

In the Labyrinth of Digital Space

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Conversations on the Internet

“Darkness, darkness, darkness,
Good brother with madness [...], with sin and murder ...”
(Ion Minulescu, *Verses to Darkness*)¹

Abstract: Pointing out some characteristics of both realities, conversations and the Internet, this study lays the grounds for some appreciations on conversations as they take place on the Internet. If the first is a human activity, the latter is medium and context for the previous. As one can easily observe, there might be characteristics of the medium/context with impact on the activity. There is more: if the medium/context is characterized by a state of permanent, fast, sometimes profound change, the people trying to perform the activity within the same alignment they knew before could end up in distress and frustration as they don't recognize the online world anymore. A *motto* I found in a book on Stalinism and other isms read “Change is certain. Progress is not”. If one cannot see any progress in some sudden change, one could be reticent about the necessity of that change. But, at the same time, there may be numerous other persons to find that changing something just for fun means there is a reason for that change. The two categories do not collide *per se* on the Internet, but they seldom find a common way, and their respective opinions of the others are quite poor. The discussion turns around two main characteristics of the Internet: the possibility for any creator of content to mask their identity, and the general tendency to deny any authority.

Keywords: Internet, conversation, social media, human interaction

¹ The original Romanian version is:
“Întunerec... Întunerec ... Întunerec!... [...]
Frate bun cu nebunia [...], cu păcatul și cu crima...”

1. Introduction

As stated in the title, the text below is about conversation and about Internet. It is not the first time someone takes a look at those two realities, so I kind of feel the pressure of the necessity of being interesting, of proposing something new in the approach at least, if not in the information conveyed.

The present approach will start with some descriptions of the conversation, as particular kind of communication, and some descriptions of the Internet. “Some” means that I won’t undertake full description of either of them, but I will rely on points of view of several authors, which may bring together different aspects of conversation and of Internet, precisely those aspects I will base my considerations upon. Then, of course, there will be a part of this construction where conversation will be regarded through the Internet realities. This will give the possibility to the reader to appreciate how some aspects of the Net functioning make conversation on the Internet a particular case of conversation.

There might be frustration among the readers as neither conversation nor Internet will be captured in their complete, complex images. I assume this situation and add: the text below is but a suggestion of how we could tackle the two phenomena. The text can be read as an invitation to go the same way I now took and speculate starting from other characteristics of both conversation and Internet.

As for the authors I refer to, my choice goes from “classics”, as Herbert Paul Grice or Jürgen Habermas, to present time Harvard researchers, as Sheila Heen and Douglas Stone, or university professors like Andrew Keen or Gretchen McCulloch and high-profile journalists like Evan Davis. Of course, titles are academic and serious (*Logic and Conversation* or *Éthique de la discussion*), but also “scandalous” (*Post-Truth: Why We Have Reached Peak Bullshit and What We Can Do about It*), with milder pragmatic accents (*The Cult of the Amateur* or *Because Internet: Understanding the New Rules of Language*). My own approach – as suggested by the title – will fall somewhere in the middle.

2. The Conversation

For the beginning, let’s have a look of one of the main concepts of the present paper: the conversation. They say it is communication at its best. It might be so, as it has verbal and nonverbal interaction, because it is the most complex way of exchanging information and intentionalities

and because it is real time negotiation between people damned to use different logics in their apprehension of the world. Two to five individuals seeking for a ballanced truth through negotiation. Best they have an idea of each other (representations and metarepresentations), some idea of the topic/s brought in attention, knowledge of the code to be used, and an agenda. Of course, the main common agenda is to reach a commonly accepted point of view on the matter under discussion. Appart that, the participants have each their own personal intentions to measure with those of the partners of interaction. Everything counts in a conversation: the above described parameters, the para-verbal as way of uttering the verbal, the physical context, the cultural background of each of the participants and a lot more. Just looking at a page of some technical notes over a conversation (like conversation analysis notes) one can see how complex it looks, how many things are described, how much is said about every detail.

Interesting things have been written on the subject. We will take a look of some discussions important authors published on conversation. H.P. Grice comes with the perspective of the logician, R. Jakobson proposes a model of language functions discussed in relation with the elements of any communication instance, J. Habermas writes about the ethics of what he calls practical discussion. And there are others, with their perspectives on conversation (and on Internet).

2.1. Herbert Paul Grice on conversation

Paul Grice (Grice 1978, 1991) paid attention to this special kind of human interaction and he came up with a principle to be observed by the participants in a conversation. It was called The Cooperative Principle and Grice refined it in four maxims we all know as the Conversational Maxims. Those maxims were conceived to fall under four categories, „echoing Kant”: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner. And Grice notes: „[...] for a full identification of what the speaker had said, one would need to know (a) the identity of x, (b) the time of utterance, and (c) the meaning, on the particular occasion of utterance, of the phrase”. And further on:

„The following may provide a first approximation to a general principle. Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or a set

of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction. This purpose or direction may be fixed from the start (e.g., by an initial proposal of a question for discussion), or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants”.

Then, there is the concept of *implicature*, which could equate the term *inference*: it is the process giving the hearer access to what is conveyed by what is said. To work out that a particular conversational implicature is present – says Paul Grice – „the hearer will rely on the following data: (1) the conventional meaning of the words used, together with the identity of any reference that may be involved; (2) the Cooperative Principle and its maxims; (3) the context, linguistic or otherwise of the utterance; (4) other items of background knowledge; and (5) the fact (or supposed fact) that all relevant items falling under the previous headings are available to both participants and both participants know or assume this to be the case”².

From all the above excerpts from *Logic and Conversation*, we need to remember the idea of cooperation which makes conversations possible. I have a representation of my counterpart and he knows that; and he too he has a representation of me and I know that; then I know that he knows that I know that he has a representation of me and he knows that I know that he knows that I have a representation of him. We both have a quasi-common apprehension of the context of our interaction and we both agree to go in the same direction in our exchange.

2.2. Roman Jakobson and his model of communication

The linguist Roman Jakobson, who was preoccupied by language usage in communication, proposed a schematic representation of the functions of language in relation with the elements of any instance of communication: addresser, addressee, message, channel, reference and code. Ever since his presentation during a conference in 1960, the schematic representation of the six functions of language (emotive, conative, poetic, phatic, referential and metalinguistic) is known as

² A general pattern is given: “He has said that *p*; there is no reason to suppose that he is not observing the maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; he could not be doing this unless he thought that *q*; he knows (and knows that I know that he knows) that I can see that the supposition that he thinks that *q* is required; he has done nothing to stop me thinking that *q*; he intends me to think , or is at least willing to allow me to think, that *q*; and so he has implicated that *q*” (op cit., p. 31).

„Jakobson’s model of communication”. I would like to stress on two of the elements of the model, the *addresser* and the *addressee*. It moves from the technical view on communication (where we have *transmitter* and *receiver*, which can be non-human as well as human) to the interpersonal communication (where we have to have humans, only; even where one of these two is a machine of some kind, we have to suppose the human beyond the functioning of the machine³). The addressee is someone present in the addresser mind when this latter one thinks of sending a message, chooses the ideas to put in the message, the manner the message will be built, the moment and the channel s/he thinks to be most favorable for the effect s/he expects from the whole intervention. The addresser really addresses the addressee and the addressee really helps the addresser in his/her endeavour. It is interpersonal, intersubjective interaction, meaning that the two poles of the conversational instance put all they are and all they have to make it work. It means that they kind of know each other at the start of the interaction⁴ and they come to know each other even better along the way. The messages circulating between the two participants in a conversation go back and forth, message, response (which can be answer and/or feedback), message again (with some alteration at code level), etc., until they both really feel they are cooperating. The discourse in such cases (conversations) is constructed cooperatively by the participants.

2.3. Jürgen Habermas: *On ethics in conversations*⁵

The well-known philosopher follows in the foot steps of Plato and Aristotle as for ethics and communication. Good communication can be but ethical communication. Social interaction can provide fair endings only if the participants observe ethical norms. We are invited to remember Aristotle's vision, according to which we do not acquire moral intuitions through philosophical learning or other explicit messages, but implicitly, through socialization.

Habermas says it without any hesitation:

³ On that, see also : Dan Stoica, “[Interacțiunea cu calculatorul. Considerații pe marginea unei lecturi](#)” [Interacting with the Computer. Notes on a reading], in *Ipostaze ale interacțiunii* (Maria Carpov, coord.), Bacău, Alma Mater, 2004, pp. 279-286.

⁴ Each of them has a representation of the other and also a representation of the representation the other might have of them (metarepresentation).

⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *De l'éthique de la discussion*, Paris, Flammarion, 1991.

„Beings that are identified only through socialization are vulnerable and need moral protection. The spatial-temporal individuation of the human race in individual specimens is not regulated by any genetic device, which passes from the species to the individual organism. Subjects capable of speaking and acting are constituted as individuals by the simple fact that they integrate, as members of a linguistic community, in each particular case, an intersubjectively shared universe of life. In the process of communicative formation, the identity of the individual and that of the community are formed and maintained in a co-original manner. In the use of language oriented towards mutual understanding, typical of socializing interaction, there is inscribed, through the system of personal pronouns, an imprescriptible constraint on individuation and, at the same time, through the same environment of everyday language, socializing intersubjectivity is manifested.” (Habermas 1991)

The need of each of us for reciprocity within the social network is something Habermas discusses on the bases of psychological considerations of Kohlberg (1984), which can be understood only when referred to H. Meads theory of individuation. „I” has meaning because there is „you”, individuals are such because of their participation in a network of intersubjective interactions, the social fabric of life itself. Let’s listen to Habermas again:

„Kohlberg insists on the intersubjective conditions of maintaining the integrity of the individual. Moral protection measures cannot ensure the integrity of the person without at the same time ensuring the network (necessary for life) of the recognition relations within which individuals can only stabilize their fragile identity reciprocally and simultaneously with that of their group. From a communication theory perspective, there is a close relationship between concern for the well-being of the neighbor and interest in the common good: the identity of the group is reproduced through the intact relationships of mutual recognition. It follows that the point of view complementary to individual equal treatment is not benevolence, but solidarity. This principle has its source in the experience that one must be accountable to the other, because they must all be equally interested in the integrity of their common living context” (Habermas 1991).

Of course, the fundamental representations of equal treatment, solidarity and the common good, around which **ALL** morals revolve, are inscribed in all societies, in conditions of symmetry and mutual expectations typical of any everyday communication practice, and this, in

the form of universal presuppositions and necessary pragmatics of communicative action.

Without these idealizing presuppositions, no matter how repressive social structures are, no one can act as a communicative individual. The ideas of justice and solidarity are above all present in the mutual recognition of the responsible subjects who orient their action according to the claims to validity. But, by themselves, these normative obligations do not exceed the limits of the universe of the concrete life of the family, of the tribe, of the village or of the nation, specifies Habermas.

The procedure of the discussion refers, both through its argumentative means and through its communicative presuppositions, to the existential pre-comprehension of the participants within the most general structures of a universe of life, and this already shared intersubjectively.

Addresser and addressee, both rely on the reversibility of their perspective (see note 3 *supra*). As for Habermas the truth is the validity claimed by the utterance itself of the phrase, the addresser and the addressee have to “mutually recognize each other as responsible subjects capable of orienting their action according to that claims”. One could see here the same cooperative principle Grice was talking about.

More than that, we are interested in observing how morality – as ethics assumed in real life – stands for the common good, which is the goal of each society:

“No one can proceed to an argument unless it presupposes a situation of discourse that guarantees, in principle, public access, equal participation, sincerity of the participants, unconstrained positions and so on. The conditions of symmetry and expectations of reciprocity related to the daily use of language oriented towards intercomprehension already contain, in a nutshell, the fundamental representations of equal treatment and common good, around which all morals revolve” (Habermas 1991).

2.4. Gretchen McCulloch, a milder approach to conversation on the Internet

Engaged in explaining who, when, why and how came online, the Canadian university professor is more preoccupied to record facts. She proposes a periodization of the people “enrollment” in this huge “army”

of what a French researcher called cyberspace⁶, where the cyber culture is unremittingly created. G. McCulloch explains the use of certain “languages” (“dialects” as she calls them) by the belonging of the online people to different generations and by the conditions and the context of the becoming of each generation as Net users, but she thinks that more than that it’s the clustering which decides of the language of the Internet users. There are – she says – trend setters and followers, and bizarre situations can be remarked, when white people imitate words or pronunciations specific to black communities just because they want to belong to some groups and be recognized as such.

The author is present on different online platforms just to capture the informal talking of the users of the respective platforms, but she also asks questions, calls for people to vote on some uncertain aspects of the verbal interactions. She pays attention to other initiatives concerning the archiving and analyzing of verbal productions of the online people. Here is an interesting project of the Library of Congress Gretchen McCulloch talks about:

“When the Library of Congress (LOC) announced in 2010 that they’re be archiving every single tweet, Tweeter users had to update their mental models for a previously ephemeral website. Many reacted by posting tongue-in-cheek instructions or commentary to future historians. Several people took advantage of the opportunity to make the august institution expands its holdings of choice four-letter words, while others asked „What’s up, posterity?” or noted „Please index all my kitten pictures properly under ‚kitteh’ as well as ‚kitten’ now that you’re saving my tweets⁷. [...] in 2017, LOC changed course, restricting their Tweeter archive to tweets that met stricter criteria of newsworthiness⁸”.

⁶ Pierre Lévy, in his *Cyberculture*, Éditions Odile Jacob, 1997, uses the term of *cyberspace* with the meaning of network of networks, containing all the wires and the waves, all the computers, the servers and the electronic devices interconnected, but also the minds of all the people connected to the Net. On that, see also: Susana Pajares Tosca, “A Pragmatics of links”, in *Journal of Digital Information*, v. 1, no. 6 (27.06.2000), <http://jodi.ecs.soton.ac.uk/Articles/v01/i06/Pajares/>

⁷ Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet*, New York, Riverhead Books, 2019, p. 31.

⁸ This raises the problem of deciding the degree of newsworthiness of the tweets (or of any other utterance, for that matter). Marc Paillet, in *Le Journalisme* (Paris, Denoël, 1974), asks himself what if some journalist would have written, in 1870, on April 22, that the Ulianovs had had a little boy born that day? Local news, it would have been. Almost insignificant. A few decades later, that little boy, now called Lenin, was to change the world, which would give the 19th century journalist justice for being the first to announce the birth of that particular son of the Ulianovs, foreseeing what the future of the boy was. Tough call!

As interesting as it is, chapter 8 (*A New Metaphor*) is about language in general, and this serves only if we have already observed that English seems to be the *lingua franca* of the Internet users, while non-native speakers of English (but also many native-speakers of this language) seem not to control the meaning of what they say/write. Maybe it's time for another Habermas intermezzo:

“International languages harm the self-understanding of the life forms of which they are part, as constituent elements. [...] Living as parasites of unconfessed traditions, they form degenerate forms of interpretation about the world. They endow the historically uprooted sons and daughters of modernity with a false ontological pre-comprehension — a “soilless cosmopolitanism” that leads them to absolutize their own criteria of rationality and to assimilate all that as foreign. The liberal inhabitants of the modern world do not have the sense of what is absolutely inaccessible to them from foreign traditions, and because of this they do not even think about the possibility of being able to learn something from foreign cultures. Abstract universalism is only the reverse of a historicism that objectifies everything” (Habermas 1991, 186).

And that because:

“Or, in modern societies we are dealing with a pluralism of life forms – and with an increased individualization of life projects – which is not only inevitable, but also desirable; and, as McCarthy points out⁹, this makes it less and less probable that we will agree, in our controversies, on common interpretations. It is increasingly rare to be able to use enlightening experiences or examples that have the same meaning for different groups of individuals. Rarely can we hope that the same reasons, read in the light of different reference systems, will have the same weight for different groups of individuals” (Habermas 1991).

Habermas's observations are a supplementary reason to keep this part, too, from the Canadian professor's book. For obvious reasons, the chapter I found most interesting is chapter 6, *How Conversations changed*. Not only has it lots of information on the language changes in e-mail messages as well as in messages on other Internet platforms, like WhatsApp, but it discusses changes in the behavior of the people using

⁹ Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions. On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, Chap. “Practical Discourse: On the Relation of Morality to Politics”, Cambridge, MASS, MIT Press 1991, p.198.

them. First, there is a review of implications technology had had along recent history (I mean last two centuries or so). Personally, I liked the story about changes that occurred at the phatic level of conversation once the telephone arrived. No more “Good afternoon!”, just “Hello!”, with the much more geographical, cultural mark, like “Hey!” or “Hi!”. That was in the 19th century, and it was a scandal.

“The greetings popular in the 1800s were based on knowing who you are addressing and when you were addressing them: “Good morning children”, Good afternoon Doctor”. But when you pick up a ringing telephone, you have no idea who’s calling (during the many decades before caller ID), and you can’t even be sure whether you share a time of day with them. The teleconnected world desperately needed a neutral option. The two most prominent solutions were “Hello”, championed by Thomas Edison, and “Ahoy”, championed by Alexander Graham Bell. At the time, both had a similar meaning: they were used to attract attention rather than as a greeting” (McCulloch 2019, 294).

Nowadays, the (much too) fast development of the ITC changes the way people communicate, and changes are dramatically present in our lives. Those who lack of elasticity are confronted to a real drama every day: they don’t have just to learn things, but to accept things. A letter is a letter, no matter if it will be sent via snail mail or via e-mail, so it has to have an introduction formula, as well as a closing one; it has to be written in a style that fits the situation of communication, the relation presupposed with the addressee, etc. No reason for a person with a classic background to be addressed in a familiar way just because it’s online. There is more to that: in languages like French or Romanian, there is a clear distinction between the pronoun in the second person singular and the second person plural (which is also used as mark of polite expression), and there still is a rule saying that you cannot address someone who is your superior in whatever hierarchy (age, social position, etc.) by their first name. Or, the generalization of what I shall call “online English” blurs the social limits and creates awkward situations. There are fewer and fewer in this world, hélas!, who can address me as Dan, for example. For the rest, I would hope they won’t go wildly English in their direct relation to me.

As expected in a book about the present situation on the Internet, a part of this study is dedicated to social platforms and social networking. The author has also a position regarding the control over the exchanges of posts that take place, as in a real conversation, on these platforms of

social media. She uses a metaphor, and she says that the bartender does not moderate the conversations people have in his pub, but he can kick out someone who troubles everybody else with their behaviour. Good point, I'd say!

3. The Internet

First, I would remark that the Internet is not such a new thing, communication wise. People talk as they used to do long before Internet, they write as they used to do long before, they gather in groups as they used to do long before, they influence each other or influence groups as they did all along the history of humanity. What's new is just the vastness of the territory covered by the new phenomenon, the number of people involved simultaneously and the speed of the transactions, which means that a lot is happening every second. And above all, it's the democratization of communication: for just one scholar like Andrei Pleșu, you have millions of people who don't have much to say but who only enjoy to go public and this because they are allowed to. And the more they upload on the Net, the more they feel like they have a lot to expose, as they believe their lives are interesting, because they're theirs. It has been determined by psychologists that the behavior of social media prosumers¹⁰ can be similar to that of drugs addicts and that of pathological gamblers.

They would say that is because Internet rules have changed. True! But rules have changed periodically all along world history. They say that with Internet rules have changed rapidly and dramatically and that they keep changing as we observe them. True! And important! Humans seem to be poorly equipped for a world changing rapidly, constantly and dramatically. This is what gives a lot of them the feeling that they are like air-borne in an ever changing, incomprehensible, unfamiliar, stressful world. „Adapt and survive” is the *motto* of the U.S. Marines Corps. We should all live by this *motto*. Then, there is this saying Americans use: if you want to cope with the future, invent it. As we cannot all be inventors of the future, we'd better try to adapt. A way to prevent stress would be to repeat ourselves over and over again that, fundamentally, things remain the same as they have always been: people talk and people listen, people write and people read, people gather in groups. There are good people and there are bad people. There is truth and there is lie¹¹. There are situations

¹⁰ It's a new word which came along with the Web 2.0: it means producer and consumer at the same time.

¹¹ There is “post-truth”, too, nowadays.

with clear understanding of messages and there are moments of confusion. Are social networks a new thing? Not at all: communities rely on this kind of organization since the dawn of humanity. Are interests and ideologies grouping people a new thing? Not at all: it is how we are and what we do. Are humans influencing each other a new behavioral habit? No! They do that since the beginning of their existence on Earth, morally, immorally, amorally. I found in a book (McCulloch 2019, 74) a name for this situation: it's called "columbusing", and it means white people claiming to discover something that was already well established in another community, by analogy with how Columbus gets credit for discovering America despite the millions of people who already lived there. So, nothing new! Teenagers will always start keeping secrets from their parents and share those secrets with their respective groups, parents will always keep looking for pairs to share their concerns about their teenage kids, groups will always form to discuss matters pertaining to their respective communities, but also to set up strategies for crime, and yes, bad guys will always try to find the moment, the place, the conjuncture and the person to harm. But, reading a book by an American university professor made me realize that I was preoccupied by the idea of knowing who is there, who am I interacting with, who might be my interlocutors in conversations, and how can anyone know who they are talking to when they go online. Let's have a look!

3.1. Andrew Keen, the elitist

As a strictly personal point of view, I would say that the most harmful characteristics of the Internet are the possibility for any user to forge themselves new identities (hiding who they really are) and the spirit of egalitarianism (which triggered, among other reactions, a very caustic book by an American professor, *The cult of the amateur*¹²). Looking to the new reality, the virtual, that we can plunge in by going online, Andrew Keen asks himself by faking to ask his readers: „What happens, you might ask, when ignorance meets egoism meets bad taste meets mob rule?“. The answer is there: „the monkeys take over“. By analyzing the so-called search algorithms of Google and the invite to self-admiration YouTube addresses everybody, Keen cannot avoid the conclusion that amateurs win and that the main characteristic of the online world is

¹² Andrew Keen, *The cult of the amateur: how blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the rest of today's user-generated media are destroying our economy, our culture, and our values*, New York, London /.../, Doubleday, 2017.

fighting authority. It's no longer just the teenagers, but the main part of the users, and it's no longer the parents' authority which is contested, but the authority of what they keep calling for more than half a century "the system", which is the family, the school, the church, the press, all those institutions societies could use in realizing social reproduction.

Apart from the names and identities almost everybody tempers with, there is the language used, and I don't mean to mention again the mostly bad use of English. I was initially tempted to write about conversations on various social platforms on the Net, privileging the establishment of a kind of slang specific to the users of each of these platforms. I had already noticed for some time that it is more and more difficult for me to keep up with the news in the written language of the younger generations and I explained this to myself by the natural tendency of young people and teenagers to break with the older generations, grandparents, etc.). The phenomenon is not new. So much so that, when it moved to the Net, it gained an infinitely greater scope and an infinitely more categorical opposition character.

As I said before, the syntax and semantics of the different languages used in Internet communication are, along with the rules of writing, dramatically altered and make the person formed in classical patterns shudder at every step and often consider themselves defeated, i.e. taken out of the target audience. By saying that we are dealing with slang, I do not want to induce the idea that the language of the virtual universe is meant to hide iniquities or social dangers of any kind. The slang on the Internet makes it possible to communicate between members of various groups in the presence of "not-welcomed" (parents, etc.), who also have free access in all areas of the network. In other words, without blocking anyone's access to any social platform, each group can protect their secrets using their own slang.

One problem, though: the models. The leaders hate authority, and they hate school the most; the followers do what they always do, they follow, and the reference tends to move as far from school as possible, which causes deep fractures between generations and a loss of the binder of societies. Not using the same language is destroying the fabric of any society (see Habermas, *supra*), but it seems a good way of hiding one's intentions.

3.2. „Hey, Teacher, leave the kids alone!”

Looking back to the characteristics of the Net, one could understand that everything is going to happen faster and at a much larger scale now

than at any other moment of the past history. It is no longer the case of just one wolf harming the poor family of that goat with three kids. There are millions of wolfs ready to harm countless families where they will find gullible youngsters to open the door (just because they mistook the voice of the wolf for that of their mother).

People from my generation might recall the 70s of the last century, when Pink Floyd were the champions of the teens of that time, with *The Wall*. „We don't need no education / We don't need no thought control" was the hymn of that young generation, and it was just a few years after the changes brought by the Flower Power movement. But not much changed in the landmarks of social life and young generation's way of becoming: there still were schools, press, even churches, and families counted. In fact, not long after, those ex-left-wing-extremists (like Cohen Bedit) entered the very system they fought against in 1968, to become MPs in the European Parliament. What a history! What interesting times, when you could really know who's who and what's what!

4. Back to our issue: conversation on the Internet

There is not much left to say. Just to put together what all these authors I invited here said about interpersonal intersubjective interaction. The Internet, with all its protocols, with all its software and all its platforms could be the paradise of communication (and I don't mean the technical communication). All is there, and more. As I have already specified, citing Pierre Lévy, along with all that technology, there are humans on the Net, human minds and human emotions, and this wrecks it all. In fact, interactions are as they always have been between humans. Even when it is a robot which answers our questions, even when someone lives with the impression that they are talking with the computer, it is always human to human interaction. I repeat myself but I don't want to miss an opportunity to say that again: there is no such thing like computer-human interaction! It is always human to human computer-aided interaction.

All this being said, one can only come to the conclusion that psychologists and specialists in social psychology are best positioned to explain what happens in conversations on the Internet and why. Personally, I would say again that the possibility of hiding one's identity gives way to wrong doings in conversations as in other kinds of interactions on the Net. Just watching the urge they have to present themselves as whatever else than what they really are is a sign they are

cooking something. The feeling that the other is cooking something alters the basis for moral, good conversations. Looking back (see supra) to the requirements for good interaction specified by Grice, Jakobson, Habermas and others, we could be alarmed by the fact that the new medium/context (the Internet) tends to alter our way of intersubjective interaction.

5. What if...

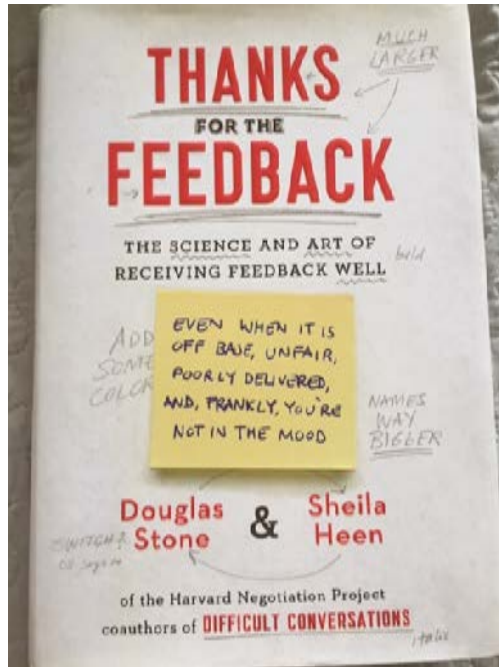
So, what if something is not there? Studies have been made on this, too, like the Harvard Negotiation Project, as well as two books by Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen (*Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* and *Thanks for the feedback*), both, outcomes of the Harvard Negotiating Project, developed by the School of Law of the prestigious American University. The first one could be read as a step-by-step approach to what should otherwise be difficult conversations: how to listen, how to pay attention to what is not said, how to avoid losing balance when attacked by the counterpart, without succumb to defensiveness.

The cover of the latter could be of service in understanding the above construction: edited as a kind of hypertext with comments and indications for the editors, it has a post-it-like added text, as if it were a proposed continuation of the title, saying that we should master the science and art of receiving feedback well „even when it is off base, unfair, poorly delivered, and, frankly, you’re not in the mood”. Again, we are invited to understand that performing a conversation should mean knowing the other, unveiling us to the other, cooperating, paying attention to whatever feedback¹³ might come from the other. This works most of the time in real world conversations.

There is this basic condition for good interaction (conversation or others): to know your interlocutor, and to let them know you. This is what I have underlined in all those writings I have evoked, from Grice, to Jakobson, to Habermas, etc. The researchers from Harvard were talking of difficult conversations in the offline. They should move to the online

¹³ A theoretical approach I have developed on feedback does not go far from the “stimulus-response” of the early theories, but makes sure that response is not taken as answer all the time. More precisely, I propose to see the semantic sphere of the word response as covering two different realities: one, voluntary and explicit (answer) and the other, mostly involuntary and non-explicit (feedback). The feedback would pertain mostly to the para-verbal and the nonverbal. You don’t ask for a feedback, you pay attention and you capture something that could stand for feedback. It could be a hesitation, a look, a change in the tone of voice, a startle, etc.

and see that there almost all conversations are difficult, because we all hide who we are and the feedback – as feeble as it comes when it comes – is false, most of the time, so you cannot recalibrate you discourse to adequate it to the addressee. But, as they say, fake only disappoints when found out. As Evan Davis pointed out, it's the best field for post-truth to proliferate.



6. Final remarks

These two books give me the opportunity to gently slide towards online conversations (or conversations on the Internet, as the title reads). There is an important psychological challenge one has to face when going online to talk: one cannot ever be sure who he is interacting with. What's really transparent is the discourse itself, the style of the other, while all the elements of context are (and are perceived as such) unreliable. The possibility of altering the context (the interlocutors' identities, too), the possibility of hiding your own identity gives way to all kind of effects of discourses. Then we have the impossibility of capturing consistent feedback. All we could capture as „response” from our interlocutor would be a pause in his discourse (he hesitates before replying, or between some words in his discourse), or some changes in the way of saying it which we

infer from the changes in the writing (he might change from lower case letters to upper case letters, which translates with shouting; he might also change from longer sentences to short ones, which translate with a state of precipitation, etc.). But the nonverbal is not there (even in video-conversations, where we can see but what the other has chosen to show), while the para-verbal is only partially present (even with the help of emojis). This big part of the feedback that could help in tuning our discourse in order to get the expected impact over the interlocutor is not there. This is what we really could call difficult conversations! Remember Jakobson and the metalinguistic function of the language? How to orient the actions when we cannot read the first effects of our discourse? Rephrasing is effect-oriented, so we need to appreciate the first reaction of the other to our discourse, in its first form, then changing something in the syntax and/or in the semantics to get a new pragmatic influence on the other.

With bloggers presenting their own truth while talking about themselves, with all those social media platforms with no control of the content they are circulating, it is not easy to have a convenient image of the otherness, so we will have to accommodate ourselves with the idea of an ever changing world, where the quantity will dictate over quality. This new context makes conversations harder and harder to perform, as insecurity glides over interactions and best is to refrain from being open. All the ethics discussed by Habermas, the Cooperative Principle of Grice, the phatic relation between addresser and addressee from Jakobson are in jeopardy. Moving sands are not a good ground for good interactions. A title caught my eye as I was ready to submit my paper: “A mental illness hospital called Facebook”. It is a comment on the contents exchanged on this platform of social media during the last months, the months of isolation because of the pandemic. This makes me think of myself as of an optimistic.

So, avoiding painting a bleak image of the conversation on the Internet, I will remain realistic and conclude that if someone wants to witness difficult conversations, they have to go online.

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