From "deception of the masses" of the critical theory to the "undefined neighborhood" of Bauman

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Abstract
Introduction. Contrary to attributing a politically democratizing imperative to communicative progress, Bauman, in his posthumous work *Retrotopia*, describes the Internet as an individualistic flow of expansive self-reproduction that forms a "global undefined neighbourhood" of "voluntary servitude". **Method**. Phenomenological analysis of Bauman's analysis through a review his works. Once the perspective of the "undefined neighbourhood" was adopted, an examination was conducted on whether Internet trends can be interpreted as egalitarian mass consumerism or as an imperatively democratizing force. **Results.** The proposal that the inter-individual global communication network creates widespread "voluntary servitude" is worthy of being considered as a verifiable hypothesis in empirical research projects. **Discussion.** The universal network of prosumers that constitutes the "undefined neighbourhood" in liquid globalization needs to be visible in all social spheres as well as in the market. **Conclusions.** The condition for establishing a relationship between critical and empirical theory is circular: it requires describing "visibility" by quantitative means as the sum of individual choices.

Keywords
Social networks; culture industry; Critical Theory; mass deception; Liquid post-modernity; voluntary servitude.

Contents

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1. Introduction. The undefined neighbourhood of Bauman, a network of global reproductive consumerism

In his posthumous work entitled *Retrotopia*, Bauman culminates his thoughts, which can be summarized in the metaphor of the "liquid society" with regard to how transportation and communication technology promotes consumerism as a differentiating feature of globalization in an "undefined neighbourhood", resulting from mass consumption of the culture industry.

In previous works, the metaphorical antinomy between "solidity" and "liquidity" is used to distinguish these two phases of enlightened postmodernity: "the passage from the "solid" to the "liquid" state (2007: 113). The separation between the two phases is not absolute, but evolutionary. In the postmodern liquid phase

> "…On a planet crossed in all directions by "information highways" nothing that happens in any one place can, at least conceivably, remain in a place that is *intellectually* on the "outside" ... On a planet open to the flow of capital and goods... nothing can be considered to remain in a place that is *materially* on the outside". The global spread of our modern way of life has now reached the farthest limits of the planet" (Id., 14 and 79).

The postmodern stage of the "liquid society" does not interrupt, but rather accentuates, the consumerist features of the phase of the "solid mass society" (2003: 9, 33 and following [2000]), which through new Internet channels deepens the tendency toward the consumption of cultural goods that began with mass culture and is nevertheless a culture that brings together "environment", "presence" and "neighbourhood". Closeness was the physical proximity that defined face-to-face relationships. As opposed to virtual proximity, the "neighbourhood" was defined by the "environment", or by a "presence" that was physical or "close" (Cfr. 2005 [2003]: passim).

As Bauman states, the fast change from the one-way communication technology in which a small number of issuers producing cultural goods disseminated their products to countless consumers, a characteristic

of mass consumption culture (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998:166; Enzensberger 1972: 34), to a system of open digital technology that allows any consumer to act as an issuer or producer of the entertainment industry, does not alter the inclination toward docility, but rather expands consumerism by personalizing the supply and demand relationship in an "undefined neighbourhood". The vagueness of this neighbourhood condition as opposed to the "defined neighbourhood" of the "solid" phase characteristic of the culture of analogic communication is enforced by the unlimited scope that face-to-face relationships reach, in a virtual sense, on Internet.

The stratified, massive use of preferences, or tastes, produced by a restricted supply was the defining feature of the solid phase (Lazarsfeld and Merton, 1977). It was the object of study of Critical Theory of the Society expressed in preceding works (2003: 43 ff.). In more recent works, Bauman predicts that the digital network, rather than dissipating mass consumption, will foster this trend by making it easier for every consumer to act individually as a producer. Passive consumption has undergone a mutation into a generalized "reproductive consumerism" through the individualized exchange of products on the Web.

1.1. From established "mass consumption" to liquid "reproductive consumerism"

Representing Critical Theory, Bauman insists that in the "liquid" phase of postmodernity, consumerism has become universal by promoting production, exchange, and mass dissemination where preference trends are stratified through the Internet. When he delves descriptively into the features of the "liquid society" (2010), he continues to affirm this version of an evolving change between the two phases. The passage from the initial solid stage - which characterized mass society - to a subsequent liquid phase, is part of a single process of phagocytisation of the old mass media through the web. Media convergence magnifies the features of consumerism, once merely receptive, but now also reproductive, thanks to digital technology. From this point of view, the liquid society that circulates through virtual flows can be interpreted not as a rupture, but rather as an unlimited expansion of consumerism provided by individual access to the production and mass supply of tangible and cultural goods:

> "To subordinate cultural creativity to the norms and criteria of consumer markets implies demanding that all cultural creations accept the prerequisite for becoming a consumer product: that they validate themselves in terms of market value" (Bauman, 2010: 294 and 295).

Bauman insists on the shift from a "solid" phase of postmodernity to a "liquid" phase in which reproductive consumption converges with receptive consumption. In previous works, Bauman continues his analysis of the culture industry and mass consumption (2003: 30 ff., 43 ff.), which was initiated by Critical Theory, by criticizing the cultural servility generated by the mass media in the "open society". In accordance with this phenomenological trend, in his most recent works he insisted on the importance that the verification of the lack of transparency of social conditioning carried out by the communication media (2016:112) had for his analysis of the "liquid" society, which is the main topic of Critical Theory in the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998: 165-213). Therefore, not only are there patterns of continuity within technological change, but Bauman's *Retrotopia* is a review of the unrestrained excessiveness acquired during the phase of liquid postmodernity of the individualistic traits that were held in disapproval by the first theoreticians of social criticism at the dawn of the solid phase: "Let us not be mistaken - both in the liquid-fluid phase and the solid-heavy phase of modernity - individualization is a destiny, not a choice" (2003: 39).

This emphasis by Bauman is in contrast to some predictions made about the impact of technological change on sociocultural transformations, especially those related to the "technological imperative"

(Becker, 1984; see Núñez Ladevéze, Torrecillas and Vázquez, 2018), according to which technological progress favours a democratization of knowledge and society (Mason, 2016), which can be understood as an announcement of a democratic and egalitarian endogenous change (Núñez Ladevéze, Núñez Canal and Irisarri, 2018). To the contrary, *Retrotopia* is a call to look to the past, a caution not to search for utopia (2007: 133 et seq.) by looking for it in some *topos*, or common places, of the past because of a distrust of the present. As face-to-face relationships become more random, we enter "the world of a weakening of human ties" (Bauman, 50: 2017).

Why does technology not lead to the utopian ideal of a better society? Bauman had already foreseen the answer to this question in previous works:

> "Moral collectivity is "face to face without intermediaries... there are no universal rules... *«The duty of all»*, as far as I know, is not the same as my responsibility, the one that I feel... Only rules can be universal. We can legislate *duties* based on universal rules. However, moral responsibility only exists, and can only be fulfilled, on an individual basis. Duties usually make people similar, but responsibility makes them individuals. Therefore, the morality of the virtuous individual cannot have the nature of a rule. We could say that morality is that which resists any form of codification, formalisation, socialisation, and universalisation" (2005: 47-48).

1.2. The technological Imperative in the liquid phase of consumerism

Conversely, the technological imperative connects a rule to the development of technology, which according to Bauman cannot be fulfilled as a rule, since it only concerns the responsibility of a moral individual who personally assumes the responsibility and purpose of fulfilling it. "To be universal, morality must have had some attributes it does not actually have. Firstly, a purpose" (id., 49). As a result of applying a regulatory rule, the attribution of a technological imperative cannot be predictive and would have to be morally contradictory. That is to say, it would depend on the individual personally assuming the responsibility and purpose. In other words, progress has a technological aspect, but moral improvement of society does not correspond to its scientific-technical progress, but rather to assuming personal responsibility. Bauman expressly refers to personal "saintliness" (2005 [1993] 46, 75, 82 and following. 102; 2018: 82). However, from the moral point of view, progress is ambivalent:

> "Science, so to speak, fosters progress by revealing and criticizing the detrimental nature of its past achievements. However, if a detached view were adopted, this would mean that science is extremely busy producing, or encouraging the production of objects of its future outrage; it reproduces its own indispensability by accumulating mistakes and threats of disaster..." (2010: 229)

In later works, Bauman dealt with the holistic nature of the manifestations of the consumer society, rather than the specific aspect of culture industry consumption. This paradigm shift explains why, in recent contributions, he devotes little direct attention to mass culture as an expression of a solid stage that has mutated into one that is liquid (Bauman, 2007: 47-54). It should be noted, however, that while focusing on specific issues such as surveillance technology, or technology applied to cultural dissemination on the web, or technology dedicated to addressing any other facet of liquid globalization, the phenomena studied share an underlying trait, which is the same unstoppable proclivity toward reproductive consumeristic individualism. This is a common denominator of the changes produced by the mutation, made possible through digital technology of the web, from the "solid" phase of unidirectional mass culture into the "liquidity" of global circulation.

In short, Bauman believes that the consumer impulses that encourage the new cultural phenomena brought about by web technology do not differ from those that fed individualism in the solid phase of mass culture. By breaking the linear model of issuer and receiver, technology transforms private consumers into producers of all types of consumer goods, especially cultural goods. By subordinating the circulation of goods to individual responsibility, the digital world multiplies the same consumerist propensity of mass culture society. Where individual freedom is unrivalled, "this represents value according to which all other values have come to be appraised..." (2001. 9). Consequently, mass consumption is absorbed by "reproductive individualism", more dispersed and discriminating in the current phase of globalized liquidity.

The consumer trends initiated by large companies through the mass production of consumer objects in industrial warehouses are diversified and expanded without limit when the consumer can exchange his receptive role for that of a productive issuer. The relationship is individualised in an egalitarian way, but is just as servile as the consumerism of "mass culture". This general feature governs the process of globalization. It is the incentive that encourages and permeates socio-cultural mutations, which have been exacerbated by the unstoppable expansion of the digital environment. This new factor unifies the process of socio-cultural change. A feature that encompasses and accelerates the various manifestations of "liquidity" in the diverse spheres of technological, economic, political and cultural coalescence. Internet exacerbates liquidity, and "reflects the growing realization that social aggregates possess blurred profiles, are kept in a state of constant flow, are not something, but are always becoming something" (2010: 25). The globalization of consumption is seen and treated as a "network" rather than a "structure" or "system", even more so than a solid structure" (2007:9). The network flows absorb all aspects of the "liquid society", transforming it into a global "undefined neighbourhood" of reproductive consumers: "today we live in a global consumer society... Retreating from the globalization of human dependence and the global reach of technology and human economic activities is surely no longer a viable option", (2010: 44, 88, 111-112). "Globalization today seems inevitable and irreversible…our interconnections and our interdependence are now global" (2017:44). The "premises of maintenance of the system of reproduction" of late capitalism (Habermas, 1999: 72) have become a reproductive condition of the globalizing process. If "happiness requires individualization" (2009: 35), then due to the fact that "society can and does make some choices more unlikely than others, it cannot deprive humans of the freedom to choose. This reflects the unsolvable internal contradiction of a society that establishes a level of happiness for *all* of its members, but which is a level that *the* majority of that group of "all members" cannot reach, or are prevented from reaching" (Id.37 and 38).

This is the essence of the discouraging assessment that converges in the posthumous work of Bauman entitled *Retrotopia*. Through the use of web technology, globalization, far from having dispossessed itself from the propensity toward culture industry consumption predicted by the Critical Theory, has instead made it universal. *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment* explained the generalization of mass culture as a consequence of the retention within large corporations of culture industry production. The receiver became a passive customer of symbolic goods that were mass-produced for consumption.

"Reproductive consumerism" has become the distinctive feature of the globalized virtual society, which is a flow of self-reproduction that propagates the consumer individualism of the solid society in an exchange between neighbours without close proximity to each other - a global "undefined neighbourhood". "The new information technology" is "ever closer to achieving full and truly universal accessibility (for all)" (2017:100). "To this day, the process of globalisation has produced a network of inter-dependencies that reaches every corner of the world" (Bauman 2010: 108). The research question

that arises is whether full accessibility to the media is equivalent to an intrinsic process that directs the system toward full democratization of society through collective empowerment, as some theorists of the technological imperative have inferred". (Núñez Ladevéze, Torrecilas and Vázquez, 2018).

2. Method. Phenomenological review of the notion of the "undefined neighbourhood"

From a methodological point of view, we consider the subject of this work to be within the phenomenological framework made accessible by the description of "reproductive individualism" with a universal dimension that allows every individual to have access to both consumption and production. We do not intend to conduct a hermeneutical study of Bauman's work as a whole. We will confine ourselves to the theoretical framework of his critical phenomenology in focusing on the scope of his assessment of "the undefined neighbourhood" proposed in *Retrotopia*. For the review of Bauman's texts, we adopted the approach offered by the studies that accept the thesis of analogue and digital media convergence, Sola Pool and Jenkins (2007), mainly (*Cfr.* Núñez Ladevéze, Torrecillas and Irisarri, 2019).

From this theoretical perspective, we approach Bauman's assessment of cultural consumerism. Being part of a universal process of "reproductive individualism", it combines individual interactions into one concept that is revealingly called the virtual "undefined neighbourhood". Through its analogy with the meaning of a physical "neighbourhood", that is "face to face", the term "neighbourhood" is used figuratively here to emphasize that in the liquid phase of Internet each person can communicate with any other person no matter how far is the distance that separates them, as if they were neighbours. We can all talk, produce, consume and potentially access everyone else.

With every person in the world capable of having a virtual "face to face" relationship from a distance, the restriction of the "solid" notion of "neighbourhood" defined by physical proximity within analogue communication spaces is no longer applicable. Since face-to-face relationships can be established virtually from a distance without the need for close proximity, the neighbourhood is no longer spatially defined. However, as in the analogical neighbourhood, it is equally true that in the undefined neighbourhood it is impossible for each person to hear, relate to, or consume what everyone in the entire world says or produces simultaneously. Just as in a city full of shop windows where an individual has to select where to shop and where not to shop, the globalization process is necessarily subject to a selection process.

One must distinguish what is particularly relevant within the commotion of innumerable conversations that are mixed, and distinguish what is personal in the collective murmur forged by people who speak. One must also inform, judge produce, and isolate what is significant in the collective mutterings in which significant and insignificant offers converge... In an "undefined neighbourhood", all neighbours can have contact with each other, and contrary to what is feasible in a physical "neighbourhood of proximity", the individual can in fact communicate with any one of the individuals who make up the innumerable totality of people to whom they have access. Hence, openness to everyone cannot be anything other than selective, discriminating, and individualised. Everyone accesses what they find according to their preferences, or to randomness, because the "freedom" or opportunity of discovery is in line with individuals' conditioning, interests, and purposes in distinguishing, appreciating and selecting what suits or incites their 'strong desires' (Bauman, 2005: 46 and).

2.1. Exegetical framework for the phenomenological analysis of reproductive individualism

Consumer involvement in the production of tangible consumer goods is not an issue that was introduced by Bauman. It is commonplace in comments on the Internet regarding the economy. The available bibliography is so voluminous that it becomes unapproachable. Our analysis assumes that Bauman's

references to the globalization of individualized consumerism through networks contain a perspective of solvent theoretical assumptions in addressing a framework of empirical research of the self-production flows of liquid postmodernity through individualized reproductive consumerism. Having accepted this endorsement for the phenomenological analysis, we use the theoretical potential on communication technology offered by the texts of the departed philosopher.

Starting from this assumption, we accept the terms implicit in the notion of the "undefined neighbourhood" in *Retrotopia*, according to which there are intrinsic continuity patterns between mass consumption and reproductive consumerism.

Our paper does not attempt to treat Bauman's thesis directly as a hypothesis that may lend itself to empirical verification or refutation. We accept it as a descriptive thesis of the group of phenomena related to globalization in the liquid phase of the Internet. The complexity of the subject, which affects an evolutionary interpretation of the shift from mass society to the digital domain, requires a cautious approach in assembling a possible empirical treatment. This is our purpose in performing this phenomenological review. Within the theoretical framework of our research projects, we have demarcated it as a previously discussed matter. Therefore, we present here the thesis of the "neighbourhood" as the subject of a previous study focused on verifying the assumption that the available empirical indicators are compatible with this theoretical framework. We intend to gather evidence before turning to Bauman's thesis on the "undefined neighbourhood" as a verifiable or refutable empirical conjecture. It is not, therefore, a question of refuting or confirming a hypothesis at this moment.

The approach searches for something basic, perhaps no more limited nor less exposed, because it is linked to a total or comprehensive thesis regarding the direction that the liquid society is taking. In the phenomenological review, Bauman's thesis of the "undefined neighbourhood", which in his view is being generated by reproductive individualism, is an intensified continuation of mass culture consumption characteristic of the solid phase of postmodernity. The undertaking of specific, empirical investigations might be placed in a theoretical and conceptual framework for the purpose of confirming and refuting, either partially or fully, the assumptions based on the notions that are a legacy of the phenomenological analysis that transmits Critical Theory through Bauman's work. Therefore, having adopted the conceptual perspective of the "undefined neighbourhood", our attention has been focused on verifying whether or not the tendencies exhibited in the use of Internet can be characterised as discriminatory (Hindman, 2009), rather than democratising.

Hindman called Google's data selection process, "Googlearchy" (2009: 38 ff.).

The evolution of audience consumption registered in "personalized" video on demand services (in online marketing jargon, customized), is an example of applied "Googlearchy". This is the theoretical, exegetical framework for the notion of the "undefined neighbourhood" and its degree of descriptive or explanatory adequacy of the phenomenon of reproductive individualism of prosumers in the liquid phase of postmodernity.

2.2. Exegetical framework of the transition from "mass consumption" to "reproductive consumerism"

The most consistent previous study on "reproductive consumerism" of the culture industry dates back to *The Consumer Society*, published by Baudrillard in 1970 (2014). Bauman's theoretical foundation on the reproduction process of the consumption system is expressly linked to *Legitimacy Problems in Late Capitalism*, by Habermas (1999 [1987]). Both references are useful for placing our conceptual framework

in a context of defined phenomenological adequacy in which the transmission of content and the shaping of public opinion are only one facet of globalization uniformly characterized by the reproductive liquidity of the individualized consumption of goods in general, and of cultural entertainment goods in particular. We summarize his posthumous analysis of the reproduction of consumption processes that are promoted by globalization technology in three proposals:

1. The transition from solid modernity to liquid modernity expresses the technological triumph of instrumental reason. It reaches its peak when the unidirectional public information transmission system of few issuers to countless recipients gives way to a system of universal reversibility of the communicative functions through Internet: all of the receivers of culture industry consumption become, at least potentially, cultural producers.
2. The main social manifestation of this change is the appearance of an "undefined neighbourhood" characterized by the profusion of diffuse groups composed of collectives who ascribe to certain leaders or dispersed influencers (2017: 100).
3. In this environment, physical face-to-face relationships *in praesentia*, based on physical contact, are extended without limit to virtual face-to-face relationships *in absentia*, the sensory contact of which is established at limitless distances through technological means:

> "Groups tended to form themselves among neighbours who shared physical proximity that promoted face-to-face encounters... groups in the information age (reincarnated in the form of 'networks') develop and gather around those transmitters of information, who for one reason or another are considered to be voices of authority and judged to be reliable (2017: 39)".

There are theories that attribute technological change to an internal design, such as an intrinsically oriented trend toward deliberative democratic egalitarianism or the creative expansion of a cultural democracy. In contrast to this normative approach, for Bauman the technology of functional reversibility facilitates universal empowerment of the means of production on the part of consumers, who until now have been passive or receptive subjects of a communication process, but does not determine a pre-established evolution that can be explained in terms of a democratising obligation. This is the "condition" for the reproductive process of a consumer society, even if the uses that have been made available by technology, or because of it (as similarly happened with writing), make all possibilities "universally" accessible that were once only available to the very few.

Our starting point aims to condense these three points from Bauman's latest work, which come together in the analysis of reproduction through networked consumption in a "global, capitalist, consumptive world" (2014: 82). The substitution of the "system" by "networks" globalizes the process of reproduction of the individualistic society of unlimited consumption, but even though this empowerment is "worldwide" and universalizes communicative interaction, it is not oriented toward reinforcing an appropriate cultural environment for the generation of a deliberative debate among citizens.

Based on concepts that have been consolidated within the sociological aspects of communication, we have examined the notion of the "undefined neighbourhood" of *Retrotopia* in the hermeneutical framework of communicative phenomenology.

3. Results. From narcotized, passive complacency to voluntary servitude

When carried out from a distance, the exchange of communicative functions intrinsic to face-to-face relations, the so-called new interface modifies the processes of mass production of cultural goods, according to all descriptors, (Núñez Ladevéze and Irisarri, 2015). This possibility of expanding face-to-

face relationships, or relations *in praesentia,* without spatial limitations led some to think that the age of culture industry production for mass consumption had come to an end. The critics had announced that the receivers, turned into producers, would break the aesthetic patterns imposed by a culture industry monopolized by the issuing business world. According to the pioneers of Critical Theory, industry controlled the "system" through "mass deception" (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1998: 165), in order to ensure supremacy. Bauman subscribes to the technological achievement: "fully immersed in the consumer society ... (Bauman, 2016:71) ... modern promises are still alive... the original promise of modernity has reached... its maximum materialisation" (79-80)".

> "Modern promises" is understood here as democratized access to the media that would liberate the masses from their "deception".

Bauman distanced himself from the bitterly severe criticism of mass culture made by his predecessors by disassociating "full technological materialisation" from the mandatory content that critical theory associated negatively with the "promise". Capitalist companies prevented the exchange of the issuing and receiving functions that were technologically possible and socially desirable. However, according to Bauman, functional interchangeability has become widespread, creating a cultural environment that is an "undefined neighbourhood" of individuals who become members of groups interrelated by communication technology. In this environment, the proliferation of individual tendencies guides the preferences in the consumer society as well as the trends in cultural production that drive the interaction of supply and demand. Functional exchange has not promoted, as predicted by critics, a deliberative, equally democratic environment, but rather "a fragmented, diffuse and dispersed space" (2017:101).

Bauman's notion of the "undefined neighbourhood" is the result of the internal evolution of Critical Theory. The initial assessment insisted that the relationship between limited issuers and countless receivers was an industry tool for securing servitude through mass deception. As a representative of the Theory, Habermas realized that this supremacy of the industry in the communicative process could not be subject to a design. It was compatible with conflicting tendencies. McLuhan had already made this announcement. Although Bauman refers to McLuhan only to refer in passing to the statement that "the medium is the message" (Bauman and Lyon, 2014:50), he does not even mention him in his work entitled *Consumer World*. In the work entitled, *Ethics of the individual in the global village* (2010), the emphasis he places in many of his works on the "return to the tribe", as well as on his posthumous reference to the "neighbourhood", confirms the idea of analogy with the Mcluhan "village" (2016: 132). It reinforces the analogy that both notions, "undefined neighbourhood" and the "global village", are announced by employing the same rhetorical figure of the oxymoron.

In 1979, Alvin Toffler proposed the notion of "prosumer" in *The Third Wave,* which was a contemplative vision of the future. The capability that Toffler attributes to industrial technology in personalizing production and consumer capacity, and to communication technology in making the issuing and receiving functions reversible, is based on data and descriptions of technological changes that were already taking place at that time. Naturally, Habermas was already informed about this issue; hence, the rectification to which he subjects his critical predecessors, to which we allude further along.

Bauman had already subscribed to all of the consequences of these technological changes that distinguish the liquid period of globalization from individualized reproductive consumption. The notion of the "undefined neighbourhood" is proposed as the fruitful consequence of the potential of technology to expand without limit the possibilities of human mediation. It is not optimistic. The process of postmodernity is disappointing because it makes face-to-face relationships more random and fragmented.

It is "a world of weakened human ties" (50: 2017), in which it is unimportant how the agents of production relate to each other: whether the same messages are disseminated among different media, or whether there is variation in the relationship of the recipients of the communication process with regard to the media used for that reception. What matters is whether the system of new, personalized connection procedures used to keep "a set of people at our fingertips" (100) through virtual face-to-face relationships at a distance, as well as through the fragmentation of groups and the individualized association of connections, reproduces or alters the cultural patterns established by mass consumption processes of the culture industry characteristic of mass culture.

For some, the parameters of production and consumption typical of industry production for widespread cultural commodification are preserved in the fluid of the liquid society. These trends appear blurred or diffuse in the scenario inherent in the conversion of Internet into a means of universal communication for personal relationships from a distance in which users exchange functions of transmission, production and reception of mass cultural goods (Núñez Ladevéze and Irisarri, 2015).

3.1. The "passive complacency" of the masses in Critical Theory

The Frankfurt School pioneers observed the topic repetition in the variation of narrative structures characteristic of mass production and the non-exchangeable rigidity of the issuing and diffusing operations. Radio directed listeners "authoritatively toward programs that were exactly the same on all stations... all traces of spontaneity on official radio was circumvented and absorbed". The criticism by Adorno and Horkheimer of democratic societies blamed capitalism for not developing a "response" in the recipient, blocking the "spontaneity of the public", imposing the receptive function on the audience. As they asserted, "the technical contrast between a few production centres and dispersed reception would determine the organization and planning on the part of the "power holders" (1998:166). With the mass reproduction of cultural broadcast goods from a distance, either visual or written, "the masses have what they want, and stubbornly assert their right to this ideology by which they are enslaved". The industry adapts itself to such requests: "Cinema, radio and magazines constitute a system... Cinema and radio no longer need to be regarded as art. The truth that they are nothing more than businesses serves as an ideology... They define themselves as an industry" (Id.165-213).

It is relevant to note that television was not the focus of attention of critical theorists, as one might expect from the present perspective, when defining mass culture. This must be stressed. The function of entertaining large audiences began with radio, not television, and preliminary studies on audio-visual production are linked to cinematography, not television series. Adorno and Horkheimer refer specifically to cinema, radio and magazines. The observation is appropriate in order to understand that the imposing exploitation of television as an entertainment industry of mass consumption only implied an accumulative modification, but it did not represent a qualitative step in the relationship between culture industry producers and receivers of mass-media manufactured products. Through the diffusion of copies through radio, the press, and cinematography, the new phenomenon of presenting a cultural offering to consumers with a potentially unlimited demand has been created.

3. 2. The narcotizing dysfunction of the media

If members of the Frankfurt School harshly criticized the "culture industry system", functional sociologists focused mainly on the choice of "culture industry products" by the recipients. Let us contrast these two points of view. Those belonging to The Frankfurt School give the following reproach, saying that:

1) The masses are complacent accomplices in the communicative process that exploits their indoctrination, a homogeneous group of passive recipients for commercial exploitation;

2) Exploitation is inseparable from the communicative system because passivity is monitored in order to impose on the masses the designs of their controllers;

3) The unilateral relationship of supremacy of the issuer (few) over the receiver (all) is presented as irreversible, when technically it is not.

This is the negative form of the media imperative. The production system prevents ridding oneself of the bondage of complacent complicity that ensures the submission of the masses by excluding them from the broadcasting function and reducing their communicative capacity to that of a receiver.

For functionalists, this massive use could be explained in another way, as a dysfunctional effect of the media. Lazarsfeld and Merton called it the "narcotizing dysfunction" (1977). It was not a new concept. Plato had already referred to *pharmacon narcoticon* as a result of the numbing action of writing. Foucault returns in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* to this Platonic idea that writing replaces the reversibility of dialogue with the unilateral nature of the *tejné,* a remedy for memory but the appearance of knowledge, because the reader does not demonstrate understanding when he only pretends to understand what he has read. Derrida commented extensively on this relationship (1975).

When they referred to "the narcotizing" dysfunction, the functionalists were inspired more by Adorno and Horkheimer's criticism than by the dialogue between Socrates and Phaedrus, even though their treatment was rather platonic. If writing is a medium that is just as artificial and unidirectional as television, then television might also be just as narcotizing as "writing". However, writing is a remedy for memory that can give the appearance of understanding at the same time. This is what Socrates was saying when he observed that by substituting memory, writing could narcotize the process of understanding. It provides a service, since it frees the subordination of knowledge to memory, but it faces a risk because reading does not prove that what has been read is understood. Writing is an irresolute subterfuge. What emerges from the Platonic gloss regarding the myth of writing is there is no normative link between communicative functions and the media, but rather uncertainty, shown in services that may or may not provide compensation for the harm inflicted.

3.3. Hypothesis of Bauman's "voluntary servitude"

Although empirical analyses tested the assumption of passive complacency, Bauman subtly admits this idea when he says, "cooperation is the main resource employed by synoptic marketing systems…..to transform servitude into voluntary behaviour and to allow submission to be lived as an advancement of freedom" (Bauman and Lyon 2014e: 140 and 141).

In commenting on the origin of writing, Plato anticipated a type of teaching that Bauman gathers perhaps reluctantly, since it is closer to the notion of the "narcotizing dysfunction" of functionalists than to the "passive complacency" of critical phenomenology. Writing is a linear medium. The reader's relationship with what is written can provide both an effective use, as well as the appearance, of providing it. The advantage is that the message is stored, it lasts over time, it is preserved, and it allows the memory to rest from the effort of having to recall it. The detriment comes from the fact that reading does not guarantee that the reader comprehends what is read. As a remedy for memory, it can numb comprehension. The text is rendered silent if the interpreter questions it. There is no interaction or dialogue. Obviously, this linear irreversibility is comparable to the linear, unilateral feature of mediation between broadcasters and

producers in radio and television (Núñez Ladevéze, 2015). However, if modernity portrays reading as a model for reflection as well as for the preservation of knowledge and intellectual transmission, then why is a linear relationship such as that found in the practice of writing, which is not functionally reversible as in an oral relationship, or that of Internet, presented as an expression of a design of "voluntary servitude"? Alternatively, by reversing the terms so they are adapted to the reason why Bauman was perplexed, the question arises: Why, once "modernity's promise" of universal reversibility on Internet has been achieved, do we remain "fully immersed in the consumer society"? (Bauman, 2016: 71)

Before capitalist industry first introduced Internet, the argument about the design was based on the hypothesis that states, "only communication based on a scheme of symmetrical relations can be considered authentic", and it would be accessed when the relationship between issuer and recipient is not imposed by the system, but rather is interchangeable (Enzensberger 1972: 34). For functionalists, people may not be passive accomplices of a system of self-deception, but they are conditioned, (perhaps "narcotized"?), by a system of production aimed at submissive consumption. However, with the expansion of interchangeable relationships brought about by the network, the hypothesis of Adorno and Horkheimer, which is accepted by Enzensberger, is no longer sustainable. The already cautious Habermas in his *Theory of Communicative Action* warned that functional exchange was within the reach of communication technology. In other words, it was not a design. In the 1987 revised edition, commenting on the review of Adorno and Horkheimer, he warned that, "the formidable expansion of communication potential has for now been neutralized by organizational arrangements that ensure communication flows in a single direction, and not reversible communication flows" (1999[1987], I: 473). He saw that the change was taking place from within the system, not against its design.

4. Discussion: the "undefined neighbourhood", a theoretical framework for studies of the Internet

Bauman's discomfort caused by the spread of consumerism in the functional reversibility of Internet in which consumers are producers, concludes with the adoption of the thesis already anticipated by Habermas's shift, which is that of neutrality or technological ambiguity: "the electronic media are neutral as to the way in which the logic of instrumental rationality is going to be, or is already being, applied by its users" (2017: 86). In summary, Bauman accepts the idea of "passive complacency", naming it "voluntary servitude", but he disassociates it from a design inherent in a type of logic controlled by beneficiaries, or imposed to serve the deliberate interests of media owners, as was done by the first critical theorists. If there is a worldwide web, the servitude is global in a universal undefined neighbourhood.

From his initial work to his most recent, Bauman insists on the following:

> "the spectacular progress of the consumer culture… is being applied to the interaction between human beings... consumers in a society of consumers (which)... has a significant amount of responsibility for the current fragility of human ties and the fluidity of human associations and societies" (2014: 96-97).

In the liquid postmodernity of prosumers, who according to Bauman constitute the "undefined neighbourhood", communications on Internet are universal and compete for visibility in all social spheres and on the market.

The current scenario of networks encouraged by the capitalist communication industry that feeds the liquid global society leads Habermas to have reservations in his theory of communicative action, and impelled Bauman to modify the interpretations of the first Critical Theory intellectuals: the productive agents that prevented the functional exchange were, and are, those who incite the process (Fuchs and Sandoval, 2014).

There was no corporate control of the "spontaneity of the public", as the industry itself made the switch from consumer to producer possible. The innovation of the business system revitalized its reproductive process (Habermas, 1999 [1987]). The inadequacy between the first phenomenological critique and the phenomenal description of the evolution produced by technological renewal impelled the critical reformulation expressed in the notion of the "undefined neighbourhood". In order to adapt the demands of the phenomenological critique to this perceptible evolution, Bauman conceives the Internet as the result of a mediation process that culminates in the "universal" exchange of communicative functions in which all users, without restrictions, can interact from a distance in a social and individually-interconnected "neighbourhood". Issuers, producers, and receivers are also interchangeable as active, passive or dissident consumers. In order to maintain the descriptive uniformity of critical theory, the possibilities offered by Internet must be interpreted as a guide for decision-making, but selective processes must be detached from a normativity that is intrinsic to the communication media. They depend on the decisions of the individual agents subject to moral responsibility, being well understood that their normative independence is determined by the instrumental possibilities offered by the communicative means in achieving its own purposes.

If functional exchange makes al face-to-face communication possible in the "undefined neighbourhood", the designation of unique differences could be blurred as well as strengthened. The Internet transfers to individual autonomy the capacity to act selectively on the conditions that users promote. As not everything can be seen, read or produced at the same time by everyone, the selective process is assured for a type of consumerism that is repeatedly duplicated through reproduction for consumption. Users' own choices, when creating a profile, serve as the parameters for offering consumer products selectively and mechanically that are adapted to a profile, which through the progressive accumulation of information can be progressively more individualised. Control of the data parameters that make up the profiles is anonymous (Hindman, 2009), although this might not be the case where there is no democratic freedom.

Internet enables virtual dialogue to transcend space and time limitations of natural proximity. If restricted diffusion is sought, as in email, the addressee will be predetermined, but if social diffusion is sought, as in the networks, even though the production and reception can be personalized, the success of the product will be measured by the acceptance of the potential addressees. Understood as the sum of individual decisions, quantification is the common denominator of communicative success expectations. "Private is now public, and can be celebrated and consumed by countless "friends" (Bauman, 2013: 23). Preference regarding audience type is subjective, but measurement is always quantitative: the number of individuals, "friends" or not, of the desired population. As the result is quantitative, the content disseminated may not differ from that of mass culture... a product for consumer entertainment, or for the entertainment of a minority.

In "the modern liquid consumer society" (Bauman, 210: 222), what is truly important in order to be considered a communicative action is "visibility". In the communicative process, what is visible is what exists. What is perceived as a successful action is that which can be quantified by reception, without which the communicator's intention is not accomplished: the number of page visits, entries, citations or views; the number of voters in an electoral process; for a book, blog or film, it is the number of readers or viewers that satisfies the profile sought by the issuer or producer. The same applies to voters, readers or spectators... index of citations, football tickets, cinema, theatre, or opera, comScore, Statista, keywords. What is communicated is always measured, and the success of the communication is only assured by the quantification of its visibility. For an interest group, the more visible the group, the better the chances of

an individual ascribing to the group. Fulfilling the intention of a communicative action produces a sum that constitutes a quantity.

Nothing can prevent the system mechanism from owning and reusing channels used for personal productivity in presenting "profiles" adapted to any demand. Such channels can converge and compete at the same time. Whether we know it or not, we are indulgent accomplices of the system of individualized quantification of cultural consumption. We nourish "the current version of "voluntary servitude"". (Bauman and Lyon, 2013: 149). It suffices to acknowledge that the performance of a communicative act is "servitude", and this is required for ensuring the self-reproduction of the system, no matter how "voluntary" our collaboration may be. That is the question.

5. Conclusions Circularity of "voluntary servitude"

Technological advances directly affect consumer preferences, and because this issue is under discussion, it can be assumed that their influence on social preferences is different. The consumption of knowledge, information and entertainment distributes the asymmetry between issuers and receivers and "has the capacity to facilitate human choice...whether we are culturally omnivorous or very strictly selective" (Bauman, 2017: 86). Receiving knowledge, information and entertainment, or being delighted by one thing or another, are demands that respond to common, generalised needs. On the other hand, providing knowledge, writing, informing, entertaining, or taking delight in others are tasks that each one does in a different way. Social demands satisfy a specific offer that is capable of coexisting or competing with other rivals. Their results can be measured, even in proportion to the subjective aspiration that each one determines as proof of success.

In addition, excellence is often measured by collecting "quantities of individuals" that is proof of success. The yardstick used to measure popularity, which includes television audiences, newspapers, and radio listeners, is the same yardstick used to count visits or entries in Scopus, JCR, Google Academic, or reading the most specialized publications. Even those who fail participate in the festivities. Whether it adapts to the personal ego of a single reader, to selective applause, to the general audience, or to recognition by the most specialized critics, the yardstick is quantification. The network that feeds "followers" of tweets, blogs, newspapers, listeners, and web accesses is the same one that develops the JCR impact index.

Critical Theory conceptualized recipients of the culture industry as "cultural consumers". It associated "consumer" with "passivity", and television replaced radio as the maximum expression of remote-controlled passivity. Discussion of the trends produced by the advent of digital society can now be equally presented as a quantitative analysis of trends such as audience analysis and links on Internet, which brings up the question of whether or not adaptation to the web promotes the continuation of a style of production and consumption. Following the scheme implied by Bauman, three possibilities for medium-term statistical verification have been simplified.

1. The status of prosumer does not alter the system of production and dissemination of the culture industry. Television retains its predominance as a transmitter of the culture industry. The globalization of face-to-face relationships on Internet, which "puts an end to the idea of a neighbourhood defined by physical distance", does not modify the flow of few competitors in an audience market. Once the activity of television was verified by studies of the context of audience reception (Torrecillas, 2013), the capabilities offered by digital technology when linking other devices to television have not displaced it. On the contrary, they have reinforced the consumption of cultural goods through television.

2. Although there are signs of declining use of the television set, there has been no weakening of culture industry consumption: mass entertainment flows copiously on Internet, propagated by "the new computer technology that is increasingly closer to achieving full and truly universal accessibility (for all)" (Bauman, 2017: 100). The selection of content is distributed in cumulative sums of innumerable individual decisions. With meta-television (Carlón, 2006), consumer users can access the consumption of mass entertainment products through any device. The culture industry is in good health because the unlimited neighbourhood of Internet overlaps with conventional audiences.

3. The spread of face-to-face relationships invites us to hypothesize with regard to the transformation of current "consumer capitalism" (Arias-Maldonado, 2016), of which the mass entertainment industry forms the greatest part. Replicated consumerism on the network can aspire to "creative empowerment" (Castells, 2009) of the production and diffusion of goods of cultural interest that the medium makes possible. However, since not everyone can see everything at the same time, what is seen is dispersed over the Internet (Núñez Ladevéze, 2017). There is no "empowerment" without "consumer selection". The web implicates these features, and at the same time separates them.

"The content of the *neighbourhood*, understood as a set of "people within our reach"... people who follow you or are interested in you, is no longer a continuous or contiguous space as it was before, but rather it is now fragmented, diffuse and dispersed" (Bauman, 2017: 101). How can you find your "neighbour" in a social network, or how can you prove that she follows you in another one if she finds you? The business of buying "followers" has become widespread within multiple strategies designed for online marketing that proliferate on the web.

Visibility is sought and measured by selective dispersion. Although Bauman refers to the collection of incitements that maintain the system, treated as an empirical hypothesis as an object of study to be verified or refuted, what is required is a quantitative study of cultural and material consumption through online marketing. The verification of the hypothesis must be compatible with visibility as a common factor in the motivation of intercommunication of Internet users.

Adopting the theoretical framework implicit in the notion of the "undefined neighbourhood", the basic hypothesis for specific empirical studies, necessary for establishing a harmonious relationship between critical and empirical theory, requires it to be seen in competition with whoever intends to see it in all social spheres, and especially in the market of visibility quantifier indicators. In other words, from the theoretical point of view the condition for establishing a relationship between critical and empirical theory is circular: it requires describing "visibility" by quantitative means as the sum of individual choices. "Voluntary servitude" is defined as the acceptance of the individualistic system of self-replication that quantifies self-reproductive consumption.

The very process of instrumental objectives and aspirations driven by each individual's accessibility to communicative functions encourages the spread of culture industry consumption through individual interconnections. The need for something to be seen is a condition for it to be recognized for its social "existence". It is useless to say, "Whoever does not want to be seen should not present himself". The question is how to exist socially in an environment of reproductive consumption, no matter how specific, if one is not seen by a user who participates as a prosumer in that environment.

The hermeneutical closing of critical theory concludes with Bauman and his concept of a universal "undefined neighbourhood", which is identified with the very system of technological self-reproduction.

Excluded from the closed circle is the imperative that ascribes to technological progress the inherent feature of a process of political and social democratization. There is no link between the negativity of Critical Theory and the achievement of collective democratization. Technological uncertainty places utopia beyond the reach of scientific progress. It is located in a different place, and to find it requires some sort kind of regression toward *retrotopia*.

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