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Disintermediation and/or Neointermediation?

The "Fourth Power" of Small and Large Intermediaries in Digital Public Sphere

Abstract: The concept of "disintermediation" is one of the instruments used to interpret recent developments in politics and communication, especially in digital media. Our thesis is that the concept of "disintermediation" can be considered from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it can be interpreted in the strict historically established sense. On this basis it may be argued that the internet has contributed to "disintermediate" traditional intermediaries, surpassing in part the traditional intermediaries of the twentieth century (such as journalists). On the other, "disintermediation" can be seen in broader, etymological, absolute and non-relative terms. In this sense, the concept of "disintermediation" is no longer appropriate and consequently, based on experimental results and a theoretical analysis of small and large digital intermediaries, we shall propose the concept of "neointermediation." This article presents the characteristics of neointermediaries, which are concentrating more and more power and are of two sizes: small and large.

Keywords: disintermediation, neointermediation, opinion leader, infomediaries, digital platform, public sphere

Introduction. Two Meanings for Intermediation

The concept of disintermediation that originally emerged in economics and finance can be defined as the activity of removing intermediaries from all types of social, economic or political relations: "Disintermediation means removing intermediaries from a supply chain, a transaction, or, more broadly, any set of social, economic, or political relations" (Chadwick 2007: 918).

In the specific context of political relations, the term refers to the capacity to represent oneself and communicate directly, thereby overcoming the mediation traditionally performed by means of communication like newspapers, radio and television. Disintermediation can therefore be understood as the capacity of politicians to engage "directly" with their citizens, as well as the capacity of citizens to form a "direct" relationship with their representatives, thus bypassing the traditional forms of intermediation offered by the mass media (from journalists and newsrooms for example). This type of relationship can be fostered by new digital media like websites, blogs, and especially the web 2.0 and social networks.

However, as pointed out by Parisier (2011), in etymological terms intermediation is intrinsic to the very concept of media: wherever there is a form of medium—even if this

medium be digital—there should be some type of intermediation, something positioning itself between individuals and the world of events.

Our thesis is that the concept of disintermediation can be understood and considered from two different perspectives, both of which offer a degree of insight. On the one hand disintermediation can be interpreted in a strict and historically established sense, in line with our traditional understanding on both a theoretical and practical level: new digital media partly surpass traditional intermediaries since the twentieth century. From this perspective we can argue that the internet contributes to "disintermediating" traditional intermediaries: digital media appear to have started a process of disintermediation for specific and historic intermediaries (e.g. journalists). On the other hand, however, disintermediation can be understood in a broader, more theoretical sense. If we look at intermediation in etymological and absolute terms and not in relation to something that took place in the past, the concept of disintermediation no longer appears suitable and the concept of neointermediation appears clearly more appropriate (Giacomini 2018). Indeed, digital media go beyond the idea of intermediary as understood until now, in terms of forms of traditional intermediation, but they do not surpass this idea in absolute terms. In other words, the internet may not have surpassed the notion of intermediaries completely, but it has introduced important new intermediaries, that are different to the ones coming before.

Considering the relationship between concepts of "disintermediation" and "neointermediation" enables us to reflect on changes in the sphere of communication in its transition from mass media (that still have a very important role) to digital media, and at the same time the elements of continuity and integration between the two systems. With regard in particular to the elements of continuity, we shall focus on the power of new digital intermediaries in "filtering" information produced and consulted by citizens, i.e. the process of agenda-setting that is the basis of the "fourth power" of traditional and digital media. Like traditional media, digital media also include "gatekeepers" (Shoemaker and Vos 2009). This consideration might prompt new lines of research regarding the political responsibilities of small and large neointermediaries in terms of public opinion and democracy in general.

Intermediation and the "Fourth Power." Experimental Studies

The capacity of news agencies to guide public opinion has been defined a "fourth power." This concept underlines the fact that alongside the three powers of the state—legislative, executive and judicial—we have another: the power of the press, television and media.

In cognitive terms, the "fourth power" consists in a transfer of prominence from the elements constituting the images of the world presented by the media to the elements constituting the mental representations of citizens. In this mechanism of agenda-setting, the elements that have most relevance in the representations offered by the media tend to acquire the same relevance also in the public's mental representations. The power of the media, stemming from their "standing between" between institutions and citizens, consists of selecting and presenting the flow of information, while contributing to forming the dynamics that inform public debate (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Iyenger and Kinder 1987).

In terms of traditional media, their agenda-setting power is confirmed extensively in literature. The early research, starting with McCombs and his colleague Shaw (1972), consisted in examining the issues making up the public agenda while comparing over time the order of importance of issues proposed by the media and citizens respectively. These studies were strengthened with other experimental studies. For example, in a series of experiments, Iyenger and Kinder (1987) divided the subjects into two equal groups. Every day for a period of one week both groups were shown a news bulletin lasting half an hour and were given questionnaires, at the start and at the end of the experiment, to monitor any changes in their opinions. The first group was shown news bulletins that were amended for the occasion, where news was added relating to a specific issue (inflation, pollution, weapons control, etc.) while the second group was shown the original news bulletin. In the above situation any evolution in the opinions of the two groups must be attributable to the different news they saw. The results confirmed the power of the media on the mental representations of the subjects: in the majority of cases, at the end of the experiment, the group that was shown the amended news, compared to the control group, considered the issues that had been artificially highlighted by the news bulletin to be more important.

An experimental approach was recently also used by Facebook—the largest social networking platform—for internal purposes. This experiment, conducted on a large scale involving 689,003 users. concerned the possibility of influencing their state of mind (Kramer et al. 2014). When a user accesses Facebook, he can see the latest status updates from friends on his News Feed. But given that the number of posts can be very high, News Feed filters the posts, stories and activities, only showing users a part of these. If a user actually visited a friend's page he could see all of the available posts, but the News Feed algorithms made selections from all posts that were recently added by all their friends, and this is the main way in which users see published content.

The 689,003 users, selected randomly, were divided into different groups. The first group was prevented from viewing posts on their News Feed from friends containing content that was emotionally "positive," while the second group was prevented from viewing posts with content that was emotionally "negative." The control group was left with the "original" version of the algorithm, without any restrictions. The result of the experiment shows that users' opinions were influenced on the basis of the nature of the Facebook algorithm: when "positive" expressions were reduced people produced more "negative" posts and fewer "positive" posts, whereas when the "negative" expressions were reduced people produced more "positive" posts and fewer "negative" posts.

Naturally, the phenomenon of agenda-setting has changed significantly over time, and the media environment of the second half of the last century is not the same as it is now. Agenda-setting cannot have the same outcomes in a context characterised by a few means of mass information or a hybrid and *networked* context as we have now, characterised also by new forms of participative culture (Shirky 1995; Chadwick 2013; Sorice 2014; Ceccarini 2021).

However, thanks to their capacity to isolate variables to investigate (partially considered in abstraction from the context), experimental studies highlight an agenda-setting power which, *mutatis mutandis*, remains present and identifiable in both television and digital media, so it cannot be neglected. Indeed, it can be argued that this agenda-setting power

responds to a need, a cognitive requirement of individuals. Given that they have a limited degree of rationality, individuals need to seek information from sources simplifying the complexity of reality and which select the most "relevant" information from an enormous mass of facts, episodes and opinions that they would certainly not be able to process in their entirety on their own (Simon 1955; Kahneman 2011). When faced with an excessive quantity of information, individuals are at risk of cognitive overload (Giacomini 2013). The consequences of bounded rationality can be seen in a widespread and cross-sectional manner: just as citizens cannot attend the rallies of all parties and often form an allegiance with one party in particular (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964), and cannot read all newspapers or watch all television channels and instead choose an editor offering them a particular "reading" of events, often presenting simplified information like the image of political leaders, on Facebook too users do not have the cognitive capacity to read through the thousands of posts produced by their friends and thus make use of "editorial" choices proposed on News Feed.

The problem is finding one's way through the myriad political messages and parties producing information, somehow managing such an overwhelming cognitive burden compared to the capacity of a single person. To do this, even with the internet one is forced to "rely on" mechanisms that select and submit information.

A Brief Phenomenology of Digital Neointermediaries

The principal image associated with the internet is that of a web, to the extent that "internet" and "the web" have become synonymous in everyday language. The web as a place without a centre that tends to promote the spontaneous development of a decentralised and distributed system of information, which is reminiscent of the brain, a form of organisation where models and structures are the result of a horizontal process and are not imposed by a hierarchically superior centre (Flichy 2001).

Nevertheless, as Zuboff (2019) points out, it is in such an "anarchic," deregulated context that "surveillance capitalism" has emerged as a new order, using human experience (the "behavioral surplus" of data left behind by users) for practices of extracting, predicting and modifying the behavior of individual users. This image of the internet as a natural and horizontal space for the exchange of information is partly misleading. While on the one hand the metaphor of the brain does do justice to the notion that the internet lacks a fixed hierarchical structure which is solidly defined, on the other hand this metaphor neglects the fact that the nodes of the web are not all the same; they do not all have an equal "weight." Some nodes are *somehow* more "central" than others; they govern particularly broad and significant information and communication flows and can have more influence on the dynamics of other much smaller nodes.

Compared to traditional media, a feature of the internet is that it enables individuals and organisations to publish information independently and interact with information published by others. However, even at this level, some sources are more important than others and we can see the emergence of "opinion leaders" used as a reference or benchmark for certain aspects. As their importance grows, these "opinion leaders" effectively end up becoming

intermediaries who offer web users their own interpretations regarding facts, opinions and ideas. An example are companies (infomediaries) operating in communication who offer services to companies—as well as candidates or parties—with the aim of changing how citizens use the web and influence the behavior of common users. Whereas at a higher level we have seen the emergence of what we can call large neointermediaries: companies with market capitalisations of tens or hundreds of billions of dollars like Apple, Google, Facebook, Amazon and Twitter. They are major polarisers of traffic, information and users: Google has been for several years the leading global search engine (with 90 per cent of traffic in 2014), while Facebook has been the leading social networking site (with a 79 per cent market share in 2014) (Agcom 2014).

Small neointermediaries. Opinion leaders, influencers, infomediaries

The first type of new digital intermediaries we will examine are opinion leaders and online infomediaries. Conducting a study on the sources of political influence from its origins through to political communication in the era of the web, Antenore (2009) focuses on the role of personal influence: interpersonal communication (including through the web and social networking sites) is an important source of knowledge of political matters and shares the mass media's significant power in influencing the construction of cognitive frameworks and beliefs that in turn influence the political choices of citizens.

Therefore, the new intermediaries can be individuals ("digital opinion leaders," or "influencers"). The first study on the role of opinion leaders within processes of electoral influence is that of Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955). In this model, applied to a physical as opposed to a digital situation, the actual exercising and manifestation of leadership (and, thus, personal influence) was connected to the position presented by the subject within an extensive network of relationships. In recent years we have seen the emergence in online platforms of new opinion leader roles imparting visibility to political content or creating spontaneous pressure groups that present or re-present political content or messages. Just think of the vast number of players—bloggers, opinion leaders, experts or normal citizens (friends)—who activate their relationship networks and act as drivers for the dissemination, circulation and distribution of content and news through digital networks. These opinion leaders ("influencers") do not just activate information circuits: they also act on the perception of the relevance of a specific issue (Gillin 2008; Lewis 2020).

As well as individuals in the role of intermediaries within their networks there are companies and organised groups working from the bottom up to influence the dissemination of messages, news and information. In some sectors, such as e-commerce, the need for new types of intermediaries ("infomediaries")—web specialists who support the activities of companies online to make these more efficient—is already evident.

There are similar figures who operate in the sphere of politics, organising and distributing information on behalf of a party, candidate, or stakeholders or institutionalised interest groups. Multimedia communication companies operate on the web and play an increasingly important role in the management of both election campaigns and consent. Indeed, except for certain specific cases and for short periods of time during the day, candidates or politicians do not have sufficient time or energy to monitor discussions

adequately relating to them on the internet. Therefore, to govern these discussions and take an active rather than passive position, they turn to professionals who are given a mandate to intervene on their behalf.

Digital marketing experts and communication companies have the capacity to influence individuals' use of the internet. Think of "astroturfing," which consists in the creation of consent from the bottom up (by entrusting individuals who are paid a fee to produce and disseminate positive comments or bots, autonomous software that make users think they are communicating with a human being). A new means of intermediation can take place using "memes." A meme is an idea, style or action that spreads across the internet, often by imitation, and suddenly becomes popular. Memes are not only spread by being shared by authoritative individuals (opinion leaders), who are often pundits on traditional media and whose fame enables them to count on hundreds of thousands of friends or followers. According to Holiday (2012), an online marketing expert, the majority of viral phenomena do not emerge spontaneously, and are instead produced. The objective of the public relations and communication industry, in Holiday's opinion, is to create the sensation that the meme already existed and became well known through encounters with internet users. In particular, Holiday reveals a mechanism he defined "processing of the chain": first you place a piece on a small blog, for example by creating false email accounts, sending suggestions or fake "tip-offs" to its editors (including with grainy photos, or by printing a document that was created ad hoc and scanned, to give it an air of authenticity). If the blog takes the bait, the next step involves convincing a larger and more important blog to post the link to the smaller blog or share the content of the latter. Moreover, a public relations agency can create a series of accounts and through its votes, contribute to making this piece emerge at the top of pages.

As Kaiser (2019) explains, from a practical point of view, the most successful technique recently consists of the widest possible use of public data and extensive microtargeting activities. Data on the interests of many people are collected, examining a long period of time in order to gain maximum information. Sometimes information is solicited (with tests and games) or data are identified and acquired by large platforms that can then be used to understand, manipulate or mobilise, once analysed. Emblematic of targeted user profiling (and the "plots" that can involve large and small neo-intermediaries) was the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which broke in 2018. Developing an application to collect the online activities of users via a survey, a developer gained access to the Facebook profiles of some 87 million users, capturing their data and preferences. This material then came into the possession of Cambridge Analytica, which used it to fine-tune the communication strategy of certain election campaigns (such as Trump's US presidency in 2016). The profiling technique used, called "psychographic," elaborated in close contact with cognitivist experts, enabled the creation of a psychological profile of each user (concerning attributes such as personality, values, interests and lifestyle) making it possible to predict what kind of message would convince the specific citizen. In this way, the election team was able to devise a communication strategy "tailored" to each citizen, directly "hitting" the sensitive points of each one (Crain, Nadler 2019).

However, small neointermediaries are not only Western. For instance, the Internet Research Agency in St. Petersburg is known in the news as the "troll factory." With more

than 400 employees in Russia and about 90 in the US, this small neo-intermediary builds thousands of digital contents every day for propaganda purposes: blogs under a false name, deceptive social media accounts, anonymous comments, articles published by web newspapers, interventions on online forums (Lesnevskaya 2017). Some of these accounts also promote demonstrations and protests organised by the same "troll factory." The New York Times identified at least eight events planned and promoted by the Internet Research Agency between June and November 2016: in New York, Washington, Charlotte, but also in some cities in Florida and Pennsylvania (Parlapiano, Lee 2018). According to the journalist Savchuk (who infiltrated the Agency), hundreds of Russians work as paid trolls, in shifts and divided into specialized groups: the "news division," the "social media sowers," the "demotivators" (a group dedicated to the production of visual memes). The Agency's main ability lies in using the properties of social media to impose "social facts" within target groups, pushing them to share in a "spontaneous" and participatory manner. A second novelty is the impact generated with respect to the budget used: it appears that with just over 2 million euros, of which just under 100,000 were spent on Facebook, the Agency reached almost 150 million American voters, over a period of about 2 years, through the creation of 40,000 fake accounts and the production of over 80,000 misleading news items (Chaykowski 2017).

The cases of Cambridge Analytica and the Russian Agency are particularly extreme. Of course, there are hundreds of small intermediaries who work, respecting privacy laws and regulations, in many areas of communication, volunteering, politics, business, fashion, sports and so on. Their services are often very good and appreciated by customers or consumers. But they too, to be successful, rely on behavioral analysis, data collection, information filtering, and finally on strategic (manipulative) communication.

Large neointermediaries. Social networks, search engines, platforms

The phenomenon of neointermediation can also be seen in the activities of the large platforms. As noted by Gillespie (2012), during Occupy Wall Street—a protest movement that emerged in New York in 2011 to criticise some of the strategies of financial capitalism—the activists made extensive use of various digital instruments to coordinate their actions and publicise their efforts. One of these was Twitter. However, the online debate which largely took place under the hashtag #occupywallstreet, was never one of the trending topics.[1] Some activists, users and commentators complained and accused Twitter of censoring the movement.

Leaving aside the merits of these accusations, this episode underlines the importance and at the same time lack of transparency of the algorithm enabling certain hashtags to trend. Indeed, it is not clear—continues Gillespie—how Twitter "measures" hashtags. Trends are not just a simple measure of the volume of use as they also include different assessments: e.g. is it the first time the term was used in a hashtag? Is the use of the term speeding up rapidly or growing constantly? Is the term used in a specific geographic and social cluster or is it cross-sectional? It seems, for example, that the algorithm prefers the

[1] Trending topics are ones which are in vogue according to Twitter, and which are given more prominence by the platform. Trending is important because it ensures even more visibility.

latest news as opposed to phenomena that might be more important but also more constant (which is also a criticism levied against TV journalism). Or it seems that discussions taking place between users of the same geographical area or demographic group are worthy of appearing in Trends compared to discussions with a broader appeal and geographically and demographically diverse groups. An "editorial" choice is then made to attribute more importance to breadth rather than depth (Morozov 2013).

It appears evident that in establishing some measurement criteria at the expense of others, Twitter contributes to giving "a certain form" to public debate. This is reminiscent of the issue of agenda-setting: Trending is simultaneously a summary of what is being said in the platform and a promotion of what Twitter considers to be most interesting.

Other social networking sites, like Facebook, have chosen to support certain political movements publicly and censor specific content published by users on the platform (Dewey 2015). For example, when on 26 June 2015 the Supreme Court of the United States made it unconstitutional for state laws to prohibit gay marriages, effectively making gay marriages legal all over the US, Facebook provided an application allowing users to colour their photo profiles with the colours of the rainbow (which symbolise the LGBTQ+ community). This decision to facilitate users in communicating their political position obviously had consequences in terms of the conduct of citizens. For example, some people researching Facebook have discovered that users feel encouraged to replace their profile picture with the symbol of a campaign after several of their friends have done so (State and Adamic 2015). The more often they saw people using a logo as their profile picture, the more likely it was to strengthen their own beliefs.

Facebook has also introduced standards of conduct which, despite aiming to protect its community from unwanted content, leave the ultimate decision on content censorship to the platform. For example, in 2016, as reported by Parmeggiani (2016) in the La Repubblica newspaper, in Italy the profile of a cartoonist called Zerocalcare was obscured because he announced he was taking part in an event in Genoa in memory of Carlo Giuliani on the anniversary of the G8 conference and protests in the city. The cartoonist was reported by some users to Facebook who in turn deactivated his profile, pending the removal of the posts (texts, photos, videos) that were deemed incorrect. To reopen his extremely popular page the cartoonist had to remove this content. As Cosimi (2016) states, the key of the problem is: who decides and who interprets the standards of the community? In 2012, reports Cosimi, the Guardian and the magazine Gawker revealed the existence of teams of underpaid temp workers that had been recruited through microwork platforms like oDesk—now renamed Upwork—to manage the vast daily quantity of reports. In this way, the decision on whether a political post in Thailand, or a banner posted by Zerocalcare should actually be removed—often with the resulting suspension of private or public profiles—is left to staff who might not have the expertise or authoritativeness to carry out a "command" (like censoring a page) that is so significant in terms of freedom of opinion.

This role of intermediation is also confirmed by investigations revealing that in 2016 Facebook had an internal team of about a dozen people effecting the final selection of information to be published, especially with regard to politics. The professionals that made up this "directorate" followed company guidelines, which suggest the presence of direct human editorial interventions in many phases of the process for the filtering of news

(Thielman 2016). In January 2021, Twitter decided to block the account of the outgoing American President, Donald Trump. In the wake of the riots in Washington and the violent occupation of the US Capitol, Facebook and Twitter decided to block Trump's profiles. However, is it appropriate that such an important decision (taking a political subject 'off air'), and one fraught with political consequences, should be taken by a private company (and not, for example, a court of law)? At present the choice is entirely in the hands of the private platforms, based on rules of conduct and community policies drawn up by the platforms themselves. These rules are interpreted by the platform, leading to "blocking" decisions against which the individual user cannot appeal. If crimes are committed on the internet (incitement to violence is not free speech: it is a crime), it is right to prosecute them, but the question is what the most correct and effective procedures are, and whether it is desirable to "privatise" them.

Similar issues surround search engines like Google. Since 2000, the scientific community has started to ask questions about the growing role of search engines in distributing and disseminating knowledge, and the potential for search engines to hide or distort information, and therefore on the growing intermediation responsibilities that search engines have (Vaughan and Thelwall 2004; Pasquale 2006; Hargittai 2007; Diaz 2008).

Considering that for every word searched on the web by users there can be millions of answers, and since nobody has the time personally to read through millions of internet pages, the search engine must firstly identify the relevance of the content, and must then order search results on the basis of significance. Three types of criteria guide the algorithm: linguistic criteria, popularity criteria, and criteria linked to the behavior of users (Granka 2010; Singhal 2008). For example, search engines have continual feedback on the behavior of users: if the third result of a certain research is clicked more frequently than the first two results produced by the search engine, it is deemed more useful for users, and could be moved up in the ranking of importance (Joachims et al. 2007). Another type of behavior relates to the length of time users remain on a page (Kelly 2005). The feedback of users could be interpreted as a democratic form of a "voting with a click." Nevertheless, it is evident that it is not just consumer choices that contribute to the ranking of web pages, as we also have to consider how the algorithm has been set up. For example, once a site is classified near the top of the rankings, based on the criteria established by Google, it is far more likely that this website be clicked compared to one lower down the ranking (Introna and Nissenbaum 2000). The choices of the platform therefore retain a certain degree of influence that affects the conduct of users.

Some studies have demonstrated that individuals maintain a certain level of independence when they use search engines. Using an instrument to measure the movements of users' eyes on the screen, researchers can understand how many and which results are considered by the user. On average, three or four results are considered, although the number changes on the basis of motivation and difficulties of the task: users take more time to assess the various sources of information being presented if their objective is to spend money, as in the case of a purchase; they take less time if the objective is to look for trivia, like the weather or the population of Canada (Joachims et al. 2007; Guan and Cuttrell 2007, Lorigo et al. 2006). Even if individuals maintain a certain degree of autonomy, they are still faced with a situation of "given" and to an extent pre-determined choices.

Google's algorithm choices obviously have consequences for politicians. For example, a service like Google Autocomplete allows Google users to type only the first letters of words or sentences they are looking for; Autocomplete immediately offers some suggestions completing the search terms. Morozov (2013) reports that Bettina Wulff, Germany's former first lady, filed a complaint against Google in 2012 because the search engine automatically completed searches for her name with terms like "prostitute" and "escort." This result may have been organised by her political opponents, but it is also the result of a (non) choice by Google, that of not restricting the combination of false and offensive epithets with female politicians. Indeed, the approach Google uses for file-sharing websites (which allow users to download music or videos free of charge) is quite different: if users want Google to provide links relating to a platform of content, Google's Autocomplete does not provide any suggestions and one has to type in the whole search term. If Google did not have similar scope or discretion, this difference would not even exist.

Another case was reported by Grimmelmann (2008). In 2004, the first result that appeared on www.google.com with the word "jew" was the website www.jewwatch.com, which hosted anti-Semitic content. The various forms of protest by Jewish activists included a petition to Google demanding it avoid indexing the anti-Semitic website altogether. Google could easily have amended its software and criteria, but it did not (Grimmelmann 2008). In Germany, because of federal laws, making it illegal to incite hatred against segments of the population or incite violence against minorities, Google's behavior is different. If you search for the word "jew" in the German version of Google not only does the website Jew Watch not appear, but we also see information explaining that Google has removed three results from the page.

This is what Grimmelmann (2008) calls the "Google dilemma": Google can suggest some websites as opposed to others; whatever the criteria—alphabetic, on the basis of the number of links or words from the search terms—the results will appear in such a way as to influence the choices of users relying on this new digital intermediary. As underlined by Granka (2010), search engines are on the one hand necessary for guiding us through the enormous quantity of information, but on the other hand this implies that search engines are able to direct what people are allowed to know about the words they search for. The search engines effectively structure access to information on the web, influencing and addressing the flows of communication. This makes them new digital intermediaries: like any form of media, even search engines are obliged to decide—to a certain extent—on what content to distribute and show to the public.

Final Considerations and Outstanding Issues

In recent years many researchers have seen internet in an "optimistic" way: academics predicted that the increase in the quantity of information, as well as the ability to share, access and produce content, would reduce difficulty of access to information. Though this has happened to a degree, it is also true that the enormous quantity of information on the web, combined with individuals' limited capacity and willingness to process this

data (bounded rationality), has also had completely opposite consequences: there are still difficulties in accessing information because of information overload, and to overcome this, new intermediaries have emerged who select information with a certain degree of autonomy, and in a way that does not simply reflect the different sources available on the internet but rather offers an order based on different degrees of visibility and importance. Digital neointermediaries entrust important decisions to developers and algorithms. The filters adopted by neointermediaries imply choices that penalise or reward content with specific characteristics, so the algorithms used by the platforms cannot be considered "neutral" or "objective"; they thus raise ethical and political concerns.

With television the flow was virtually unidirectional and recipients were often in an essentially passive condition (even if they could change channels, refrain entirely from watching, send complaints to editorial staff, etc). Now new digital technologies enable people to intervene directly on the creation/use of information (Shirky 1995). Nevertheless, reflecting on media in their role as intermediaries also enables us to highlight the similarities between the two information and communication paradigms. There is a decision-making process guiding the dissemination of content in both traditional media and large digital platforms. For both the aim is selection and intermediation, and it is the method that changes: the platforms apply an algorithm created and updated by developers, while the news items transmitted by traditional editors were selected "manually," on the basis of intuition, experience, culture and the political line of newspapers. In the context of traditional information, this activity is performed by journalists in newsrooms, whereas, with digital information, it is a platform's algorithms. This intermediation is carried out independently by both the journalists and the developers, in the sense that the decision of what to filter is not a photocopy of the preferences of the public but has a margin of discretion, even though in both cases intermediaries pay significant attention to the values, tastes and expectations of their users.[2]

As summarized by Gillespie, "despite the promises made, 'platforms' are more like traditional media than they care to admit. (…) As with broadcasting and publishing, their choices about what can appear, how it is organized, how it is monetized, what can be removed and why, and what the technical architecture allows and prohibits, are all real and substantive interventions into the contours of public discourse" (2010: 359).

Finally, returning to our initial thesis: disintermediation can be considered in historical and relative terms: digital media sit alongside and in part replace traditional media and their intermediations. On the other hand, the new media are still media, so they perform the role of mediating between the reality, individuals and information. So if we consider intermediation in etymological and absolute terms and not in relation to something that came before, the concept of neointermediation is certainly more closely reflects the dynamics of power. Firstly, given their dual nature as authors and consumers of individuals who acquire information from the web, we have seen the emergence of bottom-up intermediaries, that we have identified with the labels "digital opinion leaders" and "infomediaries." Secondly, large platforms and large website have emerged as new

[2] Just think, for example, of the constant feedback platforms receive from the behavior of users which in turn influences the set-up of the algorithms. But we must also consider the specific editorial choices of newspapers and televisions for getting across a certain line and satisfying the tastes of their audience.

intermediaries of an enormous flow and quantity of information. As we have seen, *mutatis mutandis*, the new platforms are reminiscent of traditional media in their 'fourth power': they select the most important subject matters (agenda-setting) and decide autonomously what should be disseminated and publicized. Digital media surpass the idea of the intermediary as it has been understood thus far, in that they delegate the intermediation to algorithmic processes that are fine-tuned and monitored by developers, but they do not surpass it in absolute terms and instead offer new forms of mediation.

Clearly, the subject of neointermediation cannot be covered entirely here and requires new research. From an empirical perspective, it would be expedient to assess how pervasive and significant the agenda-setting power of digital media has become, considering that the media environment is now hybrid and *networked*. From a theoretical perspective, it would be interesting to examine in greater depth the consequences of new forms of intermediation on democracy and the quality of public debate. This leads to new questions, such as: would it be advisable to oblige platforms to be transparent about their algorithms, in order to make public the criteria by which information is organized? Or could complete transparency make the platforms vulnerable to malicious attacks? Is it possible for there to be public supervision of selection operations? Would it be appropriate to promote serious antitrust legislation to cover the internet, based on outlawing dominant positions? Would it make sense for democratic power to impose some rules to ensure there is degree of pluralism in the dissemination of content?

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