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INTERVIEW WITH DENEL REHBERG SEDO

Knowledge construction, reading practices and usages of digital technologies

Construcción del conocimiento,
prácticas de lectura y usos de las
tecnologías digitales

Construção de conhecimentos,
práticas de leitura e usos de
tecnologias digitais

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The analysis of the relationship between digital technologies and communication requires a critical approach and a perspective that necessarily

considers the study of power relations, the ubiquity of the objects of study and the specificities and complexity of their uses. In conversation with *InMediaciones de la Comunicación*, the well-known Canadian researcher DeNel Rehberg Sedo of Mount Saint Vincent University, Professor in the Department of Communication Studies, lecturer in the Faculty of Education and Women and Gender Studies, and co-director of *Beyond the Book Project*, offers us a unique and enriching dialogue to understand how the themes of the three axes proposed in this dossier are mutually interrelated. The discussion explains the manner in which power relations and economic interests influence what we read, our use of digital devices and the consumption of information on various digital platforms, the needs of policies on digital literacy and the challenges - and the long way to go - related to access to information today. For this purpose, she quotes the contributions of renowned authors in the field, such as Jose van Dijk, the work carried out within the framework of the Society for the History of Authorship Reading and Publishing (SHARP), and the international research carried out jointly with Danielle Fuller. On this occasion, in her interview with *InMediaciones de la Comunicación*, she analyses in depth the microsystems of social media, because according to her point of view, this allows us to recognize regional differences, identify the affordances of the platforms, point out the current analytical challenges of research “online” and “offline” life, and the most relevant issue for her: the material and symbolic access to information. This dialogue between two researchers, a Canadian and an Argentinean, is a journey that takes a look at power relations and the way in which the business model of the platforms configures different uses of digital technologies and the multiple ways of constructing knowledge according to social practices, working conditions and available time.

SOLEDAD AYALA (S.A.): I have read your research, and all the subjects you study are characterized by the analysis of power relations, and you consider social and political contexts and cultural participation as a pivotal way of communication and industrial processes. So, in your opinion, we would like to know what the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological challenges in the relationship are concerning knowledge constructions, technology and communication processes.

DENEL REHBERG SEDO (D.R.S.): It is very satisfying that you recognize that within the whole body of my work because that is the overall theme. But my, “oh no!”, my initial reaction to the question, is that I don’t feel like I can prioritize any of those, because in all my work and the way that I approach any phenomena, or any research question, is to take all three axes into consideration. Whether they be at the beginning of a reading experience or an interaction with a social media platform always begins, for me, either always



starts with thinking about who has the power. Who has the power to have the book published? Who has the power to use the technology, the social media platform? So, I think what I would rather do is think about how do the issues of power relations interact in epistemological, theoretical, and methodological challenges. So, for example, if I was going to approach some research challenge or some phenomena from a perspective of analysis, I would think about whose voice or whose way of being are we looking at.

In addition, from a theoretical and a methodological perspective, I consider Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST), which has always been the foundation of my work. FST suggests or mandates that we pay attention to the participants' voices. So, I prioritize those whom I'm investigating. I prioritize their knowledge, their way of being, more than from my own perspective. I ask myself: What are they telling me? I try. I should say, I try. And I try to look at it from that perspective instead of starting from some sort of pre-determined perspective, or some theoretical perspective and imparting it on them. You might say that I am applying a sort of grounded theory perspective to every challenge that I look at.

S.A.: The starting point would be all the data, the opinions, and the representation of all the voices instead of taking a theoretical structure and trying to “put it into” the data. Am I right?

D.R.S.: Yes, that's right. And in some situations, you just can't do it. Because you have questions and sometimes, after a while, you know so much as a researcher that you can't put that aside. So, you look at a new set of data, but

you can't forget what you already know, and you already have some theoretical foundations. For example, this power relations foundation and coming at it from a wide variety of different perspectives. It is not new. I mean, the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies is my foundation, it is my scholarly training.

This book of Jose van Dyck. Are you familiar with van Dyck?

S.A.: Yes. I met her in the Netherlands, at a Summer School about audiences and users, organized by the Research School for Media Studies (RS-MeS) and the Erasmus Research Centre for Media, Communication and Culture (ERMeCC).

D.R.S.: Oh! Lucky you! She created a model that I have always used in my work, even though I hadn't read *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media* (van Dyck, 2013) until it was published in 2013. She uses a model when she investigates social media organizations. She's looking at the platforms as micro-systems. She investigates ownership, governance, business models, the content, users and usage, and the technology itself.

S.A.: It's a really complex and complete analysis. I mean, all the aspects are included.

D.R.S.: All the aspect are included. And, well, you have said that I look at the context, the social and political context, and the cultural participation. That's because I'm looking at all those things, but in my work, I attempt to prioritise because I am most interested in the users. But we can't ignore the business models because they have the economic power. If we think about the governance, we question the policies, you know? The policies of the platform, the policies or laws of a country, the policies of the schoolroom in which the technology is used. We have to think about ownership because it has influence on the platform. It has influence on the economic and social power, right?

S.A.: Yes, of course. And also, even if you focus on the users, they don't act in a bubble. It's fascinating work because you can find many things about that logic of the usage practice, but they're not universal. It's like you said, you have to consider all aspects.

D.R.S.: Yes! And depending on what discipline you come from, you might be prone to look at only one part of that 360°-degree microsystem. So, if you are a literary scholar, if you are a communications person, a film person, a music person, you are going to look at content. Content is what's most interesting for a lot of people. But the content doesn't happen outside the business model, outside technology, the platform and its affordances.

S.A.: Affordances! It's been such a long time since I've heard that word!

D.R.S.: The affordances of the platform. Yes. Affordance Studies. It's a very

exciting time to be a scholar in this area. There's just so much going on. Another thing that I like about the microsystem idea is that it allows for regional differences. It allows for you to think about how a social media platform, for example, is being used in a Canadian classroom and how it is also being used in an Argentinian classroom. We have different educational systems and you can contemplate that. The contexts are different, yes, but there might be consistencies. For example, when we consider your article for the *Participations*¹, it was very specific to Argentina, but there were also world-wide consistencies that we could identify.

S.A.: Exactly! And also, it was a learning process at the same time. I mean, it was an opportunity to read many authors that otherwise would have been “almost impossible” to know. We come from different frameworks, educational systems, cultural ways of reading and learning digital sources. Our backgrounds give us a different perspective of analysis.

D.R.S.: Right, I agree. Something that we are working on in the Society for the History of Authorship Reading and Publishing (SHARP)², and which Danielle Fuller and I tried to do in our last book, *Reading Bestsellers: Recommendation Culture and the Multimodal Reader* (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2023a), is to get outside of this idea that Western scholarship is preeminent. We need to read more from scholars outside of the US and the UK, outside of Canada and Australia. I mean, it is very important that we start hearing and listening to conversations among scholars from different parts of the world. And that's why I need to improve my Spanish.

And it is also essential if we think about access in general. I mean, who has the devices? How long can they afford to be on them? The access to information extends to everyday users and producers. Whose voice gets to get heard in all of the mess? Which voice or whose voice it is being heard? There are many voices that are not being heard. I feel that is paramount right now.

S.A.: In my opinion, is a big social, cultural and, especially, a political problem. I think that it is mostly political because of certain events that are taking place in the world. For example, just a “few voices” are being heard, and sadly, many voices of hate in some places.

D.R.S.: It is complicated. I think it is not only a political problem. It starts that way because everything is political, right? There's a capital P in Political, as in Political parties and Ideologies. But then, there's political with a small p because the personal is political. The problem gets more complicated with algorithms.

1 Editor's note: She refers to *Participations: Journal of Audience and Reception Studies*, where Soledad Ayala published the article: Reading and search practices in Rosario, Argentina: a case study of usage practices of digital and paper devices by students and professors in higher education (Ayala, 2019).

2 Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (<https://sharpweb.org>).

S.A.: Yes, you add algorithms to the problem and it's triplicated.

D.R.S.: Exactly! But if you are interested in users, many aspects are involved: if they can do an activity, if they have time, if they have money, if they have patience, if they have digital literacy. If the users have that, they can see the voices (social and cultural) that are lost or hidden.

S.A.: What does digital literacy literally mean to you? In the sense that, in this part of our historical era, printed and digital devices and text and reading practices coexist. However, the literacy is always linked to print reading practices. So, from your perspective, how can you define digital literacy?

D.R.S.: I think that is really a brilliant question that I've never thought about before. That it is linked to print. Because I actually think that there are several types of digital literacy. So, we might be talking about the ability to recognize fake news or an AI-generated image, for example. We can teach people how to do that. We didn't need those skills. I mean, we didn't need to have those skills, right? Well, we did need to be able to recognize fake news stories. But at the foundation of digital literacy is the ability to ask five different questions or to make different assumptions. First, for whom was this message, this image or this story, or this video created? Second, the creator, or the author, always has an agenda. That goes across print to digital. Third, there are always people who are left out. Who is this message for? Who does this message not speak to? Who is this video not aimed at? Fourth, what is the economic motivation behind whatever? Whatever the medium or message is. Fifth, how can different people can interpret this message? I mean, for me, how can they interpret this message? So, these are the assumptions or questions that whatever we are looking at, we have to go through in our mind. Who is this for? What are they intending? Who is not for? What is the agenda behind it? This is the foundation of digital literacy.

Some people are worried now about the speed through which we consume messages. At first, it was Tweets, and then Facebook, and now, it's Instagram posts or tiktoks. Something that we are not able to sit down and read. But I am not concerned about that. There's evidence that certain kind of texts can hold our attention as long as before. If you think about reading in terms of the places where is happening, like in fandoms (websites where young people are taking a story and rewriting it for themselves and then sometimes interacting with the author and sometimes not), there are some deep readings going on. It might not be philosophical all the time, but they are very active. Some of the big websites have millions of users, so reading, in that kind of literacy, is certainly going on.

I also think that humans want stories. The fact that there are millions of podcasts on Apple, and now Spotify is getting into it, money is being made. The podcast is 20 years old now, which is wild, but the medium keeps growing. That means people go for long stories and news. They are listening. They want more than a newspaper article about something that is happening. They want

to know more, so they listen for hours. The average of a podcast is one hour long. That is a lot, a lot of time.

S.A.: Indeed. It is a lot of time. Also, the orality was the first type of technology that people used to communicate and read. The first reading practices were oral, was an oral message, oral communication, oral time. It's going back to our ancient form of reading and communicating between ourselves. So, it is really weird, it is kind of "we go back in time".

D.R.S.: Yes. Absolutely. As humans, we've always told stories. That's how it is in the world. I don't get too worried about people thinking that young people don't read anymore because: a) lot of young people read, but they don't call it reading. There may be social repercussions if they identify as a reader. Some studies have shown that young boys and young men don't say that they read because it's not a manly thing to do. But it depends a lot on how reading was taught to them, usually by mothers in the home, if they were fortunate enough. And then they go to elementary school and a lot of elementary school teachers are female. And so, reading, reading stories is equated with reading and a feminine activity. But we have illustrated that young boys and men actually read nonfiction and magazines and video games and fan fiction, but they don't consider it reading because they are not stories.

S.A.: And how they consider it?

D.R.S.: They say that they don't read. But they do read. They actually read, more than what readers say that they read.

S.A.: Yes, because it's actually an interpretation. Reading is, most of all, a form of interpretation, basically; even if you check an online social network, you are reading.

D.R.S.: Exactly. It is very interesting. If you are reading your social media feed, you probably wouldn't say you're reading because we often think of reading as an spatially activity. We read in bed, or at your desk, reading a schoolbook or a novel. But, yes, they actually read. Reading is and should be conceptualized even further now because, in part, BookTok, Booktube, and Bookstagram have become so incredibly huge and popular. Being a reader is a way of identifying yourself as a young person. I identify myself as a reader. But you might not identify as a reader. You might identify as a gamer or a skateboarder, but sometimes you do pick up a novel.

S.A.: You have always shown a very responsible analytical development to interpret readers representation and we just talked about that. I mean what we just talked about, BookTok, and the result of studies that you just read about what reading is for males. In this scenario, how do you think that

this could impact in the way of participating and consuming? Does it generally impact the way of participating, consuming and building cultural, political, and social aspects?

D.R.S.: One of the things that was not surprising, but that was reassuring in our latest project, is that we're in a post-digital world where we think that everything is happening online but, in fact, there's a very strong fluidness. And if you think about your own life and your participation with communication technologies, unless you have some sort of social media addiction, your life kind of goes back and forth between online and offline. At the beginning of my scholarly career, I was very out there because I was already online; my research was looking at online reading groups, and I was the first one here in Canada to do that sort of thing. It seemed like such a big thing because my PhD was on face-to-face women book clubs. So, to go into an online environment, it seemed like such a big thing. But now, you can't do that. You can't say this happens over here and this happens over there, because it's happening everywhere.

It is all connected. I feel like the ability to move between those different spheres is a privilege. It's a privilege that we live in a time where you're able to do that, because not everybody has equal access. I suspect it's the same in Argentina as it is in Canada. For example, there are areas in my province where people still don't have high-speed Internet.

And I suspect that when we think about "readers", or "students", we think about the people who have access. And thinking about who has access to different, you know, cultural capital or social capital, you assume that your online world is the reality for everybody. And it can't be. We must think about the other percent living without technology and being online all the time. We're not paying attention as much because we're very concerned about what is happening in digital world. It is a very exciting to be researching online. However, we had the most wonderful experience conducting research for *Reading Bestsellers*. We were with 16 young people from around the world, 13 different countries. And we had a two-month chat with them on Instagram, in a private group. And we talked to them. We did various things with them. They did a survey. We had an extended conversation with them for two months, like I say, but we had them do different kinds of activities, such as showing us their favourite influencers and creating a book challenge that they would like to for their followers, if they had followers. And we talked to them about reviewing a bestseller in English because we were commissioned to write that book. But these are people who had access to the Internet. One of our participants Instagram wasn't allowed. She's in China. So, she had to drop out. Several of them had two jobs. Now that's common here in Canada, as well. Two jobs while going to university; so, they couldn't do anything extra. I think there were four of them who couldn't get to the bestseller that they wanted. One of the reasons is because of the book distribution from the major publishing houses in the United States and the

United Kingdom. They just don't have the rights in their countries. So, some of them got pirate versions. Some of them found friends to bring them in. You know, it's just we make these assumptions that everything is as we experience it. I'm not as good at it as I would like to be, but I want to hear from some of the voices that we've not heard from yet.

S.A.: What you are saying is really important because also you have to add to that, for example, the situation related to being able to get the best-seller. This illustrates one of the assumptions, one of the “truths” that in the digital world “everything is easy to get”. Everything “is just one click away”. With all these editorial products, such as books, both fiction and non-fiction, you have a problem if it's not translated into Spanish. And not only with bestsellers, but also in access to electronic academic material.

D.R.S.: Exactly. I mean, that is one of the things that SHARP is doing. They're international and they are trying to get more non-English work into the world. Now we have a new project, it's called Lingua Franca, and it's taking work from your own mother tongue and working with translators to put it into English so that your voices can be heard.

It is so important for us to hear other voices. Another point to that of academics is about systems of economic power. I mean, it's power inequities at various levels. For example, a research colleague is at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. We are using a qualitative software analysis program called NVivo for the project we are working on. It's QSR NVivo and it is a super sophisticated software that costs a lot for a license. Her university gives it to her. Mine doesn't. This leads us to think about knowledge creation. The larger universities and research institutions have big, sophisticated tools to research, access and create data. In other words, we must think about who gets to create knowledge, and whose knowledge gets shared.

S.A.: Returning to the main questions of the interview, what is your opinion about implementing public policies for more responsible social media use?

D.R.S.: I'm teaching two graduate courses this term. One of them is Communication and Social Change, and the other one is Media, Culture and Society. And recently, very recently at the end of our summer, so around August, the Canadian government set a tax (Bill C-18) that requires big tech companies, like Meta and Google, to pay Canadian broadcasting companies if their articles show up on the platforms. I'm sure many people get their news, and in particular in Canada, young people find their news on social media. They'll click through to an article, and they'll share articles from the newspapers. Meta, in retaliation, decided that there would be no news on their platforms in Canada then. So now we don't get any news on Facebook or Instagram. Google is suggesting they will

do the same. When there's not news from traditional media sources on their feeds, of course, people find disinformation or fake news. What we're asking in my class is if there should be some sort of leniency for the big tech companies? I don't think that that's the answer.

Another option is a clearing house that's outside of the social media platforms and outside of government. We kind of have that in Canada with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, which is our state media. But so, I'm not one to really advocate for policies on social media platforms. I feel a little bit of a distrust of government getting their hands into it. And I think that the big tech companies seem to be, Meta in particular, looking for abuses, for fake news and such. But a lot of that is at a cost to humans who are fact-checkers and are sitting the war zones and getting paid minimum wage to do that. So, I don't really know.

When it comes around privacy issues, I think that there have to be policies because I think it's a basic human right to stay private if you want to stay private. The European Union is much more advanced and van Dijck has been instrumental working with the European Union policy makers and they seem to be much more advanced than those of us in North America. I don't know the situation in your country and or in other South American countries but I think it has to be a worldwide effort and I don't know how that would happen.

S.A.: I think it is almost impossible that something could change, most of all due to power relations and also the economic power that many of those companies have in different countries. For example, we have a very progressive and very complete law about media regulations. But if a very important media group comes forward and if it is not convenient for that group, they have the power to either change the regulation or delay its approval. And, to those obstacles, you have to add the time justice takes. So, I think it will be up to humankind, for our wellness, to have some common points that we can agree on, besides the differences in all the continents, and then, of course, every country adapts those points according to its media legislation. For example, regarding democracy, the most important issue is to back-up plurality of voices, respect all, and leave aside hate expressions. But then, if you put "your feet on the ground", you say to yourself: "Wake up! What are the chances that something like this could happen?" It is idealistic, but I at the same time, it's something necessary for me considering the worldwide situation.

D.R.S.: Yes, and I think that we're talking about the big ones, but there's others out there as well. There are other social media platforms, there's other Internet software app producers. It's a really good point. We must decide what digital literacy entails and make it happen. I think we should say critical digital media literacy and make it mandatory in teachers' education so that it works its way into elementary school classes. So, from the beginning, people start

learning about the basics, but also learn enough skills so that it doesn't matter whether they're using X /Twitter or YouTube. There're still these basic ways of looking at something and deciding whether this is a credible voice or whether or not they really deserve to be sent money or are they being disrespectful to other humans and why?

If we start on time, the situation could change. When I started teaching critical digital literacy around 2013, to teachers, it was all new to them. None of them had done it before. Within four years later, I started seeing medialiteracy in my undergraduate students. They started knowing how to read advertisements better. They started knowing how to critique and analyse music videos and video games. They started to better understand recognizing political points of views in newspapers that they were reading. They started to understand what the algorithm is. And now, my undergraduates are very astute. They're very astute because they're taught in high school and some of them even in grade school. So, if we can get to the students earlier, the results will be completely different.

S.A.: In your recent article that appears in *The Conversation* (Fuller & Rehberg Sedo, 2023b), you say: “Even for people who regularly look to social media platforms for book recommendations, recommendations from friends, family members or colleagues are a main way of choosing what to read”. What are the main features governing the access, reading and consumption of digital files in platforms? And what about the so-called *consumption bubbles*?

D.R.S.: I think it is very interesting this idea of *consumption bubbles*, and I would say that I do not have a clear answer because I think that before I would advise my students, and myself, I would identify values. For example, I could say to my students: “Identify as left-leaning or right-leaning, or somewhere on the spectrum. Now, choose a topic. I want you to read about the topic in your preferred newspaper and then I want you to read about it in another newspaper to get another perspective”.

Along the same lines, I would ask them to follow somebody on Facebook, or Twitter or Instagram. Follow somebody whose political ideals are very much not what they hold to, someone who has political ideals different from you. Some of them enjoyed the exercise, and some of them felt very uncomfortable because they put themselves in situations where they felt people were being very racist, misogynist, just very, very nasty, nasty people. And then I heard Chris Bail talk about his study in the United States where he asked people to get outside of their bubbles. And in fact, it caused more discord between them. It made people become more adamant that their ideas were better. The study was conducted in the States, where they're very politically divided, but I think it could be applied in different places considering the political schisms that we see are everywhere. I think right now in this contemporary moment in history, in

this particular moment, I think that it's very important to find various bubbles. Not just going to one or two different voices so we can get a fuller picture, but we must seek out multiple voices who are telling the same story so that we can form a more informed perspective. That's very difficult to do.

S.A.: What are the greatest challenges readers face to know different sources? How do we get to that variety of sources? How do we know them?

D.R.S.: It takes time, but there are ways that people can find different sources with the privilege of time. How many working mothers are going to have time to seek out three or four different stories on the war? If we are critical, we need time to learn, time to speak, time to think, time to have time. Time is an abstract idea but it becomes very empirical when you go to user practices. That's a very astute thing. Yes, and we don't talk about time a lot.

* Nota: el Comité Académico aprobó la publicación de la entrevista.



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