

From Online Media-World Socialization to the AI-Connected Society An Introduction to the Sociology of Communication and the New Challenges of AI

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Abstract

This article aims to propose an explanatory metaphor to describe the relationship of the Sociology of Communication with other branches of sociology, with society as a whole, and with the changes affecting both its objects of study and its core concepts - from the early mass societies, through the Internet age, and into the current era of Artificial Intelligence: the Sociological Cell.

At the center of this cell lie the fundamental and shared theories, methods, and objectives of the discipline; within the cytoplasm takes place the interaction among different sociological areas; and the various membranes ensure a semi-permeable exchange, both internal and external, safeguarding at once the identity of the discipline and its interdisciplinary vocation.

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The article also outlines the challenges and topics the discipline has faced – and will have to face – as it evolves within an interconnected society shaped by a new triad: nature, culture, and the artificial.

Keywords: Sociology of Communication, Artificial Intelligence (AI), Connected and Online Society, Surveillance Capitalism, Digital Proletarianization

Introduction: The Sociology Cell

There have been numerous occasions where I have been called upon to introduce my academic field: the Sociology of Communication.

The proposed model is based on an organicistic vision which, however, does not seek to revive the positivist or functionalist theories of the discipline's early stages. Rather, it adopts the metaphor of a cell – *the Sociology Cell* – as a heuristic device, characterized by internal balances and exchanges with the external environment.

At its core – the nucleus, which in biology contains the genetic material and thus the identity and transmissive capacity of the cell – are located the fundamental components of the discipline: core theories, methods of inquiry, and shared objectives such as the understanding of social phenomena and the analysis of structures and relational dynamics.

The cytoplasm, the intracellular fluid where vital reactions occur and where organelles operate – specialized structures responsible for energy production or protein synthesis – symbolizes, in this metaphor, the context of interaction among the various branches of sociology. Here, the circulation and mutual fertilization of ideas take place through a form of theoretical and conceptual osmosis, ensuring dialogic density and an interdisciplinary orientation¹.

The internal membranes of the cell, which in biological systems compartmentalize specific functions (such as in mitochondria or the endoplasmic reticulum), correspond to the various subfields of sociology, which remain in communication with one another –

¹ E. Morin, *Introduction à la pensée complexe*, ESF Éditeur, Paris 1990.

listed here without claiming exhaustiveness: general sociology; sociology of cultural and communicative processes; legal and deviance sociology; family, religion, gender, territorial, political, educational, migration, and social change sociology.

The outer membrane of the cell, which in biology preserves the integrity and cohesion of the system while being semipermeable, parallels sociology's capacity to remain open to external contributions –from other social sciences, cognitive sciences, and philosophy, to public and political communication –while also engaging with society at large through the perspective of sociologists who are both immersed in their time and equipped with theoretical and methodological tools.

Within this framework, the need for a dialogical relationship with public and institutional communication becomes evident², as does the importance of a critical reflection on digital transformation³.

In biology, homeostasis refers to the way a cell maintains internal balance by regulating conditions through controlled exchanges –like the turgor pressure in plant tissues. There is, in fact, an internal “pressure and density” within the various areas of sociology, which may lead them to seek recognition, or conversely, to lose it –merging into related fields or absorbing them.

Adaptation, by contrast, allows for innovative responses to change: it is essential for survival and for the transmission of evolutionary advantages.

Sociology shows its vitality in a similar way: by adjusting its interpretive models in response to shifts in culture, technology, and global dynamics –from the rise of digital systems to the emergence of complex, systemic challenges.

Topics in the Sociology of Communication

The sociology of communication, which investigates diverse audiences and media usage in connection with broader social and cultural developments –in other words, in a state of interdependence – embodies the very mechanism of correspondence between the evolution of society, the ‘Sociology Cell,’ and its internal components.

² A. Lovari, G. Ducci, *Comunicazione pubblica. Istituzioni, pratiche, piattaforme*, Mondadori Università, Milano 2022.

³ N. Strizzolo et al., *La comunicazione eclettica. Le dimensioni comunicative nella web society*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2020.

At least three major transformative phases can be identified:

1. The emergence of mass society, shaped by the early mass media and oriented toward consumption. The rise of modern media is closely tied to industrialization, national-popular culture, and the formation of a large audience, conceived as passive and homogeneous.
2. The spread of media –initially analog and later digital –has led to the development of an interconnected society. Within social media environments, we have witnessed an accelerated shift from ‘community’ to online ‘society.’⁴
3. The blurring of the boundary between producer and consumer, together with the process of datafication, has ushered in the age of surveillance capitalism, marked by a condition of algorithmic proletarianization.

In the first phase, we witness the rise of industrialization, which drove the migration from rural areas to metropolitan centers, the spread of rational bureaucracy to manage them⁵, the disenchantment of the world⁶, and eventually, its globalization⁷.

Early media, supported not only by advances in electronics but also by the creation of global communication channels – under the seas and above the skies⁸ – effectively eliminated distance and gave rise to a new kind of village on a global scale⁹. In doing so, they first neutralized the very sense of spatiality¹⁰, and later that of ‘places’ –temples and theatres of consumption, entertainment, and transience¹¹.

In the second phase, an accelerated movement toward various forms of convergence unfolds: digital technology increasingly integrates different cultural domains and

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1978.

⁶ M. Weber, *La scienza come professione. Il lavoro intellettuale come professione*, Einaudi, Torino 1966.

⁷ A. Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1990.

⁸ A. Mattelart, *L'invenzione della comunicazione*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1998.

⁹ M. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1962.

¹⁰ J. Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*, Oxford University Press, New York 1985.

¹¹ M. Augé, *Non-lieux. Introduction à une anthropologie de la surmodernité*, Seuil, Paris 1992; J. Urry, *Mobilities*, Polity Press, Cambridge 2007.

eventually connects diverse social moments, giving rise to a *platform society* or *social society*¹².

All of this occurs against the backdrop of a disintermediated system of media production and consumption, which has expanded the volume of information to the point of turning it into disinformation –an ecosystem now increasingly shaped by artificial actors as well¹³. Specifically, by *social society* I refer to a society that self-represents through media and networked systems that have enveloped the entire globe and permeated all spheres of life –no moment or activity remains untouched¹⁴.

Within the neoliberal framework, where the consumer becomes both product and producer, a spiral of self-representation and self-consumption takes shape: those who have nothing else to offer – unlike the most followed celebrities, who are famous for achievements in sports, entertainment, or politics – offer increasingly vast and intense portions of themselves, hoping to monetize potential *likes*, effectively merging the performed persona with their entire lived existence¹⁵.

This dynamic gives rise to a new form of proletarianization –what I define as ‘*algorithmic proletarianization*’ – in which individuals from all walks of life, including parents who publicly expose their children with severe disabilities or people in conditions of extreme marginality, stage themselves and their families alongside improbable videos of performative acts or commentary – often lacking both expertise and coherence – on current events or content from the mainstream and subcultural media industries. Under *surveillance capitalism*, individuals “consume” themselves on social media even without producing content: the data generated by their activities –including passive browsing –are harvested by algorithms to fuel the surveillance economy¹⁶.

¹² J. Van Dijck et al., *The Platform Society: Public Values in a Connective World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; N. Strizzolo et al., *La comunicazione eclettica. Le dimensioni comunicative nella web society*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2020.

¹³ N. Strizzolo et al., The Information Overload of Global Information Systems: More Information, Less Certainty; More Disinformation, Less Society, in K. Chałubińska-Jentkiewicz, U. Soler (Ed.), *Legal, Sociological and Political Aspects of Disinformation – Based on the Example of the Coronavirus Pandemic*, Adam Marszałek Publishing House, Toruń 2023, pp. 134–143.

¹⁴ N. Strizzolo et al., C. Melchior, *La comunicazione eclettica. Le dimensioni comunicative nella web society*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2020.

¹⁵ A. Elliott, *Identity Troubles: An Introduction*, Routledge, London-New York 2013.

¹⁶ S. Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, PublicAffairs, New York 2019.

All of this occurs within increasingly artificial environments, such as the metaverse, where digital horizons reshape the very coordinates of reality.

Disintermediation has fostered a horizontal culture and a non-hierarchical system of knowledge organization, known as *folksonomy*¹⁷. However, the overabundance of information thus generated produces entropy rather than clarity.¹⁸ A phenomenon that feeds into disinformation and post-truth: fake news proliferates, and cognitive stress caused by information overload – along with the constant need to assess the veracity of content – prevents clear identification of reliable sources¹⁹.

A pervasive distrust emerges, fueled both by continuous transparency regarding scandals across various domains – not only media-related – and by the parallel spread of conspiracy theories. This widespread suspicion further erodes social capital²⁰, culminating in a scenario of isolated individuals, in a state of permanent vigilance, as if under siege – surrounded by threats, dangers, and fears – closely resembling the “minimal self” described by Lasch²¹.

These are artificial – not merely virtual – situations, in which physical environments themselves are no longer designed on a human scale, but are instead shaped to optimize technological functioning²².

In this new world, AI emerges as a *parasocial actor*, capable of managing communication flows that human operators cannot handle; it generates both authentic and false content; and it influences institutional, social, and political communication processes.

This scenario potentially ushers in a new crisis of democratic communication, manifested through:

¹⁷ T. Vander Wal, Folksonomy Coinage and Definition, 2007. <https://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html>

¹⁸ N. Strizzolo et al., The Information Overload of Global Information Systems: More Information, Less Certainty; More Disinformation, Less Society, in K. Chatubińska-Jentkiewicz, U. Soler (Ed.), *Legal, Sociological and Political Aspects of Disinformation – Based on the Example of the Coronavirus Pandemic*, Adam Marszałek Publishing House, Toruń 2023, pp. 134–143.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Simon & Schuster, New York 2000.

²¹ C. Lasch, *The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times*, Norton, New York 1984.

²² L. Floridi, *Etica dell'intelligenza artificiale. Sviluppi, opportunità, sfide*, a cura di M. Durante, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2022.

- manipulation carried out by bots, algorithms, and machine learning systems, leading to the loss of control by individuals and institutions over communicative flows;
- concerns about transparency, at risk both in how algorithms operate and in the content they produce;
- renewed issues of trust - this time, in relation to the actions and outputs of AI systems.

Finally, as human agency becomes diminished or marginalized - given the vast range of tasks now performed by machines, the density of information, and the velocity of socially induced change - communication appears to have taken center stage as a media performance detached from any grounding in factual truth.

A dystopian realization of the concept of *media-world*²³: digital and Internet-based media now create an environment with increasingly blurred boundaries between physical and virtual reality. Media have become integral to the human experience, shaping perception, social relationships, and cultural processes. Today, this includes AI.

We are well beyond *com-fusion*²⁴ - the seamless fusion between participatory relationships and online actions. Currently, cognitive and cultural interactions are increasingly mediated by machines: AI systems, having exhausted the supply of human data available on the web, are beginning to autonomously generate new content.

Even the traditional themes of sociology of communication - such as socialization, manipulation, or identity - have been profoundly redefined by the rise of Internet-based platforms and the expansion of online ecosystems, which have reshaped relational dynamics, access to information, and modes of expression.

In this new scenario, numerous key research areas of the sociology of communication come into play, including:

- Socialization, initially understood as the influence of audiovisual content on processes of personality development²⁵;

²³ G. Boccia Artieri, *I media-mondo. Forme e linguaggi dell'esperienza contemporanea*, Meltemi, Roma 2004.

²⁴ N. Strizzolo, *Com-fusion: Fusion between on-line and off-line through communicative interaction*, in *Conference Tales of the Unexpected. Vision and Reality in Community Informatics*, pp. 1-8, Monash Centre 2010.

²⁵ S. Martelli, *Videosocializzazione: Processi educativi e nuovi media*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2001.

- Technology and society, particularly the relationship between media environments and social structures²⁶;
- Influence and manipulation, through the study of persuasive strategies, propaganda techniques, and rhetorical devices employed by the media²⁷;
- Digital inclusion, with specific attention to the digital divide as a form of exclusion from access to resources, knowledge, and civic participation²⁸;
- Equality and inequality, examined through the media's effectiveness in fostering awareness and shaping social representations, drawing on theoretical models such as framing and newsmaking²⁹;
- Interpersonal relationships, both among online users and between lived identities and their digital self-representations³⁰;
- Gender and sexuality, focusing on the media's role in constructing roles, stereotypes, and orientations³¹;
- Sustainability and ethics, at the intersection of communication, environmental awareness, and social responsibility³²;
- Sports and media, with emphasis on spectacularization, identity formation, and new bodily languages³³;
- Health, from the perspectives of public communication, prevention, medicalization, and citizen participation³⁴;

²⁶ F. Colombo, *Il potere socievole. Storia e critica dei social media*, Bruno Mondadori, Milano 2013.

²⁷ G. Gili, *Il problema della manipolazione: peccato originale dei media?*, FrancoAngeli, Milano 2001.

²⁸ S. Bentivegna, *Disuguaglianze digitali. Le nuove forme di esclusione nella società dell'informazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009.

²⁹ D. E. Kendall, *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham 2005; V. Fielding, *Media Inequality: News Framing and Media Power*, Routledge, Abingdon 2025.

³⁰ G. Boccia Artieri et al., *Fenomenologia dei social network. Presenza, relazioni e consumi mediatici degli italiani online*, Guerini Scientifica, Milano 2017.

³¹ M. Farci et al., *Media digitali, genere e sessualità*, Mondadori Università, Milano 2022.

³² F. Colombo, *Ecologia dei media. Manifesto per una comunicazione gentile*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano 2020.

³³ L. Bifulco et al., *Sport e scienze sociali. Fenomeni sportivi tra consumi, media e processi globali*, Rogas Edizioni, Roma 2019.

³⁴ E. Gola et al., *Comunicare la salute. Metodi e buone pratiche per le amministrazioni pubbliche*, Carocci, Roma 2018.

- Politics, with particular attention to the construction of public discourse, representation, and digital citizenship³⁵.

Today, we find ourselves in a scenario where artificial intelligence is increasingly pervasive - sometimes as an ambient constant, other times as a determining variable³⁶. AI contributes not only to everyday applications across all spheres of life, but also to a redefinition of the very concept of the *social body*, which is now being constructed in symbiosis with algorithmic systems³⁷ (Floridi, 2022).

This is particularly evident in the domain of health and embodiment, where human corporeality is increasingly integrated with technological support³⁸, but it also extends to AI's involvement in processes of cultural mediation and production³⁹.

Artificial intelligence is no longer merely a technical tool but a *cultural actor*: it generates content for the culture industry and, in some cases, contributes to the construction of symbolic imaginaries - including spiritual ones⁴⁰. This does not refer solely to transhumanist debates, but also to the creation of symbolic elements that enter the realm of the sacred, such as the automated generation of prayers, symbols, or even homilies.

Conclusion: Returning to the Cell

Returning to the metaphor of the sociology cell, the sociology of communication today performs the specific function of analyzing the communicative flows that traverse society, in close connection with the sociology of cultural processes.

³⁵ M. Sorice, *I media e la democrazia*, Carocci, Roma 2014; A. Lovari, G. Ducci, *Comunicazione pubblica. Istituzioni, pratiche, piattaforme*, Mondadori Università, Milano 2022.

³⁶ K. Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2021.

³⁷ L. Floridi, *Etica dell'intelligenza artificiale. Sviluppi, opportunità, sfide*, a cura di M. Durante, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2022.

³⁸ World Health Organization, *Ethics and Governance of Artificial Intelligence for Health: WHO Guidance*, World Health Organization, Geneva 2021. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/341996>

³⁹ K. Crawford, *Atlas of AI: Power, Politics, and the Planetary Costs of Artificial Intelligence*, Yale University Press, New Haven 2021; R. Schäfer, S. Biderman, C. Raffel, N. Shazeer, M. Welling, The Curse of Recursion: Training on Generated Data Makes Models Forget, *arXiv*, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2305.17493>

⁴⁰ AI Research Group of the Centre for Digital Culture, Encountering Artificial Intelligence: Ethical and Anthropological Investigations, "Journal of Moral Theology", 1 (Theological Investigations of AI), pp-262, 2023.

It represents a “complementary organ,” essential for understanding how communicative content both influences and is influenced by culture. However, this relationship is now evolving: from the traditional nature–culture binary to a triadic framework of nature–culture–artificial.

In light of these transformations, the study of the connected and artificial society becomes central. The very boundaries of the sociology of communication – as well as those of other sociological domains – are being reconfigured to address new epistemological challenges, renewed analytical demands, and emerging methodological possibilities.

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