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Vox populi, vox neminis: Crowds, Interactivity and the Fate of Communication

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ABSTRACT

Philosophy's engagement with mass media has often been ambiguous: many critical theorists, from Benjamin to Bourdieu, recognised the emancipatory potential of modern communication technologies, but they also denounced the economic, political and ideological forces at work in the creation and dissemination of public opinion. Looking at different media, these authors emphasised the dialectical tension between the plurality of the public sphere and different forms of control and manipulation. In the present paper, I argue that this line of criticism, albeit important, is no longer sufficient. I claim that contemporary forms of communication, defined by a unique emphasis on interactivity, cannot be analysed simply in terms of the opposition between dominant and marginalised agents or discourses. In its most extreme form, interactivity leads to an implosion of the distinction between the sources and the targets of the information flow, which calls into question the very possibility of a meaningful communicative exchange. To clarify the nature of this phenomenon, I retrace the evolution of modern political communication, from live speeches to digital platforms and social networks, and discuss its implications for recent debates on political authority, participation and representation.

KEYWORDS

Communication; interactivity; critical theory; public opinion; mass media; democracy

Introduction

The emergence of modern mass media, following the invention of the printing press, allowed the information produced by a single person or institution to reach a much wider audience. While traditional forms of communication were usually confined to local contexts, with concrete geographical boundaries, modern media practices gave rise to increasingly broad information chains. Yet this increase in scope was accompanied by an increase in the distance separating the source and the target of the communicative process. In contrast to live discourses or local publications, where the authors and the public were still in close contact with one another, high-circulation newspapers and magazines ushered in a more remote form of communication, aimed at an abstract and anonymous crowd.

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More recently, however, a different model started taking shape. The circulation of texts and images continued to grow, reaching ever-wider groups of people, but the gap between those who generate information and those who receive it began to decrease. This new trend was highlighted by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s, when discussing the growth of the European periodical press:

> For centuries it was in the nature of literature that a small number of writers confronted many thousands of readers. This began to change toward the end of the past century. With the growth and extension of the press, which constantly made new political, religious, scientific, professional, and local journals available to readers, an increasing number of readers … turned into writers. It began with the space set aside for "letters to the editor" in the daily press, and has now reached a point where there is hardly a European engaged in the work process who could not, in principle, find an opportunity to publish somewhere or other an account of a work experience, a complaint, a report, or something of the kind.[1]

According to Benjamin, this transformation was first promoted by the Soviet press, whose freedom contrasted with the elitism of the European editorial market.[2] While most European newspapers relayed the opinions of a small elite, concerned with its own political and economic agenda, Soviet newspapers encouraged readers to send in their own texts and share their views with the public. In Benjamin's own words, "the distinction between author and public … is beginning to disappear in the Soviet press", where "the reader is always ready to become a writer". "As an expert – not in a particular discipline, perhaps, but on the job he happens to have – he gains access to authorship".[3]

This example illustrates what has since become a familiar trend. In the last decades, a series of social, economic and technological innovations paved the way, in most Western countries, for an increasingly open and diverse public opinion. The appearance of the Internet and the development of online media platforms generated new and easier ways to access and exchange information. And these changes prompted the emergence of a new kind of public, to whom being informed is no longer simply about reading or watching the news. With the media's rising focus on interactivity and feedback, audiences have grown used to speaking up, reacting to the information they receive and offering their own views. They have come to shape the content and direction of the information flow.

Today, Benjamin's formula is truer than ever: in the world of digital media, every reader is simultaneously an author. Or rather, every user is simultaneously a communicative agent, capable of reacting in "real time" to newly received information, transforming it in different ways and passing it on to others. But although this dynamic has opened up the public sphere, it has also led to a redefinition of the very idea of communication. Since each new message is instantly appropriated by the crowd, its original source tends to lose its autonomy. In other words, what is said or shown is increasingly determined by who it is said or shown to. And the crowd itself is hereby radically transformed. Having seized both ends of the communicative process, it is left facing its own image, or listening to its own echo.

Philosophy's interest in mass media and communication has often focused on the issues of freedom and domination: a notable lineage of critical theorists, including Benjamin and other representatives of the Frankfurt School, highlighted the economic, political and ideological forces at work in the creation and dissemination of public opinion.

Looking at different media, these authors stressed the dialectical tension between the plurality of the public sphere and different forms of manipulation.[4] In the present paper, I argue that this line of criticism is no longer sufficient. I aim to show that contemporary mass communication, characterised by a unique emphasis on interactivity, cannot be analysed simply in terms of the opposition between dominant and marginalised agents or discourses. In its most extreme form, interactivity leads to an implosion of the very distinction between the source and the target of the information flow, a phenomenon that has yet to be properly analysed and discussed.

In highlighting the need for a new philosophical approach to mass communication, I am not suggesting we should abandon the approach traditionally favoured by critical social theory. Given the current rise in information monopolies and the enormous power wielded by a handful of global digital platforms, the room for control and manipulation has only increased, along with the need for renewed and more robust forms of criticism. Accordingly, the critical approach outlined in the following pages is not meant to replace the existing one, but to complement it. Only by combining both approaches, I argue, can we hope to capture the complexity of the current communicational paradigm. Moreover, although this new approach has yet to be properly developed, it is not without precedent. The ambiguity promoted by the most recent information technologies was denounced, among others, by Mario Perniola and Jean Baudrillard, whose insights will be discussed below. According to these authors, the interactive ideal pursued by contemporary mass communication leads to the "dissolution of every content"[5] and, ultimately, to the "vanishing point of communication".[6] This line of argument anticipates my own views on the increasing circularity of public opinion.

To grasp the exact nature of this phenomenon, I start by turning to the realm of politics, and particularly to the role played by the rise of interactivity in the evolution of political rhetoric (Section 1). Afterwards, widening the scope of the analysis, I briefly retrace the development of modern interactive devices, from the earliest marketing strategies to track the reactions of the public to highly sophisticated forms of polling and feedback (Section 2). Then, drawing on previous philosophical contributions, I argue that these new practices are reshaping the notions of authorship and authority, thereby calling into question the very possibility of a meaningful communicative exchange (Section 3). Finally, I discuss the implications of this transformation for current debates about direct and representative democracy (Section 4).

The Voice of the People

In its most basic form, a political speech is delivered by an orator to a crowd. The speech consists in a communicative interaction between an *active* agent, the orator, whose role is to convey a specific message, and a *passive* agent, the crowd, whose role is to listen and interpret what is said. Yet even in this simplest of scenarios, the distinction between the source and the destination of the communicative process is not clear-cut. What takes place is not a simple delivery of information, but a reciprocal exchange, where both sides play an important role.

This reciprocity was masterfully highlighted by William Shakespeare in *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar*. In the play's third act, following the assassination of Caesar and the acclamation of Brutus as his successor, Rome's citizens gather in the forum to listen to Mark

Antony. Despite his known admiration for the fallen emperor and his refusal to take part in his death, Antony seems resigned to the new political order and begins his speech by declaring his support for Brutus and his allies. As the speech progresses, however, the ambiguity of Antony's position becomes apparent. Resorting to irony and innuendo, he sets about discrediting his new masters and casting doubt on their motivations. And his strategy eventually pays off: although the citizens start by taking Brutus' side, condemning Caesar's despotism and accepting his murder as a patriotic deed, their loyalties begin to waver. Antony's eloquence reveals the dead emperor in a new light, as a noble statesman committed to the welfare of the city, and his death emerges, little by little, as a heinous crime. At the end of the scene, the volte-face is complete: inflamed by Antony's words, the citizens rise in revolt and rush out of the forum, vowing to "burn [Brutus'] body in the holy place, and with the brands fire the traitors' houses".[7]

But it is not only the crowd that reacts to Antony's words – Antony himself adapts his speech, in real time, to the reactions of the crowd, and this symmetrical movement is ingeniously conveyed in the text. At first, Antony treads carefully, as though testing the mood of the audience. Afterwards, as his insinuations start bearing fruit, and the doubts of the citizens become more visible, his speech becomes bolder. And this change is echoed by his movements on stage. Initially, perched on the podium, he hints at Caesar's rectitude and Brutus' iniquity. Later, descending from the podium and approaching the emperor's dead body, placed on a hearse before the crowd, he lifts Caesar's cloak and exhibits his wounds, in a blatant appeal to emotion. Finally, sensing that his triumph is not yet complete, he goes on to read Caesar's final will, where each Roman citizen is granted seventy-five drachmas and the free use of the emperor's parks and gardens.

Throughout this performance, the orator and the listeners spur each other on. The distance that separates them is gradually shortened and the initial balance of power is finally reversed. In a matter of minutes, Antony succeeds in swaying public opinion and making room for his own political aspirations. His intervention marks the end of the truce obtained by Brutus and the beginning of a new power struggle, which will take up the rest of the play.

If we now turn our attention to modern political history, Antony's speech brings to mind another famous allocution, which also culminated in a popular uprise. The place is Bucharest, and the date 21 December 1989, shortly after the fall of the German, Bulgarian and Czech communist regimes. From the balcony of the Senate Palace, which housed the central committee of the Romanian Communist Party, Nicolae Ceaușescu makes his final address to the nation. The speech is broadcast by Romania's state television. A hundred thousand listeners fill the square in front of the palace, holding flags, banners and portraits of the dictator. This patriotic fervour, we now know, was carefully staged, in an attempt to dispel the rumours of an impending revolution. But despite the appearance of order, the precariousness of the mise en scène soon became evident. A few minutes into the speech, Ceaușescu's words were drowned out by a rising clamour, followed by angry shouts. The square was swept by a sudden turmoil: part of the audience fled and another part attempted to break through the police cordon surrounding the palace. The broadcast was interrupted, but the cameras managed to capture the leader's puzzled expression as he tried to grasp what was happening. This image would become a symbol of the power shift that was about to take place.[8]

Shortly afterwards, the broadcast was resumed. The order appeared to have been restored and Ceaușescu went on with his speech. Yet his attitude had changed. His authoritarian tone seemed to soften and the empty celebratory formulas he had previously recited gave way to a different and more concrete message. In an attempt to placate the crowd, he announced new policies: the increase of the minimum wage, higher family subsidies and new pension plans. But these promises came too late. The crowd was no longer listening. New protests erupted, louder than before, and the turmoil soon spread to the rest of the city. In a matter of days, everything changed: Ceaușescu was captured and executed, the central committee dissolved and a new government sworn in, with the pledge of establishing a democratic regime and holding free elections.

As in Shakespeare's play, the political future of an entire people hinged, for a short while, on the exchange between an orator and an audience. But while in the first case the crowd began by adhering to the official discourse and was then led to question it, in the second case this adhesion was merely apparent. Whereas Mark Antony opposed the status quo and sought to shift public opinion in his favour, Ceaușescu aimed to preserve the status quo by placating a rebellious crowd. And this difference is reflected in the power balance struck in each situation. In the first example, the speaker's words and the crowd's reactions condition one another. But although Antony reacts to the signs he receives from the audience, his message remains largely the same. His speech and gestures are also determined, at first, by a crowd he does not control, but he succeeds in bringing the citizens round to his standpoint without having to sacrifice its content. In the second example, the speaker starts out from a weaker position, and the pressure exerted by the audience is therefore much greater. Noticing the hostility of the citizens, Ceaușescu does not alter only his way of speaking, but also the content of his message. The crowd's reactions lead him to abandon his initial stance and move closer to that of the people, but not enough to allow for a compromise.

In short, while Antony's words steer the crowd towards him, shaping its opinion, Ceaușescu's words are steered towards the crowd and shaped by it. This role reversal anticipates a tendency that was to become a defining feature of contemporary political rhetoric. Consider, for example, the televised debates that are currently broadcast during an important political election. Originally, these debates followed a relatively simple formula: two or more candidates presented their views to the public, either by debating with each other or by speaking directly to the camera. The viewers, on their part, would listen to the candidates' ideas, compare their performances and draw their own conclusions. But a series of technological innovations transformed this basic model. The formal distinction between speakers and public was gradually diluted, leading to increasingly ambiguous forms of interaction. First, it became a habit to bring the public into the debate. A small number of electors, chosen amongst the "real people", was put on stage and encouraged to speak directly to the candidates. Later, the viewers were allowed to do the same from the comfort of their homes, via their telephones and computers. This direct feedback, in the form of live reactions and online comments, evolved into a powerful metadiscourse, with a growing influence on the candidates' original message. Instead of communicating their views to a distant, generic audience, politicians are now confronted with the immediate effects of their words and led to change them accordingly.

Just as Ceauşescu sought to align his speech with the demands of the crowd, so too are modern politicians led to adapt their discourses to the public's reactions. However, as both sides move closer together, a new phenomenon comes into view. In Ceauşescu's case, there is still a clear distinction between the speaker's original discourse and its final version. The crowd's input amounts to an external contribution, added to a pre-existing core of meaning. In the digital channels and platforms used today by millions of people, on the other hand, the temporal gap separating the speaker's and the public's voices is virtually eliminated. Action and reaction become harder to distinguish and, consequently, the origin of what is said or shown is no longer as easy to determine. In communicating, the orator is *simultaneously* controlling and being controlled by the public; and the latter, in reacting to what is communicated, is ultimately only reacting to itself. This peculiar dialectic inaugurates a new kind of exchange, which transcends the binary framework traditionally associated with political communication, and whose exact nature, scope and implications we must now attempt to determine.

Instant Audience Feedback

The two allocutions discussed in the previous section illustrate the reciprocity inherent to every communicative exchange. Firstly, and more trivially, they show that a political speech is not a one-way affair, but a dynamic interaction between a speaker and an audience. Secondly, they show that the audience is much more than a mere recipient of information. Inasmuch as its reaction to a given discourse is appropriated by the speaker and incorporated into his or her message, the audience is also a communicative agent and an active source of meaning. Finally, the previous examples also show that the speaker's assimilation of the crowd's reaction is dependent on the technological setup mediating the exchange.

In Antony's and Ceauşescu's speeches, the crowds gathered in Rome and Bucharest stand for the whole of public opinion and their reactions are directly witnessed by the speakers. In modern democracies, however, the breadth and diversity of the public sphere call for wider and more indirect forms of feedback. Ever since the early nineteenth century, politicians have used opinion polls to gauge the moods and preferences of the public. From simple straw votes to large-scale canvasses, polls have become important measuring instruments, with increasingly precise targets, methods and applications.[9] Yet as many critics have pointed out, these instruments are not as objective or as neutral as they might appear. Far from offering a transparent account of the public's views, polls tend to condition the opinions they purport to reveal. And this applies to the entire polling process, from the choice of issues taken up by pollsters to the way their questions are asked and the methods used for processing and disseminating the results.

For Pierre Bourdieu, opinion polls are above all political tools, whose ultimate aim is to "legitimise a policy and strengthen the power relations that underlie it or make it possible".[10] But this kind of criticism, reiterated in more recent analyses,[11] still presupposes a binary scheme, in which a given agenda is imposed, however subtly, on an unwitting multitude. However, opinion polls also entail a reciprocal exchange, which affects both the respondents and the object of their opinions. Although these surveys can help shape public opinion, they also have "the power to manipulate the decisions of elected

officials",[12] causing them to align their views and actions with the public's expectations. As an advisor to the American president Gerald Ford famously noted, the systematic use of tracking polls prompted a reversal of the traditional conception of political leadership:[13] with this new technology, "it's no longer likely that political leaders are going to lead. Instead, they're going to follow".

But this is not all. Apart from conditioning the actions of political leaders, the polls' effects also end up shaping the very standpoint they are supposed to reflect. As highlighted by another critic, "once public opinion polls enter the deliberations in the public sphere … they do have a chance to become true and re-enter future polling results".[14] In other words, the opinions recorded and announced by the polling agencies and the media are, to a large extent, opinions about other people's opinions, or at least directly shaped by them. Through "the constant dissemination of polling data", the public is fed back the result of its own opinions and left "hearing itself".[15]

This circularity anticipates the kind of ambiguity that has come to characterise communication in the digital realm. In traditional polling, however, the distinction between the active and the reactive sides of the relationship is not altogether eliminated. Since polls are finite events, providing a snapshot of public opinion at a given moment in time, they still refer to determinate, albeit increasingly malleable standpoints. To understand the current shift towards more extreme forms of reciprocity, we must turn to a more recent technological development, borrowed from the world of marketing.

In the 1940s, American researchers and broadcasters started assessing audience responses to different radio shows with the aid of so-called audience reaction metres – interactive devices with three-button interfaces designed to measure the listeners' "level of satisfaction".[16] In the following decades, these devices became more sophisticated and widespread: button interfaces were replaced by rotative dials, allowing for more nuanced results, and the focus on radio programming was replaced by a new and lasting interest in television. This technology was brought to the realm of politics in 2008, when CNN decided to use it in its coverage of the debates leading up to the American presidential election. The technique was by now familiar: randomly chosen electors were gathered in an auditorium, given audience reaction metres and asked to turn a dial according to whether and how much they liked what they were hearing. This time, however, the network decided to air, in real time, the results of this operation. Throughout the debates, the reactions of the audience were "immediately aggregated into squiggly lines" running "across the bottom of the screen, at the same time the candidates [were] speaking".[17] This meant that the spectators at home were shown two simultaneous versions of the debates: the actual performance of the candidates and the reactions of an anonymous crowd, also engaged in watching the debate.

This procedure was reprised four years later, during the first general election debate of 2012. At the same time, a similar experiment, with a simpler methodology and a much wider participant pool, was conducted by a research team from the University of California.[18] As later reported, more than three thousand college students were asked to share their real-time reactions to the debates through their cell phones and computers, using a mobile application specifically designed for the occasion. The experiment aimed to clarify "exactly *which* candidate cues tend to resonate positively with viewers" and "which cues provoke negative affect".[19] Moreover, the researchers highlighted the possibility of extending this approach to the "study of a host of public-opinion phenomena".[20] And,

sure enough, the last few years have seen a growing interest in so-called instant polling techniques, adapted to different social contexts. Various IT companies have developed softwares and devices designed, for example, to chart the motivation levels of the students in a classroom, to receive instant feedback from the members of a forum or even to gauge the changing moods of a theatre audience.

In all of these cases, by gaining access to the crowd's reactions, the orators (or teachers, or performers) are able to incorporate this information into their discourse. More than that, they are able to calibrate, with increasing precision, the tone and the content of their performance, in order to meet the public's expectations. And, more importantly, they are able to do so *instantaneously*, so that the distinction between the origin and the target of their message is definitively blurred. Since their words and actions are instantly modelled by the audience, the latter is simultaneously the source and the recipient of the information. The relative independence maintained, in different degrees, in the previous models, is finally dissolved.

This new development marks the culmination of the dialectical process we have been considering. To be sure, any given discourse, however original, is always indebted to the social context in which it is born. No man is an island, as the saying goes, and the very act of speaking entails an expectation of reciprocity and intelligibility. Furthermore, language is itself an intersubjective medium, based on collectively agreed norms and practices. Nevertheless, its content can usually be traced to a single, recognisable source. Returning to my previous examples, orators usually speak in order to convey *their own* views about different subjects, and the public's reactions are likewise informed by *their own* understanding thereof. But this basic autonomy is precisely what tends to disappear with the rise of interactivity. As the distance between the starting point and the endpoint of the information flow decreases, the origin of what is said becomes increasingly diffuse. As speakers and listeners invade each other's territories, the question arises as to *who* is really speaking and *what* is being said.

Authority, Authorship, Interactivity

The interactivity promoted by contemporary mass media gave rise to an unprecedented democratisation of the public sphere. Never before have such large and diverse groups of people been allowed to communicate in such a direct way. But although this process began by altering the balance of power between different visions of reality, it ended up affecting the very genesis of those visions, or the personal core from which they emanate. One of the keys to understanding this phenomenon lies in the notion of *authority* and its various implications. In a basic communicative exchange, the authority of a given standpoint is directly linked to its *authorship*, that is, to the fact that it reflects the vision of a specific *author*, broadly construed. Each individual discourse is originally based on a unique outlook on reality, revealed and brought into relation with other outlooks on reality. And communication consists precisely in this mutual conditioning process, whereby each party tries to get the others to see the world through its eyes. When a given standpoint gains ground and dominates the others, it can become *authoritarian*, in the conventional sense of the word. As a result, the sphere of communication contracts and the plurality of public opinion is threatened.

In the last two centuries, philosophers and critical theorists have approached the issue of mass communication with this problem in mind. Marx and Engels famously wrote that

> the class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.[21]

A similar argument was advanced by Benjamin, as seen earlier, with regard to bourgeois novels and newspapers, and later by Adorno, Horkheimer and others with regard to cinema, television and the so-called culture industry. All of these approaches focus on the control of public opinion for political and economic gain by the owners of the "means of mental production", and all of them highlight the increasingly subtle and effective ways in which this control is exerted.

With the rise of interactivity, however, the reaction against authoritarian forms of communication has evolved into a reaction against authority in general, in both the conventional and the etymological senses of the word. Indeed, the massification of communication and information technologies has not led only to the proliferation of authors and to the emergence of a global audience. By merging these two instances, it has dealt a blow to the very notion of authorship. And this change prompted the need for a new critical approach to mass media. The dialectical scheme favoured by critical theory, based on the opposition between a dominating and a dominated class, or a powerful elite and a naïve multitude, is no longer sufficient to account for the specificity of contemporary forms of communication. Only a criticism capable of looking beyond this opposition can make sense of the current situation.

This is not to say, of course, that the previous line of criticism is no longer relevant. In fact, it could be argued that contemporary mass communication – and particularly the information exchanged in online platforms and social media – is subject to some of the most sophisticated forms of manipulation known to date. On the one hand, despite their global reach, these new platforms are not free from censorship or propaganda. The access to the public sphere and the content of the information flow are still controlled, in many countries, by the governing authorities, with a view to consolidating their power and limiting popular dissent. On the other hand, the information flow itself, regardless of its direct political significance, is at the centre of a multi-million dollar business, dominated by a handful of so-called tech giants. Through the monitoring of online interactions and the harvesting of personal data, these companies amass and process vast amounts of information, which they then turn into publicity revenues and other forms of profit. Although the kind of domination that is here at stake is different from more conventional forms of political control, the fact remains that most online communication platforms are shaped by powerful economic interests, which determine, often unbeknown to their users, the different ways in which the latter are allowed to interact. In the words of a recent critic, these seemingly free and neutral media are in truth designed "to nudge, coax, tune, and herd behavior toward profitable outcomes".[22]

In light of all this, it is easy to see why an important part of the criticism directed at contemporary mass media is focused on the exploitative nature of digital information platforms.[23] Yet this kind of approach is not – and should not be – the only one available.

Among the few critics who have seen beyond this binary framework, it is worth highlighting Mario Perniola and his recent pamphlet *Against Communication* (2014). In this brief work, mass communication is characterised as a global civilisational transformation whereby the basic rules that govern traditional forms of meaning and discourse are gradually overturned. The author is particularly insistent on the *destructive* nature of this phenomenon: unlike traditional forms of communication, grounded in cultural, political or ideological values, mass communication destroys every stable message or meaning through a "strategy of all-encompassing incorporation"[24] which "cancels every difference (and hence every value)".[25] In doing so, it renders everything equal and equally meaningless.

> What I find particularly unsettling and demeaning in the phenomenon of mass communication is not so much the systematic practice of disinformation nor the partial and biased nature of its messages, which are modelled on publicity, nor even the lack of a critical attitude on the part of the public, which renders it easily manipulable and the victim of machinations and scams. None of this is new (…). In communication, however, there is something new and unheard of with regard to rhetoric, propaganda and publicity: indeed, it is not about conveying or impressing specific convictions on the mind of the public, and even less to instil a faith or an ideology endowed with identity and stability (…). On the contrary, the aim of communication is to favour the cancellation of every certainty and acknowledge an anthropological transformation which has turned the public into a sort of *tabula rasa* that is extremely sensitive and receptive but incapable of retaining what is written beyond the moment of reception and transmission.[26]

This analysis highlights the contrast between the extreme evanescence of mass communication and the basic stability required for the affirmation or negation of any idea or state of affairs. At stake is something like the triumph of quantity over quality, the capitulation of content and meaning to the sheer diversity and speed of public opinion. And this transformation has important consequences for both sides of the communicative process. As regards the emission of information, Perniola's point seems to be that the very notions of difference and dialectic are submerged by the endless variety of the information flow, so that every new standpoint is simply one among an infinity of others, whose relative significance is ultimately indifferent. As regards the reception of information, the "complete disintegration of communication"[27] generates a public that is itself disintegrated, that is, reduced to the immediate apprehension of fleeting bits of information and increasingly unable to follow sustained ideas and judgements.

But while this criticism rightly emphasises the reduction of the discursive space in which opinions emerge and take shape, it still presupposes the relative independence of the speaker with regard to his or her audience. For a more direct focus on interactivity, we must turn to another critic of mass communication, Jean Baudrillard, whose views on contemporary information technologies are still remarkably relevant. In the essay *The Ecstasy of Communication* (1987) and, above all, in a posthumous text entitled *The Vanishing Point of Communication* (2011), Baudrillard anticipates some of Perniola's main points: not only does he denounce the "excess of communication"[28] characteristic of the digital realm, but he also highlights the need to overcome the binary logic of classical critical theory – i.e. to complement the "well known (…) Big Brother story" or "the fear of total control"[29] with a new look at the specificity of digital communication. In his eyes, however, this new approach should not be centred solely on the quantity or the variety of

the information flow, but also on the progressive elimination of the gap that separates the sources and the targets of the communicative process.

With the development of digital communication, the speaker and the audience are not simply *brought together*, but also, ultimately, *merged together*. In a purely interactive exchange, it is no longer the author or the orator who speaks: his or her message merely mirrors the reactions of the audience; and the latter, in turn, merely reacts to the result of its own reactions. This extreme reciprocity constitutes what Baudrillard calls "the vanishing point of communication".[30] To borrow one of his images, "when the receiver and the source of a transmission are too close together, a feedback effect ensues which scrambles the transmission waves".[31] Likewise, when data reception and emission become one,

> information and communication … feed back in a kind of incestuous convolution. They operate in a circular continuity, in a superficial indistinction between subject and object, interior and exterior, question and answer, event and image – a contiguity only to be solved in a loop, simulating the mathematical figure for infinity.[32]

What is more, this endless loop marks the disappearance not only of the distinction between the sources and the targets of communication, but also of the very meaning of what is communicated. In the absence of a determinate point of view, the information that is passed along has no determinate content. It is no longer committed to a specific worldview, nor capable of affirming or denying anything in particular.

> Video, interactive screens, multimedia, the Internet, virtual reality – we are threatened on all sides by interactivity. What was separated in the past is now everywhere merged; distance is abolished in all things: between the sexes, between opposite poles, between stage and auditorium, between the protagonists of action, between subject and object, between the real and its double. And this confusion of terms, this collision of poles means that nowhere – in art, morality or politics – is there now *any possibility of a moral judgement*. With the abolition of distance – of the "pathos of distance" – everything becomes undecidable.[33]

Democracy and Interactivity

The recent surge in interactivity culminates in a communication without content, reduced to the continual reiteration of the same circular movement. In this new regime, what distinguishes a given message from another is no longer simply what it means or stands for. To value its meaning would entail an interruption, a separation, the recovery of a distance that is gradually disappearing. What leads an audience to endorse a given speech, text or image is not its actual content, but the movement of endorsement itself, i.e. the fact that other viewers have endorsed the same speech, text or image.

This circularity was illustrated earlier by the example of a political broadcast where viewers were confronted with the live reactions of other viewers. Today, however, its clearest expression is to be found in online sharing platforms, digital search engines and social networks. In these new media, each content is ranked according to its degree of popularity, that is, to the amount of "clicks", "likes" or "followers" it is able to generate. And this quantitative index, appended to each text or image, determines its degree of accessibility. The most visualised contents are also the most visible, which means that each visualisation is itself the source of further visualisations. With one

click, the selected words and images move upwards in a global visibility scale, becoming accessible to an increasing number of users.[34]

At first glance, this model appears to represent a step forward in the democratisation of the public sphere. Although the world of digital media is dominated by a handful of private companies, seeking to profit from the users' online activities, there is no longer a political or economic elite controlling what is said or shown. Indeed, it would seem that this new paradigm is simply the translation into the digital sphere of a basic democratic principle: like the most voted candidates in an election, the most viewed contents take precedence over the others, reflecting the crowd's choices and interests. Yet this kind of comparison fails to acknowledge the basic conceptual difference between a truly *democratic* and a merely *interactive* communicative framework.

In the first case, the choices of the crowd are indeed the reflection of a specific position or point of view. They entail a direct relationship between two converging poles, namely the voter's worldview and that of the candidate, or party, or project he or she supports. In the second case, the relationship is of a different order. For a given content to become an object of choice, it must first be approved by an anonymous host of users, whose choices presuppose, in turn, the previous approval of other users. While a political vote is, in its essence, an individual act, ascribable to an individual voter, "clicks" and "shares" are collective acts, which cannot be led back to a definite source. Therefore, whereas the result of an election expresses a political (or moral, or aesthetic) value judgement, born out of a combination of individual value judgements, digital popularity rankings express the provisional outcome of an anonymous chain reaction, whose cumulative logic swallows up the very idea of value.

The conflation of these two communicative frameworks is also noticeable in recent debates about representative and direct democracy. Emerging political concepts such as electronic direct democracy or open-source governance, based on the widespread use of digital networks, are often held to be fairer and more inclusive than conventional forms of political participation.[35] And the reasons for this are fairly intuitive: the Internet's decentralised structure and nearly universal scope offer the possibility of a free and direct engagement with a potentially global audience, whereas traditional politics rest on complex hierarchical structures that are often opaque and inaccessible to normal citizens. Yet for all its perceived transparency and accessibility, the kind of participation promoted in the digital realm – be it through social networks, crowdfunding applications or other collaborative platforms – is nonetheless mediated, in most cases, by the circular logic described above: free from the shackles of representative democracy, the virtual citizen enters the realm of interactivity, where each opinion is measured by its degree of visibility. While the representative model confronts each individual with the standpoints of other individuals, the origin of the political contents shared in social networking platforms is not as easy to determine. Like all other contents, they are the result of a chain of anonymous interactions, each fuelled by the cumulative impact of the previous ones. It might be countered, of course, that representative politics are equally driven by obscure interests and motivations, whose origin is also difficult to make out. But the main difference lies, again, in the *distance* required for a given standpoint to be recognised as such. To borrow yet another of Baudrillard's images, "it is only with the strict separation of stage and auditorium that the spectator is a participant in his/her own right. Everything today conspires to abolish that separation: the spectator being brought into a user-

friendly, interactive immersion".[36] The project of a democracy grounded in digital networks, where political stances are mediated by collectively fuelled interactions, can be described in similar terms.[37] Once citizens embrace the quantitative logic of mass communication, their standpoints are no longer truly *their own*; and, likewise, the objects of their opinions are no longer truly *someone else's*. What emerges, therefore, is not a direct form of democracy, but a peculiar kind of representation. Instead of the commitment to a determinate worldview, based on a concrete set of ideas or principles, the citizens' voice is entrusted to a formless, all-inclusive network, whose only true principle is its own reproduction.

Conclusions

Throughout the previous sections, I argued for the need to question the critical approach to mass media and communication favoured by most philosophers and social theorists. As I have tried to show, criticisms centred on the opposition between dominant and marginalised discourses still presuppose the relative independence of the different communicative agents – whether in the context of a classical political address, as illustrated by Mark Antony's and Ceauşescu's speeches, or in the realms of televised politics and digital sharing platforms. Although the proponents of this approach have effectively denounced the partiality of modern and contemporary media outlets, dominated by powerful economic interests, they still conceive of communication as a struggle between two or more autonomous worldviews. However, what characterises the current focus on interactivity is precisely the progressive elimination of this autonomy. As the crowd takes hold of the communicative process, what tends to disappear is not only this or that specific worldview, but also the very idea of communication. What gets lost, in other words, is the distance that renders communication meaningful. And this loss sets out a new task for critical theory: henceforth, what is at stake in a genuine critique of mass media is not merely the plurality of the public sphere, but the possibility of an actual communicative exchange.

Notes

1. Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 33.
2. See Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2, 687ff.
3. Ibid., 688. My translation. Henceforth, where no English translation is indicated, the translation is mine.
4. See notably Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, esp. 128–76; Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10; or Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*.
5. Perniola, *Contro la Communicazione*, 15.
6. Baudrillard, "The Vanishing Point of Communication", 21.
7. Shakespeare, *Complete Works*, 836.
8. This and other key moments of the Romanian revolution are presented and discussed by Harun Farocki and Andrej Ujica in the 1992 film essay *Videogramme einer Revolution*.
9. Although "voting and pre-election straw polling can be traced as far back as biblical times" (Herbst, "The History and Meaning of Public Opinion", 27), the advent of modern political polling dates back to the early nineteenth century. For a global history of political polling, see Geer, *Public Opinion and Polling*.
10. Bourdieu, *Questions de Sociologie*, 224.

11. See, for example, Bishop, *The Illusion of Public Opinion* and Krippendorff, "The Social Construction of Public Opinion".
12. Ellwanger, "Reinventing *Doxa*", 188.
13. Downie and Kaiser, *The News About the News*, 250.
14. Krippendorff, "The Social Construction of Public Opinion", 145.
15. Ellwanger, "Reinventing *Doxa*", 188.
16. Mitchell, "Public Opinion, Thinly Sliced and Served Hot", 24f.
17. Moore, "It's Entertainment; Not Polling", par. 4.
18. See Boydstun et al., "Real-Time Reactions".
19. Ibid., 331.
20. Ibid., 340.
21. Marx and Engels, Marx-Engels-Werke, vol. 3, 46.
22. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, 20.
23. Notable examples include Zuboff, Ibid., which offers a comprehensive analysis of the different ways in which online interactions are exploited for economic gain, or Eubanks, *Automating Inequality*, which highlights the different forms of inequality, oppression and social injustice promoted by high-tech tools and automated systems.
24. Perniola, *Contro la Communicazione*, 33.
25. Ibid., 36.
26. Ibid., 136.
27. Ibid., 126.
28. Baudrillard, "The Vanishing Point of Communication", 16.
29. Ibid., 19.
30. Ibid. 21.
31. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 176.
32. Baudrillard, "The Vanishing Point of Communication", 21.
33. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 176.
34. A similar phenomenon was presciently highlighted by Adorno and Horkheimer with regard to the "schema of mass culture", where "whatever is to pass muster must already have been handled, manipulated and approved by hundreds of thousands of people before anyone can enjoy it" (Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 67). However, the gregarious logic introduced by social networks and search engines is not based simply on the popularity of a given product or content. At stake is an exponential accumulation of digital interactions which, although triggered by a specific communicative content, are ultimately fuelled by their own reproduction.
35. See Coleman and Blumler, *The Internet and Democratic Citizenship*, or Milakovich, *Digital Governance*, among many others.
36. Baudrillard, *Screened Out*, 177.
37. Other criticisms can of course be levelled against digital forms of political participation and governance: apart from the permeability of digital platforms to large-scale private interests, already mentioned, or the dangers posed by hacking and data breaches, there is also the progressive abandonment of substantive forms of political activism in favour of low-effort and often superficial forms of engagement – a practice recently dubbed "clicktivism" or "slacktivism" (see, for example, Christensen, "Political Activities on the Internet").

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