

Augusto Valeriani, *Twitter Factor. Come i nuovi media cambiano la politica internazionale*

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(*Twitter Factor: How the new media are changing international politics*)

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Twitter Factor (T-Factor) is a book that addresses a central topic for Western democracies, namely the impact that new media have on international political communication. The aim of the book is to describe how these changes have modified the 'ecology' of global media in a system of relations that is constantly changing, the nature of which affects the performance of the actors involved. In other words, the idea is to consider the media not only as a social and political infrastructure, but also as a professional and organisational one, in which a competition for the definition of reality is developing.

In this context, the T-Factor is defined as 'the set of potentials and difficulties that men of international politics and those of journalism inevitably face. Both for diplomacy and journalism, the relationship with non-professional and unorganised actors is extremely complex. For structures based on very rigid and hierarchical processes of decision-making, the Web 2.0¹ is indeed a slippery environment to explore and its inhabitants are extremely difficult interlocutors to approach' (p. 7) (reviewer's translation)

The book focuses primarily on the events that have marked the last decade, placing them within the broader discussion regarding the evolution of the role of the media in international politics. The three chapters that make up the book cover this subject through different perspectives, which are nevertheless closely interlinked, those of the role of journalism, of diplomacy and of non-governmental organisations and terrorist groups. Finally, the epilogue, introduces the complex outcomes that resulted in the rise of Wikileaks.

How has this changed journalism within war zones and the role of news correspondents? To this question the author answers by recalling how the birth of the milblogs - blogs written by troops deployed to the front - marked the entry into a new phase, starting from the Gulf War of 2003. From then on, the journalist was no longer the only voice that could communicate with the public. On the contrary he or she became one among many. From the 'paradox of the total spectator' – that is, a model of journalism based on live coverage that transforms the journalist into a viewer as well - we have gone to the 'paradox of the prescient spectator' which Valeriani uses to underline the risk that the public could produce, share or come across information

¹ Coined in 1999 by Darcy DiNucci to signify the 2nd stage of Internet development allowing the move from static web pages to interactive content and the growth of social networking.

deemed relevant before the journalistic system could. This paradox highlights two key elements within the continuing transformations. On the one hand, it stresses the importance of social media for journalists both as a source of information and as a tool to keep alive the relationships that result off-line. On the other hand, it insists that journalists still define – though weakly – what the major events are. The attention given by TV and newspapers can transform an event that would otherwise remain in the undergrowth of the Web 2.0 into a public issue. Furthermore, the journalist retains control over what Valeriani calls the ‘last mile’, which is namely the ability to interact directly with the official actors. In the current situation professional journalists cooperate with non-professionals in telling a story and defining communicational objectives. This is what is called ‘networked journalism’, an interactive process of collaboration where professionals and amateurs work together.

Diplomacy is the second most important actor in international communications whose role has changed profoundly in the last ten years. Citing several examples of US Public Diplomacy, the author identifies ‘collaborative customisation’ as one of the main innovations of public diplomacy and international political communication, produced by the Web 2.0. A process that has led to the development of a ‘widespread diplomacy’ that, in addition to professionals, requires the involvement of non-professional actors in the dissemination of messages.

Finally a rather heterogeneous group of actors has taken advantage of this renewed context which includes NGOs and terrorist groups. Although in different manners and with (mostly) different purposes, both of these actors have in fact used social media to make their organisation and communication more efficient. For these groups, however, the involvement of the traditional media - motivated by geopolitical importance, by the presence of a celebrity or their interest in the story – remains essential to ensure that the flow of information exceeds the boundaries of the Web community to reach a wider and undifferentiated public.

The last actor mentioned, Wikileaks, comprises, at least in part, the characteristics of the three cases analysed above. It participates in and contributes to the process of crisis and redefinition of journalism, it challenges states and international diplomacy and it needs to collaborate with the mainstream media in order to spread its leaks. Wikileaks is therefore a ‘bridge organisation’ that destabilises the traditional balance. On the one hand, it offers to journalism the contents of cables (and the risk of drowning under the sheer volume of them), on the other hand, in the name of transparency, it attacks the secrecy of diplomats’ work (suffering in turn from their countermeasures).

For all the cases analysed, the T-Factor is the process that leads to a new relationship between professional and organised actors and non-professional and unorganised actors that are redefining the boundaries and the balance of international political communication through the Web 2.0.

In a nutshell, the book offers an intelligent and comprehensive interpretation of the changes that Information and Communication Technology and the Web 2.0 are producing at the international level, compellingly explaining the main key points of this process and exemplifying it with several micro-stories. Re-read two years after its initial publication, the major problem of the book is that, referring to current events, it appears unfortunately to be out of date. The story of Edward Snowden and the work of the security agencies, the Egyptian case, the civil war in Syria - to name only the most significant events that have recently occurred - introduce new elements

and new dynamics that seem to extend – and possibly change – the process that the author calls the T-Factor.