VareseNews

The noise polluting the Web

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"What has discussion on the Internet in 2010 become?"

Gianni Riotta, the director of the newspaper Sole 24ore, has published a long editorial on the alarming state of the Internet. "Dear, old Internet go to www.verità" is the title of the article under the banner "The decline of the Web".

Riotta adopts some arguments of Jaron Lanier, one of the first gurus of Silicon Valley, who is worried about "the levelling of online contents that search engines, like Google, and the user-written encyclopaedia, Wikipedia, have brought about on the Web."

The director does not only blame the popular search engine and the world's biggest encyclopaedia, but attacks the Web 2.0, blogs, and a certain direction in which the Internet is going. "Every day, putting the thoughts of philosophers together with the angry fits of a man in front of his lukewarm cappuccino, and the economic analysis of a Nobel prize winner with the outburst of some gal next door, without any selection process, may be celebrated by the naïve as 'open sourcing' and 'Web democracy'."

Thus, he raises an important question that often emerges from the reflections of Internet users. How can we ensure worthwhile participation without losing quality?

"The Web is, and will continue to be our future," continues Riotta. "Our children will reason on the Web. The role of informing critical public opinion will increasingly pass from the paper to the Web. So we cannot allow hooligans to pollute it with their noise, but must guarantee information, culture and excellence, over making everything the same."

How can we not agree? And what should we do? What strategies should we implement?

With this article, however, it seems that Riotta is taking a step back, almost apologising for his firm support, in the past, of a greater spread of the Web.

Michele Mezza is right in saying that the Internet is not a simple instrument of communication, it is an alphabet. It is something that is anthropologically altering our daily deeds. The concepts of space and time undergo profound mutations, and it is normal that we should be irritated by this "drift" of the Internet towards vulgarisation. But surely, it cannot be this that scares those in charge of communication.

The great merit of the Internet is that it has increased, by an incredible extent, the

number of readers that use information. Until today, its evolution entailed a search for increasing interaction among its users. The development of social networks followed the extraordinary "wiki" phenomenon. There is a desire to participate actively, a desire to extend a narrative, even starting from facts of simple everyday life.

But unfortunately, this is not all. And reading the comments that often appear in our and other newspapers will highlight this fact. A sense of rancour, of contempt for others, of anger, the inability to have serious, positive thoughts emerge, together with much more. And the anonymity that we accept encourages this mode of expression. Everything is true. So what? It is painful to admit it, but we must have the courage to say clearly that this is all a reflection of what we are experiencing. Those who are responsible for retelling society's stories, as well as facts, have to decide on the priorities. They have the power and the duty to ask questions, of others, but also of themselves. And the first question for those who work on the Web and in journalism today is what should the role of people be.

Fortunately, we cannot choose our readers. They are what they are. We might remove offensive, violent, or the more destructive comments, but doing more would mean giving up our freedoms and, most of all, the chance to read about the state of the world. Readers' comments express humanity and inhumanity, profundity and superficiality. It is then the role of us communication "professionals" to give more or less space to matters.

According to Edgar Morin, 88, one of the greatest thinkers alive today, "the Web can help to create peace and freedom, but also the opposite. On the Internet, there is a clash between two types of ethics: the ethics of freedom, which gives space to all opinions, even those that oppose freedom, and the ethics of human understanding, which are connected with the universal nature of the Internet, which go beyond simple communication. Communication just transfers information, which must be organised and contextualised to become knowledge. The next step is human understanding, but, for this, there must be some empathy and sympathy among people."

As well as seeking to increase participation and to continue its expansion, we must discover how to keep in consideration the quality of communication and of relationships.

However, we cannot forget that here, in Italy, there is a serious problem of culture and of education, and if we fail to consider this, any reasoning will be of little use. We will increasingly have the noise and comments of the stadium. This is a price we must pay. We must be aware of this, and Riotta was right in raising the question.

The director ends his article with ironic hints at those who fill the Web with insults and nonsense of various kinds. But first he makes a number of positive considerations.

"Let's bring back to the Web those canons of serenity, authority, vivacity, commitment, goodwill, debate and criticism that have always been the trademark of freedom, honesty, reason, without losing the richness, spontaneity, and equality." And he continues, "The Internet in 2010 must become this city of equality: where experts and quality information speak to the people, and the people make their voices heard without anonymous rancour and madness."

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redazione@varesenews.it