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RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE BODY OF THE ANCESTOR AND OTHER STORIES

Social Sciences and the distant past of communication

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ABSTRACT: The relationship between communication and society has been extensively studied in the 20th Century, following the dissemination of mass media announced already during the 19th Century (photography, cinema, comics, radio, telephone, etc.). However, communication has always been one of the key variables of the entire human history, and not only of modernity. Through a retrospective survey, the essay analyses communication as an adaptive invention of mankind to the environment. A winning answer to the primordial struggles for survival, communication distinguishes the human species from earlier times for the structuring of a shared oral language. Starting from the extraordinary flexibility of the human body as a multi-media and multi-meaningful tool, the essay offers a communicative revisionism that involves the antiquity, the Middle Ages and modernity. Sharing the idea of “the media as human extension” (McLuhan), the author proposes some examples for a new reading of single tales of the Odyssey, i.e. the sirens’ and the Cyclops’ episode. Eventually, five directions are proposed to run for a wide-ranging investigation of the relationship “communication-society” in the past: invention of symbols, sharing of meanings, creation of networks, construction of knowledge and exercise of power.

KEYWORDS: Prehistory; History of Communication; Sociology of Culture; Political Communication; Public Opinion

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1. Introduction: Is communication a prerogative of modern societies?

For anyone studying media, the relationship between society and communication is crucial.

But what society is to be correlated with what type of communication? The answer seems obvious: the epicentre of a survey of this kind is the mass society, i.e. the general framework in which the invention and spread of the modern media took place, from the telephone to the radio, from the cinema to the television. Only since the late 19th Century it is possible to fully recognise this moment in human history, when the industrial revolution changed the economies of Western nations and the production and consumption of standardized goods became fundamental to direct the daily behaviour of the vast majority of individuals.

The link between the development of the new capitalistic economy and the flow of communication is established in a metropolitan scenario, the most suitable and symbolic representation for the masses. The metropolis is no longer just the big or great city: it is the space of interactions and frantic exchanges between individuals and organisations that will override the global attention, proving that a new way of life is in place. This is highlighted by the multiplication and enlargement of production places and the dissemination of consumer markets, phenomena accompanied by powerful transport networks and, most importantly, by a centralized logic to broadcast news and entertainment on a wide scale, allowing for interpersonal bonds beyond spatial barriers.

Here is the media: mass press – supported by the infrastructure of the acceleration of the news, first the telegraph – then cinema, telephone, radio, television and the internet and its web. But before all these phenomena were carried out to completion, do we have to suppose there were not any powerful communication forms in non-modern societies? In the absence of mass society and mass media, do we have to think that the forms of communication have played just a marginal role up to the explosion of capitalism and the so-called modernity?

Here is the problem: how can we conceptualize the relationships between media and modern society if there is not adequate space to understand how communication forms have characterized the previous societies?

I believe it is extremely useful for a growing field such as the sociology of communication to come in comparison with the immense territory of historical interpretation. A territory that sociology cannot afford to ignore, if not for the sake of provocation, simulating social processes of modernity and post modernity that are born alone, almost boasting a record of immediate and stratospheric Epiphany. As if to say: modernity-

ty is everything, its meaning is intrinsic and immanent, and so epochal as to erase the previous eras. We could say: “Before me, the deluge.”

The scientific study of society affects the past as well as the present, especially when the object of the research is communication, which – for a sociologist – inevitably turns into the desire to interpret the relationship between communication and society.

How can communication be studied, so that the reasons for an interest in the historical dynamics become clearer?

At first, proposing a reversal of the bottom-up relationship among research fields once defined “humanities”. Communication is not at the top of the humanistic knowledge. It is rather at the base. The fact that a widespread research on communicative forms is active just from a few decades could mean that only contemporary society has produced the evidence of communication’s centrality in the whole human social structure.

But the importance of communication-studies cannot involve only modernity: I rather believe that communication is thus inextricably wrapped to the human condition from not having allowed a (scientific) distancing, if not only in the case of modernity, when the collective belief has determined that if a fact is not notified it is as if it did not exist. This finding, which works very well for small and large events of our time, leads us away from a possibility of interpretation that has always been right under our noses, so close to us as to not see it or take it for granted (which, in sociological terms, represents more or less the same thing). I do not want to dwell upon a study of communication that tries to understand the ways in which men and women communicate nowadays. Instead I want to start from a fundamental assumption: men and women have always communicated. They did it with or without electronic mass media (television, radio, internet), with or without printing machines, with or without ink, even with or without words. We have a fairly good knowledge of modern communication thanks to studies that analysed the nineteenth-and twentieth-century media (from the telegraph to the internet). But a decisive variable of the human condition – and this is communication – definitely deserves a deepening on the past and its different media, even during the centuries of typographic first modernity, the long medieval season and the Mediterranean and Mesopotamian antiquity. And even before, long before then.

But is communication somewhere interpretable as a common condition in so different periods? We may consider human body a powerful mean to communicate with someone close, but it is evident that communication has changed over time: the concept of medium as human *extension* (McLuhan 1962) can help to recognise this diversity. In the man’s remote past, people cohabited in little communities and their commu-

nication was predominantly a proximity community based on their body expressions and intensification of the auditory dimension (McLuhan 1964).

Much later, when the Romans created a vast road system, connecting the far territories of their Empire, the content of the letters carried by the imperial messengers could change the local and the general politics, and they had consequences for many individuals. Letters represent a kind of medium definitively external to the human body, but letters also mean writing, and it is related to the sense of sight. Every new medium gets to re-organise a hierarchy between the senses, and sight is at the basis of every change that has implications with analytic thinking, specialisation, differentiation, rationality.

This is the key which permits a sociological interpretation to so far and so different facts and events. We want to try a sociological connection between ancestral and historic communication phenomena, from the pre-civilization ages until the end of 18th century, that is over the millennia and the centuries *before* the birth of a complete mass society, where mass media play as powerful actors in the public space. Current media are different from past media, but it might be interesting to go back to the history, because thousand years ago our ancestors were able to survive and to change their life through new adaptations to the environment and new strategies to cooperate, called language and communication.

2. Could Turkana boy really speak?

The paleoanthropologists do not have a unique idea about when the verbal language was developed. Some scholars claim to be able to identify the brain structures associated with the language through the skulls of anthropomorphic biped species living more than two million years ago. Others, based on soft tissue reconstructions of the vocal tract, consider that even very recent hominids like Neanderthals could only express themselves with a very limited language. There is not a firm evidence of the presence of oral language, although we know that the Homo sapiens of Cro-Magnon, who lived until about 40,000 B.C., possessed a phonetic apparatus identical to ours.

An objective documentation about the use of verbal language comes from art (figures representing individuals in act of speaking) and, more recently, from writing. A circumstantial evidence comes from the reconstruction of massive parental systems ruling the life of pre-alphabetic societies, whose foundations seem to be placed in the Neolithic Age. The mere existence of such systems of kinship in the daily life of the distant past should speak for a verbal communication technology, capable of enabling individuals with high level exchanges, enhancing their social interaction.

There is another track that would imply a backdating of the dissemination of orality: it derives from the research of the great French ethnologist André Leroi-Gourhan. According to the scholar, the chance for a language starts when prehistory hands down tools, because tools and language are neurologically linked and because one is not dissociable from the other in the humanity's social structure. The ethnologist continues wondering if it is licit to go even further, and he answers that probably there is no reason to separate the primitive stages of *Antropians* from the language of his tool because technical progress is associated to progress of technical symbols of language. He adds it is possible to imagine an exclusively gestural technical education, but an education without words sets in motion, both in the educator and in the educated, a reflected symbolism. Conclusion: the organic bond seems strong enough so that to the *Australopiths* and *Arcantropiths* could be ascribed a language of a level equal to that of their tools (Leroi-Gourhan 1964).

However, the paleoanthropologist Alan Walker argues that if tools indicate the possession of cognitive abilities necessary for language, the chimpanzee can manufacture and does manufacture tools (in the wild and in captivity) but never masters a total language, even after an intensive training (Walker, Shipman 1993: 279).

Walker's point is important, but not decisive. In fact, Leroi-Gourhan talked about a language equal to that of their tools. Let us consider the first manufactured objects by *Homo erectus* species: its elementary processing of stones suggests a non-structured language, although it does not exclude the possibility of a sort of "proto-language" where the use of verbalizations was not anchored to an actual linguistic organization.

The same Alan Walker has been a member of the research team that made a sensational discovery (August 22, 1984): the frontal bone of a *Homo erectus* skull, dated approximately one million and a half years ago, nicknamed "Turkana boy" from the name of the region of Northern Kenya where the fragment was found. Alan Walker proposes a hypothesis on the language of the first standing hominids. In an interview conversation dating 2007 Walker argued:

Probably the Turkana boy was able to communicate with gestures, noises, smells, but was not able to talk like us. We found that the hollow of his spine, where the nerves connecting the brain to the muscles pass, was narrower than ours, similar to that of a chimpanzee. This should mean the boy did not have the nerves that control the muscles between the abdomen and the thorax, which are essential for modulating words and phrases. At most, he could emit inarticulate sounds. (Walker 2007: 30)

Hominids can be considered either (at least partly) able to express themselves through verbalizations or not: in any case, communication experience of *Homo sapi-*

ens' ancestors is based on the presence of numerous strategies to relate themselves to other individuals and to environment. Most of the evidence presented by scholars of various disciplines converges on the hypothesis that language processing has not happened suddenly and abruptly but that it has been socially constructed, creating an integrated multisensory system able to promote innovative experiences, assessed in their positive impact in relation to the environment. During the long hominid ages, the oral language was developed from existing languages, mainly physical, and hence within a framework of multi-physical expressiveness. The idea of an orderly succession of different media (from gesture to call, from call to word, from word to writing) is unfounded. Each new medium was created within a multiplicity of communicative expressions, and as such has acted in the environment, generating experiences capable of dissemination according to the laws of evolution and the mentally and socially shared ingenuity.

Even in the ancestral past of Australopithecus, Homo habilis, Homo erectus and Neanderthal, the simultaneity of sensory languages and proto-craft techniques were the crucible where new communication skills became characteristics of Homo sapiens, including a progressively structured oral language.

3. Communication Anthropology: the body as a medium, the medium beyond the body

First of all, the human body can be considered as a communication-device. Even on long and mysterious periods of pre-civilization, even when we speak of *hominids* and not of *sapiens*, the precondition to keep alive the human race is sharing meaning through forms of exchange of information. Even before speaking had become a proper conformation to modulate the voice, the body was the first medium of emission and reception of communications, a high level conceptual elaboration medium. Gestures, postures, glances come from the human body's physical versatility, whose effects are warnings, alerts and feelings that make possible the interaction among human beings. During that phase, a definite distinction between the ancestors of humans and several animal species cannot be traced: it would be quite improper to deny the existence of a broadly spread animal communication. Each species has developed its own survival strategy in the world, primarily founded on the issue of the most various kinds of signals.

But the human species has enormously developed the ways and contents of communication, and its awareness about them. The construction of society is based on the

invention of increasingly complex strategies of communication, on a plurality of linked languages. The naked body of hominids does not still allow to isolate the inventive spirit of communication from the natural and animal world: but the human sounds and their progressive modulation in verbal language distinguish a creative factor that responds to the needs of adaptation by making intentionality and existential sharing. Ultimately: creating society.

A periodization based on human language could be schematized as follows:

- from 3.2 million to 200.000 BC: different evolution of Homo species (Homo habilis, rudolfensis, erectus, soloensis, floresiensis, neanderthaliensis). Communication forms: yells, calls, touch, smells, percussions, dance;
- from 200.000 BC to 70.000 BC: Homo sapiens groups are active in North East Africa. Homo sapiens possesses a phonetic apparatus able to a progressive phonetic articulation: Homo sapiens starts to express himself through spoken languages;
- from 70.000 B.C. to 30.000 BC: Homo sapiens invents boats, oil lamps, bows and arrows, needle. Progressive implementation of spoken languages;
- from 30.000 BC to 3.500 BC: appearance of graphic signs and artwork. In Mesopotamia (Forth Millennium BC), pictogram writing appears: its use is initially bound to trade and accounting.

What actually produces a great impression is the long stage crossed by the human species without an oral structured system (from the first ancestor Australopithecus to Homo sapiens, before 3.2 million years ago to 200.000 years ago). In these immense periods, gestures, calls and physical contacts constituted the main expressive human media, slowly flanked by the invention of language, even able to transmit shared knowledge to the subsequent generations.

We finally note that a considerably large period (almost 200,000 years) is occupied by oral language in absence of a structured writing, which will make its first appearance in Mesopotamia about 3,500 years B.C.

For many scholars, 70.000 years ago there was a great cultural revolution, called *Cognitive Revolution* (Harari 2011), exemplified by different kinds of cultural production based on a social shared imagination (rock art, ivory and stone sculptures, graphic art). Harari argues that *Cognitive Revolution* counted on the results of a better alimentation due to the practice to cook the food, following a complete fire taming (Harari 2011: 20-28). At the same time, Harari underlines the importance of the transition from a human organization based on a few individuals to a new big collective creation:

society. In the very beginnings of Homo sapiens, communication has been a strategy to survive: it was internal, intimate, endogenous, coinciding with the possibilities of the body alone. Now, in the Neolithic environment, needs are changed. Through the language¹, Neolithic groups learnt to cohabit and to cooperate in a large number, managing big tribal settlements. In the Neolithic (approximately from 12.000 years BC to the Fourth Millennium BC) we can find structured villages, where life is mediated by rituals and communication, to keep the inter-group relationships and to get results by collective push to tribal action. Communication is now different from the ancient forms of Homo sapiens' representation and expression: the creation of myths and legends is part of the general creation of a collective imagery. It means the fiction's invention and the gossip spread as a method of social control (Harari 2011: 27). Now communication begins with the human body but it is not limited to the body: while the ancestral tales spread in a shared imagery, new communication technologies are created and established, as the first lighthouses. We are in presence of the first demonstrations of a mediation in the communicative actions, prelude to a more extensive media-communication: technologies for communication are not coincident with human body, and always more external to it.

4. Media as extensions: technologies and their supports (and legends)

The reversal of the interactional foundations seems to suggest a movement from communication to society, and not vice versa.

The interplay between ways and means of communication and ways and means of community or society is actually the discovery of a synchronism, of a "joint move" of language and human realities. However, these realities are undeniably different from one another not only for language, but also for that range of countless and sophisticated expressions that we call culture.

In other words, communication is an engine of change within the overall construction of human reality and a crucial variable of the human condition. When a great strategic value is attributed to communication among the fields of cultural understanding, it increases as well the weight of the investigation on the means that allowed, over pre-historic and historic time, a better communication.

¹ Seeking Water Benjamin, we may say "In language" better than "Through the language", because the scholar underlines that language is the human, part of a specific character funded on the capacity to furnish names to the things (Benjamin 1916: pp. 53-70).

We need at first an examination of the different platforms that have broadened communication in time and space, from the body of *hominid* to the voice of *sapiens*, from speaking to writing, from the manuscript to the typographic machine. The attempt to combine a sociological and historical investigation is based on the possibility to study technological equipment and communication media sometimes with a more synchronic than diachronic approach, for example in the reconstruction of the paths that led written technology to use very different supports such as clay tablets, papyrus, parchment and paper.

From this point of view, it is useful to return to the works on communication history by Harold Innis and to the synthesis on the identity between medium and message by McLuhan. Both theories represent an investigative attitude that can result in a conceptual re-interpretation of the human experience, even far from modernity.

Marshall McLuhan defined alphabetic writing as "an eye for the ear" (McLuhan 1962, 1964). McLuhan intended to underline the strong sensory reversal occurred after the invention of the phonetic alphabet: vision assumed the role of dominant sense, previously belonged to hearing.

According to McLuhan, only the phonetic alphabet creates a rift between the eye and the ear, between the semantic meaning and the visual code; therefore, only the phonetic writing has the ability to translate the man from the tribal sphere to that of "civilization", to give him an eye for an ear. Term "civilization" should henceforth be used in a technical sense to indicate the detribalized man whose visual values are priority in thought and action (McLuhan 1962).

Thanks to the work of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, it is easier to differentiate the oral culture from the alphabetical culture. The transmission of knowledge through orality implies participation and personal involvement in the group, both weakened by the advent of writing and the subsequent tendency towards individualism.

Writing is ultimately present in the post-tribal scope as information and an intellectual system available to the bureaucratic organization. For this function, many technicians called scribes were trained. The first production of writing appears in State entities based on an agricultural economy. New techniques of irrigation and cultivation provided food surplus, partly used to support the caste of scribes (Innis 1950).

The processing of phonetic writing occurred after a few thousand years, a long period compared to the life of a man but a minimum amount when compared to the hundreds of thousands of years which were necessary for the *Homo sapiens* to arrange an accomplished verbal system. The alphabet represents a powerful cultural revolution

promoted by people devoted to trade and exchange, which required quick learning tools and precision in commercial and administrative actions.

The different supports for writing depend both on material resources and culture: the Egyptian inscription carved in marble lasts over the centuries but it is unmovable, the clay tablet engraved by Sumerian and Mesopotamian populations is little more transportable and fragile, the papyrus scroll of the Nile is manageable and its production is abundant, the animal vellum is handy and durable but of complex processing and therefore less spread than the papyrus.

The phonetic alphabet expanded mainly through the Egyptian papyrus sheet, whose creation had provided support for the hieroglyph and the subsequent evolution of the hieratic and demotic. All the three Scriptures got mixed up with stylized images.

Papyrus becomes, by metonymy, synonymous with every appropriate paper to write, as in the words "paper" (English), "papier" (German and French) and "papel" (Spanish and Portuguese). In Italian, the word is "carta", in turn derived by the Greek *chartès* meaning "papyrus" sheet.

A passage of Pliny (*Naturalis Historia*, XIII, II) explains the method of papermaking (*papiracea*) in Egypt. The stem of the plant is processed through the combination and overlapping of paper-thin strips frame to achieve cohesive layers of fiber. The sheet is produced through a process of compression (*plagula*). Papyrus is then finished with the aid of a typing hammer which polishes the surface, thus eliminating the imperfections. The result of the process is a smooth, firm, slightly translucent, 25 to 30 centimeters in height and various metres in length, which is rolled around a stick of wood, ivory or bone.

The penetration of papyrus is not immediate: while it had been used in Egypt as early as the third millennium BC, it was introduced in Greece in the sixth century (Ferraris 2006: 316-319). The Greeks spread papyrus in the Mediterranean, writing in new alphabetic characters, where the vowels are added to the consonants, differently from the other alphabet, as Hebrew and Phoenician.

Latin alphabet, developed on the basis of Greek alphabet, spreads through the papyrus. The roads built by the Romans are impressive, works of extraordinary effectiveness, propaganda of new means of transportation on the wheel, pulled by horses and cattle. Papyrus ran through the streets, carrying in space-saving a large amount of writing that reached its destination in ever-faster times: Imperial couriers travelled approximately 75 kilometres per day. Not a small thing at all if we think that the marching army ran 10.000 steps per day, approximately 15 kilometers, which could be forced if the war required so (Tazzi 1998, p. 22). The detachment of Egypt from Rome, at the end of the Imperial era, blocked papyrus supplies and reduced the traffic on Roman

roads. The ancient parchment returned in vogue: it is said to be the original support for the Hebrew Scriptures. It had been re-launched by the new way of making books in Rome, the *codices*.

On the parchment codes, it was possible to write on both sides (only on one side in the case of the papyrus) the rectangular shape allowing larger sizes compared to the scroll. And the parchment was particularly resistant, suitable for using frequently to consult the books, including texts and study books, as well as religious texts.

Before the paper – a new support for writing obtained from the maceration of rags – completed its migration from China to the Mediterranean (in the 11th century A.C.), the ancient scrolls represented the most valuable materials for preserving the antique classical knowledge during the centuries following the Northern peoples' invasions.

A materialization of all knowledge and wisdom, rolled up books symbolized the power of the civilizations where the same books were produced. The antique libraries, a sort of temple to contain them, created an aura of sacredness around the books, and they became a flashy and spectacular target in wartime. Destruction, looting and fires inevitably hit the big clumps of books of antiquity (Camphor 1988: 23). These were short-sighted actions, anyway: the book's civilization inexorably advanced in the Mediterranean world, and expanded in all directions.

Working on the idea of "media as extensions of human senses" (McLuhan), we can even revisit from a communicative perspective some ancient narrative monuments. From this angle, in the Iliad there are several traces of the dual model of heroism: the invincible hero, protected by supernatural gifts of birth (Achilles), and the *polytropa* hero, a manifold and ingenious man (the wily Ulysses-Odysseus). After the narrative oscillation between Iliad's both different heroic models, the Odyssey tells the complex story of the homecoming hero of Ithaca, protagonist of a world that does not abandon the deep religiosity of its tradition but embraces a new rationality, according to strategies and tactics that emphasize the hegemony of privileged sensory apparatus: sight/vision, the organ from which writing originates and that writing empowers more than others. Odysseus is able to withstand the sirens' sound. He decided to plug with wax his fellows' ears (the dulling of the ancient tribal feeling, the sense of immersive and primary orality) and to expose himself to the bewitching song. The post-tribal leader, the most shining symbol of human resourcefulness, wanted to hear for the last time what he's giving up, but without risk: the mermaids, coming from the magic and supernatural world of tribal myth, are powerless in front of Odysseus' bonds. The mermaids disappeared in front of the new rational values emerging from the new post-tribal social environment.

In another famous song, Odysseus conceives and realizes the plan of escaping from the cannibal Cyclops Polyphemus's cave, making him drunk and then blinding him, therefore denying the physical superiority of the giant in his own territory. The cyclops relies upon the old sense of touch, as a last chance to detect the enemies now invisible to him.

With trepidation, Odysseus looks at the giant touching the sheep, which has to get out of the cave for the daily pasture. But the sense of touch, though crucial, is less reliable than sight, which is permanently switched off in the case of the Cyclops. The fingertips of the giant can't pinpoint Odysseus's companions, clinging to the fleece of the sheep. Only sight allows the certainty of observation. The observation is the basis of the new conception of the world, the writing its most extraordinary technology.

5. Five research directions: the invention of symbols, the sharing of meanings, the creation of networks, the construction of knowledge and the exercise of power

The ground search is therefore defined: we can tackle the new relationship between communication and society through the anthropology of communication and media history, working on the twofold argument that communication is the foundation of cognitive construction and represents a key-variable in human history. For giving substance to the socio-historical investigation on communication before the advent of mass media (from distant antiquity to the end of the 18th century) it is then necessary to outline some research directions and to set some priorities.

5.1. The invention of symbols

It is a land largely tilled, both in the palaeo-anthropological and historical-artistic scopes, as well as in the history of religions. According to Mircea Eliade (1975), rock art is a sacred tribal art, in many cases promoted by the religious behaviour driven by shamanic leaders; this role of medium between the natural and the supernatural world is entrusted with the symbolic communication of prehistoric societies, influencing not only propitiatory paintings and sculptures of mother Goddesses, but also music and dance.

The social construction of sacred symbols (funerary deposits are present since the lower Palaeolithic) is mediated both by the creative and artistic expression, and by the

spread of new technologies fostered by stable tribal settlements. Furthermore, alongside a pictorial graphic signs production involving the attempt of direct representation of objects and animals, rock art offers a number of graphic elements that seem to give off symbolic content (it is the case, for example, of the figure of the spiral, present in many primitive environments).

Many thousands of years after, another example of the centrality of the invention of symbols is represented by the artistic and architectural testimonies of the European Baroque in the 17th century: both proliferation of images with multiple references and *horror vacui* are the fundamental characters of a global representation of art in the early modernity (Villari 1991). Art exceeds, saturates the visible, multiplies the symbolic references and imposes a complex and redundant ritual of communication. The Baroque invests on the spectator's emotional stun, which prevents us from seeing the *vacuum* over the incredible dissemination of images and symbols. Meanwhile, journeys become transoceanic, and the colonists fill the coffers of the European naval powers with gold, spices and never seen cultivations. The baroque overcrowding of images hides the gap between European colonists and native Americans. At the same time, the blanket of images and rituals could not prevent the gradual penetration of *advisa*, *corantos* and *gazette* (Infelise 2002) as a symptom of new realism. These early newspapers entail a simplification of the information that will be fatal to the Baroque, readable as a long and sophisticated swan song of an aristocratic culture.

5.2. *The sharing of meanings*

Norbert Elias has told us many things about the sharing of meanings through the investigation carried out on Western medieval civilization (Elias 1969). Among many notable contexts, the sociologist takes care the table behaviour, focusing on the long transition from the middle age to the first modernity. According to Elias, the introduction of cutlery in the late medieval canteens broke the meaning of food sharing, and the assimilation of food became a way to distinguish the different *status* and roles in society. How have the uses been changing at table?

Individual dishes substituted the great common dish where all attenders took the food with their hands; the meaning of spatial privacy that envelops the entire society is transferred in every single piece of cutlery, on a collision course with community anthropology that characterized the early medieval time. An example of this process-step is the prohibition for using two forks prongs (imported from Byzantium) that Elias attributed to the Venetians in the 11th century. After approximately two hundred years,

new cutlery sets will succeed, while more precise ideas about personal hygiene and the risks of pooling of fluids and residues spread (Elias 1969: 185-208).

The contrast, the rejection and then the acceptance of new social meanings from other practices and other civilizations are part of a story of communication able to draw analytical nourishment from the history of everyday life. In this sense, the investigations of the scholars gathered in the journal "Les Annales" still guide the research about the social history of communication.

5.3. The creation of networks

The focus of our analysis is now related to the interaction between individuals interested in sharing meanings. It seems plausible to argue that tools of communication worked to include (or exclude) individuals in the same context of interaction. Two examples: the realities of aggregations for micro-groups prior to the first tribal settlements (Diamond 1997) and the organization of English and French reading societies in the late seventeenth century (Darnton 2003). The invention and refinement of the media led to the creation of entities based both on individual training and collective sharing (the verbal language for the nomad Homo sapiens and the reading societies for the people in the age of Enlightenment).

The networking, designed in its general meaning of links between users and communication technologies, responds to the above-mentioned relational essence of communication, which is accompanied by the search for the network nodes.

Basically, once communication has been defined as an action equipped with sense, the questions are: which social classes or groups were most affected by the specific communication technologies? How did the different classes or groups use technologies? For example: before the invention of the printing machine, which were the uses of writing by the merchants emerging from the medieval environment? Through which particular initiatives did the merchants share their experience?

5.4. The construction of knowledge

In this case, we should focus on how the media have contributed to the accumulation of human knowledge. The most immediate reference goes to the alphabetic writing, which was able to create permanent platforms for all knowledge, crossing the bar-

riers of time and space, by opposing the friability of the oral knowledge, threatened of extinction as well as any speaking human group.

In fact, many other media contributed to the continued existence and expansion of scientific and technical information, and to a wide cultural knowledge. This is, for example, the case of artworks: they are objects containing an accumulation of knowledge (technical, philosophical, poetic, and so on). At the same time, artworks were frequently created by artists educated and trained to a shared and spread aesthetic (Hauser 1955), basis of a cultural market active during the building of capitalistic civilization (Braudel 1979).

It is also the case of educational institutions (for example the creation of universities in the middle ages, Verger 1973) which took advantage of existing communication platforms to gather knowledge and to establish new professional roles, and which contributed to the adaptation of the media (for example the book manuscript) to the needs of the new audience of students.

5.5. The exercise of power

The media were invented and perfected in different contexts: they were used to organize society and to govern. Starting from orality and writing, the urban space – the polis – has increasingly taken into account the development of the media to include and to exclude social groups from power. The empires of classical antiquity, *in primis* the Roman Empire, have created great routes and great infrastructures where messages written on papyrus ran, light weight for the knights but often heavy for the contained orders. Thanks to the alphabetic technology an immense territory could internally communicate and be governed.

The exchange of correspondence also allowed the Catholic Church to resist the recent upheaval of the barbarian invasions and to preserve the principle of Western authority, as in the case of Pope Gregory The Great, who conceived the letter as a means of the keeping and development of religious power (Vitolo 2000).

In other respects, the mighty spectacular exhibition of Frederick II of Swabia never ceases to amaze. He was an emperor who did not hesitate to protect the poets of the Sicilian school or to dress as a Saracen or to bring during his long Government moves a number of exotic animals. These elements made him enormously popular (Frederick II of Swabia as “*Stupor mundi*”, Horst 1977).

A few centuries later, the opulent communication of Renaissance cultural events clearly indicates the role of the representation of power through expressive forms, and

entrusts the organisation to individuals, families and groups who know how to dominate with images and choreographies, performing as leaders and cultural strategists as well.

In addition, closer to our own time, the story of printed newspapers (Landi 2011) illustrates very clearly the battle fought in the media field between the supporters and opponents of absolute power, which seemed eternal up to the middle of the 18th century. The absolute power was actually undermined by the techniques of journalism available to a new and broad public.

6. Communicative stories before the advent of mass media system

Communication lies in the historical process, by claiming some flimsiness. With the exception of communication technologies, which can be somehow circumscribed and told as objects of investigation, the rest of the "communication galaxy" must be explored through other objects or, if you prefer, with another glance. When I say "glance" I mean specializations, predominantly of a historical nature: social history, history of art and culture, history of technology, economic history, political history, history of literature. For example, to identify the communicative character of the Divine Comedy, it is necessary to compare the masterpiece with the mentalities at the time in force (Farrell 1982). Although starting with the work and its author, we can investigate the possible communicative relapse of the work in terms of both dissemination and penetration in the collective imagination. We can also verify how an author's poetic, religious and political ideas influenced the public of his time (Gaeta 1982).

The communication content of the intellectual works could be told through the techniques, philosophies, interests, and the relations entertained by artists and intellectuals at their time. The phenomenon should be studied with more adequate lenses, in its dense network of cross-references to other social phenomena (Hauser 1955).

In this process, it is necessary to underline the search for the ways individuals communicated, namely spoke, wrote, produced and commented on the works of art, underwent (or rebelled to) a dominion, planned and enjoyed entertainment and distractions. In the fabric of historical facts, it is possible to establish relationships and communication links that have both sociological and *mediological* significance.

The history of the *Encyclopedie* by Diderot and d'Alembert offers a good example to illustrate this step. This is an amazing and complex adventure full of significant events, where you can recognize issues and relations between actors and the social world of great anticipation (1979 Darnton; Pons 1966). In this story, we have to investigate the

role of the work's creators, the publishers' input in enterprise, the encyclopedic sorting, the search of the compilers, the discussion in the salons of the time, the conflicts of opinion in the press, the religious and political censorship and repression, the encouragement of some courtesans, the sympathy of influential kings and emperors, the issue of copyright, the construction of a philosophical monument, the attitude of the readers. The collection of these elements provides a measure of communicative penetration of *Encyclopedie* in its time.

The *Encyclopedie* is indeed a liminal object of communication: conceived in a pre-industrial and pre-revolutionary society, already counts on the imminent advent of a mass society. Without several thousands of subscribers who purchased the work sight unseen, it would have never worked out (Pons 1966: XIX-XXI). If the reading practice had not already been so spread the *Encyclopedie* would not have seen the light, although the work was published in a country where the ruler was still considered to be of divine origin. In that country, a few decades later a revolutionary movement that Europe had never known took place: the new mass society was announced by collective actions, regularly described and commented on by a medium that until then had served primarily to circulate books among the upper classes. I'm talking about the press, which since then has especially come to signify newspapers.

The French revolution is a watershed event in the history of Western communication: the participation in revolutionary destinies by restive crowds marks the resounding entrance of mass society in historical-political dynamics. In addition, within the Revolution a new communication technology that can accelerate the dissemination of information will arise.

The optical telegraph, this is the name of a machine even trivial in its operation (Flichy 1991: 13-22), managed to dispatch messages at a speed of 500 kilometers per hour. A small acquisition, but it must be remembered that the fastest means of communication was still the horse, a means which, even though used according to a rational exchange station service, could not exceed a few tens of kilometres per hour.

The optical telegraph is the latest communication technology of the mechanical age. In a few decades, the electric telegraph will envelop the planet in its network, while the rhythms of a new type of communication will be experienced in the strategic places of mass society, the metropolis. It's a new kind of civilization, whose focus will be increasingly evident, emphasized by such expressions as "information society" (Castells, 1996). But the communication and media studies can now open themselves to the investigation of the past as well as the present. It is a task partly sketched by paleo-anthropologists and historians of mentalities, but it needs new discoveries and new

findings, which require a wide vision of communication: a form of interactive exchange essential to the human life from its beginnings.

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