

# From the Psychoanalyst's Couch to Social Networks

**Annamaria Silvana de Rosa**

*Sapienza University of Rome, Italy*

**Emanuele Fino**

*Psychologist, Psychometrician, Italy*

**Elena Bocci**

*Sapienza University of Rome, Italy*

## INTRODUCTION

The rise of information technologies and the Internet have dramatically changed the ways in which people interact, communicate and represent themselves and the world that they live in (Edwards et Al., 2013). In particular, the recent appearance of social network sites (SNS) is challenging mainstream social psychological research and it requires social psychologists to question their earmarking theoretical tools.

To date, social psychological research has mainly focused on the application of existing theories to explain the use and impact of SNS (de Rosa, 2012). Nevertheless, the convergence of social evolution and information technologies is laying a new basis for the performance of activities throughout the social structure (Castells, 1996:470-471), so that social psychologists must revise their theoretical traditions in its investigation.

Although research in the past decade has focused on the study of new phenomena generated by online social interactions, the underlying symbolic universe of meanings, products and contents of such interactions is still partially unknown.

Exploration of this semantic production can draw fruitfully on Social Representations Theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1961/1976; 1995; Farr & Moscovici, 1984). In his classic study on the image of psychoanalysis Moscovici investigated

how different forms of knowledge encounter and cross-fertilize. His specific interest was in how scientific theories circulate within common sense and what happens to those theories when they are elaborated upon the laboratory of society. Moscovici identified the product of this encounter in social representations (SR), defined as common sense theories on key aspects of the world that allow individuals and groups to represent it and master it (Farr & Moscovici, 1984).

In this paper, we present and discuss the results of research on spontaneous conversations in SNS in two cultural contexts, France and Italy, which followed up on Moscovici's classic study on psychoanalysis. This research is part of a broader research project (de Rosa, 2011; 2012; 2013) comprising: a field study, content analysis of the online press and content analysis of spontaneous conversations on SN.

## BACKGROUND

It is important to recall here that the conventional approach of social sciences to the study of SN has been rooted in the field of sociometry since the introduction and diffusion in the late 1960s of such well-known theories as the *six degrees of separation* and the *small world phenomenon* (Travers & Milgram, 1969). These theories have influenced generations of social scientists intent

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on extending mathematical models to the study of social relationships in terms of network theory and relying on concepts such as nodes (individual actors within the network) and ties (relationships between those actors). Social network analysis (SNA) is the modern sociological evolution of this trend (Carrington, Scott & Wasserman, 2005; Scott, 2004). Thanks to the recent affirmation and visibility of the Web, this approach has become hegemonic in the study of SN (Catanese et Al., 2012; De Meo et Al., 2012).

On the one hand, this trend can be seen as the consequence of the increasing interest of social sciences in computationally intense methods with which to analyse and model social phenomena (Williford & Henry, 2012) leading to the reproduction of “‘habitual practices’ employed by quantitative researchers using the procedures which they are comfortable and familiar with” (Stoneman, Sturgis & Allum, 2012:854). On the other hand, it is possible to identify a significant lack of theory in the study of “what lies beneath” the massive and multiform production of social interaction in new online communication channels, especially from a semantic perspective (de Rosa, 2012).

Research on SR investigated via interpersonal exchanges on SNS may be a valid response to this theoretical challenge. In fact, in the 1990s, Moscovici (1995; 1997:7) provided an anticipatory proposal; he emphasised the importance of investigating new communication phenomena by studying “how common sense, the language exchanged, groups themselves are shaped in this cyber-communication”.

We accordingly assumed that exploration of the representational fields underlying the ‘social discourse’ would provide track of the new type of common sense emerging from SN, as well as the social positioning of different actors and groups.

Although there is no single definition of SNS (Boyd and Ellison, 2007; Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2011) we highlight a growing interest in their role in the social construction of knowledge

(de Rosa, 2013; Mazzara, 2008). Briefly, recent decades have seen a structural transformation of the traditional communication channels whereby tele-communication is used to connect people in a new pattern of “connected-presence” (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005; Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qiu & Sey, 2007), providing interactive commitment of the actors involved, be they scientists, trainees, or simply laypersons in the sharing of knowledge. In fact, ‘Science 2.0’ (Jankowski, 2002), along the lines of the recent web revolution (O’Reilly, 2005) implies a “coupling between science and ICT”, providing new ways “for accessing scientific knowledge and [...] participation” (Ponte & Simon, 2011:150).

The development in the knowledge building through technological innovation enlarges the discourse to relevant issues already developed in the literature like: the digital divide (Castells, 1996/2000) the ethical implications (Drude et al., 2008) the effects of online psychotherapies (Andersson et al., 2009; Shingleton et al., 2013). Regarding these issues, through the SN, the experts have the opportunity to open the doors of their rooms and meet laypersons, establishing social relationships and, most of all, a “familiarity” effect, generating “trust” (Markovà, 2009).

In the SN, the traditional view of media as a ‘dirty mirror’ of scientific theories is completely reversed. Not only can the public elaboration and understanding of science no longer be compared to traditional top-down communication flows (Castells, 1996/2000; Moscovici, 1961/1976), but it also gives way to a new form of coexistence, “whose transgression launches a process of creation of profane knowledge from what was originally a concept elaborated in the midst of a small group of researchers. Thus uprooted from its original context, the concept is appropriated by the different media and thrown around, discussed, amplified, acclaimed, distorted, disproved, discredited, forgotten and rediscovered, circulating in the process among all conceivable factions of society, serving each and every one in turn” (Bangerter, 1995:8).

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