

## Editorial

# Control societies and the crisis of science journalism

In a brief text written in 1990, Gilles Deleuze took his friend Michel Foucault's work as a starting point and spoke of new forces at work in society. The great systems masterfully described by Foucault as being related to "discipline" (family, factory, psychiatric hospital, prison, school), were all going through a crisis. On the other hand, the reforms advocated by ministers throughout the world (labour, welfare, education and health reforms) were nothing but ways to protract their anguish. Deleuze named "control society" the emerging configuration.

A control society is a network society. Its language is digital. In control societies the slogans and watchwords, and the solid identities typical of discipline societies (grass-roots political organizations, trade unions, the Church) are replaced by passwords, codes and multiple, changeable and adaptable identities. The individual, moulded by the great discipline-based institutions, gives way to subjects that "have become dividuals", that is divisible in parts that can be codified, stored in databases and modulated according to various political and trade systems.

Rather than instilling in individuals what is expected of them (through punishment, mass education and ideology), a control society sets out to regulate dividual data and the way in which populations function (occupation, health, migrations, exports, etc.), beginning with the modulation of flows (of data, people or goods).

Discipline was aimed at educating and moulding individuals according to "mould-models" while controls constitute a modulation, a "self-deforming modelling, that is constantly modified". Contemporary capitalism is a cybernetic capitalism, whose dynamics act on input derived from a diffused, molecular perception, from a bi-directional and real-time feedback on the movements (and intentions) of the population.

Communication and the media are crucial elements for the functioning of most discipline systems: if Deleuze was right (or if other contemporary diagnoses are correct: "cognitive" capitalism, "immaterial" labour, risk society, etc.), it is then not surprising that the transformations of such great systems are reflected in deep changes in the media.

Amidst the issues on the agenda of science communicators this year, the crisis in scientific journalism has been cause for concern. This crisis, discussed in the sixth world conference of science journalists,<sup>1</sup> as well as in scientific<sup>2</sup> and science dissemination arenas,<sup>3</sup> has in some cases been viewed as an opportunity for rethinking journalism<sup>4</sup> at all levels. Others, on the contrary, have envisioned an imminent "swan-song" for science writers.

This is not to say that science communication is undergoing a crisis. On the contrary, the diversity of scientific fields and of the ways in which science now interacts with its audience is astounding. This is an occupational crisis for science writers and their role in mass media - which does not diminish the scope of the problem. Indeed, although it is true that the cutbacks in full-time jobs for science journalists in editorial offices is offset by the greater opportunities in other areas of science communication, the new players do not cover some of the core tasks of journalists.

Journalists have in part worked alongside scientists, often young ones, who out of passion, militancy or desire for a second job (not handsomely payed, perhaps, but generously retributed in terms of visibility), devoted themselves to the task of producing information, especially by means of the instruments made available by web 2.0. Similarly, professional science journalists, who are less and less often requested by publishers to write detailed news stories, actually end up writing articles whose content is often dictated by international press releases and by the PR offices of large research institutions. Consequently, scientists and scientific institutions exert a significant influence on public science communication. However, scientists cannot generally criticise and investigate themselves, save for specific instances. In some cases scientists or important institutions convey finely packaged information which they omit to label for what it actually is: a public relations exercise. In such cases, the public, informed about the "most important fossil ever discovered", is unaware of a crucial piece of information: that the hype which mass media journalists are often blamed for, has now carved its way in "white-collar" texts produced by research institutions and by the do-it-yourself journalistic practices of some scientists.

Not only in scientific journalism as such, but in mass communication as well, it is the watchdogs and the critical interpreters of the present that have been hit by the crisis.

Blogging, twitting, wikis, science dissemination websites, though often excellent, provide information to an audience that continuously chooses to devote time to seeking, selecting and processing such information. If civic, opinion-based and investigative journalism vanish from TV and newspapers, they will simply cease to exist for a significant fraction of the population.

In a society based on great discipline systems and narrative, the roles played by journalists (narrator, information provider, interpreter, watchdog), and the boundaries of their respective realms are relatively well defined. In a society based on the accelerated multiplication of data flows, and on the diffused ramification of networks and on the modulation of such flows, the journalist's role becomes hybrid, based as it is on epistemological, occupational and political quicksand.

The new ways in which this profession may evolve remain to be established, as well as whether or not they will ensure the survival of some of the traditional functions of journalism. Naturally the current trend must not be taken as a symptom of an inescapable fate. Likewise, we cannot simply look back to a glorified past (after all, was "independent" scientific journalism truly typical of editorial offices in the big media?). Weeping over a lost past is not conducive to surviving the present times, nor to paving the way for a different future. Control societies need critics who may well turn out not to be individuals, but rather emerge from the meshes of the net, in a "dividual", transverse and multiplied guise.

*Translated by Amanda de Felice*

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## Notes and references

<sup>1</sup> For instance <http://www.wcsj2009.org/blog/2009/05/science-journalism-in-crisis-article.html>.

<sup>2</sup> *Filling the void*, *Nature* **458** (2009) 260;  
*Cheerleader or watchdog?*, *Nature* **459** (2009) 1033. Also <http://www.nature.com/news/specials/sciencejournalism/index.html>,  
[http://scienceblogs.com/bioephemera/2009/03/is\\_the\\_internet\\_to\\_blame\\_for\\_t.php](http://scienceblogs.com/bioephemera/2009/03/is_the_internet_to_blame_for_t.php),  
<http://thesciencereporter.blogspot.com/2009/04/news-science-journalism-in-crisis.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Seed Magazine, November, 9, 2009; e [http://www.cjr.org/the\\_observatory/science\\_journalisms\\_hope\\_and\\_d.php](http://www.cjr.org/the_observatory/science_journalisms_hope_and_d.php)

<sup>4</sup> *Science* 19 June 2009, pg. 1491.

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