

Comunicação Pública

vol.10 n° 18 | 2015

Special

Artigos

Selfies in a lonely crowd: interaction and meaning in social networks

JOÃO CARLOS CORREIA

<https://doi.org/10.4000/cp.1017>

Resumos

English Português

In the early days of the Internet, significant researchers on sociological aspects relating to the Internet thought that online and off life worlds were somewhat disconnected as if they were parallel universes. Cyberculture emphasized a more contingent, flexible and fluid experience of selfhood. Those approaches produced a strong influence in early postmodern Internet studies (Hayward, 1991; Stone, 1996; Mosco, 2004; Talbot, 1995). Reading those earlier papers, it seems that the Internet has opened the way for the full realization of political utopias that conceived cyberspace as having an inherently democratic structure (Barlow, 1996).

The web of our days is far from being the same of earlier stages. Dominated not just by Google, Twitter, YouTube, and Wikipedia, it has recently been shaped by WikiLeaks and the so-called Facebook and Twitter revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East. Over the years, perspectives on identities and social interactions have very much changed. Today, Internet studies follow a path based on the empirical research of the effective social interactions performed in the digital environment. Most of these perspectives derive its theoretical framework from important currents of social thought such as phenomenological sociology and symbolic interactionism. The purpose of this paper is to

discuss complex literature on the issue of the autonomy of the self with relevance to understanding the meaning of political activism and mobilization.

Nos primeiros tempos da Internet, investigadores proeminentes dos aspectos sociológicos relacionados com a Internet pensaram que os mundos da vida *on-line* e *off* eram desligados entre si, como se fossem paralelos. A cibercultura enfatizou uma experiência mais contingente, flexível e fluida de individualidade. Tais abordagens produziram uma forte influência nos primeiros estudos pós-modernos sobre Internet (Hayward, 1991; Stone, 1996; Mosco, 2004; Talbot, 1995). Lendo essas primeiras contribuições parece que a Internet abriu o caminho para a plena realização das utopias políticas que conceberam o ciberespaço como tendo uma estrutura inerentemente democrática (Barlow, 1996). A Internet dos nossos dias está longe de ser a mesma de fases anteriores. Dominada pelo Google, Twitter, YouTube e Wikipedia, foi, adicionalmente, sendo moldada pela WikiLeaks e pelas chamadas revoluções do Facebook e Twitter no norte da África e no Médio Oriente. Ao longo dos anos, perspectivas sobre as identidades e interações sociais têm mudado muito. Hoje, os estudos do Internet seguem um caminho baseado na investigação empírica das interações sociais eficazes executadas no ambiente digital. A maioria dessas perspectivas deriva o seu quadro teórico de importantes correntes do pensamento social, tais como a sociologia fenomenológica e o interacionismo simbólico. O objetivo deste artigo é discutir a complexa literatura sobre a questão da autonomia individual com relevância para a compreensão do significado do ativismo e mobilização política.

Entradas no índice

Palavras-chave : selfies, identidades, redes sociais, privacidade

Keywords : selfies, identities, social networks, privacy

Notas da redação

Received: June 23, 2013

Accepted: September 17, 2014

Texto integral

1. Cyberlibertarian Utopias

- 1 During the early days of Internet, many scholars put their focus on the issue of personal identity as a disembodied self. The belief that technology would liberate individuals from social and physical constraints was a major issue of some postmodern perspectives on cyberspace. According to this claim, technology would allow the separate existence of multiple aspects of the self which otherwise would not be recognized. Indeed, the Internet's social technologies would emancipate social agents allowing them to playfully explore their multiple *personae* and choose who they ultimately wanted to be (Barlow, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1995).
- 2 Those narratives emphasized particularly multi-belonging phenomena, and the increasing fragmentation of social rules and contexts. In the late nineties, the most influential discourse was techno-libertarian ideology wherein converged elements of the underground culture and neoliberal discourse. This culminated in a political project of economic and societal regulation (known as new economy) deeply focused on strengthening the market regulatory imperative. This project, having as main protagonists Georges Gilder as ideologist and Newt Gingrich as the most influential player in the political arena, was a mix of social

cybernetics, digital Darwinism, neoliberal economic theory and cultural libertarianism. Those elements were added to the praise of individual freedom, entrepreneurship and creative innovation (Lovink, 2009: 11) drawing on some emancipatory narratives from the new left.

3 During those controversies, cyber-libertarians increasingly called for imaginative potentialities introduced by the computer mediated communication. The concept of identity was often connected with notions, such as “fluidity”, “flexibility” and “non-linearity”.

4 This seems to happen because of the contribution of certain technological characteristics to a faster transition among provinces of meaning and thanks to an easier recycling of objects from everyday life in virtual contexts. The chances of constructing alternatives for everyday experiences have become part of a great number of emancipatory proposals influenced by postmodern critics to the universalist narratives (Correia, 2004). The re-evaluation of body boundaries and social barriers and a new generation of anti-authoritarian rights converged with the deception on traditional emancipatory movements as they were configured after the Second World War.

5 Politics has reshaped itself in a somewhat refractory way to the conventional agendas, highlighting issues concerned with quality of life and individual autonomy achievement. Identity has become a creation of a unique and particular individuality, with chances of unlimited realization (Esteves, 1999).

6 A significant part of the debate between moderns and post-moderns was focused on those controversies: post-moderns built a new narrative about the disembodied self, assuring its democratic potentialities (Vattimo, 1992). David Riesman (2001 [1950]) identified, along history, three major characterological types classifying each one of these types as “tradition-directed”, “inner-directed” and “other-directed”. In preindustrial societies, the dominant social type would be “tradition-directed,” with his personal values being determined by the traditions of a highly structured society. From Renaissance to early twenty-century, the “inner-directed” individual predominates, with his personal values shaped and determined by immediate family and bourgeois individualism, being not necessarily related to wider social constraints. In later consumption societies, the “other-directed” type emerges, being largely shaped by “peer groups” of persons whom he resembles in age, social class, consumption habits and values. Drawing on Riesman’s classic characterological framework of social personality, it would be possible to identify in the early days of theoretical reflection on digital world an increasing fascination by a new social type that would be the outcome from an experimental and never ending self-creative process. This narrative would celebrate a kind of return of the inner-directed self, even less determined and shaped by social and physical constraints of “real” the world.

7 This social type was presented as a producer of its own meanings, independent of the horizons of coexistence with his fellows. Eccentric and bohemian, this social type searched throughout aesthetic experiences and dramaturgical mutations, his own way of crossing social and cultural frontiers.

8 The increasing use of pastiche decontextualized the symbolic element from their roots placing it in artificial environments as pieces of an identitarian puzzle. Life projects of different origins were experienced almost exclusively as dramaturgical experiences. The appearance of virtual games and hyperlinks supported this approach embraced by fringes of urban intellectual classes endowed with creative capital. The presence of distinctive subcultures leads to postmodern speculation about its radical deconstructive effect on identity and on culture in general. "We are moving from modernist calculation to postmodernist simulation, where the self is a multiple, distributed system" (Turkle, 1995, 148).

9 Fourteen years after this statement, Turkle (2011: 131) wrote that behind ubiquity, there is a kind of new regime where public places as the railway station, the city park or the café terrace are no longer communitarian places, but just places where people

are joined together each one handling a device that works as a portal. This portal would open each individual world to the values and habits of peer groups, meaning the return, in new terms, of the other-directed self.

2. Chicago School and phenomenological sociology: discovering urban social networks

10 Thanks to its concerns with social interactions in everyday life, the Chicago School of social thought brings to us significant and useful reflections to a satisfactory and coherent account on the autonomy of the self.

11 Being not a school with a unified doctrine, Chicago scholars carried with them different theoretical backgrounds such as pragmatism, phenomenology and Marxism, around a theoretical nucleus usually identified with Symbolic Interactionism. In spite of the strong diversity and the complex evolution of their thought, it is still possible to find a strong core of collective concerns, combining social theory with participant research and ethnographic fieldwork. First, one finds a common emphasis on the symbolic nature of social life. Accordingly, with this approach, the formation of social worlds implies symbolic interaction. Language is the environment that shapes the communicative exchange. Supported in distinctive philosophical style based in American Pragmatism with a particular influence from John Dewey (Subtil & Garcia, 2010: 219-224), thinkers such as Mead (1969), Park (1984) or Blumer (1969), in different moments of the intellectual evolution of Chicago school, believed that the interactions were a dynamic process. This dynamism implied to avoid an essentialist view on identities and taking into account the presence of several variables in meaning generation.

12 This approach to social interaction brings also with it a very specific concept of communication, as product of the intellectual reflection of Dewey

In order for acts or behaviors not to be mere physical occurrences of an organic symbiosis, individuals must understand and communicate each other's meanings and, through this, combined action, modify and adjust their conduct accordingly (...)
What defines communication is that is a shared experience. Hence it is an experience which, congenitally, according to Dewey, has a unique moral character" (Subtil & Garcia, 2010: 221).

13 This common theoretical approach will give a particular tune to Symbolic interactionism, visible in the commitment with a specific conception of democracy. Communication wasn't just something concerned with transmissions and dissemination of signs. It would be also a ritual of sharing, participation and possession of common beliefs. (Subtil & Garcia, 2010: 222). This concept of political participation would be a major insight and it will be present either in the Pragmatist concept of public either in its rejection of democratic elitism (Silveirinha, 2004: 433). This concept will be present in many major contemporary philosophical developments through authors such as Habermas, Rorty and Apel.

14 In addition to this common theoretical concern, all the social scientists of Chicago School shared a focus on the cultural phenomena that appeared with the urbanization process: deviant groups, racial issues, ethnic minorities, education, socialization processes, press and mass communication, etc. (Subtil & Garcia, 2010: 216).

15 Norman Denzin (1992: 8) providing an historical overview of Chicago School identifies six phases.

16 The first one will be the canonic phase (1890-1932), describing the period when pragmatism emerges as distinctive philosophical formation in America. This first phase will include the founding philosophical fathers (Peirce, Dewey, James and

Mead) and the founding sociological pioneers of interactionist research: Charles Cooley, William Thomas, Florian Znaniecky and Robert Park. The second phase (1932-1950) will be *the empirical theoretical phase* covering the appearance of Mead's posthumous works, the coining of the term symbolic interactionism by Herbert Blumer in 1937 and the institutionalization of Chicago's sociological thought around George Herbert Mead's heritage and the urban sociological pole under the influence of Park, Burgess and E. Hughes (Denzin, 1992: 8-10)

17 The *transition /new texts period* (between 1951 and 1962) will include major theoretical statements such as the initial works of Erving Goffman (*The Presentation of self and everyday-life world*, 1959), Anselm Strauss (*Mirrors and masks: The search for identity*, 1959/1999) and Howard Becker (*Boys in white: student culture in medical school*, 1961/1999) (Denzin, 1992: 10-14)

18 Many of the Chicago School alumni in the 50s formed the nucleus of the so-called third generation of Symbolic Interactionism, which will maintain a dialogue with European theory, through Linguistic (Wittgenstein) and Phenomenology (Alfred Schutz), along the fourth phase of the school (1963-1970). Denzin also identifies a fifth period between 1971 and 1980 ((identified as *ethnographic period*) strongly devoted to qualitative research. The sixth period, beginning in the eighties, showed the resurgence of interest on dramaturgy and an increasing dialogue with phenomenology, feminism and cultural studies, where Denzin would play itself a major role. Since the eighties, interactionism lost some of its adversarial and critical tune with mainstream social theory accepting its emphases on meaning, agency, and the interpretive analysis of interactional processes. Recently, one finds the emergence of new research directed to interaction in digital networks (Rodriguez, 2002; Markham, 2012; Salvini, 2010).

2.1 Interaction and phenomenology

19 Denzin (1992: 10) also understood the connections among interactionism and phenomenology. According his historical overview the period of fifties saw the first attempts to merge Mead's theories with French and Germany phenomenology, including the attempt of building a dialogue with Edmond Husserl, Jean- Paul Sartre and Martin Buber. Those attempts were particularly performed by Maurice Natanson (1956) and Alfred Schutz (Wagner, 1979).

20 In spite of the Denzin's comments of Schutz's work stay restricted to the anthology of short texts collected by Helmut Wagner(1979), he reveals a strong acknowledge on its importance. This intuition will be developed in the following years with the increasing research on phenomenological sociology (Cefai 1999; Embreem 1999; Srubar 1999; Laningan, 1988; Correia, 2002, 2004; 2008, 2013). However, Denzin in 1992, was completely aware of the influence of Schutz who, after his arrival to America, in 1939, wrote important essays on the pragmatists, published in *American Journal of Sociology* (Schutz, 1962: 207-259; 1976: 64-88; 1976a: 92-105; 1976b: 106-119; 1976c: 135-158). This awareness was significant because only the centenary of Schutz (2001) fully reveal all its importance the phenomenological movement and particularly to the dialogue between Phenomenology and Pragmatism.

21 Schutz phenomenological sociology was somewhat equally centered on the question of how individuals interpret social actions as meaningful within their "life-world" (Schutz & Luckman, 1973). As Schutz pointed out, "it is the meaning of our experiences and not the ontological structure of the objects which constitutes reality." (1967: 230).

22 Phenomenological sociology understands the existence of a tensional field amongst the concept of self. Schutz (1967) points out that the world where we live is made of meanings, built by ourselves and by our precedents. Understanding those meanings

is the human way of living in the social world. This premise is an ontological rather than a methodological condition. Intersubjectivity emerges as an a priori for all the direct human experience in life- world. At the level of everyday life and natural attitude, is taken for granted by the common sense knowledge that the social world is a shared one, appearing as identical for all the participants. Each individual act performed by each person supposes the sharing of the same meaningful universe, identical for all.

23 Without language, there is no meaning. Language and meaning are rooted in the world, making it possible simultaneously. Entire segments of the social world are depending of the institutionalization of a common vocabulary that allows the formation of shared meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1973: 6).

24 In social world, social agents reproduce in terms of daily routine the condition of possibility of a given reality. Shared knowledge on reality is conceived as starting from receipts and typical behaviors, understood in a way that assures the consistence and continuity of social order. The social actor comes closer to the world using hermeneutic categories organized according its previous daily experiences (Berger & Luckmann, 1973: 38). For Schutz, the world of contemporaries is a structure of typifications (Schutz, 1976: 37).

25 However, phenomenological sociology was also strongly aware of phenomena of strangeness, resulting from social experiences in which the social actor is confronted with new domains of meaning in increasingly complex society. In spite of accepting that we are recipients of events beyond our control, there are also relevancies that are the outcomes of our chosen interests, established by our spontaneous decision to solve a problem by our own thinking (Schutz, 1976a: 37).

26 The perception of strangeness came from the existence of multiple realities. Through the influence of William James, Schutz points out that social actor perceived the world as a multiplicity of realities, which he calls provinces of finite meaning. For each one of these provinces one finds a correlative type of relationship between conscience and world. Aesthetic fruition, labor activities, religious ecstasies, entertainment experiences, fantasy plays, dreams implied distinct ways of thinking and being in the world (Schutz, 1962: 231). Each one of these regions has both an objective and a subjective side. The objective side is represented by the individual's belonging to a group and included social relations arising from such belonging. The objective side is, thus, compound by a kind of knowledge of ready-made categories before referred as typifications. However, each province of meaning also has one subjective side reflecting the individuals' perceptions of social reality (Berger and Luckmann, 1973; Blumer, 1969; Schutz, 1967).

27 Schutz migrated to the United States running out from German national-socialism and quickly understood the familiarities among phenomenology and pragmatism, making important approaches mostly to William James, mentor of Mead to whom Schutz assumed an important theoretical debt (Schutz, 1962: 207-286). Mead and, particularly, Park were well acquainted with the sociological and phenomenological German thought. Finally, Chicago scholars and phenomenological social philosophers have a recognized common debt to Georg Simmel, philosopher and sociologist strongly interested in the ecology of urban environments (Wolff, 1950). We find his presence either in phenomenological sociology either in the symbolic interactionism.

28 It is easy to find among Mead, Schutz, Berger and Luckmann a common theoretical background. They all discuss identity and selfhood as products of social forces, shaped by everyday interactions and by struggles and negotiations over acceptable social meanings. People are seen as engaged in a constant effort to establish order so that collective shared meanings are possible.

29 Shared horizon of meaning does not explicitly mean the absence of struggles for recognition performed by excluded identities. Theoretical developments in either phenomenological sociology or symbolic interactionism call for a closer look to individual participation in social movements in order to bring to light its symbolic dimensions, without neglecting the crucial role played by structural objective constraints.

30 Drawing on a more contemporary notion of critical pragmatism, many interactionists (see Farberman, 1991) explicitly conceptualize the concurrent presence of both order and disorder and therefore, of alternative possibilities, movement and conflicts. Pestello and Saxon (2000: 9-29) considered that interactionism could act as sociology of difference, supporting democracy as the proper arrangement required to give voice and recognition to the self. In a similar style, many sociological phenomenologists also follow a critical look to phenomena of power and domination. Empirical work carried out by the phenomenological analysis of social movements showed that dissidence and activism need that actors remain embedded in social networks relevant for the protest issues keeping a symbolic linkage between their activism and their personal life-spheres (Passy & Giugni, 2000: 120-121).

3. Interaction and autonomy

31 An important contribution to the problematic of identities includes the perception of the dynamism and complexity of interactions in which individuals move themselves in often non-linear trajectories. Social action becomes possible only in a kind of dialectical play between the subjective world and objective structures in social networks.

32 The importance given to significant others or to the common sense nature of social world has, as its counterpart, the originality of each selfhood. The construction of a consistent narrative implies no more an essentialist conception of identity but an answer to an increasingly reflexive environment.

33 Social interactionists theories provided a comprehensive approach to the actual social constraints on digital world. The attempt made by postmodern thought to rethink social theory has become an effective break with some assumptions from social sciences allowing a theoretical romanticism that emphasizes the full autonomy of virtual self, by contrast to an image of the "real self" constrained by the ubiquity of power and domination devices.

34 Without a clear support of social theory and grounded methods, libertarians and some fringes of postmodern thought often portrayed Internet in an unreal and, at best, metaphorical way rather than in a practical, effective and socially constructed one. Many early theorists of Internet argue against a Unitarian concept of self. However, the assumption that, before Internet, there was a commonly accepted idea of self as a Unitarian phenomenon is not in any way, a linear one. The main concern of sociology, hermeneutics and critical theory was to establish that human being is constituted "in the world" before any kind of artificial distinction between subject and object.

35 The major achievements of post-conventional social theory included a solid debate on the historicity of thinking as a variable implied in the very nature of sociability, in cognitive relationships, tradition, labor and so. Every project of conceiving ties between subject and world as something that happens a posteriori was already, at best, simply used as a metaphor with analytical value.

36 These notions on self and identity are politically relevant. Interactionism, hermeneutic and phenomenological points of view share an emphasis on communication as central to any definition of identity or self. They assume the existence of a world of shared common meanings that are produced and processed by social actors in a dynamic that is neither free of conflict, nor free of social constraints. On the opposite side, some postmodern writers on Internet alleged that the self is connected to society only in terms of power and political domination describing this in poststructuralist terms.

37 One finds a kind of artificial gap between the real world conceived as an iron cage restricted to a severe political domination, and the virtual world portrayed as potentially liberated from social constraints. While society was understood as a universe of

domination, Internet was presented as providing people the opportunity to abandon the confines of a limiting self. Assuming that many of those narratives were simply metaphorical, and even accepting the legitimacy of literature and art to describe social universe with impressive insights, this specific glance is not free from criticism and academic discussion.

38 This particular narrative takes the properties of digital environment as its starting point, what seems to lead to an uncritical dismissal of the social and political practices that generate and sustain the objectively given quality of those properties. Internet nature or essence would be independent of their social uses, disregarding any hermeneutical approach to understanding its social appropriation.

39 Consequently, the central mistake seems to be the belief that the existence of digital interactions necessarily means emancipation from social physical constraints. This approach does not mean in any way that technologies are irrelevant in themselves. To attend closely to technical objects themselves is not to say that we can ignore the contexts in which those objects are situated (Winner, 1980: 135). Technologies reflect political options but those political options also reflect their projected human use in social contexts.

4. Technologies of social interaction

40 In sharp opposition with the prophecies that announced a new social world with “more authentic” and human interactions, the recent research on Internet reveals that its use is closely connected to the social ties from everyday life. The autonomy of the self is not the outcome of a process in which social ties were broken by the increasing independence from constraints of social life. On the contrary, the autonomous identity is the outcome of a social process in which the actor builds his narrative and his own meanings inside the social horizons shared with significant others.

41 Several causes may contribute to emphasize this change of perception. First, social web (web 2.0) brings with it the loss of some kind of aura (fascination) that once surrounded earlier virtual experiences. Shopping, chatting, dating, making gossips, discussing football and politics, exchanging family photos are common ordinary activities.

42 Those kinds of activities bring to light the social nature of technology, being difficult to imagine YouTube, E-Bay, Facebook or Instagram as the democratic collective hallucination where the selves would regain a kind of mystical authenticity, liberated from social and physical constraint.

43 Social web, with its focus on ordinary activities, seems difficult to be portrayed through the metaphors of the early Cyberculture. Not questioning the relevance of Internet and its impact on almost every aspects of life, there is a kind of assimilation process by ordinary life-world. The undeniable changes in economy, politics, education, cognition, socialization and culture are everywhere but they are being absorbed by everydayness. On the other hand, the kind of imaginary that haunts the primordial of Cyberculture remain less visible, restricted to aesthetics and creative domains or to mainstream popular culture. In spite of that, this kind of approach is still influent in some euphoric narratives on the participative possibilities of internet.

44 Secondly, as Facebook and mobile devices are naturalizing virtual presence, the discussion on identities shifts from euphoric statements on the future of humankind to the analysis of ordinary group demands, technologically supported by mobile communications (cells and tablets). Research alerts us to the presence of domination processes in the virtual world. The introduction of social interaction technologies have given evidence to connections between online and off line world. Social Web initiated the possibility of merging various social interactive features of the Internet in one platform.

45 The kind of naturalization of the societal changes induced by the increasing trivial and domestic environment of Facebook and other social networks has its limits: a certain level of blindness to alternative ways of looking to ordinary life. It does not seem much more productive to replace some early mysticism with an ideal picture of the online ordinary world, disregarding critical points particularly disturbing to the autonomy of social agents.

46 One must face the fact that disclosure of personal information in social media are highly valuable to economy and politics, considering phenomena such as surveillance and dataveillance. Business and identities are closely related at least since the beginning of capitalist modernity. The domestication of bodies and behaviors is statistically relevant for an economy increasingly dependent on immaterial concepts such as memory, culture and identity. Additionally, one must consider the critical importance of understanding what does objectively means the autonomy of public discourse inside global platforms of social network strongly dependent from global major corporations: Facebook, You Tube, Twitter and many other.

47 Dataveillance depends on the increasing value of subjective and private experience. The expanded ability for individuals to negotiate shared meanings and identities induces contradictory results being some of them incompatible with the idea of an expanded critical mind. Using again insights from phenomenology and pragmatism and not denying the existing of different provinces of meaning inside word wide web, with different levels of reflexivity, one must carefully consider that those are not in any way disconnected from social ties in the so called "real world".

48 In addition, one must to take into account some specificities of the new technologies for social interaction that seems to produce some important asymmetrical elements between subjective side (concerned with social agent autonomy) and the objective side of social constraints. Today, many scholars share a high level of concern with social networks, particularly mobile communication because of the permanent and ubiquitous connection established among individuals making themselves more dependent on preconceptions that are dominant in the communities to which they belong. The adoption of this point of view includes the suspicion of a social regression induced by new media, due to the retribalization of social world brought by digital networks and mobile communication. In spite of allowing access to a huge diversity of contents, research showed that users, wherever they are, often remain confined themselves to their private world, connecting by e-mail, Skype and message service to their usual acquaintances (Fidalgo, 2011).

49 Even when traveling abroad, users carry with them their home and their office, talking to the same people on the same issues as if they had not left the neighborhood. Social media and mobile communication seems to induce the return of some characteristics of life style more adjusted to pre-modern relationships. At least in some situations this universal and ubiquitous presence of significant Others seem to be unsuitable for an idea of a cosmopolitan vibrant public sphere. On the contrary, it allows behaviors adjusted to the idea of the crowd or mass , as a kind of acritical way of sociability (opposed to the public) that emerges from collective emotional experiences, as an heterogeneous and emotional community dominated by material interests (Tarde 1989; Blumer, 1946).

50 In such contexts, one may well accept the claim accordingly to which our selves are, more than ever, connected with others glance. Each one of us is not anymore imagined as a disembodied self, free from physical and social constraints particularly in a world where a mobile device is always at hand, loaded with social expectation and shared emotions. The presence of the in-group and significant others grew stronger emphasizing social support demands.

51 As Michael Eldred reveals there is some contradictory elements in the phenomena of identity:

My look is given first of all in my proper name by which I am called and through which my presence is communicated throughout the community. This core of my whoness, my very own, singular proper name, is associated with what is heard and said about me, i.e. with my reputation. (...). My singularity as this unique human being is first of all signaled or signposted by

my unique proper name, which situates it, against the grain, within the universal element of language. I am therefore-at heart a contradiction, for I am identified with what I am not, viz. a proper name. (...). Furthermore, my identity is elaborated in language in articulating my reputation, my standing in the view of others, by identifying my proper name with actions, abilities, attitudes, behaviors, etc. attributed to me. My unique singularity is always already exposed to the universal element of language, and through language, who I am becomes manipulable by others merely a particular human being, no longer singular, but marked beneath the universal of human beings by a specific difference, namely, the properties or qualities that, as predicates of my proper name, serve to characterize me (Eldred, 2008: 30).

52 This quotation describes the fundamental dilemma, in spite of some unilateral emphasis on social domination. Even considering elements of negotiation, consensus achievement and dissidence, political discussion must have in mind the continuous exposition to the look of others in a hyper-connected world. Turkle (2011) remembered the critical Sociologist David Riesman (2001) whom in the mid-1950s, remarked on the American turn from an inner- to an other-directed sense of self, heavily dependent from social approval. Without a firm inner sense of purpose, people looked to their neighbor for validation and social approval. Today, cell phone in hand, other-directedness is raised to a higher power. This also brings to mind the concern that contemporary media and the Internet have a culture of polarization, in which people primarily seek out points of view to which they already subscribe (Sunstein, 2011).

53 The recent proliferation of Selfies of celebrities confirms the conformist nature of digital narcissism. They are just reproducing a collective phenomenon shared by many: exposing the joy of being seen, of going public to everyone 's eyes as if this predisposition to visibility was something good in itself , and , on the contrary , the desire of intimacy was something intrinsically wrong. They are happy for having their portraits shared with many others because they have just the right attitude of being available for the Others glance. This seems to reveal how the self in the web 2.0 and mobile communications often suffers from an increasing dependence on other's approval. A possible cartoon to comment on the links between public availability and increasing surveillance could have some people making their own selfie and paraphrasing Orwell: " I'm the Big Brother and I'm watching Me".

Conclusions

54 First, one must recognize the impressive importance of online world in social connections as much as we consider the reverse. An amount of changes has happened since the beginning of Internet. The evolution of research does not go always along with the speed of those changes. Social networks and mobile communication must be at the center of the concerns of social theory, considering social philosophy, anthropology, sociology of social movements and political science.

55 Interactionism and social phenomenology (and probably, hermeneutics) are suitable approaches to recent developments in online world, considering social web and mobile communications. The use of this approach avoids social and technological determinism and allows to emphasize power without disregarding subjective elements and negotiation processes. This perspective seems primordial in reflecting the social and cultural conditions that shapes the exercise of politically relevant activism.

56 There are no linear evidences that can support the existence of an inherent democratic determinism behind the use of internet. Accepting the existence of technological frameworks, which may emphasize some uses at the expense of others, there

are still too many variables and factors that can change the political meaning of technology. Currently, it seems somewhat difficult to build a democratic narrative based on the increasing autonomy of the self.

57 Methodologically, this kind of approach needs the use of participant fieldwork in which life-stories plays a significant role. Qualitative methods are better suited than quantitative approaches to unveil structures of meaning revealing past experiences, present feelings, and projects of action. It seems urgent to avoid the impulse of building any social explanation based on intuitive speculations, replacing them by the participant account, in order to see how they actually live and experience important notions such as “participation”, “autonomy”, “intimacy”, “public” and “private”. Research fields must to reconstruct the exchanges among several provinces of meaning, considering both online and off line worlds and the different cognitive styles practiced in each one of them.

Bibliografia

Barlow, J. P. (1996) *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*.

Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Doubleday.

Becker, H.S. (1963) *The Outsiders*. New York: Free Press.

DOI : 10.3917/meta.becke.1985.01

Blumer, H. (1969) *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Blumer, H. (1946) The mass, the public and the public opinion in Alfred McCung Lee (Org.) *New Outlines of the Principle of Sociology*, New York, Narnes and Nobles: 185-193.

Cefäi, D. (1999) Making sense of politics in public spaces: the phenomenology of political experiences and activities. In Embree, L., *Schutzian Social Science*. Dordrecht, London and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publisher: 135-158.

Correia, J. C. (2004) *A Teoria da Comunicação de Alfred Schutz*. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte.

Correia, J.C. (2013) Memory and life-world on media reception: A phenomenological approach. In José Ricardo Carvalheiro. *Media, Gender and the Past: Qualitative Approaches to Broadcast Audiences and Memories*. Livros LabCom, Série: Pesquisas em Comunicação: 139-158.

Correia, J.C. (2008) Identidades e Realidades Múltiplas. Os Estranhos no Meio de Nós. In Esteves, J. Pissarra ed. *Comunicação e Identidades Sociais*. Lisboa: Livros Horizonte: 131-154.

Correia, J. C. (2002) Comunicação, Mundo da Vida e Reificação: A Fenomenologia Social e a Linguagem dos Media. In Correia, J. C. *Comunicação e Poder*. Covilhã, UBI, Coleção Estudos em Comunicação.

Denzin, N. (1992) *Interacionism and Cultural Studies*. Oxford, Blackwell Publishers.

Eldred, Michael (2008) *Social Ontology – Recasting Political Philosophy through a Phenomenology of Whoness*. Frankfurt: Ontos Verlag.

Embree, L. (ed.) (1999) *Schutzian Social Science*. Dordrecht, Boston and London, Kluwer Academic Publishers.

DOI : 10.1007/978-94-017-2944-4

Esteves, J. P. (1999) Os Media e a Questão da Identidade - Sobre as Leituras Pós-modernas do Fim do Sujeito. Available at: <http://bocc.ubi.pt/pag/pissarra-media-identidade.html>. Accessed May 27, 2013.

Farberman, H. (1991) Symbolic Interactionism and Postmodernism: Close Encounter of a Dubious Kind. *Symbolic Interaction*, 14: 471-488.

Fidalgo, A. (2011) Conectados e Tutelados. In Correia, J. C. e Maia, R., *Public Sphere Reconsidered. Theories and Practices*. Labcom Books, 63-70.

Goffman, E. (1959) *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books.

- Lanigan R. (1988) *Phenomenology of Communication*. Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press.
- Lovink, G. (2009) *Dynamics of Critical Internet Culture (1994-2001)*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.
- Markham, A. N. (2012) Moving Into the Flow: Using a Network Perspective to Explore Complexity. In *Internet contexts*. Center for Internet Research Monograph Series. Aarhus, Denmark: University of Aarhus: 47-58.
- Mead, G. H. (1969) *Mind, Self & Society*. Chicago: The Chicago University Press.
DOI : 10.7208/chicago/9780226112879.001.0001
- Mosco, V. (2004) *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace*. USA: MIT Press Cambridge.
- Pestello, F. & Saxon, S. (2000) Renewing the Promise of Pragmatism: Towards Sociology of Difference. *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*, vol. 23: 9-29.
DOI : 10.1016/S0163-2396(00)80026-5
- Rheingold, H. (1993) *The Virtual Community*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley.
- Riesman, D. (2001) *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character*. USA: Yale University Press.
- Rodriguez, A. (2002) Culture To Culturing. Re-imagining Our Understanding of Intercultural Relations. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 5: Available at: <http://www.immi.se/intercultural/nr5/rodriguez.pdf>. Accessed November 20: 2011.
- Salvini, A. (2010) Symbolic Interactionism and Social Network Analysis: An Uncertain Encounter. *Symbolic interaction*, 33(3): 364-388.
DOI : 10.1525/si.2010.33.3.364
- Schutz, A. & T. Luckmann (1973) *The Structures of Life-world*. vol. 1, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Schutz, Alfred (1967) *The Phenomenology of Social World*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.
- Schutz, A. (1962) On Multiple Realities. In Schutz, A. ed. *Collected Papers I*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff: 207-286.
DOI : 10.2307/2102818
- Schutz, A. (1976) The Problem of Rationality in the Social World. In Schutz, A. ed. *Collected Papers I*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff: 64-88.
DOI : 10.2307/2549460
- Schutz, A. (1976a) The Stranger. In Schutz, A. ed. *Collected Papers II*. The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff: 92-105.
- Schutz, A. (1976b) The Homecomer. In A. Schutz ed. *Collected Papers II*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff: 106-119.
DOI : 10.1086/219654
- Schutz, A. (1976c) Don Quijote and the Problem of Reality. In Schutz, A. ed. *Collected Papers II*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff: 135-158.
- Silveirinha, M. J. (2004) Opinião Pública. In Rubim, A. ed. *Comunicação Política: Conceitos e Abordagens*. Editora da Universidade Federal da Bahia e Unesp: 409-449.
- Strubar, I. (1999) Origin of the Political. In Embree, L. (ed.), *Schutzian Social Science*. Dordrecht, Boston and London, Kluwer Academic Publishers: 23-45.
- Subtil, F., Garcia, J. L. (2010) Communication: An Inheritance of the Chicago School of Social Thought. In Hart, Christopher ed. *The Legacy of Chicago School. A Collection of Essays in Honor of Chicago School of Sociology During the First Half of 20th Century*. Manchester: Midrash Publishing: 216-243.
- Stone, A. R. (1996) *The War of Desire and Technology at the End of the Mechanical Age*. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Strauss, A. L. (1999) *Espelhos e Máscaras: A Busca da Identidade*. São Paulo: Edusp.
- Sunstein, C.R. (2011) *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*. USA: Oxford University Press.
- Talbot, M. (1995) *The Holographic Universe: The Revolutionary Theory of Reality*. London: Graston Books.
- Tarde, G. (1989) *L'Opinion et la Foule*, Paris: Les Presses Universitaires de France, Collection Recherches Politiques.
- Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Turkle, S. (2011) *Alone Together: Why we Expect More from Technology and Less From Each Other*. New York: Basic Books.
- Vattimo, G. (1992) *A Sociedade Transparente*. Lisboa: Relógio d'Água.
- Wagner, H. (1979) *Fenomenologia e Relações Sociais*. Coletânea de Textos de Alfred Schutz, Rio de Janeiro, Zahar Editora.
- Winner, L. (1980) Do Artifacts Have Politics? *Daedalus, Modern Technology: Problem or Opportunity?*, Vol. 109 (1) (winter, 1980): 121-136
- Wolff, K. H. (1950) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: The Free Press.
-

Para citar este artigo

Referência eletrónica

João Carlos Correia, « Selfies in a lonely crowd: interaction and meaning in social networks », *Comunicação Pública* [Online], vol.10 n° 18 | 2015, posto online no dia 15 outubro 2015, consultado o 09 fevereiro 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cp/1017> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/cp.1017>

Autor

João Carlos Correia

Universidade da Beira Interior
Departamento de Comunicação e Artes
Rua Marquês d'Ávila e Bolama
6200-001 Covilhã, Portugal
Tel. (00) (351) 275319700
jcorreia@ubi.pt

Direitos de autor



Comunicação Pública Este trabalho está licenciado com uma Licença Creative Commons - Atribuição-NãoComercial 4.0 Internacional.

Este site utiliza cookies e recolhe informações pessoais.

Para mais detalhes, consulte a nossa política de privacidade (atualizada em 25 de junho de 2018).

Ao continuar a sua navegação, terá aceitado o uso de cookies.Fechar