



Essay

New Forms of Interaction in the Digital Age: The Use of the Telephone

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Abstract: The objective of this article is to analyze how the digital space has become a ground for encounters, comparisons, and sometimes even clashes among individuals who increasingly inhabit the Internet, not just as a gateway to consume products, but as a context in which to weave relationships that, in the era of the Metaverse, are no longer to be understood as opposed to face-to-face encounters but rather as a continuation that transcends space–time boundaries. The Internet has become a place where relationships can be formed in various ways, influencing daily life and individual as well as collective existence. This influence now extends across various realms, from recreational encounters to cultural exchanges, and from politics to social interactions. The focus of this article is to analyze relational transformations and consequently how each individual relates to the Internet, both within and outside digital circuits. A state-of-the-art review of digital studies primarily interested in issues related to identity, increasingly showcased on social media, aims to understand how relationships and interactions can be interpreted today. These interactions occur within the screens of devices, disrupting certain stages of each individual’s biographical experience. Knowledge often begins in digital contexts and does not necessarily translate into the “tangible” everyday life, to the extent that the term “Digital Society” no longer surprises but is part of routine language. The synergy between digital and physical spaces calls on the social sciences to carefully analyze the types of relationships we build and how we nurture them amid applications and platforms. Thus, this article explores what friendships and romantic relationships have become in this digital era. It delves into the role of individuals faced with this rapid influx of technology into contemporary society. What is the role of the person in navigating this technological excess? The article aims to shed light on these questions, emphasizing notions such as relationships, identity, complexity, and the individual.

Keywords: interaction; community; relationship; identity; digital space



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1. Introduction

Daily life, increasingly lived within digital platforms, seems to be characterized by forms of complexity that influence not only the management of family and work life but also the different ways in which each person relates to society and consequently to the individuals or groups with whom they interact. Social interactions are strongly influenced by the advent of digital technology, fully interfering in the construction of relationships in every aspect of collective life. The main objective of this contribution is to analyze the state of the art on social interactions, through the main scholars who have dealt with it. This analysis involves a selection of classic and contemporary authors, deemed most suitable for studying the chosen theme. Both theories and empirical studies reveal that digital interactions guarantee continuous exchanges between individuals belonging to different social fields and bring into play the relationship with traditional media and the complexity of the communication process. (Romeo 2017). To address the issue of organizing the complexity of communication, it is very useful to consider the contribution of McQuail’s pyramid structure (McQuail 2007). Examining what the author proposed, at the base of the pyramid, we find the level of intrapersonal communication, where the individual confronts

oneself before becoming part of a collective organization. “The intrapersonal sphere is, as Pacelli emphasizes, the sphere of self-reflection and/or the reappropriation of what may have been conveyed by communication that takes place at higher levels of organization” (Pacelli 2002). At the second level of the pyramid is interpersonal communication, which corresponds to the moment when the individual begins to interact with others and the environment. At this level, there is a need to engage with the Other, assuming roles and experiencing different communicative dynamics depending on the situation proposed. Moving to the third level, we enter group communication, which, to be considered as such, must have specific characteristics such as achieving a certain goal and creating a relationship involving at least three people. The fourth level is communication between groups and associations, referring to larger and more complex secondary groups compared to primary ones. The management of these groups depends on the communicative skills used within them. An example of this type, as highlighted by McQuail, is the local community. We then move on to institutional communication, where the predominant aspect is the ability to organize communicative modalities both internally and, more importantly, externally. In the case of large companies and institutions, the goal is not simply to foster internal dynamics but to achieve as much communication as possible with other companies or institutions externally. At the top of this pyramid, McQuail places mass communication, which, in this position, assumes the role of a key institution in modernity. It does not encompass the underlying forms of communication to the point of nullifying them but traverses them with its forms and content, determining various types of impact depending on how it is used. McQuail’s contribution starts from the assumption that communication organizes collective life in stages, and at each level of the proposed pyramid scheme, there corresponds a type of organization of communication and society. In daily life, individuals communicate using different modalities, and from this perspective, they contend with a management of this that involves not just the presence of a single type of communication but multiple “communications” that can be employed in a single situation. This has been further validated with the development of technologies that have not only redefined the communicative modalities used but have also contributed to creating new spaces and times for communicative action. As Cassano asserts, “it is difficult to conceive modernity without this increasingly irresistible tendency toward acceleration: from transportation to communications, the history of the last centuries is one of a growing reduction of time, the victory of time over space [. . .] Just a hundred years ago, it took almost a month to cross the Atlantic; today, it is done in a few hours” (Cassano 2001). What Cassano highlights underscores a significant aspect of communicative dynamics that, with increasing technological development, have assumed and continue to assume diverse facets and are constantly under discussion. McQuail’s organizational pyramid is an important starting point for a reflection that not only considers the complexity of communication in general but also reinterprets the levels of organization of communication interactions. Traditional media have been replaced by digital media, especially the Internet, leading to a reorganization of communicative interactions that stimulate sometimes conflicting observations. Consider the role played by platforms such as TikTok and Instagram, for example, where traditional norms of communication and their organization have evolved. With the growing development of digital media, there is a transformation of relational dynamics that necessitates a reinterpretation not only of the classical concept of communicative interaction but also the development of new forms of sociality arising from different membership groups. This has a significant impact on daily life and the management of primary face-to-face relationships.

2. Interactions and Social Analysis: A Premise for the Study of the Digital Society

The concept of interaction plays a crucial role in sociological analysis and is now more than ever being revisited through the contributions of literature focused on the analysis of digital dynamics (Centorrino and Romeo 2023). The symbolic interactionism approach can be useful in better understanding how the idea of interaction and the associated sociality has evolved over time. “It essentially rests on three simple premises. The first is that humans

act toward things based on the meaning these things have for them. This can include everything individuals notice in the objects of their physical world, such as trees or chairs, other humans like a mother or a store clerk, categories of humans like friends or enemies, institutions like a school and a government, guiding ideals like individual independence or honesty, others' activities like their commands and requests, and situations encountered in their daily lives. The second premise is that their meaning is derived from, or arises from, social interaction each person has with others. The third is that these meanings are handled and modified through an interpretive process used by the person in relation to the things encountered" (Blumer 1969). These three premises—proposed by one of the fathers of symbolic interactionism—when analyzed individually are a useful tool for understanding the concept of social interaction. When Blumer refers to the importance of meanings for human action, he means that in daily life, each person is aware of what they can relate to themselves. They evaluate, judge, and take positions based on the judgment they formulate about what they perceive, whether it is a significant fact for their life or a less important object or event. Humans behave according to the symbols these objects or events assume for them. The reference to the origin of meanings indicates that the objects we use only acquire meaning through the interaction we can establish with others within a particular society, where an object can have an entirely different meaning for someone living in a distant or different society from ours. Regarding interpretation, the interactionist sociologist believes that individuals interpret objects or events near them through a "dialogue with oneself" (Romania 2008), reflecting internally with oneself and then adopting a specific behavior. Blumer often compares social structure to a straitjacket concerning the idea of interaction because, while acknowledging the presence of social structures within society, such as roles, status, and power differences, it cannot be thought that they determine behavior. Therefore, one cannot speak of interaction between social roles but between people. It is important to note that while roles can influence a particular action, it does not mean that the action is the result of interaction between the roles. This perspective arises from considering humans as active subjects who interact differently in different contexts and are adaptable. The contribution of symbolic interactionists remains relevant over time because it emphasizes another aspect related to the processes of identity construction through the internalization of norms during socialization. This process, grounded in interaction, encompasses an individual's entire life. Every social change results from the interaction between two or more individuals. Social interaction, therefore, accompanies every stage of daily life and, consequently, involves another element, that of the situation, formulated by W.I. Thomas with the so-called Thomas theorem, stating that "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Collins 1998). This theorem explains how the entire social structure is based on individuals' ability to control the definition of a situation. They do this during interaction, whether it is gestural or verbal, but in both cases they are experiencing a process of interaction. Collins, to explain the concept of a situation, uses the example of a man wielding a gun, stating that if a man pretends to have a gun, he can control and intimidate a group of people in the same way as a man who possesses it. This is because, in that moment, what matters is the definition of that situation, provided that in both cases, the hostages believe that person genuinely has a gun. Collins's example indicates that in the processes of interaction, situations are managed by the individuals who interact and define the situation in which they are interacting. Another interesting perspective is the one extensively developed around the concept of communication as interaction, particularly associated with Erving Goffman. Regarding interactions, in the introduction to *The Ritual of Interaction*, the author wrote, "I start from the assumption that the object of the study of interaction should not be the individual and their psychology but rather the syntactic relationships existing among the acts of people who come into direct contact [. . .] Not men and their moments, therefore, but rather moments and their men" (Goffman 1988). Every action carried out by individuals in public places, according to the author, is a response born from the moment they are experiencing and, therefore, demands a specific behavior. Being in a place in the presence of strangers implies that each

action must be performed by the individual without anxieties and concerns, interacting with people they may not know in daily life. To explain the concept of social interaction, Goffman believes that one should not only resort to the psychology of the individual. One of the requirements for interacting in society, according to him, is understanding that each subject has a “face” that does not belong to them, is not their property, but must be considered as something they have gained or not in the moment of interaction with others. This leads individuals to conduct what he calls “face games”, which represent the basis of every form of interaction. The Canadian sociologist further specifies that within interactions it is necessary to follow certain conditions and strategies that can guide the beginning or conclusion of any interaction in a non-conflictual manner. The Goffmanian view is to consider daily life as a set of norms that can guide the management of interactions but not always solve certain problems that arise during action. Another useful element in understanding the idea of interaction according to the author is the concept of “aligning action”. Goffman’s observation concerns contexts with high formality, as each member involved in the interaction interprets the part assigned to them and applies a collaborative spirit with the other members of their team, trying to establish a stable degree of formality and informality compared to members of another team, depending on the situation that arises. “In many forms of social interaction, unofficial communication provides one team with a way of offering the other an invitation, precise but not binding, to increase or decrease social distance and formality, or to modify the interaction to include the representation of a new set of roles” (Goffman 1969). A tacit agreement is created among members of a particular interacting community, following a sort of script that functions to preserve the interaction of groups. The behavior exhibited by members of the same team does not encourage them to maintain distance or be on guard but leads them to adopt a code of secret signs that appear incomprehensible to outsiders. Goffman also believes that a situation is created in which if an individual ignores the opinion of a person they do not know and who belongs to another team, they gradually make themselves known to the other person. Only when they have gained the confidence of the interlocutor will they begin to interact with ease. Thus, a gradual revelation takes place. This concept is interesting in the debate within the social sciences that study digital spaces, where interactions and knowledge of the other transform into a continuous anticipation of elements of the person’s personality, habits, and lifestyles on the Web before the face-to-face encounter even occurs, assuming there is mutual interest and a desire to build a relationship. In Goffman’s approach, individuals live a double role in their daily lives. On one hand, they strive to save face, trying not to provoke a hostile attitude from those around them. On the other hand, when in the private sphere, they can reflect and not play a role but rather be themselves, engaging in a game of masks. Furthermore, the digital space has significantly amplified moments of encounter and comparison, reducing geographical distances that were once a cause of incommunicability.

3. Social Interactions through Some Classics of the Social Sciences

Simmel’s analysis serves as a link to the examination by scholars of the classical concept of social interaction. In the perspective of the German scholar, the necessity for each individual to interact with others in various ways at every moment of collective life is evident. This vision is found in Simmel’s formulation of the famous three a priori, clarifying possible ways to answer the question: how is society possible? Particularly relevant to the current research and the discourse developed up to this point is Simmel’s contribution when formulating the concept of sociability. Sociability becomes a crucial requirement for sociality as it provides the opportunity to express the individual’s need to be with others, the mutual and changing dependence of individuals, fostering the development of association. Simmel writes, “Association is, therefore, a form realized in infinite ways: in it, individuals animated by an identity of interests (sensible or ideal, temporary or lasting, conscious or unconscious, of a causal or teleological nature) grow into unity and give substance to their expectations. This process also occurs in the separation of what I

have indicated as the form and content of social existence. In itself, society is that set of reciprocal actions in which material or individual contents and interests take shape (or derive nourishment) from certain stimuli and certain objectives. Later on, these forms become autonomous and act only for themselves, independently of any content. This phenomenon is what is meant by the term sociability" (Simmel 1983). The concept of interaction has stimulated scholars to formulate new theories, often applied to different contexts, such as media environments, which also lend themselves to a new interpretation. However, this interpretation starts from the relational assumption formulated by the classics previously referenced. In the media field, the contribution of Thompson (1998) opens the social sciences' landscape on the concept of interaction in comparison with the advent of media. The three types of interaction he elaborated are as follows: face-to-face, mediated, and quasi-mediated. The first type of interaction involves the possibility of establishing communicative relationships only face to face, present in the same place and at the same time. This type of interaction is naturally typical of societies in a phase preceding the development of mass media. It is managed by symbols and other types of actions but always in the presence of others. It is a form of communication directed at specific recipients and is dialogical in nature. Thompson's reflection is crucial because it places media in the relational context not merely as tools for transmission but as a "factor that dictates the modes of the process itself" (Pacelli 2002). With the second type of interaction, we witness a transformation both in communication and society. According to Thompson, the advent of mediated and quasi-mediated interaction has not swept away the attention and use of face-to-face relationships. On the contrary, the development of media products has, in some cases, enhanced this type of interaction. Many editorial products from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, were packaged with the intention of being reintegrated into face-to-face interaction contexts. There is a significant fact in all of this: the change in relational dynamics brought about by the advent of these two modes of interaction. As the author writes, "it is happening more and more often that people receive information and symbolic content from sources other than the individuals they come into direct contact within everyday life" (Thompson 1998). There are situations where relationships and the exchange of information are increasingly managed by the media, which have assumed the role of primary sources in various circumstances. In the case of mediated interaction, the sharing of temporal space diminishes. Like the previous type, it is a dialogical interaction directed at specific recipients. Typical examples of this interaction can be found in the telephone and letters. In the case of quasi-mediated interaction, there is a separation of contexts, an extension in time and space, and a type of interaction involving an indefinite number of recipients. Thompson's analysis proves to be an essential interpretive key for understanding the changes that the concept of interaction, as formulated by Blumer, has undergone. This is especially crucial because it involves the emergence of new relational spaces and new actors in the interaction. New relational opportunities have emerged, further growing with the development of the Internet, where individuals can interact at any time using computer tools. When Thompson developed his theory, he was already aware that the model of the three interactions would need to evolve with the advent of new technologies. According to the author, these are tools that give rise to forms of interaction that are different from those he studied. For example, computer networks allow bidirectional communication that does not involve specific individuals but occurs in a "many-to-many" fashion (conferences, bulletin boards, etc.). On the importance and necessity of studying media for understanding forms of interaction, Silverstone has repeatedly expressed himself in addressing the debate on experience and communication. He asserts that "the media should be studied because they are central to our daily lives, as social, cultural, political, and economic dimensions of the contemporary world and as elements that contribute to our variable ability to make sense of the world, to construct and share its meanings" (Silverstone 2002). This perspective aligns with studies focused on the correlation between personal experience, interaction, and communication, as emphasized by Meyrowitz (1985). What emerges from Meyrowitz's studies is that the

advent of new media contributes to the emergence of new situations, behaviors, and roles. In his book *No Sense of Place*, using examples from everyday life, Meyrowitz highlights how the development and use of new technologies eliminate distances, making physical space in some relationships appear entirely secondary. While drawing on Goffman, the author realizes that the concept of the “definition of the situation” is not sufficient to consider the changes that occur in roles and social order. This becomes evident when Meyrowitz states, “[. . .] the mechanism by which electronic media influence social behavior is not a mysterious sensory balance but a well-recognized restructuring of the social stages on which we interpret our roles and, consequently, a change in our conception of appropriate behavior. Because when audiences change, so do social representations.” It is precisely from these initial types of interaction that we can analyze how social interactions have transformed in the digital age through the emergence of digital communities, studied primarily by Rheingold (1994), considered one of the pioneers of interactions in digital communities, and Lévy (2023) on the concept of the virtual. These two scholars, regarded as the pioneers of digital space research, represent the starting point for the new way of considering social interactions.

4. New Forms of Social Interaction in the Digital Society

The reinterpretation of the concept of interaction within digital dynamics has revolutionized both the time and the space in which individuals build their relationships. According to classical sociology, the difference between physical space and social space lies in considering the former as the material, physical “place”, while social space, being immaterial, “refers both to the space of interaction and to the dynamics of social stratification” (Pacelli and Marchetti 2007). This analysis, when placed within digital transformations, becomes central. Following the literature on spatial forms and the distinction between physical space and social space, not-so-dated studies often refer to the emergence of new spaces of interaction, places and non-places. As Augé states, “The distinction between place and non-place passes through the opposition of place with space. Now, Michel de Certeau has proposed an analysis of the notions of place and space that constitutes a necessary preliminary. As for him, he does not oppose places to spaces or places to non-places. He considers space as a practiced place, a crossroads of mobility: it is those who move that transform the street geometrically defined as a place of urbanism into space. Several references correspond to this parallel, between the place as a set of coexisting elements in a certain order and space as the animation of these places caused by mobility, which clarify its terms” (Augé 1993). However, with the increase in digital technologies, one must contend with the emergence of these new spaces of interaction, analyzing their relational and organizational dynamics and how they fit into the daily lives of groups or individuals. In analyzing the birth of virtual communities, Rheingold does not hide his enthusiasm for these new spaces, emphasizing how modern societies increasingly characterized themselves with hectic and formal rhythms of life that did not allow the establishment and cultivation of various types of relationships. According to Rheingold (2002), virtual communities solve this problem by laying the foundation for more democratic communication integrated into the social fabric. In his well-known book, *Smart Mobs*, the American scholar not only analyzes the use of mobile phones but defines smart mobs as intelligent crowds, i.e., crowds that move through small media such as mobile phones. Through these technological tools that become entirely personal, small virtual communities are formed, according to the scholar. His vision, in a sense, overturns the idea that the mass, in the traditional view, was incapable of taking specific positions and implementing intelligent behaviors. There is the physical world, where pedestrians must avoid colliding when crossing the street near the traffic light. Around the crowd, there is the artificial but concrete world of the city, a totalizing environment, a container of commercial propaganda, and the private communication channels of SMS-dependent tribes, a third sphere in which bursts of concise phrases connect people in physical space and in real time. The mobile phone, called Keitai in Japanese, constituted new relational environments at a stage of growth when adolescents wanted

to share certain topics and conversations only with their peers. Rheingold underscores, referencing anthropologist Mizuko Ito's study, that through mobile phones, teenagers had the opportunity to build an intimate space of sociability, escaping parental control that monitored their conversations through the home phone. The mobile phone ends up revolutionizing both the relationships between parents and children and intimacy with peers, as well as the daily habits of those who use it. Rheingold's analysis anticipates what would happen later with the advent of social media, applications like WhatsApp, Telegram, etc., which have built a medial space of social interactions far more complex than what happened with early mobile phones. True mobile inhabited spaces have emerged, where products are consumed and sentimental and friendly relationships are built, breaking the dynamics of face-to-face encounters, which are often anticipated by digital interaction. On the relational front and the significant influence of digital spaces on social interactions, Sherry Turkle has offered a thoughtful reflection over the years. In her main work, *Life on the Screen*, she writes, "When we confront our image with the mirror of the machine, we come to see ourselves differently. In the eighties, when I first defined the computer as our second self, these identity-transforming relationships almost always occurred individually, one to one, one person alone with one machine. Today it is no longer the case. [...] The internet connects millions of people in new spaces that are changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the shape of our communities, our deepest identity. [...] We have learned to live in virtual worlds. We can find ourselves alone navigating virtual oceans, discovering virtual mysteries, and designing virtual skyscrapers. [...] We have the possibility of creating new types of virtual communities, where we engage alongside people from all over the world, people with whom we have daily conversations, people with whom we can have very intimate relationships but perhaps will never physically meet" (Turkle 1996). In this passage, the author emphasizes how the Internet has not only changed the way of communicating and building relationships but has also contributed to reinterpreting other issues related to thinking, as well as the possibility of opening a discussion and dialogue with people who are part of the same virtual community but may not become acquaintances or friends in real life. This point regarding online interactions has spurred over the years an increase in ethnographic research in the virtual world, urging researchers to be at the forefront by becoming users/students of virtual environments such as chat rooms and virtual worlds like *Second Life*, where the role of identity and relationships becomes a fundamental interpretive key. In ethnographic research, the researcher becomes an observer and user of virtual worlds and realities. Turkle began conducting her ethnographic research online by studying MUDs (Multi-User Domains), which are virtual games where Web users meet, and their physical appearance is represented by textual descriptions. A person can appear differently from their characteristics in everyday life. Anonymity, according to Turkle, allows the possibility of expressing the unexplored multiplicity of oneself, but also of playing with it. To explain the multiplicity of oneself, she often uses the metaphor of the many open windows on our computer desktop. In this sense, she closely addresses both the theme of identity, often disguised in virtual communities, and the individual's need to establish communication and interaction with people they do not know in physical reality. Her ethnographic studies thus become an indispensable basis for subsequent works and take on their meaning when placed in a broader cultural and social context that goes beyond the classic online/offline dichotomy and considers the transformations that the Internet itself causes in the culture of every individual and in the new lifestyles created by its evolution and use. Her studies over the years have focused on the importance of online conversation, as well as the function of technology in building relationships. In her book *Alone Together*, the perpetual connection to and the daily and sometimes cumbersome use of technology in the life of every individual lead Turkle to reflect, through empirical research, on the relationship that people establish with social robots that "look us in the eye, watch us, and learn to recognize us; they ask us to take care of them, and in return, we imagine that they can do the same" (Turkle 2012). Networks and technologies almost become people; sometimes, individuals, in Turkle's view, expect more from technologies

than from the people they have daily relationships with. With technology, Turkle points out, many believe they can overcome loneliness; just look at how mobile phones are used in everyday life and how they have become indispensable for most people. Turkle's study highlights some issues. On the one hand, there is an awareness that for many people, both young and adult, technology can fill their lives and eliminate loneliness. On the other hand, there is a need to reclaim traditional communication methods while considering the developments in technology and digital spaces. It is precisely, notes Turkle, "if we want to move forward as a generation together with the next (that) we must accept the complexity of our situation. We have invented technologies that can inspire and empower, yet we have allowed them to diminish us. The prospect of loving or being loved by a machine changes what love is. [...] We deserve better. And if we remind ourselves that we decide how to keep technology busy, we will get better".

5. Conclusions

The Internet has not only opened a new way of looking at interactions and social ties but has redefined the way to consider space–time categories in a new logic that continually redefines the role of the individual in relation to others. While the theory of symbolic interactionism, which we have discussed in this contribution, represents the starting point for understanding the ongoing changes brought about by the digital age, it is also possible to observe that the path is not yet entirely clear. Digital spaces, which have matured in their own right, continue to be fertile ground for change in every context of social life. The advent of platforms and divergent scientific opinions on the effects of artificial intelligence are just two of the main issues that need to be further investigated through scientific inquiry—an inquiry that involves not only technological progress and societal change but also the role of the individual in the face of this change, which is also of a cultural nature.

Society, to borrow Simmel's analysis, exists insofar as we can consider it as a set of relationships, or as he puts it, "bundles of relations". Imagine our society today without relationships; it is difficult to picture it. However, the issue is more complex today because the Internet plays a full role in these relationships. It is precisely on relationships that the foundations of shared knowledge, shared connections, and a humanity that is built day by day on exchanges, encounters, conflicts, and cultures in verbal and symbolic motion are based. The complexity of social interactions is combined not only with the use of the telephone but also with the main field of investigation in the social sciences of platforms (Centorrino and Romeo 2023). In particular, the theoretical and empirical analysis of the last fifteen years has shifted attention to time management within digital spaces. In the first studies on the Internet, the temporal category was divided between online and offline; the advent of platforms and even before that of social media has redefined the question of time, considered as the continuity of the activities carried out in physical places (Rheingold 2002). Theoretical analysis of social interactions, therefore, on the one hand cannot be limited to analyzing exclusively the effects of the telephone or digital technologies, and on the other hand, in the near future will have to deal with the effects of artificial intelligence (Floridi 2022) on relational life.

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