

# Social Networks and Collective Intelligence<sup>\*</sup>

## A Return to the Agora (with the Polidoxa Shift)

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## 1 Introduction

In the democratic city states of Greece, a place called “agora” was the place where citizens met, discussed, exchanged information and made important decisions about the future of society. This was a political system based on the equality of knowledge and fairness of decision making. Nowadays, the mechanism with which information is spread has had a significant change in nature. In fact, most of the people retrieve their information from major TV stations, radio and newspapers. According to the A.C. Nielsen Co., the average American watches more than 4 hours of TV each day (or 28 hours/week, or 2 months of nonstop TV-watching per year). In a 65-year life, that person will have spent 9 years glued to TV. The percentage of Americans that regularly watch TV while eating dinner is 66, while 49% say they simply watch too much of it<sup>6</sup>. Accessing information mainly or exclusively from TV means obscuring the potential of other sources of information like radio, newspapers, the Internet or our community of trusted contacts. Moreover, the main problem with TV news is that the streaming of information is simply unidirectional, i.e. there is no possibility for the audience to control the process in any way. This is clearly a principle opposite to “agora”. The media product passes through many levels of organizational processing on its way to the audience and, at each step of the process, the original data is filtered, edited for style and so on. Each step can be thought of as a “gate” through which data must pass on its way to the consumer. Gatekeeping is well known mechanism to ensure that irrelevant or misleading information will be not consumed by the general public. It determines a quality ensuring process and an expert evaluation similar to what happens in conferences/journals peer review system. However, there is also a potential drawback: audience is not able to give a real time feedback, misunderstandings are quite common and there is no active interaction. Furthermore, people are not able to decide the source of

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html>, July 1st, 2012.

information, they cannot choose the content or express the will to expand some topics. This means that media tend to set the “agenda”, i.e. the list of items that people will be discussing. This theory is known in literature as agenda-setting theory: news media have a large influence on audiences by their choice of what stories to consider newsworthy and how much prominence and space to give them. Agenda-setting theory’s main postulate is known as salience transfer: the ability of the news media to transfer issues of importance from their news media agendas to public agendas. Thus, the power of the media may lie not in its ability to determine peoples opinions, but rather in its role of determining what issues will be considered important enough to discuss. Whatever is not appearing on the main media simply does not exist.

In this context, Internet and social networks can act as game-changers. The key is in the mechanism in which the huge amount of information available online is accessed. The most important aspect is to have access to the most possible independent and unbiased information source for any specific topic or, at least, having access to a variety of different sources. Indeed, despite the significant technological advances, we still cannot reach the best information in real-time.

## 2 The Polidoxa Shift

The advent of social networks may give rise to a paradigm shift in communication if a number of issues are solved. To achieve such a shift it is necessary to combine the user friendliness of search engines and the trustworthiness of social networks, in order to define an integrated platform enabling users to get trustworthy news directly from their network and on their favorite topics. We called this platform Polidoxa (see [1] for more details), from greek “poly” (meaning many or several) and “doxa” (meaning common belief or popular opinion).

Polidoxa aims at combining the strength of search engines and social networks, in order to realize a “virtual agora” where all the advantages of the traditional “agora” are actually amplified by means of social networks. Users are not passive anymore, they become active part of the information flow. The key idea is to offer a software platform for discussion which elevates users to a higher level of knowledge, criticism and consciousness. Social interaction and networking are enhanced by collective intelligence, which is the key to information and it is superior to the sum of knowledge of individuals. Opinion trends can be predicted via swarm intelligent algorithms.

Internet has an enormous potential to fix the problem of centralization of information, but social technologies commonly used like Google and Facebook lack the most important concept in this field: they do not embed the notion of individual trustworthiness of a source. Polidoxa, instead, aims at connecting local knowledge making them usable for everybody and it is conceived to promote public awareness and discussion in total freedom, like in a public square.

## References

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