

Learning Collaboratively about Critical Issues of Digital Communication: an introduction to this is- sue of the Salzburger Sonderfenster

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The present issue of the Salzburger Sonderfenster is composed of eight papers written by students of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degree (EMJMD) Digital Communication Leadership (DCLead), a programme delivered by the University of Salzburg, Aalborg University in Copenhagen, Vrije Universiteit Brussel and nine associated partners. Thanks to the generous contribution of the European Union through its Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the programme can afford to offer about fourteen scholarships each year inclusive of a monthly stipend. Thanks to the scholarship and the persuasive effect of the EMJMD brand, which suggest the selection of the programme for EU funding from a large sample from all disciplines, DCLead is an effective, elite programme in its field and able to put together a small group of very talented students from all over the world for each new intake. For example, the students whose papers are published in this issue come from India, Macedonia, Moldova, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, and the Netherlands. The first drafts of these papers have been written for the final assessment of my course, *Introduction to Core Competencies II* – soon to be renamed *Critical Review of Digital Communication Literature* - that aims at engaging students with some of the most important authors and research topics in digital communication, and also improving their academic writing skills. This course also avails of an innovative method for acquiring and managing information collaboratively and although it is tempting to take credit of the good work that these papers represent, in fairness, DCLead students were producing good work also before attending this course and the programme. One of them once asked me why I included so many writings providing a critical analysis of the consequences from the diffusion and adoption of communication technologies in the reading list of my course. Further, she argued that a majority of DCLead students would rather look at

the bright side and the potential of digital communications for improving societies. In fact, it is because of their interest in the enormous potential of digital communications for a positive impact on societies and on people's capabilities that they have chosen to join the programme. My quick and semi-ironic reaction to her question and following comments was, first, that somebody in the programme had to be the conveyor of bad news, and second, that to become proper communication scholars they will have to learn to be critical. Luckily for them, I added, this is much easier now than 20 years ago.

The more articulated answer to this question and observations makes a suitable incipit to this writing serving as introduction to this collection of students' papers, and it starts from an analysis of the interplay between technological change, institutions and societies, inspired by neo-Schumpeterian thinking in the work of Chris Freeman, with Soete (1997) and later with Louça (2001), and in the work of Carlota Perez (C. Freeman and Perez 1988; Carlota Perez 2009, 2010, 2015). Furthermore, this writing will include an explanation of the methodology of the course that was the incubator of these papers, as well as their common denominator, and end with a short explanation of the content proposed by the students.

In a nutshell, Neo-Schumpeterian analyses of the causes and effects of changing techno-economic paradigms (particularly, the latest versions) explain that technological and related economic changes mutate at a different speed than interrelated social and institutional changes. Therefore, these analyses considering the changes to societies fostered by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) propose that, in light of the bubbles and relevant crises occurred between the years 2001 and 2007, the current period is one of creative construction, or one where socio-institutional spheres have to 'catch-up' and undergo radical changes in order to adapt to the new social and economic conditions, as they have emerged from years of fast and intense technological transformations. In other words, ICT innovations are primarily driven by entrepreneurs and their new companies and supported by markets, and they push and re-define socio-institutional boundaries – e.g. of trade, intellectual properties, privacy – and the re-definition of these boundaries from a society point of view is the joint responsibility of many different groups of stakeholders and their collaboration – e.g. national and supranational governments, consumer associations, industry representatives – and therefore, the result of more complex, potentially conflictual and inevitably slow processes. Hence, from this reading of contemporary changes, we can explain that some academic research became popular in the late 1990s and early years of the new millennium because, going with the flow, it celebrated processes of transformation fostered by the introduction and adoption of ICTs and their potential, while the latter were improving the life of people. On the contrary, the socio-institutional crises emerging from the slow-moving adaptation of rules and related problems (e.g., recently, cases of unauthorized abuses of personal data) increases the attention paid to

critical accounts by academics, but also mainstream media. Therefore, in comparison to twenty years ago, more academics, experts and simply curious people are certainly more attracted by those sceptical views, critical of the success of uncontested positive accounts of the adoption of ICTs, and eventually, more researchers are likely to follow the same path.

Moreover, the increasing weight of critical views in public discourse is certainly also co-responsible for the way in which the concepts of critical and criticality are used in academia. As explained by Kaarle Nordenstreng (2016), the current meaning of criticality was mainly laid down by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and yet, nowadays, “critical no longer refers to typically anti-hegemonic tendencies with political overtones, but simply to a scholarly and scientific approach in general” (Nordenstreng 2016, 90). Furthermore, Nordenstreng characterises critical approaches to media and communication as radical, when they attempt to go to the roots of power relations, or less radical, when they exercise criticism. In my own personal experience, based on an abundant, decade-long engagement with contemporary communication literature, primarily from the political economy of communication area, a scholarly and scientific approach that can be defined critical implies a genuine attempt to analyse different opinions, and in particular, the ones providing arguments in the opposite direction of the ones proposed. In other words, a critical writing is one that provides detailed counter-arguments to established concepts after a thorough review, or one that proposes a new concept and a review of arguments against it. Such scholarly and scientific approach is very much common in research in the field of communication, and its use becomes much more apparent when this research is compared to other writings analysing, for example, the relationships between emerging technologies, communication processes and institutions within the fields of media management or media economics, where critical thinking is not a feature, with the exception of rare pluralist contributions.

To different extents, the papers that are part of this collection adopt a critical approach in the way I just framed it. For the final assessment of the course the students were asked to summarize, compare and critically assess different viewpoints on a particular topic, or on a range of topics, that concern issues of digital communication. This literature review was to be based on at least twelve sources, from twenty, used as primary literature for the course and on carefully researched, additional ones. Also, the students were asked to draw from the collaborative literature review developed during the course in order to produce a text in a relative short time, but based on a rich database containing a catalogue of opinions divided into topics that describe important trends emerging from research in digital communication.

This collaborative literature review is the core element of the course, a new approach I developed to teach students a method for building a narrative from different viewpoints, my personal attempt to challenge a group of talented individuals in providing well-structured texts

that are rich of opinions within a relatively short time, and an experiment to actively use collaborative technologies and finally ‘walk the talk’. At the beginning of the course, the students chose a book from a list of primary references for the course. In preparation of every class, each student performs two tasks: first, he or she produces a summary of the chapter read (or section of about 30 pages), a bullet point list of the main contribution of knowledge from this chapter and section, and a list of citations from this chapter, inclusive of page number. The choice of which citations is included in this document is guided by the second task, which consists of copying each citation in a common (online) document and of placing it under a particular heading, if it is considered to contribute to expand the information collected there. Each heading of the document represents a trend, or particular sets of issue, that is central to debates about the developments of digital communication technologies and their effects of society. These headings include (1) Technical innovations, (2) Regulatory, business and other social innovations, (3) Ethics and value in business, policy and regulations, (4) (Other) Cultural and societal changes, (5) Participation, democratization and digital labour, (6) Theories on the role of information & knowledge for changing society, and (7) Users’ attention and its commercialisation in the digital era. Of course, these categories are not mutually exclusive and some citations find their place in more categories. Also, for each of these headings a context and questions are provided in order to improve the selection mechanism. Moreover, a review of these citations and their use in specific individual and group exercises aimed at practicing debates or writing syntheses constitute the core of class activities.

Therefore, thanks to this particular design, at the moment of starting the paper for the final assessment, which also are the papers contained in this collection, each student can draw information from the book that he or she has read during the semester, but also from 19 other books, efficiently and in a short period of time, by reading the summary of these books and the notes included in the collaborative literature review. Keeping into account the time allowed for some additional research, the literature review on which each student paper relies on is far larger, and also, assimilated during the exercises in class, than papers written for similar courses that do not use a collaborative literature review. Provided that the students had to include a good portion of the books chosen for the course, even though this inclusion is only symbolic in some cases, the quality of the review, which forms the basis of the paper written, obviously depends on the choice of books. The papers that are contained in this collection are informed by a mixture of classic texts that have shaped the mainstream shared understanding of digital communications and their effects on society, either from a more general, macro perspective, like the books written by Benkler (2006), Bruns (2008), Castells (2010), Deuze (2012), Jenkins (2006) and Negroponte(1996), or by addressing particular aspects, like the books written by Lessig (2004), Napoli (2011), Sundararajan (2016), Tapscott and Williams

(2006) and Wu (2011, 2017). Also included as primary sources for the course and included in the collaborative review are texts, classic and new, that are specifically critical - with or without political overtone - and providing alternative readings of contemporary developments, such as the books by Bolaño (2000), Curran, Fenton and Freedman (2016), Fish (2017), Mansell (2012), McChesney (2013), Morozov (2011) and Schiller (2007).

Therefore, ideas and opinion from these books form the conceptual environment that the students used to focus on particular issues. Some tend to stick more to the literature, but nonetheless come up with an original narrative for blending different opinions, and critically discuss the two sides of the coin on a variety of important issues emerging from digital economies and societies (like Sangam Silpakar and Mikhaila Aldaba), the sharing economy (Irina Bobicev) - also as a factor as north-south disparity (Zahaid Rehman) - or the potential of social media for social action (Ana Pop Stefanija): Others have used the basic literature more as a starting point rather than the main target, to look at specific issues such as computational journalism (Angshumita Deka), the acceptance of forms of social voyeurism and the effects on video surveillance (Leo Concepcion), and the potential of adoptions of Blockchain technologies (Nina van der Giessen). Including also the papers from the other students that did not make the cut for publication, the experience of coordinating these efforts was very rewarding. Hopefully, also positive is the experience of the readers that will enjoy the insights they offer.

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