Davide Bennato

Sociologia dei media digitali. Relazioni sociali e processi comunicativi del web partecipativo

(*Digital Media Sociology. Social Relationships and Communications in Participative Web*)

2011, Laterza, 177 pp.

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The book is divided into three major sections, linked by the attempt to describe and to understand why the web (or Web 2.0, or the participative web) allows to exchange ideas, opinions, interests, passions, values, thus creating a medium (articulated today in blogs, wikis, SNSs) in which "la caratteristica più evidente sono le persone" (p. IX) (translated by the reviewer "the most striking feature are people").

The first section shows how digital media force us to rethink in a new way some of the key issues in communication studies, such as broadcast, audience, media, relations between public / private. On the one hand this can lead us to come back to some classical theories, however, though shifting the focus to these new digital tools. In particular, Bennato describes the shift from analogue to digital media, from mass to social media (or, according to Castells, to "self mass communication") as a shift from broadcasting to social-casting, following the most diverse steps, with the most diverse, temporary and sometimes overlapping names such as narrowcasting, web casting and data casting.

According to the author, social casting means the way of broadcasting which is peculiar to social or participatory web, in which distribution regards a community of people who autonomously decide to let circulate contents by exploiting the sharing opportunities of these new technological platforms. This definition encompasses both a technological dimension (i.e. web platforms), and a cultural and symbolic dimension (that enables sharing among people). For this reason, the author reviews those theories that have tried to describe digitization, and he considers the first achievements of media studies and then those of the Science and Technology Studies, showing which contribution these studies may offer to digital innovation, and which are the fundamental problems in their application.

In the second section, Bennato tries to define what we mean when we talk about digital media, showing the complexity of distinctions between the various galaxies in web universe. The basic thesis of this section is that many of the relational possibilities made available by digital media are inscribed in the technologies themselves, and are integrated in machines. The chapter traces the genesis of those terms mostly used today by researchers, journalists, marketing people and entrepreneurs to describe those technologies which have been

part of the shift in the third millennium.

The first term, taken into account by the author, is "Social Informatics" (study of the social aspects of computerization and ICT), whose main features regard that of problem solving in computing in the specific context of application, of attention given to institutional and cultural dimension, of integration between technological and social design. The second step consists of researches about "Computer Supported Social Networks" (e.g. Wellman's work), which distinguish between virtual communities, computer networks in work team and telework.

A further step is the "Cluetrain Manifesto", in 1999, when there was an attempt to redefine the markets on the basis of web impact, in corporate communication.

And finally the author tackles the notion of "Social Software" by Clay Shirky (2002), which gives rise to the birth of platforms such as MySpace and Flickr. In 2005, Tim O'Reilly coined the concept of Web 2.0. O'Reilly looked at the market performance in service markets in the web after the bursting of the dot-com bubble in the fall of 2001, and he argued that companies that survived the collapse have been reinforced in subsequent years, while those born after (almost all start-up at that point) tended to develop new and original market strategies. The term Web 2.0 at that point was already circulating for over a year, and O'Reilly by himself admitted that its semantics was still vague. However,

as we know, it managed to become the label for the whole world of social networking and of new services and platforms in the web.

The second part of this section gives an account of the consistency of these transformations and labels with some key concepts in theories of technological development such as Diffusionism and Social Shaping of Technology. The section later tackles a detailed analysis of various types of participatory networks: the first examples of wiki collaboration, experienced at the end of the last century, and then made famous by the creation of Wikipedia (2001, while the preliminary version is Nupedia in 2000); afterwards social network sites, or web services that allow to create a public or semi-public profile and a list of users to be connected with (the first, Sixdegrees, was in 1997, the famous Facebook was born in 2004, at the time of the boom of MySpace).

Finally, Bennato analyzes a wide range of "other" social media, such as YouTube, Twitter and Friendfeed. The third and shortest section of the book deals with the issue of values and ethics in digital media. Here the author's starting point is a philosophical (Heidegger) and anthropological (Gehlen) reflection about technique as a human place. In particular, the author reviews Jonas's discussion concerning relationships between technology and power in personal relationships, considering current technologies as a whole as challenging and problematic as those of genetic engineering (that's why

today we talk about techno-ethical harmony with bioethics).

Even though early signs of an interest in techno-ethics have come from Wiener's thoughts, at the end of the sixties (about limits and values in the emerging Computer Science), it can be said that this issue was finally opened in Moor's article, "What is Computer Ethics?" (1987), in which, prophetically, the author pointed out that the main ethical problems would come during the machine assimilation as part of humanity, and that this stage would be necessarily followed by a long period of technological development. Computer malleability was the main reason of its ability to change processes in which it was used. Before discussing some interesting cases (e.g. Simputer, Miss Bimbo) Bennato notes that an ethical perspective becomes crucial for social sciences, which are facing epochal changes in which the role of technology is undeniable.

This work by Davide Bennato looks like having two different sides: on the one hand a historical review of technological, social, scientific events; on the other hand a critical approach to the main theories concerning social media and Web 2.0, which, without a precise re-read of these labels, are now at risk of becoming buzz words. This ambivalence is an essential quality of this well organized book with a rich bibliography and lists of websites.

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Christian Kehr, Peter Schüßler and Marc-Denis Weitze (eds.)

Neue Technologien in der Gesellschaft. Akteure, Erwartungen, Kontroversen und Konjunkturen

(New Technologies in Society – Actors, Prospects, Controversies and Conjunctures)

2011, Transcript Verlag, 363 pp.

Mareike Glöss
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The here presented edited collection seeks to give an overview over new technologies in society, analyzing the multitude of actors and factors that are entangled with it.

The theoretical foundation is hereby building on social construction of technology (Bijker et. Al., 1987) as the editors emphasize in their introducing chapter. However, the approach this collection is taking analyzes technology as one of factors besides others and thereby rather shaped by the social than constructed (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999).

The work originated from a research project that was located at the German Museum in Munich. The main idea was to bring together scholars from social, philosophical, historical fields and discuss the different dimensions of new technologies along concrete case studies. At the same time the collection also includes contributions from actors of the discussed new technologies – natural scientists and