INTERVIEW WITH ANTONIO FAUSTO NETO

Mediatization, Circulation and Social Practices

Mediatización, circulación y prácticas sociales

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.18861/ic.2026.21.1.4561

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HOW TO CITE: Carlón, M., Ferreira, J. & Olivera, G. (2026). Interview with Antonio Fausto Neto. Mediatization, Circulation and Social Practices. *InMediaciones de la Comunicación*, *21*(1). https://doi.org/10.18861/ic.2026.21.1.4561

Antonio Fausto Neto is a leading figure in the field of communication studies in Latin America, having fulfilled a dual role over the years. On the one hand, he has been a key institutional leader. In this capacity, he has headed CISECO (International Centre for Semiotics and Communication)[1] since its foundation and played a pivotal role in the development of the postgraduate program at the University of Vale dos Sinos (Unisinos), Brazil. On the other hand, he has produced a vast body of work dedicated to studies on mediatization, politics and the circulation of meaning. A PhD graduate of the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, France (1974), he has maintained a close connection over the decades with Eliseo Verón, a founding figure of this type of studies in Latin America.

MARIO CARLÓN (M.C.), JAIRO FERREIRA (J.F.) & GUILLERMO OLIVERA (G.O.): Professor Antonio Fausto Neto, we are conducting this interview for an issue entitled "Beyond Postmodernity. The processes of contemporary mediatization", with the aim of asking you about your own specific contributions to the field, which are many and varied; and, on the other hand, about your long association with the work and person of Eliseo Verón—with whom you have strongly promoted, in recent decades, research on mediatization and the circulation of meaning. You have been director of CISECO since its foundation, alongside Eliseo Verón. This institutional space, which began in 2009 with an International Symposium dedicated to the Mediatization of the Presidential Figure, marked a turning point in studies in this field in Latin America. What do you consider to be the main conceptual contributions that have been made from this institutional space to the field of studies on mediatization? And to studies on circulation?

ANTONIO FAUSTO NETO (A.F.N.): I have been director of CISECO since its foundation, at the invitation of its president, Eliseo Verón. Over the past 16 years, CISECO has held an annual meeting in Brazil, specifically in Japaratinga, a coastal town in the Brazilian Northeast, bringing together national and international researchers to discuss topics related to the semiotics of media communication. CISECO has published books on the topics discussed at its scientific meetings, focusing particularly on topics concerning mediatization in relation to various subjects (politics; the internet; cybernetics; surveillance; education and learning; the city and the street; pandemics, elections, events, political discourse; journalism and discourse), among others. Over the years, CISECO has developed two areas of study within its in-person meetings: the first through conferences and the second through round-table discussions, where reports on ongoing research within the postgraduate programs and specialized institutions themselves are presented and debated. In this context, the potential of themes converging with mediatization has been

1 https://ciseco.com.br/v2/home/



highlighted, thereby disseminating issues that addressed the relationship between social semiosis and processes of mediatization. These works, which involved the presentation and discussion of topics and sub-topics, were subsequently published in books addressing content on mediatization and the production of meaning.

This working format, which has been in use for almost two decades—2009–2026—has sparked discussions and reflections among lecturers, professors, researchers and professionals from diverse fields, intertwining with the domains of communication, semiotics, politics, literature, sociology, linguistics, anthropology, etc., on various topics regarding mediatization and social practices, something that is reflected in CISECO's own scientific and editorial output. It is worth noting that, in listing discursive practices, we emphasize the importance of situating them within the context of more complex processes. In other words, whilst, on the one hand, the themes around which CISECO's scientific outputs develop go in line with its "core practices" of knowledge, on the other hand, studies that address methodological aspects are included, taking into account literature that has been presented and discussed in the CISECO forum (following studies involving theories of discursivity and relationships between semiotic models, grammars, etc.). And, under these conditions, CISECO contributes, as an institutional and academic space, to the dissemination and debate surrounding studies on mediatization and circulation, in interaction with related social practices, also involving issues concerning journalism, economics, politics, surveillance, education, health, artificial intelligence, youth, religion, ecology, the city, and so on.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: As early as the 1980s, in different areas of his work—for example, in his writings on mediatization, on the one hand, and on semiotics, on the other—, Eliseo Verón talked about processes. Thus, in *La semiosis social. Fragmentos de una teoría de la discursividad* (*Social Semiosis, Fragments of a Theory of Discursivity*) (Verón, 1987), he states that the analysis takes *products* as its starting point (these "products" being defined as spatio-temporal crystallizations of meaning, to which he refers as discourses), but focuses on *processes*. And in "El living y sus dobles. Arquitecturas de la pantalla chica" ("The Living Room and Its Doubles. Architectures of the

Small Screen") (Verón, 1984)—a seminal text of the Latin American perspective—he asserts that the transition from a "media society" to a "mediatized society" occurs due to the *acceleration of the processes* through which the media appropriate the three orders of meaning identified by Charles Sanders Peirce. Such processes began with the symbol in the press, continued with the icon in cinema and then with the index in television. In your opinion, what place do "processes" occupy in your work? How does this focus on processes relate to your studies on mediatization and the circulation of meaning?

A.F.N.: The theme of mediatization has been a recurring focus in Eliseo Verón's work over the years, appearing in published books as well as in courses and seminars delivered at universities in various countries, particularly in France, Argentina and Brazil, as it's also the case in our organization's publications, covering a range of topics including the mediatization of politics, discursive circulation, the internet and other topics related to the issue of social discourses. It has always been present in the discussions held, through reflections on the relationships between semiotics, the media and issues related to the production of meaning.

His studies on mediatization encompass various angles, given the depth of his exploration of the concept through historical, anthropological, and political semiotic analyses, among others, a point made explicit in his writings and other forms of communication (articles, books, seminars, etc.). One of the characteristics of his studies on mediatization is the fact that he positions it as a central issue in the advancement of semiotic research, whilst also considering the increasing complexity of the modes of meaning-making, which are intensely interwoven with the logics and operations of communication media, technologies, language and other forms of communication, etc.

As regards my interest in mediatization and circulation, I would point out that this has been the case for at least 20 years. Since then, I have been studying the effects of mediatization and circulation on society, through the presentation and discussion of works, and other forms of reflection related to different forms of communication and the increasing complexity of circulation processes; mediatization as social and meaning-making practices; discursive circulation between production and recognition (reception); circulation and zones of indeterminacy, as well as more interrogative elaborations on 'how languages affect and are affected in circulation' or, pointing to other forms of relationship, such as 'discursive circulation and the transformation of society'. Fifteen years ago, I wrote a paper for an international forum on "Mediatization, Society and Meaning—Dialogues between Brazil and Argentina," organized by the Department of Communication Sciences at the National University of Rosario (Argentina). It was an event aimed at a specific group of participants who were presenting their initial formulations on this concept, which, in a way, set the



agenda for postgraduate programs in Argentina and Brazil, particularly at Unisinos. CISECO has also published two books: *Discursive Circulation: Between Production and Recognition* (Castro, 2017)[2] and *Discursive Circulation and the Transformation of Society* (2018)[3]. Also noteworthy was the lecture "Approaches to Discursive Circulation Based on Eliseo Verón," delivered by Prof. Oscar Traversa in September 2016 (Traversa, 2017). Other related topics were discussed at semiotics colloquia and featured in conference proceedings. I would also like to recall that CISECO held an internal seminar in April 2013 to discuss a paper by Eliseo Verón on "Discursive Circulation: Between Production and Recognition," in which the author highlighted that "within the field of studies on mediatization from a perspective inspired by semiotics and the sciences of language, the problem of discursive circulation has not always been present. In the first stage of its development, approximately between 1960 and 1980, semiotics was dominated, as we know, particularly in the European context, by an immanent approach to the corpora of analysis. Such a focus on textuality excluded an adequate consideration of the problems of circulation".

To this end, the internal seminar aimed to advance the development of theories and models of reception processes, that is, of the conceptualization that might enable us to construct a theory of discursive circulation. "The promotion of studies on the reception of media discourses would identify potential conceptual and institutional obstacles, as well as promote principles of fieldwork that should be implemented to encourage research projects that simultaneously articulate the two poles of circulation: production and reception" (CISECO—Internal Seminar, on "Discursive Circulation: Between Production and Reception"—Japaratinga, April 2013. Continuing along this line, we present a reflection highlighting the issue of circulation in journalistic practices, examining the case of "the ombudsman: the interruption of a transversal discourse", at the 31st Congress of Communication Sciences —Juiz de Fora, 2008.

Starting from the question "How do different forms of communication affect and are affected in circulation" and taking into account the (functionalist) hypothesis, according to which these two concepts operate in the communication process *towards the conception of a "service activity"* (Fausto Neto, 2013), my reflection points out that this view leaves problematic concepts out of the debate and that circulation is not merely "a platform on which a message is transmitted from the mind of one person or institution to another, which receives it without issue" (Fausto Neto, 2013, p. 45). From a functionalist perspective, language would be merely a "stock of signs at the service of a convention established by a given actor". My reflection draws on Verón's analytical literature

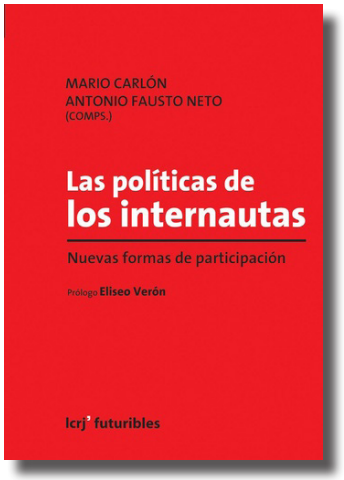
2 Castro. P. C. (org.) (2017). *A Circulação Discursiva: entre produção e reconhecimento*. Edufal.

3 Castro. P. C. (org.) (2018). *Circulação discursiva e transformação da sociedade.* Eduepb.

to show that the "conditions of production of a signifying set (production) are never the same in the sphere of recognition/reception. The interval between production and reception varies according to the level of meaning production". Verón points out that these two concepts also generate complexities, in the form of a paradox, for "whilst this process offers itself as a reference (for interaction), it is also a source of instability" (Fausto Neto, 2013, p. 63).

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: The transition from media societies to mediatized societies in Verón's work is a genuine historical "process", a change in the conditions under which a society is configured, organized and represents itself. In this context, the shift towards mediatization is not neutral, insofar as it involves (insurmountable) changes of scale that result in ruptures of scale between the conditions of production and those of recognition/reception. Thus, Verón noted that "communication technologies can be characterized as devices of scale rupture (or scale alteration) within the configuration of society's mental spaces" (Verón, 2001, pp. 106-107). How do these discontinuities manifest themselves, that is, these processes of "changes or alterations of scale" in studies on circulation and mediatization? Why are changes of scale so central to the processes of mediatization, both historical and current?

A.F.N.: The organization of society develops in different phases, which are centered on the foundations, operations and manifestations of processes and practices of interaction, such as those typical of "media societies" and of "societies in the process of mediatization". In the context of the former, social organization was structured around technologies, processes and instruments, whose practices were permeated and shaped by techno-mass media foundations over a long period. The foundations upon which society presents itself in terms of identity and develops its practices manifest themselves through functions that enable interaction between individuals and institutions, in line with the precepts and principles of organized social action. Society operates according to scenarios in which the media visualize functions and operationalize their perceptions, through which interactions of various kinds mobilize collectives. These are transformed into specific collectives, referred to as audiences or related segments. Collectives are transformed into crowds, or segments that rely on ideals, rationalities, values, and other appeals for identification, etc., which are elaborated at the boundaries of values (psychological and social, etc.) where they take root, and, are carved out and thus transformed into collectives under construction. In this context, the existence and functioning of the field of mass media communication stand out: their techno-symbolic practices emphasize the importance of upholding values as ends in themselves, through various practices with which social actors are confronted. Their foundations and operators would come to the fore, establishing dimensions of mediation, whose



principles foster values and symbolic practices in harmony with values that would underpin society's way of being. They operate, in these circumstances, according to references from the mass media as a matrix through which communicative content would be provided, in accordance with values to be implemented by individuals. Also noteworthy in this context are communication instructions, calls and appeals, through which society is invited to generate and implement values, in accordance with principles aimed at the guidelines of a 'way of being' for social organization. It is in this context that the operations set in motion, in line with the foundations of organized social action, would thus seek to visualize and emphasize the ideals of a particular model of society. From the observation of this framework, new formulations would emerge that would address the role of the mass media in policy mediation processes. There is a vast body of literature on this subject, and we must not forget that, over many years, these issues have been intertwined with values shared by communities. These are signals that are amplified by the dynamics of communication modalities, whilst acting as symbolic operators of policies of various kinds. One wonders: would this fact represent a new phase in the operation of organized social action, in which the media would fulfill a performative role? Or, in the face of these processes triggered by (emerging) mediatization, would certain principles emerge that would guide policies, with a view to building media output for the consumption of social groups? In this context, answers are formulated based on practices and other forms of strategies and communicational actions, aligned with advertising and propaganda principles.

However, answers to these challenges can be found only at the political level or, in this instance, through strategies of "sharing" knowledge made available to the masses, in accordance with communication protocols. It seems to us that the communicational framework involving the shift from "media societies" to "societies in (process of) mediatization"—as well as corresponding to a macro-theoretical problem—requires a deeper examination of issues on which the field of communication must focus in order to refine its self-understanding of the transformations and increasing complexity of mediatization, particularly those involving the production and circulation of meanings. Clues regarding these issues are found in the literature which, at a certain point, within the context of the mass media, constitutes a vast "state of the art" on communication in the service of social practices. Historically, from a certain point onwards, communication has been absorbed by frameworks, universes and practices that reflect on the interfaces of social practices, particularly those involving issues of propaganda, persuasion, etc. Its frameworks and analytical models serve largely to underpin communication practices, highlighted as vectors and

agents of change in behavior and socio-cultural habits, as highlighted by one of the critical strands of research on this subject.

In a later period, within the reflective context of communication work as the production of meaning, matrices of a different nature have come to the fore, distinct in terms of the foundations of organized social action and, consequently, socio-semiotic principles that underpin the understanding of these issues, according to theories of complex systems. Furthermore, according to perspectives that examine meanings through the dynamics of couplings and interpenetrations of meanings, based on the logics and foundations of socio-discursive complexities. Schematically, we draw attention to moments which are characteristic of communicational frameworks that examine the production of meaning, according to communicational dynamics constructed on the basis of causal logics of "media societies". Or, another perspective through which it is acknowledged and understood, that meanings do not result from processes of gift-giving, but from interpretative work, the understanding of which only emerges after the act of reading carried out by the analyst-reader, as an operator. This is a task carried out in a distinct manner within a "mediatized society". We value the analytical exercise across the different communicational trajectories—and brands—that emerge. At the same time, we emphasize reflective analysis of the effects of each of their respective dynamics. We also highlight the need to describe communication strategies in each of these configurations. Under these conditions, it seems appropriate to initiate observational processes capable of describing trajectories of communication practices—from one society to another—by examining markers of transformation (trajectories) from media processes to processes of mediatization.

In particular, ways of describing the operations of meaning-making in the manifestations of "ongoing" mediatization processes. What distinguishes them from the signs of contexts of "media processes"? The distinction between them must be addressed. There is something to be advanced without losing sight of the path, in terms of three levels: level 1, the affects, which would be the realm of feelings and imagination, a level that is inaccessible (...); level 2, where we find the diversity of languages and texts, the signs of operations (which are inaccessible at level 1, and everything indicates that there are no one-to-one relationships between the two levels). And, at level 3, theoretical models are constructed (...) which are hypotheses regarding the relationship between levels 1 and 2 (Verón, 2013).

In each of these levels, there are contexts, processes, moments and readings. The analytical work on each differs, depending on observations selected according to the process of elaboration that drives the analyst's performance. It is a complex exercise centered on an object, on the effects of which we can only draw conclusions about what we have found afterwards. One must not lose sight of the assessment of the manifestations of each period that involve the moment and the processes of the object under analysis. Semiosis is analyzed according

to dynamics of comings and goings, involving a return to the marks (imprints or traces) and shifting towards inflections, allusions, and retroactions; that is, according to an analytical process involving thirdness(es), as Culioli's work reminds us. And what helps to distinguish these moments is the nature of the societal context under analysis—is it a "media society"? Or is it a "society in the process of mediatization"? Both have their specificities. I recall that addressing this distinction was extensively covered by Eliseo Verón in various works, particularly those corresponding to the transition from "media societies" to "societies in the process of mediatization". In a way, it is in his latest book, but also in articles published in journals, particularly in texts where Luhmannian contributions are referenced and the author draws distinctions between societies. I think he has addressed the differences between them in his written articles.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: What contributions has the mediatization approach made to our understanding of contemporary societies?

A.F.N.: Certainly, understanding and assessing the contributions of mediatization to the society in which we live, in its contemporary form, requires observational and analytical training regarding its nature and its manifestations; in short, developing means that help us to interpret the functioning of social practices. Changes and their ramifications are challenges, hence the importance of constantly updating our "interpretative processes" as we interpret society. Understanding mediatization requires many (new) forms of learning.

At the same time, knowing how to read through clues—fragments of discourse—within the contexts of communicational practices through which social groups present themselves in the context of the most diverse circumstances, in terms of the realities of interfaces. This takes place in formal research environments, in the field, etc., as well as in records of studies cited by researchers at different levels of specialization and communication skills. In this context, socio-symbolic practices are evoked; these are practices that are spread, in different formats and at various levels, throughout the social fabric, including those inhabited by the "ordinary man" himself, as Michel de Certeau reminds us. Manifestations of mediatization also reveal, according to observations and interpretations, socio-cultural phenomena and clues related to everyday and symbolic practices through which society not only constructs processes of observing mediatization, but also other alternatives through which actors become "protagonists" or even "spokespeople" for the grammars upon which the discourses of the "ordinary man" are built. The expressions or manifestations of mediatization are thus "captured" by diverse practices of interpretation and observational processes, originating from various sources, ranging from academic works, through the media, to echoes of various socio-symbolic practices embedded as they unfold in the interpenetrating and interlinked scenarios of observational processes. We must

value data presented in research scenarios regarding the relevance of the media. In the context of ongoing mediatization, it can be seen that different social groups and actors present and discuss the various reading strategies through which they appropriate the media's discursive output. This observation suggests that the ways in which segments of the public appropriate the output of mediatized messages become significantly more complex, as a consequence of various factors that merit further exploration in research on individuals' modes of existence and the echoes of their everyday lives. These are contents which, drawn from media discourses, help to shape people's "ways of thinking". We may also acknowledge that mediatization and its messages are increasingly understood through "appropriations" that are turned into concepts and, perhaps, into modes of everyday conversation. We can say that the different forms of communication and discourse become the raw material, with which we engage through excerpts that, in turn, highlight important issues for researchers.

As a further comment on processes involving the establishment of the field of communication studies in Brazil: there is a long history marked by periods in which practices aimed at professional qualifications have developed, across various fields and sub-fields (journalism, advertising, public relations, publishing, tourism, etc.), and their training opportunities at different levels of study, from undergraduate to postgraduate. The educational process faces various challenges and demands related to training strategies and professional qualifications; since such concerns are grounded, more specifically, in emerging socio-technical issues involving technologies, forms of communication, ethical values, identities, amongst other aspects. We also consider that communication practices, involving experimentation (within the scope of professional qualifications), have been permeated by objects that are becoming increasingly complex in socio-technical terms, as already identified in more contemporary studies within the ongoing process of mediatization, according to research data on the training of researchers.

We emphasize that the manifestations of mediatization, and its increasingly complex practices, are associated with transformations in broader social interaction scenarios, as well as the transformation of educational settings. These are realities associated with certain macro-phenomena that are unfolding within the social fabric, in the form of knowledge, as is the case with teaching and research in the field of communication, as well as studies on mediatization in more recent processes. In addition to the very complexity of the communicational reality that generates subjects for experimentation (and reflection), it is worth noting that its manifestations make social practices more complex in distinct ways and, at the same time, give rise to new subjects for experimentation, as suggested by research reports, etc. Of particular note is the potential and importance in the formation of new markets—comprising specialists and

analysts of communicative situations, involving diverse social practices. These are processes that unfold according to socio-technical dynamics which render increasingly more complex the functioning of socio-discursive practices in a wide variety of ways. New scenarios are emerging that require study within the realm of teaching and research, which can, to a large extent, contribute to the enhancement of applied research—something that requires the development of training structures over the long term.

Transformations in markets and communicational objects have largely challenged the commitments of scientific societies that preceded CISECO—in the production of research and in the interpretation of communicative processes, according to research based on observational methods. This relates to the characteristics of training processes implemented in the more distant past, which were based on mass media frameworks proper. Such choices took into account observations drawn from other analytical models that emphasized measurement and causal(istic) paradigms (cause and effect). Furthermore, in line with the perspective on the nature of the communication field, very specific frameworks stand out, arising from the perspectives of techno-professional training models and, specifically, vocational training areas. Undoubtedly, emerging scientific societies highlighted concerns regarding the need for innovation involving more intensive training processes within their research practices. In these circumstances, scientific societies such as ABEPEC emerged, presenting themselves as collectives that, beyond the objectives of professional trade bodies, would encourage experiments capable of contributing to the enhancement of training processes for communication professionals and researchers, without, however, abandoning the profile of a society committed to vocational training in the field of journalism. ABEPEC managed to raise issues related to the need to improve the training of journalists, but with little direct impact on the world of professional training. Improvements may have occurred with the modernization of undergraduate journalism courses, driven in part by improvements taking place in vocational training settings. At the same time, student demand for postgraduate courses in journalism and related fields has opened the door to new forms of training and professional development, a trend also spurred by competition within the media sector. Other factors hinder opportunities and improvements in the qualifications of journalists. Few job vacancies: low pay; a lack of training environments, such as the absence of trade union supervision of work placements; very limited participation in training; and joint action with postgraduate programs that are still in their infancy, even at master's level. Also emerging in these contexts were academic bodies keen to expand support programs for the training of journalists, through conceptual and institutional contributions to ABEPEC aimed at developing the field of communication.

Notable examples include academic initiatives in communication teaching and research, developed at several universities across the country (Minas Gerais, Paraíba, Brasília, Rio, Rio Grande do Sul). As a lecturer, professor and participant in emerging projects at undergraduate, master's and doctoral levels, I served as director of scientific bodies in the field of communication, such as ABEPEC, an organization that brought together institutions for teaching and research in communication. Changes in the professional training markets and the existence of various types of research and scientific societies in the field of communication have contributed significantly to the growth and diversification of the studies in this field, as well as to experimentation with market models within the context of the rise of mediatization.

It is worth noting that, in some way, Eliseo Verón was involved in certain aspects of these emerging developments in the country. He contributed to various educational settings, particularly postgraduate programs, as well as courses, seminars and research, notably at Compós—the National Association of Postgraduate Programs in Communication—and at CISECO (International Centre for Semiotics and Communication), where, in addition to being its founder and honorary president, he published some of his articles.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: And what about the theory and analysis of circulation? Do you also consider circulation to be a process? What sort of process?

A.F.N.: Considering the transformations in the designs, models, frameworks and practices themselves that brought senders and receivers into contact (a dynamic that long ignored the work of circulation), circulation is now recognized as a complex phenomenon, the nature and effects of which are giving rise to new studies and analytical models, particularly observational processes that take into account the existence and workings of circulation as a new object that introduces complexity. A new field of study is opening up, one that requires the training of new analysts, readers, etc., around a phenomenon that invites study within a highly challenging context.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: As a specialist in political analysis, how would you describe the relationship between polarization, mediatization and circulation in contemporary societies?

A.F.N.: As we have shown in our research, from the earliest authoritarian political experiences right up to the Bolsonaro government, we observe discursive practices founded on rhetorical denialism. Let us recall that the then president was a central figure in constructing, through a series of denials, the reality of the virus during the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. This presupposes a different level of rhetorical presentation to that employed by centrist, or even progressive, political figures.

M.C., J.F. & G.O.: You have made a distinction between "mediation" and "mediatization" in the tradition of Latin American communication studies. Could you comment on the usefulness of this distinction for the study of contemporary processes?

A.F.N.: These are not fixed concepts. They are a work in progress (...) And, certainly, they are recognized, not ignored, in observational processes, according to various academic archives. However, they evolve; they are formalized according to different circumstances, and their results are revisited even when set aside for new interpretations... or left for posterity, in the context of digital life, as an ongoing process. These are concepts extensively and intensively developed by their authors, such as Jesús Martín-Barbero and Eliseo Verón, through works originating in Latin America—Argentina, Brazil and Colombia—from where they spread to other geo-academic contexts. Their studies span many years of research, now the heritage of many generations of researchers. They are also in the hands of scientific and publishing institutions, etc. They are at the center of the debate and of studies carried out in academic centers, as well as publications in various languages. The works of these authors are updated through theses, dissertations, books and other forms of dissemination, as they contain key concepts for the advancement of research in communication, semiotics, education, audiovisual studies, journalism, linguistics, etc.

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* Note: The journal's Editorial Board approved the publication of the interview.

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IDENTIFICATION OF THE INTERVIEWEE

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