

Mobile communication is at the centre of contemporary cultural convergence processes

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The work of the professor and researcher Carlos Alberto Scolari has been fundamental reference in studies on digital media, interfaces and media ecology. Born in Rosario, Argentina, he is living in Europe for over 25 years, where he received his PhD in Applied Linguistics and Languages of Communication at *Università Cattolica di Milano*. Currently, he is Professor in the Department of Communication at the *Universitat Pompeu Fabra (Barcelona)*, and leads the projects “Transmedia Literacy” (of the EU Horizon 2020 – 2015/2018) and “*Transalfabetismos*” (MINECO – 2015/2017).

Scolari has in his history a series of actions and works related to the research in the field of digital communication. Between 2003 and 2009, for example, he was the coordinator of the Master in Interactive Digital Communication and of the Digital Interactions Research Group (GRID) at the *Universitat de Vic*. He



has held lectures, courses and workshops on digital communication in several countries in Latin America, North America and Europe.

Very active and accessible on Facebook and Twitter, the researcher also maintains an intense routine of books and scientific papers publications. Among his most prominent works, it can be cited *Hacer Clic. Hacia una sociosemiótica de las interacciones digitales* (2004), *Hipermediaciones. Elementos para una teoría de la comunicación digital interactiva* (2008) and *Narrativas Transmedia. Cuando todos los medios cuentan* (2013). Several works are available in journals such as *Communication Theor*, *New Media & Society*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Semiotica*, *Information, Communication & Society*, among others prestigious ones.

The main points of the following interview given to *Revista Intercom* bring the researcher insight into the changes in communication research today. Formed in the tradition of mass communication studies, Scolari emphasizes the need to think about new theories that can cover the contemporary paradigms arising with digital media. Also, underlines the highlight of Latin American research on transmedia and discusses how mobile communication is placed as an important field of research to be more thoroughly investigated:

Revista Intercom – *It is clear that changes stemming from the development of computers and the Internet have brought challenges to scholars from the field of communication studies – especially regarding the impact that technologies brought to the communication classic models. Manuel Castells calls this new form of communication “mass self-communication”¹ (p.55). For you, what are the main challenges for the researcher from the communication field considering this scenario of blurred frontiers between technology and society?*

Carlos Alberto Scolari – A couple of semantic issues before answering. First: I do not like the metaphor of the ‘impact’ for technologies. It makes me remember the first models of the theories of communication... the relationship between technology-society or technology-social sciences are really complex and we can not reduce them to the idea of an ‘impact’. Second: I do not think that ‘mass self-communication’ is the best concept to define what’s going on... I remember when I was reading *Communication Power*: the first section of that volume is one of the best syntheses of the transformations of contemporary society. But when I found that expression – ‘mass self-communication’ –, I said: Why? Are the masses talking to themselves? Humm... It is not easy to define the new communication paradigm. I prefer

¹ CASTELLS, Manuel. *Communication Power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3 edition, 2013.

to use other concepts like network communication, closer to Castell's network-society. The challenges are huge. In almost one century, a lot of mass communication theories and research methodologies were created. They were mostly broadcasting theories. Are they still useful in a society where the new communication paradigm is not broadcasting but networking? It depends. We can recover many concepts, categories or methodologies from broadcasting theories, but we also need new ones. We are dealing with new production and consume processes, new textualities, new actors, and new cultural logics. For example, the concept of 'audience'... Is it still useful in a context where publics and consume processes are so fragmented? And what about traditional textual taxonomies (like Genette's) in an environment where new 'textual species' are emerging, reproducing and hybridizing at a high rate? Can we still keep the traditional definition of 'means of production' in a media ecology where anyone can generate a content and share it at a global scale using a mobile phone? Everything has changed or is changing very fast. Without discarding or refusing the past, we need a new generation of theories and research methodologies for this new media ecology.

Revista Intercom – *In one of your most recent books – “Ecología de los medios: entornos, evoluciones e interpretaciones” (Gedisa, 2015) – you classified the media ecology theory as a “transmedia theory for all the effects” (p.18). I would like you to explore a little more this idea of a transmedia theory from contemporary communicational thought.*

Scolari – Communication theories have been classified in different ways, based on their original discipline (sociology, psychology, anthropology etc.); their explanatory system (cognitive, systemic etc.); their organisational level (interpersonal, group, institutional, mass etc.); their epistemological premise (empirical, critical etc.) or their implicit conception of communicational practice (rhetoric, semiotic, phenomenological etc.). We can also talk about generalist theories and specialised theories. Generalist theories propose building integrating or global tables for all the processes that affect the communication world. Although a theory that explains everything is unimaginable, it is obvious that some theoretical constructions tend towards integration and generate an explanatory model of greater scope. Amongst the generalist theories, for example the political economy of communication and culture covers communication production, distribution and consumption processes without ignoring an analysis of cultural goods. On the other side, specialised theories focus on one particular aspect or process of communication and leave others outside their explanatory model. Theories of limited effects, of newsmaking, agenda-setting or semiotic-textual models are a type of theoretical construction that attempts to explain a smaller area of the communication universe. On the other hand, scientific discourses on communication have always shown a tendency towards speaking about the mediums in an isolated way: studying “television”,

“radio”, “cinema” etc. Semiotics have also followed the same route; this is why a “semiotics of television”, a “semiotics of cinema” etc., exists. If we base ourselves on this opposition between generalist and specialised theories, it will not take us long to find media ecology amongst the former: this is an expanded theory that covers, depending on the theory-statesperson of choice, almost all aspects of communication processes, from relationships between the media and the economy to the perceptive and cognitive transformations undergone by individuals after being exposed to communication technologies. On the other hand, media ecology does not focus on one medium in particular – it is a theory that covers all media in all aspects. That’s why I talk about a ‘transmedia theory’.

Revista Intercom – *One of your most cited and referenced papers according to the Web of Science – “Transmedia Storytelling: Implicit Consumers, Narrative Worlds, and Branding in Contemporary Media Production” (IJC, 2009) – reveals your effort to deal with the “semantic chaos” in the definition of transmedia narrative concept. Reading “Alfabetismo transmedia: estratégias de aprendizaje informal y competencias mediáticas en la nueva ecología de la comunicación” (Telos, 2016), I could realize again an effort to situate another quite polysemic term, the “transmedia literacy”. How the “integrative look” (“mirada integradora”), addressed in your work, is an important perspective for understanding phenomena in the field of interactive digital communication?*

Scolari – As I said before, there are generalist and specialised approaches. In my everyday scientific and academic activity I move from one approach to the other. In my individual theoretical reflections – expressed in books like *Hipermediaciones* (2008) or *Ecología de los medios* (2015) – I work into the generalistic approach; in my research projects, an empirical activity that I develop with a series of colleagues from different countries, the activity is much specialised. Right now we are researching what teens are doing with media outside school. In this context, the concept of “transmedia literacy” is useful for integrating under a single umbrella different activities, skills and informal learning strategies. Like “transmedia storytelling” or “media literacy”, we are moving on a marshy semantic terrain... in any case, we must at least work on operative definitions if we want to advance in our scientific activity. I think that concepts are the basic blocks of any theoretical or scientific discursive construction. Scientific conversations emerge in an organizational environment made up of universities, research centres, journals, conferences and congresses. In these spaces, researchers exchange information, discuss ideas, arrive at agreements and take on obligations – for example, to respect a scientific methodology and a series of discursive rules – inside a network of linguistic speech acts. In other words, researchers activate and hold conversations. However, the concept of “scientific conversations” doesn’t only refer to

ideas, concepts, or theories that are based on the scientific method. These discourses must also be produced by recognized institutions (a church is a good place for the enunciation of religious discourses, but not for scientific ones) for specific receivers (scholars, scientists etc.) who have some mastery of the main concepts and discursive rules of scientific discourse. To understand the dynamics of a scientific domain – for example, the theoretical production of interactive digital communication – it is necessary to map its discursive territory, identify the interlocutors that participate in the conversations and reconstruct their exchanges. I tried to do it in my book *Hipermediaciones*.

Revista Intercom – *How do you observe the scientific production on transmedia communication in Latin America in recent years? In what ways it differs and / or approaches the ones made by North-American and Europeans authors?*

Scolari – In Latin America the interest for theoretical and conceptual issues around transmedia storytelling is stronger than in the United States or Europe. When I participate in different kind of events in Mexico, Brazil, Colombia, or Argentina many people show me projects, and then they ask me: “Is it transmedia or crossmedia?”. I usually answer not to worry about concepts! In any transmedia project the most important element is the narrative! If the storytelling is good, people will *engage* (by the way, another concept that should be better defined!) and participate in the narrative world. Is it transmedia or crossmedia? My recommendation for professionals is: Don’t worry about definitions! Focus on the storytelling and the user’s narrative experience! If we move to the academic and scientific environment, these conceptual discussions are on the researchers’ desktop and we must work on them. As I have already said, the definition of concepts is the first step in any theoretical construction. In this context I think that the most important scientific contribution to transmedia from Latin America is coming from the researchers working on transmedia journalism, documedia, and transmedia documentary. Colleagues like Fernando Irigaray – editor of collective books like *Producciones transmedia de no ficción* (2016), *Reflexiones móviles: El periodismo en la era de la movilidad* (2015), or *Webperiodismo en un ecosistema líquido* (2013) – or Denis Renó and Vicente Gosciola – *Periodismo Transmedia: miradas múltiples* (2014) – are developing a great activity in the understanding of transmedia practice beyond fiction. Also Alvaro Liuzzi’s reflections and projects on transmedia “historytelling” should be included in this Latin American approach to transmedia documentary. In the specific case of Brazil, the research on transmedia fiction is also a reference. The activity of research clusters like OBITEL or the *Grupo de Estudos sobre Mídias Interativas em Imagem e Som* (GEMInIS) is highly relevant. Either OBITEL books – I’m thinking in titles like *Quality in television fiction and audiences’ transmedia interactions* (2011), *Ficção televisiva transmidiática no*

Brasil (2011), *Estratégias de Transmídiação na Ficção Televisiva* (2013), or *Estratégias de produção transmídia na ficção televisiva* (2014) – or the GEMInIS journal are great scientific resources about transmedia.

Revista Intercom – *Bauman et al (2014)² said that “social surveillance (...) is decidedly enjoyable for participants”. What do you think about the relationship between the fans – fundamental prosumers for transmedia franchises – and their engagement in digital media in times of increasing concern about surveillance and privacy?*

Scolari – In the old media ecology – that is, in the old times of broadcasting – there was a tacit contract between the corporations and the spectators: we give you content for free but you must watch our spots. Broadcasting television was not “free”: we payed for it with our attention! The television business is about making money and they used to make money by “selling eyeballs”. Were people conscious of this contract? Not at all. Now the situation is different. I think that a new contract is going on: the corporations give us services for free... and we pay with our data. Gmail, Facebook Messenger, Google Drive, Skype or Instagram are not “free”: we pay these services with our information. And we also produce the contents for those platforms! The contract has changed and, in front of it, we can visualize two opposite theoretical approaches: the acritical exaltation of participatory culture and user-generated contents and, on the other side, the critical approach to digital labour, social media exploitation, surveillance and privacy. I think that both dimensions are real and research should take both of them into account. Like in Jesús Martín-Barbero mediation theory, where mass culture and popular cultures were part of dialectic game of mutual rejection and, at the same time, reappropriation and hybridization, the same could be said about the dialectics between contemporary media industry and participatory cultures. In my article “*From (new)media to (hyper)mediations. Recovering Jesús Martín-Barbero’s mediation theory in the age of digital communication and cultural convergence*”, published in 2015 by *Information, Communication & Society*, I worked on these tensions. We must learn how to deal with them, avoiding radical positions. The ghost of the *apocalittici versus integrati* discussion is always round the corner...

Revista Intercom – *In the interview for a previous edition of this journal, Henry Jenkins claimed that “convergence and connection are what drives media right now and what insures that media matters at all levels, from the most micro and hyperlocal to the most*

² BAUMAN, Zygmunt; BIGO, Didier; ESTEVES, Paulo; GUILD, Elspeth; JABRI, Vivienne; LYON, David; WALKER, R. B. J. After Snowden: Rethinking the Impact of Surveillance. *International Political Sociology*. 2014, (8), p.121-144.

macro”³ (p. 215). In your view, the recent boom of mobility through mobile devices in countries such as Brazil has been able to enhance the convergence and connection?

Scolari – Your question makes me remember a famous McLuhan’s quote from *Understanding Media*: “Men are suddenly nomadic gatherers of knowledge, nomadic as never before – but also involved in the total social process as never before; since with electricity we extend our central nervous system globally, instantly interrelating every human experience”. Mobile communication is a brand new global social practice of content production/consumption and technological appropriation carried out through the massive diffusion of multifunctional wireless devices. Mobile communication was born with the explosive convergence of the mobile devices and access to the Internet. This is a disruptive experience for Homo sapiens... We are just appreciating the first consequences of this convergence/explosion. This is an on-going process and it hasn’t finished yet! In this context I consider that mobile communication is at the centre of contemporary cultural convergence processes. Research into mobile communication from the media studies perspective has only just begun and has a long way to go. To follow this path it is necessary to understand that a new communication medium has entered the media ecosystem, a medium with its own business models, grammar, production practices, and consumption dynamics. Unlike other historic moments, for example, the birth of cinema or radio, media studies already has the theoretical, methodological, and analytical elements for studying the emergence and development of a new species within the media ecosystem. The consequences of this apparition will be felt in the entire media ecosystem, which makes it necessary to include mobile communication in researchers’ agendas.

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³ JENKINS, Henry; KALINKE, Priscila; ROCHA, Anderson. Convergence and connection are what pushes the media now. *Intercom - RBCC São Paulo*, v.39, n.1, p.213-218, jan./abr. 2016.