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# Multifaceted Communication Processes: Which Theories?

Lucia Santaella



In the South American context, especially in Brazil, the main theories adopted by scholars of communication studies for decades have been the critical theories rooted in the Frankfurt School, mainly represented by the works of T. W. Adorno and J. Habermas. With the advent of the new media culture, also called digital or cyberculture, the trends in critical theory took new directions with the works of J. Baudrillard and P. Virilio. Among the new key issues of the critical debate were “the end of real time”, “the collapse of space”, “the agony of the real”, “the disappearance of experience”, “the obsolescence of the body”, “dromocracy”, “immateriality”, and “simulation”.

In the era of fixed Internet connections, when access to the Web depended on wires—now also referred to as the first phase of cyberspace and cyberculture—the above issues seemed to provide an adequate account of the state of the art in the domain of

communication. The opposition between the real and the virtual gave rise to disturbing questions concerning the way virtualization seemed to pose a threat to the real texture of life. However, the advent of mobile devices and the rapid evolution of cyberspace from fixed to mobile Internet are now beginning to challenge the dichotomy of the virtual and the real in light of the many overlaps and interrelations between both.

The aim of this paper is to emphasize the relevance of the concept of hybridization, and to show that being hybrid has been part of the very essence of cyberspace from the start. The trend towards hybridization has reached its climax in the present mixtures of virtual and physical spaces, especially with locative media. As these media nurture a pluralistic cultural ecology, their multifaceted communication processes demand new theories that more adequately describe and analyze the diversity of their implications.

### **1. Hybridism in Various Fields**

Hybrid, hybridism, and hybridization are the attributes that have most frequently been used to characterize various facets of contemporary societies. These words can be applied, for example, to social forms, cultural mixtures, media convergence, the eclectic mix of languages and signs and even to the constitution of the human mind.

In the field of culture, the word “hybrid” first achieved its notoriety when Néstor García Canclini (1989) published *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies to Get In and Out of Modernity*. Indeed, it is hard to think of a more appropriate word than “hybrid” to characterize the instabilities, interstices, shifts and reorganizations across cultural settings, the

interactions and reunions of levels, genres and forms of culture, the intersection of identities, the transnationalization of culture, the rapid growth of technology and communication media, the expansion of cultural markets and the emergence of new consumption habits. With this book, Canclini won the Latin American Studies Association prize in 2002, as the best book about Latin America; since then, the concept of hybridism has become ubiquitous in contemporary socio-cultural analysis.

Almost synonymous with syncretism and fusion, the adjective “hybrid” was preferred by Canclini because it encompasses several intercultural mixtures—not simply racial. This word also allows for the inclusion of modern forms of hybridization better than “syncretism”, a term which usually refers to religious forms of fusion or traditional symbolic mergers.

What Canclini was bringing forth as the defining characteristics of Latin American cultural territories coincides with the agenda of post-modernity at an international level, starting in the 1980s, with the deepening of the transnationalization of culture and the rapid growth of technology and communication media. Within the post-modern scenario, the term “hybridism” found fertile ground to expand, especially in the context of the sort of post-colonial criticism according to which the idea of homogeneous cultures, contiguous and consensual transmission of historical tradition and ethnic cultures should undergo a profound revision (see Bhabha, 1998).

However, the rapid expansion and the more intense usage of the word “hybridism” was destined to emerge with the explosion of digital culture or cyberculture in the mid-1990s. Again, the winds were blowing in Canclini’s direction with the emergence of global networks of communication accelerated by the WWW, whose media convergence and mixture of systems of signs have been referred to by the terms hybridism, hybridity and hybrid.

In 1984, in his quintessential cyberpunk novel, *Neuromancer*, science-fiction writer William Gibson coined the term cyberspace. Although the author had no clear idea of its object of reference, this concept was a premonition. Shortly afterwards, as stated in the book *Cyberspace: First Steps* (Benedikt, 1993), this parallel universe—which has its headquarters on the Internet, and shelters megacities, or data trade, and a multitude of portals and sites of all kinds—has been called cyberspace.

What constitutes that which exists in a place without place and that is at the same time, a myriad of places? Such a reality—artificial or virtual—is multidirectional, merged within a global network, and supported by computers that act as means of generation and access. In this reality in which each computer is a window, the objects seen and heard are neither physical nor, necessarily, representations of physical objects, but have the form, nature and action of data, pure information. It is certainly a reality that derives in part from the operations of the natural world (physical), but which is composed by the traffic of information produced by human enterprise in all areas: art, science, business and culture (Benedikt, 1993, p. 116). Finally, it is an area in which

information is not foreign to us, but a space that places us inside information (Novac, 1993, p. 207).

How does cyberspace relate today with virtual reality, information visualization, graphic user interfaces, networks, multimodal communication, games, Second Life, media convergence, hypermedia? Cyberspace relates to all, and includes all, for it has the ability to gather and focus all these facets around a common goal. Thus, cyberspace should be conceived as a global virtual world which is coherent, regardless of how it is accessed and navigated. In fact, there are several ways to enter cyberspace. One can do that through the sensitive animated images on one's desktop display, through the technology of virtual reality that seeks to recreate the human sensory experience as fully as possible, through the swarm of wireless devices, iPhones, smart-phones, even through direct neural electrodes.

Cyberculture is the culture of cyberspace. Until very recently, both cyberculture and cyberspace referred only to a grounded Internet, embodied in huge mix of subsidized infrastructures, private enterprise networks, information centers of all kinds, a myriad of discussion groups, sites, blogs, etc.: actually, an associative structure which shelters all kinds of economic predators. Being a decentralized giant, this grounded Internet fosters no universal rules of the game. More recently, however, mobile equipment has been offering alternative doors of access to cyberspace in the constitution of a mobile Internet. One of its most evident consequences is that the hybridity of cyberspace and

cyberculture has grown considerably in the dense mixtures and overlaps between physical and virtual spaces.

## **2. Interstitial Spaces**

Hybrid spaces and hybrid reality are key terms by means of which Souza e Silva (2006) interrogates the vanishing borderlines between digital and physical spaces in the composition of connected spaces:

Hybrid spaces combine physical and digital in a social environment created by the mobility of users connected via mobile devices of communication. The emergence of portable technology has contributed to the possibility of being constantly connected to digital space and, literally, to carry the Internet around wherever one goes. (p. 28)

In a hybrid space, it is no longer necessary to leave the physical space to get into digital environments, and this eliminates the traditional distinction between physical and digital spaces. Hence, the borderlines between digital and physical spaces become blurred and more and more indistinguishable.

Souza e Silva's idea of hybrid spaces is very close to what Lemos (2008) calls information territories, that is, control areas of the digital information flux in a zone of intersection between cyberspace and urban space. Information access and control are accomplished by means of mobile devices and wireless nets. An information territory is

not the cyberspace *per se*, but it is a moving, hybrid space constructed in the interrelation between the electronic and the physical space.

What Souza e Silva calls hybrid spaces and Lemos describes as information territories, I have called “interstitial spaces” (Santaella 2007a). The term serves to emphasize the dissolution of the rigid boundaries between physical space on the one hand and virtual space on the other, and it describes the emergence of a new space that can no longer be said to belong to the one or the other space. Although the epithet “interstitial” does not introduce an idea differing essentially from the one which is implicit in the term “hybrid”, I prefer the concept “interstitial” to draw attention to the intermingling, the *mélange* of two distinct realities giving rise to a new one.

Furthermore, interstitial spaces is a more specific expression than hybrid spaces, since hybridism is also being broadly used to mean what is happening across various levels of reality: from contemporary cultures to the media, as represented by communication networks, and also at the root of the media, the hybridism between textual, sound and visual signs. The trajectory of hybridism shows that its trend is to expand in multiple directions, and that the digital revolution in general is increasingly exploring the limits of its possibilities.

All this seems to give reason to what Smith (2003, p. 23) implies when, relying on Donald (2001), he states that the modern mind has become a hybrid structure, built of biological traces from previous stages, along with symbolic resources of an external storage—which today consists of a number of sign systems, produced thanks to increasingly sophisticated intelligent technologies. Indeed, we have evolved in tune with the environment at multiple levels, with multilevel tuners.

In this context of an extended usage of the concept of hybridization and hybridism, to characterize the hypercomplex plot of the buzzing cauldron of identities, styles, genres, techniques, practices, technologies, media and mixtures constituent of contemporary cultural hybridism, I have been developing the idea of a pluralistic ecology of languages, practices and cultures. As we all know, ecology is the study of the distribution of living organisms and how this distribution is affected by interactions between such organisms and the environment. The environment of an organism includes both the physical properties such as climate, geology etc., as well as other organisms that share the same habitat.

Similarly, a pluralistic ecology of culture refers to a considerable expansion of the parameters that have traditionally served to define the products and practices of language and communication. Instead of searching for legitimacy in terms of institutionally sanctioned principles, a pluralistic ecology aims at tracing the networks of cultures and logical operations in a broadly-conceived spatial, temporal, social and environmental context. There could not be a more prototypical example of such ecology

than the one that is found in the locative media that thrive in interstitial spaces. These multifaceted communication processes find fertile ground for development in Brazil especially, given that Brazilian culture takes the tendency of hybridization to its climax (see Santaella 2007b).

### **3. Locative Media**

The *Mcyclopedia* of new media defines locative media as location-based technologies, i.e. wireless technologies, technologies for monitoring, tracking and positioning that allow information to be linked to geographic areas. The Global Positioning System (GPS) is the most familiar technology that makes use of location-sensitive computing. Two dozen satellites orbiting 12 thousand miles away from the Earth's surface help drivers and wanderers to virtually find their paths anywhere on earth. In addition to GPSs, some other devices that make up the mesh of locative media technology include: cell phones, wireless laptops, Bluetooth, wireless networks, radio frequency identification and so on and so forth. These devices allow people to find themselves and others in geographic space, and to connect that information to geographical positions. These technologies of mobility are location-sensitive, providing ever-broader access to the Internet, and allowing information to be stored and retrieved from remote databases.

The practices that these technologies enable are many and growing. Locative media's field of operations functions as a kind of live map that charts the contradictions that plague turbo-capitalist societies. At one extreme, they begin with the military and

government tracking that is allowed via new control systems that make use of these operations, opening the door to an era of discrete and ubiquitous surveillance.

Therefore, as we are reminded by Lemos (2008), when we talk about locative media, the issues that must be addressed are not confined to communication or urbanism, but reach into political issues “related to new forms of monitoring, surveillance and control of urban space and of social mobility, since everything/everyone will have a tag, an electronic crawler, transforming city spaces in clouds of data” (p. 216).

Yet locative media are increasingly being used for purposes that have nothing to do with evil, but instead work for the betterment of industry and trade in the form of locally-based services. These first-generation applications still offer no more than a variation of ways to search for a restaurant, directions to a building, etc. Well-known car navigation systems still belong to this first generation. However, much effort is being done in the creation of more complex applications. For example, engineers are working on creating appliances that are capable of detecting our own position in space, the position of objects and places that are nearby, and devices that are able to talk to other devices through new protocols, so that location becomes a new type of data to be applied to the Internet and the Web. In addition, new forms of spontaneous self-organization are emerging from the general public’s appropriation of mobile devices such as Bluetooth and SMS, whose functions are cheap and even free; these forms would likely not be possible otherwise.

Indeed, in its constructive collectivism, locative media stresses both the power and the boundaries of new forms of surveillance. It enables the deconstruction of the way that political operations use controlling technologies by introducing moments of distortion and uncertainty in its limits, or by providing open platforms that offer the chance to revert, multiply or refract one's gaze. From this comes the potential to change the way that we perceive and interact with the world around us, as decentralized activities challenge the hierarchical structures of society.

Other prime examples of this deconstruction—occupying the extreme opposite pole from the aims of power and control—are found in media art projects using locative media. Artists have long shown their concern for locations, but the combination of current mobile devices with positioning technologies is opening a plethora of new ways for geographical space to be found and drawn, across a wide variety of spatial practices.

There is no doubt that plurality is the strongest characteristic of locative media. From an entanglement of possibilities, projects are emerging that, for example, exploit the edges of the geopolitical space of cities, allowing ordinary people to insert their own social knowledge into urban landscapes through geo designs. Other projects take a more objective documentary approach, looking to connect hidden meanings to places, rescuing collective memory from its impending loss. Widely known examples include the urban annotation projects that encourage people to post, on geographical locations, personal stories, thoughts, some information, calls to action—all shared between users. These notes can be posted virtually in a geographical area by using GPS coordinates to

be received asynchronously by another user. Therefore, urban space is seeded with stories that can be accessed by a wide variety of people—tourists, new residents or former residents seeking to rediscover new spaces in their familiar territories.

As it was studied by Canclini (1989), hybridism is a constituent part of the DNA of South American cultures. In fact, it is certainly the hybrid nature of Brazilian culture and art that has encouraged the emergence of a number of mobile and locative media events. For example, the international art festival *Vivo Arte.Mov* sponsored by Vivo, a cell phone operator company, is already in its third yearly edition; in 2008, it took place simultaneously in São Paulo and Belo Horizonte. Aiming at the production and critical survey of the so-called culture of mobility, the festival encourages the application of mobile devices to forms of exchange of knowledge, the access to information and art, and the inclusion of experiences in public spaces.

In its 2008 edition, the event emphasized the social displacements between art and technologies in such a way as to expand the notion of art and its spaces, places, and tools. New perspectives of distribution and sharing of Web information appeared in a series of interconnected events composed of lectures, exhibitions, microcinema, video for cell phones, and locative media.

Taking place in São Paulo, and also in its third yearly edition, is the *International Art and Mobile Creativity Festival-Mobilefest*. In 2006, it discussed the social, cultural, and aesthetic implications that mobile technologies (cell phones and handhelds) are promoting on a global scale. In 2007, by means of video conferences, the event occurred simultaneously in Brazil (São Paulo), England (University of Westminster), Holland (the Waag Society), and the United States (New York University – ITP). In 2008, the event opened the question of how mobile technologies may promote democracy, culture, art, ecology, education, health, and the third sector. It aimed at the contribution of mobile devices to digital inclusion by means of the generalization of knowledge and the possibilities of open interactions.

Sponsored by Motorola, the event *Motomix 2007*, under the title of “The City in Networks” took place in São Paulo. It combined a forum of lectures with a space of exhibition where scholars and artists were brought together in order to discuss topics such as liquid images, cities in flux, the new nomads, the city and the new media.

All these projects in Brazil and elsewhere that encounter invisible wires of cohesion—through the sharing of liquid images, the redemption of personal storytelling experiences, and the recovery of collective memory that goes against the mainstream of official stories—provide comprehensive frameworks for critical analysis, and foster socialization in emerging networks based on reciprocity and trust in collaborative communication for the construction of shared knowledge.

This pluralistic ecology, united by the forces of Eros, seems to encourage the re-working of pessimist, monolithic theories that have shrouded cyberspace and cyberculture with black premonitions about the obsolescence of the body, the collapse of geographic areas and the inexorable loss of meaning in the pathways of life. The emergence of hybrid, pluralistic and multifaceted communication processes, which bring back the presence of the body in space and time in a new intermingling of physical and virtual worlds, is challenging us to invent new and more adequate theories for facing the unexpected horizons that other traditional and recent critical communication theories were not able to foresee.

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## **Biography**

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