

***Collective tragedy and digital emotions: the earthquake in Abruzzi "lived" on
Facebook***

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Working paper

1. The Frame

In the night of 6th April 2009, at 3.32 A. M., in a central region of Italy, there was a long and hard sequence of earthquake shakes that leaned the land on its knees.

After few hours from the first shake, L'Aquila City Centre was destroyed and other little towns had the same sort. In all the region – and for few hours also in the neighbouring areas – the communication channels were disrupted and this situation caused some problems also for the help actions. In the following days the number of dead increased, hour after hour, arriving at 286 dead and 1600 hurts at the end of helping actions.

Assistance, rescue equips, journalists and government's delegates immediately arrived at L'Aquila and, at the same time, also the complaining voices of whom declared that the tragedy could be avoided, started to be raised.

What about information? Media gave information about the first shakes in the night but Italians learned the news only in the morning, remaining astonished.

The movement on the Net –common people circulation of news and comments – started in the morning, a part the case of few victims that used an arranged connection to inform far relatives to be alive.

The groups in Facebook, that is the object of this essay, started in the first hours of the afternoon.

It was very important the interconnection of media news and the redundant process of information through and beyond different channels because there were an unusual need of updating information by the public. Journalists of traditional media mixed the interviews to people of L'Aquila with some pieces of facebook's or blogs' posts in order to give a completed reconstruction of what was happened.

The Net was also very useful to collect resources – money, food, medicines, volunteers etc – to support the population of L'Aquila.

My paper would propose an empirical research on Facebook conducted in the following weeks afterward the earthquak, in order to understand what can be the role of the Net, and above all of Social Network sites (SNS) in the specific circumstance of a collective tragedy. My interest in this argument is linked with a previous study about the use of the Net as new anthropological and psychosocial context where share personal experiences of mourning. What does it happen in the case of collective tragedy, such as an earthquake?

But, before presenting my study, I would synthetically describe the theoretical frame of my work. Firstly, I would underline the social aspects connected with the collective trauma: what

is the role of the community in this case and what we have to intend for "community" in the late-modern western society. Secondly, I would propose my perspective in considering the Net as a narrative medium or a narrative context made up of stories more or less personal and what are the implications of this glance in the empirical research.

A disaster represents a community event that cause a disruptive effect on the collective feeling of cohesion, the System of Government, the network of formal and informal relationships, and the trust among the members of that community (Lavanco, Novara, 2003).

The reorganization carried out by steps. Mauri (1999) identifies four phases: the heroic one, which leads to prefer the interests of the community than the personal one; the so-called honeymoon phase in which prevail collective sentiments of sharing, the phase of disillusionment, that leads to accept the impossibility of a return to a situation like the previous one; and finally the reconstruction phase, during which people work on their selves and on the world around to make the change that will bring back to routine.

According to the processes of globalization and the *mediatisation* of experience (among other Thompson, 1998), it is important to understand who can considered as "involved" in a catastrophic event.

Cusano (2002) identifies three types of "victims": the first level is made up of those persons directly affected by the tragedy, the second level includes the relatives of those who have been directly affected by the disaster and, finally, a third level regards the professionalists involved in the operations of help. In my opinion, it should add a fourth level represented by the "spectator-surfer" , that is who participates to the events in a mediated way. As Jedlowski (2005) says, by media "the experience becomes a curious balance between feelings of presence and absence, between the perception of" being there "and" not be there "(p. 144).

So when I use the term community involved in the process of elaboration of the trauma I refer to its broadest sense, as a relational phenomenon that builds around the concept of "US", that share a common history. In this case the idea of community is completely untied with the idea of co-presence and physical or geographical proximity (Amerios, 2000).

The community has a fundamental role in collective coping actions, both operational and socio-affective one (Rime, 2008). The emotion that spreads from a catastrophic event has an impact on multiple levels and requires to the community - which has involved - the ability to act as place of containment of emotional charge. The result of this process is the so called "participated listening" (Castles, Sbattella, 2003), that is an empathic support based on comfort, emotional containment and understanding (Rime, 2008). The community, therefore, «expresses a primary vocation to eliminate the emotional and social consequences of temporary failure of the cognitive-symbolic systems of the individual» (ibid., p. 330).

I do not have the space to dwell on this thought. What I would emphasize here is the importance of "others" in its broadest sense when some tragic events remind us our finite nature and our limited planning time.

The community *acts, contains, supports and remembers.*

The word "community", in this broadest sense, includes also the web, where people can "experience" different forms of "community life".

The second aspect is the definition of Internet I use, by my perspective of study. For my research I used a narrative approach. I started by the Idea that the Net can be considered as narrative context where you can do technologically mediated experience (Wallace, 2000, Walker, 2001:2002). From this perspective, SNS as well as all the interactive environments of the Net are narrative context where people exchange stories, more or less personal, more or less deep.

So, I wondered if the relational context that is defined in the SNS, often purely ephemeral, would "answer" to that need for "action" that characterizes emergency situations.

2. The research

According to this framing concepts, my research would answer to the question: what is the role of the Net in the specific circumstance of a collective tragedy?

More specifically, I would understand the following aspects:

- The characteristics of the fragmented narratives posted and shared in public space of a SNS;
- The motivations that push facebookers – Facebook's users – to use public to share personal feeling in a public space;
- The expectations about the effects of the posting action;
- The collective representation of the earthquake emerged from the collective narration saved on-line as well as from the photo and image used as profile elements of the groups;
- And finally, the functions of the Net in the case of the elaboration of a collective trauma.

In order to answer to this question I divided my work in three steps. At first, I conducted a narrative qualitative content analysis of 21.000 posts published on the wall of the groups born in that circumstance. For this analysis I used a narrative schedule divided in four parts. The first was about the subject of the post, intending with this expression not the grammar subject of the period but the main focus of the narration. I identified two macro-focuses: the author of the post when the narrative is about his/her experience or feelings; the event, when the post is focused on some aspects of the earthquake. The second part was about the object, that is the theme of the post. In this case I distinguished the anecdote (something about the actual earthquake), the experience (something about previous situation of trauma), the emotion and the need (necessities or other requests). The third part was about the referent of the post that could be someone specific (relatives, real or net friends, rescue equipments etc) or someone in general (all the netusers). The last part of the schedule was about the aim – implicit or explicit – proposed inside the narration. In this case I divided three goals: to describe – that is the

case of narration less empathetic – to share – in the sense of put in common – to express – when the main aim is more personal and egoistic.

Secondly, in order to support the results, I carried out 25 e-mail interviews with facebookers that published a message. The interview was organised in three macro-questions: how they knew about the group; what was the reason why they wrote on the wall; with which expectations or imagined effects.

Actually, I completed these two moments of the research and I’m going to end up also the third one about the social representation – and above all its visual components – emerging from the visual materials published on these groups.

I chose the sample of posts, considering only the first five groups – for number of members and number of posts - appeared by researching with two key words “earthquake” and “Abruzzi”. I contacted the interviewees by the e-mail system of Facebook, proceeding with a casual sample. I sent an e-mail of presentation to 120 people and only 25 answered to me¹.

For this reason I used this material only as support of the results of content analysis.

For the visual analysis I used Photomesa program to catalogue the first 500 images of the groups about the earthquake, following the order of the search results.

3. Results

By the qualitative analysis I individuate 9 different typologies of posts, as proposed in the following table.

Table 1. typologies of posts

Typologies	Subject	Object	Referent	aims
Help request	Event-f.	Needs	everyone	express
Empathetic solidarity	I-focused	Emotions	Specific others	Share
Pragmatic Solidarity	I-focused	Needs	Specific others	share
Witness	Event-f.	Anecdote	everyone	Express
Denunciation	Event-f.	Anecdote	everyone	Describe
Pray	Event-f.	Emotion	Specific others	Share
Memory	I-focused	Experience	Self	Describe
Searching	I-focused	Experience	everyone	Describe

¹ A special tanks is for Serena Casagnola for the help in selecting the contacts and doing e-mail interviews.

delayed mourning	I-focused	Emotions	Specific others	express
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The help requests are the typical posts left by people that had some needs to be met: «we need group zero blood donators. Who is part of this group is prayed to present at xxxx». These messages are cross-media communication, defining a new space of participation and sense of belonging that goes beyond the SNs, involving all the media system.

I called “empathetic solidarity” the narratives that contains a message of support for Abruzzi’s people. This type of post is the expression of a typical mechanism of collective elaboration of an emotion (Rimè, 2008) that is the socio-affective answer by the community, through which it is possible to define a containing space for and with people that lived a traumatic experience.

The pragmatic solidarity is the case of posts where the author proposes him/herself to offer a concrete support: «I’m a volunteer of Civil protection of Catanzaro. Two groups of work are ready to come in Abruzzi. We do the possible for being there for tomorrow».

The post called “witness” is about a specific anecdote of the earthquake. The author describes all the details of the circumstance, in order to leave a memory of what happen: «I’m abruzzesian, Aquilian exactly, and I can’t forget that 22 seconds of panic, I’m alive (...)».

The denunciation is a narrative focused on hidden episodes about the organization of helps. It is the typical post with the structure similar to an news article.

I defined pray the posts that are focused on personal emotions and memories are anecdotes about Abruzzi before the earthquake. In the few days after the tragedy some people used the SNs to communicate with the relatives around the world. And someone else used the wall of Facebook to have news about a friends or other persons such as M. «I’m looking for Martinello Family. I knew Mario, Luisa and Davide on holiday (...)»

An interesting typology - very close to my previous work on the use of the Net in personal mourning - is the case of delayed mourning. The wall of Facebook are rich of post in which the author reported previous experience of earthquake, using a very emotive language, describing all the details even if after 20 years. There is a long literature about the delayed mourning in psychology. In this case I would underline only one aspect of this process. By reading other messages, people that were victims of an earthquake in the past has trigger a mechanism of projection and of mimetic identification with the Abruzzi’s people and – may be in part – this helps them to evocate again the previous traumatic experiences, completing or starting to complete the “work of the mourning”.

The results of the content analysis are supported by the interpretation of the interviews. IN fact, the interviews were useful to answer to three questions: why facebookers arrived to the group; why the decided to write down a message; what were the effects they expected by this act of participation.

The respondents declare to be arrived to the group through a direct invitation forwarded by a friend, by a personal search on Facebook, and sometime just by chance. In any case, it’s

interesting to notice that they have a link with the Abruzzi or with the event. I identified four types of links:

- The sense of belonging to the Region: this is the case both of actual inhabitant of Abruzzi or migrants that now live around the world;
- A family link, that is, parents or relatives that live in Abruzzi;
- A previous experience of earthquake: Italy is very seismic area of Europe and during its recent history there was an other great case of big earthquake in Campania (Naples). This is the reason why this episode of Abruzzi awakes again the terrible circumstance of Naples;
- Direct experience (especially of help): a lot of volunteer used facebook to give their availability to go on the field and give helps; or use the wall to report what happened during the staying in Abruzzi.

About the motivations of writing down a message on the wall, the reasons expressed in the e-mail interviews confirm my classification emerged from the content analysis. People uses the wall to:

- share feelings of solidarity, a pray for the victims, memories about previous experience;
- express emotions (above all anger, pain and suffer) or the sense of belonging;
- promote initiatives;
- inform about incorrect actions.

More in depth, the respondents underlined the importance of writing on the Net in order to:

- give and to leave a memory: during the interview they expressed the need of not to forget what happen;
- give a sign of their presence: in a large majority of cases the facebookers didn't have the opportunity to go directly in Abruzzi to offer their help and the Net – and above all the wall of the SNS – gave them a way to express their proximity to feel like being a part of "Abruzzi" ("we are a part of... we are affectively close to...")

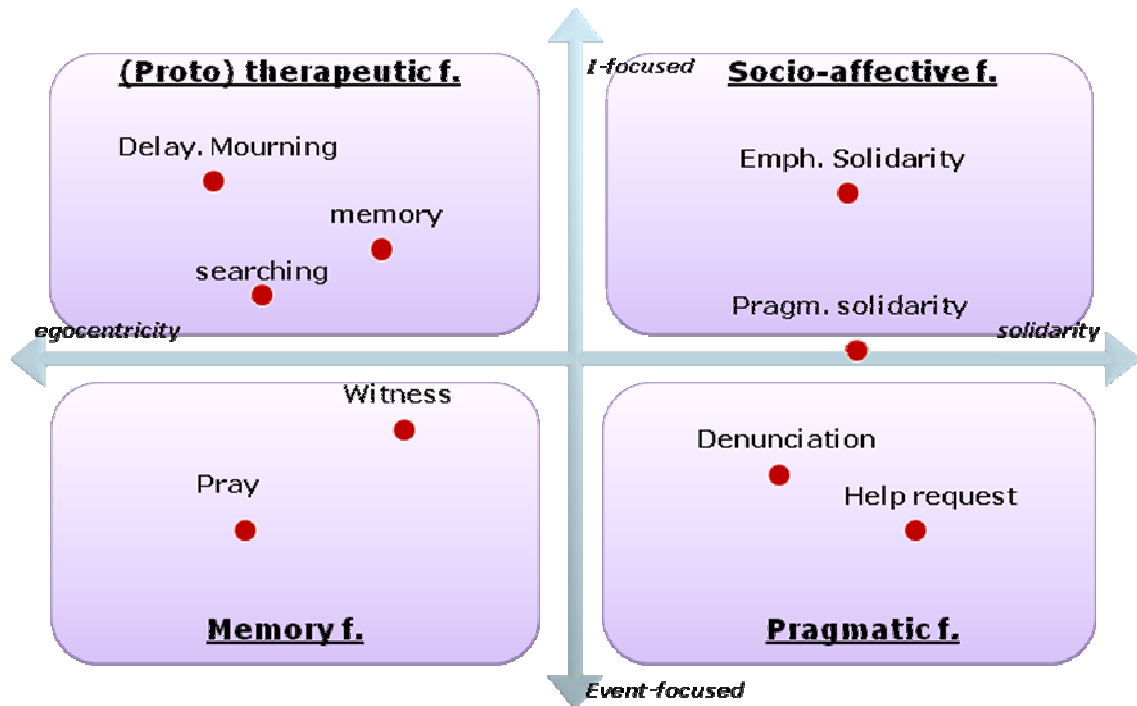
However it was interesting to discover that some respondents didn't remember to have wrote on the wall. This was the case of people that were generally less engaged, without one of the links we specified above. At the same time, some interviewees – more involved – used the interview to tell again what happened on 6 April 2010 in their life, such as a new way to leave a witness of the fact, to elaborate the trauma.

What were the expectations? By the reading of the interviews it is possible to individuate four cases. Someone specify that he/she write on the wall to move to an action. As we have said before, in a lot of cases, the act of writing on the wall was the first sign of pragmatic participation to the event. Others said that they didn't have specific expectations - especially when the message is about emotions and feelings («I wrote only to pour out my feelings») – as if the first aim was to pour out a strong feeling. The most cited expectation – according to them satisfied – was to leave e memory (not to forget). Finally, some of them would express the sense of belonging to Abruzzi (not of being Italians!).

From all of these results – the qualitative content analysis and the interviews - I try to elaborate e synthetic model about the functions of the Net using two axis:

- The narrative focus: I-focused vs. Event-focused;
- The aim of the posting: the three aims indicated before – to express, to describe and to share – can be putted on a continuum that have to extremities: the egocentric vs. solidarity one.

Model 1. The functions of the Net



In this way I identified 4 functions: the (proto)therapeutic, the socio-affective, the pragmatic one and the function of memory. The therapeutic function is typical of narratives that are I-focused and expressed with egoistic aims. I said in the first part of the paper that the act of narrate personal experience has a therapeutic effect in the complex work of define the self. Writing on the Net – in the specific case of a traumatic experience –can help the author to put in order feelings and thoughts.

I described the socio-affective function before, describing the empathetic solidarity messages. It was a peculiar mechanism of collective elaboration of emotions proposed by Rimè (2008) and, according to me, is evident in the case of that posts that are I-focused but with a solidarity aims.

The pragmatic function is typical of the narratives that try to do something with the power of the words. The Net can be used to give a sign of concrete actions. And finally, there is the function of memory. During this last decades there are a big debate about the role of new technologies as space of memory (Schonberger, 2009). The discourse is really controversial and there isn't the space to deepen it; but I think that there are two interesting mechanism

involving memory aspects that take place on the Net. On one hand we have an attempt to leave a track, through public narrations; on the other hand, however, as some respondents said, the act of writing down separates the author from his/her narration, caused a process of individual oblivion.

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