MATRIZes

Communication: a field in theoretical trouble[1]

Muniz Sodré[2]

Abstract

This article discusses the theoretical challenges involved in establishing the field of Communication, and shows that the media effects paradigm is still the foundation of most academic studies. By reviewing contributions from the School of Chicago, Marshal McLuhan's mass communication research, and the School of Frankfurt among others, this article suggests that the prestige of a social science is not just a matter of the objectivity of the knowledge it generates, but of the political, cultural, and social worth of its *production*. The publication of this article in MATRIZes is one of many initiatives to commemorate Muniz Sodré's 70th birthday.

Keywords: communication theory, epistemology, scientific field, media effects paradigm

Summary

The social and theoretical challenges involved in establishing the field of communication as a specific branch of knowledge within social thinking: institutional and biographical aspects. The differences between the sociological media effects paradigm and the semiotic code paradigm. The loss of influence of reflection on communications and cognitive dispersal within schools and movements. Communication as an ideology for the financialisation of the world.

[1] This text is part of an ongoing project on the scientification of the communication field.

The word communication has and continues to be conceptually ambiguous. Despite this, the idea of transmission and persuasion, fixed in the technical tools used to circulate social debate, with its subsequent reception by a heterogeneous and broad public – and therefore, in *functional communication or communication/information* – since the start has been primarily responsible for the media effects paradigm used in academic communication approaches. The expression *functional communication* here is ideal, as this paradigm owes its existence entirely to the persistent functionalist positivism of the North American school of sociology.

This is the theoretical route traced by the majority of studies and papers on communication. It is configured as a paradigm that embraces both old and new theories, the latter including ones like active reception theory, social context theory, the theory of institutional context of communication, the impact of media messages on the organization of opinions and beliefs etc. Even politically activistic or praxeological concepts of communication (meaning those that understand communication as a tool to achieve social ends), come into this paradigm.

To discuss paradigms is to highlight whether the problem of the knowledge level implicated in communication is merely social practice, doctrine, or scientific field. This is precisely what epistemology is: the positioning of philosophy within scientific debate, while it falls to science to position itself regarding *what* it is, or rather, to *discover* the truth. How can communication be substantiated as a specific scientific field? For some time, the most common answer has pointed to the media effects paradigm, that being to

[2] Professor at the Escola de Comunicação da Universidade do Rio de Janeiro, researcher 1-A CNPq. Email: muniz@pq.cnpq.br

the model of the consequences of the media on its heterogeneous and broad public, also known as the mass-public.

This paradigm has shown itself to be epistemologically lacking, but it is essential to understand it and to see it as a key moment in the history of modern communication knowledge, as we have made the history of a scientific field one of the requisites of epistemological understanding.

This lack can be clearly seen in statements like that by the North American researcher Robert Craig; "the theory of communication as an identifiable field of knowledge does not exist. The more we aim at a theoretical field, the more we seem to be operating in separate domains" (Craig, 1999: 119). To back this up he gives the example of a study by his colleague J.A. Anderson in seven well regarded manuals which identify 249 different *theories*.

> Apart from within small groups, communication theorists seem to be unable to either agree or disagree on much. There is no canon of general theory to which they all refer. There are no common objectives that unite them or controversial points that divide them. For the most part, they simply ignore each other (Craig, 1999: 119-120).

This is significant as, more than any another country, the United States has a long tradition of investing – not only academically, but also commercially – in all the activities that, beginning with journalism, are under the umbrella of communication. It may therefore seem paradoxical that, despite this corporate and institutional consensus about the need for excellence in education and research, Craig's assertion on the lack of a specific scientific field sums up the current opinion of North American authors and researchers in the field of communication

This is a position that is held by both young and old. Several years ago, the veteran researcher Elihu Katz suggested that research in communication is limited to the effects, and therefore, to the consequences of transmission on reception (2001). A graduate in sociology from Colombia University (in the field of academic pioneerism in journalism studies), Katz speaks with the authority of one who is now recognised internationally as one of the founding voices of the North American school of sociology of mass communication research, which also included Paul Lazarsfeld, a highly influential author both nationally and internationally.[3]

Institutional (academic) and biographical aspects are not secondary in the study of the possibilities and impossibilities (in which epistemology is interested) of establishing a scientific field in the area of social sciences. This is patently clear when one examines the construction of the cognitive fields in important modern social sciences such as sociology and anthropology. Both fields arose as practical answers to the specific needs of the State or society (although in general, the State) in a particular historical context, and they gradually became sciences through the theoretical work of key academic institutions directly or indirectly linked to researchers and thinkers. Clearly, in the course of scientific autonomism that takes place within university frameworks, knowledge can become distanced from the functions of responding to specific demands, and it can lead down critical paths, as in the *sociology of*

[3] Katz and Lazarsfeld are co-authors of the book *Personal influence*: The part played by people in the flow of communications. New York: Stops Press, 1955, which discusses the interaction between the public and the media.

denunciation, where a sociologist stands apart from the group or the society under analysis.

On their own, social demand and historical context cannot explain the cognitive autonomy of a subject field in which a gradual development of knowledge is invested. It is easier to understand this process if one refers to the familiar concept of *field* as used by Bourdieu (2007, 1983). Whether social or scientific, the field is a social space made up of objective relationships between agents and institutions with the aim of cognitively legitimizing its pronouncements. It is in fact a separate universe, with its own laws of operation.

The sociological interest of the concept of a social field is in its ability to explain the problem of transit from the subjective to the objective in the social sciences and the humanities. With this concept, Bourdieu brings together the analysis of objective structures of social reality with the analysis of the individual genesis of the mental structures that generate certain practices. His theoretical proposal is, ultimately, the formulation of a theory of practice. He is guided by three concepts: (1) *habitus*, or the cognitive system of dispositions that motivate practice and perception; (2) *social space* or the existential situation of individuals, which is their relational states or inter-subjetive differences; (3) *symbolic capital* or the group of ways of domination, both at a physical and a social, cultural and economic level, that are responsible for the structures of power.

In turn, the concept of a scientific field is applicable to any sphere of knowledge. It may establish itself through demand or from a particular context, but the simple objectivity of relationships does not completely define it: what is

important is the position held by each of its members, the social space, so that the scope of the questions raised is not independent of the cognitive value and the institutional weight of the subject. Thus, an articulate and respected philosopher, backed up by the relevant institutional weight, may respond to a question set by traditional philosophy. A word taken from daily usage can take on conceptual meaning if positioned as a philosophical problem by an established thinker in the field (with tremendous symbolic capital), an example of which is the term *Gestell* in Heidegger's work.

On the other hand, philosophical concepts seem to lose stability the less stable the institutional consensus surrounding them, this being the consecrated circle of philosophers and academics. In the work of Nietzsche for example, concepts oscillate between philosophical recognition and literary appreciation, because until now their institutional value within the field has been less stable (in spite of the reinterpretational efforts by thinkers such as Eugen Fink, Michel Foucault, Gilles Delleuze, Gianni Vattimo and Massimo Cacciari). In a work like *Zarathustra,* philosophy, literature and religion are virtually inseparable. In others, the question of sickness encapsulates the philosopher's thinking and life. Here then are his existential vicissitudes: nearly every book on Nietzsche is at least partially biographical.

The scientificity of declared knowledge is never a variable that is independent from the institutional approach adopted by academics, departments or university groups. Due to the compartmental division of knowledge, professors and researchers administratively protect their theoretical subject by setting out the specificity of the field. They also have to consider the apportioning of public grants and funding and

competition in the market for analysis and research projects. This compartmental zeal may be exacerbated as divisions between fields in social thinking that were previously well defined become ever more fluid (this is analogous to the crisis that took place in literary genres) as has happened recently with anthropology and sociology.

A FINANCIAL IDEOLOGY

The difficulty in establishing a scientific field of communication is linked to the institutional ambiguity of its situation. It may be useful to draw a comparison with the field of economics, particularly when looked at in the light of several aspects of the financial crisis that hit North America at the end of the first decade of this century. The biggest investment banks and brokerage firms in the country went bust caused by fraudulent activities and high risk operations, plunging small investors into poverty.

A large number of the financial consultants to these organizations and to the federal agencies in charge of market regulation were economists and professors at the most prestigious universities in the US. Each of them, who had previously trusted in the self-balancing of the market and had advocated state deregulation, was left even richer after the break-down of the private system, which was finally bailed out by the Federal Treasury using public funds. Several of them acted as advisers to the State when it chose to disburse hundreds of billions of dollars in order to save the financial system. It was clear that what keeps the market stable is not the application of *economic science*, but the effective control by the dominant political coalition.

In fact, the academic theory of economics – which often leads to Nobel prizes for innovators in the field – does not differ much from what is practised in the markets. The major business schools do not teach or actually research an economic *science*, instead they teach econometric methods which are formulations from mathematical science that can be applied to administrating capital flow, to business and to the complexity of the market, and that come from a standardised macro-economic model, known as *DSGE* (*Dynamic stochastic general equilibrium*). It can be summed up thus: the markets are always right. Results are internationalized in academic and institutional terms. For example, the statistical model used by the Central Bank of Brazil to evaluate

the consequences of an external shock on the speed of growth of the domestic economy is an adaptation of those used by the European Central Bank and by the US Federal Reserve.[4]

It is a form of statistical modelling, a mere empirical resource, that functions in practice without any need for scientific legitimation. Despite the occasional complexity of the maths, a construct of this type is less a theory than a tool to precisely execute a business. In general, the promiscuity between the market and State power dispenses with any epistemological principle for the field of economics, or for that matter, with any theoretical basis whatsoever.

What does this have to do with communication?

To start with, financial capitalism and communication are now, in our globalised world, inseparable. Contemporary capitalism is both financially and media oriented: finance and media are the two sides of the coin known as advanced society, this same being the one in opposition to the prefix *post* (post-industrialist, post-modern etc.). While previously, under the aegis of a productive society, communication and information were understood as *extra* to capital, nowadays they hold a prominent position in the scheme as a whole, and act as a veil for finance, in a new model for wealth. In the general scope of economic neo-liberalism, this model is moulded by a privatising ideology, which chooses productive efficiency and personal success as the most important social values. On an individual level of conscience, it is an ideology of flexibility that does away with any supposed psychological *rigidity*.

This ideology is in the foreground of the public and technological image of social wealth, alongside the reality of the change in the financial and monetary system and the *modus operandi* of industrial corporations. This is not as new as one may think,

[4] This is known as *Samba*, the acronym for *Stochastic Analytical Model with a Bayesian Approach*, or rather, *intelligent guesswork*, based on rational expectations (founded on the work of the English nineteenth-century mathematician Thomas Bayes) regarding the possibility of random variables in the operation of the economy.

as since the end of the 19th century one can trace the passage of the capitalist image of wealth as one of owning land and possessions to the *symbolisation* of money and financial assets. Although this intensified in the second half of the twentieth-century (when it became patent that the main *business* of the United States was finance), it was actually born at the end of the nineteenth-century, and was linked to sociological concerns about community transformations and the new make-up of the urban public.

The academic institution that was most representative of this intellectual environment was the School of Chicago that, from 1910 (the same year the journalism course was inaugurated at Columbia), was the centre of micro-sociological studies on communication phenomena, with particular focus on the *human community* and on cities as *social laboratories*. Researchers like the sociologist Charles Cooley, the philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey and the journalist and sociologist Robert Park (who was greatly influenced by the Europeans Gabriel Tarde and Georg Simmel) were initially concerned with the social framework of the inter-subjective transmission of meaning, and then later began to give academic importance to the emergent media. Decades later, William Thomas and Florian Zananiecki, in a pioneering study (1927)[5], tried to use the subjective experience of the public (through analysing letters to journals, autobiographies etc.) to explain social processes. Some time later, Herbert Blumer, a key figure from the school, tried to show how the sense of social practice came out of interpersonal communication.

Communication in principle is first a fundamental anthropological experience (as there is no social life without communication), and then an understanding of this experience, and then finally, an industrial reality established by a formidable technological apparatus sustained by the market. The long-standing media effects

[5] *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America: monograph of an immigrant group* was originally published in five volumes between 1918 and 1920 and was republished in 1927 in two volumes that were then reprinted in 1958 and 1974. The Spanish version (*El Campesino Polaco en Europa y en América*. Madrid: Boletim Oficial del Estado/Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas, 2004. 422 p.), organized by Professor Juan Zarco, of the Universidade Autônoma in Madrid, is not complete; it is a selection of extracts from Zaretsky's 1984 abridged edition.

paradigm came from the mirroring of North American techno-cultural reality on the academic knowledge of communication.

What one really wants to know is the extent of the discursive power of the media on the population. This is why since the first decade of the twentieth-century the questions that students of communicational phenomena have sought to answer have their origins in media companies – private organizations such as newspapers, advertising agencies, strategists and consumer research institutions. There are of course naturally exceptions, like the studies and evaluations of the foreign propaganda in North-America over the Second World War, however, in general, it is the market that presides over the demands of practical knowledge.

Within *mass communication* research, this basically empirical/critical knowledge (one that is founded on concrete studies and analyses, but with a cultural distrust of the media) comes from European researchers and social thinkers (Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and others) who emigrated to the United States in the first half of the last century.

COMMUNICATIONAL EMPHASIS

It is clear generally that the focus of North American media studies is the antithetical concept of *community/society*. From the School of Chicago until the *mass communication research* movement, theoretical concerns have always emphasized transformations in religion, work habits, family and culture – instances in which primary relationships predominate – influenced by a destructive societal urbanisation, in which emerging information and communication technologies play an increasingly influential role. The perspective of effects is, in schematic terms, the quest for tools to assess changes made by the media to traditional cohesive ties.

This perspective gives rise to research techniques that are important to large media companies, not only for ideological reasons (they make it possible to distance the suspicion of mass-media manipulation), but also due to sociometric means of measuring individual choices. Here again it is important to stress the parallel between economic

and communicational empiricism. Econometrics and sociometry are tools to reduce the historical complexity of social relations to numbers that deflate the political phenomenon and pave the way for the market administration of society.

Even with diverse *theories* and seen from different angles, media studies follow the path of *mass communication research*, which is a chapter of sociology, though only an area of an interpretative system, based on Aristotelian predicate logic, that attributes subjects/actors to facts/objects inscribed in a *delayed temporality* (an expression coined by Paul Virilio to designate extended time). Communication here is purely *functional*, that is, it is seen as a tool (radio, newspaper, magazine, television, internet and others) to be analysed, or it is a mere pretext to solve a problem with the subject at hand, such as overcoming an analytical lacuna in the face of the multiplication of informational devices in contemporary culture.

It was this same technical functionalism that was responsible for the success of the phenomenon of communication and the wonderful perspectives posited in the West between 1960 and 1980, suggesting that endless freedom of expression would put an end to discourse on domination, and society would become entirely educational. On the one hand, new technology has accelerated the sensation of existential modernity, freeing individuals of their temporal and spatial restraints: the effects of simultaneity, instantaneity and globality may be described as demiurgic.

On the other hand, from the telephone to the radio, the television to information technology, communication technology has always been seen, both by the public and in academic circles, as an approximation to the ideal of sharing the cultural and ethnic diversity of the planet, as can be seen from the academic marketing of Marshall McLuhan around his idea of the "global village". The internet, heralded as the *supreme state* of development for these techniques, was to have offered the interactivity that was able to respond to the problem of the symbolic domination (monopoly) of the media over audiences.

But all the power of thought promised by the sphere of communication over that period somehow lost impetus in the last decade of the past century. The Frankfurt School's criticism of functional communication, which saw the threat of inauthenticity

in the rise of cultural industries and communication monopolies - the glorification of symbolic production and the suppression of individual critical capacity - lost academic force. Briefly, the theory of communication seemed to fully identify with semiology – or as is more familiar to North American readers, semiotics – held within the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's general theory of signs, *séméiologie*. Then in 1957, Roland Barthes proposed in his work *Mythologies* to establish the theoretical bases of semiotics, applying his analyses to the products of cultural industry, treated as communicational myths and rites. Ideas of this kind had considerable repercussions on the *Centre d´Études des Communications de Masse* (CECMAS), founded by the sociologist George Friedmann and supported by critics and researchers such as Roland Barthes, Edgar Morin, Julia Kristreva, A.J. Greimas, Christian Metz, Eliseo Verón among others.

On these lines, since the end of the 1960s, Jean Baudrillard has been a model author, trying to reinvent Saussure's semiotics (particularly in *The System of Objects* and *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*) as a transversal operation for prominent subject areas of the time such as linguistics, structural anthropology, psychoanalysis and Marxist analysis of productive processes. At the same time in Italy, semioticians like Umberto Eco, Paolo Fabbri and others were also working in this field. Coming from the French, Italian or Europeans in general, this adhesion to semiotics is based on the supposition that a communication system is always analogous to human language.

Why is it that all this theoretical analysis of semiotics took place in Europe and not in the United States, which in its approach to pragmatic philosophy nurtured a rich tradition of similar studies, methodologically rooted in the nineteenth-century semiotics of Charles Sanders Pierce? There are those who object to this question, citing more recent scholars like Thomas Sebeok, but the studies from this line of enquiry are not distanced themselves from the field of media, but also lacked the creative brilliance of the French and Italian studies.

An epistemological answer should be looked for within the circle of French philosophy, more precisely in the response proffered by the structuralist approach to phenomenology that was dominant until the 1960s. This explanation is set out well by

Descombes:

> Let us suppose that we consider linguistic phenomena as communicational phenomena, and so-called "natural" languages as codes used by mankind to transmit messages: we achieve semiotic structuralism. If, going one step further, we assimilate all social life with a process of sign exchange, we confront the the kind of structural anthropology as defined by Lévi-Strauss, that being, the reduction of anthropology into semiotics. And, in a more general sense, the structuralist thesis sits within Jacques Lacan's celebrated formula: "The unconscious is structured like a language" (Descombes, 1979: 114).

An historical overview of the field of communication cannot ignore the affinity between the theory of communication and the structuralist approach, which has been influential since the mid-1960s. Unlike phenomenology, which describes the phenomenon (the experience lived) in the quest for a meaning, structuralism is a *comparative approach* that uses the mathematical concept of structure (a grouping of purely formal relations, defined by a range of properties) to show that any content, whether an axiomatic or cultural content, is a model that is *isomorphic* (analogous, similar) to others that are present in different groupings. So there is no quest for meaning in a representation or in an object, they can only be compared with each other. Once the comparison is made, the structure can be shown isomorphically.

How does this approach work with the theory of communication? In the idea of a *sign system* that comes from Saussurian linguistics. But in Saussure there is more a suggestion to be developed than a ready-made and completed concept. Thus, the system incorporated by the field of communication is the same as the mathematical theory of information, by engineers like Shannon and Weaver, who have concentrated on the problem of effective message transmission, of questions of coding, emission and reception. From the viewpoint of communication engineering, it is important to determine the reception of the signs or of the message without any external noise, and

this implies privileging the receiver, as this is the focus of the transmission. In this process, the encoding should be independent of the users (emitter and receiver), as well as of the signs or of the messages.

In the conversion (since the 1960s) of subjects from social thinking (Lévi-Straussean anthropology, Lacanian psychoanalysis) to semiotic structuralism, not only the unconscious, but social life itself began to be seen as linguistic structure, and language was understood as communicative code. If one prioritises the codification– or rather, treats it as superior to the message, to the speaker and at the extreme end, to the actual meaning –, as the communication engineers showed, the code takes on the statute of law in the field of the communication.

The consequences of this so called conversion of communicational, psychoanalytical, and anthropological analysis to structural semiotics were numerous at the time. In anthropology, the *death of man* was proclaimed (or rather, of the explanation according to the experience lived, as in phenomenology) as well as the *life* of the structures, which now explain everything. In psychoanalysis, in changing the terminology, the code becomes the *signifier* and this, in turn precedes the signified and subjugates the subject. Just as in philosophy, this topic has repercussions in the positions of the radical criticism on the theme of authenticity that, as Boltanski and Chiapello show,

> starting from different philosophical orientations, they share the desire to finish with the responsible subject, for whom the choice between authenticity and inauthenticity presented itself as an existential choice, [which was] denounced as pure illusion or as an expression of the bourgeois *ethos* (1999; 2011: 610).

In Jacques Derrida, for example, the two authors find a deconstruction process of the privilege granted to the voice or to the living word as a resource of authenticity in the face of the written word as a contingent stratagem that endangers the truth. In Giles Delleuze, they note the development of a representational critique that affirms the

impossibility, in the world of simulacra (figures of the code), of distinguishing between an original and a copy.

Also in communication analysis, monopolistic capitalism is defined more by the monopoly of the code than by the control of the means of production. Most of Baudrillard's communicational semiotics are oriented by the hypothesis of a generalised hypertrophy of capitalist codification, accompanied by a radical transformation of the method of signifying.

One can talk about a *paradigm of the code*, which is in radical opposition to the *media effects paradigm* worked on by those aligned with *mass communication research*. Under the code, the meaning of the world, the individual and the real self are shown as disappearing paths. According to Baudrillard:

> Behind every television and computer screen, every technical operation which confronts him daily, the individual is analysed in return, function by function. He is tested, experimented on, fragmented, harassed, summoned to respond – a fractal subject doomed henceforth to be disseminated in the networks. And the price to be paid is the mortification of the gaze, the body, and the real world (Baudrillard, 1999: 69).

This is what Marshall McLuhan called the "perpetual test", practised on the consumer society by the media, by studies and by every verification and control protocol. McLuhan thought of the new socio-technological reality within this same paradigm of the code, summarized in his famous formulation: "The medium is the message". In clearer terms, the *medium* – that is, the technological tool articulated with the market within a form of life pre-programmed by the structural law of value – is the expression of the code, which is predominant over the content. This line of analytical critique leads one to conclude that the new technological or digitalized society is in fact a *technostructure* (the term coined by the economist John Kenneth Galbraith), criss-crossed by the fragmentation of the out cuts, by the immateriality of a real discourse and at the same time by the primacy of the objects in sociability.

MORE PHENOMENON THAN CONCEPT

In fact, semiotics or semiology is merely a methodological path, one that can only be applicable to questions relating to the theory of language. The nineteenth-century thoughts of the pragmatic Charles Sanders Peirce, the brilliant analyses of Barthes, of Baudrillard and all the analytical tools of discourse used by the English (who, from the end of the nineteenth-century blended literary and cultural theory) and the French, are still academically persuasive, but the semiotic studies that came out of this, with only a handful of exceptions, resulted in works using opaque academic jargon that did not offer further perspectives for a comprehensive understanding in historical terms. Finally electronic communication, symbolized in the internet, came to offer the chance for individuals to autonomously use mechanisms that had previously been seen as dominant.

Nowadays, there is wide consensus that communication, in its practice, is the mobilising ideology behind a new kind of work force, one that corresponds to the current production phase under global control. From the viewpoint of the bourgeois liberal State, it has become an important issue for the political, cultural, and social equilibrium of the *Polis* who are below the empire of finance. In fact, it has become far more important than one could ever have imagined in the middle of the last century.

This question grew so much and involved daily life in such a way that the academic field ended up losing sight of the limits between the phenomenon and its conceptualization. After the essay-writing impetus of the Europeans had been exhausted, and there was a loss of enthusiasm for what the French called *la théorie*, all that remained, in the outer regions of Latin-America and North America, was the fragmentary landscape of dozens of theoretical attempts (each seeking to present *its own* theory) and of small functional descriptions, held up by the obligatory university performance.

COGNITIVE DISPERSION

The most creative reflection began to run out of steam in the last decade of the twentieth-century, as the same time that universities, throughout most of the world, began to manage the field by creating communication courses. This is not a phenomenon directly or specifically related to the work market, as, in what seems a paradox, it has grown amidst the crisis in journalism and the reduction in professional demand by traditional media corporations.

Even though the trend for thematic communication, influential between 1970 and 1990, lost its way (the social effects of McLuhan's discourse were huge), the word *communication* was still just an academic caption in the pedagogical administration of universities, and held an appeal that was greater for the young, than the classic subjects of the social sciences. The communication phenomenon was deep rooted, and in the universities' theoretical practice, it corresponded to the passage of communication with a political-cultural logic to communication as an applied social science. This is one of the reasons why it was seen in such a positive light by the first government of the military dictatorship in Brazil at the end of the 1960s.

It made sense that the distance from the work market should be compensated for in academic circles by an effort to epistemologically define the field. However, from another angle, communication tended to be seen more from the perspective of the *organization* (business, technological) than of the *institution,* which is defined by a political and moral framework typical of earlier social sciences.

Today, despite several isolated attempts, the field remains as scientifically ambiguous as it ever has, with thousands of studies on every imaginable kind of subject, which, if not directly related to industrial media practices or to a range of spectacles, can least find shelter under the umbrella of *communication/information* or can be adjusted to fit within the vague label of *cultural studies*.

One of the causes for this cognitive dispersion may be precisely the element of professional training in the field. This is not the exclusive realm of communication. It is not hard for a scholar foreign to sociology to note that the excessive concentration on professional training (that aims to undertake opinion studies, business surveys etc.) has

damaging consequences for long-term reflection in the field, and therefore for the production of sociology itself as an historical form of intellectual intervention in society.

Four decades ago, Baudrillard had already noted what he called the first shockwave of the passage of production to pure and simple reproduction in universities, something we can align to the passage of productive capitalism to financial capitalism. For him, this first took place in the humanities faculties, as

> ... There it became more evident (even without a clear "political" conscience) that *nothing was produced any more* and that there was nothing apart from reproduction (teaching staff, knowledge and culture, these same factors of reproduction in the general system). It is this complete pointlessness, irresponsibility ("Why sociologists?"), and demotion, that fuelled the student uprising of 1968 (and not the lack of jobs – there are always plenty of these in *reproduction* – what was missing were places, spaces where something can actually be *produced*) (Baudrillard, 1976: 51).

To put this line of argument in its context, is necessary to bear in mind that the prestige of a social science is never exclusively down to the objectivity of the knowledge generated by it, but more to the cultural, social and even political worth of its production. In this prestige, universities found the tipping point to enable them to manage the republican responsibility of counterbalancing the dispersion of professional specializations.

The *production* Baudrillard refers to however, has nothing to do with industrial activity and is to do with ideas and concepts relating to the tensions of History, as was the case of the social sciences in their more productive and fertile moments, when they shone light on the contrasts between old and new values in the emergent urban society of post-revolutionary France. At moments like these, social thinking was still outwith the reproduction of capital as a form of social relations, and this allowed theoretical production a wide range of definitions regarding historical reality. With this influx of simple reproduction, theories sprung up, feeding constantly into and out of each other, supported by the exegesis of the university.

The same question (*Why sociologists?*) can also be applied to the field of communication: Why communication theorists? An adequate answer demands that one invoke the spatio-social category (the relational properties or inter-subjective relationships between professors and researchers), that Bourdieu considered one of the constitutive elements of every scientific field. The roots of the Latin-American movement were very promising: from the early 1960s, the *Centro Internacional de Estudos Superiores em Comunicação para a América Latina* [International Centre for Further Studies in Communication for Latin America] (CIESPAL), affiliated to UNESCO and based in Quito, strongly encouraged academic research and the quest for excellence in journalism teaching. At the end of the1960s, in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, intellectuals from several different areas, many of whom were influenced by Levi-Straussean structuralism and by Lacanian psychoanalysis, were attracted to the field of communication.

Everything changed with the bureaucratization of universities. Nowadays, in Brazilian faculties in the field, it is common for journalists, advertising professionals, marketing specialists and others to become professors who focus exclusively on reproducing their specific techniques without the academic demand to be able to articulate the knowledge that is implied by the qualification. In the fragmentation of the field of knowledge, fragmentary perception - characteristic of functional communication, transmutes into a range of academically reproduced abilities. This incidentally is the emphasis of the private universities, which focus on the vocational satisfaction of their student *clientele*. Where there is no republican spirit, the student is a customer and not a citizen.

In some cases, in state education, there is an attempt to break from the so-called *communicational* field, to prioritize journalism as the central *science*, but without clearly explaining what is meant by science other than beyond positivist clichés. It is equally common that the theoretical subjects on the curriculum simply mirror the personal academic interests of the teaching staff, sometimes without any trace of epistemological coherence. In order to better approach this aspect, epistemological reflection would benefit from institutional analysis by the state faculties, where the

achievement of functional stability can mean emancipation for teaching staff faced with curricular or other academic pressures.

As one can see, the *social space* or group of inter-subjective relationships – which Bourdieu suggested was one of the requirements for the constitution of a scientific field – is extremely confused in the case of communication. When one thinks of the importance of professorships that in the past ensured the recognition of a field of knowledge (a good example is the post Durkheim held at the Sorbonne), one can see that the feeble pedagogical authority of departments in university administration have led to the gradual scientific insignificance of a subject.

From time to time in Brazil, funding bodies that offer research grants to post-doctoral professors or that supply the requisite recognition of excellence to post-graduate programmes bureaucratically attempt to draw up epistemological profiles for the field. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that on its own, this academic horizon cannot generate the cognitive and institutional conditions necessary for establishing an independent scientific field, legitimized or at least recognized as such by the most respected authors of the other areas in social thought.

This is not a proactive line of argument; I am not suggesting that it is a *lack of academic will* but rather the epistemological establishment of the field that is in question. I seek to show a lack of objective conditions, that is reinforced by the very specificity of communicational knowledge, and that makes it difficult to make a distinction between *episteme* and the practical reality of communication technologies, as they expand more *competences* (the *knowledge of to do things in practice*) than knowledge in the universal and abstract sense of the term.

The academic field of communication is criss-crossed by this ideology of competence, and in the case of Brazil, it is particularly encouraged by the emergence of an acritical technophilia[6] that tends to place old hopes of social redemption and

[6] It may be useful in the light of this ideology, to look at the debates that have been in stalemate since the end of the last century between the defenders and the detractors of Journalism diplomas. While for some of the defenders the diploma is justified as preserving the old bachelor degree spirit, for the detractors the diploma is anachronistic and unnecessary, as it only represents the *competence*. The last group, captivated by technophilia, have forgotten or are not familiar with the *political* statute of a

inclusion on the new digital technologies. According to Laval:

> Information technology and the internet are not seen as technical objects to be studied and understood, nor as supplementary tools to aid learning, rather they are seen as *revolutionary* levers that can radically change schooling and education (Laval, 2001: 146).

In the century in which sociology arose, conservatives and radicals found themselves sharing the same moral distrust of financial and industrial capital, the spirit that presides over academic communication is in most cases, similar to that of communicational function; it is conservative, with a neo-liberal basis. The fascination with technical achievement and with spectacle suffocates potential moral concerns about finance as the systemic standard for wealth, mainly due to the fact that this standard – a *manner* of wealth, with *symbolic* reach – is very badly understood by those who are not economists, and who confuse it with financial globalization.

In this psycho-social situation, the theorisation of the scientification of the field tends to be seen as unnecessary for the continuation of the university reproduction of areas of knowledge that are subject to change according to new technology on the market.

REFERENCES

BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *L`Échange impossible*. Paris: Galilée, 1999.

_____. *L´Échange symbolique et la mort*. Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

BOLTANSKI, Luc ; Chiapello, Éve. *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*. Paris: Gallimard, 1999 e 2011.

---

diploma as a form of resistance against managerial will.

BOURDIEU, Pierre; CHAMBOREDON, Jean-Claude; PASSERON, Jean-Claude. *Ofício de Sociólogo: metodologia da pesquisa na sociologia.* Petrópolis: Vozes, 2007.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. O campo científico. *In:* ORTIZ, Renato (org.). *Pierre Bourdieu: sociologia*. São Paulo : Ática, 1983.

CRAIG, Robert. Communication theory as a Field. *In: Communication Theory*, 9(2), International Communication Association, 1999.

DESCOMBES, Vincent. *Le même et l`autre* – quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933-1978). Paris: Minuit, 1979.

KATZ, Elihu. Media effects. *In:* N.J. Smelser e P.B. Baltes (orgs.) *International encyclopedia of the social and behavioral sciences*. Oxford: Elsevier, 2001.

KATZ, Elihu ; LAZARSFELD, Paul. *Personal influence*: The part played by people in the flow of communications. New York: New York Free Press, 1955.

LAVAL, Christian. *L´école n´est pas une entreprise* – le néo-libéralisme à l´assaut de l´enseignement public. Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2001.

Article received on 14 March and accepted on 25 April 2012.