Sommario

LA RESPONSABILITÀ DEL SAPERE
Critica e rilevanza sociale nella ricerca su cultura e comunicazione
a cura di Maria Francesca Murru e Nico Carpentier

http://www.cost.eu   http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special section

Building Bridges

The Social Relevance of Academic Work in the Field of Communication
and Media Studies

Edited by Maria Francesca Murru & Nico Carpentier

MARIA FRANCESCA MURRU* - NICO CARPENTIER**

INTRODUCTION
Academia's values of critique and social relevance

This special issue stems from the debate that has been developed within the *Cost Action ISO906 Transforming Audiences Transforming Societies1* (TATS) around the policy implications of scientific knowledge produced in the field of audience research. TATS is a research network supported by European Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST); it aims at coordinating research efforts into the key transformations of European audiences, identifying their complex interrelationships with the social, cultural and political areas of European societies. Policy-makers, regulatory bodies, media-oriented NGOs and industries are considered important beneficiaries of this Action. For this reason, one of the main objectives of the research activities of the TATS Cost Action is to produce rigorous empirical knowledge on the more challenging topics of current mediascapes – as media participation, determining trustworthiness, vulnerable or gullible audience segments – which is also beneficial to all these stakeholders. This purpose has been achieved through the development of a multi-faceted debate – comprising both theoretical conceptualizations and dialogical exchanges with stakeholders – on the kind and value of the contributions that academia as a critical and semi-autonomous field can make to external societal arenas, like civil society, institutions and areas of production. This special issue has been conceived as both a place to collect the reflections on social relevance of participatory theory (conducted within the Working Group 2 of TATS) and a chance to relaunch the debate addressing a wider public which is interested in the topics of academia's social relevance and critical role but has not been involved before in TATS' research activities. This two-folded rationale is reflected in the special issue's structure that is divided into two sections. The first one, entitled ''Building bridges'', collects papers produced and discussed by TATS researchers. The second one, ''Critique and social relevance'', includes papers that were collected through an open call which asked for contributions analysing how the values of critique and social relevance are currently deployed in the contemporary research of communication and culture.

Since its beginnings, research on media and communication has claimed a strong empirical and practical orientation. In 1941 an article authored by Lazarsfeld[2] examined for the first time the boundaries between critical and administrative research, specifying

* Post-doctoral fellow, Faculty of Political Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano. Email: maria.murru@unicatt.it.
**Associate Professor at the Communication Studies Department of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB - Free University of Brussels) and Lecturer at Charles University in Prague.
1 http://www.cost-transforming-audiences.eu/.
2 P.F. Lazarsfeld, *Administrative and Critical Communication Research* (1942), repr. in Id., *Qualitative Analysis: Historical and Critical Essays*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1972.

that the commitment to theoretical generalization and normativity was essential for the former but irrelevant for the latter.

Even if within the boundaries of that opposition, in the following years Lazarsfeld continued to specify that the choice of privileging empirical specificities wasn't the result of subordination to commercial interest; rather, it was an answer to the need of contributing to the social, preferring an assessment of social facts that was (or claimed to be) neutral to any aprioristic judgments. Taking into account the deep changes that have impacted both on the object of study and on the research paradigms, this special issue gathers analytical resources in order to outline and comprehend current declinations of the two parameters of critique and social relevance that have emerged in the early days of media research.

In the broader theories of culture and society we can find notions and analytical models that can be adopted and further elaborated to answer to the specific heuristic needs of the research on media and communication[3]. According to Douglas Kellner[4], critical theory deals with the actualization of a democratic project aimed both at removing hindrances to freedom and emancipation and at enhancing processes that promote them: "Critical theory is informed by multidisciplinary research, combined with the attempt to construct a systematic, comprehensive social theory that can confront the key social and political problems of the day. [...] Critical Theory is thus informed by a critique of domination and a theory of liberation"[5]. Craig Calhoun argues that critical theory is legitimated insofar as it is able to identify and dismantle those interpretative categories that limit our freedom and the possibility of recognizing the unrealized potentialities of society: "(Critical Theory) opens more space for considering the possibility that the world could be different than it is"[6].

How the critical stance of academic research can and should be framed by media and communications studies is a *fil rouge* crossing some of the articles included in the special issue. In the essay by Nico Carpentier and Peter Dahlgren on *The social relevance of participatory theory*, the critical orientation of theory – conceived as one among many other possible forms of theorising – is discussed as one of the four evidences that are put forward to demonstrate the social relevance of theory. For these two authors, theory matters because it 1) constitutes the intellectual scaffolding of research and provides us with analytic prisms to narrate and comprehend the world; 2) it allows us to speak about the social world from a distance that is conducive of reflexivity without disconnection; 3) it permits to "de-doxify" (where the term *doxa* is borrowed from Bourdieu and Barthes) prevailing common-sensical and largely unconscious perceptions about the world, unveiling the invisible and showing particularity of universality; finally, 4) when critically focused on problematic discrepancies in power relations, it is able to provide normative anchorage points from which social change can be pursued. Moving from a general reflection on the social relevance of theory towards specificity of participatory theory, the authors argue that the latter is firmly anchored in the critical theory of power relations. It is this crucial link with the normative horizon of critique that brings participatory theory both to be relevant across all sectors of society,

---

[3] An interdisciplinary path into critical theories coming from different disciplinary fields can be found in C. Fuchs, *Foundations of Critical Media and Information Studies*, New York: Routledge, 2011.

[4] D. Kellner, *Critical Theory. Marxism and Modernity*, Baltimore Md: John Hopkins University Press, 1989.

[5] *Ibid*., 1.

[6] C. Calhoun, *Critical Social Theory*, Cambridge, MA: Malden, 1995, 290.

from the commercial to the civic, and to increase the democratic character of society by increasing the existing levels of participation. Participation is the main issue at stake in the research agenda on digital audiences that is outlined in the article by Francesca Pasquali, José-Manuel Noguera Vivo and Mélanie Bourdaa. Key emerging research topics in journalism, politics and the media industry are seen to be originating tensions between concepts such as control and collaboration, amateurism and professionalism, the individual and the collective, or copyright and open licenses. The authors suggest that academic research needs to assume that the bipolarity between production and reception is not enough to explain how the social distribution of content is amplifying the importance of audiences in economic, political and media terms. These tensions should be not only unveiled in their complex layeredness but also alleviated giving specific answers to problems that media industries and other institutions are having difficulties with to solve. In the article *Media, democracy and civil society*, Peter Lunt underlines how the combination of recent developments in media and communication technologies, together with deep changes in democracy, requires a reformulation of those normative criteria by which the political role of the media has been until now evaluated. Since traditional concepts of political engagement are being seriously challenged, academics have the responsibility both to renovate theory through empirically grounded research and to bring evidences into public debate. Research activities conducted by TATS members and discussed in its multiple Task Forces and Working Groups, reveal that there is a variety of approaches to the ways engagement with stakeholders and user communities can be constructed. These approaches consist of different combinations of theory development, engagement with public debate, empirical research with a social purpose, consultation and policy advice, action research and interaction research. They show in all cases how academics, active in the field of media and communication, are advancing in processes of empirically testing and disseminating their ideas on how the convergent media environment affects the links between civil society, audiences and politics.

Discussing the *Participation now* project, a public engagement initiative recently set up at the Open University (UK) with the aim of convening, supporting and helping the emergence of publics in the contemporary field of participatory public engagement, Nick Mahony argues that the work involved in public engagement today can be strategically approached from an analytic compass that combines three different perspectives in the conceptualization of publics: emergence-oriented, normative and calculative. At times when both the definition and phenomenology of public and publicness are opaque and controversially debated, the lenses provided by the three perspectives can be combined to create a comprehensive analytical framework. Without annihilating epistemological differences, the eclectic constitution of this model is able to shed light on different ways of being public. Within a reflexive and pragmatic consideration of different perspectives as have been developed in the *Participation now* project, the researcher's responsibilities can potentially be actualized both through the traditional dissemination of pre-existing research processes and through the active support of a yet to be convened public.

In her reflections on where the boundaries between critical and administrative research can be currently traced, Elisabetta Locatelli proposes to transform the opposition in a virtuous relationship though the mediating bridge of ethics. If thought not as the application of rules or protocols but rather as a genuine self-reflexive practice, the research ethics can become a cross-cutting aspect of the two approaches able to enhance accountability of knowledge and to hold the potentialities of social reality open for unexpected developments. This proposal is exemplified by the discussion of a research

project on brands and social media, funded by a private company and conducted by an academic research centre.

All the articles of the issue underline the necessity of going beyond academic self-sufficiency in order to open a continuous dialogue with all external subjects that are addressed by, or that can benefit from, research. Negotiation with stakeholders is the place where social relevance of research can be dynamically defined as the shifting balance between normative assessment, internally shaped by academics, and the legitimating recognition coming from institutions, public or private entities that can act as initiators, funders, objects or beneficiaries of research. In developing a stakeholders theory for media and audience studies, the article by Manuel José Damásio and Paula Cordeiro critically evaluates who acts as the university's stakeholders, and how and with what consequences their mutual relationships are being shaped. The authors characterize this relation as based on three distinctive modes of interaction – scrutiny, dependency and conflict – and centred on *valorisation*, a concept pointing at the larger societal contributions universities should be responsible for (including making the results originating from academic research available or more easily accessible in order to increase the chances of others – outside academia – to make use of it). Finally a fourth mode of interaction, called *networking*, is identified as the outcome of new uses of media technology. It includes the relation with active media users; notwithstanding the lack of a clear interest in academia that often characterizes these users, their constant level of activity points to the possibility of academia engaging with community stakeholders who are actually contributing to the transformation of society and can benefit by, and contribute to, the knowledge produced by academic research. A clear example of a close interaction between academic research and direct beneficiaries of it can be found in the article by Giulia Bertone, Domenico Morreale and Gabriella Taddeo where a peculiar case of action-research is discussed. Twenty-four local stakeholders (institutional actors, local entrepreneurs and coordinators of cultural and touristic associations) have been involved in a set of participatory design sessions, aimed at identifying new web 2.0 solutions for the communication on the natural environment and for the empowerment of local communities. Methods and theoretical resources of academic research have been applied to the benefit of a professional community, showing how the complex interpretation of the participatory potentialities of web 2.0 is essential for the development of innovation and the inclusive web of relationships among different local stakeholders. On the same line, Gaia Peruzzi's essay maps and discusses the demand for knowledge within the field of *social communication* aimed at promoting people's rights and solidarity. Starting from the diagnosis of a huge imbalance between the lack of academic research on this specific topic and the exceptional dynamicity of no-profit sector, the article examines the communication needs of some of the emblematic institutions of the national Third Sector, trying to understand how these organisations perceive their own needs and how this same perception is shaped, hindered or promoted, by the surrounding environment. One of the modalities in which the relationship with stakeholders can be actualized is represented by the creation of dialogical exchanges, where the researcher's reflexivity is translated into an enhanced awareness for people that are directly involved in the phenomenon under scrutiny. These are the occasions during which social research performs its communicative task[7] realizing a kind of ''methodological intersubjectivity''[8] which

---

[7] L. Bovone, *Riflessività e ascolto*, Roma: Armando, 2012.
[8] K.D. Knorr-Cetina, *The Manufacture of Knowledge. An Essay on the Constructivist and Contextual Nature of Science*, Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981.

interlaces the narration of research practices together with the number of registered and connected stories springing out from the research field. Exploring the experiential resonance of some key concepts of the current sociological and anthropological debate, such as reflexivity, biographical narrative, generational perspective, Cristiana Ottaviano's essay discusses a project that started as a fact-finding enquiry and then turned into the exploration of a performative approach to research dissemination. Underlining the generative richness that characterized all the steps of the research project, the author suggests that the ''epistemic egoism'' of academic dissemination can be overcome in order to allow theoretical knowledge to go back to being part of the rest of the world. The photo essay by Rob Leurs continues on this track, with an exploration of the alternative ways through which analytical awareness can be generated and disseminated. Conceived in a double sense, as an essay about and including photos, the visual essay results from a fieldwork in Cambodia, critically focussing on memorial places such as Tuol Sleng (where memories of the victims of the Red Khmer regime are kept alive in always particular ways), conducting semi-structured interviews with victims, witnesses, researchers from the research and memorial institute DC-CAM, and United Nations representatives of the Tribunal against the leadership of the Red Khmer. The analytical added value of this format draws upon the critical nature of the visual, rooted in the dialectic of absence and presence which is constitutively connected to every act of framing, which is further brought into the spotlight by the author's analysis. In a fruitful dialogue with textual narrations, this innovative representational procedure weaves a fluid analytic account, where the examination and exhibition of photos is directly and significantly related to the question of what is being excluded.