From “Fast-Thinking” to “Slack-tivism”: Remarks Concerning the Web-Mediated Social Space

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Abstract
The invention of the World Wide Web, especially the Web 2.0, originally led some sociologists to believe that this tool would have favoured the creation of a “collective intelligence” able to spread and increase the level of democracy in the society. Nowadays, as a matter of fact, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) continue excluding part of the population and contribute to a top-down organisation of the main streams of information neutralising active potentialities and risking, paradoxically, to isolate users who are not aware of the mechanisms of the Internet. The “doxic” acceptance of web contents, structures, and tools indeed precludes some kinds of knowledge and some different models of participation, with significant consequences on the social construction of reality. As a result, a tendency emerges towards a virtual-only participation and the click-tivism seems more and more to be turning into a form of slack-tivism.

Keywords
ICTs, “fast-thinking”, digital divide, web-mediated social space, “slack-tivism”

The permanence and the emergence of new forms of digital divide and, above all, the different user behaviours are related to the media literacy levels (Castells 2001; Pedrò 2009; 2010; Bentivegna 2009; Bracciale 2010). The volume and the composition of the available economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital are factors of major importance regarding the possibility to access ICTs (Information and Communications Technologies) and the ability to use them as tools for educational and intellectual growth.

Active involvement in the use of the Internet often leads users to believe that they are free to surf the cyberspace following routes that are drawn by themselves. What seems to remain hidden is the system architecture that regulates the conditions of communication in the web, which imposes itself on users who are less aware of the medium, by operating a form of invisible censorship.

Power asymmetries have grown because of the worldwide spread of major companies that have the function to mediate the access to the Internet (Google, Yahoo, Facebook, Twitter, etc.). The new trend is to create different kinds of surfing, more and more individualised, in order to profile users for the targeted advertising of the goods that they are more likely to buy and consume. Most people are not enough aware of this mechanism. For instance, starting December 2009, Google’s PageRank algorithm does not show the same results to all the users entering the same

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search query. The order of presentation of results and the quantity of data shown changes according to the profiles that users have built during their previous web surfing. It is the so-called phenomenon of the “Filter Bubble”, highlighted by Eli Pariser (Pariser 2011), which is originating invisible censorships that are based on algorithms and proceeding through technologically advanced forms of manipulation.

The effects are relevant at an epistemological level, because this invisible filter bubble tends to amplify the confirmation bias by creating virtual spaces suitable for users, where it is difficult to find information contradicting the starting assumptions, or to meet people with different point of views.

Another important consequence of the filter bubble is the widespread tendency to search light-hearted and lowbrow contents in the web. As a consequence, if we are in a social network site populated by users who are interested primarily in phatic functions and divertissement, it is unlikely to come across complex issues and highbrow contents. This careless use of the web produces significant adverse outcomes. As danah boyd said,

Our bodies are programmed to consume fat and sugars because they’re rare in nature. Thus, when fat and sugars come around, we inherently want to grab them. In the same way, we’re biologically programmed to be attentive to things that stimulate: content that is excessive, violent, or sexual and gossip that is humiliating, embarrassing, or offensive. If we’re not careful, we’re going to develop the psychological equivalent of obesity. (boyd 2010: 30)

The structure of the web seems to produce what Pierre Bourdieu referring to the communication conditions imposed by television, called “fast-thinking” (Bourdieu 1996). A form of quick and superficial thinking that is very different from the reasoning based on propositions links together in a logical way, and encourages the spread of stereotypes and clichés. The slowness, which is a necessary condition for the formation of a critical sensibility, collides with the acceleration processes imposed on the web by the net economy.

The multinational corporations that dominate the ICTs global market provide “fast-thinking” products and foster an uncritical use of the web, which allows them to get, keep, and sell a huge amount of data (“Big Data”) about users who are often unaware of being object of this specific attention. Moreover, the Internet also induces a “fast-reading” that frequently becomes a “no-reading”, as when signing the long “terms of service” agreements, full of commercial clauses, which regulate access to many platforms. Thus, web users become unwitting tools of market mechanisms of whose existence they often ignore.

**SOCIAL SPACE AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION**

In the beginning, the Internet created the illusion that people could emancipate, at least in a virtual way, from their previous low position in the social space. Although the worldwide spread of Facebook and other social network sites has led to an exponential increase of contacts for each user, nowadays, the web is characterised by an accentuated social stratification. Surfing the cyberspace is not a sufficient condition to free someone from the constraints of his/her socio-economic and cultural background. The flow of information and the links originated in the web show a clear relationship with the native habitus of users. The Internet tends to reproduce the real social space. Social network sites are inherently “homophilic” because they aim at facilitating meeting between people who have similar interests or belong to the same network of relationships (boyd 2010). This homophily, which adds to the closure of the web produced by the filter bubble, reinforces social and political differences, by offering space to communities of intolerant people who would have great difficulties interacting in the real life. The pressure imposed by
the web, which pushes toward an extreme conceptual and linguistic simplification, contributes to worsening the content of posted messages. Indeed, the Internet potentially offers the opportunity for peaceful and reasonable discussions about different issues, but the quality of the exchanged opinions seems to confirm Bourdieu’s concerns about the influence of television and the mass media in general on the possibility of establishing “a perverse form of direct democracy (that) can come into play when the media act in a way that is calculated to mobilize the public” (Bourdieu 1996; Engl. transl. 1998: 63-64).

The web seems to foster primitive expressions of tribal affiliations within spaces (blogs, etc.) governed by charismatic leaders who wield their power through the social acceptance that descends from their huge number of contacts (O’Neil 2009). Beyond the rhetoric of the intrinsic democratic nature of the Web 2.0, it is clear that movements that sometimes lead to public demonstrations (from flash mobs to lesser ephemeral gatherings) are rarely bottom-up. On the contrary, many ideas in social and political fields are spreading as a top-down activity, and leaders’ personal spaces constitute large virtual stages where they use communication methods mainly in unidirectional and sometimes aggressive forms, which do not differ from those of traditional mass media (Sennett 2012; Bentivegna 2012; Bentivegna and Russo 2012). As a consequence, web users become readers involved just in signing some petition mostly decided by people in charge of the sites. The declaration of participation sometimes expressed with a simple “like” on Facebook is transforming into a worthless ritual that appeases the conscience of the élites through a virtual-only participation that seems to absolve citizens from the lack of direct and practical commitment in real life, by turning the click-tivism into slack-tivism (Lovink 2011; Granelli 2013). Moreover, this “couch” activism is anyway subject to the hidden control of the secret services of different states. Some years ago, the creator of the web, Tim Berners-Lee, launched a warning by declaring that governments, both totalitarian and democratic ones, had been spying on online users for a long time (Berners-Lee 2010). This practice—systematically started after the September 11, 2001 and justified on the basis of security reasons—had remained unknown to users until the recent revelations emerged after the “Snowden case”, which has exposed the secret agreements between multinational Internet corporations and major US intelligence agencies (CIA, NSA).

In the light of these evidences, the role played by the social network sites in fostering self-mobilisation and self-organisation among the opponents of the regimes in the uprisings in the North Africa countries results particularly reduced. If it is true that the transmission of information and contacts are facilitated by the use of the ICTs, it is also necessary to be very careful in defining what could be their concrete possibilities for promoting grassroots participation and influencing reality. Indeed, it is necessary to remember the invisible forms of control that have effects on the web and the existence of many other factors, especially of structural nature, of which social network sites are often just an expression.

CONCLUSIONS

The World Wide Web, being a powerful instrument of learning within the so-called “Knowledge Society”, has assumed a central role in the social construction of reality.

On the one hand, the “Network Society” offers the indubitable advantages that result from the possibility of having access to a world of information; on the other hand, it does not seem to be able to circumvent the limits caused by the socio-economic contexts that define the main mode of use of the ICTs.

In Western democracies, Internet-based communication processes are rarely peer to peer. Politicians, in particular, mainly use forms of self-presentation, performing the function of
self-promotion, or the top-down model, when interacting with users. In this way, democracy, instead of unfolding through the Net, is rather limited by its mesh.

Moreover, ICTs show a close relationship with the dynamics of the capitalist mode of production, a system that has maintained its purpose in the transition to the “Information Age” (Castells 1996). The continuous creation of new consumption needs favours devices of leading brand rather than lesser-known ones, as well as proprietary software prevails over open-source alternatives. Direct advertising campaigns are supported by forms of symbolic violence that induce users to adapt to the choices of the majority in order to strengthen their social networks and identities.

After a period of deregulation that prefigured the advent of a new era characterised by freedom of information and increasing participatory democracy, the web seems more and more to be turning into a “Filter Bubble”, where free will is just an illusion.

References


Bio

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