Silvio Waisbord: Diversity and fragmentation – The field of Communication as a post-discipline and its developments in contemporary times

Silvio Waisbord: Diversidade e fragmentação – O campo da Comunicação como uma pós-disciplina e seus desdobramentos na contemporaneidade

■ Interview with SILVIO WAISBORD

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COMMUNICATION SCIENCES AND digitalization are permanently linked insofar as social, economic, organizational, and institutional processes took on digital information and communication technologies as a means of connection and operation. One could argue that the field currently has a central role in the social fabric. At the same time, by participating in other fields, correlated or not, communication assumes a transversal nature, working as a social aggregator.

The academic study of communication and its applications have been clearly gaining importance, causing research, dissemination, and teaching to keep ups with innovations and changes, as well as redefinition of concepts, ontologies, and approaches. How could we, thus, characterize the Communication sciences in contemporary times?

Professor Silvio Waisbord adressed many questions in his recent book, *Communication: A Post-Discipline* (2019), not yet translated into Portuguese, a work that inspired us for his interview with *MATRIZes*.

Professor Waisbord is a sociologist by formation since his undergraduate degree at Universidad de Buenos Aires, followed by a master's and doctorate degree at San Diego University. He is currently director and professor at the

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School of Media and Public Affairs, of the George Washington University. Waisbord published more than 200 articles in academic journals in different languages, as well as nine authored or organized books; the most recent was released in March of this year – *The Routledge Companion to Media Disinformation and Populism* (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021), with no Portuguese translation.

Our interviewee writes about multiple themes in the field, especially *communication studies*, journalism, media sociology, and aspects of global societal transformations and their respective relations with the world of communication. Waisbord is a leading scholar, especially for his more than ten years of experience as editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Communication*, published by the International Communication Association (ICA), and the *International Journal of Press/Politics*, published by Sage Publications.

Such experiences – reading, writing, and editing hundreds of academic articles, interacting with authors from all continents and theoretical aspects – have given Waisbord a critical and lucid view on the recent scenario of studies in communication sciences and its future perspectives.

He coined communication as a post-discipline, portraying its diversity and fragmentation in a key phrase of his book: "The dream of a common field, somewhat unified by common ontology, theoretical canon, and the scientific method, is out of reach" (2019, Chap. 2, section Should we worry, para. 1). And, not by chance, we talked with Professor Waisbord about the directions of our field, based on its multidisciplinary origins in the social sciences and that is today closer to an interdisciplinarity, in tune with his proposition – "communication was multidisciplinary before multi- and interdisciplinary became important trends in academia" (2019, Chap. 1, section Why fragmentation, para. 1).

Our interviewee clarifies that such dissonance is not exactly a problem, it constitutes a debate that continuously puts into discussion the academic relations, the schools and scientific approaches, and the clash between broad and hyper-segmented perspectives, which permeate communication studies worldwide. In this interview, we sought to discuss the multiple themes addressed in *Communication: A Post-Discipline* (Waisbord, 2019) – the objects and methods; the tendency to use quantitative methods for research as a parameter for publication in referenced international journals; his proposed taxonomy to conceptualize the field; the impacts we experience due to digitalization, reverberated, for example, in disinformation, violence, polarization, and algorithmic modulation; the academic training of communication professionals and his hope that we may look at communication

studies as a means of discussion for common issues, regardless of regionalities and localities such as the role of communication in media literacy, in climate change, in digital dystopias, in aspects of race, gender, and ethnicity.

We interviewed professor Waisbord by Zoom, during the pandemic; he was in his residence, in the spring climate of Washington and we, in the autumn of São Paulo, but all shared a summer feeling. The result was warm, allowing us to shift between thematic formality and those more informal and personal aspects that permeate the routine of academics in the field of communication. We all agreed that any redefinition of the field will require a lot of imagination.

MATRIZes: Your book and personal experience show, with authority, how fragmented communication research and scholarship is worldwide. Regionalities, cultures, academic tradition, researchers, and scholar's behavior are some factors that reinforce, in your words, a Babelian state and a *field manqué*. Do you consider that communication identity will continue as a "multi-everything" field or are there alternatives to the emergence of an effective field?

Waisbord: I think the answer is absolutely yes, and the reason lies in the dynamics that we have observed historically, which are stronger than ever. On the one hand, there is no strong counter fragmentation trend in communication studies. There is not too many people actually working on trying to bring communication studies together, around a common set of questions or common vision, or [people] inside communications studies trying to bring together different threads of research and thinking. And, on the other hand, there will constantly be new specializations and areas, so even after a few years I wrote the book, I continue to see the deepening of these tendencies. And also, in the larger context, I think that was happening in the sciences in general, whether it is the humanities or social sciences. I think it is a constant proliferation of new areas of research, new vocabularies, new theories.

We are way past this dream of having neatly defined disciplines and fields. That is gone, that is not coming back in the social sciences and humanities. I do not think that it was ever possible because of that idea of an integrated science comes from a very, I would say, modernist early 20th century model of science – especially in the social sciences and the humanities. I mean, it never existed. And one of the reasons is because that kind of scientific model requires a dominant canon, one body of knowledge that is foundational, and in communications studies, for example, it is very difficult, today, to agree

on a foundational canon that sets the lines, the discussions, the theories, and the concepts for the field as a whole. That never existed, and today it is even more difficult given what is going on in academic knowledge globally. So, I think that is a permanent state of affairs, not only to communications studies, but also across other disciplines.

MATRIZes: There are many possible prefixes coined by scholars to characterize communication studies – a post-discipline, un-discipline, a science of the commons, for example. Whatever the prefix, you consider communication as central and transversal through different knowledge, especially at the present moment. How could this protagonism coexist and collaborate with orthodoxies of other areas?

Waisbord: Communication studies intersect constantly with other disciplines and fields and that is what I think makes communications so rich, so exciting, so like you cannot get bored. In communications studies, you cannot get bored because the research questions change constantly. The approaches change constantly. Their way of expanding previous research inquiries change. Because communication is a phenomenon that, in some ways, is constantly changing, not just because of technology, not just because of much of what we study is attached to information and communication technologies and, therefore, as technologies change, what we study constantly changes as well. I think it is because of this unique position that the communication studies have always occupied in the social sciences and the humanities: being at the crossroads of different trends, conversations, and debates. I do not believe that orthodoxy has ever been stable in communication studies, given the nature of the subject of our study. Is there an ontological [reason] or feature – if you want blessing – of communication studies that [explains] why, in communication studies, you meet people from very different disciplinary traditions that somehow converge in the similar place?

Your question is about the protagonism and that is a slightly different question. Protagonism is whether communication studies is sufficiently recognized by other sciences and disciplines and that has always been an issue. There would be some research that we are documenting that [may belong] in other fields and disciplines such as political science, history, or sociology. People that are working on communication and information questions and not necessarily aware of communication research. And that has always existed as a problem in some ways, communication has sort of been seen either as a non-existent field or science, or people in other disciplines are not aware

of it. That it is a problem. And that, in my mind, remains a problem, and it has to do with the question about protagonism. The protagonism is not only what we, as communication researchers, decide, but the place that we occupy in academia, engaged with other disciplines.

MATRIZes: Especially in Brazil, communication is not accepted by businesspeople. All the communication areas here are located with marketing. So, we have some struggles to understand what communication is and how to have a professional who studies communication working in this field in the market. It is better to work as a journalist or as a PR, but not as a communicator. Do you understand this dilemma?

Waisbord: That has to do with the ambivalence and ambiguity of communication as a concept. That is why it means so many different things, not only inside communication studies, but outside of communication studies. It is impossible, really, to unify what communication means, from business schools to political science and everything else, including computer science. What communication means, in some ways, is sort of a burden because we always need to explain what we do and what communication is. And also, because of ourselves; we do not have a consensus, I discuss this in the book: the lack of consensus around communication can be seen as part of the richness of what we study, but, at the same time, it is a challenge because it raises these questions about what do we do; how do we manage the perceptions that other fields and disciplines have about communication studies? So, that could be seen as a strength or it could be seen as a challenge. I understand that, intellectually, it is very enriching but, in terms of professional aspects, institutional aspects, especially inside universities, it becomes a challenge because you need to explain to others what we do, what we cover, and what we do not cover.

MATRIZes: Is this lack of consensus, by chance, the reason why semiotics has not become the unified block for the field of communication studies?

Waisbord: I think so, because what happened to semiotics is what happened to many other strains of research and thinking that eventually ended up related to communication, but never became the core. The traditional semiotics is very strong in Latin America, particularly in Brazil, in Argentina, in Mexico, from the European tradition, especially the French tradition of semiotics, but that is not the case in the United States or in the U. K., or even in the Nordic countries in which semiotics never had that

central position around which communications studies grew. It was never the trunk or the backbone of communication studies. In the United States, communication studies came from public opinion research and psychology research and, to some extent, sociology, but never from semiotics.

That is still the case of much of the research produced in Latin America about communications studies that is grounded in semiotics in ways that in the United States you really do not find it. And also, semiotics had in Latin America an early entrance into departments of literature, more than in communications, even before communication departments were established. So, there are many people working on semiotics and communication coming from a literary tradition – people who study literature, linguistics, as well. In the United States, that tradition does not exist, it is not as strong and defining as it is in Latin America. Especially when you look at communication studies globally, semiotics has a very different presence.

You can ask most people who graduated with a PhD in communication in the United States about Peirce or about Barthes and they have no idea who these people are – no idea. Unless they have studied interpersonal communication for example, or linguistics, they will not know what that is about. And you will rarely find U.S. communication journals publishing on semiotics, because they go in parallel lines.

MATRIZes: This quote "Communication was multidisciplinary before multi-and interdisciplinarity became important trends in academia" (Waisbord, 2019, Chap. 1, Why fragmentation section, para. 1) opens your taxonomy proposal – connection, dialogue, expression, information, persuasion, and symbolic interaction. All of them are enhanced by a digitized society and are interconnected to express our contemporary communicative actions. Could you comment on the communication effects (for good or evil) facing misinformation, de-plataformization, algorithmic modulation to trend public opinion, social media influencers?

Waisbord: That is a great question. All those approaches in some ways have always dealt with the questions of misinformation or lying deception propaganda. You can study these issues whether you understand communication as connection, dialogue, expression information, etc. I think that, right now, in some ways, it is another round of having very similar approaches to the understanding of communication by looking at misinformation or the role of social media platforms. Some of these are old questions, they are not new. What is new is the way that it happens, the

centrality of new forms of mediation, and the more sophisticated techniques of propaganda and disinformation.

But, deep down, some of these questions are not that new nor the way that they cross different understandings of communication. In fact, the recent book that we just published on media misinformation (Tumber & Waisbord, 2021) is a good example because, in some ways, you have people approaching these issues from the perspective of understanding communication as information, communication as persuasion, communication as expression. It is not explicit, it is not deliberately done, it typically underlies how people understand what the problem is – what are the causes, how you define this information, or how do you think about the alternatives to it.

What is interesting about this is how wide the pendulum has swung from the technological optimism of 15 years ago to a more dystopic vision of digital communication. That, to me, is the most interesting part of this trend. If you look at what was written only 10 years ago, around the time of the Arab Spring, it sounds so outdated, so simplistic. And that is not only because the technology has evolved so much in the last decade, it is because the arguments about digital communication were more driven by hope rather than by evidence; by the conviction that many people had about the inherently goodness of more expression, rather than concerns about more expression leading to hate, to surveillance, to all kinds of dystopian phenomena. That more expressivity would not remove questions about media ownership concentration; the fact that most of us are talking globally in a few platforms that have a very specific set of rules, considerations, economic goals; I mean, all those questions were not really central when people had these very optimistic views about digital technologies – not only people on the right, but even people on the left.

For the people on the left, the discussion was largely about this whole notion of more expression is more democracy; more democracy means more representation, more recognition of human rights. And that is true, but it is not the only story. The main story, today, is not the more expression facilitated by digital platforms and digital technologies leads to more representation or more rights, and the reason is that more expression happens in the context of power structures that have not changed dramatically, and therefore, what comes out is rather anti-democratic and more authoritarian rather than movements of expression that turn things upside down. Second, we realize that expression is insufficient, and that expression actually may lead to hate.

More expression does not lead to recognition or tolerance of people's rights, more expression actually leads to clamping down on their rights of

expression that many other people have. That, to me, is one of the central questions: the incompatibility between more expression and more human rights or more communication rights. More expression has always been a cause of liberal progressives and radical people, and now this question has been hijacked by the right. The right somehow appears to be the champions of more expression, so the whole debate, the wholesome story about cancel culture, which unfortunately has gone global, is an example of how the right – especially the far right – has hijacked the notion of more expression, more freedom of expression is good regardless of anything else. And now, the argument that we need to make on the left is that more expression actually goes against the expression rights of other people, or other human rights, given that more expression may be a vehicle for hate, for stomping over the rights of other people. You have asked what the effects are. I am more concerned with the consequences rather than, let's say, pleased by the consequences of these processes.

MATRIZes: Maybe from here on these things could stabilize, because as you said, and we agree, that we began with optimism, now we are not structured, maybe in the future there will be a center, a convergence, some day.

Waisbord: I think that, in some ways, we got burnt so badly with the baseless optimism from a decade or 15 years ago. I am not a pessimist but, in some ways, it is hard to find strong reasons to regain optimism when the current situation is so pervasive. The bad examples, the anti-democratic samples… It is very difficult. You can always be hopeful, but the question is how you reconcile your normative assumptions in your mindset with what the empirical trends show. Empirical trends show something that is very nasty, right? And of course, what happened in Brazil is a prime example of the convergence of these nasty trends, facilitated by digital technologies. So, the question is that probably what we need to do is to have much more contextualized conclusions, rather than just aspirational conclusions.

I think 10 to15 years ago, [research] was driven by more of an aspirational argument "what I would like to happen" rather than what actually, based on the evidence, might happen. And when you see the right-wing trend in so many countries, then it is difficult to figure out what is the way out, out of this situation in terms of effects, in terms of digital technologies being primarily in favor of authoritarian perspectives, positions, policies. The more progressive uses – I tend to think – are more exceptional; they are important, but they tend to be the exceptions rather than the rule. When

you look at the way the governments, not only in Russia and in China, but in many countries in Latin America are using the internet, it is hard to believe that digital technologies necessarily lead to the richest democratic impact.

MATRIZes: While we are talking about how internet produced different perspectives of living in society, let's explore a little bit more this issue before returning to our central discussion. Regarding the crescent political polarization in the world and the increasing mix of violent communication tactics used by some social actors, such as politicians, digital militias formed by common people, terrorist groups, and leaders with authoritarian aspects, do you think communication is losing the power of social mediation? If so, do you think it is possible that violence, in a short time, became a new dimension of Communication studies, going beyond authors like Baudrillard (2000) and Virilio (1993)?

Waisbord: It is impossible to think about mediation without communication, whether we are talking about macro or micro processes. So, when there is mediation, there is always communication and vice versa, I mean, I use both concepts. If you think about it, interpersonal communication (language) is a form of mediation. Communication, in my mind, by definition, is mediation, which is not just about media in the sense of technology or platforms, in the way that we are communicating right now, language is the medium.

I think it is implicit in what you have said, I think that violence has always been a dimension of communication studies, however, it has not been sufficiently recognized as a central dimension of communication. So, it does go way beyond Baudrillard and Virilio. The question is that in a violent world, communication necessarily has a strong component of violence, correct? No matter who is against the violence or what are the causes of violence. There is always a strong component of violence in communication. And violence, per se, is a way of communicating violence.

When people stir violence against others, that is a way of communicating, no matter what the episode or the act of violence actually is. And to me, unfortunately, that is so powerful, so ubiquitous that it becomes invisible how violence is intrinsic to communication. In some ways, we do not have theories of this, we have theories of communication as a peace building tool. We do not have theories of communication as a form of violence, even though that is much of the reality of both violence and communication.

I mean, I think the work of the people that you mentioned[1] reminds us how violent our societies are and how violent communication is everywhere.

[1] We previously sent questions to Silvio Waisbord mentioning the French sociologist Michel Wieviorka and his book *Violence: A New Approach* (2009), in which he relates the role of television in covering the reports of the Jews in holocaust post Second World War, contributing to what he called "the emergence of victims"; he also points the interdependence, studied also by others, between terrorism and media, discusses the role of the radio in the process of dehumanization of the Tutsi minority in Ruanda, cruelly executed by the Hutus, and says that by the means of classical sociological approach, the influence of media in the perpetration of many violence never has been proved. And we also observed that "Despite the lack of scientific proof that media in general can influence acts of violence, it seems that violence and communication are linked in so many ways, and that this relationship between them as fields is growing in the digital age".

It is not just in the news; it spreads everywhere in society, in households, in families, in institutions. And I think what you raised is a very interesting blind spot, which is how infrequently we think of violence as embedded in everyday communication acts, rather than in terms of a coverage of violence or violence affecting journalists. Violence is intrinsic in much of what happens in communication.

Today, what we are looking at it in the internet and digital communication because it is so heavily impregnated with violence, we cannot ignore it anymore. When digital hate is so pervasive on the internet, it reminds us how everywhere you go on the internet the communication is violent, or how violence is a form of communication, how communication is a violent act, in the way that people are attacked, especially women, especially people of color, especially because of religion, or ethnicity, or sexuality. In some ways, digital communication reminds us of how central violence is and how central violence is to everyday communication. It is not surprising that so many people are trying to understand this! Well, digital hate is a reflection of off-line hate. The question is that if [the internet] facilitates it, it makes easier [for hate] to be pervasive, to be massive.

But, in some ways, it reflects the societies that we have always lived in. Sorry to be so depressive. I am working on a project right now with Julie (Possetti) and other women on this, and violence is so massive, so pervasive… and so destructive, when readers or haters engage with journalist, there is so much violence in what is being said. There is so much violence on the comments sections in newspapers online. So, in some ways, it is there. We used to believe that it was located, that it was relegated to a part of society. The tremendous access to internet platforms shows how massive it is.

MATRIZes: In other words, we can say that violence is inside human nature. We communicate this…

Waisbord: Right, and also because our societies perpetuate violence. We used to think that expression, as a democratic value, was related to the question of publicity and visibility – that more people expressing themselves was a way to become more public and more visible in society and in democracy for the recognition of their demands and rights. We are in a time right now in which more visibility, more publicity, in the Habermasian sense, is dangerous. Publicity does not lead necessarily to anything democratic. More publicity leads to more vulnerability and affects people who are already very vulnerable in societies. The more vulnerable they are offline, even more vulnerable online; the more public they are, the

more visible they are. If you are a woman, or if you are a person who is gay or queer, or if you are a member of an ethnic minority in a given country, if you are visible as a politician, as an activist, as a celebrity, as journalist, as an academic – your visibility becomes your vulnerability.

We need to re-think this question that expression equals more democracy, more recognition. And we need to think that, in some cases, people choose not to be public, not to express themselves, because they want to protect themselves. Not because of censorship. Because we are living in a violent society in which you become more public, more visible, if you express yourself more. You become the target of attacks and that is because of the inherent violence in the society that we live in. And the violence is not just the economic violence in capitalism; it is about different forms of violence. Violence is violence, whether it is driven by economic costs, or by anything else, or by, as you said, by "human nature." So, the question we are trying to answer is very difficult: if you agree with Nietzsche and believe that "violence is the driving force of being human," putting that together with more expression is very complicated, and it leads to very dystopian results.

The idea of more expression is tuned to some inherent goodness in humanity that is driven by respect, by tolerance, by understanding, by listening, by dialogue. But if those conditions are missing, what you have are very troubling, very worrisome developments. In Habermas and many other theories, there are certain conditions for dialogue, for listening, for respect for norms – norms that do not exist! – in society at large. When those norms are missing, more expression or more instability revealed violence.

MATRIZes: Can we give you a small example about this? During the Oslo event of journalism security in November 2019, we presented a mini documentary about Brazilian violence against journalists and the politics condition in our country. We decided not to disseminate it in our community groups here in Brazil due this visibility-vulnerability dilemma.

Waisbord: That is what it is. And that is the reality, we scholars are less exposed than journalists or activists or politicians. But that is the reality in which we, ourselves, as scholars censor, in the way that we regulate our public presses because nobody likes to be at the center of these swarms, these attacks. We are very careful about how public we are, especially in an authoritarian country. But, right now, in democratic countries we are also doing the same thing! That self-regulation of our expression, we do that on Facebook or social platforms all the time. For a variety of reasons, including because we do not want to be the targets of violence. So, back to

the original point, it shows basically how much we forgot this question in the effects of digital communication.

The digital effects, in some ways, heightened, or strengthened, or magnified violence rather than magnified any goodness. In some ways, we are still dealing with this... This expression of Kant "the crooked timber of humanity." There is something primarily wrong within us and we could argue that this is what digital technologies have magnified – I mean, the way that these big corporations are run, they are run because they want to maximize money on engagement. They do not care about human rights. That was never a driving factor in the way they organized the algorithms or set up the platforms; they just want more money and more people talking, even if they talk by denigrating other people.

MATRIZes: It is real! Okay, we made a short (although needed) deviation from the core of our conversation. Let's return to it: There is an historical conflict between communication research and journalism research. Brazilian academia emphasizes this either in undergraduate curricula or in graduate programs, and also among scholars' interactions. Is this a paradox that must be surpassed, especially in an era of communication centrality?

Waisbord: It is part of the complexity of the confusion that we were discussing earlier: that communication research and journalism research have run in parallel lines with some intersections. I do not know if it is a paradox. I think that it is part of the multi-layer notion of communication and media studies and journalism studies that, in some ways, is more of an institutional challenge. Because many departments of journalism around the world were established before communication studies were consolidated. And journalism schools were seen as professional schools, rather than as communications schools at the intersection of the humanities and the social sciences.

Well, Brazil is the best example: journalism – the traditional journalism schools – grew parallel to the development of communication as a field of study or as a field of research. Brazil was a pioneer in the development of schools of journalism and, eventually, there was some overlap, but still I think there are important differences. That is more of an institutional aspect rather than, I would say, an epistemological question. I do not think that we can overcome that, if we can surpass it? I do not think so, because I think that part of journalism is primarily about professional skills, which are not necessarily embedded in communication theories or thinking.

So, yes, one could think conceptually about journalism from a communication perspective, but there are all kinds of issues that are not

strictly about communication. One could argue that much of what journalism does is always communication: when you produce a story, when you edit a story, when you shoot a video, when you write a book – that is always communication, but it is typically done within the boundaries of what means to be a journalist, of professional questions about skills, about ethics, about all kinds of things that, in some ways, are quite unique to journalism. So, I would see them as an overlapping practice and research, rather than something that can be unified or brought together. That is very interesting about Brazil, because I cannot think of any other country in America that has such strong journalism studies and schools, and such a strong tradition of communication schools, almost separate.

MATRIZes: We would like to talk about research objects and methods. We (Global South researchers, and specifically Brazilians) are now experiencing the burden of a more humanistic research heritage, in the face of the need of quantitative research methods, largely used in American research. Do you consider this a gap that must be reduced? How?

Waisbord: I value the humanist research legacy. To me it is not a burden, it is one of the strengths of communication studies in the global South, especially in Latin America. Why do I value that so much? I think because it has been a reflection of a broader intellectual upbringing and training in Latin America, but especially in Brazil. What I mean is that, in Latin America, we read communications studies much more widely, including the humanist tradition. What is history or philosophy or ethics, that is still a very strong component in many schools of communication in the region. We are better grounded in the way that we think about communication specifically, but also communication across a variety of fields and disciplines, largely because of the humanist tradition.

Now, the challenge is to explain why we do this at a time of the popularity of quantitative research methods, especially of large data analysis, computational science, algorithmic research. I think, in some ways, it is a new round of an old challenge. What do you do when quantitative methods are hegemonic? In terms of power or fundraising, what do we do with a more humanist tradition theoretically, epistemologically, and methodologically?

The gap has always been there. Now we have another set of ground for this gap. I do not know if we can reduce the gap. I do not think that it is possible because the reason goes back to one of the first things I have said: I do not think too many people are interested in reducing the gap. Instead, what we need is the acceptance of the different approaches of this epistemological

diversity and the recognition of institutions in the journals, in the schools, in the conferences... The fact is that people approach communication differently, ontologically and epistemologically. That, to me, is the way to address this.

Personally, I think that the emphasis on qualitative methods often forgets that the main question is not the method, the main question is "What is the question?" You know, your theoretical question, what the research question is – not the method. I am always cautious and somewhat skeptical about prioritizing methods because we are putting the cart in front of the horse. What drives intellectual pursuit are questions about theoretical or empirical phenomena. That should be the driving question, not the method. The method is a choice that we make based on our expertise or the way we think, but that should not replace the debate about one of the important questions: how do we think about asking questions? If I were to prioritize, those questions come way before you think about any methodological choices or even research design.

So yes, the internet provides opportunities for large data analysis through quantitative methodologies that are completely new and very interesting and very rich. That does not exclude, let's say, the humanness or the qualitative tradition of social sciences, which says about the importance of asking the questions; you can ask questions and you can approach answers to the same questions through qualitative or quantitative methodology. What I am proud of seeing is the collaboration between methods, more than only thinking that certain phenomena related to the internet – filter bubbles or the way the hashtags on Twitter work – can only be idolized through the use of quantitative methodologies.

MATRIZes: Well, but if we go toward the international congresses, we have a problem here.

Waisbord: Right. It is a problem, and that it is a constant, I would say, struggle in terms of how you recognize the diversity, and how you support the diversity, rather than only prioritizing certain epistemological approaches or methods. That, to me, is what needs to be done constantly in conferences, in organizations. Journals are different because some journals have specialization in qualitative or quantitative methodologies. But to me, the consistent difficulties of having an open conversation between people who work with different methodologies is part of the challenge. Especially at a time in which people think that certain internet related phenomena can only be analyzed through large data sets or computational analysis, then we have a problem. Because the risk is doing that at the expense of

more multi-perspective, multi-methodological approaches to any questions that we may have. So, I do not say this as someone who typically uses quantitative methodologies, but, at the same time, I recognize some of the virtues of using computational methods to collect data about certain questions. There is no denying that the issue is the assumption that the only way to study certain phenomena is using certain methods – with which I do not agree.

MATRIZes: It is clear that communication research and scholars must rethink its canons and foci, facing a peaceful coexistence between fragmentation and digitalization. The academic education is one of the important branches for change. If so, what is your proposal, as a school director, for a "contemporary communicator" curriculum? Is there middle ground?

Waisbord: I think the idea will be to expose students to these tremendous diversity of communication studies, rather than narrow curriculum version – that is the ideal, both at the undergraduate and graduate level. I think communication students should understand this whole variety of questions. I am not in favor of the narrow training, especially at the undergraduate level, whatever that narrow training is – whether it is one set of theories or one set of methodologies. Implementing [a broad graduate program] is not that easy because you need to have people on the faculty who can expose students to a wide diversity of epistemological and theoretical research traditions.

But it is worth the effort, especially at the undergraduate level. That is a relatively simple way of approaching this. You can ask questions: Are our students getting sufficient exposure to the diversity of communication studies? What is missing in our curricula? What is it that we are not teaching? What is that we are not exposing? Do students understand that thinking differently about communication means to take different definitions or approaches to communication? So, those are some questions to check whether or not the curriculum we have is sufficiently diverse, but I understand that some communications schools are specialized in certain issues: some are specialized in media studies, some in rhetoric or semiotics. But I think that [diversity] is important besides the specific areas of specialization of one school of communication. It is important to provide a broad understanding of communication, because communication has multiple meanings.

MATRIZes: And this leads us to the second question about this. Can we say that the digital mediation studies could be a better label to

contemporary communication studies? Or the struggle between hyper-specialization and the idea of objects with global significance will remain?

Waisbord: Yes, in principle it is an intriguing name, because we are living in the digital society. The question is we have so many options and all options probably capture part of the developments or part of what is going on. I am skeptical that any concept will be able to capture everything that falls under communication, because there is so much of communication that is not digital. One could argue I mentioned earlier that communication is mediation. This is a concept that makes sense, but again, we would have to specify what we mean, what we are including, or what we might be leaving out, if we use "digital mediation studies" or something like that. It will not solve all these chronic challenges that we have in communication studies to have a unified set of vocabulary because the vocabulary keeps expanding, keeps multiplying, you know, it is another Babel that keeps growing, becoming even bigger.

MATRIZes: Your proposal of communication as a post-discipline sounds special in our pandemic times, especially for the continuous use of the term "post-pandemic that, post-pandemic this." Do you think that it is possible that communications research is also a post-pandemic necessary discipline, especially about how people communicate (or do not communicate) in an era of political polarization and the crescent digitalization of human activities?

Waisbord: The pandemic shows exactly the centrality of communication and how little communication is central to this. If you think about it, much of the pandemic has been a response led by politicians, by public health experts. When, essentially, the pandemic, in terms of prevention and response, is a communication phenomenon. And how insufficiently that has been in the center in the cases that I know better: in the United States or in Latin America... That shows why communication is so important: think about any aspect of the pandemic and you will find communication that mentions it. And the difficulties of communication, all the communication gaps and the breakdowns, all the wrong assumptions; if anything, during the pandemic [what happened] is more of an informational approach rather than a communication one.

What you have is some governments or agencies trying to inform people about prevention, safety, vaccines, and everything else, rather than taking a communication perspective, which is very different from information. Communication is basically about understanding. Information is about

relaying data or knowledge to other people, that is not communication. However, much of the pandemic so-called communication has been basically information or the lack of information, but especially, I think you mentioned in the question, "polarization and digitalization" because the way they communicate is embedded in political polarization, prejudice, bias, and all kinds of other factors, that is why we need a communication perspective rather than an informational perspective. Information is only or mostly about the data, the knowledge, the quality of what you transmit rather than engaging, exchanging ideas with different publics – that is communication. And no wonder there have been so many problems along the way. The pandemic, like all crises, revealed some of the fundamental processes and problems that we have in our societies – including communication problems. So, you know, I think that the pandemic is a bigger scenario for everything that is already happening in digital communication trends, and that is what we saw in the last year.

MATRIZes: Could you explain why you say we need a post-disciplinary analysis to multi-disciplinary and complex objects?

Waisbord: We have so many fundamental social problems around the world that I think that the best way to come around them in communications studies is to study the research, the actions around specific problems. And that is the massive post-disciplinary analysis, and communication studies already have to do it. Just take any problem related to violence. In some ways, you can take it in all different perspectives of communication to analyze violence as a social phenomenon, political phenomenon, interpersonal phenomenon, workplace phenomenon. And that is why it ultimately does not matter what the disciplinary origin of the ideas are. What you prioritize is the question that explains the problem: what are the communication aspects of that problem? Whatever the problem may be – environmental, climate change, gender-based violence, or hate speech – you think about the cause of the problem and how communication helps explain the problem and respond to that problem. What you said – the analysis – in this direction, communication diversity becomes a resource rather than a problem.

You see a multiple perspective of understanding what explains the problem as well as what are viable effective solutions. That to me is a more productive than re-visiting all fights, all wars in communications studies. It is a way of overcoming these differences around common questions or common problems. Whether you are doing interpersonal communication,

internet communication, policy, communication policy... Whatever you do, when you come around a single question, then those differences become less important than how you can think together or act together around these questions.

MATRIZes: And last (and hoping not least) how do you define yourself as a communication researcher and scholar?

Waisbord: For someone who wrote this book (Waisbord, 2019), I try to avoid labels. In academia, labels are very important. That is the way we present ourselves to others in our self-presentation in the government. We are a scholar of journalism, or a scholar of organizational communication, or a scholar of semiotics. But to me, the labels are not very helpful. I do research, I think, I write. It does not matter how I see myself. I was trained as a sociologist, but I am a communication scholar, but I work in the media scope. Does it make any difference in the way that I do my work? Not really! Because I am more interested in questions rather than in labels.

And in some ways what I tried to do with the books is not only to map out the state of communication studies, but saying that what ultimately matters is the question that you are interested in. Not your disciplinary identity or loyalty. I mean, it seems to me that the academic reward is some license to be free and creative in the way that we think; it is not about respecting boundaries and respecting labels, respecting disciplines, even though all of us are trained in disciplines, within certain epistemological approaches. To me what is much more interesting is "What is your question?", "How do you think about it?" rather than "Is this communication studies or not?"

Even though in academia we tend to do that, journals do that: journals need to say, "if my journal is on political communication, I am not going to publish something on health communication." Fine! I got this idea from reading the way that artists think about art and creation. They just create, they do not think of themselves "I'm an abstract expressionist painter," or when I compose music, it is a minimalist composition. I just create, just try to create, I just try to think and, in my mind, that is what many of us do.

I define myself as a communication researcher and scholar. I do not like that because communication is so flexible, but at the same time I think that it provides plenty of room for you to figure out what you want to know, what you want to write, what you want to teach... In some ways that is not bounded by "oh, that comes from philosophy," "that comes from literature." In fact, what I always say is that I am a communication scholar trying to read outside of communication, because great ideas happen when things

are connected in academia. You can read great biology that inspires you to think about communication studies! Or you can read poetry that inspires you about something in communication. That, to me, is a better notion of an intellectual or an academic than just thinking about in disciplinary terms even though that is what we do day in and day out.

So, it is a balance between being grounded in certain disciplinary traditions, but at the same time having the freedom to think beyond these conventional boundaries. Because these are just boundaries, you know, that in some ways are artificial. When I teach journalism, for example, I ask students to read literature, to read political science, to read sociology, philosophy, because it is a much richer way of understanding journalism history, journalism practice, and then you will have a broader understanding of some of these questions. **M**

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