

THE METAPHOR OF “VOICE” IN COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: This paper stresses some significant ways in which the voice appears in the new media studies. Whether as a dominant metaphor in the early stages of computer-mediated communication, whether in opposition with silence or listening, whether as an important component of the participatory culture, the voice remains a key concept and a helpful lens through which the communicative, social, and cultural parts of the digital era are illuminated. In these processes, the “digital” voice is conceived as a powerful tool that can be easily heard and disseminated, in spite of the obvious limitation of its strengths or of its access. Thus, the rethinking of voice in contemporary frame brings at surface the issues of politics of voice and also ethical challenges.

Keywords: online voice, listening, participatory culture, storytelling, technological imaginary, silence

INTRODUCTION

New media have been inserted into almost every activity of the contemporary human being, reconfiguring the traditional social structures, interpersonal relationships, and ways of doing politics or research. Even the everyday life experiences and the household were shaped by the Internet and mobile communication (Silverstone, and Haddon 1996; Bakardjieva 2005; Haythornthwaite, and Wellman 2002; Ishii 2006). Thus, they are embedded in the real life, expanding the experience, displacing the spatial and temporal frames, and providing a latent communication at hand. The importance of technology, on the one hand, and of the modalities in which the people are effectively using it, on the other hand, makes visible the relevance of social shaping of technology theory. In this sense, technologic and social components must stay together for an equilibrate analysis. The familiarization with a medium conduces to the situation in which the

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medium is taken for granted, being absorbed in the daily personal and institutional routines. From the researcher's point of view, even this level has to be carefully observed, not only for its better explanation or for the figuring of the future trends, but also for understanding, in McLuhan's terms, which are the pattern transformations that the medium introduces. Thus, we can seize the environment created by new media, the changes of relational and social structures, and also the aesthetic properties of hyper-mediation. As Haythornthwaite and Wellman noticed, it is a danger to wave the Internet away as other means of communication were in the past: "ignoring the Internet is a huge mistake as seeing it as a savior. It is the boringness and routineness that makes the Internet important because this means that is being pervasively incorporated into people's lives" (2002, 7). The historical perspective on the media and the searching of the underlying ideas that shaped their investigations remain some key guidelines.

THE VOICE IN NEW MEDIA SETTINGS

The voice is a human symbol, more than a function; its utilisation became more metaphorical in the human and social sciences, being equated with other powerful terms as freedom of speech, good representation (social and political), non-discrimination. Thus, the voice was investigated not only as a property but also as a discursive function. The early stages of the development of computer-mediated communication emphasised the importance of expression as one major benefit of new media. As with every medium when it is "new", the Internet was acclaimed as a suiting tool for the democratisation of speech and the speaking-tube for all types of audiences, especially those already considered discriminated above in diverse circumstances. The large use of anonymity in the '90s and the possibilities of adjusting the online identity offered some important motives of celebrating a venue of new era, where new media should play the role of an aseptic place of communication between equal people. In this context, it is necessary to discuss several main problems.

First, we have to point out a paradox that has arisen from the labelling as a "voice" the textual mediated communications between users that might have never heard their physical voices. As Sherry Turkle narrated in her book *Alone Together. Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, the voice becomes secondary in the benefit of others means of communication, such as e-mail, blog or social network sites. In this vein, to call someone in the

old fashioned way might be felt as "intrusive" comparing with other communication forms, and even the voicemail is preferable transcribed into text than listened. If we appeal to the historical perspective, we will notice the accomplishment of the idea that when something new is implementing, we will gain something, but also we will lose something. Thus, in the technology history, humans tried to reduce the distances, to connect faster and better: we walked in order to share the news, we sent letters, then telegrams, then we talked on the telephone, and then we "talked" on chats, via Skype or messaging. The distances were abolished, but the genuine complexity of the human voice became slowly under-experienced. The use of text instead of voice gives many opportunities for the management of impression – if the voice is personal and it has its own temporality that is usually sped up when we just read the message and not listen to it. Another issue is related to the present mobile connectivity, whereas "we can communicate our lives pretty much at the rate we live them. But the system backfires. We express ourselves in staccato texts, but we send out a lot and often to large groups" (Turkle 2011, 207). Thus, the interactivity and the rapidity are certainly gained, but the ways in which the messages are transmitted, and how this affects the structure of the audiences are matters to be resolved.

From another point of view, the developments of technology acknowledge the importance of voice (devices with voice command or robots with voice). Also, a "trace" of the voice is still recovered in computer-mediated communication because it created a hybrid discursive style that combines written characteristics with oral features. Right in the immediacy of the message (that is sent while the event is happening), the digital orality appears (for example, the chat discussions are very similar with offline talks). The markers of orality – such as emoticons, slips in spelling, solecism or the use of abbreviations – are easily found in Internet discussions, provoking debates about the condition of the online discourse (Tagliamonte and Denis 2008). In Ong's tradition, research on digital communication had depicted the online orality as a part of "secondary orality", typical for radio and television (Ong 1982). Oren Söfer (2010) investigates the traits of digital orality in the context of all the types of orality: „primary orality“, „residual-manuscript orality“, „print culture“ orality, and „secondary orality“. Thus, unlike Ong's followers, Söfer thinks that digital orality is closer to the residual-manuscript orality of the Middle Ages than to the secondary orality, because "both medieval

manuscripts and digital chats exhibits a loose textual structure: the receiver is expected to construct a narrative out of the segmented texts. In both Middle Ages and the digital era, producers had to find ways to ease the difficulty of the writing of text. In Middle Ages, the difficulties lay in the physical exertion of handwriting; in SMS, they relate to manipulating the mobile phone's miniature keyboard and in meeting the demand for timely and synchronic response in chats or IM messages" (Söfer 2010, 388). Söfer emphasized the silent manifestation of the digital orality, since textual-based communication is not meant to be voiced, the audible sphere being rule out. Of course, his study is done only on written texts, excluding any platform with voice, such as Skype. Thus, the paradox is given by the fact that orality appears entirely in written discourses, inviting people to be creative in their online language use. For the keen theorist, this can only remind us about the poststructuralist and postmodern tradition which influenced the interpretation of digital textuality.

Second, we have to point out the role of the technological imaginary in the interpretation of voice in these early stages of Internet development. Having roots in psychoanalytic theory, the technological imaginary comprises all the collective desires projected onto new media, seen as something able to create a better world (Lister et al. 2009). Presupposing the concept of "remediation", the technological imaginary contains the idea of "repairing" the defects of old media and improving them: "one medium is seen by our culture as reforming or improving upon another. This belief in reform is particularly strong for those who are today repurposing earlier media into digital forms" (Bolter and Grusin 2000, 59). The social and technological imaginary manifests the tendency to occupy the central part in the development of a technology. Of course, the ideology that surrounds it cannot create the computer, but it produced "the frame of its mythical use" (Flichy 2003, 206). Any new technology gave rise to an abundant imaginary.

Commonly, the utopian reflexions about the new medium are counterbalanced by the dystopian images, marked by fears and anxieties. In the specific case of new media, the hope of a better "space" where people can talk without restraint, can create virtual communities based on mutual understanding and common interests or can put the foundation for a better socio-political situation is contested by the supporters of the "dark" side of new media, who consider that instead of an electronic agora we witness a generalized experience of Panopticon. The first stages of the computer-mediated communication,

where the anonymity was largely used, constituted a good environment for the free speech. Moreover, the disembodiment promoted in this period (the importance of ideas, of your profound self in spite of the physical appearances or social labels) accentuated the relevance of the voice. Of course, it wasn't the physical voice, but the textual sending of a "voice", a discursive creation of identity expressing itself in the virtual medium. The future developments as audio, video or mobile platforms extended the multiplicity of tools that people have when they communicate and shape the voice. Thus, the presence of micro-celebrities was possible and the "ordinary voices" (Burgess 2006) can find one's place in the online medium. "The participatory culture" (Jenkins 2006) is characterized by the stressing of importance of every voice, mobilizing the activism and the emergent things that can be made possible by the convergence of needs, skills and objectives.

Nick Couldry conceives the voice as a process and as a value: "voice as a process – giving an account of oneself and what affects one's life – is an irreducible part of what it means to be human; effective voice (the effective opportunity to have one's voice heard and taken into account) is a human good" (Couldry 2010, vi). In this respect, the opportunities offered by the Internet and the mobile technologies can be used in expressing the voice, but the issue of a particular voice being listened into a crowd of other voices is a different and a much more difficult task. Also, even if the social imaginary was very hopeful in its ideas, some stereotypes appeared from the simple need of being heard (for example, English as *lingua franca* of the Internet).

Third, the importance of storytelling is underlined by the concept of voice. On the Internet, the voice is valued especially if it can tell a story using words, images, sounds, videos. The voice that will have an audience is the voice that tells narrations that touch the others' minds and souls. The pervasiveness of social media made the Internet *the* contemporary generator of stories and, in a larger sense, almost everything posted there may be seen as a story (Facebook posts, tweets, blogs, even an image organization on Flickr). From identity stories to communities of brand stories, the Internet became a performative tool that gives the possibility to say in front of a composite audience "let me tell you a story". Conceived as a movement, digital storytelling is an amplifier of the ordinary voices (Burgess 2006, 207). The issue of authenticity is a key element that makes the difference between stories; the reader is always put in the

situation of selecting the voice that is trustworthy. Thus, the experience of the digital storyteller in the matter of what he speaks about is often a criterion especially in online forums or virtual communities. Thus, those social groups may have also leaders – people that have experience, expertise and an advanced sharing behaviour. Good speaking is online, as well as offline, a way to access power.

Juan Francisco Salazar (2012) pointed out the relevance of digital storytelling for young migrants, Cambodian and African, which use this technique in order to delineate their own voice and identity and also to weave a connection with their generations, traditions and way of living. In this respect, the creation of community media is very relevant for the migrant identity and also for the social inclusion. Nevertheless, the narrative as therapy is another key element in this equation, because “the participants were able to use the digital stories as a form of healing historical disruptions in cultural knowledge and social memory and as an innovative and simple way of bridge cultural identities and ideas about Australia and Cambodia between the two generations” (Salazar 2012, 65). The digital storytelling practices were able to construct a framework for expressing the voice of immigrants and also to create an active path for listening. Thus, the digital stories were used for social change, participation and civic engagement. In the same process of binding stories, the cultural memory records the images of their reinvented hybrid identities, strengthening the social ties and offering hopes for the future leaders of their communities. The media as the repository of their stories and also as the catalyst of their voice was laid out in this case. Also, this case revealed the subsidiary tensions between local and global, between preserving the local traditions and expanding them to the general scale, between constructing a solid community identity and interfering with other communities.

Also, beyond celebrating the rising of a voice through new media, we have to question the institutional responsibilities. For Tanja Dreher, when we use the medium of digital storytelling we can achieve only a “partial promise of voice” that challenges the “hierarchies of attention” (Thill 2009). The “voice that matters” needs a proper listening, at individual, social and institutional levels. The listening is a key element that makes a voice relevant; in this respect, the political listening is a difficult issue (both ideological and from the standpoint of power and of its practical forms). For Dreher, while there is “no doubt that digital storytelling projects have democratized media

production and allowed untold stories to be shared, the key challenge of 'voice that matters' remains at best partially achieved" (2012, 165). Thus, listening is *beyond* social inclusion, and political listening has to ensure voices. Voice is constructed here as a starting point for negotiation and participation and not as the final point of online rights. The digital storytelling is limited in its possibilities of change and indicates the need of cooperation between many factors in order to achieve concrete goals. As Jean Burgess pointed out, the active audience is now a fact and the productivity *per se* is not the decisive element. Moreover, "the question that we ask about 'democratic' media participation can no longer be limited to 'who gets to speak?' We must also ask 'who is heard, and to what end?'" (Burgess 2006, 203).

Fourth, the impact of online voices is strongly related to the politics and ethics of voice. The idea of public voice has been brought in the foreground by the social movements that emerged in the online environment (as the Iranian Twitter movement or the Arab Spring). Thus, the cyber-collective social movements "have become the new paradigm in the contemporary political arena" (Agarwal, Lim, and Wigand 2012, 113). In this context, we have to remark the power of the online voice and the importance of the collaboration between online and offline contexts. As Mitra and Watts have argued, when the Internet is conceived as more than just a new medium for communication, its political potential can be fulfilled: "the moment in which voice is actualized as an event, when it becomes an *answerable* phenomenon, is when it is acknowledged" (Mitra and Watts 2002, 484). In the older forms of communication, such as radio or television, the authority of the voices was hardly questionable. In new media, conceived as an interactive and participative form, the legitimacy of speech is *ab initio* put to the issue and a lot of opinions could divide a community into multiple tinny groups that support different ideas. The technological tools can modify the traditional ways in which a voice was legitimated and in this resides an important part of its power. The relations between spatial locations, social status, and power are changing. Of course, even if everybody with Internet connection can express his or her voice, the size of his or her audience and the impact of that content are not guaranteed in any way. Moreover, being an already known person or affiliating with a powerful media agent will increase the distribution and the visualization of your discourse. Anyhow, "it is important to note that in a discursive space, power

structures are more closely tied to the ability to create a voice than in real life where other factors such as geographic location, military superiority, and financial capital could become the sources of power” (Mitra and Watts 2002, 487).

For having an effect and not being self-contradictory, the politics of voice have to link the practices of speaking with the practices of listening. The voice is “not the simple claim to speak. By ‘voice’ – necessarily – we mean something more: we mean the *second-order value of voice* that is embodied in the process of mutually recognizing our claims on each other as reflexive human agents, each with an account to give, an account of our lives that needs to be registered and heard, our stories endlessly entangled in each others’ stories” (Couldry 2009, 580). In this vein, the dynamic relation voice – listening matters and the training of cyber-voice has to be accomplished with the training of our abilities of understanding and response. In the opposite case, if the voice and the listening aren’t sufficiently valued, the result is a “crisis of voice” (Couldry 2009, 581). Even if everybody could have the opportunity to speak, this situation doesn’t exclude the crisis, precisely because the listening is a crucial part of any politics of voice. A crisis doesn’t mean only a deficit of voice, but it can appear in an overabundance of voices; to offer a chance for a voice doesn’t equate with the realization of that voice. In this vein, the possibilities offered by new media are just possibilities; an interactive site or the democratization of communication worth nothing if these features are not activated and really used. Briefly, any voice needs an audience and the latter has to listen. To make voice matter is the really challenge for media. As Jim Macnamara pointed out, “for the most part, audiences are assumed to listen. Even more presumptuously, in mediated public communication, audiences are largely assumed to exist” (2013, 161). In fact, the public is not guaranteed and following Anderson’s metaphor of “imagined community”, Macnamara thinks that media audiences are “doubly assumed and imagined – assumed and imagined to exist and assumed and imagined to listen” (2013, 161). Moreover, if we interpret new media as a personal media and not as a mass media form, we have to conceive its public as fragmented and dispersed based on myriads of interests and needs. In the same manner, O’Donnell (2009) rejects the hypothesis of “easy listening” in new media and develops the idea of listening as a central point, an “anchoring practice” for change.

Also, we can notice the generalities that intersperse the new media discourses. For instance, the digital divide still remains an obstacle in the free using of Internet tools in creating and disseminating a voice. The digital inequality is a technological, social, and political problem. In a rhetoric way of speaking, it signifies the process of silencing and marginalizing some categories of public. It represents a complex issue, because it involves disparities both on a domestic and a worldwide level.

The problem of voice raises ethical issues too, and a lot of them derive from the main interrogation: "What voice must be acknowledged and why?" In this case, the problems of selection and of negotiation of power are in the fore, the verification and the evaluation of different online discourses being made continuously in cyberspace. In the overabundant discursive online space, only a few voices have a numerous audience; commonly, the usual posts (on social network sites, blogs, or forums) have a limited public and effects. In this context, the reinforcing of the ethics of listening (Beard 2009) in the virtual environment is a necessary task. Thus, the selection of the texts that could become a voice is essential: "the notion of voice, when applied to the internet, thus provokes a fundamental ethical question regarding how the reader can conscientiously decide whose voice to acknowledge and whose voice to ignore. Those decisions could eventually determine who *could* gain a voice in the virtual public sphere and who *would* remain unheard" (Mitra and Watts 2002, 492). Also, Mitra and Watts talk about the idea of "rescuing" a voice in cyberspace, especially for those voices already oppressed. In this vein, the marginalized people could gain a voice using the possibilities offered by new media technology. In the same time, the cyberspace might be seen as an idealized space, where the ideas of oppression, inequalities, and marginalization could be irrelevant or obsolescent. Even if these beliefs were central in the early technological imaginary that surrounded the beginnings of new media era, the researchers have proved that, in general, the cyberspace is not an aseptic space where segregations are impossible, but, on the contrary, it is a copy of offline discourses. As Alice E. Marwick emphasized, "it is clear, however, that the Internet has not liberated people from the structural oppression of difference, and sexism, racism, heterosexism, and so forth are just as prevalent online as they are in face-to-face contexts. The fantasy of the Internet as disembodied playground is just that, a fantasy" (2013, 362). So, in fact, many of the

persistent and unresolved tensions from the offline environment are transposed in the online medium, and in this gallery of problems the legitimacy of voicing is one of them.

To give an example, the relation between voicing the children and teenagers through Internet is a complicated ethical problem. On the one hand, under some conditions, it can be useful to disseminate the voice of young people, but on the other hand, it can produce a lot of harm (for instance, cyberbullying). Yang (2015) approaches the complexity of visual ethics and the dimensions of the participatory visual methods when the researchers work with young people. In this respect, Yang gives evidence about the ethical dilemmas that occur even in a controlled context (many of them deriving from the very nature of empowering and exploitation).

Also, we have to integrate the problematic of silence in the discussion about the ethics of voice and listening. As Don Ihde pointed out, “If there is an ethics of listening, then respect for silence must play a part in that ethics” (1976, 180). The interpretation of silence in the online environment is a difficult task. Online silence is expressive and it can shape many different forms and meanings: marginalization, non-participation, uncertainty, reflection, the lack of feedback or of interest etc. As Zembylas and Vrasidas (2007) emphasised in their research about silence that occurs between learners and instructors in two online courses, silence can be also a dynamic part of social presence and not a cue of the social absence and disinterest. Also, the *spiral of silence* theory was analysed in the online medium (Liu and Fahmy 2011; Schulz and Roessler 2012). Thus, even if the cyberspace is conceived as a space where the freedom of speech is distinctive, the studies reflected also the deterrence in expressing the opinions when the dominant viewpoint is different. In these situations, the silence may occur in the online environment, the people would not want to fall into minority or to become a subject of discord. This may appear in virtual communities, where the sense of belonging may affect the representation of a different point of view.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper stressed some significant ways in which the voice has been conceived, imagined and interpreted in new media context. Even if the new media has a recent history, the latter is very important in positioning the problem of voice. Thus, the differences between the early stages of the computer-mediated communication and the actual

one were discussed in the framework ensured by the technological imaginary. The optimistic perspectives emphasized different ways of conceiving the voice in comparison with the pessimistic views. Also, the modalities of expressing a voice through digital means are visibly more diverse nowadays than in the beginning of new media, when the voice was integrally constructed through textual tools. In this respect, a particular example is the digital orality that is entirely built by text. The online voice is also in a close relationship with storytelling. A good storyteller will have a better online voice (for example, some bloggers have a constant audience). The value of voice can be increased by the authenticity of the story narrated and transmitted. In this vein, the digital storytelling became a functional framework in which marginalized people can express or even construct their own voices. In the end, the paper developed the ideas of politics and ethics of voice, as necessary elements of an accurate understanding of the process and of the value of the digital voice. The online voice cannot be really interpreted in the absence of other key factors, such as listening, silence or the institutional participation.

In sum, the voice is a very important metaphor of the cyberspace, a metaphor that concentrates many meanings and areas (personal, collective, political, artistic, economic, gender forms). By this token it acquires the role of a lens through which social, political, and cultural aspects are clearly seen and related. Also, the concept of voice binds the online and the offline realms, indicating the extensions of power and evoking the benefits and the limitations of new media.

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