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Media representations of social networks: a case study

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Abstract: Social networks are one of the most recent chapters in the study of the social impacts of information and communication technologies (ICT), the subject of theoretical debate, and a recurrent topic on the media agenda. From the analysis of two Spanish newspapers –*El Heraldo de Aragón* and *El Periódico de Aragón*–, the article examines the media representation of social networks on the journalistic discourse of both newspapers. This analysis takes into account the context of the differences between social networks and the media, as representatives of the characteristics and dynamics of the Web 1.0 and Web 2.0, respectively. In terms of methodology, the text explores the possibilities for the analysis of the journalistic discourse from the articulation of Greimas's actantial model, the narrative analysis suggested by Franzosi, and the journalistic discourse analysis proposed by Van Dijk. The text proposes a methodological perspective for the journalistic discourse and also describes the major tendencies on those issues related to social networks that have a remarkable presence in both newspapers, as well as the principal sources of information, and the most recurrent actantial roles played by the different subjects on the texts analyzed.

Keywords: Social networks; Media representation; Media system, Web 2.0; Actantial analysis.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Justification and objectives. 3. Methodology. 4. Results. 5. Conclusions. 6. Bibliography.

Translated by **Cruz Alberto Martínez Arcos** (University of London)

1. Introduction

The debate over the impact and social uses of information and communication technologies (ICT) has transited a timeline marked by consecutive transitions between optimism (at times, even fanatical) and pessimism (apocalyptic, in some cases), two trends that usually find their basis in technological determinism. Although such extreme positions were more frequent in the early arrival of such technologies, each new application or resource associated with them once more simultaneously raises hopes and fears in the analysis of their potential and possible modes of employment.

This controversy occurs simultaneously in different scenarios: 1) in the communities created by the users of networks – thanks to the exercises of flexibility of regimes of virtuality–; 2) in the academic-scientific arena, from a multiplicity of fields of knowledge; 3) in the spheres of political society and civil society –institutions, organizations, associations–; and 4) on the stage of the media agenda.

In the mesh of such dimensions of the social discursive processes –whose distinction is, above all, a methodological necessity, since all are interrelated by mutual crossings and mediations in the process of configuration of the social discourse– emerges a particular social representation of each new application or specific resource of ICT, and through aggregation, a social representation of them is being (re)constructed in general.

The latest chapter in the history of ICT is the social networks, which are regarded as one of the main expressions of the Web 2.0, which among its representative hypermedia phenomena also includes *blogs*, *wikis*, or *Youtube*. Orihuela (in Díaz Pérez, 2007) distinguishes the different areas in which these resources operate: 1) communication –in the sense of facilitating the sharing of knowledge– like *Community of Blogs*, *Educ.ar Weblog*; 2) community –aiding in the meeting of– and the incorporation to communities by the subjects; such as *Friendster* or *LinkedIn*, i.e. social networks; and 3) cooperation (helping do things together) like *Bloggers Parliament*, or *Wikipedia*.

We are witnessing a new phase in the history of the uses of the ICT, which explores innovative ways and strategies of appropriation of the technological resources available. In particular, there is a reconfiguration of the theoretical questions about the conceptualizations of group and community, which have already been subjected to consecutive debates, and are considered one of the dimensions of the so-called information society. This subject now takes new senses, which are added to other meanings precedents of community on the web –like networks formed by the linking of certain groups or institutions (Mateos Rodríguez, 2008).

In general, digital social networks are defined as “web-based services that allow users to interact, share information, coordinate actions and generally keep in touch [...], [spaces that] permit to rebuild or maintain, in the virtual world, the ties that were established in the physical world: graduation classmates, professional colleagues, attendees of an event, students, co-workers and friends” (Orihuela, 2008).

The opening of "the communication process to the relations of mutual exchanges of messages between users" (Cebrian, 2008), is fundamentally characterized by a "concept of community, through the networking of users who interact, discuss and provide communication and knowledge; flexible technology and bandwidth needed for the exchange of information and free use web standards; and a modular architecture that favours the faster creation of complex applications, at a lower cost" (Campos Freire, 2008).

2. Justification and objectives

The main difference between Web 2.0 and its predecessor Web 1.0 is usually defined, from the theoretical field, in terms of a change in the communicative paradigm governing their dynamics, which transits towards the active participation dynamics of the subjects. While Web 1.0 is characterized by users who are limited to play a role of passive recipients of services, in its successor, the subjects become not only "active and interactive receivers" (Cebrián, 2008), but also become content producers –like in the blogosphere– while simultaneously "share the value (exchange) and collaborate on the development of technology" (Campos Freire, 2008).

Although, as it has been explained, in the Web 2.0 environment converge *blogs*, *wikis*, video websites such as Youtube, and online social networks, and it is the latter that, with greater emphasis, are associated with the new stage in the ICT evolution. This is justified by the fact that the reticular nature is considered as a crucial aspect of the phenomenon, which has come to be conceptualized as a "social networking platform of information broadly and generally related to many fields of knowledge and real life" (Cebrián, 2008).

According to Cebrian, networking would articulate spaces with dynamics of ways: 1) journalism or information or actuality; 2) interpersonal communication; and 3) personal communication or communications of individual/immediate environment. All of these types of communication are staged through the email, chats or forums, which are increasingly incorporating audio, in a passage to what the author terms *fonocorreos* (phonoemails), *fonochats* (phonochats), and *fonoforos* (phonoforums).

A process of change of this magnitude on the principles and logics of one of the dimensions with more importance in shaping the dynamics of contemporary societies and potential mediations of great importance in their own processes of transformation, will therefore become an issue of particular significance in the public debate around the ICT that goes beyond academic frameworks.

Added to this is that while the discussion in the public space must always be central to any social issue, in the case of issues related to the scenarios of what Castells (1999) defines as "real virtuality", the importance of that presence on the agenda of public communication is even greater. As noted by Gunkel (in Papacharissi, 2009: 200), the future of cyberspace "will be determined not only through the invention of new hardware, but also through the names we employ to describe it"; an observation that must be understood in its broadest sense, without limiting the definitions engendered from the academic and scientific field.

The social appropriation of ICTs –as of any technology, institution, event or place– will be mediated by the meaningful relations socially configured around them. This is a double process, practical and subjective, which converges uses and notions/ideas/values, as two parallel and interrelated dimensions. In the case of the uses of ICT –particularly of Internet experiences–, given the peculiar intangible *nature* of the experiences provided, such significant associations take great importance. Hence, the examinations of social representations –and the social imaginary– around ICT are lines of inquiry relevant and recurrent in studies of ICT and their social impacts.

The notion of social representations has been defined as "a set of concepts, statements and explanations originating in daily life, in the course of interpersonal communications. In our society, they are equivalent to myths and belief systems of traditional societies; it can even be argued that they are the contemporary version of common sense. [They are] [...] a particular form of human knowledge, whose role is the development of behaviours and communication between individuals [...]. A body of organized knowledge and one of the psychic activities through which men make intelligible the physical and social reality [...], it is the systems of values, notions and practices that supply individuals the means to orient themselves in the social and material contexts, to control it" (Moscovici, 1981: 181).

These social representations "are presented under various forms, more or less complex. Images that summarize a set of meanings, reference systems that allow us to interpret what happens to us, and even to make sense of the unexpected; categories that serve to classify the circumstances, phenomena and people with whom we have something to do, theories that establish facts about them" (Jodelet, 1986: 472-473).

Although subjected to varied criticism, especially due to the ambiguity of its definitions, the theory of social representations provides a foothold from which to understand the social mission of the media, given the recognition of the centrality of communication (and mainly mediated in contemporary societies, public communication) in the process of configuration of images, reference systems and categories in which social representations are manifested, as well as the recognition of the centrality of the latter in the emergence of certain conditions of the possibility of communication. It is therefore a simultaneous two-way process: social representations are resource for, and a result of, the communication.

One could speak, therefore, of certain media representations of social reality, involved in both the basis anchoring and the objectification, which according to Moscovici (1981, 1984) are the two processes of formation of social representations. In the anchoring, because the *media* would make a specific proposal for the categorization of the social reality; in objectification, because the media discourse would be the scene of "concretization" of certain realities (especially those more distant or elusive), and of the "translation" of concepts into images. In studies of senders in

communication theory, such phenomena might be linked, for example, to approaches such as agenda setting and the thematization.

The communication system provides certain "images [...] of the institutions and their actions, [...] continuous interpretations [...] of the social environment and events occurring in that area, [which] help keeping the collective representations and worldviews of the groups or individual subjects, provided they do not introduce different views of reality" (Martín Serrano, 1993: 53). The media discourse in this way institutionally produces a specific "social representation of everyday reality [...], which is manifested in the construction of a possible world" (Rodrigo Alsina, 1993: 94).

According to Adoni and Mane (1984), the process of building a media representation of social reality articulates three dimensions: 1) what they call "objective social reality", which is experienced as the world existing outside the individual and which allows the individual to develop acts of daily existence; 2) the symbolic social reality which includes different forms of symbolic expression of the former; and 3) subjective social reality, which is a convergence of the other two realities.

Among the possible media representations conveyed by the media, there are some of a particular nature: those concerning to themselves and their social mission. In a way, this would be a kind of representational self-reference, which according to Martín Serrano (1993: 126, 127) articulates, in an explicit way, the media's cognitive and structural mediation. In this case, it would be communicative products in which the addressing of the environment, the representation of events on offer, includes some representation models of the world that refer precisely to the characteristics and objectives of the media themselves.

The advent of ICT not only adds a new item to be included in such models of representation of the world, but also constitutes a new feature: a dimension of reality directly linked to the media, but at the same time is a space which gives birth to and brews some "other" global communicative dynamics, which coexisting, in that world called the Internet, with the *media*.

This involves a strained relationship of proximity and difference, closeness and separation, given that the communicative principles that govern these new resources, in correspondence with the ICT, point out to qualities opposed to the traditional characteristics of the media, which are however forced to adopt them in their emigration to the WWW. Hence, the media representation of the characteristics, possibilities, and trends of each new resource associated to the ICT earn a significant discursive space.

In the case of social networks, the pertinence of inquiring into the media representation of this phenomenon is increased by the fact that a change of such dimensions in the principles and logics of the web obviously involves particular challenges for those virtual spaces adapted to the concepts and dynamics of Web 1.0, including the media. In this regard, it is considered that in less than five years of its inception, the Web 2.0 spaces "evolve towards higher professional organizations, with the characteristics of new media", whereupon the traditional media's reaction has followed "the *unimedia* editorial strategies of the printed or audiovisual culture, and the Web 1.0 rather than the Web 2.0. The characterization and development trends of these networks could be both a threat and an opportunity for the mainstream media" (Campos Freire, 2008).

Added to this is also the context of a profound crisis in the industrial model of the press, which particularly affects the newspapers –advertising revenue losses, closure of overseas offices, newsroom downsizing, disappearance of printed editions, and even bankruptcy of some major newspaper companies in America.

This has led to the urgent need to seek new business strategies, (almost) obligatory on the Internet. Meanwhile, social networks put in place a more sustainable business model than other free services on the web based on three principles of contribution of value: the "voluntary affiliation that each user undertakes when becoming part of the network, the collaborative input content of each user (photos, videos, information, comments, voting, participation), and the attention paid by everyone to the advertising that most of them post" (Campos Freire, 2008), and the market value of their companies (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) reach a billionaire level.

Hence, the analysis of the media representation of the social networks phenomenon –the subject matter of this investigation– becomes a particularly relevant issue, especially for those newspapers that having existed in a traditional printed form, and remain as such, have also produced an online edition.

3. Methodology

The tradition of studies on media representations of reality has used techniques aimed at examining texts in a general sense, like quantitative and qualitative content analysis, and from a more complex, comprehensive and integral perspective of inquiry to discourse analysis. A proposal for the specific examination of the intertwined journalistic discourse is presented by Van Dijk (in Franzosi, 1998), based on an outline of the textual superstructure that characterizes the journalistic text.

Van Dijk proposes two main dimensions in the journalistic discourse: summary and story. The first comprises the headline and opening, while the second is integrated by the situation and comments. The latter are formed by verbal reactions and conclusions. The situation is, in turn, composed by the event and its antecedents. Each of the elements of this last pair is also shaped by two aspects: the incident, which integrates the main event and the consequences, while the antecedents include the story and the preceding context (previous facts and circumstances). These

categories not only “organize the global content (themes, macrostructure) of news, [but also] perform cognitive and social functions in the informative production and the understanding and memorization of the news” (Van Dijk, 1990: 254).

This proposal to specifically examine journalistic discourses, finds potential complementarities, in order to achieve a more complex perspective on the examination of the predominant meanings in a given text, in other conceptualizations that, in general terms, have submitted certain proposals about the potential resources and strategies available to the analyst for his or her task of deconstructing the text and explain the meanings contained therein.

In this regard, Franzosi (1998) proposes a discourse analysis, in particular its narrative dimension, which is also relevant to the examination of meanings present in the journalistic text. It is about transcending the traditional views that focus on the search for the meaningful, i.e. in those words supposedly more loaded with meanings (like adjectives).

According to this perspective, it is relevant and necessary to also search for the meanings contained in the structure and the narrative sequences of texts, because they have certain “narrative adjectivations” (the conversion of nouns into adjectives) inscribed in them, as well as patterns of causality, temporalities (order, duration, frequency, narrative duration/actual duration of the events described), perspectives (issues in the foreground or background), and even social relations and questions around these (Abbott, in Franzosi, 1998). This involves a transition “from variables to actors, away from regression-based statistical models to networks, and away from a variable-based conception of causality to narrative sequences” (Franzosi, 1998: 527).

Also, the structural semantics of Greimas (1973) offer relevant resources for the complementation of these two previous perspectives, and the examination of the configuration of meaning-creation processes in the journalistic discourse from the actantial level. Greimasian Semiotics “foreground questions of meaning and signification; aggressively promote both the fundamental theoretical reflection and the practical and descriptive application, and draw attention to the social dimension of communication” (Brodén, 1994).

The actantial model is considered the basis of “one of the major applications of Greimas’s structural semantics to communication studies”, because it is “very useful in the semiotic analysis of the diverse stories daily broadcast by the media, and mainly because it is very useful to identify the basic functions used in the discourse” (Karam, 2009).

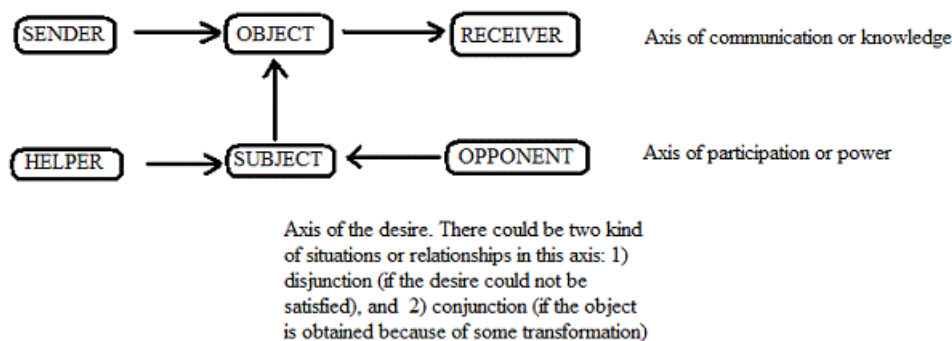
The concept of actant is “actually a way of being in the text; this concept refers to that embodying a particular story or, one or more forms of being or doing, that is, one or more actants. The model postulates the existence of a structure that fixes the mutual relations and the common medium of existence among actants. Due to the existence of this structure, each actant present in a discourse necessarily occupies a place in some of the axis present in all narratives or discursive events” (Ibid).

Actant-subjects are those willing “to personify sememes that take charge and produce effects of meaning”, while actant-objects are “simultaneously ‘patient’ and ‘actor’” (Greimas, 1973: 285). Two types of predicates can modify these actants: functional (which refer to their doing) and qualifying (referring to their being/state). The actants are “autonomous units, independent and capable of action”, while the predicates “represent the actions of actants, and are subordinated to them and depend on them to exist” (Hornelas, 2009).

The actants have different positions: the Sender, “the arbitrator, the dispenser of goodness”; [1] the Receiver, the “virtual receiver of goodness”; the Object, that “can be both object of desire and object of communication”; the Supporter, which provides the assistance “operating in the sense of desire [on the axis Subject → Object] or facilitating communication [on the axis receiver → Object → Sender]”; and the oppositionist, whose role is “to create obstacles to oppose either to the wish-fulfilment or the communication of the object” (Greimas, 1973: 272, 273).

On the basis of this typology of positions-functions, Greimas proposes his actantial model, a scheme “of distribution of the actants and the types of stylistic relationships between actants and actors”, which guides the search for an elementary structure of signification not referring to the text-context relations, but to the structure of the text itself, based on the description and analysis of a “constellation of ‘forces’ that is able of exerting ‘influences’ and of acting upon the ‘receivers’” (Greimas, 1973: 281, 284), all of which allows to know the articulation of the different actants in the story.

The actantial model synthesizes three axis and articulations (Greimas 1973: 276; Hornelas, 2009):



The pertinence of the articulation of these three analytical resources (Van Dijk, Franzosi, Greimas) for the study in question lies in the possibility of complementation for the analysis, in three levels or plateaus of the senses/meanings in the journalistic discourse, departing from:

- 1) A specific categorical adjustment to the superstructure of journalistic discourse (Van Dijk);
- 2) A strategy of comprehension of the narrative structures in their connections with the constitution of meaning, considering the journalistic discourse and the narrative (Franzosi);
- 3) The possibility to examine, on the deepest level of the configuration of meanings, the different positions occupied by actants, the roles and skills attributed to them, taking into account any possible adjustments of these to specific roles present in the journalistic discourse, e.g. actant-subject-news; actant-subject-source, and so on.

Given the nature of the research topic, I have chosen to approach it from a multiple case study, from a qualitative perspective. The case studies selected –with no representative aim– are the two most important newspapers in the Autonomous Community of Aragón: *El Heraldo de Aragón* and *El Periódico de Aragón*. Regarding the analysis of the texts, I have considered all the online editions of both publications that made reference to the subject under investigation, between December 2008 and April 2009, totalling 73 texts: 34 from *El Periódico* and 39 from *El Heraldo*.

This period is significant because it frames a marked worldwide increase of discussions about the subject of social networks on the media agenda as a result of such events as the impressive figures of growth in number of users registered with several of them, including Facebook; as well as their increased market value.

4. Results

In both cases studied, the analysis of media representation of the possible world of social networks should start from a distinction of the thematic typology in the texts: first, those in which social networks are the main event, and secondly, those which social networks are a secondary or collateral issue, a antecedent, part of a commentary, etc. A major trend, although with some exception, regarding these two groups is the concentration of the former on the negative aspects of networks, while in the latter the references to the phenomenon focus on a certain possibilities or potentialities of such resources of the Web 2.0.

In the latter case, the informative notes (the predominant genre in both types of texts, which is significant given the informative characteristics and objective nature associated to this genre according to the traditional principles of journalism) are related to topics such as the media themselves, particularly television; the policy –the use by its players, both individuals and organizations, about the networks as a tool for their activities–, the implementation of public good campaigns –especially those aimed at teenagers and youth, such as condom use, HIV prevention, recycling–; the economy, not strictly the commercial dimension of the different social networks and their appeal in times of crisis (a point which corresponds to newspaper articles focused on the topic), but the potential impacts (negative, in this case) of social networks in the waste of time during the workday, and their relationship to such phenomena as “face absenteeism” (*El Periódico*, 10 March 2009).

In the narrative sequence of these discourses is often that, when the aspect relating to the use of social networks is strictly collateral –limited to a couple of lines, as part of the list of the different new communication strategies aimed to increase the audience– it is located towards the end of the text. Such position of subordination in the sequential structure, however, is modified when making use of networks results an innovation (the case of the meeting organized by the Popular Party for its fans in the social networks Tuenti and Facebook [24 January, 2009] which was described as the first experiment of its kind in a European country), or the controversial nature of the main event (like the launch of the campaign “I use a condom” by the Ministry of Health, through a *spot* that resorted to the hip-hop rhythm, and was subject to criticisms such as the possible inducement to teenage sex).

Although, in line with the principles of the informative genre the comments generally are not abundant, such actions, in the views presented, are usually regarded as a decision to “gamble on Internet social networks”, or are usually

counteracted temporarily –on a media discourse level, as a totality– with texts focused on the proliferation of fake profiles of national political leaders –like Mariano Rajoy– qualified (by the source cited) as “made by their enemies” and therefore “no to be trusted”.

Some background information related to the main topic is also often included. A note discussing the use of networks by national and Aragonese politicians mentions as a significant precedent of this trend the use of Facebook and YouTube in Barack Obama’s presidential campaign.

However, the general trend –more marked in the texts whose focus is on social networks– points out to a low presence of antecedents, limited to comparisons of the numbers of users in previous times (as an example of their exponential growth), the place occupied by these networks in past surveys about the rankings of most visited websites, notes on the origins of some of these networks (especially Facebook and Tuenti), preceding financial transactions related to these companies and their estimated market valuation. As the topic of social networks becomes the main event, the texts tend to show the dangers and negative uses rather than the positive potentialities of these new Internet resources.

In the middle we could locate those news whose central event is caused by the use of these networks: in all cases, the result-news has a negative nature, that it is spelled out from the headline or opening paragraph: “Two militants will be expelled out of New Generations of the Popular Party on the grounds of animal abuse. The abuse came to light when photographs appeared in his personal profile in ‘Tuenti’ showing the bloodied bodies of seven cats and in a fun attitude” (*El Heraldo*, 27 February 2009); “Fired for qualifying her work boring in Facebook” (*El Periódico*, 27 February 2009); “Controversy over the cult of the Mafia on Facebook. The network admits the praises to gangsters like Riina and Provenzano” (*El Periódico*, January 6, 2009).

But the contours of the media representation of the social networks are defined much more in those texts that present the networks –from the headline and opening– as the main event of the story. These texts can identify more clearly the different actants, the positions they occupy, the functions performed and skills attributed to them, configuring the possible world represented in digital social networks, articulated from the various interrelationships among the multiple distinguishable actantial models in different accounts of the journalistic discourse.

Informative texts also predominate here, but there are several articles and reports as well as an editorial note and two interviews, which expands the possibilities for inclusion in journalistic discourse of dimensions like the background information and comments, particularly the latter, as it will be shown later in the exposition of the qualifications of the actants.

As already noted, the first type of texts are limited to: 1) the origins of social networks, a kind of “biography of the phenomenon” –among which Facebook stands out as an international paradigm and Tuenti as national Spanish example–; 2) previous data on the number of users and market value of the companies-network; 3) the history of other phenomena related to the Web 2.0, especially blogs. However, overall there is a significant relative absence of temporal connections between different phenomena or facts that would express the dangers of the social networks. Such interconnections are present especially in those texts that approach the issue of Internet from an integral perspective that proposes relations of temporality/causality/complementarity.

What follows is a classification, based on a synthesized inventory, of the different actant-subjects with a greater presence in these kinds of texts –explicitly related and centrally focused on the phenomenon:

- 1) Companies/Networks: Facebook and Tuenti –in first place– and others like MySpace, Twitter, Hi5, LinkedIn and Friendster.
- 2) Users of networks in general and in particular teenagers, (university) students and professionals (keeping in mind that there are special networks for them such as LinkedIn).
- 3) Institutions and governmental actors: police, city council (of Zaragoza), governments, prosecutors, European Union (European Commission, commissioners); European Network and Information Security Agency (ENISA).
- 4) Civil organizations and associations: Spanish Association of Internet Users; independent consultants, general public platforms; NGO Privacy International, Aragonese Association of Educational Psychology, Spanish Agency of Data Protection (AEDP), Observatorio de Internet (Internet Monitoring); Community of Madrid’s Data Protection Agency.
- 5) Experts: individual and institutional (e.g. the Association for Media Research (AIMC)).
- 6) Criminal Subjects: paedophiles, “sexual deviants”, terrorists, scammers, and cyber criminals.
- 7) Corporate advertising on social networks.
- 8) Individual subjects external to the networks; a particular group, in this case would be the minors’ relatives (parents, as individual entities and their associations: Federation of Associations of Parents of Students of Aragon) and teachers.
- 9) The media: these appear explicitly in some cases –for example, the news (*El Periódico*, 6 January 2009) about the presence of groups praising the Italian Mafia in Facebook mentions *The Times* and *Corriere della Sera*, as accusers of

the phenomenon— and implicitly as producers and transmitters of all stories.

Although, in certain specific stories, some of these actants are located in an ambiguous position between the status of subjects and objects (Internet users, for example, may be “object” of manipulations and a kind of “capture” by governments or the network companies, and these, in turn, may be “object” of regulations by governmental institutions), and usually play a key active role in the narrative structures.

There are actions performed on certain objects, whose inventory is also large and diverse, in both practical and mythical nature. A compendium of the most recurrent is: data from user profiles —an actant object that, as it will be shown, is central to the world of media representation of social networks—; identity and image (in cyberspace) of subjects (public or not) and institutions; information and content (videos, photos, messages and pieces of content in general) circulating on the networks and their exchange process [2]; databases developed from these; user fees; the profits/income/values; laws and regulations; ICT and Internet in general and their resources: the networks themselves, blogs, Youtube, Google; security; privacy/intimacy; visibility; advertising; society/relationships of sociability/social change.

There is another central issue on the examination of the representation of networks by the discourses of both newspapers: the qualifications awarded to the different actant-subjects and actant-objects. Some of the most significant qualifications are:

1) The networks: “virtual gangs”, “a danger”; “unprecedented’ loophole”, “global mass phenomenon”, “turbid episodes”; with a “dark side” and “little protection”; capable of “ruining lives”; “impossible intimacy”, “a great conversation”, “forums or meeting points”; “irrepressible expansion”, “advertising platforms for certain goods and services”; “social and economic phenomenon”, “private networks” (as opposed to public), “a very topical issue for them [teens]”, “barometers’ of new political, social, commercial, and business trends...”; “social tool”; “tool of insults and provocations”; “extremely difficult area”; “a very important problem”; “a very favourable environment [for paedophiles] to connect with minors”; “a breeding ground for cyber bullying”; “are lakes for online Narcisos to fall prey of their own reflection”, “double facet of social networking and self-promotion”; “shorter, more dynamic [...], more interactive and collective forms [of communication on the WWW]”; “[the use of networks] in itself is not dangerous”; “can be positive and very good”; “reflects a social reality and in the real society we find good and bad people” (quote from a source); “[Facebook] the sixth most populated country in the world”; “a real monster on the rise”; “fashion that has trapped teenagers and brainy politicians, divorcees and happy marriages”, “major plaza of the century”; “[MySpace] is very transparent to our users” (quote from its creator). [3]

2) The users: “addicted”, “intensive”, characterized by “exhibitionism” and “voyeurism”; “naked”, “naive”, “scared [by changed of conditions of use of Facebook]”; “[they need to be] prudent”, “from all social classes and conditions, motivated by the desire to connect with the world, to exhibit themselves or by the mere gossip”; “feeling free to speak and give opinions in a much more natural manner than in their face-to-face daily lives”; “stripped off modesty”; “unaware of the risks and consequences [of their actions]”; and, in the case of minors: “in apparent risk of harassment and assault”.

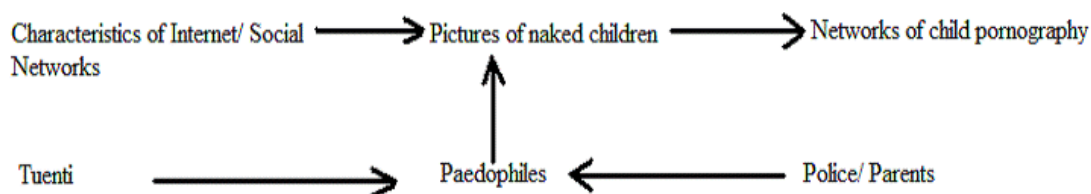
Strictly speaking, the number of actantial models would be as extensive as the number of news stories analyzed. However, this is not about reproducing an exhaustive inventory of them, but to try to present the most recurrent relational axes, according to the actantial scheme departing from the dominant positions-roles of the key actant-subjects in relation to the central actant-objects. This overview is a previous step to the possible world of social networks proposed by the journalistic discourse in both newspapers. The axes of Greimas’s actantial model, from which the key actants are often linked, are:

1) The main pair in the axis of desire is: users - privacy/intimacy/security. This is presented as a relation of disjunction to which different subjects actors (government institutions, civil organizations) aim to contribute to gain a relation of conjunction. Other two axes are frequent in this case: companies (subject) - users (object) and companies (subject) - earnings (object).

2) A central triad in the axis of power is: 1) the companies (Facebook, Tuenti, Twitter, etc.), as opponents, 2) the users (subject); and 3) institutions and government and civil organizations (supporters). However, in this case it is particularly significant that in the framework around the user profiles data and content exchanges between these, there are different alternatives in the presentation of games opponent /supporter: network-companies / citizen platforms; network-companies/government institutions. In some stories, government institutions transit from the position of supporter to opponent to privacy/security, when they propose certain measures or laws to monitor the flows of information through the networks; in this case, the citizen platforms maintain their position of supporters. This shows the ambiguities and controversies that characterize the subject.

3) In the case of the axis of desire formed by parents (subject)-minors’ security (object), the opponent’s place will be occupied, centrally, by the paedophiles and “sexual perverts”, and the fundamental supporters would be the government institutions and civil society. However, in this case, the companies occupy an ambiguous position between “opponent” which, given the pressure of the supporters, also becomes one of the latter.

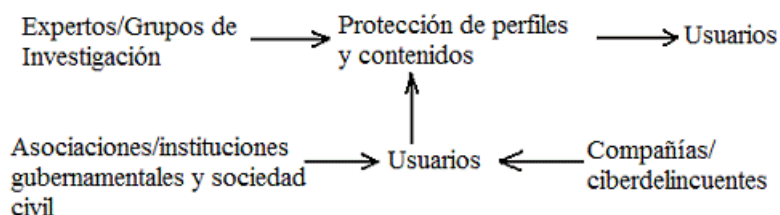
The actantial model that would reflect one of the specific stories analyzed, [4] shows another variant on the particularly sensitive issue of the dangers to which children are exposed in these networks:



4) On the other hand, a common triad in the axis of knowledge is: 1) research experts / institutions on Internet / civil organizations (Sender); 2) intimacy/privacy/security of user profiles and content of their exchanges (Object); and 3) users (Recipient).

Coherently, actant-subjects who consistently occupy the position of sender usually have an increased presence in the role of actant-subject-source. In one case, explicitly, this position is also occupied by the media –*The Times* and *Corriere della Sera*, in the aforementioned story about the Italian Facebook groups fans of the mafia–; however, the very presence of this topic in the media agenda would permanently place (implicitly) the two newspapers in the position of sender, whose role in the interplay of actantial forces somehow correspond with the social mission of journalism.

From these predominant positions of the major actant-subjects present in the discourse about social networks in both newspapers, it will be possible to propose an actantial scheme regarding the most controversial aspect of the media representation of social networks: the question of data protection / privacy of user profiles and content exchange through these digital networks:



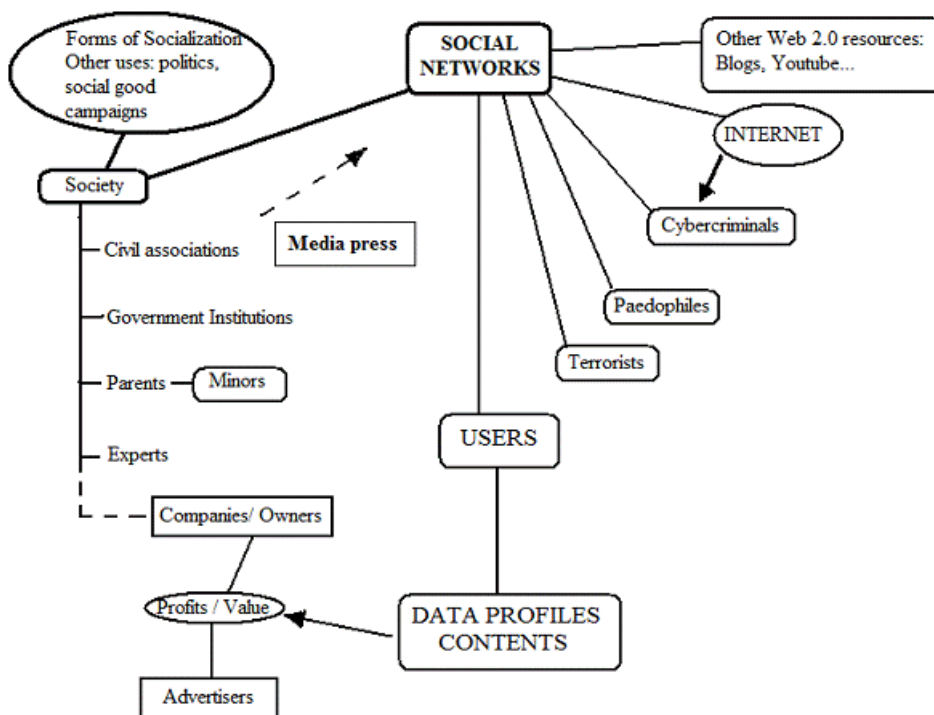
A final element to consider before proposing a representation of the possible world of social networks evident in the journalistic discourse of the newspapers analyzed, are the aspects of contextualization in the texts. One dimension of this would be given by those themes, previously listed, of the texts in which the topic of social networks is a secondary or collateral issue –which would address certain appropriations that, socially, are being proposed for this resource of the Web 2.0. Secondly, we must take into account the localizations –social themes– proposed about the phenomenon in those texts in which social networks are the main event.

With regard to the latter, such locations of the subject are presented from two scenarios:

1) From the narrow context of the digital environment. Here social networks are found usually as part of a context that includes: cyber attacks, the so-called “hijacked computers”, the controversy about privacy in electronic communications, the public or private nature of the IP (information about the computer), other resources of the Web 2.0 –blogs, wikis, YouTube–, and generally, the uses of ICT, including chats and mobile telephony.

2) From a general social perspective. In this case, the question would focus, in one of its dimensions, on the proposed connections between social networks and the (possible) changes that they would generate in the forms of sociality, as a consequence of the rupture of “traditional relationships ‘moulds’ for people” (*El Periódico*, 22 December 2008). From another perspective, it would be about the proposed relations between the negative events (crimes) committed in (or through) the networks, and those same facts committed in the real life; in this case, however, the connections between such demonstrations on the Web and its counterpart in society are only hardly insisted upon.

On the basis of all the analysis, we propose the following general scheme of media representation of digital social networks in the two newspapers analyzed:



5. Conclusions

The media representation of the possible world of social networks, in the two newspapers analyzed, shows a significant tendency to emphasise more the dangers and negative uses of these resources, rather than their positive potential.

This is manifested not only in the distribution and perspectives of the themes covered in the discourse but also in the narrative sequence of some of the texts (for example, "Facebook, or impossible privacy", *El Herald*, February 7, 2009). The correlation between narrative length and viewpoint analyzed (positive or negative) presents an unbalance regarding negativity, and a narrative ranking that favours negativity against the positive –located at the end of the text. Hierarchy that, also according to traditional conceptualizations about the journalistic message (inverted pyramid), agreed to consider a decreasing level of importance.

Although in any case, there is no text whose actantial model puts the press in a direct opponent relation to social networks –what does occur, although in just one case, among other resources of Web 2.0 (blogs) and journalism: "still underappreciated by the journalistic profession" ("Blogs. The emblem of a communicative revolution", *El Herald*)–, it is possible to establish a relationship of tension between the two actors-subjects. In the only case in which the press is explicitly included as an actor-subject of the discourse (In "Controversy over the cult of the Mafia on Facebook", *El Periódico*, 6 January 2009, refers to *The Times* and *Corriere della Sera*), the press is located in the position of Sender.

This feature of the media representation of social networks (absence of an explicit and direct opposition between networks and the media) is significant especially in light of the theoretical perspectives noted, which point out at a radical divergence between the dynamics of integration in newspapers and the principles governing communications through social networks and, in general, the Web 2.0. This relationship of conflict is not expressed explicitly with regards to the economic question (remember the context of the worldwide crisis of the newspaper industry, which is opposed to the economic boom of social network companies) nor with regards to the common informative dimension shared by networks and the press.

This absence could be explained from the traditional principles of journalistic objectivity, according to which the media should not take explicit sides in informative genres (predominant in the sample) and simply try to "reflect reality". This approach is supported by the fact that only in one case one of the newspapers ("Some benefits, multiple traps", *El Periódico*, 7 March 2009) ventures to take an explicit stance on the issue through this editorial –which in the journalistic theory is considered as an expression of the medium's position as an institution in relation to a particular theme. The very title of the editorial shows the imbalance towards the negativity of the phenomenon explained above.

However, the very presence of the subject on the media agenda –more than 30 communicative items about or mentioning the phenomenon in each of the newspapers, over a period of approximately 5 months– also reflects a (metadiscursive) positioning of the media. In this case, an intermediate position between sender and the supporter in order to ensure the transition from a disjunctive relationship to a conjunctive relationship between users and the privacy of their profiles.

This sender-opponent ambiguity is the result, again, of the prevalence of informative genre, in which the journalistic discourse is usually presented (traditional ideals principles of objectivity) from a position close to the sender, as it does not "say", but "makes" certain actor-subjects sources "say it" (a phrase used by Greimas to define this actantial function).

Regarding the latter, it is significant that the actant-subjects usually in this role characteristic of the journalistic discourse are mostly experts and organizations and/or civil and government institutions, and to a much lesser extent, the network companies (in the figure of one of their creators or directors). This, in light of journalistic theory about information sources –which presents the reliability as one of its central features–, reveals a certain "distribution" of that value and of the reliability amongst the actor-subjects referred in the journalistic discourse.

Finally, another aspect of the discourse structures that give such negativity in the media representation of the social networks is the possibility that users can take, in some texts, the position of object in the actantial schema (especially in the form of "data", "profiles" and "contents" but also in their condition as individuals who are "object" of the struggles between companies-networks and advertisers, or, in the worst case, minor users are objects of criminal subjects). Therefore, this places users in a "patient" position –according to the Greimasian definition of actant-objects–, and thus in some ways, they can be "manipulated", "victimized" (the minors is the most obvious case).

The media representation of the social networks, therefore, reflects the renewal in the traditional debate between optimists and pessimists that comes with each new step in the ICT world, with a tendency towards the latter in the journalistic discourse analysed here.

A tension that, in the specific case of social networks, must be understood in the context of the legacies of previous controversies on the matter –especially those regarding the previous resources of the Web 2.0, like the blogs–, in particular those relating to issues of privacy on the Internet, those relating to the differences between hegemonic communicative models in public communication and the principles of the communicative practices in the WWW environment, as well as the principles and strategies of integration of traditional media (including newspapers) in both the new platform, as in the new social reality emerging out of the contemporary change processes.

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7. Notes

[1] In another text, Greimas (in Sánchez Corral, 2003: 475) defines it as "the one that exercises a making that tends to provoke the making of the subject".

[2] These three aspects, only in relation to Facebook, are qualified as "the largest volume of personal data ever amassed by someone so young [its creator and owner Mark Zuckerberg]"


[3] Although qualifications referring to two other actant-objects of the virtual world (blogs and Internet), because of its proximity to social networks, it is interesting to compare some of these: 1) blogs: "emblematic of a communicative revolution", "Oldfashion"; "overrated by the gurus", "still despised by the journalistic profession", 2) Internet: "an ideal breeding ground for the negative consequences of narcissism", "'neighborhood' where every day there changes and developments", "alchemy of multitudes", "a big party where the show is the open and shared intimacy".

[4] "Detained for producing and distributing pornography posing as a girl" (*El Heraldo*, 14 April 2009).

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