

Communicative Responsibility in an Age of Fragmented Connectivity¹

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Abstract

In the face of technological advances, questions of communicative ethics seem to become more important than ever. This paper first introduces the notion of fragmented connectivity to explain major structural aspects of how public discourse can be seen to unfold today. Then we summarize two distinct studies, focusing on (i) the political weaponization of free speech, and (ii) academic complicity in politically driven historiography. Both point at the need to re-emphasize attention to communicative responsibility.

Keywords: responsibility, connectivity, fragmentation, polarization, free speech, history writing

Streszczenie

Odpowiedzialność uczestnika procesu komunikacji w dobie „fragmentarycznej łączności”

W obliczu postępu technologicznego pytania dotyczące etyki komunikacji stają się ważniejsze niż kiedykolwiek wcześniej. Po wprowadzeniu pojęcia „fragmentarycznej łączności”, w celu wyjaśnienia głównych strukturalnych aspektów tego, w jaki sposób dyskurs publiczny rozwija się w dzisiejszych czasach, niniejszy artykuł podsumowuje dwa odrębne badania. Dotyczą one (i) sposobu używania wolności słowa jako broni w dyskursie, (ii) współdziałania badaczy w politycznie nacechowanej historiografii. Obydwa wskazują na potrzebę ponownego zwrócenia uwagi na odpowiedzialność uczestników procesu komunikacji.

Słowa kluczowe: odpowiedzialność, łączność, fragmentaryczność, polaryzacja, wolność słowa, historiografia

¹ This paper loosely reflects the lecture I gave at the conference *Language of the Third Millennium XIII: Language in the Face of Technology*, held at Kraków, Poland, 13–14 March 2024. It includes ideas based on “The pragmatics of fragmented connectivity in public discourse”, presented online at the *1st International Conference on Discourse Pragmatics*, organized by the Institute of Discourse Pragmatics at the Zhejiang International Studies University, Hangzhou, China, 21–23 October 2022. It also summarizes research dealt with more extensively in Verschueren (2024b; forthcoming).

1. Introduction

This author can hardly regard himself as a digital native. Yet, I am tempted to contribute, as an ordinary pragmatician, to debates and analyses of what is happening with language in the newish realm of digital technology. I will first make some general, non-specialist remarks (section 2). “Fragmented connectivity” is the label I use for my central concern.

This “concern” implies that there is something I am worried about. Worries bear mainly on aspects of public discourse that seem to violate principles of discursive ethics that should not escape the attention of students of language use. This paper, therefore, is a small contribution to the expanding literature on discourse and responsibility (Östman and Solin 2016; Ädel and Östman 2023; Verschueren 2023) and discourse and morality (Haugh and Marquez Reiter forthcoming). In particular, I will summarize research on one politician’s conscious neglect of communicative principles he applies in his own critique of social justice movements (section 3), and on academics’ much less deliberate complicity with political nationalist aspirations which they officially distance themselves from (section 4). In the concluding section I will bend back on the notion of fragmented connectivity and the resulting demand for communicative responsibility.

2. Fragmented connectivity

It is hard to think of any aspect of social life that does not crucially involve discourse of some kind. What is more, it is virtually impossible to understand what people do, or why they do what they do, without understanding the discourses that surround and permeate their actions. The reason is that everything one does can only be social if it’s also somehow meaningful, and it is meaningful because interpretations are inevitably attached to whatever one does. This was already the tenet of Peter Winch’s (1958) *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy*. It is also the reason why metapragmatic awareness plays such a crucial role in language use (see Verschueren 1999: 187–198, 2000). This not only counts at the micro-level of interpersonal interaction, but also at the level of entire social structures – in the public sphere.

I define the public sphere as the realm of publicly accessible meaning, which is embodied in discourse. The public sphere is also an arena for struggles over meaning, struggles that take place in the form of interacting discourses. Such processes shape societies and must therefore be understood to understand how a society – any society – functions.

Though the public-private divide has never been a rigid one, recently it has been getting harder and harder to distinguish between them. This is mainly the result of how new

technologies are changing patterns of communication. Social media are of course the main suspects. Whatever you intend as a private message can easily be circulated publicly, not just by word-of-mouth (as used to be the case) but at lightning speed in uncontrollable directions. This is also related to what is known as the online/offline nexus, where we observe how group identification enters what looks like interpersonal communication. In itself, there is nothing unusual about group identities entering interpersonal interaction, but in the online/offline context, the process becomes uncontrollable for the interactants.

This is not the only current problem faced by communication in the public sphere. Further problems, however, are also directly linked to the technologically based communication architecture.

The current communication architecture enables unrivalled **connectivity**. One could certainly applaud this, as people naively did when the current communication technologies were being developed: the more communication the better. The expectation was that the possibility of communicating with people in different parts of the world would open access to a diversity of perspectives, making people think more carefully, making them question their own positions as a result of confrontation with others.

Somehow, however, the opposite has been happening. If you look at present-day media, for instance (and here I am talking mainly about western media because I am less familiar with other traditions), we see an unprecedented funnelling effect.

Already in the 1990s, Pierre Bourdieu addressed this problem in a televised talk he gave on the topic of television and other media.² His main claim: while one would expect competition between media to cause diversity of reporting, it has exactly the opposite effect; it creates ever more uniformity because the competitors are constantly looking at each other in order not to miss the scoops they need to keep attracting their audience. This is an aspect of what I have called “derailed reflexivity” elsewhere (Verschuere 2022).

Paradoxically, this effect has been strengthened in the past couple of decades by the availability of more versatile communication tools: most media (except for the few big ones) have stopped sending out their own reporters because “news” from everywhere seems so easily accessible. This results in a continuous re-entextualization of the same information, to an extent that Bourdieu could not even foresee. This is *how connectivity causes continuity*. But it also does something else.

² For the original published version, see Bourdieu (1996). For an English translation, Bourdieu (1998).

In a disturbing little book, Mark Leonard (2022) describes how connectivity may in fact cause conflict. I am not going to review his argument which bears on world politics, but I just pick out what seems relevant in this context. Communicative connectivity (e.g., through social media) is guided by algorithms which unrecognizably fragment the public sphere by creating barely visible fenced spaces (also called “bubbles”) that feel so comfortable and familiar that everything outside the fence seems incomprehensible and hence hostile. That is why this **fragmentation** also implies **polarization**. Not only are publics fragmented, so are the messages that get communicated. Communicative ethics and responsibility, therefore, require our special attention. Two examples follow to show this need.

3. The political weaponization of free speech³

Consider being invited to a debate that is announced as follows:

“From activism to cancel culture and (self)censorship: Does ‘woke’ threaten the freedom of thought?”

This text, on a poster with a picture suggesting book-burning, is far from the neutral formulation of a question. It inscribes itself on one side of a highly polarized conflict by framing “woke” (originally no more than a demand for social justice, a valuable social idea) in terms of its fundamentalist excesses (which can be found for all valuable social ideas, including laicism). Both the conceptual essence and the historical perspective get lost in the anti-woke movement that profiles itself as the last fortress protecting that other valuable idea, freedom of speech, by weaponizing it in such a way that even legislation can be passed to ban inclusive and anti-racist books from school libraries.

Though political contradictions are not new, in the communicative world of fragmented connectivity they either fade into the background (leading to needlessly foggy debates), or incongruous talk and behavior is easily tolerated – preoccupied as one may be with the content of one’s own bubble, unwilling to look across the fence.

Some politicians fully master the art of exploiting the affordances of new communication architectures. Even when using old-school tools such as books, they count on the fragmentation of the digital world to ensure (i) that their most provocative statements will go viral on the social

³ This section is an adapted and much abbreviated account of what is fully explained in Verschueren (forthcoming).

media, and (ii) that facts counterbalancing their claims will either remain undetected or will be reframed as the others' lies.

A case in point is a publication by a prominent Flemish-nationalist politician, Bart De Wever (*Over woke* [About woke], 2023). With this pamphlet he profiles himself as the great defender of free speech. In the process, he launches an attack on what he defines as “woke”, the new enemy that has been created after the author’s so-called “inclusive” nationalism has approached the extreme right so closely that the latter can no longer be pitted as the main target in his political rhetoric (and the struggle for votes). This enemy, for De Wever, is an outgrowth of postmodernism, a waking up “to the grievances of a list of social victim groups” (p. 9).

He complains that free speech is threatened by cancelling, censorship and self-censorship, criticism is expressed without regard for context, historical truth can no longer be spoken, and no more respect can be demanded for cultural heritage. The demand to **contextualize** as best one can, to make an attempt to approach the **truth**, and to show some measure of **respect** is perfectly legitimate. But how does De Wever live up to such demands in his own argumentation?

As to **contextualization**, one of his examples is the removal of Voltaire’s statue near the *Académie française* building in Paris after it had been vandalized in the course of Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests. Critique of Voltaire on the basis of racist quotes, in De Wever’s view, totally disregards Voltaire’s historical context, especially since there is a passage in his 1759 satirical novel *Candide* “condemning slavery” (p. 23). There is indeed a short passage in *Candide* in which the main character shows pity when meeting a black slave in Suriname whose right hand and left leg have been cut off by his Dutch owner and who says “*C'est à ce prix que vous mangez du sucre en Europe*” (“This is the cost of your eating sugar in Europe”). This is no doubt a sharp criticism of the treatment of the enslaved. But it does not take much research to find out that Voltaire never spoke out against slavery as such and certainly not against colonization, from which, moreover, he made a good deal of money. The main problem is not this misrepresentation, but the simple fact that, while demanding an understanding of Voltaire’s context, De Wever does not show any understanding at all for the BLM context. Deliberately invoking context unevenly clearly undermines the value of free speech.

But what about **truth**? De Wever rightly argues for not covering up historical truths. As an example, he suggests that today it is not possible to speak the truth about slave trades in the past other than the trans-Atlantic version. To emphasize this point, he does not shy away from blatantly false claims such as the following:

“At the World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, organized by the United Nations in South Africa in 2001, however, only the Atlantic slave trade was explicitly condemned. A call for reparations was added in the same breath.” (p. 31)

It takes little effort to verify whether this is true. Gathering all the pieces of text from the conference’s conclusions⁴ that mention slavery, it turns out that the transatlantic slave trade is mentioned explicitly four times: twice in an enumeration (e.g., with the explicit mention of other instances of slave trading), once explicitly as belonging to the broader category of slave trade, and once as a clear focus (“especially”). Thus, there is no basis for the claim that only the Atlantic slave trade would be explicitly condemned. Moreover, there is no mention at all of reparations in the text, except with reference to contemporary forms of slavery. I leave it to the reader to decide whether we’re dealing with ignorance or demagoguery.

As to **respect**, there seems to be a good basis on which just about everyone can agree, with two fundamental values at its core: *freedom* (including freedom of speech) and *equality* (or social justice). I quote De Wever again:

“Freedom and equality are the two core values of the enlightenment and are the compass on which our society must hold course. [...]

However, freedom and equality are not natural friends. Unbridled freedom does not lead to equality, but to the right of the strongest. Freedom and equality only function together if embedded in a community of norms and values. [...]

A wrong opinion or a shocking statement can have a very negative impact on people, but the fight against it can only be fought with better opinions and with education for respect.” (p. 71)

The problem with the formulation of the second paragraph is the utopian suggestion, inherent in so-called “inclusive nationalism”, that there is a fixed delineation for the “community of norms and values”. A reformulation is therefore needed: freedom and equality only function together if embedded in a community in which possible limits to freedom can be debated on an equal basis. There are indeed limits to freedom, as freedom is too important to be absolute. In the everyday practice of language use, this amounts to the constant search for a balance between the right to offend and the right not to be needlessly offended.

Briefly, the coarsening of public debate in the context of the so-called “culture wars” has little to do with greater freedom of speech. It simply involves a strategic breaking of norms —

⁴ Last consulted on 22 July 2024 at <https://www.un.org/WCAR/durban.pdf>.

under the guise of “the truth” — to connect with a specific audience. Habituation can broaden that audience, while polarization serves as a stabilizing anchor. Even when publishing books, politicians count on the digital media to serve as channels for these processes.

4. Academic complicity in history writing⁵

The current Flemish government started out in 2019 with a Coalition Agreement emphasizing the ambition to strengthen and promote a sense of Flemish identity. One of the concrete plans was to recruit a number of academics to write a *Canon van Vlaanderen*, an authoritative textbook summarizing whatever could be regarded as essential knowledge for all people in Flanders about Flemish history, arts, science, and culture. Though most historians objected strongly to such politically inspired history writing, the government managed to recruit academics to form the needed committee, and already in May 2023 the end product was presented.

Despite the attempts of the committee not to make the *Canon* an explicitly nationalist treatise, the book fulfils the Flemish-nationalist objectives that underlie it: a text with an undeniable Flemish identity-strengthening potential. This is the main conclusion of a discourse-analytical study, some aspects of which I summarize here.

What strikes one immediately when reading the preface, is the complete absence of the historical link between the popularizing-academic product and the political project that underlies it both conceptually and financially. The link is only mentioned in its solemn denial (p. 6), which is meant to shelter both the government and the committee members from the suspicion of politically driven historiography.

But are we then to believe that the committee succeeded in convincing the government to pay for the implementation of a project that explicitly distances itself from the goals that were equally explicitly behind it? Are we then really to believe that the Flemish government would be satisfied with a product that would not embody its own pronounced cultural-nationalist aspirations? That seems very unlikely. Politicians are not naive. It is more plausible that politicians were convinced that their identitarian goals would also be achieved without direct substantive interference and without even explicitly invoking the concept of identity in the final mandate letter giving the committee its instructions.

⁵ This section is an adapted and much abbreviated account of what is fully explained in Verschueren (2024b). The most extensive account can only be found in the Dutch version of the analysis in Verschueren (2024a).

An analysis of the *Canon*, of course, should not only deal with the literal content of the text, but also with the message more implicitly conveyed by it. What socially relevant effect does the text possibly have on its readership? This so-called “resonance” (cf. Beaver and Stanley 2023) is determined by how the text is formulated, by what context is or is not given, and by what is or is not emphasized.

Such an analysis quickly leads to the conclusion that the *Canon* tells a story that is only very partially about what we understand “Flanders” to be today, but which is presented as altogether Flemish even in that same contemporary sense. Without manipulating historical facts, the past is thus turned “Flemish” as much as possible, even where this has little relevance to an understanding of the events and developments described. Not surprisingly, this Flemish coating of history is strongest in the windows⁶ that deal with themes that play a key role in identity-promoting policies for the current Flemish government: historical symbolism, cultural symbolism, Flemish emancipation, economic-technological success, education and media, and “the language” ([Flemish] Dutch).

The committee maintains that the *Canon* does not tell a teleological story (p. 4). In other words, it does not pretend that present-day Flanders is the unique and self-evident outcome of the past. Nevertheless, the tone is strongly determined by a starting point and a (provisional) ending point in the two framing windows: “A Place in the World” and “The World in Flanders”. The title of the first window, “A place in the world”, sounds like the most neutral possible opening for a piece of history. Yet this is the window in which the word “identity”, which appears only three times in the entire *Canon*, immediately appears twice (p. 13). So, the suggestion of a “natural” beginning to a beautiful history is loud and clear. The phrase “a place in the world” does not exude the innocent neutrality that the authors may have thought to achieve with it. Minimally, “a place in the world” (sometimes in the form of “a place under the sun”) refers to a home: it is about “our” place in the world. Often this is metaphorical, with identity playing the leading role, whether or not in combination with territoriality.

In “The World in Flanders”, the window that “completes” the story, the key concepts are “globalization” and “diversity” (p. 310–313). Both terms appear only once before, giving the impression that a new reality has been or is emerging – a suggestion that ignores the entire intervening history of diverse population flows in what is now known as Flanders. More important than this forgetfulness of historical diversity is the attempt to make “the world in

⁶ Chapters in the book are called “windows.” They are accompanied by an “eye-catcher” and divided into one section called “theme” and two following sections each called “focus”.

Flanders” a success story. The eye-catcher is the picture of a giantess called Fatima, with headscarf, who is said to be partly responsible for the revival of the centuries-old giant parade of Borgerhout, now a highly diverse part of Antwerp (p. 310). Meanwhile, the *Canon* avoids mentioning continuing and institutional forms of discrimination. We cannot stop wondering, then, how a real-world Fatima may benefit from her namesake in the giants’ parade when she is not even allowed to teach or provide services at a counter wearing her headscarf.

At least three additional angles are useful to determine how strongly the *Canon* supports a Flemish-nationalist project.

First, if the intention is to create or reinforce an identity, a useful tool is always the consistent use of the first-person plural to construct a collective social order (“we”) that can be contrasted with “others” (the famous *us-them* polarization). The committee does its utmost to avoid this. Yet at certain crucial moments it fails to avoid an ethnic-linguistic and a Flemish-territorial majority perspective when using *we* and *us/our*. For example, Dutch is described as “our current language” (p. 42), and there is talk about Moroccan and Turkish immigrants who brought Islam to “our country” (p. 313). So, there is a territory that is *ours*, and the (Dutch-speaking) *us* is clearly distinguished from immigrant workers and the Islam they bring along.

Second, for identitarian-nationalist purposes, a historical text must generate some pride. Toward its “own” history, then, a predominantly positive attitude must be adopted. The question is, then, whether the *Canon* contains evaluative statements and patterns that can accomplish what the authors of the 2019 Flemish Coalition Agreement dreamed of: getting Flemish people to live their Flemish identity “unwaveringly”. A close look reveals that the *Canon* does not shy away from explicit evaluation when it is positive. Indeed, what happens in Flanders is rather often described as “big”, “beautiful”, “important”, “groundbreaking” and “unprecedented”. When elements are to be evaluated negatively, on the other hand, specific discursive strategies are used to downplay them. This is done, among other things, by ascribing responsibility for unpleasant situations to outsiders (e.g., the Habsburg rulers, p. 79), or to external impersonal forces rather than Flemish people (as when machines are held responsible for miserable working conditions in factories; p. 153).

Third, also with a view to strengthening identity, it is important to zoom in on the contributions of one’s *own* region and its inhabitants when this reinforces a positive (self-) image, and to zoom out again to a broader level when there could be a threat to the image of Flanders. In the *Canon*, this happens systematically. The clearest example of this is the narrative around colonization, zooming in strongly on positive contributions (such as the Flemish priest Pedro de Gante’s outspoken criticism of cruelty and exploitation by the Spanish in Mexico

during the earliest periods of colonization; p. 110) and zooming out equally strongly when Flemish involvement could become embarrassing (so that the colonization of Congo is presented exclusively as a Belgian story in the text; p. 216–221).

The conclusion is that the *Canon van Vlaanderen* does have great identity-strengthening potential, independently of the authors' intentions and irrespective of the ultimate identity-strengthening effects. Given this meaning potential, the current Flemish government did get exactly what it wanted and what it announced as an objective in its policy statement – thanks to academic complicity.

5. A question of responsibility

Neither of our two examples deals directly with digital communication channels, reflections on which led to the notion of fragmented connectivity. De Wever's book, however, is clearly a pamphlet intended to contain provocative statements that, in the form of one-liners, find their way into the social media where serious questioning is blocked by their going viral. The *Canon*, on the other hand, breathes the architecture of fragmented connectivity in its very structure. The book is not a coherent narrative but a (chronological) concatenation of sixty so-called "windows" through which the reader can look at specific phenomena or events without getting any explanation of how they all relate to one another. Similarly, the hyperlinking on the accompanying website only serves window-hopping. Meanwhile, media-management (in which social media have been playing a significant role) has made it extremely hard for historians to keep voicing criticism without being branded as either jealous or as ivory-tower academics.

For public discourse, responsibility should be strongly re-emphasized as the major concern it always was: paradoxically, it seems less easily within reach due to the availability of tools that seem to facilitate communication. The pursuit of political goals is perfectly legitimate. But for a politician the minimal standard should be to avoid exploiting the expanding potential for demagoguery. For academics lending their services to politicians, awareness of the risk of complicity should be expected.

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