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# SOCIAL REPRESENTATION AND COMMUNICATION THEMATIC NETWORK: A CASE STUDY FOR MONITORING THE DEVELOPMENT OF A SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY

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## Introduction

The International Network on *Social Representations and Communication* (So.Re.Com) is a unique scenario in which eCompetence acquires new importance and meaning. This article describes the network's principal objectives and the approaches being taken to realise these. First, however, the work is contextualised by reviewing representations and perceptions of the Internet in the academic literature, an overview which will also be of value to those working in the field of eCompetence.

### 1. The Internet as a new arena and observatory for the construction and investigation of social representations

During the International Conferences on *Social Representations* held in Mexico (Mexico City, 1998) and in Canada (Montreal, 2000), a number of round-table discussions took place with researchers focusing on communicative actions and interactions within cyber-space. The main objective of these contributions was to stress how, for several reasons, the exponential growth of communication via the Internet (and the different growth speed in different areas around the globe) represented an opportunity of undeniable interest for social psychologists involved in research on social representations and multimedia communications.

This interest was guided by the conviction that *virtual communities* on the web are not only a space for exchange of information, but also for constructing experiences through computer mediated interactions and social representations in action 'on' and 'by' the Internet. In other words, the idea was that the *social world rebuilds itself in cyber-space*. It positions individuals and groups within only apparently invisible social structures and with the apparent absence of social roles and communicative constraints; in a space where theoretically any person, group, company or institution in the world may reach and be reached by anyone in the world. The main assumption was that the exponential growth of communication via the Internet was not just an impressive phenomenon, but a cultural 'issue' that, although not yet sufficiently and coherently studied in the scientific research literature, has been widely reported on generally in the social sciences, mainly in social psychology. As Leah Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (2002) state at the end of their introduction to the *Handbook of New Media*, "...at least until very recently, little new media or ICT related research has found its way into the most prestigious, core or mainstream journals in communication research, sociology, social psychology, education, law, economics or political science".

However, the meagre empirical record is still marked by the kind of questions that arose in the "pre-www" era, that is, before 1995, when computer-mediated communication was a small affair that concerned a few hundred thousand devoted users. This is particularly the case for the questions that dominated the debate on the social dimensions of the Internet during the 1990s. Contrasting vs.

integrative perspectives about 'virtual' communities still characterise the *controversy about the Internet's social dimension*.

Among the general public, and experts as well, social representations of the Internet are still extremely polarised between negative and positive connotations. On the first hand there are the "apocalyptic," who associate the Internet with a dehumanised being, alone in front of his computer, lost among web pages in solitary navigation (possibly, in the public imagination at least, in search of pornographic sites!). Commenting on this usage trend, philosopher Umberto Galimberti (1999) coined a very evocative metaphor when he spoke of "mass hermits". He identified these as the growing number of people who remain glued for hours in front of screens in their own rooms or in Internet cafes, connected "at a distance" but locally disconnected from the other equally "solitary" individuals seated in hundreds of occupied workstations. Rather than progress in communication, not a few authoritative voices characterise the Internet as a de-socialising element.

However, the ranks of the "integrated" (as expressed by Umberto Eco, 1997) are no less numerous. In weighing the social effects and dimensions connected to the relationship between the social and digital universes, even the press reflects this contrast, sometimes publishing ancient antinomies inherent in the man-machine relationship and reserving the most descriptive and least value laden tones for the more purely technological aspects.

Offering conflicting responses corroborated by different experimental data, Manuel Castells (2000: 386) synthesised the question experts ask themselves: "Does the Internet favour the development of new communities, virtual communities, or, instead, is it inducing personal isolation, severing people's ties with society, and ultimately, with their "real" world?" Rebecca A. Clay (2000) asks the same question in a special edition of the American journal *Monitor on Psychology* entirely dedicated to the Internet (vol. 31, n°. 4, April, 2000) "Is the Internet enhancing interpersonal connections or leading to greater social isolation?"

According to Castell's integrative views, the answer to the question is "are virtual communities real communities?" We might answer both: "Yes and no".

*"They are communities, but not physical ones, and they do not follow the same patterns of communication and interaction as physical communities do. But they are not "unreal"; they work in a different plane of reality. They are interpersonal social networks; most of them based on weak ties, highly diversified and specialised, still able to generate reciprocity and support by the dynamics of sustained interaction. As Wellman puts it, they are not imitations of other forms of life, they have their own dynamics: the Net is the Net. They transcend distance, at low cost, they are usually of asynchronous nature, they combine the fast dissemination of mass media with the pervasiveness of personal communication, and they allow multiple memberships in partial communities. Besides, they do not exist in isolation of other forms of sociability"* (M. Castells, 2000, vol. I, 389).

Looking beyond the controversial aspects of the issue, one can nevertheless agree with Castells that the socio-cultural patterns of the new multi-media systems as a "symbolic" environment are:

1. Widespread social and cultural differentiation leading to the segmentation of the users/viewers/readers/listeners. Not only are the messages segmented by markers following senders' strategies, but they are also increasingly diversified by users of the media, according to their interests, taking advantage of interactive capacities. ...*"Prime time is my time"* (ibid: 401).
2. Increasing social stratification among users. Not only will the choice of multimedia be restricted to those with the time and money for access, and to countries and regions with enough market potential, but also cultural/educational differences will be decisive in using interaction to the advantage of each user. Information about what to look for and the knowledge how to use the message will be essential to truly experience a system different

from standard customised mass media. Thus, the multi-media world will be populated by two essentially distinct populations: the *interacting* and the *interacted*, meaning those who are able to select their multidirectional circuits of communication, and those who are provided with a restricted number of pre-packaged choices. And who is what will be largely determined by class, race, gender and country (ibid: 402).

3. The communication of all kinds of messages in the same system, even if the system is interactive and selective. In fact, precisely because of this, it induces an *integration of all messages into a common cognitive pattern*. From the perspective of the user, (in an interactive system, both receiver and sender), the choice of various messages in the same communication mode, with easy switching from one to the other, reduces the mental distance between various sources of cognitive and sensorial involvement. *The issue at stake is not that the medium is the message: messages are messages*. And because they keep their distinctiveness as messages, while being mixed in their symbolic communication process, they blur their codes in the process, creating a multifaceted semantic context made of a random mixture of various meanings (ibid: 403).
4. Finally, perhaps *the most important feature of multimedia* is that they capture within their domain most cultural expressions, in all their diversity. Their advent is tantamount to ending the separation, and even the distinction, between audio-visual media and printed media, popular culture and learned culture, entertainment and information, education and persuasion. Every cultural expression, from the worst to the best, from the most elitist to the most popular, comes together in this digital universe that links up in a giant, non-historical hypertext, past, present and future manifestations of the communicative mind. By doing so, they construct a new symbolic environment. *They make virtuality our reality*. (ibid: 403)

Not only economists, technicians and engineers, but also social psychologists can provide some explanations for what Charles Leadbeater (1999) has called the new era of “*Living on thin air*.” That is, we are experiencing a new way for the creation of wealth, no longer based on tangible products, but on ideas and on the Internet, apparently on almost nothing. Our task might be to give a social meaning for this “*almost nothing*”.

The round-table sessions mentioned earlier were focused on discussing key issues related to the new media’s impact on communication activities and social practices among *lay people* in order to highlight the interest of this area for research in social representations. In this paper, the focus will be mainly on exploring a *case study* of a *community of social scientists* linked via the SOcial REpresentations and COMmunication THEmatic NETwork.

## **2. The *networking society* and new social morphology in the Internet era**

Jankowski (2002) identifies three waves in studying the possible relations between community and media. The first wave has its origins in the classical studies carried out under the auspices of the Chicago School in the 1920s, initially looking at the role of newspapers in integrating individuals into a community. For example, they investigated ties between communities of residents in rural and urban/cosmopolitan areas and their interests, preferences and attitudes as readers of the print media (newspaper) both oriented towards local news and news from outside the regions. The second wave of the studies was concerned with community and media developed in the late 1960s and 1970s when small-scale electronic *community media* emerged with the development of portable video recording technology, cable television distribution systems as an extension of print technologies and a diverse range of mediated forms of communication. These included electronic media such as radio and television, print media such as newspaper and magazines and later electronic network initiatives embracing characteristics of both traditional print and electronic media. The third wave is identified with the Internet era and new formulations of the concept of community and network.

Sociologist Manuel Castells'<sup>1</sup> multivolume “*The rise of network society*” (2000) represents a milestone for understanding the phenomenon of the *networking society* and the new forms of cooperation and interactions supported by the exponential growth of communication through the Internet. His approach stems from the conviction that “we have extended a truly multicultural, interdependent world which can only be understood and changed from a plural perspective that brings together cultural identity, global networking and multidimensional politics.” (*ibid* vol. I: 27)

CMC networks, both inside and outside the Internet, are characterised by their pervasiveness, their multi-faceted decentralisation and their flexibility. They spread like colonies of micro organisms. They will increasingly reflect commercial interests, as well as expanding the controlling logic of major public and private organisations into the whole realm of communication (*ibid*, vol. I:385).

This dynamic introduces us to the social dimensions in Internet diffusion. Unlike the mass media of the McLuhan Galaxy, they have the technologically and culturally embedded properties of interactivity and individualisation. Do these potentialities, however, translate into *new patterns of communications*? What are the cultural attributes that are emerging from the process of electronic interaction? In this scenario, networks constitute the new social morphology of our societies and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in process and production, experience, power and culture. The networking logic induces a social determination of a higher level than that of the specific social interests expressed through the networks: “The “power of the flows” takes precedence over the “flows of power”. Presence or absence in the network and the dynamics of each network vis-à-vis others are a critical source of domination and change” (*ibid* vol. I: 501).

By focusing on the *unequal speed* in Internet diffusion<sup>2</sup>, it is not unimportant who had earlier access and to what. Unlike television, by providing content and shaping the web, Internet consumers are also its producers. Thus, the vastly unequal arrival time of societies into the Internet constellation will have lasting consequences on the future pattern of the world’s communication and culture. Diffusion and development of the Internet is very unbalanced among continents and countries. *There is inequality in the diffusion of the Internet around the world*, which is lagging behind North America and the developed countries. However, Internet access and use are catching up rapidly in the main metropolitan centres on all continents. Within various countries, social, racial, gender, age and spatial inequality in Internet access is still substantial. Matthew Zook's<sup>3</sup> pioneering work (2000) provides evidence from around the world on the high concentration of commercial Internet domains in metropolitan hubs and in North America and Europe, as compared to other continents.

### **3. Are we, as social scientists and academics, ready to pro-actively integrate our scientific community in a digital network?**

As academics we are supposed to be very familiar with new technologies. For at least two decades, the use of email has been a daily tool for exchange in the scientific community, compared to its introduction in other work/organisational settings or the more recent home use by all family members. This is also the case for other multiple uses of the Internet as a tool for information retrieval, exchange and discussion (newsgroups, forum discussion and chat lines), for economic transactions (e-commerce), and for locating individuals, organisations and institutions in cyberspace (websites) etc.

However, reluctance factors still exist for the more advanced and intensive uses of new interactive media as well as the social representation (discussed earlier) of computer mediated communication as a dehumanising form of interaction. This is anchored to the metaphor of human beings reduced to

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<sup>1</sup> described by *The Economist* as the “first significant *philosopher* of cyberspace”

<sup>2</sup> nor should we forget the origins of the Internet (ARPAnet in the 1970s) in military research as an elite channel for technical communication.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Zook, <http://www.zook.info/>

mechanical artifacts and is widespread not only amongst lay people, but also among academics. This phenomenon is especially true for those academics working in the humanities and, of course, more widespread among members of the older generations, but not necessary restricted to them. It is a matter of record that most distance teaching courses and eLearning programs are still produced and diffused in the area of the so-called hard sciences such as physics, mathematics, engineering sciences and informatics.

This is true not only for training and teaching activities, but also for the different forms of distance research co-operation in the social sciences. We could conduct a simple test in the field of Social Representations and Social Psychology to investigate just how few studies have been conducted via online web based communication. Of course, we cannot completely replace traditional techniques familiar to social psychologists, especially when they include direct and interactive contact with people observed in their own physical contexts and places. However, it still remains to be explained why we prefer closed ended questionnaires and their related evaluative attitudes and system of opinions to investigate representations, or why we could not integrate data derived from traditional research tools and media with data derived from new research tools and media. What prevents us from looking at the free discourse, texts and conversations produced in forum discussions or chat rooms as new natural interactive as well virtual environments? From the methodological point of view, the critical relationship between research tools and media is not obvious and features of the media are not indifferent in providing specific constraints and settings for the administration of the same tool. In other words, a face to face interview can have specific formats and constraints compared to an online interview, just as the speed of an email may influence the content and format of a traditional mailed letter (Bertacco, 2003).

Indeed, while the emerging discipline related to the new media<sup>4</sup> abounds with new research questions posed by its multidisciplinary nature, often in conflict with conventional methodological criteria for defining good research, new media studies pose a number of empirical issues and methodological challenges that have only recently been taken into consideration. In response to the question, "Do the new media require new methods?" two positions have emerged.

As Lievrouw and Livingstone (2002: 9-10) stress: "The first presumes, at least implicitly, that media research rests on the same, well-established methods as any other area of social science (or humanities). In relation to the new media, therefore, the use of surveys, interviews, case studies, observation, textual analysis and so forth is considered to be 'business as usual'. Those adopting this position would argue that in the new media research as elsewhere (perhaps even more so here, give the rush to produce findings before they go out of date), traditional standards of reliability, validity, generalisability and so forth are crucial to the evaluation of good research.

The contrasting position tends to draw primarily on a qualitative or ethnographic tradition (e.g. Hine, 2000), arguing the traditional methods must be changed both conceptually and procedurally. To the extent that new media generally, and virtual environments in particular, challenge key concepts of media research – authority and power, production and consumption, community and identity and so forth – then research must frame and operationalise its questions (and answers) in different ways (Lyman and Wakeford, 1999). So again, particularly for virtual environments, many guidelines, practices and evaluative criteria regarding, for example, research ethics, the nature of

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<sup>4</sup> "It is difficult to pinpoint precisely when a new epoch has begun, but serious academic concern for the Internet can be traced to publication of a joint theme issue prepared by the *Journal of Communication* and the electronic upstart *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication (JCMC)* in 1996. Another indication of the significance and importance of the third wave was the formation of the *Association of Internet Researchers* and the holding of its first international conference in September 2000. And, almost simultaneously across North America, Europe and Asia, new academic departments and research centres have been and are being established, all claiming niches in this academic frontier. Some of these initiatives have taken virtual or online communities as objects of study." (Jankowski, N. W. in Lievrouw and Livingstone eds. 2002:37). Many academic journals concerned with new media appear in the recent few years: *The Information Society*, *Information, Communication and Society*; *New Media and Society*, *Television and New Media*; *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, *Journal of Online Behaviour*.

naturalistic/unobtrusive versus participants observation, or criteria for survey sampling and evaluating responses rates, must be reformulated (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

#### **4. The So.Re.Com. THEMatic NETwork as a case study for monitoring the development of a scientific community**

Building on the earlier foundations of a pre-existing network of 13 European universities coordinated by the University of Rome “La Sapienza,” So.Re.Com supports a Europe wide PhD programme which is supported and recognised by a wide range of projects and organisations across the continent. The network aims also to support a wider community, or “network of networks” spanning the interdisciplinary themes of social psychology and communications and will encourage the development and dissemination of “best practices” in the development of a European joint curriculum at doctoral level and harmonising appropriate Master’s programmes.

Additional outputs will include the construction of a *virtual campus* and a wide range of highly-developed online systems and resources, including databases, virtual laboratories, Internet/web-based conferencing system, comprehensive bibliographic inventory, meta-analyses of literature in the fields, advanced search and information processing tools.

Given these ambitious goals which address research, teaching and transnational and interdisciplinary community building and their reliance on advanced networking technologies, the concept of the eCompetences of individual academic staff, subject discipline networks and institutions are of crucial importance. Furthermore, given the discussion above the network will be able to serve as an excellent case study for the exploration of key underpinning concepts such as acceptance vs resistance to new technologies. Socio-demographic variables (like age, sex, country of residence) and prior degree of familiarity/expertise and practice in the use of the Internet and other new media must all be taken into consideration. The metaphorical system of representations demonstrated in relation to the *man-machine* perspective on one side, as well as the specific communication system (synchronous vs. asynchronous), setting (implying multi-channel communication vs. communication limited to the textual format) and technical interface (like a system based on traditional audio and email communication system vs. web-conferencing tools) used in the *digital network* on the other side.

Discussion will be focused on the peculiarity of a digital network largely based on a pre-existing scientific community, but also including partners with no previous knowledge of the people and the scientific field (the so-called partners for dissemination actions, technological partners, partners from governmental institutions) as compared to the virtual community of lay people with no previous mutual knowledge, or shared theoretical vision of the community’s reality or professional mission.

Avoiding individual-level research perspectives, the theoretical and methodological *network approach adopted* will focus instead on the relations between the nodes or units of the network. It will provide an opportunity to consider:

- the density and strength of relations within the network and between sub-networks;
- the degree of heterogeneity among units within a network with regards to several levels of analysis (including the social representations of the new media and its application in teaching and research practices);
- the impact that connections and positions within a network may have, not only on the development of planned products, but more importantly on the development of more intense and long term relationships within the research community specialising in Social Representations and its members within the larger target society for dissemination activities and applications.

Integrating face-to-face interactions with computer mediated interactions, the results of this case study may also contribute in developing the literature in the field on communities, and especially, on scientific/research communities integrated in digital networks. Today the literature still provides a controversial and fragmented picture of the domain in comparing real to virtual communities. (van Dijk, 1998; Baym, 1995, 1998; Silver, 2000; Schneider, 1996, 1997; Jankowski, 2002; Matzat, 2003; Jakubowicz, 2003) or is restricted to the analysis of communication through rituals and discourse circulating in the academic settings.

## 5. Conclusions: Turning from e-Tools into eCompetence

Our central theme is turning a real community of experts on Social Representations and Communication into a virtual community and to look at its mid and long term developments as a result of increased online communication and improved eCompetence, feeding back into the real community. eCompetence poses fundamental opportunities for its advancement of the scientific community. It guarantees the growth of young researchers all around the world, solidifying an already existing important research base for the research community to grow on. Communication channels can be established faster and wider across the continents, approaches, literature and methodologies can be exchanged, research can be disseminated more rapidly, and the enormous potential that eCompetence entails has yet to be fully explored. Being a network of social scientists and experts in the field of communication, one would expect enthusiasm to abound for the new possibilities. It is true that, in order to guarantee efficiency, one must avoid two types of risks. In many cases, networks of this genre remain purely attached to technicality and risk offering empty boxes that are rarely filled. From other experiences, another risk is that of producing and developing content, but neglecting proper dissemination through the exploitation of new technologies.

For a network to really come into existence, participation is crucial, no matter how efficient the system is from a technical point of view. Resistance factors can emerge when the “virtual” settings are not anchored to the daily routine of research activity. Therefore, identifying and solving the problems that underlie this resistance remains a crucial aspect of the evolution of a Virtual Network, especially one that is so widespread.

On the one hand, eCompetence in the network renders historical literature and researchers virtual entities, represented to whoever cares to join the community, bringing them to question their reality, the reality of the relationships they forge, the reality of results they obtain. Thus one resistance factor could be the perceived risk of literally basing a community on “almost nothing”. This constitutes an obstacle to the evolution of eCompetence in this particular context, as the E-tools are perceived as a threat and not as an instrument.

The different social and cultural constructs that emerge from the ever expanding eCompetence in various virtual communities also bring Social Scientists to question their paradigms. Therefore, the implications and potential impacts of what this can bring to this academic category is becoming a research question in its own right, so much so, that the intensive study of communication patterns is becoming one of the objectives of the So.Re.Com. THEMatic NETwork’s coordinator.

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Outputs: [http://www.euophd.net/html/\\_onda03/01/06.00.00.00.shtml](http://www.euophd.net/html/_onda03/01/06.00.00.00.shtml)

Website for the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Social Representations:

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[http://www.euophd.net/html/\\_onda02/07/00.00.00.00.shtml](http://www.euophd.net/html/_onda02/07/00.00.00.00.shtml)

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<http://www.ecompetence.info>