

THE COMMUNICATION SOCIETY

Notes from the book of Erik Neveu

In his book (NEVEU, 2006), written in French, Neveu studies the society in the light of the communication between the population and governments. His approach differs from that of Manuel Castells as Neveu observes the *communication* as an element in itself and its implication in the relationship between citizen and state. Accordingly, for Neveu, the Civil Society is probably a by-product of the communication society and as such has only a role of spectator in the play organised by the State. Naturally he is taking the Civil Society at its final stage of development, the seventh's one described above at paragraph **Erreur ! Source du renvoi introuvable.** above. We just mentioned above that the "Knowledge Society" was an important element of e-Governance. State officials explain the knowledge society in terms of country development and progress of the society. We shall see that Neveu has a different point of view on the subject.

We shall also see, when analyzing another practical work, that of Marie-Gabrielle SURAUD (2005), that the functioning of the Civil Society is already influenced by the means of communication. The ability of NGO leaders in mastering communications will have an impact on the prosperity of their organisations. There is a real similarity between the mutual impact of ICT and Society development that was so well described by Castells and the Communication means and the Society. We even see a link between these twin virtuous circles.

The myth of the Communication Society

Neveu seeks out to deconstruct the "myth" of the Communication Society and invites fellow sociologists to answer to these three questions:

- What does the concept of "Communication Society" or "Information Society" reveal?
- How did this concept grow to become so visible?
- What links evolutions of the social relations and the new social representation of the Communication Society?

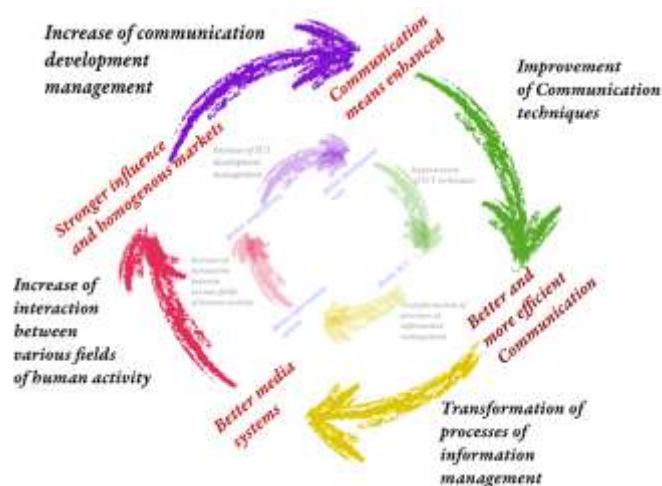


Figure 1 - Virtuous circle of Communication

To answer these questions, Neveu takes us first back in history, at the end of the 18th century: the Liberals were the first ones to develop a theory of the

political interest of Communication considered as the means to provide access to the political expression in the public arena (Bautier & Cazenave, 2000).¹

Neveu further explains in his book that one of the merits of Habermas² (1986) was to restore this liberal legacy. Legally speaking, the State is only a State of Rights, with its well known concepts: separation of the powers and guarantee of equal rights on one side and representation on the other. Effectively Habermas considers these as two different concepts. The liberal constitutional State can also “*think communication*”, “*under the principles of publicity and of the organization of a public space where the judgements and opinions on the public affairs circulate, where they receive a free amplification by the press and by public confrontation, where they penetrate in the apparatus of State by the means of the Parliament*”. At the same time, like the *heart of the political deliberation* it relays the debates of the ‘civil society’.

The thematic of the Human Rights as made up these last years a clear return in ideological discussions consolidating, in the collective representations, the association between the free speech and traditional models of the liberal democracy. This suggests a convergence between the social representations structured by the idea of a ‘Communication Society’ and those relating to the ‘Democracy’. It must instigate us to reflect on possible affinities between the tradition of the liberal thought and the modernism of speeches on the communication. Despite apparent contradictions, this also became the playground of many NGOs and associations.

Tracks to study the Communication Society

In order to study further the concept of Communication, Communication / Information Society, Neveu invites us first to learn from its historical development: by what stages, what speakers, what social dialogues this concept of communication did grow to become a central instrument of reference to describe our social environment. A first question to ask is: What do sociologists say currently on the Communication Society?

A second one will be: what did cause, from a sociological perspective, the success of the speeches on the Communication Society? And of course let us not forget that the topic of the Communication Society was initially developed, for understandable reasons, in the richest countries, those that are best irrigated by networks and media. It is by definition, western-centred and does not really integrate widely in the North-South dimension.

Genealogy of the communication speeches

Origins - The Frankfurt School

According to Neveu, the study of the communication society started in the Thirties with the School of Frankfurt, organised around the *Institut für*

¹ BAUTIER Roger & CAZENAVE Elisabeth, 2000, Les origines d’une conception moderne de la communication, PUG,

² HABERMAS Jürgen, 1986, «*L’espace public* », Payot

Sozialforschung. There, researchers like Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and Benjamin developed a whole set of analyses, marked by ‘critical Marxism’ and taking into account the contribution of the psychoanalysis. Among the sociologists who marked the study on the communication society, Neveu mentions often Jürgen Habermas, who, in his thesis on ‘Public Sphere’³ shows how the constitutional State creates a new political order, structured around the communication where the word of the discourse, of the public opinion through the press, of the debates and the electoral process succeeds to the power received in the name of God. He later described the degeneration of public sphere in the 20th century by the conjugate action of a mass culture grown to an object of consumption without critical charge, of a political life seized by the logic of public relations and the strategies of image, and of a decline of the critical functions of the media.

Many previous works illustrated this, moderated it, and even reversed the verdicts. Habermas reproduced precisely the dominant opinion of his colleagues though some of them reflected an opposite opinion on some subjects, like Missika and Wolton do for example while talking about the *democratic virtues of the television*.

Slightly posterior to the work of Habermas, ‘the One-dimensional man’ of Herbert Marcuse illustrates convergent problems of a closed one-dimensional society where even the revolt cannot escape the seductions and mechanisms of the ‘system’ because of the role of the media, a purely distracting and tranquilizing culture. The development of the Information Society will clearly reinforce this tendency as eventually all will use the Internet as their favoured communication media. The ability to use the Web 2.0 to contest the State is a clear example of that evolution.

Propaganda

The work of Serge Tchakhotine⁴ on ‘*the rape of crowds by political propaganda*’ echo to another problem **inspired of social psychology**. His work on the mass communication will be supplemented by those of Lazarsfeld and Berelson, based on the situation in the United States.

Norbert Wiener

He is one of the founders of the discourse on the Communication Society. According to him, all reality can be interpreted in terms of communication and information. This is a very strong concept as it is the base of the whole development of ICT technologies. The user of ICT has to trust it for its ability to deliver a true image of the reality. The intelligence is therefore defined as the capacity of an individual to exchange and process complex data in his relation with the environment. He foresees that ICT, that he calls Cybernetics⁵,

³ HABERMAS, Jürgen, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*; Neuwied a.R. Luchterhand, 1965 (2nd ed.)

⁴ TCHAKHOTINE Serge, 1939, *Le viol des foules par la propagande politique*, Gallimard Paris

⁵ “The idea of “cybernetics” came to Wiener at the beginning of the forties, prompted by his work on anti-aircraft defence and by contacts with colleagues in Mexico (“Behaviour, purpose and teleology” with A. Rosenblueth and J. Bigelow, *Philos. Sci* 1943). It was made known to the world by the book *Cybernetics* or

will allow increasing the human power by giving him the knowledge of the processes of circulation and processing of data in all complex systems. For him, the pathologies of the social world are due to the improper and immoral behaviour of opacity, the retention or the blocking of information, the irrational choices related to a distorted ‘processing’ of these data by the ideologies. Cybernetics — ICT — will answer to this. It will put at the service of the government of the city the science of communication and control of information. The addition of rationality, suggested by the cybernetic model applied to the government, would give hope for a society in rupture with the one responsible for its recent disasters (WW2). Norbert Wiener might well be the founder of the present concept of e-Government.

Evolution to the present times

Neveu in his synthesis describes a society of the 50^{es} marked by the crisis of the social bonds caused by its confrontation with the scrambling of its symbolic reference and hierarchies which previously structured it. The Communication became in these years the “*unavoidable solution to think of a better world*”. The optimistic vision of the status and the functions of Communication lead to the *enchanted speech of the Communication Society*. Finding back certain aspects of the Liberal thought of the 19th century, this approach restores the social bond, pillar of the media and communication networks. The means of communication become the social cement by the sharing of meanings offered by the use of the mass culture and mass media. The presenter of the television news fixes the agenda and offers a unified meaning to the events. Communication networks fulfil also the promises of transparency and democracy.

This period marked the start of the Informatization Revolution as Castells clearly demonstrates. It shows that the Communication Society was indeed born before the upcoming of ICTs, in a period when people were in need of change and ready to accept it. The invention of television dates back to 1939, but its commercial application did not start before 1940 because of the war. It became a mass market in the 50^{es} only and played an essential role in the development of the Communication Society. In parallel, new forms of organisation appeared in enterprises, based as well on the new paradigms of the communication society.

— The concept of communication is the essential notion of ‘human engineering’, emphasized Crozier, in an article published in 1951⁶, dedicated to the new relations policies in the society.

According to Marshall McLuhan⁷, “*The message is the medium*⁸”. He emphasized therefore how much, by their structures and their grammar, *the*

Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine, published in 1948 after contacts in 1946 with M. Freymann of Hermann & Co (Paris)”; <http://www.iss.org/lumwiener.htm>, accessed on 10.04.07

⁶ CROZIER Michel, (Apr. 1951), in *Les Temps Modernes* edited by J.-P. Sartre

⁷ McLuhan, Marshall (1964) *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill.

⁸ “In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of our-

media act like symbolic forms and moulds which make the signification put forward over determined. He invites us to think the media like extensions of human sensory faculties and human nervous system. To have a clearer explanation of this thought of McLuhan, see the text written by Mark Federman⁹ on unanticipated consequences of innovation. “The message of a newscast are not the news stories themselves, but a change in the public attitude towards crime” for example.

«Mass culture»

In the 70^{es}, Guy Debord, a member of the ‘*Situationist International (SI)*’ movement, described in ‘*La Société du spectacle*’ (1971), the modern capitalism as a huge accumulation of spectacles. Thus, according to Neveu, he *provided the most completed translation of the denunciation of the manipulation of the crowds*. “The show is not only a flow of images” (advertisement, stereotypes of films or of press review), but “a social relationship between people, mediated by images”. People tend to imitate in their real life the ideal representation they get from the mass culture.

We count in the founders of the reflexion on communication the work conducted in Palo-Alto in California since the beginning of the Fifties. Palo-Alto did put forward an ‘orchestral’ vision of the communication which is neither reduced to the articulated language, nor submitted to transmitting a message. Bateson stresses the importance of the body messages, the non-verbal communication¹⁰. The communication becomes a permanent process from which one cannot escape. The very success of Palo-Alto, according to Neveu, can enlighten the distinction, essential in its approaches, between contents and context of the communication.

A technical discourse

After Mai 1968 in France, the theories of the ‘new social movements’, explore forms of new mobilisations, essentially carried by social groups of high education level, targeting qualitative claims (feminism, ecology) of the Western ‘post-industrial’ societies. Alain Touraine in France, Alberto Melluci in Italy reflected, in a premonitory and stimulative way, on the role of the control of the flow of information and knowledge in these new social configurations. Melluci¹¹ talk about ‘Information Society’, where capitalism reorganises its capacity around the accumulation of unceasingly widening

selves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology.”

⁹ Federman, M. (2004). *What is the Meaning of the Medium is the Message?* Accessed on 11.04.07 from <http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/MeaningTheMediumistheMessage.pdf>

¹⁰ Which means that, consequently, ICT based communication becomes significantly poorer

¹¹ “Collective identity is the name given to the tendency of many social movements to form a group self-image shaped by, but in turn shaping the consciousness of, individual participants. Social movement theorist Alberto Melluci emphasizes that such collective identities are not so much fixed as in process and offers this more specialized definition: “Collective identity is an interactive, shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level)... that must be conceived as a process because it is constructed and negotiated by repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals (or groups) [to the movement].” See Melluci, “The Process of Collective Identity,” in Johnston and Klandermans, eds., *Social Movements and Culture* (1995); <http://www.wsu.edu/~amerstu/smc/glossary.html>; accessed on 05.04.07

stocks of knowledge, data, refined capabilities of symbolic control of the social forces which defy it. Not to mention its ability to manage data.

The role of State

Zbigniew Brzezinski¹² demonstrated in 1970 that States there was in the United a better understanding of the situation and of the concepts of the Communication Society. There was a need, according to him, to increase the global performance of the 'collective intelligence', as it was a key to power.

Considering the role of State in the development of the communication Society, the examples of Korea and Japan are of extreme value. We can see now, as evident results are achieved in term of eGovernance status and in term of development of a national ICT industry, what achievements result of the efforts of a voluntary government aware of the powers of the communication society.

Digital Divide

It is quite common, nowadays, to talk about the digital divide. Dozens of studies showed, from the international to the local levels, the persistence of strong difference of resources, of communication competencies and of ability to simply use the communication devices. Neveu sends us for an example, to a study of Marie-Gabrielle Suraud (SURAUD, 2005) made in a research workshops of the international networks of NGOs. We shall come back to this study as it shed a desperate light on e-Civil Society that we have to address.

¹² Z. Brzezinski, *Between Two Ages: America's Role in the Technetronic Era*, New York, 1970

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