

Abstract.

**Participatory journalism and culture: the conversational nature of the contents before and after the Internet.**

Information is going through a period of transition: its lines are assuming the physiognomy of a joint conversation overcoming the pedagogic model that has motivated the birth of journalism. Technology, through widespread connectivity, has reduced time and distance among people and now we can share ideas, opinions, testimonies at the same moment in which we are expressing them, with implications that concern every aspect of social life.

Limiting to information field, the set of these practices originated *participative journalism*, but it is a larger phenomenon that concerns the whole culture: the role of media audience has evolved into an active participation, alternating consumption, production of new contents and diffusion phases, even interesting the very generation of symbolic universes.

This text describes both aspects: the first part tells how semiotic adjusted its models to describe *textual* communication spread by media contents and new *participative practices*; this will furnish the clue to analyse, into the second part, the changes concerning the journalistic field.

Textual communication contains complex messages whose understanding doesn't implicate just mastery of a variety of codes, but mainly a whole *encyclopaedic* knowledge to put texts into their own circle of *ideal interpretation*. The placing that the receiver effects involves, therefore, an interpretative activity that proves itself as legitimate meanings generator.

Stimulated by the potentialities of new media, the creative vocation of the interpretative action has found new possibilities to propagate: the net realizes a complex of references , assembling, quotations able to produce identity beginning from accumulation and recycling actions. On these bases, culture boils down to massive individual productions: the relationship between cultural industry and its audience is losing, unavoidably, the traits of inclusiveness.

The origin of these practices is previous to the Internet: Henry Jenkins, professor of literature at MIT, in Boston, singles out beginning in the *fans* phenomenon. Beginning from the seventies, a large number of keens on *Star Trek* decided to take possession of the distinctive contents of the tale to elaborate them again: literary sub-genres were born, each one with its own canons and linguistic registers, and that community became so mature as to found its own discussions, not yet net-related but epistolary, on the bounds which to legitimate the manipulation of themes and characters.

The author explains the apparent strangeness of this phenomenon bringing it back to the consideration that culture social function, especially considering the increasing weight acquired by media, acts in a conclusive way in the construction of individual identity: through use and interpretation of symbolic forms, individuals incorporate them in understanding of themselves and

of others. That's why audience have freed themselves from times and politics of cultural industry, they have take possession of some contents and have shaped them to their personal imaginary, using an organization that resembles an elementary form of *collective intelligence* spontaneously originated, without formal acts.

The ability to accumulate knowledge, to elaborate it and share it collectively, has found the place for new collaborative practices in the diffusion of the Internet. *Web 2.0* makes the net a place for those who elaborate contents, no more for technicians only: unavoidably, journalistic information had to be the first one to risk its own position. But social centrality assumed by traditional media had already invested the world of information with new assignments in comparison with the historical role concerning public opinion formation: the exponential growth of informative offer, produced by organizations interested in promoting their own public identity, and the increasing demand joined to the affirmation of its transversal nature, consequent to the reassessment of intermediaries role. The journalistic field, therefore, had to face the amplification of its competences in a context extremely dynamic and with new and unexpected competitors.

The birth of the *Blog* is an emblem of this transformation, it is an extremely flexible support where putting photos, personal information, and above all news in a simple way, and to receive comments posted by subscribers and guests. Some characteristics of the *Blog* have emphasized the practice of connecting among contents and among authors, this has produced a chain of references that has made the *blogosphere* a *net inside the net*, equipping it with autonomous rules. The media convergence, besides, has made it a window on the world: the first images of unpredictable events as natural disasters or news items, are captured more and more often by advanced cellular telephones, provided with lens, optical zoom, stereo microphones, umts connections and gps locators. The tsunami took by surprise everyone except tourists lens: from Maldives to Indonesia tourists wearing shorts told through images the tragedy of million of inhabitants overpowered by the tide.

But the collective enthusiasm has created a massive structure of public contents that grows with exponential course. Accordingly, communities have introduced techniques and automatisms to guide user navigation. These techniques privilege the most appreciated and shared contents setting them in the foreground, but they trigger off a process that risks to marginalize original and unusual contents producing levelling and conformism.

When a community of users manages this kind of architecture, its structured use is classified as *participative journalism*. Its peculiarities concern three different roles it is shown to be proper to hold.

*Diffused journalism* practices the widespread omnipresence of its reporters: tourists, soldiers, motorists, hotel doormen or passers-by, united by the casualness to be witnesses to a sudden

event. It gets a certain objectivity from the possibility, open to anyone, to become part of it, but its extreme fragmentation also constitutes its own weakness.

*Residual journalism*, talking about little or less appealing themes, has a niche audience, but it can also bring an underestimated theme to footlights and can operate as *antibody* against thematic polarization phenomena operated by institutional media.

*Collaborative deepening*, finally, traces the social role historically attributed to journalism: to supply news interpretative keys, correlations, incentives, directing thought in order to favour construction of a socially shared meaning. It has intervened, providentially, to integrate the little space that traditional press devote to close examination today: the general increasing of life rhythm also induces to reduce the life cycle of news.

Traditional press in the nineties assimilated the novelties introduced by the net. The flexibility of the Internet allowed them to determine, without particular ties, expenses and human resources engagement: from simple contents replication to autonomous editorial office that gives prominence to multimedia contents and interaction with the reading audience. Shortly each newspaper has guaranteed its own online presence. Currently, the weight of computer formats is leading to redefine the inner equilibriums of journalism: some prestigious newspapers are announcing the imminent closing of the papery formats in favour of the online ones or, as *The Guardian*, reverse the terms of the relationship because now it publish, first of all, online news, then, following day, the same news on the paper. In accordance with collaborative practices diffusion, besides, online newspapers are beginning to integrate the *Blog* among their formats entrusting them to the most popular, and most acquainted with new languages, journalists.

Through this hybridization, institutional press acquires participative forms of new journalism integrating them into the complex architecture of an institutional editorial office. In this way, it confirms its own leading role and keeps at distance from the purely spontaneous phenomenon that, according to Simon Waldman of *The Guardian*, produces an "*informative dust*" far to be defined *news*: it is not able, by itself, to furnish an interpretative context and discernment elements.

Several parts are expressing fears but also trust in the potentialities of a technology that endows the community with tools that encourage participation and dialogue, essential to face the matters that modernity has brought to foreground: pacific coexistence into cities and among the nations, new economic and political equilibriums, confrontation on ethical themes and environment. Matters that can be faced only [through](#) everybody contribution.