Nick Couldry: from the mediated centre to the hollowing out of the social world – the media and the process of datafication of society

Nick Couldry: do mito do centro mediado ao esvaziamento do mundo social – as mídias e o processo de datificação da sociedade

Interview with NICK COULDRY[a]

London School of Economics and Political Science, Department of Media and Communications. London, United Kingdom

By BRUNO CAMPANELLA[b]

Universidade Federal Fluminense, Graduate Program in Communication. Niterói – RJ, Brazil

IN THIS INTERVIEW, given shortly before his keynote at School of Communications and Arts/University of São Paulo, in May 2019, Nick Couldry reflects on his research over the past 20 years, in particular on the role of media in social ordering. Although this theme was implicit in his early work on rituals and myths, Couldry explains in this conversation how the data proliferation in contemporary society makes this discussion more complex and urgent. For the English researcher, the datafication of society must be understood not only as a development of capitalism, but also as the beginning of a new phase in human history that rivals its importance with the rise of historical colonialism.

[a] Professor of Media, Communications and Social Theory in the Department of Media and Communications at London School of Economics and Political Science. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8233-3287.
E-mail: n.couldry@lse.ac.uk

[b] Professor at the Graduate Program in Communication of Universidade Federal Fluminense. Orcid: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4040-3472. E-mail: brunocampanella@yahoo.com

MATRIZes: In your talk last week in Rio, during the II Congresso Televisões held at UFF, you presented some of the main discussions that drove your work in the last 20 years or so. From your researches on television to your most recent works on datafication, you offered a privileged view of what you have been investigating all these years. What line, would you say, connects all these works?

Nick Couldry: Well, I've always been interested in power and, particularly, symbolic power – or [to] put it more directly, the ability of institutions, maybe governments too, to describe worlds, name the world, construct the world. And 20, 25 years ago it seemed to me the fundamental aspect of media

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institutions, that no one talked about – except as something so obvious they didn't need to talk about. We used to say that "the media are a window to the world…" or whatever – and for me this was always a very strange fact, that in societies where the resource to tell stories is so unequally distributed, so strongly concentrated into a small number of institutions that tell us the way the world is, with most people never knowing that power. Why do people accept that? Why would people accept such a massive inequality in something so fundamental which is the ability to describe or, as Paulo Freire said, to name the world? This is what started the theory on media power, in my first book (Couldry, 2000), and then developed into theory media rituals, in my second book (Couldry, 2003).

And what we described in Rio is how, as the thinking evolved, it had to face a big challenge, which was the challenges of the profound changes in media institutions themselves. First of all, the shift from a world of small numbers of television and radio channels, newspapers and so on, to a world of an expanding internet, with faster and faster access, which people started to take for granted, many new sources of information, and many new possibilities for people too, it seemed, to tell their stories to the world in the early 2000s. Suddenly, media seemed to be democratized. Did this change the concentration of symbolic power in media? That's what I wondered in the mid-2000s. Then I began to realize: no, it didn't. What it meant was that the struggle of a concentrating power through media organizations, like television companies, had become more intense. So, it was all the more necessary for those institutions to say you must still watch, you must still follow, they could use even social media as it developed to encourage people to watch.

And, of course, it wasn't just media companies who wanted this; governments rely on the fact that there is somewhere where we watch. They could rely on that – otherwise, what would the possibility of politics be? There would be nowhere for governments to go to send the message to us. And remembering José Saramago, in a novel of his called *Seeing*: it describes a world where suddenly no one votes, no one is watching, government doesn't know how to communicate anymore, government doesn't know what government is anymore. This is an impossible situation for government, and, therefore, government needs media. So, what I concluded it in the first phase in my work was that the myth, what they used to call the myth of the mediated centre, the myth that there is a centre of society where media has a special access, that didn't disappear with the internet, it became more and more essential to renew, to fight over, for governments, marketers, and television companies.

But then a new challenge came with the rise of social media platforms and [with] the fact that our phones increasingly became smartphones, not just ways of talking to people, but ways of connecting direct from our phone to the world of information, and sending information data ourselves. This possibly did challenge in a much more fundamental way the myth of the mediated centre because it created the possibility of imagining a different centre, which was the centre of the world we experience when we connect with our friends, as we go around the city, seeing what they're doing, seeing what they're seeing, hearing what they're thinking. There seemed to be a new centre, but when you think about the idea that is our *us*, those we know literally in their natural state, connecting through these platforms, is itself a myth, it's another myth, a myth that I call the *myth of us*, a myth in which new types of institutions, social media companies and those who benefit from their data, themselves benefit and need to keep going, and they do all the time because they tell us we must all be connected.

One of the first things I saw when I landed in Brazil was a whole series of advertisements by Samsung, the Korean company, describing a phone, a fridge, a computer, of course, and many other objects [as] "*sempre conectado*". That's what's important. So, the myth that by being always connected, we just do what we want, we have the life we want, we are with the people we want to be, our family, our friends, this is our essential new "myth of us", which is based on our new ideologies of connection.

But there was still a final stage I have to go through which was the question of understanding data. Around about 2012, 2013, through field work I was doing around storytelling I realized what the profound impact the gathering of data, the processing of data was having on every actor of the social world, including civil society and institutions. They only wanted to tell the stories of the people around them, they wanted to give them voice, but at the same time they had to translate what they did into data, analytics of web platforms and so on. And this is when I started looking more in detail at the impact that the collection of data was having on the social world, how it was translating, forcing a translation of the flux of everyday life into something particular, measures, things that can be counted, things that by being counted can be aggregated, put into data and the data can then be processed. This seemed an ordinarily banal thing, we know it happens everywhere and we are all used to it, but it's also very profound change on what the social world is. It no longer become something that we just live, that we feel together, that comes and emerges out of how we interact, it becomes something that needs to be processed. The entities that do the processing are corporations and their vast bags of computers on which they rely.

So, this point I realized that my interest in symbolic power, the power to name the world, was reaching a new phase, which is understanding how new ways of naming the world are emerging through data. That's when I started to get interested in new power relations, which led to my more recent work around data colonialism.

MATRIZes: There is one important work, however, which was left out of your presentation, your book *Why voice matters* (Couldry, 2010). Don't you think, though, that the capacity to have one's voice heard was never so important as it is today, when social life happens mostly on platforms structured by neoliberal logics that allow certain types of interactions, and not others?

NC: Well, yes, you're right. I've always tried to write both about media and about culture – although most of my books in the end happen to be about media. So, I've always being interested in cultural studies, at least in the project of cultural studies, a form of genuinely transformative critical knowledge that understands the world in a different way, a more deeply democratic way. And that interest led, in 2010, for me to write the book about *Why voice matters* (Couldry, 2010), which was a response to the rise of neoliberalism and the effect that it was having in politics in Britain, closing down of democratic values after the Iraq war in 2003. And there I wanted not to celebrate voice exactly, because everyone celebrates voice, everyone wants to speak, the most racist antidemocratic populist politician wants voice, his voice, her voice, the voice of his or her supporters, they want that to be strong. Everyone's in favour of voice. So what really matters is not voice itself, even though that is fundamental to human life being worth living, but the organizations of societies in a way that voice is mattered, that everyone's voice has a chance of mattering.

My original title for the book was *Voices that matter*, not *Why voice matters*. That would have been my preferred title, *Voices that matter*. So, when I thought about that, I realized this is a very neglected topic: how would we reorganize society if we did it seriously to make voice matter. And once you ask that simple question you realize that most of society, most institutions are organized so that even if they pretend to be democratic they're actually organized on the basis of, in reality, insuring that voice does not matter, that power can go on operating as it wants. So from that perspective, the rise of tech populism [and], more recently, extreme forms of voice in the political domain, which actually are based around closing down the voices of parts of

the population, is not a surprise. It's a continuation of closing down of many voices in neoliberalism, where market forces are deemed to be more important than democratization.

So, the question for today is: Is there something particular that the era of data collection and social media adds to this rather frightening world where voice is celebrated by some politicians but, in fact, denied? And I think that potentially is something important, which is that in a world where everyone seems to have voice, everyone seems to be speaking all the time to everyone, than it becomes very difficult to separate the moments when voice matters, when voice really makes a difference, when one has a genuine connection with someone that transforms one's possibilities for living and acting together. In other words, when voice makes real solidarity possible, for those moments when we have the illusion of solidarity, because we are all speaking together. In other words, the conditions of genuine transformative politics become harder to see in a world where everyone seems to be speaking. So, we have this paradox: we live in a world where everyone seems to have voice, everyone seems to be empowered, yet they're less empowered, they're less clear about where to go, who to work with, who to find solidarity with in order to build a better society, maybe even to save the possibility of democracy. So, these are uniquely confusing times when I believe we need social theory, we need communications research more than ever, and, of course, we need true voice, a genuine chance to have our voices valued more than ever.

MATRIZes: One can argue that, perhaps, the two biggest challenges we have ahead in the twenty first century are related to global warming and the destruction of natural environments, on the one hand, and the colonization of life by logics of datafication, on the other. Both problems are extremely difficult to deal with, as they are the base of capitalist expansion; they are present in the basis of how we conduct our very daily lives. How can we possibly try to engage society to deal with them in a concrete way?

NC: I would add a third, I think there are three massive battles today: Obviously, to save the planet at all. Secondly, the threat to human freedom and any possibility of democracy through data colonization, which is this new book with Ulises Mejias is writing about. The book come out later this year called *The costs of connection* (Couldry & Mejias, 2019). But, thirdly, also gender violence and sexual violence, which in some ways is the basis of organizing important dimensions of society but has now reached the point where its intolerability is clear to more and more people that it will no longer be accepted by women in many countries. And the result provoking a backlash, this time backlash

by conservative forces against the rights of women, sexual minorities, racial minorities that had being gained over 30, 40 years.

So, just to summarize this triangle as I see it. So, the ecological crisis provokes the backlash from those who want to deny the truth, because they're still making money out of the old way of living. Data colonialism is beginning to become an issue and is creating a *techlash*, a lash by people who concern for their freedom. Gender violence is creating… we don't have a word for it, but it is sort of a backlash by conservative forces who want to reverse 50 or even a hundred years of history of greater social empowerment, greater justice, particularly justice for women. They want to reverse all that.

So, we have three massive conflicts happening at the same time, but all of them are competing for attention in this massively intense world where all of us can watch each other all the time in theory, whether we know it or not, all of us can be speaking at all times.

So what is essential in this very difficult and complex circumstances, first of all, obviously, the sharing of information, the sharing of tested information – journalism, the values of public journalism have become absolutely essential to defend, even though the economics of journalism is now under threat, partly because of this overwhelming flow of information, so information becomes too cheap, too easy. So good information has too a high price, becomes too difficult to produce, so we need to think of ways for human beings working together and generating resources, to support journalism and link that to social struggle, that's one thing, so that information can still be retained and trusted information can be sustained. This is now enormously difficult because of this, if you like, tempest, this massive storm in the domain of knowledge and information.

Secondly, people, of course, need to find ways of solidarity, they need to come together with those who think similarly, in spite of this world of tremendous confusion and some of the time of course they have to do it through the social media platforms around which most people, particularly those people with children, now have to arrange their lives. We can't deny the importance of these platforms. In my new book with Ulises Mejias, the last thing we want to suggest is that people should abandon platforms right now, when there is such an urgent crisis to react to them. That's not realistic. Which creates a new challenge, which is how to think about possibilities for solidarity and connection in a new way. And we end our book arguing not that people should abandon social media platforms, not that they should suddenly resign from all connection with the world, but that we should think seriously about how we connect together, what

practical things we can do, not as individuals – because an individual can do nothing, nothing in relation to a whole world, that is impossible – but through solidarity, by helping each other. How do we help each other become less reliant, not on connection, because connection is fundamental to human life, but these terms of connection, these conditions? How can we help each other become less reliant? This is a massive project.

But, of course, we know it's possible because it was possible before social media platforms existed and this was only fifteen years ago, so we know it must be possible. So, the idea that it's not possible is another fiction, but it's a fiction that comes from the ideology of data colonialism, which says that the direction of change is inevitable, there is one direction to go to, we must stay on the road, otherwise we don't exist. And our argument at the end of our book is that, although this has overwhelming force, this idea of the path of data colonialism, the path towards the future, there is a space to the side of the road. We can step off the road, we can look around, we can see who else is there, and we can start to imagine a different world in some direction we don't yet know, which is not based on these terms and conditions. That's what we have to find, but the first step has to be imagination.

If we give up on our imagination as human beings then we have no chance. Or as Paulo Freire put it, if we give up on the human beings' ability to name the world, which means to rename the world, to fight, to give it another name, to name a different reality, then we have no chance of fighting this, we just accept the journey along the road which has already been determined. But I don't think, I really don't think people want this, I really don't think people want to go in this direction. They need to be put the question and this is the responsibility of the university, academics and public intellectuals and those on civil society, it's our responsibility to ask the question, to ask these questions to people, to give them a chance to speak on this fundamental issue for the future of humanity.

MATRIZes: Considering that your forthcoming book *The costs of connection* (Couldry & Mejias, 2019), written with Ulises Mejias, deals with new forms of colonialism, do you think that it can have a special resonance in Brazil or Latin America in general?

NC: We hope so. Ulises is from Mexico, I am very interested in Latin America. I've learned Spanish so I can understand the history, the literature, academic literature around Latin America. I'm trying to learn some Portuguese too and I can read some Portuguese. So, we certainly hope so. And, in the book, we really make a big effort not just to rely on western theorists, but also

theorists who come from other parts of the world, particularly for us, Latin America. So, we quote philosophers like Enrique Dussel, from Argentina and Mexico, and sociologist Aníbal Quijano, from Peru, and, of course, Paulo Freire, and Ivan Illich, the great reformer, who is originally from Austria but lived lot of his life in Mexico. So, we tried to honour those theorists but, more deeply, more importantly, yes, we really hope the book will have a resonance in Latin America, which was the experimental zone where colonialism, historical colonialism, which is still continuing in some form today, began to coin its most intense form from the 1490s onwards.

But in using the very heavy word colonialism in order to capture the scale, the depth, the intensity of the changes going on today and their world historical importance, we don't forget or underestimate the special features of historical colonialism, particularly as they are remembered by those who suffered most, which includes everyone who lives in Latin America, because societies were formed through colonialism. And that was, of course, the terrible physical violence of historical colonialism, unimaginable violence, on unimaginable scale and intensity, made worse because people came to believe that these were not human beings that they were killing and cutting up, burning. They believed they were not human beings. First, they [the Europeans] thought they [the indigenous people] were, they thought they were potential Christians, but they convinced themselves that no these are not human beings, "we [the Europeans] can do anything".

So, the violence and, of course, also the racism, the racism that was linked to that necessary belief that these were not human developed into a whole racial hierarchy. This evolved over time, and we remember them intensely now as the tools so which colonialism could be stabilized. So, our question is: what was colonialism fundamentally if the tools it handled, violence, extreme violence, and racism riving up the world are not [seen as] a problem? At its core, even if this is not what we remember, colonialism was the taking of things, the appropriation, the astonishing change in human history when suddenly one part of the world, Europe, realized everything in the world was to be taken, everything was there for us if you lived in Europe, everything, without limit, [something] unimaginable. And that it was there just for taking and maybe laws could be invented to make this seem legal and, of course, it was colonialism, this changing the idea of what the world was, that generated vast, extraordinary profits which became entirely legal, because new legal structures were invented to make it seem legal. That led later, two centuries later, to Britain acquiring Australia. Britain called it the *Terra nullius*, the land

of nobody, because there was no one there, except the aboriginal populations who they could see but didn't regard as human.

So, this originally Spanish and then Portuguese ideology spread to support a whole international colonial cause and movement which transformed the economies of the world and made possible what became capitalism. So our argument is, is it possible that what's happening today with data rivals that historic colonialism, not in terms of its violence, or in terms of its racism yet, but in terms of the appropriation of resource, the building of new social relations, the restructuring of whole societies based around what, based around the acquisition of a new resource which is data, human beings, the taking of every interior aspect of human life of everyone on the planet whether they are inside American, or Chinese, or British or Brazilian society and transforming it into economic value through data processes based on huge computing power?

Many people think that this is a distraction. Because of the terrible memories of colonialism, as to do with physical violence, and as to do with racism, which we don't deny for one moment. But it's only a distraction if you don't see through those terrible memories of colonialism to remember what colonialism was about at its core, which was about the taking of resources. So, what we see today is about the taking of resource, it's about not just the taking of more as capitalism always expands, of course, it's always been expanding, but the taking of something fundamentally different, something which even 30 years ago the president of IBM, or the biggest oil company could never imagine was there to be taken, which is human life itself. But now it is possible to take, it is imaginable. We have to capture that deep, deep change and there's only one historical presage that extraordinary in history, which is the start of historic colonialism, modern colonialism, which made the modern era, as Aníbal Quijano says, which made modernity possible.

So, we hope that Latin American societies, which have been so profoundly shaped by the struggles of a colonialism, the struggles to find alternative modernities in spite of everything, in spite of this history, will be societies where there will be an interested audience in what we are arguing, the transformation that is going on today not just in Latin America, but in Europe, North America, Africa, Asia, everywhere.

MATRIZes: The issue of media power that crosses your work is being addressed by you, a media sociologist, who has a preoccupation with social order, ritualization etc. How can an academic interested in cultural studies engage in this discussion?

NC: That's a very good question because it might seem to some people that this talk about technology platforms seems a very long way from people's attempts to make sense of the world, theirs joys, their pleasures in music, and so on. And it might seem to be invalidating cultural studies but I don't think that's true. So if we go back to the beginnings of the cultural studies in the work of Raymond Williams, or Stuart Hall, or, of course, in Latin America, where officially was not strictly cultural studies but it was profoundly influential in an alternative version of it. Jesús Martín-Barbero, in Colombia, and of course the great writers in Argentina, Brazil, they developed this movement for thinking about culture in a deeper way, thinking about *lo popular* in a deeper way. All these movements were focusing on one essential thing, not just meaning itself but who has power over meaning, what types of power can be built through the control of meaning, so, the control of space, which affects how meanings flow in the world, who can speak, who is silent, whose stories count, whose stories don't count. This is the core of cultural studies from the very beginning. Remember Raymond Williams' famous amazing statement that there are no masses, even though the elites talk all the time about masses, just as they do today, they talk about masses, the stupid people, the poor. There are no masses, there are only ways of talking about people as masses. So, Raymond Williams brought out that at the core of our understanding of democracy and politics has to be an understanding of culture, who controls meaning, who controls the ways of talking.

So, for me if we go back to the origins of cultural studies than it must pay attention to the new transformations going on in the ways of talking and the ways of categorizing people in the world. In a way, it doesn't matter what happens to cultural studies as a particular form in the academic world, in the end these are all institutional forms, we all understand that. But if we go to the spirit of cultural studies then there surely must be a crucial alliance between those working in cultural studies today, those working for data justice in the information science, sociologists concerned with the new ways of reinforcing poverty through categorization through algorithms, health sociologists worried about the same things, educational sociologists very worried about what is happening to children now in school, when the toys they play with are actually robots which are surveilling them… There must be common ground between that and those struggles in cultural studies too. So I would hope that those working in cultural studies will see that and join this battle to think about these fundamental struggles today. M

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