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## MEDIATIZATION OF THE NET AND INTERNETIZATION OF THE MASS MEDIA

**Leopoldina Fortunati**

**Abstract** / To measure the impact of the internet on the traditional media, researchers usually begin by considering their presence and use online. The hypothesis of this article is that the most crucial measure of the impact of the internet on the classic media does not depend on the more-or-less forced invasion of the internet by the press, radio and television, but is to be sought in other processes. More exactly, it is to be found in the mediatization of the net, both fixed (computer/internet) and mobile (internet/mobile phone), and in the 'internetization' of the classic mass media. These two processes at the same time enable one to measure the impact of traditional media on the internet, making it possible to trace the succession of thrusts and counter-thrusts, modifications and reciprocal incursions, for which the traditional means of communication and the internet have been responsible.

**Keywords** / internet / internetization / mass media / mediatization / news

### Introduction

To assess the impact of the internet on the traditional media, their increasing presence and use online is usually considered (Eco, 2001). Our position, on the contrary, is that the invasion of the internet by the press, radio and television is only the first stage of a more complex process. This process comprises, on the one hand, the dissemination of news in many territories of the net and, on the other, the influence of the internet style on the classic media. The dissemination of news increasingly reinforces the internet as a mass medium (Morris and Ogan, 1996), while the influence of the internet at a symbolic level, in particular on television, and the beginning of a new process that makes the internet the starting point of trans-medial production, reinforce the 'internetization' of the traditional mass media.

Together, the mediatization of the internet and the internetization of the classic media focus our attention on the succession of thrusts and counter-thrusts, modifications and reciprocal incursions, for which the traditional means of communication and the internet have been responsible. They make it possible to provide a precious social testing ground, in which the balance and synergies between classic and new media and the specializations of different ICTs are being defined. The internet is modifying newspapers, radio and

television; and, vice versa, the traditional media are changing the internet irrevocably. Together, these processes may be seen as manifestations of one underlying process, which is the mutual domestication of and convergence between the internet and the mass media. The net is becoming a 'mass medium' – that is, it is undergoing the influence of the classic mass media and taking on the 'mission' of providing information and entertainment – while traditional media are succumbing to the fascination of the internet, its electronic immateriality, its self-representation and its recognition as the emblem of modernity.

A degree of mutual influence between media technologies is inevitable, both because the communicative environment squeezes them into one space and because people make use of various means of communication in everyday life. Depending on differences in approval expressed by users over time, communicative technologies find that the territory they occupy is reduced or expanded. Let us recall, incidentally, that, according to the National Media Observatory of the University of Salerno in 2002, the most popular medium for Italians to obtain information was television news (preferred by 47 percent), followed by newspapers (25 percent), the internet (13.5 percent) and radio (5 percent).<sup>1</sup> The internet as a source of information has overtaken radio, but is still quite a long way behind newspapers and television. Actually, there is nothing new in these developments, as means of communication have always substantially influenced one another, between sectors and within the same sector.

The primary action that takes place behind the scenes in the media industry and drives the mediatization of the net and the internetization of the media, therefore, is the attempt to reconquer markets. Newspapers, for example, have invaded the internet to get hold of the young and adults who refuse to spend money on the printed press. Television has given itself a facelift so as to look like the internet, in the hope that those who have abandoned Italian television to navigate on the open sea of the net will retrace their steps. It has been said that the engine that powers, not always in an evident way, the processes of mutual domestication of ICTs and media is the user (Silverstone, 1994). But users, important agents as they are (Pacey, 1983), are not the only ones. Also important are the producers and owners of the means of communication, the distributors, the publicity agencies, the journalists. It is the negotiation between all these actors that in the end leads to the mutual domestication of the internet and classic media, and ultimately to changes in power relations between the various media technologies (Day, 2001; Gallino, 2000; Murialdi, 1996, 1998).

## Aims and Methods

The aim of this article is to analyse the processes of the mediatization of the net and the internetization of the mass media, e.g. television. In the first and second part of this article we focus specifically on the invasion of the net by newspapers, trying to reconstruct all the stages of this process. Then we examine the process of the spreading of news provided by newspapers and other traditional media into the fixed and mobile networks. The third part is dedicated to understanding this dissemination, its significance and its consequences for the structure of the internet. In the fourth section, we analyse the inverse process, i.e. the

influence of the internet on the classic mass media. The research so far conducted has shown many areas in which this influence has been seen. Here, we limit ourselves to examining two aspects of this influence that have remained relatively unexplored: the influence of the internet at a symbolic level on television, and the beginning of a new process that makes the internet the starting point of trans-medial production. In particular, we discuss RAI News24, a television news channel which is emblematic of the internetization of television news and which belongs to RAI 3 (the third network of broadcaster RAI), and, finally, we discuss the trans-medial product MediaMente, which has developed through various means of information and communication, but starting from the internet.

The analysis builds upon a number of interviews conducted for two international projects. One is COST Action A20, dealing with the impact of internet on mass media; the other is the European research project SIGIS (Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society), part of the EU Information Society Technologies Programme,<sup>2</sup> from which we draw on three case studies: 'Donna Moderna'; 'From GSM to UMTS' and 'Lifelong Education and Strategies of Gender Inclusion in the Information Society'.

As regards the spreading of news, provided by the traditional media on the (fixed) internet, we base our analysis on interviews with three print journalists: Giulio Anselmi, former director of ANSA (the oldest and most important news agency in Italy) and currently a journalist for *La Repubblica* (the second most widely read newspaper in Italy), Alessandra Spitz, editor-in-chief at the multi-media desk of ANSA, and Pino Nicotri of *L'Espresso* (the second most widely read magazine in Italy), and with Leda Guidi, head of Iperbole, which is the digital city of Bologna. As regards the dissemination of news on mobile networks, in particular, we draw on interviews conducted with Antonella Roella and Alessandro Scatolini, two psychologists in the team that guided the transition from GSM to UMTS in Telecom Italia Lab. In addition, we use material from an interview with Francesca Campioli, marketing director of Mondadori.com, the vertical portal of one of the biggest editorial groups in Italy that also owns many magazines such as *Donna Moderna*, the most widely read women's weekly in Italy, and, again, Alessandra Spitz (ANSA). As regards the internetization of classic mass media, we draw on interviews with Luigi Bertolo and Marta Mandò, both of MediaMente, a key example of a trans-medial product produced by RAI Educational,<sup>3</sup> which was initially developed for the internet and subsequently adapted for other media, e.g. television.

## The Mediatization of the Internet

Under the heading of mediatization of the net, we focus specifically on the invasion of the net by newspapers, trying to reconstruct all stages of this process, and then the process of the spreading of news traditionally provided by newspapers and other classic media into the nooks and crannies of the internet and mobile phone networks. As the call for papers of the Tromsø conference organized by COST A20 (21–2 June 2002), 'The Impact of the Internet on the Mass Media in Europe', declared, '10,000 are the sites that contain material that competes with the sort of content that was traditionally carried

by the mass media'. Little by little, the spread of information on the net has invaded various kinds of virtual territory.

### *The Garrisoning of the Internet by the Classic Mass Media and the Spread of News on Fixed and Mobile Networks*

For a long time, going onto the net for many traditional newspapers meant only and exclusively opening a website. Their reason was clear: to make those well-educated, middle- to high-income strata of the population, who were increasingly drifting away from newspapers and becoming good internet navigators, continue to use newspapers as information sources. Many scholars list three stages of the invasion of the net by newspapers (see, for example, Magrini, 2002).

The first, in the mid-1990s, was that of the site as a display window, in which a version that was more or less the same as the offline newspaper appeared on the internet. At this stage, there was great prudence on the part of editors in investing money in the internet, and the idea behind it was 'we can't afford not to be there'. The second stage was a site that accompanied the traditional newspaper, but began to change in an attempt to exploit the potentiality of the new medium. It was the point at which in-depth services, audio and video features, and an archive were proposed. Strategies emerged regarding the role of the site as compared to the original paper. To avoid the dangers of the site cannibalizing the traditional newspaper, publishers aimed for a complementary relationship between online and offline (van der Wurff et al., 2004). At this stage also, financial investment from publishers started to become more consistent (Mandelli, 1999). The third and present stage is that of the 'mature' site which has learnt somehow to use multimedial language and is struggling to find a strategy for economic return.

But this classical reconstruction does not account for two previous stages in Italy, which are just as important. One pre-stage covers 1994 and part of 1995, and the other covers the second part of 1995 and the first part of 1996. In the first pre-stage, recalls Leda Guidi from Iperbole:

*The papers described the internet as a mysterious object, gave it a sensational aura, certainly did not just give information about it. As a category, journalists came to the internet late, because initially they had been describing it as some kind of subterranean monster, then as a site for paedophiles, etc. Only when they realized what sort of business was involved did things change for the better, because they started to take upon themselves the great function of teaching the ABC of computers.*

In the second pre-stage, the protagonists of information and of early computer and internet literacy were the media (and not the school system). Dailies and weeklies, apart from offering continuous information as to these new technologies, offered supplements for learning about computing and the internet. Pino Nicotri, reporter for the *L'Espresso*, agrees with this reading:

*Sure, the papers and journals from 1996 onwards have effectively had an important role in the new technologies. They have also done it with the clear aim of making profit, but the*

*result has been a widespread commitment to producing booklets in instalments, which have been popular with readers. The papers entered this business in a moment of complete euphoria for the internet, for mobile phones, email, WAPs, etc. Some papers, such as La Repubblica, or some weeklies, like L'Espresso, were bought in greater numbers on the days when there was a beginners' computer course insert attached. It is a moot point how good these inserts are: some, like Enciclopedia, edited by Umberto Eco for L'Espresso, are very good and have contributed to a certain increase in sales and credibility of the magazine itself. Others, that is, the majority of those found in the newsagent's and including all the papers, are pretty bad.*

This pre-stage is important because it acts as a sounding board, as a publicity trailer for the new means of communication. Newspapers, if only to demonstrate that they are up-to-date, will go to any length to inform, analyse, teach and use the internet, thus helping to launch a new and dangerous competitor. This 'masochistic' behaviour on the part of the papers was to continue for some time, passing through many stages. At any event, after having led that celebratory campaign, the media found themselves having to be present on the internet. This is the reason which is generally adduced for the three classical stages. Their meaning must be read as a growing garrisoning of virtual territory on the part of the classic mass media, whose purpose was to open and 'hold' certain citadels (their sites) and live barricaded within them.

But at the same time, a silent but extremely widespread and important process is taking place on the net: the spread of news outside the websites of newspapers and magazines. Journalistic agencies like, in Italy, ANSA, Telecom companies such as <www.tim.it>, research engines like <www.virgilio.it/home/index.html?pmk=tin> or <www.yahoo.it>, publishers like <www.mondadori.com>, political institutions like <palazzochigi.it> (the site of the Italian Presidency of the Council of Ministers), local councils like <www.padovanet.it> or <www.comune.bologna.it> or political parties like 'Democratici di sinistra', <www.dsonline.it>, have begun to give visitors a large offering of news. And this is not to mention independent or 'alternative' sites, such as <www.indymedia.org>, or blogs, which have assumed so much importance as regards 'counter-information'.

### *How the Fixed and Mobile Net is Being Mediatized*

When we talk of the mediatization of the net we must emphasize that this process involves both the fixed and the mobile net. The net is now so interconnected that to distinguish between fixed and mobile makes no sense. However, for the sake of simplification, let us start to analyse the fixed net by means of the interviews we carried out. What are the virtual places from where this spreading of the fixed net starts? As we mentioned before, they are various. Giulio Anselmi, the then director of press agency ANSA, tells us:

*I am one of the people responsible for the strengthening of ANSA in this direction. Given the ever-growing costs of producing information, we had the idea of selling our product to as many customers as possible, then to supply the same product, not only to our classic subscribers (newspapers, television, radio, companies, institutions, etc.), but to reach all possible users directly. We started with Televideo (a teletext service offered by RAI) and some television*

*services such as Bloomberg (finance), and then provided information also to airports, railway stations, undergrounds, internet. In general, much information is second-hand today (not only on the internet), because it is a rewriting of news given by us, passed through Televideo and then beefed up and adapted to the various situations.*

Concerning Televideo, Alessandra Spitz, editor-in-chief of the multimedia area of ANSA, explains:

*ANSA is like a big information supermarket, but we, with the internet, have also had to make a great leap forward. First we were an agency that traditionally turned to the experts, then which used special writing procedures (so as to facilitate, for example, research through keywords, etc.). With the internet, we also had to change the way of writing information and making it simpler, because in this case it is no longer only for the experts (that is, journalists who then rewrite it, adapting it to the style of the newspaper and their own personal tastes). The difference in language aimed at the experts and the public is diminishing greatly nowadays, but up to four/five years ago it was much greater.*

Telcos buy information from ANSA and other content providers and then use it in the fixed net. From their sites here they usually transmit 'scrolling news', the latest news received from ANSA. Alessandra Spitz says: 'Scrolling news is 80–90 percent our market. We do AWN, that is, the ANSA Web News. This is a kind of news programme that is a selection and synthesis of the ANSA news, and which is prepared expressly for the net.'

Many other enterprises buy content in order to make their sites more attractive. Francesca Campioli of the Mondadori Group, for example, underlines the new role that the classic editors have begun to take on as 'content providers for third parties'. Which shows how also, in this sector as in many others, a strong thrust towards outsourcing is developing. Campioli explains:

*Mondadori provides content for third parties; in particular it provides information for the world of technology, for example Tiscali. But it also provides information for other sites, on payment. If, for instance, I have exclusive rights to follow fashion shows with a telecamera, I can provide this content to anyone who is interested in buying it. Another example: Sanremo. Sorrisi e Canzoni is the only magazine that can go to Sanremo. It's obvious that it is able to supply content that others cannot offer. There are many customers. For instance, if Mr X has a site that is a product site, and is interested in having journalistic content to enrich this site, he does not use a journalistic structure, which would cost him a lot. He can come and ask me – as often happens – to provide him with content, travel itineraries, for example. So I prepare the editing of these itineraries and I sell it to him. Obviously, the product that he buys, being signed Mondadori, has a different guarantee of quality than if he had ordered it from someone working freelance. That's why we very often provide information both to portals and individual customers.*

The role that digital cities (i.e. the websites of cities) could play in local information, on the other hand, is still in the phase of elaboration and discussion. Leda Guidi, manager of Iperbole, the city network of Bologna and the first digital city in Italy, tells us:

*For a city council it would be very important to become a vehicle of communication, to be able to send all sorts of information ahead of time to its citizens. The city net in itself is a very powerful vehicle, even if we must go and see what the political culture and perspective are of the administrators. I must say here that we are doing quite well, because in Bologna*

*Iperbole has probably served the political forces of the whole constitutional arc. What is difficult is that to set this thing up you need time, because a whole series of administrative and bureaucratic things have to be done. The risk is that you can lose yourself in all these transitions, using up a whole load of energy in the entropy of the machine, without being able to concentrate on constructing the product. The other risk is that, when the moment has arrived to be able to concentrate also on constructing the product, it may already be too late, because in the meantime someone else has already done it or has done some other thing that works better. In this field it is all a rushing after things, which is why we have to think of a more rapid form of management, more streamlined, which will still have the public characteristics, which will guarantee the accountability side even more, accessibility to usability, acceptability, let's say all those elements that are necessary for a proper relationship between institution and citizen.*

Lastly, a further source of information, which this time comes from the base, that is, from users themselves, is the weblog. Blogs ('web logs' or 'weblogs') appeared in the US in 1997 and were imported to Italy in June–July 2001 (the Italian weblog site is: <[www.splinder.it](http://www.splinder.it)>). A weblog is a website which has thoughts, comments, articles and reflections by the owner. Weblogs (like those that covered the anti-G8 Genoa demonstrations) make it possible not only to rewrite the chronicle of events through the interventions of protagonists, but to rewrite history, revealing for example in this case the differences between the fresco of an event from official sources and that of the protagonists.

Finally, as regards the mobile net, it was the transition of GSM to the third generation mobile phone that signalled the evolution of its mediatization, the culmination of which is the ability to follow television news on a mobile handset. An interesting service already offered on GSM TIM (Telecom Italia Mobile) mobiles is ScripTim, which gives the user short news flashes. The user can choose to be informed in various ways (by means of sounds, flashing lights, vibrations and so on). The mediatization of the mobile net is removing the monopoly of handling news from the large television groups and the print press. In this process, 'mobile' consumption of information will have to pass through the art of selecting news. Antonella Roella, psychologist for Telecom Italia Lab, recalls:

*Telecom Italia's Service lab conducted an ad hoc survey on the world of information. From this analysis of users' needs it seemed to us that information mediatization was an element that could configure a certain number of different services and that therefore it was worth running separately. The world of information in particular has an impact also on the services that can be offered through UMTS. We therefore conducted a second study, this time qualitative, to see what the clientele expected from the new services. There is, however, a big limitation in the penetration of the world of information by the mobile net, which is the danger of information overload, which usually ends up by cancelling the information itself. Even if high-performance terminals are imagined, linked to the idea of mobility, we will still have to keep their weight and size down, and these two aspects will create a very strong need and desire, to select the information received.*

To manage to personalize the information to the optimum, however, is not easy, even if the limits of the means of communication itself impose the need to select. The tendency towards personalization of information is an old project of MediaLab of the MIT, which is becoming an increasingly popular idea. But that



daily mail, the possibility of receiving a paper personalized according to one's interests, will not, in my opinion, arrive in one's personal email box, as has been forecast up to now, but come to one's mobile. It is indeed with UMTS that daily mail is becoming an ever more concrete reality.

With the transition to UMTS and this inexorable tendency towards media-tization of the net, therefore, telcos are being pressed to take upon themselves a series of functions that are not simple, and which are new to them. But they have an important card to play: they are the possessors of the transmitting net, which means that they can buy content from traditional media without being beholden to them. Alessandro Scatolini, psychologist for the Telecom Italia Lab team, explains:

*For now, TIM [Telecom Italia Mobile] uses the services of content providers, such as ACOTEL, ANSA, Buongiorno and DADA (which are independent companies), limiting itself to handling tariffs, offering choices of information services, and network traffic. It does not produce these services directly. Once it has decided what kinds of information SMSs to send (from horoscopes to traffic information, from weather information to financial, and so on) it makes use of these content providers. The management process of acquiring and spreading information inside TIM takes place by means of a function called marketing interactive services (MKIS). The task of this function is to supply interactive services. In practice it makes contracts with content providers to carry news with TIM technology. These content providers supply information according to the technology that TIM intends to use. That is no more than 140 characters if we are speaking of SMS, 4000 characters a page if we are speaking of WAP. And having 4000 characters at our disposal allows us to have a fair amount of information. If the news continues on the following page, we can have another 4000. On the contrary, the information on SMSs cannot in theory go over 160 characters, and in practice 140, because the remaining 20 characters are used for the advertising banner 'scripTim by ANSA'.*

Alessandra Spitz emphasizes the role played by ANSA here:

*The news programme ANSA Web News is also the basis for information that we sell to mobile telephony companies. It serves, in written form only, for the services implemented in mobile phones, whereas the version 'news plus photo' is for the new generation phones. We were the first to stipulate an agreement with TIM for news to be transmitted via mobile. We have recently drawn up another agreement with another mobile telephone company to provide the spoken version of the news. The main product for us is ANSA Online, from which all the other applications descend (for sites, for second and third generation mobiles, etc.). Spoken news is no problem for us, because we are already doing radio news programmes that can be heard on the ANSA site and which we sell to radio networks.*

The mediatization of the mobile net at this stage of the transition from GSM to UMTS is actually becoming the attraction that is being used to seduce possible buyers. It is no accident that the advert for latest-generation mobiles shows a boat, *Mascalzone Latino* (Latin Rascal), on which there is a group of photographers and friends, among whom is a girl who, with her mobile, manages to take a snap of a VIP falling into the sea from the boat next to them. None of the photographers manages to take him falling into the water. One of them then invites the girl to send her photo to the editorial office as a scoop. The message is clear: possessors of this new model of mobile can change into a brilliant photographer and contribute to documenting the events of the world. The importance of the mobile is evident also when one considers how its mass

use can sustain the spreading of news in situations or tempos with which the classic media cannot compete. The 9/11 attack was announced and shouted out via many mobile phones.

### *How the Internet is Strengthened as a Mass Medium*

My thesis is that the dissemination of news over the net has been made possible, and in a certain sense produced, by the special structure of the internet as a mass medium. In one unbroken process, the internet is editorial office, newsagent, newspaper library and place of consumption. In the internet, the newspaper is produced, distributed, filed and read: the whole chain of information finds its dwelling place on the net, at tempos that do not have a ritual progression as in the offline world, if only because the life of the net is a continuous process. This means that a fundamental feature of the internet appears to be fusional logic, in that it concentrates in its virtual territory all the parts of the information chain.

This logic, which makes contiguous or indistinguishable moments that in the offline information world are separate and distinct, is giving rise to a series of phenomena that are still under examination. Let us, however, look at one specific point of this process, which concerns the disappearance from the net of the distinction between production and distribution. The product, once constructed, is ready to be consumed. There are no mediations, constrictions or filters between finished product and user. In other words, the product distributes itself, supported by the hypertextual structure of the net (Oblak, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2004), in a chain of links that works as a distributional cascade.

But, above all, consumption can enter the sphere of production, cooperating in and conditioning it. That users may influence production is nothing new: proof of this is the age-old use of surveys to understand users' needs and desires so as to calibrate the product. What is new is that users now not only influence the product but actually help to do it for free. Online interactivity might be understood as a way in which users are like unpaid consultants. Think of discussion forums: users give ideas, points for discussion, news and so on (Deuze, 2003). However, for the moment, users' contributions are rendered less useful by the fact that few editorial staff are able and/or prepared to profit from this contribution (Fortunati, 2003).

Thanks to its fusional logic, the internet brings about not only the elimination of the temporal gap between production, distribution and consumption, but also the devaluation of time as its regulating principle. It emerges with increasing clarity that the regulating principle of the internet is not time, for the following reasons. (1) Time on the net is not a measure of money or, rather, money cannot be the store of time (McLuhan, 1964: 141), given that it is difficult to make users pay. (2) There is a great mixing of tempos and chronologies in general, even in newspaper sites. If we think of the world offline, a real newsagent is the guarantor of actuality, in the sense that customers find there the last issue of newspapers, magazines, etc. Previous issues can be found only in the newspaper library because they have become social memory; they are no longer present news. The internet is a great deposit both of present memory

and historical; if anything, one of the attractions of newspaper sites is the archive, where the editions of the previous days and/or months are kept. (3) Last but not least, actuality in online newspapers assumes a peculiar dimension of desynchronization, which represents another variant in the whole media system, where radio announces an event in the early morning, television shows it a little later and newspapers explain it. Online information represents the possibility to read news from abroad, to read news when one cannot buy the offline newspaper in the morning, to read news without paying and so on.

At the same time, it emerges that, although the structural characteristic of the internet is its spatial-temporal decontextualization, the regulating principle of the internet is space, in particular the identity and culture of the fictitious place. Claude Augé (1997) has a happy expression for it – the non-place – to indicate the location where the maximum of relational alienation is experienced. These are places, such as airports, etc., where we pass but do not stop. Internet sites are places like that, where you come and pay a visit, usually brief, and then you go off again. They are places that at most times are consulted but not read, or probably are read in the same way we are used to reading headlines in offline newspapers. In the same way as the traveller historically was a person who had read places and retained memory of them, so the virtual traveller is the person who seeks information on the net. On the other hand, the internet public is made up to a great extent of lurkers, people who visit places without showing themselves.

The internet as a ‘mass medium’ has been able to count on the fact that its users are actually the ideal public for transforming into an audience, because it is the traditional use of this medium to do it in a unidirectional and silent way. It is evident that, from this fusional logic, the intrinsic devaluation of time and the maintenance of fictitious space as its regulating principle, the internet emerges as the most suitable terrain for the spread of news outside the online classic media. Thus, the spread of news has been the inevitable consequence of the internet’s structure itself. This ineluctability of news dissemination over the net has been reinforced also by the fact that internet culture is the culture of the journey (consider the metaphor of navigation) and that the internet public is made up to a great extent of users who visit places without showing themselves.

From what has been said so far, it appears evident that the spread of news over the net does not derive from a strategy on the part of the classic media. It is rather a process that, to be understood, must address the theory of communicating vessels and which starts from below, from the need above all on the part of the inhabitants of the internet to fill the immense virtual territory with content. This process, born out of a sort of *horror vacui*, develops unbridled and pirate-like. ‘It is’, declares Pino Nicotri of *L’Espresso*, ‘most of the time poor information, because it has been recycled and is too loud.’ The fact is that the net, being acephalous and so not hierarchical and not controllable, is changing into everything and changes everything, so that information on the internet is immediately becoming ‘other’: it is becoming contagion, a virus that is spreading everywhere. News has the big advantage of reducing virtuality. The virtual, as Virilio (1993) writes, does not oppose what is real, but what is

present. Starting from that point, the spreading of information on the internet has the meaning of making the virtual present; that is, of making the virtual be perceived as if it were actual. Providing information becomes a must for sites that want to be perceived as alive. This is also a way to react against the devaluation of time on the internet. Internet sites can find in the link with the present a way of giving proof of their existence through actuality (even if postponed in respect to offline). In other words, classic information is resorted to for its most important characteristic: to have a date, to be dated.

If this is what happens in the fixed net, what does the spread of news over mobile networks imply? It implies a substantial change in the very connotation of news. As the medium is the message, an item of news that arrives at one's mobile number, which is generally the number of one's intimate net, means that the news, from being public, has become intimate. In other words, what happens is a strange phenomenon: public news draws to itself attention, and the playful expectancy that is usually reserved for contacts within the sphere of love, family and friendship. It is not met with the distanced attention with which public news normally is greeted. We say 'distanced' because individuals create a psychological distance between themselves and the information arriving from the world, given the great difference between their strength and power and that of the world surrounding them – society, reality, nature. The aim is to ensure a kind of defence from the intrusive power of the world itself: it is a way of sheltering and in some way concealing or deactivating one's helplessness.

News consumption, in fact, is consumption that is never direct, immediate, from close-up. Not only is it a question of distanced consumption, but also of cold consumption. In the distance that has been created between oneself and the news, one has in a certain sense frozen one's potential emotional involvement. If one's emotions were not deactivated, one would not be able to handle consumption, even at a distance, of the bad news from the world. When the news arrives to any mobile phone, a short circuit is set up between meaning and emotional impact, between expectancy as to the kind of message and what it really is. So there is a great difference, if not opposition, between an SMS received from a person in love and an SMS with the latest news. The axes are those of near–distant and warm–cold. The first message will be in the area of near/warm, while the second will be found in the area distant/cold.

In conclusion, what has the spread of news over the fixed and mobile net implied as regards the structure of internet as mass medium? We can say that the internet, through online newspapers, television and radio and the mediatization of the net, is strengthening its identity as a mass medium. The transition from garrisoning the internet to spreading news seems to have enabled the internet better to arrange and configure its specific structure as a meta-medium, at the same time specifying some of its potentiality. This does not mean, however, the definitive and complete consecration of the internet as mass medium. The structure of the internet still has problems in metabolizing information: its strength, which is that of being a meta-medium, for now is also its weakness, in that for the net it is difficult to excel in possible specializations. If that is true, it is just as true that its poly-functionality (archive, mail, information, commerce, advertising, library and so on) is showing, at least for now,

how threadbare it is. Like all poly-functional machines, which can only do one or two things well, and the rest badly, the internet can for example do mail and library well, but the mass media relatively poorly (at least for now).

As regards mobile networks, the mobile phone is structurally an ideal container for short news items. Not because there are no other instruments equally capable of carrying such items, but because it has the advantage that one tends to take it around with one. This is the reason why the mobile will always win over the other communicative instruments when it comes to news flashes. It remains to add that, in third generation mobile phones, there will probably be a certain convergence between SMS and email.

## **The Internetization of the Mass Media**

In this section the inverse process is analysed: that is, the influence of the internet on the classic mass media. The research so far conducted has shown many areas in which this influence has been seen. There has often been talk of the role of the internet as a source of news, even though, if we look carefully, its truthfulness and reliability appear rather problematic. The internet is without doubt also considered a great deposit and archive of the written, iconic and sound memory of humanity, and has developed important strategies for selection and filtering. Furthermore, the internet's influence on journalistic style (which has become faster, more synthetic and highly charged), the graphic layout of the mass media and the broadening of possibilities of interaction between users and editorial bodies or single journalists (by means of email, forums and newsgroups) is widely recognized. Recently, Colin Sparks (2002) stressed nine main changes for the internet/mass media: (1) a common delivery technology; (2) reduced distribution costs; (3) altered patterns of consumption; (4) erosion of advantages of place; (5) removal of advantages of time; (6) competition for revenue streams; (7) disaggregation of editorial and advertising; (8) direct relations between advertisers and consumers; and (9) weakened boundaries between editorial, advertising and transactional material. Here, we limit ourselves to examining two aspects of this influence that have so far remained in the shade: the influence of the internet at a symbolic level on television, and the beginning of a new process that makes the internet the starting point of trans-medial production.

### ***RAINews24: The Net-News***

A significant example of a trans-medial integrated project is RAINews24 <[www.rainews24.rai.it](http://www.rainews24.rai.it)>, a specialized channel that produces and transmits digital information 24 hours a day. This project produces news for the internet and programmes for television via digital satellite, and non-encrypted on RAI 3, setting itself up as a model of digital and multimedial innovation. Its innovative importance derives from the fact that it comes from satellite to television screens and at the same time through the internet onto the computer monitor, and also to the fact that it uses multimedial technologies that are not always immediately homogeneous (it is enough to remember that editing and page

layout follow standards and systems that so far have been considered incompatible). In the course of every edition there are programmed links with 'Teleport', the digital recorder into which converge programmes from over 70 channels around the world, with the economic and financial editorial office of Milan, but above all with the internet editorial board. RAINews24, apart from the internet, with which it is organically integrated, also uses as sources the non-traditional networks of embassies, institutes of culture, stock exchanges, chambers of commerce abroad, volunteer associations and so on.

In this product the influence of the internet, as the first link in trans-medial production, has been great also at the level of structure, stylistics and semantics of space in the television net-news, totally inspired by internet stylemes. There is no space here to conduct a thorough analysis of the page layout of the RAINews24 news bulletin. It is enough to say, however, that the architecture and functioning of the page with the reading instructions that intersperse it are a close copy of those of any online newspaper, and that the written verbal code is much more used than is the norm on television.

It is, however, interesting to observe that the use of internet layout implies not a few problems on television. While on the internet the complexity of reading and approach is connected both to close-up vision and the tempo decided by navigators who can dedicate all the time they want to the screen, television imposes its own rhythm, which is not that of reading, but of looking/listening. Transmitting a news programme like that of RAINews 24 on television imposes a complex process of reception, with various focuses of attention reverted to the reading of the written news that passes superimposed in the banners above, below and, in some modules, inside the screen, and to the news read by the speaker or by the voice in the background. RAINews24 has inscribed within itself a sophisticated spectator who can master a fast reading together with listening. Reading, listening and looking are the three modes that overlap (Casetti and di Chio, 1999).

Given these premises, what significance does this operation assume? For television, using the layout of internet site presentation means selling an idea of modernization. The internet, the latest and most powerful meta-medium, has become in the collective imagination the means by which to 'propose oneself' to the public in an innovative way. Classical mass media which continue to handle news of the day can do so only as long as they forget their historicity, their belonging to tradition. When they provide the news of the day, at the same time they have to communicate modernity. The most simple and easy way to conduct this operation is to pass through the internet, using its language and style. Not because these are more functional, more effective and attractive on the aesthetic plane, but because they are becoming a symbol of the new and futuristic. News of the day, which describes the present, draws in television viewers much more if it places itself in a context that symbolizes the newness of the news.

Even if this operation may be quite successful on a symbolical level, on the practical level it is paradoxical, as the television image is being modernized by being resemantized with the immature style of a new means of communication. Restyling a news programme, which is generally mature at the

multimedial level, using the young graphic layout of the internet, which is still in the experimental stage, is a risky operation on a usability plane. But a word of warning: the internetization of television is only a facade, because, on one hand, although it is losing viewers, television still has a firm grasp on the greatest share of the market and because, on the other, television is the only production organism able to produce high-level multimedial content. Not by chance are the big internet sites in fact television sites (BBC, RAI, etc.). But it is precisely the awareness of television's superiority (at least for the immediate future) that makes us consider the internet a place of uncertain and fluctuating value. In Alessandra Spitz's words:

*The internet is a great instrument of documentation, a great data bank. So it redefines the problem of sources for journalists, because it widens them out enormously. In a certain way it guarantees a real democratization of information, as it enables us to make a newspaper with few funds. Even the poorest paper, if it goes on to the internet, finds, if not everything, at least a lot. The internet is a great opportunity for the traditional media, but it will always remain an accessory.*

## MediaMente

In addition to this influence of the internet at a symbolic level on traditional television, another way in which the internet is conditioning television is the rise of trans-medial integrated projects which develop into various means of information and communication, but starting from the internet. Trans-medial products have generally started from classic media and have then moved on to the internet (see, for instance, Big Brother). In other words, the internet has been the landing place of papers, radio and television programmes; that is, it has been the last stage of the trans-coding process. MediaMente, founded in 1995, has taken an opposite path, being an integrated project that has developed simultaneously in various means of communication: on the internet – <[www.mediamente.rai.it](http://www.mediamente.rai.it)> – on television (both on the general channel and the specialized one, via satellite) and offline (videocassettes, CDs and booklets, which correspond to an introductory multimedial course for the new media). As it is an information, training and updating project for the new technologies, MediaMente could only represent in itself a great experimental laboratory of multimedial production. On the Italian scene, it started to invert the classic path – from television or radio to the net. The idea advanced here is that the process of inversion begun by MediaMente is destined to become more frequent. But let us analyse this integrated project more closely.

MediaMente, a project of RAI Educational, is inspired by an educational view, rather than an instrumental or commercial one, as has been the case of the mass media in general. Its site offers a picture of what is happening in the sector of the new technologies: it houses an important digital library as well as the integral texts of the television programme, and offers a modular course as an introduction to multimediality, which is a sort of 'multimedial cooking' school, which provides ingredients, recipes, experiences to prepare lessons and activities based completely or in part on the use of the new technologies. MediaMente, even at the first stage of sensationalistic information about the

internet, had always opposed the trend and tried to shift the discussion away from the excesses of apocalyptic and evangelistic positions. MediaMente's Luigi Bertolo declares:

*When we started, the computer and internet were seen as the panacea for all problems, or vice versa as the source of all evil. I believe we helped in Italy to overcome this constriction in the debate, by trying to make the public reflect over technologies and leave behind these schematic positions according to opposites.*

The mass media normally go through the classic three stages on their way towards the internet, while in the case of MediaMente, recalls Luigi Bertolo:

*The programme and internet site have always proceeded in parallel. We were historically the first RAI programme to also have an internet site. We would be on the site and then at a certain hour we would go on with the programme. Ever since we have had Marta Mandò with us, in planning, let's say, the editorial and also intellectual path, we have tried to invert the production process of multimedial products, which normally goes from television to the internet site, and not vice versa. My intention was for the opposite to happen somehow, and that the first link in the chain should be the internet site, strong with its exchange of ideas with users. So, for television to become the last format of a process that was born, let's say, collegially among authors, but which right from the start would be able to fortify itself and enrich itself also with the help of the user-viewers present on the internet site, where it was really possible to carry out an exchange. This, which was in my dreams, has never fully come true. What has come true at best was an integration between the two means of communication.*

From the beginning, forums were opened, in each of which was launched a subject connected with the net. These forums were so popular that at the end of 2001 an e-book – the first by RAI – was produced on the usability of sites. After this e-book, a programme was also made. So, in this case what was supposed to be the real innovative process happened: that is, the emergence of a television product from a reflection on the internet (Siapera, 2004). But the process was even more complex. This initiative also led to a presentation, a study meeting on the e-book at the University of Tosca, and another at the main national television building in Rome. Paradoxically, MediaMente was also the first case of a trans-medial product, not only from the net to television, but also from television to the net. Big Brother was to come many years later.

This new way to proceed from the internet to television has had the effect of avoiding the dangerous mechanism of homologation – of content and layout – between sites. Marta Mandò explains:

*If we go and read lots of articles that are coming out in The New York Times and in other newspapers, they all tend to suggest a kind of Ten Commandments of how a site is supposed to be made in respect to usability, with the result that the sites in the sector are all the same. Whereas it is better for there to be an element that is not perfectly readable on a site rather than being flat and the same as others.*

Starting to work on the internet to produce television programmes and being able to include users as agents in the project right from the start is a way of creating a useful synergy, by making use of the interactivity offered by the



internet in an original way, that is, not a posteriori on an already made product but a priori, in planning the product itself. The possibilities of integration of the means are many and still largely unexplored. MediaMente is an example of very successful medial integration and is one of the first programmes in Europe that started from the internet and then went on to develop on television, thus representing a good example of trans-codification or 'a media as the content of other media' (Meyrowitz, 2003: 199).

## Conclusions

It is hoped that this article has shown that, today, the full impact of the internet on the traditional media can be understood only if the ongoing circular process between the traditional media and the internet, which causes a sort of co-production and spread of information at a trans-medial level, is observed. The great influence of the classic media on the internet can be measured by observing the phenomenon of the mediatization of the fixed and mobile net. The spreading of news in the communicative environment is developing thanks to the trans-medial capacity of the news itself, which is adaptable to the specific means of communication. The migration of news from one means of communication to the other is a phenomenon that has become so relevant that it has added a considerable extension to post-production. The influence of the internet on the media can be measured by starting from the many changes that newspapers, television and radio have undergone. Two changes perhaps have remained in the shadows so far: the process of overturning trans-medial production that starts from the internet, no longer from the classic media, and the use of the internet at a symbolical level, which has the advantage for the traditional media of 'modernizing'.

From the research presented here, it emerges that the internet is the most suitable terrain for the spread of news outside the online classic media. The spread of news has been indeed the inevitable consequence of the internet structure itself, which is characterized by a fusional logic, the intrinsic devaluation of time and the keeping of fictitious space as its regulating principle. On the mobile networks, the spread of news implies a substantial change in the very connotation of news. As the medium is the message, a piece of news that arrives at one's mobile number, which is generally the number of one's intimate net, means that the news, from being public, has become intimate. One might conclude that the internet, through online newspapers, television and radio and the mediatization of the net, is reinforcing its identity as a mass medium. The transition from garrisoning the internet to spreading of news seems to have enabled the internet better to arrange and configure its specific structure as a meta-medium, at the same time specifying some of its potentialities as a mass medium.

In addition, we saw that starting to work on the internet to produce television programmes, and right from the beginning being able interactively to include users as agents in the project, is a way of creating a synergy that is not a posteriori on an already made product, but a priori in the planning of the product itself. The possibilities of integration of means are many and still largely to be explored. MediaMente, one of two cases illustrated here, is an

example of very successful medial integration and is one of the first programmes in Europe that began on the internet and then went on to develop on television.

So far, the phenomenon that has developed most among those observed is the mediatization of the web, both fixed and mobile. The spread of news over the fixed web is proceeding irreversibly and the Italian mobile net has seen the appearance of Mediaset (the second Italian television network, which is private and commercial), offering possessors of cellphones the possibility of following from the internet the news of Canale 5 (one of its networks) <www.tgcom.it>. In Italy it has become normal procedure to see goals scored by one's favourite teams on one's cellphone, or to follow the kind of news chosen in advance. But, to conclude, neither can we pass by in silence the fact that RAI News24 has been an example, promptly followed by TGcom of Canale 5, which presents similar characteristics of internetization, although in a minor tone.

## Notes

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1. Source: [www.scienze.com.unisa.it/osservatori.htm](http://www.scienze.com.unisa.it/osservatori.htm)
2. These case studies are based upon research conducted under the European Union Information Society Technologies programme. Accompanying measure: Strategies of Inclusion: Gender and the Information Society (SIGIS contract IST-2000–26329).
3. RAI Educational is an autonomous structure of RAI which deals with school and education in non-encrypted programmes and via satellite. All definitions of television topics in the text are taken from Grasso (1996).

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