Networked audiences and small scale groups' belongings: viewing, sharing and archiving TV content in the Italian social media scenario

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Abstract

Starting from a set of empirical qualitative researches (i.e. multi-situated and virtual ethnographies) on TV consumption and social media use among young Italians, the paper aims to investigate audience performances in downloading, sharing and archiving TV content in contemporary scenario. In addition to a phenomenological approach, the paper proposes to theoretically investigate the TV and social media users from the perspective of social definitions and uses of TV, promoting a (re)consideration both of how TV content grassroots distribution is relevant in personal everyday routines and sociability, and of how these practices shape personal, group and collective identities and belongings.

Keywords: television, social media, user distributed content, idioculture, young Italians.

1. Introduction

Television is now no longer what we were used to assume, it is no longer what we felt to be "television" well before we actually defined it.

If we look at the contemporary media and television scenario we see that in the second half of the past decade plenty "trends" of changes began to consolidate changing both TV's technologies and its "cultural form" (Williams, 1974)[1]. Digitalization[2] allows the circulation of TV content on multiple technological platforms and devices (DDT, DHT, IPTV, Mobiletv, etc.), and at the same time it allows the presence on a single platform of different media content (TV, music etc.). Media institutions more and more enact transmedia storytelling and crossmedia distribution strategies and consumption practices while audiences are more and more active in content curation and distribution[3]. Last but not least it is increasingly possible to see TV content in spaces other then the traditional domestic setting, thanks to the spread of personal mobile devices and of screens within everyday life spaces[4].

We are thus seeing the breaking up of a well-established set of correspondences between TV technologies, languages and patterns of use. Of course what is crumbling is just a historical form of television, the result

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[1] Among others see Spigel and Olsson (2005); Colombo and Vittadini (2006); Scaglioni and Sfardini(2008); Kackman et. alii (2010); Gillian (2010), Bennett and Strange (2011).
[2] We assume digitalization as a sociotechnical process involving technologies, designers, developers, users, and institutions (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1999; Williams and Edge, 1996).
[3] Jenkins (2006). For case histories and a theoretical discussion on crossmedia/transmedia and "convergent culture" see the essays collected in Bourdaa, Noguera and Pasquali (forthcoming).
[4] For an early account of TV viewing outside domestic space see McCarthy (2001).

of years of technical and social operations. Certainly TV has already been troubled by innovation in the past[5], but now changes seem to be more radical, affecting what has been for long the core structure of television. Following Roger Silverstone (1994), we can say that what is changing are the relations among what used to be the constitutive elements of the "double articulation" of television as text and technological artefacts, as TV set on which to watch TV programmes [6].

Moreover, the very idea that the ontological characteristics of television comprised synchronicity is under discussion (Scaglioni and Sfardini, 2008). Traditionally, the airing and viewing of television programmes took place and were enjoyed by audiences at the same time and in similar contexts, while TV content lifecycles were consistent and controlled by media industries. Now that is no longer the case. Several factors have cooperated in the deconstruction of synchronicity. Just to mention a few: 1) the changes taking place in personal and family technological infrastructure with the arising of mobile networks and interconnected devices; 2) TV content made accessible through the different technologies and according to highly personalized time/space patterns; 3) the increased activation of audiences inside the very lifecycles of TV content (with the audience being active in content circulation, editing and production).

However, it is not (only) a question of television missing some of the features we used to take for granted. It is more a question of television participating in a larger and deeper process of change of the whole "media system" (Ortoleva, 1995) in the direction of a new form of "mediation"[7] that overcomes the hegemony of the mass media paradigm. Cardoso (2008, p. 558) defines this new form of mediation "networked communication", and he argues that it is characterized by three main features: "1) communicational globalization processes; 2) networking of mass and interpersonal media; 3) different degrees of interactivity usage".

In the paper we will focalize our attention on the main axis around which, according to Cardoso (2008), contemporary media system and mediation are structured: the television and the internet "that communicate between each other […] establishing nodes using various communication and information technologies such as the telephone, the radio, the print press, etc. (Cardoso, 2008, p. 591).

In the following pages then we will try to understand the new relations existing between TV content, video technologies, social media and audience's practices like viewing, commenting, sharing, downloading, and archiving TV content. The analysis will be developed from the specific perspective of young Italian's TV audiences' performances analysed through a set of qualitative data coming from different empirical researches carried on from 2008 to the present. The researches I am referring to where intended to

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[5] Cfr. Flichy (1991); Briggs and Burke (2000).
[6] Cfr. Livingstone (2007). Recently Courtois, Verdegem and De Marez (2012) suggested to talk of "triple articulation" adding as a crucial feature of television and audiovisual experience the "sociospatial contexts" of consumption (the expression "triple articulation" was already used by Hartmann in 2006).
[7] We assume mediation as the negotiations and dialectics between both the technological and institutional dimension of a social and cultural environment and "the relationship that participants, both individual and institutional have to that environment and to each others" (Silverstone, 2005, p. 198). For a discussion of the concepts of "mediation" and "mediatization" see Couldry (2008) e Lundby (2009a).

understand television and social media uses by teenagers and people in their twenties and early thirties, in order to investigate the interconnection between people's daily life, interpersonal communicative practices (both online and offline) and media use patterns. All the researches have been conducted in the methodological frame of multi-sited and mobile ethnographies (Marcus, 1995; Hine, 2005) and have been triangulating different research tools and sets such as offline interviews, group interviews, focus groups, online and offline participant observation, collaborative construction of meaning through the production of online self-accounts, and online virtual shadowing (Pasquali and Vittadini, 2010; Vittadini and Pasquali forthcoming)[8]. Alongside this phenomenological approach, we will investigate these social practices within a theoretical framework that tries to interconnect the contemporary idea of the networked communication and the networked self with the hypothesis that group interaction and belongings still play a central role in social networks and social media.

2. Television and social media: commenting, sharing, archiving TV content

Given the plurality of intersections of communicative models, situations and devices experienced by contemporary audiences, it is difficult (and we should even question whether it is useful) to individuate a bunch of consolidate, clearly recognizable, patters that define contemporary TV consumption. Nevertheless, it is possible to point out some of the ingredients that shape the intersection of TV with social media and create a whole set of mixed styles of TV consumption that design new media "repertoires" (Hasebrink and Popp, 2006) and "matrices" (Cardoso, 2008)[9].

We can definitely not give a full and proper typology, but we can list at least four common tendencies in TV content use and reuse in this media environment where traditional flow television consumption increasingly overlaps and intersects with social media: 1) real time TV viewing multitasked and supported with social media conversations; 2) access to mainstream TV content through different institutionalized and branded platform (official websites, social networks profiles, forum, games etc.); 3) mainstream and niche TV content grassroots downloading/sharing/archiving; 4) Following TV content on You Tube or on other video sharing services.

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[8] Within these researches 130 subjects were interviewed. This part of the empirical work was conducted within the research activities of OssCom (Research Centre on Media and Communication of the Università Cattolica of Milan). For other research findings see (Pasquali, Scifo andVittadini, 2010; Colombo andVittadini, 2008a, 2008b; Mascheroni and Sfardini, 2008; Scifo, 2008). I'd like to thank all my colleagues, and particularly Simone Carlo and Marco Tomassini, who specifically worked on some of the consumption practices analysed in this paper (cfr. Carlo, 2010 and Tomassini, 2010). These empirical data were further integrated with an online ethnography of Facebook interactions and with face-to-face interviews with a group of students and former students (in total 20 subjects) participating to extracurricular activities at Bergamo University. This part of research has been conducted in the framework of the research project "Culture convergenti, cyberculture e la ridefinizione dei circuiti della produzione/consumo culturale".

[9] Cardoso takes the term "media matrix" from Meyrowitz (1985) and defines it as the idea that people "tend to create a mental hierarchy for the different types of media and the importance of them in our lives. These hierarchies are strictly individual but also shared socially" (Cardoso, 2008 p. 591).

Some of these practices are totally integrated in traditional linear TV viewing and mass audience activities. Some are alternative to linear TV viewing. Others configure a new scenario based on user's performances in distributing TV content outside TV flow[10].

Idling (Lull, 1990) on You Tube, following the different suggestions the system and other users' tags offer is alternative to lazy and casual TV consumption.

> "my parents use remote control zapping from one channel to the other, I go on you Tube" (m., 26)

Exchanging through social media occasional comments on what is aired on TV is just another way we have for talk about television while we are watching TV.

> "When we watch TV we usually make comments with my sister and my mum, if I am on Facebook and my best friends are online we do comments like 'look at that' or 'see how she's dressed'… stupid things like that" (f., 16)

> "Sometimes while I watch TV I also follow Twitter, I like to read others' comments and sometimes I also post some comments. It is interesting but I do it only when something controversial is happening… I like to see how people react, comment" (f., 26)

At the same time, posting in a private group on Facebook devoted to a TV programme is very similar to some well-established offline practices like "viewing party".

> "We have organized this private group on Facebook for the season finale of Glee. Every member was allowed to invite a friend or two, at the end we were more or less twenty online people commenting the show, posting You Tube videos, lyrics. It was fun!" (f., 25)

> "I was watching Sanremo[11] and I started to post on my Facebook profile and to write comments on my friends' posts… it was the usual old stuff with Sanremo, 'how people are dressed', 'how stupid the lyrics are' and so on, etc. … and then other friends started to say that Sanremo sucks, and that we where annoying them with our comments and so on, so I made this private group. This is how it started the first night, then for the whole week we met there, it became an appointment for everyone in the group" (m., 25).

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[10] On corporate/grassroots cultures relations see Jenkins (2006); Deuze (2006); Sonvilla-Weiss (2010).
[11] Sanremo (the official name being *The Festival della canzone italiana di Sanremo*) is the most popular music contest in the country and one of the few remaining (if not the only one) highly ritualized TV programmes of Italian public service (it started on radio in 1951 and it runs on TV since 1955).

We definitely may define this kind of integration between TV and social media as a "remediation" of common and well-known audience activities: social media conversations and interaction are just another part of the endless conversations and intertextuality that defines the process of "mediation" (Silverstone, 1999 and 2007)[12]. On the other hand, on the content side we can see plenty of continuities between on- and offline audience's conversation and performances. For example, cult content and fandom[13] generate more ritualized activities, whereas ordinary TV content generates more occasional conversations, both face to face and on social media.

Content typology, on the other hand, is fundamental when referring to those practices – like downloading/sharing/archiving – that do not necessarily imply a synchronous linear TV viewing.

Two kinds of content seem indeed more exposed to grassroots use, reuse and distribution. The most shared content are TV series or News content (even through completely different technological set and different time/space frames). Along with this very valuable (both economically and symbolically) content, a lot of content without any value *per se* (funny videos, music videos, snack content, TV spot, TV show clips, often tailored by media corporation for crossmedia fruition) is also massively distributed (Carlo, 2010).

The very way these contents are shared and used is also indicative of the different value people give to them. Content like music videos, TV shows clips, funny videos etc. are usually shared (via social media, social network or messenger services or via Bluetooth and mobile phone), seen and thrown away (or buried somewhere) just after being used. On the other hand, more valuable content (in the perspective of personal identities and social interactions) is usually stored and catalogued in digital memories and archives both for overcoming the constraints of TV scheduling and for building personal and specialized repertoires (especially for niche and cult products or fandom practices)[14].

"Look, this is one of my hard disks… here I have stored only my favourites TV series" (m. 25)

"In this hard disk I have stored all the cartoons I used to watch when I was a kid, I am collecting them, I will show them to my kids" (f. 20)

In a media scenario where almost any kind of TV content is easily available online, owning content is still appreciated. Furthermore, downloaded files from peer to peer networks are often integrated by official and branded material. Peer to peer downloaded content is considered indeed handy (it can be easily find and shared) but with a low quality. Original DVDs assure more quality and they better perform, in their "aura",

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[12] Of course there are some major differences between what we do with social media and what we do in face-to-face communication. The most relevant are probably connected to time patterns and to the shifting from the private space of home to the public, or semi-public, space of social networks and social media.
[13] On cult content see Hillis (2004). On fandom see among others Lewis (1992); Harris andAlexander (1998); Hills (2003); Sandovoss (2005).
[14] Tomassini (2010); Kalviknes-Bore (2010). On digital memories see Garde-Hansen et alii (2009); on domestic media archives see Jedlowski et alii (2010).

the desire of fighting dispersion and fragmentation: that very same desire that, as Walter Benjamin (1966) clearly stated, is embedded in every collection, be it a collection of bus ticket, ancient art or TV programmes.

"If you are not a fan it is ok finding something on the internet, watching it and that's it. But if you are a fan it is not enough: poor quality, no specials, no logo... So if you are a TV series fan you buy DVD collections and you are proud of them" (f. 28)

This same desire to control reality seems even more urgent in a scenario of almost unlimited content availability that we try to categorize and organize within our personal frames.

"On YouTube I have create this profile where I have gathered all the themes from TV show I used to watch when I was a kid. I started a couple of years ago by chance, I wanted to create a playlist for a party, and now it is something I do for myself, like a trip in the past" (m., 24)

Under this perspective, TV content downloading and collecting is an exquisitely individual and idiosyncratic practice, but from another point of view it is also a highly socialized activity.

"I have a friend, he is a big fan of many TV series, he has the entire official series in his library but he also has them downloaded. Sometimes when we [friends] are at his place we go through his collection, and then he gives us the series we like best or what he thinks we may enjoy" (f. 24)

"You see in this hard disk I have Lost and Heroes, I keep it here with my comics collection" (m. 20)

"In the living room we have all the movies and a lot of TV series on DVD on library shelves" (f. 20)

The same social value is, indeed, paradigmatically clear in the sharing of collected material, but also in the way collections are incorporated and shown within domestic geographies (or increasingly within communication devices), and in the way media memories are often integrated and stored with meaningful relations with digital mediated personal memories (Van Dijk, 2007).

3. Media content, the networked self and idiocultures

One of the buzzword used for a long time to describe the digital TV scenario to come was "personalization". It was a well-chosen keyword, given that TV consumption is now more and more flexible (in time, content and space), but it was also a misleading one.

TV consumption is now definitely more personal and individualized, but it is also more social than ever. On the one side, media content – along with user generated content, Facebook status updates and post, twitter tweets, microblogging, social tags etc. – becomes a piece of the mosaic of contemporary mediated identities; it is part of our personal storytelling (Lundby, 2009b), and it is used by the "networked self" (Papacharissi, 2010)[15] as a tool kit for self-expression and self-branding (referring to tastes, interests, passions, emotions, actions and activities).

> "I post on Facebook a lot of stuff like music video, movie trailers… I like best to say 'take a look, that's what I like, that's me!' (f., 21)"

> "I work as a DJ and I use my profile to make me known, to show what I like or not, to share what is brand new in music; people trust me" (m., 22)

> "When I go shopping with my friends back home we put on Facebook what we have bought" (f., 20)

> "I put crazy stuff on my profile because I want that everyone says that I am the craziest in town" (f., 19

On the other side, media content is more social then ever and plays a big role in our social interactions.
At a very first level, sharing media content is part of our sociability (Simmel, 1949) and it is indeed a kind of mediated "small talk"[16] primarily serving to keep communication open and to keep alive and strengthen both strong and weak personal social ties.

"I used to receive a lot of e-mails with link to stupid videos, now we post directly them on Facebook (f.,20)"

In this perspective, the very act of sharing (no matter what is actually shared) plays in itself an exquisite "phatic function" (Jakobson, 1960), and it is important in keeping the self networked, in the endless circulation of meanings that characterizes contemporary "mediascapes"[17] crossed by delocalized (both

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[15] Cfr. also Wellman's (2001) "networked individualism" and Castells (1996).
[16] On social and linguistic implications of small talk see for example Schneider (1988) and Coupland (2003).
[17] On mediascapes see Appadurai (1996).

spatially and temporally) flows of symbolic forms.

At a more deeper level, however, media content is carefully used as a repertoire from which to draw symbolic materials useful for grounding the identities, differentiating experiences, and transforming the virtual world into a place full of different meanings locally shared into the specific social and groups interactions (both online and offline) that compose the networked self's personal biography.

"We share our stuff… stuff that it's difficult to get outside the group and that is interesting for us"
(m. 19)

"At school we were all Lost fans, there was this friend that was so good in downloading, he used to bring us subtitled episodes on the following day" (f. 24)

"It happens that if we go to the movies or to a concert then we share video and trailers on the Facebook, commenting it" (m. 20).

"I like dancing and I go to dance with people coming from all over the region and sometimes we post on our FB a clip from that movie, "Shall we dance?", or a clip from "Ballando con le stelle[18]". It's a kind of code we have to say: Let's go dancing!" (f. 24).

"At high school I went crazy for Eighties music, we used to play it at parties, now I have completely changed my tastes and I would never click "I like" under, let say, an old 80's video, but if the video is published by one of my high school classmate I comment it because it is one thing we have in common"
(m., 24)

"My close friends know that if publish a De André video it is because I am sad and then they turn on the chat" (f., 21)

Media content works, in this perspective, as a "thickener" used – in the only apparent horizontality of social networks – to create/maintain hierarchies among different interpersonal relations and to feed group identities and belongings: a way to mix or separate "friends" with different degree of intimacy as well as "friends" from different spheres and lifetime moments. Commented/shared /collected media contents become, then, relevant cultural items for group interaction and become part of the group "idioculture" that

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[18] The Italian version of the TV format *Strictly Come Dancing*.

following Fine (1979, p. 734) can be defined as a "system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction". Although it was developed more than thirty years ago, the category of "idioculture" still maintains its worth in the analysis of cultural dynamics of contemporary society. It is particularly valuable because of its ability to identify a place of mediation between the subject and the global flows in which we are immersed, and the ability to offer shared meanings where the individual biographies find a common ground on which to build social reality (Hannerz, 1996; Paltrinieri, 2003). Looking at the audiences' new consumption practices the idea of "idioculture" maintains this very same utility in defining a microsociological level of analysis that is extremely useful in understanding on the one side the nature of social relations online and the importance of group interaction, and on the other side the different media "uses" performed by the subject "in relation", online and offline. This is extremely interesting if we look at the level of cultural items circulation (and media content shared online can definitely be considered as a cultural item). At the same time if we look at television consumption within the social media scenario it is indeed pretty clear that it is more likely to be commented or distributed the content that support the group from the cognitive and functional point of view (as was observed by Fine in his seminal study)[19], or the content that is in the "mood", so to speak, of the group tuning with, and reflecting members' emotion and feeling in any single moment (confirming, once again, the crucial role played by emotions in the contemporary media and technological landscape)[20].

4. Final remarks

TV consumption, even in its most trivial forms, has always been recognized as a social practice: watching TV is a social activity at both individual and collective level. In the contemporary media scenario, the social nature of TV consumption seems to be both strengthened and undermined.

The increased number of TV channels, the fragmentation and crossmediality of corporate media content, the increased time/space flexibility of consumption, and audience performativity in TV content curation and distribution: they all deconstruct the well-established double articulation (Silverstone) of TV content viewed through a Tv set (with in a domestic space and in a linear fashion), and impact on our perception of television viewing as a shared, everyday life experience.

At the same time YouTube, social media, peer to peer networks, and personal digital archives can be considered "time capsules" (Gervais, 2007) that extend and fragment, in an unlimited way, our mediated

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[19] Fine (1979) research for example highlighted that it is more likely to be shared cultural items that 1) are already part of the cultural capital of the group; 2) support group goals and individual needs within the group; 3) are appropriate in supporting the interpersonal network and power relations in the group; 3) are triggered by events which occur in group interaction.
[20] Vincent and Fortunati (2009).

memories and our memory of media programmes undermining the role that the media (and especially TV) have long played in connecting biographies with "collective" and "cultural memories" (Assman, 2003; Halbwachs, 1992).

Media content is now much more rich and fragmented while time and space patterns of media use are less predictable, and this is definitely diminishing the role until now played by television in building our collective memories and shaping common sense, "shared semantics" (Landsberg, 2004) and "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983).

However, as we have underlined, this doesn't mean that TV is loosing its inner sociality. On the contrary in contemporary media scenario in its being collected, distributed, and reorganized by audiences, TV content is deeply social. Facebook or Twitter conversations performed while watching TV, and TV content sharing are fundamental in building both the "networked self" (Papacharissi, 2010) and the "network sociability" (Castells et al., 2007). Moreover television content keeps it centrality in providing a kind of repertoire of contents and discourses that not only circulated through into the (apparent) horizontality of social network weak ties but also are used to structure our online/offline belongings and relations, to differentiate through the many different networks we interact with (Wellmann and Haythornthwaite, 2002), enacting group belongings and "idiocultures" even within the flow and fragmentation of contemporary culture.

Furthermore, our socio-technical network is increasingly the precondition for our media practices, and also the "place" where we perform as media users, distributors and producers.

In conclusion, we can hardly say what is television and what are television audiences in this new scenario, given that television and TV viewing is no longer what we used to know. New articulations are arising involving a flexible set of relations among content features, group interaction, media technologies affordances and personal social relations and networks that operate in defining both new television access and usages.

It is quite hard to define the concrete forms of these new articulations, but we can say for sure that in contemporary "mediascapes" it is not technology and text to be doubly articulated in media. More provocatively, we even might say that – thanks to circulation and consumption of media contents – it is our technological network and our social networked interactions that, in their double articulation, become the medium.

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