Culinary blogs and social networks

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1. ONLINE CHATTER

The culinary megatrend we are currently witnessing owes a great deal to the Internet. The fact that food today is once more the protagonist of our daily life, a main topic of conversation both in bars and on social networks, in offices, schools and most of our social spheres, is perhaps thanks to the chatter on the subject that has informally proliferated online with the technological development of Web 2.0*. The one thing the users involved all have in common is their interest in food, whether linked to contingent reasons (finding a recipe that can save dinnertime), a passion for a certain style of cooking (Middle Eastern, Chinese, Italian?), or motivated by adherence to a particular food sub-culture, such as religious diets, lifestyles such as vegetarianism or veganism, and so on. Whatever their reason for choosing to discuss food online, what mattered was that so many people were doing it and that these conversations, unlike those held over coffee and destined to disappear the minute the cup was empty, would leave some trace of themselves online, generating multiple texts (video, written texts, images, audio recordings). The texts created in this way would, thanks to search engines, be easily found by

other online users, contributing to the creation of a gigantic archive of texts on food that would be available, organised (by the search engines themselves) and perennially open to the next contribution.

At the beginning of the phenomenon in the early 2000s, these new interactions were characterised above all by the fact they were performed by a particular kind of person, *outsiders*, typified by the fact they did not belong to the world of experts entitled to talk about food. They were best described as *amateurs*, nothing more than unknown enthusiasts. They were — and still tend to be — users who, having become casually involved in some online conversation, had been enthralled by it to such an extent that they had developed a taste for it and decided to get involved themselves. It really would take very little for these users to learn how to interact in their virtual communities, transforming themselves into *authors* of blogs and Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or Snapchat pages, thus further enriching the enormous archive of conversations mentioned above.

The very act of 'establishing' their writing within a precise framework with equally precise rules of interaction (a blog, a Facebook page, what are these if not *editorial formats*?) means that these users begin to think of themselves as real *authors*, constantly developing their knowledge of the object of their passion with a view to creating more articles and posts.

But what is new about the writing by these *amateur* social media authors? In answer to such a question we can highlight how in their culinary pilgrimages these new writers tend to search for a correspondence between life-time and story-time, using their posts to progressively create a sort of *bildungsroman** about their own lives in the kitchen, a culinary autobiography. Each significant evolution in the gastronomic adventures of the latest blogger[1]— the first recipe, the blog's anniversary, the first interest shown in the blog by journalists, the successful execution of a difficult recipe — ends up the object of a story that develops over a series of small victories (the successful dish) and defeats (the burnt cupcakes) that constantly push the limit of glorifying proof and, subsequently, the end of the story.

If we look closely, however, these new authors whose identikit we have quickly outlined are also asked to take on a new role, that of *editor*, which sees them called upon to plan the logos and graphic *design* of their pages, the columns, its title, quickly organising ways of directing readers to their blogs, securing *friendships* and forging alliances in the name of their own success.

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1 We use this term to refer not only to those who write blogs, but all of those other writing identities present on social media, regardless of the platform they use (be it Facebook, Instagram or anything else), as when it comes to the communicative dynamics studied in this chapter, the tools for their analysis are interchangeable.

FROM AUTHOR TO AUTHOR-PUBLISHER

The key to understanding the great transformation that the diverse galaxy of online writing has brought about in the world of publishing is closely linked to the way in which they view their own activity as Internet users. Historically, *publisher* and *author* have always been two separate figures. The publisher's role consists of selecting authors, curating the publication of and the form taken by their works. Authors, on the other hand, have the task of producing original works considered worthy of publication by an publisher. With *social media*, the possibility of taking on those tasks demanded by the role of publisher/editor becomes a very real one: the economic costs of publication are almost eliminated, anyone can afford the online infrastructure necessary for publishing texts and hypertexts online, doing away with the economic and technological obligations these usually entail. The fact that anyone can become their own publisher, however, does not imply that the role of the editor is no longer needed, as a certain rhetorical stance may have us believe. All it means is that the online users are required to combine the roles of *publisher/editor* and *author* in everything, from the creation of their avatars and the management of their social media pages, to those texts that require more structured editorial formats (blogs or online newspapers), presenting themselves as both the creators of texts (authors) and the architects of their selection, the shaping of content and its publication for public consumption (publishers/editors). On closer inspection we see that these dynamics end up modifying the structures of power in public discourse, giving the social media user an unprecedented level of control over their writing. This is precisely because it is the user, acting as their own publishers/editors, who decides whether their texts are worthy of being published, and it is they who, once this judgement has been passed, goes on to prepare them for publication. It will always be the user who promotes initiatives (*giveaways* and *contests*, which we will discuss later) aimed at *activating* their own texts, promoting their circulation on the blogs and feeds of other users. Lastly, it will always be the user who moderates the community as it builds progressively around their writing, admonishing those who behave badly and even going so far as to remove those comments deemed, by their own unquestionable judgement, to be offensive or inappropriate.

This new power wielded by social media has consequences that can, in some ways, appear counter-intuitive. The rhetoric that drives online discourse often focuses on the fact that social media sites promote an open, more democratic world, a quality people associate with the idea that, with the advent of the *great online conversation*, anyone can give their opinion online on any issue, intervening without anyone else's mediation in a landscape regulated by horizontal relationships in which everyone is equal. Actual practice in online communities demonstrates how this rhetoric could, in part, be criticised if it is indeed true that the very difference we have just mentioned

in the power between the historic role played by the author in the world of traditional publishing (which required them to run the gauntlet imposed by the publisher) and that of social media authors (who absorb that role) leads to the creation of new hierarchies based on the prestige garnered online by bloggers harnessing their own 'augmented' power within networks of followers who actively engage with their writing. The blogstar phenomenon — those bloggers given this title by adoring communities — and the current phenomenon of social influencers can be viewed in these terms.

It is clear how such an opportunity for prestige could, more often than not, be embraced by subjects who, in their first experience of publishing, make the most of the internet in order to ensure their own personal success, publishing their *stream*, the flow of thoughts and words somehow connected to their personality. Moving in this direction, opening a social *channel* on food or any other subject, allows them to construct a real community of users around their own writing that, if well cultivated, can grow disproportionately (unlike with traditional publishing, *online* publishing has no circulation limits). The breadth of this writing, used as a measure of publishing success, will be useful in the blogger's eventual transition into the world of traditional publishing.

Let's give an example. Whenever a user decides out of the blue to open a cookery blog, they can do so (from a technological point of view) in very little time and with minimal, if not zero costs. As the process of opening a blog on any platform requires the user (who initially considered themselves an *author*, so as having something to say) to carry make choices traditionally reserved for the publishing house — naming the blog, taking charge of its graphic design and its publishing plan. However, the problems do not end once the blog has been launched and the first posts published. This page needs to be seen by someone who chooses to visit it and read its contributions. It is necessary therefore that the user-*publisher* find (as soon as possible) a strategy that ensures what is written by its *author* (who happens to be the same person as the user-*publisher*) 'counts' in the public discussion of a particular subject. Most probably, the user-editor will do just that, announcing their blog on their *Facebook* profile, channelling their own (pre-existing) community of readers towards their new publishing project. By doing so, they establish the hard core of their community of blog readers. However, as time passes, if our user (in their double role of *publisher/editor* and *author*) has done their work properly, the community will grow exponentially, attracting more and more readers. The blog's success will therefore be measured by its ability to ensure it and its author are being talked about by the most diverse range of media, thanks to the capital provided by their online *reputation*.

Let's give another example. Let's imagine a world before social media, in which a cookery fan has their own recipe book sitting in a kitchen drawer waiting for some editor to take

an interest in potentially publishing it. Once the right publisher has been identified, it would be their job to promote the book to its target audience. The publisher would have to 'plan' the book's audience, imagining who it would be composed of (gastronomes? enthusiasts? beginners?), then informing them of its forthcoming publication, enticing and convincing them to buy the book with the right marketing tools. Now let's try to imagine the same situation today, in which the only difference lies in the fact that the author of the book in the drawer, whilst writing the hard copy, had at the same time created and maintained a cookery blog. In this case, whether they were aware of it or not, their online writing meant the author was progressively creating and consolidating a community of *followers* brought together by their appreciation of the author as a *leader* in their specialist field. This community would have been the perfect fit the instant the possibility of publishing a hard copy recipe book had arisen, thus opening the doors to the publishing world and perhaps even leading to other opportunities, such as TV appearances to discuss the blog and the book, cookery columns in newspapers and so on. Why? For the simple fact that such a community of *followers* guarantees an audience and therefore a publishing market (for the book, but also for television programmes and newspapers). The evidence of this drastically reduces the business risks linked to book publishing, guaranteeing the publisher a start value, a 'hard core' of online users bound to the identity of the *leader*.

FOCUS 1

Cooking with *giallozafferano*

GialloZafferano is an Italian website and blog platform founded in 2006 by Sonia Peronaci. The project was the result of an idea by its founder, who had a simple *concept* that had never before been tried online: "a recipe a day every day" that must be "easy and easy to repeat, demonstrated and photographed at every step". The experiment met with enormous success, reaching two million new users a month by 2011, and more than four million in 2013. The portal GialloZafferano.it is currently believed to average 6.8 million new users a month, with more than 2 million daily users. Every month more than 4,500 comments are added to the site and another 20,000 are made on Facebook, where the portal has more than 6 million followers. It is without doubt the most popular and most successful Italian online food project ever.

The story of GialloZafferano's stratospheric success exemplifies how the Internet and the blogging world have renewed the discourse on gastronomy, establishing themselves as new ways impacting the *public sphere* and earning consensus in a given social scenario. The site, as with most culinary blogs, began in an almost amateur way. Precisely because

of the scarce economic investment required to begin an online publishing business, Sonia Peronaci began her online adventure, together with her partner, without ever having worked in food communication. She was, however, incredibly skilled in the kitchen thanks to her long career as a cook in the family restaurant, which began at the age of 6. The 'unknown' Sonia Peronaci began her online business as an *outsider*, rapidly earning consensus thanks to the clarity of her model (one recipe a day, explained step by step), the fact that it appealed to a particularly broad spectrum of users (not to the meddlesome and decidedly elitist world of haute cuisine but to the much broader, if not more prosaic world of everyday cooking), and to the fact that she was a pioneer in the *blogosphere** which, in 2006 – the year GialloZafferano was launched – was still virgin territory for initiatives of this kind.

Sonia Peronaci's career and her project moved so quickly that by 2010 they had already caught the eye of one of Italy's most important social media agencies, which bought the site and invested heavily in it. Thanks to these funds, a working group for the project was established and expanded, becoming increasingly precise and professional. At the same time, there was an increase of traffic, which as we have said had reached millions of new users a month, attracting advertisers who had initially been reticent to invest in the site. This was the case with Granarolo, a famous Italian dairy brand, who chose to sponsor GialloZaferano, commissioning a number of sponsored recipes using their mascarpone. This kind of collaboration multiplied until it became the norm, constituting the project's main source of income. The founder's popularity grew alongside this, something we can measure (as mentioned previously) through her ability to 'leave the Internet' and be successful in other media. Sonia Peronaci has become an intermedial* heroine thanks to the publication of various cookery books, which quickly became bestsellers, a television programme (*Cooking Class*) that she presents on FoxLife, her work as an advertising testimonial for popular brands such as Philadelphia cheese, as well as extensive work in cookery writing and consultancy for food communication. Even the GialloZafferano brand now straddles various forms of media securing prestigious collaborations, the most recent being with McDonald's, which created an entire menu in collaboration with the site.

2. FROM *AMATEUR* TO *PROFESSIONAL* AND BACK AGAIN

But how does one move from amateur blogging into a professional publishing career? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to remember that despite the chance nature of the motives that lead a user to open a blog, the very fact of writing online reveals itself to be a highly socialising practice. We have all seen this. A user who opens a blog is immediately

informed by their peers about the iron-clad rules regulating the online community. Once they have joined this world, they will discover how there are classifications and hierarchies that can be incredibly stringent. Lists are periodically compiled of the most influential blogs by varyingly prominent publications that travel the world to take a snapshot of the competitors that will then be used a fundamental tool for advertising investment and the eventual acquisition of the blogs themselves by large corporations, guaranteeing their authors the success we have referred to. But there are also tools in the *blogosphere** that are used in the not-so-subtle pursuit of marking out a hierarchy between bloggers, such as the numerous giveaways and contests used in the online culinary world. The former are nothing but mini-competitions bloggers promote to their readers, aimed at awarding the speed at which followers comment on a post or respond to a new recipe, rather than being a task of any significant difficulty. More than anything, giveaways benefit those promoting them, who can demonstrate to both their rival blogger-colleagues and the general public, both the excellent relationship they enjoy with their followers and the contractual power they wield (measured by the number of products offered as prizes) with the sponsors providing those prizes, which tend to be *lovemarks** (such as *Kitchenaid* or *Le Creuset*) for food enthusiasts. The giveaways allow those promoting them to flaunt their professional network, affirming their own prestige with competitors as if to say, "Look! I'm such an influential blogger that I have caught the attention of prestigious brands such as Le Creuset!". Even more interesting are the culinary contests, which consist of a competition open to all bloggers that are announced by a food blogger, with a simple excuse such as the blog's 'birthday', who publishes the reasons for the contest and its rules in one of their posts. These contests generally involve the collection of themed recipes, destined to become a real recipe book (perhaps downloadable as a PDF) based on the blog pages that came up with the idea. Contests offer an excellent opportunity to evaluate the bloggers' publishing talent, in particular those bloggers who promote themselves in this way. The final PDF embodies a fundamental transformation in blog writing as it allows the writer to move from serial tales (typical of the diary structures of blogs) to a *finished* text in a clearly defined format (the PDF).

FOCUS 2

Mastering the Art of Blogging

There is a film that clearly explains what it means to be a blogger. It is called *Julie&Julia* (2009), and is written and directed by the great culinary author Nora Ephron. The film recounts the parallel lives of two very different characters. On the one hand we have Julia Child, an icon of

American cooking who became famous thanks to her 1961 recipe book, *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*. On the other we have Julie Powell, an unknown 29 year old who works at the *Lower Manhattan Development Corporation* on the reconstruction of the site of the September 11 attacks. Their paths cross almost by accident. Julie Powell is frustrated at work and cannot find a way out of the monotony until her husband suggests, only half seriously, that she start writing a blog. Julie had never considered this opportunity, let alone considered what its theme or focus would be. That is until her passion for food, and recipe books in particular, comes to mind. She decides to dedicate her blog to a bizarre competition with herself, requiring her to make all the recipes (524 of them!) in her all-time hero Julia Child's book in just one year. It is interesting how, before this moment, she had never entertained the idea of writing a blog, and even less so that of dedicating herself to cooking. Her choice is made without any kind of plan, emerging as a way of carving out a space for something different and exciting in her life, a hobby capable of compensating for the dissatisfaction of her professional life, one that focuses on her playfulness and spontaneity. At the beginning, Julie's blog is merely a pretext for escaping the existential dead end in which she finds herself, a hobby that would help change her life for the better. And this is precisely what happens. Firstly, this project keeps her occupied. The blog has an incredibly intense work schedule: to make 524 recipes in 365 days is no mean feat; it means cooking at least two dishes a day. However, this demanding mission forces her to deepen her knowledge of the art of cooking, following the recipes leads to a fortification of skills such as choosing the best ingredients, mastering the more complicated culinary techniques, managing cooking times and so on. Our blogger, driven by her unusual hobby, becomes increasingly competent. Day by day, Julie recounts all this on her blog in miniscule detail, progressively updating it with her failures and successes. It is understood that by continuing along this path, her stream becomes an actual *autobiography* in which the recipes become a metaphor for life and the changes that this has caused her to make. On the other hand, however, as the project goes on, a kind of magic happens. The blog reveals itself as a communications tool, filling with the comments of curious readers and fans of the 'mission', quickly elevating her to a major reference point for online gastronomic discussion. The consolidation of the community of followers around Julie Powell's blog ensures that her leadership is progressively recognised, leading her towards the publishing world. Indeed, the blog's activity catches the attention of the New York Times, and subsequently other newspapers, literary and publishing agents, allowing her to carve out a coveted career as a writer.

> When she is cooking, Julie sees Julia Child as an unattainable legend bound to the exceptional heights that her work had reached in US food culture, without realising how close her work is to that of the more famous Julia.
> Nora Ephron's film wants to document precisely this similarity and does so by juxtaposing the stories of the two characters. Both Julie Powell and Julia Child are *amateurs* who joined the world of gastronomy almost by accident, yet both make a living from their personal passion, using media to reconfigure their own discourse (Julia Child on television, Julie Powell online) and make it increasingly popular. The sign of Julia Powell's success, just like that of her forerunner Julia Child, seems to be precisely this, spreading her own discourse using media, embodying a third way for gastronomic storytelling that surpasses the sterile dichotomy between the unfathomable discourse of *experts* and the over-simplification by *popularizers*.
> This is the positive role embodied today by the *amateur* discourse on food, driven by social media.

At the end of this excursus we can ask ourselves what talent the bloggers themselves want to demonstrate to their community of peers. The answer is something we might call 'the competence of the curator'. The downloadable PDF is the precursor to the printed recipe book every blogger dreams of publishing. As such, it is important to have an appropriate plan for the contest format and its accompanying communications strategy (choice of theme, name, possible sponsors, prizes, invitations to take part, design of associated banners for the blogs taking part, etc.), as well as the skills related to promotion of the finished product (editing and publication of the PDF, its possible print publication and so on).

The construction of an authorial identity that is recognised and does not require additional adjectives is, then, the existential and professional aim of online writing.