

# Paths and exchanges in communication research: A Luso-Brazilian trajectory

## *Paths and exchanges in communication research: A Luso-Brazilian trajectory*

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### ABSTRACT

In this text I try to outline and analyze about 30 years of a personal research trajectory, based on geographic, political and social contexts in the Portuguese-speaking world and in the Communication Sciences field. The path was made up of personal, professional and institutional encounters and disagreements, where the School of Communications and Arts and the Graduate Program in Communication Sciences at the University of São Paulo acquired great centrality. Many of the references are memories guided by temporal milestones and, as such, present, from the outset, a reconfiguration of the real, where the bias of time, spatiality and generational nostalgia take on significant relevance. Written as an essay, the text adopts a chronological order in the exposition to explain many of the thematic, theoretical-conceptual and methodological options undertaken over these three decades of research.

**Keywords:** Communication sciences, research, methodologies, media analysis, Portuguese speaking world

### RESUMO

Neste texto, procuro traçar e analisar cerca de 30 anos de uma trajetória pessoal de pesquisa, balizada por contextos geográficos, políticos e sociais no espaço da lusofonia e no âmbito das Ciências da Comunicação. O caminho fez-se de encontros e desencontros pessoais, profissionais e institucionais, onde a Escola de Comunicações e Artes e o Programa de Pós-Graduação em Ciências da Comunicação da Universidade de São Paulo adquiriram grande centralidade. Muitas das referências são memórias pautadas por marcos temporais e, como tal, apresentam, à partida, uma reconfiguração do real, onde o viés do tempo, da espacialidade e da nostalgia geracional adquirem relevância significativa. O texto configura-se como um ensaio e adota-se uma ordem cronológica na exposição, com vista a explicitar muitas das opções temáticas, teórico-conceituais e metodológicas, que foram tomadas ao longo destas três décadas de pesquisa.

**Palavras-chave:** Ciências da comunicação, pesquisa, metodologias, análise dos media, espaço da lusofonia

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IN THE BEGINNING IT WAS the determination to do a graduate course at the School of Communications and Arts of the University of São Paulo (ECA- USP). It was the early 1980s, Portugal still did not offer training in this area and the opportunity to go to São Paulo arose after a stay in Brazil. ECA-USP became an immediate objective due to its international credentials and its trans and multidisciplinary proposal in the field of Communication and Information. In the early 1980s, aged around 30, I had completed a five-year degree in History at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Lisbon – completed in 1974 – and a specialization course in Librarianship/Archivalry, held between 1976 and 1977 in Coimbra. Meanwhile, I accumulated experiences as a librarian at the National Library of Portugal, in Lisbon, from 1973 to 1977, as a cooperating professor in Angola, Luanda, in 1975/1976, and in the newly independent Republic of São Tomé and Príncipe, from 1977 to 1979.

Supported by Brazilian friends, many of them ex-exiles from the dictatorship that I met in different places after the Revolution of April 25, 1974 and who were returning to Brazil after the enactment of the Amnesty Law – Law no. 6.683/1979 –, I applied for the graduate school at ECA. In the following years, I completed my master's degree in 1984 and my PhD in 1988, the latter in the specialty of Librarianship and Information Sciences, and then I began to teach and participate in research groups (1984-1990).

Recollecting this period, I observe how important the graduate curricular years at ECA were, both for the master's and PhD degrees. First, I emphasize the theoretical and conceptual diversity expressed in the seminars offered and in the dynamics given by the professors, including visitors from different nationalities and theoretical schools that taught them. Then, I notice how exciting it was to attend seminars at other faculties, such as the Faculdade de Psicologia, Letras e Ciências Humanas (FFLCH-USP), an opportunity that expanded my horizons in relation to Sociology, Anthropology, Philosophy, Literature and Comparative History and allowed me to be in touch with professors with different academic worldviews, theoretical and methodological understandings, in which the Marxist and structuralist matrix prevailed. Added to this substantive academic path were the experiences arising from living together and sharing ideas with colleagues from all Brazilian states and Latin American countries, with multiple readings and backgrounds that constituted a network of professional and intellectual companionship throughout more than 30 years.

Having taken a degree in History at the Faculty of Letters of Lisbon, during the period of the Salazar dictatorship, between 1969 and 1974, joining

the graduate course at ECA presented me with a range of knowledge and forbidden readings at the time in Portugal, namely by Marxist, structuralist and functionalist authors in the Social Sciences. I emphasize as profoundly impactful the readings of authors of the Frankfurt School, such as Adorno, Benjamin and Horkheimer, as well as the writings of Roland Barthes, Bakhtin, Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Bourdieu and Umberto Eco, which constituted the theoretical foundations of an academic and research journey. These authors are joined by the Brazilians Raymundo Faoro, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda, Florestan Fernandes, Celso Furtado, Milton Santos and Antonio Candido, whose readings were mandatory in graduate courses and contributed to deepen knowledge about Brazil, then limited to the teachings and worldviews acquired in the degree in History in Portugal. The acquisition of this knowledge was always associated with heated and dynamic discussions in classrooms and in informal meetings with colleagues and teachers, against the background of the end of the Brazilian dictatorship, the Diretas Já movement (1983-1984) and the process of democratic affirmation in Brazil.

The intellectual freedom that I experienced in the seminars, in the proposed readings and in the final works allowed me to approach and adopt innovative themes and methodologies, trained my look towards discipline and observation of phenomena and instilled in me doubt and methodical criticism, characteristics that I tried to deepen in the research that I have been developing throughout my professional life. In an academic environment in which the support for the interdisciplinarity of the works was explicit, it was possible to combine, in the master's dissertation and doctoral thesis, the initial training in History with the interest in the history of Africa, with the knowledge acquired in the graduate course – especially of discourse analysis and sociology of language – and the experiences lived in two newly independent countries: Angola and São Tomé e Príncipe.

Also dating from the 1980s are some collaborations that I carried out in the ECA graduate course as a professor, of which I highlight the seminar dedicated to deepening the knowledge of graduate students about Africa and the African legacy in Brazil. As a professor at the Department of Librarianship and Documentation, after my doctorate, I collaborated in the Documentary Analysis seminars inspired by the French archaeologist and philosopher Jean Claude Gardin, which constituted an added teaching learning experience and a stimulus to the deepening of discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. This path influenced the acquisition of skills in computer data processing, reinforced by carrying out a post-doctorate at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), in Paris, between 1990 and 1991.

## RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE SPACES

Personal issues brought me back to Portugal. The one-year stay at the CNRS, where I had contact with professors involved in projects centered on History and Archeology that used content analysis methodologies assisted by specific software, definitely influenced my decision to pursue the field of Communication.

In Portugal, it was the early 1990s and people were starting to talk about Communication Sciences, sometimes simultaneously and in an ambiguous overlap with Journalism. Academic training offers were restricted to a few universities and departments and few professors had specific training in the field (Mesquita & Ponte, 1997; Rodrigues, 2002).

Dating back to that period, and in cooperation with colleagues at ECA and the Graduate Program in Communication Sciences at USP (PPGCOM USP) – namely with Marques de Melo, Immacolata Vassalo de Lopes and Margarida Kunch –, the movements in which I participated, with a view to organizing the association of researchers in Communication Sciences. Thus, the first meeting, with a view to founding the Portuguese Society of Communication Sciences (SOPCOM), took place at the Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades e Tecnologias, in 1997, followed by other meetings to organize associations that grouped Portuguese-speaking countries (LUSOCOM) and Ibero-American countries (IBERCOM). In the country, the media landscape had changed substantially at the beginning of the decade with the privatization of the media and the emergence of private television groups (Pinto et al., 2000). the nationalizations of newspapers and radios were left behind, as well as the governmentalization of public television, situations that characterized the post-Revolution period of April 25, 1974. These changes, following Portugal's entry into the European Union in 1986, constituted a challenge both for teaching and research in Communication and Journalism, because the Salazar dictatorship (1933-1974) did not allow academic training in these areas (Correia, 1999).

I joined the Catholic University of Lisbon in 1992 as a professor, when the Faculty of Human Sciences and the degree in Social and Cultural Communication were created. At the institution, I had the privilege of starting an original academic project that required the deepening of new theoretical and methodological skills in the field of Communication and Social Sciences, in which the research components and student involvement were innovative and determining factors. In this scenario, and stimulated by the lived context, I coordinated the presentation, to European instances, of projects that aimed to apprehend how the Portuguese media, specifically national newspapers, addressed the phenomenon of immigration in Portugal. The objective, at the time, was to create databases on journalistic coverage of migrations, adopting a matrix common

to all European research institutions participating in the project and using content analysis methodologies (quantitative) – based on discourse analysis (qualitative) – which came to shape a field of research called Media Analysis. The experience of the ECA graduate seminars inspired not only the coordination of activities carried out together with master's and doctoral students, but also the works that gave rise to the Media and Migrations line of research.

A phase of economic growth was underway in Portugal, provided by the country's accession to the European Union, with major public works importing labor, such as the Vasco da Gama bridge over the Tagus River, Parque das Nações and the national highways (Viegas & Costa, 1998). Among the migrants who arrived, Brazilians stand out who, together with citizens from countries of the former USSR, and from African countries where Portuguese is the official language, found work, preferably in public works and services.

The developed academic studies, mostly exploratory, aimed to analyze the images/representations of these migrants, in newspapers and on television, by recording the characterization of these actors: attributes conferred, most frequent framings or geographic areas of location (Cunha et al., 1996)<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, these works sought to understand how the routines of communication professionals, journalists and anchors consolidated and renewed certain colonial stereotypes, creating hierarchies, defining profiles and associating attributes with the different national origins of migrants. These empirical works initially intended to obtain results to provide them to funding agencies, which, in turn, used them in their public policies. Subsequently, these researches stimulated and demanded from researchers the acquisition of a growing methodological/theoretical/conceptual apparatus, capable of framing into their interpretation.

<sup>1</sup>[https://aps.pt/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/DPR492ad0fbef4a4\\_1.pdf](https://aps.pt/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/DPR492ad0fbef4a4_1.pdf).

Thus, these researches led to the recovery and deepening of the French sociolinguistic bibliography of such authors as Bronckart and Charaudeau, as well as theoretical and conceptual elements, of critical tendencies, in terms of discourse analysis – Chomsky, Van Dijk and Fairclough. The methodological path that combined quantitative and qualitative methods and acquired new contours, depending on the observed phenomena and contexts, was called Media Analysis. Based on this methodological proposal, Media Analysis has evolved into an area of investigation that presupposes prior mastery of a set of knowledge relating both to the functioning of the media and, evidently, to information and communication technologies and to the themes involved in research objects.

Apprehending the complexity of the representations and images conveyed by the media, mainly television, led to the extension of the understanding of those concepts in other disciplines. The forays into Moscovici's theory of representation and, equally, into symbolic interactionism are highlighted, in which

Goffman's framing proposals and the discussions on the construction of reality by Berger and Luckman stand out. On the other hand, and under the influence of studies on media and journalism, namely of Anglo-Saxon origin, in a consolidation phase in Portugal by the hand of Nelson Traquina (1993), authors such as Denis McQuail, Gaye Tuchman, Gurevitch and Blumler, Horace Newcomb and Michael Schudson were resorted to in order to analyze the impact of the media, especially television, on Portuguese society.

Simultaneously, taking into account the need to explain complex contexts in which communication phenomena acquire multiple nuances, theories and concepts arising from Cultural Studies were examined, not only Anglo-Saxon ones, with Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall, but also Latin Americans, with the introduction of readings by Canclini and Martín-Barbero (Ferin, 2002).

At first, the diversity of theoretical and conceptual currents that emerged made it difficult to assume a single interpretative theoretical line. Sometimes, in this journey of discovery, the analogy of "going to the supermarket of ideas" arose, a situation that was configured as follows: depending on each study's objectives, the characteristics of each phenomenon and their possible interpretations, the theory or concept that could best clarify it was selected, regardless of theoretical and conceptual orthodoxy. In this way, an attempt was made to fit it into the research objectives. On the basis of support for this attitude, in the face of knowledge and research, authors who focused on the epistemology of knowledge, such as Thomas Kuhn, Paul Feyerabend and Boaventura de Sousa Santos converged. Kuhn based a set of procedures that were articulated around the principle of discovery context, paradigm and paradigm crisis; Feyerabend inspired the conviction that objects determine methodologies and methods and that knowledge advances sustained by methodical curiosity; Santos made it clear that knowledge must be socially shared and become a vector of citizenship and social well-being.

The journey undertaken resulted, simultaneously, in a considerable capacity for interpretation in the light of different theoretical scenarios and in criticism from peers fearful not only of a dismantling of theoretical purity, but also of the establishment of a theoretical and conceptual anarchy that would break the commitment to a dominant interpretive line. The multidisciplinary approach has contributed to the studies and research of communication and journalism in Portugal to diversify the primordial philosophical and linguistic matrix, as well as to consolidate the empirical studies in parallel with the existing essay tradition.

Empirical studies on the media and migrations immediately intersected with two other themes: television images of discrimination against Brazilian women and the role of Brazilian *telenovelas* in Portugal. It is observed that, since the end

of the 1970s, more precisely since 1977, with the exhibition on RTP1 – Portuguese public television channel – of the telenovela *Gabriela*, from *TV Globo*, Brazilian *telenovelas* maintained a constant and dominant presence in the television schedules until the beginning of the millennium (Cunha, 2011). The impact of this phenomenon on Portuguese society, much undervalued by Portuguese academic studies, proved to be decisive when Brazilian immigrants arrived in Portugal during the 1990s. At that time, without field reception studies on Brazilian *telenovelas*, the indicators available in Portugal were limited to *share* and *rating indices* or journalistic chronicles. While the former expressed the Portuguese population's adherence to the telenovela product, the journalistic chronicles tended, with rare exceptions, to call out against the pernicious influence of *telenovelas* on spoken Portuguese and on the acquisition of strange uses and customs. Some commentators even spoke of symbolic post-colonial Brazilian revenge.

Being a phenomenon without many academic studies – specifically, there were two published studies (Moreira, 1980; Viegas, 1987) –, the theme attracted Portuguese and Brazilian masters and doctoral students to Portugal, a moment in which institutional support was obtained, and allowed a closer collaboration with ECA and Núcleo de Pesquisa de Telenovela (NPTN) and their investigators. I emphasize, in this collaboration that extended to the Centro de Estudos de Telenovela (CETVN), to Obitel Internacional and to the participation in seminars of the Graduate Program in Communication Sciences (PPGCOM) of ECA, the dynamic interaction between colleagues, such as Anamaria Fadul, Maria Aparecida Baccega, Immacolata Vassalo de Lopes, Maria Lourdes Motter and Solange Couceiro. I also note the influence that the publication, in 2002, of the research *Vivendo com a telenovela: mediações, recepção e teleficcionalidade* (Lopes et al., 2002) had on reception studies in Portugal, which gave rise to dissertations and theses and a line of research consolidated at the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), the Portuguese research funding agency.

The originality and interdisciplinarity of the Brazilian colleagues' approach to the *telenovelas* theme constituted the theoretical basis of the research work that I coordinated and boosted the theoretical and empirical expansion as a function of the Portuguese social and academic context, guided by the insertion in European research networks, with relevance to the Anglo-Saxon matrix. Two study perspectives emerged as a result of empirical work: one aimed at deepening television fiction and *telenovelas* in Western societies and another aimed at discussing identity issues in the contents and reception of television fiction.

The first perspective led to studies centered, preferably, on fictional products, their production characteristics, evaluation of *shares* and *ratings* and quality of scripts. Examples of these works are the collaborations, in partnership with Obitel



Internacional, which required the formation of a national team and constituted a challenge to the multidisciplinary and inter-university organization, training a new generation of researchers able to participate in cooperative and comparative research. The second line of studies led to the exploration of the contents and their comparison with perceptions at the moment of reception, focusing on the audiences' identity issues. A line of research that gave rise, for example, to studies on Brazilian immigrant women and simultaneously colonial, feminist and gender issues. This last route resulted in different projects financed by Portuguese national agencies<sup>2</sup>, as well as a seminar offered at USP's PPGCOM, in 2006 and 2007, on identity and recognition in the media.

In both paths, inspiration can be seen from classic authors of the 1980s on serial fiction and its reception, such as Brunsdon, Ang, Cantor, Cassata, Morley, Modleski and López Pumarejo, but also from others of the 1990s, such as Geraghty, Gripsrud, Kilborn, Mattelart, Livingstone, Liebs and Katz. Other reading objects are authors who point to globalized scenarios of mediation and reception, in a first reflection on the role of the media and information and communication technologies in a globalized world, for example, Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai, Chris Barker, Katherine Woodward, Alain Touraine and Joseph Straubhaar.

In this context, the tried-and-true methodologies are guided either by principles developed in the works of the NPTN, CETVN or Obitel and in Brazilian manuals on Communication research, or in proposals presented in specialized Communication research manuals, such as *Researching communication* (Deacon et al., 1999).

## CHALLENGES IN VOLATILE RESEARCH CONTEXTS

The beginning of the millennium coincided with a new challenge in the degree in Journalism and Communication, at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Coimbra. This degree, preferably devoted to journalism, which had the journalist and professor Mário Mesquita (2003) as one of its promoters, demanded a greater concentration in journalism studies and directed research and projects towards this communication field. Without completely abandoning previous research topics, which initially sought to accommodate new themes, it became clear that it was necessary to redefine priorities. Thus, and gradually, I moved away from the fiction and migration themes and concentrated on projects in the areas of Journalism and Communication and Politics.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the FCT Project *A televisão e imagens da diferença*, carried out between 2002 and 2005.

More information is available at: <http://cicdigitalpolo.fcsh.unl.pt/pt/televisao-as-imagens-da-diferenca/>. It is fair to name the researchers who followed this path, integrated in projects or in training, such as Teresa Libano Monteiro, Verónica Policarpo, Catarina Burnay, Catarina Valdigem, Josefina Tranquilim da Silva, Fernanda Castilho Santana and Ana Paula Guedes.



I underline that the common thread of these works was media analysis, which, along the route described above, absorbed both the theoretical frameworks of social theories and experimental quantitative and qualitative methodologies, namely those present in cultural studies research, in which the question of perception and emotion acquire value as analysis indicators (Pickering, 2008; Ragin, 1994). Due to the breadth and complexity of the objects to be researched, media analysis expanded the theoretical frameworks, linking to the historical, social and technological circumstances of the analyzed phenomena. It is a theoretical/empirical exercise that resorts to mixed methodologies in order to dissect phenomena present in the media, assuming that the choice of the research object and the type of research to be carried out will determine the choices of models, methods and instruments (Cunha & Peixinho, 2020). I underline that media analysis has, throughout this academic path, acquired a dimension that aimed to contribute not only to the design of public policies on certain phenomena, but also to the civic and citizenship education that accompanies media literacy.

With that perspective, projects were developed that aimed to analyze the journalistic coverage, in the press and on television, of political events in Portugal, such as the elections for the different sovereign bodies. In a media ecosystem in which the transformations caused by accelerated technological and economic change were reflected, with the emergence of new media operators and the interference of foreign capital, these analyses aimed to understand the role of the media, especially television, through the news conveyed in television newspapers, in the construction of images of politicians and politics (Cunha, 2007)<sup>3</sup>. The results reinforced the theories that pointed to the media as political actors, as well as demonstrating: the tendency of the media to favor *fait-divers* to the detriment of substance; the fascination of information formatted in entertainment; the confusion between popular language, the simplification of the sound/image byte; the attractiveness of an ideology critical of democratic institutions and the role of the State in liberal societies.

In these projects, there was always the collaboration of Brazilian researchers from various institutions and states, with emphasis on the partnerships established with the coordination, through Cristina Costa, of the Miroel Silveira Archive, later designated Communication and Censorship Research Nucleus, which involved PPGCOM-USP.

It can be seen that the 2010-2012 period was particularly demanding in terms of funding for research in Portugal, following the bankruptcy and rescue in 2011, caused by the fall of Lehman Brothers in 2008 and the public

<sup>3</sup>The book *Jornalismo e democracia* is derived from the *Jornalismo e Atos de Democracia* project, which can be accessed at: <https://bit.ly/3twRoVT>. Estrela Serrano, Rita Figueiras and Vanda Calado participated in this project. Brazilian researchers Antonio Albino Canelas Rubim and Leandro Colling were invited to jointly publish.

debt crisis of Eurozone. European and national political circumstances and options generated a period of austerity – which has not been reversed to this day – in its multiple economic, social and political impacts. The consequences of this option for capital, to the detriment of citizens, in resolving the subprime crisis in Europe, led to the emergence of a wave of populist and extremist governments on the continent, accentuating anti-democratic tendencies in most of these countries and jeopardizing the independence of institutions and freedom of expression (Aalberg et al., 2016).

The Portuguese situation, unfavorable to research funding, did not prevent the continuation of partnerships, boosted by previous projects involving researchers and institutions, such as the one developed between 2018 and 2019 and entitled *Freedom of expression and of the press: a comparative analysis of election processes in Portugal and Brazil*<sup>4</sup>. Joint events were organized, some of them for the first time by videoconference, involving Portuguese researchers from the then Center for Research in Media and Journalism (CIMJ), headed by Nelson Traquina, now the Center for Research in Communication at Universidade Nova (Icnova), and ECA – Miroel Silveira Archive and PPGCOM. The events that took place at the two institutions privileged the different faces of censorship, from a historical-political perspective associated with the Portuguese and Brazilian dictatorships, but also explored the growth of new forms of censorship associated with threats to democracy, globalization processes, traditional media, and information and communication technologies (Costa, 2014).

The focus on the globalization process and the threats to democracy in Europe – against the background of the growing dominance of information and communication technologies and the installation of surveillance capitalism – led to the deepening of studies on this theme. The trauma of the European public debt crisis and the adoption of measures centered on capital, to the detriment of citizens, opened new research focuses on communication and politics and on the media's role in the mediatized public space. In parallel, the dissemination of global indicators, presented by international institutions, which monitor the quality of democracy, its institutions and freedom of expression, confirming the decline of democracies in the face of autocracies and underlining, in this process, the role of social networks and the impact of information pathologies on the public space has aroused growing interest in the subject. Under discussion was – and still is – the process of transforming the concept of democracy, focused on citizens into another conception of democracy, centered on the interests of the globalized market. This is a change that tends to transform democracy into a set of rules – or necessary procedures – for the legitimation of governments that manage national public interests in favor of the great globalized economic and

<sup>4</sup> In this project, I emphasize the participation of the Portuguese researchers Ana Cabrera and Francisco Rui Cádima and the Brazilians Cristina Costa, Walter Sousa Jr. and Jacqueline Pithan.

financial interests. In this context, democracy works as a method for forming governments and managing interests, not offering ideological connotations in its practices, but rather making itself available as a utilitarian tool of the political, economic and financial system (Cunha, 2015).

In the aftermath of the Eurozone debt crisis (2014-2017), the project *Political corruption in the media, a comparative perspective*, was in progress<sup>5</sup>, which aimed to compare media, political and social systems in three countries that have Portuguese as their official language. The participation and cooperation of researchers from very different contexts and scenarios made it possible to compare electoral political phenomena and governance practices, as well as to assess and confront theories and concepts, such as those associated with the conception of democracy and the understanding of the corruption phenomenon. The work involved theoretical procedures, such as: sharing bibliography, with a view to explaining concepts and theoretical frameworks; the design of the objective contexts of each geographic space and the interpretative contexts inherent to each research group; the discussion of potential methodological approaches, with the aim of adopting common procedures; the identification of comparative categories, having as a criterion the recognition of comparable components, their compatibility, with the purpose of identifying functional equivalents and justifying possible adaptations.

The results obtained, along this path, pointed to the identification of patterns common to the three participating countries, for example, the visibility achieved by political actors in the corruption phenomena, the opacity of corruptors, be they natural individuals, institutions or organized interests, and the constant discrediting of democratic institutions, even when the prevaricators are private. The project's execution also demonstrated the difficulty of comparing the corruption phenomenon in three geographic spaces with disparate political, historical and social paths, to which colonial and post-colonial replicas were added, determining that the understanding of the concept tends to acquire differentiated conceptions and a distinct civic gravity.

The developments of this project were multiple and occurred not only during the execution, but also after it was finished. Within the scope of the collaboration with ECA's Communication and Censorship Research Center and with the Nova Communication Institute (ICNOVA), national and international trends associated with threats to democracy were discussed, as well as the growing signs of a destabilization of the international order implemented by the United States, interpreted as imposed by the West at the end of World War II. If indicators on de-democratization can be universally measured, based on indicators such as those released by Freedom House<sup>6</sup>, it is more difficult to

<sup>5</sup> More information about the project is available at <https://bit.ly/3g8T84r>. The following participated in this project: Estrela Serrano, Ana Cabrera, Rita Figueiras, João Figueiras, Bruno Araújo, Nuno Coimbra Mesquita, Fernando Felgueiras and Álvaro Moisés.

<sup>6</sup> Check out <https://freedomhouse.org>.

discuss what is at stake, who are the actors, what are their interests and what future the ongoing process of deglobalization and dewesternization promises (Costa & Blanco, 2019).

It is emphasized that globalization is based on the development of information and communication technologies at the speed conferred by these devices to financial and commercial exchanges and the expansion of a symbolic imaginary of global consumption that was appropriated according to places, regions, continents and cultures. However, while the expansion of globalization in the last century was mainly associated with the written press, the radio, the telegraph and the multiple screens of content produced by film and television companies, deglobalization and the dewesternization process are, imminently, linked to social networks, the commercialization of big data and what is called digital capitalism (Meier, 2019) and/or surveillance (Zuboff, 2019).

At this moment, the route outlined in this text undergoes a theoretical and methodological inflection once again, which starts to focus on the fragmentation phenomena in the Western world, on the polarization of democratic regimes – with the rise of populism and authoritarianism – and on the threats of misinformation, produced industrially and used as weapons. Added to all these elements of change and destabilization is the global blackout caused by the covid-19 pandemic and the start of a war in the heart of Europe.

#### **“IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD THERE WAS A STONE...”**

The covid-19 pandemic, which broke out at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, China, and spread across the world, has tended to follow the path of globalization. Authors consider that the coronavirus acquired a transmission pattern, called 3C, that expanded, preferably, based on populated places, proximity contacts and confined and closed spaces (Fujita & Hamaguchi, 2020). This pattern had a transversal impact on large urban and industrial areas, but was mainly supported by populations that often live under unhealthy housing conditions, have precarious and low-paid jobs and little access to health care and social protection. The pandemic also demonstrated the weaknesses of globalization, exposing dependence, mainly on the West, on global value chains and Asian suppliers, namely China. At the same time, covid-19 reinforced the power of Big Tech, with the refuge of the working world in a teleworking regime and the use of social networks as an advised and safe form of interpersonal and social communication.

The context of globalization, as it was experienced until 2019 from both the Western and Eastern perspectives, began to be reinterpreted through

the accentuation of cleavages between geostrategic blocs, indicators that had already been observed since the beginning of the millennium (Stiglitz, 2020). In February 2022, the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation effected, apparently irreversibly, the reorganization of the globalization space and the reordering of geographic and political blocs of the great powers and their interests (Roubini, 2022).

The polarized international context was announced in many countries with formal democratic regimes by an extremization of the party and political systems, to which the performance/use of social networks is no stranger. Best-known and studied examples are Brexit, which began in 2016 in the United Kingdom, and the elections that led Trump to the presidency of the United States, in 2016, and Bolsonaro to the presidency of Brazil, in 2018. These events, based on the manipulation of algorithms and in the misappropriation of big data – by specialized companies and pirates contracted for these services – tend to become exponentially more complex when their activities extend to infrastructure security, war and the struggle for technological supremacy. The controversy surrounding the Chinese company Huawei, in Europe and the United States, accused of including a data transfer and analysis device in its technology, indicates this change.

However, polarization, associated with populist and neo-Nazi/neo-fascist movements, had already acquired great visibility in the post-crisis of the Eurozone, especially in central and northern Europe. The ideas of those parties underlined certain values as founders of Western society and, based on them, defended nationalist, xenophobic and homophobic attitudes that were translated into programs aimed at limiting individual rights, especially with regard to gender and migration issues, particularly those of Islamic origin. Freedom of the press and expression and the policing of social networks were also a target of these populist parties, which have been gaining significant positions in national and international parliaments.

Polarization and fragmentation are not an exclusively political phenomenon, but affect, in a movement with contrary political characteristics, academic thought and knowledge. In westernized societies, but above all in universities, mainly Anglo-Saxon ones, a set of movements have grown up which, having a democratic and egalitarian foundation, tend to become extreme, deepening fractures in democratic regimes, they are, for example, the woke movements, the so-called *culture wars*, *cancel culture* manifestations, and decisions based on the principle of *political correctness*. This scenario, driven mainly by universities and non-governmental organizations, has fragmented and threatened democracies, diverting attention from autocratic, populist and

neo-fascist threats, imposing agendas that, while important, prevent democratic convergence and the concerted struggle against neoliberalism. At the same time, these positions, by confining production and activism to the intellectual milieu and universities, distancing them from the aspirations of civil society in general, tend to contribute to anti-science wars, to the propagation of bad information and to the incapacity to understand many of the social, political, economic and technological phenomena that underlie the emergence of current populisms and autocracies.

Social and human sciences, which include communication sciences, seem to falter in the face of these challenges, not only in their theoretical and analytical dimension, but also in their methodological perspective. The data, which would support the understanding and interpretation of the phenomena associated with the use and impact of social networks, are often inaccessible to researchers because they are Big Tech's property. On the other hand, the volume and the necessary apparatus for its processing – hardware and software – are beyond the scope of the work of individual researchers and most research centers. It is worth adding that the developments of digital technologies, artificial intelligence, the platforming of life, as well as their mathematical tools, statistics and principles of rationality, constitute unknown fields for most researchers in these knowledge areas.

With these limits, research tends to focus on the foam of the days and the food of the academic industry. Once again, social networks cooperate for this panorama, privileging the conflict, inflating fractured themes, promoting fan clubs and, in thematic bubbles, favoring the demonization of opponents and the destruction of mediations in the public space.

This scenario does not bode well and only postpones the choices that lie ahead as humanity and as individuals. But history is also made of hopes... ■

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