

Elements for a Social Theory of Technologically Mediated Communication: from Modernity to Postmodernity¹

Leonarda GARCÍA-JIMÉNEZ
Universidad de Murcia
Leonardagj@um.es

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Abstract

Mass and digital media (Technologically Mediated Communication) have been one of the most decisive motive forces in the transition from Modernity to Postmodernity. It has helped to change the nature of power that has evolved from the capacity to define reality for a few groups to a greater participation in the selection and exclusion of social imaginary elements. Social movements represent this diversification and more participation in the social construction of reality. This article proposes the theoretical tool the *communicative paradox* for explaining how communication works in a social level and how it is possible to explain society from a communicational perspective (communication as the primary and constitutive social process). The paradox, the symbolic power and the role of counter-ideologies (social movements) are three elements for the social theory of communication proposed in this paper.

Keywords: Technologically Mediated Communication, The *Communicative Paradox*, Power, Postmodernity, Critical And Sociopsychological Traditions

Elementos para una teoría social de la comunicación tecnológicamente mediada: de la Modernidad a la Postmodernidad

Resumen

Los medios de comunicación (la comunicación tecnológicamente mediada) han sido fuerzas motrices esenciales en la transición de la Modernidad a la Postmodernidad. Ellos han ayudado a cambiar la naturaleza del poder, que ha evolucionado de la capacidad de definir la realidad por parte de unos pocos grupos, a una mayor participación de actores sociales en la selección y exclusión de los elementos que conforman nuestro imaginario colectivo. Los movimientos sociales representan esta mayor participación en la construcción social de la realidad. Este artículo propone la herramienta teórica “la paradoja comunicativa” para explicar cómo la comunicación funciona a nivel social (la comunicación como elemento primario y constitutivo). La paradoja comunicativa, el poder simbólico y el rol de las contra-ideologías (movimientos sociales) son los tres elementos de la teoría social de la comunicación propuesta en este artículo.

Palabras clave: Comunicación tecnológicamente mediada, la paradoja comunicativa, poder, posmodernidad y perspectivas críticas y sociopsicológicas

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Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. First element: the *communicative paradox*. 3. Second element: the symbolic communicative power. 4. Third element: the role of counter-ideologies. 5. Conclusions. 6. References.

1. Introduction

This paper develops a General Theory of Technologically Mediated Communication (TMC)² based on the role of mass and digital communication in the transition from Modernity (mass society) to Postmodernity (information society). TMC has been one of the most relevant social motive forces along the last century in the transition from mass society – characterized by the domination of the structural elements of social order – to information society – individualistic power has been reinforced due to technological revolution based on information. The hypothesis of this paper is that TMC helps to create a symbolic social tension. Specifically, there is a tension between the established order and the excluded groups that are marginalized for the maintenance of that order. Thus, the situation tends to exclude subcultures or alternative points of view to status quo in the definition of rules that construct social reality. This tension between the established order and its exclusions (subcultures) is stronger in current network context than in mass society because of the increase of symbolic individualistic power as a consequence of the informational revolution (CASTELLS, 2000). For that reason, counter-ideologies represented by new social movements have more power and capacity of resistance than old social movements. And here is where the *communicative paradox* emerges: the same communicative interactions that maintain established order and exclude subcultures that can threaten it, are a source of emancipation (HABERMAS, 1989). That is why communication in a social level implies, at the same time, order, exclusion and emancipation. How does this *communicative paradox* work? It works through a power that is, above all, symbolic (THOMPSON, 1998: 34). *Communicative paradox* lies down in a symbolic power that explains the configuration and nature of Modernity and Postmodernity. *Communicative paradox* is a theoretical tool that gives an explanation based on the communicational perspective, that is, a point of view that places communication itself as the primary and constitutive social process that explains all kind of factors – psychological, sociological, cultural or economic (CRAIG, 1999: 126).

The methodology used in this paper is a revision of two of the main traditions of thought that have focused in Technologically Mediated Communication (mass and digital media) along the last century in our field of study: critical and sociopsychological (BRYANT and MYRON, 2004). For the selection of some key authors who represent these perspectives, I have used the following metatheoretical references: BENIGER, 1990; BRYANT and MIRON, 2004; CRAIG, 1999; CRAIG and MULLER, 2007; GARCÍA-JIMÉNEZ, 2007; GALINDO et al., 2008; KATZ et al., 2003; LITTLEJOHN and FOSS,

² Technologically Mediated Communication describes the kind of symbolic interaction that needs the intervention of a technological channel (mass media, cultural industries, technologies of information, etc.) to carry out the communicative process. Thus, this kind of interaction takes place through mass media, cultural industries, and new technological devices.

2005; PARK and POOLEY, 2008; PETERS and SIMONSON, 2004; RODRIGO ALSINA, 2001. Based on these references, the authors selected have been the following: on the sociopsychological tradition LASSWELL, SCHRAMM, BERNAYS, McLUHAN, DE FLEUR, CASTELLS, BERELSON, LAZARSFELD, MCPHEE, WRIGHT, and MERTON; on the critical, ADORNO, HORKHEIMER, DEBORD, WILLIAMS, CURRAN, HABERMAS, MILLS, KELLNER, SARTORI, FROMM, HALL, and MARCUSE. The proposal developed in this paper is an integration of these two traditions of thought.

This general social theory of communication is articulated in three key elements: the *communicative paradox*, the symbolic communicative power (and society as a place of symbolic struggles) and the role of counter-ideologies (old and new social movements).

2. First element: the *communicative paradox*

Historically, mass communication was defined through its power to create functions -the repetitive set of actions that maintain the system in equilibrium, create consensus (DE FLEUR, 1970: 71)- and dysfunctions, that is “negative causes and effects that are undesirable from the point of view of the welfare of the society or its members” (WRIGHT, 1960: 610). From this point of view, society was the symbolic process and place where the social equilibrium and its negative causes-consequences lived in a constant tension. In this way, communication is the interaction that creates equilibrium, dysfunctions and, at the same time, is the emancipation for the oppression of the structures of power: the *communicative paradox*. The emancipation means a critical communication that would serve as a way to unmask the structures of powers, action that will liberate to human being. Thereby, HABERMAS (1984) points out that the source of human emancipation is present within all speakers’ communicative competencies. He proposes the conditions in which to develop the ideal speech situation and specifies the rules of rational argumentation. Thus, through rational speech, human being can be liberated from social, economic and political forces.

For Habermas, our alienation from the world is a by-product of the exigencies of institutional life, which have denied us the opportunity to freely, openly, honestly communicate (HUSPEK, 1997: 269).

According to HABERMAS, it is necessary to critique social order because of its systematic deviation of the ideal speech situation. This critique makes the emancipation possible and it can be realized through political praxis. That is to say, political action can guarantee that public discussions obey the conditions of ideal speech, those are: unrestricted discussion, mutual unimpaired self-presentation, and full complementation of expectations. Further, the participants cannot be forced into agreement and consensus will be achieved because the speakers will

relativize their utterances against the possibility that their validity will be contested by other actors [...] The concept of communicative action presupposes language as the medium for a kind of reaching understanding, in the course of which participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested (HABERMAS, 1984: 99).

This situation implies that speakers will dialogue to achieve the common good because the dialogue is based in the values of comprehensibility, truth, rightness, and sincerity. In this way, functions, dysfunctions, and emancipation³ integrate the *communicative paradox*, an expression that encapsulates the common conceptualization of society shared by the critical and sociopsychological traditions of thought. Because the communicative activity creates functions and dysfunctions, but at the same time serves as a solution -emancipation- for the negative context, social contradiction that highlights the complexity of the communicative phenomenon. In this sense, the meaning of communication would have a double paradoxical dimension: communication as the activity that reproduces order and excludes/oppresses for the reproduction of this order, and communication as emancipation from this oppressive social environment.

In general, functions were defined in terms of concord by the sociopsychological perspective. Inside this tradition, functionalism during the middle of the twentieth century developed extensively the organic metaphor of the human body to explain society. The interest of the functional analyses was to study the set of actions that developed the social equilibrium. The focus was the equilibrium so, from this point of view, the alterations of order were infrequent (DEFLEUR, 1971: 80) and non significant. From this perspective, communication is interactive actions to achieve consensus and agreement, because through them the system will be maintained and reproduced. The classical functions⁴ of communicative processes –the surveillance of the environment; the correlations of the part of society in responding to the environment; and the transmission of the social heritage (LASSWELL, 1960: 118)– focus on the description of symbolic operations of society. Therefore, it was pointed out that mass media conferal status to the issues (or persons, organizations, and so on) that receive media coverage. This function thus entered into organized social action by legitimizing selected policies, persons and groups that receive the support of mass media (LAZARFELD and MERTON, 1948: 234). Be that as it may, there was no conflict in the description of the functions, because the objective was to describe the operation of society as living organism. The conflict was not an important element, because society worked through agreements.

On the other hand, the dysfunctions focused in the causes and consequences of this social equilibrium. The reality was the same as in the functional description –society is a homogeneous equilibrium and an excluding perspective on the world– but the dysfunctional problem is focused not in this hegemonic perspective but in its (negative) causes and consequences (manipulation, exclusion, alienation and so on). And clearly these social environments, where the functions took place, had a negative influence on humans, who lived alienated by communicative process. Critical theorists, like ADORNO and HORKHEIMER during the twentieth century, analyzed this question. The problem had a structural nature, because individuals lived subordinated to the

³ These are three basic elements of communicative process from a societal level.

⁴ WRIGHT (1960) developed this subject in depth.

distorted communicative action, where mass media had a central role as important social institutions. Dysfunctions were causes and consequences of functions, in an interaction that would explain the complexity of society over the last century. Said differently, one cannot exist without the other; that is, for the success of functions there have to be dysfunctions. From this critical point of view, communication is the real process that unmasks the structures of power, power that establishes the social order because “an activity that merely reproduces existing social order, or even one that produces new social order, is not yet authentic communication” (CRAIG, 1999: 148). Thus, the maintenance of consensus would be, from this point of view, pseudo-communication, because for maintaining established social order the communicative process has to be distorted. In this way, mass communication was seen as a medium for something else: information was self-destructive because it was used to dominate (HORKHEIMER and ADORNO, 1993). There were several dysfunctions like the narcotizing one – the population is politically apathetic and inert because information works like a narcotic destroying social action and contributing to social conformism (LAZARFELD and MERTON, 1948) – or the visual culture (SARTORI, 1998) that simplifies reality and appeals to feelings. In this culture, *homo videns*, who has substituted to *homo sapiens*, cannot understand what is going on because of the preponderance of the visible over the intelligible. This kind of culture responds to economic interests and this situation does not allow the growth of society (WILLIAMS, 1967); it is a context of alienation and isolation where the enlightenment project has been destroyed (HORKHEIMER and ADORNO, 1993). Enlightenment turned into a mythology because reason consists above all in the calculation of effectiveness, and of the techniques of production and distribution: “What men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men. That is the only aim [...] The Enlightenment has extinguished any trace of its own self consciousness” (HORKHEIMER and ADORNO, 1993: 4). Reason is now reduced to instrumental that is used as a power tool; that is why power and knowledge are synonymous and Enlightenment has become totalitarian. Because society has destroyed this project, communication (from interpersonal to mass media) establishes uniformity among men by isolating them; films, radio and magazines make up the system, which is a uniform whole in every part. HORKHEIMER and ADORNO argued that the executive authorities (who produce films, music, advertising...) do not produce or sanction anything that in any way differs from their own rules, their own ideas about consumers, or above themselves.

As we can see, the conceptualization of society and its relation with mass media was characterized by the dichotomy function/dysfunction. But nowadays, talking about functions and dysfunctions inside contemporary society seems a contradictory proposal, because the concept of network (or information society) emphasizes the horizontal and interactive character of social order. It seems more appropriate to talk about the network equilibrium and its negative social environment because functions and dysfunctions implied a structural conception of society that would not be very reliable in our current age. And today, the structure would not exert a direct and unidirectional influence on the individual, because the latter would have more power through its technological interactive possibilities.

However, it would be possible to characterize society over the last century (from mass society to information society) with this theoretical framework, where cultural industries are important organizing forces in the economy, politics, culture, and everyday life. And also they carry out an outstanding role in the communicative processes that maintain social equilibrium through the tensions between inclusive networks and its negative social context. During the 20th century, mass media created mass society. Now, digital media are generating an information society based on the convergence of capitalism and new technologies (KELLNER, 2003: VII).

Up to here, the approach to society that has characterized the communication field during the last century is mainly symbolic and communicative. Because, through the interactive processes, the privileged groups and dominant elites had a greater capacity to influence the definition of social reality based on agreements. These predominant definitions of reality had negative consequences albeit also some of the causes that could explain social peace. But unfortunately, these forces always try to exclude minorities or disadvantaged strata of population that can be a threat for social order. Therefore, society, power and the tensions between network and negative environment are generated by symbolic interactions.

In this way, the system is simultaneously stable and perverse (because of marginalization), and in both situations the TMC is in the epicenter of the conflicting phenomena. Consequently, society is a process and a place characterized by the tensions created by communicative processes, a struggle for the symbolic power that is the second element of the social theory of communication developed in this paper.

3. Second element: the symbolic communicative power

Communicative paradox works because power is the symbolic capacity of defining, selecting, and excluding the elements that shape reality. It is an ideological power for signifying events in a particular way. As HALL has pointed out (2009: 123):

The power to signify is not a neutral force in society [...] The signification of events is part of what has to be struggled over, for it is the means by which collective understanding are created [...] Ideology becomes a site of struggle (between compelling definitions) and a stake -a prize to be won- in the conduct of particular struggles.

From this point of view, society would be the place where struggle (class, gender, race, religion, etc.) over meanings occur, and where “subordinate groups attempt to resist the imposition of meanings that bear the interests of dominant groups” (STOREY, 2009: XVI). The ideologies -systems of coding reality- support the interests of dominant groups. And that is why the symbolic struggles are between the supporters of the dominant ideologies and other alternative groups, which do not share the official perspectives about the world. An example of one of these symbolic struggles is the crisis of patriarchalism provoked by women who

whether or not avowedly feminist, are spreading throughout the world, thus undermining patriarchalism in the family, in the economy, and in the institutions of society. I consider it very likely that, with the spread of women’s struggles, and with women’s increasing awareness of their oppression, their collective challenge to the patriarchal order will generalize, inducing processes of crisis in traditional family structures (CASTELLS, 2008: 321).

This transformation of relationships of experience is not anecdotal because it is one of the reasons⁵ that has promoted a new social structure of the Information Age.

The symbolic tensions generated are higher in network society than in mass society because digital technologies constitute a tool useful for gaining access to the public sphere, historically controlled mainly by mass media. Even more, “the web is transferring power to the people, and facilitating the construction of emancipated subjectivities” (Poster in CURRAN, 2006: 138). In this sense, gay communities are using Internet as a tool for forming new communities because it seems that the control over the means of reproduction has started to be placed in the hands of “ordinary citizens – the residents of cyberspace” (GROSS, 2003: 259). Furthermore, Rielly (quoted in GROSS, 2003: 260) indicates “the Internet is the first medium where we can have equal footing with the big players”. New media are creating opportunities for the formation of new movements and the organization of gay communities in many countries (GROSS, 2003: 266). There are several examples of this kind of organizing force: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, The Gay And Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), The Human Rights Campaign, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (P-Flag) (GROSS, 2003: 260). Therefore, this would be an example of the opportunities that new technologies are providing to self-identified minorities.

For all these reasons, TMC has been one of the decisive elements that has influenced the change of the nature of power in its evolution from Modernity to Post-modernity.

Therefore, pluralistic and heterogeneous character of network society (and the options offered by new technologies) implies that individuals and subcultures have a stronger symbolic power in the information age than in mass society. And as a result, the tension between inclusion and exclusion of different voices and subcultures from established social order is now stronger than before. In this way, the power of the structure characteristic during the 20th century has been debilitated for the individualistic action that takes place in information society. In this paper, the structure is understood as the given conditions of existence, the structure of determination in any situation. That is, the result of previous practices because “practice is how a structure is reproduced” (HALL, 1985: 96). From this point of view, structure is a complex conglomerate of tendencies that has different modes of action and is multidimensional. Structure exhibits lines of force, openings and closures, which constrain, shape, channel, and in that sense, determine. But it cannot

Determine in the harder sense of fix absolutely guarantee. People are not irrevocably and indelibly inscribed with the ideas that they ought to think; the politics that they ought to have are not, as it were, already imprinted in their sociological genes (Hall, 1985: 96).

This conceptualization of society -the tension between individual and structure- implies that presence of structure is unavoidable: “Social formation is a structure in

⁵ CASTELLS (2008: 322) proposes other reasons for the consolidation of a new social structure: changes in relationships of production and power, and the transformation of material foundations of social life, space, and time

dominance. It has certain distinct tendencies; it has certain configuration; it has a definite structuration” (HALL, 1985: 91). But the increasing individual action has made the symbolic tension⁶ stronger and more complex than before.

Nowadays, postmodernity is the emergence of multiple voices and subcultures that take the word and cannot be silent (VATTIMO, 1992). In this context, we could say that power has a more horizontal character, because more groups have the option of struggling for the definition of reality. Society is a conflicting place where subcultures try to open the meaning of official point of views. Network are horizontal and open. But the construction of reality means that we live in a social world that has inherited official points of view consolidated over centuries. That is why the symbolic fight is focused, in these moments, on the opening and overcoming of the consensus pointed out by the functionalism during the XX century (e.g. the definition of the nature of marriage). And this symbolic struggle for the opening of the meanings of reality makes sense and is possible in a moment where public space is not controlled just by mass media.

For all these reasons, the role of counter-ideologies, that is, movements than resist the imposition of meanings are a third key element in the explanation of society.

4. Third element: the role of counter-ideologies

Our current situation is the result of the Informational Technological Revolution that happened during the 20th century (CASTELLS, 2000). It would be possible to argue that in the evolution from Modernity to Posmodernity, Technologically Mediated Communication has been an outstanding social motive force that has shaped (and it has been shaped by) mass and information society.

Over the last century, functionalism underscored that one of the main roles carried out by the communicative processes was the maintenance of the social order, which created a social stable structure, thereby revealing more or less concentration of power (LASSWELL, 1960). Communication was understood as an integrative social activity. It would not be very controversial to say that this conception had a clear symbolic dimension because through communication and through the definition, integration and exclusion of the elements that shape reality, the system was produced and reproduced under conservative conditions (LAZARSELD and MERTON, 1948; KLAPPER, 1960).

In this way, communication and mass media preserved power of dominant elite and shaped a particular way of seeing the world and human nature and relationships, until configuring an hegemonic situation (WILLIAMS, 1976: 118).

Mass media had an outstanding role with the maintenance of the equilibrium and social order. Mass media were defined as social systems that in their interaction with the rest of social institutions produced and reproduced social order. This situation was described in multiple ways with several connotations and some of the expressions to define this situation include: the surveillance of environment and dominant elite (LASSWELL, 1960); the contribution to the status quo (SCHRAMM, 1971); consent (BERNAYS,

⁶ This tension could be translated to the contemporary moment highlighting the interaction between the network society and the power of identity (CASTELLS, 2008: 324).

1928)⁷; the creation of an organic interrelation (MCLUHAN, 1964); the maintenance of financial equilibrium (DE FLEUR, 1960); patriarchal system (HERZOG, 1941); technocapitalism and consumer society (KELLNER, 2003); mass society (MILLS, 1956; WILLIAMS, 1967); control, alienation (ADORNO, 1945; FROMM, 1984; HORKHEIMER and ADORNO, 1993), and oversocialization (MARCUSE, 1968). Clearly, mass media served as conservative institutions that confirmed viewpoints rather than challenging them (BERELSON, LAZARFELD and MCPHEE, 1954: 655). The role of media in a democratic society, as LAZARFELD and MERTON (1948) argued, was more likely to contribute to the status quo than to great change. In this light, LASSWELL (1960) described a kind of society where the equilibrium was maintained through communication, a useful tool for eliminating counter ideologies and reinforcing the power and ideology –which shapes the social values- of the dominant elite. LASSWELL, like the theory of gatekeeper, pointed out that power and wealth are in a few hands. Otherwise, the gatekeeper theory accepted that “communication chains are far from perfect, and that, with communication organized as it is, a few important gatekeepers have an enormous power over our views of our environment” (SCHRAMM, 1960: 177).

Similarly, another theoretical frame that focused on equilibrium was the global village proposed by MCLUHAN; a big -and naïve- network where space and time were abolished and the world was integral and decentralist. The moment we overcame the fragmentation produced by the machine was “the moment that translated us beyond mechanism into the world of growth and organic interrelation” (MCLUHAN, 1964: 12). But this organic stability was also maintaining a patriarchal system, a consumer society that promoted spectacle (DEBORD, 2004). The spectacle was permanent opium, which stupefied social subjects and distracted them from the most urgent task or real life⁸ narcotizing dysfunction (LAZARFELD and MERTON, 1948). According to this interpretation, the social equilibrium was based on the manipulation and alienation of consciousness that prevent the development of an authentic consciousness. Even more, people lived in a pseudo world dominated by instrumental reason.

The mass society of the 20th century was described in this way by the field of communication. Mass society was a kind of organization in which the dominant type of organization was the formal media. However, the communicative organization of network society has a greater grade of complexity that does not only focus on mass media, but on a full swing of informative flows created by digital communication. Thus, in this network society, there are more symbolic forces that have an influence in the definition of reality -for the final objective of maintaining established order. From this point of view, the dominant structural elements of mass society are still present. But they are weaker than before because of the horizontal character that impress the technological contemporary interactions (CASTELLS, 2000).

The crisis of patriarchalism by the influence of women’s struggles pointed out before would be an example of this higher contemporary tension between structure and

⁷ According to BERNAYS (1928) democracy is order and consent and in this context, propaganda is an instrument of democracy because achieves these goals.

⁸ This is the narcotizing dysfunction developed by LAZARFELD and MERTON (1948).

individual. In general, without any doubt the new social movements would represent an example of the rise of individual power against structure. In other words, the increasing of alternative views against contemporary structures. New social movements function as networks and are smaller, more decentralized and less hierarchical than old social movements. Furthermore, new social movements work to shape political identities, denunciate inequity power (power structure) or challenge social roles and norms, rather than working on the creation or abolition of institutions, the rights of workers or legislation and material gains, as we could say about old social movements (ATKINSON, 2010: 7). The new social movements are power structures where participants use digital channels of communication as tools for accomplishing temporary goals and resist the dominant power structures in society. Thus, alternative media (e.g. The Independent Media Center-Indymedia.org or MoveOn.org) include critical perspectives that often urge readers and audiences to resist the hegemonic reproduction:

Conceptualizations of power found in alternative media content aid in the construction and reinforcement of worldviews concerning power and social justice in society and set the stage for Resistance Performance (ATKINSON, 2010: 34).

This Resistance Performance is a paradigm that highlights the alternative narratives about power and social justice against dominant power structures. And in this context, Internet is allowing the mobilization and the construction of temporary and alternative communities (e.g. anti-globalization movement).

This new structure of power has a network geometry in which “power relationships are always specific to a given configuration of actors and institutions” (CASTELLS, 2008: 320).

Because of these multiple informative flows, the social equilibrium is based on a more heterogeneous conglomerate of voices. The strong structuralist elements that clearly were present in the concept of mass communication and culture, put the interactions between systems in a societal context over the individualistic communicative action. However, nowadays the network logic seems to revalue the individual action in its interaction with structure. In spite of that, even with this pluralistic conglomerate of individualistic forces, the social order creates a democratic equilibrium that continues trying to marginalize in the definition of reality to minorities or disadvantaged strata of the population (homosexuals, women, immigrants, young people, etc.), considered “dangerous” for the social peace according to the established power. That is why society is a place of symbolic struggle for defining reality, where agreements about specific labels are a complex process of linguistic discussion. The case of same sex marriage would reflect one kind of symbolic struggle for the definition of reality, where marriage has different meaning for gay communities on the one hand, and conservative institutions, on the other:

There is also the struggle over access to the very means of signification the difference between those accredited witnesses and spokesman who have a privileged access [...] As contrasted with those who have to struggle to gain access to the world of public discourse (HALL, 2009: 133).

For all these reasons, the contemporary process of the construction of social reality is much more complex than in mass society, because network society includes

counter-definitions of reality represented by the characteristic diversity of the postmodern moment. The public sphere, still partly controlled by mass media, is in a process of opening because subcultures, traditionally marginalized, have started to be visible and disseminate their voices and points of view (VATTIMO, 1992).

“Modern communications have drastically altered the ordinary terms of experience and consciousness, the ordinary structures of interest and feeling, the normal sense of being alive, of having a social relationship” (CAREY, 1989: 1). Thus, postmodernity is the historic moment where the social order is organized around information and knowledge and these two realities cannot be understood without their essential technological dimension. According to CASTELLS (2008: 315), a new society has emerged because of the transformation observed in the relationships of production, power and experience – transformations that have modified social forms of space and time creating a new culture represented by the new social movements.

5. Conclusions

The social theory of communication proposed in this paper has defined society as a place of struggling for the definition of reality. The multiple struggles lie down in communicative processes that create an interesting (social) paradox: communication makes equilibrium (status quo) and exclusions (subcultures) but at the same time is a source of emancipation (action of counter-ideologies). This theoretical proposal is an integration of two of the main traditions of thought of the field of communication: critical and sociopsychological. This article understands the main contributions of communication theory along the last century not in a contradictory way, but in a complementary and useful one. Communication is a complex phenomenon and its analysis may take into account the different traditions of thought integrating their points of view. This integration of different perspectives for the research of communication is summarized in the *communicative paradox*, proposal that is based in a symbolic power and helps to understand the role of counter-ideologies in mass and network society. The last one, because of its horizontal character, has made (and it has been made by) digital media that are opening the public space and generating more symbolic tensions (struggles) in the definition of reality. That is why new social movements have a greater symbolic capacity than old social movements. In both cases (mass and information society) the *communicative paradox* is a useful theoretical tool for analyzing society from a communicative point of view. Definitely, this situation represents the logic of our current moment, a way to understand the postmodern age.

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