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## TRUST AND POWER. A FOUCAULTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON TRUST AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA

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### *Introduction*

The topic of my speech is trust in the media, under the theoretical perspective of Michel Foucault. The choice could be read as strange, because the french scholar didn't expressly deal with the topic of trust. Nevertheless I think that my approach can be useful for two different reasons.

First, Foucault is an unavoidable reference for the studies on social media and more in general on digital interactive media. Who knows his work, instinctively understands that texts like *Discipline and Punish*, and *Society must be defended* force us to see interactive media under a new light. It is not a case that the reflections on surveillance society, both in its sociopolitic version of the nineties (such as Lyon 1994) and on the current on privacy control in web 2.0 (such as Andreevic 2007) constantly refer to Foucault's work.

The second reason is that dealing with Foucault's point of view enables us to look to the topic of trust in media in a more complex and problematic way, that is very helpful when one wants to focus on a concept. I believe that this can be a starting point to rethink the ways of being an audience by web 2.0 users.

I will then follow this path: first I'm going to illustrate Foucault's theory of the social control; then - using his results - I will try to clarify the pattern of questions in the field of digital interactive media.

### *Foucault and the concept of surveillance*

In some of his works, Foucault distinguishes between two different forms of power: sovereignty and discipline. The first one is the typical kind of pre-modern power, based on the king's visibility and on the intermittance of its expression (for instance throughout the punishment of the citizen subjects (those who become visible only when power punishes them)). The second form of power is absolutely modern: it is based on the continuous surveillance exercised by the power. This surveillance shapes the citizens and their behaviour in order to preserve the status quo (Foucault 1975, 1997).

A typical place where the power of discipline is exercised is the Panopticon, the prison planned by Jeremy Bentham, where the convicts live in cells with only one transparent wall. Through this wall they can be watched by prison guards, or any citizen who decides to observe them.

Prisoners are not being constantly observed, but their awareness of the possibility of being observed makes them act as control was uninterrupted. Foucault does not seem to have a dialogue with Erwin Goffman, who in earlier years analysed the asylums (Goffman19961), but both scholars have interesting points in common in their results: first of all the idea that to be seen by anonymous controllers may induce conditioned behaviours (for Goffman a peculiar relation between face, back-stage e front-stage).

From this point of view, and agreeing with Foucault, we could say that the Panopticon (and more in general any modern prison) is a place where who doesn't comply with the social rules is confined to learn to do so. We therefore could distinguish between a preventive and a corrective discipline: both

of them are based on writing, which enables the system on the one hand to settle the conditions of the social life, on the other hand to memorize the citizens' behaviours.

It is easy enough to apply Foucault's theory to Web 2.0. In fact – according with Andreevic – our behaviour with digital interactive media is completely under observation. Two are the main goals of this observation: the political one (aimed to repression or social control) and the commercial one, typical of the the great web 2.0 companies that use the informations on the users, customers and surfers as a commodity. The main difference between the model of social control evoked by Foucault is that the commercial surveillance is not assigned to the political power (wich in democracy is balanced by counterpowers).

However, what I want to emphasize, is that search engines, social networks, web portals (such as on-line banking and auction systems) can be defined by the same word (and concept) Foucault applied to the asylums: the french word is *dispositifs*, that we could translate with the term 'apparatus'. The apparatus – in foucaultian sense – are a synthesis of technological and social systems, able to work in automatic way as regulators and controllers. The main characteristic is that they do not need any form of trust: consensus is unnoticed and automatic.

In short, we could say that in digital interactive media there are some similitudes with the control apparatus analyzed by Foucault, and that – in this case – we should reconsider the same classical idea of trust.

### *Beyond double articulation*

We are now getting to the topic of trust in (new and old) media, to resume, where possible, Foucault's contribute.

In the traditional media (i.e. analogical and non-interactive ones), the mechanism of trust reflects a double articulation ("material" and "symbolic": Silverstone 1994, Livingstone 2007)

a) On the one hand, the reception of media content by the receiver is conditioned by the confidence he (or she) has in the truthfulness of information/communication (credibility: Gili 2010, Meyer 1974, Sorice 2010). In Hall's model (Hall 1973) - for instance - once the encoding process has concluded, what happens when decoding a message depends on the trust that the recipient relies on the sender. The differences between dominant, negotiated and oppositional readings, that depend on the different position of the recipient towards the preferred meaning, is mainly due to the trust in the author and/or the publisher. I must point out that we are speaking about a social mechanism of trust-making which is related to past experience, to political opinions, to mood and so on.

b) On the other hand the choice of buying a certain media device depends on the confidence the consumer has in different brands and standards (reliability). Apart from domestication processes (Silverstone & Hirsch 1992), in which what is drawn is drawn through the device and its affordances, researches show that also in this case we face a psycho-social process that depends on different factors (such as moral economies). Some of the researches which focus on domestication of DTT have precisely highlighted the role of prior beliefs in the choice of a technological standard for another.

In both cases, however, we see that trust determines the acceptance or refusal of a content or of a 'point of view on the world', of a technological standard or a device. And in both cases the relationship between the producer and the receiver is clearly asymmetrical. Nevertheless, the receiver/user can shape the meaning of the device: he (or she) can trust and accept content, but he (or she) don't produce it. Users can trust and choose a device or standard, can domesticate them but cannot change its affordances.

Therefore, trust is a quality of the act of media reception/consumption provided by the autonomy of the receiver/user. The conditions of this autonomy are basically two: a) opacity of the receiver/user and b) the episodic (not continuous) ritual flow of communication.

- a) That a recipient is 'opaque' means that author and publisher/editor build an imagined model of the reader (Eco 1979) whereas the real one is (invisible to them, unknown, 'hidden' from them). The same happens for technology users. The interpretive and domestication act is invisible and can only be inferred ex-post from the recipients/users' statements (market research, reception tests, etc.)
- b) On the other hand we must recall the ritual, and therefore episodic, dimension in reception, consumption or use, that happens in definite and qualifying moments of the day, seasons or life. This implies expectation and remembrance phenomena which are important in building the relation between the consumer/recipient and the media's messages and interfaces.

It is a similar mechanism to Foucault's power-as-sovereignty. What is staged and shown is in a privileged position, but its power is no longer exerted on the recipient, or the user, when he takes on meaning or handles a device.

In the digital, interactive media, both characteristics have changed: on the one hand every single act of the receiver/user can be read by the "apparatus", on the other hand the communication flow is practically continuous (Andreevic 2007): any single act of the user is traceable and traced, and the information is filed in the system's database. We are near to disciplinary power: (potentially) continuous surveillance and the transparency and visibility of the recipient.

As we can see, the differences between these features and those of traditional media reflect the classical distinction between the power of sovereignty and the power of discipline:). In particular, as in Foucault's theory of power, the forms of this power exist not only between individuals and domains, but in interpersonal relations too, where the same logic seems to replicate. It is the case of so called interveillance, that is the interactive surveillance exerted not only by the 'apparati' onto users but amongst users too.

*Digital interactive media: doesn't trust matter?*

The basic idea in my speech is that digital media are used as simple tools, but they actually act as 'apparatus' (in the double articulation, the idea of apparatus is clearer for what concerns the symbolic dimension, less regarding tools).

In practice, whilst in the traditional activity of interpreting exerted by audiences, the flow of communication goes from the apparatus to recipients, in the case of digital interactive media, users use the tools (for example social networks) as a resource for horizontal communication, but they are in fact generating a flow of information towards the same apparatus, thus providing information about them that can be used, managed or sold.

This means we are not totally aware of this controlling function, and in my opinion for two reasons:

- a) we assign to the apparatus the value of tools, therefore considering their reliability and not their credibility.
- b) our propensity for interveillance results in an underestimation of the issue of surveillance.

It is as if in name of reliability we surrender to very opaque and scarcely controllable apparatus. In these instruments, trust is of automatic type and poorly verified. This is the point we should focus on.

What we need at present day is a reflection on the apparatus, an increasingly precise and critical analysis of this trust deception.

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