THE MEDIAGATE

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THE ERA OF INFINITE VERSIONS

Abundant, cheap distribution of facts means an abundant, cheap, and unlimited variety of narratives, on demand, all the time. (Bill Wasik)

There's a traffic jam on the information highway

This is an uncertain era for the media. The 19th and 20th centuries' set-up of communication media (TV, radio and print) was literally swept over by the arrival of digital technology and network systems, that in a few decades have created a crisis in a system that is solid and affirmed in every way, obliging it to rethink its shape and content, languages and format. In better cases, we witnessed the appearance of brief identity crises with consequent pushes to renewal; in the worst cases the shielding to defend a presumably acquired and untouchable authority. But if the old system appears weak and lost, the new media horizon does not seem to have reached its own balance yet. The undeniable potential of the channels of media communication, identifiable mostly through the accessibility of information and the endless variety, are accompanied by contradictions and side effects that still need to be understood.

Internet is by nature the reign of the alternatives, a place where all voices can find a place, where counter-information acquires platforms and resounding bodies. Where the critical consciousness of citizens can proliferate and become stronger, where a single and central point of view is substituted by multiple visions. Most of all, debate and conflict are a rule and not an exception.

But the more attentive observers will not miss the new dangers of this never-before-seen information abundance, which together with what we could call a real-time dictatorship, often makes the search for the truth of the facts a difficult if not impossible task.

As stated by Bill Wasik, a famous American writer and journalist, known for having organised the first Flash Mobs in 2006, once a human being has formulated an opinion, it tends to search for facts and information that supports it (in psychology this is called 'confirmation bias'). This tendency, which is certainly nothing new, in Wasik's opinion finds a privileged place of action on the Internet, where it is possi-

ble to gain access to – in a short amount of time – an enormous quantity of information with opposing opinions, capable of giving any kind of opinion some kind of foundation. It isn't surprising then that the most popular sites are dedicated to "conspiracy theories", pages and pages of detailed information, full of texts, videos, images and statements, trying to de-mask what are presented as global lies (the 9/11 attacks were organised by the U.S., man has never been on the moon, AIDS was created in a laboratory, Paul McCartney is dead, etc.). In this case, we are not faced with a new phenomenon, but certainly the ease and vastness with which these pages can be shared contributed to making them stronger, confusing the already murky waters of information.

It must be said that, in the old and new media, sensationalism has never lost its footing, with the consequent tendency to give a broad amount of space to the real or presumably real big events, neglecting the small changes that are perhaps less visible but that influence people's lives directly (the changing of a law for example, or the presentation of motions in parliament).

The Long Tail of Truth

The possibility of finding endless "versions" of the same story, is defined by Wasik, as being "The Long Tail of Truth", establishing a parallel interest with the renowned theory of the "Long Tail" coined by Chris Anderson, to describe the new economical and commercial models created with the Net: *In the realm of political discourse, and indeed of narrative in general, I fear we have fallen into a far less salutary situation. One might call it the Long Tail of Truth: given any trend that one wants to identify in the world – about the popularity of a buzzword or a band, the mendacity of a politician or a pundit, the rise and fall of any fashion – on the Internet one can readily convince oneself that the trend exist, as long as one runs the targeted search or browses the properly biased sites.*

What Wasik describes is a particularly unpleasant distortion that can be recognized in the media all over the world: the journalistic obsession for trends, for the creation of cases, trends that exaggerate from one article to another, from one News show to another, in a kind of exponential auto-legitimisation. You could almost say it was a self-fulfilling prophecy. This is the most common and dangerous disease in the contemporary information field, forced into the obsessive search for the story, as microscopic and used as a pretext as it may be. This isn't so bad when the trends that are being waved around are bizarre Hollywood diets, designer shoes or vacation spots, but the risk is when the case, for example, is a viral disease

destined to spread over the whole global population.

The multiplication of points of view, that in the opening we cited as potential, then risks becoming a kaleidoscopic trap for the citizen.

Welcome to the era of infinite versions.

An alerting system

The manipulative possibilities of the media – the new and the old – is a theme that is increasingly dealt with by contemporary artists. The mediascape that we are immersed in is so invasive, omnipresent, and controversial – as well as in full redefinition – that it cannot be ignored. Naturally, artists are the ones who realise this and use the media as a platform for their experimentation. They expose the weaknesses of the system, its contradictions and its risks. Sometimes with openly political works, sometimes with the weapon of irony and disorientation, other times simply detourning the medium through unforeseeable uses. Art works as an alarm system, an alarm clock for slumbering consciousnesses, a memento of awareness, to remind those who watch that they can be "the public" without being "the audience". That Internet, despite its contradictions, is mostly a place for participation and a platform for the sharing of knowledge. As Clay Shirky states, *the intention of users has more impact than the intention of the designers.* Technology therefore must be taken into our hands and used, and its uses are not and must not be predetermined by the industry. The artists help us to remember, once again, that what the media will become in the future will depend on how we use them in the present.

Krzysztof Siatka

KILKA USTALEŃ O JĘZYKU JAKO MEDIUM KREACYJNYM, CZYLI ODWIECZNE POTYCZKI KOMUNIKATU Z PRZEKŁADEM

Z początkiem 2010 roku dotarła do mnie informacja o postępach w przygotowaniu systemu tłumaczeń, w oparciu o które będzie pracował przyszły telefon firmy Google. Urządzenie ma, w założeniach, tłumaczyć rozmowę w trakcie jej trwania na około 6000 języków. Program tłumaczący, dzięki znajomości bilonów danych (m. in. z Internetu) – przykładów użycia języka, ma rozpoznawać sens wypowiadanych zdań i w konsekwencji tłumaczyć je na wybrany język obcy.