

- G. Orozco, E. Navarro & A. García-Matilla
Guadalajara (Mexico), Amsterdam (Holland)
& Segovia (Spain)

Requested: 28-06-2011 / Received: 18-07-2011

Accepted: 12-09-2011 / Published: 01-03-2012

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3916/C38-2012-02-07>

Educational Challenges in Times of Mass Self-Communication: A Dialogue among Audiences

Desafíos educativos en tiempos de auto-comunicación masiva:
la interlocución de las audiencias

ABSTRACT

This text is an approach on two leading topics: the changes emerging in the way audiences deal with new and old media, and, the multiple processes of reception and interaction occurring as a result of the information and communication systems. Audiences are seemingly devising new roles as creators and emitters of media products which they exchange through a variety of languages, formats and technologies. Significant differences are emerging between widespread consumption and connectivity, and the authentic, horizontal and creative participation of audiences. This paper also develops a proposal that is educational, communicative and pedagogical for this changing and polymorphous audience repositioning. This proposal is based on the tradition of the Latin American Critical Pedagogy of Communication course offered by the Communication Studies department of the University of Valladolid (Segovia). The study of Communication, Education and Society in a Digital Context is part of the degree course in Communication at the UVa, which was established with the aim of developing and reinforcing the skills required to achieve a global dialogue in the field of communication and education. The main goal of communicative competence is to instruct on the techniques and skills needed to produce and explore the application of media contents.

ABSTRACT (Spanish)

En este texto se abordan esencialmente dos temas. En primer lugar, los cambios emergentes en el estar como audiencias frente a nuevos y viejos medios y, en segundo lugar, los procesos múltiples de recepción e interlocución que hoy experimentan. Se argumenta que las audiencias sin perder siempre ese rol, están también asumiendo otros más activos e interactuando cada vez más como noveles productores y emisores de contenidos mediáticos, similares a los que intercambian a través de diversos lenguajes, formatos y dispositivos tecnológicos. Se destaca la necesidad de diferenciar el consumo amplificado y la gran conectividad existente, de una auténtica interlocución horizontal, creativa y propositiva de los interlocutores. Por otra parte, se presenta una propuesta educomunicativa acorde con esta realidad polimorfa y cambiante de las audiencias, que rescata la tradición pedagógico-crítica iberoamericana y que se desarrolla en la Universidad de Valladolid (Campus Segovia). La asignatura «Comunicación, educación y sociedad en el contexto digital» se programa en los estudios de Comunicación de esta Universidad con el objetivo de desarrollar y fortalecer aquellas capacidades, destrezas y reflexiones apropiadas para una interlocución más integral en el mundo de la educomunicación. El principal objetivo de la educación en competencia comunicativa es educar en las técnicas y estrategias para el análisis y producción de contenidos en medios.

KEYWORDS

Mass self-communication, reception, audiences, emirec, media competence, digital literacy.
Auto-comunicación masiva, recepción, audiencias, emirec, competencia mediática, alfabetización digital.

- ◆ Dr. Guillermo Orozco Gómez is Full Professor in Media Education at the University of Guadalajara (Mexico) and Coordinator of OBITEL (Iberoamerican Observatory of Fiction Television) in Mexico (gorozco@cencar.udg.mx).
- ◆ Dr. Eva Navarro Martínez is member of the Research Group «Babilonische Europa» of the University of Amsterdam (Holland) (eva.navarro@hmca.uva.es).
- ◆ Dr. Agustín García Matilla is Full Professor of Audiovisual Communication and Advertising at the Faculty of Social Sciences, Juridical Sciences and Communication of the University of Valladolid (Spain) (agustingmatilla@gmail.com).

1. Introduction

What is changing and what stays the same in audience and screen interaction? Are audiences a dying breed in the society of networks? Is the age of being mere passive receivers of media over, and with it the media's traditional modes of educommunicating with their audiences? As social subjects on the move from one communicative form to another, are we now different from when we interacted with screens? What are the conditions that mark this new culture of dialogue? Now that we represent many different types of audience, does that change us as citizens and allow us to be more assertive and creative; are we empowered? How can educommunication respond to these challenges and be culturally, socially and politically relevant today?

We tackle these questions in order to respond to and reject certain implausible suppositions that these issues present, both in terms of the mass migration to the digital world and the use of social networks and the predicted «death» of television and other hegemonic mass media (Carlón & Escolari, 2009), as well as the culture of passivity or «spectatorship» that lives on in certain sectors of the audience and in many of their interactions with the Internet (White, 2006). We also contest other assumptions about the disappearance of this audience which seems to have cast off its status as receivers or spectators to become users, senders and receivers, «prosumers», or even fans within the new culture of interactivity and convergence (Jenkins, 2008).

We adopt Castells' (2009: 105) expression «mass self-communication» as we believe it conveys the phenomenon we are experiencing in Latin America, of classic mass communication and its concomitant audience reception that is more or less passive operating alongside a gradual but still incomplete migration of sectors of this audience to the digital world and a more proactive and creative dialogue.

It is precisely horizontal dialogue and its modes (types, levels, styles) within interactivity which establish the conditions «sine qua non» that define new roles and identities for audiences within the contemporary communicational ecosystem (Jenkins, 2009). And it is these challenges that we aim to meet with educommunication strategies. However, for Ferrés there is an important nuance: «If up to now receivers have been referred to as the public or the audience, those who use the new screens are now called interlocutors. The arrival and acceptance of the term «prosumer» is probably the ultimate expression of this paradigm shift. Today's consumer does not deny himself

the opportunity to be a producer. He has all he needs to do so at hand» (Ferrés, 2010: 251-252).

2. Disillusionment with broadened connectivity

Following the widespread optimism at the possibilities offered by connection to the digital world and the potential for audiences to become producers, the euphoria over the advantages of the new technologies and social networks has been tempered by a check on reality, which lags behind desires and good intentions.

Firstly, the instrumental access of the social sectors to the technology is less than desirable. In Mexico for example (more or less as in the rest of Latin America), no more than 40% of the population, that is 45 million out of 110 million, has Internet access compared to 64.2% in Spain, according to recent surveys¹.

Secondly, access to the digital culture that the technology seems to offer is still at a low level, although it is difficult to measure because it transcends basic access to digital devices and their occasional usage. Various studies across different countries have demonstrated that only small segments of those who are connected can really be identified as active and engaged communicators (Orozco, 2011).

The reasons behind this are many. History shows that although technology has an impact on society, the cultural change that this brings takes longer to materialize. Another factor to consider is that we are emerging from an age of authoritarianism and verticality in mass media mainly conveyed by television, which positioned audiences as passive and too timid to express opinions which had no resonance because there were no channels to argue against the mass messages, or opportunities for any real or symbolic interaction.

Latin America also has another communication-related problem in the decades-long educational imbalance in which schools have given greater priority to reading than writing, favoring reception over expression. If we consider Postman, «in a culture dominated by the printed word, the main feature of public discourse has been the orderly and coherent presentation of ideas, and the public is trained to understand this type of discourse» (Postman, 1991: 56), we see that this is not the case. In Latin America, there is an expressive deficit that seems to hold us back from being subjects who are fully capable of communicating, transmitting and producing within the new platforms of dialogue (Orozco, 2010).

And it is not as if being different types of audience (and being audiences many simultaneously), using new digital skills and expertise and possessing various communication devices is something that comes auto-

matically or necessarily out of the effervescence of interactivity and convergence between screens. Neither is it something that is simply attained and which stays with us for always. Dimensions of interactivity are different from those of the complex and essentially cultural exchange which occurs beyond the mere mastery of digital devices, and assumes a degree of learning and entertainment, and explicit agencies and willpower on the part of the subjects who interact (Jensen, 2011).

Being an audience member means being able to use different modes of interaction, from the latent to the explicit, which do not necessarily qualify the audiences that use them as senders and producers. Much research into Latin America audiences (Jacks, 2011) concludes that one of the greatest challenges for the reception of old and new screens is to clarify where consumption ends and production begins for all communicators.

Not only in Latin America but worldwide, there is an illusion that participation, dialogue and creative production in audiences-communicators represent a broad, decentralized, deferred consumption controlled by the audiences themselves which, in the end, is still consumption. Controlling consumption or personalizing it does not make it a productive, innovative and transcendent action, nor is it a mutation from consumer-receiver to sender-producer. We should not forget that «consumption can also make us think» (García Canclini, 1994).

The challenge of consumption is that it is more than just food for thought. It helps foment creativity and production, and situates the audience within a dimension of interlocution in which they exercise greater leadership capacity. The creative act itself provokes other communications in an ascending spiral of creativity and empowerment for all participants.

What has changed and will continue to change in the reception processes is the positioning of the audiences. As various studies have shown (Orozco, 2011) reception can be deferred, collective or personalized. A communication can be seen outside the screen for which it was originally produced and then

transmitted on yet another. This is the case with TV programs that can be seen on the Internet, on a cell phone screen or on an iPod. This was the case with the cinema in which films, and now videos, can still be viewed on television, on the Internet or on any other screen. Essentially there is nothing new in this except a growing and often compulsive transmediality in the reception of audiovisual products.

The reception of television has come out of its historical closet: the space in the home where we watch TV can now take place anywhere (Repoll, 2010). Reception happens in places outside the home, in

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bars, markets, shopping centres, restaurants, on public transport, in shop windows, to name but a few of the scenarios where there is interaction with screens, as many studies have pointed out.

This transmediality of diffusion and reception, the increasing range of places where audiences are found and their hyperconnectivity all give the impression that media consumption automatically translates into something productive now that it is under the control of the consumer, the Net user, the videogame player, the film or TV watcher, etc., without realizing that the majority of consumer exchanges are reactive and unaccompanied by any type of premeditated reflection. The fact that they are deferred and transmedia in nature does not mean they contain a germ of creativity or a horizontal relationship.

The sensory spaces for reception are also undergoing important changes. Watching TV now not only takes place away from its traditional location and scre-

en but also watching a film now longer means physically going to a cinema to sit and watch a movie. Young people have different reasons for going to the cinema, converting the experience into a sociocultural activity to be shared with those with whom they are developing important common reference points in their socio-affective relationships.

Likewise, the cell phone has completely revolutionized the traditional usage and reason for the telephone, now transcending verbal communication over distances to become a versatile device that receives and transmits the voice, sounds and images personalized by

more complex but we also see the challenge ahead for educommunication: to foment understanding of the multiple languages and channels, and the transmediality of the dialogues; to form subjects who engage and participate in communicative exchanges.

It is becoming increasingly clear from international studies that straddle various countries, such as the Pew Internet and American Life (2005) report, a study by Fundación Telefónica and Ariel (2008) and the Manifesto for Media Education (2011), that the concern is not about participation but about user reaction or passive connectivity, for it seems that only a small percentage of those who connect really participate.

When the complex relationship between channels and languages are taken into account the channels, changes in audience participation can be measured by their degree of interaction and dialogue. Participation of this type transcends technical competency with digital devices and instead responds to the meanings and pathways opened up by interacting with information on the screen.

If we believe that the whole is not the sum of its parts, then it follows that the usage of new screens does not reflect the mere sum of possibilities (react, download material, send material to others, simultaneously handle activities such as listening to music, chatting and playing videogames) and not just part of a sum, we

can then start to believe, in the strictest sense, in the emergence of a different form of dialogue. Other types of interaction that are broad and diverse must be understood as a preamble or prerequisite for a different kind of dialogue. Supporting this transition is one of the most pressing issues for media education and educators.

As Jensen (2005) contends, interactivity is the dimension in which the audience's sense of identity is modified because the audience who engages in interactive production is also, at the same time, the user. Being a user marks a qualitative difference in regard to the concept of audience. A user-producer means the

The education of active audiences means that teaching-learning models need to be created and inserted into university curricula. These models should give students free rein to express themselves and they must reflect constantly on the new logic of interlocution. Neither the interactivity nor the technological possibilities offered to contemporary audiences are sufficient to develop a knowledge society; only an integrated form of education that makes best use of the immense potential of the new value chain that the current digital context provides can transform the new audiences into engaged producers and critical users of a communication that is truly global, participatory and integrated.

the user throughout the day (Winocur, 2009). Screens and digital devices are now much more than mere instruments. They are complex machines that connect and locate, acting as a safe haven in a sea of uncertainty, and entertaining the user when bored, etc.

The diversification and the growing, simultaneous use of various languages and formats in intercultural communication enable the user to construct and send discourses in many different languages, similar to those transmitted by different channels or devices. This assumes that the audience's communicative processes are increasingly participatory, creative, innovative and

audience becomes a critically autonomous agent. And agency, as Giddens (1996) stated, involves reflection not just action or reaction. It is precisely this dimension of cognitive, conscious production and decision that distinguishes interactivity from mere reaction to stimulus or to any behavioural of sensory change.

Various studies of cases of young people teaching themselves to read and write outside the school show how the critical point in their learning is reached when the subject reflects on and distances himself from these practices to assess their worth and then reinserts them in other contexts and scenarios.

Be this as it may, it does not rule out the possibility that in other moments or different digital practices or contexts, the audience will not behave as users-producers. That is, they will not make a coordinated media-based reflection or action via the real, material and significant transformation of the audiovisual reference.

In this age of revolutions fanned by the communication and mobilization made possible by social networks, it is more vital than ever to recover the «intelligent multitudes» concept coined by Rheingold. «Intelligent multitudes are groups of people who undertake collective mobilizations, be they political, social, financial, thanks to a new medium of communication that enables new forms of organization to be set up, different in scale, involving people who until then were unable to coordinate such movements» (Rheingold, 2002: 13).

The author's concept is particularly relevant today with the Indignant Ones, a protest movement led by young Spanish people that mobilized in the spring of 2011 (Movimiento del 15 M, Democracia Real, ya) and with the uprisings in countries in North Africa. This new form of interactivity was crucial in the latter case, in which a large number of citizens became both users and producers of communication by applying the new technologies of the social networks. What emerged was a form of organization based on the network concept, active participation and not just being an audience or taking part in varied consumption.

For this reason the education of today's users and producers, and especially of those university students studying Communication, must be toughened in two ways: as recipient and critical user of messages and as producer of information and communication. Media literacy needs to confront this seemingly contradictory perspective of citizens and the media, in which there is an audience which is more or less passive or there are critical users and producers, based on the experience and reflections of the producers-receivers themselves. This is the objective of «Communication, edu-

cation and society in the digital context», a pioneering university degree course on offer in Spain, which takes media literacy content as the basis for the students' learning process.

3. Communication, education and society in the digital context

In Spain, as in the majority of countries in Latin American, media education has never been a staple of the school curriculum. The LOGSE (General Organic Law of Education) created two optional subjects: Processes of Communication and Audiovisual Communication which both appeared then disappeared from the curriculum. Currently, the contents of any Education in Communication course can be found spread across various different curricular subjects.

As we have posited in other works, we must ask ourselves: «Which educational model do we want to promote in the 21st century? This question must incorporate the best of recent pedagogical trends that centre educational action on the process of the student's work and which are able to adapt to a world of changing realities» (García Matilla, 2010: 164-165).

«Communication, education and society in the digital context» is a basic part of the degree course in Publicity and Public Relations at the University of Valladolid's campus in the city of Segovia, which aims to prepare students to face the new challenges of communication in the 21st century. From the start, students learn how to become users-producers, creative producers and critical receivers of messages. They get to create their own self-portrait, which gives them the chance to talk about themselves to others and to exchange opinions with their fellow students through interviews. This task is completed at the end of the first year by a piece of creative work and the production of a micro-investigation in which students apply skills and expertise to frame questions, draw up hypotheses and choose suitable methodologies for research into specific communication-based themes. The process ranges from the most personal to the most instrumental, completing a cycle of critical reception and creative production. This process has included reflection and practice of artistic creativity as a basic instrument for media literacy in the digital context. Digital literacy in this case refers to an integral multimedia and audiovisual communication. It puts the students in touch with a new hypermedia world in which new and old media coalesce, and situates them where the changes and transformations are taking place that reflect the end of the analogical age and the beginning of the digital age.

The main objective of this subject is to provide basic theoretical-practical knowledge and a global framework for understanding the communicative processes in their many facets, and how they function in our society within the digitally globalized multimedia context. Coming at the start of the degree course, it also aims to give students a series of basic conceptual tools for understanding and assimilating contemporary communication processes, which the students study in greater depth later in the course. It also aims to provide students with the basic instruments for communicating through the written and spoken word («audio-scripto-visual» in the words of Jean Cloutier) and to instruct

the understanding of and reflection on the communicative and information processes; students should be able to identify the main elements, actors and structures of the communicative processes, and know how to integrate the knowledge acquired in an interdisciplinary perspective.

2) Creative communication as an educational instrument of analysis. We designed the second part of the course around the idea that one of the deficiencies in educommunication has been its failure to integrate the teaching of the traditional arts or to underplay their importance as instruments for communication. In the same way, the teaching of art and culture at the basic

educational level has failed to include the audiovisual arts and the new communication media as part of the understanding of our cultural heritage. This could be due to a deliberate separation or mutual incomprehension (which often occurs in practice) between communication and culture, between «new and old media» and «new and old media disciplines» (Navarro, 2008).

Today, with the application of audiovisual and digital communication technologies to art and communication and the creation of new genres, we can no longer talk of a clear-cut division between cultural media and communication

This situation has given rise to a new value chain and the creation of new genres of digital communication: social networks, blogs, wikis, platforms such as YouTube, etc., but it has also affected the old forms of communication and expression. We believe it is vital to study and analyze these transformations, their nature and the repercussions on the way we communicate with each other, and that the students on this course reflect on this context based on their own experience as users-producers.

them how to analyze messages across different media and supports in the current digital environment.

The subject content is based on three pillars each with a different theme:

1) Introduction to media education: educommunication in the digital society. This first part of the course consists of an introduction to the concept of education in communication and to other fundamentals of the educommunication field (user-producer, interaction and interactivity) as well as to the work and research carried out by leading educommunicators. Basic notions of visual deconstruction and discourse analysis are discussed, and group work is promoted as an important factor in this early stage for boosting creativity and producing creative output and the development of critical thought; these are the basic working tools of the course. The objectives of this section are for the students to acquire a conceptual language for

media. Yet we need to understand the new forms of production and reception of media (communicative and cultural) in an intertextual and contextual way. The subject with the title «Communication, Education and Society» in the digital context aims to close this gap with experiences and proposals for research and action based on the creativity of the students themselves, starting from a review of key concepts such as culture, the media and the information and communication systems.

The students work on applying creativity to the analysis of the media, culture and their relation to the social context. To do this, the students must produce their own piece of creative work (individually or as part of a group), which consists of the creative reading of an urban space in Segovia. This activity is part of an artistic and educational research project called «the city's footprint: an interdisciplinary project» in which

professors and artists work in collaboration with the city's «Esteban Vicente» museum of contemporary art. In this practice, an analysis is made of the actual processes that emerge from an idea in a script to final production, concluding with a reflection on how to make the best social, educational and cultural use of the media of creation and communication. The objectives are: to promote creativity as an instrument of personal and collective development, and to understand the importance of creativity for making the best social, educational and cultural use of information and communication systems.

3) Old and new media in the digital context. Genres, convergencies and discourses. The emergence of new technologies has brought about changes in communication, information and culture that not only affect production but also reception. In this context, one of the most important phenomena has been the transformation of receiver into producer of messages and content: the user-producer. This situation has given rise to a new value chain and the creation of new genres of digital communication: social networks, blogs, wikis, platforms such as YouTube, etc., but it has also affected the old forms of communication and expression. We believe it is vital to study and analyze these transformations, their nature and the repercussions on the way we communicate with each other, and that the students on this course reflect on this context based on their own experience as users-producers.

As a culminating experience, the students work under the supervision of a tutor to conduct deeper investigation into specific research topics from the course: educommunication and participative culture; the concept of public service in the digital industry's new value chain; new participatory media in the network; new forms of providing information in the digital context; leisure in the digital culture: 3D animation and videogames. Their approach to these themes comes from the proactive audience perspective. The aims are to work with the fundamentals of educommunication that go beyond Web 2.0; to know and analyze the new communication and information platforms and to reflect on their reach and importance; to be able to identify the new value chain and the new genres of culture and information that come with the ICT; to know the potential of ICT for media education and the training of citizens to be more critical; and to come away with the ability to recognize and analyse new forms of creation and reception of cultural output.

This subject emphasizes the educational method based on the process, so the teaching strategies are

specifically directed towards active student participation and group work. To meet this objective, we use the blog as a didactic instrument for sharing knowledge contributed by university teachers and students alike. This course has also generated complementary activities such as seminars, workshops and conferences that have enabled students to meet professionals working in the fields of culture and communication in their various facets.

4. Conclusion

The education of active audiences means that teaching-learning models need to be created and inserted into university curricula. These models should give students free rein to express themselves and they must reflect constantly on the new logic of interlocution. Neither the interactivity nor the technological possibilities offered to contemporary audiences are sufficient to develop a knowledge society; only an integrated form of education that makes best use of the immense potential of the new value chain that the current digital context provides can transform the new audiences into engaged producers and critical users of a communication that is truly global, participatory and integrated.

Notes

¹ Indicators that track the information society. Ministry of Industry, Tourism and Commerce, Government of Spain, May 2011.

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