

ON TRUTH

by Marialaura Ghidini

THE TRAFFIC OF ABUNDANCE

Constant flows of information are to be found in the regularity of Twitter updates, Facebook news feed, blog feeds - or simply Feeds - and all the other web and software applications we use to receive and filter information.

Every single day, from when we have breakfast to the last 'check' before going to bed, we consume large amounts of information at such a rate and pace that it is often too laborious to examine sources and compare data in real time. One does not really know, after the first 'check out and go', whether to accept and agree with the filtered information or to discard and be in dispute with it; remaining in an uncertain state of mind that fluctuates between the two positions.

This is the state of irresolution inherent to digesting online abundance.

The 80s spread of the personal computer - proclaimed the *Machine of the Year* by the TIME magazine in 1982¹ (for the first time replacing man with an object) - symbolised the beginning of this phenomenon. Through allowing the creation of networks between home and the outside world - an outside that at the beginning was one's work space -, it enabled ever-increasing systematisation and access to information, which progressively became more ready to be diffused and shared.

This technological phenomenon was widely discussed at the time; and Langdon Winner, a professor of Political Science², identified its socio-cultural causes and effects in his essay *Mythinformation*³, published in 1986.

Mythinformation deals with the hopes and ideals of the then "computer enthusiasts", and it indicates, as Winner very sceptically describes, the "almost religious conviction that a widespread adoption of computers and electronic communication systems, along with broad access to electronic information, will automatically produce a better world".

Their premise being that information is knowledge and knowledge creates more democratic systems.

Is this true?

TRAJECTORIES OF TRAFFIC

Is information knowledge?

This is a question that now involves a more tortuous path towards finding an answer; which can later be accepted or discarded.

After almost thirty years since the publication of Winner's essay, we see a yet un-definable geographical and social expansion of the effects of the "broad access to electronic information"⁴.

But the scenario described by the professor has changed: the World Wide Web

1 "The Computer" by Otto Friedrich, *The Time*; 4 January 1983

2 At Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York.

3 In "The Whale and the Reactor. A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology", 98-117 pp; University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986.

4 Ibid.

has substituted the personal computer in the discussions about information technology and power.

Most of the information we consume, that relentless flow, is not sourced through private networks, i.e. those which connected home and work spaces, but within and through the 'public' realm of the web.

The World Wide Web has been complicating the way in which information and knowledge are received and understood, resulting in a series of twisting and turning highways of data in which the two are blurred and their distinctiveness superficially erased.

The WikiLeaks case and the Egyptian revolution - two widely known recent instances - exemplify this new scenario: the Web - or better still, the social and communication systems operating within it, from Facebook to Youtube and personal blogs - have become the kernel of many debates about the relationship between knowledge, distribution and democracy in the digital age⁵. Here is an example: if on the one hand, we have those who are in favour of the idea that recent revolutions have taken place because of the capillary 'diffusion' allowed by social networks; on the other hand there are cases of how that very same 'diffusion' was blacked-out by, for instance, internet providers. The case of Vodafone Egypt's advert created to associate the company with 'inspiring the revolution' is quite revealing of two positions that are at both ends of the spectrum of this debate⁶. For this reason (and many others which are related to the erasure of information, which I am not going to dwell on here)⁷, the more the Web consolidates as a public space, the more it raises issues about closeness, control and power. And it looks more, in contemporary debates, like a space that has failed the ideals of freedom and democracy of the first-generation of web enthusiasts, rather than a space for creating new and more democratic systems.

This is a consequence of the increasingly close regulation of the open Web.

Is this really happening?

NAVIGATING BEHAVIOURS

The political arguments surrounding these very recent political events have brought into light fundamental questions about our attitude towards receiving and consuming information and news in relation to digital technology. Questions that are, surprisingly or not, very similar to what Winner describes in the 80s when criticising the assumptions of his contemporary "computer enthusiasts"⁸: *Is information knowledge? Is knowledge power? Does an increasing access to information enhance democracy?*, and so on.

It seems that the Web, with its enduring in-circumscribable role of enabling systematisation and diffusion of information, is often superficially

5 For an instance listen to the lecture on *Democracy in the Age of Google, Facebook and WikiLeaks* by Professor John Keane at the University of Sidney, 18 May 2011; <http://vimeo.com/26413007>

6 See *Vodafone Egypt advert claims revolution*, guardian.co.uk, Friday 3 June 2011 15.15 BST; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/jun/03/vodafone-egypt-advert-claims-revolution>

7 Notorious is the deletion of the Wikipedia entry of Italian activist Vittorio Arrigoni, see *Vittorio Arrigoni on Wikipedia?* by Maria Molinari in Digimag 65, June 2011; <http://www.digicult.it/digimag/article.asp?id=2096>

8 Ibid. "The political argument of computer romantics draws upon a number of key assumptions: (a) people are bereft of information (b) information is knowledge (c) knowledge is power (d) increasing access to information enhances democracy and equalizes social power. [...] Taken as separate assertions and in combination, these beliefs provide a distorted picture of the role of electronic systems in our life"

discussed with a frame of mind resembling that of the long-gone 80s, in which - to use Winner's wording - common "beliefs provide a distorted picture of the role of [digital] systems in our life".

Web-induced abundance of information is a no more radical attainment than what the electronic age brought about with the TV, for instance. The consequences that these two communication systems have generated were and are gigantic in our life, from a socio-cultural and political point of view. The usages of this abundance, and their dynamics, have changed from the electronic to the digital era, and thus, if one wants to 'truly' relate to this new scenario, behaviours need to be reconsidered and rethought - both on a personal and more public level.

So, how do we go about understanding the myth of information, and our supposedly superficial acceptance of data flows?

A recent essay by Slavoj Žižek⁹, *Good Manners in the Age of WikiLeaks*, brings in a further point that revitalises the above discussion, which is the idea of the fine line existing between truth and lie - and he does so starting from one of the most controversial examples of web communication and information system of our time, WikiLeaks.

In his discussion, Žižek introduces the concept of appearance and social behaviour, focusing on the interplay between truth and lie, and fascinatingly lessening the dichotomy between the two; to the point of suggesting the non-indispensability of knowing what is true and what is false, and, conversely, putting forward the indispensability of re-considering the role of appearance.

Power does not inescapably derive from knowing all that is "behind the facade" or being able to prove that a given fact is true. Rather, with an emphasis on historical political crisis, the philosopher suggests what the WikiLeaks case exemplifies: "tak[ing] the risk of provoking the disintegration of the appearances".

What is next?

What is the role of digital communication systems, and namely the Web, in contemporary consumption of information?

What is the kind of truth, or lie, or their merging, that liberates us in this age of 'information-hype'?

Where is the truth amongst Feeds?

Perhaps, we can find the truth in experimenting with the way in which each of us defines its own navigation pattern, a personal way of travelling with the traffic of abundance. It might be that by fiddling with the mode in which appearance manifests itself we rediscover new ways of moving through this online profusion, which, after all, when tamed, has many positive sides and uses.

This could be simply described as a complication of the process of acceptance, which would make us active receivers, and users.

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⁹ See programme quote; "[...] It is a mistake to assume that revealing the entirety of what has been secret will liberate us. The premise is wrong. Truth liberates, yes, but not this truth. Of course one cannot trust the facade, the official documents, but neither do we find truth in the gossip shared behind that facade. Appearance, the public face, is never simple hypocrisy.", from Slavoj Žižek's *Good Manners in the Age of WikiLeaks*, in *London Review of Books*, Vol.33 No.2; 20 January 2011