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Beyond the “personal” and the “political”. Rethinking journalism as relational work

Abstract

Traditionally, the information process had the receiver as the end point of a negotiation that started with the producers of events and reached the audience through journalistic mediation. Now, in digital spaces, the terms have been reversed: each person creates a specific and idiosyncratic information diet, obviously relying on the mainstream media. The focus is on the recipient, who has an almost infinite number of options to choose from. The individual receiver becomes his or her own *de facto* gatekeeper, less supported in his or her news consumption by the journalist's own work of news selection, hierarchisation and presentation. Moreover, he has to carry out these processes on his own, through the information channels he considers most appropriate.

Starting from this scenario, which highlights the features of a new ecology of information, the paper aims to describe and analyse the complex relationship between journalistic production and publics within the mediated public sphere. The aim is to understand how the idea of a journalistic field, understood as a “space of relationships”, manages to overcome all the personal, political and techno-economic logics within the current flow of information, in order to create the conditions for co-participation and thus the definition of a new information pact. We are faced with an information system in transition, capable of producing changes in the audience and in the way public opinion is formed. The fact that audiences are increasingly sceptical and cynical can be an “advantage”, because it is a sting in the tail for a journalism that tries too hard to chase quantity of news rather than quality.

Riassunto

Tradizionalmente, il processo informativo aveva il destinatario come punto finale di una negoziazione che iniziava con i produttori di eventi e raggiungeva il pubblico attraverso la mediazione giornalistica. Oggi, negli spazi digitali, i termini si sono invertiti: ogni individuo costruisce una dieta informativa specifica e idiosincratica, pur facendo ovviamente affidamento sui media mainstream. L'attenzione si sposta sul destinatario, che dispone di un numero quasi infinito di opzioni tra cui scegliere. Il singolo ricevente diventa di fatto il proprio gatekeeper, meno supportato nel consumo delle notizie dal lavoro giornalistico di selezione, gerarchizzazione e presentazione. Inoltre, deve svolgere autonomamente questi processi, attraverso i canali informativi che ritiene più appropriati.

A partire da questo scenario, che evidenzia le caratteristiche di una nuova ecologia dell'informazione, il contributo mira a descrivere e analizzare la complessa relazione tra produzione giornalistica e pubblici all'interno della sfera pubblica mediatizzata. L'obiettivo è comprendere come l'idea di campo giornalistico, inteso come "spazio di relazioni", riesca a superare tutte le logiche personali, politiche e tecno-economiche presenti nell'attuale flusso informativo, al fine di creare le condizioni per la co-partecipazione e, dunque, per la definizione di un nuovo patto informativo. Ci troviamo di fronte a un sistema informativo in transizione, capace di produrre cambiamenti nel pubblico e nelle modalità di formazione dell'opinione pubblica. Il fatto che i pubblici siano sempre più scettici e cinici può rappresentare un "vantaggio", o meglio uno stimolo, per un giornalismo che tende a inseguire più la quantità di notizie che la loro qualità.

Keywords: personal; political; journalism; news; relational work; audiences

Parole chiave: personale, politico, giornalismo, notizie, lavoro relazionale, pubblici

Introduction

Digital communication and the massive spread of social networks have created a growing demand for interconnection, further strengthening the individual character of communication processes in contemporary society.

This change is closely linked with the 'triple revolution' of social networks and the information system, which places the individual at centre stage, able to connect at any time and create collaborative networks to provide immediate answers

to different needs¹. Everything takes shape within “connected platforms”, huge infrastructures that link content, subjects of different cultural backgrounds and “saturating new media”, such as the hundreds of cable or satellite television channels or social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter².

The multiplicity of media and access to the internet have enabled the daily use of ‘polymedia’, of different media that are increasingly connected, even though, globally – suggests the sociologist Paul Starr – the consumption of information through the legacy media still endures because the constant availability and overload of content on the net transforms information into ‘news-like information’.

The formats represented by modern journalism have in part been replaced by undifferentiated ‘news stories’, told by several voices, gathered by increasingly less defined audiences, which for this very reason acquire a continuously decreasing value for media institutions, which prefer to invest economically in niches of consumers³.

The change imposed and the speed with which the network operates daily on our screens and in our daily lives have, of course, also been affecting journalism for some time now, with decisive stresses that require information professionals and their audiences to get active and keep up to date, as they are continually immersed in a ‘field’ of action that has to come to terms, on the one hand, with the ‘news’ as the object of the profession, and, on the other, with the use and search for alternative sources that can put a strain on a job that, more often than not, has to reckon with tight deadlines.

The dynamics of the web have redefined many characteristics of the journalistic profession, which is increasingly influenced by the logic of the digital, often allowing the simple citizen to replace the figure of the communication operator, with footage or comments produced through personal devices, often then reused by journalists⁴.

¹ Couldry 2015; Gillespie 2018; Colombo 2020.

² Madianou, Miller 2013.

³ Bird 2000; Ruddock 2008.

⁴ Hamilton 2006.

Traditionally, the information process had in the receiver the end point of a negotiation that started from the producers of events and through journalistic mediation reached the public. Now, the terms have been reversed: each person carves out a specific and peculiar information diet, obviously relying on the mainstream media. At the center of the project is the receiver, who can draw on a virtually infinite number of options.

The usual, everyday practice of news exposure may clarify the extent of what we are saying. Today, most people receive information on their devices, especially their smartphones, by accessing it through social platforms. While a few years ago this practice concerned a limited number of people – the so-called digital natives – today it has spread to older people as well. Whereas before, people used to enjoy a container – the 40 pages of a newspaper, the 30 minutes of the news or the 10 minutes of the radio news – now they enjoy individual contents: the news that incessantly bursts into our lives. The container becomes the flow of information that we individually receive through the various platforms we frequent and that sees the juxtaposition of a breaking news story of global significance and immediately afterwards, perhaps, an emoticon sent to us by our partner or a friend.

There is a profound deconstruction of the information process.

In this regard, what Alberto Melucci wrote in 1994 seems prophetic: he noted how there is an unlimited expansion of symbolic possibilities, of self-reflexive activity, of the capacity to reflect and represent reality through multiple languages. This capacity seems gradually to replace reality itself and makes us live in a world produced by the images that we ourselves create, so much so that we can no longer distinguish between reality and the reality of the image. We participate, in reality or in the imaginary, in an infinity of worlds. Each of them is characterised by a culture, a language, a set of roles and rules, to which we must adapt each time we migrate from one to another⁵.

⁵ Melucci 1994.

1. *A new ecology of information*

What might appear to be just a trivial change in the way information is distributed actually has very significant consequences.

The individual receiver becomes *de facto* his own gatekeeper. He is less helped in his exposure to news by the journalists' own work of news selection, prioritisation and presentation. He has to implement these processes on his own, through the information channels he considers most appropriate: newspapers, websites, blogs, influencers, but also friends and acquaintances. Moreover, in a changing information environment, which is increasingly dense.

Information is the environment we live in, a bit like the air we breathe. And the air can be polluted; especially by the excess of information in circulation, which creates that information overload that is increasingly at the centre of thinking about 'information bubbles', the growth of fake news, and the reasons why people are increasingly tempted to avoid exposure to news⁶.

Indeed, information overload induces one to retreat into the already known or to expose oneself to content with which one agrees, with the consequence that information, ideas and beliefs are amplified and reinforced by repetition, within an information world that tends to close in on itself almost as if to protect itself from excessive exposure.

While initially the greater possibility for each individual to choose the news he or she wanted was seen as a goal to strive for, as it was capable of raising the degree of freedom of the user, who could construct his or her own personal palimpsest (*my media*)⁷, over the years this greater autonomy in choice has appeared to be the main cause of a defensive action on the part of the public, which - dazed by the excess of information available - takes refuge in the already known and shared, preferring echo-chambers⁸. The public takes refuge in more circumscribed and reassuring worlds, where we find what we like best, meeting

⁶ Haim *et al.* 2018.

⁷ Negroponte 1987.

⁸ Sunstein 2017.

those who have the same interests and share the same narratives
as us .

Confirmation bias is certainly not a discovery of the digital world. Research on media effects since at least the 1950s has agreed on the propensity of users to select perception, attention and memorisation in favour of what they already share. However, in the former communicative set-up, one was exposed to a largely shared offer. Within this sharing, one could then choose what to investigate. In information bubbles, on the other hand, one remains within universes separate from those of others, with the consequence that one absolutizes one's own points of view.

Thus, communicative acting is redefined, it requires wide and stable public spheres, as well as a co-presence of the other and his thoughts in the formation of one's own opinion⁹.

The opinion constructed in these bubbles is not discursive, but 'sacred', as it coincides entirely with the identities of those who participate in it. Informing attenuates the fundamental character of a process aimed at understanding, in order to participate, to become a matter of identity. Through information I understand and make explicit who I am and what I want. But in this way one is induced to believe what is consistent with one's own worldview, one's own values, and to undervalue the accuracy of those contents that do not correspond to one's own orientations.

Chul Han uses the term 'infocracy' to describe how information increasingly has its own logic, its own temporality, its own dignity beyond truth and lies.

Paradoxically, therefore, the excess of information and the spread and increase of rumours and disinformation can produce a polluting effect and affect the credibility of journalism¹⁰, fostering news fatigue, which encompasses a range of feelings and sensations such as perceived fatigue to keep up to date precisely because of the incessant nature of the information flow,

⁹ Arendt 2004.

¹⁰ Blumler, 2016; Davis 2019; Sorrentino 2018.

resulting in feelings of exhaustion, burnout and “techno-stress”¹¹ and promoting the phenomenon of “news avoidance”¹².

Traditionally, news avoidance has been linked to political disinterest or anti-politics, while recent literature on the topic tends to consider more complex and broader interpretations of the phenomenon.

Skovsgaard and Andersen (2020), distinguish between ‘intentional and unintentional’ news avoidance to identify a conscious way of opposing news that is misjudged or appears too ‘complex’, such as politics, the global economy, wars or, more generally, the challenges of liberal democracies.

In the latter case, it seems that audiences prefer to draw their own ‘comfort zone’, avoiding certain topics and selecting content in a personalised way, thanks also to the help of algorithms and their constant profiling activity¹³. The nature of the content chosen and the selection methods themselves are aspects shaped in response to structural constraints and the life circumstances of individuals, which determine what is most useful or attractive to them¹⁴.

What the contemporary user seeks seems to be not so much ‘good information’, but the construction of a meaningful, safe, effective, risk-free information path through practices of resistance, what Certeau calls ‘tactics of “invention of the everyday”’¹⁵.

For Blumler (2016) and Davis (2020), all this points to an unprecedented crisis of public communication and an increasingly evident uncriticalness of citizens and a wide distance from institutions.

In this context, the avoidance of news could be interpreted as a ‘simple’ attempt to escape from a complex reality or as a new tactic of the media citizen to orientate himself within the

¹¹ Ravindran, Yeow Kuan and Hoe Lian 2014.

¹² Strömbäck 2017; Skovsgaard, Andersen 2020; Ytre-Arne, Moe 2021; Edgerly 2022; Palmer 2023.

¹³ Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, Ardèvol-Abreu 2017.

¹⁴ Palmer *et al.* 2023.

¹⁵ Buoncompagni 2018.

information ecosystem, making a selection among the many contents he is exposed to.

2. A dense and mediatised public sphere

Even without going so far as to abandon information through defensive strategies aimed at containing the overload and selecting what one likes, agrees with and shares, there is no doubt that the new and intertwined paths of information require each one of us to carry out a work of selection among the many pieces of information. This means that the work of recontextualising each piece of news must be carried out directly by us, the receivers, within a space intended for the formation of social relations that no longer coincides with the places of face-to-face interactions, and is no longer based on a common culture. A distancing is determined that is the precondition for the process of disembedding, the disengagement of social relations from the situated contexts of interaction¹⁶.

The process described by Giddens is accentuated by digital media, which allow social actors to separate themselves from place, understood as physical and real locality, thus generating a sort of enlargement of the significant space of construction and reproduction of culture and identity, of encounter with the Other. The scenarios of the situational geography of human behaviour are modified, generating the weakening of place.

We find ourselves embedded in a new form of anthropological space, the space of knowledge, an open environment of the virtual community of knowledge and know-how, where mental abilities, skills and imagination are pooled¹⁷. The new digital culture tends to shape the world by describing a constantly mediated reality that is superimposed on the real one, confining the latter to individual experience that gradually regains meaning by referring to what is seen, heard and read through the media.

Virtual and medial reality mingle with the real one, bringing consequences that are now impossible not to see and consider.

¹⁶ Giddens 1994; Riva 2012.

¹⁷ Lévy 1996.

The media, therefore, are no longer limited to the representation of events and the transmission of information and symbolic content, but move on, coating the very relationships between individuals with meaning. Every part of contemporary social life is touched by the presence of the media, to the extent that their absence is perceived as a wound: in the so-called information society, the absence of information is considered an "immense deprivation"¹⁸.

The mediatisation process of culture and everyday life, understood, on the one hand, as an ecological meta-process of cultural and social transformation influenced by the media and, on the other hand, as the diffusion by the media of its own formats and frames in the spheres of the world of life and social relations, leads individuals to experience events, observe and learn about new cultures, real and imaginary worlds, activating a process of reflexive self-formation¹⁹.

A new and shared symbolic communicative space is created, in which belongings can be defined. These new spaces connect to a communicative reality to be understood as a set of meanings and actions that assemble realities, reproduced imperfectly and continuously transformed. There is a progressive enlargement of the digital environment that produces an incessant transformation of the public sphere. More inclusive, accessible and privatised, the public sphere invades the domestic environment, causing the latter to lose its characteristics as a private space.

As Joshua Meyrowitz wrote, formerly private places are more accessible to the outside world through these media. Everything that happens almost anywhere can happen wherever we are. But if we are everywhere, we are not even in a particular place.

The public sphere becomes mediatised and dense, populated by a great plurality of social actors, whose interactions define the potential for social action that each of them enacts²⁰.

Journalism is both producer and product of this dense wealth of subjects, events, channels through which to relate; it thus

¹⁸ Thompson 1998.

¹⁹ Couldry, Hepp 2013.

²⁰ Thompson 1998; Sorrentino 2008.

contributes to producing an arena continually redefined by a dense web of interactions where what others do is discussed, criticised, proposed, approved and witnessed.

It becomes more consistent, because it is incessant, continuous, the interactive production of meaning, significantly defined by Manuel Castells as “creative audience”. Source of the remix that characterises the world of mass self-communication.

However, if the receiver, who historically was the content broadcaster, becomes the information creator, the forms of sharing change.

The level of content sharing decreases because the paths of access to information become more articulated and heterogeneous, so that each one of us prefers channels, formats and contents that best suit our needs; making us, however, lose exposure to topics and events that are less central to us. Whereas in the past we received less information, but through more generalist channels that ensured common ground even among people far apart in terms of cultures, lifestyles and interests, today it is more likely that among these distant people there is no opportunity to discuss the same things²¹.

Moreover, the digital environment facilitates the horizontality of communication processes, making it very easy to discuss, comment and share.

There is a narrowing of sharing understood as a common ground on which to engage in discourse among strangers; while sharing is widening among those who are socially and culturally more homogeneous. It is precisely this redefinition in the forms of sharing that has led to talk of a pluralisation of the public sphere, increasingly declined in the plural – the public spheres – precisely to emphasise the variety of possible places and forms of information exchange.

This fragmentation of the public sphere is combined with a simultaneous acceleration and expansion of information processes²². The acceleration is favoured by the end of the

²¹ Sorrentino 2008; 2014.

²² Russ-Mohl 2011.

deadline which, in fact, makes everything publishable at any time of day or night.

Whereas newspapers, radio and television news used to be packaged with precise deadlines, to send the edition on press or on air, for the web this insurmountable limit no longer exists. The flow of information is accentuated, making it more and more incessant. The concept of time is redefined. Deadlines used to make publishable only what was able to acquire significance by the time it had to go to print or video. Now, instead, individual news items are published as soon as they arrive. Once again, decomposition and recomposition differ from what was happening before. And once again in this continuous flow, meaning must be attributed by the receiver.

Similarly, the concept of space is also redefined, as – again – the constraints of traditional media are not present.

These transformations affect the concept of relevance. In fact, the hierarchy of the news is less and less given by spatial relevance – being on the front page or occupying several columns – nor, even less, by temporal relevance – the news opening the news or a radio news bulletin – but has a mere chronological order, in which it must be the receiver who defines priorities and emphases.

The concept of relevance of a piece of news becomes frayed, and the activity of selecting what is considered most significant clashes with much more complex problems caused by increasingly less compact and coherent worldviews²³.

Carey's well-known distinction between the transmissive and ritual conception of communication takes on new substance.

The transmissive conception focuses on the sender and his persuasive strategies, implemented to convince the recipients. For this paradigm, communication is "a process of transmitting messages at a distance for the purpose of control. The archetypal example is, therefore, persuasion, opinion change, behaviour modification [...] influence and conditioning"²⁴.

²³ Bogaerts, Carpentier 2013.

²⁴ Carey 1989, p.18.

The transmissive conception is opposed by the ritual, or sharing paradigm, centred on the ability to create a communicative attunement between sender and receiver; attunement possible thanks to a continuous negotiation that is interwoven between the various subjects involved in the communicative process; communication is considered a symbolic process where reality is produced, consolidated, corrected and transformed²⁵.

For the transmissive approach, all communication takes place through a medium conceived as a mere channel and the control of which becomes strategic in order to provide the public with characterised information and construct knowledge that is functional to the communicative power of the various broadcasters. For the sharing paradigm, the media define a socio-cultural environment in which interactions between subjects are formed.

In the first approach, the communicative process reflects the power relations existing in a given social system, in a zero-sum game. The more a broadcaster is able to have a say, the more power it gains in conditioning and effectiveness in reaching its recipients.

Following the second approach, we emphasise the reconstruction of social reality rather than the mirroring of it, carried out by communicative processes on the basis of a negotiation that is interwoven between the various social subjects, each of them bearers of interests. In this case, what counts is the ability to establish interpretative frames, which can be translated into signs, opinions and events that enable individuals to recognise the different social situations in which they have to think, decide and act. In the conception of sharing, the role attributed to the public sphere as a collective place in which civil society and the state confront each other, a place of discursive rhetoric, negotiation and identity confrontation, is exalted²⁶.

The continuous interaction between issuer and receiver provides for a less clear-cut play of the parts.

²⁵ Carey 1989; Mazzoli 2013, p. 38.

²⁶ Solito 2002; Pizzorno 2008.

The notion of sharing seems even more appropriate to describe the communicative process in the digital environment, since receivers have greater freedom in the processes of reconstructing reality, as they are exposed to a stronger, but also more accelerated, fragmented and dilated information flow, which forces them to re-contextualise the received news in the interpretative schemes and logics of their everyday life.

McNair defines all this as cultural chaos: there is no longer a uniqueness of direction in the message, now thrown into a crowded communicative environment, in which the times of production, distribution and fruition of information increasingly merge into de-spatialised instantaneity. Everyone is constantly receiving information from mainstream newspapers, but also from other sources that are increasingly professionally equipped to handle their own communication needs, which fragment the communication offer, crowding the information ecosystem with differently attractive and persuasive voices.

In this way, journalism progressively loses its monopoly in the production and dissemination of 'news-facts': practices that were the basis of journalistic authority and the acceptance of the legitimacy of its *modus operandi*²⁷.

Despite the important role played today by various audiences in the production and sharing of content, the journalist is still entrusted with the task of verifying the veracity of the fact. Indeed, journalistic verification ascribes not only the connotation of what really happened, but also that of relevance and public interest, on the basis of a solid agreement on the meaning to be attributed to the fact (Lorusso 2018).

However, with the digital revolution such prerogatives become more open to speculation about what is newsworthy, what is relevant and of public interest. The 'facts' are assembled, distributed and enjoyed through a network by social actors interconnected in ways that still rely on journalistic mediation, but then expand to other references²⁸.

²⁷ Tong 2018.

²⁸ Deuze, Witschge 2018.

More fragmented distribution processes and more segmented audiences adversely affect the effectiveness of sharing, making information more unstable and exposed to continual reversals. Therefore, stabilisation of meaning becomes more difficult to achieve, because the process of negotiating these meanings changes in form and substance, involving a greater number of actors.

The term ‘chaos’ proves to be appropriate insofar as it contrasts with the concept of control, which is less and less exclusively practised by journalists, who are called upon to share it with all those who enter the communicative agon – as already described – no longer only in the role of consumers, but also as producers.

This rich but confused flow of information redefines the journalistic function, which, from being the “decision-maker of last resort” of what is considered newsworthy, is transformed into a work based on relations, that is, on the ability to unite the thousand rivulets of this flow into a coherent whole, involving the various actors who co-participate in the definition of this new information pact.

However, this involvement struggles to turn into real inclusion, both because it continues to be more advantageous to treat the public as consumers to be satisfied, and because it is objectively difficult to identify pathways that really succeed in acquiring the many and diverse skills present in society and translate them into practices of effective involvement in information production, despite the many existing technological possibilities²⁹.

Journalists continue to perceive themselves as intermediaries between sources and the public. However, the awareness that they have to capitalise on their increased communication skills, as well as having to select from an enormously enlarged repertoire of topics and events, prompts them to identify strategies to shorten the distance. They frequently give the floor directly to the sources, whose statements they increasingly publish, also

²⁹ Hermida, Turman 2008.

taking up audio, video and social messages produced directly by these sources.

While journalism has long connected sources, translated facts into simple and effective formats for a mass audience, it is now called upon to generate a different, double connection.

On the one hand, aggregating more information through an activity of in-depth analysis, updating and interpretation, providing accurate interpretative frameworks and showing the differences in viewpoints; on the other hand, involving both the sources and the audience of information users in this content processing work.

Within this scenario, it is possible to distinguish four different levels of feedback in the production of networked information that journalists receive from the audiences³⁰.

First, each online site, depending on the platform used to create it, obtains a constant flow of statistics with respect to its users (number of accesses, reading time, most read articles, etc.).

A second level concerns the possibility of commenting on published articles by a certain number of readers. The editorial staff, which is responsible for everything the site/page publishes, must necessarily proceed with a filtering operation, deciding whether or not to read, take into account cues or criticisms, interact or give explanations and answers where required.

Another important element has to do with the profiles of the newspaper and those of the journalists themselves who receive likes or increase the number of followers by bouncing articles and comments within the different news environments.

The last level concerns the interaction with the audience and the network as a source.

On the one hand, digital information changes certain production routines also by virtue of the influences, intervention and skills journalists acquire over the reader, but it can also introduce a wealth of contributions, especially if coordinated by careful editorial work. On the other hand, the available sources are able to reach citizens directly, who in turn, react, respond,

³⁰ Deuze 2004; Singer 2004; Valentini 2012; Buoncompagni 2023.

comment, realise a process of disintermediation that further highlights the criticality and changes inherent to journalism³¹.

Both in the construction of the news, as well as in the measurement of the interest it arouses, which can now be easily determined in real time, journalists are able to rely on the participation of the public, with whom the forms and levels of interaction have grown considerably.

We are faced with the possibility of building a new information pact that, however, poses an urgent demand for media education.

3. *Journalism as a relational field*

If until now the most effective term in describing journalistic work has been gatekeeper, a guardian who decides what can stay in and what can stay out of the public eye, out of the shared attention of public opinion, now the correct term is networker, separator and distributor of facts - news, to differentiate what is to be published from the rest of the available content.

In this sense, contemporary journalism is – as already mentioned – connection between information, or rather, ‘a work of relations’ (Jarvis 2006; Maistrello 2010). In recent years, there have been several studies that have mainly considered how online social networking platforms have transformed the way news is produced and the relationship between journalists and the public. These works mainly focus on how journalists use social media during newsmaking processes and how the relationship between journalists and the public is changing, especially as a consequence of the possibility for users to interact with journalists and to produce and share journalistically relevant content³².

To define these dynamics, Jervis (2006) spoke of networked journalism, Hermida (2010) of ambient journalism and Vale-riani (2011) of the ‘prescient spectator paradox’. With respect to the effects of these dynamics on the editorial organisation,

³¹ McNair 2009; Hermida 2010.

³² Wardle, Williams 2010; Hermida, Lewis, Zammit 2014.

theoretical contributions and empirical research have focused on the emergence of new figures within the newsroom, such as "social media editors" and new editorial compartments such as social media desks or user generated hubs³³.

A further interesting aspect considered in the literature concerns the effects on journalistic values and practices at the individual level. In this regard, for example, the study by Lasorsa, Lewis and Holton (2012) pointed out how the management of the Twitter presence of American journalists tends to be characterised by an abundance of opinions and renounces the principle of objectivity understood as impartiality and detachment.

A more active role of the citizen/user in this process allows for a hitherto unexpressed visibility and favours the enlargement of the public sphere, thanks to the greater centrality of the interactive and cooperative dimension. However, the road ahead is rather long and difficult, because it requires giving greater centrality to citizens.

Therefore, the most correct term to define what has happened and is happening in journalism, as well as in the relationship between the public and digital information, is "transition"³⁴.

An information system in transition produces changes in the public and in the way public opinion is formed. The fact that the public is increasingly cynical can be an "advantage" because it constitutes a sting for a journalism that struggles to chase quality and quantity at the same pace.

After all, as American journalist Carlson suggests, journalism has always been a varied cultural practice embedded in a complicated social landscape, destined for constant change. It is not something solid and stable, but a constantly changing denotation applied differently depending on the context.

If, in its first phase, mass journalism performed above all an educational function, in which the normative character predominated, later on, informational tasks became central, which exalted the role of thirdness attributed to operational

³³ Wardle, Williams 2010; Kietzmann *et al.* 2011.

³⁴ Sorrentino 2014; Zelizer 2004; Schudson 2013.

procedures such as objectivity, impartiality and completeness, also and above all used strategically to build trust and reputation (Solito, Sorrentino 2020).

Nowadays, networked information requires scholars and practitioners to work around new paradigms involving greater interaction between the different actors of journalistic negotiation, as well as the ability to include users with their expertise and their sceptical and demanding vigilance within a dense public sphere.

The distinction between information production and information consumption becomes, as described in the previous paragraphs, less and less evident. The journalistic system thus sees its space for action compressed by the new competences of its interlocutors and, above all, it sees its own specificity weakening, consisting in sifting - according to shared principles - from the vast world of communication the appropriate information through the careful verification of what is happening³⁵.

It is therefore necessary to understand what journalism is becoming.

An institution which perhaps represents (and will represent) less and less a shared world, but which must try to make the multiplicity of interpretations dialogue.

In conclusion, the difficulties encountered by journalism stem from a set of causes that are redefining the criteria for legitimising journalism, the operational procedures that qualify it, and the role of each social actor in the negotiation of what makes the news.

It is precisely this long transition that is producing the crisis of confidence in journalism, as well as the avoidance of news. In order to regain trust, there is a need to change the character of authority, accentuating its dialogical aspects.

For the world of information, especially digital information, this can be translated into the need for a better inclusion of the user audience in the production processes and greater communicative pluralism against all forms of polarisation.

³⁵ Peters, Broesma 2013.

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