

## THE NEW REVOLUTION IN COMMUNICATIONS

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In the first pages of *The Politics*, Aristotle observed that animals as well as humans communicate among themselves by emitting and receiving various signs as gestures, sounds and songs, but there is one sign that pertains exclusively to human beings: Speech. How is speech different from the rest of the signals that humans share with animals? It is that, in speech, men do not only emit and receive expressions of pleasure and pain like the rest of the living beings, but also exchange the only thing that is their own: a sense of what is advisable and harmful, just and unjust? The word is exclusively man's because only he possesses the faculty to say what is good and what is bad, 'and the community of these things is what constitutes the house and the city'. Man is a political animal that, for being so, participates in the life of the city or *polis*, and for that reason, he who dispenses with the life of the city, 'would be a beast or a god, but not a human being'. As a result, 'while perfect man is the best of all animals, apart from justice, he is the worst, because, justice being the "quality of the city", without it man sinks into barbarism'.

The ability to communicate by speech is the universal gift of humans. It has had different manifestations throughout history however. But people, having accepted one form of communication in a given era, are troubled each time a new form of communication appears to threaten it. *Cultural fear* accompanies each change in the form of communication because humans, having become accustomed to identify the form of communication they possess with the culture itself, fear that, when a new form of communication appears that rivals theirs, it will plunge them into chaos, into a Tower of Babel of communicational confusion capable of eradicating their cultural identity.

The first form of human communication was *oral*. The most ancient human groups communicated among themselves via oral tradition. Gathered around the fire, the primitive Greeks and other peoples preserved their culture generally in poetic form because, still without the aid of written text, verse could fix their epic tales and mythologies in memory. Recall that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* circulated through the transmission of oral culture, from fathers to sons. When you think about the considerable length of the Homeric poems, it is clear that the memory required for oral culture was incomparably superior to that which we could produce in our day, because the predomi-

nance of the written word exempts us from such a gigantic effort. From the Greek *aedas* to the Latin American poets or *payadores*, there is a long tradition of reciters and singers whose mission was to conserve and transmit, almost always in verse, the cultural possessions of their peoples.

It is estimated that oral culture was prevalent in the West from the beginnings of civilization until around the eighth century BC, when Homeric poems finally passed into written form, the emergence of which marked the revolutionary beginning of *writing* as the new form of communication. Greek was the key language in this cultural transformation from oral to written because it had the advantage, before other languages did, of a simple and efficient alphabet with a complete set of vowels and consonants, making it more conducive to writing than other early languages such as Egyptian or Phoenician.

The *Indoeuropean* language merits a separate mention, a language about which we know almost nothing because it only succeeded in leaving traces in the roots of the European languages that succeeded it, from Greek and Latin to the modern European languages, though naturally in written form. Along with this whole set of western languages should be added Sanskrit, the Indian aspect of Indoeuropean culture.

Very little is known of oral culture, but the various ancient languages that have come down to us, entered for example in the Old Testament, are eloquent testimony to their admirable richness. The passage from oral cultural to writing was received with alarm by the practitioners of oral culture, who saw it as a threat to their own culture because it was difficult for them to see at the dawn of writing that it would complement oral tradition rather than threaten it.

Socrates, who lived between the years 470 and 399 BC, did not use written language, despite the fact that he knew how to write, out of respect for the oral culture he had inherited. His disciple Plato (427–347 BC) not only knew how to write but elevated the language, in prose rarely equaled, in his famous *Dialogues*. Why did his writings adopt the dialog form? Because it reproduced the oral exchanges among Socrates and his disciples in colloquia, that today we would call ‘classes’, ‘scholarly meetings’, or ‘round-tables’, on such great philosophical themes as justice, education and love.

Because the dialog form was adopted not only by Plato but also by the majority of ancient authors until the arrival of Cicero himself (106–43 BC), the fact of its prevalence until well into the season of written communication should be interpreted as a vast exercise in *cultural nostalgia* for preserving as far as possible the valuable capital of the oral tradition. We should also note that in the beginning reading was practiced not so much in private by each reader, as is usual today, but through meetings during which someone

read a written text aloud to his listeners, who in this way became 'passive readers' of the same material.

After the barbarian invasions that would finish off the Western Roman Empire (5th century AD), the Middle Ages began in the midst of a long Dark Age that lasted until the advent of the High Middle Ages, beginning, approximately, in the eleventh century AD. Throughout this lengthy stage Western civilization was preserved in the monasteries, where selfless monks laboriously copied ancient texts to protect them from oblivion. 'Laboriously' but not always 'faithfully', as, motivated by their orthodoxy and their piety, the monks from time to time introduced interpolations on their own authority to 'correct' so far as possible the pre-Christian cultural inheritance they judged 'pagan'. The word 'pagan' comes from 'pago', the rural and traditionalist sector where the influence of Christianity, which had become the official creed of western Europe since the Emperor Constantine (272-337), had not yet arrived.

José Ortega y Gasset distinguished between *ideas* and *beliefs*. We have ideas, but beliefs 'have us' because, without having created them, we have them, barely consciously, as part of our cultural inheritance. In the Middle Ages, religious faith was not, like today, an 'idea' that some have and others not, but a true collective belief that sustained all of cultural life, as no one imagined then that the text of the Old and New Testaments was uncertain and thus merited investigation and debate. Anyone who dared to question the content of Christian culture was considered in that time a dangerous rebel and a 'heretic' deserving of the gravest punishments by the Inquisition because his preachings compromised the cultural identity of Christendom.

The cultural heritage of Christendom was held to be not subject to objection until the Protestant, and Puritan, Reformation, the roots of which can be traced to the fifteenth century, manifested itself fully with Luther and Calvin in the sixteenth century, dividing Christendom into two irreconcilable camps, whose reciprocal hostility, accompanied by episodes of unusual violence (violence is never more terrible than when exercised in the name of God), culminating in the terrible 'wars of religion', that bled Europe until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 consecrated the principle of 'to each kingdom, its religion', (*cujus regio, ejus religio*), which opened the doors of religious tolerance, permitting at the same time that each kingdom could be just as tolerant or intolerant as it wanted within its own borders.

While these processes developed, writing encountered a series of difficulties spreading, due to still-reigning illiteracy. In the Middle Ages, few knew how to read and write apart from the monks. Consequently, literary culture (now no longer solely oral) only reigned in small circles, outside of

which the oral tradition, and not writing, counted no rivals in sight. To this we must add that the still-archaic methods for copying and disseminating written texts did not give books the decisive role they later acquired. Let us say then that for a long time medieval culture continued being oral, with small literary islands.

This drastic limitation remained until the German blacksmith Johannes Gutenberg developed the new technology of moveable type in 1450, which brought a revolution in the diffusion of books and documents. Gutenberg printed the Missal of Constanza and the Bible in editions that today appear to us as modest runs, but that from then forward were multiplied to set up a true literary revolution. It was soon after Gutenberg's moveable type that writing began to develop, on a path to overtake oral culture.

And, as Plato had warned, nostalgia for oral tradition still lived, enduring well into the Middle Ages. Anyone who reads St. Thomas Aquinas's (1225-1274) *Summa Theologica*, for example, notices that his writings are in a certain sense 'oral', as they tend to reproduce the university discussions prevalent in his time, by a definitively 'scholastic' method that begins by posing a question to be resolved, continuing with a succinct exposition of the contrasting theses and culminating with the offering of a solution to the question posed. What was still most important in the thirteenth century in the brand-new university of the Sorbonne where St. Thomas taught, was not so much books – Aquinas himself only possessed a small library, that he knew from memory – as the 'written' record of his 'oral' classes. Even today the Church, with its two thousand year tradition, mixes the issuing of its written documents in the form of papal encyclicals and conciliar and episcopal declarations with a formidable residual oral tradition in the form of 'sermons' that are preached from pulpits throughout the world every Sunday.

### **Freedom of the press**

The predominance of the oral culture shone in the agora of Athens and the Roman forum, where few people needed to know few things, which they were informed of through direct contact among citizens. The revolutionary eruption of the printed word gave rise to the appearance of *journalism* in the nineteenth century, which resulted in the fundamental innovation that people, feeling called on to receive news of events that occurred beyond the almost familial precincts of the forum, did not have – unlike their experience within those precincts – a 'direct' contact with that which was occurring, but only an 'indirect' contact, that required the intermediation of those witnesses of the faraway, who came to be journalists. But this new 'remoteness' resulted in the problem of the *credibility* of the

transmitters of information. If, now deprived of direct contact with the events and personages that interest them, readers need the intermediation of journalists – who of them they believe?

Almost all of the facts that today we take for certain we only have news of through the mediation of journalists. We have not seen with our own eyes any of the great scientific, political or social happenings of whatever kind that now condition our perceptions and instead of paying attention only to what we see and touch, we must pay attention to news others bring us, which forms an inevitable risk of alienation.

If the relating of the wide world that now so vitally interests us were in the hands of a single agent of transmission, we could be easily manipulated and if we rejected all manipulation we would still navigate in a sea of doubts. The only way to avoid dependence on others in the matter of information and opinion is for the sources of transmission of information that reach us to be multiple. In a pluralistic society, the media of communication enjoy the right of free expression but the foundation of this right is not only to protect the broadcasters but also the audience, since the multiplication of broadcasters is the only effective way for the receivers to know where they stand with information that comes to them from afar, by comparing the diverse versions of reality that are presented to them. Normally a reader will establish a relation of habit and confidence with a particular news source, but the guarantee of his choice depends on the audience member knowing that, at any moment, he can change broadcasts.

Therefore, freedom of the press exists not just for broadcasters but also for the audience, and from this it can be derived that the first sign that a political regime is heading on a path in the direction of authoritarianism and even totalitarianism is the restriction on freedom of information and opinion, with the intention of monopolizing them. While *authoritarianism* consists of the concentration of power in a single hand, *totalitarianism* goes farther because it doesn't claim only to concentrate power but also that the citizens, now converted into subjects, think as they think or as they are told to think by those in power. The deepest intention of oppressive regimes is to submit systems of communication to a return to a state equivalent to that which existed before the revolutionary modernization of written communication and, in particular, before the expansion of journalism.

For this reason, contemporary democratic constitutions protect freedom of expression more than any other freedom because it is the condition for the exercise of all the other liberties, even going so far as to prohibit states from regulating it in any form because the very act of regulating the circulation of ideas and information inevitably leads to the suspicion that behind

this regulation lurks a coercive intent. Apart from being prohibited by democratic constitutions, attempts to condition freedom of expression reveal the extent of the vigor of free thought such that even in totalitarian regimes like the Soviet Union, seventy years of state monopoly of communications and education was not enough to suffocate it, such that, as was demonstrated from 1989 on, societies apparently submitted to strict control of communication recovered suddenly, almost magically, the freedom of communication that had been denied to them for so long. I remember that when I read the book *Can the Soviet Union Survive in 1980?* by the Russian dissident Andrei Amalrik (1938–1980), I noted with astonishment that the author had read practically the same books that we used in the West in his generation, confirming that even underneath totalitarian censorship free thought continues to flourish on the part of those who are supposedly submitted to it.

### Television and radio

But if the expansion of writing in books, documents and newspapers brought a radical change in forms of communication, although the modern world now was incomparably more open than in earlier eras, thanks to now-prevailing written communication, it left out the immense ‘reserve army’ of the illiterate still prevalent, above all, in the developing world.

At this point two new media instruments arrived on the scene to expand the contemporary revolution in communications: *radio* and *television*. With them, paradoxically, came the first resurgence of the old world of oral culture. Radio, in effect, consisted in the expansion of the word in its *vocal* expression. It was as if, through it, we had once again the ancient oral communication between issuer and receiver of information. The other communications innovation belonging to the twentieth century, in addition to radio, has been television, which is able to illustrate with powerful images that which it announces in words. This amplification, also revolutionary, brings with it however the presence of a less precise type of material of information and opinion than written messages. For this reason, it is recommended to young journalists that the first stages of their formation be in the rigorous discipline of written expression; in that way, we can marginalize at beginning of their careers the strong emotionality ascribed to audiovisual messages.

On the other hand, television, similar to radio, has been able to reach through its wide diffusion hundreds of millions of persons who can’t read, who were previously absent from citizen debates, amplifying decisively the number who can be amazed by what happens in the outer world, even while these same audiovisual outlets can, sometimes with alarming fre-

quency, be put to demagogic use, a tendency aggravated in turn by state monopolies on media of communication, which becomes easier to effect as radio and television airwaves are more controllable by a central state than was old-style freedom of the press that was only controllable through a monopoly on paper; audiovisual messages may have less resistance to the arbitrary distribution of the licenses that the State grants to particular operators.

### **The rebellion of audience**

Except in islands of ‘intercommunication’, the back and forth relation between emitters and receivers of information, which only existed fully in the popular assembly or *ecclesia* of Athenian democracy and its imitators in the golden fifth century BC (in which the members of the *polis* received the active name *politai* (politicians), not simple ‘citizens’ (because they simultaneously issued and received messages in discussions and votes in the popular assembly), *all* forms of communication we have mentioned so far, from oral culture almost to our own day, share a common feature: the *dominant position* of the broadcasters with respect to the audience members who, as we have seen, only have the capacity to choose among this or that station in order to guarantee so far as possible the truth of the messages directed at them.

This historical audit is key to noting the extraordinary reach of the most recent communications revolution that is taking place today via the diffusion of the Internet in a universe of dizzying expansion, that now reaches hundreds of millions of people and that appears destined in a few years to cover the entire world population. We may say that while almost all messages prior to the present time, from oral culture to television, were characterized by the primacy of the issuer of information, the communications revolution that is occurring before our eyes is characterized by the *emancipation of the audience member*, or, in other words, by the possibility that is open to the audience members to convert themselves into issuers of information.

Looking over the numerous variations that people the Internet today, all channel in one way or the other what we can call the *rebellion of the audience*. The role of the audience before the diffusion of the Internet did exist, but was severely limited. Newspapers can publish ‘letters from readers’ though in a limited number that demands they be carefully edited. Some newspapers also give recourse, sometimes obliged by law, to a ‘right of reply’ to audience members who feel themselves affected by some broadcast or report, written or oral. Radio has featured, more and more frequently, direct interventions of listeners. It is evident, moreover, that the proliferation of public opinion polls, by agencies of greater or lesser credibility, is one of

the 'intercommunication' features of our era. But these new forms of expression run the risk that those who commission or transmit the surveys incarnate a new method, more subtle, less obvious, of the conditioning of the audience by the issuer of information.

Whatever the variety of the services today multiplying on the Internet, those called *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Wikipedia*, *Wikileaks*, *social networks*, or otherwise, all have the common feature of being carriers of the vast rebellion of audiences at the expense of the old quasi-monopoly of broadcasters of information.

This new form of intercommunication contains, no doubt, a *political* implication. Can we say then that we find ourselves before a new form of *democracy*? In his book *The New Prince*, the analyst Dick Morris is so enthusiastic as to affirm that this is the birth of a form of democracy that he calls *electronic democracy*, something like a new Athens within which the citizen, a new *polites*, can inform herself and meet in virtual assemblies open to mass debate and also to voting where each *polites*, after having debated no-holds-barred the matters that interest her, can also exercise her ability to vote for or against candidates and propositions presented.

It could appear to us in a sense that 'electronic democracy' can only have its full reach in developed societies with near-universal access to the Internet, but the popular revolutions against dictatorships like that of Mubarak in Egypt and Qaddafi in Libya are telling us that, even with less technological development, the oppressed inhabitants of the Third World have been able to use 'social networks' to communicate among themselves regardless of the will of their dictators, which was previously all-embracing, taking advantage of this method of sudden democratization of communications and putting on defense not only Arab dictators but also authoritarian regimes outside the Arab world like the Chinese regime, that has not hesitated to censor intercommunication on the Internet among millions of its subjects who aspire to convert themselves into active citizens in a new democracy. The fact that Qaddafi has bombed his own people from the air, openly committing the greatest crime imaginable against humanity, reveals at once the desperation of the autocrats in the face of the democratic revolution the Internet has made possible, against which they cannot employ the old repressive methods.

Various questions arise, in any case, around the rebellion of the audiences. From the right, one can ask whether it doesn't give place to a kind of *communicational anarchy*, in consequence of which no authority, not even democratic ones, has been able to channel constructively the new energies that have been unleashed. In particular, 'Wikileaks', with its sometimes scandalous diffusion of diplomatic cables originally confidential and even secret, is it not



an attack against the secrecy that until recently protected exchanges between States? To what point must we accept diffusion of information without filters or curbs capable of compromising public security in these times so open to the actions of terrorists? If that is what is asked, from the right, by those who want to shield their countries from subversive threats, then from the extreme, or if you like, from the left, others worry in the face of danger that, being in possession of more efficient and more sophisticated instruments than the common people, the centers of power will take advantage of social networks by utilizing them as vehicles of their own projects of domination. In his famous study on *Power*, Bertrand de Jouvenel took note that, despite the fact that many revolutions, such as the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution, began with ardent cries of liberty, they ended in the exponential growth of the power of the State, this leviathan against which they fought in the beginning, whose capacity to pressure the citizens always augments beyond the libertarian intentions of its own revolutionaries.

But these questions that now present themselves from the right and the left before the new intercommunication revolution, are they not, in turn, the most recent manifestation of the ancestral *cultural fear* that we spoke of at the beginning of this paper, that reappears all throughout history each time a new form of communication dawns?

Another observation that can also be made before the formidable expansion communications are experiencing today via the Internet and ‘audience rebellion’ is that, of the hundreds of millions of people fit out to cross over from mere reception to the broadcasting of messages, only a minority, although an extensive one, appears disposed to take advantage of this. The supposed anarchy that could accompany the rebellion of the audience, does it not then constitute a passing phase, a fashion even, after which the world will return to the rule which the ‘Machiavellist’ Gaetano Mosca, who did not believe in what for him was the illusion of democracy, defined by saying that in whatever regime, whether defining itself as democratic or not, an ‘organized minority’ always rules over a ‘disorganized majority’? For those who accept this polemical point of view, what the revolutions have done is not annul the dominance of a minority to the benefit of the people, but to the benefit of ‘another’ emergent minority, that also will falsely proclaim the sovereignty of the people. So thought another follower of Machiavelli, Wilfredo Pareto, in his theory of the ‘circulation of elites’ which posits that revolutions, even in their majoritarian proclamations, have always culminated in the replacement of one minority for another, more modern and efficient and not to the satisfaction of authentic democratic aspirations.

All of which signifies definitively that not even the revolutionary amplification of communication the advent of the Internet has brought promises to resolve in one fell swoop the ancestral conflict between liberty and authority. What is clear is that the Copernican revolution we are experiencing with respect to the eruption and universalization of the internet will demand of new generations, whatever their origins and ideological biases, that they rethink and revise from a new view the most profound dilemmas of our life in society.

### **From ‘real’ communication to ‘virtual’ communication**

‘Don’t bite off more than you can chew’, the saying goes. Communication via the Internet ‘bites off’ a space incomparably more extensive than interpersonal communication, in a movement that the old frontiers of the family, the city and even the nation can no longer contain. But it is also true that some who bite off little, chew much. Relations established between two or more persons in a small community of a family or a neighborhood have a level of intensity rarely reached by Internet messages. It is true that the almost casual contacts established on the Web can on occasion generate friendships and even marriages that never could have been conceived of before. But it is also true that relations beyond one’s physical neighborhood, between interlocutors, for example in the circles of ‘friends’ on Facebook, are most of the time superficial and ephemeral because it is not possible to cultivate thousands of friends all the time. Other times, legions of operators contracted by the Government inundate a web space in obedience to directives that are arrived at and financed from the nucleus of power.

What is, then, the ‘weak’ flank in these Internet relations in comparison with the ‘strong’ relations that accompany the links between spouses, parents and children, teachers and students, political co-religionists, followers of the same faith, or between those in close friendships? Is the world crossed by two circles that don’t touch each other, one of the most amplified circle of ‘friends’ on the Internet and the other the reduced circle where learning, apprenticeship and friendship flourish?

Maybe the border that separates the two circles of communication that co-exist today in the world is the fact that, as much as the profound relations between human beings, quantitatively limited, are *real*, the superficial relations, quantitatively more extensive but less intense, taking place in the new empire of the Internet, are *virtual*.

What is the difference between the ‘real’ world and the ‘virtual’ world? The word ‘real’ is related to the Latin ‘res’, which is to say ‘thing’. The embrace, the handshake, the intimate communication, confidence, spiritual

affinity, to be 'real', must necessarily have a bounded spatial range. One can't have more than a reduced number of family members and friends, that maybe fit in a house. Confronted with the revolutionary fact that millions of persons can now contact each other via the Internet, as emitters or receivers, if we say that this massive communication is 'virtual' we are also saying that it cannot articulate itself in the warmth of real intercommunication among few persons, but across a screen that, without being, is everywhere, but we are also saying that, thanks to technology, this new communicational wave can expand indefinitely.

Are we saying then that, so much as real communication is *direct*, person to person, virtual communication is *indirect* because, by way of it, concrete persons, of flesh and blood, emerge in a medium that is, in and of itself, impersonal and, for that reason, what we call 'media-like'? Not solely the 'physical' encounters between people but also their telephone conversations or letters are, in this sense, 'real', while the contacts between an author and reader are in a certain sense 'virtual', as are all those that figure on the screens of the Internet, as they create spaces to which all, emitters and receivers, can come in a form not exclusive but inclusive, open to all. But the universality of the screens is also 'virtual' because it only includes a 'representation' of what it communicates by them, without their real, effective presence.

The enormous diffusion of *e-mails* deserves a separate paragraph. If well utilized and directed to personalized recipients, are similar to old paper letters. As a new mode of traditional letters, e-mails, if interpersonal and not 'circulars', are an additional proof of the immense expressive richness the eruption of the Internet has given place to, without knowing yet if it will end by channeling itself in the examples we have mentioned, or if it will still give new surprises.

Faced with the eruption of a new form of communication like the Internet, the people of our time are solicited, like our ancestors were, by two opposing trends. There are enthusiasts of the new invention who see in it the possibility that democracy will be amplified, overcoming old social and political restrictions. But there are also the new carriers of the old 'cultural fear', who are alarmed in the face of the negative impacts that the new revolution in communications could cause, as for example the militancy of the sadly famous bloggers who flood the screens in exchange for a payment in cash or fanaticism.

Before this new condition that affects human beings today, we can remember that technology as such is morally *ambivalent*. Nuclear energy brings and can still bring with it the cure for the gravest diseases that yesterday were taken for incurable, but also brings and can bring with it large-

scale slaughter as in Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Chernobyl or Fukushima in present-day Japan. All is open, in sum, to the use we make of our *freedom*. What happens is that, as Martin Heidegger warned in *The Question Concerning Technology*, since man is each day more powerful in his new scientific and technological possibilities, his capacity to do good, as much as his capacity to do ill, has grown enormously. The worst that could be would be that Humanity, now armed with its new technological faculties and now having in its hands previously unsuspected possibilities, will not develop a comparable moral progress capable of channeling them in the right direction. The philosopher Robert Nozick maintained that ‘moral progress’ consists of the warning that, in view of our greater technological power, we know that as much as the frontiers of the good that we can do, so the frontiers of bad into which we can fall, have widened decisively. The killer no longer has only the dagger, but the doctor has, for his part, instruments incomparably more useful to combat illness. For good as well as for bad, our moral options have become extreme.

In a world more and more interconnected, both the power to create beneficent ideas and the power to spread propagandistic manipulation of human beings, have multiplied. The optimists trust that we will be able to use our new weapons of the communications revolution to extend the empire of good. The pessimists fear that evil and deception will conquer new frontiers. William Shakespeare wrote that human life is a tale told by an idiot, but it appears at other times a tale told by a wise man. It falls to each of us to choose between the two tales, knowing that the *nous* (‘intelligence’) that Teilhard de Chardin anticipated, is the revolutionary appearance of an intelligent area that, for being interconnected, will be universal, will challenge us as never before because it is already knocking on our doors.