Media fragmentation, party system and democracy

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The crisis of journalism: past and present

Most of the titles of today’s meetings, conferences and seminars on journalism contain some recurring words: first of all there is the word “crisis” and then there are “future”, “change”, etc. Obviously this is not fortuitous; the recurrence of these words points out that, yes, there is a problem. At least this recurrence may indicate that, yes, something is dramatically changing. This diffused feeling started with the publication in October 2009 of the Columbia Journalism Report significantly titled “The reconstruction of American Journalism”. In a way, since the publication of this report the feeling that, at least, western world journalism is in crisis has gained ground and has become the dominant image of journalism in this part of the world (Fenton 2010; Franklin 2010; Levy and Nielsen 2010).

The most diffused characteristics of the crisis are well known: the circulation of print press is decreasing, profits are shrinking as well and television news too is not in better shape. Many news outlets are disappearing from the market and those that remain in the competition are firing reporters and reducing their organizations: fewer correspondents, fewer seats abroad, etc. If one looks beyond print press, the situation of crisis may change its character but still remains.

To better explain the changes that journalism is undergoing today I would use an expression for which I’m indebted to Jan Zielonka: “blurred identity”. In the Columbia Journalism review it is possible to read the same word again in relationship to the changing nature of journalism: “What is a journalist? In Western media circles these days, the boundaries are blurring between online newspapers like the Christian Science Monitor and Guardian.co.uk, blogs such as Huffington Post.com, You Tube’s citizen journalism and the rantings of political attack-dogs of all political stripes. Sure, HuffPost has a White House press pass, but, beyond that, it’s all semantics today, right?” The identity of journalism in much of western world is becoming “blurred”, more confused and less stable in terms of both structure and professional identity. The old certitudes are disappearing and new ones are not yet defined; this makes this paper very speculative as it deals with changes that are taking place at a very fast speed and that have not yet been investigated in depth by scholars. While investigating the causes of the so called “crisis of journalism” I’ll try to place them within a larger picture of changes and possible problems affecting also the structure of our democracy.

Professional journalism is changing dramatically for at least two main reasons: the increasing commercialization and technological innovation. Both reasons determine what is already well known: mass media fragmentation and audience segmentation. The consequences of this change are even more general affecting the structure of our democracy determining strange “paradoxes” regarding the more general relation between media and politics that I’ll try to outline in the next pages.

Indeed, I want to argue that, beyond the already well know evaluations of techno-optimism vs pessimism (Wilhelm 2000; Benson 2010) there are other consequences deriving from the ongoing changes that so far have not been stressed and that are not yet discussed enough in the literature. Fragmentation may have very positive consequences as it increases the number of available sources of information and may represents a more diffuse instrument of control, as I shall argue later on. But, at the same time, fragmentation may produce consequences on the structure of democracy that
are not to be underestimated. These consequences may take different forms and may have different levels of intensity in relation to well established vs transitional democracies and to different structures of the mass media system. They represent challenges for decision makers and for those who are involved with professional journalism and politics as they imply new models of socialization and participation.

Already in 1992, my colleague Daniel Hallin wrote an article that, in spite of being written in a pre-Internet era, anticipates a description that seems completely applicable to the present situation of the mass media system. In this article, that has been discussed at length by many commentators, Hallin maintained that the universalism that featured the golden age of American journalism and that was embodied by figures such as that of Walter Cronkite and Ed Murrow and that was rooted on the idea of professional autonomy, objectivity and distance from advertising and political pressures was close to an end. (Hallin 1992). Few years later, in 1996, Elihu Katz wrote another article that, with different words and with a different normative view, discussed a very similar situation pointing out the risks of the process of audience segmentation that, according to the author, was replacing the traditional mass audience. The increasing commercialization of the mass media system, that was stressed also by Hallin, was determining for Katz the end of the common meeting ground assured by the previous, less commercialized, media system: the cohesion of nation state itself was at stake following the increased segmentation of media audience (Katz 1996).

Many years later, the description that Cass Sunstein proposes to describe his idea of “daily me”, created by communication technologies, is not too far from Katz statements: “Perhaps you have no interest at all in “news”. Maybe you find “news” impossibly boring. If so, you need not see it at all. Maybe you select programs and stories involving only music and weather. Or perhaps your interests are more specialized still, concentrating on opera, or Beethoven, or Bob Dylan, or modern dance, or some subset of one or more of the above (Maybe you like early Dylan and hate late Dylan)” (Sunstein 2007: 2). In this sentence, too, a process of individualization is closely linked to the segmentation of the media system that, in Sunstein’s thesis now depends on technological innovations, more precisely on the web, and not just on commercialization.

The changes in the structure of communication may affect the structure of our democracy as Katz underlined. In his book published in 2003, Bruce Bimber has observed how, over the years, information technologies have affected American democracy. The most recent situation, that he defines as the “Fourth Information Revolution and Postbureaucratic Pluralism”, is characterized by media fragmentation and the birth of more flexible, less structured and volatile political organizations (Bimber 2003). The main thesis of his book sounds like this: “technological change in the contemporary period should contribute toward information abundance which in turn contributes towards postbureaucratic forms of politics” (Bimber 2003: 21). This change implies that traditional political organizations are less capable of managing and affecting the political arena, leaving space for new forms of social aggregations strictly depending on the new structure of the communication system.

**Media fragmentation today**

The situation described years ago by both Hallin and Katz has been brought to an extreme by the internet, and more in general by new technologies; with the internet the number of the possible sources of information increases and therefore the number of consumers may now be distributed along a larger number of media outlets, determining new patterns of consumption that either give life to new consumers or move traditional consumers from old to new media. Mass media fragmentation generates audience segmentation. Many have already talked about the end of the “mass audience” that is taking place with the fast development of the internet (Rheingold 2000; Chaffee and Metzeger 2001; Castells 2010). Sunstein brings this idea of the end of the mass
audience to an extreme: “the whole idea of general-interest intermediaries providing shared experience and exposure to diverse topics and ideas for millions was a short episode in the history of human communications” (Sunstein 2007: 9).

What is defined today as the crisis of journalism is deeply seated within this new process of fragmentation and even the print press itself is undergoing a process of internal fragmentation. Indeed, the decrease in the circulation of traditional paid newspapers has been largely compensated in many western democracies by the birth and development of free newspapers that have motivated new readers (and, of course, has taken readers from paid newspapers) so that, in this case, the total number of the circulation of newspapers in many countries has either increased or has remained stable. But here comes a first sign of blurred identity: free press journalism is very different from the traditional one and implies very different kinds of reporters and work procedures.

Traditional analogic television has undergone a very similar process of transformation (Prior 2007; Havick 2000; Chaffee and Metzeger 2001). Today, with the development of new media, and internet in particular, citizens have many more choices in terms of cultural consumption. Multiplicity and polycentrality are the words that Natalie Fenton has used to describe the new media environment (Fenton 2010), while John Keane has used the expression “The era of abundance” to indicate the richness that features the today’s mass media system vi. The same expression was already used by Jay Blumler and Kavanagh in their paper on the “third age” of political communication (1999) and, as said, Bimber himself talks of the present “era” of abundance (Bimber 2003).

In this very fragmented media market each new (and old) media outlet is forced to find its own target/audience to distinguish its own product from the others: the old logic by which few competitors were competing for the broader audience possible (the so called golden era of broadcasting) is over: segmentation is replacing mass audience. “Niche audience” becomes today the dominant paradigm (Iyengar – Hahn 2009; Jomini Stroud 2011; Starr 2012). The most discussed and more recent example of this tendency is Fox news. There is no doubt that its conservative slant derives from September 11 and the anti-islamic, strongly nationalist feelings that the attack on the Twin Towers aroused throughout the United States. These contextual factors have been embodied in a precise market strategy: to compete within the very crowded US television market and mostly to compete with the much older, much better rooted and much more famous twenty four hour cable channel, CNN, Fox News has chosen its own target/audience: a public that is less sophisticated and clearly more conservative than that of CNN. Following a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press “Nearly half of Americans (47%) say they think of Fox News as “mostly conservative” vii. This has been a choice that has made it possible for Fox News to distinguish itself from its more direct competitors. The initial conservative, anti-islamic, nationalist slant has been further implemented by the political polarization that followed the election of the “black” Barack Obama and then the approval of health care reform that was strongly opposed by a large part of American citizens and the birth of the “Tea Party” movement that has identified Fox as its spokesperson. In this polarized environment Fox News has found its own audience of conservative citizens that has become its primary audience (Iyengar and Hahn 2009).

This conservative slant (such as a possible liberal slant in a potential competing network) takes shape with the adoption of a less neutral, more partisan and aggressive journalism that may appear to be very far away from the traditional liberal model that was affecting all American journalism in the middle of last century and that today many (see the Columbia report) seem to regret.

Discussing about the audience of Fox News (but not just about that) Natalie Jomini Stroud talks of “partisan selective exposure” as the emerging and developing tendency. The results of her study are not far from what has been discussed until now: “Conservatives and Republicans are more likely to read newspapers endorsing a republican presidential candidate, browse conservative leaning magazines, listen to conservative talk radio, watch Fox News and access conservative Web sites. Liberal and Democrats are more likely to read newspapers endorsing a Democratic presidential candidate, subscribe to liberal leaning magazines, listen to liberal talk radio, watch CNN or
Blurred identities

All this makes today’s journalism “blurred”: first of all, the process of fragmentation has determined the disappearance and the weakening of many traditional and very well rooted media organizations and the birth of many other new media outlets that are not always possible to define as traditional “news organizations”. Internet, twitter and blogs are dramatically changing the nature, the procedures and the norms of traditional professional journalism (Witschge and Gunnar Nygren 2009; Lasorsa . Lewis and Holton 2011)

Already in 2005, Barbie Zelizer wrote a large part of an entire paper around this simple question: “can bloggers be defined journalists?” , what kind of professional culture do they perform? Are they reliable sources of news? (Zelizer 2005). The overlapping between bloggers, social networks and journalism is becoming increasingly confusing. There is no doubt that citizens’ journalism increases the circulation and the availability of sources of information. Great for democracy! But at the same time the reliability of news circulating in the internet decreases dramatically. The process of de-professionalization of web sources seems to advance even further; writing about the market crisis of Yahoo, the International Herald Tribune had such words: “the tale of Yahoo’s misfortunes is not just of management troubles. It is a vivid illustration of the transition from Web sites that publish professional content to a new digital world dominated by mobile phones and sites where users are the creators of content” . In their study of German web sites offering “journalistic” content, Neuberger and Nuernbergk ask: “are organizational forms like editorial staffs or trained journalists, who regularly pursue a journalistic profession, still needed in order to gather information and select and disseminate news?” (Neuberger and Nuernbergk 2010: 321). They conclude their study stressing how “participatory media tend to complement rather than to replace professional journalism” (Neuberger and Nuernbergk 2010: 321). While this confirms that traditional media still play a major role in disseminating information and that we are in a process of dramatic change taking place at a very high speed (the Neuberger and Nuernbergk’s article was written two years ago and there is no doubt that since then things have changed significantly) at the same time there is confirmation that the question that new technologies raise is not just that of “who are the professional journalists” but “what kind of organizations can produce journalistic content” and what is their relationship with the traditional ones. With the advent of “disintermediation” (Chadwick 2006), the traditional organizations that were in charge of the operation of “intermediation” enter a situation of crisis of identity or, at least, they are going through a dramatic process of change. Even if bloggers and social networks do not enter the field of “professional journalism”, there is no doubt that they become source of information for much of the world of the so called professional journalism (what Neuberger and Nuernbergk define as the complementary role of new media) and there is no doubt either that many citizens, mostly young citizens, rely on these sources for their everyday information needs.

The most confusing overlapping is between sources of information and political activism: indeed, most of the time (not always) blogs embody communities identified by common ideological and political feelings. The dramatic and very recent diffusion of Facebook and other social networks clearly reinforce these tendencies as people get together mostly when they share either common interests (topics, habits, passion for the same brand or sport team, living in the same community etc.) or common feelings and perceptions that very often are of political nature. As Andrew Chadwick writes: “most of the claims about the Internet role in promoting political participation rest on underlying view of community. In this perspective, the Internet is medication for the perceived ills of modern society: isolation, fragmentation, competitive individualism, the erosion of local identities, the decline of traditional religious and family structures, and the downplaying of
emotional forms of attachment and communication” (Chadwick, 2006: 26).

Blogs and social networks are becoming sources of information both for final consumers and for other news outlets (the so called old media) that transform what they find in the internet into a news story for the final consumers. Here everything becomes blurred: the goal of informing people overlaps with the sharing and reinforcing of common feelings and attitudes that most of the time represent the goal of the social networks that originate the news. What happened recently in the Mediterranean area is a clear demonstration of this: blogs and social networks were instruments used to spread news but, at the same time, they were instruments that served to organize activists and to mobilize citizens. They were also sources of information for many “traditional” news media outlets all around the world.

To sum up, increased commercialization and internet are dramatically changing the landscape of today’s journalism along three main lines that imply important changes in relation to democracy. If “technological optimism” (Benson 2010: 188) is still to be supported, it, nonetheless, has to be framed within a set of conditions:
- fragmentation: progressively news media addressed to a mass audience are disappearing. Because of the increased commercialization and new technologies, the “niche news” paradigm becomes dominant;
- less clear identity of news organization: fragmentation is determined also by the development of many sources of information (blogs, social networks, etc.) that can’t be defined as “news outlets” in the traditional sense. The nature of these on line organizations may result to be very different from the ones that have featured journalism in the past years. While they very frequently become sources of information for the “traditional” media, at the same time they are also becoming providers of news for many final consumers, mostly of young age.
- less defined professional identity: most of the times those who work on the new on-line outlets are not journalists. They do not have any professional training and, what is more important, their main goal is not the circulation of news but mobilization and consensus building. The professional identity of journalists becomes blurred. Expressions such as “citizens’ journalism” and “do it yourself journalism”, so much used also in scientific literature (Chadwick 2006; Fenton 2011), are the best metaphors of the emerging blurred professional identity.

**Consequences on the structure of democracy**

The changes taking place today in the structure of the mass media system and on the professional identity of journalists may deeply affect democracy. In particular I see four main consequences that will be discussed in the next pages. Of course there is still little evidence of these tendencies that have been taking place just in the last few months/years.

**Political polarization**: one possible consequence of media and audience segmentation is an increased social and political polarization. Members of the community rely just on their already existing knowledge and opinion: a place, even of a symbolic nature, where one can meet with the others and get in touch with their needs, opinions and proposals may be missing. Citizens will be reinforced in their opinions rather than becoming open to new ideas and feelings. What table n. 1 shows about Italy may be a very likely future for a world that is characterized by a high level of media fragmentation. Italy is undoubtedly a very polarized country; it has always been so since its medieval time and it still is. The figure of Berlusconi has further increased the level of political polarization that has always existed in the country even if along different lines. The development of a more market driven mass media system in the ‘80s has increased the number of the available media outlets. More and more they have addressed their own niche audiences following the already existing tradition of political parallelism. In an extreme way it could be said that citizens have been
divided into those who watch Mediaset channels and those who watch Rai channels. Those who vote for Berlusconi watch his own networks in a measure that is definitely surprising. In some way, by knowing how many citizens watch either Canale5 or Rete4 or Italia1 one can predict the electoral outcome. In the 2008 Itanes studyix the authors write “the importance of television is associated with one of the major featuring characteristics of the election in the Second Republic: the alignment between electoral choices and TV consumption” (Legnante and Sani 2008).

Table 1 - Tv news consumption by vote (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>PD</th>
<th>PDL</th>
<th>Other voters</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>(N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rai1</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>702</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rai2</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>49.5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rai3</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>297</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canale5</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>525</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italia1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>39.4</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rete4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>59.3</td>
<td>33.9</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La7</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>19.4</td>
<td>58.3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Itanes 2008

50.9% of those who watch Canale5 (the major Mediaset channel) vote for Berlusconi’s party (Popolo della libertà, Pdl) while only 10.1% vote for the major competing party (Partito democratico, Pd). On the opposite side, 44.4% of those who watch Rai3 (the traditional leftist Rai channel) vote for Partito democratico (Pd) while only 9.1% vote for Popolo della libertà. (Pdl) These data, that confirm the results of several previous studies (Itanes, 2001; Itanes, 2006), stress the high level of political parallelism existing in the Italian public sphere. This doesn’t facilitate the sharing of a field of common interests and values and instead pushes towards the polarization of political options and affiliations that up to now have just made the recurring victories of Berlusconi possible. In this context, the news media don’t play that function of social integration that could foster the necessary negotiations and agreements; they don’t foster the sharing of common knowledge and opinions facilitating, in this way, the possibility of a more integrated, more dynamic and open to change society making the idea of common good stronger.

Mass media and audience fragmentation will increase political polarization the most in all those countries where involvement with public good is traditionally lower (such as in Italy, in other Mediterranean countries and in Central Eastern Europe) (Hallin – Mancini, 2004); where the Government is not able to provide a set of different resources, services and policies that allow citizens to feel part of a community that takes care of them; where essential rights are not universally ensured and the rules of the democratic game are adapted to the different circumstances and actors (Mungiu Pippidi 2010). Media fragmentation may produce different consequences where the idea of common good, of a common “house” is stronger. For years mass media in Northern European countries were very politically targeted (as news media outlets were in the first years of journalism everywhere) (Hadenius 1983; Solinge 1999) also because of the existence press subsidies policies, and nevertheless the sense of belonging to the national community was very high because there were welfare state policies and other interventions that could establish and reinforce the sense of common belonging.

But also in traditionally homogeneous countries media fragmentation following commercialization and new technologies may increase polarization. This is what Jyengar and
Hahan write about the situation in the Us: “It is no mere coincidence that the trend toward more divided electorate has occurred simultaneously with the revolution in information technology. Forty years ago the great majority of Americans got their daily news from one of the three networks newscasts. These newscasts offered a homogeneous and generic “point-counterpoint” perspective on the news, thus ensuring that exposure to the news was a common experience...given this dramatic increase in the number of available news outlets, it is not surprising that media choices increasingly reflect partisan considerations” (Iyengar and Hahn 2009: 20).

Before Iyengar and Hahan, Baum and Groeling had convincingly demonstrated the increased polarization of American political opinions, following the development of the new on-line media environment: “regardless of their normative implications, our findings offer a striking validation for those who complain about one-sided coverage of politics in the so-called blogosphere. Daily Kos on the left and Free Republic and Fox News on the right demonstrate clear and strong preferences for news stories that benefit the party most closely associated with their own ideological orientations” (Baum and Groeling 2008: 359). A few lines after this statement they confirm “for instance, a 2006 survey on media consumption (Pew Center, 2006) reported the percentages of self-reported “regular” users of 21 news genres and outlets who indicated that they prefer news “from sources that share [their] political point of view” to “sources that don’t have a particular point of view” (Baum and Groeling 2008: 360). This is what Time magazine writes in September 2011 about the downgrading of US debt: “Narrowcast media amplify strong voices at the ends of the spectrum and make politicians pay a price for any deviation from dogma”.

The situation of “abundance” that features the mass media system today is in some way threatening the existence of a common place where to meet and debate even contrasting views. This common place is replaced by a number of different partisan outlets whose main goal is to reinforce the already existing opinions and also to serve as organization tools. “Groups polarization” or “blogs polarization” seem to be the emerging tendencies while information “cascades”, that is the continuous flow of information that may derive from an uncontrolled source (Sunstein, 2007), further risk of increasing social and political polarization and complexity.

**Party systems and new forms of participation.** Media outlets may progressively substitute political parties and other traditional organizations of political socialization; they may join the already existing ones and/or give space to new forms of social aggregations. At the time of the mass audience it was clear that news media were replacing political parties as the main sources of information and instruments of political socialization. Now the situation has come at a different extreme: more and more frequently news media outlets themselves are becoming political actors. Different media outlets and single media figures (anchormen, TV stars, etc.) enter the field of politics with either their own organizations or with an organization that they construct thanks to the internet.

It is not just a matter of celebrity politics that a vast literature has already pointed out (Marshall 1997). What happens today is the case of news outlets (and their owners or the members of the star system working within them) that become political actors and enter the field of politics and the electoral campaign. The case of Silvio Berlusconi is the best example of the opportunities that the increased commercialization of the media system may create. After establishing his successful media corporation, Berlusconi decided that it was time to enter the political arena. He did this thanks also, but not exclusively, to the opportunities that his ownership of the Mediaset corporation was offering.

Very frequent today, blogs and different kinds of social networks after being active also in the political field take a very extreme decision either to compete in free elections or to assume a clear political position and contrast more or less authoritarian regimes. The recent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt have demonstrated very clearly how the place of either not existing or very weak political parties has been taken by different kinds of social networks that have played a major role...
of mobilization and organization. They have been able to serve as instruments to connect people and to give voice to their needs and requests. As we know, in the end they have been successful in overthrowing authoritarian regimes that had been in power for several decades. This is what the “Arab spring” has demonstrated so far even if it may be risky to overestimate the role the new media have had (Shirky 2011).

Blogs and social networks have been able to play such an important role not only where there is an absence of other, more traditional, political organizations but also where political organizations exist and are very rooted there are experiences of new forms of political organizations deriving directly from media outlets established on the web. Let me give you the example of the Italian Movimento 5 Stelle (Five stars movement). Some years ago a well known show man, Beppe Grillo, started a blog struggling against corrupted politicians and in favor of issues that apparently had been forgotten by the existing and well rooted political parties. Within a few years the blog of Beppe Grillo became the most diffuse one in Italy to the point that its founder decided, together with a number of young people who had been in touch with him through the web, to start a political movement “Movimento 5 stelle” (Five stars movement). It obtained important results in the polls competing essentially with other center leftist parties that were more better organized and much more rooted (Lanfrey 2011).

The very well known case of “Pirates” is not very different. Established in Sweden in 2006, essentially through internet, it spread all over the world and in 2010 it became Pirates Parties International with its main seat in Brussels. Its main electoral success was in the Berlin state elections where the German branch of Pirates got 8% of electoral votes. This is a very different party from the traditional ones: it has a very weakly organized structure and its communication channels are essentially depending on the internet. Pirates parties are mostly single issue parties: they are a perfect example of what Helen Margetts defines as “cyber party”. In her contribution to the Handbook of Party Politics she makes a surprising list of new parties established thanks to the Internet and points out how Internet itself, on the other hand, has changed the already existing ones (Margetts, 2006).

Another experience: one of the politicians interviewed in the course of the project “Media and Democracy in Central Eastern Europe” told the story of “a problem in Bulgaria with fuel prices. A group was created on Facebook to protest against increasing fuel prices, and after that, this group became a political party.” Interviewed for the same project, Mihai Coman from the University of Bucharest, tells another interesting story on how bloggers and television showmen can establish a political party: “And of course, there have been some cases of journalists or media moguls creating their political parties. An interesting case is Dan Diaconescu – he came from print press, and had worked for some time for the “real” media mogul Dan Voiculescu. He created a weekly, then became independent and started his own television, OTV. It used to have something like 0.0001% of the audience share. Then, something happened – an attorney was killed, but nobody found her body. Her husband, a “usual suspect”, was a policeman. And this guy made a national O.J.Simpson-kind of show out of this case. For one year, he had kept the nation focused at Erodea – this was the name of that lady. The audience ratings went sky high; and he used that moment to create his own political party.

New technologies also favor the formation of new social movements (very often of an international nature) and may strengthen their organizations by representing powerful instrument of mobilization (Bennet 2008; Mosca and Vaccari 2011). This was already noticed years ago at the time when the diffusion of new communication technologies was much less developed than today (della Porta and Tarrow 2005) and the recent events in the Arab world have further demonstrated the enormous capacity of twitter and blogs in becoming an exceptional instrument of organization (Valeriani 2011).

This appears to be another step towards the progressive weakening of traditional mass parties but also towards the increasing fragmentation of the political landscape that now appears to be open to a number of different competitors very frequently without any previous traditional, political
experience. These new entities may be driven by affiliation with and sympathy for new values and attitudes that are of very different nature from the previous political ones. This is the case of the so called “lifestyle politics” that finds such a large space in the new online communities (Bennet 1998, 2003, 2008). As it is well known, in this regard scholars have talked about “post-bureaucratic” and “de-centralized” organizations stressing the changes that the internet is determining at the level of government and political organizations. The borders of these organizations are becoming blurred and their internal operations less hierarchical and less dependent on the existing formal structure (Bimber, 2003; Chadwick, 2006). This new “modus operandi” has undoubtedly favored new and smaller parties while better established and older parties have had some difficulties to adapt to the new environment (Margetts, 2006).

All this may produce a more complex political environment, crowded with competitors talking different languages, not used to the traditional ways of political bargaining, being representatives of new and different values, needs and interests. Very likely these new parties will not be able to win elections but they may increase the fragmentation of the political spectrum not rarely preventing the possibility of a clear majority within the Parliament. Enrichment of democracy? Of course, but also more complexity.

Consequences on government scrutiny. The following two sections have more speculative nature. Studies in their regard have not yet been extensively carried out even if there are indications that these tendencies may well take place.

A large part of the existing literature on internet and government stresses the positive consequences of the diffusion of the Internet. Citizens have the opportunity to have access to an enormous amount of information; government is more transparent and becomes the subject of very spread and continuous scrutiny by citizens (Klotz, 2004). But, at the same time, the development of “group polarization” we have discussed so far, may favor the isolation of the different enclaves; it may favor the isolation of what Sunstein defines the “echo chambers”, places where one can hear just his own voice or very similar voices. These groups are becoming more numerous than before but at the same time they risk becoming less powerful in front of the government as, very often, they are more interested in improving their internal capacity for deliberation than looking at alliances with other groups with whom they rarely interact as they just rely on their internal networks. This seems to be one of possible risk of the “daily me” (the metaphor for a paper that talks just of arguments that have been selected on the basis of personal preferences and attitudes) in front of the decreasing importance of “general interest intermediaries” and their capacity to build alliances among groups of different nature and affiliation (Sunstein 2007). At the end of the game, one of the possible consequences is that the watch dog function traditionally played by the news media may become weaker because of audience segmentation. Indeed, there is no doubt that the possibility of control over government may increase because of the higher number of sources of information. At the same time, it has to be recognized that the traditionally more centralized media system of the previous years was able to play a major watch dog function because of the large number of people, the famous “mass audience” that it was able to reach. Today the new media environment is characterized by news media outlets addressing “niche” audiences. Reaching a large number of people, the action of control of the “traditional” news media was very powerful as it was almost impossible for the government not to take into account criticism that was mobilizing so many citizens. If “The New York Times” was taking a position regarding a particular issue, it was almost impossible for US government not to consider this position (Hallin 1986).

Today the control exercised by a fragmented system may be weaker as each news media outlet reaches a minor number of people and therefore the pressures these people are able to exercise may obviously result in being less effective. In some way, here a strange paradox emerges: on one side
there are many more possibilities to exercise control over the rulers but, because of the fragmentation of the sources, the result of their activities of control may be weaker and scattered.

In the final remarks to his study on the anti-Iraq war demonstrations Lance Bennet raises an issue that goes along the lines of the possible weakening of scrutiny over government: “many questions can be raised about these emerging styles of activism and mobilization. Perhaps the most important issue is whether such flexible political identifications operating through such personalized political communication channels can produce the kinds of focused collective action that often seem necessary to define common goals, develop power relationships with targets of protest, and ultimately achieve political and social change.” (Bennet 2008: 286).

This is an open question that further research has to investigate.

Consequences on social and political negotiations. The advocacy and mobilization nature of many of the old and “new” news media makes the entire political environment more complex and, as said, blurred. The tendency towards forms of “governance” are favored as now many organizations may have their own “voice” on the decision making process, but, not rarely, this new “governance” becomes very complex and fragmented in multiple and often contradictory levels of interaction (Chadwick 2006). Indeed, next to traditional and more rooted political actors now a much larger number of actors exists who represent, often in a completely new way, interests, old and new, that have a very specific and not rarely temporary nature. Social movements, also because of the young age of their members and activists, greatly take advantage of these opportunities advancing their requests and using new media as mobilization tools (Bimber 2003; Nah, S., Veenstra, A. S., & Shah, D. V 2006; Shah, D. V., Cho, J., Eveland, W. P., Jr., & Kwak, N. (2005). Interest groups too are the recipients of these new possibilities (Bimber: 2003; Chadwick: 2006) and many other social actors appear on the public sphere following the opportunities offered by the Internet.

All these actors are less stable and less rooted in the community than the previous ones. Very often they are the product of contingent and temporary conditions (not rarely of some dramatic nature) that are subjects of continuous changes and interferences. Moreover these new actors don’t have well-established cultural and social roots. They are, in the words of Bruce Bimber, “postbureaucratic” organizations exposed to volatility and informality, (Bimber 2003). Very frequently they lose control over the internal and external flow of information so that they not rarely appear to be open to every kind of news and emotions (Bruce and Williams 2001; Bimber 2003). They become more vulnerable to pressures and manipulations as their identity is always under threat because of their openness (Bennet 2003).

Take the example of the Egypt and Tunisia. As said, social networks have had a major role in overthrowing the old ruling regime but now their temporary and “movement” nature is clearly emerging: often being the product of strong emotions and improvisations they are not able to express and support stable and clear issues. They are not able to represent trustable and stable interlocutors for the new regimes (Lakhani, 2001)

As previously stated, evidence of these tendencies from scholarly research is still poor and fragmented but let me give an example of this new complex framework of negotiation that depends on the process of fragmentation taken from a newspaper article. In a news story about the difficulty to approve a budget law, the Italian correspondent in Washington for the major Italian newspaper, Il Corriere della Sera, Massimo Gaggi writes: “Congressmen wander around as crazy ants also because they don’t have any more clear ideas on what public opinion believes and what their voters believe. In the era of digital technologies the old mechanisms of consensus building have disappeared. Not only the old anchormen such as Walter Cronckite who were able to strongly influence public opinion with their sober and moderate discourses don’t exist anymore. The abundance of news channels, the extreme tones of the debate on the internet and on the talk shows,
the cable televisions, from CNN to Fox, that roll their drums 24 hours a day, puzzle the spectator – voter citizen who react condemning the entire Washington and the politicians who live there. 

It is not by chance that also in the article by Massimo Gaggi the name of Walter Cronkite comes back: a clear indication that probably the era of mass audience with its heroes is over. A new era, undoubtedly more open but also more complex and, yes, blurred is starting. If it is true that, as Rodney Benson suggests (2010), the model of pluralist democracy may greatly gain advantage from the new media, at the same time it may risk implosion because of its level of complexity.

Finally, it can’t be forgotten that the complexity of social and political negotiations is further increased and fragmented by the opportunities that terrorist groups may enjoy, thanks to the internet, in getting more visibility and taking some role in the decision making process. The events in Iraq, Palestine and Afghanistan have clearly demonstrated this (Oates – Owen – Gibson, 2006). They, too, become, either officially or unofficially, players in a very complex game within which roles are not as clear as they were when the public arena was less crowded.

In the presence of a process of media fragmentation, all the consequences that have been highlighted in the previous pages are more likely to happen in transitional or new democracies where political organizations are weaker and little rooted in society. In these transitional democracies the state is still under construction and most social organizations are not so deeply rooted in society, contrary of what takes place in more stable democracies. In other words, in many transitional democracies, civil society doesn’t have any strong, institutional and political representation (Lewis, 2000). Most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe stress these features and it is not by chance that in those countries news media are so active in politics and that figures of media oligarchs have developed there (Koltsova 2006; Coman 2010).

But older and more established democracies are not free from these possible consequences. As already said, many have underlined how the process of polarization of American politics depends also on the communication choices of Fox while the Italian case of Beppe Grillo and that of the Pirates demonstrate how new media may push even further an already existing process of polarization in an established democracy like the Italian one.

Final remarks

The so called “crisis” of journalism is not just a problem of professional journalism itself. It raises questions for democracy at large. Indeed, the increased commercialization and the application of new communication technologies that seem to be at the origin of this crisis determine a new “blurred” identity of professional journalism and at the same time stress strange possible paradoxes regarding the structure of democracy. These paradoxes have not yet been addressed extensively by scholars and further research is obviously needed. The aim of this paper is also to highlight new topics for future investigations.

First paradox: more diffuse but weaker public scrutiny. There is no doubt that today public scrutiny over the rulers is more diffused as many citizens and organizations are now able to exercise that scrutiny that up to a few months ago had been reserved just to organized structures with high level of institutionalization. Now public scrutiny is more diffused but it may also be less effective as it involves fewer people at a time. The mass audience that was mobilized by the New York Times or CBS is now fragmented in many, often competing, niche audiences built upon an increased level of commercialization and the opportunities offered by new technologies. These niches audiences are characterized by the so called “echo chamber” attitude: they are self-referential and may be less available to establish collaborations and coalitions with other groups with which interactions are more difficult to be established. In the end the possibility of influencing the government may be at risk because of this fragmentation.
Second paradox: a more segmented but also more polarized public sphere. Media fragmentation may increase political polarization as seems to happen in many well established democracies and especially in those countries where the idea of “common good” is not very deeply rooted. At the same time, under some conditions, media fragmentation may foster integration as, for instance, it seems to have taken place in the Arab world (but elsewhere as well) where the new media (internet, Twitter, etc.) have been powerful instruments of mobilization against dictatorships aggregating against them citizens and organization that otherwise could not have been mobilized. Different outputs can be generated by fragmentation depending on the level of democracy consolidation, the level of social cohesion and the structure of the media system. It would be wrong to assume that just one “universal” tendency is valid for all circumstances. This is another matter of investigation.

Third paradox: extended possibilities of social aggregations but “blurred” and less stable ones. New media favor the development of new, flexible organizations such as in the case of the Pirates, Beppe Grillo and many others. These organizations appear less institutionalized and, in some way, more “blurred” than the traditional ones. They have been defined as “Post-bureaucratic” organizations (Bimber 2003). The minor level of institutionalization may cause higher levels of complexity in social and political negotiations. Today’s public sphere is crowded with a larger number of actors fostering social and political participation. At the same time, the political arena is becoming more complex: the representation of interests is more fragmented; the volatility of new actors often increases and therefore, determines problems also regarding their ability to be established as reliable and stable interlocutors for government choices and for the decision making process.

As said, much of this paper has some sort of speculative nature as it deals with processes of change that are undergoing under our eyes but this implies that new questions now face the community of scholars. Investigations are needed as to how new actors enter the political arena through the way of the web. How do they interact with the more established political actors? What kind of issue do they raise? How does this affect the political complexity of the decision making process? And, as to journalism: what kind of education is possible in this fragmented and “blurred” environment? What kind of regulations are possible and necessary? Are there evidences of a weaker public scrutiny over government? These questions pertain to both media scholarship and political science.
References


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\(^1\) Part of the data for this paper come from the Erc funded project “Media and Democracy in Central Eastern Europe” based at the University of Oxford (http://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk/).

\(^2\) http://www.cjr.org/reconstruction/the_reconstruction_of_american.php

\(^3\) With Jan Zielonka we used the expression “blurred identity” within the Erc funded project on “Media and Democracy in Central Eastern Europe) to indicate one of the featuring conditions of the media systems in Central Eastern Europe (http://mde.politics.ox.ac.uk/index.php/publications)


\(^7\) http://people-press.org/report/559/

\(^8\) C. Cain Miller and V. G. Kopytoff “Striving for a foothold as glory days fade”, in The International Herald Tribune, Friday September 9.

\(^9\) Itanes is the Italian national elections study center.

See also the debate that followed the publication of Clay Shirky article (http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67325/malcolm-gladwell-and-clay-shirky/from-innovation-to-revolution, accessed February, 7th 2012)
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