Abstract: The article aims to highlight the central place taken by the cultural dimension of media participation, as well as the ability to develop new perspectives of meaning which become possible by way of a fundamental change, generated by a shift from logics that are typical of broadcast systems, toward grassroots forms that converge with media participation to open up spaces of negotiation and conflict. “Media communication” refers to the co-presence of different technologies used in various contexts and users with differing backgrounds and cultures that are reflected in their use of media technologies. Media communication is now a part, in its own right, of the users’ daily life. It also forms part of a variety of social spaces. The Web 2.0 may be understood as the possibility enjoyed by those who access the web of autonomously generating and publishing various kinds of materials. In contemporary movements and in the forms of political commitment, which are popular online, within network dynamics and propagation properties, collective forms of self-representation of identity are generated through the production of content that is shared. Media communication, Social space, Social networks, individual space, Web 2.0, prosumer, affordance, user-friendly technologies. Examples will be given of social relations, identity on the web, in social networks and others related to technologies of self mediation and to the affordance and limits of social media.

Keywords: Media communication, Social space, Social networks, individual space, Web 2.0, prosumer, affordance, Technologies user friendly.

1. Introduction
In this particular historical period, maybe without full awareness of it, we are experiencing a “new modernity” that, in comparison with the past, prefers discontinuity and distances itself from the categories of knowledge of post-modernity, [1] and we are moving toward an authentic “change of paradigm”. The new modernity that corresponds to the contemporaneity of the current historical period is not an appendix of the previous one; instead, a new “historical depth” is coming to light that was not perceived before. Such contemporaneity has and will have the power to let us perceive differences where previously there were only similarities, and similarities where there were only differences [2]. During this period, attention is given to the “communication paradigm” rooted in the technological changes that contributed to changing the structure of society, with the spreading of the network and the advent of the Internet. The latter, in a short span of time, has modified communication habits with a fallout on relationships between people and the structure of society itself. In a relatively short while, the network has changed the structure of work, politics, relations within society. The rules characterizing social identity emerge when individuals take the role of communicating subjects. The different assumptions of roles have an irreducible identity that places individuals, in their uniqueness, as members of one or more social groups. Even in front of a computer, our sociality is always active. The number of people with whom one can interact online may be large indeed, and what is shared is not only the message but also, in part, the needs. These subjects partially activate a reciprocal recognition. The protection afforded by anonymity facilitates the telling of personal information. Online it is possible to experiment with different aspects of oneself that are personalized and individuated.
representations of the self in the past and also include hypothetical states of the self projecting into the future.
Man can never be separated from his material environment, from the signs and images through which he gives sense to the world. As a consequence, the material world cannot be separated from the ideas through which technological artefacts are conceived and used. Technology is seen as the byproduct of a wider process that also includes a typically human characteristic, that of modifying the external environment and transforming what is naturally given into the artificially constructed, thus balancing one’s own organic insufficiency [3].

In the network society, technological and social change come together, each sphere hybridizing with the other. This hybridization may be described with terms such as: digitalization (dematerialization of images, sounds, documents, that may be interpreted by a PC), convergence (various types of contents coming together on a single support), distribution (unlike traditional media, digital media are not unidirectional and centralized), hypertextual (use is not linear, but content can be personalized), social (social dynamics are promoted on Facebook, Twitter or others), interactivity (users have a chance to interact on content). Convergence underlines a greater diversification for digital technologies, while more important technologies – telephone, television and computer – are re-mediated, so much so that each of them represents a hybrid of technological, economic and social practices [4]. Convergence does not happen only between media equipment, but also in the brains of individual users and in their reciprocal social interactions. Each of us proceeds by putting into practice Piaget’s theory of adjustment: assimilating media fragments and then transforming them into resources by way of an adjustment to what is already known. This is how we give sense to our own experience and daily life.

2. Media communication and the transformation of communicating subjects
The most important shift is that from communicating subject to digital man: from the position of user, meaning consumer of news from media broadcasting, to that of content producer [5] This shift generates consumers/producers who are born in the participative cultures of “do-it-yourself”, viewer-users, co-producers, user-producers [6].

On-line and off-line are two different experiences, just as different as real and digital or man and machine, where the two are not always clearly distinguishable. A passage is necessary from a culture of connection to one of contact, thus overcoming conflictuality. The problem is not the existence of the information technology network, but the fact that it is used exclusively as a device to exert control over one’s self, one’s language and therefore one’s communication [7]. The connectivity logic of the network becomes a cultural matrix that awards the individual a competence and an increased role in the weaving of social bonds, supporting forms of organization and reorganization of the roles themselves and of managing relational forms [8].

Society, in Simmel’s view [9], is the place where several individuals enter into reciprocal action; this is why it appears to be a difficult world to understand. Every “social action” may be “understood” through an interpretive procedure based on the elaboration of categories that are found to be useful when interpreting the various problems of explanation posed by history [10].

So, as regards individuals and society, there is no difference between off-line and on-line because both modes are adequate for the sociality of the individual who knows different approaches that, in their turn, make it possible to show oneself through authenticity and individualization. The point is including one’s own narrations in the social networks, narrations that seem to be a mixture of public and private [11]. The increase in individualization has led to greater incertitude, even if the sense of daily routines does not disappear completely. The search for authenticity is a search for the freedom of self-determination, which generates a new subjectivism of a reflexive kind [12]. Reflexivity, therefore, is the awareness of the provisional character of one’s theses, a continuous search, a willingness to question oneself and employ more than one perspective [12] It was Lyotard (1991) who defined the second half of the twentieth century as “postmodernism”, a time witnessing the end of grand narratives [13].
2.1. Affordance: meeting between new and old media

Affordance is a watershed between objects with easy comprehensibility and usability and objects that are impenetrable [14]. Technologies defined as “user-friendly” are easy to use and immediately comprehensible. Affordance is therefore a unique combination of qualities that specify what the object allows. Such qualities represent opportunities or a potential for a series of actions that we perceive. Furthermore, as soon as we use these objects, they become an extension of ourselves, so that the dichotomy between subject and object is overcome [15]. Internet, mobile technologies and social media platforms possess a set of affordances that need to be recognized as such by users. The result is that the usability of social media is linked to the affordances of other tools of mediation of the self such as printed paper, broadcasting media or the classical forms of telecommunication. Social media combine one-to-many communication with one-to-one communication using a matrix of affordances that is at a crossing between real time and asynchronous time, between public/to the outside and private/to the inside [16].

Social media promote individualism: there is an intrinsic tension between the individualistic nature of social media platforms (like/don’t like), but on the other hand there is a need to construct and support collective identities and to organize collective actions. It should be remembered that the radical fragmentation of requests and of the causes that determine them, as on-line activity demonstrates, is the symptom of a wider problem involving the de-ideologization of social, economic and political struggles and leads to direct democracy.

2.2. The prosumer

With the advent of the Internet we are no longer just audience, consumers and citizens. In blogs, Social Networks, wikis and on-line worlds we construct our connected reflexivity, and this allows us to produce, distribute and consume in new ways the symbolic forms and the meanings that are necessary to change the world. A different social equilibrium is in the making. The modifications occurring between the new media and those that existed previously mostly concern the reality of connected audiences and the production and disambiguation of the media content, which takes place with the participation in production and distribution forms guided and developed by a driver that takes into account the cultural convergence of mainstream media and grassroots convention. We may speak of a “state of connection” that creates a mediated environment of culture, whose behaviour involves a non-dichotomic and non-contrasting logic [17]. Connected audiences consuming information and entertainment are created, but the same audiences also become producers. As highlighted by Jenkins [18], one of the most characterizing elements of fanfictions is the fact that they make a participatory culture possible, and this has affected the communities of those who define themselves “fans” in particular. The advent of the Internet, in fact, has initiated a gradual revolution in the possibilities for communication and exchange among individuals who belong to the same fandom and to different fandoms. On one hand, it facilitates the arrival of newcomers into communities; and on the other it allows those who already belong to come into contact with other fans more quickly – even if geographically very far away – and to share, in a more immediate manner, opinions on what was seen. More in general, what becomes possible is more effective collaboration on the interpretation of the product, and this is an essential element that connects a person with a text [19]. Such interpretation can now take place in real time, through discussions on forums or blogs and through the creation of artistic products such as fanfictions, the first form of amateur approach to production [20]. The current time, more than any other, marks the transition to new values, new institutions, new languages. The key to this change has to be sought in a new cultural sensitivity and in the break from the past that, even if slowly, is taking root in all sectors of our life. A new cultural identity is imposing itself.

The Web 2.0 user is undergoing a transformation, from simple viewer to director and entertainer, and his/her participation becomes an extension of face-to-face personal communication: the new media, in fact, foster the development of a sense of sharing and belonging, but also of exclusion and isolation. Finally, precisely these premises allow us to say that such communication abnormally
develops its meta-communicative and relational aspect and leaves that of the reflection tool in the background [21]. Real and virtual socialities are on the same plane, one does not exclude the other, they are contemporary both in society and in real life. Globalisation has changed the meaning of certain terms: if men were reciprocally “neighbours”, now with individualization all men are “strangers”. In the case of social networks, it is desirable, adventurous and interesting to have a circle of people who are connected (strangers, as my friends’ friends may be). We could think to a reversal of Simmel’s notion of sociability, moving toward the concept of strangeness suggested by Sennett [22].

3. Media communication and democracy

With Web 2.0 we enter a new evolutionary stage where everything becomes instrumental: the users’ participation, the use and transformation of users and data with the possibility of manipulating (remixability) and of inserting shared products and new content (user-generated content). All that information is incorporated in password “sharing” and “personalization”: from an interaction based on simple consultation to the possibility of inserting one’s own contents and helping enrich the network. There are certain aspects that generate incertitude and worry, both because they stem from issues that are already problematic off-line and because they represent challenges that have not been adequately met or have recently come to the fore.

The free circulation of news jeopardizes the legitimacy of politics by exacerbating a collective disaffection with democracy, which is seen as a stalking horse, effective on those who allow themselves to be deluded by false promises of representation. The perspective of the Panopticon comes out of Bentham’s prison view and enters society, but with a difference: in Bentham the prison population was controlled without their will, while in the Panopticon now transposed into society people themselves register on the social networks and deliberately reveal personal information concerning tastes, consumption, political orientations, entrusting to data banks the possibility of acting with marketing. By compiling their personal profile, users make themselves accomplices in their own control: they are spied on, catalogued and auctioned without their knowledge [23]. Furthermore, the dynamics of polarization and fragmentation that is present especially on the Internet entails the risk of promoting the spread of “fake news”, false news that propagates and acquires strength in echo chambers and communication bubbles. The lack of confrontation adds to the crisis of journalism and this allows such news to escape any check.

As regards interpersonal relations, we remember Granovetter’s theory of “weak ties” [24], which is useful for interpreting the importance of the knowledge networks developed on-line. According to his theory, weak ties [25] constitute sparse networks that establish communication among the networks of “strong ties”, meaning ties with the close group of friends and family. The networks of weak ties tend to choose functions that are often underestimated. People with few weak ties are excluded from the information and opportunities that lie outside their own group. A society with few weak ties is a fragmented society, where ideas travel slowly [26].

The consequence of the digitalization process is that each medium gains the possibility of circulating on various technologies. For example, the radio can be broadcasted both via the ether and in digital form, on a mobile phone or the Internet. Every technology may lodge different media, so that a mobile phone can include telephone functions, the Internet, cinema and television. Information technologies have led to the creation of connected networks that uninterruptedly convey information flows and image flows. This produces informationalism, where production is mainly based on the trade of information [27]. In a communication perspective, the Internet mirrors the model of diffused capitalism. The same is true of Google; even though the company claims to pursue freedom and transparency, information is used and sold – information that, together with the massive amount of data produced by users, goes through the endless connections between computers [28].

In the introduction to Sunstein’s book, Pasquino [29] writes that the Internet is a threat to democracy and a resource for democracy. Both statements, in specific conditions, are correct.
Many consumers approach information sources that are different from their usual ones, even just out of curiosity. So, though only occasionally, they enter pluralism of information, which does not serve only to increase consumers’ knowledge – and for a few moments those consumers become citizens – but also to contain and reduce the overall polarization of opinions. Starting with Tocqueville, pluralism has been regarded as a founding element of democracies. In democracy citizens must be able to access a plurality of sources, not only electronic. The access should be guaranteed to citizens by a flow of political information according to a number of ways. For democracy to be maintained, demanding citizens are necessary who want pluralism of sources and appreciate the sources’ impartiality, or at least their competitiveness, in respect of shared constitutional values. A successfully maintained democracy should guarantee its citizens the correctness of the information they receive and, in any case, easy access to opinions that are opposite to their own.

4. A critique of the Web 2.0
The continuum between the micro-reality of interaction practices occurring on a daily basis and those that are intentional and mindful constitutes a privileged point of view for the study of contemporary digital environments. Here we catch a glimpse of the central position of the horizontal connection that is unprecedented in the history of modern media; and the rooting in the apparently destructured fluidity of daily life, that is just as decisive. Thinking about the digital media in the perspective of a connection that differs from social action means asking questions on the spaces of intersubjectivity that take shape in these media; it also means asking questions about both the structures of the relation and the compensations that become necessary for such relation or the possibilities to which it leads [30].

The visibility is given by the connection. Schutz’s vital worlds [31] may be taken as a starting point. The experience that individuals have of the world that surrounds them has a transverse articulation with myriad social circles, each characterized by an increasing degree of anonymity. Between what is close, immediately present and accessible to direct space-time experience, and abstract images of highly anonymous social collectivities, there is a scale of “social typings” characterized by varying levels of immediacy: people met and later lost track of, people who third parties have mentioned, people met through the media etc. The greater the inaccessibility of the immediate contact, the greater the degree of anonymity of the subject’s experiential relation [32].

The more recent media allow the possibility of flexibly going through the various levels of proximity to which the individual feels he/she belongs. Social media are an uninterrupted connection tool with friends’ circles offering connections with weaker ties, with the extended networks of friends’ friends and acquaintances that were previously just potential.

The notion of visibility may be useful to interpret both the dynamics of connection, participation and creativity that are typical of Web 2.0 and their promises of emancipation. Information is always constructed: it was when it depended on news sources and the areas of social life that lie beyond the direct experience of the individual. Information belongs to a circular communication process produced by an ascending flow – consisting in the search for news and its selection – and a descending flow that originates the newspaper, that is, the neutral level, so called because in order to become a communicating subject it needs to be activated by a reader [33].

In the eighties, the New Journalism no longer hid the sources of differing and contrasting opinions. This stance was taken in order to give readers a greater possibility of choice. At the same time, the need was felt to have some shelter for the production of news without manipulation, making it inside its own universe. An event is capable of making the news regardless of its true or false substance; the point is not setting a limit as regards information but extending it, in a strategy where news management feeds on the same mechanisms as information and endeavours to accommodate them. The creation of events can be a decisive investment for economic and political success. The risks posed by this type of journalism are low, because the events presented to public opinion lack
authorship. Furthermore, the mass media system prefers wealth rather than censorship, so that even news management becomes acceptable: a mixture of disinformation triggered by a skilful and totalitarian use of the management of news (one such example was the Gulf war). News management involves the invention of meaningful episodes and catchphrases; but this is something the audience will only find out after it made the news. The sources cannot be checked.

5. Individual spaces and social spaces: conclusions
Shared knowledge – information deemed reliable and maintained by the group as a whole – and collective intelligence – the sum of all information retained individually by the members of the group – are made available in case of need [34]. Spoilers for television programmes [35] are a significant practical case. Spoilers gather and develop items of information and, in doing so, form a community of knowledge. According to Levy, such knowledge communities will have a central role in restoring democratic citizenship.

Sharing is the access key that is necessary for understanding the forms of sociality that characterize contemporary life and result from human interaction and physical space. This intertwining is allowed by new technologies. A generation gap is always present in different historical periods because generations are always in contact one with the other, but their knowledge does not coincide. The generation gap requires a flexible management of personal identity. The network offers not just information, but also participation, as becomes evident from blogs, forums, Twitter and all other social uses of Web 2.0. The contamination between old and new media is very strong in all information technologies: the network re-mediates all the other media. It is actually a reality that never gets rid of the stages it went through, but rather incorporates and transforms them into the later stages [36].

Every contemporaneity is always problematic because of the conflictuality that living between the old and the new entails. The strength of the traditional models lies in their supposed regularity, which gives confidence; but it clashes with the human desire for novelty. It is always considered that society should be well structured, when in fact we know that stability is precarious because man himself is changeable. If on the one hand we look for strong individualization, on the other we wish to behave like everybody else while still being ourselves. It is not possible to overlook the constant and contradictory tendency present in human beings configured in the homogeneity/differentiation dichotomy, reflecting the essential duplicity of individual/society [37].

The structuring of the social system deals with the way the system, in generating human resources and structural norms, is produced by social interaction [38]. In order to know the social dynamic, an a-priori interpretive model is necessary, a “place” into which we can channel the “disorder of change”, thus avoiding the mistake of confusing model and observed reality [39].

Sharing is the necessary access key to the forms of sociality that characterize contemporary life, which results from the interaction of social space with relations occurring in the physical space. Such intertwining is allowed by new technologies. Web 2.0 is not a simple update of Web 1.0, but offers a different vision in which “the second generation” comes into play. An active and interactive participation is entailed that performs a sharing of data, contents and platforms. Promotion takes place through the sharing of the networking software supporting these activities [40]. Man’s drive for relations with others has found a powerful flywheel in remote interpersonal communication, allowing each subject to find his/her own identity not just face-to-face, but also with a “you” who is not present – and therefore evaluates the “I” for what is declared or shown of it. Such communication allows each user to overcome timidity and expose his/her face as he/she wishes [41].

We go toward the illusion of an unstoppable global coincidence of the media, to be realized through observation of the modes with which, even though tools diverge, contents may converge, in a market where pushes from the top down (broadcasting) and from the bottom up (grassroots) are present, determined by users [42].
We are witnessing a historical process of change that highlights a reduction in the rituals of passage from the old ways of use and enjoyment, to personalized forms, as regards the possession, access and normalization of media consumption [43]. Social networking has remodelled social behaviours and led the individual to experiment with new, more gratifying lifestyles. Gratification is not the point of arrival for the individual or for society: it is not enough. According to Sunstein [44], when personal preferences are the product of too limited options, there is a problem in a perspective of freedom. But the same problem arises when options are a very large number, even though things work better. When it comes to communication, a system with no limits to individual choice is not necessarily suited to the interest of citizenship and self-government.

References and Notes:
[1] It was Lyotard (1991) who defined the second half of the twentieth century as “postmodernism”, a time witnessing the end of grand narratives.
[5] The user, either listener of reader, is never passive, but rather performs an activity that goes to meet the interlocutor’s activity.
[20] Anyone who reads a text has to interpret it, connect it to the world and bring to light the issues it contains, which would otherwise remain hidden. Social networks are closer to orality than they are to literature; but with posts they introduce an “act of reading”, thus activating the reader’s mental images – that are not necessarily present in the text of the posts themselves. Pietrobon, A. & Tessarolo, M. (2011). L’elaborazione di testi nelle comunità di fan: indagine sulla produzione di fan fictions in Italia. Testoesenso, 12, pp. 1-12. www.testoesenso.it;


[25] If we communicate with our family members we have a limited sphere of movement, while the greater the number of our weak ties, the more we are connected to the world and the greater our chances to obtain useful information.


[35] Spoiler è un’anticipazione sulla trama di un film o di un telefilm (in genere di un testo). È qualcosa che rovina la sorpresa del finale.


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