

Weblogs between Counterinformation and Power: an Italian Case History

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Abstract

The paper studies the civic and political role of the weblog in the public sphere. In the first part the authors review the current debate, reconstructing on the one side the reflection on the practices of weblogging as participative forms, and on the other, that on the specificity of the weblog as a medium. In the second part, the paper presents the analysis of the role played by the blog Macchianera.it in the diplomatic crisis between Italy and the United States following the killing of an Italian secret service agent by American soldiers in Baghdad. After an historical reconstruction of the case, the paper focalizes the involved subjectivities: traditional media, weblogs, political institutions and military authorities. Then, the analysis concentrates on the individuation of conflictual equilibriums from three different points of view: public opinion, media market and strategic fields. The analysis tries to demonstrate that blog micro-information does not necessarily represent a counter-informative practice competing with traditional political, military or mediatic hegemony. At the opposite, bloggers' communicative strategies should be analyzed within the more complex strategies of the various social subjects, including the institutional ones, with which they should be appropriately compared.

Weblog and mediasphere: some open questions

This paper intends to contribute to the debate on the civic and political role of the weblog as a specific form of participation to the public sphere. This debate appears twofold: on the one side we have the reflection on the practices of weblogging as participative forms, and on the other, that on the specificity of the (especially informative) weblog as a medium, in opposition with traditional media.

From the first perspective, weblogging practices are analyzed as a variant of the complex phenomenon known as *user generated content*. Hence, the analysis focuses on the dynamics and consequences of a content creation process which is communitarian, collaborative and iterative.

The word produsage (Bruns, 2007) illustrates well the intertwining between production and consumption which brings together Indymedia's citizen journalism together with open source software development projects, sharing platforms such as YouTube and Flickr and the innovative practices of knowledge organization and divulgation incarnated by the Wikipedia project. At stake is not only the transformation of the audience into a multitude of active and interactive subjects, ready to produce just as well as to consume, but also a different notion of the product, which is never finished or definitive, always subject to a continuous process of critique and re-writing by community members.

As Marlow remarks, "What distinguishes weblogging from previous web media is the extent to which it is *social*, and one can say that the medium came into existence when the set of web journal writers recognized themselves as a community" (2004, p. 1).

Many have read this evolution as a concretization of the utopian ideal of a de-centered and plural cultural sphere, devoid of any form of control and homologation and therefore able to act as a driver towards more authentic and participative models of democracy (Kanh & Keller, 2004; Bruns, 2007; Benkler, 2006). As stated by Benkler, the newly emerging practices of commons-based peer production or produsage

hint at the emergence of a new information environment, one in which individuals are free to take a more active role than was possible in the industrial information economy of the twentieth century. This new freedom holds great practical promise: as a dimension of individual freedom; as a platform for better democratic participation; as a medium to foster a more critical and self-reflective culture. (2006, p. 2)

Recent studies have however proven how also in the blogosphere hierarchical, far from flexible structures gets replicated. Employing network analysis techniques, a study by Herring et al. (2005) revealed a wide variance in conversational and communitarian densities within the blogosphere. Around a densely-populated and intensely-connected (not only via hyperlinks, but also via repeated conversational patterns) core, gravitates a periphery of partly-isolated nodes, coagulating from time to time around specific topics, often reflecting communicative flows originated in offline contexts.

The web "counter-cultural folklore" rhetoric is instead challenged by the cold analysis of Geert Lovink (2007), who sees weblogging as one of the heralds of the dominating nihilism.

"What is declining is the belief in the message. That is the nihilist moment, and blogs facilitate this culture as ever done before" (Lovink, 2007, p. 8)

Therefore, far from opening any space for emancipation and cultural freedom, the decline of mainstream media would instead crack wide open an abyss of uncertainties and mistrust towards any system of truths and beliefs.

The second line of studies – as already indicated – thematizes the fluid and contradictory relationship between blogosphere and traditional media. The object of this comparison can only be a well-delimited region of the blogosphere: the one populated by individual and collective subjects (following Krishnamurthy's typology (2002), "enhanced columns" in the first case, "collaborative content creation" in the second case)¹ acting as filters and gatekeepers of the information circulating in the web (Blood, 2000).

¹ Krishnamurthy proposed a classification of weblogs into four basic types according to two dimensions: personal vs. topical, and individual vs. community. Both of the cited examples present non-personal contents, but feature a different relevance of the communitarian dimension. In the case of the enhanced column, we have a re-proposal of the typical printed editorial, and the weblogger imports over the net, often enhancing it, a credibility that was built off-line. Conversely, in the second case, the centrality within the network is subordinated to the fiduciary accreditation by the community. (2002)

Henry Jenkins defines them as “web snowboarders”, “turning the hunting and gathering, sampling and critiquing the rest of us do on line into an extreme sport” (2006, p.179)

In the social discourses produced by the blogosphere’s protagonists themselves, the claim for a counter-cultural and oppositional status – that would characterize the bottom-up information typical of these platforms – is widely prominent. Atton’s definition of “alternative media” (2002) seems to legitimate this position: “A model of alternative and radical media must account not only for active audiences in the Fiskean sense of creating “oppositional readings” of mainstream media products but also for “mobilized audiences” – as well as notions of horizontal linkage, reader-writers and extremely democratic organizational structures”(2002, pp. 24-25).

Starkly contrasting with this depiction, recent surveys have however proven how the topics covered by weblog are surprisingly in-line with the mass media agenda (Delwiche, 2003; Halavais, 2002; Reynolds, 2005). Many reasons can be identified, such as the difficult access to traditional fonts (seized by information professionals), and the fact that many weblogs are produced by media professionals themselves, therefore replicating the same newsmaking criteria. It is also true that the informative function of weblog can not be measured on the basis of topical richness alone. Instead, they often act as opinion catalysts, stimulating impressions, confirming or denying interpretative frames around specific issues. “The blogger puts himself or herself in the pensively pleasurable position of media observer” (Lovink, 2007, p. 7). Weblog thus configure themselves as users, more so than as content producers; critical and interactive, but users nonetheless – and yet able, from their position, to make “traditional news media more responsive and responsible to the people, claiming a watchdog role similar to the one traditional news media claim to have in relation to powerful institutions ”(Kim & Blood, 2005).

According to Jay Rosen (2005), instead of persisting in conceptualizing the relationship between professional and grassroots journalism as if they were two incompatible communicative practices, we should start reasoning in terms of *information environment*, molded and folded by a variety of informative flows and different communicative strategies. While with the advent of weblogs traditional media certainly ceased to guard their kingdom, their symbolical power has not been totally compromised. More realistically, it gave way to a process of progressive fragmentation and flexibilization of the power exercised over the mediatic arena, leading to a re-negotiation of the roles and maybe to a new “communicative pact” with the audience.²

² “The price of professionalizing journalism was the de-voicing of the journalist. The price for having mass media was the atomization of the audience, who in the broadcasting model were connected “up” to the center but not “across” to each other. Well, weblogging is a re-voicing tool in journalism, and the Net’s strengths in horizontal communication mean that audience atomization is being overcome” (Rosen, 2005)

As indicated by recent news coverage, the subordination of the blogosphere to the agenda setting power of mass media can be observed along with an opening of the latter towards social media logics and dynamics³. Among the many issues at stake in the re-definition of the information environment, there is its ability to re-configure the flows of political communication towards a more direct and self-aware participation by the citizen to the democratic process. The communitarian and interactive nature of new media lead several scholars to hypnotize that the web can effectively contribute to the realization of the normative ideal of a public opinion that is dynamic and independent from the systems of economy and established power, as formulated by Habermas (1990).

The more optimistic hypotheses foster a radical ousting of mass media from their traditional role of mediators of ascendant and descendant communication between citizen audience and political system (Grossi, 2005). In this respect, Bentivegna structures e-democracy along three dimensions:

The first dimension to introduce is definitely the one which relates to the widening of opportunities for access to information... what was once the exclusive prerogative of experts in the field... is today accessible to anyone interested [...] The second dimension is that of the activation of communication flows of a vertical nature between citizens and the numerous public institutions ... [for example] on-line consultation between citizens so as to gather opinions and points of view regarding the project elaborated [...] A third dimension, lastly, refers to the activation of communication flows of a horizontal nature. In this case the flows that are set up involve citizens who discuss, in a sort of virtual public space, issues of political relevance. (Bentivegna 2002, p. 133-34).

Our contribution intends to problematize these hypotheses, starting by the pre-assumption that the public sphere constitutes an arena where various subjects - traditional media, the blogosphere and the political system – compete for the prominence of their identity role, in a continuous dissemination of power, in the Foucaultian sense of the word.

We would like to put forward a reflection on the conditions enabling an alternative conceptualization of the weblog, such as, on the one side, the “passive citizenship” reducing itself to vote without any authentic partaking to the public life, and on the other side, the role of traditional media in the construction of the mainstream. In other words, if weblogging is really a different practice from those previously outlined, how can this be verified? And if there is diversity, is this diversity specific with respect to other historical forms of alternative media, such as Italian free radios in the '70s, the *samizdat* of postwar Soviet Union, or the '60s underground press? One of the foremost differences undoubtedly lies in the distribution platform.

³ In the occasion of Turkish elections, BBC launched a project for reportage over social media platforms. One of its correspondents is indeed reporting through a weblog, Twitter, YouTube and Flickr. (http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/special_report/webreporter_-_turkey/). On the printed media front, The New York Times put forward an equally innovative proposal, adopting the city blog formula to supplement official information, therefore offering dedicated web-surfing hints (<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/>)

Today, sites for institutional communication (such as ministries and various international organisms), counter-information sites such as the Indymedia network, traditional newspapers (either deriving from a printed edition or not) and other traditional media are present on the same weblog platform.

However, is it to be taken for granted that the unification of the socio-technical production frameworks of content production and distribution automatically translate in a facilitation of the modes in which alternative circuits, communities and other collective micro-identities establish themselves and join the competition for user time?

And, finally, is this diversity enough to grant positive effects on democracy and public sphere? Can we conceptualize weblogging, in Habermasian terms, as a purely communicative action, oriented towards reciprocal understanding and free knowledge sharing, or should we rather suspect that even the blogosphere can be colonized by the system through strategic actions?

We will illustrate such possible analyses through a brief presentation of a case in which all of this concretely happened: the case of the role played by a weblog –Macchianera.it - in the informational and political confrontation regarding the March 2005 killing of an Italian secret service agent by American troops in Iraq.

The death, the media and the weblog

Here's the story. Giuliana Sgrena, an Italian journalist of *Il Manifesto* (a left-wing newspaper which always openly criticized the military intervention in Iraq and the Italian involvement therein) gets kidnapped in Iraq. The Italian Secret Service negotiates her release, and the journalist is freed. During the journey to the airport, the car she was being transported in is intercepted by U.S. troops, who open fire injuring Giuliana Sgrena and killing secret service agent Nicola Calipari.

In the joint Italian-American commission subsequently issued, the experts of the two countries can not reach a conclusive agreement. The American branch of the public commission then releases its own report, packed of blacked-out portions, on an open U.S. army website. Italian newspapers simply report the news without any in-depth inquiry.

Shortly thereafter, Italian weblog *Macchianera.it* (made by a free journalist, Gianluca Neri: *Macchianera* means "back blot", but it is also the Italian name of an historical enemy of Mickey Mouse in the Floyd Gottfriedson's stories published by Disney) publishes the uncensored version of the document, removing the blackouts with a trivial cut-and-paste operation of the document from Adobe Acrobat to Microsoft Word. The names of the troops, previously classified, get exposed along with the American viewpoint: that Italians had negotiated with the kidnappers unbeknownst to allies, and U.S. Army had not been warned of the

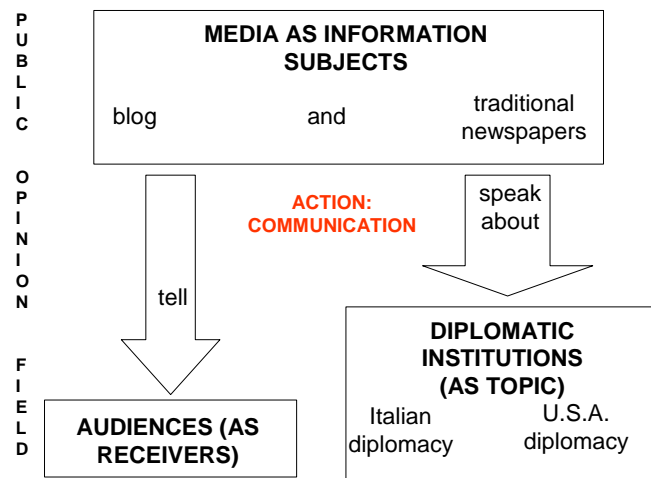
release of Giuliana Sgrena. The operation is thus a true scoop. Almost a full day later, Italian newspapers report the blackouts removal, albeit in the vast majority of cases no mention is made of Macchianera.it.

This case can be analysed through the traditional categories of weblogs' informational role.

As the diagram in figure 1 shows, we are in the field of mediatized public sphere. Media, weblogs and traditional newspapers act on the same plane, working as vectors for a communicative flow between public institution and citizens.

Right from the start, the Calipari case assumes shape of an "event" (Arquembourg, 2003), which undermines consolidated cognitive schemes and social representation mechanisms. Its enigmatic and opaque character is further intensified by the news chronicles which repeatedly codify it within the "friendly fire" framework. Along with a faithful report of the always-contradictory and never-exhaustive statements by the political institutions, most mainstream media frames the case historicizing it among the previous, unresolved conflicts between Italian and American diplomacies.

Figure 1. Public opinion field



In this light, the important informational role played by Macchianera.it with regard to the public opinion can be easily demonstrated. While the media simply report the blacked-out proceedings of the investigative commission, Macchianera actually works on the text, removing the blackouts, and thus performing a typical operation of counter-informational disclosure – of blackwashing.

This initial analysis also confirms the participative mechanism typical of the weblog communitarian dimension. After decrypting the report, weblogger Gianluca Neri tries to inform the newspapers. Nobody

listens to him. Thus he publishes the full text on his weblog. The news start spreading among the weblog readers, which work as amplifiers; eventually newspapers become aware of the text, read it, and publish synopses for their readers. Meanwhile, on Neri's weblog a thick debate ensues, in which the role of newspapers is also discussed.

In a word, a circuit based on word-of-mouth seem to run along and integrate with the circuit of official information. A more in-depth analysis appears necessary, as the previous analysis barely scratched the very surface of the phenomenon, the level of "information" in its classical sense. If one looks at the chronological succession of informational events, everything gets a little clearer: from the gunfight where Calipari got killed until the release of the proceedings by the American branch of the commission, the centre stage is occupied by the major information media. Obviously so as the only sources are official ones. Access to eyewitnesses (Giuliana Sgrena herself, U.S. officers, other Italian secret service agents partaking in the operation) is only possible for major information networks. Since the proceedings' release, thanks to Neri's intervention, everything changes. The blackouts are important to understand the American point of view that Italian secret service had not informed U.S. troops and American soldiers thus acted in accordance with established protocols; that the Italy-US joint venture in Iraq is riddled with misunderstandings; that the Italian government had negotiated the liberation (something the Berlusconi cabinet had up till then never acknowledged) .

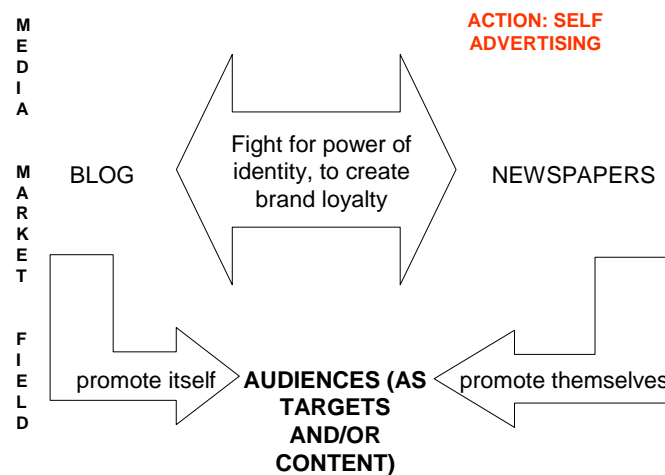
While it is therefore certainly true that from the standpoint of the informational flow reaching the public opinion, a weblog managed to change topical issues, there are at least two other level of analysis. The first is that of a competitive conflict between weblogs and traditional media as citizens' informational sources. From this standpoint, it is interesting to remark that Gianluca Neri got from traditional media the news of the online release of the proceedings. He performs an online search for the material. On this material then he gets to work. Therefore, in this first phase Neri utilizes the informational function of the media to identify a field for investigation and counter-information. Once his weblog publishes the uncensored document, it's the media that utilize his work to create another flow of news, thematically different from the previous one. The media almost never mention the weblog. At first, TV news talk of an hacker who allegedly decrypted the document. The weblog only gets mentioned generically, without a name; whereas at the same time Neri's role is exalted and praised by the webloggers network (his own weblog publishes a full summary of the affair, along with links to newspaper and television coverage. The first newspaper to mention macchianera.it is an online technical magazine, which utilizes the example to explain how to convert a document from the Adobe PDF to Microsoft Word formats...

Therefore, public opinion at this level ceases to be a strictly communicative horizon, and becomes instead a liberal marketplace for ideas where the public 'buys' (accepts/agrees with) certain ideas, and rejects others

(Dahlgren, 1995) and informational subjects get accredited through propaganda. There is therefore instrumental propaganda in those media not mentioning Gianluca Neri. But then, Neri himself is acting on the same scoop frenzy typical of the media's competitive logic, as proved by the frenetic sequence of his actions directed towards media and citizens after the blackouts removal.

This communicative force field (the second one, after the strictly informative one) can thus be described as one of competition for identity affirmation. The two competitors (media and weblogs) influence and take advantage of each other to gain credibility in the public eye. The public opinion becomes a major player in the competition, as from his final praising depends the acknowledgment of one's role as a subject in the information market, as showed in our second table:

Figure 2. Media Market Field



We do not mean with this that a weblog such as Macchianera and a newspaper such as the Corriere Della Sera act according to the same economic market logic. Instead, we want to assert that in the value economy at stake in this competition, even a non-profit weblog plays the game for audience and brand credibility with the same rules followed by the information industry.

On a third, important level of analysis we shall try to discriminate, within the information flow, among the different dimensions in which the various subjects act in relation to the public opinion. This perspective highlights the role of strategic communication enacted by political, diplomatic and military actors.

After the affair, the internal conflict within the joint Italian - American commission over the responsibilities in the Calipari killing becomes manifestly clear. This dialectical conflict revolves around the responsibilities

for the violation of the rules of engagement. For Americans, Italians should have notified the operation and acted more cautiously at the checkpoint. For Italians, Americans had already been properly notified and U.S. soldiers at the checkpoint were too aggressive, opening fire well before expected.

All of a sudden, with the release of the report, U.S. authorities start addressing directly to the public opinion their own conclusions - deemed as fully satisfying and not further negotiable with the Italian side. The effectiveness of the release is however crippled by the blackouts relative to the names of U.S. soldiers in action and to the various phases of the affair. The media, utilizing the report as it was issued, respect the diplomatic modalities of the release; nonetheless, the magnitude of its contents does not however emerge, as no in-depth inquiry is enacted.

Conversely, Gianluca Neri breaks the classified portions, thus violating the silence agreement accepted by traditional media. However, the release of the uncensored report actually enhances the effectiveness of the American diplomatic strategy, as it exposes the conclusions of the American branch and casts a shadow of suspect over the role of Italian secret service.

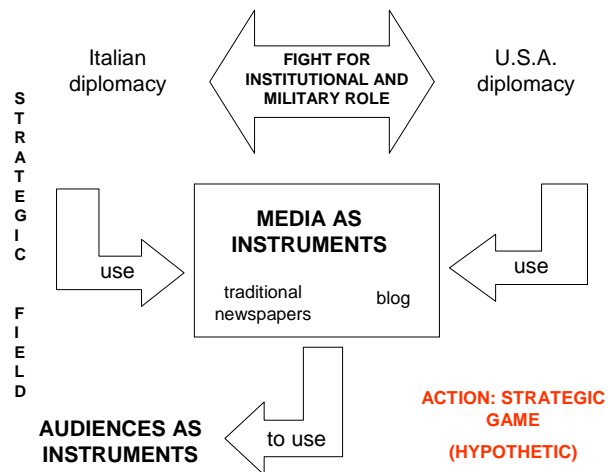
One could suspect that American sources, adopting an easily crackable censoring technique, willingly supported the violation of the secret, and that, therefore the counter-informational role played by Gianluca Neri's weblog paradoxically ended up being collateral with the needs of American diplomacy.

On the contrary, when the news get picked up again, mainstream informative media only emphasize the identity of the American soldier who performed the actual shooting, and therefore seems to give credit to the position of Italian diplomacy, who interpreted the accident as a mistake by U.S. troops.

Basically, U.S. diplomacy holds that Iraq is a war zone, and therefore that the mistake leading to Calipari's death has been the violation of the norms by the Italian side. Reading the uncensored report as presented by Macchianera.it brings the public opinion in direct contact with this point of view. Conversely, Italian diplomacy holds that Iraq is not a war zone (as this is the only possible justification for the presence of Italian troops, since the Italian constitution forbids the partaking into military endeavors of occupation), and that therefore the U.S. troops' attitude is unjustified. The media implicitly confirm this perspective by indicating the name of the American soldier as the responsible for the violation. This is a relevant aspect, as it reminds us that diplomatic communicative strategies have historically always utilized media as vectors of both information and disinformation, and that such strategies are readily adaptable to any circumstance and to any configuration of the media themselves. In this case, the public opinion is neither a receiver nor a player in the informational value market. As showed by the table 3, it instead becomes an instrument in the hands of an institutional, military and diplomatic subject for applying pressure on its counterpart. The media (and Neri's weblog in particular) in turn act as instruments for the activation by this public opinion/instrument of a true strategic action, in a Habermasian sense.

In conclusion: even if the suspect of a unwilling instrumental role of the weblog Macchianera.it were unsubstantiated, an exploitation of the weblog as a possible unknowing agent of strategic communication by political and military institutions can not be excluded.

Figure 3. Strategic field



The fact that most of the webloggers network engaged in counter-information act in good faith for the scrutiny of institutional powers and actions, doesn't rule out by definition the efficacy that institutional disinformation networks can strategically exercise also on this network.

It could therefore be said that – instead of starting from the indemonstrable pre-assumption of a “natural” counter-informative and communitarian role of weblogs within the public sphere – it'd more appropriate to analyse within each single case the strategic interplay between institutional strategic communication, informative communication and competition strategy – as we briefly attempted to do here.

Conclusions

In this paper we tried to offer a contribution to the discussion on the role of weblogs in the public sphere with respect to their participation and confrontation with traditional media. The analyzed case should have proven some points, which we think to be useful for a general discussion:

- i) In order to analyze the role of weblogs, it can be useful to investigate concrete cases in which they deal with strong topics debated in the public arena; in this way, we can compare their impact on social discourses along with that on media-specific ones; in particular, the more the

cases revolve around borderline situations (such as war cases, scandals, terrorism and so on), the more relevance they hold.

- ii) Bloggers' communicative strategies should not be analyzed outside of the more complex strategies of the various social subjects, including the institutional ones, with which they should be appropriately compared;
- iii) Just like traditional media, weblogs can be conceptualized as possible agents of wider communicative strategies; in this case, the sources (in the analyzed case, military sources) can set up traps to take advantage of opponents, using communication as a weapon.

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