

RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE PUBLISHER TODAY

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The publisher of the future will produce relationships.

The network has given individuals the opportunity to express themselves autonomously, independently, uninterruptedly, and freely connect with each other. In this way, it has disrupted the concept of “mass” understood as a set of consumers of the same product, creating an ecosystem populated by innumerable communities in its place. This is the true cultural revolution of our century. A revolution that does not have the features of a technological monster, but which is the result of a vital breath towards sharing and sociability that resides in the human soul since the birth of our species.

Today, all people and all objects of the world can be connected in a flash through the net. My home keys, for example, are connected to the network, thanks to a small transponder that costs some euros. My daughter is online because she has a mail. I am networking in many ways: through social networks and through my devices, like my phone. We all are constructing continually network segments, gathering people and things around our interests and needs. We do this when we send mail to a list of recipients, when we create a group on WhatsApp, when we follow a Facebook page, when we subscribe to a service to know real-time traffic in the city. All these connections are technology-enabled and supported by new forms of market that rely less and less on the amount of attention that a single content can get, always more and more on trust that each person transmitting it is able to deserve in one’s network of relationships.

Countless social networks, from simple Facebook emails, from Instagram to Waze, have been defined by US thinker Clay Shirky as “the connective tissue of our society”. Every social network finds its own specific identity in the way that relationships are generated inside and in the particular end for which it is done. This identity never resides in the first place in the content produced: a social network must first connect itself and then connect. Content that is produced and shared inside is subordinate to this purpose. In other words, when every user in a social network produces a content and publishes it, when in turn sends a content he has received, he is telling something about himself and how to consider the link that binds him to the recipients of his message.

In this ecosystem, a content has no value in itself, its value is extrinsic. For this reason, publishing, which for centuries has based its fortune on being a content producer with intrinsic value, has lost the great opportunity to enter the relationship market in the first decade of this century. Let’s understand ourselves: each publisher has always been aware that his own choices, the care and editing of his own contents had the effect of linking people and ideas. But this has never been the direct object of the economic livelihood of the publishing company, while it was the sale of the content. A range of specific skills was born around it: to regulate people’s access to information, manage accounting, protect copyrights, and so on.

The success of Amazon, which is the largest online marketplace, and yet it does not own the goods it sells, of AirBnB, which is the largest chain of accommodation and does not have a room, Uber, which is the largest taxi company and does not own a vehicle and Facebook, which is the largest producer of relationships without producing content, have shown us that the new economy thrives where businesses transform value-enabled relationships, not goods produced (including in this category of course also the content produced) .

The content, in this new scenario, is now mostly commodities, that is, almost identical merchandise available in large quantities in many different places. Think of a recipe: if you want to cook a good saffron risotto you will find thousands of high quality recipes published on the net. The same applies to so-called news: in a world where every phone is a camera, a microphone, a repeater, each of us is a potential witness, each of us is a “medium”. All the research, in fact, agrees to show that today people get to know the news in the first instance from social networks.

An editorial company can legitimately consider all of this a threat, but the trend in the budgets of recent years shows that limiting ourselves to a conservative approach is losing. The only possible alternative is to consider this new information ecosystem as an opportunity. Move the business’ focus on generating relationships, redefining the content produced and published for their value over people. In summary: the way to overcome the crisis and – maybe – to thrive again, it has to rethink the purpose of its mission as a service, not as a product. A service for a set of communities that we feel is closer, more worthy, more needy or whatever “more” you consider to choose.

Forms of economic livelihood need to be found to become essential catalysts, namely the ability to create unique digital and real places to enable a certain kind of dialogue and sharing, which can be the solution to the real needs of a community. Places capable of building and returning relevance and usefulness, and therefore a value, to individuals and their communities, receiving in return trust and ... data, information that can feed and improve the service itself and useful in generating new services.

The logic of service puts man at the centre. For this reason, in this new scenario, the most important skills a firm has to acquire concern the ability to identify existing or potential communities and to listen, to understand the needs of those who are part of it. Only after this first step can you imagine what relationship dynamics build to enable productive conversations, what content to select and produce to help communities do better what they want to do. Conducting surveys on the territory with the techniques of ethnography, making prototypes, testing, putting into the disposition of “participatory observation”, as the anthropologist Malinowsky said, is the key to the Human Centred Design, in Italian, “user-centred design”: it's just the method that my discipline – The Information Architecture, or the User Experience Design that you want to – have developed in the last twenty years. For this reason, more and more companies hire information architects or send their staff to work in this field. I register year after year, for example, through the success of the Master in Information Architecture and User Experience Design I founded at the IULM University in Milan.

Even in the past, publishing firms carried out quantitative and qualitative surveys on the territory, but the survey techniques used – especially from the marketing sectors – were

essentially of a sociological-demographic type. But beware: today we cannot think of identifying communities to serve based on statistical extrapolations because grouping individuals on this basis very rarely defines human groups that can be considered “communities”. Can you think of “millennials”, “immigrants”, a community? The second risk of this approach, as the journalist and writer Jeff Jarvis reminds us, is to convince ourselves that even people who buy our current product can be considered as a community. Moreover, our community.

In general, it is good to start from the communities that define themselves as such and to extend the look to the human groups that have a common interest. Examples of possible communities are parents of children in kindergartens who live in a certain place, people who want to do something for the environment in their daily lives, people with a certain disability, people who want to learn to do something, etc. In this dynamic, we cannot expect people to come to us, we must organize ourselves to go to them.

To better understand, we follow Jarvis in an episode of an interesting episode at the journalism school where he teaches: “[some of my colleagues at the Columbia University Journalism School] conducted a great project with their students to investigate the mould phenomenon in the popular New York homes. In collaboration with the New York Daily News, they told the story to the general public. I call this Jarvis-externally focused journalism: to tell someone's story to the public in the hope that this knowledge leads to awareness and change in politics. This has always been and will remain a vital role for journalism. But in Columbia, we have also done what can be seen as an internally focused journalism, that is, to say to the community what it needs to know how to solve its problems, for example, measuring the mould, or reporting it to the authorities and calling them to respond to the health consequences. A representative of a group of people living in popular housing then thanked the school for not being limited to putting the nose in the affair to get a good story, but to stay alongside the community to help her learn, act and react. But then this representative also asked us why we had chosen to deal with mould: “it is true that this is a problem – he told us – but it was not the worst”. What would happen if the school involved the community of those who live in popular homes – Jarvis asks himself – precisely to define the subject on which to focus the students’ work? The moral of this story is to observe, listen, ask, dialogue before providing what we think is the answer to the needs of a community is the passage needed in order to succeed.

Getting to the service of a community does not necessarily mean investing in technology infrastructures. It's a service, or rather, it can be a service, even opening a page or group on Facebook (a social network can also be a listening place) as well as being able to assign a person to a community, organize a series of events on the territory or online. The enormity of possible solutions today and the need to serve different communities and constantly evolving over time, impose a new way of working. It is more than ever necessary to entrust to multidisciplinary teams with autonomy in defining and designing new services. Within these teams, there must be people with business skills, others who can handle dialogue through digital tools, there must be information architects, developers, graphics, content creators, and so on. By direct experience – our editorial team is working hard on this front – I can tell you that the biggest obstacle is not to make people develop new technical skills to work within these interdisciplinary teams but to make it so that they accept to participate in

a culture of work based on the assumption and sharing of responsibilities, merits and demerits; who accept to work for continued agile repetitions rather than according to the linear development of the classic “cascade” production process; who accept to translate their specific language into an understandable one by all the other members of the working group in which they are inserted. We cannot hope to change our organizations and our business models from today to tomorrow, but we must consider this change as an integral part of our work and look for our specific model, that is, the particular way in which we will make these principles concrete in our company, through this same logic of work. It is necessary to go back to study. The literature on production, business, networking dynamics, anthropology and the new forms of sociality is and has been consolidated for many years. The knowledge that has taken us to occupy the key places we are devoting today to invent the products we have created to date, to select people, to organize resources to date is not enough and often – alas! – end up suggesting metaphors inadequate to read this new reality.

Changing the way of seeing reality is what Anita Zielina, head of the Neue Zürcher Zeitung has done, for example, to organize content creation more responsive to new challenges. Anita has divided the editorial into three distinct groups: those who work on fast content, those who work medium and finally slow. Fast content is what people can find in abundance between different TVs, social networks, radio and various sites. On this type of content, the editorial staff should spend the least amount of energy possible, limiting work to a cure activity. Medium content is the one where the header adds value. On such content, for example, the headline asks a researcher, a professor, a material expert to offer a unique perspective or an in-depth analysis of a topic. In essence, it is on medium content that the head adds value by contextualizing, deepening, and offering people ways to act to help solve a problem. Slow content is the one that expresses a vision of the future, offers prospects, a bit like doing a university with its own publications or a circle of thinkers. In all three cases, the basic rule is to look in all ways to make relevant content for communities that it has decided to serve. In a way, to make them part of the solution to a problem. This way of dialogue and serving of their own communities reinforces bonds and extends them, generating a return flow to the brand and, as previously said, a return flow made up of data.

These data allow publishers, for example, to offer advertisers to get in touch with people in a much more targeted manner. Be careful, however: since the stakes are the trusted relationship built between the publisher and the people, in getting these forms of revenue, it is good to establish a code of conduct for investors as well. In general, the logic of the “clear pacts, long friendship” is the one that regulates networking because it is the logic that governs parity relations. Any company proposing network-based relationships based on an autocratic logic such as the old mainstream media – is bound to be simply irrelevant.

Among the forms of revenue we are observing, there is the organization of targeted events. Very interesting, on the merits, is the Texas Tribune case, which earns more than a million and a half dollars a year from its festival and weekly meetings where, for about an hour, the newspaper appears from time to time in several districts of the city by submitting to the administrators a list of questions prepared from the contribution of members of their community, who can attend the event to ask further questions. Meetings are open to everyone, because the Texas Tribune considers it an opportunity to associate new people

with their membership program. This initiative also has the effect of forcing competing printers to journalistically cover events, as they often come up with major news stories.

Making forms of revenue based on a membership plan is not easy. It means dedicating resources to building, cultivating and extending the sense of belonging of the people to the community through their services. The key is to reward and strengthen programmatically and consistently the virtuous actions of community members. They need dedicated tools, planned strategies in motion and the ability to evolve these strategies following the evolution of the same community. What differentiates a person's affiliation into a supermarket chain from membership to a journalist's membership program lies essentially in the quality of the relationships that the second program is able to substantiate. It is a passage from a vision that the paying member sees as the one who has the right to possess a good, to that in which there is a member who has the right to have a particular relationship with the brand or with his own territory, thanks to the brand. In other words, a stakeholder who can, for example, access high-value themed newsletters, participate in meetings with experts (maybe even through Skype-calls or Google Hangouts), to propose topics on which to work, to have discounts on certain goods or services, etc.

The numbers declared by some headlines (such as the Flemish De Correspondent, for example) suggest that the conversion rate of the general public in the community subscribing to a membership form is around 5%. This proportion makes us understand that for a publisher who intends to proceed in this direction, it is crucial first of all to focus on creating services that are perceived as a value to extend the user base and only later propose a model of membership-based pattern .

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I imagine many of you are asking questions like this: how do we continue to be ourselves in this new scenario? How can we possibly redefine our identity? Where does this new world reside in our specifics as news headlines and publishers?

As I have described in more detail in my book, "Architecture of Communication", in a world where every subject is potentially connected, as well as every person, we are what we connect. Our identity is defined by the people we choose to connect to communities, the communities we choose to serve, the needs we decide to deal with and the solutions we identify. Our role is defined by the plot of the connections we create and enable. Our style, the way we do all this. The content, the quality and the nature of the relationships between the people within the ecosystems we create and live are at the same time the fruit and the lymph of our ecosystems.

I'm sure that the publishers can continue to be themselves and carry out their mission in the world. But they have to understand that this is only possible by fully accepting that everything has changed and learning to love this change. It's the hardest thing. The rest (in comparison) is easy.