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## **ON THE UNIVERSALITY OF INCOMMUNICATION**

**Katarína Chovancová\***

Communication remains one of the major issues for science and research, policy, culture and social life of our communities. It is a value, an art, and a business; it should be an ambition. Communication stands for a highly complex phenomenon which needs, requires and deserves a constant analytical interest, as well as wisdom and a capacity of insight from those who examine it. The reason lies in its polysemy and its context-bound nature.

Far from the flawless reality suggested by early communication theories, authentic communication is often full of imperfections due to both internal and external factors. The social context in which communication takes place can be one of them. In contemporary Europe, as all of us can witness, individuals are constantly confronted with communication problems and difficulties. Obstacles arise in everyday interactions between individuals, playing active parts within their multiple social roles; they also arise between institutions and individuals, as well as on the interinstitutional level. It appears that communication very often gives way to rupture, silence and incomprehension. In this intricate everyday reality that marks Europe's social and political life just like the existence of so many other modern communities, it seems convenient to rethink the very concept of communication and to understand its limitations.

### **1. Communication and incommunication**

Discourse analysis enlarges territories for potential understanding of communication practices by anchoring communication into a social, public and political space. These settings are always characterized by multicultural cohabitation and, very often, by divergent goals and ambitions inciting speakers to vary discourse strategies to include persuasion or even manipulation in order to maximize impact. We are interested in cases when contradictory positions of

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speakers appear behind their discourse as these are moments when incommunication appears: „*Finally, there are three kinds of situations. First, the ideal case, sharing and inter-comprehension. Then, incommunication: we don't understand each other despite common values and common vocabulary. We negotiate incessantly, in an effort to coexist. In the end, there is absence of communication: a break, a failure. In these three situations, the crucial role of negotiation, of confidence and of stereotypes shows.*“<sup>1</sup> (Wolton, 2022, p. 10).

There seems to be an interdisciplinary consensus on the importance of placing the reverse side of communication under the spotlight and making it a new object of research. Indeed, the lack of understanding of the other and the mutual unintelligibility is what must catch our attention. In this sense, **Wolton** (2022) puts forward the concept of incommunication underlining how tightly it is bound to our everyday communicating efforts. „*Incommunication is not as much a failure, be it temporary or chronic, of a communication situation, as it is its horizon: misunderstandings, mutual incomprehension, mistakes, disagreements, are constitutive of the communication process, reviving endless interactions characterizing all human or technological communication.*“ (Wolton, 2009, p. 436).

Setting up theoretical background for the concept, **Wolton** shows, with much relevance and very convincingly, that incommunication is an integral part of the communication process itself. What is more, incommunication is a condition for the pursuit of communication. It allows us to renew constantly our efforts after a difficulty, a failure or a stop. The concept refers to the idea of disagreement and that has been experienced and at the same time the willingness to negotiate. These aspects of the communication process, sometimes underestimated or neglected, become of crucial importance.

It is **D. Wolton**, one of the leading contemporary French social scientists that started carrying our theoretical outlining of the concept. In fact, basic theoretical framework for the study of incommunication is set in **D. Wolton's** monographic works and in collective works he edited. Moreover, the *Hermès* scientific journal represents another platform for developing the concept and bringing new pieces of research on the matter to a larger public. The journal has been established in 1980s and it is published three times a year. It creates a very broad interdisciplinary space open to social science and humanities, with a special focus on cognition (compared epistemology, cognitive science, knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by K. Chovancová.

industry), communication (digital challenges, information and communication technologies, cultural diversity of societies) and policy-making (relations between science, technology and society; expertise and controversies, political communication). The journal is intrinsically intertwined with two Hermes book serial editions. First of them, *Les Essentiels d'Hermès*, publishes books facilitating the access to the contemporary research in communication science. The other one, *CNRS Communications*, established in 1998, promotes theoretical works, empirical research and interdisciplinary scientific approaches towards communication. Hermès journal creates an excellent framework for international cooperation through the network of its offices worldwide and a series of scientific events. One of *Hermès* offices was established in November 2022 at Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica. Hermes journal has dedicated 2 complete volumes to the issue of incommunication. One of them dates back to 2017 (*Hermès 77*, 2017), another one is very recent (*Hermès 90*, 2022).

## **2. Incommunication as a principle of political discourse**

The concept of incommunication comes particularly handy when rethinking Europe and taking a more detailed look at its policies. Incommunication is what marks it best, as Europe has always meant conciliation of more or less strictly opposed viewpoints, valorisation of a dialogue to prevent communication from coming to a complete stop.

Indeed, Europe can potentially be viewed as the largest democratic experiment, lying upon the power of incommunication. The incommunication, carrying along the will to overcome misunderstandings and oppositions, is the tool Europe has successfully used throughout the decades of its existence and still continues to do so in the difficult moments of armed conflicts on its own soil and in its close neighbourhood. Europe can even be seen as „a set of incommunications, a week pride for what has been achieved but still an implausible will to avoid the rupture.“ (Wolton, 2022, p. 12). When we reflect on incommunication, we cannot avoid to think about how frail intercomprehension remains and how powerful the weight of inequalities in various communication contexts is.

In the context of today's Europe, communication and incommunication are becoming operational as political concepts. They also act as solid points of reference when we look back at co-creation of practices of political communication in our territories, marked by diversity but still in search of defining

a common destiny. The power of incommunication, understood as conscious effort to overcome communication obstacles, has been proved many times in Europe. First of all, the importance of speaking to each other has shown in the process of constructing Europe. It is reflected in the creation of the Council of Europe and, successively, all the other European institutions. Then, it has been confirmed in most crises Europe has gone through: from efforts to preserve peace against potential or real war conflicts to the efforts to maintain balance and human integrity in the midst of contemporary economic, energetic, environmental, migrant and pandemic crises. On a different level, the willingness to dialogue has enabled Europe to define the „*diplomacy of the regions*“ (Rouet – Turbet Delof, 2022, p. 18).

Europe can be seen in a double perspective. On one hand, there are successes: from decades of peace preserved, through the constant overall economic growth, to several more specific ones. On the other hand, there are failures. In some cases, the status is ambiguous. For some, it might be case of the construction of European Higher Education Area during which universities have undergone a deep transition: „*from spectators of an evolution, they have become actors of a process of construction of a common space /.../, they have modified their social role /.../, creating a new innovation system*“ (Côme, 2022, p. 162), the one that is known as Quintuple Helix.

For others, Europe has not succeeded at the moment of Brexit. However, although many see it as a failure which has led to „*a kind of a punishing tendency trope often observed in EU*“ (Rouet, 2022, p. 155), it might also be perceived not as a lost case, but as an opportunity because it has shown to the political elites who are responsible of communicating the European project to their citizens that „*everyone is not European in the same way*“ (*ibid*, p. 156).

In-between successes and failures, European policy turns the latter into challenges. „*Almost all great milestones in the history of the construction of a state as a political community, or of international relations and integration waves, have been realized in response to a turning point, a crisis or a major discovery.*“ (Klus – Huraj Rošteková, 2022, p. 69). Thus, the major challenge remains how to improve institutional communication of Europe with its citizens if they don't conceive Europe in the same way.

### **3. Becoming good interlocutors**

All of the above mentioned leads us back to the original concept of

communication. It is definitely not worth abandoning, although it is a highly complex phenomenon and an unpredictable social practice requiring a set of skills and a proactive, cooperative mindset. We should not care just about how to be good speakers but also how to become good readers and listeners. The art of responding (in words or in actions), is crucial for the success of both communication and incommunication. First of all, raising good interlocutors means building up reading and listening skills, making an active use of the totality of individual linguistic and cultural repertoires. This might seem as a matter of language acquisition, still it goes far beyond. It includes the activation of complex communicative competence and a sensibilisation to alterity which is at the core of each communication event.

Setting up new goals in educating competent, vigilant, critical and empathic interlocutors means to innovate educational policies as well. On top of campaigns in support of the development of receptive skills, we should specifically focus on promoting a critical approach to the assessment of information we receive. Nowadays, this need is mostly reflected in promoting the fight against disinformation, hoaxes and fake news. These practices, speedy, omnipresent and sometimes very influential, are considered as one of the major threats of today, as they aim at the integrity of institutions and communities.

Up-to-date technical communication tools, be it alternative, participative or social media, are considered to be major actors of the rapid spread of manipulative discourse and/or of fake news in our societies. They multiply impact this kind of information may have with less-skilled readers, often inclined to accept it and truly adhere. In response, media users must be trained to adopt a selective critical approach as a part of a more general media literacy. This need should be answered by a joint action aimed at improving competencies of European citizens, foreseeing individualized paths towards reading for the largest possible number of Europeans, *„to make resources available that would allow for an individualized support and to keep an eye on it so that no child is left aside.“* (Huraj Rošteková – Molnárová, 2022, p. 159). Reception skills are transversally used in all areas of human activity. We can presume to successfully develop them in a large number of ways, just like all the other soft skills we consider essential for each individual member of communities contemporary Europe is formed of. Thus, European values are promoted through personal engagement of Europeans in culture, in lifelong personal development and in sport. Highly valued, sport is the sphere of activity that gains the ground as a new soft power within European Union, as it opens doors to a social, cultural and political dialogue: *„Sports, or the*

*'sport diplomacy', is one of the components that influence public opinion in the world and thus, it becomes a pillar of public diplomacy, with no need to rely on propaganda nor on openly governmental support" (Mancoš – Gura, 2022, p. 167). In the end, any means are welcome to eradicate disinformation and the necessity of this eradication is obvious for many actors of political, public and community life: „Let us not allow disinformation to become a cancer to decent and honest communication between citizens in the countries of the EU. Hatred, aggression, lies and conspiracies must not prevail over friendly debate, truthful news, or useful information.“ (Klus, 2022, p. 236).*

## **Conclusion**

With the growth of information and communication technologies, many have expected that communication would become easier, if not completely flawless. This perspective has proven to be far too optimistic. Contrary to that, we are forced to admit that the perceptible absence of technical limits in human interactions cannot resolve social challenges. They must be resolved by the willingness to overcome differences through a constant dialogue, potentially leading to a consensus or a compromise.

Incommunication, present in various domains, is a transdisciplinary concept which needs to be further developed. It is of interest to take a closer look at its different forms and occurrences to feed the reflection on its relevance and its heuristic value. Incommunication has the potential to become one of the central issues in contemporary social sciences. The analytical work that will relate to it can find its basis in general linguistics and communication theory, but its fields of application are many. While focusing of political discourse, discourse analysis is one of those. The example of Europe, a space within which internal frontiers have virtualized (Rouet – Turbet Delof, 2022, p. 18), still with a high level of historical, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity and with a long track of confusions, erasures, lapsus and failures in communication throughout the decades of its construction provides a rich area for research on the matter. As it has been acknowledged by one of the major social scientists that focus on Europe's history, present and future (Wolton, 2022, p. 14), what counts for Europe is embodied in the simple statement: Never we agree, but we always stay together.

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