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Narratives, languages and media in the context of interactive digital technologies¹

Interview with Carlos Alberto Scolari²

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Introduction

Carlos Alberto Scolari has been devoted in recent years to study the communication interrelating languages, media, mediation and communication theories in order to build a theoretical and methodological framework which takes into account the profound changes brought out by the digital technologies and by media convergence nowadays. Part of that effort can be seen in two of his books: *Hipermediaciones. Elementos para una teoría de la comunicación digital interactiva* (Gedisa, 2008) and *Hacer Clic. Hacia una sociosemiótica de las interacciones digitales* (Gedisa, 2004). In 2010, invited by the Graduate Program in Communication Sciences, Scolari gave the lecture “Crossmedia Narratives: Strategies for transmedia expansion/ compression”.

In this interview granted to MATRIZes, the professor answers to questions about language in digital media, transmedia storytelling, cross media, emphasizing, among other things, the need to investigate new forms of interactive digital communication from renewed semiotic approach which considers the processes of interaction and the new reiform and multimodal textualities in the production of meaning.

MATRIZes - As any rising field of knowledge, the studies related to the interactive digital communication face some challenges, not only in its conceptualization, but also - and perhaps primarily - in terms of the comprehension of practices and social uses that are engendered from the communication mediated by this technology. In one of your recent books, you state that we currently live in a "semantic chaos" typical of the construction of "a new area of research" (Scolari, 2008: 72). In an attempt to order this chaos, I would like you to say three words that

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have become ubiquitous when it comes to digital communication, transmedia storytelling, cross media and multiple platforms.

Scolari - All theories are constructed from a basic set of concepts. Constructing a theory of new forms of communication is not easy: every week new concepts and keywords appear, which somehow forces us to use them in our scientific discourse. It is a kind of Moore's Law for Semantics; the lifetime of concepts decreases and we should renew them so we do not be way off. This semantic pressure comes from the world of marketing, where the products and the discourses that support it must be permanently renewed. The theoretical discourses can not keep this pace! Scientific discourse must find its own rhythm, which is different from the rhythm of technological marketing discourse. In this context, some concepts have emerged: cross-media, transmedia storytelling, convergence, etc. The concept of cross-media is widely used in the professional scope, although some countries like Italy also use it in the academic world. Transmedia storytelling - a concept introduced by Henry Jenkins in 2003 – is more specific and sounds much more theoretical. In general, both concepts refer to productions that take place through different media and platforms, such as social networking, YouTube etc. On the other hand, Jenkins gave much importance to user-generated content. If we talk about transmedia storytelling, we evidence the narrative dimension of these productions, while cross-media is a broader term that also includes other dimensions, not only the narrative one. For my part, I use the terms as synonyms.

MATRIZes - *In this disposition for organization of the "semantic chaos", we can say, based on Lotman (1978:52), that we are living a moment in which those terms appear as language (message) to be later absorbed as code?*

Scolari - If we think from the perspective of the receivers, no one talks about cross-media or transmedia. These are concepts that we, academics, or professionals, use. People say, for example, "I watch *Lost*" or "I watch *Big Brother*", but that "watching" is, in many cases, radically different from the old television "watching". Nowadays, "watching *Lost*" or "watching *Big Brother*" include practices such as web browsing, illegal episodes downloading, video consumption on YouTube or discussion on the program in social networks and internet forums.

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The relevance of the TV experience is strong, therefore we still continue speaking about "watching".

***MATRIZes** - In a classic text on the technologies applied to the word, Walter Ong (1991) states that there is a principle that a new technology of word reinforces the old one at same time that transforms it. What reinforcements or changes would you indicate as consequences of this new communication system in which prevails the digital communication based on hypertext?*

Scolari - Ong's proposal is fully in tune with McLuhan's ideas, especially his four laws of media. Each time a new media or technology appear, there are continuities and ruptures. The emergence of new media - like the *world wide web* in the 1990s or the mobile devices in the 2000s - has generated disruptive processes in multiple areas, from education to politics, through the social relations and subjectivities. In almost every part of our lives there are a "before" and "after" the web. Does anyone remember the communication of letters, handwritten and sent in an envelope with postage stamp? The web has less than 7,000 days of life, which in historical terms is nothing! And yet we can not deny that it has profoundly changed our ways of knowing and doing. However, there are also many continuities. When Tim Berners-Lee created the web, he defined it as a "page" - webpage - for information documents on the network. The webpages were made in the image and likeness of the printed "pages": the text was organized into columns, there were titles and "normal text", tables etc. Just look at an online newspaper to find these continuities with printed newspaper. McLuhan said that "the content of any new medium is always some older medium". In other words, there are disruptive processes, but there are always continuities. The same can be said about other similar transformations in the past, for example, the transition from manuscript books to printed books in the fifteenth century. There was a radical rupture - the Gutenberg's revolutionary technology that allowed mechanical reproduction - but at the same time, continuity: the printed books reproduced the interface of manuscript books.

***MATRIZes** - In one of your texts (Scolari, 2009), you state that Roman Jakobson's (2003) definition for intersemiotic translation or transmutation as the process of "interpretation of verbal signs through systems of non-verbal signs" seems insufficient to analyze the transmedia storytelling. I would like you to talk a little about it.*

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Scolari - One thing is adaptation - the intersemiotic translation from one system to another - and another is the expansion of the narrative through various media (transmedia storytelling). One example: *The Lord of the Rings* was faithfully adapted to film by Peter Jackson and, at the same time, other texts were produced - for example, by fan communities -, which expand the narrative world imagined by Tolkien and incorporate new characters and plots. Transmedia narratives can be represented as a centrifugal process: from an initial text a narrative big bang is produced, in which new texts will be generated to reach user-generated content. From this perspective, transmedia storytelling generates a textual galaxy. The intersemiotic translations follow more linear (from book to screen, from comics to television etc.) and less explosive paths. Can we consider the adaptations a particular form of transmedia narratives? I do not believe that it is an issue to discuss. If we consider that every translation is a process of text transformation, in which you always lose and win something, maybe the adaptations could be incorporated as one of the possible strategies of transmedia narratives.

MATRIZes - *Several authors, among them Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and Umberto Eco, have studied the reception of literary and artistic work and the reader's active role in constructing the text. In your view, how these studies can help or limit the understanding of consumption and production of creative audiences – as Omar Calabrese (1999) and Manuel Castells (2009) respectively deal with?*

Scolari - The conception of "productive consumption" already appears in Marx in the second half of the nineteenth century. The production process always involves the consumption of something (raw material, labor, etc.) in the same way that the consumption process always has a productive dimension. Anyway, when the semiotics or the hermeneutic theorists speak about the interpretation as an active process, they referred to a cognitive, mental type of work with the text. Nowadays, besides the active interpretative practice that was already present in the mass media consumption, other productive practices are aggregated, in which the consumers, in many cases, assume the role of producer and, from the original text, create a new textual product, for example, a post on a blog or a video on YouTube. That's what Bourriaud called post-production; other researchers claim to a concept of Alvin Toffler in the 1970s: the prosumers, the sum of producer plus consumer. Also in this field, we need to refine the concepts: these are new

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phenomena that sometimes cost to be placed on discourse. There is an interesting element that affects the processes of interpretation. According to Eco, reading a book or watching a movie, we create *possible worlds*, hypothesis that anticipate the continuation of the story. As the story progresses, many of these hypothesis are not verified and we must discard them. This process is individual, possible worlds are a cognitive construction of the reader or viewer. Now we have a different phenomenon: in some cases, this construction of hypothetical possible worlds have become a collective process. One needs only to complete the transmission of an episode of a TV serie for a few minutes later, forums and web pages come in a state of agitation. The viewers discuss the text they have just seen, they analyze its possible continuations and discuss the characters and plot of the episode. In many cases, the construction of possible worlds is no longer an individual process to become a collective process that develops in the social networks.

***MATRIZes** - In your book *Hipermediaciones* (2008), you propose to analyze "an epistemological territory" in which "the theories of communication and digital technologies intercross". It is possible to say that the central axis of your reflection is the mediation, strongly marked in your work by semiotic and discursive perspectives. In Brazil, we can say that in terms of studies of interactive language for the internet, the main focus has been placed, according to Fiorin⁴, on the conversation analysis, leaving the discourse in the background. In your opinion, what are the main challenges the semiotic and discourse studies are going to face in digital communication?*

Scolari – In Europe, it was not the semioticists but the linguists who have studied the language on the networks, particularly the “condensed” languages of the internet forums and chats. On the semiotics of interactive digital communication, in the early 1990s, Umberto Eco has been committed to this study, including the hipertextual production. The famous Encyclopedia project – a multimedia encyclopedia of European culture in CD-Rom format – was supported by Eco and developed by some of his collaborators at the University of Bologna. Umberto Eco has also participated in discussions with hipertext theorists, as George Landow and Stuart Moulthrop. It is possible to say that Eco's current reflections on "the end of the book" derives from his debate on the possibilities of digital text. During this period, I was living in Italy, and when I had to decide the subject of my doctoral thesis, I was guided toward the development of

⁴ Cf. interview conducted by Roseli Figaro in MATRIZes, n.4.

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a semiotics of interfaces and interactive media. Part of this work appeared in 2004 in my book *Hacer Clic. Hacia una sociosemiótica de las interacciones digitales* (Barcelona, Gedisa), and in the fifth edition of the journal *DeSignis*, entitled *Corpus digitalis*, which I coordinated with Professor Rafael del Villar. The crossing between semiotics and new interactive forms of communication was beneficial to both. On the one hand, the semiotic studies need to confront new experiences and textualities of meaning production and interpretation to renew themselves and remain in good condition. The methods of semiotic studies are in danger of becoming paralyzed in the repetition of elaborated schemes for nearly half a century; in this context, the crossing between "old models" and "new media" brings a breath of fresh air to the semiotics. On the one hand, the study of new forms of interactive digital communication cannot prescind with a semiotic look. We cannot fully understand the "new media" if we do not think about the meaning production processes and the interpretation they generate. For example, the analysis of interfaces sometimes comes to quantitative studies of usability which do not consider others views and approaches. The semiotics has much to say on the interaction processes and the new reticular and multimodal textualities⁵.

MATRIZes - André Lemos (2010) and Pierre Levy affirm that the main advantage of the internet in relation to the massive media of the first half of the twentieth century (press, radio, television) "is that it allows everyone to express themselves without going through the power of journalist or another mediator" (Ibid.: 88, emphasis added), reconfiguring the public sphere, as the post-massive communication actions strenghten.

In other words, the internet would allow an expansion of the public sphere of communication, because alongside the "controlled and hierarchized massive systems", the internet would open up possibilities for citizens and even for the companies só they can transmit messages on different subjects, from different points of view. In short, this reconfiguration of the public sphere of communication would characterize the cyberdemocracy. What do you think about the scenario described by these two scholars of digital communication technologies?

⁵ More information about these discussions on SCOLARI, Carlos (2004) "Semiótica: el desafío digital (en 7 preguntas y 3 historias)", the presentation text of the homonym round table in the AISS congress (Lyon, july, 2004) <http://www.scribd.com/doc/31712963/SEMIOTICA-EL-DESAFIO-DIGITAL-EN-7-PREGUNTAS-Y-3-HISTORIAS>

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Scolari - Some profound changes are being verified in the public and political communication. On the one hand, if we speak of "public communication", we suppose that there is also a "private communication". Does this difference between public and private still exist? Or digital technologies of communication have invaded the wall that separated the two spaces? In the digital network, the private and the public are reconfigured and they return porous. The documents published by Wikileaks or the eternal questions about privacy on Facebook are good examples of these tensions and "porosities."

On the other hand, if we analyze these processes from an economical-political perspective, we could say that the mass media first *filter* and then *produce*. For example, in a newspaper, one first selects the information to publish, and then the newspaper is printed. The network communication has reversed that situation: now it is first published and then it is filtered. The information can appear in any unknown *blog* or web page, but the same dynamics of the network is responsible for making it grow and gain visibility through *links*... This reversion affects the scope of journalism, but also other sectors related to information, for example, the publishing companies. We are all potential creators and publishers of information and there is nothing easier and more economical than creating information in the network, but then it is the users interactions that eventually filter and prioritize the information. This change affects the role of the journalist - who must learn to live with the amateur informers - and the traditional business models. Another issue that directly affects the political practices is the fragmentation of the media ecosystem.

Until now the television and the press were fundamental media to build the agenda, in other words, to decide what society discusses on. In a context of increasing textual and audiences fragmentation, where the synchronic consumption which the broadcasting proposed tends to explode into millions of individual asynchronous situations, the question is "how do we build the political agenda in a network society? Who decides what to speak about when a growing part of society practices an individual and fragmented consumption of the media? "

MATRIZes - Henry Jenkins (2008) says that we must think about the convergence provided by digital communication technologies not only as a technological change, but as a process that modifies the relationship between technologies, industries, markets, genres and audiences. For him, convergence must be understood both from technological and cultural transformations in

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the producer and consumer poles of media products and in the ways these poles interact. What are the the main cultural transformations that can be observed within the current convergence framework?

Scolari - As I said earlier, *convergence* is another of those concepts that carry different meanings. There are several convergences. My colleague Ramón Salaverría published in 2003 in the journal *Chasqui* a paper – that for me is still valid – in which he describes various types of convergence: business, technological, professional and communicative. Each of them includes a sequence of trends and processes, for example, the merger of companies, the union of analog and digital newsrooms or the appearance of hybrid professional profiles, as the multimedia or multiplatform journalist. In this context, we can also speak of a *semiotic convergence* - where different languages and systems of meaning intersect and contaminate each other - and a *narrative convergence* in which the reports move from one medium to another. For Jenkins, the *cultural convergence* includes the transmedia narratives but also gives great importance to the production of content by users. As you can see, there are many convergences. The worst thing is that within a few years from now the concept of convergence will seem old, old-fashioned, and we will almost be forced to find a new word to name these processes.

MATRIZes - *Henry Jenkins and even you analyze and discuss in your books and papers the fictional universe created by transmedia narratives originated in american and japanese franchise industries as success cases. In your perspective, it is possible to imagine that other countries with communications industries with less "globalized" insertion can also successfully produce this kind of narrative?*

Scolari - The globalization and the economic power of a communication group obviously facilitates the production of transmedia narratives, but it is not the fundamental condition. Transmedia narratives can also be made in limited markets or even in the underground or alternative communication. You can make low cost transmedia communication, for example, investing in social networking, podcasting or online comics, creating web pages, blogs and wikis, or making simple videogames with Flash. Also, the creation of short videos (clips, mobisodes, webisodes, etc.) is now much easier to develop than a decade ago. This, combined

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to the content the users can offer, forms a panorama that may be really rich, even without great resources or infrastructure.

MATRIZes - *In our country, the telenovela has constituted over the years as the fictional program with greater audience and impact in Brazilian society. In your opinion, the narrative of telenovela, characterized by the opening of the text and by its long duration, allows the creation of fictional universes of transmedia storytelling?*

Scolari - I am not an expert in the study of telenovelas, but from the outside, this fascinating narrative world seems to be perfect for the transmedia development. In telenovelas, there are many characters, plots that arm and disarm, and a loyal audience that follows and "lives" the stories every day. Certainly this experience could be amplified and expanded through transmedia narratives. Another key element of telenovelas is the "secret", the information hidden by the characters. Now, as I said, the construction of hypotheses and possible worlds is an activity that tends to grow increasingly on the web. We can say that social networks are the ideal place to talk about the plot of a telenovela and to try to decipher its "secrets".

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