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CARACTERES

Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

En este número participan ■ Elena Alcalde Peñalver, Leyre Alejaldre Biel, Consuelo Allué, Carmen Álvarez García, Eva Álvarez Ramos, Alessandra Anichini, Daniel Cassany, Viola Davin, Araceli García Rodríguez, Alicia Gil Torres, Raquel Gómez Díaz, Ricardo González-García Hugo Heredia Ponce, Antonia Olivia Jarvio Fernández, Ilaria Marchionne, Javier Merchán Sánchez-Jara, Mª Isabel Morales Sánchez, Javier Puche Gil, Elsa Margarita Ramírez Leyva, Laro del Río Castañeda, Sonia Ríos Moyano, Manuel Fco. Romero Oilva, Marta Sampériz Hernández, Cristina San José de la Rosa, Maria Sanz Ferrer, Luca Toschi, Ignacio Vidal Franco

Dosier: Medios digitales y educación
Dosier: La lectura en y por la Educación Superior

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Caracteres. Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

Caracteres es una revista académica interdisciplinar y plurilingüe orientada al análisis crítico de la cultura, el pensamiento y la sociedad de la esfera digital. Esta publicación prestará especial atención a las colaboraciones que aporten nuevas perspectivas sobre los ámbitos de estudio que cubre, dentro del espacio de las Humanidades Digitales. Puede consultar las normas de publicación en la web (http://revistacaracteres.net/normativa/).

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Dosier: La lectura en y por la Educación Superior

Coords. Mª Isabel Morales Sánchez

WHO IS AFRAID OF ROBOTS? WHO IS AFRAID OF PROFESSORS?

¿QUIÉN TEME A LOS ROBOTS? ¿QUIÉN TEME A LOS PROFESORES?

LUCA TOSCHI
UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI FIRENZE

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ABSTRACT:
In the last century, the process of globalization seemed to finally offer a chance to stimulate an active citizenship in the construction of a common planetary vision, but recently it has proved to be an instrument of homologation, massification, globalization.
This was a consequence of the established paradigm of communication - a mechanistic-transmissive one - which has created subjects organized to "produce" and not human beings organised to "generate" and "create". Individuals educated to operate according to increasingly invisible, imposed, non-critically chosen algorithms, as 'humbles' of our time that are renouncing to the 'revolutionary' value of their 'weak' condition, their 'ultimate' culture entrusting the 'intelligence' of their humanity to machines built to be more persuasive and manipulative.
This scenario favored the emergence of small, but increasingly powerful, groups, oligarchies in all respects, that have control over physical and symbolic automation systems able to change the world with a speed that humanity, in its brief history, had never experienced before.

RESUMEN:
El proceso de mundialización - que en el siglo pasado parecía orientado hacia la construcción de una visión planetaria común y, al mismo tiempo, abierta a la diversidad - se ha vuelto una herramienta de homologación, masificación y globalización.
Esta deriva es el resultado de la consolidación mundial de un paradigma de comunicación mecanicista, que transforma a los seres humanos en sujetos orientados a "reproducir" pasivamente en lugar de "generar", "crear". Formados para operar a través de algoritmos cada vez más invisibles, impuestos y no elegidos, los "humildes" de hoy están renunciando al valor "revolucionario" de su condición y de su cultura "débil", confiando en máquinas construidas para ser cada vez más persuasivas y manipuladoras que limitan la "inteligencia" de su humanidad.
Este escenario ha favorecido la aparición de una pequeña élite que tiene el poder de cambiar el mundo con una velocidad que la humanidad, en su breve historia, nunca había experimentado antes.

KEYWORDS:
Generative Communication, Robot, Social representations, University, Professor

PALABRAS CLAVE:
Comunicación generativa, Robot, Representaciones sociales, Universidad, Profesor.

Luca Toschi. Catedrático de Sociología de los Procesos Culturales y Comunicación y Director Center for Generative Communication de la Universidad de Florencia. Autor del libro La Communicazione generativa, base de la metodología que cotidianamente aplica en sus proyectos en el CfGC. Fundador de la Italian University Line (IUL), universidad telemática constituida junto al Instituto Nazionale di Documentazione, Innovazione e Ricerca Edicativa (INDIRE-MIUR).

1. From the social representations of reality to the reality of social representations

In 1928, following a series of studies dealing with the relationship between deviance and social condemnation, William Thomas formulated the so-called Thomas's theory - *if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences* (Thomas, 1928). This is the main element of one of the most controversial and fascinating sociological theory of the last 70 years: the "Self-fulfilling Prophecy" by Robert Merton (Merton, 1971).

Merton introduces the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy in one of the texts that is considered a milestone in the social sciences titled "Social Theory and Social Structure":

> The self-fulfilling prophecy is, in the beginning, a false definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception like true. The validity of the self-fulfilling prophecy perpetuates a reign of error (Merton, 1948: 195).

In order to help the reader to better understand the profound meaning of this prophecy, the sociologist reports the Black Wednesday parable of the Last National Bank. In particular, it was in 1932 when the President of bank, Cartwright Millingville, entering to the office, noticed that there were too many people asking for their money back. It was the beginning of what is remembered as one of the biggest financial crisis:

> The stable financial structure of the bank had depended upon one set of definitions of the situation: belief in the validity of the interlock system of economic promises men live by. Once depositors had defined the situation otherwise, once they questioned the possibility of having these promises fulfilled, the consequences of this unreal definition was real enough (Merton, 1948:194-195).

In other words, Merton used this fact as a sociological parable where Cartwright had to deal with the falsification of a real situation (the risk of insolvency of a bank which actually did not have any problem), caused by shared information about alleged financial difficulties of the Last National Bank.

The clients, believing in the bank's lack of solidity, activated a series of behaviors that realized concretely a situation that was not real but only imagined: imagination and words created something that did not exist before (Austin, 1962).

Later, in the 80s, Paul Watzlawick resumes and deepens this dynamics of media prophecy, underlining the fact that man, through his own convictions, is able to 'read' and 're-write' the reality around him. In this way, the traditional causal thought - where in the sequence A → B, A is the cause of B - is totally undermined by a model defined by the self-fulfilling prophecy where the possible effect (B) produces the cause (A). It is very famous the example made in this regard by Watzlawick:

> When California newspapers began publishing sensational reports of an imminent and drastic reduction in gasoline supply in 1979, Californian drivers assaulted the pumps to fill their tanks and possibly keep them full. Filling up 12 million tanks exhausted the enormous reserves available, causing the aforementioned scarcity almost overnight; while the anxiety of keeping the tanks as full as possible created endless queues of machines and very long waiting times at the distributors, increasing the panic (1988: 87).

Therefore, we deal with the definition of an extremely useful and functional mechanism where social representations become the product of the reality itself and, at the same time, tools able to transform it (Moscovici, 1984).

These representations stand out as a precise way of expressing and shaping knowledge (Searle, 1995) and interests of well-defined social groups.

2. From machines made to free man, to the freedom of machines

The self-fulfilling prophecy has a strategic role in redefining the relationship between robots, automated processes and the labour market.

In particular, looking at one of the last studies published by *McKinsey Global Institute* (McKinsey, 2017), 49% of jobs carried out by men and women are at risk because of the increasing mechanization and automation of production processes. Innovation is creating machines that are able to perform these kind of tasks: the McKinsey report states that, in the 60% of jobs, 30% of activities can be carried out automatically by robots or artificial intelligence systems. These machines reduce the risk of making mistakes and improve the productivity of companies (the McKinsey study states that productivity growth due to automation can vary, from 2015 to 2065, from 0.8% to 1.4% year after year).

This scenario is defining an imaginary where innovative technologies are seen as neutral tools *(the self-fulfilling prophecy is* a *false definition of the situation*...) that push individuals to think that the only thing that matters is the way they use them (...*evoking a new behavior* ...). In other words: is the use that makes technologies potentially "good", "bad" or "useful" for the development of the whole society.

To be passed from the centrality of the contents to that of use implies the renunciation of any form of evaluation, of critique, of judgement of the social, economic and cultural meaning of technologies. A growing subjection to symbolic and physical algorithms increasingly designed, engineered and, of course, owned by a planetary network of oligarchies (... *which makes the originally false conception come true*) who decides what kind of technologies to produce and what is their use.

This situation is creating, at the same time, a deep sense of responsibility, inadequacy when machines do not work as men would like, because people are wanted to believe that the fault is not of men who designed and built them but of those who are not able to use them. It is the man who has to adapt himself to the machines and not vice versa. Or better, it is the man-consumer who must adapt himself to the interests of master-designers of the machines.

In this perspective, we can identify the process of strong mechanization of our humanity as a self-fulfilling prophecy, sustained and reinforced by an old hierarchical-transmissive-emulative communicative paradigm, that is:

- *hierarchical,* because those who hold the power - at every level and in every sector of socio-economic life - turns out to be the best;
- *transmissive,* because it is based on *top-down* processes where every form of *bottom-up* flow is functional to strengthen those who command;
- *emulative,* because it emerges from the need to identify a matrix, a well-defined example to follow, avoiding all the forms of creativity.

The main groups of power are interested in defending this kind of paradigm in order to safeguard a strongly oligarchic organization of society, in which to win it is still the Fordist model of the acquaintance and therefore of the organization. They managed to make this paradigm the absolute 'lord' of communication, creating a planetary social representation where new technologies are seen as the providential response to the needs that subjects feel to be recognized and distinguished the one by the other.

Consequently, what we define 'new technologies' have been realized and presented to us as if they are the only ones that could have been produced worldwide, avoiding us to understand that we might have had the opportunity to plan those tools in a different way, for example making them useful to respond to social and cultural needs, unexpressed, or that we even consider inappropriate to show. (Toschi, 2015a:17).

If we abandon the idea of technologies as neutral instruments - the mother of all the ambiguities in which we are struggling - it is immediately clear that every automated system - not just ICTs but also the unexplored frontier represented by Industry 4.0, - influences the relationship between experience and knowledge, between action and representation, between practices and knowledge, transforming the way we 'read' and 'write' the reality itself. These processes have become always more invisible and unconscious but also powerful in manipulating us (Toschi, 2012b: XXII).

Technologies, however, are not only tools able to give us goals and to facilitate us in transforming reality - from climate to big data: above all, they are essential *media* between our humanity and our citizenship (Toschi, 2015b: 19), that impose a redefinition of the concept of literacy.

Nowadays, digital literacy completely ignores a reflection about how we can understand the socio-economic-cultural strategies which guide the design and realization of technologies, in other words an analysis of the values and interests that are hidden behind a specific technical-engineering architecture.

When we speak about illiteracy, there is an instrumental meaning which is at the center of many interventions of cultural politics. But there is also an illiteracy that makes us unable to analyze and understand the social, economic, cultural, architectural value and functioning of these technologies (Toschi, 2011).

3. From class robots to robot classes

In all the sectors of human activities there is an evident qualitative drift in our life caused by the need to manage the effects of automated processes that are producing machines that are always more capable to 'learn' and to 'decide'. We have created very useful and increasingly sophisticated automatisms to govern the reality we are transforming - today's world, compared with a few decades ago, looks like a new one -, but now those physical and symbolic automatisms seem to replace our ability to choose the deep strategies which inspire our own possibility of changing reality (Toschi, 2018: 198).

Automation, how it is conceived and used today, is designed to weaken the contractual strength of common people, to hide the real dynamics of control and power - making them more invisible - and to misinterpret the necessary technological progress with the current technological architectures expression of balance of oligarchies very consolidated (Toschi, 2017: 12). This kind of automation reveals a truly exceptional force of action, capable of

interfere on every dimension of reality. Thus, it is happening that while the socio-economic-political differences become more evident, there is a growing concern about the effects that automation processes can have on man and his environment.

Therefore, we need a new communication paradigm that does not 'transfer' contents top-down, after having well-packaged them in such a way as to create an effective operation of persuasion, of conviction violating our judgment, our critical and project capacity. We must try to give ourselves a new communicative paradigm, that here, in a perspective of project, we indicate with the name "generative", able to generate a creative and democratic environment where it is possible to identify objectives, building policies and economics radically different from the past, to discover the resources to realize them in the light of a new idea of collaboration and cooperation. A communication model capable of conceiving, designing, developing, realizing and monitoring a 'different' cultural and socio-economic reality from the one we are living today. Both in private and public spheres.

In this scenario, schools, universities and the world of education, in general, play a fundamental role because they do not have to be considered as 'machines' to prepare young people to enter the assembly line of social and economic organization, a Tayloristic structure of knowledge and skills.

On the contrary, they must become great laboratories of knowledge, practices, abilities, experiences that engage all the citizens. It does not mean to weaken schools, universities or the research system, reducing their value as social agencies, arguing that every manifestation of socio-economic and cultural life is training and research. On the contrary, it means that it is necessary to look for, to individualize, strengthen, enhance any form of

knowledge, practices, abilities, experiences in all aspects of society creating a vast network of interactions and collaborations between *Scientia* and *Usus*. That precisely is the task of universities, of research centres to recognize, reinforce and legitimize every component of reality which is, in some way, keeper of knowledge, creating a community of interactions thought a generative communication paradigm (Toschi, 2018: 208).

In this context, teachers should be the first to change their way of teaching, developing a new awareness about their strategic role. In this sense there have to choose between two main possibilities:

1. they accept to be the gatekeeper of a knowledge system (expression of a social system in a precise historical situation), assuming the role of preserving it and defending it;
2. they decide to play an active role in transformation, favoring - with their formative communication - the development of a very different social project.

In the first case avoiding, and in the second promoting, encouraging questions and doubts from their students about the pillars of the dominant cultural, economic and political powers. Thus fostering an attitude that directly affects the relationship between every teacher and his own knowledge, but also promoting a critical reflection on what he has learned and he is teaching by his own students as well (Anichini, 2012).

The best lesson that can be offered today to the new generations to generate knowledge.

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