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Communicative Empowerment: Narrative Skills of the Subjects

Empoderamiento comunicacional: competencias narrativas de los sujetos

ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the educommunicational consequences of the transformations of mediated communication in the process of digitization. We present qualitative empirical evidence on the use of mass media and digital technologies from the digital convergence of media, the industry and the resulting complementary formats. Television, in particular, has experienced a process of changing its formats and expressive content by delivering interactivity, facilitating the expression of subjects by means of different technological devices. So from the perspective of the subject, it is observed that the new technological devices and their new grammars are utilized provided they contribute with meaning to his daily practice and biographical trajectory. Nevertheless, digital inclusion policies have focused only on maximizing access to equipment and digital literacy associated to technology applications and not to the narrative skills of the subjects. It is therefore necessary to generate new concepts that allow new methodological guidelines, in communication and education academic processes, to promote the use of new emerging digital spaces for communicational empowered citizens, that is, from competent to tell (expressive skills) to more specifically, tell oneself (as an individual) and tell us (collectively). Finally, these will be the expressive spaces of the new television with citizen's expressions, fostered by converging elements of digital technology.

RESUMEN

El presente trabajo analiza las consecuencias educomunicativas de las transformaciones en la comunicación mediada por el proceso de digitalización. Se presenta una constatación empírica de carácter cualitativo en el uso de los medios masivos y las tecnologías digitales desde la convergencia digital de los soportes, la industria y la consecuente complementariedad de los formatos. En este sentido la televisión ha vivido un proceso de cambios de sus contenidos y contenidos expresivos, entre otros aspectos al entregar interactividad, facilita la expresión de los sujetos, desde los distintos dispositivos tecnológicos. Así a nivel de los sujetos se observa que los nuevos dispositivos tecnológicos y sus nuevas gramáticas son usados en la medida que asumen un sentido en sus prácticas cotidianas y trayectorias biográficas. No obstante, las políticas de inclusión digital solo se han centrado en la maximización del acceso a equipamiento y en una alfabetización digital asociada a aplicaciones y no a las competencias narrativas de los sujetos. Por tanto, es necesario generar nuevas conceptualizaciones que permitan nuevas orientaciones metodológicas formativas en comunicación y educación que promuevan el uso de los nuevos espacios digitales emergentes como ciudadanos empoderados comunicacionalmente, es decir, competentes para relatar (habilidades expresivas) más específicamente relatarse (como individuo) y relatarlos (colectivamente). Finalmente, estos serán los espacios expresivos de la nueva televisión con sus expresiones ciudadanas, propiciados por los elementos convergentes de la tecnología digital.

KEYWORDS / PALABRAS CLAVE

Convergence, communicational policies, citizenship, empowerment, narrative competences.
Convergencia, políticas de comunicación, ciudadanía, empoderamiento, competencias narrativa.

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1. Introduction

When identifying the strategic factors of the guiding principles of the future progress in the field of communications and education, these can be seen to make up three main axes: the complexity and permanent changes to the information-communications systems; the characterization of the «prosumers» of the same system; and proposing possible strategies to strengthen the narrative competences (through the mass media and information and communication technologies) of civilians, starting with children and adolescents.

The present study attempts to take into consideration the need for an integral communications policy that deals with, from the state, the different dimensions implied by the development of the information-communications industry and, especially, the narrative competences required by subjects in order to participate in the Society of Information.

The above is founded upon qualitative research that shows, from the subjects themselves, the strategic nature of mass media and ICT in socially excluded sectors.

2. From industrial media to information-communications system

Aguaded (1999) indicates that the four strategic elements to be incorporated into education for television are:

- Family, by constituting the natural space for television usage.
- School, because of its central formative function.
- Civil society, because of its ability to «press» for a television for all citizens.
- Communications media, as it is responsible for the contents and programs they show.

These four mediating elements will probably continue to be fundamental as far as the challenges to researching the dynamizing factors of education and television. However, the scenario has changed, becoming even more complex; in just over fifteen years the mass media system was transformed by the digitalization of many processes, a situation which also affected the basic institutions: from politics to the school, from entertainment to economics. Castells (1996) indicates that it has to do with structural changes and not simply cosmetic technological innovations.

In this way, it is now possible to verify that there is a technological convergence of digital platforms that has modified the industry and media consumption. There is also an imminent need to understand, within this new context, the forms of use and appropriation

of traditional supports like television and the instances of symbolic participation acquired by the audiences as converted into «prosumers», based on the interactive options offered by even the web versions of these same TV channels. In this sense, it is necessary to consider that the subjects fit into a single consumption diet, the «new and old» communication devices (Tudela, Tabernero & Dwyer, 2008).

On the other hand, children and teenagers have been important in the implementation and understanding of these changes at a cultural level, and not only a communicational one. They form, in many cases, the vanguard of adoption of broader social and communications innovations. Mead (1971) stated that a younger age group was beginning to be formed, that would produce its own cultural-symbolic systems, even without fully considering the proposals of traditional agencies of socialization such as the family and school. Probably, during the first few years of this century, characterized by high-speed changes, it is precisely the teenagers and children who are protagonists of many symbolic proposals. However, to this we should also add marketing and publicity that have broadened their «protagonism».

The growing complexity of the phenomenon leads us to question the categories used up to this moment and that are obviously valid for certain historical periods. It is rational to begin reflecting on new categorizations to understand this phenomenon from a more cultural-communicational perspective rather than based on age (Saintout, 2006).

ICT has assumed an increasingly central position in the daily lives of social subjects of this century, and the differences provoked by the digital gap are still insurmountable in many cases. This is no more than the expression of structural differences with socio-cultural origins, so we should refer to it more as a digital social gap, and therefore the action of almost all states to design and implement school and community programs to help minimize differences of access and use of ICT. The digital gap in its one-dimensional version, limited to access, has changed to a multi-dimensional perspective (Villanueva, 2006) which allows us to approach the issue from the socio-communicational sphere.

Ford (1999) already used the concept of information-communications to describe how ICT and traditional media make up an integrated system of growing importance not only in communications but also as a strategic economic sector. The new communicational devices make up a group of digital resources that inhabit the daily lives of the subjects. Never-

theless, the social differences in which information-communications are inserted are multiple and not merely limited to access to equipment, but they are also related to cultural factors. Ford (1999: 162) indicates that, «at the center of all of this is the abysmal difference between cultural, technological and economic power of mergers and the North Americanization that faces various and multiple cultures».

3. From receptors to «prosumers»

Different studies (UNICEF, 2010; Robinson, Ketsnbaum, Neustadt & Álvarez, 2002) indicate that digital devices tend to have a similar importance as that of TV in children's and teenagers' daily lives. However, if this phenomenon is associated with socioeconomic differences, we can see that children and teenagers from lower-income levels have less access to ICT than those from middle and upper classes. These would appear to continue using TV to a significant degree due to a lack of options for using digital devices (Consejo Nacional de Televisión de Chile, «National Television Council of Chile», 2009). This is especially relevant because the social uses of information-communications probably constitute an important change. Jenkins (2008: 14) proposes that cultural convergence is one of the attributes of emerging communicational practices, understood as «the flow of contents through multiple media platforms and the migratory behavior of media audiences willing to go anywhere in search of the desired type of entertainment experiences».

This places communicational practices on a cultural-symbolic plane, in which subjects use technological devices as a form of what Lull (2000) calls symbolic power, with the central distinction that it no longer has to do with the construction of meaning based on what is seen/read/heard from the industrial communications media. Rather, convergence poses the possibility of generating symbolic proposals that take into account the experience of the subjects themselves, communicational products that in «form and content» express their individual points of view: feelings which make up emotions and ideas to be shared.

What is also relevant is that these expressions can be shared not only on the local/national level, but also in regional/global spaces, or more precisely what Sinclair (2000) calls «geo-linguistic regions».

Subjects have the possibility of receiving and generating proposals for meaning, based on the use of information-communication system devices; they are able to generate «stories» and «micro-stories» that tie them to concerns and issues that involve their own experience and that of others. In other words, it entails talking about oneself from a space that involves «otherness».

These symbolic spaces of conversation are evidently different, from issues proposed by mass media to neighborhood problems, from an environmental perspective to reduced employment opportunities, from criticism of the educational system to their own affective experiences.

However, on all of these planes, it is not only

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necessary to have «experience» from which to «recount», nor devices and necessary «digital literacy», but also a certain cultural capital is needed (Bourdieu, 1997). Although it is true that available digital technology allows those with access to it the opportunity to participate in communicational experiences beyond their daily terrain (the daily here-and-now) this does not necessarily imply having a «domain» over communication, given the differences in cultural capital and narrative competences. Tudela, Taberner and Dwyer (2008: 103) mention two categories: on the one hand, the «initial level» of use that implies managing e-mail and Internet navigation and, on the other, an «advanced» level that involves the active participation in the generation, production, edition and distribution of contents.

Nevertheless, having access to computer equipment does not necessarily imply the management of expressive resources to transform them into communicatively active subjects. A study done in Santiago, Chile, PNUD (2006) shows the limitations to access/use and limits imposed by precarious living conditions on the symbolic realm. Although this certainly does not imply determinism, it does take into account a «context» that affects the communicational competences of the subjects. It concludes that «teenagers from low-income families, once they are

entertainment (games), in other words, at the «initial level».

On the other hand, Phillippi and Peña (2010)¹, in a study on the development of women who use public-access telecentres, showed a trend of more intensive use by those women that found meaning in the Internet, while they show differing levels of domain over navigation.

Therefore, the uses in which the subjects participate require having access, managing basic elements of digital literacy, and it is especially relevant to have constructed a sense of Internet use, that is, the pretext established by the subjects to relate their own biography (socio-culturally situated) to some determined uses. The concept of social uses, in communicational terms, comes from studies by Lull (1999) with families in the United States and research by Martin Barbero (1992) in Colombia based on soap operas. In both cases, the social uses are determined by the subject and his or her micro/macro social context, which allows for the construction of specific meanings.

To illustrate the concept of the meaning of Internet usage, we will present four cases, which come from the above-

mentioned studies and the authors' experience in training workshops with classroom teachers:

a) Meaning: promise of overcoming and consolidating. In the community of Lo Prado, in northwest Santiago, a marginal community built during the government of Salvador Allende as a result of squatting by homeless people, three families live together: the in-laws who have lived there since the house was built, Evelyn, her husband and 13-year-old daughter and the other son of the homeowners with his wife. To the original house, a series of rooms have been added for children that, for lack of options, gradually came to stay there.

Evelyn's husband works in a company that installs cable TV, and he spends most of the day outside of the house, since he also has to travel outside of Santiago. This couple's main concern is that their daughter receive a good education and avoid spending

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disconnected from their schools, highly reduce their use of the Internet. When added to high rates of unemployment, it would over time generate a lack of opportunities to apply what they learned in school and a difficulty for reintegrating into the world of New Information and Communications Technology in the future». This shows how the use of ICT is associated with the position and context of the subject, that is, structural living conditions, also opening up other questions, such as, «why use technology?» (PNUD, 2006: 98).

This is backed by another study by Avendaño and Phillippi (2009) on the use and valuation of digital technologies in working-class sectors, using focus groups and ethnographic interviews. It shows that the meaning that subjects give to the Internet and other digital devices generates differences with regards to uses beyond communication (e-mail, chat) and

so much time with the teens from the neighborhood, since they believe that she will only learn «bad habits», in this case associated with delinquency and drugs that, according to them, are rife throughout the street. Because of this, they have invested in a large TV and at the start of the year they bought a computer for their daughter to do her homework. For Evelyn and her husband, the computer and TV are factors that keep their daughter at home, so that she can concentrate on her studies, without needing to go out on the street. However, Evelyn's daughter has also managed to develop a certain domain over the Internet: she has her own Fotolog, she comments on sites of interest and connects with people from other cultural and geographic areas that are different from her own. The main problem has been to make the monthly payments of the Internet service, and since money is always scarce they have agreed to share the costs of the service with the sister-in-law. This has allowed them to make the monthly payments not too far beyond their due date, although they are not always so successful with this.

b) Meaning: development of new abilities. Rolando lives a few blocks from Evelyn. He is in the sixth grade, he is 13 years old and since two years ago he has a computer that was given to him by an uncle that lives in another neighborhood and who had replaced his PC with a new one. When he gave it to Rolando, he mentioned that it had a few small problems that he did not know how to fix. It was at that moment that Rolando, out of necessity, decided to «repair» computers that had minor imperfections, and he became the neighborhood expert. Although demand for his services is not very high, when he gets repair jobs that take him only 30 or 45 minutes to fix, he invites his friends to have ice cream and sodas. Since he knows that software and applications are constantly being updated, he has become a good friend of the teacher who mans the computer lab at the school where he studies, in order to stay up-to-date and to have a representative. Here a horizon of new potential professional practices has opened up to him, as well as the search for specialized information that may be useful for his «trade».

c) Meaning: window to diversity. Carolina is an elementary school teacher at a private school in a very exclusive neighborhood of Santiago. She has been working in the area of language for the past few years and is in charge of groups of adolescents that, in her opinion, are not really connected to the world beyond their homes and neighborhood. She believes that the true educational process is not limited to developing

the curricular contents, but rather it is also for forming citizens who are conscious of the complex reality of the country in which they live. Because of this, she tends to encourage her students to be more open-minded and autonomous, as well as to use media communications tools to access situations beyond their daily lives. Communication media such as television and the Internet make this job easier since the analysis of the television and information agenda that she asks of them, allows them to establish necessary bridges to cross in order to form a more comprehensive idea of the country. She has generated a project involving blogs and online social networks to favor the discussion of public issues.

d) Meaning: tool for communication and belonging. Maria lives in a working-class neighborhood in West Santiago. Her neighborhood was built a few years ago by the state, and it consists of four-story apartment buildings, with a minimum square footage to house a family of four or five people. However, various circumstances have led the inhabitants to receive other family members or children along with their families. During the past few years, Maria has converted to Protestantism (sometimes called Evangelical) after conversations with a neighbor. In addition to going to church on Sundays, she frequently listens to Christian radio programs and, especially, goes to an Internet café that is a few blocks from her house. She uses communications tools that offer Internet in order to stay in touch with her church community. In this sense, Internet allows her to feel part of a group with a high sense of belonging. Although she has also become more open to social issues and current events, which have generated greater commitment and involvement with the situation in her own neighborhood, even taking on a certain informal leadership position.

The converging dimensions in these synthesized examples of the relationship people establish with mediated communications (media communications and ICT) allow us to establish the following:

- In all cases (saturation) the uses of communicational and digital devices help people to develop means of communication with individuals that they have previously known and also with whom they seek to intensify their friendship. In this way, it allows them to overcome the limits of their own everyday experiences, de-territorializing communication.

- There is a reason for the use of the communicational devices. The subjects presented recognize a «before» (Orozco, 1996) from which they construct a media/digital diet based on their own subjectivity.

- Likewise, the development of grammatical and technological competences allows them to participate in an interactive communicative process –prosumers– that entails the development of comprehensive and expressive abilities.

- There is a convergence between «off» and «on» between mediated communication and the interpersonal and group communicative processes. There is no gap separating digital from analog or both these from daily practices. The communicative practices are inserted into their lives.

- There is an interrelationship between biography/context/text. The texts appropriated and generated by the subjects are not only related to the socioeconomic and cultural context but also to the paths of their own life stories.

- Because of this, it can be seen that the dual categories that have been used: digital/analog; on/off; receptor/broadcaster do not make sense in the case of these subjects that, despite their limited economic conditions, are able to use their symbolic power to access different points of view, establish relationships, and definitely use their communicational capacities to project their lives.

Nevertheless, these micro life stories are exceptions within the context of the mentioned studies, in which the «initial level» tends to dominate.

4. The fifth element: communications policies

Aguaded (1999) reasonably affirms that, by definition, there are four forms of television mediation: family, school, civil society and the communications media themselves. However, at the beginning of this century and the end of the 20th, we have seen that communications policies have once again been given strategic importance, primarily because of the process of digitalization and the need to regulate the development of the information-communications industry. This fifth element has meant that different governments have generated their own programs of digital inclusion, based on the verification of a social digital gap, especially in the countries of the Southern Hemisphere. These programs go from the subsidy of the demand for computer equipment by telecentres, to digital governance and the incorporation of digital technology in schools. In this way, governments have multiplied their efforts to achieve universal access, which has occurred almost at the same time as the digitalization of TV.

In Chile, from the publication of the «Blue Book» (1999) during the presidency of Eduardo Frei to «Digital Strategy» by the government of Michelle Ba-

chelet (2008), we can see the progression of public policies in this area. However, although progress has been made in the development of programs that maximize universal access and digital literacy, specifically in spaces of citizen participation there is much more to be done to develop communicational and narrative competences. The PNUD report (2006:192) indicates that, «skeptical users have appeared, pointing out the Internet's limits to influencing the public sphere, as well as the Chilean social characteristics that also impede this from happening». This demonstrates the communicational deficit of Internet and, by extension, the communications media, which have a high level of concentration (Sunkel & Geoffroy, 2001).

From the communicational perspective and, especially, from Communications and Education, it is necessary to review the conceptualizations and make proposals to contribute to the formation of critical, conscientious citizens with narrative competences that allow them to participate in information-communicational public spaces, both individually and collectively. The development of terrestrial digital TV may provide the opportunity to question the dimensions of the public sphere and open possibilities for participation that this new technological advance offers. To do so, we need to strengthen the subjects' abilities to offer greater options in the construction of new meanings.

Communications policies of this century must incorporate new dimensions in their designs, so as to take on the challenges posed by technological changes and new business models of the industry. It is essential that they incorporate a new perspective, from communications and education, that takes into consideration the formation of a subject to communicationally participate in the new possibilities offered by digital TV and various devices that offer access to it, from traditional home appliances and mobile phones; from the office and the classroom.

In short, the TV of the future, which in a way is already here, is more and more interactive, pushing aside the old Fordist TV that only allowed symbolic appropriation. Now, it is not only possible to see and obtain meaning from new physical spaces (mobile phones), but also to create and distribute material, in essence construct MY television. These changes at the level of the uses given to them by subjects must be included in Communications Policies, insofar as they are a part of communication law in the 21st century. For this, it is not enough to merely demand plurality at the level of mediated communications, but also to

provide public programs to train citizens in the use of communications.

Now it is commonplace to say that political circumstances are affected by the media and that the democracy of surveys is influenced by the media's agenda, and therefore it is necessary that the subjects not only have access to elections and opinion surveys, but that they also begin to participate in the public sphere through their own stories. This has already begun as indicated by Castells (2009:395), «the public sphere is a space of social and meaningful interaction where ideas and values are formed, transmitted, backed up and fought for, a space that ultimately becomes a training camp for action and reaction».

The challenge is to institutionalize these practices from Communications and Education and, more specifically, from education through communications, obviously including television and ICT.

5. Towards communicational empowerment

Bauman (2002: 37) points out that the social processes of this liquid modernity tend to «transform human identity from something given as a task, making the actors responsible for carrying out this task and the consequences (collateral effects) of their work»; it is what Beck (2001) calls institutionalized individualism. In this sense, it is not strange that digital technologies and the transformations of large industrial media such as TV have to accommodate themselves to the new subject and even go to where the individual is. Large audiences that are socio-culturally situated in a specific space and time, correspond to another time, heavy Fordism that has been replaced by nomadism and mobility. This does not mean the disappearance of the social realm, but rather an eclipse of categories to understand it. In this way, we move from identity to identities in social contexts that are increasingly changing and «liquid» (Touraine, 2005).

Likewise, the solid media industries must adapt more quickly to subjects and communities that have greater possibilities, not just for selecting contents but also for interacting in public spaces. For many years, the main job of Communications and Education, especially in the Latin American context, was to «multiply voices», in a public space seized by just a few (Kaplún, 1985). The analytical and methodological proposals tended, on one hand, towards generating a conscientious and critical view of the mass media and, on the other, sought to create communicational spaces and devices for marginal groups to express themselves. Although media concentration continues to be a reality, having critical capacities is still a relevant factor,

and today there are information-communicational devices that offer the possibility of expressing the viewpoints of the subjects. Perhaps an individualized expression that overshadows group expression, but it is precisely from there that we see new challenges emerge like those we mentioned earlier; today, citizenship is lived at the level of media communications, a both individual and collective experience.

The proposal made by Communicational Empowerment seeks to take on the new challenges posed by changes in the subjects, social processes and new devices and grammars that include «new and old media». There are three dimensions from which to define and construct this educational-communicational perspective.

The first dimension is generated from citizenship and civil society. Both the market and the state provide the resources, knowledge and technology to make their points of view public and to exercise symbolic pressure. Even the area of strategic communication, which first appeared in companies, has been adopted by the state and politics. There are some relevant cases in which strategic communications have been used in the third sector, but not widespread. What is necessary is for the people to promote and strengthen themselves communicationally.

A second aspect is oriented around the development of the narrative capacities of the subjects, in other words, promoting expressive abilities to construct stories. This is associated with a certain level of cultural capital, since we understand that communication and culture are two inseparable dimensions. For this reason, it is also assumed as a task for educational institutions, due to their role as reproducers of the cultural capital of the subjects. Narrative competences imply critical and reflexive abilities, not only for media communications but also for the social context of the subjects. Additionally, it assumes not only familiarity with technology, but domain over the emerging grammars that allow a subject, for example, to tell their stories in 140 characters. This obviously has to do with cultural matrices such as the use of language, discourse strategies, among other factors.

In third place is the coordination among the subjects themselves to be able to organize themselves with regards to common objectives or social movements. Obviously, it is also possible to participate in dialogues that emerge in the media spaces (such as TV and social networks). The inter-textual dialogues are a frequent practice today, TV journalists use online social networks not only to present their points of

view, but they also use topics that are of interest to the people. It is evident that there is a dialogue between, for example, «tweeters» and certain communicators that, although still weak, is starting to increase. These are the new converging communicative realities: spaces of social coordination. They are not isolated cases, but rather show a more widespread phenomenon of collective experiences in which «on» and «off» are intertwined.

«Communicational empowerment» as a socio-communicative space, in which subjective is mixed with social, critical analysis with expression, also implies a methodological direction that takes from Latin American active-participative traditions that have gained strength during the past 40 years and even earlier with the concepts of Paulo Freire. These continue to work if they are re-appropriated during this new century, within the framework of the new technological scenario and emerging social dynamics, precisely because they focus on work with sectors that have been socially excluded but, as we saw in the four cases presented, are communicatively active when they find a meaning beyond that of entertainment, although this is certainly an integral part of the pleasures of communications.

Communicational Empowerment implies learning to tell about the new social context with the available communicational technologies (new TV and ICT) in order to help subjects talk about themselves and for us to talk collectively about ourselves.

Notes

¹ Phillippi, A. & Peña, P. (2010). «Mujeres y nuevas tecnologías en Chile: el impacto del acceso público a las TIC, la inclusión digital de género», a paper currently being written under the 2010 Amy Mahan Fellowship Program to Assess the Impact of Public Access to ICTs. The paper is studying working-class sectors of the Metropolitan and O'Higgins Regions with regards to the implementation of a program called «Quiero Mi Barrio» (I Love My Neighborhood, in English). This paper provides an analysis of the results of surveys and the first focus groups held in a neighborhood located in south Santiago.

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