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Neo-communication: A Pragmatic Outlook on the Evolution of Modern-day Communication

Abstract. Although the advances of today's technology are overall ironclad improvements, they are sometimes defensively regarded. In this article, we furnish evidence that communication is afflicted by its mediators. We show that changes occur when it comes to individual's values, understanding and proneness to debate, underlining at the same time biological and physiological transformations inflicted by technological mediators. Our aim is to demonstrate that, since individuals have transmogrified from all the major standpoints which define them, their communication will also evolve. We suggest the concept of neo-communication to illustrate this evolution.

Key words: neo-communication, virtual reality, critical thinking, biological transformations

1. Introduction

The technological progress has led to numerous changes in the way people see the world and that is reason enough to study its impact on communication. We start by reminding that Immanuel Kant argues in *Critique of Pure Reason* that the perception of reality is mediated by *a priori* concepts, which can only build an image of said reality. This resulting image is not necessarily accurate, it can also be distorted and the *de facto* reality can be misrepresented (Kant 1998). The conclusion which logically follows this hypothesis is: if new mediators constantly appear along with various technological contraptions, the way reality is perceived will definitely be dissimilar when compared to the way reality was understood prior to their invention.

In addition to this, we have to notice how the perception of reality, combined with the truths strongly held by individuals, govern their actions and their thoughts, according to the Law of Parsimony. Therefore,

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if reality is different and actions are modified congruently with this change, we can infer that individual values will also change. If and when this change occurs, it triggers as an outcome a modification in the symbols that express these values. Because humans are defined by the capacity of communicating through language, reasoning tells us their language will also be prone to significant alterations. However, accepting that ideas do not preexist in relation to words, it can be stated that the whole ideational system of human beings will be remodeled, if that has not happened already.

2. A Brave New World?

Giovanni Sartori states that humans are regressing toward their animal side. The reason would be the increase of visual mediators, which are responsible for people's leaning toward perception as opposed to cognition. A first result of this transformation – which is in fact a setback from an evolutionary standpoint – is that humans lose their ability for abstractions, for operating with symbols and from using connotative words which can precisely nominate a specific concept. Sartori claims that, through this loss, understanding becomes seriously impoverished. Humans do not deliberate as much as they used to, they do not question things and rational thinking does not advance. If intellectual exercises are weakened and even uncalled for, deemed objectionable in an all-knowing world, Sartori sees a gloomy end for critical thinking (Sartori 2005).

In this "brave new world" we come across a novel concept, that of *Second Life*, which anyone can experience by simply creating a free account on the website www.second-life.com. This game regards an alternate reality, constructed by internet users who become residents of Second Life and create an alter-ego for themselves. They can later on modify this persona as they see fit, they can build families and relationships, they can buy properties in the game and generally, they can achieve whatever they lack in real life. The key words and phrases here can be used in the outlining of an imaginary dominion: alternative, avatars, virtual space, social networking, alter ego. They all come together in sketching the choice between reality and fiction – a fictional world which imitates the real one, while allowing users to opt for their look and personality, which does not happen outside the virtual space. This is the main reason why the residents from Second Life try out their demiurgic abilities, constantly creating and reinventing themselves and their environments.

However, taking into account the fact that during adolescence individuals are caught in between identity and role confusion (Sokol 2009), the second-life.com alternative, the potential of creating avatars and additional personalities, could not possibly be regarded as a beneficial instrument, especially in the personal development of a youngster who always has the handy option of being someone else online. And these wishes can start as early as childhood, through their online socialization, through endless hours watching television, in the absence of a better past-time to alleviate boredom. The harms of these distractions regard an increasing toll taken on imagination, on abstract thinking and concentration, as well as on their abilities to socialize. These effects that last into adulthood are caused by an increasing tendency to take refuge in the imaginary, adventurous realm of television's virtual reality (Lecomte 2004). Lecomte's same conclusions regarding the effects of television can be transferred to other media that allow people to submerge in virtual reality, such as the Internet.

Nevertheless, one has to admit that forums and social networks have shown an increasing ability in shaping and creating opinions. They also have significant effects when it comes to providing the required stimulus for a specific action, especially in coalescing and mobilizing individuals towards certain goals. On the other side of the coin, it is highly relevant that these opinions rarely regard public interest problems, and revolve around things which can be at best deemed frivolous. This tendency can be explained through the concept of Sartori's *juvenile culture*, which affects the decision-making process, leading to a *cybernetic democracy*. As Lecomte argues, the major political and social events are ignored in favor of discussing fashionable events that help build an *entertainment cult*. In these conditions, people cannot be expected to make uninformed decisions regarding various political problems, even though they should be directly concerned by these matters. Consequently, the core concept which characterizes nowadays' society in Lecomte's point of view is *acute disinformation* (Lecomte 2004).

To support this outlook, we can rely on a study cited by Werner J. Severin and James W. Tankard, Jr., regarding one of Roosevelt's speeches. Severin and Tankard noticed a decrease in audience, correlated with a decrease in socio-economical status. Moreover, the people who have actively followed the debate are most likely actively involved with politics. In addition to this, the well-informed people were acquiring new data, while at the same time the less-informed became even lesser-informed (Severin and Tankard 2004). This concept of *acute*

disinformation can also be supported by an article written by Rachel Kovacs, namely "The broadcasting *public sphere*: Enduring issues, enduring relationships, enduring activists". Comparing the strategies of six activist groups from 1997 and 2001, Kovacs finds that the groups tried to build a public sphere for generating debate around politics and programs developed by television and to trigger certain changes in them. Thereby, they have reclaimed the role of broadcasting in society. These strategies, which included media education, media advocacy and good interpersonal relations, are correlated with the fact that the exclusion of the public from debates leads to mass-manipulation of opinions by the media (Kovacs 2003). This comes in obvious contradiction with Habermas's model of the public sphere, since the advancement of society is no longer determined by the collective process of rational argumentation.

When it comes to favoring dominant speeches, Kovacs uncovers another shortcoming of the media, which is supposed to be subordinated to the public (though it is actually not), in view of the fact that one of its roles is disseminating the values of society (Kovacs 2003). As Lecomte very accurately notes, the strategies employed by participants in a debate are no longer mainly rational, but keep involving seductive elements, which should in fact take less space in a public debate. The participants are not only confronting each other, whereas they are doing a sustained effort in transmitting both direct and indirect messages to their public. These seductive endeavors set in motion the audience's hooking through structuring its communicational devices. This hooking ensues a broadening of the political sphere's borders inasmuch as everyone is welcome inside them. The spectacle of public life begins to anchor itself in the private life when media transforms politics in a new type of entertainment (Lecomte 2004).

3. A Dangerous Path of Evolution

The present-day individuals are continuously evolving even from biological and physiological standpoints. In *Television: Opiate of the Masses*, Wes Moore finds that, following the brain's electric activity when an individual watches TV, a prevalence of alpha waves can be observed. Despite the fact that they generally appear when attention is not focused, they seem to be dependant of the television medium, regardless of the program that is on. In addition to this, scientists note the inhibition of the brain's left hemisphere and the lack of communication between the cerebral hemispheres. These effects are also accompanied by a deficient

development and functioning of the prefrontal cortex, which is in fact the center of all superior mental processes, such as attention, motivation, behavior control and emotions (Moore 2001).

Moore purports that the addiction to alpha waves creates a passive mental attitude and a general lack of energy. The reason for this can be found in the nature of television as visual medium. The outcome of visual imagery is that the brain's left hemisphere is less stimulated, seeing that television accesses mainly the global and simultaneous perception of the brain's right hemisphere. Therefore, logical and analytical reasoning, together with mathematical and scientific reasoning, which pertain to the left hemisphere are gravely diminished in the contemporary world (Moore 2001). We can infer that the level of intelligence, affected by the defective communication between cerebral hemispheres, can dramatically decline. In a society dominated by visual media, reading is being left behind since people are finding it harder to understand and process written words. On the other hand, the prompt pleasure associated with watching television is much easier, and more effortlessly addictive. The constant endorphin release triggered by alpha waves, the inhibiting of the cerebral left hemisphere and the cognitive activity being left solely in charge of the right hemisphere leads to more *emotional responses* instead of *intelligent responses*, as Moore states (Moore 2001).

Aric Sigman, Fellow of the Royal Society of Medicine and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society, points out that watching television causes obesity, predisposes to diabetes, heart attacks and cancer. This happens mainly because a person's metabolism is much slower when they are exposed to alpha waves, even slower than when they sit around doing nothing. To increase the chances for type 2 diabetes, it only takes two hours per day of watching television, which is 50% less than the average. Moreover, watching TV is linked to afflictions such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. In addition to this, Sigman claims that violent criminal activity has increased from the invention of television and seems to think that, if there were no television today, the rate of violent crimes would be half of what it is (Sigman 2005). Although we cannot be sure of the actual percentage's accuracy, we can rely on the *Social Learning Theory* to ascertain some of Sigman's conclusions. If people imitate the behaviors they are exposed to (Bandura, 1969), then we can conceive an increase in violence due to its increasing presence in media.

Furthermore, Sigman argues that the biological effects are related to the channel and not the message. Aside from the already mentioned

ADHD, sleep is also afflicted. If sleep becomes irregular, then the melatonin levels will drop, causing cancer-related mutations to the DNA. A low melatonin level is responsible for the age-drop in girls reaching puberty as well. Aside from this, another one of society's problems is obesity, caused by the brain's inability to correctly interpret the signals received from the stomach. The constant feeling of hunger is in itself caused by the prolonged exposure to alpha waves (Sigman 2007).

Along with television, the Internet is likewise responsible for generating biological effects. As such, social isolation is caused by the decrease of real interactions, the increase of self-employed people who work from home, the fact that parents spend less time with their children and that more people (aged 25 to 44) choose to live alone instead of marrying. Real relationships are replaced with virtual ones. And Sigman argues that social isolation is linked to alterations in leukocyte transcription, which cause immunological disorders, cardiovascular disease, dementia and strokes. An even more macabre result that Sigman publishes is related to the higher mortality rates in people who are not involved in a steady romantic relationship. As opposed to married people, bachelors have a higher risk of suicide, and they apparently tend to have shorter lives. Moreover, these tendencies are cumulative and hereditary (Sigman 2009).

Taking all these modifications into account and defining communication as a semiotic interaction (Fârte 2004), we find that neo-communication is not far from this determination. However, it represents a mediated semiotic interaction, being subject to biological and psychological alterations in individuals. Forasmuch as human beings evolve, they become different, more alienated in society, oscillating between the need of uniqueness and the desire to socialize, their cognitive and relational capacities are somewhat afflicted. That is why we can be certain that the modern-day neo-communication is essentially different than communication.

4. Conclusions

We note that our concept of neo-communication is quite distinct from the already existing term of computer-mediated communication. The latter only accepts some differences in the way people communicate, in how they convey their messages, but disregards the inner and outer changes their minds and bodies go through. We strongly emphasize that, in point of fact, these changes are responsible for the difference in concocting and conveying different messages. Individuals' entire symbolic system is altered, they become more interested in less

substantial subjects. Their language changes, becomes more impecunious with words, their definitions become more ostensive, the concepts used more concrete. The capacity for seeing beyond the immediate is blurred, since their sensory organs and brain are modified, even though they should make important decisions in all sorts of public affairs. As a consequence, neo-communication becomes a dysfunction of communication when it estranges individuals from reality. Nevertheless, from all of the above, one can deduce that the governing concept of neo-communication is change. However, since nothing is truly evergreen, the only weighty fact would be the effective management of this change after it is accurately comprehended.

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