MATRIZes

Communication and technology in society: a transversal dimension[1]

Interview with Bernard Miège[2]
By Elizabeth Saad Corrêa[3]

MATRIZes journal has in its second edition of Interview section the professor Bernard Miège, who gives a contribution on the relation between communication and technology in contemporary society. The set of questions we have elaborated intended to present a discussion, from the perspective of Miège, about the changes that the field of communication has experienced since the consolidation of ICTs (digital technologies of information and communication) as a major factor of production and consumption of information in the 21st century. In order to contextualize the ideas of Miège and to amplify the spectrum of his proposals, we present throughout the text a sequence of textual (and linear because of the media) "hyperlinks" on his thinking.

MATRIZes: To begin our dialogue, we begin with your wide perspective of the term "information society"[4] and its impact in the contemporary society and in the field of communication in particular. The set of qualities associated with the term reflects a transverse dimension associated to the communication relationships arising from the digital world. Thus, due to the predominance of ICTs, there is not anymore a universal vision of the field of communication, not even a delimitation of it. How do you discuss the contemporary delimitation of the field?

Bernard Miège: This is a crucial issue, but the answer is not easy or simple. As I do not have, however, an extensive overview of the communication, I try to offer an answer for that. For me, the modern communication - what I call communication/information – does not embraces the communication that occurs between human beings. The communication / information is something that began to develop in the middle of the twentieth century, and which we call "mediated communication"[5]**.** Somehow, of course we cannot separate it from human communication. At first, I started to call it modern communication, but now I prefer to

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[1] Interview conducted in April 2009 during the visit of Bernard Miège to the Graduate Program in Communication Sciences at University of São Paulo.

[2] Bernard Miège is emeritus professor of Information and Communication Sciences in Stendhal-Grenoble University, France.

[3] Titular professor of the Department of Journalism and Editing – ECA-USP, researcher in digital communication and digital journalism.

[4] Miège considers the information society as a strong syntagma that is required in everyday life, and exactly by the massive use of the term, it demands a clear understanding of a series of factors that constitute its essence. It is important to remember that it is linked and correlated to the expression other qualifying words such as communication, knowledge, control, networks, surveillance and ubiquitous societies, among others. To the author, understanding the field of communication in the context of the information society requires an understanding of the following key factors: the informationalization; the promotion of technologies and networks as the dominant factor in relation to the content; the modification and expansion of media systems; and the transnational control of the flow of information and communication.

[5] Miège proposes the term "mediated communication" to introduce the role of ICTs in communication processes, not as a reducing element of the opposition between the mass medias (considered too managerial in their speech and unidirectional) and digital medias (in which ICTs enable the emergence of *self media*). Mediated communication is much broader and more complex, setting new communication systems in which the main actors are not only the large communicational conglomerates, the material builders and the State, but also the different categories of users considered as strategic components of this new process.

treat it as communication/information, because I believe it is necessary to link the process of communication to the information. Communication cannot be considered as itself, because there are many ways to see it. Communication can be considered or used, for example, as the society management by large organizations, by business companies and by political power. That does not mean, however, that communication is only ideology or phenomenon of manipulation. It allows individuals to exchange information in different ways, that's why I articulate communication/information. With the development of ICTs, the relationships between the actors have improved, and since the second half of the twentieth century, the techniques are part of society and its continuity.

MATRIZes: Facing your explanations, we can affirm that with ICTs, there is more emphasis on mediated communication than for the communication which occurs through the mediation processes. What difference do you see between these two forms?

Miège: Yes, I distinguish between them. The mediatization does not cover all the phenomena of communication. The phenomenon of mediation exists in societies for so long in the cultural, social, political and legal extent. We cannot confuse cultural mediation with cultural mediatization, for example. Communication/information refers to the mediatization[6].

MATRIZes: Considering the prevalence of mediated communication in our society and therefore the competence in the use of ICTs as essential, what is the profile of the professionals in this contemporary communication? How does he enter in the labor market nowadays?

Miège: The development of ICTs has been accompanied by the professionalization. The diploma offered at the universities has to legitimize this new professional. It is difficult to clarify this problem of the profile and formation. I have empirically noticed throughout my career as a teacher how different is what the student develops and shows during the course from the job he will have, the type of work that he will develop in the labor market. I was always amazed at the activities that students developed years later, so different from their projects at the academy. My teaching

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[6] The differences between mediatization and mediation indicated by Miège are constituted in a central point of his propositions. On the other hand, he does not consider the two communication processes as divergent and/or opposites. Instead, he proposes a perspective of complementarity and re-framing, in which the media phenomena mediated by different forms of social mediation also turns to have an intermediation through the vehicles supported by ICTs.

The author discusses in his latest book (see bibliography at the end of the interview) different and converging perspectives on the process of mediatization of communication - the media, the pedagogy and the public sphere, among the main elements - and conclusively reinforces the centrality of mediated communication in the context of information society. The communication processes which transit in the world of ICTs (or digital communication if we want to use the term) not only refer to different forms of insertion and social relations, but especially those arising from communication actions.

In his propositions, Miège considers the perspective of *Web 2.0* as a communicational phenomenon typical from mediated communication, through its capacity for apprehension and inclusion of the reception process and of the relationship between receptors.

career began when the first jobs for professionals in the field of communication were created. Over time, I noticed that there are different professions within communication and that they are complex. There are opposition and controversies, but overall, one of the signs of the importance of communication and formation is the professionalization. And most important, all communication activities emphasize how the labor market is today. Well, not all, of course, because there are associations that have sectors and communication activities and we cannot consider them as being in the market. However, anything that involves technique is linked to the market. But it was not so before. Besides the market, the professionals could also consider as a job option the government, the political scope, etc. Users have no clear idea about the technique. For example, many techniques from different areas are being questioned from an ecological viewpoint. But the information techniques are not. They are naturally absorbed and there is generally a favorable attitude to the techniques of information and communication, without questioning on the fact they are charged. We do not realize that we pay for content, so it should draw our attention more than the equipment or the media itself. I can say that communication has become the phenomenon of market and industry in the past 30 years.

MATRIZes: With all transformations occurring in the field of communication, which your work provides a detailed analysis, the question about academic and professional formation arises. How do you structure the formation of communicators in the current scenario? Is it more instrumental or theoretical?

Miège: This is a balance in which we have not yet arrived. The market requires technical formation, but then the professional lacks in theory. It is a debate that runs through the universities and the responses are different in each country. In some, there is the fundamental theoretical formation as humanitarian formation, and on the other hand, the technique, that is utilitarian, in tools management. In France, we have not made that choice. Normally, we join basic formation with technical and professional formation. It is a good solution, even if not all universities have opted for this, once it is not easy to put curriculum in operation, there are always tensions and conflicts. These come especially from the professions that admit, at first, this ambivalence in professional formation - theory and practice - but even so, sometimes there are questions. I personally have met this kind of difficulties. And I hope that this issue does not retrocede, that it does not privilege one formation or another. It would be a step backwards. There are still people who are graduated in Laws, Economics, etc., and who are interested in Communication and can take a master degree at universities. Formerly, this was the most common situation.
I notice that globally there are universities offering university formation in Communication, however, the formation is easier on the graduate level. Nevertheless, to make it work, you must develop research of quality and in quantity. The communication/information needs to produce research work on the same level of other areas. Countries that fail to develop research in communication/information do not have much to offer, neither for students nor for professionals, or for the public.

MATRIZes: The research on communication/information involves transdisciplinary themes, with the inclusion of new knowledge, especially in the aspects of technology and its relationship with the modes of communicating. The research on ICTs ends up not being encouraged ...

Miège: The new students and teachers may be surprised nowadays, but there is a continuing adaptation, not to cultural and conceptual modernity, but to the practices and tools. Universities have difficulty on this, because it is difficult to follow.

The digital network has a wide and almost imperceptible presence. This leads to two points. On the one hand, to the expansion of collective participation in the network, more people become content producer, and use it as a source of information. On the other hand, the network, that has a constant presence, turns to be an element of private sphere. It is a new state of relationships. In the area of communication, we, researchers and professionals say that the tools we use in leisure time are the same for work. Web 2.0, for example, is an instrument of work, leisure and public space as well.

That is exactly what is attractive in the ICTs. It is what makes people without technical formation, such as children, to dominate. We are self-taught in using the tools of communication. It is also true that new forms of communication we use for recreation tend to be imposed for the job. ICTs encourage us to exchange more and more information, to integrate ourselves into groups, and for that, there is no need to learn in the formal point of view.

MATRIZes: Communication is nowadays practically incorporated into what we call "social being". The level of mobility that we have is enormous, and we can almost speak of "connected beings." Is there disruption of the structure, does the emission pole turn collective?

Miège: Yes, the classical media was founded in a one-way perspective. But the mass television, the radio, the press, in general, followed the development of ICTs. Nowadays it is difficult to understand what was the TV operation in the 60's and 70's. The viewer will no longer accept one-way transmissions. The media domain becomes more and more complex, different and it interpenetrates. Even the major media no longer have the same shape as before.

MATRIZes: In your book [7], you talk about processes to the social rooting of ICTs[8]. Which of these processes do you consider the most important?

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[7] **Les Tic entre innovation technique et ancrage social, launched in 2009 by Paulus publishing company entitled A sociedade tecida pela comunicação – técnicas da informação e da comunicação: entre inovação e enraizamento social.**

[8] **Miège presents a different approach to what he calls social "rooting". He advocates the use of this term rather than terms like "social insertion" or "social inclusion", which he considered to be linked to social modes of information and knowledge inclusion. Miège assumes the conception of rooting expressed by the researcher Serge Proulux, who emphasizes the formulation of a theory about the forms of absorption and use of ICTs by society. Miège proposes a concept of social rooting beyond the use, it is conceived as a set of seven processes: informationalization, the mediatization of communication, the expansion of media field, the commodification of communication activities, the generalization of public relationships, the differentiation of practice and the circulation in flows and transnationalization of activities.**

Miège: It is not possible to emphasize one as more important than another. In the discourse of a specialist, a publicist, the communication is the most important. I would not choose any of them; instead, I insist that they are both dynamic. These processes are articulated in the technical mediation, in social mediation. The actors involved do not choose one or another. The articulation of techniques and the social rooting are what must be considered.

MATRIZes: What is the influence of political economy and cultural studies in communication? How they are articulated or not, in your perspective?

Miège: The political economy of communication is always my approach. I am not the kind of person who focuses only on economic and domination factors, no matter how important they are. My perspective is a vision of economy and also of development of public space and of communication/information techniques. I do not consider as three different areas the cultural industry, the fragmentation of public space and the rooting of the techniques of communication/information. Of course it takes me, unlike other authors, to have a more systemic perspective, and I end up by taking into account all the economic aspects, as well the social and political ones. We cannot consider only the authors who do different things, but realize that they also have an overview of the main aspects.

MATRIZes: To do research on contemporary communication we have to do interrelations between theories. Often, as researchers, we found difficulties in finding a unique theoretical and methodological selection when it comes to communication/information. What is your opinion about that?

Miège: The different theoretical approximations are justified since these researchers and authors are able to dialogue. I have never advocated a single epistemology in research on communication. I hope I have never imposed any procedure. I criticize perspectives that seem inappropriate together, but I always defended well documented discussions. It's a big risk to create disciplines without the dialogue with other ones.
There are many seminars based on an extremely private perspective. Who can be sure that their epistemological and methodological approach is the one? Nobody can. I have a lot of security in closed projects requiring particular theoretical approaches.
I would add that when we face the empirical work, it seems relatively easier to communicate with other researchers. The dialogue is more difficult when the authors are satisfied to present things that need to be verified.

MATRIZes: Finally, we put a question which you presented at the opening conference here on PPGCOM: that you do not always defined yourself as a communication thinker, but as someone who tries to validate the hypotheses of communication. What are these hypotheses?

Miège: Very often there are thinkers who are not researchers. This was no longer justified. I'm surprised with the fame of some of these thinkers in my country elsewhere in the world. A researcher must always have hypotheses and is obliged to answer these questions, confirm them or not. It is a circular reasoning. My aim, therefore, is to check the communication/information in all its complexity and how it makes the management of societies, organizations and what is their role in society nowadays. That is true in organizations and in public life, in the debate of issues of society and in personal life. And you do not have to be a researcher to validate them. They are there.

The phenomena of communication are always explosive, always in motion; it is difficult to compare one to another. That's why I am interested in working with young people and students because they are sensitive to the effects of innovation, and they call my attention on important elements of it.

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