

Umberto Eco and Emotions in The Time of Internet

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Abstract

"Social networks gives right of speech to legions of idiots". These are the words from Umberto Eco directing an attack on Internet during the ceremony in the University of Torino to award him Honoris Causa for Communication and media culture. After these statements "the network people" felt offended and they launched a harsh attack against the writer. Therefore I decided to get deeply focused on such argument and made researches to create an idea about the writer's reflection and tried to formulate a potential personal consideration.

The purpose for doing this is not to protect Eco: he is part of those people of reputation in culture who with their work have changed the way we study language and communication, let alone his extraordinary talent as a novelist. I conducted this analysis to better understand his opinion on Internet, social networks and technology. In this reflection I have indicated that his harsh words did not come out of nothing, in contrary, he made similar statements in other cases.

The theory developed by him was complete, consolidated and logically argued. Behind this attack lies a reflection on such an important topic for our society: Internet information filtering, necessity of education on internet, things which need to get started since the early school education. At the end of the article I have provided a short information about a platform, an online multimedia compiled by him named Encyclomedia, an encyclopedia based on a new concept which is dedicated to the history of humankind by establishing links between what is searched in internet with relation to literature, science, art, music, economy, society, religion. This project demonstrates the fact that this man regardless of being part of cultural environment of "Novecento" tried to utilize the new technology to the benefit of knowledge and its dissemination.

Key words: *Umberto Eco, Internet, Web, Social Networks, Filtering, Information, Encyclopedia, Encyclomedia, Memory, Education.*

1. Introduction

Umberto Eco, a long time researcher in the science of communication, one of the most illustrious intellectuals in Europe, a cultivated essayist and successful novelist could not avoid dealing with the fast progress occurring during the recent years especially with the birth of Large Network.

After receiving the title in Communication and Culture from University of Torino on 10th of June 2015, while answering to questions of some journalists, Eco gave his opinion with regard to Internet and especially the social networks by stating:

“Social networks give legions of idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community. Then they were quickly silenced, but now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner.”

The news was spread initially by ANSA, and was afterwards reflected in many newspapers. The next day there were press headlines such as «*Eco against social media*», «*Eco and harms of internet*» and so on.

In social networks the words of Eco were criticized before listening to the complete interview. The semiotician was accused for providing a reactionary and archaic vision of the social networks.

The journalist of “Stampa”, Gianluca Nicoletti, in his reply stated: “there can’t be generated ideas in the digital culture if we do not accept to stand side by side with the dark side of the force”. (La Stampa, Gianluca Nicoletti, 2015).

But while reading press articles of those days there is noted in fact that only the targeted sentence was subject to assessment while there were not mentioned the entire explained reasons made by Eco which praised the positive aspect of the internet. As I was born before the era of new technology and shaped in a culture where the Gutenberg model of written word dominated as per definition of Marc Prensky, I am part of a category of people named **digital immigrant**, who differently from the **digital sons**, needed to adopt to the technology and with the passing of time become habitants of network. But in my private and professional life, either internet or the social networks have played an important role.

Because of this reason I felt displeased by the affirmation of Eco and agreed with those who raised their voice and unfolded the arguments on freedom of expression, opinion and the completely free nature of the network and internet. I felt uncertain because on one hand Umberto Eco has been to me a genius of culture, one of the few intellectuals of time who have changed through their work the way we study language and communication, let alone his talent as a novelist. But on the other hand Umberto Eco was part for those cultural environments who can be named “novecento”, who have gained their competencies and are still getting shaped and shape others by using technology as a passive instrument, by using internet only as a secondary information tool, as their first choice in reading the newspapers, check the encyclopedia or listen to the broadcasted news. It is more than

normal that he was not so fond the Web and social networks, but why those outspoken harsh words? Why such an attack against them?

After a reflection and out of curiosity with regard to such prominent person of culture for whom I have high regard, but who has an idea partially different from mine about the world of network where I am actively involved, I decided to make some research to understand better his opinion and identify the true parts of his affirmations.

2. Research on Umberto Eco interview .

I started my research precisely with the full video of his interview (Eco, Internet Social Media e Giomalismo). In essence, Eco, when replying to questions of journalists said that the Web is full of unreal things, that the press nowadays is not able to control or analyze with critical viewpoint different sites which commonly are used as source, that the professor should, but most of them are not able nowadays to help students to filter information found in the internet. Speaking of social networks like Twiter, the semiotician affirmed that it is exactly the free and uncontrollable nature of such networks that allows idiots to speak and tell rubbish from morning till evening.

During my analyses I understood that his words did not come out of nothing, in contrary, he made similar statements in other cases. His theory was complete, consolidated and logically argued. With his affirmation Umberto Eco presented to us some true aspects, which although we do not appreciate and disturb us, exist and shall continue to exist, towards which we have to be careful.

The first truth regards our involvement in the virtual world and risks coming with it. He speaks about the power possessed by the virtual world, about necessity of spending physically more time with each other. According to him it is necessary to return to reality time after time. (LIVEon4G David Parenzo – Intervista a Umberto Eco)

We all know that today one of the highest risks on internet for young people is the online meetings. One can have a dialogue with an unknown person during an online game, in a random meeting site, social network, forum and any other type of joint conversation platform. During his speech in the First Festival of Camogli with his *Lectio Magistralis* “Communication: soft and hard”, Eco emphasized the issues caused by online communication where frequently the receiver does not know the sender.

In his article “Dear grandson, learn to memorize” (L’Espresso – Quattordici lettere d’autore per il 2014 : “Caro Figlio ti scrivo”, gennaio 2014, Umberto Eco: “ Caro nipote, studia a memoria”) the semiotician writes to his grandson and tells him: “...this is about a trap which forces you not gout of the house and know real girls.... but you have to look at girls at school or play because the

real ones are the better ones and there will come one day when they give you greater satisfaction than those online.”

Another truth hidden between metaphors that only Eco knew how to use, is related to the rubbish and false theories which have been already existing in the press but which with the utilization of Internet were wider and faster spread. Even the idiots have always existed, but now, they have found in social networks a safe stage where they can proclaim their absurdities which earlier could not find a place in the press.

On one hand, the right of speech cannot be denied to the idiots because as Eco says “they have the same right of speech with a Nobel Prize winner, but on the other hand it is difficult to distinguish the reliable sources from the false ones. It cannot be negated that internet is the most magnificent tool invented by humankind. We must also not forget the great opportunities possessed by the network.

It was precisely Eco who underlined the political potential of the network:

“The phenomenon of social networks is positive not only because it is instrument enabling communication between people with each other. Let’s think about events in China or Turkey, where the great protests against Erdogan was generated in the network, thanks to the tam-tam. Someone said that if internet would have existed during the time of Hitler, the concentration camps would have been impossible because the information would have gone viral.” (Umberto Eco - Internet, Social Media e Giornalismo)

But if Internet and Network are used without the required critical sense, they might constitute a risk for our entire society and especially for the young people.

We all know that nowadays the disinformation on Internet has become a real danger due to dissemination of false news from false sites which we need to learn to distinguish. These sites produce false news with satiric and humoristic purpose to attract users or just for the sake of seeing who is the easiest prey to fall in trap.

Not only during this intervention, but also in other cases, Umberto Eco has emphasized the necessity of information filtering. He considered internet an indispensable mean for the approach to information but lacking a critical capability, examination and filtering, exposing us to the rubbishes of the idiots.

According to Eco the institution which could guarantee information filtering was the school but today it is under threat by the large information flow as the teacher is not the only source of communication, but all means available to young people in classroom as computer, I pad, I phone.

The consequence of this excessive communicating is neither measurable nor can there be predicted what phenomenon it may produce.

In this case the need for an “education with Internet” arises which must start from the school, and as explained by Eco “we must learn how to filter Internet information, a thing which usually even the professors themselves are not capable of doing...”

The purpose of such “education” is to enhance awareness of the risks encountered in Internet and not getting people away from the Web. The target must be a correct approach to Internet, a conscious approach and a proper sense of criticism.

In this wide range of information is based the concept of “semiotic overfeeding” used and explained by Eco during an interview (Intervistato da **David Parenzo** negli studi di **#LIVEon4G**). With few words he defines with such term our state of being bombarded with overwhelming flow of information which without the capability of selecting and filtering makes us stupid. He explains further that collecting information without filter teaches us to avoid memorizing, thus causing a social Alzheimer.

But his is an argument which he has treated even in other cases and environments. In 2014 the semiotician and writer addressed a letter to his grandson with a reflection on technology and counseling for the future “Dear grandson, learn to memorize” (Umberto Eco: “Caro nipote, studia a memoria”).

In the first instance while reading the first lines: “I wanted to talk about a disease which has caught your generation and those older than you, who probably attend the university: the loss of memory” it comes natural to think “Eco hits again the Internet and sees it as the cause of such disease ...” But reading it with attention one can understand the beautiful metaphor and his critical opinion about Internet and its use. Eco accepts that Internet and world of Web opens a great window of opportunity to learn about the world, history and culture. New technologies have a crucial role in counseling and learning aspect, especially for young people. But they need an accurate guide and motivation which besides assigning simple tasks of research in the network must teach them to memorize the information, nurture their personal memory and when the day comes that “you get old, you would have the sensation as living for thousands years, because it would be like you were present in the battle of Waterloo, as if you were present when Julius Cesar was murdered and were near the place where Berthold the Black, by mixing substances in a pot to get gold, discovered by mistake the gunpowder and was blown. ...” (Ibidem)

This argument was utilized again during an interview to the magazine *Famiglia Cristiana* Eco intervistato da *Famiglia Cristiana* il 22/08/2012) where Eco speaks about the relation between knowledge and memory, the greatest tragedy of our time that is knowledge only of the present, emphasizing that how new technologies may play an important and essential role in counseling and absorbing information. The students, indeed attended and properly motivated by professors may exploit internet to learn by following nontraditional models or not divided in non communicating blocks. New technologies would turn didactics less passive and more motivational and would save the memory of the past.

Also the multimedia tools can be means needed to enhance the ability of memory.

Eco being always a supporter of Wikipedia, which he advised to his students for utilization in their researches, recognizing the vast opportunities it offers but being cautious of the inherent risks, puts the technology to the service of knowledge and its dissemination. Thus project Encyclomedia was conceived, an encyclopedia managed by him, giving a new perspective in brining the history of mankind through such powerful tool as Internet used to establish links between literature, science, art, music, economy, society, religion.

It is precisely this platform which indicates how the “technology of the future” will save the past because:

“Encyclomedia project dates from the Big Bang until nowadays. The ideas that got us started was to show the time lapse from the dinosaurs to the foundation of Rome, clarifying that how space of time between those events was so long while that between Jesus Christ and atomic bomb was so short: in the 2000 years of the latter is concentrated most of the history of interest to us. The first major instrument of Encyclomedia consists of making use of chronologies which enable us to list and understand the interrelation between events and personalities by creating visual maps with events, personalities and ideas ...” (Famiglia Cristiana il 22 Agosto 2012, Umberto Eco)

Conclusions

These are harsh words from Umberto Eco: *“Social networks give legions of idiots the right to speak when they once only spoke at a bar after a glass of wine, without harming the community. Then they were quickly silenced, but now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner...”*

Behind the attack lie the reflections on a topic which cannot be ignored: the big problem of the society and the mainly of the school actually is lack of indicating which are the risk of Internet, but not with purpose of making people stay away from web. The target is to assist them to a proper and conscious use of it and with an appropriate sense of criticism.

The school has an important task: teach young people how to filter the immense information found in Internet. As teachers are unprepared to use this tool, the challenge starts with them. They shall be the first ones who must learn and reason in a critical way and pass it to the students. If we shall be capable of using properly the Internet, Web and “future technology”, then we shall save our past: technology and Internet: technology and Internet will provide new opportunities of creating a joint memory, make didactics less passive and more motivational. But Internet is overloaded and such “information glut” represents the risk of mixture of positive things and harmful things. With an encyclopedia going hand in hand with the Internet, the user can undergo education on filtering; hence, such encyclopedia will enable the creation of a “discipline of memory”.

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