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Abstract

In the first stage of internet diffusion and appropriation interactivity has often been seen as one of the innovative forms of citizens' participation in public life, a proof of citizenship social and/or political involvement. Unfortunately this vision is based on mythology rather than on empirical evidence. In this article I discuss the relationship between interactivity and e-participation, on the basis of four research projects that I carried out with colleagues on online newspaper interactivity and the influence of the Internet on journalists' practices in newsrooms. The cross-cultural research projects were carried out from 2003 to 2006 inside the newspaper working group of COST A20 (a European funded research network on the influence of the Internet on mass media). In this article I will focus specifically on the results from the Italian context.

Keywords Interactivity, online newspapers, e-participation, democracy

Introduction

The aim of this article is to reflect on the notion of interactivity following the first stage of internet diffusion which has been accompanied by a strong debate about the relationship between interactivity and e-participation (Kiousis 2002; Deuze 2003; Boczkowski 2004; Chung 2007). My purpose here is to take stock of a series of empirical research projects that I carried out in Italy with colleagues in the first part of this decade under the umbrella of interactivity (Fortunati & Sarrica 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2006; Fortunati 2005a, 2005b; Fortunati et al. 2007).

It is necessary to draw on these earlier studies because in the second part of this decade a new stage of internet use has developed which can not fully be understood if it is not somehow historicised. This new stage has seen the vast development of blogs and social networks that have presented a new relationship between users and the Internet (Hindman 2008; Ito et al. forthcoming). In particular, the rise of social media—and in general of Web 2.0— have been changing the nature of the game in relation to social and political participation. It is social media that appears to have been undermining the ground for newspapers and news journalism. The role of users has grown and their competence in internet use has meanwhile increased, but also their ownership relationship with the virtual space has changed and adding to the responsibility that users have on their communicative expressions (Fortunati et al. 2005).

Today we talk of we-journalism, citizens' journalism, networked audiences, and also of the possibility for citizens to take advantages from the Internet to better perform their political rights/duties, to answer to their needs to be informed, to express their opinion, to check the work done by public administrations, to influence parties', unions' and social movements' decisions and finally to deliberate online (Gillmor 2004; Shirky 2008). This second phase is characterised by users who reveal or better disclose their personal identity, in contrast to the first stage, which I will elaborate upon here in this article.

By looking at the structure, strategies and models of interactivity of online newspapers in the first stage of internet diffusion, it is possible to follow the first, tentative and prudent steps users made in an environment— that is virtual—which was new and so characterised by lack of trust, and hence to understand how online participation was structured.

In addition, it is possible to understand whether these new online users were able to challenge the control of the media on content and on the ownership of the virtual space given that the forums of online newspapers were owned by media organisations. At the same time it is possible to capture the peculiarities and the novelty in the forms of e-participation of this first stage of internet diffusion. The research sought first to understand the true meaning of this mass participation in the forums of the online editions of these newspapers (was it political or social participation?) and, secondly, the meaning of the social thinking that was elaborated in these forums.

This article is organised as follows. First, I discuss the notion of interactivity and participation; I then present the main results of four research projects on the practices of interactivity in the first stage of internet diffusion and appropriation. I then conclude with the final remarks.

Interactivity and Participation

First of all, it must be said that interactivity isn't co-dependent with the rise of new media (Rafaeli 1988). Historians of journalism argue that forums and free tribunes are old institutions of journalism (Murialdi 1982, p. 106). In 1990 in Italy, a weekly called La Pubblicazione came out, entirely written by users. After few months, however, it was obliged to close down (Ambrosi & Tessarolo 1991, p. 73). If we examine the traditional media—radio, television and press (Bretz 1983; Deuze 2003), it is the newspaper that is the medium less endowed with interactive potential. In the first two media cited—the radio and television—a vivid interactivity has been present for many years and it has spread by means of a transmedia practice.

Telephone and mobile phone were and are often used to make live calls to the radio and television (Williams et al. 1988; Fortunati & Manganelli 1995), to which, today, SMS and emails should be added. Among these different modalities, telephone or mobile calls have the merit of introducing the spontaneity and vivacity of everyday conversation in a dialogic environment, which can not occur in an analogic medium. However, this interactivity connected to traditional media is technically poorer in comparison to that made possible by the hardware and software of the new media (Kim & Sawnhey 2002, p. 219). Ronald Rice and associates (1984, p. 35) in fact argue that new media, in contrast to old media, allow or facilitate interactivity among e-actors or between e-actors and information. So, it is not surprising that in the studies of mass media a relevant issue emerges in the way in which interactivity is integrated in the model of mass communications and in particular in online newspapers (McQuail & Windhal 1993).

According to Thiel (1998), interactivity is one of the factors which make the online newspaper a postmodern tool. Van Dijk (1999) suggests that new media is more interactive (and also more multimedia, integrated and flexible) in comparison to old media. But by producing such a comparison—as Manovich (2001) identifies—we run the risk of not understanding the differences between old and new media, since from a certain point of view new media could be seen as digitalised old media. Thus he suggests that interactivity should be first analysed through one of the principles regulating new media: variability. The principle of variability is a useful framework that allows us to study several characteristics of new media, among which is branching interactivity. It is evident that the new media are on the whole generated by a society in which, at a certain point, people have fought against social processes such as homogenisation, indifferentiation and standardisation of the labourforce and opted for the development of individualisation. This has translated into a strong challenge for post-industrial society which has to be able to personalise its commodities formerly produced on a mass scale to one of individual scale production. In particular, the consequent variability guarantees users that their choices inside the practices of use of new media can be unique, instead of being pre-programmed and common to all the users.

However, as Manovich (2001) rightly argues, a main effect of the principles of automation and variability is that now users, thanks also to interactivity, have more power of control and determination on the representation of the world in the medial object. Interactivity has received from the Internet an enormous response (Van Djick 1999) as there are now millions of people who write to express their opinions and points of view on different matters in online newspaper forums, blogs, newsgroups, chats and so on. The traditional mass media, with its inadequate feedback inherent in their predominantlyt mono-directional communicative model, have acquired a possible alternative in the interactive digital environment of the global network. Technically, the Internet offers, in fact, the possibility of a more circular communication model.

The interactivity of the new media, by allowing a more involving and responsible role of users, is often seen in relation to participation. Participation is one of the main features of the notion of communication, which means to put in common something and so let someone share in something (Volli 1994). Thus the Internet, by enhancing communication through interactivity, is also expected to enhance social participation, which is generally understood as participation in voluntary, ecological, union, cultural, civil rights associations and so on. E-actors might participate more actively and with more power in deciding the everyday agenda setting of online public conversation (Fortunati et al. 2009; Gebhardt et al. 2009). Thanks to the creativity and will of e-actors, the Internet has been transformed into an instrument increasingly capable of conveying users' participation. People have activated several tools on the web to maintain or increase their social capital (mailing lists, blogs, social networks etc.), to vote (polls), to discuss and express their opinion (chats and forums), to influence public decision making processes, to buy commodities, to commercialise their products and themselves, to participate in online events, to use the Internet for accessing public services (paying taxes, checking the traffic, and so on). Social media have, of course, also been used for a specific, social participation—a type of political participation.

The line of separation between social and political participation has blurred, because social participation is in itself potentially political. Here my deployment of political participation refers to Pasquino's notion (1997)—that is, each action and behaviour influences (in various ways) political decisions and the selection of political power owners, thus strengthening or modifying the structure and values of the dominant power system. It must be recalled that in the definition of political participation the double meaning of the verb 'to participate' (having a part in a determined action or process and being part of a body, a group, a community) might create some ambiguities. Participation in fact may consist, on the one hand, in an involvement inside the decision making process and in the choice of persons destined to assume political positions, and, on the other hand, in a more or less active inclusion at different levels inside a socio-political organisation (Fici 2002).

This definition of political participation is apparently accurate, since there is a series of further factors to be considered both offline and online. Offline the crisis of the political party form has resulted in militants leaving parties and migrating towards different places of social interaction, which today are online. If globalisation develops the de-massification of productive processes and the fragmentation of tastes and consumption, there is a place where the accumulation of people takes place: online. In the net a transnational, multi-ethnic, multicultural and multilingual population is associated with sharing virtual space and its services. It happens that in parallel to the mediatisation of politics, there is a politicisation of the use of media. Today a large part of political participation passes through the new media—representing an important place for the elaboration of public opinion.

People have introduced several specific tools to express political participation: from websites of political propaganda to online petitions, to the use of social networks and blogs by social movements. There are many examples of how internet users have tried to become informed citizens, to express political conflicts, to deploy their ideology or local interests. But the fact that the Internet can offer a more equal communication status to every participant through interactivity, and that the communicator and the recipient can continually change their roles, is a necessary, but far from sufficient, condition for online mass participation.

The Internet is only a technological precondition for such participation. So, it is necessary to investigate whether the practices of use of internet communication are responding positively or negatively to this hope. My research question is: did the interactivity, as it was made possible by online newspapers in the first part of this decade, constitute a valid tool to enhance social and political participation in some way? I am aware that these two concepts—social and political participation— are difficult concepts since they represent complex phenomena, which are made up of multiple behaviours, so that they are scarcely capable of guiding empirical observation and the production of clear, reliable data. Putnam's seminal work (2000) has, however, greatly helped in clarifying the indexes and data appropriate to sketch this phenomenon.

Even if his work is rooted in the American situation, it has inspired several studies around the world. One of these is the study carried out in Italy by ISTAT in 2005 with a representative sample of the Italian population from which it emerged that exactly 24.8% of the Italian population never got information about politics, because of their indifference (58.1%), mistrust in politics (20.5%), 'politics is too complicated' (15.3%) and 6.1% 'have no time to dedicate to it' (Seriani 2006). As to the others, Italians in general acquired information about politics more by listening and reading than by talking about it. Television (93.7%) and newspapers (52%) were the media from which Italians received political information.

To these media sources, radio (31%), discussions with friends (24.8%), relatives (16.9%), colleagues (13.1%), magazines (13.3%) and other publications (4.2%) should be added. Fifty-five-point 9% of respondents gained information about politics weekly and 32.6% every day. At the same time, amongst those who talked about politics only 32.8% talked once a week, 30.5% occasionally and 34.2% never. However, political participation, which aims to influence the political choices of the country, conditioning the programme of political parties and government, was experienced by more limited groups in the population. This type of direct participation might require co-presence in collective forms of political 'actions', such as attending a meeting (6.9%) or participating in a demonstration (5.5%), and might require interaction with a party/movement, by dedicating time and laboir (1.7%) or by contributing financially (2.7%).

In the first part of this decade the frequency with which Italians talked about politics decreases (from 37.1% in 1993 to 32.8% in 2005 for those who talked at least once a week) but, at the same time, the number of people who never talk about politics also decreases (from 48.6% in 1993 to 43.6% in 2005). But what about politics on the World Wide Web? Research carried out by Digital Pr (an institute specialising in digital communication) on newsgroups and forums showed that politics was a marginal argument in users' online discussion. According to this research—which examined more than 36 million messages published between January 2002 and June 2003 in 3778 virtual communities (767 newsgroups and 3011 forums)—it emerged that, among the most debated issues, online politics was only in the thirteenth place, current affairs in the twenty-sixth and the news even in the fortieth. Of the 36,443,364 messages that were considered, only 3.3% related to politics, 1.2% to current affairs, and 0.5% to news (Observatory on online information 2003). Given this framework, can we consider writing in the forums of online newspapers a political resource to increase citizens' participation and enhance discussion on political matters in the public sphere? This participation was involving whom? In what kind of activity? Was it a dialogue between newsrooms and their readership or was it a series of monologues acted by the readership of online newspapers in a public space?

Four Research Projects on Interactivity and e-Participation

Let us illustrate and discuss the relationship between interactivity and e-participation while drawing on the four research projects I carried out with colleagues in Europe, but of which I will report and analyse only the Italian data. The first research project This research involved a cross-cultural survey of offline and online newspapers conducted on 5 March 2003 in five European countries: Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Portugal and Slove nia (Fortunati & Sarrica 2004a). The main purpose of this research was to understand and measure the influence of the Internet on daily newspapers and vice versa the influence of newspapers on the Internet. The survey was carried out simultaneously in these five countries: for Italy we chose the first four most-read generalist Italian papers: Corriere della sera, La Repubblica, Il Sole 24 Ore and La Stampa, of which we analysed both the print newspaper and its online edition with the aim of comparing them. In addition, an online news service www.gmbox.it was also chosen since it was at that time the most visited information site in Italy. In particular, we analysed the content of the front page of these print newspapers, the front page of their relative sites and the only-online news site cited above. What did we learn from this research? Three main results have to be mentioned:

1) In the front pages of offline newspapers in 2003, interactivity between journalists and users and amongst users turned out to be completely absent, thus reconfirming that the relation with users was a secondary business for print papers. On the front page the unidirectional message was, and continues to be, all-important, because it is the core business of what the single paper has to say to its users. If we leaf through the whole paper, the situation does not change very much, as, for example, in the Corriere della sera only two journalists signed with their address or website. On the contrary, in the column 'Letters to the Editor' as many as half the writers signed with their email address. This not only shows that users were much more evolved than journalists, but also that by signing with their email address users made it possible to get in touch with one another. The only information about interactivity that the paper offered to users was signalling that it was possible to discuss five topics online.

2) There was instead a better possibility of interactivity between users and advertisers. In fact, in Corriere della sera (for this specific analysis we analysed the entire issue), out of 59 companies that occupied advertising spaces, 67.8% indicated their site, while 32.2% did not. It is amazing that we found the same proportion also in another study I carried out on the women's magazine Donna Moderna (Fortunati 2003). As I argued in that case study, mentioning one's site has the function of distributing an advertising message virtually—creating a transmedial continuation of the message. It is as if the advertising had assumed the logic of the non-finite, of instalments, like a soap opera. The advertising in the magazine thus becomes a premise, the first message of an open communicative chain and therefore a hypertext of persuasion (Fortunati 2003). This transformation is very important because it completely changed the dimension of the persuasive message which, having been until then rigorously mono-directional, became more interlocutory in regard to users. Internetisation of the publicity message is a very important sign in this and other newspapers, in that out of 48 pages of the newspaper around one-third is made up of advertising.

3) Another relevant fact that emerges from this research is that, in the transition from offline to online, 29.8% of offline articles were unsourced vs 80% of online articles. This obviously contributed to questioning the reliability and credibility of online articles (De Biase 2002). But what is more, in this situation 52.6% of online articles were not signed vs 5.3% of those offline, thus creating the basis for reducing their status. The big names online, those able to attract thousands of users in offline newspapers, were placed in a minority position, the beneficial effect being above all for publishers who could thus reduce the bargaining power of journalists as a category.

The second research project This research project was conducted on 8 October 2003 and replicated in 16 countries (which this time were Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Netherlands, Portugal, the UK, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland and the US) with a more detailed questionnaire. For Italy, the newspapers chosen were again Corriere della sera, La Repubblica, Il Sole 24 Ore and La Stampa, while the online news service was this time a newspaper published only online: ilnuovo.it (Fortunati & Sarrica 2004a, 2005; van der Wurff et al. 2008).

Again, only the content of the front page of these print newspapers, the front page of their relative sites and of the only-online news site were analysed. The second research project fully confirmed the main results collected in the previous one and registered some small changes. For instance, six months later in the transition from offline to online, the source tended to be cited less both in the print papers and in the online version (63.6% cited vs 21.4% uncited), while journalist signatures tended to be a little more present in comparison to six months earlier, even if the basis for the reduction of its importance continued to be valid.

But beyond the comparison with print newspapers, did online newspapers really deploy the interactive possibilities offered by the Internet? To answer to this question adequately, in this research a series of indexes were built to detect a) reachability, that is, the presence in the front page of addresses, telephone numbers and emails of newsrooms, different offices, and single journalists; b) the presence of interactions with users: user letters, invitations to comment, chats, forums in the front page; c) discussions on articles, that is polls on the articles, requests to comment on news and the possibility to send them via email; d) the interactivity of contents, that is the possibility for users to personalise the first page, the presence of a research engine or other interactive instruments; e) multimediality of articles: images, sounds, videos accompanying articles; f) use of hyperlinks. The analysis of these indexes allows us to say that print and online newspapers didn't differ very much on these indexes. Online staff and single journalists remained difficult to reach.

The possibilities that the online newspaper offered, in terms of multimediality, interactivity and contact with users, were utilised on very few occasions. In particular, if interactivity with and among users is examined, this seems to be completely absent from the first pages of print newspapers, reconfirming the fact that the relationship with users was a secondary point for traditional newspapers. At the same time, interactivity between users and advertisers turned out to be very modest, but we must take into account that, in comparison with the first wave of collected data, these data were much more limited, as in the first study the entire edition of the Corriere della Sera was examined and here only the front page. The third research project

This cross-cultural research project aimed at exploring in four European countries—Bulgaria, Estonia, Ireland and Italy—how the websites of the most important newspapers were embodying interactivity in their communicative practice. On 12 October 2004 we collected the data related to the five most read Italian newspapers: Corriere della Sera, La Repubblica, La Stampa, Il Sole 24 Ore, Il Messaggero (Fortunati 2005; Fortunati et al. 2005). Online interactivity is made up of many elements: emails, forums, chats, newsgroups, polls, hyper textual links, portals, games, possibility of homepage personalisation (choice of the language, for instance), personalisation of news to be sent and received and so on (Downes & McMillan 2002; Greer & Mensing 2003; Aoki s.d.). Among all these elements, in this research we chose to explore only the following elements, present on the front pages of the websites: emails, forums, letters to the editor, polls, chat, interviews with important public persons, pleas, requests to signal news or issues and competitions.

This third research project was dedicated to study interactivity and therefore I will report the results concerning the Italian situation in a more detailed way. The only interactive element, which was present on the front page in all five Italian newspapers, was the email address, even if its management remained anyway very mysterious, insofar as in the online newspapers there was no trace of this communicative flow between users and newsrooms. Other elements were also considered: these ranged from the most frequent, such as forums and polls, to the less frequent: these included letters to the editor and experts, interviews or chats with important people, pleas, requests to signal news or issues and competitions. The column 'Letters to the editor' was present in the form of forum only in the Corriere della sera. It is interesting to observe that the column 'Letters to the editor', during its transmigration from offline to online, had undergone two changes. First of all, in the internet versions they were much less popular than in the print editions. Secondly, in the internet version this column was accompanied by the archive of 'Letters of the week'. New and old messages were published on the same pages, an unusual spatial contiguity for newspapers websites.

This practice was even more surprising, if one considers that the structure of the print newspaper generally distinguishes news from social memory, dedicating to this last a special space in the newsroom: the archive room. Instead what remains unchanged in the transmigration from the print newspaper to the electronic one is the formal setting of the letter to the editor, which is between a communication addressed to a specific person in his/her professional function and a communication which one hopes will become public knowledge.

This ambiguous and spurious modality (in a journalistic sense) of the letters to the editor tended to be extended to all the readership messages. Online editorial staff treated these messages in the same way as print newspaper editorial staff.

Like these, in fact, they were selected and a title was assigned to them. Taking into account what has been pointed out so far, it is clear that readership letters to the editor in online newspapers does not represent a model of interaction between editorial staff and readership, but rather the introjection of the monodirectional model of mass communications by the users. Moving onto the analysis of forums, the prevalent strategy of management was to use an anonymous moderator who selected, and gave a title to, the messages to be published on the basis of the net-etiquette and traditional journalism rules (no dirty words, curses, insults etc.), and invited users to send short messages (no longer than 30 lines etc.). Closed forums managed by an anonymous moderator accounted for 80 per cent of forums. Much less frequent were open forums with a moderator, forums with journalists and forums with experts (Table 1).

Table 1 Models of Managing Online Forums in 5 Italian Newspapers

	Forum				
	Open with moderator	Closed with moderator	With journalists	With experts	Total
Corriere della Sera	2	41	7	5	55
Il Messaggero	-	-	-	-	-
La Repubblica	33	99	-	-	132
Il Sole 24 Ore	-	-	-	-	-
La Stampa	11	121	4	-	136
Total	46	261	11	5	323

Source: Fortunati 2005

The effort made by moderators to make users assimilate the etiquette rules seems to be challenging, given the frequency with which pleas and invitations were launched. As to the content, editorial staff seemed to regulate the agenda setting of forums—it was almost always the staff who launched the issues which later on were discussed by users.

Users who wrote had the possibility only to react, not to propose and least of all to impose. It was clear that users who wrote in forums were guests of a public space, which belonged to the publisher, and that responsibility lay with the staff director who had the power therefore to decide what could be published. Furthermore, the feedback from users was allowed and was not solicited by the newsroom—this further ratified the asymmetrical relationship between users and newspapers. In the end, it was always the moderator who decided to open and close the forum. All these elements depict a framework in which the power hierarchy seemed to remain unchanged, in contrast with what others have argued (cf. for instance, Bucher 2002).

There were some modest attempts to overcome it, but they were prattles, which however it was good to register. For example, La Stampa, in launching a new forum, sometimes utilised an issue that had been created by users. This shows that the forum agenda setting only began, in some cases, to be jointly constructed by journalists and users. Obviously the skill of the journalists who launched forums was to find the 'right' arguments that might attract discussion by users. The launch of themes for forums, being a kind of implicit poll, was also a way of measuring the emotional temperature of online users about current events. But also users applied their strategies to determine, although in a silent way, forum agenda setting.

Users, for instance, indirectly influenced the agenda setting, being selective in the messages they sent to the different forums. In addition to this strategy, users often discussed another argument, completely different from the official forum argument and, despite moderator's invitations, wrote long messages, articulating their own thoughts in order to make the discussion really effective. And, in effect, users' messages were on average rather long, to such an extent that moderators sent many invitations to write more briefly. Even more numerous were the invitations to avoid insults, menaces, dirty words, and so on, on pain of the non-publication of the message. Evidently users used forums to given vent to rage and anger. All the frustration of masses without name and face seemed in some way to emerge in this public communicative space. The moderators continually reminded users that good manners were part of the democratic tradition (fundamentally, the respect towards others).

In regard to print newspapers, there was clearly more space dedicated to users' interventions and also a better articulation of this space. However, the technical possibilities of interactivity provided by the Internet were only partially exploited by print media and only inside the classic logic of print newspapers. Forums were far from representing a driving belt of users' ideas, reflections and stimuli influencing editorial staff. Forums, unfortunately, were not a way of conveying the user's voice to the editorial staff of newspapers; editors and journalists did not consider them an important source of information, ideas and reflections. At the same time, editorial groups' investments in building an organisational model of newsrooms, able to support real bivocal exchange, were not sufficient.

Taking into account that the online users of our newspapers (excluding Il Messaggero) in 2003 were 2,708,116 (Accertamenti Diffusione Stampa), the collected messages numbered 390,542 and many users had sent more than one message, online interactivity accounted for just under 10 per cent of online users. This means that the majority of internet users were not interested to interactivity. They preferred to remain anonymous and silent, probably because they were not interested at that time in investing time, money and energy in order to re-design information on the Internet, modifying the process of news production, elaboration and distribution. Surfers at the mass level were still children of books and print newspapers users and interpreters of a model that separated the activity of reading from that of writing. The discourse on interactivity becomes more detailed, if one examines the messages both from users and journalists, published online on 12 October 2004 (Table 2).

Table 2 Number of Messages by Forum, in 5 Italian Online Newspapers, 12 October 2004

	Forum					
	Open with moderator	Closed with moderator	With journalists	With experts	With letter editor	Total
Corriere della Sera	67	46,656	191	59	8	46,981
Il Messaggero	-	-	-	-	-	-
La Repubblica	1865	318,278	-	-	-	320,143
Il Sole 24 Ore	-	-	-	-	8	8
La Stampa	-	23,410	-	-	-	23,410
Total	1932	388,344	191	59	16	390,542

Source: Fortunati 2005

The number of messages is in itself meaningful: journalists', moderators' and experts' answers represented only a fifth of all messages. This means that the percentage of cases in which the publication of the message in the online newspaper was accompanied by an answer was even less than offline; the research carried out in Italy by Ambrosi and Tessarolo (1991) showed that a third of the letters published in the 'Letters to the Editor' column in print newspapers had an answer from the editor.

Moreover, the analysis of these messages showed that most were written by persons who intervened once or few times, while few users wrote several messages (Fortunati & de Luca 2003). This means that in reality interactivity took place among few active e-actors while the majority of users presented a limited degree of involvement. But there is another element that is as meaningful: the length of messages. If the length of users' messages is compared to that of journalists' answers, it turns out that the latter was 10 times shorter than the former. This means that, even where the answer existed, generally it was much more laconic and speedy than users' messages (Table 3).

Table 3 Interactivity in 5 Italian Online Newspapers by Number, Length of Message and Sender, 12 October 2004

	Message			
	Readers no.	length (characters)	Journalists and Moderators no.	length (characters)
Corriere della Sera	211	203,355	38	19,525
Il Messaggero	-	-	-	-
La Repubblica	-	-	-	-
Il Sole 24 Ore	8	2254	8	41,200
La Stampa	51	34,583	11	4,789
Total	270	240,192	57	65,514

Source: Fortunati 2005

The number of answers and their length are elements that help depict the relationship between users and editorial staff, which continued to be asymmetrical also online. Or rather, asymmetry tended, as we saw above, also to get worse in the model applied on the Internet. Certainly, the online space that hosted users' interventions was augmented exponentially, but it was governed by the same criteria as those of the offline, with the consequence that users, as Lieb argues (1998), seemed a protected minority and many online newspapers seemed mausoleums, instead of saloons. To make the picture of the relationship between users and newspapers more complete, we also examined the way in which users revealed their identity (Table 4).

Online newspapers users were persons without face: only 25 per cent of those who wrote in forums introduced themselves with their name, surname and email, that is, with the maximum of credentials usually provided online. In reality also this presentation, which seems to be the most explicit, could be vague, or evanescent. A name and a surname without a place of residence and other data—such as, for instance, age, gender and profession—provides little context or meaning. Furthermore the email address might reveal a lure, because one might create a lot of them and quit them in case of need. Almost 40 per cent of users gave only

Table 4 Identity Supplied by Online Users in 5 Italian Online Newspapers, 12 October 2004

	Identity Supplied by User																	
	Nickname		Email address		Name & surname		Name		Nickname & email address		Name & surname & email address		Name & email address		Anonymous		Total	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Corriere della Sera	62	93.9	-	-	17	81.0	31	91.2	27	77.1	35	72.9	39	68.4	-	-	211	78.1
Il Messaggero	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
La Repubblica	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Il Sole 24 Ore	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	8	100	8	3.0
La Stampa	4	6.1	1	100	4	19.0	3	8.8	8	22.9	13	27.15	18	31.6	-	-	51	18.9
Total	66	100	1	100	21	100	34	100	35	100	48	100	57	100	8	100	270	100

Source: Fortunati 2005

their name or nickname, that is, an extremely ephemeral identity. These data justify our talking of the 'minimal self'—to deploy Lasch's expression (1984)—in relation to online interactivity. We can elaborate the relationship between users and journalists further by analysing their relational closeness.

To completely understand this dynamic, we examined how the relationship was encoded and ritualised in message openings. In other words, how users addressed editorial staff or a single journalist and/or forumists and, vice-versa, how journalists addressed users.

Sixty-five percent of users entered directly in the virtual space, almost a fifth explicitly addressed to forumists, only 15.2 per cent addressed journalists or experts who managed forums. It is evident that users were uncertain about the most suitable way to address their interlocutors, perhaps because of the complexity of the communicative relationship which, as we saw, could be one-to-one and to several at the same time. The tendency of these users to mask their identity in virtual space seems to contradict users' behaviour among the audiences of other media. These forms of behaviour referred to a strong tension and desire for popularity: think, for instance, of the success of reality shows. While in TV people perform a representation, in forums people have to discuss ideas, express points of view, state their opinion—that is, involve their authentic selves. Surely, to renounce the opportunity to provide information about own identity might shelter them from self-censorship.

However, users' behaviour in the forums of online newspapers was simple and clear: users didn't perceive the real possibility of a true freedom of expression—they didn't feel that they could deeply involve themselves in discussing their ideas and opinions. They were still reticent, as if they were afraid to lose control of their personal sphere. As to journalists' answers, the disparity between journalists' and users' behaviour emerged distinctly. In the majority of cases they began the message by discussing a subject; very few addressed the single user with an opening in which they referred to the user by name.

In addition, journalists did not reciprocate users' feelings but instead tended to keep a distance from users, referring to users in a way which ratified the inferiority of the latter. But it must be said that the 'minimal identity' of online users didn't encourage any other behaviour on the part of journalists. From journalists' behaviour in the forum it clearly emerged that the power relationship between themselves and users was not brought into question. At the same time, from users' behaviour it emerged equally that there was not sufficient participation to create a public debate, which distinct and precise individualities and the diffusive strength of the Internet would allow. The fourth research project The aim of this last research project was to explore how journalists assessed the changes provoked in their work and professional status by the integration of the Internet in newsrooms.

This research was part of a wider European research project which took place in 11 countries, including Italy, between September and October 2005 (Fortunati & Sarrica 2006; Sarrica et al. submitted) and to which we refer to know the position of journalists on the domestication of the Internet in media organisations. Here we present the results from a series of questions related to interactivity, which we added to the common questionnaire for Italy. These additional questions were submitted only to Italian newspapers (Fortunati 2005; Fortunati et al. 2005).

In this research a new, important organisational aspect of interactivity emerged: the fact that interactivity involves all the organisational labour that the editor should promote in order to manage communicative flows arriving in newsrooms and especially for online newspapers (Geens 2008).

If this work is not sufficient, as in the cases we analysed, the level of interactivity is destined to remain low, that is, interactivity is more apparent than substantial (Hanssen et al. 1996). As for publishers who are the first pole of the triad presiding over interactivity in the media (publishers/editors, journalists and audiences), the propensity to invest in the potentialities connected to communication with users emerged as a scarce resource. Moreover, editors did not regularly inform journalists about their readership (Table 5).

Table 5 Journalists' Knowledge of their Readership for 4 Online Italian Newspapers, by Number and Percentage, 12 October 2004

	Journalists at									
	Corriere della Sera		*La Repubblica*		*Il Sole 24 Ore*		*La Stampa*		Total	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Extent of Knowledge										
Detailed	1	11.1	-	-	1	14.3	1	11.1		3
8.8										
General	3	33.3	5	55.6	1	14.3	2	22.2	11	32.4
None	5	55.6	4	44.4	5	71.4	6	66.7	20	58.8
Total	9	10	9	100	7	100	9	100	34	100

Source: Fortunati et al. 2007

Scarce investments probably explain the absence of people whose task was to read the content of forums and import the issues proposed by online users. Furthermore, publishers seem to assume that print newspapers can not benefit from new technologies, since they gave information on users' behaviours mainly to online journalists (Table 6).

Table 6 Journalists' Knowledge of their Readership for Print and Online Italian Newspapers According to their Professional Identity

	Journalist							
	Print		Online		Print and Online		Total	
	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%	no.	%
Extent of Knowledge								
Detailed	-	-	1	50.0	2	28.6	3	8.8
General	6	24.0	1	50.0	4	57.1	11	32.4
None	19	76.0	-	-	1	14.3	20	58.8
Total	25	100	2	100	7	100	34	100

Source: Fortunati et al. 2007

As for journalists, instead, almost half of interviewees declared that they spontaneously carried out a series of interactive practices in online and offline newspapers. But this activity was rather informal and referred to a do-it-yourself interactivity, which started from the bottom, not only among users but also journalists. Despite their spontaneous commitment, journalists were scarcely aware of the importance of online communities that developed around the website.

This lack of understanding may also relate to a stereotype expressed by the majority of journalists: the audience prefers print to online newspapers. However, interviewees agreed that the future of newspapers was in interactivity and multimediality. This research has focused on information professionals and the third actor of interactivity: users. However, while users have acquired a certain, indirect influence on journalists in online forums, the power they can exercise in addressing editors' and journalists' choices did not seem radically strengthened compared with that in offline forums.

Final Discussion and Remarks

From these four research projects, it emerges that, in Europe, in the first part of this decade, interactivity in online newspapers has led to a limited revitalisation of newspaper readership that could intervene and comment on current affairs and political and social events, but with a modest outcome. Few internet possibilities were exploited. But I do not join the chorus of those who complain about the fact that online newspapers do not yet fully exploit the technical possibilities of the Internet.

This is an idle discourse and is valid for all the information and communication technologies, including mass media such as print newspapers, television and cinema. As it does not happen that people use an invention because it exists, similarly the degree of use of the functional possibilities of a medium varies according to how much it is compatible with the complex framework in which manufacturers, service providers, telecommunication enterprises, designers, and users play their game. The extent and modalities of use relate to the social process of co-construction of every medium. The more equal model of public interaction, that many expect the Internet to offer, influences peripherally and indirectly the political agenda of newspapers. The organisational variable of interactivity has also brought to light that the application of the current communicative model to the study of interactivity (Kim & Swahney 2002) is limited. This model in fact does not show that the management of interactivity in newsrooms is tridirectional (publishers-editors, journalists and users) nor that the communicative flow becomes more equal when it becomes multi-directional.

The reason is that it is made up, on the one hand, by paid and regular labour (that of journalists) and, on the other hand, by unpaid labour which is executed in the sphere of social reproduction (users). Moreover, users were mostly unable to challenge the power of the media on content, given that media groups were still largely defining news topics. In addition, forumists generally presented themselves via a minimal identity and often wrote in aggressive and offensive terms. The novelty and the technical characteristics of the Internet offer a sufficient explanation of the reasons which are behind the fuzzy and fragile identity of users in the period under consideration. In the World Wide Web users were mainly hidden by their nicknames because they were trying to experience the medium and especially to understand how social relationships could be reconstructed in an artificial environment.

And they were fundamentally guests of somebody else who was the true owner of the virtual space (media organisations, public associations and so on) and so dictated the rules of the game: how many words to use and how to express emotion. Presently the development of social media with pictures and profiles indicates how the relationship on the part of users with the virtual space has changed. At that time, in 2004, the possibility for users to express themselves was regulated by webmasters whose role was to encourage users to write briefly and to respect the netetiquette. Vague identity and scarce solidarity make very problematic talking about communities, even at virtual level. Furthermore, in forums the communication modality was writing and it was this modality that made the discussion less fluid, since it was asynchronous and also more demanding than oral conversation. Who were the users involved in interactive practices? A frequent mistake is to see media user as coinciding with the notion of citizen.

The notion of citizen is founded on a net of rights/duties, while that of media user is founded on a practice of consumption, which operates as a form of social control. Citizens are much more than media users and not necessarily such. In online newspaper forums, the research showed only a process in which the private became public (not yet political). Furthermore, if we follow Millefiorini's (2002) definition, according to which participative behaviour includes elements such as interest in politics, political discussion or political information, the results showed that interactivity in this decade had nothing to do with practices of political participation. The levels of interest and political discussion, which sometimes were traceable in online newspaper forums, cannot be considered indicators of political participation.

How can we thus conceptualise them? In my opinion, they can be considered useful predictors of potential political participation, or they can indicate a major or minor lean towards participation and in this sense it is interesting to study them. However, the fact that writing in online newspaper forums was not a political, but a pre-political, 'activity' does not mean that the presence of millions of users had no political weight. In effect it forced traditional editorial groups to reconfigure their organisation: for instance, by merging online and offline editorial staff, resorting to outsourcing for journalistic products, producing the free press and so on.

If discussing politics was not the point, how can we interpret this choral participation in forums? In my opinion it represents the attempt to use forums as a place in which common knowledge or better social thinking can be elaborated, beyond the conditioning which the structuration of social groups, such as family, job colleagues, school, and so on, produce. More specifically, the first part of this decade might be considered as a pre-political stage, in which users tried to make public the private. Rather than understanding this as a form of virtual political participation, we should think of it as a communication spectacle and the exhibition of the self, even if in an anonymous form.

Writing in forums was a phenomenon which entailed the social sphere rather than the political. In the majority of cases, online newspapers users, therefore, did not express the will to strengthen their power in regard to information. A certain counter-power on information was probably more possible inside other experiences or modalities such as we-journalism, blogs and so on. Online newspapers forums were instead inhabited by people who were willing, but also afraid, to deal with the public dimension and who had a fragile sociability, in which mediation by the Internet meant a more limited and distorted communication, even if freer from a certain point of view.

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