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Eternal present of the spotless mind.
Youth, memory and participatory media.

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Abstract:

The paper's aim is to explore, through an empirical, qualitative research (focus groups conducted in Turin with preadolescents, adolescents and university students) if web 2.0 can constitute a suitable environment for discussing, sharing and elaborating historical public events and contemporary issues. The research states that web 2.0 is not really decisive for sharing practices related to memory. Web 2.0 is rather a place where people can talk about everyday lives. Most important are, instead, the traditional *off line* agencies, such as family and peer group.

From the point of view of young people interviewed, media elaborate and give relevance to events that should not have so much relevance. Young people's memory though, doesn't have any specific features – it's not *specialized* - ; it seems to be aligned to the global and mediatized representation of a recent past.

1. INTRODUCTION: MEMORY AND MEDIA

At the crossroads between new network environments and digital media, the participatory web raises new and complex issues related to individual and social memory which through those media is expressed, represented and shared.

The debate about memory obtained a renewed interest in the last decades in relation with the spread of the digital media and the World Wide Web. We could point out, among the others, two main approaches to the memory issue.

The first approach focuses basically on the new kind of supports for memory: digital media and new technologies for information storage and retrieval provide individuals and institutions with extremely efficient tools for managing end preserving memories. Digital memories such as cd-rom, dvd, the World Wide Web itself, proved to be new support for historical documents, text, audio and video with huge potentials in terms of storage capabilities and easiness of access. This approach emphasized then the issues related to reliability, security, and persistence of digital memory compared, for example, with traditional archives based on paper and magnetic tapes. In spite of their evident potentials, how could people and institution in fact could trust new digital media supports whose future development was, at that time, still unforeseeable? As far as we are concerned, that approach affects basically the domain of cultural heritage and traditional institutions such as museums, libraries, archives as we can infer from a number of publications (Gregory, Morelli, 1994; Morelli, Ricciardi, 1997; Spazianti, 2005; Vitali, 2004,). At the crossroads of multiple disciplines, - archive and museum studies, biblioteconomy, computer science, computer engineering etc. - this heterogeneous domain was characterized by an operational insight focused on finding design and technical solutions to the problem of the storage of documents and multimedia evidences on stable supports.

The second approach, more sociological and psychological, deals instead with the concept of social memory and the relation with new digital media of communication. This field of studies concentrates on cultural processes and social relations - on communication - where social memory is conceived as an ongoing process with multiples dimensions and relations with time and space.

This approach is strictly connected with media studies and cultural studies, and it focuses on transformations produced by digital media and network on communication processes

and mental framework. Although some positions had seemed too deterministic or radical, e.g. the Toronto school theories (McLuhan 1962; Goody, Watt 1968), others emphasized the more complex socio-technical contest which affects social memory and its latest translations. Memory is, in fact, conceived as a complex phenomenon articulated in different dimensions: social structures, human relations, technologies, media etc.

Although those different positions, a new central relation between media and memory rises up enhancing the role of communication in the dissemination, development and sharing of social representations of the past.

2. THE COMMUNICATIVE MEMORY AND PARTICIPATORY MEDIA

Communicative memory is the object of new or renewed processes of appropriation, representation and communication. *Communicative memory* refers to a recent past, evolves through the communication among the witnesses of a specific event, it involves the group of peers who share a common and recent past. This memory relies upon a biographic memory (unlike *cultural memory* which relates to a mythical past) and it has a widespread, participatory structure. Memory, though, is committed to common people: unlike *cultural memory*, *communicative memory* hasn't any "specialist". Some people remember more than others, elders rather than young people, but there aren't any exclusive *collective memory-holders*. This kind of memory is acquired through daily communication, face-to-face or mediated by new technologies (Assman, 1997: 30-35)[1].

Roger Silverstone defines memory as a new "battle ground" for the contemporary society: a strategic and controversial place where individual and collective identity definition processes are brought into play. It's a contested field in which new and old media play a central role: -"*Media* - Silverstone states - *intentionally or automatically represent tools for expressing memory, a memory which is public, popular, penetrating, plausible and then irresistible and sometime constraining. What implications come out from the way media "play" with our past, as narrators, archives, memories providers?"* - (Silverstone, 2002: 199). Media take possession of the collective representations, -"(...) *in absence of other sources, media have the power to define the past: they show and represent the past. Media claim an historical authority in fiction and documentaries: versions of realism which haven't any other reference besides of other fictions or images. The call for witnesses, the reconstruction of situations and contacts, the discovery of the evidence, the rhetoric of the truth, in here as well as elsewhere, the statement of a memory emerges, a definition of the past; this is what really happened: his image*» - (Silverstone, ib.: 200).

The importance of images is a persistent feature which goes through the arts of memory since ancient times: Latin authors' rhetoric was based on *loci*, the mental images of places, while the gothic cathedral glasses or the complex memory's theatres in the XVI century (Yates, 1966), proved the role of images as tools for sharing and representing memory, techniques for memorizing and object of collective memory at the same time, images of a lost past and devices for bringing memories to a new life. Silverstone point out the persistence of those aspects in contemporary media: they in fact tend to re-create a public past and a past for the public (Silverstone, ib.: 201). Through and thanks to media, besides, public images are intertwined with individual and private memories: our personal past is tied to the images and sounds of a mediated past which has the power to deny, to replace individuals' memory with the mediatized ones.

If mass media, cinema and television, play a strategic role as providers of a shared imaginary made of visions, characters, stories in which, the individuals experiences and the memory distortion produced by large screens are strictly intertwined, what is the role of new participatory media in the 2.0 scenario (Jenkins, 2006)?

[1] For an interesting in-depth examination of the collective knowledge of public events, see Tota, A.L. (2004).

Digital media and Internet tend to mess up the conventional roles and identities of the memories subjects. Interactivity and real-time communication compress, as ever before in Western society, the times of production, sharing and elaboration of any content or individual and collective memory. Manuel Castells identify the singularity of network culture in *interoperability* (Castells, 2001: 190-192) : the opportunity for subjects to access, to mix multiples sources and contents independently from the ties and conventions of their traditional cultural formats. It seems that network could melt the different representation levels of memory in a single flat and horizontal timeline which removes the distances, brings the past closer to the present, condense the history. Castells writes: - " *The lack of time in multimedia hypertext is a central aspect in our culture which reshape minds and the memories of our children risen up in the new cultural environment [.....] We're facing though, a culture which is eternal and ephemeral at the same time. Eternal because is spreading forward and back through the entire sequence of cultural expressions. It's ephemeral though, because every single configuration, every single sequence relies upon the context and the objective for which a cultural fact is required and elaborated. We're not in a culture of circularity, but in an universe of an undifferentiated temporality of cultural expressions "* - (Castells, 2002: 526).

3. THE DESIGN OF THE RESEARCH

Starting from those theoretical assumptions, the paper will try to investigate if and in what measure young people could be conceived as particular subjects of memory and how the use of the participatory media may affect the elaboration, sharing and preserving their memory.

This research is based on data collected with focus group[2], which is a qualitative method based on conversations on a given topic, at the presence of a moderator.

We realized five focus group in the city of Turin (in the course of 2010) with preadolescents, adolescents and young people. We chose to conduct homogenous focus groups with people having similar experiences: young people (a mix of boys and girls) of low secondary school, young people of high secondary school and university students.

The hypothesis of the research is that the new media environments and in particular web 2.0 can help young people to elaborate their so called *specialized memory*.

Firstly, the aim is to explore if web 2.0 is used to discuss global events or rather events which concern their personal everyday lives and biographies. Those main research questions will be articulated in other more specific questions such as those pertaining the facts of memory: which events could be considered the most common to young people's memory? So, the object and the target of this study are the specific witnesses of communicative memory: young people and their practices of remembering and oblivion, their processes of sharing and storing memories.

Secondly, the research is oriented to explore who are the privileged agents who take part in the process of creating, debating and sharing their social memories: parents, schoolmates and teachers, or peer group.

For this extent, the interview guide was organized in several parts. In the first part there is an introduction with a presentation of participants (name, studies, hobbies, etc.), in the central part there are some questions about the following thematic areas:

- The definition of social or public events which have perceived as significant for young people's memory and lives;
- The role of family, media and other socialization agencies to construct and share public memories;
- The techniques eventually used by interviewees to collect documents about the public events;
- The use and perception of web 2.0 and his future (in particular the use of social networks).

[2] For a complete analysis of focus group technique see Krueger, R.A. (1994).

In order to interpret collected data, the focus group were recorded, transcripted and analyzed to locate semantic areas to organize the different positions, featuring patterns, themes and perspectives.

4. FROM 2.0 GENERATION TO MEMORY TRACKS. YOUNG PEOPLE AS MEMORY SUBJECTS?

Young people (11 – 25) were chosen as a particular target for this research, for two main reasons: they are heavy users of digital media and networks. They are considered as *pioneers* and *innovators* in the use of new technologies (Rogers, 2003) and especially new tools of communication and they make a particularly significant contribution to the diversification of media uses within the home through their eager adoption of multiple media goods.

Teen agers and young adults could be, secondly, the subjects of a *specialized memory* (Esposito, 2001). In her recent work about social memory, Elena Esposito, in fact, argues about the consequences of the lack of an unitary notion of culture typical of the post-modern era. This "culture gap" is reflected also in a lack of an unitary social memory which appears instead specified in several, functional social memories which correspond to different social groups (Esposito, ib., 178).

The reflection about media role in the construction of communicative memory is involved in a larger frame, that implies the sphere of effective young people's cultural consumption and the attitudes towards the various media environments.

The members of digital generation are engaging in new media in very different ways from those of older generations. The generation of adolescents and preadolescents could be defined as a *post-television* one, grown into a communicative environment characterized by the presence of digital media and, in particular, of web 2.0, that has determined a change of paradigm in the practices of media production and media consumption, towards participation and sharing.

In his book *Convergence culture*, Henry Jenkins describes the new participatory culture, where consumers are enabled to archive, annotate, appropriate and re-circulate media content and where every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms. For the first time children and teens assume an active role and are not only passive spectators. This scenario can be defined as a *digital revolution*: online communication, social network sites, online games, video-sharing sites, iPods, mobile phones have permeated people lives and that implies a cultural revolution (Jenkins, 2006).

The new media environment, inhabited by youth, is characterized by interactive media and media for social communication. These new practices are associated with youth culture, with their lives. This new media "mood" is oriented to participation and to digital media production (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning, 2008).

From the point of view of technological changes, we can observe, from the end of the '90, a radical change of young people's media diets. With the diffusion of the digitalization of information and of media convergence, young people's cultural consumption became to characterize their self for a prevalence of *interactivity* and *mobility*. The "imperialism" of television consumption has been gradually replaced by the relevance of new media, beginning from videogames, pc, Internet, until the mobile phone.

Web 2.0[3] implies, as a qualitative further progression, the presence of *User-Generated Content* or *UGC*, that means contents made by users, such as digital video, blog, podcast,

[3] The term Web 2.0 was coined by Tim O'Reilly referring to the transition to a full participatory Web. Web 2.0, differently from Web 1.0, is characterized as a two-way medium, where people are both readers and writers. The main catalyst for this is social software, allowing communication and collaboration between two or more people. Besides, the web is seen as a programming platform upon which developers create software applications. The main catalyst for this is Application Programming Interfaces, or APIs, allowing communication between two or more software applications. So this term is commonly associated with web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centred design, and

photos taken by mobile phones, wikis. This kind of contents are often published in social network sites such as *MySpace*, *Friendster*, *Xanga*, *Facebook*, where people subscribe themselves in order to meet new people, sharing tastes and desires, but also documents and digital resources, establishing a deeply emotional relationship and taking advantage of relational and sharing practices and contents potentialities. Social networks sites, online games, video-sharing sites, supports such as iPods and mobile phones *"have so permeated young lives that it is hard to believe that less than a decade ago these technologies barely existed. Today's youth may be coming of age and struggling for autonomy and identity as did their predecessors, but they are doing so amid new worlds for communication, friendship, play, and self-expression"* (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning, 2008).

Moreover, web 2.0 is the most evident expression of the transition from a "Gutenberg mode" of knowledge transmission to the new "connective intelligence" typical of contemporary informational societies.

As Marc Prensky suggests, the right designation for the young generation should be *Digital Natives*. It means that young people are "native speakers" of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet, because they were born in the digital world. On the other side, adults should be defined as *Digital Immigrants*: they learn to adapt to their environment and, at the same time, they always retain, to some degree, their specific "accent" (Prensky, 2001).

The "digital immigrant accent" can be seen in such things as turning to the Internet for information second rather than first, or in reading the manual for a program rather than assuming that the program itself will teach us to use it, or printing out your email; needing to print out a document written on the computer in order to edit it..

5. CLASSIFYNG EVENTS

So, the role of media is very relevant in these practices of memory elaboration, because hold and new communication technologies are both embedded in the everyday practices and mediate events, values and other social forms:

"*Cultural and individual memory are constantly produced through, and mediated by, the technologies of memory. The question of mediation is thus central to the way in which memory is conceived in the fields of study of visual culture, cultural studies and media studies. This means that concepts of memory in these fields tend to consider it dynamic, contagious and highly unstable – the famous photograph becomes a part of an individual's memory and personal memory is incorporated into a narrative film; we all have 'personal' memories that come to us not from our individual experience but from our mediated experience of photographs, documentaries and popular culture*" (Sturken, 2008: 75) and

"*the term 'cultural memory' highlights the extent to which shared memories of the past are the product of mediation, textualization and acts of communication*" (Rigney, 2005: 14).

One of the first results of this research project concerns the different kind of events that emerges from interviewees discourses. The knowledge and the social representations about these events is often mediated by mass media and new communication technologies.

We can distinguish these events:

- *historical events*, such as September 11th , Obama's election, Prodi's resignation;
- *trans-generational events*, such as the 1st and the 2nd World War;
- *events mediated by mass media and new media*, such as Michael Jackson or Luciano Pavarotti or Giovanni Agnelli's death; Pope Jean Paul II's death and the election of Pope Benedict XVI; the Fifa World Cup; the Tsunami, Aquila and Haiti earthquakes; 2006 Turin Olimpic Games;

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collaboration on the World Wide Web. Besides, web 2.0 implies the birth of new teaching and learning forms.

- *events that constitute sociocultural trends*: *berlusconism* (related to Berlusconi phenomenon) or terrorism;
- *events related to media products: the come out of Titanic, Harry Potter books, The Lord of the rings, Avatar and so on,* or the come out of technologies supports such as I-pod, I-pad and so on.

There are also other events, most related to actuality, and not so covered by traditional media. For example events like the "mad cow disease" or "human genome mapping".

Among the meaningful historical events, the most cited by young people is doubtless the 9/11 2001:

"9/11 is the first who came in my mind. I just remember I was ....it was 2001, I think, so I was ten, I was at the primary school and I remember I came home, probably it happened already in the morning, I can't remember what time was it, but I remember it was something striking...everyone was shocked, everyone got the news .. here is it. Everyone knew that and ...the news shocked the world and it changed also the way of thinking, the western culture ..in worst ...because from then ..well... many things realted to terrorism started, so the fear towards immigrants raised up... ethnical conflicts in general "[V (F), 18] [4].

…I was afraid there was a war here...[…]. My generation will die like that....I will die in a terrorist attack...[,,,] the 9/11 threw me in another world I didn't know…[V (M), 26];

for me is really difficult to recall that tragical moment .. I can't explain how much important was that event in my perception" [A (F), 23].

The Twin Towers collapse though, emerges clearly in an empty scenario which hasn't any other connections with a recent past. The only other significant event cited was Barack Obama election. A third fact finally, regards a kind of *habitus* or culture, rather than a specific media event. This "fact" distinguish the last twenty years of Italian history:

My best memories start from primary school... and that period corresponded to different political events which....this emphasis on the coolest, the most macho..[E (F), 19].

Berlusconi can say whatever he wants on his televisions. Some people of our generation have been "brainwashed", because they are grown in this way. If there isn't anyone that helps you to reflect, young people can probably fall in this way of life [A (M), 20];

By now, my peers meet each other in *non-places*. Even music become a product, everything is reduced to appearance, there is no more a real interest in things [A (M), 20] .

In this sense, the *Berlusconi phenomenon*, seems to define the memory of this generation, even if it doesn't correspond exclusively with a single and recognizable event. This phenomenon identifies an attitude based on the appearance in the absence of any other values and political concerns. Berlusconi is an icon or a lifestyle, but young people interpret it as something distant from their world and their point of view.

There is also a memory dimension related to the images of current events: for example images connected to Berlusconi "entering the field": were the images spread by his television networks, in 90's, precisely in 1994.

The role of the family is also very important to mediate memory facts: the I and II World War, for example, are mentioned by young people because they become aware of the importance of this events thanks to the narrations of their grandparents.

6. YOUNG PEOPLE AND WEB 2.0: A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP?

[4] From now on, in square brackets, we will indicate noun initial, genre and age of participants to focus group.

The focus groups realized in Turin identify a really controversial relation with generalist media and digital technologies. This relation is characterized by prejudices and strict positions which don't correspond to the relation they actually have with the different multimedia tools they daily use (this relation is reported by the subjects of the focus themselves and it's also documented in several researches about cultural practices of youth[5]). The subjects we interviewed in fact, are "heavy" network users: even if they're Facebook *"posters"* and instant messenger users, they seem to deny the value of those tools and the importance of the generalist television.

The most common prejudices involve:

- the *social image of Television* (even defined "second mother"), considered the medium of superficiality and ostentation;
- the *opposition between a virtual reality produced by Internet and "the" reality of face to face relations*:

> once was better because there were more personal relations [...] nowadays people get apart [V (F), 18].

- the *general emptying of values* which would identify youth, apart from the young we interviewed who don't recognize themselves in "that youth" and tend to replace it with a more encouraging self-representation:

My generation just live with television, computer ...many people's culture is just based on Studio Aperto or even... When I watch the news on tv, I try always to assume a critical attitude, with a filter in mind, I try to catch the news from whom.. why....[…] I'd like to have a group of friends to hang out with and talk to ... everything is useless. I find hard to go out with people of my age. None has interest, an ideal....[A (M), 20].

Web 2.0 tools are used to discuss current events (Eluana Englaro, Iranian revolution, Lega's landslide victory, Rosarno facts)

> media don't cover issues that should be covered, for example Rosarno facts… have been just neglected, young people doesn't have a political culture. [G (f) 23].

Skype, MSN Messenger and even Facebook, are used by students of the secondary school to share the everyday facts both with peer group and with familiars.
Young people about 18 show a critical opinion towards Facebook, but they use it very frequently. Finally, university students have a realistic, pragmatic and disillusioned approach.
Facebook is perceived as a potentially large memory archive and a big container that has enclosed everything (Youtube, Flickr, mobile phone) and is a way to meet people, rather than a way to delve into problems. The elaborations of problems (in deep) take rather place into specialized channels. Finally, interrogated about Facebook future, young people interviewed says that Facebook will disappear or, at the contrary, that it will replace television.

7. CONCLUSIONS: A GENERATION WITHOUT MEMORY?

"in my opinion that's a circle…we'll forget what has happened [...] the more we move forward the more we'll lose the sense of the past" [A (M), 20]

[5] See Tirocchi, Andò. Antenore (2002), Gay, Mazali, Monaci, Taddeo, (2008). See also A.A.V.V. (2007), Pasquali F., Scifo B., Vittadini N. (2010).

A "weak" memory, where events lose their specific temporal dimension, seems to be the general impression which distinguishes young people's answers. The idea of powerful media, often attributed to a bad television, enemy of critical thinking, is a prejudice shared also by the groups interviewed. We can notice also that, together with the despise toward television, young people don't rely upon web 2.0, in order to establish authentic relationships based on meaningful communications. Memories, which are not spoiled by the "eternal present television", are to be found in private memories, such as personal diaries and photo albums. Nevertheless, those private memories are never recalled in public discourses neither in the web 2.0 environments.

So, young people are not subject without memory. Memory is elaborated and shared some other ways. For example, according to their reports it seems that young people use traditional paper supports such as newspapers articles which are selected and stored in private. Memory is also to be found in novels which, more than other media, offer a more faithful portrait of our contemporary society. In this sense Federico Moccia's novels may represent the mirror for this generation, while Marco Travaglio's books represent a way to get a deeper comprehension of the political changes.

A perspective for the future will be, as the young people say, the live streaming technology, which could be allowed by internet broadband.

Moreover, from the point of view of young people interviewed, media elaborate and give relevance to events that should not have so much relevance. For example, the *Cogne case*[6], has been covered by media for several months and has been constructed "as an event" even for young memory; nevertheless, when interrogated, young people don't consider that fact so significant for them.

And there is another remark: a great part of memory events are mediated and not personally lived. In fact, "cultural and individual memory are constantly produced through, and mediated by, the technologies of memory". So, "what is important for the media is not as well always important for people".

Unlike our starting hypothesis, our exploratory research points out that young people haven't any *specialized memory*: their memories are rather related to the mediated representations of a recent past. The reference to such global events as the 11/9 or the Obama's election, or the media ceremonies such as Jean Paul II's death or Giovanni Agnelli's funeral etc. prove that young people's memory is connected to a global media dimension shared by different generations.

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[6] The so-called *Cogne case* (known in Italian as *caso Cogne*) involved the death of 3-year-old Samuele Lorenzi on 31 January 2002 while sleeping in her parents' bed in his family home in the mountain village of Cogne, a mountain town in Aosta Valley, northern Italy.

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