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Per questo numero una menzione agli studenti Nicola Bertoli e Luca Frezzato per aver realizzato il *concept* dell'impaginato della *Rassegna*, presente nella Sezione 4 del periodico. Tale progetto è stato elaborato durante il corso triennale in Grafica, diploma accademico di I livello in Graphic design, corso di *Lettering II* tenuto dal docente Andrea Amato. Il *naming* della testata nasce da un'idea degli ex studenti: Gugliemo Albesano, Virna Antichi, Alessandro Masoudi, mentre frequentavano il Biennio Specialistico in Grafica e Comunicazione nell'a/a 2019-2020. Il *visual concept* del numero 0 del periodico è stato ideato dall'ex studente Alessandro Masoudi nell'a/a 2019-2020, il design grafico e l'impaginazione dalle ex studentesse Sara Baricelli, Giulia Bosetti, Elena Gandossi, Francesca Mucchetti (a/a 2020-2021).

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INSTANT COMMUNICATION

New Forms of Digital Textuality and Self-Construction

Francesco Ciaponi

ABSTRACT - We all live immersed in what is defined as the society of images. In support of this century-old thesis, numerous examples could be used, just think of the global success of platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram or, if we broaden the concept of images to include those in motion, phenomena like Stories or TikTok. Let's consider the amount of visual stimuli our cognitive systems are exposed to, from omnipresent advertising to social design and product packaging.

However, one aspect that remains culpably hidden in this type of evidence is the equally pervasive presence of text. In fact, throughout the entire history of humanity, there has been no other period in which such a quantity of texts has been produced as in the current one, and it is precisely from this premise that I would like to take inspiration to overturn the aforementioned thesis.

We all live immersed in what is known as the society of images. To support this idea, which has been around for over a century, countless examples could be cited. Consider the global success of platforms such as Pinterest and Instagram, or, if we expand the concept of image to include moving ones, phenomena like Stories or TikTok. Think about the sheer amount of visual stimuli our cognitive systems are exposed to, from omnipresent advertising to social design and product packaging.

However, one crucial aspect that often remains overlooked is the equally pervasive presence of text. Throughout human history, no other period has witnessed such an enormous production of textual content as the present one. This is precisely the perspective I would like to adopt to challenge the aforementioned thesis.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF MESSAGING

When discussing text in its most contemporary form, it is essential to start with one of its most widespread manifestations: messaging.

First, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by messaging. This broad field of textuality should be categorized according to definitions widely accepted by most scholars.

Originally, the term "messaging" referred to messages sent via the Short Message Service (SMS), which later evolved to integrate alphanumeric text with multimedia content such as digital images, videos, audio files, and ideograms like Emojis, through what became known as Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS).

Following the rapid development of this digital-era textuality, we arrive at platforms specifically designed for this form of communication, including WhatsApp, Telegram, WeChat, and social media applications like Twitter and its Chinese counterpart, Weibo.

At this point, it is useful to distinguish between SMS, initially characterized by an asynchronous exchange between writer and reader, and Instant Messaging (IM), which allows synchronous message exchanges. IM is often metaphorically compared to a

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conversation, even though it lacks the physical presence of participants.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW TEXTUALITY

Digital communication via mobile devices has led to the renewed prominence of text. Written words are reclaiming space and reasserting themselves within everyday communication, generating an almost continuous stream of textual elements.

However, instant messaging presents specific characteristics that make it a distinct form of textuality, shaped within a particular technological environment. Elena Pistolesi defines this environment as “a domain where multiple media are simultaneously accessible and converge today in mobile devices”

For example, mobile phones are inherently multifunctional and integrative technologies. They not only preserve the traditional function of writing as memory and archival—previously a feature of personal computers but in an isolated and local manner—but also enable the sharing of this memory within a common global space.

The concept of a technological environment and its impact on writing practices is closely linked to the idea of technological determinism, a theory developed by the Toronto School, which we will explore later.

One major shift in interpersonal communication due to the spread of IM was highlighted by a 2012 study conducted by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University. Their paper analyzed how messaging is divided into two main modalities: one-to-one and one-to-many.

These modalities correspond to two distinct types of relationships: the first relates to the formation and maintenance of individual relationships, while the second is tied to a sense of belonging within groups, such as school, neighborhood, or workplace chats.

One-to-one communication provides individuals with a means to compare experiences with others, seeking feedback on their emotions, thoughts, and events. This aspect is central to identity formation and self-construction, as it relies on recognition from the community.

On the other hand, one-to-many communication, beyond facilitating cooperation and managing collective situations, plays a crucial role for adolescents at different stages of their social development. It serves as a powerful tool for connection and fostering a sense of belonging.

A second aspect concerns the variable of time. A person can engage in a conversation with another user without the constraint of having to respond within a short time and without having to immediately dedicate themselves to the conversation. This characteristic is linked to a function present in all messaging services, which notifies the sender whether the recipient has received the message, whether they have read it, and, more generally, whether they are available. This leads to an individual’s ability to decide when and whether to respond. This can be considered a social negotiation activity between users, which can also influence the proper conduct of communication itself.

A frequently occurring scenario is when the recipient cannot be reached in person or by phone because, for example, they are busy or decide to appear so. In this case, unlike verbal communication, it is still possible to send the message without interfering or acting as a disruptive element. Here, the centrality of the

time factor becomes evident: the possible interruption of the flow due to asynchronicity acts as a moderator of communication and is central to the use of messaging because of an individual's tendency to be increasingly involved in multiple activities simultaneously (multitasking).

The suspension factor has been at the center of debate for years, with two opposing factions: on one side, those who see speed and immediacy as the added value of IM. However, a whole body of scientific literature highlights two highly invasive limitations in the normal dynamics of instant communication: the excess of messages and group chats and the excess of interruptions due to notifications.

If the first point concerns the entire information exchange system that has invaded our daily lives, leading to phenomena such as information overload, the second issue is typical of always-on communication. This problem raises serious doubts about the actual usefulness of certain tools, especially in the workplace, where the extensive use of IM results in an excessive number of messages exchanged in a very short time.

Another typical property of instant textuality is its brevity, sometimes extreme brevity.

The brevity of texts is primarily due to the predefined message size, but upon deeper analysis, forms of semantic, lexical, and syntactic redundancy can also be observed. These are related to poor planning, intermittent management of textual composition, the emotional tone of exchanges, and the time elapsed between a request and its response.

Initially attributed to economic reasons such as connection costs, brevity has been analyzed by Jean-Pierre Jaffré, who derived a socialization index from it, designed to measure the tendency to share the same code within a network of relationships, whether broad, as in discussion groups, or between two individuals.

Nonetheless, this creates a communicative continuum that is quite exhausting and often leads to drops in productivity or, in the worst cases, burnout.

Another characteristic of IM is that it conveys unstructured texts, often written while working on other projects. These unorthodox texts are drafted in often creative ways to communicate sometimes complex thoughts that may also carry a high emotional charge.

This aspect may seem trivial but hides a phenomenon with which we are increasingly forced to reckon: the reality that the very fabric of our language is gradually transforming into a complex and collective set of digital symbols interconnected with each other. Setting aside the traditional view that messages degrade the orthodox use of language—a claim never actually proven—instant messaging presents new interaction potential, challenges that revisit the text, its functions, its fundamental elements (letters), and its relationship with emotions (emoticons).

Whether texts are sent via SMS or IM, the characteristics that have always captured the attention of the public and researchers refer to the excessive use of abbreviations, extreme conciseness, grammatical and syntactical inaccuracies, poor planning, and lack of attention to what is being written. However, upon closer inspection, this is not the case at all, and a deeper reflection on these points raises a spontaneous observation: no one is forced to use these inaccuracies; moreover, the user does not want to pay the cost of an

SMS or waste their time delivering a message that will not be understood. What has shaped the perception of the new instant textuality, to the point of depicting it as sparse and empty, is the idea that it has been presented as necessary. A new form of writing that was deemed essential simply because smartphones require it.

This brings back, in all its relevance, the historic debate on technological determinism proposed by the American sociologist Thorstein Veblen, which pits those who emphasize the relationship between technological media and the resulting cognitive processes against those who do not consider the specific technology of the medium as a decisive factor in the transformation of cognitive processes. Among the latter, we can include Jay David Bolter and European thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

Although, as mentioned, it is a form of writing that expresses specific characteristics, instant messaging texts present both substantial similarities and differences compared to spoken language. Instant messaging is a mix of these two distinct categorizations because, while both are informal, simple, and conversational, it is also evident that instant messaging involves planned textuality since it is pre-organized and still contains a certain degree of attention in its drafting.

With messaging, the novelty is dialogicality, a characteristic of new media that also transforms interpersonal textuality, its features, and the language in general. New technologies such as instant messaging make writing dialogical, eliminating the temporal distance between sender and recipient, thus enabling the exchange of roles between the two subjects, who alternate in a continuous exchange of feedback.

There are also more strictly functional aspects of the new uses of textuality. Consider its role in supporting the organization of our social relationships. Frequent examples of this type include texts such as: “I just sent you the file,” “I’m home, call me on the landline,” etc. All pieces of communication that, even if unnoticed, help prevent delays, misunderstandings, and generally contribute to a more effective organization of social relationships.

Additionally, the ability to mute one’s device—a sort of “whispered communication”—allows for more discreet parallel exchanges. The forwarding function facilitates the development and dissemination of message chains, and finally, the ability to see the sender’s number in real-time allows users to decide what to do, whether to filter incoming calls or not.

In general, instant messaging often creates a nearly constant temporal tension among the various subjects involved, a craving for feedback and responses that may seem trivial but are only superficially insignificant. It is a technology in transition, perpetually evolving and rarely complete, usually integrating dialogue that also occurs across other media. This is referred to as eXtreme cultures: “those that, in the course of their self-production, construct themselves according to the spatial modules of the boundless. eXtreme cultures are unbounded: eX-terminate, in the sense that they push to remain unfinished, to feel interminable, to reject any limit to their construction-diffusion process.”

B) THE RELATIONAL ASPECTS EMERGING WITH MESSAGING

Let us now delve deeper into the effects that

new forms of textuality have had and will continue to have on our social relationships in the future.

Naomi S. Baron, in her book Letters by Phone or Speech by Other Means, describes text in messaging as a "technology of sociability," a new form of hybrid textuality that blends aspects of both written and spoken discourse.

It is evident that, beyond the specific functionalities of messaging previously analyzed, its widespread adoption is also largely due to its drive toward connection between individuals—an integral part of the participatory culture underlying Pierre Lévy's concept of collective intelligence. This concept moves away from the one-directional communication typical of pre-digital culture and fully integrates into what philosopher Luciano Floridi has called the Infosphere.

Messaging has often been analyzed in terms of its perceived triviality and lack of informational content. While this perspective may hold some truth, as we will see, it remains a rather superficial view.

First and foremost, as Crispin Thurlow and Alex Brown argue: "It is through these fleeting exchanges that linguists can track the evolution and changes in social interaction in a postmodern online world". The two scholars propose overcoming the apparent contradiction within the concept of the importance of the banal, advocating instead for recognizing the significance of these collective texts in shaping both individuals and communities.

If we examine most of the textual production within messaging, we can assert that what Thurlow and Brown term Small Talk falls into an informal type of discourse—rarely tied to the need to convey information and more often linked to the representation of individual subjectivity. Or, in Erving Goffman's terms, it is a means of seeking social recognition through relationships.

This phenomenon finds its roots in the research of Polish anthropologist and sociologist Bronisław Malinowski, who, in 1923, coined the term Phatic Communication to describe this type of communicative exchange.

At the heart of Malinowski's studies lies a paradox: a fundamental shift in perspective that requires us to examine textuality not based on its formal structure but rather in terms of its effects on social behavior.

Let us take a step back and contextualize social behaviors and their relationships with textuality in the forms of communication.

In The Transformation of Intimacy, Anthony Giddens argues that in an era marked by the dismantling of ideological and social security, the constant construction of one's personal and public identity becomes crucial. This self-construction is a process in continuous flux, where the very object being shaped remains indefinable.

For Stjepan Meštrović, we are in a Postemotional Society, where emotion—or rather, the persistent display of emotions—has become a resource to be manipulated and utilized in the representation of the self.

For Manuel Castells, the constant deconstruction and reconstruction of social ties characteristic of the digital age, as theorized by thinkers such as Zygmunt Bauman and Ulrich Beck, has led to a new social morphology. This is what he defines as the Network Society, a form of multiple interrelations based on the ongoing formation and reformation of personal networks and

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related contacts.

Contrary to the initial assumption of the triumph of the Image Society, text has regained a central role in social discourse. According to Malinowski, this centrality represents a genuine social skill aimed at fostering the highest degree of conviviality.

But how can we define this conviviality?

Through the use of instant messaging, we engage in a continuous exchange of information that is low in informational intensity—seemingly devoid of depth but crucial for ensuring social cohesion, a sense of belonging, and the overall well-being of both individuals and communities.

With the globalization of the 1990s, individuals lost traditional anchors—history, major political and cultural orthodoxies—along with many of the structures that once provided certainty and reference points. Today, in our vast yet destabilizing freedom of movement, we are forced to construct our biographies around our social ties. Given the increasingly disembodied nature of late modern life, one of the individual's key tasks is to continuously reconstruct and maintain personal relationships, which remain fragile in the face of the economic forces shaping our lives. As Nicolas Bourriaud states: "The sphere of current relationships is the one most severely affected by the general reification. Symbolized by commodities or replaced by them, marked by logos, the field of human relations must take on extreme or clandestine forms if it wants to escape the empire of the predictable".

It is thus evident how interpersonal relationships become fundamental to self-construction and self-realization. Texts, rather than serving merely as vehicles for narratives, become vehicles for information, where data is exchanged more than meaning. In this regard, Karin Knorr-Cetina has coined the term Postsocial Knowledge Societies to describe not only the dismantling of modern selves but also the increasing volume of documents, texts, and information concerning environments centered on constructing different subjectivities.

Phatic Communication thus constitutes the set of texts that build relationships and sustain social interaction—not through informative contact, but through an intimacy far more pervasive than in the past. The goal is not to exchange meaningful information but to express sociability and maintain social connections.

This new form of textuality carries much greater importance than its content might initially suggest. Although repeated phrases like How are you? and Where are you? may seem devoid of meaning, they represent the anthropological shift in text, where content is no longer the foundation of communication. More significant than what we write in our messages is the fact that these texts serve as a means of connection. The exchange of information becomes secondary—what truly matters is staying in touch. Thus, text becomes an integral part of a network of relationships necessary to maintain a connected presence in a sociality that is both fragile and constantly evolving.

The logic underpinning Phatic Communication is based on what can be termed a low-investment politics: brief, stereotyped, and repetitive textual forms that require minimal effort and little investment in terms of time and knowledge. Easily produced by anyone, they allow individuals from all social and cultural backgrounds to construct their own

self-representation within a community. These new forms of textuality thus imply a broad reconsideration of activism—moving away from real-world politics and toward more discursive (virtual) and symbolic texts.

Political action, in this sense, becomes a fragmented intervention—one could say grassroots awareness-building—that reshapes popular sentiment and behavior from the bottom up, ultimately influencing institutional policies. Nicolas Bourriaud reminds us that as early as 1977, Félix Guattari had expressed a similar perspective:

“I believe it is illusory to bet on a progressive transformation of society, whereas I think microscopic attempts—communities, neighborhood committees, daycare organization in universities—play an absolutely fundamental role”.

This idea, that change can only be initiated through small deliberative groups, aligns with the views of anthropologist David Graeber, who argues:

“We must abandon the idea that revolution means seizing the state apparatus and instead initiate a process of refounding democracy based on the self-organization of autonomous communities.” He further suggests that “it almost seems as if democracy is returning to the spaces from which it originated: the intermediate spaces, the interstices of power. Whether it will extend across the entire planet depends not so much on our theories but on our real conviction that ordinary people, sitting together to deliberate, can manage their own affairs better than the elites who claim to govern on their behalf and impose decisions through force”.

It is precisely in these intermediate spaces that emancipation occurs, as anticipated by Karl Marx in economic terms through the concept of interstice—those exchange communities that escape the capitalist economy by resisting the laws of profit, materializing in phenomena such as bartering, loss-leading sales, and self-productions.

Through new forms of textuality, new forms of activism have emerged over the years, defined in various ways: micro-activism, micro-contributions, sub-activism, or more critically, clicktivism or slacktivism.

As often happens with phenomena of this kind, scholars tend to be divided, renewing the historical dialectic between the apocalyptic and the integrated.

On one hand, authors like the Spanish sociologist Manuel Castells emphasize the importance of new textuality as a catalyst for actions that, when multiplied, can lay the groundwork for transformative events. Supporting this argument, Castells highlights the role of Twitter and group chats in the mass protests that took place in the first decade of the century in Iceland, Tunisia, and Egypt. Similarly, Clay Shirky, in his article The Political Power of Social Media (Foreign Affairs), underscores how:

“For political movements, one of the main forms of coordination is what the military calls Shared Awareness—the ability of each member of a group not only to understand a situation but also to know that the same awareness is shared by all other group members.”

From an opposite perspective, more skeptical observers such as Malcolm Gladwell, Evgeny Morozov, and many others tend to downplay the political activism aspect of these new uses of text, focusing instead on their purely communicative and non-political function.

For Gladwell and others, these are forms of participation in which individuals are not required to engage in anything particularly demanding, leading them to argue that this is a form of self-redemption—where people feel the comforting sensation of having contributed to something good and useful without actually doing anything to bring about real social or political change.

To summarize, we could argue that the primary purpose behind the use of texts typical of instant textuality is not necessarily to express or support a stance but rather to build or maintain a connection through various forms of individual and collective recognition.

The American scholar Tobias Menely, in his essay Forgive Me If I Am Forthright – or, Conversational Freedom, demonstrates how Phatic Communication primarily functions to cultivate and sustain social harmony, acting as a kind of social glue that shifts conversations toward less controversial and divisive topics. To draw a somewhat forced parallel, consider the fact that Facebook has a “Like” button but not a “Dislike” button, as the latter would threaten the formation of conflicts, thus hindering the expansion of the network.

Menely goes further, distinguishing between two different types of texts. On one side, he places expression, which consists of simply maintaining interpersonal contact through simple and immediate texts that are nearly devoid of meaning. On the other, he speaks of conversation, where the text also aims to produce change through the transmission of information. In the first case, comprehension relies on mutual recognition, whereas, in the second, a different level of attention and willingness to change is required.

At this point, it is useful to return once again to Nicolas Bourriaud and his concept of the interstice as it relates to the relational role of contemporary art—namely,

“the space of human relations that, while integrating more or less harmoniously and openly into the global system, suggests alternative possibilities for exchange beyond those currently in place within the system itself.”

But what are the prevailing human relationships within the system that Bourriaud describes and that we have defined as Phatic Communication? And above all, why are they so central today?

To answer this question, it is necessary to emphasize how today, the value of information constructed through new textuality is essentially based on the generation of vast amounts of data that can be easily tracked and analyzed through increasingly advanced marketing processes. Strategies such as Data Mining, the exploitation of consumer activities, their relationships with brands, and buzz monitoring are all phenomena that are more efficiently managed through databases, algorithms, and artificial intelligence, with the ultimate economic goal of obtaining insights into consumer behavior.

Thus, this form of textuality serves a function in collective self-representation—it is not merely background chatter—but rather has developed in response to the collapse of traditional cultural, social, and political reference points. The goal of text in instant messaging is not to

“transmit thought or stimulate reflection, but rather to break the silence and establish bonds of mutual recognition.”

While remaining skeptical about the Phatic Communication’s actual role as an agent of change, I believe it is crucial to focus on these

forms of textuality as tools for understanding contemporary social dynamics.

To conclude, we can define text as both a witness and an instrument of the complex cultural, cognitive, and linguistic structure of collective coexistence—by no means subordinate to the consumption of the visual universe.

Francesco Ciaponi

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Note

[1] The society of images, the current definition of today, describes the living environment since the time of nineteenth-century Paris, also known as the city of talking walls. This definition is derived from the affiches, the posters that began to cover the city with figures and colors, continuing the communicative will born from the republican and democratic ideals of the great revolution.

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[6] Information overload means the inability to make a decision or identify an element on which to focus attention due to the excessively large amount of information received. For further information, please refer to the texts: B. Gross, The Managing Organizations: The Administrative Struggle, Collier-Macmilla n, London, 1964 and A. Toffler, Future Shock, Rizzoli, Milan, 1971

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