"JOIN THE CONVERSATION"

(VARIATIONS ON CONVERSATION AND THE WEB)

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Abstract:

Online "conversation", as it unfolds in social networks like Twitter[1], may be considered a grassroots form of democratic communication, but this kind of horizontal and viral dissemination of information can also be viewed as a sophisticated, unobtrusive and effective way to exert power and transmit influence. Conversation inter pares has always been, too, an "extension of the medium", and this fact should not be forgotten. The viral capacity of conversation that has made it, from time immemorial, a key element in the chain of influence, is today reaching enormous proportions in the online environment. We will discuss some implications of this phenomenon by tracking back its history in the field of mass communication research. The main objective is, therefore, genealogical. This article is not intended to be a "state of the art" on the subject at the present time.

Keywords: Online conversation, Social Media, Social Networks, Twitter, Feedback, Virality, Influence, Power, Entertainment.

1.   The most important thing is to keep the conversation alive

"Join the conversation", tweets the bird, inviting us to make our own contribution to the "global conversation". The conversational siren song tempts us from all the corners of the World Wide Web. These kind and casual invitations to participate in a dialogue inter pares happen again and again. One of the first theoreticians of the "conversational device" in its relation to the mass media was Gabriel Tarde. In "Opinion and Conversation" (1899/1986), Tarde gave the following definition of conversation: "I understand conversation as any dialogue without direct and immediate utility, in which one talks for the sake of it, for pleasure, as a game, out of courtesy" (p. 93). He also stressed the important role played by conversation as an economic agent: "(Conversation) is, in fact, the most essential economic agent; without conversation there is no opinion, and without opinion there is no value" (p. 92).

Tarde foresaw, with great insight, the role that conversation was intended to play in a mass mediated society. He conceptualized this role, long before

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[1] Even if there is an open debate regarding whether Twitter is a social network or a kind of news media (unlike other social networks, there is less reciprocity, and as a recent study pointed out, "only 22.1% of users pairs are reciprocal" (Kwak- Lee-Park-Moon, 2010, p. 4)), we consider Twitter as a hybrid social network, which integrates broadcast-like functions and that works, due to its viral structure, as an effective content distribution platform.

Lazarsfeld and his colleagues reached the conclusion that "primary interpersonal relations might be an important intervening variable in the mass communication process" (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955/2006, p. 34), and a key factor in spreading influence.

Tarde intuited from the very beginning that it was completely pointless to disconnect interpersonal and mass communication, because they were inextricably linked. More than eighty years later, in 1983, Cathcart and Gumpert were still advocating the "Tarde approach" as opposed to the "traditional division": "We are quite convinced that the traditional division of communication study into interpersonal, group and public, and mass communication is inadequate because it ignores the pervasiveness of media. We propose that media be incorporated in definitions of communication" (p. 277).

When trying to establish how this pervasiveness is disclosed, Tarde wrote: "If people did not talk, it would be futile to publish newspapers (...) they would exercise no durable or profound influence, they would be like a vibrating string without a sounding board" (1899, p. 92).

Without the conversational recycling of subjects, influence (and the power derived from it) could not flow, not even from an all-embracing Big Brother. The fact that much of the "conversational rhetoric" associated with interactive media, the Internet in general, and the so called "social media" in particular, do not usually take into account the persuasive and potentially manipulative side of the conversation dynamics, reveals some theoretical feebleness or simply ideological political correctness[2].

Decades later, Paul Lazarsfeld and his colleagues reinvigorated through empirical research the central hypothesis put forward by Tarde[3], and fashioned two well-known concepts in the field of Communication Theory: The "two-step flow of communication"[4] and the "opinion leader", both associated with the intertwinement of media and interpersonal communication, summing up the dialectic between "vertical", one-way communication provided by mass media,

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[2] "The great majority of mainstream interpersonal research studies are based on an individual unit of observation, subjective and often imaginary responses to hypothetical scenarios, and explanatory models that highlight individual intentionality, but not the complexities of larger cultural and historical systems. To the extent that this trend mirrors the ideology of our everyday cultural experience, the discipline is at risk of reifying what are essentially cultural forms of thought and treating them as if they represent natural facts" (Lannamann, 1991, p. 187).

[3] "Lazarsfeld certainly had knowledge of Tarde -I know this, as a student, despite my failings- even though Lazarsfeld reported to Clark, in a personal communication that he and his associates were unfamiliar with Tarde's relevance "at the time" (Clark, 1969, p. 69), presumably referring to the 1940 election study" (Katz, 2006, p. 265).

[4] "Analysis of the process of decision making during the course of an election campaign led the authors of "The People's Choice" to suggest that the flow of mass communications may be less direct than was commonly supposed. It may be, they proposed, that influences stemming from the mass media first reach opinion leaders who, in turn, pass on what they read and hear to those of their every day associates for whom they are influential. This hypothesis was called "the two- step flow of communication" (Katz, 1957: 61).

and horizontal communication sustained by feedback, that is, "conversation" *fed with media topics* and taking place essentially at the reception level through face to face interactions.

According to Tarde (1899) and Katz & Lazarsfeld (1955), the influence of mass media relies not only on its power to communicate massively and vertically, but also on its ability to generate conversation inter pares. Without conversation, without the kind of "casual" interaction it provides, and without this "second step" that allows the "conversational relief" of "mediated" issues, the power and influence of the media would be drastically reduced. Katz & Lazarsfeld, decided to refer to this "conversational recycling" stage as "the part played by people": "Interpersonal relationships imply *networks of interpersonal communication* (…) and this characteristic seems to be relevant for campaign effectiveness in several interlocking ways. The "two-step flow" hypothesis suggests, in the first place, that these interpersonal networks are linked to the mass media networks in such a way that some people, who are relatively more exposed, pass on what they see, or hear, or read, to others with whom they are in contact who are less exposed" (1955, p. 45).

Mass media, conversation and public opinion have always been closely linked elements, so obviously this interdependence does not emerge with the arrival of Internet and virtual social networks. It is inherent in the logic of any mass media. Most of the issues and topics of conversation we use to talk about with our friends or relatives, or that inspire us while writing an article, or a speech, or while shooting a commercial, or while engaging in a conversation with someone we barely know, have come to us through the media, even if, theoretically, and as Cathcart and Gumpert (1983) pointed out, "the role of media in personal communication has, by and large, been overlooked" (p. 268). A large part of the "glorified" and "auratized" interpersonal communication in Western culture[5], is actually indebted to the "vilified" forms of mass communication: "Journals have ended up running and shaping opinion almost at their whim, since they impose on the speeches and talks most of their everyday issues" (Tarde, 1899, p. 87).

The mediation system, however, does change substantially in this "Network Society" we are supposedly living in. Internet as a media entangles forms of mass communication (e.g. mainstream media sites) and conversational-like processes (e.g. social networks). The main difference from the previous media

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[5] "Auratized" because interpreted as the place of the "original", "authentic experience", as opposed to the "surrogate", "inauthentic" and vicarious experience of the mediated communication and of the technical reproduction reaching us through the mass media.

system and the prevalent dialectics between mass communication and interpersonal communication is the partial removal of this "second step", since the "private" recycling of media issues occurs now not only offline but online too, *within the medium*. Social networks, like Twitter or Facebook, show how conversation- like interactions without borders have massively entered the medium.

Social networks blur the boundaries between private interaction and public diffusion of information that sustained the division between interpersonal and mass communication. There we have a medium that incorporates both. And this fact is not without implications. We cannot longer celebrate the "healthy" environment of conversation, as the "real" environment: "face to face", "authentic", unmediated conversation, as opposed to the "gray" background of the vicarious media "pseudo-environment". And we can no longer do this because conversation has partly moved to this pseudo-environment[6]. Nonetheless, it must be made explicit that online conversational dynamics differ in certain important respects from the offline ones, if only because the latter are sharply demarcated in physical and spatial terms, mainly restricted to small groups with a high degree of social control, and conditioned from the presence in situ, "face to face", of the participants that often share organic ties, etc. Those "small, intimate groups" have become, in the online environment, a kind of "almost global, not intimate communities" playing their role in the Social Media stage, and not exactly involved in an "spoken interaction", but rather in a written one.

In summary, the so called "online conversation" does not fit in all its points the definition of conversation laid down by Goffman (1981): "Thus, conversation, restrictively defined, might be identified as *the talk occurring when a small number of participants come together* and settle into what they perceive to be a few moments cut off from (or carried on to the side of) instrumental tasks; a period of idling felt to be an end in itself, during which everyone is accorded the right to talk as well as to listen and without reference to a fixed schedule; everyone is accorded the status of someone whose overall evaluation of the subject matter at hand--whose editorial comments, as it were- is to be encouraged and treated with respect; and no final agreement or synthesis is demanded, differences of opinion to be treated as unprejudicial to the continuing relationship of the participants" (p.14, emphasis added).

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[6] We are referring here to the distinction made by W. Lippmann in Public Opinion (1922) between "environment" and "pseudo-environment".

Once we have set out some conceptual warnings about the concept of "conversation" when directly applied to online environments, we can go ahead with the dialectic between mass media and conversation, while addressing the thorny issue of the "feedback".

2. Exploring the Jurassic Media Landscape & The Disintermediated Republic
The first thing we should try to clarify is the role that legacy media play in today's disintermediated environment and its ability to highlight the topics of conversation and influence public opinion through interpersonal communication. When Tarde wrote "Opinion and Conversation", newspapers were the lords of mediation[7], the only ones capable of communicating with the great public, as well as sending out messages from those for whom they acted as mediators (mainly, secular and spiritual powers). With the Internet, this "mediation monopoly" (and part of the income proceeding from it, derived from the monopoly of the public dissemination of messages) has in a certain way been diluted. However, this so-called "disintermediation" has not prevented the existence of privileged mediators. As the new systems of mediation and dissemination of information permitted by the Internet become increasingly sophisticated and their possibilities are explored and exploited, we can see the apparent anarchy of the Web turning into a new but complex order. New hierarchies are being established in the apparently anarchic streaming of data coming from all over the world.
In this "new order", there are privileged gatekeepers, able to generate a high amount of viral response[8], and an enormous mass of users that fall in behind these new opinion leaders, committed mainly to a viral, subsidiary mission. Even if what "influence" means in social networks is a hot topic and no agreement has been reached so far on this matter[9], it seems clear that the "invisible hand" of the Web is not working perfectly and some conversational monopolies are beginning to show up. New "librarians", as Ortega y Gasset (1935) called this

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[7] "Newspapers now exercise power as they please and shape opinion by imposing their own topics in speeches and conversations. One cannot, or could not imagine the extent to which newspapers have transformed, enriched and, perhaps, balanced, unified and diversified conversations in space and time, even for those that cannot read but that by conversing with those who do are forced to enter the habit of thoughts borrowed from the press. One pen is enough to make a million tongues move (...). If there were no conversation, even if newspapers were published (...) they would not have any profound or lasting effect on people"(Tarde, 1899, p. 87).

[8] "The main way to propagate information on Twitter is by re-tweeting. Thirty-one percent of the tweets of trending topics are retweets. This reflects a high volume of propagation that garners popularity for these topics" (Asur, Huberman, Szabo, & Wang, 2011).

[9] "The million followers fallacy", according to Adi Avnit, who maintains that "the number of Twitter followers (or reach) is usually meaningless".

"epic" gatekeeper-like figure, filtering the continuous streaming of data[10], "curating" and helping the overwhelmed recipient/user to overcome the "paradox of choice" (Schwartz, 2004)[11], flourish on the social web, together with the "old gatekeepers" coming from the analogical environment. Both created a mixed public agenda that furnished the bulk of online users with the topics required to keep the talk going: "While social media players espouse a different agenda than the mainstream media, blogs still heavily rely on the traditional press -- and primarily just a few outlets within that -- for their information. More than 99% of the stories linked to in blogs came from legacy outlets such as newspapers and broadcast networks. And just four -- the BBC, CNN, the New York Times and the Washington Post accounted for fully 80% of all links. Twitter, by contrast, was less tied to traditional media. Here half (50%) of the links were to legacy outlets; 40% went to web-only news sources such as Mashable and CNET. The remaining 10% went to wire stories or non-news sources on the Web."[12]

This map of the Social Web "lighthouses" shows clearly that very few still set the public agenda on the "mainstream Social Web". Among this oligarchy of conversation inceptors we still find the "traditional media" now reinvented online. In view of this data we should not give up for dead the legacy media as key influencers in the social media environment. They are still feeding much of the online chatter. Accordingly, the statement made by Cohen in 1963 remains half-true despite the increasing disintermediation: "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about (and what to talk/write about, we might add)".

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[10] Although much of it is redundant. Digital environments are the paradise of the copy. The Internet may be considered as the culmination of a process characteristic of Western culture beginning with the invention of printing.

[11] Title of Barry Schwartz's book, The Paradox of Choice (2004), although the mentioned "paradox" (very "sepia toned" in Schwartz's version), in goods as well as messages, is not so recent, being a manifestation inherent in the process of cultural commercialization;A process that continues to grow as the mechanisms of reproduction and distribution become more sophisticated, less "material" and much cheaper. However, this long running process already was causing Abbé Dinouart some concern in 1771, when the form of the bourgeois socio-cultural cycle was beginning to become clear: "Too much is being written (...) We write without any regard for the limits of the human mind, about any subject, even knowledge denied to us by Providence (...) there are men who write for the sake of writing, as those who talk for the sake of it... and so the world overflows with sterile and fruitless books (...) oh how useful and interesting would be a book that condensed all the books that are not read or that cannot be read without tediousness or repulse (...) this strange illness of writing or reading what one writes, which has afflicted us for some time, is getting worse every day (...) if this goes on, the appeal of education or the obsession of writing, everyone will become literate, without even knowing it; we all energize each other. There is no subtler or rapid infection than the one caused by books... If everyone writes and becomes an author, what will we do with all that talent and all those books that exceed, flood and submerge us superabundantly? In a word, when all is said and done,what will the human spirit do? So it is consumed, imperceptibly, and so it will finally be completely consumed, the innumerable quantity of books of whose birth newspapers talk about and that will leave no trace behind" (1771/1999, pp. 71 and ff.) Do these words not remind us, almost disturbingly, of many of the "apocalyptic" critics of the Web 2.0, appalled by the incessant flow of "useless chatter"?

[12] "Pew Research Center. Project for Excellence in Journalism (2010). "New Media, Old Media How Blogs and Social Media Agendas Relate and Differ from Traditional Press". http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1602/new-media-review-differences-from-traditional-press

The fact that "old media" brands are still playing an important role as influencers and powerful viral devices (online and offline) in the new digital environment can be well illustrated by the most recent Wikileaks affair to date. Despite the harsh criticism manifested by Julian Assange about journalism and journalist[13], he decided to publish his last massive delivery of leaks not directly on the web page of the organization he represents, or directly through social networks, but via the most renowned and highly trusted newspapers of the world, the journalistic *crème de la crème*, the dinosaurs of the analogical age, now immersed in a frantic digital and not yet accomplished reconversion, i.e., The Guardian, Le Monde, The New York Times, El País and Der Spiegel. The truth is that the publication of the leaks in this selected group of journals triggered the viral frenzy of Twitter, Facebook and other social media. Assange was perfectly aware of this multiplier effect.

We should ask ourselves if the impact of this controversial issue would have been similar if initially directly published in social media and, then, being gathered in a much more testimonial way by the news media, instead of initially overexposing it in their privileged arena for a considerable (if measured in journalistic terms) time.

It is true that in current times, not only the "classic" journalistic sources/ gatekeepers, but also companies, political parties and pressure groups, as well as individuals representing themselves, of course (although the latter, the former "audience" now reshaped into "users", are at a different level in terms of objectives, of means to obtain those objectives, and of information flow control and communication strategy design) are able to communicate directly and pervasively to a potentially global public. They do so through their own web pages, sending messages via social networks or generating striking or "useful" content, shaped to be "viralized" or "journalized". The sophistication of the forms of publicity, dressed as "interesting" or "useful", "amusing" or "astounding" information, is reaching historic levels of refinement and pervasiveness. It just takes a quick glance through any newspaper, especially online, to discover piles of "free ads", biased information disguised as pieces of public interest, obediently gathered by the press (Diezhandino, Carrera et al. 2004). When we make this precision –"especially online"- this does not mean that we are opposing the print press as the watchdog of journalistic essence and the online press as the "betrayer" (eroding the "excellence" in journalism) that

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[13] "It's a worry,isn't it.?- that the rest of the world's media is doing such a bad job that a little group of activists is able to release more of that type of information than the rest of the world press combined?" "Why the world needs WikiLeaks". Julian Assange on TED.com. July 2010. http://www.ted.com/talks/lang/eng/julian_assange_why_the_world_needs_wikileaks.html

is putting an end to a supposed "golden age" of exemplary journalism. It is just that the informative pace online requires a continuous flow of data that, as it would seem obvious, does not fit with the slower pace required for investigative reporting and content creation. Looking for information that could be considered innovative and relevant or writing a good story is something that can hardly be consummated in a permanent "breaking news" simulated environment. Therefore, the effect of continual update, the simulation of the new, has to be generated most often by encapsulated information from third parties. These third parties may be, in the case of an online newspaper, journalistic agents like news agencies or non-journalistic emitters like press offices of companies or institutions. Companies, institutions and organizations have created a communicative shield using their own media departments, with splendid results in the meticulously designed world of "real time information". Political and economical powers have learned over the years the art of communicative armor plating.

Disintermediation[14], has had, without any doubt a direct economic effect, especially in newspapers (e.g. as classified advertising and the substantial income derived from it migrated from newspapers to platforms like Craigslist, etc.) ... but its effect on terms of influence is not so obvious, since the proliferation of senders may not determine the proliferation of new content, but only the viralization and exponential extension of pieces of content still sourced by a reduced number of emitters, as we have already said. Perhaps we are witnessing not so much a real, widespread and effective disintermediation process but, largely, a global simulacrum of disintermediation, a kind of fuzzy hyperreality which is less polyphonic and more homogeneous than might appear at first sight.

In this new environment where senders proliferate and receivers are at the same time "editors", Kodak's wish, "We want the impact of print with the speed of a tweet"[15] seems difficult to accomplish, but there is still no doubt that visibility and viral potential are not at all a democratic asset in the Web 2.0 environment. Even if new influential actors have showed up, fracturing the former journalistic monopoly of mediation, we could talk, at most, of a new oligopolistic situation in which media still are desired and privileged platforms for mediation.

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[14] "An effect of e-commerce whereby producing firms bypass traditional intermediaries and sell directly to end consumers" (Bidgoli (Ed.). 2003).

[15] Advertising Age, October 18, 2010.

3.   The talk for the sake of talking

Actually, it does not matter so much that what is said on Twitter is "useless chatter"[16], the main argument for many critics to defend, protected with a quixotic "qualitative" helmet, against this massive army of 140 characters. The "profoundness", the "quality content" is not the key in this case. Moreover, one only has to log in on Twitter to realize that most of those 140 characters are not finished messages, but "link-hooks", hypertextual doors that, in an seemingly unselfish and altruistic mood, lead us to other sites where the Twitter-headline unfolds and deepens.

Twitter is not a typical content platform, but primarily, a powerful viral device that allows messages to be expanded and amplified, operating as a horizontal and apparently spontaneous micro-prescription system, dealing with messages not necessarily originated in the "online civil society", but, much of the time, coming from media outlets or institutional sources.

Conversation does not rely (it never has) on the "profoundness" of the subject, nor on the sharing of "transcendental" messages, nor on the "quality" or "creativity" of the content. When we talk with our friends or relatives in a supposedly relaxed and casual manner, it is the phatic function itself, the "keeping the interaction going", the "talk for the sake of talking" that prevails. When we feel that we are obliged to say (to "write" in Twitter's case) "very intelligent and sharp things" during an interaction of this kind, when our purpose is to dazzle or to explicitly persuade, we are not exactly in a conversational mood. We are not saying that conversation does not imply a persuasive component. Its supposed "spontaneous" nature may play the role of a major persuasive device.

In fact, the foundational motto behind Twitter, was not "What are you thinking" but "What are you doing" showing clearly that it was not about "deep thoughts", but about informal, quotidian stuff. "Be one among others" (or at least pretend to), is the motto for success in conversational environments. To get people involved in this kind of informal interaction implies that you have to get rid of the temptation to patronize and pontificate.

The bottom line is, therefore, that through casual online conversation, *intentional messages* can be amplified and disseminated via users' chatter and informal communication, provided that its instrumental function remains in a discrete and preferably unnoticeable second place. We are not pretending that

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[16] "Forty percent of what is written on Twitter is 'useless nonsense'" was the title of an article published in the Spanish newspaper El Pais (17/08/2009), which commented on the results of a study by Pear Analytics.

all the messages that went highly viral on Twitter had been systematically scheduled to do so. There is no need to deny the freedom of the user to "pick up freely" those issues he considered worthwhile communicating. All we are saying is that not all the senders have the power to source information likely to go viral, even if all of them have an unlimited power to provide comments and opinion on those issues. In fact, the contribution of most of the users/audiences in social networks and in "the world outside" as well, is to recycle and comment issues that are still coming from a minority of content creators. Perhaps the chattering, the "debate" and conversation that take place through "social media" can be considered grassroots. However, as it turns out, the type of information that originated the debate is most of the time less grassroots than it might seem[17]. Be as it may, it seems almost indisputable that conversation in the Web has reached a degree of virality never seen in the analogical system of mouth to ear.

As we have already said, thanks to the Internet, the "great public", for the first time in mass media history, can fulfill its "classic" viral function consisting of horizontally spreading the issues generated in vertical communication processes, through gloss and the opinion, *within the medium*, which happens to be the first global medium.

Continuing with analogies and similarities, we might be tempted to conclude that many bloggers and twitterers perform in "cyberspace" a similar function to that played by the lazardsfelian "opinion leaders" in "live" contexts: "One of the functions of the opinion leader is to mediate between the mass media and the rest of his group (...). It is commonly assumed that individuals obtain their information directly from the newspapers, radio stations and other media. However, our discoveries did not confirm this. Most people acquire their information and many of their ideas through a personal contact with the opinion leaders of their group (...). Mass media usually reaches the audience in two phases. Once the opinion leaders read the newspapers or listen to radio emissions, they then filter bits of ideas and information to less active sectors of the population" (Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1962, pp. xxxiv-xxxv). Likewise, influential users fulfill the task of clearing the way for the second communicative scene (the place of viralization and legitimation of mass media/institutional messages through conversation) and playing -inter pares, close, trustworthy, accessible, perhaps in an unconscious manner and in a non-

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[17] "We then classify the trending topics based on the active period and the tweets and show that the majority (over 85%) of topics are headline or persistent news in nature" (Kwak et al., 2010, p. 10).

purposive way- the role of a relay in the process of transmission of influence[18]. Those "new" opinion leaders usually channel messages originated at an institutional level, and they do so in a "natural" and supposedly "unbiased" and even "truly innocent" manner (in the sense that the viralizer might not be consciously promoting the source's interests). As receivers-emitters, users may be interested in specific subjects and eager to obtain information in their own field of interest. Through them and the relationships they establish with their environment using informal communication, the content transmitted vertically by institutional sources of all kinds can grow and become "social". It can thus reach, in a second phase, those users who have initially "escaped" a given message, circulating it to a "secondary" audience who will receive this information through interpersonal mediated communication instead of directly from the original sender. Through online conversation, a particular topic intentionally spread to influence and orient decision making becomes viral and obtains the rank of commonplace. Let us give an example: Suppose you have a colleague interested in dietetic issues (he can be considered an "opinion leader" in this matter, without being a specialist, as long as he stays informed, tracks the news, and gives his advice on dietetic-related topics for free) who suggests a brand of margarine because he has read in a trusted niche magazine the results of a comparative study, which concludes that this particular brand of margarine is the best option in price/quality terms. Our friend, perhaps unconscious of his "collaborative" role, giving you advice in the kindest and most unselfish fashion, is actually helping to spread influence from the source who initially released the information he had gathered and passed along. He disseminates the message to those who would not necessarily have had access to that particular source of information. How many goods do we purchase "by recommendation"? How many decisions do we make following "advice" or after an "exchange of opinions" with our friends and family? How many sites do we visit "following" a tweet? Now, we can find those "reliable friends" that give us unselfish advice not only offline but online as well. The individual who voluntarily spreads an "interesting link" to information via Twitter, originally provided perhaps by PR departments or the "old" legacy media, becomes, in a way, an extension of the original source of the message, an extension not only of the medium but also of the original sender's intentions (even without the sender being aware of it). The

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[18] The "opinion leader" was not just someone who "tempered" the influence of the mass media, the warrant of "limited effects". He was, instead, the ultimate "collaborationist", spreading the content obtained from mediated communication at the interpersonal level. The opinion leader allowed the dissemination of media content through people who were not directly reached by the message. The same can be said about very popular blogs echoing the latest information about the newest gadget in a very casual and "non purposive" way.

same can be said of a blogger who "quotes" a news item he considered interesting or embeds a video he did not create. In both cases, the "user" echoes this information voluntarily most of the time and, consequently, the original source of the "useful" information can reach new targets, free of charge. If this is the case, the user should be considered a "collaborationist", an extension of the original source, rather than a "creator" of content. We are fully into the realm of "propaganda" as Edward Bernays understood it

So far, too little grassroots and original user generated content attains the category of "trending topic" to consider that social media have reached the desired stage of "communicative democracy".

4.   Wasn't TV the best friend of interpersonal communication?

Let us go back for a moment to the controversial and long standing issue of "feedback and the mass media". According to a generally accepted assumption, the pre-Internet mass media would have essentially caused passivity and alienation in an audience described as highly influenceable. The public was described as passive and "narcotized". The old and "outdated" "hypodermic needle theory", on many occasion and as paradoxical as it might seem, has still provided the mainstream theoretical frame for understanding media effects and processes. Its echoes still reverberate today despite having been declared in theoretical bankruptcy many times [19].

Despite all the theoretical nuances of the reader's interpretative activity and the degree of "openness" of media messages, whose final meaning would not be considered unambiguous but instead the result of a "negotiation" with the receiver/public; non interactive, one-way or unidirectional media are still being conceptualized as essentially manipulative, oppressive and inhibitors of the audience's creativity, diametrically opposed to the interactive, "emancipative" conversational media.

Nonetheless, if we stick to the facts, we should agree that mass media have generated an enormous amount of interpersonal communication during the twentieth and the twenty-first century so far (daily conversations are packed with fragments of mixed information obtained from the different media, nurtured by what Abraham Moles referred to as "mosaic culture" (Moles & Zeltman, 1971)). We have always talked about films, football or the language of

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[19] "The old ' 'hypodermic needle'' theory (popular in the 1920s), which postulated a direct and universal response to a message stimulus, has been abandoned by almost all researchers. The tendency, instead, has been to put additional variables in between the stimulus and the behavioral response. Individual differences, group differences, the role of influential peers, stages of cognitive development, and other social and psychological variables are now seen as muting, changing, or negating the effects of the messages. But ultimately, the new models are still based on the concept of a response to a stimulus—the message" (Meyrowitz, 1985, p.14).

bees according to some article in a popular science magazine or about politics, the economic crisis, and so on, and most of the arguments we use were provided by non interactive mass media. We have, for more than a century, built our ideas of the world and "the pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922) using fragments of information that we have collected from the "pseudo-environment" created by non participative and unidirectional media. Media that do not allow (or only do so in a testimonial way) "users' feedback" (essentially every medium prior to the advent of the Web 2.0, except for sporadic manifestations such as the "letters to the editor" in newspapers), especially television, have been accused of subduing and alienating the audiences. However, this interpretation cannot be considered accurate enough to explain the changes brought about by digital interactive media. The alleged passive state of the movie or TV spectator (let us take this opportunity to vindicate the right to see a film in a passive, contemplative mood, with no interaction at all) was (and is) usually followed by an active emission of messages fueled and inspired by the film/ program, through friendly conversation with colleagues or using that content in many other situations. We cannot seriously believe that comments about the latest TV series or the newest TV program began with Twitter, Facebook or Blogger! Audiences have always been active commentators / glossers of media content. There has always been a lot of "user generated content" inspired by analogical media issues. The main difference is that pre- internet user generated content operated essentially in small groups, through private or semi-private messages and mainly at a non-mediated level (excepting private phone calls).

Consequently, the difference between the Internet and other mass media (since we consider the Internet a mass media) is not that the former generates opinative - creative[20]- emancipated activity, while the latter generate inactivity and alienation. Mass media (all of them: Press, Radio, TV, Film and now the Internet) have always stimulated, inspired and nurtured dialogue and private interaction; their contents have generated somewhat "creative" activities and inspiration in the audience.

Therefore, we should ask ourselves if instead of accusing TV of "destroying families" and social organic ties, we should not praise it for doing the opposite.

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[20] "User's "creativity" as the "brand new gratification" derived from media use (from digital interactive media use, especially the Internet), would be the coup de grace for the remaining relapses of the "brainwashing paradigm" of the mass media, according to some advocates of the "new media age". The "artistic" flag brandished by these gurus for the redemption of the audiences by way of "creative users", "content generation" and "self-expression" may turn out to be, in a lasting unequal and communicative regime, the main refuge of ideology. And, what is worse, this focusing on "artistic", "spiritual" gratification, may contribute to hindering the theoretical awareness of the true and much more prosaic "newness" of interactive digital media.

Why not consider TV as the most powerful instrument of socialization ever known, since it has provided more topics for "chitchat"[21] to every generation of western civilization than any other medium? We have been taught and told many times about the lost paradise of the "non-mediated family", the conversational and utopian paradise where all conversations were "live", in an auratic "face to face", and every form of telecommunication -especially television- had been methodically excommunicated (even if most of the time this "critical" discourse was brought to us, paradoxically, by the same media that were being accused of destroying family ties and weakening moral values). When settled as a normative horizon, this kind of "only in praesentia" interaction is intended to depict a place in which the intergenerational conversation would have apparently created a nirvana of empathy, mutual knowledge and intergenerational comprehension... until the television arrived. When that happened, according to many, that "holy state" of non mediated, interactive coexistence, broke into a thousand pieces, leaving the living room filled with broken ties, solitary, shadowy and non- interactive souls hypnotized by the "idiot box".

If we step outside this idyllic scene, we would have to recognize that nothing has done so much to increase the flow of global conversation, motivating and enabling the glorified interpersonal interaction (a place of power and manipulation par excellence, let us not forget) as the "unidirectional" media now known as "old media". Furthermore, we will be forced to recognize that the Internet has not "redeemed" the old media from its "sin" of lacking interactive stimuli, since these "old media" have indeed nurtured huge amounts of conversational flow among audiences for more than a century.

5.   The silent feedback

Therefore, if the main difference between Internet and the so called "mainstream media" is not the ability to generate conversational feedback (as we have said, this asset is shared by all mass media, even those bearing the burden of uni-directionality), then it must be the nature of this interaction which actually defines an important distinction. This is due not so much to the alleged emancipating repercussions of interactivity on the "Third State", but is instead because of the way in which influence flows and the "two steps flow of communication" interspersed on the Web. The clearly defined boundaries

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[21] Tarde defined the public as an invisible community of shared information, created by "the transmission of thoughts over distance" allowed by the press. So, according to Tarde, the press would have created the public and the public opinion, by allowing conversation on shared issues.

between interpersonal and mass communication are starting to blur, and we can no longer maintain the "classical" categorical distinction that supported assertions such as the following: "More people learned the news from a mass media source than through interpersonal communication" (Larsen & Hill, 1954: 432). Mainly because now we can learn the news through interpersonal-like, partly individually based communication channels like Twitter or Facebook where the private members of the former offline audience are interacting and circulating information.

It has to be said that perhaps "conversation" is not the best word to describe the forms of bidirectional communication that take place on the web. The similarities with interpersonal offline communication exist, but there are striking differences. What is called "online conversation" is actually a mixture of broadcasting with right to rebuttal and in absentia exchange of messages "among peers".

The mass mediatization and the globalization of private communication exchanges have further implications, among which are some we have already mentioned: the creation of new and promising horizons of influence for those privileged emitters capable of controlling, monitoring and leading the dissemination of their messages through social networks, blogospheres and celestial spheres of "classic" journalism, with the help of "brand evangelists", community managers and devoted users.

Let us summarize some specific features of online conversation:

First at all, and it represents a vast difference with respect to "face to face" conversation, almost all the "physical", "non verbal" information between the individuals involved in a conversation, has been removed from online interaction[22]. The physical presence gives way to a paradialogic relation between disembodied users ("The angelic discarnate man of the electric age" in McLuhan words) that does not even have to match the identity of the senders behind them (they can be hidden behind brands, corporate names, pseudonyms or avatars).

The "ceremonial order" that rules offline conversation has been broken too. Even if the play has its rules[23], the protocols foregoing the conversational exchange, especially those aspects related to the extent the participants know

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[22] "What ensures textual cooperation when faced with these possibilities of more or less aberrant interpretation? In face to face communication, endless forms of extralinguistic reinforcement intervene as do infinite processes of redundancy and feedback that shore up one other. This reveals that communication is never merely a linguistic activity but a semiotic activity in a broader sense as well, in which several sign systems complement each other. But, what happens in the case of a written text where the author creates and then delivers a variety of acts of interpretation? (Eco, 1979)

[23] http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/7-ways-to-totally-destroy-your-reputation-on-twitter_b6256

each other and the introductory ceremonial required, are radically altered online. Just to give an example, Goffman's statement about conversation and "the general rule that, in our society forbids to address strangers" (1986, p. 88), does not apply to online interactions, in which you can introduce yourself in an all spontaneous manners, to people from the entire planet who you have never contacted before or even heard about.

It has to be noticed, too, that when we reply or send a "tweet", to mention a usual form of online feedback, *we are writing*, not talking. The same can be said about many other forms of online interaction such as e-mail or "posting" on a blog. Of course, there are ways of online interaction that are shaped into oral language, but its viral relevance is much more limited.

As we can see, online "conversation" has little to do with the homonym offline form of interpersonal communication than what may seem at first. We could hardly agree with Roger & Chaffee's early statement about computer-mediated communication: "We are observing interpersonal communication driven through media that is similar to mass media communication" (1983, p. 25). The user of the "Social Web" is more like a shipwrecked graphomaniac throwing messages in a bottle into the ocean of the web and hoping that some of them will reach the shore and capture the attention of an occasional cyberpasserby, than a conversationalist aware of the reactions of his partners and ready to deal with an unexpected derailment of understanding.

Social networks, therefore, taken as a whole, are much more a written environment than a spoken one. This also sets online "conversation" apart from its offline equivalent, mainly based on the spoken word.

Concealment and deception play quite a different role, too, much less destabilizing in the superficial relational environment that characterizes the online conversational system. As Simmel (1906) pointed out, "the farther third persons are located from the center of our personality, the easier can we adjust ourselves practically, but also subjectively, to their lack of integrity. On the other hand if the few persons in our immediate environment lie to us, life becomes intolerable" (p. 446).

Another very significant difference between the two forms of conversation we analyze here, is the fact that online conversation introduces a key factor, absent from face-to-face conversation, namely, what we have decided to call "secondary feedback", superimposed on "primary feedback". This latter one is a distinctive feature too of face to face communication, whereby a message leads to a response (or a lack of it, which is also, in a sense, a message, a "response":

the refusal to answer has to be decoded as relevant information). Primary feedback happens at the "surface" level, being easily noticeable by those involved in the interaction. If we analyze non-mediated conversation, we will soon realize that the motto of this kind of communication (except if it is recorded) is "words are dust in the wind".

As for secondary feedback, which generates a kind of information only noticeable for a minority controlling the required analytic tools, far from the reach of the mainstream users, it occurs as a result of the Internet completely entangling the consumption/production of content by the users/readers/ spectators and audience measurement in real time by a "elite" of emitters. When we have a "conversation", when we interact in the medium, we are leaving behind lasting traces that can be followed –at least until the right of "digital removal"[24] is recognized. The truth is that these "traces", this particular kind of information, has little or nothing to do with "content" as we usually understand it, nor with the issues discussed which stimulated participation and interaction. The information provided by "secondary feedback" is the one that can be extracted from audience analysis through web analytics. This is perhaps the truly *new kind of feedback* that "new media" allow. The "information" that influential emitters are eager for is more likely to come from the itinerary of the user's click than from the specific content (the "story") of the user's posts, even if getting lots of comments (and that is "significant" information from the point of view of professional emitters) also means that the reader has not only accessed the information but has taken the time to read it as well, just to give an example to differentiate those two kinds of "information" arising out of online interaction.

Therefore, quantitative and strategic conclusions can be easily drawn from the hyped qualitative and blending state of "healthy" (although uneven) and prolific interaction we have heard so much about. The talkative element is, for those wishing to create economic value out of the web, only a means to reach another set of data, which has little to do with conversation.

The "cyber-conversational" form (or "cyber-messaging", to be more accurate) is not only the place where user generated content comes to light ("the wisdom of crowds") , but also a powerful tool for tracking audiences, providing a continuous record of quantifiable feedback from users ("the intelligent click"), which is unintended and unavoidable, since this "secondary feedback" (and "secondary" as it seems obvious does not mean in this context "less important",

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[24] "France claims the right to digital oblivion" in the Spanish newspaper El País, 31-05-2010.

rather the opposite) is, in the case of the Internet, simultaneous, strictly bound to content creation and content access.

When we post a comment, information flows not only through explicit or manifest content, but also through the "implicit" information that can be used in web analytics; and precisely this unconscious or semi-unconscious feedback (let us call it "meta-interactivity") is the one that can be monetized and sold or used for influence-seeking strategies.

When we are just surfing a web page and we think we are not interacting at all, simply browsing and picking up information in the same "half-passive" way as when we search for and read a book or we tune in and listen to a traditional radio broadcast, the truth is that we are constantly sending back information, even if we are not aware of interacting at all. So, we are forced to interact online even if, as Bartleby would say, "we would prefer not to". Interacting is not a choice for the online user. It is compulsory, since we cannot remove the traces we are leaving behind. There is no "burn after reading" as in spy movies, for the average user. The feedback we are providing online goes much further than the "content" we post.

Therefore, even admitting that online conversation reproduces, to a much larger scale, some of the dynamics of offline interaction, especially as a key factor in the implementation of mass media processes, its communicative nature is quite different.

6.   Interaction and control: The cybernetic warning

This relationship between feedback and control has a long history in the field of Communication Theory. If we take a look back in this field, we found at its core "the moral issue of feedback" (Carrera, 2008, p. 47), relentlessly haunting the theory of mass communication. The lack of feedback of unidirectional media has been considered as a kind of cardinal sin, redeemed, according to some, with the arrival of interactive digital media. Media criticism, prior to the advent of the Web 2.0, has focused, largely, on the lack of interactivity: "In its present form, equipment like television or film does not serve communication but prevents it. It allows no reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver; technically speaking, it reduces feedback to the lowest point compatible with the system",wrote Enzensberger in a well know article entitled "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" (1970, p. 262). In the same article he established what he considered the main features of an "emancipatory use of media" against what he called a "repressive use of media". The presence or absence of feedback is

considered a major cause for determining the place of a media in one of the two categories:

The "repressive use of media" was characterized, according to Enzensberger by: centrally controlled program; one transmitter, many receivers; immobilization of isolated individuals; passive consumer behavior; depoliticization; production by specialists; control by property owners or bureaucracy.

On the other hand, the "emancipatory use of media" was described as fulfilling the following requirements: decentralized program; each receiver a potential transmitter; mobilization of the masses; interaction of those involved, feedback; a political learning process; collective production; social control by self organization (1970, p. 269).

It can hardly be denied that feedback is a precondition, a major requirement for any democratic communication. Nonetheless, we must distinguish, as we have already pointed out, at least two different levels of interaction, taking into consideration the degree of autonomy of the private user in establishing the "rules" of the interaction and the issues to be discussed. Let us say that those situations in which participating implies the power of establishing the rules that will govern the interaction and the issues to be discussed, are the paradigm for a democratic communication. But there are subsidiary forms of interaction, which, on the other hand, are the majority, and which distance themselves to a greater or lesser extent from this ideal state of interaction. The most obvious and everyday example of these surrogate forms are those intended to "debate" or "give an opinion" on topics suggested by third parties. This constitutes most of the conversational flow in our lives, where "induced" discussions are the majority, and the power to "loosen tongues" is quite unequally distributed. If we understand interaction only in this second, surrogate way, only as "participating in a debate" set out not indistinctively by the people involved in it but by privileged "emitters" (mainstream media, political or corporate agendas, some kind of opinion leader…), that may not be involved directly nor have any intention of "joining the conversation", then feedback reveals a less bright side, that of a privileged element of control. In this regard, silence and secrecy, the voluntary absence of response and interaction, usually negatively connoted, could also be considered as a way to preserve autonomy and freedom by refusing to magnify the debate set by others, most of the time not in an

innocent and disinterested manner[25]. In this regard, Baudrillard (1972) warned that "the absolutization of speech under the formal guise of exchange is the definition of power" (p. 281).

There are many levels of speech, some autonomous and emancipatory, some alienating, because they keep the individual tied up with issues not at all relevant for himself, not only as individual but also as a citizen, perhaps, preventing the emergence and public debate of more sensitive issues. From this perspective, "the absolutization of feedback" reveals itself as an ideological construct. Norbert Wiener, the father of the Cybernetic theory, established a theoretical relationship between feedback and control in which one is closely tied to the other. The subtitle of his emblematic book explicitly states this idea: *Cybernetics (Or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine).* His definition of "cybernetics" is based on this established relationship: "We have decided to call the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or in the animal, by the name 'Cybernetics', which we form from the Greek 'kybernetes' or 'steersman'" (1948:19). A classic example, used by Wiener, is of a thermostat which sends signals (feedback) allowing a heating system to self-regulate, thus preventing destruction from overheating. By applying this idea to any system, we can see that feedback is a crucial element of control, which guarantees the stability of a system and therefore prevents change (seen in this light, the "revolutionary" power of feedback and interactivity that has been celebrated with much fanfare by some analysts of the so-called "new media", should, perhaps, be reconsidered or at least nuanced.)

Let us compare two communicative situations: one involving media without feedback, e.g. watching television in an analogical context, and another with feedback, e.g. a face to face conversation. Let us suppose we are dealing with persuasive messages in both cases. In the first case, the potential for manipulation and persuasion is comparatively small precisely because the receiver cannot respond, preventing the sender from verifying that the message was received or understood "correctly"[26]. However, in an interactive situation, the sender can always re-adjust the message, repeat it, make sure the receptor has understood correctly, using verbal and non verbal feedback, using feedback for clearly instrumental and even manipulative purposes. Therefore, this

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[25] This refusal may imply even the refusal to criticize a given issue, a "suggested topic", since we all know that refutation and opposition carry out not so dissimilar functions as adhesion and loyalty as far as "getting publicity" is concerned, to a point where a topic is sometimes more glorified and exerts more influence on the public opinion process if it is fueled by controversy and contradiction than by acquiescence.

[26] That is, the way the sender wanted it to be interpreted. "Derailment of understanding" is most likely to be dimmed by feedback than by massive unidirectional message bombarding.

reciprocity is conditio sine qua non not only for democratic communication, but also for effective persuasion. It is the core of persuasive communication, allowing the emitter to adapt his message, redirect it systematically, avoid deviations, fight "misinterpretations" effectively and obtain substantial information for his own purposes. Control can be consummated through feedback in a much more effective and sophisticated way than exclusively through "linear control". As Bateson (1972/2000), pointed out: "Goebbels thought that he could control public opinion in Germany with a vast communication system, and our own public relations men are perhaps liable to similar delusions. But in fact the would-be controller must always have his spies out to tell him what the people are saying about his propaganda. He is therefore in the position of being responsive to what they are saying. Therefore he cannot have a simple lineal control. We do not live in the sort of universe in which simple lineal control is possible. Life is not like that" (p. 443).

Thus, even if it might sound paradoxical, the lack of feedback, especially in non-equipollent situations (which are the majority in the Web 2.0 as well), may, in some cases, be considered a major barrier against control. As we have already stated, even in social networks like Twitter, a space that is apparently very "horizontal" and of "universal access", most of the "tweets" originate not from the average man (the individual), but from some organization or mass media that has "planted" the initial idea, allowing Internet users to "cultivate" it themselves ("twittering"), unselfishly, by re-tweeting or "quoting" it in some way. A recent Yahoo research study on production, flow, and consumption of information on Twitter, found "a striking concentration of attention on Twitter - roughly 50% of tweets consumed are generated by just 20K elite users- where the media produces the most information, but celebrities are the most followed. We also found significant homophily within categories: celebrities listen to celebrities, while bloggers listen to bloggers etc; however, bloggers in general rebroadcast more information than the other categories (Wu, Mason, Hofman & Wats, 2011, p. 1).

Users receive main inputs originally sourced from mainstream media (online or offline), institutional or corporate communicators or some leading bloggers, especially in the field of technology. Afterwards, users comment about these contents, or directly retweet them, contributing to their diffusion and benefiting those who have the communicational initiative and promote communication and interaction, as well as the owners of the platforms in which this interaction takes place, the owners and developers of "interactive software" (we should not

forget that "traffic" and "user segmentation" have become the main argument for selling advertising space on the Web, even if there seems to be a lot of confusion about how to deal with this promising hyper-segmentation of audiences permitted by the Internet, and with all that burden of data in real time provided by users). If this is the case, and interaction essentially equals viralization, then feedback implies not only more potential control over the user, but it also becomes the main requirement for selling users as audience, e.g. to monetize the "public gaze". Under these circumstances, the "emancipative process" associated with online interactivity might turn out to be an instrument of control and domination.

But, perhaps it is not only private users who are baffled by the changing rules of the media game, but also confused advertisers and perhaps even more disconcerted "old media" people coming in from the former analogical environment. McLuhan warned, in his oracular manner, against the misconception of new media environments: "The frantic effort of the literate and mechanical powers to retain their mechanical ascendancy while being undermined from within by the integral and organic character of electric technology creates the typical confusion of the present day" (1968, p. 99). This statement could fit well, too, the almost literal theoretical transposition of the "conversational approach" from face to face encounters in small groups to the global virtual online "conversation".

Our goal is not to perform some apocalyptic revival of the "Big Brother Show" in an attempt to perpetuate the old scheme of the omnipotent media and their fooled audiences, essentially because now, in the "Age of the Internet", *we all are the media*. This is a brand new "collaborative Big Brother" we are building together, which has little to do with the powerful and simple scheme of unidirectional brainwashing that so far has been the core of the apocalyptic approach. In the "new media" environment, it is not very clear who is fooling and watching who. As McLuhan wrote, "the entire planet has become a whispering gallery with a large portion of mankind engaging in making its living by keeping the rest of mankind under surveillance" (1974, p. 54).

7.   Conclusions: Forever Power

If we agree that power is held essentially by those who are able to focus attention, set the public agenda and determine the topics of conversation and debate, and of course by those who host the debate (let us call them the "software Maecenas") and not by those who "freely" manifest their opinion on

any induced topic (as Gilles Deleuze wrote: "First of all, we must become the owners of our questions") or just disseminate it (in a conscious or unconscious way), then we would conclude that it is as if there were two levels of "freedom" and autonomy in communicative terms. The first one, as we have already said consists of setting up the debate and establishing the topics of discussion (the "creative moment"). In the second level "participants" (or "propagators") express their ideas on these subjects, they analyze them, agree or disagree (the "quotative" or "reactive moment"), they just "quote" and viralize it in an "induced" manner, i.e., as a response to a request most of the time "institutionally" settled, or just contribute to passing the information along in the echo chamber of the social web. It seems obvious that communicative autonomy in the broadest sense of the term basically manifests at the first level and relates to the power of establishing or modifying the issues of debate, i.e. "setting the agenda". "Emancipation" or "freedom", in communicative terms, consists not only of being able to criticize, praise, support or refute an argument or information, but of making (or having the power to make) a chosen issue the subject matter of a discussion. Which sources originally spread the issue that was destined to become a "trending topic" or a talkative hit? Are they just private users or are there usually some kinds of power structures behind most of those highly viral messages[27]? According to a report we have already mentioned, the answer is quite clear: "We found that the content that trended was largely news from traditional media sources, which are then amplified by repeated retweets on Twitter to generate trends" (Asur & alt. 2011).

Pushing further along this line of reasoning we will find at the front line of those who have the power to establish the debate, those who own and develop the "conversational" or interactive software (the "masters of the software"[28], the ultimate rulers of the "new Agora", those who take the greatest advantage of the "secondary feedback" we have discussed before) that allow both the insulation of topics for conversation and the user's "reactions" to these topics (debate and viralization). So, things are more complicated than they seem at the first sight.

Essentially, the Web is a new sphere of power in which the management of influence and its transmission greatly differs from the "traditional" media, from the "old broadcasting model" which is characterized by a restricted access to

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[27] Viral Storytelling (stories that are built to be spread through social networks) is, without any doubt, a new and interesting field of research with its own "news values"

[28] In a way, as Lev Manovich pointed out, "software takes command".

emission and a massive reception, or as Raymond Williams (1974/2004) pointed out, by the "deep contradiction of centralized transmission and privatized reception" (p. 24).

The transmission of influence has changed, at least in part, but the power relations in the field of mass communication (especially power relations between the powerful) are also undergoing significant changes. This does not mean that power in the mass media sphere has diminished or that we find ourselves in a situation of communicative anarchism, as insinuated by the dogmatic discourses about the emancipatory wonders of the Web, the new spot of conceptual and propagandistic pilgrimage[29]. Are the traditional media institutions ("mainstream media") suffering a crisis of mediation as they move online? : "News organizations, old and new- still produce most of the content audiences consume. But each technological advance has added a new layer of complexity -and a new set of players- in connecting that content to consumers and advertisers"[30].

Disintermediation exists, that is true, but it essentially works among the powerful ones, we should add. Consider the case of a politician who is no longer forced to speak to his potential voters exclusively through newspapers, television or radio (although he still cannot avoid journalistic mediation for credibility, legitimacy, visibility and impact on public opinion), being able to reach them now via webpages or social networks, like Twitter or Facebook or YouTube, which might be considered a paradigmatic case of "disintemediation". Our politician can, in order to achieve certain goals, circumvent former compulsory gatekeepers that used to be unavoidable in order to reach a mass audience, e.g., the press, TV or radio (we could ask ourselves, nonetheless, momentarily giving way to skepticism, if the use our politician makes of "social web" tools is not mainly directed at capturing the attention of the "old" mainstream media online and offline). Keeping up with the issue of "disintermediation among the few", it should be noted, even if it is a truism, that "direct" communication with users available to our politician is also open for companies, institutions, pressure groups, or any kind of "influentials" and the same considerations should apply.

The Web is not a blank page, because it has been built upon previous power relations. Since those relations have not yet been subverted in the least, it seems

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[29] The overuse of "revolutionary" rhetoric when theorizing about the Internet has helped to create a kind of unrealistic, fully ideological and highly populistic discourse.

[30] Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. "The State of the News Media 2011". http://stateofthemedia.org/

obvious that not everyone is on the same communicative level, even if all of us could, potentially, send our messages to the Global Village. We should face these facts when we happily theorize about "user's empowerment", "the era of information transparency" and so on. The "micro-perspective" which puts the individual at the center of the analysis about "new media" ("YOU, Yes, you. You control the Information Age", said the celebrated and zeitgeistliche front page of *Time* magazine in 2006, who declared the "You" -the user's ''I'- "person of the year") systematically ignores the compulsory (if we are talking about a serious theoretical approach), political and economical "framework" of communicative processes[31].

Since an important amount of the conversational flow on the social Web is induced, the core of "secrecy" ("general sociological category" according to Simmel) probably remains stable in the "Information society" (a term beginning to sound cliché and whose requiem Castells himself had already sung over a decade ago[32]) or, if we prefer, in the "compulsory feedback society". We should remember that communication serves not only to reveal and clarify ideas, but can also work as smokescreen obscuring particularly sensitive information under tons of biased bits. The proliferation of induced messages is also the best system of concealment and disinformation, and it applies not only to users but also to journalists, victims also of some kind of "dysfunctional narcotization" as a result of the growing amount of "information" (most of it clearly biased) they have (or they think they have) to deal with[33]. The tragic events that took place at the Fukushima nuclear plant and the information delivered by the media as this catastrophe unfolded in slow motion and real time, are a clear sign that the proliferation of "live" information 24/7 hours in no way guarantees the transparency of information- not even a minimum of transparency. After days of "live coverage" and frenzied Twitter activity, what was really happening at the Fukushima Daiichi power plant was mainly (or completely) unknown to the

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[31] "That is to say, what blindness, what deafness, what density of ideology would have to weigh me down to prevent me from being interested in what is probably the most crucial subject to our existence, that is to say the society in which we live, the economic relations in which it functions, and the system of power which defines the regular forms and regular permissions and prohibitions of our conduct? The essence of our life consists, after all of the political functioning of the society in which we find ourselves." This quotation is from "The Chomsky-Foucault Debate", which took place at Amsterdam University in 1971 and was broadcast by Dutch television.

[32] "Thus, we should abandon the notion of 'Information Society', which I have myself used some times, as unspecific and misleading" (Castells, 2000, p.10)

[33] "Journalists are becoming, willingly or at least fully consciously, mere classifiers of the information that comes in torrents from external agendas, marked by institutions (from the highest levels of politics and finance, to NGOs and civic associations of all kinds) well educated in the language of communication and marketing, looking for a place in the media sun (...) In other words, current journalism, instead of watching power, props it up, journalists gather but do not seek information, report but do not investigate, make value judgments but do not give interpretation, journalists comment but they do not analyze" (Diezhandino, Carrera et al., 2010, p. 17)

mainstream media and to the information agencies as well. The much discussed "transparency", the quality of information we get relies on the ability to access information sources, not only on the ability to disseminate information. Sources are usually zealous when it comes to protecting the information that directly affects their interests, hence, they seek to control and dose out information, and it has yet to be proved if they are more vulnerable in the Internet Age than they were before.

We would like to finish this article about the metamorphosis of the conversational dispositive in the social media environment, alluding to its transformation into a spectacular device. Conversation has become, in itself, thanks to the Internet and all the participatory platforms that allow the users to "broadcast" and at the same time to address personal messages in public, a new mass spectacle. We have millions of people "contemplating" Twitter streaming or Facebook walls, or YouTube videos, while making, at the same time, their own contribution to the online society of the spectacle. All those conversational bits that, in face to face or telephonic interaction, used to fade away immediately after being pronounced, now are intended to endure, fixed into a binary code. They have entered the "political economy of the sign" and can be monetized, since they are part of the media, i.e., they are a spectacle, and as such they can be "contemplated". In this new entertainment scenery, highly "addictive", since it gives the user the impression of being tasting the once forbidden fruit, namely "the power to broadcast" without borders, the impression of being the one who sets the rules, even if the liberty is a "programmed" one, a kind of uneven "codesign process"[34] where the user is able to "customize" his information consumption (nonetheless, we have to be aware that a gulf still exists between "customization" and "personalization" and "setting the agenda"). Against the background of rigidity of the front page or TV programming, the "freedom of choice" allowed by the Internet creates a completely new and gratifying experience of media consumption.

As we have said, the transformation of "conversation", informal interaction inter pares, into a mass spectacle[35], a cheap self-managed show, causes a dramatic change in the nature of conversational-like interactions, since it is becoming a promising field for the entertainment business. We are at the same time the

[34]"One variation of mass customization used online is the codesign process, which requires company-to-customer interaction (Piller et al., 2005). Codesign activities let consumers decide what to design by selecting and/or matching items from a list of options or predefined components (Duray et al., 2000)" (Lee & Chang, 2011, p. 172)

[35] "Social media more popular than online entertainment", said a headline (http://weblogs.hitwise.com/robin-goad/2011/03/social_media_more_popular_than.html). This recent statement is not fully accurate. We should better say: "Social media are one, if not the most, popular online entertainment".

public and the participants in this big global dialogic "reality show". This is not necessarily bad. In no way are we going to sing the familiar "apocalyptic anthem of mass media". We are just saying that "off the record" conversation is not the same as online conversation, and if we still use the same word to describe two completely different realities -as Althusser (1967) wrote, "any theory is obliged to think and express their radical novelty in old concepts" (p.17)-, we have to at least avoid making a literal transfer of "virtues" from one to another, at the risk of being "ideologizing" instead of theorizing.

The difference between offline and online conversation is nearly the same as that established by John Berger regarding the difference between "nakedness" and "nudity" (Berger, 1977/2010, p. 62). Online conversation, as "nudity", is conversation when becoming an object of contemplation, a spectacle[36].

We may wonder, to what extent, and in spite of appearance, the statement made by Baudrillard on "unidirectional" mass media in 1972 is no longer true as applied to interactive mass media like Internet: "The mass media are anti-mediatory and intransitive. They fabricate non-communication—this is what characterizes them, if one agrees to define communication as an exchange, as a reciprocal space of a speech and a response, and thus of a responsibility (not a psychological or moral responsibility, but a personal, mutual correlation in exchange). We must understand communication as something other than the simple transmission-reception of a message, whether or not the latter is considered reversible through feedback. Now, the totality of the existing architecture of the media founds itself on this latter definition: they are what always prevents response, making all processes of exchange impossible (except in the various forms of response simulation, themselves integrated in the transmission process, thus leaving the unilateral nature of the communication intact) (...) They (the media) speak, or something is spoken there, but in such a way as to exclude any response anywhere. This is why the only revolution in this domain—indeed, the revolution everywhere: the revolution tout court—lies in restoring this possibility of response. But such a simple possibility presupposes an upheaval in the entire existing structure of the media" (p. 281).

We apologize for the long quotation, but we find it extremely telling. Perhaps the questions we have to ask ourselves are: Has such an upheaval really been accomplished so far through the modalities of online participation?; Is the

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[36] "To be nude is to be seen naked by others (...) A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude" (Berger, 1977/2010, p. 62).

monopoly of speech really broken in interactive contexts such as social networks, beyond the *petit affaire privé*?

There is evidence, we think, to remain in a hopeful state of healthy skepticism.

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