. This means that even though the relationship between knowledge and communication has been reversed; it has, in fact, become more complicated. It would be too shallow to say that it has been reversed, that communication dominates again and determines the significance and meaning of the pandemic event, as it also happened in premodernity or in the Middle Ages, suggesting somehow that all digital media casts such intense light upon opinions surrounding an event that it just gets dark again, without fail.

However, for the first time in human history, a pandemic is being communicated live, instantly, similarly to how the Romanian Revolution was televised in 1989. On social networks, some have gone so far as to say (ironically, of course, but echoing a touch of metaphorical truth) that the current pandemic owes its existence to communication as much as to the virus itself: “If television hadn’t spoken out and if the newspapers had gone silent on this issue, we would have died healthily, like fools.” In effect, this is what the pandemic has done: it has focused global communication on a specific topic. It has piled up a huge mass of different and diverse opinion messages, making it difficult to discern between them and clouding the truth of medical scientific knowledge. (Codoban, 2020)

2. What happened to „Public Knowledge”?

Of course, at this first level of analysis, to talk about the functioning of public knowledge in the context of the coronavirus pandemic through omnipresent and omnipotent communication, the general terms of knowledge and communication are too vague. Specifically, we should talk about how traditional public communication is affected under the influence of the expansion, diversification and globalization of new digital media, particularly if we think of social networks as “new media” in this communication amalgamation. (Levison, 2013) Let us also consider, while delving into this matter, a term that we felt from the outset to be too general and vague, namely common knowledge. According to a large group of political, cultural, sociological and historical economy researchers from University of London’s Political Economy Research Center (PERC), this can be more rigorously defined as “Public Knowledge”.

By “Public Knowledge”, authors understand a type of knowledge that is known by the broader public, definable by its bolstering of the social

contract, political legitimacy, commercial transactions and joint decision-making. It is, therefore, the foundation of democracy, markets and societies. This public knowledge is the space where citizens recognize each other and understand the world in which they live. Education, media, culture, arts, science, as well as various types of specialised expertise and knowledge are involved in its creation. Public knowledge refers to a sphere of information and culture serving the public interest, belonging to all citizens whose needs it should satisfy regardless of their purchasing power, geographical location or social background. (Davis, 2017)

I think that, in order to better understand a concept that possesses a fairly heterogeneous sphere and is made up by content that is quite difficult to identify operationally, we should make some enlightening comparisons. Without identifying with the “common places” of Aristotle’s rhetoric or with the nineteenth-century idea of the “worldview”, public knowledge belongs to the same family of concepts. It is part of the same conceptual family as the myth system, as analysed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, for whom mythology is a “mytho-logic”, an attempt to think and solve the contradictions of a society through the “savage mind”. However, during the twentieth century, the “worldview”, which belongs to the realm of public knowledge, was much clearer and more easily supported by institutions — education, media, public administration — due to the evolution of society. It was also much more connected to the scientific practices of establishing the quality of knowledge by standardizing the truth in such a way that the communication it generated could be described as public communication.

But now, in the twenty-first century, something has happened to the knowledge and public communication stemming from the twentieth century: there has been a massive erosion of information and knowledge. Different voices, in different tones, have always deplored the decline in human intelligence attributed to the new media, expressing concerns about traditional classical culture and the fate of the erudite culture. (Carr, 2012) The blame was and most often is still laid on IT and the new medias, social networks, in particular. But what is actually happening is that a certain form of culture, as an extensive form of organized memorization, invented in the Renaissance is replaced by a new form based on empirical and functional testing. Perhaps a more important contribution to this erosion, as noted by the authors mentioned above, is neoliberal thinking and the involvement and expansion of competition in all areas of social and political life: public knowledge and culture are averse to quantification and auditing, even though the latter has become a key market policy and management mechanism. The leaders or agenda-setters of these fields are becoming increasingly

economically oriented, while knowledge and culture are gradually turning into a question of costs and of individual option, much like religion in European modernity, after the “religious wars”.

But something has altered within Western culture itself: modern science itself has undergone tremendous changes as a component of culture. The handiest comparison is offered by physics, where in the nineteenth century and even in the early decades of the twentieth century laboratory appliances were large, massive, made of bright copper and transparent glass, with the unconcealed mounting wires that made physical, electrostatic, or electromagnetic phenomena visible. What does this entire realm of electronic laboratory research into physics offer us today? Some green plastic pads with metal drawings on them! The difference between the appliances that clearly showcased their construction, their joints and their wiring and the plates that live in our phones, computers or household appliances (which look very much like paintings or cave drawings, is what makes the transition from what we can explain by obvious causes, to something that seems miraculous.

How many people who sit in front of their TV or their computer, or talk on the phone, understand exactly what is going on inside these devices? Suddenly, an entire cohort of instruments and technologies that surround us appear to be magical. In a paradoxical sense, science and its technologies have brought us back from a realm of obvious causal explanations to a realm of miracles. In fact, we don't understand much; we're just pushing some buttons. Pushing a button is like casting a spell: you don't see anything happening inside – you have a board in front of you that remains the same. *Mutatis mutandis*, science has by and large ceased to be a theoretical discourse that can be experienced by any ordinary man. It remains a practical undertaking only for highly specialized experts, with very complicated and expensive, industrial-size equipment, and with results that can be translated into a mathematical language – devoid of meaning in common parlance.

Surely, there is an increase in the level of civilization. The world in which we live is, altogether, more civilized than before. The number of people who wash their hands and brush their teeth has increased enormously. But public knowledge, common civilized knowledge has not evolved as much, especially not qualitatively. Some of the qualitative tasks that we attribute to our own knowledge have been outsourced and conferred on scientists in laboratories. And the same has happened with medicine. A doctor nowadays is, in a way, less of a craftsman (in the sense of an artisan) than the physicians of fifty years ago. Doctors fifty years ago used their intuition, their own knowledge, which was quite consistent with public or

common knowledge, to detect the disease. Today, some of the diagnoses are solved by laboratory samples and quasi-algorithmic procedures that the computer can solve better. Behind all these current processes lies an intense and specialized fundamental biological research, incredibly sophisticated and very difficult to comprehend for common knowledge.

The complexity and technicality of postmodern knowledge affects even the specialists engaged in it, because it isolates and distances them, depriving them of having a sufficiently comprehensive view of the world. Because of complexity and technicality, scientific knowledge is increasingly escaping common understanding and generalized public knowledge. At the same time, because its cost gets higher, it becomes the exclusive preserve of corporations and wealthy people who can afford to pay for it. Not only has postmodern knowledge become more and more incomprehensibly complex and technical, but it is evolving at great speed and aging at an ever-faster pace. And because it gets old faster, it proves, paradoxically, the vulnerability and relativity of the truth it claims to own.

Withdrawn in sophisticated mathematical accuracies, truth as a value of classical and traditional science ceased – quite a long time ago, actually – to impregnate the current culture as it did with that of modernity. Of course, the wonders of scientific knowledge seem to be very present in today's culture. Still, the discourse of scientists very rarely permeates the broader cultural field. In fact, what scientists are doing is talked about by scientific advertisers, those who understand what happens in the sciences better than ordinary people, but still not well enough to practise them. And they often do it just like the bards who used to recount the actions of great heroes: by creating myths, legends and ballads of scientific discoveries.

Imagining a dystopian future, Orwell staked his hopes against dictatorship and coercion, while Huxley imagined a brave new world where true information is muffled by entertainment and trifles. It seems that Huxley's anticipation is the right one: contemporary culture has moved away from the truth of dry scientific knowledge and closer to spectacle...

3. Truth-significance, the third possible form of truth

This is the context in which, years ago, in 2004, Ralph Keyes launched, perhaps, the very first idea of “post truth” in his essay entitled *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. Reviewing in *éléments* (issue no. 165 of April-May 2017) his ideas, Pascal Eysseric believes that the origin of the concept of “post-truth” must be sought in the

structuralist liberal left. This idea needs some clarification. But if it is to be found there, it needs to be searched for more deeply and differently.

Indeed, Claude Lévi-Strauss said about the consequences of the dissemination of psychoanalytic studies in France between 1920 and 1930: “They taught me that the static oppositions around which we were advised to construct our philosophical essays and later our teaching – the rational and the irrational, the intellectual and the emotional, the logical and the pre-logical – amounted to no more than a gratuitous intellectual game. In the first place, beyond the rational there exists a more important and valid category – that of the meaningful, which is the highest mode of being of the rational (...), Freud’s work showed me that the oppositions did not really exist in this form, since it is precisely the most apparently emotional behaviour, the least rational procedures and so-called pre-logical manifestations which are at the same time the most meaningful.” (Lévi-Strauss, 1968, p. 60)

But the idea proposed to us by the French anthropologist is that the significant offers a broader possibility of understanding the world than can relate to the truth of bivalent logic. From this perspective, the stakes of the psychoanalytic project are to show that if what the psychic patient is doing is analysed from the perspective of signification, not causality, then the pathological behaviour – aberrant from the perspective of a strictly logical rationality – becomes profoundly significant for the history of that patient’s life. This stake becomes as clear as daylight in the interpretation of dreams, which most often seem deprived not only of reality, but also of logic. This is also how Mircea Eliade saw things. For Eliade, who belonged to a different school of thought from both Freud and Lévi-Strauss, the behaviour of the archaic religious man, as well as the superstitions of modern man, which are steeped in affect and are illogical according to the positivist history of the religions promoted by Frazer and Muller, become intelligible as soon as they are interpreted from the perspective of the significant. (Codoban, A. 2011a, p. 8-16)

This way of understanding rationality made possible the linguistic turn, the episteme that relies on the paradigm of language and the autonomy of language, in a word, on the thematization of communication. In Western thought, the thematization of communication occupies the third place in terms of historical succession and truth-grasping capacity. The first theme, that of existence or being, of “what is”, runs from Greek Antiquity until the end of the Middle Ages, i.e., all the way to the threshold of the modern era, marked by the Renaissance. For this theme the object is a sign. The second theme belongs to modernity and is interested in knowledge. For the second

theme, which takes into account the existence of things and ideas about things, knowledge becomes the construction of the world as a reality, and signs (words) are more appropriate or less appropriate names for things. The transition between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries marks the emergence of the new theme, communication. It brings forth a new mutation: the world is given to man through communication, through signification, and the sign becomes a thing. The sign is primordial because the world does not exist for man except insofar as language exists.

Parallel to these theoretical attitudes to signs there are three forms of the theory of truth. The first of them is the correspondence theory of truth. Since things are signs, they have a meaning of their own, which is the order of the world and which we can formulate as such or from which we can deviate. Our statement about them is true if it corresponds to "what is". In this theory of truth, the property of truth belongs to the relationship between the statement and the state of affairs. This kind of truth is the one we encounter in sciences based on observation and direct experimentation.

With the second theme, what "exists" becomes relative to what we know. That is, what we don't know doesn't really exist for us. Different from the first situation, here there are already two distinct orders: the order of "what exists" on the one hand, and the order of thought and utterance, on the other. The order of "what exists" can no longer be accessed directly (unless, as Kant believes, it cannot be accessed at all, being "the thing itself"). The only order we can control and be sure of is the order of our knowledge process. The consequence is a theory of truth-coherence. That is, if the starting point is axiomatically correct and the steps we take are logically coherent, the result of our reasoning must be true. This truth is the truth of the theories of deductive sciences, which often resort to mathematical language.

The third theory of truth is not yet as clearly formulated as the first two. Theoretically, there continue to be two orders, that of the world and that of human thinking, but from now on language appears as an additional order to the first two, just as the order of knowledge arose in modernity to the order of existence. Just as knowledge proved, in a way, to be more essential than existence, now communication, in turn, proves to be more essential than knowledge and, implicitly, existence! In an order of language, which precedes thinking, the theory of truth as meaning is based on an order of communication prior to knowledge and existence. That which has the meaning of reality becomes true.

The truth is all the more truthful the more generally acceptable and broader its meaning is. Since the idea of meaning can be more easily

understood if we attribute it to value (meaningful is what is important, valuable), this kind of truth is, after all, the truth of values. That is, a value is all the truer, the wider its scope or amplitude in relation to the other values and to the human groups that support it. This kind of truth is the truth of individual faith, or as Pope Francis said beautifully in 2017: “All religions are true, because they are true in the hearts of those who believe in them. What other kind of truth is there?”

There are two ideas that can better explain the meaning in which we can understand this meaningful truth. The first derives from the autonomy of language, proclaimed by structuralism, which entails that the language first signifies, and only then designates. What structuralist semiology seems to claim, with good justification rather for poetic language and discourse, has, in fact, a broader applicability. Einstein very suggestively describes the process of knowledge as the miracle of coincidence of some products of mathematical language, equations, with certain areas of reality discovered by physicists. First mathematicians write the equations, which signify in a mathematical language. Only then do physicists discover that they have a referent, and so the new fields of physics theories emerge.

The other idea comes from an opposite position, from Heideggerian hermeneutics. In traditional hermeneutics the relationship between the three concepts, explication, interpretation and comprehension, closely followed this sequence: the text or events were explained in order to interpret them and grasp their meaning. Heidegger, however, reverses the classical relationship between interpretation and comprehension: interpretation becomes the explication of comprehension. Comparable to the arbitrariness of Saussure’s linguistic sign, the change that Heidegger brings to the sphere of hermeneutics refuses the epistemic conception of comprehension — and, implicitly, communication. The fact that comprehension is pre-interpretation in Heideggerian hermeneutics leads to the consequence that, in epistemic order, comprehension — language, communication — is also prior to knowledge. For Heidegger knowledge is secondary, springing from a more elementary comprehension that is far from strictly cognitive. (Codoban, 2001, 122)

Truth-correspondence belonged to the world and existence, truth-coherence pertained to logic and knowledge, and truth-significance is of communication and signification. The problem of confronting truth-significance with the other two forms of truth, with which it coexists today, is the general problem of the relationship between communication and knowledge and today’s specific problem of the relationship between public knowledge and public communication. Knowledge is relative to

communication, because in the order of the constitution of the human subject, communication is pre-knowledge and belongs to language and to the relationship with the other. Communication without specific knowledge, without the transmission of precise information, as simple networking, can exist, but knowledge without communication or, in any case, without meaning, is impossible. Unlike the process of signification, of naming through language, the process of knowledge is gradual, slow and progressive. It consists of assigning names and qualities, rectifying clippings, regrouping things, defining affiliations and discovering new sources within a totality. This is where truth-correspondence and truth-coherence intervene. But the truth-significance remains prime and original to any human subject of knowledge, as Pope Francis said.

4. Truth-significance, “post-truth” and “fake-news”

If we accept signifying intelligibility, founded in language, in the existence of significant systems, then the new model of our world should be based on coding-decoding, metaphor-metonymy, archetypal analogies and pertinent differences, everything being rendered simultaneously. Classical philosophical oppositions, essential vs. apparent, external vs. internal, primary traits vs. secondary traits, depth vs. surface, origin vs. descent, and centre vs. periphery have become irrelevant. The data of the real are simultaneously essential and apparent, everything is original and copy, depth and surface.

The world becomes a significant surface, or, as Nietzsche told us, a story. There is no “true world” of essences, of the “thing itself”, in short, of truth as an absolute point of departure or arrival. Nietzsche does not accept the existence of any event in itself, absolutely. There is only a set of phenomena which form the world, as they are interpreted and structured by a being is prone to interpretation. Opposing Parmenides, according to whom one can only think of what exists, Nietzsche believes that what we can think is only a story. Truth-significance is the truth of this story. (Codoban, 2011b, p. 145-163)

The predestined place of this concept of truth-significance is today precisely the media –especially the “new media” – which now tell the story of this world. They also allow us to verify the concept of truth-significance because they’ve created it in the first place. This operationalization was the answer to the problem: how can one, in an “uncontrolled environment, where anyone can publish anything”, tell users which information has a better chance of being true? The solution to this problem is the digital

incarnation of what we call truth-significance and one of the most significant ideas of the digital age. It was invented by Sergey Brin and Larry Page and is found in Google (Chatfield, 2016). The algorithm they invented, PageRank, observes the frequency with which a link to a web page appears on other pages and considers it a useful proof of its meaning. This operationalization of truth-significance has radically changed the meaning of authority and of cultural or intellectual value by making them dependent on clicks. (Chatfield, 2016, p. 75-78) This example is the best way to understand how, through inter-relationship and inter-subjectivity, knowledge emerges as the objectivizing effect of communication.

Since other spheres of social life are still more related to other types of truth, this truth-significance could generally seem like the “post truth” of the “fake news” of the “new new media”. Post-truth makes some sense, because it tells us that it is a truth other than that of knowledge, it is a truth of communication, ranking below the first truth, that of existence, and the second truth, that of knowledge. We can illustrate this by counter-value and by extending Eco’s observation: error and counterfeit are something different than lying. (Eco, 1982) But “post truth” is something other than “fake news”, although manipulation involving “fake news” has a lot to do with communication, since it is communication that produces it as a virtual reality. What is essential to virtual reality is not so much the illusion, the reality effect, but that it relates to you. But the new concept of communication is precisely what the emphasis is being placed on: on the ability to build relationships rather than transmit information. You have to build relationships and, in this sense, to emote and tell stories that are somehow ahead of factual truth or accuracy.

Complicating the relationship between knowledge and communication makes the difference between public communication and public relations disappear. Different from what public communication is — a mass transmission of utilitarian, normative, motivational or knowledge information — public relations identify how certain social groups promote and support their values, attitudes and interests through communication. Therefore, even if one might conclude that the current pandemic is one of PR, the Covid-19 pandemic is not the one that promotes its values, attitudes and interests. Still, different people use the pandemic event and build their messages to put themselves in positions of knowledge, leadership and power, and in the capacity to mobilize. That is, a global event blows wind into the sails of their self-promotion interests and personality.

In our Western world, where political struggles are most often a kind of wrestling show, the one that qualifies the group or individual for certain

positions in social or power structures and hierarchies is communication. Social groups, networks and, ultimately, individuals define themselves and build their identities on the basis of their messages and their adherence to them. Gone to the extreme, such thinking easily becomes a cynical one: communication is a field where people meet and confront the interests of individuals. There are no truths testable by correspondence or coherence, as in knowledge. On the contrary, as in communication, there are only individual meanings that gain truth value through adhesion, through an Internet algorithm, or through the gesture of a double click. The truth of the message becomes the meaning that most people believe in.

But the real causes, the actual ones, should not be forgotten: IT and the digitization of communication have greatly affected the way media and many forms of popular culture work. The Internet and social networks have become a primary form of communication. Because communication remains the most constant feature in the definition of communities, social networks are the new religion, in the old sense of *religion*, given by Feuerbach: relationship, connection. We could thus say that the masses are the product, or rather the community correspondent of mass communication. Modernity has imposed the nation as a subject of public communication under the common language and printing as a means of mass communication. The possibility of new forms of community relates to new communication technologies. The new media differs from the traditional media just as the modern assembly table, the “black crowds” that Canetti talked about, differs from the “variegated mass” Sloterdijk talks about. (Sloterdijk, 2002)

The big difference now arises from a shift of focus: if the language and content of communication initially mattered more in the formation of communities, now communication technologies, metamorphosed into social networks, matter more than language or the transmitted content. These communities, established through social networks, can evade the contractual reciprocity of organic communities, functioning rather in the form of spontaneous and temporary pacts. Postmodernity privileges such “tribes”, often with a generational configuration. Perhaps we are returning to the style of social aggregation characteristic of the Middle Ages. But the pacts that constitute the communities structured by digital social networks are no longer those of relationship, but those of spontaneous individual emotion, which currently aggregate different individuals just in the name of that emotional reaction and nothing more. The *Flashmob*, which appeared in 2003 in the US, is such a volatile form of community that it apparently can mobilise people without directing and advertising, but solely through the Internet (Dâncu, 2015). “Tribes” differ from the publications of modernity,

as their mobilization is not based on persuasion. They are no longer related to an ideology of the text, but to an ostentatious one, of the image, of what can be shown seemingly directly and lived in unmediated and immediate fashion, in the way that Jung imagined the collective unconscious, differently from Freud. (Jung, C. G., 1994, p. 52-64)

To better understand the situation, it is appropriate to return to the above comparison of public knowledge with the form closer to it, worldviews. The Greek, Christian, or Renaissance worldviews provided a functional mental framework for the societies that supported them. With modern differentiation within societies and the expansion of knowledge, worldviews have changed in the sense that they are competing with and counteracted by ideologists or utopias. If the worldview represented the least common multiple of knowledge and culture in the modernity of some Western societies, ideologies promoted worldviews limited to the interests of a class or social group, and utopias developed alternative models. But these forms of collective consciousness belonged to certain subjects of history, placed in different positions and playing different historical roles.

In the twentieth century, public knowledge is the successor of worldviews in which a large dose of knowledge is infused, especially from social sciences. Public knowledge is a more informed type of truth-significance than that of worldviews. In a way, public knowledge is a disenchanted worldview that lacks the backing of a consistent historical subject. Its context was Western modernity and postmodernity no longer supports it due to the hypertrophy of communication supported by IT. However, its dissolution has similar effects to those of the dissolution of a worldview. It makes room for what ideologies and utopias were in the stage of worldviews. Without a human historical subject (because, obviously, the historical subject is now capital), considering how communication technologies and communication-driven society work, the individual – and individualism – can end up being a total presence. So, the discussion can no longer be about utopias and ideologies, but rather about direct phantasms and the promotion of group or individual interests. That is, on either side, there only the expression of individual desires and interests without symbolic mediation or cultural construction – only phantasms and individual interests, somewhat statistically overlapped only by higher interests. Consumerism leads us to believe that everything is for sale and that the commodity market is the new agora. (Frunză, 2004, Frunză, 2014)

5. The pandemic of relational communication and the clash with virtual reality

For most people, the coronavirus epidemic has made it inordinately clear that there is a pandemic of communication. The handy solution – which Trump’s ban on social media suggests – would seem to be proposing or imposing silence. But silence is ineffective now because, compared to communication, it is like non-being in relation to being: it simply doesn’t exist. A different approach is needed, one capable of instilling adequate silence. This could only be achieved through selective communication. It would be necessary to distinguish, first of all, in the torrent of incoming messages on all channels, between what imparts knowledge and what is just communication. That is, only a few of the people who produce or distribute messages are those who possess what little knowledge of the virus we have at the moment, but communication is communicated, as the students say “in joy”: knowledge is rarer than communication. Knowledge is elitist, undemocratic in some ways, even if we dislike specialists or experts. (The specialist is all too often a self-inflating donut and, as Murphy says, “the expert is someone who hails from a distant city”). But most likely, there are only a handful of people in this world who really understand what this new virus is – as much as they can understand for now, before they have all the data, implications and consequences. But everyone nonchalantly communicates allegedly absolutely safe information about this – still very novel – virus.

Here we need to point out an additional difference between communication related to knowledge – the one that sends you as much information as there is – and motivational communication, which is largely, from the lucid perspective of the truth tested, a kind of blah-blah. But it’s a blah-blah that many find worthy: at least it gives some landmarks, at least it fills the gap of knowledge that scares us, at least it domesticates the unknown. So, on the one hand, there are those who have information, albeit partial, incomplete, and on the other hand there are those who communicate “information” that they don’t actually own – it’s just communication, not knowledge. At best, it’s motivational communication (please forgive our abhorrence for motivational communication, which has its social role and its administrative utility, but also lays claim to absolute and indisputable knowledge). Above all, there is a third attitude in communication – comic, humour, irony, which entails distancing, dissociation. One of the essential skills in the psychic mechanisms of human communication is dissociation, detachment, distancing, which tells us that we should not invest too much

energy in something specific, be it an event or a person. When we laugh, it means that we don't give dignity to the event, we detach ourselves from it – “oh, it's not worth the hassle” with the sense of “being too serious”.

Always, those who know, know as much as they know. In the same way, people communicate all the time and communicate most often, as they do now, not producing, but distributing content. Their grand author gesture here is limited to how they select content, how they determine what to pass on. Because what they're going to pass on is something that resonates with them. But people do this, and in order to keep their ties, people want to be in touch with other people. And since they can't make actual gestures for each other, they engage in communication... Most often, someone receives a message and feels somehow indebted to respond with a message. It's a kind of exchange at the level of messages, as if it were an exchange of activities or even material goods. That kind of communication connects us. What is clearly shown is that, as the new theories of communication argue, communication is mostly relational. This, in parallel, is true for epidemics/pandemics...

Because there are a lot of us, and we're all very different, and because we are democratically respecting numbers and positively discriminating against differences, we will have to get used to and accept communication as it is carried out now. We will also have to acknowledge the response of people cramped together in large urban settings to such situations. Our ordinary life is very uneventful and tame. We've domesticated not only animals, but also ourselves, which is not a bad thing, after all. Only when borderline situations arise, are we forced to think more than one step ahead of us. Only when faced with a limited situation, do people renounce their domesticated life, their day-to-day existence, which is neither miraculous nor dangerous, and contains almost nothing that is unexpected or uncertain. The pandemic is one such borderline situation, and people may not even fully perceive this boundary situation, but simply copy the behaviour of others, whom they perceive as terrified... It's like flocks of birds or shoals of fish, animals that live in hordes. Often the human horde is beneficial because individuals react without being aware of the danger directly, in accordance to the behaviour towards danger exhibited by others, through a mimetic reaction. That's the meaning of mass behaviour, actually. One contagious mass communication.

6. Conclusion: From a culture of knowledge to a culture of communication

The way communication works during the pandemic shows that we need to demystify the stories about “the society of knowledge and the increase in civic power associated with it”. Producers of content in traditional media (written, spoken) or visual media – that is, in general, producers of public knowledge – have lost a lot of power over global digital distributors and communication producers. That is why we need to question more carefully the netocracy, the power of those who own social networks, the “new media”. In an attempt to tackle and challenge both old and new forms of communicative power concentration, we must ask ourselves who the dominant voices are, how they become amplified and what the extent of their influence on public debate and knowledge is.

McLuhan first noticed to what extent the change in communication technologies attracts changes in human perception. He realized that the implications extend far into the areas of cultural and social values. There are a lot of books that discuss the change that IT and the sphere of digital has brought, making us superficial and fickle. More analytically and weighted, the change could be understood as a shift from the culture of knowledge to the culture of communication and from the means of knowledge – demonstration, argumentation, persuasion – to those of communication – persuasion, seduction, the spectacular. For modernity, knowledge is what reality was constructed upon: what man knew was decided by schools, thinkers, scientists, cultural elites of that time, which were mostly related to science and knowledge. At the moment and for us, communication builds our every-day reality. New media as communication technologies cannot function otherwise than as a resonance box for the virtual reality of communication and truth-significance. The way that the Internet is built encourages one who knows to only be told what he knows, without being told what he doesn't know, he is not told anything that would contradict what he knows. Whatever I decide to be true is true – everyone thinks that was! Meaning, language, communication, is for everyone, knowledge is selective and elitist. Pluralism is specific to communication and challenges expertise, which is elitist knowledge. Above all, elitist knowledge is relative and is known to historically erode. This is how the new media gets to replace theories and become the new ideology. An ostentatious ideology based on proximity and sharing, which produces a virtual reality, a hyperreality. Communication becomes stained glass, not a transparent window and it even produces reality. (Codoban, A. 2011, (Codoban, 2013)

New technologies allow us to do something different. Not only are we respectfully adapting our existence to reality, not only do we boldly dialogue with it through knowledge, as we did in modernity, but we actually produce a reality that is parallel and sometimes even contrary to what reality is. Not adaptation to reality or correspondence with it, but inter-subjectivity objectifies. Something is objectively true as long as more people think it's true. We are on a road that leads to the collision between a true reality and a virtual reality of communication, and perhaps we are approaching the moment when virtual reality will overwhelm actual reality. For now, the pandemic has occasioned only an accidental and easy collision, but it can give us some thought about what can happen if the virtual overwhelms the real. Our world is beginning to look more and more like the Middle Ages, as a world of stories and phantasmagories, of magical beliefs that encompassed crowds. A curious paradox remains though: knowledgeable technologies give the chance of a new Middle Age of meanings, and our sophisticated technologies, which are growing increasingly digital and abstract, support more and more analogical, actual content!

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