

# Past, future and change: Contemporary analysis of evolving media scapes



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# Control, Identity, Self-Governmentality. A Foucauldian Approach to Web 2.0

Fausto Colombo

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to show the applicability of some of the theoretical assumptions made by Michel Foucault to the analysis of web 2.0. Foucault's complex thought has been heavily debated in the academic world, and this debate continues today, nearly thirty years after his death. I will not, therefore, look at this debate in depth, but will instead take only some Foucauldian topics into account, in order to examine a number of issues in relation to the web. It seems to me that a work of this kind could be particularly useful today, at a time when there is a general rethinking of the historical, technological, economic and political development of web 2.0, and when new theoretical approaches seem to be emerging. Many of the key figures in this new wave can hardly be suspected of conservatism or moral panic (Formenti, 2011): some of these people are the founding fathers of web studies (such as Tim Berners-Lee), of virtual reality (e.g. Larnier, 2010), or of the effects of the computer or the internet (Turkle, 2011). Their concern seems to me to be a strong indication of the need to question the web in new ways.

From this perspective, Foucault's thought can be an important contribution, either in terms of the issues raised by the French scholar, or in terms of the method (or methods) applied in its investigation.

In this paper I will try to highlight three issues in Foucault's thought that could be relevant in illuminating analysis of web 2.0. These issues are: the relationship between power and social control, the "talking about the self", and the relationship between free speech and truth in democracies.

## 2. SURVEILLANCE, INTERVEILLANCE

The relationship between media and power has always been one of the major issues in critical sociology of media (Colombo, 2003; Castells, 2009). It concerns the branches of study which look at the effects produced by the media (short- or long-term, direct or indirect, specific or general, media are regarded as being powerful, as being able to exercise significant influence), at critiques of ideology in the media (hegemony as a form of mainstream), and at organisational processes in the cultural industry (e.g. in research into news-making). There is no doubt that - in the transition from old to new media (or from one to many media to digital and narrowcasting media) - the key issue of the relationship between media and power has been turned upside down. Broadcasting and, more generally, mass media, are excellent examples of social control based upon content, bottleneck distribution and the ideological distortion of news, but without control over the audience and in particular over the single receiver (Stuart Hall's model is the best-known example). Conversely, in narrowcasting media, particularly web 2.0, it is very difficult to control content (although the progressive enclosures of applications and the various closed systems seem to suggest new types of bottleneck distribution), while it is very easy to control the user (web tracking, online behaviours, economic transactions or consumption practices).

It is important to note that the technologies of surveillance over users in Western societies are not always related to political control over citizens (e.g. anti-terrorism purposes, since September 11, especially in the U.S., see Lyon 2007), or to bureaucratic control, either in terms of efficiency or of deterrence (e.g. tax evasion). However, the relationship between technological and social control is strong. From this point of view, the Foucauldian theoretical contribution is crucial.

From the mid-seventies, Foucault (1975, 2003) started explaining how the modern age had caused a shift from the power of sovereignty, characteristic of the monarchies of the *ancien régime*, to the power of discipline that characterises an age of enlightenment. In the former, the relationship between the sovereign and the people is such that only the first is socially and permanently visible, while in an age of enlightenment the people challenge the sovereign's power. Conversely, the discipline itself consists of the preventive control of every single person's act which becomes fully visible, while power becomes much more obscure, anonymous, and remote, a bureaucratic apparatus which can be found in prison, in the army, in schools and in medical and psychiatric clinics.

Web 2.0 is not exempt from the power of discipline (Andrejevic, 2005, 2007). It is precisely the new possibilities given to users to act, to talk and to communicate, and therefore to leave traces of information about themselves, that make the web a new place of disciplinary power.

The Panopticon, a prison designed by Jeremy Bentham to which Foucault dedicates an extraordinary analysis, seems to have been destined to be a metaphor for the web, and this connection is often made (Ragnedda, 2011). Here, however, I would like to suggest an approach that I believe could optimise the application of Foucauldian paradigms to analysis of the web. This approach is very simple: it consists of retracing the questions that Foucault addresses to the disciplinary apparatus, and in re-addressing these questions to the new digital apparatus.

In *Discipline and Punish*, the first issue regards the 'subjects of control' (not those who plan control but those who actually exercise control). Foucault's answer, in the case of the modern 'apparatus', is that these subjects are both institutions (school, army, hospital, church), and ordinary citizens (in the Panopticon guards can be replaced by passers-by: it is the potential presence of someone in the central tower that allows control over the prisoners. Prisoners know that they can potentially be seen, but they do not know when they are seen).

The second issue concerns the 'techniques of control'. Foucault shows the role of writing, in making it possible to exercise surveillance through education, transcription and archive. Without writing, Foucault observes, modern power would be unthinkable. Unlike pre-modern sovereignty, discipline does not occur in punishment, in torture and in the execution of bodies, and does not exhibit the subjects of power.

According to Foucault – as I have already mentioned – visibility, in pre-modern power, applies to kings and courts, in a continuous exhibition; visibility of the subject is an episodic fact, occurring only in the case of execution. In contrast, surveillance is exercised over the habits, behaviours and ideas of citizens (in the soul – Foucault sarcastically evokes a sort of reversed Orphism, in which "*the soul is the prison of the body*", Foucault, 1975: 30), who are always visible, unlike the subjects of power, who are nothing more than anonymous and invisible officials. From this perspective, the writing, the establishment and the application of rules are essential, because these form a power that occurs preferentially in prevention rather than repression.

And finally, there is the third issue addressed by Foucault: the 'objects of power', which, as mentioned, consist of the physicality of bodies but also of the abstractness of habits and beliefs. Two reports at the beginning of *Discipline and Punish* make this issue especially evident: the first refers to a bloody and spectacular torture, and the second to the "rule" of behaviour. It makes clear what is crucial in the management of modern power: not its form of spectacular and violent punishment, but rather a continuous and hidden power permeating all institutions, from family to school, from army to the state bureaucratic system. The object of this power is the individual, as a mechanism in a system held together by a solid consistency of subjects, objects, actions and words (Foucault talks about "dispositive"). It can be said that the individual is both actively and passively part of this mechanism. His/her place in the mechanism of power is that of an interchangeable role, in which the same individual may be either controller or controlled (e.g. members of a bureaucracy).

## 2.1. WEB 2.0 AND DISCIPLINE

What happens if we apply the Foucauldian model to analysis of the web and particularly web 2.0? Somewhat surprisingly - in this space of individual choices, free creativity and grass-roots democracy as described by net enthusiasts - we find quite a few connections with Foucault's thought.

### 2.1.1. SUBJECTS

Who are those active in surveillance in the web? We may recognise three types:

- a) the traditional political institutions, whose repressive force is obviously particularly evident in non-democratic countries. In fact, even democracies enforce control over the internet, but they are bound by laws that protect (or should protect) the privacy of citizens and guarantee freedom of expression. However, these mechanisms of preventive control remain active, and what, if anything, is at stake is their legal value, in front of the counter legal protection of citizens' rights (Lyon, 2007).
- b) non-institutional agencies, such as large companies operating on the internet (e.g. Google, Facebook), which manage user data and use these data, on their own or by selling them to other companies,



for commercial purposes. They are obviously subject to laws, but there is no doubt that their potential use of information goes beyond what can be controlled by political power (Andrejevic, 2007). The relationship between these agencies and institutional actors is often complicated, ranging from peaceful coexistence to connivance (in totalitarian countries) to violent conflict. What is certain is that these agencies exercise a control which, for the first time in the history of humankind, does not belong exclusively to political institutions (and therefore is not restricted by laws, at least in democratic contexts).

- c) users. One thing that Foucault has taught us is that the specific forms of power are not only about a vertical relationship between institutions and citizens, but are actually more deeply embedded in the horizontal relationships existing within families, in the agencies of socialisation and in the everyday situations of relationships between gender, generations, roles, and so on. So surveillance becomes something more than a top-down control condition, and includes implicit forms of the relationships between social subjects (Andrejevic, 2005). For example, let us think about the forms of geolocation used by several SNSs (e.g. Foursquare) that allow you to map where your 'friends' are. Or the amount of information concerning ourselves that we make available to others, in an absolutely voluntary way. The fact is that human beings as never before are now subjected to a communicative pressure that never leaves them alone, at least virtually. This form of horizontal 'surveillance' (or 'interveillance'), to which many people expose themselves, can be regarded as a peculiar adaptation to this pressure.

Here we reach an essential issue in Foucault's theory about surveillance: the social motivation which makes citizens submit voluntarily to power. According to Foucault, in the modern and disciplinary society, the essential reason for this acceptance of control has been the search for security, which leads people to resign portions of their freedom in exchange for assurances about a good life.

We should try to update this issue, questioning why today, on the internet, exposing ourselves, information about us, pictures, stories, thoughts and opinions regarding ourselves, is perceived as a reasonable price to pay in order to have access to other people's information, images and thoughts. At the same time the risk that the personal data we give to an e-commerce website could be improperly and unexpectedly used is com-

pensated for by the speed of the transaction, and maybe by the discount received. In the latter case, however, we receive an immediate economic benefit, which simply underlines the classical economic principles of time, money, purchasing power and satisfaction of need.

In the first case, conversely, the answer is more complex and needs to be analysed from two different perspectives.

First, the control of others over us is balanced by the control we exercise over others. This deals with how much 'interveillance' can become the specific form of communicative and relational behaviors Habermas (1981) would not hesitate to define strategic actions, which are focused in the relation in itself, but instead are aimed to reach subjective benefits through the relation, which reduced to its instrumental purpose.

Do we have to believe that a society which spreads via the web is by nature a society of 'interveillance'? I think that a positive answer would be excessive. However, Foucault's question needs to be taken into account: if the control of others over us is a natural and relational form of (horizontal and vertical) power distribution underpinning a disciplinary society, should we not think that one of the conditions for a free and informed citizenship could be a deep knowledge not only of the technical opportunities of technology, but also of their social effects, including the forms of power to which we are subjected, but which we also exercise?

### 2.2.2. TECHNIQUES

Now let us talk about techniques or technologies of control in web 2.0 (the equivalent of writing in modern disciplinary society as described by Foucault). We could say that the web, and indeed any kind of software-hardware forming part of the web, is a technology which is capable of identifying<sup>1</sup>. Any single action in the web conducted out of the so-called "dark web" (i.e. the protected and encrypted area in the web) leaves traces. And so our Google searches allow a progressive customisation that is influenced by previous searches; our past reappears regularly in the web through simple search engines: it is difficult, in many cases, to delete our own account from a platform (e.g. from Skype). Geolocation, as I have said, is a technological universe based on continuous control of

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1 Chothia et al. 2012 is an interesting study about tracking in p2p, a place regarded as anarchist and free although undermined by copyright legislation, which reflects what I am trying to say.

the user's location, and the development of apps configures the so-called digital enclosures (note the similarity with the ownership of public lands by English landowners) in which the direct and confidential relationship between those who provide the services and the user authorises the first to know many aspects of the tastes, possibilities and behaviours of the second. Moreover, the writing Foucault talks about is, in all respects, only a technology of control. It can be used for personal diaries, literary texts, gardening manuals, school textbooks. In Foucault, disciplinary control would be inconceivable without writing. Exactly, we should add here, as 'surveillance' and 'interveillance' today are not conceivable without our digital platforms.

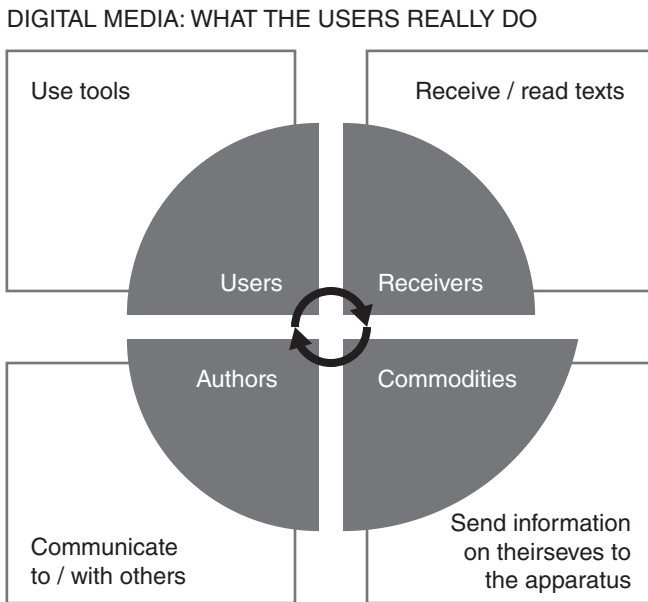
### 2.2.3. OBJECTS OF CONTROL

Finally here follows the third issue in Foucauldian thought that can be applied to the web: what is the object that is being controlled by the discipline? We have seen that, according to Foucault, the modern "soul" (i.e. habits, beliefs and behaviours) is shaped by disciplinary institutions such as the school, the army and the hospital.

The purpose is clear: a society that is going to be a mass, more or less democratic, changed by the egalitarian and individualistic principles of the Enlightenment, but also marked by radical changes such as urbanisation, industrialisation and increasing social organisation, needs organised institutions, just as citizens need rules that allow them a structured and civilised life. What Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* is the birth of the modern individual as a disciplinary construction, as a product of social pressure rather than (as intended in Enlightenment rhetoric) as the result of a process of liberation from the fetters of pre-modern societies. The network society partially resembles that analysed by Foucault, first because some of the key institutions of the second seem to be strained by innovation and change. Let us think about school, and how the pedagogical process of a typical linear "disciplinary", whose objective was the construction of good citizenship, has been challenged by the discontinuity of technological literacy, which for the first time enables young people to be "naturally" literate, and leads to the elderly losing their role as leaders for future generations. And let us think of how the pressure of a society being progressively economised has challenged the more traditional cultures, replacing the complexity of knowledge to the single thought of liberalism (Couldry, 2010), thus making "market" the only possible metaphor for knowledge and cultural practices. From this perspective, web control is

exercised by tracking user activities, which are not interpreted for their cultural value but rather for their economic value, and are therefore treated as such. At the same time, however, any user activity on the internet is a communicative act. For instance, let us consider someone posting a video on YouTube. In this activity it is possible to ascertain an intention, an ideation, a productive effort. From the user’s point of view, posting a video is essentially a communicative act. A posted video, however, is also a traffic generator, which can be monetised, especially when it is interesting enough to be seen, reposted and commented on by millions of people, so as to become a popular phenomenon of interest to the mainstream media as well. This aspect is an additional element in the act of communication, as illustrated in the following diagram (Gili and Colombo, 2012: 325), which summarises the various types of assets brought into play in a case such as the one just described:

**Figure 1: Digital media: What the users really do (Source: Gili and Colombo, 2012: 325)**



Thus, we can say that the web user is under surveillance in the Foucauldian sense, as the user is generating flows of information about himself/

herself that are transformed into a commodity, and consequently into informational capital. This is the other side of freedom of expression on the web, which also makes it possible to avoid the traditional bottlenecks of the cultural industry as a result of the disintermediation which is often cited as the main asset of the web. This approach reminds us that there is, in fact, a form of control whose object is what we might call the user's "information aura", hence its potential as a commodity for those economic entities which govern and use the web.

### 3. TALKING ABOUT THE SELF IN WEB 2.0

The second Foucauldian issue I want to address concerns "talking about the self". The relevance of this topic in web 2.0 studies becomes very clear when considering the breadth of literature about freedom of expression on the web (for example in the blogosphere) or - less positively - critical essays about "online narcissism".

It is worth saying that never, in the history of mankind, have human beings been so exposed to communicative relations. We can argue that the pressure of these relationships is the most certain anthropological fact, while its consequences are still largely unexplored. Of course, the plurality of relations (and of situations) to which we are exposed stresses certain characteristics in our messages, which cannot always be of a functional nature, but often relate to the size of what Simmel (1910) defines as sociability, i.e. a type of relationship aimed at experiencing the pleasure - more than the usefulness - of communication.

It is not surprising that, during the continuous chatting - which is one of the most common activities in the web and which is a feature of sociability - the self of the participants is often at stake in statements about personal thoughts (e.g. "What are you thinking?" in Facebook), or in life chronicles (micro-statements in Twitter rather than self-produced videos on YouTube), or in those narratives presented in pictures (photos on Instagram), or in the more or less autobiographical thoughts which fill posts and comments in blogs, where the main feature of some of those thoughts is that they are autobiographical. How should we evaluate this "autobiographical explosion" in the context of "social pressure"?

The Foucauldian perspective can be fruitful because it addresses the simple opposition between freedom of expression and mass narcissism, and takes into account the limits within which autobiography takes place in

the web. From the mid-seventies, Foucault (1976, 1983, 1994) started dealing with issues of sexuality on the one hand, and the “acts of talking about themselves” on the other (for more on this issue see Besley and Peters, 2007). Applying Foucauldian thought about sexuality to the practices of online exhibitionism would be misleading here, even though not entirely irrelevant. What I would like to emphasise, especially with regard to speech and truth, is that Foucault closely links sexuality over the last few centuries to a “discursive explosion”: what Roland Barthes, in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1977 (Barthes 1979), called the “fascism of language” (because, according to Barthes, “it forces you to say”). Barthes was referring to the constriction of sign systems, Foucault to “talking about the self”. But there are very close points of contact. According to Foucault, the discursive production of sexuality is crucial in modern societies:

*But more important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail (Foucault 1978: 18).*

The well-known example to which the author is referring is the practice of penitence following the Council of Trent. And Foucault, talking about confession, returns to a general topic: talking about the self even beyond sexuality.

However, if the statement about the issue of sexuality has its foundation in confession, the same cannot be said of “talking about the self”. In this case the discussion is broader, and owes its origins to the classical age in Greece and in Rome, as Foucault shows in the courses he gave at the Collège from 1979/80 until 1984, the year of his death. The relationship between mentor and disciple in Greek and Roman philosophy is the first indication of this practice of hermeneutics of the self:

*It is well known that the main objective of the Greek schools of philosophy did not consist of the elaboration, the teaching, of theory. The goal of the Greek schools of philosophy was the transformation of the individual. The goal of Greek philosophy was to give the individual the quality which would permit him to live differently, better, more happily, than other people (Foucault, 1993: 205).*

Foucault notes that, in Greek philosophy, techniques of talking about the

self are not particularly explicit: it is the mentor who speaks to the disciple more than the other way around. There are notable exceptions, however: first, self-examination, an example of which can be found in *De Ira* of Seneca, and second, the confession to another, such as quoted by Plutarch: *"There are many sick people who accept medicine and others who refuse it; the man who hides the shame of soul, his desire, his unpleasantness, his avarice, his concupiscence, has little chance of making progress"* (Foucault, 1993: 208).

From here onwards - according to Foucault - techniques of the self become crucial in the construction of Western subjects. But things have changed with Christian penitence, medical science, psychiatry, and so on.

It seems to me that, in order to grasp the meaning of Foucault's analysis rather than attaining a literal understanding of his writings, the heart of the problem is the communicative frame which is established in certain circumstances (in which the techniques of the self are at work): a space (materialized in one place: confessional, doctor's office, hospital), a time (divided into periods: holidays or preparation for them, appointments with the doctor, the routine of 'asylums'), a role (either leader of subordinate), knowledge (accepted by the faithful or the patient, possessed and exercised by the confessor or the doctor) and actions (to be performed by those being instructed; to be recommended or imposed by those giving instructions).

This frame is necessary in its entirety: not only do none of the elements have the same meaning outside of it (advice given by a doctor at lunch does not have the same value as advice given at the hospital), but it is impossible that the frame itself is active if it is contested or challenged in any of these elements (for example, the competence of a doctor or the effectiveness of medical treatments recommended). In short, what Foucault sees in the "talking about themselves" is a social modelling that can only build binding conditions in two ways: (1) pushing people into talking about the self as a way of improving their lives, and (2) suggesting speaking in a certain way by adopting already given forms, already recognised in a specific frame. But what makes each technology of the self different from the others? For Foucault, the difference lies in the specific purpose. In confessions, in medical practice as in psychiatric practice, the purpose is primarily the maintenance or return of the subject to normal (i.e. to norms) society.

The penitence in confession, being absolved, comes back in the great com-

munity defined by Grace; the sick, using therapies, returns to health and is welcomed back into healthy society. However, the confession and medical or psychiatric practice confirm the knowledge and power of the corporation of priests and doctors, or the bureaucracy of the soul that for Foucault is the essence of Western knowledge (Foucault, 2003). Conversely, in the ancient philosophical dialogue between mentor and disciple, what is at stake is the personal change experienced by the latter, to whom specific instructions on how to change, to learn and to improve are given. Technologies of the self can therefore become either forms of normalising control or liberating 'self-government'. Obviously I cannot discuss here the many ideas presented in Foucault's discourse. I would rather ask the following question: to what extent is this intuition applicable to web 2.0 and to its forms of "talking about the self"?

Let us start by assuming that the communicative relationship is not in this case an interpersonal relationship, but rather a typical form of mediated relationship. What is the frame, in this case? First, we observe that the platforms used (the blogosphere and also social networking sites) play a dual role here: they are a specific place (albeit within a different articulation of real / virtual space which depends upon the "everywhere" of the web and the other "everywhere" created by mobile devices), in the same manner as the confessional site and the doctor's office, but they also act as interfaces, with specific knowledge and skills, which provide tools which suggest to users how (with which graphical form, in which characters, with or without images, with or without words) and what to say ("I am here", "I'm thinking about this", "I like / I do not like this thing", ...).

This is basically a rhetoric that the user adopts and assimilates (e.g. violations on Facebook, which can be considered denials of the frame, and which are punished with exclusion from the SNS). On the other hand, we can say that, in the space offered by social networking sites and blogs, users get in touch not only with specialists (priests, doctors, teachers), but also with other, more general users. It is in this point that the peculiarity of the new techniques of the self lies. I think, however, that this argument applies only to a certain extent, because if it is true that there is a continuous exchange of roles between people who speak and users who listen, between questioners and respondents, it is true that the only subject which never changes roles is precisely the technological platform in its anonymity, in its apparent neutrality as a tool.

And it is true that our use of a technological platform provides knowledge



about us, framed within the boundaries of what is interesting both to others and to the platform itself. The latter - as we have seen - then uses information about ourselves for purposes that have nothing to do with our well-being (although it is possible that it will in some way respond to our needs).

In any case, the Foucauldian perspective remains crucial here: the exponential increase in "talking about the self" is likely to be restrictive if no attention is paid to how and why we are talking about the self, neither from the point of view of subjective motivations, nor in terms of the device. When we talk about ourselves - beyond the reasons why we do it (Giaccardi, 2010; Boccia Artieri, 2012), with whom and with what results - the rhetoric that we use is not indifferent, especially if it is made available as a kind of ready-made, waiting to be put in motion by the content that we are required to provide. Millions of "likes" on Facebook about the most diverse subjects have for a long time meant an opportunity for elementary expression, limited to a yes / no, while the reduced number of characters in Twitter enables a discourse which is concise, brutal, direct and perfectly attuned to a capitalist machine which produces meanings, in which discourse is divided into discrete units, duly measurable and therefore - if you wish - commodified.

#### 4. TRUTH-TELLING AND THE PARADOX OF DEMOCRACY

Now for the third issue in Foucault's thought that I want to highlight as an open question for discussion about the web 2.0, in particular with regard to its democratic potential. We know that a key issue is the importance of specific forms of internet communication in strengthening democracy. The adversaries in this debate are: on one side, those who believe that there is space, in the internet, for new forms of direct democracy; on the other side, those who are severe critics of the populist and demagogic excesses resulting from the online "public sphere".

In particular, since the birth of BBS (in the seventies, in the eighties in Italy), a utopian practice of online idea-sharing has developed and has ushered in the utopia of a new active citizenship (including a political one). From the historical point of view, the Italian crackdown of the mid-nineties (with the closure of Fidonet, on charges of facilitating piracy and child pornography) clearly highlights one of the key points in this issue: "to open" the web also means making it available to those who practise any unlawful purpose; "to close" means suppressing forms of democratic participation and individual freedom.

The new era of web 2.0 has also seen an increase in the conditions of participation, of access to the web, of potential activities for users and of access to both mainstream (online news sources, broadcasting content, cultural content provided by traditional agencies) and grassroots (citizen journalism, self-produced videos, wikis) information. Those who support the democratic potential of web 2.0, in the end, highlight two aspects: on the one hand, an extension in the number and range of people who may be decision-makers in real time, and, on the other hand an increase in the availability of information that empowers citizens, increasing their opportunity to participate in the public sphere.

All these factors, however, raise some relevant questions: an increasingly complex control over information quality; an increase in the number of irrelevant news items or of disinformation; and a sort of "bastardisation" of public debate, in which participation can produce bad use of communication codes.

The most useful topic Foucault develops, which enables me to address this issue, is probably that of 'parrhesia', namely, the act of telling the truth in formal social contexts, as acted out by individuals who are in some ways advocates. There are three main chapters which encapsulate Foucault's thoughts on this point, which can be dated from the early eighties through to his death, from the course taught at the University of Berkeley (1983) and the last two courses at the Collège de France (1982/83 and 1983/84). The topic is apparently linked exclusively to classical ancient times, especially to Athens, and to its democratic experience, and later on to the Roman Empire. Foucault writes:

*To summarise what has been said before, parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relationship to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty.(...) In parrhesia, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy" (Foucault, 1983: 9-10).*

The topic is very broad (and extremely interesting), but can only be addressed very briefly here. It seems to be essential to me to focus on Foucault's criticism of the Athenian democracy. Foucault observes that *parrhesia* is, from a certain point of view, the focus of society: that someone, even

at the risk of his/her own life, tells the truth in public, responding to his/her own duties with his freedom (only the Athenian may, in fact, exercise *parrhesia*), enriches society as a whole. The dangers, however, are equally obvious. In Plato's *The Republic* (Book VIII, 557B) at one point a city is mentioned where everyone lives in freedom and speaks frankly, makes his own decisions and governs as he wishes; Isocrates, in *Peace*, evoking the orators heard with pleasure by the Athenians, speaks about people out of mind, sharing public fortune and state money (cf. Foucault, 2009: 47). This freedom for all to speak (no longer exercised only by those who are able to tell the truth), is a deadly threat to democracy: there is a risk that those being heard are acting in their own interests.

Moreover, the real *parrhesiastes* will be endangered by those (who may even be in the majority) who do not like the *parrhesiastes'* criticism and frankness. So there is a good *parrhesia* (i.e. for those who are suited to it) and a bad *parrhesia* (exercised in civil right by those who do not have moral right). In a paradoxical oligarchic text, the *Constitution of the Athenians* - a false exaltation of Attic democracy which is actually a radical critique - the anonymous author describes Athens as a city in which decisions are taken not by the best, but by the most numerous (Borges, many centuries later, will declare himself to be wary of democracy as a "curious misuse of statistics"), with serious consequences for the city: the best thing for the city cannot be done if the right of expression and participation is extended to all. Foucault analyses in depth the mechanisms of this paradoxical argument that - in the text just quoted - destroys the root of the very possibility of the survival of democracy. The basis of everything is the overlapping opposition between few/many, the best/the worst, where the first of the former are identified with the first of the second. It is, of course, an unfounded assumption. Foucault's suggestions regarding *parrhesia*, however, give us important tools with which to study the relationship between web 2.0 and democracy.

Often in the debate between enthusiasts and critics of the web, it seems that the contrast lies in the fact that the latter emphasise the large number of superfluous comments or even manifestly unfounded statements which can be found in political-cultural debates in the web, while the former emphasise how the large volume of these comments is crucial to the regeneration of democracy, something that the web can enhance. It seems to me that, in light of Foucault's reflection, we can address this issue differently, addressing what is the link between truth and democracy, i.e. not only in freedom of speech, but also in the responsibility of speaking.

Responsibility means commitment to tell the truth, risking unpopularity, but also to direct opinion through research and investigation.

The question of whether web 2.0 is in itself good or bad for democracy does not make a lot of sense. The question to ask instead is even more radical: does web 2.0 enable a higher or lower quality of public debate? After all, democracy is (morally) founded upon this subtle principle, rather than upon the tools used. And then we can see one of the paradoxes of web 2.0, hence the separation between the spread of it as a means of access to the public debate and the awareness with which it is used by users.

Here, the following seems to me to be crucial: it is well known that the number of people with internet access is much higher than the number of people who actively participate with posts, comments, messages, etc., in short, with all those activities that constitute the most celebrated potential of the web (Barabasi, 2002; Lovink, 2007; Miconi, 2011; Shirky, 2003). Here we have a reproduction of the few-many mechanism, namely the establishment of a small number of people who attract public attention to their opinions, information and content in the face of a large number of people who simply follow, or who are perhaps not interested. But does this mechanism really ensure "in itself" that the elite "with a voice" coincides with the elite of the best, most qualified to speak, of the followers of the common good, in short, of the potential *parresiastes*? I find this difficult to prove. Foucault is right to observe that the identification of the few with the best is very difficult to attest.

So should we conclude that universal access to debate (still far from being achieved, see Bentivegna 2009), a mass activism involving all citizens in democratic decisions (in a sort of democracy which is not only direct, but also permanent), would better guarantee the presence of *parrhesia* in public debate? Again, the argument seems difficult to sustain, because violations, abuses of freedom of speech and lies are there before our eyes on the web, along with true statements, braveness in supporting an awkward position and good journalism. In short, if you consider democracy a matter not only of the quantitative but also of the qualitative (for which a lie of many can bring even more damage than a lie of few, as well as the truth of many being more socially productive than the truth of few, then web 2.0 is in itself neither more democratic nor less democratic than any other public arena. There will be rather more or less democratic areas, places of discussion, but they must be viewed in the overall context of a society, in their general political efficacy. And then how we deal with the issue of silent participants in online de-

bates? To disqualify their silence as an absence of political participation is certainly dangerous: to do so, we should argue that only the presence in the online debate describes the web as a democratic tool, while in fact a silent participant in an online debate could offline be an active citizen capable of political action. In short, web 2.0 can be an effective tool for democracy, but it is not more democratic than other places.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I have tried to explore the applicability of three Foucauldian concepts (the relationship between power and social control, talking about the self and the relationship between free speech and truth in democratic contexts) to the debate regarding web 2.0. I think I have shown that, rather than providing answers, Foucault's questions have a strong applicability, especially if the method of the French scholar's analysis is adopted at root and in its specific form, which consists of questioning phenomena in relation to the overall social devices rather than to specific places, techniques or events.

If I am right, to adopt Foucault's method and questions means to redefine some of the issues: the debate between freedom and power of the web can become an investigation into specific forms of inevitable power in the network society. The approach of analysing the autobiographical explosion leads to a questioning of the terms and conditions of talking about the self, and especially the pressures to exercise it. The controversy over the democratic nature of the web can be reformulated by questioning the conditions of truth and forms of knowledge that circulate on the web. These are three new approaches, based upon Foucault's thought, which was developed long before the birth of the web, but which remains deeply embedded in the development of late modern society.

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