

The Virtual Age and the Challenges for the Body in Le Breton's Book "*La Fin De La Conversation? La Parole Dans Une Société Spectrale*" (2024)

Milena de Oliveira Aguiar¹, Maria Isabel Brandão de Souza Mendes²

^{1,2}Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte, Department of Physical Education, Natal, Brazil.

¹ORCID: 0000-0001-6079-8980

²ORCID: 0000-0002-9648-0007

ABSTRACT: Digital technologies and their widespread use in society require new ways of acting, educating, communicating, producing, and influencing - to the point that this context constantly confronts us with the need to produce, consume, or communicate information. It is against this backdrop of communication technologies that David Le Breton published his book in France in 2024, titled "*La fin de la conversation? La parole dans une société spectrale*" ("The End of Conversation? Speech in a Spectral Society"). David Le Breton is a professor of sociology at the University of Strasbourg in France and he has published several books in his country, which have been translated around the world. Le Breton's book (2024) presents the nature of interaction in the digital age as a challenge. In this context, the author calls on parents and educators to reflect with their children and students on adopting critical attitudes toward digital technologies and the consumption associated with them. The book also highlights the need for children, adolescents, and even adults to experience their bodies and to move. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, while in the virtual age bodies are exposed through Instagram and Facebook, there is no need to recognize oneself as a body. This is a cause for concern!

KEYWORDS: Body, Virtual Age, Digital Technologies, Movement, Sociability

I. INTRODUCTION

Who did not walk into a restaurant and come across a table where diners were connected to their cell phones? Or even spent hours scrolling through social media? What kind of society is this in which we are increasingly immersed in the virtual world?

Studies such as Han's¹ indicate that society is shifting from a disciplinary regime to an information-based one. This is due to advances in digital technologies that allow us to connect with multiple people simultaneously and to produce and receive diverse information. Digital technologies and their widespread use in society require new ways of acting, educating, communicating, producing, and influencing - to the point that this context constantly confronts us with the need to produce, consume, or communicate information.

It is against this backdrop of communication technologies that David Le Breton² published his book in France in 2024, titled "*La fin de la conversation? La parole dans une société spectrale*" ("The End of Conversation? Speech in a Spectral Society"). Distinguishing communication from conversation, Le Breton² examines the changes in everyday life brought about by the social use of communication technologies. The author demonstrates how this social use have affected individuals and shaken the very foundation of sociability: conversation.

David Le Breton is a professor of sociology at the University of Strasbourg in France. He is a member of the French University Institute and the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Strasbourg. He is the author of several works that have been translated in Brazil, including: "Adeus ao corpo: antropologia e sociedade", "A Sociologia do Corpo", "As paixões ordinárias: antropologia das emoções", "Antropologia dos sentidos", "Desaparecer de si: uma tentação contemporânea", "Rostos", among others. There are books in the English version: "Sensing the World: An Anthropology of the Senses" and "Faces: A Cultural History".

With a fluid narrative that captures the reader's attention, David Le Breton's book (2024) is divided into eighteen short and thought-provoking chapters.

II. FROM CONVERSATION TO COMMUNICATION: REFLECTIONS ON DIGITAL SCENARIOS

In the first, Le Breton² provides an overview of the influence of smartphones on social relations since their emergence, highlighting how they have come to dominate the lives of most people today. He highlights the hybridization of man and machine: even though

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the cell phone remains outside the body, it is recognized as a necessary companion, and if forgotten, the belief arises that something is missing.

In the second chapter, the author addresses conversation. Without idealizing it, he highlights a conversation in which we are attentive to the other, open to listening, and capable of engaging individuals in each other's presence—where we are confronted by the other's gaze, marking the celebration of reunion.

In the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters, Le Breton² presents elements of conversation. In his view, face-to-face interaction is based on the principle of mutual respect, which in turn fosters reciprocity. In his own words: "The rituals that nourish conversation are, above all, orderly and mutually intelligible enactments of bodily conduct and facial movements" (p. 29). However, the author draws attention to the fact that the disappearance of the face is a symptom of the decline of conversation, a claim supported by simple observation that, during walks through cities, many faces remain hidden behind screens.

In the seventh chapter, the author presents examples of what he calls "digital sociability," weaving projections of a near future in which social interactions - even the most intimate ones - are established through constant remote stimulation via digital relationships. In this scenario of predictions, physical encounters will be rare. The so-called "cyber-relationships" will guide our interactions with others, whom we will not see in person.

In the eighth chapter, the world of communication takes center stage, consuming daily life and absorbing all attention. This communication through digital tools imposes interactivity, which the author calls the "liquidation of the dialogic"—that is, the gradual end of conversation.

In the ninth chapter, Le Breton² shows that the hypnotic appeal of the smartphone causes a hyper-individualization of our societies. Each person tends to create a unique world based on self-sufficiency. Amid a sense of urgency, the impoverishment of contact with others, and a lack of time for oneself, the smartphone plays a perverse role by directing all of the individual's concerns. On one hand, The need for quick responses across multiple social media platforms creates a sense of being busy. But on the other hand, the more time we spend *online*, the harder it is to disconnect, he says.

Chapter 10 highlights the idea that there is a "Taylorization of communication." Time is no longer personal; it becomes governed by the digital tool that colonizes our existence, according to Le Breton². All the available time spent connected to Google or social media is exploited by advertising companies to collect data. Another interesting point is when the author highlights research showing the contemporary impoverishment of early interactions with children, as parents become mesmerized by their cell phones.

In the eleventh chapter, the author shows that the Internet blurs the individual's identity, as there is no need to provide genuine proof of who one claims to be. For him, the postmodern subject becomes a "hyper-individual," dissolving into a variety of connections and possible identities. In some situations, this subject is bodiless, consisting purely of information.

In the twelfth chapter, the author emphasizes that "a statement that does not present a real face before it is merely a simulacrum" (p. 77). He adds that there is a loss of acuity, as one is no longer fully engaged in the exchange. With the advent of social media, blogs, and even websites, it is easy to see that the growth of communication exacerbates conflicts rather than mitigating them.

The thirteenth chapter deals with conversations with robots, which have come to be seen as a loss of conversation in our societies. It is evident that, regardless of their technical sophistication, robots have become companions, whether for the elderly or even for children in need of attention.

In chapters 14 and 15, Le Breton² focuses on communication among adolescents. According to the author, today's adolescents have grown up using social media and cell phones, and these technologies shape their identities and relationships with the world. "Digital sociability is at the heart of their daily lives" (p. 89). These adolescents can be recognized as "digital natives," as highlighted by Prensky³. Continuing with Le Breton's² book, he helps us see that intensive cell phone use contributes to a sedentary lifestyle.

In the sixteenth chapter, Le Breton² reinforces the earlier idea that the imperative of modern communication renders conversation obsolete and devalues silence. By eradicating inner reflection, there is no time left for contemplation, as immediate responsiveness is required. It is necessary to remain connected, perpetually available, and constantly alert. For the author, while thinking—or even the simple act of living—requires patience and slowness, communication, by contrast, is always characterized by speed and utilitarianism.

In the seventeenth chapter, Le Breton² states that some individuals tend to adapt to this accelerated pace, investing most of their lives in this world of urgency and communication. They set aside the time for conversation. On the other hand, this constant need to be available at all times and to be flexible gives rise to a desire to disappear, to escape mandatory social definitions, to become invisible.

In the final chapter, Le Breton² shows that his position is related to the "countercurrent to the techno-prophetism that dominates the prevailing discourses and thus our individual, familial, professional, or administrative lives" (p. 119). The author acknowledges that connectivity has become mandatory today, making it impossible not to rely on the Internet or cell phones.

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However, he helps us recognize that the possibility of engaging in conversation is a form of resistance to our societies' demands for productivity, connectivity, and speed. Conversation makes it possible to reestablish the real—the presence of the other, the body, and sensory experience.

CONCLUSIONS

The book presents the nature of interaction in the digital age as a challenge. In this context, the author calls on parents and educators to reflect with their children and students on adopting critical attitudes toward digital technologies and the consumption associated with them. The book also highlights the need for children, adolescents, and even adults to experience their bodies and to move. Furthermore, it is worth noting that, while in the virtual age bodies are exposed through Instagram and Facebook, there is no need to recognize oneself as a body. This is a cause for concern!

Le Breton², in clear language, guides the reader toward a closer look at the new possibilities for interaction that impact social, educational, and personal experiences. Just as he invites us to reflect deeply on the speed and automation of life brought about by digital technologies, we need to slow down to savor the beauties of the physical world—especially conversation.

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