

Communication, relationships and societal change

# From real to virtual (and back)

Stefania Tanesini

*Long gone are the days of a clear distinction between the real and the virtual. We are going through the hybrid era of 'onlife, and it is not over yet. After two years of global pandemic, experts on our information society are looking even further towards a more human digital ecosystem. The author, a journalist, is currently head of the international communications office for the Focolare Movement.*

I'm a big fan of travel. Upon arrival in a place, I prefer an immersive approach, one that allows me to experience the *genius loci*, or those emblematic socio-cultural characteristics of a city or environment.

The Faroe Islands are an archipelago of 18 tiny volcanic islands with an unspoiled, fairytale appearance located between Iceland and Norway. I discovered the Islands while on lockdown in my attempt to continue traveling despite being closed within four walls.

I toured far and wide in my virtual travel experience, thanks to a new remote tourism tool made available by the Faroe Islands Tourism Board. It is a kind of device which connects the "tourist" to an Island resident who is equipped with a *bodycam* (micro-video camera) that broadcasts live. For about an hour, it was possible to explore the landscape and the environment through the resident's eyes and with their legs.

It was an extremely real experience that reminded me of the theorem by the American sociologist, William Thomas: "If men define certain situations as real, they are real in their consequences". That speaks powerfully to us today and perfectly illustrates the "real" dimension of our modern hyper-connected society. To be clear, the pressure of our fingertips on the *touchscreen* of our mobile phone or tablet is the gesture-bridge *par excellence* which connects the real and the virtual today. Think of the click by which we buy a product online. Often, it is delivered to our home in less than 24 hours. Ultimately, we make real choices, take action, form opinions and follow the latest fashion trends through apps and social networks.

## Onlife or the mangrove society

"The barrier between real and virtual has collapsed. There is no longer a difference between online and offline. But there is an *onlife* existence, a hybrid life." Luciano Floridi, renowned expert in philosophy and the ethics of information, and a professor at Oxford and the Alma Mater in Bologna, has worked to clarify this concept. Using a metaphor, he describes *onlife* as "mangrove societies" which live in the brackish water where sea and river meet.

To use Twitter jargon, which is perhaps the most cultured among the social networks, "life" is a *trending topic* and one that is recurring. On social media there is more and more space

for stories that speak about segments of existence, including videos, captions, gifs, music, etc. What matters is to be there, in addition to that primary need for social recognition of our existence. In other words, if you do not have visibility, you do not exist.

We must therefore agree with the great theorist of communication, H.M. McLuhan. When, in former, unsuspecting times in which a digital revolution seemed like science fiction, McLuhan wrote that this same media was nothing more than an extension of the human body, one which amplified the options of one or more organs to the detriment of others. Technological innovations were seen as having the power to alter the environment in which a person was living<sup>1</sup>.

### **The business of attention**

Social media like Tik Tok and Instagram can lead us to ask ourselves if it is technology that influences and deeply changes us or if we are the ones – pushed by societal and cultural need – guiding things? Probably both are true, because today we can say that they are steps along a single path. Thinking of the Internet and the ensuing digital revolution: After a phase of adaptation and redefinition, technology has profoundly changed us, as shown by numerous neuroscientific brain studies in our hyperconnected lives of today. The average attention span in front of a screen is 40 seconds at work and even less outside those hours. This is because we are constantly jumping from chats to a photo, to posts. In a world that is always connected and distracted, attention has become the most precious asset today and the real business of web giants.

"As a consequence, we are becoming only reactive creatures. It's great to have access to lots of information but if we never exercise logic and reason, we're in trouble. Scholars are finding that half of us no longer think rationally. The question is when will we come to understand that what we are losing is much more than what we are gaining? Technology is changing us and it's changing right in our heads." Professor emeritus at the University of California San Francisco and renowned neuroscientist, Michael Merzenich also explains: "There is a threshold beyond which these tools that previously facilitated our lives begin to make us regress in a destructive way and we have probably already crossed that line"<sup>2</sup>. Human integrity is at stake, so the neuroscientist suggests working intensely to educate children from a very young age to recognize and resist manipulation.

### **From linear time to circular time**

According to Professor Floridi, much of our time is spent in the "infosphere" – exactly 6 hours and 22 minutes a day -- according to the 2021 annual digital report of *We are social* and *Hootsuite*<sup>3</sup>. So, Floridi goes on to say: "It no longer makes sense to ask, "are you online?" to one who has a *smartphone* in his pocket, or perhaps a *smartwatch* on his wrist while talking to us through the Bluetooth of his car, and following GPS navigator instructions to extricate himself in the streets of Rome"<sup>4</sup>.

But if we were to define the concept of "reality" associated with the digital revolution, what has never been questioned is the notion of "time". Time spent in front of a screen is in effect "real time" made up of minutes, hours, and days. We are also aging while we chat, click, post and browse the internet. What changes is the perception of time. In front of a screen, time expands and changes.

The space-time barrier today is being broken down not only by social media but also by popular video streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime and the newer Disney+ platforms. Thanks to them, I no longer miss the end of the film or a TV series episode. There is no need to run home or respect a schedule. Everything is on the web at any time: time goes from being linear to circular.

### **Between 'real' life and digital life**

While today humanity proceeds at varying speeds towards an exit from the pandemic tunnel, women and men at every latitude are constantly (although often unconsciously) looking for a balance between digital experiences and a growing need to rediscover physical contact.

Online business meetings and schooling are "the new normal" and, for some time, we have also deluded ourselves that we have already found this magical balance. However, as we begin to exit from this crisis, we are seeing that this is not the case and questions emerge. Will the constant expansion of the digital dimension remain at its current level or will we arrive at a kind of rejection? Since the experience as it is remains insufficient and unsatisfying, what will it take to find a new balance between *digital-life* and *real-life*?

### **Betting on generosity**

To bring the human person in his proximity and physicality together with interpersonal relationships (real and not programmed ones) back to the forefront of our attention, is none other than Seth Godin, undisputed guru of global marketing. In his latest beautiful book, *The Practice*, he declares a '*j'accuse*' that leaves no room for misunderstandings<sup>5</sup>. He says that in the vast majority of cases, social media is a trap. They certainly provide us with a microphone, "but it is up to us to decide how best to use it"<sup>6</sup>. Godin affirms that what remains is the authentic experience of the person, a mosaic of expectations enclosed in often unfulfilled needs and experiences to be listened to. It is a path to be undertaken consistently, day by day, which excludes any form of manipulation and persuasion. It is one that, on the contrary, surprisingly places its bet on generosity.

"Generosity," - he says in his book - "subverts resistance (which drives us to seek security) by concentrating our efforts on someone else. Generosity means that we don't have to seek reassurance for ourselves but can instead focus us on serving others. It activates a different part of our brain and provides us with a more meaningful way to progress. [...] Our work exists to change the recipient for the better. When you do something for someone else, to make things better, suddenly your activity is not about you. Jump into the water, save that child."<sup>7</sup>

### **Digital empathy and the dimension of relationality**

If I could end with an image, it would be a Formula One racing pit stop: Pit stops are necessary and indispensable steps to get us to the finish line. Similarly, by its nature, the digital ecosystem in which we swim is not "finished" but rather constantly evolving. To clarify, the phase of powerful, social media infatuation for its own sake is ending. This is because we are increasingly understanding its 'instrumental' nature and that what ultimately matters are what is put inside. This offers hope. Growing numbers of communication gurus - from engineers who build algorithms to philosophers of informatics - agree that one of the most requested and important skills today, also in the digital sphere,

is empathy, the capacity to "see" the other in his truth and integrity. The great challenge today is one of reconstructing a blanket of trust at both the interpersonal and societal level.

But this commitment does not end in front of the screen. Today, more than ever, it needs to take to the streets, to encounter and embrace the other in their entirety. Otherwise, there is the risk of closing in on oneself, as Pope Francis recently said to a group of students: "Boys and girls, you are children of the digital society, one which opened new knowledge and communication pathways; but by now we well know that there is the danger of closing in on ourselves and of seeing only a filtered reality that seems to show to us greater freedom. The experience of the pandemic with its 'abstinence' of friendly relationships, can urge you, when you are aware of it, to be more critical in your use of these tools; this way they will remain as instruments which are subject to our intelligence and our will"<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. Marshall McLuhan, *Gli strumenti del comunicare*, Il Saggiatore, Milan 1967.

<sup>2</sup> "Iperconnessi", 15 October 2018 episode of the transmission "Presadiretta", RAI 3 TV. <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2018/10/Presadiretta-Iperconnessi-a5d6226e-1fd2-450d-a8e7-ecd622413b20.html>

<sup>3</sup> Digital 2021: global data. <https://wearesocial.com/it/blog/2021/01/digital-2021-i-dati-globali>

<sup>4</sup> A. Santopietro, *Interview with Luciano Floridi, vita onlife, informazione transdiegetica e iperistoria*, Zest, 21 October 2016. <https://www.zestletteraturasostenibile.com/filosofia-etica-dellinformazione-intervista-luciano-floridi/>

<sup>5</sup> S. Godin, *La pratica*, Roi Edizioni, Macerata 2020.

<sup>6</sup> G. Colletti and F. Grattagliano, *Seth Godin: influencers are the past, fallen into the trap of social media*, «Il Sole 24 ore», 13 February 2021. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/seth-godin-gli-influencer-sono-passatocaduti-trappola-social-ADPuLmJB>

<sup>7</sup> S. Godin, *La pratica*, cit., p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis, *Greeting to the directors and students of the Ambrosoli Institute of Codogno (Lodi)*, 22 May 2021. [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2021/may/documents/papa-francesco\\_20210522\\_istitutoambrosoli-codogno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/it/speeches/2021/may/documents/papa-francesco_20210522_istitutoambrosoli-codogno.html)