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# THE QUESTION OF LEGITIMACY OF THE MASS MEDIA: RORTY VERSUS HABERMAS

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**Abstract:** The ‘democratising’ function that the liberal theory assigned to the media is under suspicion because it is neither evident nor factual that the main goal of the media is geared towards contributing to fulfil democratic ideals. Nowadays, the media operate as an industry with ad hoc interests, which are far away from the role that liberalism once ascribed to it, and despite this, the ideas of truth, right to information and freedom of expression are still interpreted with inherited concepts from liberal theory. This paper argues that there is a need to reinterpret the democratising role of the media. In so doing, it delves into two contrasting understandings of democratic life: Richard Rorty’s liberal irony and Jürgen Habermas’s communicative action. The article contends that the theory of communicative action embraces specific notions and definitions, which are necessary to give an adequate and responsible response to the ever demanding task that legitimises the media: that of providing the citizens with pertinent and significant information to live in a society.

**Keywords:** *truth, justification, irony, contingency, media ethics, communicative action, pragmatism, democracy, validity claims, right to information.*

## RICHARD RORTY'S PRAGMATIC PROPOSAL

Richard Rorty believes in hope as a claim and a goal that mobilises social dynamics. His suggestion is based on the experience of hope-based “philosophy” in the USA. Rorty explains that, according to the fathers of pragmatism, James and Dewey, this would mean a North Americanisation of philosophy, for, in his view, the USA are the country that only has the future to support its reason and justification. Besides, he considers national pride as a necessary condition for self-improvement. Hilary Putnam established the essence of pragmatism as the primacy of the practical over the theoretical –what she has called the primacy of the agent point of view. Rorty believes in his country’s democratic experience, as well as in what he defines an experimental, promising, progressive state of mind prevailing in the USA. Moreover, he shares this view with John Dewey and Walt Whitman. The latter contends “...because the United States is the first country founded in the hope of a new kind of human fraternity, it would be the place where the promise of the ages would first be realized ” (Rorty, 1998:22). Like several Americans, Rorty is thus proud of the legacy left by the country’s founding fathers to the USA democracy.

Rorty’s democratic project is defined along the following axes (Curcó, 2007):

1. A compendium of the Enlightenment values without their metaphysical weight.
2. Opposition to essentialism.
3. A pluralist society with democracy, solidarity and tolerance.

The citizen of this democratic project is a liberal citizen, defined as the citizen who is aware of his placement in history and from this placement can discern in his practices a potential of universality, yet not their necessity of being universal. Rorty rejects the necessity of universalising practices, of considering something as human nature or of a univocal concept of truth. He questions the belief of the existence of Truth in the sense of something not made by human hands, something which has authority over human beings (Rorty, 1998:27). For this reason he suggests that truth cannot be important for democratic politics and he urges this citizen to adhere to justification. He argues that democratic politics can be defended, at the same time as three premises are rejected: a) there is only

one truth and the universal interest in it provides us with a reason to create an inclusivist community, b) truth is a correspondence with reality and c) reality has an intrinsic nature (Rorty & Habermas, 2007). In connection with the above, he rejects the need for a theory of knowledge that works like a cultural base, and the idea of keeping philosophy as something “rigorous” or “scientific” (Rorty, 1990).

In the next section there is a short presentation of the concepts related to Richard Rorty’s democratic project, in order to be able to subsequently present the function the mass media would have in this framework.

## CONCEPTUAL AXES

### Contingency

Rorty asserts that in order to understand the human being, one has to do it from the point of view of contingency, not of necessity or of substantiality, i.e. he accepts that the ego, as well as reality and our explanations of it, could be different. Contingency points out that thinking about something beyond what we are able to understand right now in a specific context is senseless. This is why considering reality as something existing out there, independently of the person that can describe it, a supreme being or a transcendental ego, can only limit and confuse people. Rorty explains that Dewey’s philosophy is a systematic attempt to temporalize everything, thereby leaving nothing fixed. This means abandoning the attempt to find a theoretical frame of reference to evaluate proposals for the human future. The price of this temporalization is contingency (Rorty, 1998: 20-23). So he prefers historicism and contextualism and urges us not to seek depth or significance in events; on the contrary, we should try to understand them within their context as cultural events.

Just like habits, moral concepts, such as for example justice, are contingent and depend on a particular place and time. The individual is historical contingency and depends on the provisional agreement about which attitudes are normal and which practices are fair or unfair.

### Irony, Ironist, Liberal Ironist

Irony is a quality of people, citizens, which makes them feel a radical detachment from themselves (Rorty, 1989). This detachment occurs

precisely because the ego is contingent. Rorty adds that to some extent irony has an epistemological character, because it connects the subject to its *Final Vocabulary*<sup>1</sup> or to fundamental values of its culture. Therefore he goes as far as to say that irony has an ethical character.

He states that in order to be an ironist a person has to meet three conditions:

1. To have radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary one uses, precisely because having been in contact with other vocabularies makes one constantly doubt.
2. To realise that one's own final vocabulary can neither clarify nor confirm or resolve these doubts.
3. Insofar as somebody philosophises about their situation, they do not think that their vocabulary is closer to reality than others or that it is in touch with a different reality. An ironist only confronts vocabularies in order to confront the old with the new, this is his only interest (Rorty, 1989).

The *Liberal Ironist* is a citizen that includes among the desires that cannot have foundations his own hopes that suffering diminishes and that human humiliation caused by others ceases. For, according to Rorty, the only expectation one can have is to diminish the cruelty towards and the suffering of others, and the *Liberal Ironist* is committed to this, while at the same time understands the contingency of his own commitment.

## Solidarity

Solidarity is what people have to aspire to living in a society. It does not depend on the participation of a common truth or a common goal but on sharing a common selfish hope: the hope that one's own world will not be destroyed. Rorty (1989) develops this idea taking it to the moral level and says saying that people have the moral obligation to experience a feeling of solidarity towards all the other human beings. His approach is based on the doctrine according to which moral obligation is "we-intentions" as explained by Wilfrid Sellars. The moral force comes from feeling part of a group, i.e. thinking in terms of "one of us" has more force than

<sup>1</sup> Rorty defines *Final Vocabulary* as: "...a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives." Cf. Rorty 1989, p. 73.

thinking about somebody as “people like us”. The feeling of solidarity is strengthened when we consider that the one with whom we declare solidarity is “one of us”, while “us” includes almost the entire human species.

## Truth

Rorty’s suggestion disregards truth, for once it is obtained it cannot be recognised. Nevertheless, we do realise it when we find ourselves before a justification. One can recognise an appropriate justification but not a precise truth; one does not know if a belief is true in absolute terms, however nobody can formulate an objection against it (Curcó, 2007). Objective truth, if it is possible to speak in these terms, is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have about how to explain what is going on (Rorty, 1990: 385). Objective truth is thus tied to his own idea about cultural anthropology.

For Rorty, pragmatism dissolves and dismantles the traditional problem of truth by suggesting that truth has no explanatory use but the following uses: a) Warrant or support, b) Warning in observations such as “your belief in S is completely justified but it might not be true” (Rorty, 1991:127– 128) and c) Diverging reference in order to say metalinguistic things such as “S is true only if....”. He rejects the idea of truth being a universal desire (Rorty, 2000), a common claim, as well as the idea of truth having a specific correspondence with reality and of reality having an intrinsic nature.

In addition, it is possible to appreciate the pragmatic influence in Rorty’s concept of truth: “...the achievement of Dewey’s philosophy was to treat evaluative terms such as ‘true’ and ‘right’ not as signifying a relation to some antecedently existing thing –such as God’s Will, or Moral Law, or the Intrinsic Nature of Objective Reality– but as expressions of satisfaction at having found a solution to a problem: a problem which may someday seem obsolete, and a satisfaction which may someday seem misplaced” (Rorty, 1998:28).

“The error is to assume that ‘true’ needs a definition” (Rorty, 1991:127), a maxim that warns of the need to distinguish between the statement that “the world is out there” and the one that “truth is out there”. To say that the world is out there means that most of the things in space and time are the effects of causes that do not include human mental states. While, according to Rorty, truth is not out there, because

it cannot exist independently of the human mind: where there are no propositions there is no truth, propositions are elements of the human language and these elements are human creations. The world is out there, but the description of the world is not, therefore only the descriptions of the world can be true or false.

In his democratic suggestion, Rorty links truth with life in society as a part of free discussion (Rorty, 1989: 84):

“From our angle, all that matters for liberal politics is the widely shared conviction that, as I said in Chapter 3, we shall call ‘true’ or ‘good’ whatever is the outcome of free discussion –that if we take care of political freedom, truth and goodness will take care of themselves”.

### The Priority of Democracy over Philosophy

Rorty defines democracy as a free exchange of opinions that does not result in or necessarily has to result in a universal agreement. At the same time, he criticizes the position of particular pretensions regarding philosophy, i.e. that of judging other areas of culture on the basis of its special knowledge about the “foundations” of these areas (Rorty, 1990: 8). He explains that as citizens we can be as indifferent to the philosophical disagreements on the nature of the ego as Jefferson was to the theological differences on the nature of God (Rorty, 1991). In both cases it is a matter of beliefs that have to remain private. Every one of us is the sovereign of our private realm, where everything can happen. Nonetheless, understanding philosophy as an explanation of the existing relations between a particular order and human nature is irrelevant for political democracy; this is why Rorty concludes that “*when the two come into conflict, democracy takes precedence over philosophy*” (Rorty, 1991:192).

Having verified that one cannot get convincing and practical answers from philosophy when it comes to guiding social relations, he suggests that it should be democracy, as a method of obtaining concrete agreements, the one that guides relations in society. In this sense, consensus is a task, a goal, but it cannot be considered a presupposition of intercultural dialogue. On Rorty’s account, consensus is not the starting point, it is the finish line. The emphasis of Rorty’s project is on hope that unites citizens, it is bound to the citizens’ ironic attitude –a product of verification and experimentation of constant contingency– and shared vocabularies. Thus he argues that “*The idea that liberal societies are bound together by philo-*

*sophical beliefs seems to me to be ludicrous. What binds societies together are common vocabularies and common hopes” (Rorty, 1989: 86).*

#### THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN RORTY’S PHILOSOPHY

Our question to Rorty has to do with the role of mass media in a technocracy, i.e. in democracies subject to the constant changes of information societies and the technology entailed. On the one hand, mass media can be a part of the system, following the dictates of the market within the communications industry, and on the other hand, it can have a critical role and a role of active defence of democracy. Rorty opts for the second one because he believes that mass media were transmitting stories about the pain that can generate solidarity between citizens.

In Rorty’s picture, mass media as a democratic institution are defined as tools justified by the success they have when they promote the democratic purposes we want to achieve. If the way of achieving this “success” is not defined, there is the risk of them becoming just another source of entertainment. And this is not what Rorty suggests; what he suggests is a reformulation of how the media carry out their function for democratic life.

Rorty’s suggestion has to do with Irony and, as already stated, he even attributes an ethical character to Irony, and by doing this he is providing foundations, leaving an aspect outside contingency. If we let Irony be the citizen’s quality that governs, for instance the mass media function, could the mass media inform of things that are not true? Could they stop doing it? One could say that the media inform of things that are not true and, by doing this, they misinform the citizens, but the difference is that Rorty does not consider this significant. Or maybe he does? Rorty takes the actual Irony seriously. Maybe Rorty, without realising it, suggested a project with much more foundations than he would have liked.

Rorty dismisses the need to talk about truth in social dialogue, as well as to consider it the aim of the investigation, for the investigation should only aim at solving problems, convincing audiences and/or achieving our goals. He rejects the epistemology understood as the search for certainties to cling to. At the same time, he refutes the attempt of philosophy to constitute itself in a tribunal of reason (Rorty, 1990: 166). In his opinion, the question is not whether human knowledge has foundations, but whether it makes sense to suggest that it does (Rorty, 1990: 178).



However, journalism has a value inasmuch as it narrates other people's pain, which reinforces –or at least it should– the expectation of solidarity and permits the identification with the others. Moreover, the media, among other institutions such as the judiciary, elections, or universities, are a space favourable for free discussion (Rorty, 1989). However, truth is not the aim of the mass media work.

Rorty acknowledges the task of the media to narrate the pain experienced by others (Rorty, 2002), and, although a vast range of people offer this kind of descriptions (journalists, anthropologists, sociologists, novelists, film directors, painters), he prefers novels and articles and newspaper columns as ideal spaces to find them. The usefulness of this kind of writings is to make types of pain visible, so that one can get over them. If we avoid pain, solidarity shall awaken and we shall achieve hope. Liberal ironists shall get to know this pain through the narratives they are given, but how should this narrative be? Does it not matter whether it is offered by an ethnographer, a writer or a journalist? Is it the same if the narrative is given in a university, through a book or every day through the mass media? Is there a method that favours this narrative? How do we measure the effectiveness, the success of these narratives, if we consider them democratic institutions?

## JÜRGEN HABERMAS'S COMMUNICATIVE PROPOSAL

Habermas's suggestion falls within the context of Critical Modernity developed in the Frankfurt School in the 20th century, which rejects the instrumentalist shift tacitly produced by the enlightened reasoning and, instead, favours moral reasoning as a key to make history (Cortina, 2000). An enormous difference between Habermas and the original ideas of the Frankfurt School is that, whereas some of its principal exponents, such as Adorno and Horkheimer, considered that the world suffered from excessive reason, Habermas considers it is rather a matter of lack of its application and, in order to explain this point, he develops his Discourse Ethics. The work of the prolific writers of the Frankfurt School sought, through criticising modernity, not only to provide a theoretical suggestion, but also a driving force of change (Velasco, 2003).

In the next section there is a short presentation of the axes along which Habermas develops his suggestion, which shall enable to understand the role of mass media it entails.



## CONCEPTUAL AXES

### Communicative Action and Validity Claims

Habermas explains that there are different kinds of actions depending on their orientation: actions oriented to reaching understanding and actions oriented to success. Among the actions oriented to success there are the instrumental actions, oriented to success in non-social contexts, and the strategic actions, also oriented to success but within social contexts. He develops his theory based on those actions that are oriented to reaching understanding, to seeking consensus and to the way of achieving it. Among them there is the communicative action. Habermas (Habermas, 2001 a:124) defines it as the search for understanding amongst actors, who seek to coordinate the action. The interpretation is crucial as it bridges the various definitions of the negotiative situation susceptible of consensus.

Habermas states that the action situation is a field of current needs of understanding and of current possibilities of action (Habermas, 2001 b:175) and that the consensus achievable through intersubjective recognition of the validity claims can be measured (Habermas, 1991). According to Habermas, one can distinguish two “types” of validity claims. On the one hand, there are the validity claims of the actual act of communication (intelligibility, truth, veracity and honesty), which are transcendental and implicit in communication. This means that, when one of them is accepted, all of them are accepted; otherwise, the rejection of one or another validity claim has to be declared.<sup>2</sup>

On the other hand, Habermas also refers to the validity claim which aspires to reach a norm, i.e. its content. Having met the claims of the act of communication itself, which are a condition of acceptance of the norm on behalf of the people involved, the content of the norm has to be the object of consent of everybody involved. This is why it is crucial to reach understanding, which is the mechanism coordinating the action and depending on the rational approval and on the acceptance of the speech act on behalf of the hearer.

The conception of language changes depending on the type of action: in teleological actions, language is conceived as one more means of influencing according to one's own purposes. In normative actions, language

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique regarding the influence of Kant in Habermas in connection with the expectations of validity and the consequent relation established between truth and justification, Cf: Bernstein, 2010.

is a means of transportation of consensus (cultural values) ratified in every new act of understanding. Language in dramaturgical action is a means of presentation of self. In the case of communicative action, it presupposes language as a means of understanding without any abbreviations, from the pre-interpreted horizon his world represents, simultaneously with something in the objective world, in the social world and in the subjective world, in order to negotiate definitions of the situation that can be shared by everybody (Habermas, 2001 a:137).

There are two aspects of language that Habermas deals with: first of all, the fact that language is the only rational medium for getting to know reality and, therefore, a condition of possibility of knowledge. Secondly, that language is in its original form, when it tries to reach understanding, not when it tries to achieve other goals.

When actions are oriented to reaching understanding, the actor takes for granted, even if it is in an implicit way, four validity claims, namely:

1. Comprehensibility or intelligibility: good expression.
2. Veracity or authenticity: making oneself clear in the presentation of subjective experiences (Habermas, 2001 a).
3. Propositional truth: presenting in an understandable manner something that exists with the claim to represent facts.
4. Honesty or normative correction: the content expressed has to adjust to a specific normative context socially recognisable as valid.

Each validity claim alludes to a different reality: the objective world, the social world or the subjective world: the objective world is the totality of all entities about which real utterances are possible; the social world is the totality of all legitimately regulated interpersonal relations; and the subjective world consists of the totality of the speaker's experiences, to which he has privileged access. And each one of these worlds is related to a specific validity claim: the claim of truth refers to something in the objective world, the claim of honesty refers to something in the social world and the claim of veracity refers to something in the subjective world (Habermas, 1991).

The three worlds are a framework for interpretation within which common definitions of an action situation are produced. In the case of the claims of propositional truth and the claims of honesty or normative correction, the speaker can comply with the guarantee by discursive means, i.e. reasoning. In the case of the claim of sincerity, it shall be

through congruent behaviour that the actor will account for the expressed guarantee, given the fact that somebody really believes what they are saying only if it can be proven with acts.

Although propositional truth and normative correction are the claims that can be achieved by discursive means, they coordinate the action in a different way. Speech actions behave differently in the case of events and in the case of rules. Habermas puts it this way: A moral norm has sense and validity independently of whether it has been promulgated and is used in one or another sense. However, there is no assertive utterance that can achieve autonomy of norms unless it is through a speech act (Habermas, 1991: 80). The claims of truth lie only in speech actions<sup>3</sup>, the claims of normative validity in principle lie in norms and they only lie in speech actions in an indirect way (Habermas, 1991).

This is why it is so important to distinguish between the social fact of intersubjective recognition and the claim of a rule to recognition. A positive entry into the force of norms is not enough to assure their long-term social validity. One can easily see this by observing what happened at different moments in history and in different countries throughout the world with laws that were promulgated under dictatorships: they are in force but not valid.

The Habermasian proposal goes all the way to the field of communicative action: the ground of ethics. Habermas explains that the justification of norms, unlike the justification of utterances, is a communicative matter, and it is not so by chance but for essential reasons: “*The question whether a controversial norm is equally good for all the people involved is something that can be decided according to pragmatic rules in the form of a real discourse*” (Habermas, 1991: 90). The communicative model proposed by Habermas lays emphasis on the role of language and the role of understanding. Language is significant only from a pragmatic point of view, when speakers establish relationships with the world and they do it in a reflective way. Understanding works like a mechanism that coordinates action. This means that the participants in the interaction agree upon the validity they expect, because they intersubjectively recognise the validity claims with which they present themselves to each other (Habermas, 2001 a).

<sup>3</sup> For a critical approach to Habermas’s work on the theory of speech acts, as well as the answer of Habermas to critical comments on his own approach, Cfr: Thompson, J.B. & Held, D, 1982, p. 130 y p. 271-273, respectively.

### Speech Act

The coordinated action that seeks understanding is expressed through speech acts. Following Austin's theory, Habermas recognises three elements in the speech act:

1. Locutionary act: the content of declarative sentences ('p') or of nominalised declarative sentences (that 'p'). With these actions the speaker expresses the state of things, he says something about them.
2. Illocutionary act: the agent performs an action by saying something (for instance, a statement, a promise, an order or a confession). The illocutionary aim the speaker is trying to achieve comes from the actual meaning of the utterance, so its communicative intention is complete if the other party understands.
3. Perlocutionary act: the speaker wants to have an effect on the hearer. The perlocutionary aim is not followed by the content; it can only be determined by verifying the agent's intention. Thus, the description of perlocutionary effects has to refer to a context of teleological action that goes beyond the actual speech act (Habermas, 2001 a).

Moreover, there is a correspondence between the three components of the speech act and knowledge, obligations and expression (Habermas, 2001 b). Speech acts are means in which understanding happens and they can be used for the following purposes:

1. To establish and renew interpersonal relationships in which the speaker refers to something that belongs to the world of legitimate regulations.
2. To present or presuppose states or facts, when the speaker refers to the world.
3. To present experiences, i.e. the presentation the subject makes of itself by a reference to its subjective world (Habermas, 2001 a).

Communicative action seeks illocutionary aims, not perlocutionary ones, given that the latter ones can only be known once the speaker's intentions are known and they cannot be obtained by the actual utterance content. Hence for communicative action, only the speech acts to which the speaker relates claims of validity subject to critique can be considered

decisive, (Habermas 2001 b: 391). This way, the situations in which the speaker seeks undeclared aims with perlocutionary acts are excluded. The same goes for the case in which the speaker seeks illocutionary aims before which the hearer cannot take a stand based on reasons, such as the imperatives. Aiming exclusively at perlocutionary acts can cause different kinds of distortions, as well as asymmetries detrimental to the search of consensus. Habermas explains that, whereas in teleological, normative and dramaturgical action one only emphasises one function of language (causing perlocutionary effects, establishing interpersonal relationships and expressing experiences), communicative action takes into consideration all of the language functions.

### **Ideal Speech Situation**

The ideal speech situation is a theoretical model of approach to communicative interactions that represents a distortion-free communication. It consists in the fact that communication is freely performed and on equal terms with no coercion other than the best argument.<sup>4</sup> As a theoretical construction it is useful, for it allows us to explain and understand the theory of communicative action. However, we should keep in mind that for Habermas this is not a goal of communication. The goal is reaching understanding and the means is the coordination of the action between two or more linguistically competent actors.

### **Discourse Ethics**

What Discourse Ethics suggest is an extension of the Theory of Communicative Action towards the moral field (Cortina, 2000): it does not provide content orientations; it is a process full of assumptions that seeks to guarantee impartiality in the formation of a judgment. Its method is practical discourse, in the sense of a process of verification of the validity of rules uttered in a hypothetical manner (Habermas, 1991). So by extension, moral thinking also aims at resolving conflicts of action through communicative means in order to achieve agreements. Its process is intersubjective; therefore, the task of foundation-building depends on the real discourses between human beings. This way, all metaphysical *a*

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<sup>4</sup> For some critiques of the role of the best argument: Cfr: Hesse, 1995 and Rorty & Habermas, 2007.

*priori* elements are rejected, given that everything starts and ends in a human praxis.

Discourse Ethics uses the discursive principle of universalisation (“U”) as a principal criterion of moral evaluation: the proposal is universal, because with the foundations of “U”, the fundamental assumption of ethical relativism is rejected. Habermas explains that in the same way theoretical discourse eliminates the rift between particular observations and general hypotheses through induction, practical discourse needs a bridge principle. This moral principle takes the form of a norm of argumentation and carries out a function that is equivalent to induction. He defines it this way: a moral principle that excludes as invalid those norms that do not get the qualified approval of all possible recipients, (Habermas, 1991: 83 and 142).

For Discourse Ethics, a norm can only aspire to validity when everybody involved can manage to achieve an agreement (or is able to achieve an agreement) in which such a rule is valid: this is the postulate of Discourse Ethics “D”, which presupposes that the selection of norms can have foundations. Discourse Ethics has, therefore, two assumptions:

1. Claims of normative validity have a cognitive sense and they can be dealt with as claims of truth.
2. Foundation norms and orders require the performance of a real discourse which is not a monologue.

Habermas warns of the importance of distinguishing the principle of universalisation “U” –rule of argumentation–, from the postulate of Discourse Ethics “D”, which makes the claim clear. Otherwise, the attempts to provide foundations for Discourse Ethics are weakened, for the rules of argumentation are confused with their contents, and the assumptions are confused with moral principles as foundations of philosophical ethics.

The discourse proposed by Habermas has a number of rules tacitly accepted and intuitively acknowledged, through the use of the method of philosophy –transcendental reflection– and by application of the *factum* of argumentation. Therefore, consensus is established in a discursive manner (Habermas, 1991). Thus, Ethics is placed within the framework of universal pragmatics, which conceives the use of language oriented to reaching understanding as the original use of language (Habermas, 2001) and seeks to identify and construct the possible universal conditions of

understanding. He believes language is a means of this understanding and, therefore, the principal element for the coordination of human action. This is why the possible understanding conditions coincide with the universal assumptions of communicative action.

#### THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA IN HABERMAS'S WRITINGS

The definition of truth given by Habermas makes the work of mass media possible, because it recognises the possibility of presenting real or false events, so it admits the possibility to inform or not. On the other hand, it does not take into account the concept of correspondence that has marred journalists' work, because it is so easy to abdicate truth when it comes to something unachievable or maybe even non-existent. Moreover, it is a definition of truth that takes into account processes and rules of the game that can become a compass when it comes to providing information.

In the same way, the distinction made by Habermas between entry into force and validity allows us to understand the modern functioning of mass media. The entry into force of a use –a regulation, a law, etc. – has to do with a coercive force (social or legal), while validity has to do with legitimacy. In the case of mass media, both are required: on the one hand, the democratic function of the media has to be valid, and on the other the professional work of journalists has to follow certain rules, so that in case of transgressions there will be a coercive force that sanctions.

Before the moral discourse limitations –taking for granted that there are or there could be such limitations– it is necessary to introduce processes for correcting the ones related to facticity. In the meanwhile, validity of norms has to derive from a dialogue that combines the interests of the interested parties. In the case of mass media, Habermas's distinction between entry into force and validity allows us to combine the interests of the citizens that trust that their right to be informed in the best way shall be met with the interests of the journalists for doing their job well and with the interests of the company that has to survive financially but whose original concept has to meet the information obligation.

Habermas sees democracy as a field and ground of practical use of reason. Moreover, he has been critical towards the role of mass media as these have contributed to the progressive dissolution of the concept of public opinion (Habermas, 1981). In this light, Habermas does not deny



that the mass media can act as catalysts of forming public opinion, if they are true to their democratic function<sup>5</sup>.

## JUSTIFICATION OR TRUTH IN MASS MEDIA: A HABERMASIAN PERSPECTIVE

The model proposed by Jürgen Habermas seems more propitious for re-legitimisation of the democratising role of the mass media<sup>6</sup> given that Habermas acknowledges a normative function of mass media. His model is rational and cognitive and, according to it, understanding is achievable given the existence of interpretative contexts (common horizon) while it appeals to a universal background. It is the way Habermas sees language and the social importance of the coordination of actions that make his proposal an opportune framework for an ethical proposal for mass media in nowadays societies.

As it is a deontological perspective, it permits reconsidering the principles orienting the professional action and revitalising the democratic function of mass media. From this point of view, it is important

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Garnham explains the basic critiques and the virtues of Habermas's notion of public sphere as far as mass media are concerned, emphasising on the connection between pluralistic political project, media and public sphere. Cf. Garnham, 1992: 360, 361 and 372.

<sup>6</sup> This article deals with the differences between Rorty and Habermas with regard to these aspects that seem relevant to legitimacy of the democratising function of mass media in modern societies. However, given the huge range of Habermas's work and the importance of the subjects he dealt with, he has inspired many critical works from different perspectives. Some of them: regarding the theory of the public sphere (Cohen, 1989; Dryzek, 1990; Frishkin 1991; Calhoun (Ed.) 1992; Peters, 1993; Thompson, 1995; Page, 1996; Phillips, 1996; Buckingham, 1997; Shudson 1997, Hass 2004), regarding the possible contribution of discourse ethics to mass media (Calhoun (Ed.) 1992; Keane, 1991; Scanell 1998), regarding the theory of Habermas in connection with the work of mass media under the paradigm of public or civil journalism (Anderson, Dardenne & Kilenberg, 1997; Glasser & Bowers, 1999; Hass 1999), regarding the pragmatic proposal and its aim of investigating general competencies required for a correct performance of speech acts (Thompson & Held (Ed.) 1982, on the force of the best argument (Hesse, 1995), ideal conditions of truth and separation between theory and practice (Bernstein, 2010).

A particularly interesting work is Thompson and Held's (1982), editors of a compendium of critiques of various matters including a chapter in which Habermas answers to his critics.

for the assumptions of Discourse Ethics to have a claim of normative validity, because, if they do, there is also the possibility to guide journalists' work in mass media. The fact that norms have dialogue foundations is crucial, for dialogue creates a commitment and if there is a commitment, there is also responsibility. Rorty does not see "the pragmatic force" of saying that an argument that, like most of them, convinces certain people and not others is a good argument (Rorty & Habermas, 2007). In contrast, Rorty believes that the pragmatic base of his proposal should understand truth as that which is better for us to believe in (Rorty, 1990: 10). With Habermas the force of the best argument lies in the fact that it makes coordination of the action possible.

#### THE DEMOCRATIC CONTEXT

Rorty defines the democratic institutions as tools that are justified by the success they can have when democratic purposes are promoted, without explaining who is it that defines these purposes or the success achieved and how this success is determined. In the particular case of mass media for example, would it be enough to have a wide covering? I.e. is it enough if a great number of people can have access to them? According to Rorty, mass media would "work" as successful tools, but he does not explain what kind of success that would be, nor does he study in depth the features and implications of their democratising role.

Rorty acknowledges the mass media's task of narrating the pain other people have experienced, so that we can approach hope and try to avoid what we share, i.e. pain, by means of identification. This means that he attributes a function to mass media, even though he does not explain why do they have that function, neither does he attribute to mass media relevance for the foundations of such a role. But given that mass media any have to inform of true facts, that the existence of mass media is valid because of the social function attributed to them by the liberal theory, and that all this results in a responsibility from which they cannot be detached –neither mass media nor journalists–, this role requires foundations. And these foundations are found in communicative action, because communicative action seeks understanding in the social context and requires a role of language and truths under critical thought. Habermas's acknowledgment of democracy and the way of understanding the delib-

erative processes that exist in democracy, offers the possibility of reconsidering the legitimacy of mass media work in modern democratic societies.

Just like democracy has its foundations due to the communicative action, given that the latter one seeks social agreement, it also where mass media foundations lie. This is why, according to Habermas's paradigm, the possibility of foundation-building and re-moralising mass media brings about not only the mass media functioning, but also the quality of democracy.

#### CONTEXTUALISM OR LIFEWORLD

The mass media should take into consideration various contexts when they inform: they have to transmit interpreted facts, having considered references to other facts and to their possible consequences. Of course the information is transmitted from a particular context, but this does not prevent the journalist from considering there are others as well. Otherwise, complicated situations might come up, such as excluding points of view, opinions or different attitudes, which would question the activity of mass media. In this sense, the way Rorty understands contextualism can reduce the possibilities of interpretation of facts of which the mass media wish to inform to some very culturally defined elements<sup>7</sup>.

This is why Habermas's lifeworld seems more appropriate, in the sense of an unquestioned substratum that allows reaching understanding: it is a background from which we act and interpret actions –our own or other people's– and from which existing situations can be problematised. Even if there is no common background –in the case of two people from different cultures for example– Habermas acknowledges the possibility of communication, because there is –not *de facto*, but there can be– an existential opening to communication.<sup>8</sup> Rorty, on the other hand, abdi-

<sup>7</sup> Rorty himself clearly explains the distance between those two in comparison with the truth: the American philosopher believes that when the distinction between justification and truth has been explained, there cannot be much more to say about truth, while Habermas believes that there is a lot more to be said and that doing it is important for democratic politics. Cf: Rorty & Habermas, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> In his words, the intersubjectivity of reaching understanding substitutes the objectivity of experience (mentalistic perspective). Cf: Rorty & Habermas, 2007.

cates the possibility of understanding if it is not shared in the same context. This, besides limiting the possibilities of understanding, it entails a risk, because globalisation and immigration present a picture that makes people communicate with others from different cultural and geographical contexts. While Rorty criticises the belief that building an epistemology should consist in finding the maximum common ground with others (Rorty, 1990: 316), he is not considering that even without the intention to find the common ground, such common ground exists and thereby allows communication. Moreover, such common ground exists prior to the establishing communication while allowing such an understanding, which is a fundamental condition of possibility in Habermas's proposal.

On the other hand, Rorty believes that in practice it is not important to pose the question of whether our common assertions are universal or they depend on the context (Rorty & Habermas, 2007), according to him. With regard to this distinction, Habermas suggests something that can be more important in practice: the tension between facticity and validity. However, it seems that Rorty and Habermas do not mean the same thing when they talk about practice: Rorty's proposal alludes to the utility in everyday life, while Habermas refers to the lifeworld, for it is there that decisions are made in contrast to discourse or theory.

#### TRUTH OR JUSTIFICATION? THE ROLE OF TRUTH<sup>9</sup>

Habermas attributes value to the concept of truth, he tries to define it and this is of great value because the mass media cannot do without it, given that truth is a condition of information. Rorty agrees with Habermas on the point that the only general foundations of the criterion of truth we can have are those that refer to a distortion-free communication. However, Rorty believes that one cannot say much about this distortion-

<sup>9</sup> In *Sobre la verdad: ¿validez universal o justificación?*, it is made clear that what creates the biggest difference between them is precisely the matter of truth. Rorty emphasises the role of truth in democratic politics, fallibilism, universality versus context, performative contradiction, the best argument and the necessity of a theory of rationality. On the other hand, Habermas takes up again some of these subjects: contextualism, fallibilism, justification and truth, language and speech acts, as well as the necessity of certainties in everyday practice. Finally Rorty gives an end to their dialogue by claiming the elements that create the distance between them, truth and justification.

free communication except that it is the communication achieved when there are democratic political institutions and the conditions to make these institutions work. Habermas asserts that there is much more to say (Rorty 1989): besides recognising it as a condition of the possibility of free discussion, he explains that it has to be a symmetrical, public communication with no coercion whatsoever except for the one of the best argument, among other things.

Since that mass media have to inform of facts and since there is the problem of the possibility of access to truth, it seems more appropriate to think along with Habermas there shall be arguments, interpretations or justifications that will be constantly checked, while a better argument can arise for debate with the original one.<sup>10</sup> This way, besides the possibility of a debate and of not believing that “Truth” is a possession of one or of a small group of people, there is a mechanism of constant contrasting.

On the other hand, Rorty and Habermas understand *Justification* in different ways: while Rorty states that it has to do with what can be used at a particular moment and place –this is why he acknowledges some historical norms of acceptability–, for Habermas *Justification* means exclusively that the parties involved have good reasons to choose a common form of action (Habermas, 1991: 96). It is not a substitute for truth; it is what makes a speaker prefer certain reasons or others when he presents arguments. While Habermas defines truth as the result of the communicative process and as a universal claim of validity previous to all kinds of communicative process, Rorty does not consider it the result of a process; he relates it to language contingency, rejecting a use of truth as foundations or explanation. According to Habermas, the connection between truth and justification<sup>11</sup> explains why we can talk about a claim of unconditional truth that aims beyond what is justified. It is not the right representation of reality that is in stake, but the everyday practices that should not collapse. The assumption of an objective world independent of our descriptions meets a functional requirement of our processes of cooperation and communication. Without this assumption, daily practices would break down, (Rorty & Habermas, 2007: 108-109).

<sup>10</sup> He also says that all knowledge is fallible and when it has been problematised it will depend on justification. Cf: Rorty & Habermas, 2007.

<sup>11</sup> For a critical approach of this relation Cf. Bernstein, 2010.

Some of the arguments Rorty gives in favour of *Justification*, which are to the detriment of the mass media function, are the following:

1. Mass media give information and narrate facts. If we only have Justifications, there would be an implicit reduction or elimination of space for informing of facts (the hard facts, as in the journalistic jargon), thus limiting the space to beliefs, opinions, interpretation or entertainment. And in our complex societies both are necessary to make a decision, informing of facts and opinions or interpretations about them.
2. Rorty explains that if we want to discuss a difference to be worthy, this difference has to have some importance in the practical sphere. However, who is it that decides whether a difference has importance in the practical sphere? Who is it that defines the practical sphere in various contexts or situations and how? Who or what is it that acts as an “invisible moderator”, when it comes to evaluating differences? Particularly in considering that the relevance of practice in Rorty is connected with the problem’s solutions.
3. He adds that the only difference of this sort –that has consequences in the practical sphere– that exists between truth and justification is the difference between former and newer audiences (Rorty, 2000: 88); i.e. the difference between the conditional character of justification versus the unconditional character of truth and the price one has to pay for the unconditionality is the price of practical lack of importance. However, if we consider the mass media work, it is the contrary that takes place: the information shall be such and shall be of service to the function of democracy, only if it is true. If somebody informs that the maximum temperature today will be 10°C and it ends up that the maximum temperature is 3°C, there is a practical lack of importance precisely because of the conditionality of the information. How do we make decisions, if we do not have the appropriate information? How many times have we heard people complaining precisely about the lack of precision, appropriateness, truth of the information we read, see and/or hear from the mass media? The journalistic information loses practical importance if it is not reliable, if it is not unconditional, if it is not true. We cannot survive only with suppositions in everyday life (Rorty & Habermas, 2007).

4. Rorty says that the use of warning of truth is the only one we cannot easily do without, when there is a warning that a belief can be justified and not be true. But we can easily refute it, on the one hand: how can Rorty get to know it is not true? And on the other hand, what happens, when we wish to talk about the truth of the narration of a fact and not of a belief?<sup>12</sup> One of the risks the journalistic work in mass media entails is precisely to fill newspapers, the news, radio programmes or Internet pages with beliefs or personal opinions that are very well justified without providing narrations of true facts.
5. According to Rorty, the assertions that can be made, by extension, the information that can be transmitted, depend on their possibility of justification before a particular audience. He does not even consider it important to wander about the existence of certain assertions that could have a validity that goes beyond the context of the audience in question. He claims that believing that an assertion depends on the context or it is universal does not have any kind of practical significance (Rorty, 2000). There are occasions when this difference has a practical significance, such as when a law is passed. On the other hand, there is also significance, when it comes to defining the functioning of mass media in democracy. The functioning of mass media that derives from Rorty's pragmatic proposal does not seem solid enough to sustain the citizens' right to be informed nor to be part of the democratic mechanism. Moreover, since according to Rorty, to consider that something as inalienable rights is a cultural construction and as such it belongs in each and every context, the lack of freedom of the press and information not being considered a right in some countries would be something absolutely legitimate, as it is the result of the current culture<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Habermas is right when he explains that convictions have a different role in action than in discourse and they also prove their truth in a different way. In everyday practice, facing the world makes us see whether convictions "work" or they are problematised, while in argumentation they merely depend on the reasons given. Rorty does not agree that there are these two levels, because he considers that rational discourse is one more field of action. To study this Cf: Rorty & Habermas, 2007, p. 130 and p. 147.

<sup>13</sup> It would be interesting to know how Rorty would resolve the dilemma given in situations where countries whose population –at least a part of it– does consider



## MASS MEDIA FUNCTIONING

The role that would correspond to mass media in Rorty's perspective is not very clear or could be described as lax, depending on one's point of view. But it is nonetheless deficient, if we consider that mass media are a part of democracy. Rorty seems to neglect the linkage between the 'right' purpose of functioning of mass media and that of democracy. In other words, Rorty ignores whether democracy should benefit from the fact that mass media does its work in the right way and *vice versa*.

Rorty considers mass media as 'transmitters of others' narratives about pain which could generate solidarity amongst citizens. However, this results insufficient when attempting to justify the mass media's role in current democratic contexts, particularly if considering that the mass media's function is also contingent. Moreover it is worth asking whether Rorty would deem such narratives relevant, particularly when the pain described by mass media has already been experienced by someone.

It is deficient, because, as we have already stated, it does not take into consideration one of the conditions of information –truth–, and also because it does not take into consideration the idea of the aims of the professions with a particular *ethos*, neither does it take into account a concept of responsibility in the case of the journalist's profession. As Rorty does not differentiate the role of journalists from that of anthropologists or filmmakers, etc.,<sup>14</sup> he exempts journalists –even more– from responsibility, who appear to be exclusively devoted to deliver these types of descriptions. Devoting oneself professionally to a particular activity implies professional responsibility. For instance, with the arrival of the internet and the multiplication of the forms of retrieving information, one can access information and opinions through bloggers, individuals who are not journalists but create descriptions and opinions that could potentially enrich social dialogue. However, such proliferation of voices does not equal the responsibility –ethical or juridical– of those professionally dedicated to spread information. Moreover, by giving the novel a prominent role as the space capable of generating debate and dialogue

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that freedom of the press and the right to be informed are a part of its culture, while their presidents or ruling parties and their supporters do not agree.

<sup>14</sup> The goal of this description is not to be a faithful portrait of reality. Rorty says that they have an important role in the conception of moral identity. Cfr. Rorty, R: *Achieving our country*. Harvard University Press, London, 1998, p. 12.

about social theory, one could be tempted to confuse the role of the media role with that of entertainment in the best case scenario, or camouflaging both roles in the worst of them.

What motivates Habermas's project is seeking foundation elements, while Rorty's proposal is based on how to organise social life after having renounced them. For Habermas, the aim of social communication is understanding, while for Rorty it is giving hopeful narratives, and this is neither enough to legitimate the democratic function of the media nor to give a moral framework to the profession of journalism. The liberal ironist has to criticise in order to open horizons of hope; therefore, the work of journalists is one of irony. The big difference is that Habermas considers a supreme criterion, some ultimate concepts: the expectance of validity and the involved parties' consent. This is ultimate, non-hypothetical, it is a condition of possibility so that there can be a framework of circumstances.

But irony also has game rules. Rorty abdicates the expectance of validity. Is it possible not to take seriously the conditions of possibility of irony? Doing this is ultimate, in a certain way it also means providing foundations. So there seems to be a logical contradiction in not wanting to consider ultimate concepts. There are occasions in which reality asks for an explanation in a way we cannot simply stay in contingency: neither the journalist that informs, nor the media transmitting the information, nor the citizen who is informed.

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