Transmedia Communication System for Social Dialogue

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Abstract

Nowadays cities are subjected to social, economic and urban planning transformations that provoke crisis or changing in identity. A complex system in which representation converge not only physical emergencies, but also the way in which communication artefacts help to create the image of the city. In this scenario we need a designer able to manage the coexistence of multiple communication exchange using the design tools to overcome the problems of understanding and access information.

In fact, the aim of this paper is to suggest an answer to these emergencies from a design point of view, through an *Audiovisual Design Thinking* approach to the problem.

Starting from the audiovisual capable of promoting dialogue through the storytelling practice, is possible to suggest a communication project able to build an open, participative human environment.

First of all, the work will explore how convergence culture is affecting society. After this, the paper will focus on the *Imagine Milan* research pointed out by professors, researchers and students of Politecnico di Milano in order to suggest a *Transmedia Communication System* able to promote social dialogue, social innovation and sustainability.

KEYWORDS: Convergence Culture, Transmedia Communication, Communication Design, Audiovisual Storytelling

Introduction: city as complex system

The city is a research field common to many studies - architecture, urban planning, sociology, semiotic, place marketing. Nowadays also communication and design are involved in the investigation of this area from different points of view.

For example, Maldonado (1997) describes the city like an aggregation of complex subsets that need rigorous and flexible methods able to respect the territorial dynamics.

Therefore, we could describe urban fabric as complex system in which representation converge not only physical emergencies, but also the way in which communication artefacts

help to create the image of the city (Lynch, 1990): what we should call a *collective mental synthesis* (Bonini Lessing, 2010, p. 20).

The current result is the reading of the city like a complex fabric because of global transformations – social, technological and financial; by the light of these evolutions, the urban area remains more than ever active and characterized by the coexistence of real life and electronic infrastructures. A city whose we need, although its fall is been declared by society, and where communication flow supports the creation of different identities.

As a consequence, the great challenge of contemporary cities is the promotion of coexistence in plural societies that need planning, involvement and collaboration like the Anglo-American concept of *governance* (Innerarity, 2008, p. 225).

Therefore, if the society asks for behaviours able to match up with cultural and politic pluralism, we will need strategies to tackle what Charles Taylor called the *deep diversity* (Innerarity, 2008, p. 161). After this we can't forget the relationship between social environment and technological landscape. In fact, the developments leaded by new technologies influence not only the communication field, but also consumption, experience and social habits (Bonini Lessing, 2010). As a result, if we break the hierarchical relationship between sender and recipient, we will obtain an equal relationship among stakeholders and a new social order.

A scenario, rich of a growing number of information spread by multichannel and multimodal devices (Piredda, 2008; Manovich, 2001), that outlines the need of a communication designer able to manage the coexistence of multiple factors using his tools to face the problems of understanding information and access them.

Communication Society

We can't continue to read the city like an architectural built-up area, while it is closely related to citizens who are as important as the physical framework.

For this reason, for a communication designer it becomes important to understand the perception that citizens have of the image of the city, which was built with memories and meanings that grew up during them living in the urban fabric. The public image created by the overlapping of individual images, or by a series of public images shared by people (Lynch, 1960/1990, p. 46).

Therefore, we must focus on communication flows able to affect the relationship among citizens: or rather, on communication and how it has been changing society.

The communication could be seen as an environment where generative flows converge. Hence a designer should study the evolution of the existing communication systems, in order to understand the new processes, and how media and languages have broken their historical isolation and incompatibility.

Thus it is possible to highlight the developments and how these transformations are affecting society, focusing on audiences, technologies and the degrees of engagement.

This research allowed us to outline an historical transition able to transform the communication's world, and whose analysis gave us the tools to develop an answer to the problem of dialogue among stakeholders.

Audience

The first change is related to audiences that use the communication systems.

According to Toschi (2011), this is a process whose construction is taking place nowadays in what we could define *script's society*.

As a consequence, the developments are giving a new importance to storytelling able to interweave our endless and different stories in a single one. Also because we can't forget that, since the dawn of history, the human culture has been based on narrative and through it people can build and share the meaning of their common experiences. Indeed, mankind communicates through stories and uses the storytelling to structure the surrounding reality. Compared to last decades, the strength of contemporary days is the rising importance of new narrative structures: this makes stories able to provide not only a linear path - with beginning, middle and end – but also multiple accesses.

Indeed, this is a scenario where stakeholders, looking for an increasingly number of information and experiences, can cross the boundaries of a single-line story.

This means that to design new communication systems, the first step is identifying and understanding audiences in order to offer them the right contents that are spreaded by appropriate devices. The next step concerns the definition of the engagement, in a degree ranging from "doing *something* (like a click) to *creating* something" (Pratten, 2011, p. 21) (let's say a co-design process).

Technology

The second change is related to the technological field: a development that lead us to interact with a digital vision of reality, and whose new textuality can be an important tool to envision our future.

Nowadays the remarkable acceleration in technological development has provided unimaginable instruments to the communication strategy. Hence, we need to understand how to make a proper use of these tools in our era, in order to develop communication systems able to using the latest technological innovations to engage audiences.

In fact, with all the technological tools available is possible to sustain an "ongoing conversation and engagement with the viewer" (Bernardo, 2011, p.54) choosing the best media for our contents.

Engagement

The third change is related to the engagement.

As a matter of fact, while in the last decades the user interaction was related to technology, nowadays it depends on the time and space that people are willing to devote to contents.

This makes it possible classify audiences into two categories of experience: users that don't interact with the platforms (*Lean Back Experience*) and people who are very active (*Lean Forward Experience*) (Bernardo, 2011).

Therefore, today we need to move from a *platform-centric vision* (Bernardo, 2011, p.137) to a *user-centered vision*, focusing on the engagement we want to design for the audiences.

This doesn't mean we must design the highest possible degree of engagement. Thus, shifting the focus from technology to user experience, it is possible to find a balance between the two engagement degrees: as a consequence the audiences can enjoy the best contents spread by the suitable devices.

For these reason, the designer have to learn how to manage the new communication processes: shifting his position from an executive role to a supporting role, while the generative process increases. This is because the audiences can become aware of their important role in the new communication activities.

Of course these three areas are living in a situation of interchange into the age of convergence (Jenkins, 2006): an era characterized by audiences able to do connections among different media content, looking for new information.

In the light of these developments, is possible to outline three trends that are characterizing our contemporary society: *Storytelling Space*, *Participative Space* and *Experiential Space*.

Storytelling Space and *Participative Space*, referring to new narrative structures that give people more tools to tell and to listen stories, are closely related to the audience field.

In fact, there are new generations of interactive narratives able to change the connection between the mass media (*top-down*) and the participatory culture (*bottom-up*).

Often the concept of participation is linked to access issues. For this reason the designers have to focus not only on technological developments, but also on cultural and social aspects that are more related to the audiences: in fact, quoting Tim Brown (2008), a designer should follow a *human-centered design ethos*.

Instead, *Experiential Space* is related to how the audiences, thanks to developments in technology and media, can interact with each other creating collaborative networks that are able to experience complex narratives spread out by non-linear communication systems: as a result, the consumption become a collective process (Lévy, 1996).

Imagine Milan: an Audiovisual Design Thinking approach to social dialogue

Our answer to the emergencies outlined is an educational and research project started in 2009 – *Imagine Milan* – pointed out by professors, researchers and students of the School of Design (Politecnico di Milano).

Starting from the audiovisual capable of promoting dialogue through the storytelling practice, we suggest a communication project able to build an open, participative human environment. We are designing a process able to integrate audiovisual artefacts and collaborative tools in a transmedial communication system for promoting a social and sustainable dialogue among stakeholders in the city of Milan. A city, as well as other metropolis, that is facing the common problems of a transition era.

The first two years we worked on districts that are described by Lynch as "an area of homogeneous character, recognized by clues which are continuous throughout the district and discontinuous elsewhere" (Lynch, 1990, p. 103).

In particular, the first year (*Walking in Milan*, 2009-2010) we worked on the concept of sustainable mobility in collaboration with Milan Municipality. The areas involved were *Bovisa, Isola, Sempione, Brera, Lazzaretto, Lambrate/University Campus, Navigli, S. Ambrogio, Fashion District*. The second year (*Street Tales*, 2010-2011) we focused on the quality of life in Milan with the aim of activate relationship with the stakeholders of these districts: *Garibaldi, Bicocca, Farini, Ortica, Ticinese, Dergano, Padova, Sarpi, Buenos Aires, Tortona*. Instead, this year (*The changing city*, 2011-2012) we have decided to experience a different approach starting from themes related to the city transformation: again Sustainable Mobility, adding Smart City, Green City, Multiculturalism, Social Memory, Suburbs.

Related to the research process is possible to identify two different phases. A first phase linked to the development of audiovisual formats for the territory's listening, which allowed us to map twenty districts in Milan. A second phase whose aim is the integration of audiovisual artefacts and collaborative practices in a transmedia communication system capable of supporting a sustainable dialogue among stakeholders.
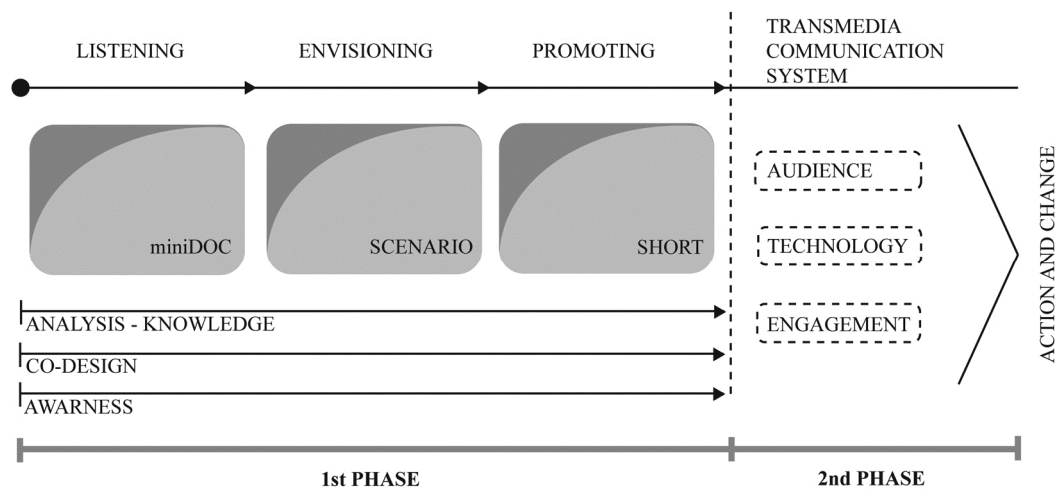
Figure 1. Research Process. This figure illustrates the research process of *Imagine Milan* project and the output related to each steps.

1st phase – Audiovisual Communication Formats

The first phase of *Imagine Milan* research had the aim to test audiovisual formats, focusing on the potentialities of audiovisual storytelling through three different narrative structures. It's possible to highlight the main first phase steps according to the *Design Thinking* approach that describes the design process as a system of spaces.

The first space – *Listening* – has the objective of exploring and listening the city districts. Therefore the designer should analyze these areas using different methods as: history documentation; video and photo shooting; the search of iconographic repertories useful to piece together social memory and imagery; video interviews with stakeholders involved in the district (citizens, workers, associations, craftsmen and companies).

The output is the *miniDOC*. An audiovisual format capable to tell in a short length of time (five minutes) all the aspects emerged during the research work. This work pushes the young designers to discover the key elements and to organize them, in order to obtain narrative and aesthetic groups. Clusters that become source of inspiration for the subsequent work steps.

The second space – *Envisioning* – has the goal of provide an epistemological and aesthetic contribution to envisioning a sustainable future, through an *Audiovisual Design Thinking* approach (Piredda, 2008; Galbiati et al., 2010).

The output is the *Scenario*: a short audiovisual format (three minutes) based on a three-acts narrative structure, whose aim is the visualization of abstract concepts able to activate dialogue among stakeholders.

The third space – *Promoting* – has the objective of promote a sustainable city life and its benefit. The output is the *Short*: a typical advertising format, whose length is thirty seconds. In the first phase, the research tested the use of tools that could be useful for designing collaborative processes - as Moodboards, Storyboards, Instructables – and the use of Copy Strategy: a typical brand communication tool.

In conclusion, during the first phase we have tested and verified the potentialities of audiovisual storytelling to foster collaborative processes and the results dissemination, in order to demonstrate how the audiovisual formats can become an integral part of communication systems able to promote dialogue with society.

2nd phase – Sustainable Communication System

The second phase started in 2010 with the analysis of how communicative context affects and is affected by society.
The research question is: how is possible to design a sustainable communication system capable to promote a dialogue among citizens in our society?

A possible answer is the *transmediality*: a current approach capable to embody all the features that characterize new communication systems in a convergence culture (Jenkins, 2006), and which highlights how has been changing our relationship with media.
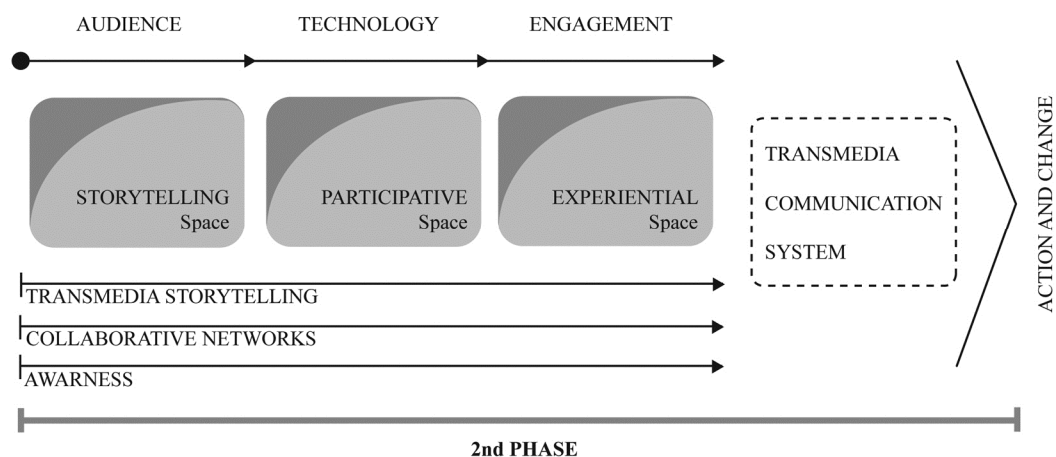

Figure 2. This figure illustrates the elements that characterize the 2nd phase of the project.

This new cultural paradigm allows audiences to access contents in a different way, with a subsequent changing in the relationship between the mainstream media (*top-down*) and participatory culture (*bottom-up*). Audiences that, looking for an increasingly number of information, can cross the boundaries of a single-line story and promoting a transformation in the narrative structures.
Since the dawn of history, the human culture has been based on stories and mankind has been used them to build and share the meaning of everyday experience.
In fact, according to Monique de Haas (2010):

> *Since the time of Aristotle, story has been the way we structure meaning and it will not be different in this age. But the story will be built much more through dialogue instead of monologue and this in itself is a turning point with how we have built and consumed stories in the twentieth century. This "new" model of storytelling harkens back to when word of mouth and social communication were the only means to forward information. This is why the tribal model of communication is relevant again and social communication in communities is becoming more dominant. At this time, this evolution is occurring beside the classical model of spreading (broadcasting) information. But it will influence and change the status quo of communication profoundly, particularly driven by the younger, cross-media literate generation. (de Haas, 2010, p. 222)*

Thus nowadays, the designers have to manage a major complexity that is due to changes in audiences, technologies and engagement processes.
In fact, heterogeneous audiences share the same technologies and devices that enable to enjoy the contemporary stories in new and different ways (Giovagnoli, 2009).

As a consequence, designers have to develop new communication processes that embrace the contemporary evolutions, with the aim to foster the creation of the collective imaginary and the dialogue among people.

In conclusion, is possible to highlight four features (Giovagnoli, 2011, p.17) that characterize the design of a transmedia communication system able to promote a communicational exchange among audiences that have different points of view:

» The involvement of different media that takes into account characteristics and languages proper to each one.

» The distribution of contents on different platforms, without interferences, to engage several audiences in the narration.

» To allow the various media to tell different elements of a common story (through multiple narrative perspectives).

» Helping audiences to develop a synergic and participatory communication using a *human-centered* design process.

In conclusion, the paper describes a project capable to support the construction of a *human landscape*, playing on the ability of audiovisual storytelling to foster different perspectives.

Conclusion

The main results of this research are related to the two phases of the project.

It is possible to see the first step as a good starting point for developing an *Audiovisual Design Thinking* approach able to document physical, social and cultural reality, and also capable of suggesting additional values.

In fact, in these three years the research unit tested and verified the dual status of audiovisual artefacts:

» Tool able to read the present – Nowadays the citizens feel the need of instruments capable to reconstruct the social imagery, which was lost for the growing mobility and the isolation phenomena.

» Tool able to foster a dialogue on a possible future – The audiovisual artefacts can support a kind of *pedagogy glance* able to involve audiences in the daily city life.

Even in the first phase, the process tries to interweave the communication project and the experimentation of co-design practices. In fact, this step ended with a workshop to present the results at the *Urban Center* in Milan: the aim was to do an experimentation about the use of audiovisual artefacts to foster a dialogue among stakeholders to envisioning a sustainable future.

Instead, it is possible to consider the second step as a good starting point for designing a Transmedia Communication System able to transform the contemporary weaknesses in strength points. A useful approach in an era characterized by digital media that lead people to interact with each other through new forms of storytelling.

The result obtained is the identification of a possible answer linked to the contemporary developments. Transformations that are related to a convergence era (Jenkins, 2006):

» An era where stakeholders can cross the boundaries of a single-line story, looking for an increasingly number of information.

» An era where technological transformations allow people to create collaborative networks.

» An era where the different ways to access contents have changed the connection between the mass media (top-down) and the participatory culture (bottom-up), allowing the increase of possible engagement degrees.

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