

Is more communication always better communication? From silencing to strategic silence in Latin American social movements

¿Más comunicación es siempre mejor comunicación? Del silenciamiento al silencio estratégico en los movimientos sociales latinoamericanos

Mais comunicação é sempre melhor comunicação? Do silenciamento ao silêncio estratégico nos movimentos sociais latino-americanos

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The current conditions of public communication grant almost everyone the possibility to express their opinions. However, one might well ask whether more communication necessarily means better communication. This study adopts a theoretical and normative approach to communication as a human right in the analysis of documents and 25 interviews conducted with representatives of social movements of historically marginalized groups, and of public institutions dedicated to memory, truth, justice, and peace in Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina. Then, a typology of silence is proposed that nuances the traditional normative perspective on freedom of expression.

KEYWORDS: Public communication, censorship, denialism, social movements, Latin America.

En las condiciones actuales de la comunicación pública, cuando las posibilidades de expresión están al alcance de casi todos, ¿es el silencio siempre resultado de la censura y la opresión? Desde un enfoque teórico y normativo de la comunicación como derecho humano, se analizan documentos y 25 entrevistas realizadas a representantes de movimientos sociales de los grupos históricamente atacados y de instituciones públicas de memoria, verdad, justicia y paz de Colombia, Brasil, Bolivia y Argentina. Sobre esa base, se propone una tipología de silencios que matiza la perspectiva normativa tradicional sobre libertad de expresión.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Comunicación pública, censura, negacionismo, movimientos sociales, América Latina.

Nas condições atuais da comunicação pública, quando as possibilidades de expressão estão ao alcance de quase todos, será que o silêncio é sempre resultado da censura e da opressão? A partir de uma abordagem teórica e normativa da comunicação como direito humano, são analisados documentos e 25 entrevistas realizadas com representantes de movimentos sociais de grupos historicamente perseguidos e de instituições públicas de memória, verdade, justiça e paz da Colômbia, do Brasil, da Bolívia e da Argentina. Com base nisso, propõe-se uma tipologia de silêncios que matiza a perspectiva normativa tradicional sobre a liberdade de expressão.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Comunicação pública, censura, negacionismo, movimentos sociais, América Latina.

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INTRODUCTION

Among journalists, politicians, and researchers in communication and politics in Western countries silence is discredited and it is rarely, if ever, the object of discussion. A priori, it is regarded as negative, since it is often associated with the cover-up of perpetrators' crimes –denialism (Feierstein & Rafecas, 2023)–, being forced to remain silent –censorship (Loreti & Lozano, 2014)–, being urged to keep silent –incitement to self-censorship (Loreti & Lozano, 2014)–, or historical learning of self-repression (Fraticola, 2020). In other words, silence is associated with the exercise of the arbitrary power to impose it, or of silencing information and public expression, that is, the power to silence.

However, as social networks' digital platforms play a central role in public communication, almost the entire population has access to public expression, although not to the possibilities of its discourse being circulated and having an impact on the public agenda (Balle, 2025). The wide reticular circulation of hate discourses, disinformation campaigns, as well as historical and scientific denialism seeks to incite historically subalternized social groups to keep silent (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos [CIDH], 2015; Segura, 2024). Therefore, one might wonder whether more communication is still better communication, as the classical liberal theory claimed (Becerra & Waisbord, 2021; Napoli, 2018).

The main questions in this paper are as follows: given the current condition of public communication, does more communication still mean better communication? Is silence always the result of censorship and oppression?

A theoretical and normative approach to communication as a human right is adopted to analyze different types of silence on the basis of the experience of Latin American social movements bringing together the most vulnerable groups: women, sexual dissidences, Afro-descendants, indigenous groups, and victims of dictatorships and civil wars, as well as public institutions of memory, truth, justice, and peace. To this end, 25 members of such groups and institutions from Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina were interviewed, and documents and bibliography were studied.

We argue that not all forms of silence are the same. They are not all encouraged or permanent: people who have been historically silenced can cease to be silent and take on a public voice. Nor is every silence forced or induced: people do not always remain silent because it is impossible to speak. Social organizations and public institutions sometimes choose silence as a communication strategy and might succeed in getting those who kept silent in denial or complicity to speak up. Based on this finding, a typology of silences, ranging from forced to strategic silence is proposed, thereby transcending the rigid distinction between voice and silence. Furthermore, traditional normative premises on freedom of speech and public debate are nuanced.

The first part of this paper presents the theoretical and methodological approach taken. Then, a typology is developed: silence and silencing are conceptualized. Finally, conclusions are presented.

THEORETICAL APPROACH

Social practices are viewed from a sociological perspective that conceives them as choices made by a collective or individual social agent under certain conditions that both limit and enable them (Bourdieu, 1991). Therefore, practices are understood as related to the relative power, competencies, and background of those who produce them and to the conditions governing their production (Costa & Mozejko, 2001). Even though the strategies analyzed here are part of deliberate action plans, not all of their components are necessarily conscious or rational (Bourdieu, 1991).

In addition, these strategic practices are evaluated from the normative point of view that defines communication as a human right in accordance with the principles of universality, access, pluralism, diversity, participation and equity (MacBride et al., 1980). The right to communication implies both the individual right to freedom of speech and the collective right to be informed, and it is defined with reference to states and private actors (Loreti & Lozano, 2014). Furthermore, the right to communicate calls for an environment allowing interactive and relational communication which, in turn, builds mutual understanding (Hamelink & Hoffmann, 2008). This requisite faces enormous chal-

lenges under the current conditions of public communication (Couldry, 2010).

Therefore, democratizing communication is defined as a process that helps make visible, audible, and legitimate in public space those subjects that have historically been made invisible, silenced or underappreciated; broaden the cultural patterns of legitimate expression; make media property more accessible; and introduce new subjects in the public agenda (Fraser, 2006). That is why democratizing communication is linked to the fight for democratization of other social areas and to the condition of power relations in a society (Segura, 2018). Public debate is essential in order to bring new issues into social and political consideration and to broaden the limits of justice and the definition of rights. This process takes place within unequal power relations because the public sphere reproduces social, cultural, economic, and political inequalities.

In the classical model of liberal communication, public space is conceived as an arena for debate and negotiation between social differences, power inequalities, plural identities, and diverse political action (Segura, 2021; Waisbord, 2014). The search for truth and justice is understood as a common public effort. Public discussion is trusted to be able to regulate itself (Mill, 1859). However, the increase in the chances for public expression as a result of technical possibilities offered by digitalization, connectivity, and social networks has not improved public debate as expected (Becerra & Waisbord, 2021). On the contrary, the threat to democracy and to people's lives implied in the spread of disinformation and hate discourses is perceived as growing (United Nations [UN], 2019).

Censorship and incitement to silence are not only the work of political or media elites but also of the "mobs", which use social networks to harass, bully, and exercise violence (Waisbord, 2020). This adds to the censorship imposed by large transnational corporations. As owners of various platforms, they are able to set their own hazy moderation standards and enforce them with little transparency (Pérez Bertrán & Martínez Elebi, 2022; Scheck, 2021). This type of censorship is highly dangerous in a public space that is more privatized than ever before due to the dominance of few content circulation corporations whose value

as a whole is well above the gross domestic product of most countries in the world.

The maximalist view of freedom of speech has proved to be ineffective in this new public communication system (Becerra & Waisbord, 2021; Napoli, 2018). It has once again become evident that socio-economic and cultural inequalities prevent access to participation in the public conversation (Becerra & Waisbord, 2021). Besides, socio-psychological processes such as selective attention, sense activation, and exposure operate as powerful filters in the debate of issues of public interest (Calvo & Aruguete, 2020). Not to mention the unequal levels of attention and consideration given to the various producers of discourse on social networks (Fiss, 1996).

However, Latin American history of censorship and incitement to silence exercised by dictatorial and authoritarian governments accounts for the reasons why the Inter-American Human Rights System provides more protection for the right to communicate than in other regions in the world (Grossman, 2007). That is why the critical assessment that more communication does not necessarily mean better communication does not automatically imply proposing mechanisms to restrict public debate in the region.

Silence has proved to be more than just the mere absence or impossibility of communication; it can be a strategy that transmits and organizes meanings (Dimitrov, 2019a; Johannesen, 1974). Such meanings may differ depending on cultures and power relations (Ling, 2003; Nakane, 2007; Quan, 2015). Together with speech and nonverbal communication, silence is an essential component of any communication strategy (Dimitrov, 2019b).

Strategic silence is, therefore, a more complex and essential concept—both for communication theory and practice—than its conception as lack of communication or the result of oppression. It is a deliberate communication strategy—it is targeted to certain addressees—, it carries meaning, it occurs in communication situations, and it is somewhat indirect (Dimitrov, 2019b). This more nuanced understanding of silence is only just beginning to emerge in communication studies (Dimitrov, 2019b; Müller, 2025; Müller et al., 2025).

According to the spiral of silence theory (Noelle-Neumann, 1977), public opinion is formed through a process that encourages individuals to follow and support the positions that appear to be held by the majority and to remain silent if those positions do not align with their own convictions. Therefore, subjects belonging to groups that have been historically attacked would tend to keep silent (CIDH, 2015). However, social movements of genocide victims, women, sexual minorities, Afro-descendants, and indigenous peoples in Latin America use different strategies to overcome hateful, false, and denialist statements, and to build new consensuses (Segura, 2024).

Social movements aim to achieve social change by means of collective actions of advocacy, education and protest. They are heterogeneous, and have various organizational structures, activities, financing, and principles. Besides, they hold complex relationships of autonomy with the state and the market (Sorj, 2010). Public institutions of memory, truth, justice, and peace are a form of collaboration linking the state and social organizations. They institutionalize civic participation in human rights policies during transitions from dictatorships or civil wars to democracy and peace. Such “institutional innovations” (Avritzer, 2019) seek to mitigate the effects of government policies captured by elites (Cortés Sáenz & Itriago, 2018).

METHODOLOGY

The empiric analysis is based on two sets of sources of information. The first one consists of primary sources: 25 in-depth interviews with key members of social movements and public institutions in Colombia, Brazil, Bolivia, and Argentina. The selection criteria were as follows:

- The social movements and institutions chosen bring together subjects that reported being attacked by hate discourses, disinformation and denialism: women and social dissidences, Afro-descendants, indigenous peoples, and victims of dictatorships and civil wars.
- Out of those groups, the most successful in the region were selected based on their seniority and persistence over time; their impact on public policies and on public opinion; and their influence on

similar organizations in other countries. Therefore, the selection included women's and dissidences' movements in Argentina, Afro-descendants' in Brazil, indigenous peoples' in Bolivia, and human rights movements in Argentina and Colombia, besides public institutions for memory, truth, justice, and peace in Argentina and Colombia.

Finally, representatives of those organizations and institutions were interviewed. The interviews were conducted online by the author using a semi-structured script, between November and December 2022, and lasted about 90 minutes each. All of the interviewees provided their informed consent to participate and be identified in any publication resulting from the research.

The second set includes secondary sources: analysis of documents and bibliography on the initiatives, on their context and impact, and on the history and circumstances in each country.

The results were interpreted based on the empirical analysis. It is to be noted that the subject of silence was not included in the interviews' original script. Interviewees brought it up time and again, which prompted research in related bibliography on the subject. Therefore, in the analysis of qualitative data, an inductive categorization was made. However, this emerging issue partially coincides with some existing categories in the literature.

RESULTS

New forms of oppressive silence

Four types of oppressive or repressive silence are described, which are the result of silencing acts performed by certain subjects and social groups on less powerful ones and therefore imply an unequal power relationship: structural silence, denialism, censorship, and induced self-censorship. The first category is proposed based on the interpretation of results, the other three have been taken from existing literature on the right to communicate.

First, the structural silence of the most vulnerable groups is caused by censorship and incitement to self-censorship. In societies such as the

ones studied in this article, disadvantaged people are also those who have the most difficulties speaking and being listened to in the public space; they have been historically silenced and rendered invisible. Censorship –a habitual and naturalized occurrence– can also be imposed subtly by subjects holding positions of greater power over others, such as men over women and feminized identities; business men over workers, or perpetrators of genocides over their victims. In these cases, silence is the result of structural and historical inequalities.

Therefore, this type of silence resulting from structural inequality is also translated into silence learned by subjects that have been attacked over a lifetime, a form of self-censorship that is not necessarily conscious. For someone who has always been mistreated, it is more difficult to speak out publicly because they have been censored or induced to keep silent. Besides, when speaking in public, they are often stigmatized, ridiculed or scorned. As told by the first Gender Secretary for one of the country's three labor unions: "In the meetings of the union's Executive Board they would all get together at a big table and I wouldn't even speak, because if I did, they would all look at me like this [questioningly] (Gabarra, personal communication, 2022).

It is no coincidence that historically silenced social groups, such as women in almost all societies, Afro-descendants in Brazil, and indigenous people in Bolivia, should very often account for the largest part of the population. "The history of black people in Brazil is characterized by more than 300 years of slavery, 300 years of silence, because it wasn't until the drafting of the 1988 Constitution that these groups were acknowledged as subjects of law" argues educator Givânia Maria da Silva (personal communication, 2022), founder and member of the National Coordination for the Articulation of Black Rural Quilombola Communities [Brazilian Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais Quilombolas].

Such structural silencing might get to substantially modify people's lives: one's language is silenced, one's last name is changed, one migrates to other regions, one's clothing and habits are changed, one's hair or skin color is changed, even one's physical features are reformed in a self-discrimination exercise, as reported by Omar Ramírez, International Relationships Secretary of the Bolivian Rural Workers Union [Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia].

These structural relationships usually operate in a combined or intersectional manner (Espinosa-Miñoso, 2009). Kalinec (personal communication, 2022), a referent of the Argentine collective *Disobedient Stories, Relatives of Genocides for Memory, Truth and Justice* [Historias Desobedientes. Familiares de Genocidas por la Memoria, la Verdad y la Justicia], speaks about the threefold silencing acts performed on them: the legal one, as the legal system does not allow them to testify against their parents; the religious one, that prescribes “Honor thy father and thy mother”; and the social one, because the saying goes: “A chip off the old block”.

Denialism is the kind of silence that covers up criminal activity by perpetrators of serious human rights violations and their accomplices and followers. It is inherent to crimes against humanity because there is no genocide without the accompanying strategy of subsequent impunity (Thus, 2023). In Argentina, a paradigmatic expression of this type of denialism can be found in the words of former dictator Jorge R. Videla: “A missing person is an enigma. He has no entity, is neither dead nor alive. He is just missing”.

By remaining silent, perpetrators of crimes against humanity, state terrorism, and genocide, as well as their accomplices, prevent access to socially relevant public information and the right to the truth (Loretí et al., 2014). These are important rights not only for victims and their families, but also for society as a whole. The damage caused by denialism to victims and societies does not cease; it has lasting consequences. Denialism challenges not only the administration of justice, but also the social consensus that views justice and human rights as the core of a democratic society (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights-OHCHR, n.d.; Segura, 2024).

Third, censorship –that is, the suppression or modification of a work’s content and/or form in order to control what can be published or shown– was initially believed to be imposed only by states. Governments held the most silencing power, to the detriment of citizens’ freedom of speech and of pluralism in societies. In order to stand up to that power, freedom of speech was defined in the eighteenth century as one of people’s fundamental rights. Organized crime, guerrilla and paramilitary groups as well as other armed groups in some coun-

tries also have the power to impose censorship, as explained by Nubia Rojas (personal communication, 2022) former researcher for the Colombian Commission for the Clarification of Truth, for Coexistence and Non-Repetition [Comisión para el Esclarecimiento de la Verdad, la Convivencia y la No Repetición]. According to members of RESANDER (Sur de Santander Cooperative Network of Community Radio Stations [Red Cooperativa de Medios de Comunicación Comunitarios del Sur de Santander]) (Tibaudiza & Muñoz, personal communication, 2022), in rural Colombia, for instance, it was difficult to talk about peace when the negotiations that were underway with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia [FARC] in the détente zone were called off and a president who proposed forcibly eliminating the subversive groups had been elected.

Later on, in the twentieth century, it became clear that the power to silence voices was also exercised by private media corporations (Loreti & Lozano, 2014), which control not only what their journalists publish, but also what information they will or will not report from their sources. In media-driven societies (Sodré, 1998), such editing power is crucial when companies use it arbitrarily, in their own self-interest and failing to fulfill their social responsibility and often in collusion with governments. At present, digital platforms of social networks have also developed censorship mechanisms (Srnicek, 2018).

A fourth type of silence is incitement to self-censorship. As a consequence of the dramatic rise in the possibilities for public expression on social networks, self-censorship is now not only induced by states and companies, it is also the result of bullying, harassment, and insulting by a mob which is often unidentified (Waisbord, 2020).

Hateful and discriminating discourses seek to erode the credibility of those attacked or induced to self-censorship. Such discourses are aimed not only at those who are directly attacked, but also at all those who share certain social characteristics with them. They fear being harassed, and with good reason, so they give up participating in public discourse (Amnesty International, 2018; Posetti et al., 2020). The spread of alternative facts and fake news undermines the acceptability of certain subjects and affects the credibility of those who deal with them.

Finally, when someone is overexposed or at a disadvantage, remaining silent may be a necessary self-preservation strategy and a way to protect others from exposure to greater violence. Although keeping silent is a conscious decision, it is not made freely but under threat and violence. In Argentina, for instance, the journalists who published the research article “The Conservative Reaction” [“La reacción conservadora”] on the relationships between groups that campaign against the rights of women and sexual minorities in 2021 were violently attacked on social networks and media. Besides, through Denial of Service (DoS) attack, they overwhelmed the website with fake traffic and made it unavailable to users. Therefore, the attack not only meant the imposing of censorship, as the article was not published again, it also promoted self-censorship and affected people’s right to information.

Silence as a strategy

Some forms of silence are the result of a collective choice. In social movements and public institutions, remaining silent can be a conscious, rational, and deliberate communication strategy. “We talk with our fellow members and a collective decision is made on how to move forward”, says Ceballos (personal communication, 2022) a member of Trans Women of Argentina (MTA [Mujeres Trans Argentina]). Strategic silence is defined in terms of the opponent’s ability to influence, the intended audience, the institutional framework, the reception conditions, the legitimacy and credibility of the organization and/or individual making the statement, and the acceptability of the issue within a given society at a specific point in history. Therefore, this section focuses on the different forms of strategic silence according to the “speech situation” (Austin, 1962; Habermas, 1987).

Sometimes, targeted groups do not respond to attacks or to slander so as to avoid lending them greater relevance and spreading them further, in particular, when their potential influence is low, either because they circulate in media or social networks of limited reach and/or because the authors are unknown or of little significance. For instance, Hernando Salazar (personal communication, 2022), responsible for communication at the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP [Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz]) –one of the three mechanisms of the Colombian Integral System for Truth, Justice, Reparation and Non-Repetition,

created under the “Final Agreement for the Termination of the Conflict and the Construction of a Stable and Lasting Peace”—signed in 2016 by the government and the country’s main guerrilla group, FARC, says: “We avoid responding to direct attacks so as not to validate them. We wait for the dust to settle”.

Members of Argentina’s National Campaign for the Right to Abortion [Campaña Nacional por el Derecho al Aborto] learned the same lesson: “Silence was often a strategy to avoid making waves ... We learned that we didn’t always have to respond publicly because that way media space was provided to the most conservative sectors” (Domínguez, personal communication, 2020). The activist’s mention of learning is crucial: they learn not only when and how to speak up, but also when and how to remain silent. This, too, is part of their communication skills (Dimitrov, 2019b).

Activists occasionally keep silent to preserve their advances. It is a strategy to avoid alerting reactionary groups that might hinder them, explains Alejandra Domínguez (personal communication, 2022), a member of Argentina’s National Campaign for the Right to Abortion. The above quotes, as well as the previous ones, could be examples of what Jungkunz (2012) and Müller (2025) refer to as “silences that refuse”, here, to respond. What might appear to be inaction is, in fact, a deliberate decision.

They sometimes decide not to respond directly to the attacker or disseminator of false information but rather to inform society at large about the subject or to organize talks for specific audiences, among other actions. “We respond without personalizing. We write posts on social networks. We also hold workshops with journalists to clarify doubts”, says Salazar (personal communication, 2022). In such cases, they choose the form and recipients of the communication and remain silent in the face of the attackers, but not publicly (Ceballos, personal communication, 2022).

Different strategies are defined on what to say and what not to say depending on the speech situation; whether it is on the mediatized public space—media, social networks, etc.—or in an institution—legal, educational, etc. In this respect, an important factor in the decision is associated with the concurrent physical presence of “the others”

(Segato, 2003). When deciding whether to speak or to keep silent, it is also important to know who the listener will be and/or who the addressee. “When HIJOS (Children for Identity and Justice against Forgetting and Silence [Hijos por la Identidad y la Justicia contra el Olvido y el Silencio]) first started, we refused to sit at a roundtable with defenders of the dictatorship so as not to reproduce the image of ‘the two demons [theory]’”, recalls Emiliano Fessia, a former member of Argentina’s HIJOS (personal communication, 2023).

Other times, silence is kept in the privacy of interpersonal relationships, but speaking out is favored when it is deemed necessary. Then, even though it is a personal and not necessarily conscious choice, selective silence is the result of a combination of an identity strategy used by victims of crimes against humanity with a collective strategy of seeking justice. Some survivors of kidnapping, torture and/or rape during Argentina’s last military dictatorship, for instance, spoke before judges in court about events they had not mentioned to their families (Fessia, personal communication, 2022). This is so because such testimony has legal value, but also biographical (Pollak, 1989; Da Silva Catela, 2001). And within the framework of an organized collective, telling one’s own experience can also be a communication and political strategy.

The choice between speaking out and keeping silent is also defined by the chances of being heard. In Argentina, for instance, “In 1984, when the *Never Again* report [Informe Nunca Más] by CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons [Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas]) was published, everything about the horrors of the dictatorship had already been said, but the listening conditions had changed” (Fessia, personal communication, 2022). Thus, there are times when it is possible to raise an issue in a society’s public debate and others in which it is not acceptable. Colombian popular communicators describe how difficult it was to talk about peace in their country in the last decades (Tibaudiza & Muñoz, personal communication, 2022).

Listening conditions sometimes improve as a result of unforeseen conjunctural events. Social movements can take advantage of such changes if they develop strategies for that purpose well in advance. That was the case, for instance, of the protests by the Brazilian Black

movement that broke out when the police murdered George Floyd in the city of Minneapolis, United States, in 2020 (Cezar Nunes, personal communication, 2022).

Whatever the case, social conditions of listening and acceptability for certain subjects are not static, they are developed over time. That is why, in their attempt to modify those conditions, social organizations present their demands and proposals even when they fail to have much impact. “At the beginning and for many years we would attend whatever event we were invited to, wherever it was held, because it was a way to be heard and seen, a way for people to know us, to learn about what we were doing”, says Mabel Gabarra (personal communication, 2022) from Argentina’s National Campaign for the Right to Abortion. The members of Argentina’s Not One Less [Ni Una Menos] also debated on the ways of starting public dialog on subjects that are rejected offhand or are not part of the public agenda: “How can you open a crack in that door so that you will be listened to?” (Rodríguez, personal communication, 2022).

Public institutions for truth, justice, and peace also build the conditions to get others to listen. At La Perla, the Space for Memory and Promotion of Human Rights [Espacio para la Memoria y la Promoción de Derechos Humanos] in Córdoba, Argentina, tours are designed so that visitors not only “run into” testimonies from victims of crimes against humanity but can also “listen to them” (Tabera, personal communication, 2022).

Listening conditions have to be built institutionally in the state agencies that are supposed to respond to victims’ demands, like the Judiciary (Fessia, personal communication, 2022), and they are also built collectively within the organizations (Fessia, personal communication, 2022). “We listened to the testimonies and we too ended up devastated ... Listening has to be built collectively because those words are hard to listen to”, explains Fessia (personal communication, 2022). That is why, during public hearings organized by the Colombian JEP in which victims or their relatives face perpetrators, the victims are heard first. They are given time for catharsis and are accompanied so they are prepared for what they will hear. Similarly, strict rules have been developed that state the procedures, rituals, and ways in which such dialogue

will take place (Rojas, personal communication, 2022; Salazar, personal communication, 2022).

To the extent that human rights organizations and public institutions for memory, truth, justice, and peace conceive memory as a dispute, they find it strategically important to create the conditions for listening to those who propose dissenting narratives. In order to listen, “I have to acknowledge that the person who is speaking has a right to speak, I have to humanize him”, says Sandra Raggio (personal communication, 2022), a member of the Province Commission for Memory [Comisión Provincial para la Memoria] of Buenos Aires, Argentina. This requires creating spaces where participants feel “listened to and valued”, explains Noel Tabera (personal communication, 2022), a member of La Perla’s teaching staff.

When a subject has not become acceptable in the public space yet, it may be possible to raise the issue in a smaller group, addressing a specific and organized audience in an alternative public sphere (Fraser, 1999). At the same time, such spheres allow the collective to grow stronger so that it can have an impact on the public space in the future. This would be what Jungkuntz (2012) refers to as “empowering silence”, although he uses the term in a different sense. However, even in those cases it is necessary to weigh the chances of being listened to or rejected.

The possibility of speaking out or keeping silent is also linked to the degree of legitimacy and credibility achieved by a given institution at each historical moment. In Colombia, says Rojas (personal communication, 2022), judges “enjoy great prestige and respect”. That is why they may, at times, remain silent in the face of criticism, and have not been questioned for that: “There have been cases in which the JEP has been attacked and it has maintained a dignified silence in keeping with the dignity and majesty of justice, which has had a good reception”. Such prestige, which also has to be built, is the basis for their credibility. That is why social movements and public institutions invest in building and upholding their moral authority on the subject.

The legitimacy of institutions and organizations is what gives them a voice, allows them to influence public opinion, and earns them the support of outsiders. Thus, as the power dynamics of the contending actors

change, so does the relative power of the participating institutions. When they become stronger and gain consensus, as well as state and socio-political support, more strategic options are made available to them. When in such cases they remain silent and withdraw, it is not out of weakness but out of strength, as explained by a member of the National Campaign for Abortion in Argentina (Gabarra, personal communication, 2022).

Similarly, when they have succeeded in influencing public opinion and their proposal is more acceptable, they don't even have to respond to attacks or slander because others do it for them. This is the case of Argentina's Not One Less collective (Rodríguez personal communication, 2020). Silence does not necessarily imply weakness; it often indicates just the opposite (Jungkunz, 2012).

The success of social movements and public institutions in shaping public discourse and perspectives makes it easier for those who witnessed the oppression to speak out and bear witness, sometimes after decades of silence. Tabera (personal communication, 2022), from La Perla, described how the creation of this space and its initiatives made some of these processes possible.

Likewise, when social movements succeed in imposing issues and points of view on public opinion and in influencing public policies, they can sometimes get those who have been oppressors and perpetrators to talk. That is also the result of the change in the relations of force when victims have a more relevant place. After the 2016 peace agreement in Colombia, unlike what happened in Argentina, some members of guerrilla groups, armed forces and paramilitary groups gave information about their crimes and victims when testifying before the Truth Commission, the JEP and the Unit for the Search of Disappeared Persons in the Context and Due to the Armed Conflict [Unidad de Búsqueda de Personas dadas por Desaparecidas en el Contexto y en Razón del Conflicto Armado]. In particular, the breach of perpetrators' silence in the public hearings organized by the JEP works as reparation for victims, their families, and society (Salazar, personal communication, 2022).

When a victim transforms forced, induced, or structural silence into strategic silence and expression, they assume political citizenship. Ceballos (personal communication, 2022), a member of MTA and a trans, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant activist, for example, recounts

that as a teenager, “I was a very quiet person who avoided speaking so as not to be insulted, mocked, or laughed at”. In the same vein, as already mentioned, Mabel Gabarra (personal communication, 2022) expressed the same sentiment. The subjective transformation from avoiding speech to becoming the leader of a social organization –as in their cases– is, fundamentally, a political transformation. It involves claiming a public voice, alongside and on behalf of others with whom they share needs and build demands. Therefore, in this process of political subjectivation and, at the same time, personal empowerment (Habermas, 1994) of those who were historically silenced, collective organization plays a fundamental role: in this way, one becomes a citizen (Rancière, 1996).

CONCLUSIONS

Current problems in public communication –disinformation, hate discourse, denialism– seek to delegitimize or silence certain groups and to limit their chances of speaking out. This not only includes silencing certain people but also excluding specific subjects, approaches, cultural guidelines, and languages from public dialog. The people attacked are those who are the most socially disadvantaged; therefore, their possibilities of participating in the social debate are reduced while at the same time communication and social inequalities deepen.

Latin American human rights’, women’s, Afro-descendants’ and indigenous peoples’ movements as well institutions for memory, truth, justice, and peace use various strategies to fight expressions of hate, discrimination, falsehood, and denial, and to build new consensus on the ways to define what is true, fair, and authentic.

Communication strategies are not always expressive; they include strategic silences. These are not invariably forced or permanent; they do not necessarily imply weakness, inaction, or fear: social organizations and institutions sometimes remain silent as a strategy depending on their legitimacy as speakers, the acceptability of the subjects and points of view they propose, the institutional and social listening conditions, the social power relations, among other conditioning factors. In this hybrid, non-linear way they are able to overcome censorship, self-censorship, denialism as well as structural and historical silence.

Furthermore, when progressive social movements and public institutions for human rights succeed in influencing the symbolic and political dispute over the desirable form of society, they sometimes get perpetrators to speak and break their own silence. When denialism is overcome, access to public information and the right to truth are restored. They not only choose when and how to speak; they also decide who to speak with and about what. Furthermore, they sometimes get others to speak as well.

The typology of silence proposed distinguishes imposed silence (structural silence, denialism, censorship, induced self-censorship) and strategic silence, chosen in terms of the speech situation (adversary, addressee, institutional framework, the speaker's legitimacy and credibility, and the statement's acceptability). This allows updating and nuancing, while taking into account the new conditions in public communication, the liberal orthodoxy on freedom of speech and public debate, as well as overcoming the dichotomy between voice and silence.

The suggested distinction has theoretical, political, and practical consequences. In research, it is important to avoid underestimating the silence of vulnerable groups; otherwise, social inequalities may be reinforced (Kawabata & Gastaldo, 2015). Moreover, communication strategies cannot be understood or explained without also understanding and explaining silences. The idea that change and social justice only imply raising one's voice must be revised, as must the notion of political participation based solely on taking over that public voice (Müller, 2025).

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