

COMMENTARY

A Semio-Anthropological Perspective on Mediatization: *Semiosis, 2* by Eliseo Verón¹

Una perspectiva semio-antropológica de la mediatización: *La Semiosis Social, 2* de Eliseo Verón

Uma perspectiva semio-antropológica da midiatização – *Semiosis, 2* por Eliseo Verón

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Since the late 1960s and until his death in 2014, theorist Eliseo Verón built bridges between semiotics and communication studies—two territories that actually belong to a single domain not always perceived as such. His last book, reviewed here in the context of his overall scientific production, was aimed at the systematic development of a semio-anthropological theory of mediatization. Unlike scholars such as Hjarvard, Krotz, Hepp, or Lundby, Verón situates the entry point of the historical sequence of mediatization at the very start of the evolution of human species, directly connecting both. He thus puts forward an interpretative approach and a line of work that will encourage much needed discussion and reflection. His theoretical model is yet to be debated.

Eliseo Verón ha sido, desde finales de la década de 1960 y hasta su deceso en 2014, uno de los teóricos que más puentes tendió entre la semiótica y el campo de estudios en comunicación: dos territorios que, en realidad, forman parte de un único dominio no siempre percibido como tal. Su último libro, reseñado aquí en el contexto del conjunto de su producción, tuvo como finalidad desarrollar sistemáticamente una teoría semio-antropológica de la mediatización que —a diferencia de las perspectivas de autores como Stig Hjarvard, Robert Krotz, Andreas Hepp o Knut Lundby, entre otros— sitúa el umbral de ingreso a dicha secuencia histórica en conexión directa con el inicio del proceso evolutivo de la especie humana. Verón marca, de este modo, una actitud interpretativa y una línea de trabajo que incitarán, durante mucho tiempo, necesarias discusiones y reflexiones en torno a un modelo teórico cuyo debate no está cerca de saldarse.

Desde o final da década de 1960 até sua morte em 2014 o teórico Eliseo Verón construiu pontes entre a semiótica e os estudos da comunicação – duas teorias que pertencem ao mesmo campo, mas que nem sempre são percebidas dessa forma. Seu último livro, resenhado aqui no contexto geral de sua produção científica, tem como objetivo o desenvolvimento sistemático de uma teoria semio-antropológica da comunicação. Diferente de teóricos como Hjarvard, Krotz, Hepp, or Lundby; Verón situa o ponto de entrada da

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sequencia histórica da midiatização no início da evolução da espécie humana, fazendo uma conexão direta entre ambos. Dessa forma, o autor propõe uma abordagem interpretativa e uma linha de raciocínio que abre espaço para discussões e reflexões extremamente necessárias. O modelo teórico proposto por Verón necessita ainda está por ser debatido.

Keywords: Eliseo Verón, Mediatization, Social Semiosis, Communication.

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A very brief introduction to the author's work

From its very start, the theoretical production of the Argentinean semiologist [Eliseo Verón \(1935–2014\)](#) took shape by following a trajectory already spelled out in the introduction to his first book, *Conduct, Structure and Communication*: “to elaborate the basis for a theory of social communication” (1968, p. 11). By then, after returning from his first stay in France, he embraced the scientificism of modern semiology, even if its path at that time was quite different from that of European structuralism. This led to an intellectual style partly distanced from those propositions considered as really “Latin American” in our field of study, and to a theorization not always linked to local problems (and thus different from those centered on understanding development, subordination, subalternity, or autochthonous political and social processes). In Verón’s own words, “The objects that we study are local (or regional), but the methods and concepts that we use are not. (...) By definition, scientific activity is global” (2011, p. 39). Verón’s theoretical arguments have encouraged the blurring not only of geographical borders, but also of disciplinary boundaries. Both his theory of social discourses—first systematized in *The Social Semiosis* in the late 1980s ([Verón, 1998](#)), and partly reworked in [Boutaud and Verón \(2007\)](#)—and his theory of mediatization—which reached its maturity in *The Social Semiosis, 2* ([Verón, 2013](#))—are the result of a viewpoint that circumvented disciplinary contours, weaving productive links between sociology, anthropology, linguistics, history, psychology, paleontology, cybernetics, and even biology. As noted by the Argentinean researcher Mario Carlón, he used the propositions of diverse authors such as Niklas Luhmann, Bruno Latour, Jack Goddy, Antoine Culioli, Elizabeth Eisenstein, Richard Leakey, Gregory Bateson, and Gerald Edelman² as “legitimizing and explanatory analytical frameworks” (2015, p. 1126). We must take this trajectory into account in order to understand why Verón defined semiotics as “a knot of problems that have multiplied [in the context of increasing complexity] and have somehow become the way in which science tends to operate at present” (2001, p. 4). Or, in other words, as a “global theory of society and culture, situated in the production of meaning” (1997, p. 68).

Verón’s theoretical development has proved to be not only foundational but also prospective, with a notable heuristic value for the study of the complex phenomena of meaning production, such as those that take place in the context of the media. The

fertility of Verón's theoretical-methodological framework for the analysis of mediatized discourses is based on his non-intentional conceptualization of discursive strategies (Raimondo Anselmino, 2011) and the development of prolific operational categories (a language of description or meta-language) to work on discursivity in different signifier supporters. He connects these to the functioning of social semiosis by way of constant epistemological reflection on the role of the observer.³ Notwithstanding this fertility, the English-speaking world has not yet granted him the recognition he deserves, perhaps due to a certain reticence among English-speaking academics to read in other languages, which stands in contrast with the imperative to transcend language barriers that Latin American scholars have always been faced with. This contrast is noticeable if we compare European observations on mediatization with those formulated in the Southern Cone. Conceptualizations of mediatization are being taken into account in the context of the more contemporary theoretical-epistemological Latin American ideas, even if the scholarly production from the South of the continent is not always contemplated. To give an example, Valdetaro (2015) carefully reviews the studies of mediatization undertaken mainly in Argentina and Brazil with a clear influence from Verón, while Orozco and González also consider conceptualizations of mediatization briefly, focusing exclusively on non-Latin American references.

Verón's last theoretical course

The notion of mediatization began appearing in Verón's texts in the late 1980s, but he systematizes his argument in the last period prior to his death in 2014. In his book *Semiosis Social*, 2, Verón consolidated his *semio-anthropological theory of mediatization* in order to understand and encompass the historical sequence of media phenomena "that follow from specific materializations of semiosis achieved via technical procedures" (Verón, 2013, p. 147, emphasis added). In this book, Verón brings together his ideas regarding diverse aspects of social change in post-industrial societies and records those changes as elements of a long-standing historical process. Condensed propositions derived from the book, as yet untranslated, were published by Verón both in English (2014) and in Spanish (2015).

In a nutshell, Verón (2013) argues that *all communication implies mediation* because there is no process of meaning production (not even the simplest interlocution) without materialization.⁴ Mediation is, for Verón, "a defining aspect of communication in general, which results from sensory materiality, inevitable of the support" (2013, p. 145). This differs from the dissimilar ways in which Martín-Barbero (1987) or Hjarvard (2016) conceptualize mediation. Verón differentiates *mediation* from *mediatic phenomenon*, using the latter to categorize the products that result from the human species' semiotic capacity. Via more or less complex technical operations (i.e., *production*), mediatic phenomena enable the exteriorization of mental processes that thus become *autonomous* and *persistent* in time (Verón, 2013, pp. 145–146). Therefore, only interpersonal face-to-face communication is not mediatized (though it is mediated by voice, intonation, gaze, etc.).

Mediatization is a precondition of complex social systems (Verón, 2015, p. 180), i.e., a process of the transformation of meaning that leads to the social, and not the other way around (Cingolani, 2014). This is an interpretative approach that Carlón (2015) qualifies as *non anthropocentric* in that “it does not consider the human being in isolation from his natural habitat” (p. 1114). On the contrary, as stated by Oscar Traversa (2015),⁵ unlike the European and Scandinavian perspectives,⁶ “to support the long trajectory of mediatization implies in the first place to leave aside the epistemological restrictions characteristic of what has been termed ‘human exception’” (p. 140). For Verón (2013), this implied disassociating the emergence of semiosis—which starts from the exteriorization of mental processes that favoured the Stone industry and shaped primeval secondary meaning-systems—from the problematization of the origin of language (see Chapter 9 and 11).

Therefore, mediatization is not an intrinsically contemporary phenomenon. What is contemporary is the speed at which it becomes increasingly complex, leading to a period of “remarkable change, qualitatively and quantitatively more intense than the previous period” (Fernández, 2014, p. 199). Verón himself remarks that, “the conceptual advantage of a long-term perspective is that it reminds that what is going on in late modernity societies started a long time ago” (2015, p. 175). In this way, his theorization—grounded in an eclectic, openly provocative and controversial erudition—bequeaths both an interpretative attitude and a line of work with plenty of detail yet to be considered and debated.

Notes

- 1 Translated from the original in Spanish by Florencia Enghel
- 2 To name a few of the explanations that nurture Verón’s most recent theoretical reflections.
- 3 An aspect condensed in Chapter 26 of his book *Semiosis Social*, 2 (2013).
- 4 Note that the materialist model was already present in his first reflections from 1960.
- 5 A representative of Argentinian and Latin American semiotics.
- 6 These perspectives regard both mediation and the mediatization process as circumscribed to the consequences of the operation of the mass media. See e.g., Harvard (2016) and Fernández (2014).

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