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MONOGRAFICO

“La disputa sull'ortodossia della Teoria critica”
A cura di Luca Corchia

Luca Corchia	*Presentazione. La disputa sull'ortodossia della Teoria critica*	9
Fabian Freyenhagen	*Che cos'è la Teoria critica ortodossa?*	11
Stefan Müller-Doohm, Roman Yos	*Ortodossia fatale. La Teoria critica sul pendio scivoloso del decisionismo. Una replica a Fabian Freyenhagen*	25
Fabian Freyenhagen	*Accusa dogmatica di dogmatismo. Una replica a Stefan Müller-Doohm e Roman Yos*	39
William Outhwaite	*Grounding grounded?*	55
Luca Corchia	*L'unità della Teoria critica nella molteplicità delle sue voci? Proposte e lineamenti per una ricerca collettiva*	65

SAGGI

Cristian Perra	*La partenogenesi della ragione. Appunti per una storia critica del mito*	95
Francesco Giacomantonio	*Eclissi e abuso della Ragione. Spunti di meditazione a partire dalla lettura di Max Horkheimer e Friedrich von Hayek*	113
Gabriele Giacomini	*From neo-intermediation to the return of strategic action. A Habermasian reflection on the Internet of platforms*	125
Alessandra Peluso	*Frammenti di un discorso filosofico sull'educazione. Tra Nietzsche e Simmel*	147

LIBRI IN DISCUSSIONE

Francesco Antonelli	*Mirella Giannini (2020, a cura di), Karl Polanyi o la socialità come antidoto all'economicismo*	189
Lorenzo Termine	*Roberta Iannone, Romina Gurashi, Ilaria Iannuzzi, Giovanni de Ghantuz Cubbe, Melissa Sessa (2019).* Smart Society. A Sociological Perspective on Smart Living	193
Giulia Giorgi	*Martijn De Waal, José Van Dijck, Thomas Poell (2019).* Platform society. Valori pubblici e società connessa.	201

FROM NEO-INTERMEDIATION TO THE RETURN OF STRATEGIC ACTION
A Habermasian reflection on the Internet of platforms

di *Gabriele Giacomini*[*]

Abstract

The analysis of the traditional public sphere conducted by Habermas contains interesting keys to analysing the web 2.0. According to Habermasian criteria, platforms presents both highly vertical/top-down aspects (e.g. the asymmetry of power between companies like Facebook or Cambridge Analytica and individual users) and permits forms of strategic (and hence manipulative) conduct with a computational power and accuracy the likes of which have never before been seen. Habermas was concerned less with identifying how political systems functioned than he was with safeguarding the independence of the public sphere's periphery from the centres of communicative power. It is therefore essential to examine whether and how the periphery can be influenced or controlled by the current Internet of platforms.

Keywords

Habermas; public sphere; Internet; platforms; deliberation

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1. INTRODUZIONE

According to Habermas (1961), the emergence of public opinion between the 18th and 19th century was accompanied by the affirmation of the formal equality of individuals and the rise of communication processes which nurture democracy. This historic intuition allowed Habermas (1981, 1992) to theorise an ideal model for the public sphere which is defined as a series of rational discourse processes between citizens and the space where popular sovereignty can be expressed.

From this perspective, democratic participation requires "virtuous" mechanisms to promote, as far as possible, rational and critical capacities. However, this in turn requires a sociological understanding of how these mechanisms can be triggered within contemporary digital media. The places and ways in which people communicate have changed and are no longer restricted to the coffeehouses and clubs Habermas referred to (1962), or even newspapers or television studios, as they now include Internet platforms.

The increase of information on the Internet, that shows greater ease in expressing online individuals' voices, is well represented by the growth of users. In 2014, there were 2.4 billion Internet users. That number grew to 3.4 billion by 2016, and in 2017 300 million internet users were added. As of June 2019 there are now over 4.4 billion internet users. This is an 83% increase in the number of people using the internet in just five years. The growth of users is associated with the growth of available information. Since 2013, the number of Tweets each minute has increased 58% to more than 474,000 Tweets per minute in 2019. Youtube usage more than tripled from 2014-2016 with users uploading 400 hours of new video each minute of every day. In 2019, users are watching 4,333,560 videos every minute. Since 2013, the number of Facebook posts shared each minute has increased 22%, from 2.5 Million to 3 million posts per minute in 2016. This number has increased more than 300 percent, from around 650,000 posts per minute in 2011 (Schultz 2019)[1].

There is therefore a need to investigate how freedom of thought and expression – which are necessary for the development of public opinion that is not manipulated – can be achieved on digital platforms which currently host an increasing share of information for citizens and volume of communication between individuals.

This article is structured as follows: in the first section we will look at

[1] The increase in information on the Internet has been monitored by numerous researches over the past thirty years, as Press (2013) recalls.

the main features of the Habermasian public sphere; in the second section we will be looking in more depth at the difference between communicative action oriented towards reaching an understanding and strategic action oriented to manipulation, and will show how these different forms of communication can be incentivised or prevented by specific media; in the third section we will illustrate the peculiarities of the Internet and Web 2.0 environment; the article concludes with some final considerations.

2. ON PUBLIC OPINION. HABERMAS'S MODEL

The emergence of public opinion and the development of the public sphere are linked to the creation of the modern state: according to Habermas, the emerging power of public opinion fostered a political conscience which, in contrast to absolute power, enunciates the concept of general laws and affirms itself as the only legitimate source of these laws – as it represents the opinion of the public. The public sphere is therefore a series of communication processes through which opinions are exchanged and which can progress through dialogue to form the basis for political decisions (Calhoun 2015).

Collective dialogue in Habermasian theory (1992) occurs on two levels: the first is the centre of the system consisting of government bodies with jurisdiction over formal decision-making[2]; the second is the periphery of the system where informal public discourse takes place and problems are expressed, interests or needs are articulated, political claims put forward, political guidelines developed and legislative processes influenced [3].

In the centre of the political system, most operations move forth in accordance with routine procedures[4]. As Privitera (2001) explained, democratic institutions play an important role in "unburdening" political activities and allowing individuals to produce goods and services or even engage in leisure activities. However, this cannot occur independently of democratic communicative power. When the routine no longer works

[2] In the centre we have parliament, government, political parties, the judicial system as well as bureaucratic and administrative apparatus.

[3] The periphery is divided into internal (comprising committees of experts, ombudsmen, universities and other organisations administering decentralised power through a delegation from the state) and external (comprising associations, professional and cultural groups, clubs, churches, lobbies, consumer or environmental protection organisations, etc.)

[4] For example, bureaucratic institutions prepare laws and acts, parliaments approve laws and budgets, courts pass sentences.

smoothly – i.e. when a new problem emerges – the public sphere comes into play with a legitimising and policy guidance role. The source of the legitimation of political choices remains in the periphery as it may always intervene actively to correct undesirable political developments or present new requests.

However, in order for a problem to emerge from the periphery towards the centre it must pass through a public sphere consisting of three different levels: the lowest level is the ephemeral public sphere which consists of informal and sporadic communication between people (e.g. in the home, on the street, in bars, in the workplace); next we have the organised public sphere which consists of settings like party meetings, artistic representations or religious events; the third and final level is the abstract public sphere which is animated by the mass media and made up of a delocalised and separated public (Habermas 1992). The latter is not a domain of pure discussion that is free from domination.

While communication (especially within the context of the ephemeral public sphere) is in principle open to everyone, it is equally true that communication flows are structured and become increasingly structured as we rise from informal communication in the ephemeral public sphere towards the media system in the abstract public sphere. Indeed, in the latter case, we encounter significant flows of communication moving in the opposite direction to the periphery-centre. The independence of the periphery is forced to contend with manipulation from the centre[5].

Given that democratic participation in Habermasian theory requires mechanisms for promoting public opinion's rational and critical capabilities, we need to identify a realistic space for these mechanisms within the Internet of platforms (which is dominated by economic and political centres of power).

3. FROM THE AGORA TO TELEVISION. MEDIA AFFORDANCES

Two Habermasian categories that are particularly useful for analysing the features of the digital public sphere are communicative action and strategic action: by changing the means of communication between individuals we also change the ease with which communicative action will be used instead of strategic action, and vice versa.

Let us now introduce these two concepts in light of the argument put forward by Privitera's (2001): true dialogic, face-to-face, communication was pivotal for the politics of ancient public assembly spaces like the

[5] For more information on the key concepts of Habermas's theory please refer to Edgar (2006) and Müller-Doohm (2008).

ancient Greek agora and Roman forum. The limited dimensions of these public spaces and the relatively small number of participants made discussions viable without the need for technical expedients, i.e. media[6]. The "engine" of the discussion was a simple meeting between citizens, which did not require any instrument or technology to make its existence, transparency and disclosure possible. Moreover, there was no need to have clearly differentiated roles for assembly members: the boundaries between listeners and speakers were fluid, roles were interchangeable and in a given discussion any individual could take on the role of an actor and member of the public (Thompson 1995).

Moving on to mediated and "indirect" communication, it is interesting to note that, even within ancient social and political systems (that were dialogic in the strict sense of the term), the introduction of the textual dimension led to a change. In Plato's *Phaedrus* Socrates argues that writing and reading are inferior to dialogue: if, in a desire to learn or explore something in more depth, one turns to a written text for a question regarding content, the answer will always be the same. Moreover, written discourse does not know who it is addressing and may "irresponsibly" come into contact with either people with knowledge of the respective subject matters or people who know nothing about them at all (and who may, as such, be easily deceived).

In this Platonic passage there are two connected and valuable intuitions: the first is that every technical and instrumental innovation in the field of media has its "affordances" and can promote specific uses that are different from other innovations, thereby ending the public space and the means of political participation (Gaver 1991); the second is that the "technical" extension of the range of communication made possible by media may lead to a "quantitative" increase of communication but not necessarily a "qualitative" improvement in communication.

As writing was followed by printing with movable letters, in a process of progressive technical development, a fundamental novelty was introduced compared to a strictly dialogic context: the abstraction of the public sphere. During the 20th century this process was further accentuated by highly effective media like radio and television. Despite the significant differences between them, the press, radio and television have certain common features that create two main effects which confirm Plato's intuition.

The first effect is that for public and political communication there is no longer a need for people to be physically present in the one space: a public of readers, listeners or viewers is heralded in that no longer have a

[6] Or perhaps we could say that the absence of media made it necessary to involve a relatively small number of participants in a limited space.

defined spatial and temporal localisation. We now have different communication opportunities, that are scattered, lacking precise boundaries and not even bound by time. Tangible dialogic environments (coffeehouses, clubs, associations, etc.) still exist, but with the advent of the press, radio and television, a sizeable share of the formation of opinions no longer develops through dialogue in a strict sense, but rather through the process of reading or listening. As noted by Thompson (1995), the action of making something public is separated from the dialogic exchange of linguistic acts in a strict sense and is instead connected to access to the means of production and dissemination of words, i.e. the media.

The second effect of traditional media is that it accentuates the differentiation between producers (who are limited in number) and users (of whom there are many) of communication flows by creating a distance between them. In theory it is still possible for an individual to move from the role of actor to member of the public, but this is rare and difficult to achieve: the two roles become separated and individuals within the public sphere will be distinctly characterised as actor/public, issuer/receiver. While classical dialogue (in the agora or forum, or even the French coffeehouse considered by Habermas) had a symmetrical reciprocity, in the 20th century media environment there was a move towards a largely one-way flow of communication (McCombs 2018).

In the process of interaction between social parties, Habermas distinguishes between a "communicative action" (characterised by procedures oriented towards dialogue and understanding) and a "strategic action" (which aims to intentionally manipulate opinions).

As highlighted by Privitera (2001: 44-45), while discussion in the *polis* or other assemblies may have included significant elements of strategic action (threats, extortion, peremptory orders), given the ease of foreseeing the consequences of what was said[7], in the abstract and mediated public sphere the model no longer involves speaking to someone one knows, as the written or "fixed" word is directed to an undefined audience beyond the clear and defined perception of the actor-issuer. Even though increasingly sophisticated analytical techniques were created over the years, compared to a pure dialogical situation and a community of limited size, the audience of 20th-century mass media comprised a vast and anonymous group of people. An actor of a mediated public sphere (e.g. someone writing a newspaper article or speaking on television, especially in general-interest broadcasting) will find it more difficult to use strategic argumentative methods, because they do not know the precise consequences of their

[7] The public was under the eyes of the orator who would know these people and their preferences and weaknesses which meant it was possible to adopt oratorical strategies.

communication to the public. An actor is more likely to seek agreement, so the main intention will be a more generic building of consensus and appearing credible by presenting points of view and positions that are universalizable and potentially acceptable to everyone[8].

Unlike ordinary day-to-day contexts, the public sphere is an environment in which it is difficult to make *power claims*, but *validity claims* are permissible. This is evident empirically mainly because of the uncontrollability of a public sphere characterised by mass media – where producers of messages are unable to appraise with certainty the consequences of their actions – and also because of the complexity of the contemporary public sphere: so when faced with opposing interests there will always be a part of the public sphere that is not directly involved in the clash and, in virtue of its existence, will be capable of giving an "external", and to an extent "impartial", opinion. These elements encourage political actors to use communication methods oriented towards reaching understanding and tend to steer actors towards a universalistic approach – at least in part or on the surface.

On the one hand, the mass media increased opportunities for exercising a form of influence or manipulation over a vast public (much more so than in an agora), on the other hand, the vastness and anonymity of the audience increases the impetus to seek a consensus with choices of arguments that are universalistic and which can achieve a consensus that is as broad and comprehensive as possible.

4. THE INTERNET OF PLATFORMS AND THE RETURN TO STRATEGIC ACTION

An authentically dialogic public sphere, which is achieved through a face-

[8] Actually the "universalisation" is always defective in the context of mass media. There is, in fact, a theoretical difference between communication directed to a universal sense and communication directed to gain general consensus. In the first case, we experience a communication aiming at a dialogical exchange, where the subjects can possibly modify their viewpoint because they have been persuaded by other views. In the second case, consensus can be gained also in an instrumental way, resorting to psychological or rhetorical tools. As Corchia and Bracciale show (2020), communication through media implies specific mediation, social and systemic processes that limits the possibility of a universal translation of the issues and instead favours fragmented but at the same time general processes of identification and personalization. In the public field, communicative action can be shaped as a narrative discussion where the regulatory criteria of Habermas are weaker and far from the ones characterizing the ideal deliberative lines of argument (Giacomini 2016). Nevertheless, as we will prove, compared with the digital context and to the web big platforms, mass media promote communicative flows which have at least the "general features" of "universality".

to-face discussion, has certain characteristics: communication is essentially "horizontal", the boundaries between the listener and the speaker are fluid and strategic action is easier since the public is well known to the actors involved.

Conversely, in a public sphere dominated by the mass media, the press, radio and television, communication becomes more "vertical" and a distance is created between the producers ('few') and the users ('many') of communication flows, with information flows mainly moving in a top-down direction (which Habermas perceived as a threat). However, this type of sphere also makes it more difficult to adopt strategic actions since audiences of 20th-century mass media comprised vast and anonymous groups of people, thereby encouraging actors to adopt forms of communication oriented towards reaching understanding.

Nowadays the spread of the web and the nature of the communication it elicits are transforming the dynamics and boundaries of the public sphere once again. The cyberspace offers information and communication tools (websites, blogs and especially the digital platforms of the Web 2.0) with an unprecedented power, since they can perform functions that were once solely within the domain of the mass media, as well as those we would associate with interpersonal means of communication, like the postal system or the telephone.

On the one hand the web 2.0 has certain features of face-to-face discussion: at least in part, it permits a 'many-to-many' discussion, that is horizontal in nature, and where the boundaries between a user and producer are faint. This feature means that the emergence of claims from the bottom-up is possible. On the other hand, the web 2.0 offers digital intermediaries (neo-intermediaries) powerful tools for influencing the flow of communications and systematically interfering with top-down choices by platforms (e.g. algorithmic choices). Digital media also retain the same possibility for strategic action as face-to-face communication and thereby move beyond the characteristics of mass media audiences: on the Internet an audience is no longer largely abstract and anonymous and can be studied in depth by collecting personal data and using the computing power of big data and AI. We no longer have a vast and indefinite audience, instead there are multiple audiences, each of which are often internally homogenous and have characteristics that are defined and known. As a result, it appears that on the web discourse oriented towards reaching understanding is discouraged.

4.1. *First movement. The peripheries of the Web and disintermediation*

Let's start with the characteristics of the Web 2.0 that are reminiscent of a face-to-face dialogue, i.e. the "horizontal" nature of interactions, the overlapping between the roles of producer and user, and the resulting possibility to disseminate and make claims emerge from the bottom-up.

These are characteristics that can be collected under the umbrella concept of "disintermediation"[9]. On the web anyone can – easily and at an extremely small cost – publish, share and disseminate ideas, opinions and information. Communication mediated by computers and telematic networks have given rise to what has become known as "cyberspace" (Benedikt 1991), a communication and socialisation space that is digitalised, multimedia, interactive and hypertextual. Websites, message boards, blogs and social media produce a constant flow of communication and are spaces where citizens can present opinions, speeches and their positions on themes of general interest[10].

As underlined by Parisi and Rega (2010), the digital and telecommunication revolution has opened public discourse to other parties. In particular, applications on the so-called Web 2.0 are designed with an interface that also allows inexperienced users to express their ideas, approve other people's opinions and share content. For politicians there has been an extension and renewal of the means of producing and disseminating messages, information and original content; even actors outside the institutional political sphere can organise their political and communication actions and actively take part in public debate and political life. Moreover, relations are reconfigured as politicians can transmit their positions by bypassing any interference or censure by the system of journalism; the power to determine agendas is no longer under the control of journalists and professional politicians and is opened up to new players, e.g. bloggers contribute to the increase of the plurality of information sources and the proliferation of points of view (Li, Du 2014; Balabanis, Chatzopoulou 2019). Individuals who had largely been passive users in a media landscape characterised by the press, radio and television have simultaneously become users and active producers in the web 2.0, thereby overcoming a distinction that had become more

[9] The term "disintermediation" refers to the capacity to communicate and represent oneself directly, moving beyond the mediations that were traditionally carried out by newspapers, radio and televisions or even political parties (Chadwick 2007).

[10] According to Boccia Artieri (2011) and Aroldi (2014) the communication dynamics in a tweets or Facebook status – where news and information appear alongside chatter – are reminiscent of the communicative sociality of English coffeehouses and polite society.

pronounced with mass media.

In terms of Habermasian theory, this is good news for the vitality of democracy since new tools are available for the periphery and the capabilities and means of expression have improved. However, the Internet does not only consist of a multitude of users – it also includes platforms whose algorithms are organised (and kept secret) by powerful web platforms.

4.2. *Second movement. The centres of the Web and neo-intermediation*

In reality, the concept of disintermediation is partly misleading (Giacomini 2018a, 2018b). On the one hand disintermediation can be interpreted in a strict and historically established sense, in line with our traditional understanding. From this perspective we can argue that the Internet contributes to "disintermediating" traditional intermediaries (e.g. newspapers, mass media or mass parties). On the other hand, however, disintermediation can be understood in a broader, more theoretical sense. If we look at intermediation in etymological and absolute terms and not in relation to something that took place in the past, the concept of disintermediation no longer appears suitable and the concept of neointermediation certainly appears more appropriate. Indeed, digital media go beyond the idea of intermediary as it has been understood until now, but they do not surpass this idea in absolute terms. In other words, the Internet may not have surpassed the notion of intermediaries completely, but it has introduced important new intermediaries, that are different to the ones that came before.

In this sense, (as is the case with mass media) on the web we may also have top-down dynamics and an asymmetry of power between managers and users of digital information and manipulation of the periphery from the centre.

Let's consider an episode. As noted by Gillespie (2012), during Occupy Wall Street – a protest movement that emerged in New York in 2011 to criticise some of the strategies of financial capitalism – the activists made extensive use of various digital instruments to coordinate their actions and publicise their efforts. One of these was Twitter. However, the online debate which largely took place under the hashtag #occupywallstreet, was never one of the trending topics[11]. Some activists, users and commentators complained and accused Twitter of censoring

[11] Trending topics are ones which are in vogue according to Twitter, and which are given more prominence by the platform. Trending is important because it ensures even more visibility.

the movement. Leaving aside the merits of these accusations, this episode underlines the importance and at the same time lack of transparency of the algorithm that enables certain hashtags to trend. Indeed, it is not clear – continues Gillespie – how Twitter "measures" hashtags. Trends are not just a simple measure of the volume of use as they also include different assessments: e.g. is it the first time the term was used in a hashtag? Is the use of the term speeding up rapidly or growing constantly? Is the term used in a specific geographic and social cluster or is it cross-sectional? It seems, for example, that the algorithm prefers the latest news as opposed to phenomena that might be more important but also more constant. Or it seems that discussions taking place between users of the same geographical area or demographic group are worthy of appearing in Trends compared to discussions with a broader appeal and geographically and demographically diverse groups. An "editorial" choice is then made to attribute more importance to breadth rather than depth (Morozov, 2013).

By establishing certain measurement criteria and excluding others, Twitter contributes to giving the public debate "a certain form". Trends are not just a summary of what is being said in the platform, but also a promotion of content Twitter deems most interesting. Twitter is therefore a neo-intermediary (Giacomini 2018a, 2018b), a centre of power which contributes not insignificantly to "giving form" to communications emerging from the bottom.

Other social networking sites like Facebook have chosen to publicly support certain political movements while blocking some content published by users on its platform. For example, when on 26 June 2015 the Supreme Court of the United States made it unconstitutional for state laws to prohibit gay marriages, effectively making gay marriages legal all over the US, Facebook provided an application that allows users to colour their photo profiles with the colours of the rainbow (the colours of the historic flag that symbolises the LGBTQ+ community). This decision to facilitate users in communicating their political position obviously had consequences in terms of the conduct of citizens. For example, some people researching Facebook have discovered that users feel encouraged to replace their profile picture with the symbol of a campaign after several of their friends have done so (State and Adamic, 2015). The more often they saw people using logo as their profile picture, the more likely it was to strengthen their own beliefs. Not to mention Facebook's standards of conduct which, despite purportedly aiming to protect its community from undesirable content, leave the ultimate decision on censorship and removal of certain content from the platform to its algorithms and its staff

(Casilli 2019).

Similar issues surround search engines like Google. Introna and Nissenbaum (2000) were amongst the first to focus on the importance of the development of online search engines in both technical and political terms. Since then the scientific community has started to ask questions about the growing role of search engines in distributing and publicising knowledge and the potential for search engines to hide or distort information, and therefore on the growing intermediation responsibilities that search engines have (Vaughan and Thelwall 2004; Pasquale 2006; Hargittai 2007; Diaz 2008).

Considering that for every word that is searched on the web by users there can be millions of answers, and since nobody has the time to personally read through millions of Internet pages, the search engine must firstly identify the relevance of the content, and must then order search results on the basis of significance. Three types of criteria guide the algorithm: linguistic criteria, popularity criteria, and criteria linked to the behaviour of users (Granka, 2010). For example, search engines have continual feedback on the behaviour of users: if the third result of a certain research is clicked more frequently than the first two results produced by the search engine, it is deemed more useful for users, and could be moved up in the ranking of importance (Joachims et al., 2007). Another type of behaviour relates to the length of time users remain on a page (Kelly, 2005). The feedback of users could be interpreted as a democratic form of a "vote through a click". Nevertheless, it is evident that it is not just consumer choices that contribute to the ranking of web pages, as we also have to consider how the algorithm has been set up.

This is what Grimmelmann (2008) calls the "Google dilemma": Google can suggest some websites as opposed to others; whatever the criteria – alphabetic, on the basis of the number of links or words from the search terms – the results will appear in such a way as to influence the choices of users relying on this new digital intermediary. As was underlined by Granka (2010), on the one hand search engines are necessary for guiding us through the enormous quantity of information, but on the other hand this implies that search engines are in a position to steer what people are allowed to know about the words they search for. This makes them new digital intermediaries: like any form of media, even search engines are obliged to make a decision – to a certain extent – on what content to distribute and show to the public.

In other words, the web's nodes are not all the same and do not have an equal "weight". Some nodes are more "central" than others and govern particularly extensive and substantial flows of communication and

information, meaning they can influence, to a greater or lesser extent, the dynamics of the "elementary" nodes, i.e. the citizens-users. Although a user of information can also become a producer within platforms, it is equally true that a user cannot become a manager of information flows. Therefore, compared to a traditional media environment, the asymmetry may look different but essentially remain radical unequal.

In reality the role of the neo-intermediary does not just apply to large platforms and also extends to communication agencies, political consulting firms, parties and organisations that can use the data collected by platforms with the aim of manipulating digital users for specific purposes. Nowadays social networking sites are the environments with the most data, where hundreds of millions of users express their preferences, especially on platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

From a practical perspective, the strategy that is generally adopted consists in the widest possible use of public data and widespread micro-targeting activities. Data is collected on the interests of a large number of people over a long period of time, in order to acquire an increasing amount of information and understand voters better (Kaiser 2019). For example, information is acquired through questions (e.g. with tests and games) or data is identified and acquired from platforms and later analysed and used for the purposes of understanding, manipulating and mobilising individuals. It should also be considered that big data offers the chance to act on the totality of information and not just on statistical samples, thereby allowing responses to be processed more quickly, cheaply and more precisely than in the past (Mayer-Schonberger, Cukier 2013). Nowadays, analysis of big data takes place in real-time for maintaining control over current decisions and choices and also for forecasting purposes (Zuboff 2015).

Starting from the 2016 presidential elections, the power of controlling data for political purpose became evident: the staff of Democratic candidate and later US President, Barack Obama, used these innovative instruments extensively (Kenski et al. 2010). Since then more and more parties have started using sophisticated "big data analytics" strategies to make more accurate and (strategically) more effective communication decisions (Nickerson, Rogers 2014).

A case in point of the profiling of users (and the intrigues involving small and large neo-intermediaries – the managers of large platforms and political consulting firms) was the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which came to global attention in the spring of 2018 and had significant political consequences (Heawood 2018). It was found that, while developing an

app for collecting data on users' online activities through a survey, a researcher had accessed the Facebook accounts of approximately 87 million users and captured their data and preferences. This "material" then came into the hands of the English communication company Cambridge Analytica that used it to perfect communication strategies for certain electoral campaigns (including, allegedly, the American presidential campaign of Republican candidate, Donald Trump)[12]. The profiling technique used by this platform is known as "psychographic", as it allows a psychological profile to be created for each user (covering attributes like their personality, values, interests and lifestyle) and enables politicians, parties or communication companies to precisely foresee what type of message could convince a specific citizen and therefore allow them to put in place strategic communication actions (Kosinski et al 2013)[13].

As Byung-Chul Han (2017) observed, every step by individuals on the web is observed and registered. Our digital habits provide an exact copy of who we are as people and our souls and may even be more precise or complete than the image we have of ourselves. Political candidates have a comprehensive snapshot of voters as they can collect, or rather purchase, immense quantities of data from a variety of sources which can be connected to produce extremely accurate voter profiles. Micro-targeting is used to reach out to voters in a targeted way with personalised messages in order to influence them (2016, pp. 75-77).

The "rigorous" profiling of users also makes it possible to create and disseminate highly effective fake news (McIntyre 2018). Propaganda and "sophist" communication have clearly always existed, however the tools now available make it possible to package fake news based on the vulnerabilities of single individuals (Matz et al. 2017). Indeed, this fake news is created to reflect the goals, interests and personality of the recipient and their respective digital community. They understand the psychology of individuals and are fed into their interactions. In the offline world an approach of this kind would be virtually impossible or extremely costly but the web's vast quantity of data and processing tools make it possible to strengthen propaganda and create fake news.

The effects of this are extremely relevant for the purposes of strategic

[12] The scandal led to a record-breaking $5 billion penalty imposed upon Facebook by the Federal Trade Commission in July 2019. The Federal Trade Commission action, however, has been criticized as failing to adequately address the privacy and other harms emanating from Facebook's release of approximately 87 million Facebook users' data, which was exploited without user authorization (Hu 2020).

[13] It is not just Cambridge Analytica that used these techniques as they also appear to have been adopted by the Russian company, Internet Research Agency.

action. Technology and data have made it easier and less risky for parties organising electoral campaigns to target people whose political position is already known (for the benefit of their candidate) instead of reaching out to a larger chunk of potential voters. It has become possible to raise the most controversial subjects and target only people who are sensitive to the message without running the risk of alienating other voters who see things differently. Strategic action is "incentivised" once again as opposed to a communicative action oriented towards reaching understanding. The data collected by platforms make it possible to find very precise and detailed information on voters, just as was the case for corporations at the beginning of the Internet and e-commerce era. This makes it possible to precisely identify and target voters with advertising and content they will certainly appreciate and which is in line with their views and beliefs. The result is that communication no longer "needs" to be oriented towards reaching understanding – as it is with mass media – and can be extremely strategic.

For all these reasons, the audience is no longer anonymous for the large platforms managing flows of information and for companies or politicians using this data to adopt the most effective forms of strategic communication. The partial and imperfect "veil of ignorance" that characterised mass media and encouraged communication actors to universalise their political message is therefore lifted.

5. TOWARDS A NEW BALANCE BETWEEN THE CENTRE AND THE PERIPHERY

The principal image that has been associated with the Internet is that of a web, to the extent that "Internet" and "the web" have become synonymous in everyday language. The web as a place without a centre that tends to promote the spontaneous development of a decentralised and distributed system of information, which is reminiscent of the brain, i.e. a form of organisation where models and structures are the result of a horizontal process and are not imposed by a hierarchically superior centre (Flichy 2001, Cuono 2015).

Nevertheless, this image of the Internet as a natural and horizontal space for the exchange of information is incomplete. While on the one hand the metaphor of the brain does do justice to the notion that the Internet lacks a fixed hierarchical structure which is solidly defined, on the other hand this metaphor neglects the fact that the nodes of the web are not all the same, i.e. they do not all have an equal "weight". Some nodes are *somehow* more "central" than others, they govern particularly

broad and significant information and communication flows and can have more influence on the dynamics of other much smaller nodes.

While the media, money and power can give rise to a manipulation of information, are there new ways communication from the periphery can contrast deception?

Habermas distinguishes between a manipulated public sphere, (that can strengthen power but which is not particularly legitimating for institutions) and an independent public sphere (that has the power to criticise and control institutions) (1992). In the former we would mainly find actors within known organisations, with their own easily recognisable resources and tools, while in the latter we mainly find actors who exist outside organisations, in a fluid, peripheral and relational communication context.

On the one hand, in the Web 2.0 it is easier for "peripheral" parties to emerge. Anyone can easily and at a very low cost publish, share and disseminate ideas, opinions and information, unlike was the case in a media system dominated by newspapers, radios and televisions. Moreover, the web has characteristics of face-to-face discussions: to a certain extent it enables many-to-many discussions of a horizontal nature and the boundaries between users and producers are weak. We tend to think of peripheral actors as being disadvantaged compared to actors that belong to the system: since they lack well-structured and established organisations, or organisations with a mass media power, they are obliged to carve out their own recognisability (this is the case for social movements who must go through a phase of self-definition and self-legitimation). However, through the Internet it is much easier than it was in the past for parties to make available and propose the subject matters they deem most important: for example, the costs for opening a blog or a website are a fraction of those required to launch a traditional television channel (Bruns, Highfield 2015). The more grassroots initiatives, movements, associations we have the more independent the public sphere becomes. Conversely, where a system merely amplifies the voices of actors from structured organisations who represent the interests of established groups of power (e.g. through important and influential or television channels), there is a greater chance of living in a manipulated public sphere (Habermas 1992).

As we have argued, the Web 2.0 allows new actors from the centre (neo-intermediaries) to manipulate the flow of communications with new tools, in a manner that is reminiscent of the "top-down" power of mass media. Moreover, digital media also offer the possibility for the type of strategic action that can be adopted in face-to-face discussions: on the

Internet an audience is no longer largely abstract and anonymous, as is the case with traditional mass media, and can be studied in depth by collecting personal data and analysing big data.

In other words, the Web 2.0 appears to have the "defects" (the threat to the independence of citizens) of both face-to-face communication (that would have been typical in the Greek agora, Roman forum or 18th-century coffeehouse) and mass media communication (newspapers or television channels). Indeed, while face-to-face communication incentivises strategic action but is not top-down, and the mass media communication is top-down while incentivising communicative action oriented towards reaching understanding, digital communication technologies have very vertical/top-down features (think of the asymmetry in power between a neo-intermediary like Google and an individual user) and enable forms of strategic action (and thereby manipulation) with a computing power and precision that has never been seen before - not even in a Roman forum where everyone knew one another. Digital communication has the strategic action of face-to-face communication and the top-down structure of the mass media.

Habermas's concern was not that of identifying the way in which political systems worked, but rather protecting spaces for a free communication by the periphery of the public sphere (Rusconi 1992). Potential intrusions can be especially dangerous when they are hidden, as is the case with digital neo-intermediaries. In a phase of change for the public sphere, given the advent of new digital technologies, it is therefore essential to examine in depth how the periphery can be controlled by systemic constraints and media structures.

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Numero chiuso il 25 febbraio 2021

ULTIMI NUMERI

2020 / XXII(2 - aprile-giugno)

ROBERTO CIPRIANI, *Presentazione*;
MARIELLA NOCENZI, ALESSANDRA SANNELLA, *Quale conflitto sociale nell'era dei robots e dell'intelligenza artificiale?*;
RICCARDO FINOCCHI, MARIELLA NOCENZI, ALESSANDRA SANNELLA, *Raccomandazioni per le future società*;
FRANCO FERRAROTTI, *La catarsi dopo la tragedia. Le condizioni del nuovo umanesimo*;
MARCO ESPOSITO, *La tecnologia oltre la persona? Paradigmi contrattuali e dominio organizzativo immateriale*;
ALEX GIORDANO, *Tecnica e creatività – Societing 4.0. Per un approccio mediterraneo alle tecnologie 4.0*;
PAOLO DE NARDIS, *Conflittualità urbana, AI e digitalizzazione*;
VITTORIO COTESTA, *Tecnica e società. Il caso della Fabbrica integrata Fiat a Melfi*;
ANTONIO LA SPINA, *Trasformazioni del lavoro e conflitti*.
LUCIO MEGLIO, *Evoluzione tecnologica e tecnologie educative in una società conflittuale*;
MARTINA DE SOLE, *Aspetti orizzontali dell'IA, Gli aspetti di genere*;
RENATO GRIMALDI, SANDRO BRIGNONE, LORENZO DENICOLAI, SILVIA PALMIERI, *Intelligenza artificiale, robot e rappresentazione della conoscenza*;
MICHELE GERACE, *Il conflitto ideale*;
ANGELO ROMEO, *Maria Cristina Marchetti (2020),* Moda e politica. La rappresentazione simbolica del potere.
DOMENICO MADDALONI, *Edmond Goblot (2019).* La barriera e il livello. Studio sociologico sulla borghesia francese moderna. *A cura di Francesco Pirone*;
LUCA CORCHIA, *Francesco Antonelli (2019).* Tecnocrazia e democrazia. L'egemonia al tempo della società digitale.

2020 / 22(3 - luglio-settembre)

MARIA CATERINA FEDERICI, ULIANO CONTI, *Vilfredo Pareto. Dialogo postumo con la modernità*;
DONATELLA PACELLI, *Vilfredo Pareto oggi. Ancora un talento da de-ideologizzare?*;
Maria Cristina Marchetti, *Rileggere Weber e Pareto. Ragione e sentimento nella teoria dell'azione sociale*;
MINO GARZIA, *Pareto e la matematica*;
ALBAN BOUVIER, *La théorie des croyances collectives de Pareto. Essai de reconstruction et d'évaluation de la théorie des « dérivations » et des « résidus » du point de vue des recherches contemporaines*;
FRANCESCO ORAZI, FEDERICO SOFRITTI, *La sfida della digitalizzazione in Italia. Transizione forzata e welfare tecnologico ai tempi del Covid-19*;
LUCA BENVENGA, MICHELE LONGO, *Kropotkin. Mutualismo e Anarchia*;
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