

Between media and communication: origins and modalities of a dichotomy in studies of the area¹

Entre mídia e comunicação: origens e modalidades de uma dicotomia nos estudos da área

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Abstract *The words “media” and “communication” often appear indistinctly in studies of the area. However, in epistemological terms this relationship may not be obvious. This text proposes that, although taken as synonyms, these expressions reveal an epistemological position, discussed from three aspects: (a) between the notions of media and communication as a study approaches; (b) between academic and market demands in the development of theories and (c) between the word “communication” and its use as a delimiting epistemic operator of Communication. These tensions are conceived from the research references of communication epistemology.*

Keywords: *Communication theory. Epistemology. University. Genealogy.*

Resumo *Embora as palavras “mídia” e “comunicação” muitas vezes apareçam de maneira indistinta nos estudos da área, em termos epistemológicos essa relação talvez não seja óbvia. Este texto propõe que, embora tomadas como sinônimas, cada uma dessas expressões revela um posicionamento epistemológico, discutido a partir de três aspectos: (a) entre as noções de “mídia” e “comunicação” como recorte de estudos; (b) entre demandas acadêmicas e de mercado na formação das teorias; (c) entre a palavra “comunicação” e sua utilização como operador epistemológico delimitador de uma área. Essas tensões são pensadas a partir dos referenciais de pesquisa da epistemologia da comunicação.*

Palavras-chave: *Teoria da comunicação; epistemologia; universidade; genealogia.*

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Introduction

To suggest, in the title of the paper, a difference between “means” and “communication” may seem to contradict a field of study that for more than a century has dedicated itself to dealing with the means of communication. Moreover, the vocabulary of Communication tends to address the terms as synonymous or interchangeable, along with other similar expressions.

If communication theories are evidently linked to the study of Communication, problems appear when the specificity of each theory is looked at more closely. A disparate set of theories and concepts for the most varied problems and objects are observed, reverberating positions of countless other areas of knowledge, defined as “communication” or as “media.”

According to Paiva (2008, p. 2), the “translation” of communication as media “tends to hastily compress all the meanings of *Communication*” and, therefore, “neutralizes the cognitive and aggregating complexity of the communicative phenomenon, which must be understood in its dynamic relationship with society and culture.”

However, each one of these expressions, in addition to their common use, indicates epistemological positions in studies of the area. A “means theory” is not necessarily a “communication theory,” despite the semantic relationships that can be built between the terms. In other words, when a communication theory is conceived in its epistemological dimension, there seems to be two main appropriations of the idea: The first focuses on the *means of communication* or media studies, while the other one considers communication as *relationships*, with a different scope.

In addition to a conceptual division, it is possible to observe the above when examining the development of research and theories circulating in the area, as done in other instances (MARTINO, 2009, 2010, 2015). In this observation, the scenario is a questioning of the relations between “means” and “communication,” or the notion that any communication theory is linked to a “media theory.”

What does someone engaged in the study of communication theories?

This question, formulated in different ways by several researchers – França (2001), Martino (2004; 2007), Sousa and Geraldés (2009), Martino (2009; 2010) and Quiroga (2015) – leads to a problem that would demand the examination of the theories of the area accompanied by a meta-reflection about the epistemological possibilities of considering the relevant link between a communication theory and the area of Communication – assuming that epistemic operators are responsible, although in a partial way, for the delimitation of an area of knowledge.

Torrico Villanueva (2004, p.11) mentions the “epistemological weakness” of Communication, which, even being sometimes understood as a “confluence space,” has not yet solved some of its identity problems.

In a way, as Felinto (2011) suggests – see also the discussion started by Pimenta (2011) and Ferreira (2012) – the lack of definition between media and communication is reflected in epistemological problematics when answering the prosaic question “What do you study?” in Communication. If, as the author points out, in some academic settings the response “media studies” can provide a satisfactory answer, it is inevitable not to note that even in Anglo-Saxon spaces this definition does not follow absolute and clear boundaries.

This work does not specifically discuss these ways of understanding or authors who sustain them, as previously done; it outlines some constitutive reasons for this division by focusing on what appears to be its genesis. While, for example, Ferrara (2016) addresses the distinction in epistemological terms, this research articulates the epistemological issue in terms of a genealogy of theoretical thought – not as a history of theories – where it is possible to find some lines of thought that support this development.

In the basic epistemological formulation of the study area, how was this double perspective formed, which up to now has resonances in the modularity and organization of the area, as suggested by many authors (Martino, 2001; Braga, 2001, 2010, 2014; Gomes, 2003; Lopes, 2003; 2007; Ferreira, 2003; Signates, 2013)?

It is suggested here that this epistemological dichotomy emerges from three main unresolved tensions present in the study area: (1) the lack of definition between the study of the “materiality of technology” or “communication phenomena” as a perspective of the area, which is anchored, among other factors, in (2) university and institutional demands, which either privilege technical and professional or theoretical matters. This is related to (3) the notion of communication, which already carries a wide possibility of resonances and interpretations.

1. The problem of the materiality of media

An epistemology of communication has to emphasize, firstly, the aspects of communication and then mention means and technology. This last aspect seems to be a specific modality of a relational phenomenon (i.e., communication) that is broader and more difficult to define than a specific media – a concept that is also fluid, but seems to present clearer boundaries in the area’s research.

Here, it is worth taking up the proposal of Verón (2013). It would certainly be possible to trace common elements, differences and overlaps between the notions of media and communication. However, the usage of both concepts suggests important differences. When working with issues of identity and difference in digital environments, a distinction between media and communication is emphasized.

The term “media” can be found in some research as synonymous with a certain apparatus with an artificial character, produced within a historical, economic and social context through which relationships are established – and the use of “intermediate” is only to emphasize the perspective of “being in the middle” – between the instances connected by media.

The nature of media connections are evidently linked to communicational processes in a complex articulation, with no possibility of reducing any part. Without getting into a detailed discussion about the concept – as Baitello (2000) did – some confluences of meaning can be observed from the definition established by its use in Communication.

In this case, the term “media” seems to refer, with little questioning, to a set of means of communication, being either mass or digital communication. These are highlighted because they are technological devices sometimes encompassed by an institutional framework in which media also means communication companies. In both conceptions, as an apparatus and institution, it is possible to observe the unilateral accentuation of a dimension that sometimes seems to do without the human and/or the social as a principle, context and purpose.

At certain points of the epistemological discourse in Communication, it is possible to observe a tendency to highlight media from a set of communicational processes, in order to make it the agent of actions and conditions for the holding of certain facts. Although technological elements are not in any way neutral – since they are elements crossed by vectors arising from their social conditions of production and existence – the perspective of them not existing, apart from when integrated with human actions, is lost. They do not have, at least for the time being, any possibility of real autonomy.

When a specific media is studied, isolated from its conditions of production and use, the result is the formation of a type of media ontology that attributes, to a greater or lesser extent, agency capacity. This can be translated into statements such as “The media does this,” “This application does . . .,” “This device does . . .” – used in a strict sense and devoid of human resonances.

For this aspect, even the unsystematic observation of the empirical routine of communication research, particularly in certain instances of formation, shows the construction of epistemological discourses. They are not interested in the articulation between media and social processes, or in human relations in digital environments. In fact, they are interested in the effects of digital media on certain aspects of human life, echoing some of the origins of mass communication research in the 20th century. Without denying the possibilities of this approach, when studying digital media, it is worth questioning to what extent it would not be necessary to observe, in its intersection with communicational

processes, something beyond a technical apparatus that agencies effects, something with a dynamic and contradictory relation.

This conception of a media ontology is also revealed by the stipulation of a certain temporality marked by the advent of certain technologies, putting aside not only the dimensions, flows and contradictions of its incorporation into daily life, but also the inequalities present in this process. This perspective can be identified in temporal markings in which chronological, if not social or historical ruptures, are defined from the appearance of a certain medium or technical device. To some extent, this type of procedure points to a discourse of absolute change, objectified in claimed discourse for an eternal resumption with each new invention – “this application has changed everything,” closer to strategies of dissemination than to a critical scrutiny.

At the same time, the counter-discourse that attributes little or no importance to media apparatuses, as if their emergence were not linked to any social aspect, seems to be equally reductive in the sense of eliminating existing relations between human beings and the culture produced by them, and that also produces us.

The lowering of digital environments to a minor phenomenon compared to others seems to lead, in turn, to a purposeful closure of the changes actually underway – in the form of a possibly correct denial of cause or causality, where the consequences and derivations of a particular phenomenon are put aside.

The conception of a media ontology tends – in a kind of semantic deviation that perhaps identifies oblique relations that are also in its conception – to blame technological or institutional apparatuses for human actions. The idea that “everything has changed” because of digital media, as well as the negative correlative that “nothing has changed” in spite of it, also takes the media as a central element, emptying the sense of the social origin of its forms, languages and discourses.

It is the incorporation of technical and technological devices into social processes that gives them some kind of sense from which it is possible to articulate them in the set of these same processes. In this

aspect, it seems necessary to emphasize that the relationship between media and social processes does not occur in terms of a determination from one side to the other – it would be equally difficult to defend the autonomy of social processes in relation to the means used to shape their relations – but in a complex dynamic of tension between their elements.

This seems to be enough, at the same time, to consider the specificity of this kind of difference – see Trivinho’s (2007) study of “dromocracy” in cyberculture. The possibility not only of reading, but also of sharing, remixing, transforming and commenting about circulating messages is added to this in order to understand that in digital environments the processes of appropriation obliterate any linearity, logic or predictability.

Thus, it would be reckless to think of media outside of its potential and potentiating relations, or as dependent on processes derived strictly from human practice. It is a question of observing the centrality of the human in communication processes without, evidently, leaving aside all ethological research responsible for revealing processes of observable meaning in certain animals, but reiterating this element for methodological reasons.

2. Between the professional-media techniques and theory in university space

In the 1980s, Venício Lima (1983) had already indicated an “identity crisis” in Communication courses from what could be understood as an epistemological problem related to the very definition of the parameters of a course with this approach. It would not be an exaggeration, perhaps, to indicate that this identity crisis identified at that moment has continued to the present day, seeming to have spread to the whole area of Communication.

Lima’s argument – followed by other writers who dealt with the problem of teaching Communication, such as Noetti (1972) or Lins da Silva (1979) – derived from a prevailing oscillation in the focus of courses.

On the one hand, a mold of a technical character is mainly aimed at the training of professionals who are able to meet the demands of a

professional market based on the model of large companies. On the other hand, there is a humanist or theoretical mold, which understands Communication courses as a specific space for the development of researchers and scholars who are not only capable of critically thinking about communicational phenomena, but also engaging in scientific research.

The absence of an articulation that could effectively resolve this dilemma resulted in problems, which were identified shortly after the institutionalization of Social Communication courses in 1969: the lack of epistemological parameters from which a branch of knowledge, based on the basic constitutive elements of a science, could be developed; and the delimitation of a set of phenomena within a specific objective that constituted a scheme of purposeful research – following, here, Sodré's (2014, p. 106) perspective in relation to this provision of academic practice.

The institutionalization of the area in terms of university education seems to have preceded its epistemological foundation. An indication of this phenomenon, for example, is the almost total absence of a bibliography on Communication prior to university courses. In fact, except for Décio Pignatari's (1967) works, which focused on issues related to design and information theory – to some extent, as a result from his poetic activity – and Gabriel Cohn's (1969) works, part of a perspective related to Critical Theory, there was not even a bibliography on Communication available for university education in Brazil.

Theoretical books on Communication written by Vellozo (1969), Sá (1973) and Beltrão (1973), for example, are openly the result of lectures in undergraduate courses, which were transformed into books to be used again in the classroom. Without discussing the validity of these works or their contribution to the area, it is interesting to note that their emergence not only met a university demand, but also shows the lack of an earlier bibliography that could suggest interest in this object of study.

Indeed, for the case of Brazilian, communication does not seem to have aroused the interest of researchers before the founding of

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Communication courses centered on professions and means. On the contrary, the existence of a few works related to Sociology or technical manuals is noted.

Despite the lack of initial epistemological clarity, the consolidation of Communication courses was quite rapid, which seems to have accentuated the conflict generated by the identity crisis pointed out by Lima (1983) and echoed thirty years later by Sodré (2014): while the institutional structure of the courses was ruled by qualifications focusing on professional training and the labor market, their epistemological basis for Communication was fragmented in a plethora of approaches from many fields of knowledge. According to Vizer (2011, p. 83), it is possible to point out that «when a discipline expands, both its interests and field of problems are conditioned by the social and economic pressure of technological change,» and it seeks to «maintain a <humanistic> perspective, finding itself subjected to unbearable tensions.»

This dichotomy seems to have deepened in the following years, and even increased with the expansion of university courses, which develop around specific qualifications, reiterating their professional origin and projecting epistemological questions. In this sense, it is possible to understand curricular guidelines that transform professional qualifications into courses as a result of this process of configuring Communication around professional activities and/or technologies. In academic practice this is visible in the area's discourse: No one graduates in Communication; they graduate in journalism, publicity or public relations.

To a certain extent, the area of Communication, developing itself from and around university courses, somehow inherited and broadened these problems from which, perhaps, some questions periodically come up, raising fundamental questions of what defines communicational knowledge itself.

The emergence and consolidation of postgraduate courses in the 1980s and their growth in the 2000s seem to exacerbate the issue even more. These spaces are no longer oriented by the immediate demand of a professional market (although it is possible to talk about an «academic

market,» this would divert the focus of this discussion) but by the education of researchers; it is a place where epistemological questions are continually emerging or becoming practical problems.

The experience of guiding students offers signs of daily life. Recurrent questions such as «Is my research in Communication?» or «Is my object from Communication?» suggest a deeper problem: how to delimit whether a study is actually of Communication. Choosing a theoretical framework, in particular, puts researchers in front of what seems to be the heart of the problem: What theories are *of* communication? Where are Communication concepts formulated from? Or is it, on the other hand, about studying the *means* of communication based on references from other areas of knowledge?

The references, coming from diverse areas, often lead researchers of communication to embark on other fields of knowledge in the search for epistemological operators that will then be applied as communication objects. Of course, there is no intention here to generalize, but only to illustrate an argument from practical situations.

It would not be idle to recall, from Wolton (2001) or Sodré (2014), that the definition of Communication itself derives from the theoretical input given, which is responsible for its delimitation. Each area of knowledge appropriates phenomena of Communication from their specific view – which is built in the history of the discipline – and each of them contributes in their own way, broadening understanding of the subject.

This creates at least two problems.

First, the fact that the communicational object is linked to a perspective that constitutes itself can lead to tautology: If there is an anthropological or sociological perspective in Communication, what would be the specificity of a communicational perspective on Communication? What would justify, for example, the inclusion or exclusion of research in a postgraduate Communication program?

At the same time, to what extent it is possible to talk about an area of Communication? The core of its categorization is not formed by

specific definitions, but by an object constituted in the juxtaposition of knowledge. Besides coming from other fields, this knowledge is not appropriate and reconstituted, but applied to objects that are supposed to be communicational. A specific definition of Communication is not proposed here, but indicating, as Braga (2014) does, a need for diversity in general leads to dispersion.

The taxonomic definition of the pertinence of a study does not therefore derive from preciosity in the search for a definition, but from the perspective of an axiology of the classificatory elements at stake within any epistemological search that defines Communication itself.

3. Modulations between the word and the concept of Communication

The polymorphism of the communicational phenomena seems to constitute another epistemological obstacle to the definition of the contours of a study area. Here, there is the need to suggest a terminological distinction that may perhaps contribute to situating the question. Following the problem outlined by Paiva (2008), Verón (2013) and Sodr e (2014) regarding the relationship between the word and the concept of Communication, it is worth looking for some definitions and tensions about both.

Several authors emphasize the communication perspective etymologically, trying to find in the roots of the term some clues to define what could be the theoretical framework of a research area. In general, this input tends to underline the relational aspect of communicational phenomena, establishing a basis between the various words within a close semantic field, such as communion, common, community and so on.

Merloo (1973, p. 168) draws a relation between the notion of communication and its radical “*munis*” to the concept of “*munia*,” which translates as “service,” and becomes the object of a more detailed reflection in Esposito (2005), Paiva (1999), Yamamoto (2014) and Sodr e (2014). In fact, some of the ambiguities present in the establishment of a concept of Communication can xxxxxxxxx. As Lima (1983) indicates

the ambiguity of the term, which ends up, in its root of “making common,” both the ideas of “transmission” and “sharing”, elements that would become, in the author’s view, the dominant points of view in the construction of communication models, either focused on the work of transmission (of a unidirectional nature) or in the act of sharing (of a dialogical character).

However, if the meaning and etymology of the word are known, and of course without neglecting the contribution that this type of research offers, it may be possible to expose another problem: If the meaning of the term is known, difficulties seem to emerge from the transformation of the word into a concept, which is understood as an epistemological operator capable of handling a relatively defined portion of phenomena that, seized by the word, lose their dynamic reality to gain in terms of intelligibility.

If it is possible to trace an origin of the word “communication,” its operationalization as a concept capable of handling a certain reality seems to be much simpler. The concept, at its oblique intersection with the phenomenon to make it operational, does not dispense with limits capable of offering some definition to what is being studied. The *definition* of Communication seems to be separated from the *concept* of Communication in the sense that the idea of a concept presents itself as interconnected to a research perspective due to its definition. It would be worthwhile, in this sense, to ask not only what communication means or what words are of the area, but what types of phenomena are conceptualized as communication.

Indicating the polysemy of the answer may not be foolhardy. Somehow, as Vizer (2011, p. 98) points out, Communication studies tend to delimit the phenomenon and apprehend this notion mainly from matrices that favor the social or language (without necessarily talking about Sociology or Linguistics, but inputs more or less originating from and directed to these areas). It is a perspective close to what Breton and Proulx (2002) argue, or even Miege (2000) and Wolton (1998), despite differences in perspective.

As suggested by Verón (2013), Muchielli (1991), Wolton (2011) and Vizer (2011), among others, Communication studies are developed around a relational perspective like a social practice focused on the development of meanings. Without neglecting the differences between these authors, it is possible to question to what extent a concept of relation that emphasizes the proper communicational approach can be established, as far as the relationship between the relational and the construction of meanings is also an object of, for example, Anthropology or Linguistics.

Although European and American academic environments seem to have partially resolved the issue by choosing the term “media” or the old “mass communication” to define the area, there are still certain ambiguities. Wright (1968) and DeFleur (1976) or, more recently, the textbooks of Severin and Tankard (2001) and McQuail (2005), solve the issue by considering mass communication as an object of knowledge, spread in various media – TV, radio, cinema – as a study object.

It is worth noting, however, that this does not mean eliminating polysemy from the notion of Communication, since similar studies, both old (Dance, 1973; Littlejohn, 1976; Mortensen, 1980) and more recent – Lazar (1996); Severin and Tankard (2001); Crowley and Mitchell (1994); and Holmes (2005) – use the term “communication theory” to refer to media, mass communication or, to a lesser extent since 1990, digital media.

The Iberian environment does not seem to offer a specific division either, as suggested by the works of Santos (1992), Freixo (2012) or, previously, the collection of Moragas Spa (1981), which define communication theory as focusing on the so-called “mass media.”

The semantic field covered by media studies, therefore, is only partially equivalent to communication theory. At the same time, as indicated, because of the conceptual polysemy of media in Communication studies, the perspective of media studies does not necessarily seem to contribute to the definition of the object, but only to what seems to be an immediate resolution of an epistemological problematic that does not subsist to wider scrutiny.

The transition of the word “communication” to a conception of communication, as observed, does not seem to be something clear in the studies of the area. Behind what could be understood as an element of transparency – which is almost evident when talking about Communication studies – the perspective seems to be directed much more to the idea of media studies than to a communicational phenomenon that can be separated from the media.

This does not mean in any way that this transition is not the object of research excellence. The interlocution between Braga (2011), Marcondes (2010; 2012) and Ferrara (2013) developed, among other spaces, in the *Compós Working Group for Communication Epistemology*, seems to be searching exactly for a concept of Communication from which some of these problems can be rearticulated.

The purpose, in this sense, is obviously not to suggest any kind of exclusivity for Communication as a discipline, but to think about it in its specificity. The asymmetrical balance between Communication as a discipline and as a field, reviving Braga’s (2012) definition, can result in the constitution of a contribution that, based on Sodr  (2014), could be understood as something that conserves characteristics of juxtaposed disciplines without providing an element of dialogue between them.

Braga (2010) indicates how often the communicational element presents itself as what the author calls an “epiphenomenon” of a plethora of diverse social processes, from which the communicational element, even in all its diversity, is only apprehended as a given formed from these processes, without the centrality of the framework as an object, returning to what Martino (2007) could presuppose. The search for what Signates (2013) indicates as “specifically communicational” does not always appear as an epistemological problem in the field. The supposed transparency of the word corresponds to an opacity of the concept from which the epistemological foundation of the area is in a constant tension.

Final considerations

The approach of an area of knowledge tends to bring to the surface the threads that constitute it in its dynamics. This is no different for Communication. Daily work in the research environment can suggest the perception of certain problems that, located in some fundamental points of its epistemology, end up being spread in almost all of the constitution of knowledge produced in this area.

Some of the tensions pointed to in this text – the media materiality issue, institutional and professional demands, and the polysemy of the concept – tend to manifest themselves on a considerably larger scale when one thinks not only in terms of the identity constitution of the area, as done by Martino (2001), but also in several other aspects. The definition of an empirical research object, which tends to subordinate itself to the problems of the object knowledge of an area, becomes more complicated when the parameterization of the relationship between the two terms is not clear.

Rather than taking part in any of the dichotomies indicated, which would close the act of questioning – an element present in the original concerns of this text – this text sought to establish three points in the genesis of communication theories, where these elements can find some of their origins.

As noted in the beginning, the notion of communication is directly connected to the concept of means, especially because of decades of studies on the means of communication. On the other hand, the questions underlying this type of study – Which means? What communication? And how are they related? – if observed more closely, show that the apparent obviousness of the relation does not withstand a more elaborate investigation without showing some of their profound contradictions and the asymmetry present as original tensions in the foundations of the area.

Thinking about these questions in the openings of new questions may perhaps contribute more than just sketching an answer to work the theoretical problems of Communication – something that, far beyond

what could be a mere conceptual elaboration, is reflected in the everyday problems of education and research.

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