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Media Between Power and Empowerment: Can We Resolve This Dilemma?

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This article analyzes how media have been conceptualized sometimes in accordance with notions of power and other times with those of empowerment. It is time to overcome this inconsistency in explanations of the media–users' relationship and look at in a more innovative way. After a brief introduction in which I present the issues regarding the relationship between media and power/empowerment and the related research questions, in the next section I take stock of the how the debate historically developed in the social sciences on the notion of power, which is one of the most important sociological concepts. In the subsequent section I analyze the more recent notion of empowerment, which is used to explain the presumed role of media in shifting power toward users in beneficial ways. The final discussion demonstrates how classics can help us reconceptualize the role of power and empowerment in a reasonable way that accommodates both notions in the same theoretical framework.

Keywords empowerment, power, information and communication technologies, media, sociological theory of power

Studies on media have a long familiarity with the issue of power (Altheide 1985). Television, radio, and newspapers have been largely studied and theorized from this perspective (Curran, Smith, and Wingate 1987). Early the theories that explained the role of media in society, such as the Hypodermic Needle Theory, conceptualized media as all-powerful (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). Over time, media power has been increasingly perceived as more mitigated, as a result of the progressive loss of credibility and authority of media (e.g., Kiousis 2001) and the
increased level of education of audiences and associated higher social power to domesticate the media (Silverstone 2006; Fortunati et al. 2013). On the other hand, information and communication technologies (ICTs) have been less studied in terms of power (of course there are some exceptions, one of which is Green and Haddon [2009]). That was probably due to the fact that ICTs only provided the infrastructure for the delivery of content and until recently offered limited possibility of influence and manipulation by the user. Even in the field of science and technology studies the issue of power has not received the attention it deserves.

And yet the notion of power can serve as the modeling principle for mapping most of the theories and studies on media and ICTs. As I have proposed elsewhere (Fortunati 2010), the theories advanced can be grouped in three broad strands: (1) theories that see technologies as more powerful than human beings (i.e., technological determinism) ;(2) theories that consider technology as less powerful than human beings (i.e., domestication); and (3) theories that consider technologies and human beings as having equal power (i.e., social shaping of technology) (Fortunati 2014). Although the conceptual structure of the majority of these theories is related, even if implicitly, to power, the notion of power in itself is discussed in a quite limited way. In fact, the notion of power in these studies is operationalized mainly in terms of capacity to induce determinate effects. This is of course one important element of power, but it is only one among many elements.

The strong reductionism in the notion of power, as it has been dragged into communication and technology and society studies, has without doubt impoverished the debate on media, which, in the meantime, had become even more complicated because of the ever-expanding array of ICTs (mobile phones, personal computer, Internet, smartphones, and tablets). ICTs share many more characteristics with human beings than other machines (Longo 2003) and are used by another type of audience/users: more educated, more experienced and critical, for the first time networked, and with many more degrees of freedom and agency than before. Today, however, media (TV, radio, newspapers) and ICTs are no longer distinct since they converge and merge together in many manners, facilitated in this hybridization by digitalization. For this reason, I use media here to indicate not only mass media but also ICTs.

On top of this, another notion—empowerment—that seems like the opposite of power began to spread and be used in the academic debate. In the last decade, studies and narratives on ICTs often characterized them as "empowerment tools" (see, e.g., Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal 2008). In this debate, ICTs are generally cast as tools of power that have the potential to produce user empowerment. The notion of empowerment, which in principle means "give power to" (Thomas and Velthouse 1990), has apparently nothing or very little to do with the classical notion of power. It is instead connected to an emerging and transdisciplinary debate inspired by pedagogical, feminist, and organizational (business, health, community) studies, and also some psychological approaches. From this cluster of disciplines, the notion of "empowerment" has passed into the debate on media, especially ICTs. The supposed connection between ICTs and empowerment has been strengthened by institutional, political rhetoric that has identified ICTs as tools of social inclusion, capable of allowing disadvantaged people to get true access to the wealth of tools and languages that the information society uses to inform, communicate, work, and provide services. The empowering approach has marked not only much of the political debate but also much of the debate carried out at a professional and a scientific level. Consequently, these technologies are now conceptualized both as tools that convey dominion and as tools that can give people the possibility to enhance both their power as citizens and their autonomy.

From the debate developed so far, it is not clear whether on the whole media are mainly tools of dominion and control over user imagination and behavior or whether they are instead mainly tools of user empowerment. Also, it is not clear how the same devices can serve these two opposing purposes.

This lack of clarity is the gap I would like to address and leads to my research question: Are media tools of power or of empowerment or both? And in the case, they are both: How could the same tools be conceived in such contradictory and opposing ways? To address these questions, I reexamine some issues of the classical debate on power and also the new debate on empowerment.

The article is organized as follows: In the next section I analyze and discuss the concept of power especially at the political and sociological level. Then, in light of the reflections that emerge in this section, in the following section I analyze the notion of empowerment and engage studies on media to show how their conceptualization could be enriched by the historical reflections on these two concepts. In the conclusion I summarize the main contributions emerging from the analysis and discuss how they could inform future research.

THE CLASSICAL APPROACH TO POWER IN SOCIAL SCIENCES

A good starting point is March's (1966) argument about power. In his opinion, power is a dimension that "conveys simultaneously overtones of the cynicism of Realpolitik, the glories of classical mechanics, the realism of elite sociology and the comfort of anthropocentric theology" (39). Although this metaphorical definition is profound and brilliant, it does not touch an element that I would like to analyze first, which is the fact that power is a spatial notion.

We are indebted to Foucault (1994, It. transl. 2001, 188) and Allen (2003) for the insight that power entails a spatial relationship, and that space is fundamental for any exercise of power. According to them, any power relationship is always situated in space, where those in power are at the top, up, and over and those not in power are at the bottom, down, and under. In reality, these expressions can be considered metaphors of spatial orientation, a projection of the physical constitution of our body (Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Gibbs 2008). "Up" is associated to a bundle of metaphors that recalls being glad, being good, aware, with good health, high social position, being rational, having power, and being in control. Conversely, "down" is associated with the opposite: being sad, being bad, being emotional, being unaware or ill, being located in a low social position, or being subordinate and lacking control. It is this bundle of metaphors that makes power so attractive and conversely also makes the lack of power so discouraging.

Georg Simmel (1908/1989) points out that for there to be a power relationship, superordinate's must have some effect on subordinates (and vice versa). A more recent way to explain the spatial dimension of power is to distinguish between "power upon" and "power toward." McLean (1966) states that in the first case A tries in some way to modify the behavior of B and so they establish an interdependence between them, or A achieve their goal without necessarily modifying the behavior of B by allowing the latter to perform any behavior on the condition that the behavior of B does not disturb the behavior of A. In both of these cases the attitude of A is instrumental toward B and aim to reconfirm their superordinate position. By contrast, the notion of "power toward" means that A uses their power not to reconfirm themselves as superordinate but to help B to overcome their condition of subordinate. In this case the attitude of A is beneficial toward B. Power toward seems to be the most applicable to the concept of empowerment, since it is more relational and less hierarchical than power upon. Thus, the context in which power acts is taken to be an important factor (Gladwell 2000).

The spatial dimension comes back again, this time in the specification of the typology of social space, but this time telling us that the context of power is always limited. Each powerful actor, as far as they are powerful, has a certain power only "on" a certain number and type of persons and even of them only a part of the personal sphere is usually involved: the political sphere or the economic, or the educational, and so on. The more substantial an actor's resources are, the larger their field of action. From this point of view, the subject who possesses the most substantial power is the State. Bureaucracy in advanced societies possesses a lot of power, based on its organization, knowledge of administrative issues, and legal norms, even when it presents itself as "soft bureaucracy" (Courpasson 2000). The spatial limitation of the power—local, national, or global—is the reason why many scholars prefer to talk of power in terms of power of negotiation: It might occur that B does not have sufficient resources to counteract efficiently the will of A in a determinate context, but it is possible that B has the resources to damage A in another field (Gallino 1993).

Second, the notion of power is relational in the sense that power structures itself not only in space and contexts but also in the social sphere. As a relational notion tied to the ability to negotiate, power for a long time has been conceptualized as an element that strongly contributes to shaping a social relationship. McLean (1996) summarizes power relationships in a four-part typology: "1) A has effects on B's choices and actions; 2) A has the capacity to move B's choices and actions in ways that A intends; 3) A has capacity to override opposition from B; 4) The relationship between A and B described by propositions 1, 2, and 3 is part of a social structure (not necessarily the social structure) and has a tendency to persist" (396–97, italics in original). This four-part typology of power relationships is at the core of sociological notions such as social stratification and class and status as its principal dimensions (Tronti 1966). The difference between class and status is attributable to the fact that while classes are considered the outcome of a polarized distribution of economic power, status is seen as the outcome of a polarized distribution of social power.

Going back to Weber (1914/1968), power can also be considered as the ability to make people do what they would not have done otherwise, that is, constrain other people's will. Weber also sees a third dimension to power: domination or command, which is made possible by legitimacy (Courpasson 2000). Domination, which involves the polarization of economic and social power, was seen later by Mills (1956) as the basis of the formation of elites and by Negri (1967) as command on work. If we share Negri's perspective we then have to conclude that the inevitable consequence of power is the differential distribution of economic, social, political, and cultural resources, which implies that life chances are also differentially and unequally distributed. In sum, power includes the capacity to influence, to dominate, and to command others' choices, will, and work (Zuboff 1988).

Third, power is also in relation to social abilities and social strategies. One of these is the ability of the powerful to strengthen their moral claims by conventionalizing their moral defaults (Gouldner 1970). Another is the ability to prevent opposition (Lockwood 1966). While many studies of political power have focused on the decision-making process within state apparatuses and institutions, Steven Lukes (1974), following Bachrach and Baratz (1970), criticizes them for neglecting the manipulation of political agenda by powerful groups who prevent issues from emerging and becoming objects of a formal decision-making process (see also Urry and Wakeford 1973). This manipulation, continues Lukes (1974), is performed by shaping people's perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept a subordinate role. Another relevant element that should not be neglected is the elaboration and imposition of specific strategies to reach objectives that have been decided upon. Here it is the political soul of power that emerges, with its abilities of persuasion, communication, and manipulation.

The Weberian framework has other elements such as intention and conflict. However, a deeper analysis shows that both these elements are problematic. In Weber's analysis intention seems to imply a sort of conscious and rational action in pursuit of a specific objective. On the contrary, the exercise of power often passes through an emotional action or reaction, as in the case of spontaneous social movements that are born in the wake of an immediate reaction to an order, decree or law that is considered unjust. And in other cases, it passes through critical questioning of planning, design, programming, information management, and other rationalizing processes (Fieldman and March 1981). Furthermore, Flyvbjerg provides concrete examples in which rationalization projects were more the fruit of political mediations than a deliberate

decision-making process (Flyvbjerg1998). Conflict also does not appear to be an automatic outcome of the exercise of power, although very frequently, power involves and/or provokes subordinate resistance, which must be managed by superordinate. Weber himself states that power in certain circumstances can arise in an apparently consensual situation where subordinates do not contest power and attribute legitimacy to superordinate. Actually, in such cases legitimacy instead of flowing from the subordinate to the superordinate (implying authority) is probably imposed from above (implying manipulation and ideological hegemony). Analogously, the lack of conflict depends, in certain situations, on problems that subordinate might have in organizing the contestation of power. This discourse shows how the relation between power and intention as well as conflicts continues to be problematic.

Finally, power should also be understood as a dispositional notion because the disposition of goods is the basis that guarantees to owners the full will on how to use them. As Marx (1964) suggests, the ownership of means of production and the control over labor are the most important power resources upon which several other power resources are built. The other resources that complement ownership and control, according to Scott and Marshall (2005) and Gallino (1993), are organizational capacity, numerical support, competence, expert knowledge, control of information, occupation of certain social positions, control of religious and moral values, control of legal norms, control of the instruments of force, and reputation for power itself. It is worth emphasizing that all these power resources are interchangeable. However, since power often requires a hierarchy (again, another spatial notion) in order to be handled, there are many positions with different levels of power that do not require the ownership of power resources but only the supervised access to them (e.g., managers and senior civil servants). This notion of disposition, the link between power and ownership, is quite important for understanding empowerment, as shown in the following.

POWER AS CYNICISM AND VIOLENCE AND THE AMBIVALENT ATTITUDE TOWARD IT

The debate on power does not end with what was reported in the previous paragraph. For example, another prevailing tendency of scholars is to connect the concept of political and economic power to cynicism or violence. With regard to cynicism, it might help revisiting what Macchiavelli (1532/1989) wrote in the Chapter VIII of Il Principe when describing the opinion of people (vulgaris opinio) who are more interested in the ends than the means applied to reach the ends: "Faccia dunque il principe di vincere e mantenere lo stato: i mezzi saranno sempre iudicati onorevoli e da ciascuno laudati" [The prince should try to win and maintain the state: means will be always judged honorable and praised by everyone]. Regarding violence, it might be useful to refer to Hume (1748), who in Of Original Contract writes: "Almost all of the governments, which exist at present ... have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest or both, without any pretense of a fair consent, or voluntary subjection of people." Given these premises, the ambivalent reaction to power on the part of those not in power is not surprising. On the one hand, Bertrand Russell (1938) has pointed out that followers gain vicariously from the achievements of the leader. On the other, Sigmund Freud has argued that people's attitude toward those in power should be brought back to that of the child toward the father. The child, who looks at the father's omnipotence with esteem and diffidence, charges their actions with an emotional ambivalence. In the essay "Taboo and Emotional Ambivalence" (1913), Freud argues that an unconscious hostility toward those in power is often covered by excessively affectionate gestures.

The admiration and adoration surrounding those in power are in fact the other side of people's powerful hostility and diffidence.

The hate against those in power in general is not confessed but is dissimulated by means of the ceremonial. Apparently, the ceremonial serves to express the deepest respect toward those in power and to guarantee their safety. In reality the ceremonial represents often a punishment, a revenge exercised by common people on those in power to punish them for the honors and the homage they tribute them. Freud reports an example cited by Frazer on the Timmes of Sierra Leone, who reserved the right to beat the king before his coronation (to the extent that future kings could not survive for long). Today, a good example could be the low quality of life that important politicians, managers, stars, entrepreneurs, and professionals experience in terms of workload, stress, and insecurity. Another strategy employed by those not in power, according to Frued, is that of exaggerating the importance of those in power with the purpose of laying on them the responsibility for every disagreeable or painful event that happens.

POWER AS A FORM OF ENERGY AND A GIFT OF GODS

The discourse on power is also enriched by two other original definitions that deserve to be reported here. Bertrand Russell (1938) defined power as "the production of intended effects" or another "form of energy." Merton (1936), however, 2 years earlier had indirectly stressed the limitations of power at the rational level when he invited the scientific community to explore the unintended effects that can arise from purposive social action. Let me come back later to this issue. Here it is worth noticing that of the two definitions proposed by Russell it is the second one that is most promising, although it presents several problems with regard to formalization. From another perspective, Benveniste (1973) reconstructing the meaning of power in the Indo-European tradition shows that power is perceived as a gift of gods, which is given by them to somebody in a unilateral decision. And it is a contingent gift, which has a limited duration. What is important to note here is that power is not in relationship with a particular merit but with an inscrutable divine will. As its attribution on the part of gods is disconnected from evident virtues and merits, it needs to be consequently legitimated. Benveniste's analysis reveals several truths about power that deserve a great deal of attention: its fragility with respect to time, its disconnection from personal virtues and merit, and its continuous need of legitimation.

THE MAIN PRINCIPLES AND FORMS OF POWER

In addition to this discourse, the paradigm of power presents, according to the classical literature (Gallino 1993), three principles: (1) intentionality; (2) comparability and quantification; and (3) time and causation. The first principle—intentionality—is fundamental since the possession and the exercise of power have to be seen in relation to the capability to achieve intentions. The second principle, comparability and quantification, dictated by the difficulty of understanding the power per se given the social dimension of this construct, directs effort to understanding its range. However, any comparative analysis risks becoming very complex given the range of variables that must be used and the fact that many social actors seek power for power's sake and not as a means of achieving certain aims. In fact, actors often adapt their aims to those prevailing in the social environment. Hence the development of power indexes has not been successful (the best-known index is the Shapley–Shubik index).

The notion of power is often understood as "zero sum" (with a reference to game theory), wherein what A gains in power B correspondingly loses. However, this notion

does not take sufficiently into account the fact that power always implies a cost in terms of resources consumed for showing the owned capacity to dominate.

Other scholars have elaborated the concept of power as a degree of control exercised on a limited resource (Gallino 1993). On the other hand, Parsons (1963) sees power as mean or a generalized resource that is produced by the members of a social system with the purpose of reaching goals of collective relevance, which is then made to circulate among its subsystems. Power is considered here as a circulating mean like money, and correspondingly it can circulate among individuals, groups, and institutions and accumulate in some roles and/or positions within the social system.

Last but not least, Foucault sees power as permeating all social relationships, not simply accumulated in some centers such as the institutions of the State. That is, power is a property of the system and not of its components (1994, It. transl. 2001). Thus for him, understanding the distribution of power within the social body is important. The debate on power distribution opposes elitism to that of pluralistic liberal thinking. The former sees power concentrated in a few centers of the community/society, while the latter sees power as distributed in many centers of decision making and supports vetoes at the national and local levels. The dissemination of power in all parts of the social structure and the accompanying phenomenon of complicity and intermediation is a political problem very difficult to investigate and understand.

The third principle—time and causation—makes things even more complex, since it introduces a diachronic dimension in the notion of power and rightly corrects a tendency to see power only in terms of conquest or possession and not of performance and use. On the contrary, it is better to look not at the power but at its use and to observe whether this use contributes to its decrease or increase, according to how its resources are spent.

Finally, let me discuss McLean's classification of power into five main forms: force, persuasion, authority, coercion, and manipulation. Force means control of the body rather than of the person and clearly it does not belong to the modern notion of power. Persuasion means advancing of ideas which become power only when they create a dependency and thereby the possibility and capacity to manipulate. Authority on the one hand can exist in a pure form, without power, and on the other it can be seen as a resource for power in the same way as money. Coercion is the paradigmatic form of power that entails controlling people through threats, while manipulation involves control exercised through resources of information and ideas and seems to be the more durable form of power. Hence of these five main forms of power only the latter two are really recognized as real forms of power, but the most interesting aspect for the specific aim of this article is the double character of authority, which will be the breach through which the empowerment process develops (as shown in the following).

EMPOWERMENT

The notion of power concerns, as we saw earlier, ruling classes, ownership, top-down exercise of command and control over people, administrative capabilities of the state, institutions, corporations, and so on. By contrast, with the notion of empowerment we are catapulted into another space—one of working classes and the multitudes who have been disempowered, lack ownership of resource, and are subjects of disciplinary mechanisms. I now try to understand the meaning of empowerment by comparing it to the notion of power. Here an in-depth comparison between empowerment and power could help us understand the shift in the meaning from one to the other and reconstruct the path from which the former arose.

Definitions of Empowerment

While the notion of power has a long tradition of reflection and elaboration, that of empowerment is quite recent and presents a maybe less robust, conceptual structure (Woodall et al. 2012). Yet it has attracted a remarkable amount of researcher interest (Hur 2006), especially in measurement attempts, as states and international organizations have sought to verify the effectiveness of their policies and programs for the marginalized sections of the population.

"Empower" can be used as an active and a passive verb; in the first sense it is connected to the notion of counterpower in a network society which is, according to Castells (2007, 239), "the capacity of a social actor to resist and challenge power relations that are institutionalized." In the second sense, it is connected to the sharing of knowledge, resources, and capabilities by those who have authority with their subordinates. In addition to the political, economic, and social aspects, here psychological and personal aspects also intervene. Although there are many definitions of empowerment due to the multidimensionality and trandisciplinarity of this concept (the term is used with different meanings in many fields from sociology to political science, from health to business; Hur 2006), it can be summarized in these terms: Empowerment is a process by which the empowered gain mastery over their personal affairs, influence over the political problems that affect them, ability to articulate their own stories, capacity for self-action and the transformation of self-definition, capacity to access information and resources, confidence and autonomy to make meaningful and free choices and to translate their choices into desired actions and out comes, capacity to increase agency for shaping their lives and the community in which they live, and so on (Baron and Gomez 2012; Campbell and Jovchelovitch 2000; Chamberlin 1997; Doctor 1991; Kabeer 1999; Melkote and Steeves 2001; Zimmerman 1995; Rappaport 1987; Wallerstein 1992).

This literature covers both the process of construction of power by the powerless and also its outcome. Obviously, the contexts and environments in which this process takes place are many: from education to health, from culture to business, from access to money to skills and capabilities building. What is important to note here is the focus on the pre-political phase in which the powerless build the skills and capabilities required to take political action and make their voices heard. With regard to its outcome, the process of empowerment has much in common with the notions of human capital (Becker 1964) and cultural and social capital (Bourdieu 1980). Becker argued that education, training, and knowledge, termed by him "human capital," are important factors for the productivity of individuals and nations. Bourdieu pointed out that academic qualifications, cultural goods consumed, and the aggregate of social relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition are crucial for the building of personal power. Here it is important to be mindful of the limits that constrain the influence of human, social, and cultural capital (Fortunati 2007); they can be critically used to enlighten the debate on empowerment. For the current reflection it is worth reporting that empowerment often deals with the notion of social inclusion that involves individuals or members of groups who have been subject to social discrimination and exploitation and to whom opportunities for self-sufficiency, self-efficacy, and full self-support have not been given (Loader, Hague, and Eagle 2000). Of course, these people too often lose their self-confidence, since they are not able to fully provide for themselves and therefore become dependent on charity or social welfare. Empowerment also has a certain kinship with development, wherein developing

countries empower themselves. As always it happens when a concept is applied to other cultures, it needs to be re articulated, often radically, as the rich debate on empowerment in developing countries shows (e.g., Anderson and Shrum 2007; Huyer and Sikoska 2003).

Personal and Collective Dimensions of Empowerment

In the case of developed countries, the empowerment process involves both a personal and a collective dimension. Personal empowerment relates to how the powerless value themselves and the knowledge, skills, and capabilities they possess. The components of personal empowerment are meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact (Hur 2006). Collective empowerment relates to how people join action to attain a social change favorable to them. The components of collective empowerment are collective belonging, involvement in the community, control over organization in the community, and community building. The majority of the research considered by Hur (2006) situates the powerless within the context of their community—not social classes or groups. I discuss this shift from class to community a little later. In contrast, the rich literature on women's empowerment often stresses the need to include the "capacity building to cope with the requirements of life more efficiently" and the "capacity building to transform the conditions of life and assert alternative gender roles" (emphasis in original; Huyer and Sikoska 2003, 4).

Woodall et al. (2012) argue that over time the notion of empowerment got diluted from its original roots in radical social movements, advocacy, and resistance to power structures, community building and organization (Labonte 1994), and capability to combat oppression, exploitation, and injustice (Laverack 2006), as it passed from the macro (class, community, social movements) to the micro (individuals) level. McGregor (2001) argues that this has not been a product of casual drift but of the infiltration of neo-liberal ideologies into the field. Here one very important element of the empowerment concept—acquisition of the awareness of their unequal condition of life by the powerless—provided the entry point for the neo-liberal ideologies. Like empowerment, its awareness also has two aspects—personal and social—that need to develop harmoniously as they both contribute to the process of empowerment. When the development of one aspect outstrips the other, problems emerge, as in the recent cases discussed in the empowerment literature (Wise 1995; Carey 2000). If the empowerment process remains confined to the individual level, its outcome can be assimilated by the actual social order (Staples 1990). Simply, societies will have less sad and frustrated powerless people, but the powerless will continue to remain a weak social subject (Wallerstein 2006; Riger 2002). The converse—high collective empowerment and low personal empowerment—represents a political problem that can be enlightened by the Marxist experience.

The acquisition of class awareness was emphasized by Marx (1847) as the first, fundamental step in the formation of working class. According to Marx, there is no possibility of struggle without self-identity as working class. As a result of this focus on collective empowerment, in class struggles the personal dimension tended to weak. Consequently, at the end of a cycle of struggle, the advancement of the grassroots activists did not progress at the same pace as that of the leaders or the political middle. For this reason, often the vanguards of political movements (leaders, political middles) become the ruling class of the restructured social system, while the grass-roots militants continue to remain subordinated. Therefore, in the political process it is important not only to focus on the macro level—class, community, and social movements—but also to

involve the personal dimension with the same intensity. Otherwise, the social change that is produced is destined to be mutilated. It was not by chance that the feminist movement, conscious of the limits of the political action experienced until then at mass level, launched the slogan "the personal is political" (Dalla CostaandJames1972). This slogan not only encompassed the idea that the domestic sphere is a political field but also that the individual dimension is political and has to be an integral part of politics and political organizations and programs.

In the recent past, several attempts have been made in different disciplines to measure empowerment (e.g., at socioeconomic level, Kabeer1999;at socio-psychological level, Bobbio, Manganelli Rattazzi, and Zorzan 2008). These attempts have been driven the institutional needs of agencies charged with social welfare, as they need to justify the monies spent on their programs.

Some questions remain for the moment without an adequate answer: Who gives power to the powerless—the powers that be or the professionals their organizations employ? Through what process is power shared or earned? What exactly is given or earned? Where does empowerment finish and power begin? While we often easily talk about technology and knowledge sharing, it is unclear the sense with which we talk of power sharing, given the breadth and depth of the concept of power as well as the complex social situation in which power is recognized and discussed. The next sections perhaps yield some insights.

Power and Empowerment: Similarities and Dissimilarities

Like power, empowerment is a spatial relationship, but different from power, empowerment includes the utopia of a nonhierarchical space where equal, "horizontal," and peer-to-peer relationships are considered possible (How can we not see the recent debate on Web 2.0 for what it is?). And in fact, as I mentioned, among the different forms of spatialization of power, empowerment is "toward" not upon or against. As in the case of power, not only space but also the context assumes importance for empowerment. It is through the spatial and dimensional limits of power that the process of empowerment can take place. However, empowerment can more easily deal with the local than with the national or the global.

Second, empowerment, like power, is a relational and asymmetrical notion since it presupposes a person in power and a person who is not in power. The person who empowers has more power than the empowered and between them there is a power relationship. Being a personal process, empowerment implies agency by the disempowered to overcome the unpleasant consequences that the lack of social power generates for them—lack of self-esteem, self-confidence, and so on. Since empowerment is also a social process, it involves collective agency, dynamics, movement, social and/or political action, activists, social workers, and other actors. But here their efforts are directed at reducing the asymmetry in power. In this concern, empowerment is very different from power, which has been elaborated as a gift of gods, often disconnected from personal virtues and merit, and which can even be inherited.

Third, ambivalent dimensions such as rationality/emotionality, consciousness/unconsciousness, and conflict/consensus unite empowerment to power. Depending on the circumstances, empowerment, like power, is connected not only to an "alleged" rational analysis and planning but also to emotions and to the continuous reeducation of emotions. Likewise, empowerment can be a process put in motion with deliberate willpower or can result from an unconscious process of which empowerment is the final outcome. Finally, empowerment can be a consensual process or a conflict-

riven process wherein the empowered is hostile against the person in power (think of the frequent attitude of adolescents toward parents). In this regard, research is needed to investigate what are the prevailing emotions of empowerment (rage, indignation, frustration, envy, etc.), to what extent the process of empowerment is conscious or unconscious, consensual or contested.

Fourth, another key element of empowerment, as for power, is the concept of disposition. As the most important resources of power are the ownership of means of production and the control and command over labor, empowerment also entails that disposition over commodities, tools, and technologies is important for empowered people.

Fifth, while in principle empowerment does not accord with cynicism that marks power, in reality it can be accompanied by violence, depending on how conflict-riven the empowerment process is. Empowerment could be seen in some cases as energy (like power for Bertrand Russell), in the sense of the motivation, enthusiasm, and trust in the future that the disempowered need to generate to make a push for changes that would improve their circumstances. Also, Benveniste's conception of power is applicable to empowerment, since it is as much contingent as power; for example, hard-won rights can be lost if empowerment is not continuously exercised. On the hand, unlike power, empowerment is not disconnected from merits and virtues. In fact, empowerment usually requires a will for its attainment, which needs to be deliberately cultivated when the disempowered do not see a need for empowerment. Moreover, empowerment is often motivated by comparisons with the advantaged groups, often fueled by quantification of their well-being.

This line of reasoning prompts important questions such as the following: Does empowerment of one party mean the disempowerment of the other? To what extent do the disempowered need to be empowered?

From this analysis it follows that the concept of empowerment is very contradictory, since it is opposite to, but also very similar to, power. The meaning of empowerment, which is essentially to give power to somebody, itself is a paradox, since power is gained, not given. What is different between empowerment and power is the standpoint from which the discourse emerges.

The Roots of the Notion of Empowerment

What is neglected in the debate on empowerment is the history of this concept, which is worth reconstructing. Generally speaking, the concept of empowerment goes back to the critiques and political challenges to traditional power by the social movements of 1960s, and in particular by the academic literature on civil rights, and then by the feminist movement. It seems that the first author to use this term was Paulo Freire (1973), who saw in education the lever to release the powerless, followed soon after by John Conyers (1975), who used this term in the article "Toward Black Political Empowerment: Can the System Be Transformed?" Three years later the term was used by the social-work community (O'Connell 1978), and then it passed to other academic circles such political science, health, and organizational studies, and from there to many other fields of studies. In 1983 the Women's Studies International Forum discussed specifically the issue of women's empowerment (Moglen 1983). From then, the feminist literature has increasingly focused on empowerment (Wallis 2010; Augustine 2010).

But in my estimation, its real birth goes back to the men and women of the post-World War II period. They challenged the classical notion of power and authority. They did so because the old conception of power and authority (very close to despotism and

dictatorship) had led to the horrors of World War II. The first target of this new antiauthoritarianism was education. Parents refused to wear the cloak of authoritarianism and began to reject corporal punishment. Children became the kings and the queens of the household; this was the result of a process wherein the children were empowered by their parents.

The arena of formal education was also a fertile ground for empowerment of the youth because in education a process of empowerment is structurally required and performed. Education is the process in which a student is enabled by a teacher to appropriate knowledge. The issue here is how this process is performed by the teacher and how it is received and appropriated by the student. In an empowerment-oriented process, young people are seen as active actors who must be supported and helped to become mature individuals who can participate in society as full citizens. Herein adults, parents, and educators must progressively provide them with power, in accordance with the capacity of the former to express a responsible and autonomous will.

In the 1960s, when the children who were the kings and queens of their household went to school, university, or work, they acted as vectors of insubordination against social order and hierarchy, contesting authorities and their laws, norms, and rules. As the parents' style in exercising parental authority had changed radically, in the same way, schools, firms, and public agencies had to change the way they claimed obedience from students, workers, and citizens. Commanding became a hard, complicated, and necessarily a more polite job. Each order had to be put as a question introduced or followed by "please." In a similar vein, many strategies had to be invented in order to handle the motivations of workers and increase productivity (Thomas and Velthouse 1990). Continuous attempts to reshape the notion of leadership, adapting it to the new needs of human resources management in business environments and public administration, had to be made (Bobbio, Manganelli Rattazzi, and Zorzan 2008). For some time, in enterprises and public agencies there was talk of "empowering leadership" and even of "servant leadership" (Bobbio, Manganelli Rattazzi, and Muraro 2007), and in the domain of citizen-centered local organizations and associations of "grounded leadership" (Williamson 2007). To face the new maturity and capability of multitudes, the power was obliged to become less personalized, more impalpable, more concentrated in increasingly few hands and more finance-based, opening with these profound transformations a new era in contemporary social relationships (Gallino 2013).

The second area where the new dynamics of empowerment played out was the relationship between men and women. The arena again was the household. Empowerment, as we mentioned, is often associated with feminism and its critique of power (its management as historically performed by public institutions run with a masculine view). Feminists criticized the traditional concept of power as the capacity of a social actor to impose their will over other social actors, even with violence. In the masculine tradition of power, they argued, this notion is always connected with against. Women introduced a new concept of power as the capacity of a social actor to express their will not over but toward the other social actors: power as self-determination, as enhancement of the control of own bodies and lives, as enhancement of the social respect, and as consideration for women's contribution to social and collective life. This criticism of the masculine concept of power and related practices was carried out through the practice of empowerment and accompanied by struggles for a counterpower. As a consequence, although it is not automatic that, if somebody acquires new power, there are people in society who probably lose their old power, in the first moments of feminist empowerment men lost some of their previous power.

However, the power of women was not against men, but was aimed to bring about long-term well-being to themselves, as well to children, the elderly, other disempowered groups, and also to men. The dynamics between women's power and empowerment of the other family members was seen as capable of breaking the hierarchical division of power within the family and reshaping the stratification of class within society. In part this did occur, although the process was not as peaceful or without victims as women thought at the beginning. The process of empowerment opened up by women was the fruit of a social and political struggle. It was a hard-fought conquest by feminists who organized mobilizations and social protests, and constituted a true political and social movement. But now it is time to come back to the role of media regarding power and empowerment by taking advantage of the insights that have emerged so far.

MEDIA BETWEEN POWER AND EMPOWERMENT

As I mentioned in the introduction, the literature on old and new media is permeated with concerns about power. Media have historically been understood as strategic instruments of power for ruling classes. Through them, ruling classes have attempted to manipulate people's minds, project patterns of behavior on them, manage their emotions and imaginations, and shape their attitudes and ideas. The critique from political economy has discussed these aspects of media in detail, including contradictions a rising from the complex relationships between ruling classes, politicians, and media owners (Fuchs 2011), and the critical role of "watchdogs of democracy," a role for which journalists are trained but in professional practice rarely live up to as the ideal.

Media as Tools of Power and Empowerment

To properly understand the relation between media and power it is worth reflecting on the dual nature of this relationship, including the ways in which media have been used by subordinates to empower themselves. The analysis in the previous two sections offers some insights into how media can be used to exercise power, how they can be appropriated for empowerment, and how, when, and why one form of power (upon) has been challenged by another form of power(toward). From this short excursus on power and empowerment we gain the important insight that both these concepts are in reality contained in the classical notion of power. It is not by chance that the English term for power masks two different meanings: power as a repressive or confining force/limit and power as an expressive force/capacity/disposition: the French "puissance" and the Italian "potenza" (Negri 1984; 2009; Foucault 1991; Foucault and Deleuze 1977; Harre and Madden 1975). It is´ to the latter meaning of power that the concept of empowerment is connected. This means that the answer to the first research question "Are media tools of power or of empowerment or both?" can conceptualize media as dual-natured tools, as the concept of power itself contains both meanings. The answer to the second research question, "How could the same tools have been conceived in such contradictory and opposing ways?" can then affirm that the contradiction is only apparent because it resolves if we go to the concept of the multiple roles of media, as proposed elsewhere (Fortunati 2014). Media can convey power upon or power toward because they play multiple roles according to the moment and the context. Which role media will play in various situations will depend on the particular relationship that users, understood as the independent variable in the context, will be able to develop with technology? However, it remains a problem to be solved: In the

classical debate on power, power acts with respect to individuals, not with technological artifacts or objects. In this concern, we must resort to micro sociology approaches or to the studies in technology and science to understand that even the relation with objects might be shaped by power and that, in their turn, objects strengthen the power of their owners (Latour 1986). Furthermore, as Castells points out (2007), power relations in the present social and technological contexts are also largely dependent on the process of socialized communication.

Understanding Media Power/Empowerment

In addition to answering the initial research questions, the reconstruction of the classical debate on power has other lessons that can be useful for our discourse.

One, since the context of power is structurally limited, there is always space for user empowerment: media might convey power here and there, but not everywhere. How far do media take power? Beyond the long-running research on influence of broadcast content, the research has expanded to many other directions in response to the new challenges posed by digital media. Let me mention some of these directions. Media "power upon" conveys power, authority, and control by means of categorization as a resource in an elaborated and formalized systems of social control (Suchman 1994), embodiment of mechanism of inclusion/exclusion (Tongia and Wilson 2007), programming and switching (Castells and Monge 2011), imposition of standards (Backhouse, Hsu, and Silva 2006; Grewal 2008), and management of infrastructures and networks (VanDijk1999; Luke2006; StarandBowker2006). Even if there are people who would rather not use ICTs, the social pressure on them is so high that at a certain point they are obliged to come to terms with the new media (e.g., e-government forces people to use technology).

Two, the power of media reduces that of the body, as with media use the physical and emotional infrastructures of the human body have less chance than the mind to be the protagonist in the communicative process (Fortunati2013).Although multimedia communication activates more broadly the human sensorium by bringing together an aggregate of sensations (Ricco 1999; Bennett 2005),` this does not change the fundamental fact that the body is put in a state of inferiority. This power upon is highly destructive to the mind–body balance.

Media artifacts give people a feeling of power via the procedures and practices of their use and the relationship with the content conveyed by them. As to the former aspect, digital media are machines that present more control devices (effector organs) than indication devices (receptor organs) compared to usual machines (Fortunati2005).The digital media have the sophisticated apparatus of keys for the command, which gives users an exhilarating sense of control over the machine and all the pleasure that comes with it. Although users generally have scarce knowledge of how technological artifacts are made and work, they enjoy a feeling of dominion upon them. For example, when they want to turn on the computer it is sufficient to push a key and automatically this technological artifact begins to work. The same happens when they want to turn it off. Such automatic obedience that a machine offers users has a heady effect.

This power is extended also to the content conveyed by the media artifact. Take, for example, the television. Televiewers co-construct their representational world by selecting the TV programs to watch. If a movie is boring, they can change the channel; if an entertainer seen to be obnoxious appears on the small screen, they can change the channel. TV audiences do not have the power to change the content, but they have

the power to make it disappear. This power so far has been understood as a power of choice and has served as a counterpoint to the notion of passive audiences. But the bigger point here is that this habit of expressing power over stories, news, games, and so on ends up interfering with the power of negotiation that people need to exercise in personal and social relationships in order to keep them alive. If this discourse is extended to new media and the Internet, where the content can be modified or produced ex novo, it turns out that this power is not only of choice but is also of self-expression and creation. This power of negotiation in co-present personal and social relationships in everyday life risks getting weakened.

The power upon media competes and challenges the power upon/toward co-present personal and social relationships. If we introduce in this framework the "time" variable, we can maybe capture the social dynamics of how, when, and why this form of power upon has seriously competed and challenged the more hybrid form of power upon/toward. New media have arrived in a historical moment—the 1990s—in which the family in industrialized countries was subjected to great tensions because women and children had gained a certain power (also communication power) in the relationships with partners and fathers (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa 1996). Digital media and the Internet represented a way to escape from a co-present communication that had become more problematic than in the past. The great success of these technologies, in the first instance among men, probably can be explained as men reacting to this new power of women and children by distancing themselves from co-present communication and taking refuge in the new media. Here they could take advantage of a communication which is mediated, more detached, less embodied, and less demanding than traditional relationships (Fortunati 1998). In this situation digital media became the ideal partner or friend, because they did not protest, were obedient, and easy interlocutors. In comparison to women and children/adolescents who had become too problematic, demanding, and rebelling, new media represented formidable communicative tools that could inform, entertain, and communicate at users' will. In general, relationships in an online world require much less negotiation. The virtual characters that are broadcast by the television, for example, can be more easily dominated than co-present people. They present a form of complete obeisance to the will of users, who can easily delete them by switching off the television or shutting down the computer. Of course, the dynamics described so far represent only one aspect of the complex dynamics that have invested the power in media. Many other forces and elements were put in motion by and through media that also attracted women and children.

With regard to power toward, media represent a formidable opportunity for humankind to empower themselves by getting together, communicating, informing, learning, teaching, creating, expressing, and reinventing media themselves. One of the most recurrent metaphors that people use to describe media is that of a window to the world. The prospect of humankind as a unit opened up by the Internet and social networking is breathtaking. It is the first time that humankind has this opportunity, and it is of priceless value in terms of empowerment of humanity as a whole. With this analysis I do not want to neglect or ignore the existence of negative aspects of the media (e.g., the hate discourse online), but on balance there is potential for much more positive than negative.

Three, the notion of power as power of negotiation can be fruitful for understanding the relationship between power/empowerment and media. Media practices of use are based on the power relationship between media stakeholders (economic rulers, politicians, journalists, etc.) and users/audiences. The more

substantial the resources of a group, the more appreciated are its values, the larger is its field of action, and the more powerful is its negotiating position vis-a-vis media and the stakeholders that influence` its members. Users'/audiences' power of negotiation has increased because they are now networked and hence, they are able to discuss, coordinate, and organize themselves and create alternative media.

Four, the notion of power that can be also applied to our case is the relational notion of power. Media, like power, are structured in the social sphere and in fact they can be seen as relational objects. In order to exercise their power, media need the users/audiences to put themselves in relationship with them. If they do so, media channels influence imagination, and structure information, daily rituals, social behaviors, and the organization of everyday life in general. As relational tools, media also mediate personal and social relationships. In doing so, media contribute at the same time to separating people and to creating the technological conditions for people to get connected and become more empowered. But media are in relation not only with users but also with powerful economic and political players, toward which they are subordinate. Media are in a certain sense the right arm of these players, through which they exercise modern forms of persuasion and manipulation. Media enable exercise of their power at an operational level. Here the media have inherited from the economic and political power also its characteristics of cynicism and violence. Users/audiences were transformed into subordinates and for a long period of time they had very limited capabilities to work out their relationship with media. By contrast, after the advent of new media, users/audiences have developed the relational quality of media to their advantage, by networking among themselves and building alternative sources of information, to realize grass-roots political discussion and organization, to provide bottom-up paths, and so on.

Five, the issues raised by Weber and Freud about the conflict related to power can also shed new light on the role of these technologies in society. And in fact, users have expressed many forms of resistance against media. It is in these forms of resistance and counterpower on the part of audiences that a new dimension of media users' identity has also emerged. Digital media are no longer mere tools of power, as they are also tools of empowerment that enable a high degree of distributed, generative, and self-determinant behavior by the users (Kallinikos2007). In this regard these two notions—power and empowerment—help us understand the recent history of the transformation of audiences from a subordinate role to a proactive one.

Six, we can learn from the classical debate on power the importance of the disposition (Fortunati 2006; 2007). With the widespread diffusion of new media in the last few decades, billions of people now directly have access to information and communication. The power to "control," within certain limits, media gives people the capacity to decide whether, how, to what extent, and for which purposes to use them. Consequently, ICTs have become grassroots means of production of immaterial goods such as information, communication, education, entertainment, and so on. Although the real ownership is in the hands of firms such as Apple, Google, Facebook, and Microsoft and the people are only peripheral terminals (Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody 2008), the new-found disposition over useful resources has contributed to their empowerment.

Seven, power produces unexpected or unintended effects. If, as Bertrand Russell has argued, power is the production of intended effects, then power's ability to produce robust long-term strategies is poor in the case of media, as users have time and again proven to be inventive and tenacious in their appropriation of the media. In many ways,

media are emblematic of the misadventures and structural limitations of power. Processes such as planning, designing, rationalizing, and reengineering have always struggled against unintentional effects. The numbers of sociological and psychological variables involved in any event or social phenomenon are so high as to make impossible to disaggregate them into causes and effects. We cannot know which variables causes an event or a phenomenon; at most, we can understand if there is a relation between two or more variables. In this situation, it is practically impossible to predict and calculate all their effects. Thereby, structurally planning, designing, rationalizing, and reengineering are candidates for producing unexpected effects, although the rhetoric of rationality sustains these activities.

In the case of new media, with their openness and affordances, the possibility of empowerment for users is higher compared to the system of traditional mass media, which was fundamentally closed. At the same time, the development of the individualization process, of education and material and immaterial well-being of the users, has also facilitated the transformation of the social personality, which has become more proactive. It is sufficient to notice the new ease with which ordinary people answer questions from journalists on live TV. Kallinikos (2007; 2010) points out that the high degree of generative, distributed activities enabled by new media allows for the emergence of many behaviors and arrangements not anticipated by those who deploy them.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The new forms of empowerment experienced by users through media should not be underestimated. The Internet has been shaped like it is now by users who have introduced features, affordances, services, and applications, and also symbols, meanings, values, norms, and languages. Moreover, new media have enabled people to inform, discuss, learn, teach, share, participate, cooperate, work, and produce together by challenging many traditional structures, organizational systems, and institutions (from education to democracy) and by creating new forms of expression, creativity, and engagements that represent potential for social, cultural, and economic innovations.

This empowerment process has its origins in the domestic sphere, which is a sphere whose political economy functions on two levels: It appears as a natural order of things but in reality, it is an arrangement for production. To maintain its double functioning, all the features that characterize the organization of labor in this productive system have to be dissimulated. As the women and children have gone past this mesh of dissimulation, the vehicles for command and control, including technologies, have lost their power in the domestic sphere. That has opened the door for the emergence of many unintentional practices, purposes, modalities, and meanings of use, giving rise to a broad process of empowerment. From the domestic sphere the empowerment process has expanded into the rest of the society.

While we have much to learn from the classical discourse on powers, the scholars who study power could also benefit from our efforts. The classical discourse on power has long had difficulties in building reliable methodological tools to measure it. Maybe the large body of empirical research and methodological tools that have been applied to measure empowerment might represent a source of inspiration for researchers who study power. More generally, the literatures on power and empowerment could be

fruitfully brought into conversation, as several questions remain open: Do the conditions necessary for empowerment go beyond access to technologies to other elements such as symbols, norms, frames, laws, regulations, and policies (Kulkarni 2011)? Would "power appropriation" be a better term than empowerment to describe what is happening in many communities' informatics practices? What is the relationship between empowerment and political counterpower?

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