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CONVERSATION WITH JAMES LULL
HIS PERSPECTIVE EVOLVING THROUGH HIS EXPERIENCES AND LIFE

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Abstract

Capitalizing on the notable momentum that the work of James Lull has undergone, the outcome of an extensive and intimate conversation with him about his life and work is presented here. Through this material, one can grasp the emergence of his theoretical perspective: evolutionary communication, while gaining access to the image of an informed humanist who, aware of the structural limitations for human agency, seeks to locate the human voice at the center of the communication process, thereby breaking away from the narrative of economic determination of manipulated audiences. The history of audiences, Lull reveals to us, extends beyond contemporary technological developments. They are the achievement of the long and winding process of human evolution driven by communication.

Keywords: James Lull, audiences, evolution, communication, evolutionary communication.

Dear David:

Jineth Amezquita Rivas[1] read your paper, 'The Language of Life: How Communication Drives Human Evolution' (Mateo, 2013)

Email sent by Academia.edu to the author of this manuscript

I am not saying that a *'Lullmania'* has broken out, but neither am I exaggerating when I say that due to his recent *'evolutionary turn,'* James Lull's work is experiencing renewed interest. The journal *Communication Theory* chose *"Approaching Evolutionary Communication"* (Lull, 2022b) as its lead article, and the Academia.edu network informs me several times a day that someone is reading either my review of *The Language of Life* (Lull & Neiva, 2012) or *Reclaiming Communication: foundations for understanding James Lull's perspective* (Mateo, 2015), the abstract of my doctoral dissertation.

I don't think it's just an impression caused by those constant e-mail alerts. I had noticed it before with the string of publications and re-publications of his books and scientific papers. In 2020, for example, just before the COVID-19 pandemic, *Routledge New York* published *Evolutionary Communication* (Lull, 2020), his latest book, and during 2014 they reissued in their featured revivals *Inside Family Viewing* (Lull, 1990) and *China turned on* (Lull, 1991). In July 2021, *New Media and Society* published *Living with Television and the Internet* (Lull, 2021),* and then, in 2022,* the Brazilian journal *Matrizes published From Ethnography to Evolution* (Lull, 2022a). Undoubtedly, something is happening, 'aliquid agitur.'

Considering this notorious impulse, as well as the spirit of this journal oriented to perspectives on communication, the publication of this conversation with James Lull about his life and work could not be timelier and more pertinent. Like Alexander

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1 This name has been modified

(1987), I believe that theories are not floating abstractions and that if we are to understand them better, we must know about the people who wrote them.

Through this long, even intimate conversation about his experiences and life, from his youth to his stage as an academic, we will not only find traces of the emergence of his theoretical perspective but will emerge the brilliant figure of, as McLoone (1991) defined him, a committed humanist who distanced himself from the hypothetic-deductive logic, quantitative data flows, scientific models and dehumanized statistics regularly used in the study of communication. Lull, on the contrary, was interested in placing the voice of human subjects at the center of the process, validating there the practices of an audience that he considered relatively autonomous from the ideological operations of texts and political-economic determinations (1991: 53). The history of audiences, Lull reveals here, extends beyond contemporary technological development. They are the result of a long and winding process of human evolution driven by communication.

Before I begin, I should clarify that although this was not the case, the conversation appears here as if it had been 'in one go.' It was actually constructed based on four different semi-structured interviews. Each lasted almost two hours and took place during my five-month research stay at *San Jose State University, SJSU,* California, in 2012. Since then and to this day, the conversation has continued through various means.

The interviews were conducted in English, but -when necessary- we both used Spanish to clarify the point being made. The locations were all different. From the terrace of his home in the city of San Jose to the campuses and surroundings of *SJSU* and the *University of California-Santa Barbara*, also in California. They were audio-recorded and flowed from semi-structured questionnaires that I prepared throughout my stay and sent to Dr. Lull at least 24 hours in advance. We also had an unquantified number of informal conversations 'in passing' while having lunch or touring the city, including several trips in his car to San Francisco - *listening to Lana del Rey!* - to attend academic, cultural, or sporting events. Its content is not

made explicit here, but it is behind some of the questions and my interventions during his answers. The first translation and transcription work was done immediately after my return to Santiago de Chile, from June to August 2012.

Finally. A first version of that document drifted around in my files for my consultation only. I kept it private and '*in extenso*' for several years until just a few months ago, when, due to the previously mentioned constant notifications on my phone and personal computer, I decided that its publication could be of interest and usefulness. I improved the phrasing of the questions and interconnected the answers, whose translation I polished and relocated to make the reading more interesting, always taking care of the integrity and sense of what Lull had said. I adjusted through bibliographic review the accuracy of the stories, the dates, and the names that came up, as well as the meaning of some of my interventions. The last version went back and forth a couple of times so that Professor Lull had space to correct what 'I said he said' or to add something else. The latter is the one you have in front of you and are about to read.

Conversation with James Lull

James Lull is Professor Emeritus at *San Jose State University, SJSU*. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Wisconsin (1976). He has received two *Honoris Causa* doctorates. One is in Social Sciences from the University of Helsinki, Finland (1995), and another, also in Communication, from the Universidad Inca Garcilaso de la Vega in Peru (2013). He is an honorary professor at the University of Aalborg, Denmark, and in addition to the United States, he has taught courses and supervised research in several other parts of the world, including the People's Republic of China, England, Sweden, Denmark, Spain, Italy, Brazil, Venezuela, Mexico, Argentina, and Chile, where we met in 1999 and to which he has returned several times since then.

Lull is the author and editor of ten scholarly books in English: *Popular Music and communication (*Lull, 1992a*), World families watch television (1988a), Inside family viewing (1990), China turned on (1991), Media Scandals* (Lull, 1997)*, Media,*

communication, culture (2000), Culture in the communication age (2001), Culture -on- demand (2001), The Language of life (2012) and 'Evolutionary communication' (2020), several of them translated into Spanish, Italian, Chinese, Portuguese, Indonesian, Japanese, Turkish, Romanian and Ukrainian. He has also written more than a dozen influential articles, several of which are referenced in this conversation.

In general terms, one can say that throughout his academic career, Lull devoted himself to trying to elucidate the role of communication in culture and today's mediatized society. By placing analytical emphasis on it as a unique and distinctive human faculty, he investigated *in situ* the processes of reception, especially of television, and he did so in a wide variety of domestic contexts (Lull, 1974, 1976, 1978, 1978, 1980, 1982a, 1982b, 1988a, 1990, 1991). He did so in some rather lax contexts, such as those of American families in the 1970s, and in others more abrasive, as in the case of Chinese families in the mid-1980s.

World-renowned for having been one of the driving forces behind this *'ethnographic turn'* in audience studies and for having helped to sustain an understanding of audiences in active terms, he went on to refine and extend the implications of this understanding of communicative processes (Lull, 1992b, 2000, 2000, 2001, 2007). Individuals, he concluded, are knowledgeable and encouraged constructors of meaning and social action, even though they are in contexts of dominant forces that influence them. Since his perspective recognized that structureist principles *a la* Giddens (1998) could be applied to the study of audiences, the integration between macro-social conditions and micro-social processes was decisive and key in his analysis.

Rather than just audience members, people are communicators and they use media and contents. That conclusion will result in some of the most important concepts of his work, among them: *'zones of indeterminacy,' 'symbolic power,' 'cultural programming,' 'personal supercultures,' 'pull and push,' 'cultural spheres,' 'open spaces for global communication'* (Lull, 2000, 2001, 2007), all to account, as he

himself had said, for:

> "people's communicative capacities; [of]how it is that through the willful manipulation of symbols in a given sphere of everyday discourse men and women not only come to understand but also to manage their life worlds" (Lull, 1992b, p. 52).

After almost 35 years of studying and thinking about audiences, as well as reading very carefully, as he told me when we talked, "page by page" *The Origins of Species* (Darwin, 2010) and *The Descent of Man* (Darwin, 1871), Lull set out to try to clarify the role and again the use of communication, but no longer exclusively and primarily for the purpose of media and audiences. He now extended his interest in communication practices, but he did so backward, towards the context of the origins of our species and of communication itself.

Lull is defending the idea that although today's scenario is more complex than the one that existed in the primordial stages of our development, before the first hominids separated from the African apes seven million years ago, the interest in survival has remained unchanged, and that therefore, we must understand that what has happened is that human communication practices, although they have evolved, accommodated and adapted, have done so to serve the same purpose (Lull & Neiva, 2012; Lull, 2020). The practical actions of audiences are nothing more than evolutionary adaptations that extend the nature of human experience (Lull, 2022b). In an attempt to reconstruct and comprehend this sinuous trajectory and to recognize its implications for theory and research in communication, this conversation took place.

David Mateo (DM): *Professor Lull, with this conversation, I want to defend the idea that your academic perspective and trajectory will be better understood if put in the context of your personal life and experiences. I would like to start with some stories from your childhood and move from there through your youth and adult academic life.*

James Lull (JL): Well, I grew up in *Owatonna*, a small town of farmers and very simple people in Minnesota. I did that with my mom dancing and playing piano at home. She would play *jazz* and paint with me being around. She would take me out to the yard to pick flowers to make beautiful arrangements. It's also the time when *rock n' roll* was developing. I can't forget that feeling of visiting the little record stores and listening to the new music. It wasn't like my parents'; it was mine, and I felt I had this 'power'. That was a resource that *eventually* allowed me to express my personality and elaborate my identity...

On the other hand. Although I considered myself socially introverted, I always loved all forms of expression. I loved to dance. I did it in a very athletic way and with a very personal style. I remember I had a little player in my room. There, I would listen to music and dance. I would rehearse privately so that when I went out to parties, I could show off my moves. I also remember when I turned fifteen and worked at the radio station in my town. There was only one, and it operated during the day. Every Sunday morning, I would open the place and start the commercial programming. Television had arrived a little earlier. It was equally important. It was a kind of opening to the world. I was a somewhat naïve boy who now had alternatives... I experienced all that as a kind of personal freedom. I was very happy because popular culture had given me something to do... It's very interesting to talk about it because I always felt there was a relationship, but I didn't quite understand how it fitted in with my later life...

(*DM*) *So do you think there is a relationship with what you will investigate next?*

(*JL*) Yes, I think that is the origin. It must come from, or at least be reinforced by, those experiences from the period when I was becoming a teenager.

(*DM*) *You said you were kind of 'naïve', so what was it like to fight the war in Vietnam? Or, even before that, how did you come to do it?*

(*JL*) The story is a bit long. In 1962, at the age of eighteen, my uncle Randolph

Schmalhorst, with whom I lived for a while, suggested that I join the army[2]. I did so as a way to escape a period with some family conflicts. Also, the U.S. intervention in the war had not yet occurred, so in that sense, I was not sort of 'going to Vietnam'. Upon enlisting, I first attended basic training in Missouri and then went to Information School at Fort Slocum in New York. I was assigned to train as an Army journalist. My service code was 'information specialist.' I was happy to be independent from my family, from my high school, to be out of my hometown, and to meet very diverse people. One of my best friends worked at the Miami newspaper. He and others taught me how to research and write, basically, how to be a good researcher. This was in 1963, the same year John F. Kennedy was assassinated.

Anyway, after that training, I went to Georgia for at least two years. I remember I had two identities. During the day, I was in the Army at Fort Benning. I wore my uniform, wrote a little military information, did a little military radio, and then, in the evenings, I worked as a *deejay* at *WCLS*, a commercial radio station near Columbus, Georgia, where I became very popular. I was known under the pseudonym Chad Reynolds. Later, in early 1965, during my senior year, I was ordered to transfer to the embassy in Panama, but now the U.S. was involved in the conflict, so my group of friends in the information office and I decided it was best to go to the front lines in Vietnam. Although it wasn't mandatory, we applied and did it... Partly, it was out of patriotism, 'doing the right thing...'. My father and the fathers of many others had fought in World War II. It was also out of excitement at the thought of covering what at the time, was the most important news story in the world... After passing off Acapulco by boat, and a brief stop in California, we landed at *Qui Nhon*, a fishing port in southern Vietnam. That's how I got to the war...

(**DM**) *I see, and what was your opinion?*

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[2] Lull dedicated his 1991 book *China turned on* to his aunt and uncle Kate and Randolph Schmalhorst as a thank you for their support during those years.

(*JL)* It was changing. Not many people had criticized it at the beginning because we didn't really know what it was. When I arrived, I began to understand the situation better. While I was there, I read a lot about what had happened, and I understood that there was some kind of manipulation. That the U.S. government was withholding information and pressuring us to wage war. We weren't supposed to think; we were just supposed to take orders. That disappointed me, and I started changing my position. I went from being someone who was independent, a little bit conservative, as I said before, from being a naïve farm boy to being rather progressive and political. I matured a lot during my last year of military service.

(*DM)* *In* Inside family viewing *and other books, you describe some of your experiences on the battle front. They are quite strong situations that seem to have marked you deeply.*

(*JL)* Yes. I was on the battlefield for the first six months with the 1st Cavalry Airborne Division of the Navy. Out of the five friends we traveled together on the ship to Vietnam, two were killed, one was seriously wounded, and only one buddy and I were unharmed. Being in the middle of the jungle, mostly wet, was very stressful. There were people dying all around you - and I was in my early twenties! It was so shocking to me that I even wrote an article about the first person I saw shot to death. So, while several of my 'official' quantitative reports were published in the military newspapers, I also sent the 'other stories' - the qualitative ones - to the alternative media. I did this to expose the problems of the war. That was my first form of resistance against the real motives of my government. I did it from the inside...

Then, in 1966, I managed to get out of the jungle and was assigned to the most important military radio station in Saigon, the same one in the movie *'Good Morning Vietnam'* and in which Robin Williams played Adrian Kronauer, the radio operator to whom in real life I delivered the station every day. That job gave me some relief. I no longer had to wear a uniform, just a shirt with my name on it, which I still have.

My schedule was from midnight until six in the morning. Here comes my second form of resistance. There was a list of albums and music considered 'acceptable' by the authorities that were what you could play on the station, but I got my friends to send me recordings of the artists who were banned for being against the war, including Bob Dylan, Donovan, Joan Baez, and several others. I would play their songs at two or three in the morning, when my superiors were asleep and my coworkers were listening. Once again, and as I told you I did in the military diary, I used the resources and technology of the institution to fight against the institution itself and, in a way, against the war as well....

(**DM**) *It makes sense with your idea of active audience and your insight that media are social institutions penetrated by people and their agendas. I'm not trying to reduce your work to your personal experiences, but it seems to me that they reflect those ideas and understandings to come....*

(**JL**) In some sense, yes. I use those examples that come from my experience when I write, but I never consciously reflected on their link to my work. But it's true; you can see the same motivations in them... In fact, I can also say that the war was a very ethnographic experience, similar also to the one I had a little earlier, when my father took me to Europe at the age of fifteen. He had been part of the American infantry in France during World War II, and he wanted to go back and tour those places. When he did, he took me with him. We visited small villages in several countries. On one occasion he said to me, *"Jimmy, we are eating in a Swiss restaurant, the waitress is Italian and the food is German..."*. Today I think he was showing me globalization through those details. That surely planted curiosity in me. It opened me up to the idea of the mixture of cultures, to the flux and the lack of certainty about the cultural definition of places. So, by the time I was sixteen, I had been to Europe and then I went to Asia, as well as growing up in the United States.

(**DM**) *I understand that after working as a journalist in Vietnam, studying journalism was a practical choice, but why did you decide to pursue master's and doctoral studies?*

(*JL*) That's another story. I had wanted to live in California ever since I heard the first stories about it from my regimental buddies as we passed off its shores aboard the ship that took us to Vietnam. At the end of the war, I decided to go to that intriguing city. I enrolled at this university - San Jose State University - and earned my bachelor's degree in electronic media and journalism in 1970. After graduating, and here comes the answer, I worked for a while as a programmer for a commercial radio station, *KSJO-FM, in* San Jose. In that position, I had to do some telephone surveys, something very simple, questions like: which station do you prefer? which programmer or *deejay*? or why do you listen to the station? and so on. The quantitative data I collected piqued my curiosity and I realized that I wanted to continue doing it in a more scientific and systematic way. To go further and try to understand the reasons behind their responses. That was the beginning of my interest in the relationship between mass media and interpersonal communication. I left the station in San Jose and went on a scholarship to the University of Eugene, Oregon, to pursue a master's degree in communication. To graduate, I did some very good research on people's response to Bayer's anti-advertising, which resulted in *"Counter advertising: persuasibility of anti-Bayer TV spot"* (Lull, 1974), my first important scientific article. -**(*DM*)** *And that led you to a Ph.D.?* - **(*JL*)** Yes. My professors at Oregon motivated me. My courses introduced me to the scientific study of interpersonal and group communication. Then, I went to Wisconsin-Madison, the best alternative in the United States at the time. They were very rigorous, and the students came with many credentials. I received excellent training.

(*DM*) *However, in the same 'Inside family' you said that the way to combine the study of communication with the study of mass media in Wisconsin was not exactly the one you were looking for...*

(*JL*) That is true. I always say that I had two types of courses, the official ones and the alternative ones, and that I *'cooked my own Ph.D.*.' What happened is that, as was very typical of the time, mass media was separated from audiences, and the interaction between audience members in everyday life was not talked about, which

was the idea I had and wanted to explore. I thought that if we wanted to understand the nature of human communicative behavior in social situations, we had to do it like anthropologists, microsociologists, and symbolic interactionists. That's why I took courses mainly in interpersonal communication. I didn't want to do it in mass media because I had already read enough during my journalism studies and my master's degree at Oregon. I moved towards the study of social interaction, persuasion and everything related to the dynamics of conversations, behavior and family life. I attended seminars with leading figures in sociopsychology and microsociology. I managed on my own to read and integrate the approaches of Blumer (1969), Schutz (2003), Garfinkel (1987), Malinowski (1950), Hymes (1964), and Lewis (1959), among others. I remember that I wanted to take a course on ethnography, but it was not offered in my department. The only one offered was in the Anthropology department, and they did not accept me because I was from 'another field'…

It turned out that my research idea was quite original for the time. I wondered what familiar interpersonal processes were like when watching television. Schramm and Roberts (1971) talked about interpersonal interactions, but neither they nor anyone else had thought about them from the point of view that suggests that media content is negotiated through the social dynamics within families, school, work, and all of people's natural locations. Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) had also proposed something similar, the theory of *'personal influence.'* They did this to refer to the ascendancy of opinion leaders on their followers. I thought that was fine, that communication flowed, but that, unlike their well-known argument, it did not seem to me to flow in only one direction, from leaders to people, but that there were many negotiations going on in between, and therefore, that communication should be understood as going in several directions simultaneously. That is what I decided to investigate, and that is what I finally documented and presented, first in my paper for the International Communication Association meeting in Chicago in 1974 and in more detail in *'Mass media and family communication: An ethnography of audience behavior,'* my doctoral dissertation in 1976, which was also the first ethnography of families watching television in the world. That work led to the publication of several

very important articles. Among them, the best known was *"The Social Uses of Television"* (Lull, 1980), which won the *Golden Monograph Award* from the National Association of Communication in 1981.

I would like to take this opportunity to clarify that the first part of my work has been wrongly related to the 'uses and gratifications' perspective. I respect it, and I think we owe them a great deal; however, at that time I was more on the side of uses than on the side of gratifications. That is why I did ethnographic work, going back to the basic forms of data collection based primarily on observation. Edwin Black, my Ph.D. supervisor helped me a lot, and I thank him for finding a way to generate a harmonious committee, as I took several risks in proposing an ethnographic study to graduate in communications at that time. However, I can't complain, even though it was not exactly what I was looking for, Wisconsin put me in contact with really good students and professors.

(DM) *It is true, and the result of your research after what you did in Wisconsin will attract the attention of many people, for example, Thomas Lindlof (1987) in the United States and also David Morley (1990, 1996) in England. It is interesting because it was not common for Americans to be considered by Europeans on these issues, let alone to be treated as a kind of influence or reference, which is how Morley considered you.*

(JL) Dave Morley had been doing some things similar to mine when he read my article *"How families select television programs"* (Lull, 1982a) and became interested in the approach, especially because of the importance I gave to the analysis of the natural context of television viewing. He incorporated some elements into his study of *Nationwide's* home audience in England, and that is how I began to be known and discussed in that circle. I was also very active in panels and conferences in Europe. I met Ing Ang (1996), Janice Radway (1991), John Fiske (1992), and Paul Willis (1990), with whom I started to exchange views, to agree, but also to discuss...

(DM) *How is it that you think those who were in a Marxist-based perspective*

arrived at the same point as you, that of the active, negotiating, meaning-producing audience that is a little freer?

(JL) The British culturalists were also developing independently of the main lines of social science in England. They too were unsatisfied with quantitative solutions, but especially with deterministic ones. They were interested in politics, feminism, racism, and Marxism, but from new positions, from a rather Gramscian point of view. Hegemony is a type of power that results from a negotiated process. It is neither determined nor deterministic... -**(DM)** *But in your article 'Audience texts and contexts'* (Lull, 1987a)*, you criticized them. As for the case of 'uses and gratifications,' it seems that you were also simultaneously inside and outside cultural studies...* **(JL)** I didn't like that they tried to draw conclusions that would coincide with their previous ideas. I have another article, *'The audience as a nuissance'* (Lull, 1988b). In it I point out that, for Marxist-based studies, the empirical data they found on the audience were a nuisance to their idea of audiences manipulated and alienated by the capitalist system. On the one hand, I observed and found in my studies, with very robust evidence, that audiences were more 'active' than the models of mass communication I studied in my Ph.D. would accept, and at the same time, I saw that many culturalist researchers were bending the qualitative data to fit neatly into their pre-theoretical positions and victimizing them. The data were blatantly used to promote a political agenda.

I want to clarify something else. I made this criticism of members of the first generation of culturalists and 'critical' theorists. On the other hand, with Ang, Morley, Fiske and Willis I had quite a lot of affinity. They are part of a second and even a third generation and they influenced me quite a bit. In their work, I did not see these problems and rather agreed with them that people use and interpret symbolic resources based on their needs, interests, contexts and experiences.

(DM) *Let me pivot a little bit in the conversation. Why did you decide to stay at San Jose State University and not move to one of the academic centers in England where this interesting debate you just recounted was taking place?*

(JL) Before San Jose, I spent seven years at the University of California, Santa Barbara. That was from 1976 until 1983. The point is that I was always much more concerned about having a life than being part of a particular institution. As I told you, from the time I sailed across its shores and heard those stories, I decided I wanted to live here in California. Also, in many universities, there was pressure to publish following certain orientations that at that time I didn't share. I was interested in punks, rock n' roll (Lull, 1982c and 1987b), electronic media, and popular culture, and that didn't fit in with the majority. I was concerned about being able to go to the beach, have my skateboard, work in radio, as well as teach and do research. *SJSU* gave me that intellectual and emotional freedom I was looking for. - *(DM) By the way... who was Dr. Rock?* **(JL) (**Smile). That was the brainchild of a friend, who was also my boss at the Santa Barbara radio station I worked at. Since I had a Ph.D., but I also liked rock, he gave me that nickname. A lot of people don't know this, but I became a well-known character, a 'figurehead,' with fans and everything... I could teach how the mass media worked because I was 'on the inside.' I knew the industry. My students thought, *"'Dr. Rock' must know what he's talking about...".* It's interesting because while I was teaching my courses at the university, I felt like I was documenting the local culture, and then in the evening, when I was on the radio, I felt like I was part of it...

(DM) *Let's move on to your methodology; what do you think of empirical work now that you are developing a rather theoretical one?*

(JL) I still think that informants are key and that they teach you a lot, so you have to listen to them. You have to let the field of study produce the theories and not the other way around. That comes from my training as a journalist. Disciplines such as Sociology and Communications should have respect for this type of research... **(DM)** *But in the academic field there is criticism of the scientific value of this type of material. It is said that journalists rely too much on what their interviewees tell them and that they reflect very little or not very critically...* **(JL)** It is a good criticism, but it does not apply to journalism itself; it applies to bad

journalism. In both cases, in journalism and in scientific work we need to have a sufficient representation, to push for a kind of 'representativeness', to find enough evidence to consolidate impressions. To take a good look at everything that is going on, talk to a lot of people and spend time with them, all at the same time as we write and think. That's how you get confidence that what we think is a pattern really is. It's not about saying how often something happens but about clearly distinguishing what is commonplace from what is exceptional and offering a reasonable interpretation that is in keeping with what is described and heard. That is the voice of the author. Another researcher located in the same place may make a different interpretation of the same situation, and that is fine, because the point is to make an interpretation that is consistent, linked to the field experience. That is the big problem with a lot of research in general. This idea that the scientific method is objective. It isn't. Even the statistical evidence you choose is subjective. In your selection and interpretation you start to become the author of the argument. You offer strong conclusions, you speculate, but you do so in an informed way. No one can tell you that what you propose is 'false'. They can disagree with you, but not accuse you of falsehood.

(DM) *You once told me that China was your most important empirical experience. Where did the idea of going to study Chinese families come from?*

(JL) I wanted to extend the evidence on the social uses of television by families that I had studied in my Ph.D. and at universities in California, but now in the context of a communist country. That hadn't been done either. That's why I wanted to go and embarked on the project that concluded with the publication of *China Turned On* in 1991.

(DM) *How did you do the interviews for that book? Did you speak Mandarin?*

(JL) No, I was not fluent in Mandarin, although I understood it very well. Professor Se-Wen Sun, my co-investigator did, and she led them. We worked as a team.
We interviewed eighty-five families in the four major cities, *Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou,* and *Xian*. While she talked to the family members, I stood around

listening as they tried to explain their feelings about the country, taking notes on the atmosphere of the interviews and took photos of the interior of the houses and every detail of daily life. That was very important to make up my mind. During the night we would translate and discuss the material. When I returned home to San Francisco, I took a large table and organized the hundreds of notes I had made, and related the specific comments to the material in the books I was reading about the political situation and Chinese history, e.g., Bishop (1989), Deng (198), Hopkins (1989), Ju and Chu (1989), Li (1989), Ming (1987), Sun (1987) and several others. I did it in a thorough way, keeping everything in play. I did that for several years.

(DM) In the introduction to China Turned On, you said that you had a very romantic idea about the country before you started the research, and in the end, you had to change it.

(JL) It's true, I thought that going to China was to see a model for the world - *after* Chile! I had this romantic idea about Mao Zedong and Salvador Allende. Like many, I was looking for an alternative to 'savage capitalism.' But when I talked to the families there, I realized that they didn't like communism or the government, that they didn't want them. -*(DM) Was the romance over? (JL)* I lost my romantic idea about China, but I increased my romanticism about the people. I understood that they were resisting. There was resistance to the system coming 'from the people.' The system was not completely controlling people's ideas. They were talking to each other and trying to decide. My point was that unlike what the government intended, to use television to build a bridge to promote the virtues of the socialist project, television, instead, played an important role in favor of the uprising that would occur later, in 1989, in Tiananmen Square. Of course, it was not responsible, but in my opinion, and this is what I theorize in the book, it provided them with symbolic resources that allowed them to elaborate their own understandings of the situation, which they then brought into play in the conversations of their everyday lives. The Chinese used local programming but also programming from Japan, the United States, Mexico, and elsewhere, and they got a sense of the world. That opened them up to alternatives and allowed them to objectify their reality critically. They understood that socialism

was not the only way and that it was not necessarily the best way either... -**(DM)** *You did not intend to insist on your romantic idea of socialism?* **(JL)** No. I had to be honest with the data, and that is what I was seeing happening. As I explained just now, the ideas developed during the research. I compared the conversations and the reading of the different perspectives and tried to see if they fit with the trajectory of the country and my own reasoning. One theoretical argument I used is that of John Fiske (1992) in his book *Television Culture.* He talks about the appropriation of resources by the people. That is exactly what I thought was going on. Also, I gave importance to the sociological concept of 'agency,' and I tried to put it at the center of the discussion about audiences. I used much of the empirical data from China in my analysis and theoretical commentary in the books and articles that followed. I did this to bring the discussion into the issue of ideology and culture, which, in my view, was dealing with structuring processes as well. I proposed that ideology influences but does not determine what people think and do. That is clearly the influence of Gramsci (1973), Hall (1980), Martín-Barbero (1998), and Thompson (1995) on my work.

(DM) *Before I continue talking about your theory, I would like to ask you a little more about your method and methodology. You are considered the driving force behind the 'ethnographic turn' in audience studies; what do you think about that?*

(JL) I'm aware of that, but I did not seek it. My collaboration in the institutionalization of ethnographic studies in communication resulted from my work, not from struggles or my political interests. I did not fight in the name of qualitative methods. **(DM)** *And why did you stop doing empirical research?*

(JL) Over time, you lose some energy to do extensive fieldwork, although I still like it, and somehow, I still do it informally. I'm always paying attention to what's going on, writing and thinking. It's part of the trajectory to move from empirical to much more theoretical work. In a sense, I am now refining my ideas. The context is in my head. I'm trying to broaden its scope. While I still like to get 'dirty' with the data, I don't like to be just an empirical researcher. I prefer to see how evidence illuminates

theoretical approaches, so I consider myself a theorist, but empirically based.

(**DM**) *What would you say are your most important theoretical influences and themes?*

(**JL**) Well, in addition to those I have already mentioned, I would stress that I also discussed individualism and the consequences of the second modernity quite a lot. I did it using again the work of Giddens (1995), and also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), its most important promoters. Perhaps I did not formalize them in theoretical terms, but they are in the development of my work. When they make sense, I like to take ideas and mix them with my empirical material to try to expand my understanding of the issues. If I had to use one word to describe my line, it would be *'adaptation.'* I reject the idea of culture as a determining structure. Whether in China, in the Arab countries, in the United States, in Chile… or anywhere else, as I believe I showed in *World families watch television* (Lull, 1988a). Many like to think that most people are stuck and that they will never be able to get out because forces manage to control them. Those structures exist and may try to do so, it is true, but have they really succeeded? I think not always, not everybody, not all the time… This justified my interest in Giddens' structuration theory, but also, and as I told you, in Gramsci. He provided us with the escape mechanism. He opened up space in the room for us to understand ideology as a 'looser' structure and agents as stronger and more powerful.

(**DM**) *Along those lines, what was your interest with your notions of 'superculture', 'cultural programming' and the 'pull and push' that you developed more extensively from Culture in the communication age* (Lull, 2001) *onwards?*

(**JL**) On the one hand, to continue with the argument, pointing out that in the current cultural and technological conditions, the active role of the individual, of the audience, is even clearer. Culture has always been in a process of change, but now it is more rapid, dynamic, and even democratic. With that in mind, I was not only considering the 'agency-structure/ideology' theoretical line and trying to put

mediated communication in structureist terms; I was also attending to the context in which I was saying this was occurring, one that is abundant in cultural and technological resources for its use.

I also wanted to offer a fresher picture, one in which cultural changes also occur 'inside' the individual. We cannot put culture in a specific 'place.' It is not. We can see it in the way people represent what they think, for example, in the way they wear their clothes, but is the culture in that skirt or those pants? Is it in the group? Culture was a category for the social and the shared, but it has changed, and today we must include the more personal aspects as well. That is why I like the expression 'personal culture' of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, whom I mentioned. The location and the number of those who share it matters less. With my concepts, I tried to re-localize the concept of culture, moving it from the group to the individual. Although we are in social groups, in 'cultural groups,' we are also 'cultural individuals'. People in reflexive modernity are somehow living 'on their own' as modernity theorists say. So, culture is 'experienced' by people. It is open and can, following Giddens (1995), itself be the object of individual scrutiny and modification. In the context of this symbolic abundance and access to an almost infinite wealth of cultural and symbolic resources, the individual is always processing and using resources. This is in line with the active audiences that I have studied since the 1970s. Now I propose culture as in flux and in a more abstract and personal way. We have this or that religion, this or that language, this or that ideological position that can be more or less dominant, but the individual can modify them, mix them, as García-Canclini (2000), Tomlinson (2001) and Chaney (2002) say, for example.

Although perhaps I did not say it before with the centrality it requires, those individual practices that I emphasize always have as their ultimate reference and meaning the realm of 'the social.' The incorporation of evolutionary theory reinforced the pro-social foundations of communication in my schema and has helped me to better specify the point. Communication is certainly the mechanism that activates and simultaneously sustains the individual and then collective reflections that would enable cultural re-elaborations and changes in broad social

contexts. That happens now, but it has evolved and has been around since before us. In that sense, your idea of *'collective individualism'* (Mateo, 2015) is a very good contribution and allows to explain well what I am trying to say.

(*DM*) *Thank you for your comment. Then you agree that this is the beginning of a new moment in your work...*

(*JL*) Yes, I have been proposing this as a new starting point for the theoretical discourse on communication which I call 'evolutionary communication'. In a sense, I initiated it in *The Language of Life. It'*s the result of realizing that, although there is some discussion of communication practices in evolutionary theory, it's just *'a little bit here and a little bit there'*. When I read Charles Darwin's work, I looked very carefully at each of the opportunities in which he referred to communication, and I understood that although he did so very much, he did not make it a category of analysis per se. However, I think, and this is what I documented and explained in *Evolutionary communication* (Lull, 2020), that its role is key.

(*DM*) *And in what sense do you think your earlier concepts are still useful in that evolutionary context?*

(*JL*) I think they make complete sense with evolutionary theory. Between 'mutation' and 'selection', we must understand that 'communication' occurs. Communication is the engine of evolution. As you said before, my ideas have always emphasized the adaptability of human beings through their creativity, something that is particularly noticeable in communicative interactions. I have always been in favor of common people's use of symbolic resources and information to potentially solve their concrete life situations, for the exercise of symbolic power to confront those dominant and *status-quo*-sustaining structures. At this point, I refer to communication as the evolutionarily documented mechanism that has enabled people to do that in the various contexts and levels of development throughout their existence, not just in the present ones. The range of cultural and symbolic options today is greater and therefore the possibilities have expanded because we can communicate in ever more

sophisticated ways, but the principle is the same.

Too bad that what some call 'social Darwinism' has reinforced the idea that Darwin's thinking and the theory of evolution are only about survival of the fittest, *'kill or be killed.'* This is a mistake. It is also about community cooperatively (Tomasello, 2010) and, therefore, communicatively grounded. There is competition, but also cooperation. Communication is the way in which we can imagine but also promote a better world, one in which people who don't know each other can cooperate... my point is that we did, do, and will continue to do that in and through communication...

(DM) Thank you, Professor Lull, for this hopeful humanistic legacy. Following your story, it seems to me that it is possible to understand that your trajectory had a common thread based on the voluntary activity of people to use available resources within structured but non-deterministic contexts. Your perspective on the role of communication, as well as your life and experiences, helps us to see the world as one in which we can imagine, discuss, and evaluate possibilities. It makes us aware of our responsibility, but, above all, that we have 'at hand' the mechanism to collectively establish guiding principles for action and moral decision-making. That although we know they are never completely attainable, they serve as goals to aspire to, and that, in the process, there is more to be gained than lost... That as you rightly said earlier, and I quote you to close this document:

> "neither evolution nor social development are determined, [but] neither are they random, and it is right there, in the available space between the two, that our special talents as communicators will be able to help us decide the course of our shared future." (Lull & Neiva, 2012, p. 210)

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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