

# Surveillance capitalism: the Mattelart line of thought and its criticism towards mediatic processes

## *Capitalismo de vigilância: a vertente Mattelart e a crítica aos processos midiáticos*

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the trilogy communication, capitalism, and surveillance, verifying the convergences determined among these elements by utilizing Mattelart's theoretical framework. The business model of cultural industries is assumed to no longer be restricted to the diagram involving media production, dissemination, and consumption, including algorithms capable of extracting mass data from users to increase the generation of new products and services. The connection between the cultural, political, economic, and technological fields in mediatic processes is evaluated to question the social contract imposed by technology companies situated in the context of surveillance capitalism.

**Keywords:** Mattelart, capitalism, surveillance, mediatic processes

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### RESUMO

O artigo analisa o trinômio comunicação, capitalismo e vigilância, recuperando as convergências estabelecidas entre esses elementos à luz das contribuições teórico-metodológicas de Mattelart. Considera que o modelo de negócio das indústrias culturais já não explora somente o diagrama que envolve a produção, a circulação e o consumo midiáticos, somando-se a esses processos programações algorítmicas capazes de extrair dados em escala de seus usuários em prol da geração de novos produtos e serviços. Avalia o cruzamento entre os campos cultural, político, econômico e tecnológico nos processos midiáticos para criticar o contrato social imposto pelas empresas de tecnologia inseridas no contexto do capitalismo de vigilância.

**Palavras-chave:** Mattelart, capitalismo, vigilância, processos midiáticos

## INTRODUCTION

WITH AN INVESTIGATIVE route based on critical thinking and committed to denouncing global capitalism's inconveniences, Belgian researcher Armand Mattelart has also been a reference for researchers interested in understanding the current moment of consumer society and its surveillance mechanisms. Historically, his research has focused on the mass media problems, sowing a concrete dimension to the study of media conglomerates and their transnationalization strategies. However, after the publication of *La Globalisation de la Surveillance: Aux Origines de l'Ordre Sécuritaire*, in 2007, Mattelart also started to dedicate himself to analyze information systems, surveillance technologies, and the seductive power of too light and addictive portable devices, capable of influencing social relationships, consumer practices, and network activism. Guided by capitalist logic, the use of increasingly compact and interactive screens has been a marker for understanding a new way of relating human beings to the media. From the critical perspective of hypervigilance, the primary assumption is that algorithmic programming has been explored to extract data at scale from its users, serving to expand the power and concentration of new transnational technology conglomerates.

From the Mattelart line of thought, understanding the logic of these transnational conglomerates – many of whom, in recent years, have started to invest in communicational businesses – has meant considering their cultural crossings and historical-social movements. Consideration is also given to the power structures that govern media groups and geopolitical issues from different countries, carefully analyzing their information flows and global consumption implications in the technological improvement context. Thus, this article seeks to recover Mattelart's main contributions to Latin American critical communicational thinking. It covers the period since he was an analyst of imperialist communication and mass media products between the 1980s and 1990s, going through his epistemological contribution during the 2000s. The non-linear analysis also explores the denunciative approach to surveillance capitalism. This analysis proposes civil society alternatives to understand, criticize, and renegotiate the companies' social contract involving surveillance capitalism.

## CRITICISM TO INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS

Mattelart is inserted in the Marxist paradigm dedicated to analyzing the macrostructures of information systems and flows in Latin America and the

world. A demographer by training, his political militancy in student strikes led him to choose Chile as his Latin American home, soon developing cross-sectional researches in the field of communication during Salvador Allende government Mattelart (Maldonado, 2004). He narrowly did not settle in Brazil, accepting an invitation from the Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) in Rio de Janeiro. However, the national bureaucracy prevented his arrival, reflecting the prognosis generated by the military coup of 1964, which made the presence of progressive intellectuals aligned with the struggles for social movements unfeasible. As a researcher at the Universidad Católica de Chile (UCC), Mattelart created and coordinated the Center for the Study of National Reality (Centro de Estudos da Realidade Nacional – Ceren), carrying out the first researches on media multinationals operating in the country. At this moment, his perspective on the macrostructures of cultural industries can be read in *Multinacionais e Sistemas de Comunicação*. This is a study developed in Allende's Chile dedicated to analyzing the penetration of foreign companies in subordinate countries, a business model that "is structured as the local ruling classes are convinced of the effectiveness of the proven production schemes and norms" (A. Mattelart, 1976, p. 216). The paths were open for Mattelart to offer significant contributions to the consolidation of a critical epistemology in communication. He has been one of the leading researchers and disseminators in the Latin American continent and the world for his transit and scientific influence.

He starts his trajectory considering the changes processed in European society, initially after the Industrial Revolution. Then he analyzed its diverse social issues, which established industrial movements capable of shaping the bases of transnational mediatic markets – especially concerning information circulation and culture homogenization. The context in which Mattelart's work is inserted is marked by the international crisis of capitalism, which starts to cause declines in regional productions, increased costs, low wages, and increased social inequalities. Added to the scenario are the strengthening of large companies through transnationalization, the weakening of governments as regulators, and the expansion of information and communication technologies (Mosco, 1996). At the heart of deconstructing certainty-centered communicational studies, this ambiance establishes several debates on the institutionalization modes of electronic media and the commercial and public broadcasting regimes (A. Mattelart & M. Mattelart, 2001). At that time, public policies were increasingly being fought as they were framed as state interference in private businesses. According to a neoliberal (economic) segment, the interference would remove the free

market's business competitiveness. According to another neoliberal (political) segment, it would represent the establishment of censorship. With these two thoughts ever closer, academic hegemony began to undervalue the role of regulation, given the strength of the production of meaning by the receivers and the super dimension of the media disconnected from the big economic groups. A. Mattelart (2002) summarizes the difficulty of proposing and adopting public policies today:

Freedom of communication should not be prohibited. Pressure groups will soon label the reservations that can be made regarding this conception of freedom as attempts to restore censorship. Only the sanction exercised by the consumer on the free-offer market should govern the circulation of cultural and informational flows. The principle of self-regulation removes the legitimacy of any attempt to formulate public policies, national and regional, on the subject. Not even questions about the role that the State must play in coordinating information and communication systems to preserve citizen expression channels regarding the logic of segregation in the face of the market and technology are welcome. Nor are those linked to civil society organizations' role as a decisive pressure factor to demand such arbitration from the public authority. The world morphs into consumption communities. (p. 156)

Under the political-organizational bias, critical studies in communication are driven by the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), developed at the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Unesco). Thus, detachment occurs with the so-called cultural dependency theories, developed by Mattelart and his disciples. At that time, based on both Gramsci's notion of hegemony and ideas on Althusser's ideological devices, his position came to represent a counterpoint to American and European cultural products, such as comics, photonovels, cinema, television, and music. In this movement, the emphasis was placed on establishing national communication policies, believing that the media would democratize the media with independence and autonomy, seeking greater economic and social balance. In an interview for Rebouças, Mattelart references the continent as the pioneer region in the construction of a field of study on internationalization in communication, based on investigations inspired by cultural dependency theories. However, in France, the emergence of the first studies in this direction only occurred in the second half of the 1980s (Rebouças & Mattelart, 2002). According to A. Mattelart and Neveu (2002), among the factors responsible for the distancing of cultural

studies from politics in Latin America, the main one would be the lack of a problematization about the new status of knowledge in capitalism. This is “characterized by the double subsumption movement of the intellectual work and the general intellectualization of work” (p. 155). This is added to the ignorance, on the part of many intellectuals at the time, of cultural and informational industries’ political economy and the organizational lag of many social movements.

### CONSUMPTION, ENTRETENIMENTO, AND IDEOLOGY

From a unique analysis of political-economic processes and their interactions with the media, Mattelart offered original contributions to investigating cultural industries in the best seller *Para ler o Pato Donald* (Dorfman & Mattelart, 1978), whose co-authorship he shares with literary critic Ariel Dorfman. Censored in the United States, the book denounces Walt Disney products as ambassadors of American ideology, becoming one of the bestsellers in Latin America, with thirty editions in Spanish and fifteen other languages, accounting for more than 1 million copies sold until 1996 (Berger, 2001). Nevertheless, Mattelart’s thinking, focused in the early 1970s on denouncing the strategies of imperialist propaganda practiced by comic books in the United States, should not be seen as a rupture regarding his current production. Subsequently, the researcher remains concerned with the problems surrounding symbolic goods, nuances of culture and technology, based on a critique of the system governed by hegemonic empires.

The slide that leads communication to a definition with totalizing pretensions, in the view of A. Mattelart (1994), replaces the “ideology of progress” with the “ideology of communication.” This is a task performed by technical vulgarizers and ideologues-writers, who make the “technological revolution” (p. 143) a new workhorse in the fight against everything that moves at their left and put those in disagreement with this new redeeming myth in the field of authoritarianism sympathizers. In a globalized society, information and communication technologies and their culture are absorbed as commodities, circulating as if overcoming man’s conflicts with himself.

It is in this direction that the role of advertising should be considered. In 1982, from the coordination of the research *Para um Espaço Audiovisual Latino* – resulting in the book *Cultura contra Democracia?* (A. Mattelart et al., 1987), with authorship shared with his wife Michèle and Xavier Delcourt –, Mattelart considers that spread all over, cultural industries – from TV to tourism and advertising – seek to transform the audience into transnational consumers. Thus,

they spread a set of notions of development, communications, organization, daily life, and change based on self-service (A. Mattelart, 1983).

The main genre of Brazilian television also falls into this category, studied by Michèle and Armand Mattelart in *O Carnaval das Imagens* (1998). They identified how the need to reach internal and external markets had led communication oligopolies to create synergistic alliances capable of increasing their profitability. The work represents a continuation of his previous study on transnationalization, focusing on the dynamics of the Brazilian market, one of the largest audiovisual industries globally, thanks largely to the giant nature of the national consumer market. This huge nature refers specifically to Globo, the first broadcaster to attribute major importance (M. Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998) to audience measurement, especially in its prime time, as the Americans say, or the French *première soirée*, as also Armand and Michèle Mattelart put. Transnational exchanges of cultural goods, not only in the audiovisual field, start from the understanding that:

This internationalization is such an imposing logic that, in itself, it would authorize it to stop here: in the globalizing character of the new production process of material and symbolic goods. However, in this age of universalization of norms, the need to observe the concrete and particular way each society articulates itself in reality surrounding the market and international exchanges has never been more felt. (M. Mattelart & Mattelart, 1998, p. 8)

Globo's growth coincided with the military government's interest in creating a broadcaster that would unite the Brazilian territory, serving the interests of economic reforms and their political project. The initial strategy prioritized popular products and then constituted a qualified production pattern. Its competitors could not reproduce such a pattern at that time when the *telenovela* played a predominant role – which it still does. They identify that, from the modernization of the Brazilian *telenovela*, in the late 1960s, there is an approximation to reality. *Antonio Maria* (Tupi, 1968) and *Beto Rockfeller* (Tupi, 1968) were responsible for the melodramatic genre's rupture. Their characters had qualities and defects, with a colloquial language. According to M. Mattelart and Mattelart (1998), it is at this moment that the Brazilian public identifies themselves in the *telenovela*: the TV channels “leave aside the watery Latin productions to reconstitute the genre with their perspective and techniques. The speeches become colloquial; the open dialogues; Manichaeism disappears; the hero appears without qualities, subject to mistakes and successes” (p. 31).

The transnationalization of national products follows a global trend – according to which medium and small corporations are absorbed, succumb, or take inferior positions in the market, directing their actions to restricted audiences, desiring alternative aesthetics –. However, Michèle and Armand Mattelart (1998) place the central problem of domination through widespread consumption, recurrent in their analyses, as in the penetration of the telenovela. “The popularity of a telenovela is not measured only by the” amount of audience, but by the space they occupy in everyday conversations, “by rumors that they feed, by their power to catalyze a national discussion, “also about social issues (p. 111).

The global framework also ensures a new dimension to the local space. Parallel to the deterritorialization, which can be understood as the development of a global society guided by consumption, mobility, and technology, mixing global contours with local elements, the reterritorialization is inserted, i.e., the high consumption of globalized goods leads to a valorization of the local and the national. Thus, this is not a revocation of the place, but a social convergence in which general influences that result from mobility and transnational corporations, with their globalized products and their easily identifiable brands, reconfigure the world space. According to Michèle and Armand Mattelart (1991), the new approach refers to deterritorialization simultaneously with reterritorialization, recomposing private spaces as units endowed with meaning for identities.

### REVISITED COMMUNICATIONAL THINKING

A new phase of capitalism began to develop in the last three decades of the 20th century. This phase was characterized by articulating globalization and capital expansion, neoliberalism, privatization and deregulation of markets, computerization, and digitalization. Adding epistemological robustness to previous works, Mattelart proceeds to propagate his hypothesis that culture is no longer a reasonably coherent uniform system, capable of clarifying the world's transformations, as the first anthropologists propose. His understanding of a global and digital society and the observation of its socio-cultural movements require cross-sectional and sophisticated analyses, capable of considering the inequalities of individuals inserted in a global world and dominated by technique. The culture itself ends up being framed as a commodity. This process differs, for example, from the time when the culture was in the process of industrialization (A. Mattelart, 2002).

In the cultural industry era<sup>1</sup>, communication conglomerates were established as hegemonic producers, maximizing their presence through the launch of media products and constituting political lobbies and articulations to obtain various advantages, not infrequently with damages to human rights (A. Mattelart, 2009). In line with Mattelart's denunciative approach, it is possible to consider, for example, the advance of the private sector and banking institutions in maintaining culture – a sector that, in the face of historical sustainability difficulties, ends up succumbing to the resources of transnational financial capital. In the political sphere, capitalist logic has shown that social subjects, symbolic goods, and the meanings resulting from these interactions feed into an alienating system, with the analytical training of professionals in the communication sector as one of the most significant current challenges. Progressively, the consumption tentacles start to penetrate daily life, instigating desires, conditioning social life, and promoting inequality.

Beyond the impacts in technological development and innovation, these companies are inserted in the paradigm of restructuring information capitalism (Castells, 2011). With noticeable effects from the end of the 1990s onwards, a new social structure, driven by financial capital restructuring, began to take shape (A. Mattelart, 1994). In analogy to the historical colonialism of oil exploration, contemporary capitalism is organized in the form of data colonialism, led by countries such as the United States and China, which seek to obtain, process, and explore digital data capable of being converted into a new form of value. With the penetration of digital media, data science begins to succumb to the logic of capital, detecting and predicting patterns of behavior and consumption that are soon converted into business insights, generally distanced from social interests aimed at eliminating inequalities. At the same time, these movements of transformation and consumption are inserted in a macro-structural logic. The neoliberal advance ends up reshaping the understanding of citizenship in society itself. Political and economic movements that involve high unemployment rates, the weakening of unions, precarious work, and forced entrepreneurship are some examples.

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<sup>1</sup> The concept inaugurated critical thinking about processes that culminated in reducing the boundaries between literary and industrialized cultures. Its founding parents, Adorno and Horkheimer, conceptualized that the artistic manifestations integrating the so-called cultural industry would be products manufactured from standardized reproductive methods and purely interested in satisfying their consumers' needs (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1985). These products established massive consumption and reinforced the nascent perspective of a deliberate intention to instrumentalize interests based on a supposedly alienating consumption environment. The industrialists combined technical concentration and labor division with standardized formulas, promoting structured products based on pre-recognized and widely accepted axes by consumers.



Culturally, due to the historical deficiency of social reflection, citizens start to operate as individuals-consumers. “It is no longer just a consumer, but a consumer considered sovereign in his choices, in a market also considered free” (A. Mattelart & Mattelart, 2001, p. 152).

In this sense, a very mature analysis can be found in *História das Teorias da Comunicação* (A. Mattelart & Mattelart, 2001). This book synthesizes critical development thinking in Europe and the United States, questioning the imbalance of information flows and cultural products then produced. The authors summarize that the critical perspective portrays, from its origin, questions about the debate about the two modes of institutionalization of electronic media, the commercial regime, and the public service. The authors cite one of the most expensive contributions to the discipline since 1975: the “abandoning an overly generic view of communication systems” (p. 113), after adopting the term cultural industries, in the plural. Michèle and Armand Mattelart (2001) analyze the change as a break with Frankfortian theorists since they start from the assumption that all cultural products obey the same technical rationality, organization, and administrative planning, similar to that of automobile manufacturing.

For example, for political communication economists, the cultural industry concerns the processes of production, circulation, and consumption of symbolic cultural goods. At the same time, its variant, in the plural, starts from the understanding that there are different industries, markets, and sectors of cultural production whose processes do not occur in an isolated manner. This perspective can be considered an advance based on the work of Adorno and Horkheimer (1985). The development of a theorization contemplating cultural industries shows that classical models are insufficient, if not related to more current approaches. The work on the culture and communication industry has gained a better direction, especially concerning the peculiarity of media and products. Between the 1980s and 1990s, Mattelart inaugurated a more pluralistic perspective connected with his socio-cultural transformations. Considering the historical aspect, he examines capitalism’s logic and its production of inequalities in the social fabric.

## FUNDAMENTALS OF HYPERVIGILANCE

Mattelart is inserted in the critique of surveillance capitalism, warning that, after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US government started to invest in social identification technologies, equipping public spaces with devices that soon became permanent systems. His critical legacy regarding

American imperialism reaches new heights, updating cultural digitization and hypervigilance issues, implemented by the United States and China governments. Over forty years after releasing his first works in Latin America, Mattelart revisits his production and relativizes summary condemnatory visions of his initial production. However, he does not abstain from his characteristic critical commitment (Maldonado, 2015). His book on the birth of a hyperconnected and digitally watched society (A. Mattelart, 2007) follows this direction. In this work, Mattelart is concerned with media communication policies and the informational issue. In parallel with the researcher's theoretical movements, it is worth considering that, at that moment, media companies were in the process of transformation. As in no other time, they were fundamentally becoming technology companies. System automation now allows greater exploitation of the participation (or the role shaped by capital) of users in the production processes and the decrease in communication professionals' job demand. Automation also increases the requisition of professionals who work at the interface of innovation and technology.

In the scope of social sciences, a close look at surveillance systems emerged in the 1980s. At the beginning of the digitalization of information project, Schiller (2011) warns about the issue's complexity and the possible reorganization of ways of life – which materializes –. This occurs from integrating consolidated sectors, such as the economic one, to those still emerging, such as nanotechnology and biotechnology. At that time, Schiller considers that a kind of information manipulation could be outlined, since “the architects of digital capitalism had in mind the main objective: to create a broad economic network that could support the ever-wider range of projects within the companies and the relationship between them” (p. 21). The digital is offered to the consumer, in the second half of the 1990s, through “computers that transmit audio, video, image, and data signals, requiring the total alteration of the regulation and telecommunications structures of the different countries” (p. 21). This seductive multimedia proposal gradually became a mediator of social life, a role previously played by television.

Schiller's denunciative speech, which ends up echoing alarmist among some theorists, finds its breath in Mattelart's reflections. In *História da Sociedade da Informação*, the researcher describes the emergence of the National Security Agency (NSA), created by the United States and its four partner countries (Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand), interested in “collecting as much information about the Soviet Union and its allies” (A. Mattelart, 2002, p. 147). The NSA ends up becoming a powerful

intelligence system, protecting the United States' economic and security interests. Although unable to prevent the attacks on September 11, 2001, mainly due to the camouflage techniques (stenography) used by Osama Bin Laden and his followers, the NSA has "planetary systems for listening to communications" and integrated spy satellites with state-of-the-art technology for capturing "images with 15 centimeter-precision" (p. 148).

As an astute and attentive researcher, during the 2000s, Mattelart continues to exhaustively follow the changing world and media advances in the social fabric, examining the importance of contemporary communication for the capitalist system's recent history. He sets crucial precedents for understanding how surveillance systems can reconfigure decision-making and consumer preferences, with heavy losses for a citizen's conception of the life in society. In this sense, the researcher points out that the American security systems and prevention policies (alarmist and with terrorist connotations) start to support the principles of the democratic regime in force in the country. George W. Bush's administration, seeking to increase his popularity, began to legitimize the development of surveillance technologies, not later on obtaining privileged information on the broader segments of social life. The main movement in this direction is based on the American Congress law entitled Patriot Ac. With the prerogative of strengthening surveillance mechanisms and obstructing foreign terrorism, the government started having indiscriminate access, including unconstitutional prerogatives, to homes or businesses without their owners' consent. The law also allowed detain immigrants and provided ample access to telephones, e-mails, and other financial records without a court order. The law's lack of precision, which has been updated so far and has been extended, sparked criticism for its massive data collection program. In 2020, the Senate also gave law enforcement agencies – the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) – the power to examine US citizens' internet browsing history without an official warrant. Activists immediately initiate a kind of response to surveillance systems based on leaks of diplomatic information to curtail citizens' rights.

Schiller's (2011) warnings or the watched world of Mattelart (2007) go beyond the Internet's limits, reaching civil society's daily life. Privacy rights are gradually being revoked: organizations, almost in their entirety, begin to use biometric systems, which in American discourse are synonymous with infallible systems; portable cameras are no longer present only in large commercial establishments or places with broad access, but incorporated into urban planning, in all residences, avenues and streets, parks and squares in

the largest cities in the world; on computers, tracking cookies start to store data in internet browsers, mapping users' consumption patterns; and even digital photos stored on the network can carry geographic elements with them, informing where they were recorded, since state-of-the-art cell phones and cameras have the built-in Global Positioning System (GPS) technology (Wünsch, 2013). More recently, we are moving towards a personalized camera: each individual will carry a barely noticeable camera, in the shape of glasses, based on the augmented reality proposal of Google Glass.

### **SURVEILLANCE CAPITALISM**

Today we know that the results of a Google search are not the same for everyone: there is a selection of content and each user can come across a Google personalized for them. Contemporary mediatic processes explore different logics from the mass media of the past, which launched generalist schedules in the social arena that society could discuss as a whole. According to Pariser (2012), "democracy requires that we base ourselves on shared facts; however, they are offering us different and parallel universes" (p. 11). With the receipt of different levels of information, transparency is impaired, and the idea that the Internet can become a medium capable of providing citizenship without any previous literacy. However, in the realm of consumption, the biggest problem with surveillance capitalism, as Google is implementing it, may be its intersection with social life. For example, with easy access to their users' data, banks can expand or limit credit lines according to the consumption pattern of their account holders; health plans can increase deductibles if their clients' habits and lifestyles guide them; or, yet, an insurance company may consider behavior patterns when pricing its products.

In the analysis of Mattelart's watched world, the product is the individual. Following different logics from traditional mass media, modern transnational technology conglomerates start to invest in a diverse offer of digital products and services. Thus, they inaugurate the era of datification, positioning companies specialized in a mix of information management, exploitation of participatory human capital, segmented advertising, distribution of digital products or services such as games and applications, etc. Processes of data extraction and monetization co-opted by companies such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Google, and Wireless Lab would come to honor the researcher's previous alerts. The informational raw material can be harvested from the users' actions themselves from the recent development of online participatory

culture. Thus, the media ecosystem reorganizes itself as transnational technology companies start to access information at scale about human behavior. The data and metadata collected can identify behavior patterns and trends and predict products and services with adequate penetration in global markets.

This process began to develop globally in 2004, when Facebook emerged, one of the complete categorizations of human beings in the world. In recent years, its business role has included the transfer of information from users to third parties since Facebook has incorporated in its platform several applications developed by third-party technology companies. Once installed (download), third-party applications require the Facebook password, taking with them a multitude of information spontaneously declared on this social media. In such cases, the privacy policies, although offered, are ambiguous and imprecise, not infrequently confusing users. At the same time, there is an increased understanding that fair use of the Internet, from the point of view of security and privacy, consists of developing collective awareness about the responsibility for the information posted and shared. However, it is a too complicated dichotomy since there is still a false notion of anonymity. Problems such as intellectual property, control or censorship, pornography, and violence, in general, such as bullying, defamation, and racism are also involved, the latter three being especially present in social networks.

The social surveillance procedures adopted by the United States are revised from 2006, with the emergence of Wikileaks. Headquartered in Sweden, the transnational non-profit organization starts to disseminate, via the Internet, confidential diplomatic information provided by anonymous sources. The year 2013 becomes emblematic, as Edward Snowden, a former NSA analyst, alerts the world through the newspapers *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* about the NSA's massive digital surveillance program. At the global level, Snowden denounces the intersection with surveys carried out by users of Google, Facebook, Microsoft, Yahoo!, and YouTube, in addition to several technology startups, from the NSA's Prism project. The monitoring of national and foreign information favored research histories, passwords, private content of e-mails, videos, photos, voice calls, and videoconferences, and transferred files. In a letter addressed to Brazilians, Snowden (2013) refers to everyday situations to explain mass surveillance programs' reach. According to the former analyst, "if you carry a cell phone in São Paulo, the NSA can track where you are, and they do it: they do it 5 billion times a day with people worldwide" (para. 6); also, continues Snowden, "when a person in Florianópolis visits a website, the NSA keeps a record of when it

happened and what they did on that website” (para. 7); or still, “if a mother in Porto Alegre calls her son to wish him luck in the college entrance exam, the NSA can keep the call record for five years or longer” (para. 7); finally, he assures that “the agency even keeps records of those who have an extramarital affair or visit pornography sites, in case they need to stain their targets’ reputation” (para. 8).

In the Brazilian context, the challenges are enormous. The neoliberal model advances in several sectors of society, trumpeting technology’s potential without parallel investments in human resources. Information systems are supplied by databases, in isolation, without concern for the promotion of citizenship. The lack of media literacy undermines the way users consume content on the Internet, compromising society’s autonomy and critical thinking in general. The expansion of false news and the post-truth environment, amplified through the deliberate distribution of disinformation, are some of this process’s results. Another central issue in capitalist culture is that technologies are being employed further to exploit labor forces (Figaro, 2018). In general, technology companies are systems connected for the production, control, and circulation of commodities. Among the most latent transformations, we can mention digital nomadism and remote activities. This movement, which has been analyzed in recent years, is evident from the crisis generated by the coronavirus pandemic (Sars-CoV-2), which accelerated restructuring the traditional business model that lasted during the 20th century. In addition to making the hours worked and the multisectoral activities performed by the same employee more flexible, there is also the use of the employees’ domestic technological infrastructure, often without compensation from the companies. As a symptom, there is also a greater distance between training and professional performance. These issues are aggravated as of 2019, when Brazil is going through a process of precariousness in its social protection network, notably due to the weakening of institutions and drastic reduction of budgets in strategic sectors capable of ensuring human dignity. However, it is not a question of refusing technological advances, but above all, following in Mattelart’s footsteps, questioning how technology has been consumed and applied in different sectors of society.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Mattelart line of thought continues to perpetuate and illuminate critical research in communication among new generations. Consistent and committed to denouncing the capitalist revelry, this line of thought has been

an alternative for investigations on counter-hegemony, the democratization of culture, communication policies and technologies, transnational interests in the markets of cultural industries, and, more recently, global surveillance systems. The theoretical-methodological axis that the Belgian researcher developed and his choice for macrostructures transformed him into an authentic transnational communication system analyst. Given the economic increase of the so-called digital age and its technological constitution, his more recent studies began to illuminate later analyses on the new (digital) industries and the misaligned commercialization models; the possibilities and impacts of the Internet in the face of media convergence; new content production, distribution and consumption schemes; digital media and their implications for the role of surveillance systems.

From the anti-colonization bias present in his first works to his periods of maturation and consolidation, responsible for the constitution of a historical and critical epistemology in the field of communication, Mattelart was one of the pioneers in envisioning, in the second half of the 2000s, how the transnational technology conglomerates operated. The triad of cultural penetration, power, and capital does not clarify the complexity and variety of these conglomerates' businesses. However, it offers clues to analyze how, historically and socially, they knew how to exploit their products' political systems, market opportunities, and economic potential with relative competence to perpetuate power over the past seventy years.

At the threshold of the 2020s, Mattelart continues contributing to emphasizing, with all theoretical and methodological rigor that characterizes the researcher, the economic and political problems established around transnational communication systems. From the critical analysis of cultural industries to the denunciative tone about data extraction, damage to privacy, and the restriction of freedom in the capitalist context, his line of thought continues to present itself as a suitable alternative for researchers interested in dissecting the technology conglomerates using information systems to penetrate their tentacles in social life. ■

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