

# The age of blob communication: trapped within the algorithmic mesh

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## Abstract

The accelerated transformations of the hegemonic communicative and cultural model have rendered obsolete concepts that until now have been key, such as the culture of surveillance (Zuboff) or the network society (Castells). The critical examination of these digital transformations and the discussion of significant works from different currents of philosophy and sociology of culture have allowed us to identify a new hegemonic form of communication, which we have called blob communication, and which we have described as the infrastructure that challenges all human mediations in a mercurial mesh or rabbit hole supported by algorithms. This communication blob is the communication apparatus that sustains the culture and capitalism of containment. Based on this diagnosis, the article presents conceptual avenues for thinking about a kind of communication and journalism that can overcome the capitalism of containment and propose new ways of imagining and narrating human communities.

## Keywords

Blob communication, mercurial cage, algorithmic matrix, containment capitalism, hypersimulation, journalism, artificial intelligence.

## Resum

Les transformacions accelerades del model comunicatiu i cultural hegemònic han deixat obsolets conceptes que fins avui havien estat capitals, com el de cultura de la vigilància (Zuboff) o el de societat-xarxa (Castells). L'examen crític d'aquestes transformacions digitals i la discussió de treballs significatius de diversos corrents de la filosofia i de la sociologia de la cultura ens han permès identificar una nova forma hegemònica de comunicació, que hem anomenat comunicació blob, i que hem descrit com la infraestructura que reté totes les mediacions humanes en una malla mercurial sostinguda per algoritmes. Aquesta comunicació blob és l'aparell comunicatiu que sosté la cultura i el capitalisme de la contenció. A partir d'aquest diagnòstic, l'article presenta eines conceptuals per pensar una mena de comunicació i de periodisme que pugui desbordar el capitalisme de la contenció i que proposi noves maneres d'imaginar i narrar les comunitats humanes.

## Paraules clau

Comunicació blob, malla mercurial, matriu algorítmica, capitalisme de la contenció, hipersimulació, periodisme, intel·ligència artificial.

## 1. Introduction. Make the wish a possibility

The hopes we placed in network communication, and which Manuel Castells predicted like no other in *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996/2017), have vanished. Today, faced with the overwhelming logic of digital platforms, which some have described as the *goliath* of new media (Diresta, 2023), we verify with resignation that this paradigm, born in the decades of the 1980s and 90s thanks to the contributions of the Interpretative School (Watzlawick, Helmick and

Jackson, 1967/1985; Berger and Luckmann, 1966/2003; Blumer, 1969/1982; Bateson, 1979/2002) and cybernetics (Wiener, 1958/1998), is not yet done with the alienation and behaviourism of mass communication.<sup>1</sup>

Then the Internet exploded like a supernova and content produced by anyone was able to reach large communities of users in a free and uncomplicated manner, node to node, in a web of information that would configure the so-called *global village* (McLuhan and Powers, 1995). The evolution of information technologies and microelectronics generalised the

domestic use of the computer and led to a specialisation of the mass media and the emergence of the blogosphere, a new digital space outside the hegemonic communicative institutions. These were no longer aimed at large audiences, but done in a much more segmented way, and still ultimately on a grand scale. In the days of the blogosphere, when almost everyone had a blog to make themselves known, be it on MySpace, Blogger, Tumblr or Fotolog, no one imagined the constraint of ideas that we would be subjected to in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

As Mark Fisher (2018) wrote, capitalist realism has inevitably taken hold and we cannot claim that, despite the spread of the web as a form of hegemonic organisation for decades, we have abandoned hierarchies of control at large scale: we continue under the rule of the rich (D'Eramo, 2022), even more so than a few years ago. However, we are no longer part of the network grid, but are contained —retained— within a matrix driven by a very small oligopoly of technological companies (Lanier, 2018; Peirano, 2019), which have converged, first, in the so-called *surveillance capitalism* (Zuboff, 2020), and which are now causing a mutation from surveillance to containment, from the network to the mesh, as we aim to explain in this article.

In this sense, Zuboff, who at the end of the 80s anticipated the revolution that computers would cause in the workplace (Zuboff, 1982) and who at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century predicted the rise of digital capitalism and social networks (Zuboff, 2004), now laments the innocence with which she and many other intellectuals like Castells witnessed first-hand the mutation from classical Fordist capitalism to informational capitalism and, finally, to surveillance capitalism. The author insists that this surveillance capitalism “is not technology; it is a logic that imbues technology and commands it into action”. (Zuboff, 2020, p. 28). Since the actors who created network communication are the hegemonic powers of rampant capitalism, the architecture of the global grid has ended up taking the form of a mesh, as we will argue, where the main interests, as already pointed out by the authors of the Frankfurt School (Marcuse, 1954/1993; Adorno and Horkheimer, 1969/1998), are consumption and social control; its values are those of the morality of success, aggression and violence; and the projects are the accumulation of capital and the perpetual enrichment of a privileged minority over an increasingly poor majority.

In this way, the first generation Internet, whose architecture was built in the form of a grid with connection points, has now modified the very idea of network communication by authors such as Castells (1996/2017; 2006), Lévy (1997) or Mitchell (2003).

As Terranova (2004) states, in reality the Internet has become a space of connections without transformations, and for this reason the author wonders if the first-generation reticular Internet, which has been mutating its architecture thanks to the algorithm, especially since 2010, has not, in a certain way, exhausted the network communication as defined by authors such as Castells (2006). Indeed, Evgeny Morozov (2011) explains in *The Net Delusion* how the “Google Doctrine”, this

enthusiastic belief in the liberating power of the Internet that proclaims that big tech companies will join the global struggle for freedom, has not done more than ruin the public’s ability to evaluate its policies, because it has exaggerated the positive role of technology companies and prevents them from being subject to public scrutiny.

This liberal faith is professed by senior officials of the United States administration from across the political spectrum, as Morozov himself recounts, and the mass media have happily contributed to spreading it. At the dawn of this new, much more restrictive kind of capitalism, which here we call *containment capitalism*, data is the prized commodity that the capitalist West is willing to obtain from private technology companies at any price to maintain hegemony, even when it goes against the freedoms it proclaims (Zuboff, 2020).

In the midst of platformisation (Srnicsek 2018; Scolari, 2022), every day we see how the network communication that intended to lead us to the desired global village is perverted. In this article we will try to describe how this capitalism of containment, which we have explained as a sophistication of the informational capitalism of surveillance, is in fact forming a new kind of communication, which we call *blob communication*. And why *blob*? Because we are trapped living in a new universe, in a mercurial mesh, with no possibility of escape. The reticular nodes of the global network that were supposed to emancipate us have instead made us captives of a much more sophisticated control structure than we thought. We believe that this description that we will develop below is essential to understanding the inertias that drag us down in the field of sociology and the philosophy of culture and communication.

At the beginning of the era of containment capitalism, network communication ceased to be an opportunity to become a computational matrix, an algorithmic mesh that covers everything we can think and narrate. Where were those of us who believed that communication must be a radical encounter with otherness, when in Silicon Valley the foundations of this new type of much more enveloping communication were being laid? Why weren’t we there to tell them how we think communication should be so that it avoids reproducing the evils of mass communication or generating new ones from the vices of network communication? And, above all, how can we help, now, to make the wish a possibility? Are we in time to reverse the inertias?

The third and fourth batch of critical theory (McLuhan, 1964/1996; Castells, 1996/2017; Terranova, 2004; Zuboff, 2020), as we have explained, will warn of the economic, social and political changes that motivate the passage of exploitation, alienation and inequality typical of Fordist capitalism to domination, precariousness and hegemony typical of surveillance capitalism. But we will use the most recent critical authors (Parisi, 2013; Sadin, 2017; Crawford, 2021) throughout this article. They have begun to describe how surveillance capitalism is being mutated by the latest computational advances in artificial intelligence, favouring the birth of a new

type of algorithmic communication. This new communication is being described, but still from the theoretical framework of surveillance and network communication, and thus is not being precisely characterised or distinctively named. In this article, we will venture to name it and characterise it. We believe that it is essential to spend time on this basic definition, because this is an article of a hermeneutic and theoretical nature, whose main contribution is to rethink, offer new frameworks for reflection and propose new forms of academic work that complement what has already been written or is being written in the discipline of communication and journalism.

## 2. Hypotheses, theoretical framework and methodology. The human helix

In the era of platforms, a new form of capitalism, which is an evolution of surveillance capitalism, rises as the hegemonic economic model. This new system does not seek to maintain social order, as it has done up until now, but to contain social chaos, and that is why we suggest naming it *containment capitalism*. Based on this diagnosis, we propose as hypotheses that:

- A. There is a new form of communication, in which mass communication, symbolic interactionism and network communication are intertwined, which is the algorithmic infrastructure necessary to make this new kind of capitalism work within a new narrative matrix.
- B. From this new matrix a new form of hegemonic culture is born, which is characterised by the replacement of the linear and segmented time of classical bourgeois society by a time without process; the configuration of a hypersimulated social space; the production of new languages and stories and new narratives that contain us; and the exaltation of an unprecedented egotism.

The aim of this article is to determine the characteristics of this new narrative matrix on one hand, and on the other hand, of this form of hegemonic culture, describe its operation, and propose operational concepts that allow us to reflect on them.

Therefore, this is a work of an eminently theoretical nature. It starts from hypotheses that derive from observation and knowledge of a new communicative and cultural scenario. These hypotheses, which have already been presented, need a methodological environment, which in this case is the prospecting of books and the emptying of bibliographic and documentary sources. The methodology that guides us is that of interdisciplinary comparatism, through which we adopt terms used by the sociology of culture and philosophy for the analysis of transformations in the field of communication and, more specifically, journalism.

More precisely, this exploration adopts the methodological form of a double spiral and allows us to explain these transformations in culture, communication and journalism. We have named our

methodological tool the *virtuous helicoid*. We believe that the hermeneutic road map it unfolds, with its conceptual universe, can help researchers outline reflections in all knowledge of the humanities, philosophy and sciences. In our case, in these pages we will use it to describe the characteristics of this new cultural and communicative matrix.

The theoretical framework of this article draws, on the one hand, from the heritage of the poststructuralist tradition, with thinkers such as Derrida or Foucault, as well as all those who in some way have been their disciples, such as *cyberpunk* or the authors of the Warwick School, such as Berardi, Morozov, Fisher, Sadin, Srnicek and Parisi, among many others. We cannot forget, either, the legacy of interactionism and the Palo Alto School, keys to understanding the interactions of cybernetics, and the work of the Critical School in communication studies, especially those of Manuel Castells around the network communication. Finally, we must cite the essential readings on critical economy and biopolitics by authors such as Arendt, Marcuse, Zuboff and Peirano.

As we have said, this exploration takes the form of a double spiral that we have dubbed the *virtuous helicoid*. Let us look at this in more detail, as it constitutes, from a methodological point of view, a first conceptual contribution of this work. A helix is the curve whose tangent turns on an axis and the helicoid is one of the three minimal surfaces, along with the plane and the catenoid, that occupy the universe in a unique and whimsical way. The most famous double helix is the sequence of deoxyribonucleic acid or DNA, the three-dimensional arrangement that links the genetic sequence of all living things, and was discovered by scientists Watson and Crick at the University of Cambridge between 1951 and 1953, based on the research of Wilkins and Franklin, and which earned them the Nobel Prize in 1962. As Watson himself (1968/1993) recalls in the essay that commemorates that fundamental discovery, “the sugar-phosphate backbones twist about on the outside with the flat hydrogen-bonded base pairs forming the core. Seen this way, the structure resembles a spiral staircase with the base pairs forming the steps” (p. 152). Let us imagine, then, that we have to think about and describe the DNA of humanity.

Culture and communication would make up the double helix shell that wraps the genetic consciousness of our societies. Culture and communication are anti-parallel, but complementary, and they intoxicate each other, protecting the chained sequence of base pairs that make up, first, memory, imagination, thought and affections; and, second, the mediations, the actions, the community links and the knowledge we are acquiring. We have to imagine that all human disciplines and, among them, of course, communication, which is the object of study of this article, unite these pairs of bases in a particular way, as links of hydrogen do in the sugar-phosphate chains described by Watson. This is how the steps of this spiral staircase that is humanity are combined and recombined and made up. In this way, while the first four bases appeal to the

sense of the subject; the second four have to do with a certain sense of communion with that which is radically ‘other’.

In this article we also consider that the DNA of humanity grows and spreads within a reproductive cycle, that is, through a process of transmission and renewal of human quality, rather than within a productive cycle, as the industry has intended for a century and a half, and which uses the available resources in a rather sloppy way to obtain goods that satisfy human needs, always according to the dictates of the market economy. Precisely because the DNA of humanity inhabits this reproductive cycle, we can therefore consider that the assemblage that compacts, in the end, this humanity is the recognition that we can only grow if we live a political life, in the way that Arendt explains (1958/2005).

In this entanglement of communication and culture, as we show in the figure that closes this section, and which is shown in plan view, that is to say, from above, but which must be imagined as a three-dimensional spiral (see Figure I), there are still four hermeneutic coordinates —time, space, story and

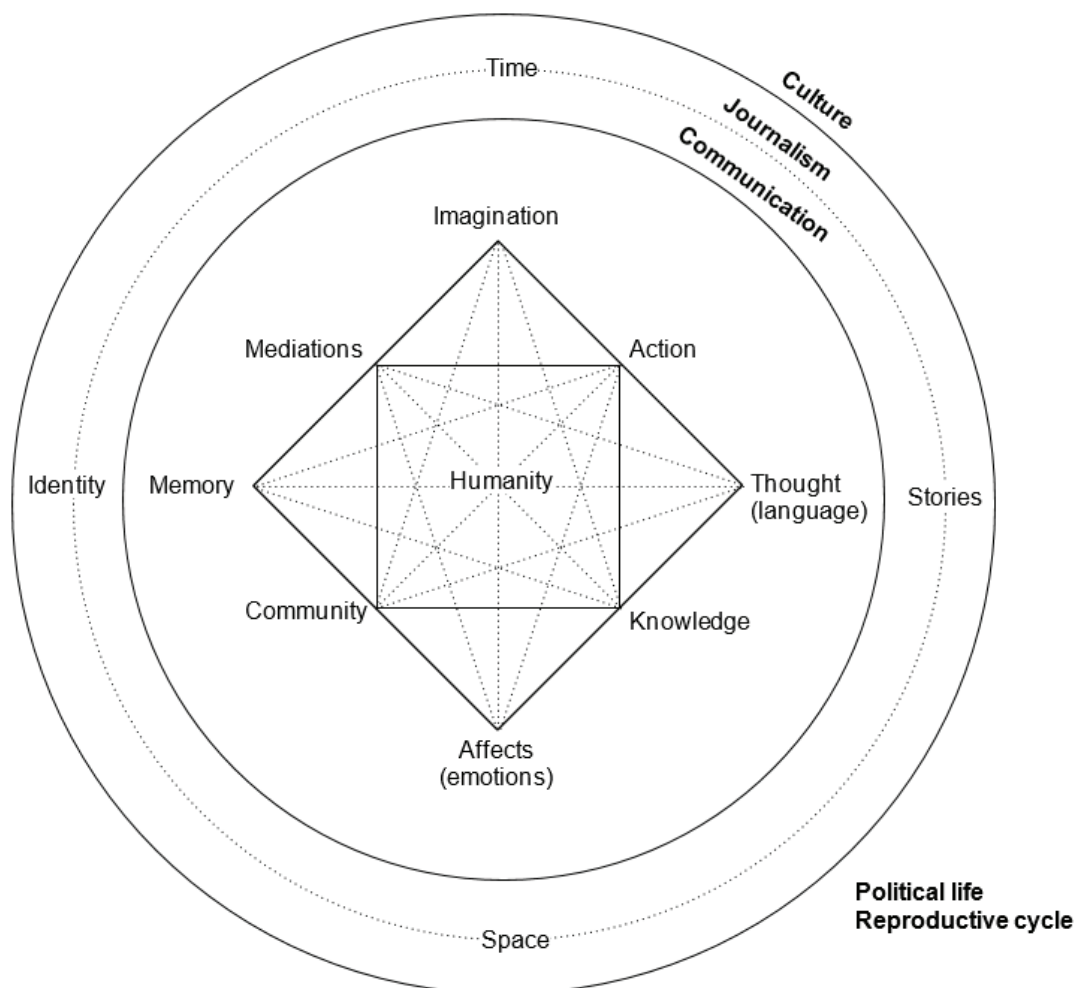
identity— to which we will return later, which will allow us to travel through what has been and is this double helix that envelops us and all the base pairs it protects.

### 3. Critical proposal and results. The era of blob communication

#### 3.1 Conceptual contributions. The mercurial mesh that envelops us

The current architecture of the Internet is in the form of a mesh. It is a geometry without vertices that isolates citizens. The communication that derives from this architecture transmits a meta-story<sup>2</sup> —a set of stories— that imprisons with its narratives, precisely because all limits have been removed. We will call this the *communication blob*. To do this, we draw on the work of Sadin (2017) and Parisi (2013), who have theorised about the next-generation Internet in which we are immersed today —some technologists have dubbed it Web 2, to differentiate it from the

Figure 1. The virtuous helicoid: a hermeneutic for thought



Source: Own work.

first stage, and we can assume that we are actually already on our way to the so-called Web 3 (Moscow, 2017)—, and we will then return to Terranova (2004). We can therefore affirm that blob communication is the communication device where the behavioural alienation of mass communication, the contributions of Symbolic Interactionism and the nodular structure of network communication, are intertwined. The result is a membranous digital environment that envelops the individual in a virtual social reality that constrains them and that makes all human condition, transfer and common world impossible.

If the recent history of the Western tradition is based on acceleration, wrote Terranova, the emergence of network communication marked a limit, as if we had backed ourselves against a wall. For this reason, the simultaneity of arbitrary and banal actions has replaced, little by little, the succession of events—or has, in fact, hijacked the event, as we have already pointed out in previous works (Garde Cano, 2022)—, and the world has been reduced to a kind of unprecedented accident. In this article we argue that we live in a space of *hypersimulation* and in a *time without process* (Garde Cano and Vidal Castell, 2022), as we will try to explain below.

Thanks to Terranova (2004) we know that «the time of the network is “real time”: everything happens simultaneously and thus fatalistically with a kind of after-the-event sense of inevitability» (p. 43). Acceleration leads to simultaneity, simultaneity demands immediacy and immediacy makes everything seem to happen inevitably (Derrida, 1995). Crawford (2021) also relates this *time without process* to which the digital subjects us when he describes the visit he made to Amazon’s *fulfilment centre* in Robbinsville, New Jersey, which was full of clocks. Berardi (2003) defines it with the term *cybertime* and Garcés refers to it as “posthumous time” (2017). We can affirm, therefore, that the capitalism of containment has ended up possessing the *continuous present* and prevents us from building any occasion, any possibility, because it forces us to conceive of the past and the future as antagonistic. In the capitalism of containment, of platforms, the eternal scrolling through social media is a good example of what we are trying to explain.

Based on this idea of inevitability due to the acceleration that governs us, Terranova (2014) dismantles the premises on which we had trusted that the network communication would organise the world in an orderly and diverse manner. He admits that even though this architecture has allowed alternative communities to gather, they are hermetic and exclusive to forums like 4Chan or the so-called Deep Web<sup>3</sup>. Likewise, he senses that the reticular, automating and simplifying architecture, with which the programmers imagined the first Internet, has made us fall into the classic trap that confuses time with space, duration with movement. Caught in this trap, the networked Internet has ceased to be the place where we meet, and is now the space where we isolate ourselves.

Terranova warns that these decentralising features of the Internet that inaugurated the network communication, and

that organised information with circular structures inspired by Symbolic Interactionism—from boards to rings, passing through nodes and fractals, structures that formed and warped within the reticule at convenience— were isolating us and, consequently, could lead us into a much more uncompromising world, rather than leading us to the global village that McLuhan and Powers (1995) envisioned. Terranova argues that, “the mass is not simply massaged by the medium, as Marshall McLuhan argued, but also segmented by the media”. (p. 147)

The author took the theses of Castells (1996/2017) on how network communication promoted the mass diversification of audiences and concludes, however, that “in a network culture, a mass is a transversal cut in the body of an informational milieu that never ceases to be microsegmented, highly differentiated and at the same time interconnected”. (2014, p. 150) This micro-segmentation, which differentiated and at the same time interconnected communities through information, has driven programmers to try new ways of retaining us within the networked reticule. For this reason, according to Berardi (2003), the colonisation of cyberspace has required the progressive expansion of electronic commerce, *fintech* and intranets. In the latest generation Internet or Web 2, predicts Berardi, we have gone from a decentralised system of frequencies that *connected* us to the network, to the oligopolistic control of a few suppliers.

Terranova (2004) defines information as the content of communication, obviously, but also as something less material. He argues that this immateriality of information has been amplified by technology. To the point of, in the era of blob communication, it has made possible an instantaneity and multiple distribution like never before. Information, which was conceived during surveillance capitalism as an object to be exchanged (Zuboff, 2020), as another commodity, in containment capitalism it becomes raw *content* that is sold and bought in unprecedented quantities thanks to algorithmic processes that go faster than human perception. If, in network communication, information was presented to us in a repetitive manner, as in the television loop, in blob communication the contents become viral in a reverberating way, the same as memes do.

In addition to this, if for two decades the first Internet had been a mostly passive exercise in front of computer screens, with mobile phones it becomes an incessant movement, and it remains to be seen whether it manages to overcome the tyranny of the screens and is able to move in an augmented reality (Mosco, 2017), as proposed by technological gurus with the so-called metaverse. Little by little, in the last decade these experiments of the first Internet have given birth to a new, much more sophisticated and intricate digital architecture, as Parisi (2013) explains, which will eventually shape the structure for the new blob communication.

This state-of-the-art digital mapping has been shaped in the image of a new trend in design and architecture, the so-called *blob architecture*, which is based on biology, morphogenesis and artificial intelligence to build buildings and objects with



curvilinear posthuman shapes —which we could even say are not human—. Examples are the Guggenheim in Bilbao or the Kunsthouse in Graz, described by neighbours as a “friendly alien”, The Sage in Gateshead, the Metropol Parasol in Seville or the Selfridges in Birmingham. In these buildings, the experience is one of great disorientation, which is why museums or shopping centres are often located there: the windows do not fulfil any human function, the corners are not useful for meetings, the slopes of the walls do not serve to shelter from the cold or to protect from the heat. Indeed, inside one feels alone in an alien immensity: there is no landscape to be seen and nothing invites you to stay there; space encapsulates individuals in the void.

With this referent in mind, Parisi (2013) describes the architecture of this latest Internet as a mesh woven from nodules that, unlike the network, envelops without holes, like a drop —blob— of mercury that engulfs, transforms and isolates any bond that develops within it. By contagion, it spreads without limits or form, creating its own architectures through algorithms, whose logics intoxicate everything that is human. The author explains that digital platforms have been able to merge the networked vision of the grid of first-order cybernetics, as described by Terranova (2004), with this biomorphic vision of blob architecture through mereotopology, a science thought by Alfred North Whitehead. In short, we have to imagine a mesh arranged in an elastic manner, like a veil that allows the contours to be glimpsed; like a membrane that defines units or objects, but at the same time is infinite; that extends, but at the same time contains.

Through this blob communication, digital platforms become the institutions of symbolic construction of the new digital culture (Lovink, 2023), with the ultimate promise of optimising the choices of their users and trading with the massive data they are capable of storing, of containing. As Wiener (2021) recalls in the essay in which she reconstructs her experience as a worker in several Silicon Valley start-ups that sell big data management infrastructures, with these algorithms companies hope to gather more users to increase their data volume, and consequently increase their income. Some authors, from orthodox Marxism, such as Cancela (2023), have hypothesised about the possibility of using the capabilities of digital platforms for the common good, when they suggest that nation states can appropriate data centres or create truly free software. Scolari (2022) also proposes using the infrastructure of the platform for emancipation.

Wiener, like other critical technologists and journalists, such as Lanier (2018) or Peirano (2019), abounds on the interests of digital platforms, and the start-ups that provide them with the technology necessary to start these algorithmic processes: they all seek to eliminate quantitative biases, improve recipient selection systems and statistics, measure their effectiveness, prioritise impact, make investments profitable and promote accelerated growth, among others. The journalist also warns that, to manage these algorithmic infrastructures, workers have unlimited access to their clients’ databases, what they

colloquially call *God mode*, a privileged position that is not questioned by the industry.

Within these structures, says Parisi (2014), algorithms are no longer just a tool to accomplish tasks, but are the constructive and abstract material that gives meaning to the elastic mesh, realities defined in data that process endless probabilities. Sadin (2017) points out that algorithms make possible a multi-architecture and multi-platform flexibility that allows free circulation throughout the mesh, and predispose artificial intelligences to cooperate with each other. These agents essentially make up a kind of “artificial society” (p. 113).

Blob communication, therefore, is the symbolic instance that platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2018) builds to simulate communicative mediations without them actually being so. Wiener also explains how the basis of the business of these technological companies is a vicarious form of interaction or participation (2021, p. 53). The mesh allows exchanges in heterogeneous, decentralised, dynamic and evolutionary sections. For this reason, living within these architectures ends up being perceived as organic. We tour the “friendly alien”, whose story leads us to believe that, thanks to him, we are part of the media narrative of cyberspace; what’s more, we are contributing to creating it. In this way, the subject, within these structures, is an ego (Žižek, 2014), and not an individual who is part of the community. This architecture makes you feel unique at the same time as isolating you, and every narrative is then self-referential, which causes ego-attunement and egophony. That is why we talk about *mercurial egotism*.

And that is why we also talk about mesh. Inside, the nodes that share information flows do so mainly to isolate the population through mediations that are used only for consumption and social control. The hegemonic mediations within this structure do not, therefore, serve to build accounts of diversity, tolerance or recognition of the other, but are created to consolidate homogeneous, polarised and narcissistic accounts, which some authors have come to call a *cage of mirrors*, because they set up self-referential narratives that see the other only as distorted reflections of oneself. We also find other concepts that have made a fortune explaining this isolation, such as the echo chambers described by Sunstein (2001) based on the essay *Being Digital* by Negroponte (1995) and the bubble filters theorised by Pariser (2011).

There is then, as the authors of the critical theory of communication agree, a dissolution of the borders between human life and synthetic life, which transcends the barriers of time and space. We now know that this physical-virtual fusion will be the origin of the diseases of self-perception that proliferate today and of a lack of recognition of otherness that has led us to the polarisation of discourses, what some authors call “totalism” (Duch and Chillón, 2016), and the destruction of the agoras, the social contract and the principle of tolerance. Several years earlier, recall Duch and Chillón, Marcuse (1954/1993) had already warned of this totalitarian drift of advanced industrial society: “By virtue of the way in which it

has organised its technological base, contemporary industrial society tends to be totalitarian". (p. 33)

Algorithmic sophistication will be the last key to this totalism. As Peirano (2019) explains, the power of collection, data storage and processing speed make it possible to assess in real time a large number of parameters, to establish accurate maps of ongoing situations, to suggest solutions prescribed by power or to make decisions based on criteria determined by random factors. Infrastructures, Sadin (2017) says, which are both physical and digital, and which regulate the general operation of complex units aimed at guaranteeing a greater degree of security and optimisation, classification and distribution; "megastructures administered mostly by electronic protocols that act with us and instead of us, product of their aptitudes for surveillance, deduction and initiative". (p. 67)

In fact, these megastructures will inspire the birth of blockchains<sup>4</sup>, with which their creators and followers have wanted to believe that they were inaugurating a new age of the Internet, the awaited Web 3, in which the totalising logics of the second generation Internet would be surpassed. As the *New York Times* explains in an interactive publication about the crypto world (Roose, 2022), if Web 1 was the age of static websites, HTML code and JavaScript, and Web 2 is characterised by the appearance of the platforms and social networks that are nourished by the creation of digital content by their users through smartphones, Web 3 would combine the first cybernetic infrastructures with this vicarious participation that promotes Web 2 through augmented reality applications, to drive a decentralised cooperative movement through collective data systems, shared ownership between developers and users, and encrypted transmission chains, which would enable secure and anonymised transactions like those employed by the cryptocurrency, NFT, and other token communities.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is not at all clear whether blockchain technology, born for the supposedly free exchange between users without the intermediation of platforms, will be the technology that allows the emancipation of communities. Neither is it clear whether it is the ultimate tool that has just strengthened the containment of the few over the majority in a hypersimulated world and in a third generation of the Internet, as predicted by technology gurus Andreessen and Horowitz (2021) through their venture capital platform.

Today we know that these thousand programmers who worked in a network for an open source were not hegemonic enough for there not to be a few thousand more working, not so freely (Lanier, 2018), to create what are today the main platforms and which have ended up forming a new communicative scenario. Now we know that they also did not have enough humanistic knowledge to fully understand the ethical implications of channelling a large part of human mediations through algorithms, through mathematical codes that respond only to economic interests. The blockchain community, although born with the hope of subverting the logics of power promoted by Web 2, is beginning to look dangerously similar to those other hermetic and exclusionary communities

that Terranova (2014) described in network communication. Instead of a popular tool within the reach of anyone without knowledge of software and hardware, the blockchain seems more like the perfect infrastructure for the decentralised, but ultimately despotic world that artificial intelligence presents.

We use the concept of *mercurial mesh* precisely because we cannot escape it, because it is a cage of magnitude which is no longer global, as Castells pointed out about the communication of networks, but infinite: it has colonised everything, because all life has gone on to function within this architecture. Within the mercurial mesh, artificial intelligences are virtually eternal, with a horizon as open as any number sequence. For this reason, they live trapped in a *continuous or immediate present*, where events no longer happen in well-defined fragments or sequences, but are multidimensional —combinations are endlessly juxtaposed, sometimes in unpredictable ways— and, for this reason, it is hard for us to find the words to narrate them.

Precisely because the digital membrane encompasses the entire human world and beyond, the feeling we have inside it is of a false freedom, because we do not see the limits, even if for us they do exist. This mesh is like a spherical bubble, a kind of algorithmic orb, and therefore has no vertices to break the geometry; to fight it we can only go through it: we are Alice beyond the black mirror.

Crawford (2021) recalls that this network is only possible on the basis of big data and cloud computing: the proliferating data magmas are hosted in servers or data centres spread across the planet. Sadin (2017) also senses that "the will to make an 'encrypted copy' of each fragment of the world continues to intensify, erecting a kind of duplication, virtually in the course of consumption, of all the fragments of the real under the format of binary codes" (p. 77), what in this article and in previous texts we call *hypersimulation* (Garde Cano, 2022). Consequently, the author claims that this immeasurable volume of data *de facto* inhibits all human and manual understanding, and takes for granted that it can only be processed through deductive systems. The data hosted by cloud computing —with this dimension, the *cloud*, almost celestial in nature— can only be visited by robots, mediators between the subjects and the world, in server farms distributed around the planet. "And it is the data that appear now as the instance of decisive interference" (Sadin, 2017, p. 81). Perhaps this space of narrative and symbolic exploration, until now exclusively human, is the only thing that journalism that wants to make sense has left.

### 3.2 Glossary. Elastic, reverberant, encrypted

At the end of this conceptual exploration, and in order to make the contributions very clear, in this glossary we gather the set of neologisms that we have used to match the current cultural and communicative context. We would like them to draw a map of hope for future reflections. We want them to describe an outpouring of journalism in the context of what we have named *blob communication* and *containment capitalism*.

**Table 1. Three views on communication**

	<b>Mass communication</b>	<b>Network communication</b>	<b>Blob communication</b>
<b>Time</b>	Lineal	Reticular	Encrypted
	Production	Automatisation	Optimisation
	Expires	Repetitive	Echoing
	Concentration	Dispersion	Retention
	Visual	Tactile	Meta-sensorial
<b>Space</b>	Centre	Nodes	Mesh
	Imposition	Interconnection	Interaction
	Partial	Global	Infinite
	Rigidity	Flexibility	Elasticity
	Verticality	Polycentrism	Blockchain
	Analogue	Digital	Virtual
<b>Story</b>	Product	Information	Data
	Sequentiality	Hypertextuality	Algorithm
	Soliloquy	Homophony	Egophony
	Passive	Reactive	Egosyntonic
	Submits	Monitors	Contains
<b>Identity</b>	Mass	Audience	Users
	Institutions	Media	Platforms
	Uniformisation	Polarisation	Isolation
	Competition	Cooperation	Manipulation
	Apathetic	Disagreeable	Asocial
	Imposition	Vigilance	Contention

Source: Own work.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions. Towards an ecology of doubt

The critical examination and discussion of significant works from various streams of philosophy and the sociology of culture have allowed us to identify a new hegemonic form of communication, which we have called *blob communication*, and which we have described as the infrastructure that retains all human mediations in a mercurial mesh sustained by algorithms, dedicated to tracing the processes of communication to contain contingency, tyrannise choices and hijack the discursive symbolic event.

Blob communication and containment culture are the two intertwined helixes that make up the containment capitalism in which we live. This culture of containment is defined through the four coordinates that we have defined in the methodology: a time without process, hypersimulation, the algorithmic orb and mercurial egotism.

The *time without process* is the time of containment: it does not run out, it does not make concessions, it only serves for privatisation and apathy. Containment capitalism has ended up possessing the continuous present and it prevents us from building any occasion, any possibility, because it forces us to conceive of the past and the future as antagonistic, and not as a confluence of energies in transformation in the here and now.

The space that this blob communication builds has the structure of a mercurial mesh and contains all human mediations by means of algorithms. In this mercurial mesh, there is only what we have called *hypersimulation*. The latest form of hypersimulation that the technological gurus have proposed is the so-called *metaverse*. For this hypersimulation to be complete, it must be persistent, that is to say, it does not end or restart; it must have a massive scale and enveloping technology; it must organise a digital economy within itself that sustains it—the blockchain seems to respond to this demand—. In this way, a narrative



matrix is formed based on stories and self-referential narratives. This algorithmic orb is the stuff of which the mercurial mesh of blob communication is made. The language that shapes it are the algorithms.

Consequently, the identity of the subjects is destructured and what we call *mercurial egotism* is born, the new ideology of containment capitalism, which has replaced modern individualism. The mercurial ego is the cold, insipid and merciless projection of the individual who does not seek any fusion with the collective, but expresses itself in the corrupted fable of Narcissus. This is how an interconnected and hypermobile humanity has been born which, from now on, will be hybridised with artificial intelligence systems. In hypersimulation, the ego is exalted in such a way that it forces us to act on impulse, with hedonism and megalomania. This is why we feel an extreme isolation that leads us to mistrust and, finally, to the absence of empathy that dehumanises and reifies others, which is why we end up relating to them with violence. Mercurial egotism leads us to take refuge in fantasy and to seek constant stimulation. This extreme isolation finally leads us to egoism, that is to say, to feeling that we cannot change anything, which forces us to lead a parasitic lifestyle.

The contributions made in this article aim to open a space for debate. The cultural and communicative context in which we live has dismembered human communities. At the same time, the industrial journalism of the conventional media is unable to fulfil the function of symbolic structure and generation of collective meaning. For this reason, in this article we argue that there must be a kind of journalism within blob communication that is capable of surpassing containment capitalism and proposing new ways of imagining and narrating human communities. We believe it is time to imagine this other-journalism (Vidal Castell, Garde Cano and Ventura-Pocino, 2023) which is capable of surpassing blob communication.

## Endnote

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## Notes

1. Some authors have argued that not all mass communication has been alienating and behaviourist (Marín and Tresserras, 1994). Although we accept this nuance, we accept the criticism of mass communication made by Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948/1986) from the perspective of functionalism when they talk about the *narcotic dysfunction* that the media causes on the masses or the postulates of the School of Frankfurt by authors such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1969/1998) when they talk about the *atrophy of the imagination* in the public.
2. Stories pulsate within narratives and these narratives are nourished by the repertoire of stories as principles of meaning. The stories are available to the being as cultural baggage, in which it lives and manifests itself, as implicit ideological principles. At the same time, we will call the set of stories that make up the symbolic substrate of a community, and that are conveyed through the narratives, meta-stories (Gayà Morlà, Rizo García and Vidal Castell, 2022).
3. The term *Deep Web*, as expressed by the *New York Times* (Wright, 2009), is attributed to computer scientist Mike Bergman and describes a deep, invisible or hidden Internet, the content of which is not indexed by conventional search engines like Google. Although the Deep Web should not be a space only for crimes, the fact that it escapes the control of search engines, means it has turned into a space where networks of child pornography, terrorism and espionage, drug trafficking and all kinds of alternative economic exchanges to hegemonic financial institutions, like cryptocurrencies breed.
4. Blockchains are structures of transactions between users in the digital market, which are stored in the so-called blocks—we should imagine them as safes that are stacked on top of each other and that contain the data of each of the exchanges which have been validated and encrypted at a given time thanks to the mining work developed by digital miners using hardware that is assembled and installed in ventilated and isolated spaces such as garages—. These miners are often computer scientists and amateur programmers who activate, all together and around the world, the necessary technological force—the mining rigs are a set of graphics cards and processors—to channel these transactions in exchange for rewards, be they commissions or cryptocurrencies directly. Usually, these miners organise themselves into teams to provide each other with technical support and achieve bigger rewards.
5. A *token* is the value given to an object or thing within a specific community. For example, casino chips are tokens, which have a value that can be exchanged with a currency, but only within the same betting house. In computing, tokens are identifiers used to encrypt and protect digital data. There are several types of tokens: utility, payment, and also currency. Cryptocurrencies are essentially tokens that operate as digital currencies with their own blockchain. NFTs are non-fungible tokens, i.e. digital identifiers that give value to unique artistic and intellectual creations, and are bought and sold via a blockchain.

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