
**Conclusion: Browsing, News, Filters and Citizenship**

*Education should consist of teaching people to discern, a very difficult art. But when he opens a book at the first page, an average reader knows if it is an erotic novel or a book of philosophy and then decides. He chooses what he wants. That means that a minimum of literacy at least teaches one to understand immediately what one has in one’s hand when one is in a book shop, if not more. Attaining the same level of knowledge in this telematic jungle is quite a problem. But it is something that will be taught in school in the future.*

Umberto Eco, *The nomenclature and electronic democracy* (own translation)

In our informational societies, which are organized on the basis of a network paradigm and culture, the media and our practices in relation to them, are organized in networks of media diets, media matrixes and media biographies (Castells, 2002-2004; Miranda, 2002; Colombo, 2003-2004). In today’s societies, and predictably in the near future as well, we are experiencing an unparalleled condition in our history that has created a new paradigm for the participation of individuals in society. That new paradigm is the fact that, for the first time, the conditions that make a citizen economically more valuable in the work sphere and those that enable full civic participation are the same. The collection, processing and sharing of information constitute the main conditions for the generation of wealth and economic success and also provide the necessary conditions for the full exercise of citizenship. In both dimensions, success depends on the informational literacy of the individuals. By this I mean the possession of the literacies necessary for creating the different autonomies that constitute our life trajectories, i.e. the capacity to generate our own individual or collective projects. Literacies, which, in a world in which we are living more and more through and with the media, transcend the space of writing and reading to take over the spaces of the image and sound as well.

In a culture of real virtuality (Castells, 2002), literacy is the same as mastering mediation—in the sense of understanding the information, entertainment and communication production models. Literacy thus means more than just the knowledge of how something is produced, but also the reading of written, sound and visual texts through computers, television, radios, newspapers, books, multimedia games and in mediation spaces as varied as telephone networks, television networks and networks of networks such as the Internet.

Literacy, in the network society, means the capacity to manipulate and assimilate information with the end purpose of the production of knowledge in a preponderantly mediated universe (Silverstone, 2005).

In an informational society organized in networks, of all the different forms of autonomy there is one that constitutes the basis for the others: communicative autonomy. Communicative autonomy does not depend on access to information, entertainment and communication alone, for fruition thereof can have little capacity for individual empowerment if the necessary literacy is not given or is not used in the selection and filtering processes. So that one cannot remind often enough that access is not the same as knowledge (Oliveira, 1995).

The introduction to this book referred to a number of hypotheses with the aim of better understanding how the media in the network society are organized, function and are appropriated by us for the most diverse purposes and, in particular, for the exercise of citizenship.

In the network society, integration between different media, and not technological convergence (i.e. the sum of the various media in one single technological interface) is the scenario of the future. Not for technological reasons, but because that is the model that best responds to the
cultural practices and the new models of public perception. The dominant paradigm is that of the autonomy of interfaces that inter-relate in a network logic, using for that connectivity between interfaces any technologies that facilitate the networking, such as the Internet or mobile phone SMS. The common denominator between technologies is network connectivity and not digitalisation. The latter is a necessary condition but, on its own, it does not influence the way in which the different media, be they personal or mass media, are evolving.

Clearly there are successful cases of technological convergence of interfaces, namely the hybridisation of radios, mp3 players and mobile phones and, to a lesser degree, multimedia game consoles and mobile phones. But these successes perhaps owe less to technological affinities between the interfaces and more to the fact that they respond to complex social functions that characterise lifestyles in advanced contemporary societies.

Lifestyles that promote the use of technologies that enable one to manage the boundary between the private and publics spheres. In other words, technologies that allow for networked connections. Technologies that, as a final consequence of the connectivity, enable one to respond to the identity and participation demands. Technologies that enable one to create and manage communication networks. Technologies that enable one to represent effectively the communication interface between the public and private spheres, allowing for personal privacy management and adapting to the personality of the user at the same time as giving them mobility.

In a world of niches and different tribes, people see in the media a form of help in recognizing the identity they have chosen and, at the same time, the possibility of expressing that identity, of cultivating their individual or community identities (Castells, 2003) in a logic of adherence and recognition.

Our representations in relation to the media, or media matrixes (Ortoleva, 2002), which orientate our media diets (Colombo, 2003) thus seek to configure more and more an elective space (Menduni, 2002), in which a networked synthetic communication model is developed [note: Elective space applied to the media means a space that configures a world made up of different cultures, languages, objectives, lifestyles and cultural users. When we individually choose one of the media, be it a personal or mass medium, we are giving it communicative maturity for that space (Menduni, 2002)].

Browsing, News, Filters and Citizenship

Our participation practices and the way we use the different media configure a citizenship that can be described as citizenship between browsers, filters and news.

In a society in which mediation plays a central role, the management of citizenship not only has to do with the concretisation of a given action or taking a certain position. Most of the time our use of the mediation space has nothing to do with specific, pre-defined objectives. What we essentially do is to combine looking, listening, reading and observing, adding information in order to process it and transform it into knowledge. Our television and Internet practices have more in common with “window shopping” than “going shopping”. Just as we mostly surf the Internet without concrete objectives, our television viewing is also more the result of discovering “what’s on” than the concrete desire to see a programme or series that we follow, thus giving rise to phenomena such as zapping.

Civic participation in the informational societies implies, in addition to our non-mediated social relationships, extensive knowledge of the mediated reality. It is that knowledge – the sum of many segmented interests (which differ from subject to subject) – that constitutes the foundation for the management of citizenship. Only through that free – and not previously guided – experimentation with reading newspapers, watching television, surfing the Internet, listening to radio, experimenting mobile phone SMS functions, does one obtain the conditions necessary for the development of the informational literacy required by each person to be able to assert themselves in the different spheres of citizenship and achieve their autonomy objectives. Citizenship in the Information Age is also a product of the different windows that we browse on the Internet because only if we are aware of the diversity they contain can we make the right choices.

Traditionally, filters have always been a part of our experience, providing a basis for classification. That is true for book and magazine publishing companies, record companies and film and game production companies, the television and radio programme directors, but it is also true of journalists, editors, churches, scientific institutions, etc. – entities and persons that have the function of filtering and reorganizing knowledge and information. In the relationship between the filter and user, there is a restriction of intellectual liberty, but access of the user and the community to the essential information is guaranteed. It is thus that the filters influence the management of citizenship.
With the development of the Internet, the matrix of the relationship between filters and user has also changed and, consequently, the conditions for the management of citizenship as well. On the one hand, the Internet has reduced institutional filters, because it is possible to select information without going through the institutions and it allows one to compare the filtering carried out by states, churches, teachers, librarians, doctors, opinion leaders and entrepreneurs. On the other hand, it repeats online the filtering already carried out by newspapers, radio and television. In other words, the Internet, when looked at through the search engines, shows us a filtered reality that continues to give an out-of-proportion voice – considering the number of media online – to the newspapers, radio and television stations. The Internet has thus introduced new classification agents for the experience, such as the search engines and portals, giving rise to a new selection and classification phenomenon – Internet gatekeeping – and thus also altering the conditions of management of citizenship.

It would be difficult for us to imagine a world where we would no longer find the news at the newsagents, where we would not hear the news every half hour when we turn on the car radio, where we would not surf the Internet in search of a sports page when we arrive at work, where we would not (occasionally) be tempted to go check the website of a newspaper to see if anything new has happened, or where, when we get home, there would not be one of those faces on the television screen that we have become so accustomed to watching at dinner time reading the news to us.

News is part of our everyday life, so we do pay a certain amount of attention to it, even without such emotionally strong catastrophes such as the 9/11 disaster or the tsunami in South-east Asia in 2005. Because news is a mirror of reality, it informs our value constructions and helps us to define how the political, economic, military, social and cultural power relations are structured. Accordingly, when changes are made to its form and content, its editorial organisational models, its business management, its distribution model, the way in which we use it or in the time we give to it, we are also altering the conditions in which we exercise management of our citizenship. There is an intimate link between news and citizenship.

The news we see, read or hear today has changed because the formulation of the media system and the information meta-system has changed, though, in general, the continuity is greater than the change. The news remains today, as it was yesterday, the most common form of information on public events transmitted by the most diverse media, and its basic characteristics are update, relevance and reliability.

The change in the field of the news results, primarily, from many of the newspapers and radio and television stations going online. The fact that they have established an Internet presence has also brought about new strategies. In the case of television, this has given rise to a networked television model; for the newspapers, it has resulted in a repositioning in relation to television; and in the case of radio it has led to a consolidation of this communicative intimacy. But if the Internet has brought alterations with it, it is also true that the changes in the news field came before the massification of the Internet. The newspapers had already began to occupy themselves with an increasing number of social events, customs, varieties and rumours, thus altering the criteria for defining what was and what was not news. That logic contaminated television, first at the entertainment level and then the field of information, through the news, turning television programmes and presenters themselves into news stories.

A further transformation that news has undergone resulted from the extension of its personalisation practices, traditionally confined to political party leaders, to promote the anonymous individuals. Celebration in the news became a possibility for many who were not politicians, athletes or actors, thus producing a condition of ephemeral stardom, taking the form, in the news, of reports on someone’s illness, a village feast and who organized it or injustices suffered at the hands of the State or an insurance company. This second change in the news dimension can be characterized as the application of the reality show narrative logic to information.

The fact that the massification of the Internet took place at the same time as the institutionalisation of populist journalism was also reflected in the content model offered by the portals, in which quality of content is defined as being that which keeps the users on the site and, only collaterally, the fact that it fulfils socially shared objectives and has intellectual or artistic merit. In the model practiced in portals, the editorial integrity of the information provided is not the central dimension of the act of informing, nor does it necessarily have to be a product of the creative and analytical capacities in relation to information on the part of the journalists. The information content can be anything and does not necessarily have to be the product of a specialist accredited as a journalist.
News has changed, though perhaps not radically, for the portals have given rise to the coexistence of news and information contents and, in the mass media, to the option between populist and serious journalism. Various types of information coexist, produced in accordance with different criteria with different objectives and also serving our interests and tastes in a different way.

The practical result of that change for the management of citizenship in its relationship with the news was the rise of a new classification environment for experience and a new mirror of reality, introducing new notions of update, relevance and reliability.

However, if these are the new conditions of citizenship management, it is also true that a new paradox has emerged in our societies.

Today, a few of us, making use of the symbolic mediation space offered by the mass media and interpersonal communication media, can confront the stronger and realize their objectives. But, at the same time, those that have that combination of literacies are also, today, proportionally less in number than those that, in previous periods of our history, successfully became involved in other non mediated mass movements, struggles and civic protests.

In this condition, formal education and the informal experimentation of the media play a fundamental role in our society, for only they can guarantee expansion of the number of those who will exercise full citizenship in all its multiple dimensions, from the civic to the economic dimension, and, consequently, the social and economic development of their societies.

Because citizenship, regardless of the era we are living in, is an expression of the will to improve our lives and our world, I will finish with the words of Hugo Pratt:

_Hope. The desire for a better life._
_A few masochists apart, everyone focuses on that, at all latitudes._
_To live better is the wish of all, but the paths we chose to try and get there are multiple and they vary just as the personality of each person varies._
_The only paths I would consider condemnable are those that do wrong to others: I am for civility – but the civility of the strong, not that of weakness._

Hugo Pratt, _Le Désir D’être Inutile_ (own translation)