



Language and Discourse in Social Media: New Challenges, New Approaches.

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This special issue of *Altre Modernità*, entitled *Language and Discourse in Social Media: New Challenges, New Approaches*, represents a perfect fit with the overall aims of this journal, focused as it is on paradigms that subvert, weaken or transcend the monologic discourse of mainstream culture. Web 2.0 platforms emerged in the first decade of the 21st century, and particularly through social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Google+, they fostered users' creative input and opened up new conduits of participation, not only horizontally, among social peers, but vertically, between users and established institutional hierarchies, be they in the media or in the political, corporate or professional realm. Indeed, few contemporary phenomena have held so much promise for radically challenging and rewriting hegemonic discourses both locally and globally to so many in such widely differing social and cultural contexts. Recall the so-called "Arab Spring", which came to be known as the "Facebook Revolution". However, after the initial flush of enthusiasm, it is fair to say that this potential of Web 2.0 has been only partially realized. In many cases the gatekeepers are still there, and the old moulds have yet to be broken. Employing a variety of linguistic approaches and methods, the essays in this collection present a spectrum of case studies from an array of spheres. In some cases social media have enhanced horizontal or vertical engagement among digital interlocutors, while in others, they have failed to do so, either due to the difficulty of breaking down hegemonic attitudes or because some users are setting agendas that run contrary to social media's professed vocation of improving interaction. Taken together, these contributions offer a significant consideration of this as yet unresolved tension at the heart of social media use.

Altre Modernità



Introduction

This special issue of *Altre Modernità* on “Language and Discourse in Social Media: New Challenges, New Approaches” aims to contribute to the ongoing debate about the importance of computer-mediated communication (CMC), and specifically social media in the era of Web 2.0, in today’s public sphere. It does so by presenting an array of approaches to and uses of social media in a variety of contexts – media, corporate, professional, institutional and voluntary work. In each of these ambits, the affordances of CMC appear to hold the promise of new means of communication and engagement for a wide variety of digital interlocutors. At the same time, many of the contributions to this special issue describe challenges and, sometimes, significant shortcomings in the exploitation of these resources.

According to Herring (2013), the so-called Web 2.0 consists of

Web-based platforms that emerged as popular in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and that incorporate user-generated content and social interaction, often alongside or in response to structures and/or (multimedia) content provided by the sites themselves. (4)

This definition highlights the two most distinctive aspects of Web 2.0, that is, its emphasis on users’ creative input and the social relations established thanks to it. Notably associated with the latter are social network sites (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Google+, which are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) to view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (boyd & Ellison 2007: 211). SNSs foster interpersonal contacts and encourage ties between people on the basis of shared familial, geographical, professional, cultural, and political affinity. They have transformed the conduits on the internet used for social activity into “free” services supported by advertising, through which users do not so much transfer their offline social activities online as build their social activities there. We would go so far as to claim that the construction of platforms and social practices is mutually



constitutive: People negotiate their activities on the net by organizing their strategies on it, and these strategies aid users to construct both their online and their offline sociality.

Indeed, even at an anecdotal level, it seems quite clear that the affordances of the participatory web have redesigned the contours of the public sphere and the knowledge that circulates within it. To its most enthusiastic supporters, the internet “is a new layer of the world, perhaps a new society, or a path to a different and more public future” (Jarvis 2011: 8). According to this view, the internet can be seen as an instrument to make society more public, and a more public society would mean a freer society, or one in which “participatory culture”, based on “new forms of participation and collaboration”, would turn the Internet into “an alternative source of media power” (Jenkins 2008: 4). Indeed, the dominant ideology of the internet is related to the concepts of empowerment and freedom. That is, the interactive, many-to-many, transparent communication afforded by CMC promises greater, more democratic participation by seemingly empowering the citizen-user with the possibility to access knowledge and exercise control. This ideology extends back to the earliest days of the internet (e.g. Barlow 1996). The advent of the so-called Web 2.0, it was felt, would establish a culture of connectivity in which, through social media platforms, users exchange data and information, in contrast with the culture of participation of “Web 1.0” (O’Reilly 2005). This transition from “networked communication” to “platformed sociality” (van Dijck 2013) characterizes the evolution of the internet, from its earlier forms and applications to the current age of social networks, user-generated content and social interaction, all fundamental features of Web 2.0.

In the face of the popular view of social media as interactive environments where user-generated content can be freely and openly shared without any “gatekeepers”, a more critical view is needed to assess the actual nature and import of the social media communication paradigm. While it has introduced elements of innovation, especially in terms of individual empowerment, Web 2.0 appears to be dominated by pre-existing market rules which follow a neoliberal ideology of commerce. Several critics have observed that the “newness” of Web 2.0 is largely a fabrication and a discursive and ideological construction (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011: xix-xliv). The discourse or, indeed, “mythology” (Thurlow 2013) of “change” is both a market ploy and a new opportunity for corporate interests to approach the user-consumer in a more subtle way compared to previous media platforms. Thurlow (2013) describes this as a process of colonization and incorporation of the social life by corporate interests for commercial gain. Users are seemingly empowered by the new interactive, user-centered media, but at the same time they are also lured into very traditional market traps to become consumers, or rather “prosumers” (Fuchs 2014: 106-11), that is, producers and consumers at the same time.

A similar degree of (dis)illusion can be observed in online politics. To be sure, some changes in the dynamics of discursive power have taken place within (and because of) social media. Grassroots participation and political engagement are greater than in the past. For example, in the “Arab Spring” of 2011, opponents of some dictatorial regimes in the Middle East used new technologies (mobile phones,



Facebook, Twitter) to organize protests and gatherings, which in some cases (for example in Tunisia) led to the overthrow of those regimes, in what has been called the “Facebook Revolution”. The extensive use of social networks, with their huge network of small donors, was also decisive in helping Barack Obama win the 2008 and 2012 U.S. Presidential elections. Obama’s support came mainly from Facebook users, who so helped him in mobilizing the vote that he has been dubbed the first “Facebook President”. His election proved that more democratic participation in public life could be achieved through the internet. The perceived authenticity of social media communication seems to reinforce a sense of unity between candidates and their supporters and goes a long way toward motivating political participation in young voters.

However, social liberation and fully empowering participation in the public sphere and in political decision-making through the resources made available by Web 2.0 are still, to some extent, a “mythology”. Democratic civil engagement still seems to be largely top-down rather than bottom-up, as illustrated, for example, by the use of Twitter by political leaders such as Donald Trump to set national agendas. Trump’s tweets display the power of social media, but it is as the gatekeeper himself who orchestrates the public’s response to current events and media contents. Trump’s populist language on Twitter communicates an impression of authenticity and accessibility which is rather effective in generating consensus (Demata 2018), furthering his agenda-setting goals. Moreover, online misinformation is now so widespread as to cast serious doubts on the idea that social media can still be considered an instrument of democracy. Several studies from the Oxford Internet Institute (e.g. Kollanyi, Howard and Woolley 2016) have found that the flow of information through social media can be heavily manipulated; as evidence they cite the use of bots and other automated devices in the Brexit referendum and in Trump’s election.

Rather than endorsing either an optimistic or a pessimistic view of the effective “real-life” role played by social media in the public sphere, this special issue of *Altre Modernità* is premised on the notion that digital resources play an important role in the exercise of social and political power, and that there is increasing interaction between online and offline social and political spheres. Indeed, the emerging research area of Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraVinik 2017) aims to address the demand for a more problematized approach to social media discourse. The use of social media as instruments of propaganda and hate and, more recently, the online dissemination of nationalist and populist discourses, emphasize the need to further explore the connection between media and society and to illuminate how meanings are negotiated through the interplay of online and offline social spaces.

What appears certain is that increased engagement for different ends, be it among consumers or professional peers, between experts and laypeople, or between politicians and citizens, is the key opportunity afforded by CMC. The papers that comprise this special issue reflect this ground truth. The first paper, by **Michael S. Boyd**, addresses the importance of user-generated content in the context of online newspaper editorials. The study focuses on a set of editorials in *The New York Times*



that deal with the European migrant crisis and the reader comments posted in response to the editorials. Boyd proposes that such commenting practices not only change media discourse and social practice but also, ultimately, have the potential to reverse the traditional flow of media discourse, transforming it from a primarily top-down, one-to-many model into a more interactive and participatory paradigm fostering many-to-many interaction. As yet, however, this reversal is rather limited. Although online news sources like *The New York Times* recognize that reader comments are redefining the genre of the editorial and providing legitimate additional perspectives, the content, economic and institutional power still reside firmly in their hands and is robustly maintained by a set of gatekeeping procedures.

Good communication has always been a lynchpin of effective military operations. In the second paper in this issue, **Michelangelo Conoscenti** reminds us that social networking is potentially a matter of life and death, or at least, of military effectiveness. Drawing on his own experience as a subject matter expert in NATO working groups that are active in social media (especially Facebook) communication, Conoscenti provides analysis from the field on the present shortcomings currently besetting NATO's social media strategy. These include, among others, overreliance on outmoded graphics and discourse (associated with the Cold War period), a resistance to or rejection of others' comments and only a partial monitoring of inappropriate content, all indicating that NATO does not allot sufficient attention to communication in this environment. Meanwhile, the author warns that while the NATO leadership is locked into decision-making processes that delay the introduction of much-needed communicative adjustments, its adversaries are exploiting these weaknesses and dominating in terms of strategic communication.

The third paper, by **Paola Catenaccio**, investigates dialogic strategies in the corporate communication of the Biotech giants Monsanto and Bayer. Both companies have to face considerable criticism on the part of activists and biotech-averse consumers. In response, each has made a considerable commitment to consolidating forms of stakeholder dialogue, turning to CMC as the preferred means of interaction to achieve legitimisation. Catenaccio analyses two sets of documents: Monsanto's dedicated "Conversation" website section and Bayer's "Transparency Initiative". The resulting analysis, grounded in discourse analysis and pragmadialectics, highlights the challenges posed by these dialogic initiatives on controversial issues and indicates how difficult it is, despite the corporations' professed intention to engage in meaningful dialogue with stakeholders, for such corporate entities to break the mould and successfully resolve the tension between discursive gatekeeping and transparency.

In the fourth paper, **Giuliana Elena Garzone** analyses the opportunities and challenges posed by CMC in the context of professional discussion groups on the LinkedIn social networking site. The analysis is conducted on a corpus of 557 interactions on four Groups of legal practitioners. The main aims of these Groups, as identified in the analysis, are sharing knowledge, finding and providing updates and information, and participation in discussions. However, only the first two are confirmed through Garzone's analysis, while only rarely do the participants engage in



authentic discussions. Thus, although members' activities in LinkedIn groups are conventionally called "conversations", actual interaction is limited. What is more, the results indicate that very often professionals are active within such Groups for motives of self-promotion (personal branding) and the promotion of goods and services, thereby engaging in genre bending – here, turning a professional genre into a promotional one.

Anna Franca Plastina's paper considers how the hashtag constructs meanings in public health campaigns on Twitter. This study describes a positive example of interaction in a CMC environment. Drawing on a corpus of sample tweets taken from the hashtag #AntibioticGuardian, a campaign led by Public Health England to reduce Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR), Plastina analyses lexicogrammatical realisations, evaluative language and predominant discourse functions to seek the meanings that the hashtag can construct in four communicative activities, namely, increasing awareness and knowledge, providing cues for action, demonstrating simple skills, and changing and/or reinforcing attitudes and behaviours. The data suggest that the hashtag encourages substantial user-generated content in contrast to traditional top-down media campaigns. Indeed, the author claims that the #AntibioticGuardian campaign is characterized by significant interactions among health professionals, health professionals and laypeople, and among laypeople themselves, leading to greater involvement in important health issues like AMR.

Ilaria Moschini's contribution examines the meaning making potential of the stickers used by the Walt Disney Company in the 2016 As Told by Emoji campaign. A 'sticker' is a kind of graphicon that originated in Asia in the early 2010s. Along with emoji, it is a further example of cross-cultural fertilization in the sphere of CMC that has produced a new tool to enhance communication in the transnational, transcultural digital language of the 21st century. Adopting a socio-semiotic, multi-modal approach integrated with mediated discourse analysis, the study focuses both on the modal affordances of the Disney digital stickers and on the semantic components added to stickers by the translation of Disney stories into the emoji idiom.

Marianna Lya Zummo sounds a less euphoric note in her analysis of an asynchronous discussion forum devoted to the sensitive issue of Measles, Mumps, and Rubella (MMR) vaccines and their possible links with autism. While the study indicates that participants use the asynchronous interactional tools effectively, it also reveals how such communication often spills over into interactional conflicts in which two opposing camps do not so much interact as oppose each other from their respective echo chambers. Zummo concludes by identifying a lack of media literacy apparent in the absence of critical attitudes to information, as well as an inability to understand alternative viewpoints or to respect the opinions of others. The emerging picture in this CMC scenario is one where participants are trapped in their respective confirmation niches.

The final contribution by **Alessandra Rizzo** brings us back full circle to the current European migrant crisis, with a focus on the role of social media in voluntary work. Specifically, Rizzo conducts an in-depth analysis of the Syrian Trojan Women website, investigating how the visual, textual, and auditory modalities of the internet



facilitate user-generated content and counter-narratives to anti-refugee discourse. The study describes how the new multimodalities, combined with a user demographic within which different linguistic backgrounds converge, encourages highly creative and dynamic user-created output, resulting in a radically new perspective on the migrant experience and related issues. This in turn encourages consumers of such online content to reassess the oversimplified narratives or incomplete information about migration available through the mainstream media. The author thus ensures that this special issue closes on a positive note as regards the promise of social media.

This overview of the special issue's contents cannot, of course, do justice to all the fine-grained analysis in the individual contributions themselves. It can only provide a broad outline of some of the significant sectors in which social media have been analysed in this issue, and perhaps encourage analysts to cast their investigative nets even more deeply into these specific areas or more widely to encompass others. Also, as will be seen upon close reading of these contributions, despite the affordances and participants' competence in exploiting them, "interaction" is a term that still needs to be used advisedly and certainly not taken for granted as a given (or necessarily always a positive force) in social media. As a number of the contributors here rightly suggest, there is much scope for investigating and accounting for the partial or indeed illusory nature of much of the interaction purporting to take place within social media.

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