Comment

SCIENCE AND THE INTERNET: BE FRUITFUL AND MULTIPLY?

Access to news on line: myths, risks and facts

Lella Mazzoli

ABSTRACT: Although the debates on the Internet (sceptical, enthusiastic and finally more mature ones) in our country started in the mid 90s, it is only over the past few years that the Internet, especially thanks to social networks, has become a daily practice for millions of Italians. Television still is the main medium to spread information, but as it becomes increasingly cross-bred with the Internet (and other media too), the information-spreading process deeply changes. This creates, also in our country, the preconditions for the development of a web public (an active and connected one), founded on the new practices of multitasking and participatory information.

Any communication strategy – especially in the domain of mass media – should now increasingly take into account the evolution of new media, the Internet and what circulates within it. What especially interests the social observers of the communication field is to understand whether *old media* can still bear up – how long and which way – under the massive invasion of the Internet, and the *social networks* in particular. A reference to Marshall McLuhan is needed here. He believed that new media do strain old media, but they also stress them to find new forms and positions. The one hundredth anniversary of the birth of the Canadian sociologist has also offered an opportunity to delve deeper in the study of his philosophy.[1] It seems the cohabitation of old and new media is going to last long. However, the more powerful the new media, the more they should lead to the weakening of pre-existing ones. This is an introduction to the Internet and the evolution it has been experiencing with respect to communication strategies.

So, now the Internet. In Italy, it started to appear in the public eye in the second half of the 90s,[2] but its spreading dates back to the early 2000s. Since the early steps in its use and spreading, much of the interest from scholars and the public was in what its consequences could be on the information system, the spreading of news and the ways people shape their opinions. Now that the Internet has reached a wide public also in our country[3] and theoretical reflections have multiplied, I deem it particularly interesting to observe the web with a historical outlook in order to understand what is going on today starting from its outset and the development it has had so far.

There may be many interpretations and many different stances. In this paper, the analysis aims to draw a picture which should stay away from catastrophic or strategically optimistic perspectives. In other words, an interpretation to go beyond the typical gap which separates the opposing views of the apocalyptic and the integrated.

When considering the evolution of the reflections on the relation between the Internet and information, excluding the earliest phase of the web, when it was only a platform reserved to scientific and professional domains, three different phases can be outlined: two are now over and a third one is still in progress.

1. Internet. The age of enthusiasm

The early spreading of the Internet spurred an excess of enthusiasm both among communication experts and intellectuals and opinion makers. With the exception of the chronically *apocalyptic* – to use a popular expression – who feared Orwell-inspired outcomes, many people were hoping that the Internet could be the place where to attain a new freedom. Many others, however, while expressing their

curiosity, had some ill-concealed concerns. Back at the time, only a few people envisaged a development with the actual dimensions it has taken later on. Although our country does not stand out, to this day, for the number of people using the Internet if compared with the rest of Europe and the United States, it should be said Italian Internet users are very similar to European and American ones.[4]

1.1 As many authors as users

Quality as opposed to quantity? The rising of the web could have suggested – given its characteristics – that *a high number of* messages rather than *a certain type of* messages would have flooded our mind. This is the starting point – but also the real path – of those willing to analyse information. Quantity becoming quality is an issue the Internet can and should tackle.

A broader interpretation of the quality supremacy principle envisaged the rising of a virtually unlimited number of subjects producing information and opinions, with the consequent creation of a more richly informed public opinion, equipped with new instruments for its growth.

2. Internet. The age of scepticism

After the first phase – which could be defined as *enthusiastic* (and I do prefer this label over another recurring one at the time, namely *suspicious*) – a shift took place, probably as a result of the clash between the enormous aspirations and the changes actually taking shape. (Or rather, by the fact that controlling the agenda of Internet users was more difficult than expected.)

This phase started to highlight more pessimistic and critical characteristics such as: the risk of isolation and the risk of aggregation between peers sharing similar opinions.

3. The mature age

In the light of many years of studies related to the Internet, I wonder if today we can define the time we are living in as "the mature phase of the Internet." We are into the third phase.

Certainly, based on what has happened and the developments the Internet has had in various fields, it is possible to outline some observations and evaluations to be less ideological and more practically involved in the analysis of the social phenomena now developing in that bi-dimensional place which is hung between the online and offline world. A sort of micro-macro link between two worlds which are only apparently faraway.

Therefore, I would like to make a few remarks on some of the points mentioned so far, using as a *magnifying lens* the one of information, of the relation between users and information sources and the motivations underlying the access to information.

It is undeniably true that many of the initial hopes (the freedom to get informed, the chance to create from the bottom, without hierarchy or with a low one) have had some outcomes, and unquestionably, to this day, independent information platforms and single subjects acting within contexts where freedom is limited make up an important instrument and manifestation of freedom and allow news to circulate, regardless of the *mainstream* media, and to escape the censorship and different types of gags (I do not only mean organisations, but also countries and nations). So, it is important to wonder about the proportions of the revolution sparked by the rising of the Internet.

3.1 New users do multi-tasking

The 2010 ISTAT Statistic Surveys reveal that in the age groups 18-19 and 20-24, the spreading and the use of the TV and the Internet have similar percentages and in both cases extremely high ones. This shows firstly that the two media do not *steal* the young audience from each other, and secondly that, judging from the percentages, the use of both media is combined: namely, young people use them both, probably simultaneously.

   With regard to the mix of different media used to look for information, the survey carried out by the Laboratorio di Ricerca LaRICA (already mentioned above) shows that half the Italians interviewed say they use a combination of online and offline sources, with Internet being the third most popular platform, after local and national TV channels.

   Many people (63%) say they use on average between two and five online sources and, however, a significant share of 15% say they use only one website to look and have access to news. These data actually downsize the myth users perform an action of verification and falsification.

   Though realising that 68% of the users having access to online news do not have a favourite website, it is striking that among the users declaring their loyalty to a single online source, this is usually a website belonging to the large news corporations.

3.2. Participatory information

Participatory journalism in our country appears still today to be a domain that limits itself to a small group of writers/users, or only a niche for information sharing, not able to fulfil its educational and civilising mission typical of the old paradigm. On the basis of what has been said so far, this paradigm can hardly be defined as faded or totally overcome. On the contrary, the perspective which outlines on the horizon seems not to coincide with an inevitable deconstruction, but rather with a double movement of colonisation and sedimentation in the network of operational principles, power dynamics and traditional access models.

   When the cost of a publication was high, what surfaced was what managed to pass through the filter of the publishers. Thanks to the network, many people can publish whatever they want via blog platforms and content sharing websites such as *YouTube*. The filter for the access to these contents comes in only after the publication and is entrusted to the reports of other users. Any content not linked/reported/shared will basically be invisible.[5] The circulation of information within circles of contacts, especially if they use social networking platforms or collaborative information websites, with the increasing fine-tuning of content analysis systems and the chance to filter the news according to user-personalised parameters may provide a basis – as some maintain – for a phenomenon known as "collaborative filtering", namely a shared, yet not less standardising, form of content selection.

4. Social networks. The Twitter case

Although the study on social networks – one of the past few years' most relevant events – still has to provide many answers and methods, some remarks can be made to show how far we still are from univocal answers – provided that they exist – and how much is still missing in the observation and analysis work on the issue, also capitalising on the reflections made so far by the scientific community.

   As it is impossible to thoroughly deal with all the complex world of social networks in this paper, I will only touch upon *Twitter*, as I believe it exhibits a few aspects that are particularly interesting to the purpose of my reflection.[6]

   One of the *Twitter* features is the use of *hashtags*, i.e. key words which make it possible to trace all the tweets concerning a specific topic, virtually giving a chance to abstract a conversational thread from every context and even from the tweets posted by the users quoting other *hashtags* in their own messages.

   In general, within *Twitter* you can trace a layer circulation of information, where opinion leaders and repeaters have a fundamental role[7] in the spreading of information from circles of peers sharing similar opinions to a broader public.

5. Conclusions

The analysis of the specific literature highlights that the change in the relation between access to information and the propensity to act (politically, socially, culturally) is related to the leap identified in the theoretical reflection and in the analysis of the practices that can referred to the concept of citizenship as defined by the scholar Bennett.[8] Or rather, in the terms of the shift from a traditional definition to a

more modern one. Bennett starts his reflection by analysing the so-called *duty-based citizenship*, typical of a hierarchy-oriented modern social organisation, divided into classes and fed by a communication system which corresponds to the mass media system. Therefore, it was characterised by the presence of interaction forms between citizens and institutions that follow the asymmetrical model of mainstream communications. The institutions develop the communication, set the agenda, define the space, time and occasion for the expression. Participation, then, is constantly filtered from above. A person is considered only as a citizen-voter-consumer. On the other hand, the paradigm of self-determined citizenship presents itself as a characteristic of a globalised society, structured on network relations and a consequent model of horizontal communication, devoid of hierarchies, dynamic and implemented by the evolution of instruments that do nothing but fuelling the collaboration, the interaction and the permanent participation among individuals no longer considered as passive interlocutors, but endowed with an ontological dignity and a consequent positive and proactive entitlement to a citizenship. Voting, the activism mediated through top-down communication dynamics are less significant than in the past. What becomes much more important is an action defined on a personal basis and which can be expressed through individual choices such as: consumption, voluntary work, local activism, the self-imposition of a *media diet* based on the access to *contents* and *containers* according to specific political and social commitment choices. What is more relevant today is the community action networks built and supported through peer-to-peer friendship relations, characterised by social connections reinforced by interactive information technologies (social media and social network websites).

Therefore, if the interbreeding of contexts (public and private, mass and new media) has eventually brought about an idea (and a practice) of citizenship whose identity is defined in a series of communication-oriented behaviours and actions but nonetheless provided with a social, political, cultural meaning; if the road we are walking on really seems to translate into reality what Bennett effectively defined in his above-mentioned book as "lifestyle politics", i.e. the convergence of communication, political and cultural behaviours; if this really is the most reliable embodiment of a future's citizen, then it is desirable that the part of academic research which is most sensitive to the study of society's evolutionary paths take seriously into account this interbreeding dynamic and adopt it first of all as a strategic methodology option when observing such changes. Unfortunately, the importance of such changes does not seem to be evident enough to awake the conscience and the interest of a large part of our scholars.

Translated by Massimo Caregnato

Notes and references

[1] Marshall McLuhan was born in Toronto on July 21, 1911. Here, the reference is to the book M. McLuhan (1986), *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, Milano, Garzanti.

[2] The first articles in the archives of the major Italian newspapers date back to that period.

[3] Over 80% of the Italians between 11 and 34 say they are Internet users, with a 90.4% peak in the 18-19 age group (2010 ISTAT report). A recent survey carried out by Laboratorio di Ricerca sulla Comunicazione Avanzata (LaRiCA) has also reported that 58.4% of the Italians over 18 use the Internet (http://larica.uniurb.it/wpmu/news/news-consumer-italia/).

[4] According to the results of the above-mentioned LaRiCA survey, similarities in their behaviour – at least with respect to the access to information – significantly exceed differences.

[5] C. Shirky (2009), *Uno per uno, tutti per tutti: Il potere di organizzare senza organizzazione*, Codice, Torino.

[6] Used by 16% of the Italians on the web (Source LaRiCA) and 19% of the Americans on the web.

[7] Recently, Twitter introduced the 'trending topics' also in Italy. It is a list of the most popular topics appearing on the platform. In the first days, this list saw a predominance of trending topics of an exogenous nature over those of an endogenous nature. In particular, what interested most was the use of the hashtag #vieniviaconme used by the viewers to comment in real time the TV show presented by Fabio Fazio. Since the broadcast of the first episode (Monday 8 November, 2010), over 17,000 tweets posted by 2,014 users have featured the hashtag #vieniviaconme. As usual, a relatively low number of users (33%) has generated most part of the tweets (80%) with a high number of users – a long trail – who used the tag only once (45%).

[8] B.W. Lance (2003), *New Media Power: The Internet and Global Activism*, in Couldry, Nick & Curran, James (Eds.), *Contesting Media Power* (pp. 17-38), Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield.

[9] I. Asimov (1995), *Il sole nudo*, Milano: Mondadori.

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[16] G. Orwell and G. Baldini (1989), *1984*, Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori.

[17] K. Purcell et al. (2010), *Understanding the Participatory News Consumer*, Pew Internet & American Life Project, 1 March 2010, http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Online-News.aspx, 20/01/2011.

[18] C. Shirky (2009), *Uno per uno, tutti per tutti: Il potere di organizzare senza organizzazione*, Codice, Torino.

[19] D. Weinberger (2002), *Arcipelago Web*, Milano: Sperling & Kupfer.

Author

A full professor of Communication Sociology and the director of the Department of Sciences of Communication and the Institute for Journalism Training at the University of Urbino "Carlo Bo".
E-mail: mazzoli@uniurb.it.