

## The present and the past as communicational process

Marialva Carlos Barbosa <sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper discusses the reasons why the communication studies' nature is mainly "presentist", and concomitantly, tries to show how a historiographical look could infer a greater complexity of the analyses for the communicational scientific Field, due to the procedural nature of historical reflections. Presenting communication as a place of knowledge, yet shows the importance of considering communication as a relation. To think of relation is perhaps the scientific destiny of communication and not to see the scientific Field of communication as something finished by itself.

**Keywords:** Communication, History, Communicational Studies

I would like to start this paper with a question which has been accompanying me for decades: why do communication studies relate, mainly, to the present? Why is the past an almost forgotten place in the communicational process reflections? What is the reason for this presentist nature in the studies and how can a historical view enrich the communicational processes study?

To answer such questions is not an easy task, because the reasons for the so-called "presentist nature" of communication studies are of multiple orders and places: the place of power, the place of knowledge and the symbolic place. We will, though, try to define these orders of the discourse in the communicational scientific Field<sup>2</sup> at the first moment, to; posteriorly show the contributions that a historical vision could add to the area studies.

### The place of power and of knowledge

The definition of what each reflexive place shall include is not constructed, exclusively, by one Field of knowledge. There is a force game to rank acquisitions, which divides

<sup>1</sup> Professor of Journalism at Universidade Federal of Rio de Janeiro. E-mail mcb1@terra.com.br

<sup>2</sup> In the sentence there is, evidently, a reference to the idea of "order of the discourse" by Foucault (1996) and to the concept of Field by Pierre Bourdieu. We here consider that a scientific Field is one of struggles, forces, clashes and conflicts which entails multiple relations. According to the Bourdieu concept, it assumes a place and objectivity in the society, but also the necessities of the agents and the positions these agents occupy. A Field is the space where a competitive battle takes place between actors according to specific interests of the area in question. The concept allows adjusting objectivity and subjectivity, since every social actor is inserted in a socially determined Field, though Bourdieu doesn't highlight only the predetermined actions of the individuals. Within a Field it is possible to study the existing relationships – always power relations – as well as the strategies used by the agents who compose it, permitting its conversion or change. About the concept of Field by Bourdieu, see **A economia das trocas simbólicas** (1987), **O poder simbólico** (1989), **Coisas Ditas** (1990), among other works.

places of knowledge, leaving whole reflexive universes as species of natural world of determined disciplines. This happens, even when we repeat to exhaustion that we shall have a multidisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach, as conceived by Morin (1996). But often, these words work more as a rhetorical game to divide competencies than, in fact, as rhetorical-reflexive actions.

Thus, there is certain naturalization that the past is a process fond of historical studies. That is, history becomes a sort of incontestable owner of *passed times*. Likewise, the present becomes the natural place for the communicational processes reflections. It seems as if only the present could bear the communicational act. But, not only the present is an object of communication reflection: it must be the present fully filled with communicational practices. What is object of communication are communicational processes. And how to debate processes without thinking of the temporal relation?

It is also necessary to realize that, the chains of ideas and thoughts are not inherent to the disciplines. It is only by means of a symbolical power, the need of distinctions, the construction of orders of heretics and orthodoxes, by using the expressions and the reflection by Pierre Bourdieu (1989) that we need to define the place we are speaking about and about what we speak. It is also needed to think, as Foucault (1996), that each age builds, from a set of practices, a singular historical face, which we believe to recognize and which we designate as historical science, religion, philosophy, modern science or, updating it even more, century of the practices and communicational processes. Thus, as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century there was not any historical science or modern science, also what we call “postmodernity”, “postmodern”, “contemporaneity”, among other less precise terms, to define such a crucial moment of visibility and immediatism are objectifications, classifications, most times built *a posteriori* to attribute nexus and try to explain the world that has passed or the world we are living in.

Therefore, practices and communicational processes are defined as the privileged *locus* of the communication Field studies. Not necessarily in this order. There are those who want to privilege the knowledge connected to the professional

world, defining, for instance, specific theories for the journalism world, while others postulate a more generic knowledge under the name of communication. The struggle among groups in this dispute for a place to speak is persistent. And in the name of the settlement of our goals and reflections, there is a competitive fight whose winners will be those who occupy the key positions in charge of the institutional voices, in the recognition instances, of distinction and of classification (BOURDIEU, 1989). It is so that a Field of knowledge is defined, above all, as a power Field.

Foucault historian, by means of the method that he established and denominated “archeology”, advised to look away from the objects in order to notice the practices, always dated, which objectified them, at a given time and place. By highlighting the practices, the times, the action of the subject, essential to the historical order, he interpreted the world with a historical look. The practice is not mysterious instance, as Paul Veyne (1998) says, but what people, at certain times, do. It is not the subsoil of History, but its most visible mountain. It is our practices that also determine the knowledge objects, which are power objects. Foucault invites us, then, to notice what is practised. And statements, such as this which defines communication as a present Field of reflection, are also part of the practices.

On the other hand, the knowledge classified as scientific as much as many others, at a given historical moment, constructs, through the narrative logic, the idea of succession of linear valid times in which facts overlap, building, in a precise manner, a History. It is this way that the common sense conceives History: tributary of an absolute linearity, allowing the succession of time. The present, in which we locate ourselves, and a future open to uncertainties follow the distant and, most times, strange past. If historical discipline constitutes and establishes itself as a recognized place of knowledge over the past in a long process since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century a *locus* of practices and specific processes emerged, which we call communication Field.

These objectifications, making use once more of Foucault categories (1996), establish a discourse which builds a place of knowledge, giving it coherence throughout time. In this linear history, oriented towards an infinite future, there are some singular moments, fundamental cracks, iconic marks which systematize into categories that

knowledge: the emergence of a new “theoretical school”, the celebration of a singular date; the institutionalization of recognition and formation instances, among multiple processes. We must build a singular Field, different from all others, with its theories, specificities, conceptual universe clearly delimited and, above all, with its own history: the history, for instance, of its theories. Objectifications of a practice which constitutes itself, then, as the building of a Field of knowledge to be recognized also for having its own trajectory. Therefore, also because of it being defined as a place within a battle and competitive force Field, in the sense explained by Bourdieu (1989), communication shall specify exactly what it speaks about and how it speaks about this object. And, to this effect, encompassing the past is not convenient, because it is almost a kind of history domain reservation. All the rest, that is, all the present, always involved in communicational practices, is, therefore, almost the evident object of the knowledge/power of communication. So, conflicts also emerge, which at the first moment were qualified as voluntary loans of multiple pieces of knowledge for the communication Field. Thus, sociology, literary theory and many other kinds of knowledge lent, quite naturally, its theoretical postulates to one discipline which was defined as being recent. But time passed and other positions became necessary.

## **A symbolic place**

To define the most important current practices as object of the reflection of the the so-called communication Field, in which everyday actions stand out from each visible or onvisible pore in a communicational world, gives to communication an unprecedented recognition and visibility. A world in which information transforms daily life, and technological processes are means and ends of communication: we have to admit that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the century of Communication, as much as the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> were the centuries of History. Therefore we must be lucid enough to, by trimming our own limitations, realize the field battles in order to build a validated and recognized knowledge and, mainly, one which meets the demands arising from the fact that our daily life practices, processes, technologies, visibilities, images and imaginary are part of a communicational world.

But, even though, we shall not assume that only the present is a place for

communication. Nothing starts today. The same procedural logic which rules the reflection around communicational practices, also rules the historical view. The current moment is a result of a cumulative game of processes that began way before us.

On the other hand, it is not a context outside communicational practices that will explain the historical world. History is nothing but communicational acts of men from yore (BARBOSA, 2009). And only because it is a communicational act, these remains, tracks and traces could get to the present. The past is only visible in the form of long-lasting communicational processes. So, to think of communication is not only to think of an act that exposes the dialogue. To think of communication is to think of the construction of common spaces. In this sense, its theoretical-conceptual reflection should not only target formats or communicational processes developed at the scene of the most evident means of communication. We should also take into account not to make a *tabula rasa* of the previous knowledge, as if today's reflections were the founders of a "nought degree in our writing", using here the expression which gave name to Barthes' book (2006). Others have produced knowledge which shall be considered and recognized.

But what is, in fact, the universe over which we lean? And finally, how can the past be the object of studies in such a presentist Field as communication? These are the two questions we will try to answer from now on.

## **Communicational universe**

As did Paul Ricoeur (1997), we should consider the communicational act as a conundrum and a miracle. A conundrum, because through language we can transmit experience to others, who will understand it or not. Lived, the experience is my experience. Communicated, my experience becomes something shared. For such reason communication is a kind of miracle: by means of it we can overcome the loneliness of each human being.

Thus, the question of reference becomes essential for communication. The language transcends itself and refers to a world presented as noticeable because of the act of saying. We bring to the world the language and not the experience, but we communicate the meaning of experience and of language. It is also because of this that communication is a conundrum.

Of course, in order for the transcendence of the language to exist in relation to the reference, it is necessary to share a common world, presume the existence of similar things which we identify (by means of a process of signification culturally shared or, if we want to employ the notion by Clifford Geertz (1989), for a cultural system). There must be universality of the meanings. But the language, when transformed by the multiple communicational processes is not only merely an inscription: it becomes meaning, in which the sense and the reference are immersed, that is, the dialogical character of the discourse, which makes its interpretation possible. However, interpretation is made in the absence and not in the presence. In every communicational act there are always multiple authorial voices and the inscription of multiple authors: all of those who will take ownership of the world always contained in the text. Thus, to comprehend is not to repeat the event of the discourse, but to generate a new happening, which starts exactly in the text where this event was initially manifested.

The communicational matter is, therefore, directly related to the *logos* and the form how it has been represented. It is about thinking of the subject constituting its knowledge, its opinion, its critical reason in its own body (through speaking) or through what is located outside its body (the writing, at the first moment), in a process which has become each time more complex throughout history. It is about thinking how the enunciative act constitutes the subject. How ideas have been modeling the argumentative games, the descriptive possibilities and the complexity of representation in the very logic reproductive of the language.

Human action, historically thought, allows rescuing the processes of creation of external technological prostheses which were added to the body technology, which is the word. The history of communication is, in this sense, a history of creation of technological possibilities in order to make the communicational act more efficient. Technologies allow the multiplication of communication possibilities, but, mostly, modify the space-time in which we are immersed. If, at the first moment writing had freed memory and memorable games of the speech technology, in a second stage, other technologies were added to that first one, expanding the space-time. In a releasing

game, new prostheses allow the multiplication of memorable acts, causing memory to be something more than the possibility of storing information in the human mind: memory becomes a document. Communication, therefore, is not defined through the constitution of knowledge from evident objects (the means). Communication consists of the means and the mediations, as already defined by Jesus Martin-Barbero back in the 1980's. Communication is the relation between the praxis (subject/subject) and the *techné* (subject/object), the theoretical path of communication is the pragmatic relation and *techné*, also reflected in the analyses about subjective and pragmatic relations around the enunciative process and the production of meaning.

In this sense, the theme of Reason is extremely important. Taking into account that Reason is a product of the arguments built within human exchanges, the language constitutes its founding element and Reason takes place in the communicational processes. Reason is, to this effect, communication; it is not inside us, but among us (in human exchanges), in the incessant stimulus to dialogue or dispute, it is in the arguments that complete and fit one another or in the ones which face one another. Thus, maybe it is more efficient to debate communication in intersubjective relations that launch the critical thinking about mankind's most essential action. To think of relation is maybe the scientific destiny of communication and not to think of the scientific Field of communication as something finished by itself.

And to think of relation is to mandatorily refer to the narrative issue. If we see the narrative as we see ourselves in the duration, that is, the way we, as beings, relate to time (past, present and future), the human act in its historical dimension is essentially narrative (past, as memory; present as action and future as project or wait).

The removal of communicational theories from the theories of the acts of the discourse articulated with an analysis of the moral *ethos* (as does Ricoeur), placing self-esteem first, the solicitude and fair institutions, produced a practically uniform movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that is, the approach of the theories that deny the metaphysical value of communicational reflection. The technological issue introduction, as a privileged place of the analysis, due to the emergence of the discussion around the new communicational processes, on the other hand, put during the last years the primacy of

metaphysical discussion in focus. To debate the technological dimension is to think of centuries of the individual's place and body transformation, which became constituted in another one, always product of his action (the writing, the electronic means, the informatics, and so on), by valuing technological appendices as being essential to the communicational process.

I would like to introduce here another discussion: to debate communication as conversation, in a broad sense, that is, in terms of exchange between the self and the other, the self and the world, in a hermeneutic process of production of knowledge from the interchangeable places of the world. A world which is text, which makes itself text, which goes back to text (RICOEUR, 1997). Rearticulate the theory of the discourse acts with the moral *ethos* analysis wouldn't give communication an indispensable political-philosophical dimension? It is not only about inserting the logic of the pragmatics of communication in its both possible plans: one where common subjects speak and the context of interlocution acts as a decisive place for comprehension; another, to visualize the situation of communication with all of its complexity, evoking the context of enunciation, the ideological and cultural competencies of the interlocutors, the psychological determinations, the filters of interpretation which stand between exchanged messages. It is about thinking of communication in a world as narrative, that is, a historical place in which the attempt of explanation and comprehension of communicational acts is always present.

The solution is to debate communicational relation, that is, the subject in relation. To focus on the communicational processes in relation is, for example, to think about the relation between subject *versus* technological nets. Through the writing, the printing, the printed diffusion, the electroacoustic means and the informatized means we have mankind's relation with a built world beyond the being and the knowledge that sprouted from his mind, in order to sprout in the technology that the being himself has produced (and still produces). Technologies that broaden his possibilities as a communicational being. Technologies that produce forms through which we develop certain cognitive abilities. Thinking as Havelock (1981) or Ong (1982) we can say that writing, for instance, introduces the linear form to visualize the world: a cognitive way

featured by the linearity of thought. The turn of the page, the continuity argument, line by line, paragraph by paragraph, piece by piece, lead to the formulation of a thought whose primacy is linearity. The thought, necessary to the mnemonic practices of a world without writing, was substituted for the linear thought introduced by the practices of writing. The printing begins another cognitive moment as well as the electronic technologies and informatics start new ones.

The theoretical world of communication concerns, therefore, an essential relation: the sphere of ideas according to the media and the so-called biosphere, that is, the world in which this human being lives in relation and in which his ideas constitute in relation. The theoretical world of communication relates to communicational performances, from one subject to another, but also from subjects' nets to interfaces between the world and the individual. It is about the subject in the virtual relation and about the theme of seduction of subjects, if we start from the idea that the isolated subject only exists in fiction. The communicational world is the theoretical world of relations.

### **What about the past as communicational process?**

I would like to finish this idea by emphasizing that, in order to debate communication as a relation, we must mandatorily insert the past. The long-lasting communicational acts of men from the past come to us and history takes ownership of them. It is also this way that we emphasize history as communication (BARBOSA, 2009).

To think historically, on the other hand, allows the enrichment of the reflection on the communicational universe. Obviously, we do not refer to history as a discipline, but to a historiographical look, a philosophical way of feeling the world as a historical universe: that is, to realize time relations, the ways we spend time and insert ourselves in it, in other words, we find out what the temporal logic of the world in which we live is. To think historically is to highlight the world's procedural vision and the practices and communicational processes as proper from a certain moment and place. Generalizations, in history, only become possible after particularism. And, in communication, we are masters of generalizations without the necessary particularizations. Our global universe makes our global look be, many times, mainly,

decontextualized.

History is, therefore, the way we feel in the duration, as we see ourselves like beings, along a trajectory, which we classify as an existence in space (which we sometimes call world). History is our silent or noisy relation with time: the present, the past and the future. History is the fact that we are in the world.

From the present, from our now, always transitory, we look at the past and project the future. But the past only exists as a mental representation of the individual look of those who uncover it. Therefore, the past is not immovable: it is materialized by the memories and always transformed by interpretation. Thus, as the past is not immovable, the present is not also only a punctual instant. The present shows what we live, as well as the memories provided by the past. These memories always exist in the present, building it by the interlacement of itself (the actions lived in the present) with the other (the memories which make the past present). Itself and the other, too, because, being life an act of historicity, we always live in relation: there is a world inhabited by beings who equally share the same humanity.

We shall still think of the knowledge issue as something which is always relative to a historical moment. At different moments, and previous ages, there was always something that a mortal could never know. This knowledge could be considered demonic or a form of moral transgression. Therefore, knowledge is a value which possesses the possibilities of the historical eras in which one lives. History, as affirms Dilthey, is the autobiography of people and of humanity. In the same way as we daily rewrite the history of our lives, humanity rewrites its biography (Heller, 1993, p. 107). What is the reason for communication to occupy the center of the reflexive arena today? We must think of this apparent “success” as knowledge that also possesses the possibilities of the historical age in which we live.

If we consider as well that history refers many times to the failure or success of men who live and work together in societies or nations, who aim either the truth or the credible, history is always the fragment or segment of the communicational world. The communicational acts of men from the past are intended to be rescued as the absolute truth or as something able to be believed as truthful. And, to this effect, we can affirm

that history is a communicational act. We finish by reasserting that, in communication, we still live the dilemma of present time, the logic of the idea of permanent transformation, of means as primacy of the discussion, of human mediations often displaced from the communicational process. Which are, in fact, our concepts? How can our look be qualified: do we still consider communication a fact *a priori*?

If the answer to this question is yes, perhaps our theoretical path should follow another logic. To think of the enunciative processes as a historical problem, in which the humanity issue is involved. Communication is a human phenomenon and a consciousness phenomenon. To debate a history of concepts<sup>3</sup> in communication as well, perhaps helps us to rebuild the semantics of the term communication, and then, try to link communication as a historical issue to the question of human consciousness.

## References

- BARBOSA, Marialva. “Comunicação e história: presente e passado em atos narrativos”. In: *Comunicação, mídia e consumo*. Revista do Programa de Mestrado em Comunicação e Práticas de Consumo. São Paulo: ESPM, 2009.
- BARTHES, Roland. *O grau zero da escrita*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 2006.
- BOURDIEU, Pierre. *A economia das trocas simbólicas*. São Paulo: Perspectiva, 1987
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Coisas Ditas*. São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1990
- \_\_\_\_\_. *O poder simbólico*. Lisboa: Difel, 1989
- FOUCAULT, M. *A ordem do discurso*. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 1996.
- GEERTZ, Clifford. *A interpretação das culturas*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Guanabara, 1989
- HAVELOCK, E. *The Literate Revolution in Greece and its Cultural Consequences*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- HELLER, Agnes. *Uma teoria da história*. Rio de Janeiro: Civilização Brasileira, 1993.
- KOSELLECK, R. “Uma história dos conceitos: problemas teóricos e práticos”. *Revista Estudos Históricos*, Vol. 5, Nº 10 (1992), p. 134-146.
- MORIN, Edgar. “A noção de sujeito”. In: Schniman, Dora Fried (org.). *Novos paradigmas, cultura e subjetividade*. Pará: Artes Médicas, 1996.
- ONG, Walter J., (1982). *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. Londres: Methuen.
- RICOUER, Paul. *Tempo e Narrativa*. Vol. 3. Campinas: Papyrus, 1997.
- VEYNE, Paul. *Como se escreve a história e Foucault revoluciona a história*. Brasília: Editora da UNB, 1998.

---

<sup>3</sup> We refer to the position of Koselleck (1992) in the Field of history.